

# Listening and Commemoration: Maurice Scully



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The books are not ‘collections’ of disparate ‘poems’, but pieces, tesserae, that make-up a larger shifting picture or thought-sound-world. Dip in anywhere, even the very beginning if you must, and go float. I’m not trying to be original or eccentric in this; it’s just the way I work, and I’m comfortable with it. Having read one piece the best thing is to go on to the next. And the next, and the next. One will throw light on the other eventually, picking up a repetition a variation a distant echo, changing the meaning of the preceding as the reading progresses and drawing a strange energy from the spaces in between.<sup>1</sup>

Maurice Scully’s poetry has been described by Billy Mills as a ‘poetry of learning to live with and in the world, not explaining and improving on it’<sup>ii</sup>. Scully’s evolving work *Things That Happen* published in a series of four volumes as *5 Freedoms of Movement* (Devon, Etruscan Books 2002 /Originally Galloping Dog 1987); *Livelihood* (Wicklow, Wild Honey Press 2004); *Sonata* (London, Reality Street Editions, 2006); and *Tig* (Exeter, Shearsman Books, 2006). These volumes, spanning 1981-2006, mark the work of a writer at rest and reflection; the poems respond to but never simply describe events. Scully’s poetic is one of responsiveness and encounter. Some readers have

commented on the evolving nature of his work, his poetics of extension and expansion. Others have stressed the phenomenological aspect of his poetry, its mobility and responsiveness to a sense of being in the world. One could also think about Scully's writing as ventilating the idealisation of the book as form, offering an expansive form of design, or an accumulative poetics. As the poet stresses in the citation above, one can dip into the sections of serial poems and be propelled to omnivorously read on. And this is what one is seduced into doing especially in the later volumes which include *Humming* (Shearsman Books 2009) and *Several Dances* (Shearsman, 2014).

These recent poems published in *Golden Handcuffs Review*, 'Pip' and 'Patch Work', are from a larger projected work entitled *The Play Book*. Other excerpts from this longer work have appeared as the chapbook *Play*, by Smithereens Press, accessible at <http://www.smithereenspress.com/index.html> and in the Trinity College literary journal *Icarus* [www.icarusmagazine.com](http://www.icarusmagazine.com). I draw reference to *Play* in particular not only to stress the Scully's frequent use of seriality, but to make note of the chapbook's cover. *Play*'s cover might at first seem fairly innocuous, it depicts red, yellow, green, white and blue tiddlywinks, seemingly scattered mid-game. Tiddlywinks of course is often diminished as a child's game that one graduates from to other more adult pursuits. However, since Scully's poem 'Patch Work' also closes with a game of tiddlywinks, I became intrigued.

Tiddlywinks I discovered was far from a childish game. Tracing the etymology of the word offers an intriguing history. The word tiddlywink once referred to 'a. An unlicensed public-house or pawnshop; a small beer shop b. rhyming slang a drink'. Used figuratively, tiddlywinks denotes 'a useless or frivolous activity; esp. in phr. to play tiddlywinks, to waste time on trivia.'<sup>iii</sup> One plays the games with coloured counters named as 'winks' and the basic premise is to deliver one's own winks to a pot. However there is an offensive strategy to the game, one can prevent one's opponents by immobilising other's counters. Mary Ann and Robert Dimand specifically mention tiddlywinks in the context of authority and strategy in their history of game theory: 'The application of "dominance" depends on the objective of players and the rules of the game played: this definition of solution applies to problems of optimization, cooperative games, games of tiddlywinks and games of politics.'<sup>iv</sup> The sketching of gains and losses is evident in the poem 'Placed', from Scully's chapbook *Plays*:

PLACED

Plastic disk  
laughs into  
its cup.

*roof*  
*roof-roof*  
*roof-roof-roof*  
disk by disk  
the cups open  
uplaugh

The plastic  
flat primary  
colour of it.

