

# Leave the Hedgehog Alone! The Problem of Privacy in Paul Muldoon's *Hedgehog*

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**Abstract—** Paul Muldoon is an outstanding Irish poet. One of his poetry's characteristics can be coined as the 'intricate spontaneity,' which does the most that it does, inspires. This paper deals with the problem of privacy in his poem the Hedgehog. Privacy is an essential right that everyone must have. Its importance is huge as it relates to such areas as identity, sovereignty... etc.

The paper is an attempt to follow the brush touches by which the poet draws the object of his painting, the hedgehog. It aims at observing the animal closely both externally as well as internally. In respect to the external part, the symbolism the poet makes use of through this object of painting is impressive and urges upon examining. As for the internal part, the poem is to be mystically considered for a better understanding of its purport concerning the concept of privacy. The paper setting benefits of Imagism tools to assess the poem properly.

**Keywords—** Privacy, Paul Muldoon, Imagism, Hedgehog, Poetry.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Nature is the mother of all. It is the mother of all forms of life, that is why it is personified as Mother Nature. On the other hand, in her bag, there are the causes of the other fact, death, as well. Within the confines of nature there are the tools of construction besides those of destruction. This massive fact is strongly present in man's mind, ever since the first creation. The genius of man, reflecting on this, embodied it, and has always been seeking to embody it by all means of expression, oral, visual, and written.

The richness of nature as a subject can be broadly seen in art and literature. To the artist and the writer, taking an element from nature as a source of inspiration proves positive, to the extent that each element, animal, or plant began to suggest, stand for or symbolize an abstraction, a value... etc.

In this paper, the interest is in considering the Irish poet, Paul Muldoon's poem, Hedgehog. His selection of the animal, as a source of inspiration, imaging it, and his manipulation of its qualities are discussed. Also, the reflections on the hedgehog and the connotations associated with its image are highlighted, not apart from the concept of privacy. Muldoon's

tendency to 'draw' images is confirmed as he promises "to give voice to the allegedly silent image," (1)

As a standpoint, our discussion is to begin with the definition of privacy. For the most part of it, privacy is a major within the field of freedom. It roots go back to the early times when man chose, for instance, to be alone, to have private deliberations when there were problems to be consulted on, and in general, to determine his own private life.

To draw close to the concept, the lexical meaning of privacy is stated as:

"1.a: the quality or state of being apart from company or observation: seclusion

b : freedom from unauthorized intrusion: one's right to privacy<sup>[SEP]</sup>

2 . Archaic: a place of seclusion"(2)

The definition above lays emphasis upon 'seclusion,' both as the state people get to, or the place where this state is achievable.

In the same way, the editors of Wikipedia put together a kind of an extended definition that derives from the lexical one. They define it as follows:

"Privacy is the ability of an individual or group to seclude themselves, or information about themselves, and thereby express themselves selectively. The boundaries and content of what is considered private differ among cultures and individuals, but share common themes. When something is private to a person, it usually means that something is inherently special or sensitive to them."(3)

The interesting side in the definition they present is that it sheds light on the matter of 'expression' and its boundaries, which is of high importance.

From a physical point of view, some see that it is to do with the whole of a physical entity. Jonathan Herrig, for instance, would like to indicate privacy as "a form of bodily integrity."(4) Thus, it relates to the whole of an entity with all the peculiarities that entity has. Else, as far as sociology is concerned, privacy is seen as a means of trust. Being as such, it paves the way for harnessing the potential and allowing the promotion of "meaningful social relations."(5) To conclude it, an interesting definition that fits the sense we intend in approaching privacy is put by Judge Cooley. It is a comprehensive one that calls for 'letting alone.' He sees that privacy involves "The right to be let alone to live one's life with the minimum degree of interference."(6)

The sum of all the above-mentioned can be concluded in saying that the state of seclusion of an entity, its boundaries, boundaries of self-revelation or expression, from the self

toward the scope of social life, provided the freedom, are the elements constituting the overall concept of privacy.

Next to defining privacy, our consideration of Muldoon's poem is to begin from his selection of the hedgehog as a muse. It should be noted that the animal is an infrequent guest in literature, in general, and in poetry, in particular. Though, Muldoon, contemplating the animal, could find the way to make use of it. Being both, spiky in the exterior and downy in the interior; its cute character; its inclination to be lonely or for itself; and its physical capability to be introvert are inspiring tokens. He employs the opposite sides available in this creature to create metaphoric and symbolic counterparts.

Upon an imagistic premise, which stipulates no superfluous information but only direct description or analogy to an image (7) we can judge that Muldoon's poem is an imagistic. Beginning from the title, Hedgehog, it fits, typically to the structure of the poem as it serves to meet imagism principle of concentration, (8) and in the same way, it contributes to its meaning and augments its overall creation.

