

## The International Linguistics of Art and Music

This paper takes as its title Carol Ann Duffy's definition of poetry (*The Times*, 30/01/2010), as 'the music of being human'. I think this can best be applied to that subgenre of poetry, the lyric, in which the musicality of form and technique, the weightiness of private and public issues, stressed in haunting imagery, concentrate the writer's mind to a humane voice, and this is what the humane reader hears. Here is an example by Michael Longley:

Terezin

No room has ever been as silent as the room  
Where hundreds of violins are hung in unison.

Here Longley depicts the inhumanity of the concentration camp of the title through the humanity and music of a lyric, in which the musical instruments are silenced, like the dead. Because we know Longley's background as a poet who has written about the Troubles in Northern Ireland, this couplet takes on even more weight.

Or, to move to the private, take this sonnet by Douglas Dunn:

Sandra's Mobile

A constant artist, dedicated to  
Curves, shapes, the pleasant shades, the feel of colour,  
She did not care what shapes, what red, what blue,  
Scorning the dull to ridicule the duller  
With a disinterested, loyal eye.  
So Sandra brought her this and taped it up –  
Three seagulls from a white and indoor sky –  
A gift of old artistic comradeship.  
'Blow on them, Love.' Those silent birds winged round  
On thermals of my breath. On her last night,  
Trying to stay awake, I saw love crowned  
In tears and wooden birds and candlelight.  
She did not wake again. To prove our love  
Each gull, each gull, each gull, turned into dove.

Sonnets, as the name suggests, are 'little songs', where music and meaning are in harmony, and here both bring out the human bond of love and the human reality of death. The first movement in the octet gives us the degree of his artist wife's decline, as she rejects colour and shape; the sestet gives us the mobile spinning on 'thermals of my breath', almost to the music of the spheres, and 'love crowned...in candlelight'. The moment of her passing is marked with a caesura, like the breath not taken. Then Dunn emphasises his loss with strict iambic pentameter, where 'Each gull, each gull, each gull' replays Shakespeare's 'Howl. Howl.', turning again to an upbeat note, as he sees the seagulls transformed into doves, birds which mate for life.

Let's move from Dunn's doves to Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale', a mellifluous poem, as we know very much concerned with being human, creativity and mortality. In this poem Keats states that he wishes to 'dissolve' and merge with the nightingale to escape the human realm, 'where men sit and hear each other groan'. Of course, it is relevant to note in a poem

which speaks of pain and death that Keats had worked as a surgeon at Guy's Hospital, seeing acute suffering, and had recently nursed his brother, as he died in December 1818 of tuberculosis. Moreover, the biographical detail that Keats himself died at 25 from TB is especially poignant. But we need a close reading of the text, not a biographical summary. As TS Eliot wrote in his essay, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent': 'Honest criticism and sensitive appreciation is directed not upon the poet but upon the poetry'.

In the second stanza, Keats wishes for wine to intoxicate him, but by the fourth stanza he has abandoned alcohol for poetry as a means of escaping reality: 'I'll fly to thee on the viewless wings of Poesy'. Briefly, he feels at one with the ecstasy of the nightingale's music, and presumably with his own creative endeavour: 'Already with thee! Tender is the night'. Yet next he can say that in this perfect moment, 'Now more than ever seems it rich to die/ To cease upon the midnight with no pain'. By the final stanza the birdsong has flown away into the next valley and Keats is left 'forlorn'. This seems to be a lightly veiled allusion not only to the creative process, but also to the sexual one. The 'fancy', or rather the poetic imagination, has failed and Keats has been tolled back 'to my sole self'. The flight of imagination has come back to earth and the moment of merging with the other, the nightingale, has ended and returned him to himself and his senses: 'Do I wake or sleep?'. So although 'Ode to a Nightingale' is in one sense an escapist poem, it also offers a critique of escapism and of the Romantic imagination.

Juxtaposition, as in 'wake or sleep', is central to the poem, which is undecided between poles of waking and sleeping, life and death, pain and ecstasy, cold and warmth, the permanent and the transient, as Keats swings between sensitivity to these states. There are varieties of oblivion mentioned in the poem: drink, drugs, suicide and the ecstasy of art and song. Keats states that he is 'half in love with easeful death', but only 'half'. The nightingale, which is 'pouring forth' its soul 'In such an ecstasy' is comparable to the figure of Wordsworth's Romantic poet dealing with 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings' and Keats is like both Wordsworth's ideal poet and the nightingale. His very lines pour forth, overflow and spill over the line-breaks in enjambment. Although the argument of the poem is that human joy ends, in a sense this message is enveloped in the song that lingers on for a bar, so that the negative word, 'sleep', is in fact outweighed in the balance by the positive harmony of the closing rhyme and this is what endures. So in this poem too we have met musicality and insights into the condition of being human, which I am proposing are most effectively and affectingly found in the lyric voice.