The green  
disk blinks  
into its cup.

Don't let  
the cup  
tumble.

Dice tickle  
the board.

Flick.

Slim textures  
in circles squares  
diamonds cylinders –

I heard  
you rang  
you answered  
you

you parked  
in the park  
you too parked  
next to the park

Scully moves us through a repeated sequence of action and event. There are oppositions here between chance and strategy, between 'dice' and 'flick'. One might also hear echoes from Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés Jamais N'Abolira Le Hasard* (*A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance*). Scully's interest however, is not in the typographic flourish and the concrete aspects of poetry on the page, or of writing just as materiality. Focusing on sound and sight, 'Placed' depicts the coordination between eye and body and moves from these dynamics to consider the realm of interpersonal communication. There is a shift from literal games, tiddlywinks and others (given the poem's emphasis on shapes circles, squares and diamonds) to language games, between and the 'I and you'. The poem thwarts any lazy linguistic expectations, *pay attention* it seems to tell us since even the change in a phoneme can disrupt our preconceived meaning. For example laugh becomes 'uplaugh' and associative expectations are thwarted as in the disk which blinks rather than winks (given the context of tiddlywinks). Strategies of defamiliarisation elicit humour, how a dice may 'tickle the board'. The patterning of phrases is key to this slight section from 'Placed'. Prepositions alter ideas of space 'you parked/ in the park' becomes 'you too parked/ next to the park'. This testing out of spatial relations is mirrored in the negotiation between speakers. We remain uncertain if this begins a discursive exchange: 'you rang/ you answered'. There are also suggestions that this could be the testing out of the syntax of an instruction primer. The accumulative repetition of 'roof- eventually becomes the onomatopoeic transcription of a barking dog.

I would be reluctant to reduce Scully's poetry to being purely obsessed with indeterminacy of meaning, or fetishizing linguistic irresolution. Instead, it might be useful to think of these new poems published in *Golden Handcuffs Review* as enabling us to consider the propositions of a discursive poetry. In short, how poetic expression can be thought productively 'aslant'. From the 1970s discursivity as has often been linked to a particular model of what was referred to as the 'expressive lyric'. The critic Charles Altieri identifies the dominant model of the 1970s as the 'scenic mode', and suggests that this model of the lyric poem is firmly rooted in the extension of a romantic ideology.' The impetus of the work is towards an expression of an inchoate interiority and the poem in his words: 'Places a reticent, plain-speaking and self-reflective speaker within a narratively presented

scene evoking a sense of loss. Then the poet tries to resolve the loss in a moment of emotional poignance, or wry acceptance, that renders the entire lyric event an evocative metaphor for some general sense of mystery about the human condition' (10). The everydayness of this form of poetic writing is referred to by Robert Pinsky as a form of 'discursive' writing. For Pinsky the discursive poem or lyric presents the poet 'talking, predicating, moving directly and as systematically and unaffectedly as he would walk from one place to another'.<sup>vi</sup> Central to this tendency is the articulation of the subject's feelings and desires, and a strongly marked division between subjectivity and its articulation as expression. This focus on expression is frequently evoked with reference to the speaker's voice, and a suggestion of certain 'sincerity'. Broadly speaking both these models of an 'expressive' or discursive lyric', posit the self as the primary organising principle of the work.

Scully's poems too can also be thought of as discursive, but they address the interlocutor in different ways. Instead of the 'naturalness' of movement identified by Pinsky, or the moment of retrospective accounting identified by Altieri, Scully's speaker is more deeply attuned to a process of listening, as well as speaking. Jean-Luc Nancy in his reflections on the act of listening, offers a way of thinking about the dynamic between listening and the construction of selfhood. Nancy proposes that:

To listen is to enter that spatiality by which, *at the same time*, I am penetrated, for it opens up in me as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me: it opens me inside me as well as outside... To be listening is to be *at the same time* outside and inside, to be open *from* without and *from* within, hence from one to the other and from one in the other... In this open and above all opening presence, in acoustic spreading and expansion, listening takes place *at the same time* as the sonorous event.<sup>vii</sup>

Scully's poems open up the possibility of how to envisage a poetics of listening and being listened to; what it is to be responsive to others, as well as being an agent in the world. Perhaps this is most apparent in his poem 'Pip'. The title alone generates multiple impressions, 'pip' as kernel or seed, or the 'pips' of a phone. One senses from this poem a countering of T.S. Eliot's proposition that to be an artist is to 'purify the dialect of the tribe'.<sup>viii</sup> 'Pip' indicates that it is only in the latent spread of words, their sonic mutability and constant regeneration

that the convening of a discursive community can take place. Take as example the initial questioning a search for the first very 'first word'- the genesis of language that is 'trapped slick/ head slow a / splash zone/ around a gap/ that might be/ the -.' Instead of finding stability and cohesion this 'first word', Scully offers a latent expansion of expanding concentric circles of 'that *first* ((ripple)).' 'Pip' offers us an interlocutor and an addressee; it focuses on processes of listening and intersubjective exchange, including remnants of a conversation in all its flaws, misinterpretations and errors. A voice tells of 'talking to / you noticing / something/ strange'. This shared space become a 'talking to / you listening / to what/ we're speaking.' In all of these interventions 'Pip' records a shifting momentum 'a change/ a beginning/ a to each'.

In this poem, there is a constant desire for the recognition of, and even responsibility towards the other. This interaction can be sensed in the voicing and appreciation in 'each/ noticing both passing/ the over-/ lapping regions of / preparation'. This desire for a recognition of something that exceeds the self, reminds us of an ideal of an intersubjective ethics, or at its most basis a sense of responsibility to another. One might think of Emmanuel Levinas's *Otherwise than Being* and the idea of an 'encounter' not as the epic wandering of an imperial self that seeks to appropriate the other to a form of knowledge. This meeting or summoning of responsibility in the philosopher's work is prompted dramatically as a dialogic 'face to face encounter.'<sup>ix</sup> The insistence on the immediacy of the encounter privileges not only spontaneity, but the necessity of a performative response to the other. Indeed the face-to-face meeting with the other is evoked as a moment of epiphany.

It is important to assert that there is an inherent optimism in 'Pip'. The poem articulates a hope that this encounter (between people, between interlocutors) could 'shift an inch/ or two/ on-/ plinth-clock-/time-/a long way back'. The visual rendering of space around the poem and the staccato intervention of em-dashes mark a fragile vertical tower of words. By contrast there is a pleasure to be found in shared space, which closes the poem. Children are described sat in a circle 'feet touching' each naming a round object 'the sun, the moon,/ an eye'. The game chronicles a movement from nouns to 'figurative expressions' to include 'the family circle,/ togetherness'. The epiphany that is rendered in Scully's poem relies on the shaping of a single word, *osani*, which is extended to the formation of a community of players at

the poem's close. Working through this word game we finally arrive at an explanation of *osani* as 'the Congolese /pygmy word/ for love'.

Scully has mentioned the influence of the Irish language upon his engagement with poetic language. Not being from a native Irish speaking background, the poet recalls the initial strangeness of being sent to an Irish language boarding school: 'I'd come home from boarding school on holiday full of a language my parents didn't understand, thinking in that language and translating as I spoke, dreaming in that language, or a jumble of both' (11). Scully reads this early encounter with Irish in school and in *Gaeltacht* culture as an empowering one: 'I remember thinking how strange and stimulating it was that simple objects and actions were known to me, in a way my parents didn't know them' (11). He adds that 'the seed of the attraction to language for me may lie there, in that early experience' (11). But when Scully moved school to Dublin he found the language associated to a to a 'vehement' nationalism. He went on to study both English and Irish at Trinity College in 1971.

