

## POETRY AS A TRANSFORMER

Stirling 07.02.08

Tessa Ransford

James Elroy Flecker (1884-1915) wrote a play called Hassan, set in Baghdad. In it the sweet-meat maker, Hassan, has the ear of the Caliph. The caliph waxes philosophical saying: *In poems and in tales alone shall live the eternal memory of this city when I am dust and thou art dust, when the Bedouin shall build his hut upon my gardens and drive his plough beyond the ruins of my palace, and all Baghdad is broken to the ground. If there shall ever arise a nation whose people have forgotten poetry or whose poets have forgotten the people, though they send their ships round Taprobane and their armies across the hills of Hindustan, though their cities be greater than Babylon of old, though they mine a league into the earth or mount to the stars on wings - what of them?* And Hassan replies, *"they will be a dark patch upon the world."*

There is a Gaelic proverb too which says in translation: *"Heaven and Earth may pass away but music and poetry will last for aye."*

This may not as fanciful as it appears. Daniel Barenboim would probably agree when he claims that music actually constitutes life for it comes out of silence, it is sequential, it sounds and it dies back into silence. The same could be said of poetry. Certainly sound vibrations are real, subtle and electronically visible, having powers no doubt as extraordinary as those of light. Voice is perhaps our most unique human attribute and is unique to each person. And voice is the instrument used by poetry, whether spoken or written, when the voice is the authenticity of the writer, putting their utterance on the line on the page.

I'd now like to read a poem of mine: 'Phoebe Traquair's angels.'

Phoebe Traquair was an artist who worked in tapestry, embroidery, jewellery, enamelling and also in large-scale frescoes, notably in the Catholic Apostolic church, the children's hospital chapel and the cathedral music school in Edinburgh. She was Irish, married to a Scottish academic scientist and aligned with the arts and crafts movement, which believed that art should enhance the daily lives of the general public. Her four-panel tapestry, *The Progress of the Soul*, is displayed in the National Gallery of Scotland. The final panel is of a huge red-winged angel embracing the pilgrim soul.

### Phoebe Traquair's Angels

This red-winged angel of rapture  
receiver of souls after  
torture, the kind that life inflicts  
stitch by embroidered stitch

*The Progress of the Soul.*  
Is this red-winged angel  
from the ranks who swell  
the Song School choirs  
in *Benedicite omnia opera*?  
Or from those who cradle  
souls of dead children  
in their hospital chapel?  
Or one of the seraphim  
frescoed in serried praise  
in the Apostolic church?

Pinions. Spilled blood. Tenderness.  
Restoration. *Comfort-ye*, against  
all odds, against indifference:  
*Take courage! Be not afraid!*  
Yet the red of these fluted wings  
Is fresh-blood-bright  
and swan-like in grandeur.

Tapestries of the soul; *improvisations*  
*of Spirit*, plucking the strings  
sewn on linen in spiralling silks,  
gold, silver, satin stitch,  
sumptuous.

Who receives today's dead children  
blasted by bombs dropped 'collaterally'  
or left for them in markets and buses  
or infiltrating their schools?  
What wings could sustain or soothe,  
What colour depict? What linens,  
what shrouds for wrapping the remnants?

And the bodies of children who slowly die  
of infestation, infection, starvation, neglect?  
stretch your hands out gently for these  
and fold your violent wings.

Who receives the bombers crimsoned  
with rage and despair  
red-winged  
O angel of rupture?  
Stem-stitch, split-stitch  
*Triptych.*

Do you remember the bottle-nosed whale which swam up the Thames as far as Westminster in January 2007? Do you remember the sandstorms which seemingly 'fought' against invading US/British troops as they attacked Iraq in March 2003?

It seemed to me that these, and many other incidents and events, are the Earth's way of speaking to us, warning us, advising us. For each of these two phenomena I wrote a poem, to try to find human words for the earth's non-verbal communication.

### **A SIGN FOR OUR TIME**

Disgorged from a beached whale  
Jonah gave warning to Nineveh  
and that great city paid heed.

The whale itself came to London  
on a suicide mission to save.  
It struggled far up the Thames  
level with Westminster.

Thousands gawked at the whale  
a northern bottle-nosed beauty  
and experts tried to save it.

They said it had lost its way  
and wasn't too well. But it came to warn  
that the planet is ailing and that  
it is we who have lost our way.

and

### **EARTH IS NOT MOCKED**

(see Galatians 6:7: **Be not deceived. God is not mocked:  
for whatever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.**)

The earth will rise. The worm will turn  
obedient to natural law  
to bury us who bomb and burn

What is it we would shock and awe?  
This planet that we live upon  
will spin and orbit as before

Grains of sand the wind has blown  
water systems running dry  
soil where nothing can be grown

Poison in the land and sky  
pollution in the sea, and war  
launched on wilderness and city

Flood and famine, fire and fear  
would surely halt us, seem to warn  
who will notice, who will hear?

