

Selection as Rewriting: Maurice Scully's Re-Envisioning of *Things That Happen*



Marthine Satris

The title of *A Tour of the Lattice*, the 2011 edition of poems selected from the multi-volume work *Things That Happen* by Maurice Scully, guides the reader to two helpful ways of understanding Scully's poetry: the project is one of movement and process, and also one of cross-weavings and internal structure that have emerged from the gradual accretion of the poem(s) over several decades. When I was first delving into *Things That Happen* several years ago, the words "lattice," "weave," "trellis," and "net" struck me in their frequent appearance. The looping, revisiting structure of the multi-volume collection of poems weaves its own lattice, with each motif and linguistic repetition became webbed with the associations it accrued during my different encounters with them across Scully's many books. Coming across the words *weave* or *lattice* in the project, I saw these moments as connections between the poet and myself, moments in which he acknowledged the scaffolding on which I could develop an understanding of his concerns. In creating *A Tour of the Lattice* from the wide-ranging and inclusive *Things That Happen*, the winnowing and carving Scully has necessarily done to create this selection from the project underscore the threads strung between each part. This window into his project emphasizes the coherence that is much less

visible when one reads the several volumes that make up the entire poetic venture. Scully's large project records, in fragments and loose groupings of associations, his life as a poet and a father, and this selection condenses particular aspects of that record.

Maurice Scully's poetry has appeared in *Golden Handcuffs Review* several times over the last few years, and earlier responses to his poetry, including Meredith Quartermain's in issue #14 and Augustus Young's in issue #9, have explored the fundamental structural and thematic concerns of Scully's work. Young's description of Scully's project as "punctuating one man's life with bloc-notes to chart his passage," helps the reader to understand that the amalgamation of poems that comes together under the name *Things That Happen* is an effort to record both daily life and the very acts of recording and remembering. Like "*Krapp's Last Tape* without the technology," Young says of *Things That Happen*, and the cyclical returnings of moments and memories in Scully's project almost predict the creation of this book of selections. Like the entire project, *A Tour of the Lattice* returns to what has been written and reuses it, rearranges it, reinterprets it.

A few years before Veer's publication of *A Tour of the Lattice*, the Irish press Dedalus published Scully's book *Doing the Same in English: A Sampler of Work 1987-2008*, which included work Scully has published outside of the umbrella of *Things That Happen*, although most of the material was drawn from Scully's main work. Despite this, there is almost no overlap between the Veer Books and Dedalus Press selections, and consequently, they lead the reader through related but, in some ways, quite dissimilar poems. This difference can be hard to see initially, since the titles of subsections and individual poems often are repeated over *Things That Happen's* many volumes; "Sonnet" titles many poems chosen for both *A Tour of the Lattice* and *Doing the Same in English*, as do "Ballad" and "Song." One of the very few pieces that both books include is one particular poem titled "Sonnet" that begins with a line that also occurs frequently in Scully's work: "then I woke up." This particular "sonnet," from *Sonata*, 2006's addition to *Things That Happen*, includes a small section that, as Scully explained in my interview with him in 2009, is a riff on a well-known passage in James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Scully's language reads as follows:

*foam**ice**bale**castor*

blunt as that –

to live

watching

never expecting to

participate

.... (*A Tour of the Lattice* 95)

The italicized words above rhyme with those Stephen Dedalus considers when comparing his English to that of an English dean at his university: “The language he is speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words *home, Christ, ale, master* on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired language” (Joyce 189). Of his own slant take on Joyce’s comment on the Irish estrangement from and absorption into English, Scully said in 2009 that it is “a mock daisy you could hand to Bloom in Nighttown” (20) – the Nighttown episode of *Ulysses* is of course the one in which encounters and ideas Bloom has had earlier in the novel are twisted through dream imagery, re-emerging to confront him with his own memories.

The nod to Joyce is not an attempt to build up *Things That Happen* into any kind of monumental epic – Scully does not seek to write the history of a nation, but the history of a life as it is sensed and observed. And that life is always in process, always re-envisioning itself. Ideas are reshaped by new pressures to reveal new facets. The impact of even minor changes in context is one of the effects of the rearrangement done in *A Tour of the Lattice*. In this new volume of selections, the Joycean moment discussed above is preceded by an extract from the 1997 booklet *Postlude* in which an arrangement of nouns is similarly gathered:

to get to the company of those never
 practicing freedom never
 or isolation

pen creel hive
 fire ice or
 to yes

you me everybody
 each *isola*
 SPACE

(*A Tour of the Lattice* 65)