J.C.C. Mays states that that one of the dilemmas for the Irish poet is that 'you need to be incorporated into the tradition to be an Irish writer on those terms, or you might as well not exist.'<sup>x</sup> Scully's poetry offers a challenge to readers more familiar with of tamer version of contemporary Irish lyricism. Tradition is most certainly negotiated in Scully's poetry, and strains of an Irish language bardic inheritance resonate in his work. The texture of reiteration within individual poems as well as consonantal patterns point us towards an earlier oral tradition. The opening epigraph to the pamphlet *Plays* is taken from an early bardic poem attributed to Giolla Brighde Mhac Con Midhe, dated 12-13th century:

Gémadh bréag do bhiadh san duain,  
is bréag bhuan ar bhréig dhiombuain;  
bréag uile gidh créad an chrodh,  
bréag an duine dándéantae

This early Irish poem depicts, according to its translator Reverend L. McKenna 'an address to some Priest who was pretending to have brought back from Rome a condemnation of the Irish bards.'<sup>xi</sup> In translation, the poem places the act of writing in opposition to wealth yet in tandem with a tradition of patronage:

Though a poem be only a fancy  
 it is a lasting fancy given in return for a passing one!  
 Wealth, however great is a mere phantom  
 A phantom too he for whom the poem is made. (681)

During the writing of poems in *Plays*, Scully mentions that the burdens of the 1916 centenary commemoration. Tracing the composition of 'Placed' he sees a link with gaming, power and commemoration. For him the poem began with an account of a game of tiddlywinks and led to reflections on Yeats's infamous 'terrible beauty':

I was interested in the colours & shapes as well as the rhythms of the game. The colours & shapes led to 'motley' & that, in turn, to Yeats's 'Easter 1916'. 1916 in this year of centenary, led me to think about the complexity of commemoration. Those I think were the links that made the piece.<sup>xii</sup>

Turning to 'Patch Work' one can read the iterative patterning of the poem as an attempt to document history, climate change and processes of making history and art. The poem offers a constant sense of beginning again. Its space opens as a studio where we are offered a composition in *media res* 'Meanwhile/ back at the/ studio'. But there are also heavy hints at a regime that governs this making. Bureaucratic orders or instructions are given 'Tick. / Sign. Number.' Clearly this poem envisions the making of an important artefact under pressure 'with time tight'. Scully pays attention to detail of orchestrated movement and interaction as each of the 20 A5 sheets are touched 'with yr right/ middle/ finger & /have them / touched/ each one/ by yr/ assistant'. Later, the intrusion of an artist 'Wearing /a blindfold' hints at a possible historic connection. Of course the figure of justice is frequently blindfolded, but one might also think of the blindfold as a preparation of a subject for execution. Given Scully's sensitivity to issues of commemoration, one could read the poem as an evocation of the martyrs of the 1916 Easter Rising. Remnants of typography emerge as 'A hammer bangs/ & its echoes angle/ back' which could lead one to consider the processes involved in the making of the Proclamation of the Irish Republic. Such was the haste of the original's production, that the printer had to improvise with the type available. In his brief essay on commemoration, Scully has drawn attention to the seduction of public monument and appeal of collective memory. He comments in *Icarus* that 'Commemorative statues & monuments



are public static moments of statement about an event or person or movement.’ Persuasively he proposes that ‘collective memory gathers up simplifications that serve agendas not controlled or initiated by the majority of those that “remember.”’ In ‘Patch Work’ one senses an acute discomfort to the processes of recording events, there is an instruction to ‘Document/ the action’. This act of witness, or recording is then allied to narcissistic ‘processes that are/ self-augmenting’. Scully in his deconstruction of historical narrative, warns us of what Charles Olson referred to as the ‘lyrical interference of the individual as ego’. In this case, the temptation is to turn trauma and historical event into a magnum opus, or as Scully states in ‘Patch Work’ – ‘Opus II’ and ‘Opus III’.