Grains of sand the wind has blown  
the earth will rise, the worm will turn.

It isn't fashionable in literary circles today to write poetry which engages with the contemporary socio-political scene. We saw from Richard Roberts' lecture on MacDiarmid and early PEN how MacDiarmid set himself a mission to save Scotland from the post-war numbness of trauma in the 1920s. At the International PEN Congress in Berlin in 2006 the theme was that of the writer as witness. The poet's role in society is to see behind and beyond the phenomena, witnessing to what is happening and interpreting it from another perspective, whether you call that eternity or particularity for the two are one. As Francis Thompson wrote: (in his poem 'The Kingdom of Heaven')

The angels keep their ancient places  
Turn but a stone and start a wing!  
Tis ye, tis your estrangéd faces  
That miss the many-splendoured thing.

When I was attached for several years recently to the Centre for Human Ecology in Edinburgh, I found myself among committed environmental and social activists. I was asked to set up a series of writing workshops and did so under the title 'Creative Conviction', asking 'can we write with conviction today?'

Yeats, wrote in his poem 'The Second Coming',  
"The best lack all conviction while the worst  
are full of passionate intensity."

Do we think Yeats was right about this? Can we find a balance so that we can use our creative skills to say what needs saying? Is writing an ineffective exercise that cannot change anything? Should writers be engaged in the public domain or should they remain 'outside the action'? Is writing something we do for its own sake, for its intrinsic value, which it must also have -- or for ourselves personally, or for the market to earn a living, or might it ultimately be for the sake of life in earth? - We can think of Milton or of Blake who illustrated Milton and of writers like James Meek today. Can writers play a part in effecting change by using their particular skills? Dryden wrote, *it is literature's task to imitate justice and*

*instruct our lives.* Action can talk but it may be misinterpreted. The word is still a strong creative force. We need not apologise for choosing to write well and with conviction. If writing is a way in which to think, then the thinking matters. Even as witnesses we are not automatons.

Many people, including young people today, are concerned to use their skills in the service of a larger cause, to promote understanding, peace, justice, and to save the environment. They want to change attitudes of mind, to adopt new ways of thinking, new ways of living that are more sustainable, more just, more peaceful. We have to train our minds to make new choices and it is often seeing the situation differently that helps us to make such changes. (It is like taking your shoes off in a restaurant in Japan. To remember to do this I told myself to think of floors in Japan as if they were beds, and then I wouldn't stand on them in my shoes.) Why shouldn't writers contribute to this effort? By not doing so, it could be said that they support the exploitation and destruction. Ken Saro Wiwa, executed by a tyrannical government in Nigeria in 1994, thought that the writer should not merely X-ray society's weaknesses, but should take the appropriate action to heal them too.

Robert Louis Stevenson, descendant of lighthouse builders and engineers, wanted to be a lamplighter when he grew up (see his *A Child's Garden of Verses*), going from lamppost to lamppost individually. And that is what he became in becoming a writer, never ceasing to light those lamps for us one by one.

Since the millennium, when I retired from the Scottish Poetry Library, I have been working on the committee of an organization called Scottish PEN, which stands for Poets, Essayists, Editors, Novelists, but also includes journalists and academic writers. It is a world-wide community of writers with autonomous centres affiliated to a central International PEN. I managed to find an office for us to work from in the Writers' Museum in Edinburgh. Scottish PEN had not had an office for the 78 years of its existence up till then. (We celebrated our 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary last year, hence the exhibition in this museum.) This office was made available largely because Edinburgh was claiming to call itself a Unesco City of Literature and Unesco supports the work of International PEN and its 145 centres in 104 countries around the world. Exiled and immigrant writers coming to Scotland in recent years were amazed there was no PEN office. For them, the presence of PEN in a country was a sign of freedom of speech, democracy and release from tyranny, whereas closure of PEN Centres spelt persecution, with censorship, silencing, imprisonment and death. City of Edinburgh Council realised that a city of literature without a PEN centre was unthinkable.

We used to think it was just the Eastern bloc countries where writers were not free, but since the end of the communist era more and more countries have used terrorism as an excuse to introduce laws which curtail or oppress their writers. PEN's remit is to support the need for literature in a way which knows no frontiers; to campaign for writers who are imprisoned or persecuted; to befriend those who are exiled or in difficulty; to support women writers; to support and encourage minority languages and translation and to encourage writers to engage with the need for peace in the world and specifically, I believe, against the arms trade, even as our predecessors worked to abolish the slave trade. We have worked on translation projects with immigrant writers here in Scotland; and we hold an annual lecture in honour of Naomi Mitchison, which seeks to sustain the critical evaluation of Scottish women writers.

