

When the Pie was Opened. By Paul Muldoon. Pp. 44. Lewes: Sylph Editions/Center for Writers and Translators at the American University of Paris, 2008. Pb. £10.

This is a beautifully produced pamphlet, but it's also a most revealing one. In amongst the exquisite drawings of Lanfranco Quadrio (a centre page of torn-off wings like an angel's, a frontispiece of a partly eaten bird of paradise, a damaged and perhaps gnawed human body with entrails and bones suggested, and a hunting dog straining at the leash opposite a poem about quails and manna) are four original Muldoon poems and five new translations by him, shuffled into an order most of us would find reminiscent of his poem 'Something Else' or the patent dream-logic of *To Ireland, I*, those lectures of a dazzling grasshopper. Muldoon the man is presumably as logical as the next man, and he explains the connections of these pieces to his life in a preface as carefully composed and rounded as one of his poems. What is revealing is not just the arrangement of topics in the prose paragraphs, and the arrangement of the actual poems, but the passion barely contained in these verses.

In the first poem, 'The Windshield', the mother waiting in a car for him as he is waiting for his daughter is presumably the same person whose skeleton 'has managed to worm / its way back on top of the old man's, / and she once again has him under her thumb'. There is a sense that one is getting to know Muldoon as he is getting to know himself and his parents. The next poem, 'The Cock', is a translation of Dafydd ap Gwilym's 'brassy address' to his own member. I don't think one would know it was a translation – but one would know it was not by Paul Muldoon. The next poem is 'Wulf and Eadwacer', that Old English puzzle which Craig Raine gralloched, boiled to a skeleton of plot, and refleshed the bones of. By contrast, Muldoon's poem is a real fair translation but this time with a tang of Muldoon's own chutney.

The next poem is the famous 'Elegy' from Ovid's *Amores* (1.5) whose last line Marlowe renovated as 'Jove send me more such afternoons as this.' That was certainly Ovid's drift, but Muldoon's 'If only more afternoons would turn out this way' is a good deal nearer to the tameness of what Ovid actually wrote. On the other hand Muldoon says the girl's hair was 'piled up' while Marlowe correctly had her 'tresses hanging downe'. Should one alter the style in this way? Of course neither poet can reproduce the 'golden line' effect of the original – 'candida dividua colla tegente coma' – but it is odd that one correctly hides the white neck while the other shows it off. Next, we are back with another original (and excellent) Muldoon poem, 'Balls', about (if that is the word for anything by Muldoon) an operation to remove a spermatocoele, 'this teeny-weeny / third ball'. The two others are described as 'a brace of deboned / quail' which I suppose is the connection with the next poem, another non-translation, the impenetrably mysterious 'Quail', a linguistic trap which doesn't seem to have caught anything except itself.

The three final poems are two translations, one from an anonymous Irish song (which becomes 'The Wandering Navvy') and the other a section of Palamas' poem 'The Twelve Lays of the Gypsy' (there is a misprint in the Greek title of this, by the way), and finally the title poem, 'When the Pie Was Opened', an original meditation on marital relations resumed, a poem so apparently intimate that one was rather surprised to see it in the *Times Literary Supplement* on 9 May 2008. The Palamas translation has a clear connection with Muldoon's fine version of Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's 'Ceist na Teangan' ('The Language Issue'), and its gypsies reappear in the final poem, connecting with the wife ('The hedgehog bristling on your tabard') just as the idea of wandering connects the gypsy and the wandering day-labourer with Muldoon's father.

This fascinating group of poems will, if it all reappears in Muldoon's next collection, be hidden, buried in the sparkle of the surrounding *trouvailles*. It is a pleasure to read it like this, on its own, and set off among so many feathers as fine as the poet's phrasing.

ALISTAIR ELLIOT
Newcastle upon Tyne

DOI: 10.3366/E0968136108000502