

Dia Art Foundation
Readings in Contemporary Poetry
Paul Muldoon and Susan Wheeler

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Introduction by Vincent Katz

Susan Wheeler is the author of the poetry collections *Bag 'o' Diamonds* (University of Georgia, 1993), *Smokes* (Four Way Books, 1998), *Source Codes* (Salt Publishing, 2001), *Ledger* (University of Iowa, 2005), *Assorted Poems* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), *Meme* (University of Iowa, 2012). She is also the author of a novel, *Record Palace* (Graywolf Press, 2005). Her work has appeared in ten editions of Best American Poetry as well as in *New American Writing*, *New Yorker*, *Paris Review*, *Talisman*, and many other journals. She teaches at Princeton University.

“Frantic” is a word that comes up on two facing pages in two poems in Susan Wheeler’s first book, *Bag 'o' Diamonds*. It’s a word that might suit the restless jumps her poetry makes — in subject, tone, register, timeframe. But not really. Her mastery of rhythm and sound creates something much denser and full of flow. Oceanic, one wants to call it.

Her poems are not usually *about* anything, so there’s that. But, again, that belies the intense *thereness* of her poetic. Wheeler’s consciousness is many places, often simultaneously. She is both delightfully superficial and shockingly deep. She’s not classical, but she gets along with the classics, and, one bets, they would relish the opportunity to spend time with her poems.

She’s fast. I recommend: just go along for the ride. She’ll get you there for sure. She may use prose for poetry, she may use shorter lines. She can use singsong rhyme, there are sonnets, and stanza forms. She very much likes to push at the strictures, to see what comes of it.

“Oldest Psalter,” from *Smokes*, is a take on the sonnet form. It ends:

I could not say that it was mine, before
Switching off the boxed light switch —
The postal clerk who had them stung.

I could not find the phlox, the star
To restore the taken-over.
The sad sacked hero of the lot of them.

Her later books of poetry have large-scale structures that replicate her line-by-line and word-by-word playfulness. *Source Codes* gives sources to the poems in the table of contents, e.g. "John Kelly as Joni Mitchell, Westbeth Theater, 1996." You wouldn't know it, but you might sense a connection in the lines, "He was a free woman noodling, / He was untethered and alive." There is found language, as well as transmuted sources, but all is changed, partially by juxtaposition, partially by the energetic mellifluousness of her ear.

Then, without losing her sense of humor (impossible), she gets simultaneously serious in the verbal elegiacs of *The Maud Poems*, in memory of, and built from phraseology of, her mother. Wheeler interleaves, herself and her mother, to weave a tapestry of generations, women speaking. Susan:

Where is there room for all I have to say
In the deepening dark of fall's afternoon?
Baubles, prizes, in the cereal box.

Then Maud:

He was a trooper, but out in his neck of the woods that was what they did. The others walked around in their Skivvies all day.

The *Maud Poems* may be Wheeler's greatest achievement so far, the summoning of language to the heart's demand. But take note of the *so far*. So far she has taken us; so much farther she will. Please welcome the intriguingly delightful Susan Wheeler.

Paul Muldoon was born in 1951 in County Armagh, Northern Ireland, and educated in Armagh and at the Queen's University Belfast. Muldoon's collections of poetry include *New Weather* (Faber, 1973), *Mules* (Faber, 1977), *Why Brownlee Left* (Faber, 1980), *Quoof* (Faber, 1983), *Meeting the British* (Faber, 1987), *Madoc: A Mystery* (1990), *The Annals of Chile* (Faber/FSG, 1990), *Hay* (1998), *Moy Sand and Gravel* (FSG, 2002), *Horse Latitudes* (2006), *Maggot* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015), *Poems 1968–2014* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016) and *Lamentations* (Gallery Books, 2017), a book of translations and reimaginings. Between 1999 and 2004 he was Professor of Poetry at the University of Oxford, where he is an honorary fellow of Hertford College. From 2007 to 2017 he served as poetry editor of the *New Yorker's*. Muldoon is currently Howard G. B. Clark '21 University Professor in the Humanities, Director of the Princeton Atelier, and Professor of Creative Writing at Princeton University.

Paul Muldoon is so prolific a poet, and so varied a poet, that an introduction must necessarily be incomplete. I'd like to start with the smallest increment I could locate — the haiku-like stanzas of his "News Headlines from the Homer Noble Farm," from his book *Moy Sand and Gravel*, the Moy being a large village in County Tyrone, Northern Ireland, near where Muldoon grew up. Here are the first two stanzas:

I

That case-hardened cop.
A bull moose in a boghole
brought him to a stop.

II

From his grassy knoll
he has you in his crosshairs,
the accomplice mole.

I am mesmerized, drawn in, by the accessibility of Muldoon's language and the complexity of his thought, such that, when he takes on larger subjects, I am thoroughly engaged as well. But staying with the simplicity for a moment, a kind of dailiness in which aficionados of New York School poetry can certainly find a kindred spirit, his poem "A Trifle," from the collection *Quoof*, is in a free-ranging sonnet form. For a rhyme scheme it substitutes a play on words — trifle being a dessert, the situation definitely not unimportant, not trifling, but still, everyday. Here is the beginning of the poem:

I had been meaning to work through lunch
the day before yesterday.
Our office block is the tallest in Belfast;
when the Tannoy sounds

another bomb alert
we take four or five minutes to run down
the thirty-odd flights of steps
to street level.

Of course, he has been living among us for years now, and so American subjects have infiltrated his poems as much as memories of Irish ones have. In *One Thousand Things Worth Knowing*, we find, for example "A Civil War Suite," a poem about Lewis and Clark's intestinal problems, a poem about Cuba that catalogues the 1950s cars and begins, "I'm hanging with my daughter in downtown Havana," a poem on the site of Buddy Holly's plane crash, and a poem that includes Rockets Redglare in *Down By Law*. Well, it doesn't get more New York than that in fact. On that note, we have arrived at the present, the moment at which it is my pleasure to put you in the hands of the expansive, brilliant Paul Muldoon.