Now let us look at Yeats' 'Leda and the Swan'. When contrasted with his early poetry about male-female relations, this is stark, graphic, mechanical language: 'sudden blow', 'staggering girl', 'helpless breast upon his breast', 'terrified vague fingers', 'loosening thighs', 'white rush'. This is worldly word choice designed to elicit sympathy for the girl through its violence. By contrast his early poems to Maud Gonne contain such words as 'stars', 'murmur', 'eyes', 'heavens', 'dreams'. So he is showing us this is an act of rape that is solely about the physical, without the mental. But then in the sonnet's sestet, in which traditionally there is a *volta* and twist in the exposition, as well as putting in bold and underlining the violation still further with the imagery of war and both a caesura and line-break, Yeats leaves us with a rhetorical question:

Did she put on his knowledge with his power  
Before the indifferent beak could let her drop?

He now talks in terms of the mental sphere and conflates the violated woman's newfound 'knowledge', or experience, with Zeus' omniscience and omnipotence. In one sense this

seems to be early romantic Yeats looking for small consolation in the myth, but by the last line he is telling us how she was dropped, of the inhumanity of the god, not merely that he is fickle, as classicists would say, but that he is 'indifferent', which classicists would say is an unfair description of the gods. The end-rhymes are all long vowel sounds, holding their notes, apart from the staccato last pairing, which stresses the 'drop' even more. So Yeats paints a graphic picture of the abduction in stark language and exaggerates the inhumanity of Zeus in order to evince sympathy for the girl and by association a human response of empathy for all like her, who are violated and indifferently abandoned.

Yeats' poem appeared in his collection, 'The Tower', published in 1928. It is interesting to compare the poem's image of the swan's 'indifferent' beak letting the girl 'drop' and its emotional affect with Auden's image of Bruegel's *Icarus* 'falling' and its emotional affect in his 1938 poem, 'Musée de Beaux Arts'. In Yeats' poem the 'drop' elicits sympathy and outrage. In Auden's poem the fall elicits a cold knowing of how 'About suffering they were never wrong,/ The Old Masters', and pity verging on mockery of 'how everything turns away'. Auden's poem is written in a plain, conversational style and this is an excellent device with which to deliver his throwaway asides about objective observations. The form and the meaning of his poem work extremely well. But I would argue that it is the musicality of Yeats' sonnet, as much as Yeats' personality and perspective, or the innocence of the girl, compared with Icarus' hubris, that result in a more humane affect.

But that is not to say that poetry necessarily needs to be humane. While I am proposing that lyric poetry in particular is 'the music of being human', sometimes 'being human' is about expressing a negative emotion, as Donne does in 'Love's Alchemy', where after voicing his cynicism and comparing the elusiveness of love to an alchemist's elusive elixir, he goes on to give the following misogynist view:

Hope not for mind in women; at their best  
Sweetness and wit, they're but *Mummy*, possessed.

Here the end-rhymes of the closing couplet almost seem to hiss their frustration.

Or take this uncharitable, but deeply felt, curse which Kate Clanchy called down when she was moving house, as if she were sticking pins in a doll:

To a Lawyer

May your cows come home,  
Not singly,  
Not warm-breathed in the evening,  
Quietly to their paddock  
Past a hand-smoothed, wooden gate;

Nor in hundreds,  
With docked horns and whistling cowherd,  
Stamped hips and heavy udders,  
Soft-eyed and organised,  
To pasture in your meadow;

May they come  
In truckfuls, in planeloads and ships' holds,  
With flecked sides and red eyes,

Black-flanked and glistening,  
A prairie-full, a continent, a cavalcade of cows.

This poem is a mischievous and lexical delight. Of course between the lines the poet is calling the recipient 'a cow' and 'dead meat'.

Or lyric poems may sometimes relate negative reports and events in the third person. In 'The Shout' Simon Armitage tells the story of a boy he knew from schooldays. One lesson they had to conduct an experiment: 'We were testing the range/ of the human voice:/ he had to shout for all he was worth,/ I had to raise an arm'. In the poem the boy moves further and further away. Then he moves to Australia. Then he puts a gun in his mouth and pulls the trigger. The closing couplet reverberates, like the human voice they were testing:

Boy with the name and face I don't remember,  
You can stop shouting now, I can still hear you.

