

‘to pick up on the possible &
go on with that from there’
– the poetry of Maurice Scully



Peter Hughes

We lost Maurice Scully back in March 2023. His poetry remains full of life.

how’s this? a girl goes by from elsewhere
to set street music its cryptic rhythm against another
how you can live to a different beat an old radio
in a hut on a deserted building site paid little to
live & as to writing/well! but between stations
to pick up on the possible & go on with that from there

The world keeps shuffling the syntax, the mood shifts suddenly but then the changes are folded back into the texture. The poet delights in throwing in images that could stand as metaphors for poetry, but only fleetingly:

A monkey’s grassblade trickily siphoning living niblets
from the anthill.

Maurice’s poems are life affirming without ever verging into the cosy or complacent. He’s frank and daft. He energises lines with

details of his love for his children and wife then here comes another insect. There's a strong sense of someone drafting, writing, thinking in new lines and directions as if poetry really were a fresh way of attending to the experience of being alive right now. Which it is, though reading much of the mainstream you might be forgiven for wondering, anyway...

His poem 'Sonnet' has 26 lines and begins with these words:

This is the house I live in now. Dance.

The first sentence is repeated at the start of the third stanza and there is a kind of *volta* into an unusually frank series of statements:

This is the house I live in now. It is to be poor.
It is to be decided on without grounds. It is to
spend one's life thinking, and be thought an idiot;
to live by dint of intensive works, and be thought
lazy; to cherish one's wife and children and
be thought ga-ga. Dance! The grub feeds on the egg,
fat enough then to step down onto the appropriated
honey pool in the cell. See through the delighted
entomologist's eye, delight, discovery. Cracks the
mud-wall, flies free.

The final words of the poem are 'Look, wait, I ...'

'Sonnet' is unusually frank in sketching out the contexts of despair and then dramatising an escape, a way forward, a shrugging off of the contemporary wastelands. It's a determination to press on. The way forward doesn't involve any transcendent gestures. It's rooted in the behaviour of life on earth, and shifts in perspective.

Those shifts in perspective are often accompanied by shifts in scale. The tiny and the huge are juxtaposed and allowed to comment on each other. In 'A Personal Note' (which involves picking blackberries in a country lane and characteristically ends with the word 'Listen...') there is a beautiful arc that starts from nettles and wet grass, soars into the sky before descending and resolving on a single drop of water. There are seven four-line stanzas in the poem

and these are the middle three:

Over nettles & wet
 grass over the hedge &
 where birds pass
 over the sky

the planet's envelope
 & its dead satellite
 over this system & its
 ordinary star

elliptics spinning, circling,
 to a speck my fingers reach in to
 one waterdrop tensed from
 heaven on a rosehip.

These stanzas lift us via the birds from the nettles and hedge to the sky and thence to a view from distant space before the final close up. Those shifts in scale, as well as shifts in linguistic tone from 'poetical' to informal, are important elements in the inclusive 'dance' of these poems. In the last two lines quoted above he certainly takes a risk with that 'heaven' but just about gets away with it because of 'tensed', I reckon.

Maurice Scully doesn't filter out the miserable, boring and unfair but what he does do is dramatise a kind of strategy for dealing with all the shit which is by veering that focus in or out (close up of ant's tibial spur then intergalactic dust) and also connecting the past with a sense of the ongoing, riding the river of time. The river may be filthy and lowered by illegal extraction but it's still moving. And he likes its name, which means different things to different folks and let's all compare notes. Then he holds up a chunk of language and says 'isn't this phrasing or cadence odd and almost comely?'

He watches a fly meticulously clean itself, lifting its legs two at a time then having a break then doing its head and he says 'quite / like writing really. Out there. That'.

The fly will come back. Its wing will chime with a leaf, a section of lace. We are shown correspondences but not in a way that could smear out differences. The specificity of the particular

thing is attended to and celebrated. The celebration of the details of living is what the work is all about, the celebration of consciousness and articulation, the world and our involvement with it, the dance of interconnectedness. Given that this is the case it is no surprise that our poet gets impatient from time to time with the petty, the fake, the crooked and the pious.

the hinges singe & the money burns
 & hey presto. Lick, twist.
 The light. Ethical?

Rubbish!...

Gouging pretty
 messages

on the Church-Bank door—
 there goes Michael
 rowing his

bloody boat ashore again & good
 riddance (Alleluia)...

Many people have spoken of their happy memories of hearing Maurice read in person. I was lucky enough to hear him at the Cambridge Conference of Contemporary Poetry, and also more than once at the SoundEye festival in Cork. The good news is that there are readings available online through various sources, such as the University College Dublin Digital Archive. You can find some on YouTube. One such is 'Tap Dance'.

There is a great deal going on in this poem. The deadpan opening has the poets working hard these days dutifully 'filling in/ steel/ boxloads/ of grant/ application/ forms'. The poem's camera pans to where 'Elderly ladies/ eyes closed/ heads lifted/ listen to/ mell/if/luous/poetry/ & no/body's/bitter'. A central passage evokes the touch of a winter rose from a pergola, and an owl blinking as a droplet of water falls. Then an evocation of traditional poetry 'O/ come dance/ with me/ ye/ prety maidens.' Then these startling lines:

It's good
to be
dead.

Past the
pastoral fascists
& gallery
thugs.

This is an unusually direct and scathing indictment of the art industry, the commercial mechanisms, the political castration. Poetry as home furnishings. This poem ends with an abandoned dog at night providing its own forlorn commentary on the whole business:

And a dog
out there in
the dark going
Art! Art-Art!

Art!

It reminds me of that poem by Paul Klee where he says that at the moment of your death you'll imagine soaring upwards and look back between your legs to see a small dog pissing up a lamppost and you will sob at the loss of the world you once shared. That isn't the only reminder of Klee in this work, by the way.

But Maurice wasn't one to give up and he returned to the fray refreshed, bristling, attentive, good humoured. He cast wide and deep to gather in the world that turned into his poems. He allowed language to be pulled out of its familiar orbits to remind us that there are always gravitational forces at work, often unrecognised, rarely neutral, seldom benign. His poetry reminds us that language is dynamic and loaded and that we need to exert a few gravitational forces of our own while we still can.

Item: pencils, pen, desk. Paper. It's good to
see you again this morning, citizens...activists!
Death is nothing.

Note

I wrote down these thoughts on the poetry of Maurice Scully in Spello, Umbria, in August 2023. The only book of his that I had with me was 'Do-ing the Same in English – A Sampler of Work 1987-2008'. This valuable book came out from Dedalus Press, Dublin in 2008. So all quotes are from there, except the one gleaned from the archive recording online. Maurice's great project, 'Things That Happen', was finally brought together in a single edition by Shearsman in 2020. This major event coincided with the publication of a collection of essays on Maurice's poetry edited by Kenneth Keating. That book, 'A Line of Tiny Zeros in the Fabric', is also from Shearsman.