

Ian Duhig

Will There Also Be Singing..?

It seems to me that the biggest change in UK political poetry is not the commonly-mooted notion that the younger generation of poets are uninterested in politics, but one that flows directly from the much greater involvement (resembling more the US situation) of all poets with academia, whether as fully-fledged academics or in the semi-detached positions which I have enjoyed in the past. Although Town-and-Gown divisions have always existed here, universities are even less local institutions than they used to be. As Slavoj Žižek's *In Defence of Lost Causes* puts it, "a New York academic has more in common with a Slovene academic than with blacks in Harlem half a mile from his campus" which, *mutatis mutandis*, would also be true of where I have lived in the UK, and of Ireland. This process parallels larger patterns of globalisation where, in Terry Eagleton's blunt words from *After Theory*, "the rich have mobility while the poor have locality". Locality's presence in poetry has almost become an index not of economic poverty, but of ambition and talent. Yet a confusion of Seamus Heaney's distinction (discussing Kavanagh) between parochialism and provincialism is common now – someone wrote not long ago that he would be happy to be described as any kind of poet, except a local poet. ...Not even a John Clare, who panicked at being "out of my knowledge" when he walked too far from his village?

Inevitably, academic political poetry will be very different from local politically-informed poetry. Once, in an interview, I was asked why I employed traditional forms when writing about homeless people; naively I answered that I felt it lent my subjects' stories more dignity. However, I haven't come up with a better way of expressing this since, so it will still have to do. Obviously, this sort of thing isn't terribly relevant to debates about traditional forms that take place in universities. But my concern here is to note that these debates take a different direction outside universities, and that outside universities poets still survive to have these debates at all.

The most recent campaign with local political dimensions I have been involved with was the David Oluwale Memorial Appeal. This really got going following the 2008 publication of Kester Aspden's *The Hounding of David Oluwale*, which made previously-classified information on the case available for the first time. Somehow, for many people Oluwale's fate embodied a world of wrong, in a way that recalls the words of the Qur'an: "If anyone kills a person... it is as if he kills all mankind". Oluwale's case had made a big impact on me, as the first local job I had in Leeds after moving up from London was in Hepworth's cloth warehouse, where Ken Kitching, one of Oluwale's police tormentors, was employed as a security guard (having just been released from the short time he served in prison). My workmates told me the whole dirty story, which I won't repeat – it's easily found on the web. It fed into many influences which led me to spend most of my working life in the field of homelessness.

There was a strong non-academic cultural presence in this campaign: the BNP/EDL code for immigrants as "cultural enrichers" perhaps meant that we felt it incumbent on us to prove the truth beyond their sneer. Corinne Silva's film *Wandering Abroad* was given a run in the City Art Gallery. Caryl Phillips wrote about Oluwale in his book *Foreigners*. Dipo Agboluaje's play based on Aspden's book, and with the same title, toured nationally. Was the campaign successful? Yes; an area close to where David Oluwale drowned was proposed by the City Architect for "some form of memorial garden or terrace", though negotiations are ongoing. And the campaign may have been symptomatic of, or contributed to, changing local attitudes in a period when Leeds lost its sole BNP councillor, returning a new Labour administration to the City after a deal with the Greens

and countering a regional trend which returned a BNP Member for the European Parliament.

The cliché is that race, not class, is the real social issue in the US, while the reverse is true here. In fact both are urgent in both places, now class means one of the walls of social inequality. But here, questions of race are resolving into mealy-mouthed Multiculturalism-versus-Midsomerism discussions. To me, immigration as locally experienced has clear national and international significance, after the success of Marine le Pen in France, and with similar parties to her National Front rising all over Europe and Scandinavia. Although some reading this may wonder what local issues like the Oluwale campaign have to do with them in their more “civilized” parts of society, this country, or the world, I would ask them to think again. There is a tendency now to devolve unpleasant things – cuts and poverty by the Coalition, or responsibility for shameful attitudes by enlightened societies at large – to the fringes of a society or nation. Meanwhile the local view here would devolve responsibility for the dead of Iraq and Afghanistan onto New Labour, and that party’s desperation to ingratiate itself with a wealthy South-east and the USA. North American poets and commentators on poetry frequently express impatience with the class and regional issues that complicate this small island’s lives, but the North/South divide here is becoming more, not less marked. We are developing a modern version of what Procopius described:

In Britain, men of ancient times built a long wall cutting off a large part of it [...] to the south of the wall there is a salubrious air, changing with the seasons, moderately warm in summer and cool in winter. But on the north side, all is reversed in a home to countless serpents and wild beasts [...] Natives believe any man crossing this wall will be struck dead immediately.

Well, if not struck dead in body, in danger of boring stiff those they talk to about it.

Unlike Clare, being “out of my knowledge” is a condition I experience most of the time, so my prediction in the last paragraph needs to be taken with a bushel of salt. I never imagined that the social inequalities that were being swept away in my youth would return and become even more entrenched now. I would not have believed that the council estate I grew up on would be sold off despite increasing need. I left school at sixteen, but found my way into higher education through night-school free, and easily; yet I did not develop the mental faculties to foresee that my son’s generation would be saddled with decades of debt for a less valuable qualification. My wife and son both work for the NHS... but you get the idea. If poetry begins in wonder, such stupefying political changes could not fail to influence mine, as they do many other poets now, writing in many different ways. I’ll end with Brecht, doing our job in a considerably worse situation:

In the dark times
Will there also be singing in the dark times?
Yes, there will also be singing
About the dark times.



Ian Duhig
from Skew Bridge Sonnets

I. Wrong Turn

Later, the language of the people, which up to then had been known as Trojan or Crooked Greek, was called British.

– Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain*

Askew from Skewsby, but not too far,
and just a digression from Shandy Hall
though harder to find than Shangri-La,
they built a new Troy without any walls
or signposts (to baffle Greek invaders);
remaining unmarked on motoring maps,
this smallest of all Britain's turf mazes
was never designed as a tourist trap,
but turns like a sonnet to trap Old Nick –
as he can only move in a straight line,
the locals say, who might seem thick,
still shy of strangers and their designs,
but if in the end they choose to speak,
it sounds like Trojan, or Crooked Greek.

II. Doubling Back

*Our language can be seen as an old city: a maze of little streets
and squares... In the actual use of expressions we make detours.*

– Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

Strangers ask, *Why the 'City of Troy'?*
The answer to this turned into a maze –
it's lost in translation; a turn of phrase
unwinding from the old Welsh *Caerdroia*,
where *Droia* was 'Troy' but 'Turns' as well...
so runs the web's unByzantine explanation,
But does *Caer* mean 'City'? Isn't it 'Castle',
as in Caernarfon, whose Byzantine walls,
like Byzantium itself, are also translations,
Roman to Greek – yet still Greek in Wales
as its conqueror's words to local Britons
who he made slaves, working like Trojans,
now called 'Welsh', "English" for 'Strangers'
(from invaders' *extraneus* and *étrangers*)?

III. Skew Bridge

I felt quite at home, / As if it were mine, / Sleeping lazily / In this house of fresh air.
– Sora, in Bashō's *The Narrow Road to the Deep North*

I knew I was lost passing the Ross Maze Museum
a third time, late for connections at Skew Bridge.
Missing the Orient Express, the Troy quinquireme,
the last magic carpet and Pharoah's golden barge,
I settled with ghosts from its old navvies' shanty
to drink in that night the spirit of the navigator,
whose camp might mean a song, or build upon *ty*,
the Welsh word for house, our house of fresh air.
I turned in and dreamed of a nearby skew bridge,
built yearly from fresh words which only connect,
though turning like pages, a verse-end or sonnet,
or any of the coats worn by the English language.
I slept soundly. When I woke and rose next day,
I found a thousand years had passed away.