Here the boy's voice and the dead man's silence, the poet's voice, the human voice and the lyric voice merge as one.

Here's a similar poem by Robin Robertson:

### Lithium

After the arc of ECT  
And the blunt concussion of pills,  
They gave him Lithium to cling to –  
The psychiatrist's stone.  
A metal that floats on water,  
Must be kept in kerosene,  
Can be drawn into wire.  
(He who had jumped in the harbour,  
Burnt his hair off,  
Been caught hanging from the light.)  
He'd heard it was once used  
To make hydrogen bombs,  
But now was a coolant for nuclear reactors,  
So he broke out of hospital barefoot  
And walked ten miles to meet me in the snow.

Though this poem describes tragedy too, the patient is as much object as subject, as much victim as agent. The poem reads like a list of injuries and significantly brackets have been placed around his actions, jumping in the harbour, burning his hair off, hanging from a light, from the list register and are in iambic pentameter, celebrating his courage in breaking out and walking miles through snow.

The lyric also voices the poetry of war and wartime experience, which can bring out both the worst and best sides of 'being human'. Think of the famous couplet by Simonides for the three hundred Spartan dead at Thermopylai, who saved the Greeks from Persian invasion in 480 BC:

O stranger, tell at Sparta that you saw  
Us lying here, obedient to her law.



When you were three, upstairs, asleep,  
And haunting *me* because I conjured you  
The way that child you were would cry out  
Waking in the dark, and when you spoke  
In no child's voice but out of radio silence,  
The hall clock ticking like a radar blip,  
A bottle breaking faintly streets away,  
You said, as I say now, *Don't be afraid*.

This poem opens and closes with the exhortation, 'Don't be afraid'. Donaghy, who poignantly was aware that he, like his own parents, would die young, seeks posthumously to comfort his son. When his son recognises his father in his surname's signature, in a book, in the reflection of his maturing face in a shop window, he wants him to know that he was once 'here, alive'. Moreover, he wants him to know that he was a source of comfort to his father. In Don Paterson's 'Waking with Russell' – which according to legend a homophobic *Daily Mail* reporter thought was about gay sex – father and son are linked not through fear, but joy:

#### Waking with Russell

Whatever the difference is, it all began  
The day we woke up face-to-face like lovers  
And his four-day-old smile dawned on him again,  
Possessed him, till it would not fall or waver;  
And I pitched back not my old hard-pressed grin  
But his own smile, or one I'd rediscovered.  
Dear son, I was *mezzo del cammin*  
And the true path was as lost to me as ever  
When you cut in front and lit it as you ran.  
See how the true gift never leaves the giver:  
Returned and redelivered, it rolled on  
Until the smile poured through us like a river.  
How fine, I thought, this waking amongst men!  
I kissed your mouth and pledged myself forever.

Here what endures is not so much inherited features, glimpsed in the glass of a shop front, or memory, or the wisdom not to be afraid, but the 'gift' of a smile, 'returned and redelivered', a river of life as much of emotion, which the father 'pledged himself forever' to protect. These two poems about haunting and waking may seem opposites, but both encapsulate the love and concern that outlast the human span.

We have already looked at Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale'. Let us turn to two more poems in which birds are symbolic of human experience. Hardy's 'The Darkling Thrush' uses the lyric voice to relate an agnostic, or atheistic, world view, penned by the author of *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, which closes with the pagan perspective that 'the President of the Immortals had finished his sport with Tess'. In the poem Hardy's spirits are in a bleak midwinter:

The ancient pulse of germ and birth  
Was shrunken hard and dry,  
And every spirit upon the earth  
Seemed as fervourless as I.

It is at this lowest ebb that he hears the thrush's song:

At once a voice arose among  
    The bleak twigs overhead  
In a full-hearted evensong  
    Of joy illimited;  
An ageing thrush, frail, gaunt, and small,  
    In blast-beruffled plume,  
Had chosen thus to fling his soul  
    Upon the growing gloom.

Note how the bird is 'ageing', 'frail', 'gaunt', 'small' against the winter landscape, and despite this 'had chosen thus to fling his soul/Upon the growing gloom'. Hardy's novels do not allow for much free will, but he accords it the darkling thrush. However, the poet cannot bring himself to see with the bird's eye:

So little cause for carolings  
    Of such ecstatic sound  
Was written on terrestrial things  
    Afar of night around,  
That I could think there trembled through  
    His happy good-night air  
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew  
    And I was unaware.

Like an Impressionist painter, Hardy records the winter scene, but to him the birdsong is like sunlight on snow, a passing detail in the landscape, and he remains 'unaware' of Hope.