Each individual centre works for these aims according to its own character and preference. For instance in France the work is mainly literary. In Norway and Germany it is mainly campaigning. In Scotland we try to find a balance. However delegates for the campaigners for Writers in Prison from every centre are coming to Glasgow in April, where Scottish PEN is hosting a three-day international conference ending with our introducing a board- game we have devised, for raising awareness that we have to be guardians of our own liberty. It is called *The Freedom Game: the future of our liberty*. You shake dice and pick up cards which tell you your fate or whether PEN succeeds in getting you out of prison. The oppressors play against the writers.

Here is a poem of mine comparing the need now to abolish the arms trade with that of 200 years ago to abolish the slave trade.

### **Andrew Thomson**

Dr Andrew Thomson (1759-1831) Minister of St George's Church, Edinburgh

A passionate philanthropist and advocate in 1830 of the immediate abolition of slavery, **regardless of the costs** who said:

*Let it not be said that I am indifferent to the consequences of immediate emancipation. I am indeed indifferent to them. I despise them wholly as put into competition with the demands which are made by outraged humanity for justice.*

### **Let it not be said**

that I am indifferent  
to the slavery abolished two centuries ago  
or the pleas made then by impassioned Scots -  
such as Andrew Thomson aged seventy-two -  
despite the threat of a total collapse  
in the world's economy - and their own discomfort.

**Let it not be said**

that I am indifferent  
to the arms trade that enslaves the world  
manufactures war for the tools of war  
to be sold as foundation for western wealth  
our comforts, our freedoms, our cutting-edge science  
our democracy and hypocrisy.

**Let it be said**

that I am indifferent  
indifferent to any consequence  
of the end of war and the arms trade.  
I despise them wholly when compared  
with the widespread, outraged demand  
for justice by humans among us.

**Let it be said**

through our knowledge economy  
the networked consciousness of our species,  
our collective conscience, our international intolerance  
of money from death **let it be said**

**regardless of cost**, of cost to our lifestyle  
of cost to our comfort, of cost to our tribe,  
of cost to our cars, of cost to our pride,  
**it shall be abolished, the arms trade, now.**  
**regardless of cost.**

Here are some statistics about the fate of writers around the world for the year 2006. (The countries with the worst records at present are China, Cuba, Iran, Burma and Eritrea.) In 2006 50 writers or journalists were killed, 171 in prison, 274 on trial, 73 had death threats, 81 were attacked and 320 were harassed, deported, threatened or detained.

People tend to think that the problems are only in other countries, not our own democracies. I wrote this poem in 2004, and yet it seems even more relevant today:

**HARK THE HERALD**

(the decree of Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.)

Orders are out to be counted  
to congregate in the area  
where we are registered, that means  
EVERYONE: the sick, children, expectant  
mothers, the very old. This census will omit  
no-one, no fear, all will be listed, why?

to prevent TERRORISM.

We'll be given a free identity card to make sure we are who we say and have paid our taxes but, just in case, our mobile phones and emails, our cars, our national insurance, our medical records, our bank accounts and memberships and employment trail will be MONITORED.

And just in case we may ever consider taking part in some future act of civil disobedience, we will be arrested in advance, without recourse to legal aid and sparing us any accusation to which we might reply. After all we don't want terrorism do we? Nobody wants that: terrorists are no respecters of persons. We are all potential targets, so whoever, wherever we are we will be protected by pre-emptive strikes and whatever police-state laws and malpractices may be considered needful for keeping us safe – safer – secure – SECURED: welcome to liberation, to *pax Romana*, Happy Christmas, Joseph and Mary.

Books, reading and the concept of literature are now as vitally needed as ever to supply the idealistic, activist, hopes and concerns of younger generations. People, and young people, do read and will read the literature that speaks to their condition: their needs, hopes, anxieties, ideas (of the mind) and ideals (of the heart): a literature of and for change.

We are easily seduced by the language and terminology of 'the oppressor' (as Paulo Freire described). We internalise this language and begin to use it ourselves, even against ourselves, so that we become unable to think differently, having no other language, no other vocabulary, no other thought-structures within which to think differently, to look for intrinsic rather than always pragmatic values, and for the long term continuing, maybe straggly effort, rather than the neat, tidy, media-conscious project. In Scotland in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century the 'common-sense' philosophy held sway. This meant sense held in common, for the common good or commonweal. It was found by taking in diverse views and disciplines to see how they could converge towards the best solutions, without uniformity or suppressing any particular view. Thus the scientist: notably

geologist, botanist, physicist, physician, could and did converse with the artist, the philosopher, the writer, the explorer, the musician. In Scotland we talk about 'the democratic intellect', meaning such communication between specialities but, in a similar way, the intellect that is within itself a democracy of ideas. Patrick Geddes and James Clark Maxwell were exemplars among many in Scotland in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, whose ability to think creatively benefited from this patternheadedness (as opposed to blockheadedness!).