In *A Tour of the Lattice*, the reader feels upon reaching the “mock daisy” that the poet has dipped back into this earlier collection of nouns to pick out one and reinterpret it. This passage from *Postlude* is not included in *Doing the Same in English*, and therefore the word “ice” does not work as a pivot point or gateway as it is in *A Tour’s* version of *Things That Happen*. There are other pieces included in *Doing the Same in English* that would build a different journey of associations with the “mock daisy”; even the title of the Dedalus Press volume, with its allusion to translation, might drum more heavily the language question present in Stephen Dedalus’s words. Leaving that aside, the commonality of “ice” between both selections available to the reader of *A Tour of the Lattice* insists to me that these pieces, seemingly otherwise unrelated, be considered together. Instead of the allusion to an author’s relationship to language created in the “mock daisy” section, “ice” in the selection from *Postlude* is one of several words associated with objects and experiences encountered by the body and with the relationship of the individual body to others in a crowd. The reader also notices that the lines that follow both instances of the word in *A Tour of the Lattice* address the distance that being in one’s own mind, observing life’s passage, imposes between the writer who records life and the world he or she inhabits. Tracing the use of “ice” therefore draws the reader’s attention to this note of isolation, which can then color how the reader experiences the other parts of the work that emphasize the sensorial or the bodily, such as when Scully records the movements of tai chi or of a skateboarder.

In both collections of nouns present in *A Tour of the Lattice*,

the isolation of the nouns as words, not as parts of a sentence, means that we consider them initially as separate moments of meaning, then consider what might connect them. This connection is the work the reader must do throughout *Things That Happen*, and Scully's creation of two quite different tours of his project demonstrates the flux of meaning in his multivolume project. Rather than the selections being "highlights," as editions of selected poems often are for lyric poets, each recombination of Scully's work creates an emphatically different poem from the larger project.

The two different volumes of selected poems also repeat, on a larger scale, the work that *Things That Happen* does itself. *Things That Happen* was written over a nearly-thirty-year period, and as it developed, Scully not only reflected upon experiences and moments that had occurred earlier in his life, but also revisited earlier phrases or motifs that then acquired significance in their repetition. The moves of dancers recur, titles are reused, phrases first used in one volume find new meaning in another. To make his poetry, Scully weaves the present and the past, mixing reflections on the process of writing ("This is my desk. This is where I work." [22]) with memories of sensations and experiences from elsewhere. There is change, but rarely a sense of destination; rather, the "I've been busy. Busy eating, drinking, giving ear, / listening to repetitive nonsense, setting out, getting a living..." of page 22 in *A Tour of the Lattice* continues as the "busy busy busy" of page 120, though they are selections from texts composed several years apart. Children grow taller, the family sets up house in a new location, but the duties of today feel awfully like those of yesterday. Scully attends to the cyclical nature of the quotidian, which makes his own cycling back to *Things That Happen* of a piece with his style of composition in each book of the project.

In the halls of Irish poetry, the author returning and rewriting and not letting the canon of work stand solidly has a bit of a history. Derek Mahon is known for revising his poems significantly between editions of his *Collected Poems*, of which there have been a few. In a better-known case, W.B. Yeats returned to his early poems and revised them several times between initial publication, collection, and inclusion in his *Collected Poems* decades later. Unlike Yeats, who was focused on constructing a final, perfected legacy, Scully's work refuses a final form. And unlike Mahon, it is not the individual pieces that are rewritten, but the structure, rather, is recomposed each time. For

example, because *Things That Happen* has been published in stages, the 1990 pamphlet *Prior* also has a life as part of the larger volume *Priority*, but it has been pulled out of *Priority* again to stand separately in *A Tour of the Lattice*. Not only that, but parts of *Prior* as it existed in its initial incarnation have been dropped. How can we say which version of *Prior* is the perfected version? In each moment of publication, it has been a reflection of what the poet was creating at that time. These acts of exclusion, inclusion, and rearrangement all are a part of Scully's refusal of the finished, perfectly built poem. *Things That Happen* refuses to differentiate between epiphanic moments and the everyday grind, allowing all in, and readers of Scully's oeuvre must do the same.

We should see the act of building multiple editions of selections from *Things That Happen* as an extension of Maurice Scully's poetics, since the act of selecting (or "curating," as it is trendily known) is a creative act itself. The volumes that weave together threads from *Things That Happen* concentrate the themes subtly present in the encompassing project and spool them up a bit more tightly, revealing overlaps and connections a reader might otherwise have overlooked. As a result of Veer's publication of *A Tour of the Lattice*, readers of Scully's work will realize that while such a volume of selections may condense *Things That Happen*, it does not simplify the project; instead it reveals the open-ended nature of the project to an even greater degree.

Sources

- Joyce, James. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man: Text, Criticism, Notes*. Ed. Chester G. Anderson. New York: The Viking Press, 1968. Print.
- Scully, Maurice. *Doing the Same in English: A Sampler of Work 1987-2008*. Dublin, Ireland: Dedalus Press, 2008. Print.
- . Interview by Marthine Satris. *Contemporary Literature* 53.1 (2012): 1-30. Print.
- . *A Tour of the Lattice: From Things That Happen (1981-2006)*. London, UK: Veer Books, 2011. Print.
- Young, Augustus. "'How Do You Do' – The Strange World of Maurice Scully and his Poetry." *The Golden Handcuffs Review* 1.9 (2007-8): n. pag. Web. 1 July 2012.