In a recent email, Scully offered that his latest poems could be read as being part of a ‘patterned work.’ He adds that ‘Medieval Irish bardic poetry in the shadowy background. But not (I hope) in too heavy-handed a way. Like the bardic stuff it is preoccupied with power.’<sup>xiii</sup> Using patterns of repetition and anaphora ‘Patch Work’ threads throughout variations of a statement from what reads as a newspaper or journal article on climate change.<sup>xiv</sup> Initially the statement reads ‘Apparently/ our climate/ is much more/ sensitive to/ small forces/ than had/ previously been/ imagined’. But during the poem displacements and intrusions extend and expand the phrase to other variations: ‘converting / slight ripples/ times/ temperatures’ and later ‘small/ forces’ is later adapted to ‘minute forces’. The insistent repetition of the scientific assertion in its various forms and tenors, offers a desperate attempt to communicate a threat, which is either ignored or fails to elicit responsive action. The poem halts accordingly with the aphoristic statement ‘Ars longa/ vita brevis So.’ The actions of reading and responding to pages close with a rapt observation of a game of tiddlywinks. Placed as a conclusion to a treatise on climate change, the gaming may initially appear inconsequential— fiddling while Rome burns. We are though reminded that the tactic of tiddlywinks is to assert dominance and be a winner- ‘you win’ is the poem’s hollow assertion at the close. Playing or gaming, in Scully’s recent poems are often provocative acts and in this last poem, become acts of aggression and power. Through Scully’s forensic attention to rhythmic patterns, intrusions and pauses he creates poems that pay attention to the linguistic games that we play. Scully’s poems in *Golden Handcuffs Review* perform acts of listening, while deconstructing ideas of witness

and commemoration, offering an important praxis to how we might review the discursive in contemporary poetry.

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<sup>i</sup> Maurice Scully, 'Interview with Maurice Scully by Marthine Satris' *Contemporary Literature* 53.1 (2012): 1-30 (p. 13)

<sup>ii</sup> Billy Mills, 'Sustainable Poetry' *Elliptical Movements* Accessed: <https://ellipticalmovements.wordpress.com/tag/maurice-scully/>

<sup>iii</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online* Accessed: <http://www.oed.com.ucd.idm.oclc.org>

<sup>iv</sup> Mary-Ann Dimand, Robert W. Dimand *The History Of Game Theory, Volume 1: From the Beginnings to 1945* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>v</sup> Charles Altieri, *Self and Sensibility in Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 10.

<sup>vi</sup> Robert Pinsky, *The Situation of Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), p. 133.

<sup>vii</sup> Jean Luc-Nancy, *Listening* translated Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002) p. 14.

<sup>viii</sup> T. S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding', *The Four Quartets*, in *T.S. Eliot: Collected Poems* (London: Faber & Faber, 1970) p. 205.

<sup>ix</sup> Emmanuel Levinas *Otherwise Than Being, or, Beyond Essence* trans. Alphonso Lingis (Heidelberg: Springer, 1981).

<sup>x</sup> J.C.C Mays 'Flourishing and Foul: Ideology, Six Poets and the Irish Building Industry' *The Irish Review* 8 (1990): 6-11

<sup>xi</sup> L. McKenna 'A Bardic Poem' *The Irish Monthly* 47. 558 (Dec 1919): 679-82 (p. 679).

<sup>xii</sup> Scully, 'For Icarus' *Icarus* 67.1 <http://www.icarusmagazine.com/winter-2016/>

<sup>xiii</sup> Scully, personal email 11th July, 2017.

<sup>xiv</sup> Scully's phrasing and rephrasing in the poem reads as a variation on headlines reporting the findings from the research article by Tobias Friedrich, Axel Timmerman, Michelle Tigchelaar 'Eocene atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> from the nahcolite proxy' *Geology* 43:12 (2015)