On the other hand, Hopkins' 'The Windhover' uses the highly musical language of sprung rhythm and his own particular brand of hyper-alliteration to celebrate the 'Hope' Hardy missed. We know Hopkins was a priest and this poem is subtitled 'to Christ our Lord', seeing the bird as Christ:

I caught this morning morning's minion, king-  
dom of daylight's dauphin, dapple-dawn-drawn Falcon...

But if we filter out the Christian premise, we are left with some wonderful expressions of high emotion, as Hopkins too voices 'the music of being human':

My heart in hiding  
Stirred for a bird, - the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!

In 'Pied Beauty' Hopkins praises God for a list of delightful details in creation, but reading between the lines this could equally be a poem to an earth goddess:

All things counter, original, spare, strange;  
    Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)  
    With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim.

As well as being Catholic, Hopkins was familiar with pagan culture and read classics at Balliol. Arguably the reach of his work is because he is influenced by both traditions. At any rate, these two poets show us variations in pace, pitch and key of mood in the music of being human.

To conclude, let's look at two outstanding contemporary poets, who like Hopkins, come from a Catholic tradition, but write in the real world. Carol Ann Duffy's 'Prayer' needs no introduction; it is a sonnet which voices the musicality of humanity in a secular age. It is full of the *Zeitgeist*. It speaks of when 'we cannot pray', when 'we are faithless'. It draws us to listen to birdsong, 'the minims sung by a tree', to 'the distant Latin chanting of a train', and how 'Grade I piano scales/console the lodger looking out across/a Midlands town', and how 'someone calls/ a child's name as though they named their loss', before we hear the litany of the shipping forecast:

Darkness outside. Inside, the radio's prayer –  
Rockall. Malin. Dogger. Finisterre.

All these instances where Duffy finds musical solace are in everyday epiphanies that appear to the ear, not the eye, and these, like her sonnet itself, work on our responses through synaesthesia, rendering perceptions through harmony.

Heaney's 'Postscript', which closes *The Spirit Level*, is an uplifting poem of natural beauty and epiphany. This poem is set in 'September or October, when the wind/ and the light are working off each other', a season of raw energy, 'so that the ocean on one side is wild'. Meanwhile, inland 'a slate-grey lake is lit/ by the earthed lightning of a flock of swans', a classical and prehistoric image. But the poet does not only describe; he also makes the observation that philosophically it's:

Useless to think you'll park and capture it  
More thoroughly. You are neither here nor there,  
A hurry through which known and strange things pass  
As big soft buffetings come at the car sideways  
And catch the heart off guard and blow it open.

Here Heaney shows we are *in medias res*. Heaney, like Duffy, focuses our attention on the present place and moment. Both use the lyric voice to transmit the contingency of sense experience which makes us feel what it is to be human. In this last poem, we have come full circle to another poet of the Troubles and here 'buffetings' that 'catch the heart off guard and blow it open', have an undertone of car bombs to stress the 'explosion' of spontaneous response, just as Carol Ann Duffy wrote:

'Some days, although we cannot pray, a prayer  
Utters itself.

It is such utterances that the lyric 'music of being human' voices, setting a sensitive key for the poet to work in and encouraging the humane reader to respond to its textual score.

To conclude my talk, I shall quote two poems I wrote, the first during and the second following my last visit to Berlin in September, 2005, when I held the post of British Council House of Football and Culture Poet-in-residence in the run-up to the 2006 World Cup. 'Exchange' was first published in *The Times Literary Supplement* and both are available in my third book, *A Knowable World* (Bloodaxe Books, 2009):

### At the Brandenburg Gate

On the city's pitch the Brandenburg Gate  
stands like one goal, one aim, to be United,  
let players pass, so none can relegate  
another. And with no net, no score is counted.

Better to be whole and well than schizophrenic.  
One needs to stick together to keep sane.  
The lonely child who plays against a wall must kick  
not just the football, but the frontier down.

### Exchange

As I look at the postcard of a woman smiling,  
I smile to recall my smile in the gallery,  
when turning the corner, I smiled as on meeting,  
on seeing the portrait of the woman smiling,

and for a moment became Frans Hals smiling,  
eliciting a smile in return from the woman,  
whom I now see in the card from the gallery,  
as if she were alive again and smiling at me.

To mix metaphors, languages and alphabetic scripts, in order to promote the international linguistics of art and music with a view to fulfilling in practice the aim of this conference, which is neutrality, would that each individual of the set of those who are φύσεις-και-ψυχαι in the multiverse might be, somatically, ψαῖ and use his, or her, gut instinct sense of δίκαιοσύνη, or νόος, according to gender!