Reading the poem, we find that it consists of five quatrains. Except for the first one, the other four ones deal immediately with the hedgehog. The opening quatrain deals with the snail. The first three lines give due physical descriptions of the snail and how it moves. They read as follows:

*The snail moves like a  
Hovercraft, held up by a  
Rubber cushion of itself, (9)*

There is nothing else to do with the snail in the rest of the poem. But, in essence, what has this to do with the hedgehog? And is not this a violation to the principle of relevance and concentration imagism holds?

As a matter of fact, it is all about the similarity or 'analogy,' prescribed by the imagists, between the snail and the hedgehog. The snail, in a way, is identical to the hedgehog in the outer appearance. The shell of the snail is like the 'crown of thorns' on the back of the hedgehog. As for the interior, both's interiors are downy, tender, 'rubber,' ... etc. Thus, we can see that the first three lines firmly establish the analogy imagists insist upon in the essential building of a poem. The fourth line shifts the attention from the physical traits of the snail to the platforms of social trust and the interrelationships peculiar to it. It reads:

*Sharing its secret*

The secret is a 'content that is considered private,' and indeed, very private. Sharing a secret is, by no means, an 'eclectic' and 'selective' matter. Anyway, the other function of this informative line is on the structural level. It prepares for an enjambment that continues onto the next quatrain by the fifth line, which tells us to whom the secret is communicated:

*With the hedgehog,*

being the analogue in physique. Here ends the role of the snail and begins that of the hedgehog.

Another enjambment is involved as the line continues:

*..... The hedgehog*

Shares his secret with no one.

Now we mark a difference between the two analogues. It is in the norms. It is a peculiarity the hedgehog has, the which

increases our curiosity driving us to interfere. Our normal reaction would be just as Muldoon says:

*We say, Hedgehog, come out  
Of yourself and we will love you.*

We notice that in these two lines there is a metaphorical analogy. Yet, the analogues now are the hedgehog and the human. We can sense the deliberate gradation the poet provides beginning from the snail to the hedgehog then to the human. The analogy is revealed by using the pronoun, 'We' in the beginning of line seven. There are two important things to be examined, yet. First, our bidding to the hedgehog to 'come out of himself,' which bears on two aspects: a physical one, as it has the ability to come inside itself or shrink; and a metaphorical one, as it has a secret and may sacrifice its privacy share it with us. The metaphorical one is more favorable because it is reinforced by the second important thing we want to examine, that is, the love we offer in return to sharing the secret with us.

The attempt goes on and we stoop and try to reassure the hedgehog:

*We mean no harm. We want  
Only to listen to what  
You have to say. We want  
Your answers to our questions.*

The intent sense of superiority is very obvious in this stanza with the repeated use of the pronoun 'We.' It determines the nature of the relationship between the two analogues, now, the human and the other human. The superiority of the speaker emphasizing the inferiority of the addressee.

The answer to our offers of love and reassurance we know in the first two lines of the fourth quatrain:

*The hedgehog gives nothing  
Away, keeping itself to itself.*

It insists on protecting its privacy, maintaining the boundaries of self-expression by giving 'nothing away.' The hedgehog's discretion and silence against our curiosity only shocks and astonishes us:

*We wonder what a hedgehog  
Has to hide, why it so distrusts.*

We, as superior, do not expect the hedgehog, as inferior, to have something worth to hide. In addition, we think that we have the right to know the reason that makes it so distrustful.

In the last stanza we find a major change in the point of view. The tone denotes a big deal of exasperation that departs from the calm tone of the previous four stanzas. They read:

*We forget the god  
Under this crown of thorns.*

We, it seems, forget that this creature, with the thorns on his back, has full authority in living the way it likes, and these thorns are only his crown, being the king inside itself, having the reign of itself.

The last two lines show a kind of a religious allusion. Just like the previous two lines, they begin with the same reproaching refrain:

*We forget that never again  
Will a god trust in the world.*

It is an unusual ending to a well-structured poem that tackles an important matter. There is no question that when Muldoon wrote his poem, he meant to highlight some people's unjustifiable intrusion into the details of others' lives, on both,

a micro and a macro levels. It sounds to some people that this intrusion is justified because the other is not meeting the standards of those people, due to class, race, defects, ... etc. Unfortunately, some feel that they do have the right to trespass others' privacy boundaries and do not feel that the others have the right to it, i.e. the right to be let alone.

## II. CONCLUSION

Paul Muldoon's poem tackles a very important issue that is common to all humanity and exceeds it. The importance stems from the values of respect and sovereignty, which are unnegotiable. In imagistic terms, he succeeded in building his text around the hedgehog (and the snail), and achieved coherence.

Last, the most important thing that Muldoon presents at the end of the poem, the which he concludes the poem with, is oppositeness between 'trust' and 'distrust.' It is really urgent and crucial to know what it means to trust and what it means to lose trust or to distrust as to people's multifaceted relations. When trust is lost, there is nothing else that can recompense and people's life becomes imbalanced. The hedgehog teaches us to let alone as it likes to be let alone. Finally, as the Greek poet, Archilochus say: "The hedgehog knows one big thing." That one big thing is that everyone has the right to privacy.

## NOTES

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