Who is the oppressor today? We cannot blame others when we allow managerialism with its global business-speak and consumerism with its global market-speak to rule our lives. From nursery age upwards we are grooming our children and the public to be and to think of themselves as 'consumers'. There are only two possibilities for the consumer: to consume or to be consumed. Officialese creeps in and calls itself professionalism. Nothing could be further from the truth. Profession is for beliefs and practised disciplines. Officialese is a cover for 'control and limit'. We seem to assume we have to enter this mentality in order to win the funding it controls and limits. I do not agree. We must find ways of communicating the reality of our vision in our own language and terms: a vision that includes cooperation rather than competition, conversation rather than sales-pitch, art rather than advertisement, rational, elegant argument rather than the soundbite, mediation rather than confrontation, a language born of the interweaving of an ecological aesthetic rather than a mechanical pragmatism. We need to find the language of mediation, capable of actually constituting the principles and values within which it is formed. Scientists are now using the word 'autopoiesis' for systems which are self-creating, self-regulating, self limiting, inter-sufficient among each other and in relation to the whole. I am reminded of Yeats' 'self-delighting soul.'

We still need to go on finding and using a language that cares, a constant carefulness with and for the language, each other and the planet. The future of life on earth lies as much in our words and in our minds as in our hands and deeds. In that understanding, language/literature knows no barriers.

Thinking as I do along these lines, I wanted to do something about empowering the hundreds of poets working in Scotland today, who are silenced by a system of publishing that calls itself commercial, but is, in reality, controlled in order to be subsidised. I was asked to think of a suitable memorial to my late husband, Callum Macdonald, a printer who also ran a small publishing business. Through his Macdonald imprint he kept the post-war Scottish poets in print and launched the careers of many who became well-known. So the Callum Macdonald Memorial Award

began in 2001 as an annual award to the publisher of a poetry pamphlet. It is not a competition but a celebration. No money is paid to enter. All the entries are displayed at the award ceremony and archived thereafter in the NLS.

Let me quote from Leonard Woolf, husband of Virginia and himself a publisher of the famous Golden Cockerel Press: *the pamphlet is an extraordinarily good literary form from both the artistic and social and political point of view.* I'm sure Shakespeare could conjure up a sonnet of lasting persuasion about the beauties and benefits of the pamphlet for poetry. 'Shall I compare you to a mighty book? / You are more sparky and companionable.' It all depends what we believe poetry is, why we write it or make it, when we want to share it, how we bring that about, who we want to reach and where? The word poetry in Greek means makar, suggesting performance as well as composition, which is what we used to call our poets in Scotland in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, until our King went to reign in London in 1603.

The Callum Macdonald Memorial award has given two awards a year, sometimes three, to publishers of a poetry pamphlet, whether that be the author or on behalf of an author. Since 2001 some 300 poetry pamphlets have been entered and are in the NLS archives. In the new millennium the new technology was making independent publishing much more possible. Through pamphlets we can each get in touch with our own potential readership, those who want to read our work, our type of poetry, our scale of things, our scheme of things, our kind of caring language. In between the awards we hold fairs where pamphlet poets can set up stall – in Edinburgh, (we had 35 stalls at the pamphlet fair this Christmas) at Stanza in St Andrews and at the Book Festival in Edinburgh. There is no selection. Anyone who joins our website is welcome. The website both lists and sells pamphlets. On it we have some 120 pamphlets and 80 authors. All the work is done voluntarily. It is an expression of the democratic intellect at play. Poets need a playground: a bit of protection, a bit of a soft landing here and there, lots of exciting apparatus to climb and swing on, to whirl and balance on, others to share and play with, as we gradually become fitter for the life that is true for the human being and find our own poetic voice.

To succeed in this setting is to have fun, to have thrills, to be companionable, sharing with others. This metaphor is in contrast to those which have prevailed in the last decade, such as 'the writing factory', 'the poetry business'

We have therefore an inclusive, independent, inexpensive, joyous, non-hierarchical, friendly, aesthetic, high quality artistic and creative

phenomenon, which also serves to rescue to some extent from the tyranny of the market place the creative writers of our time, to save us from becoming a dark patch upon the world.

I'll end with a poem given to me by a student written by Mother Teresa.

### **Mother Teresa's poem**

People are often unreasonable, illogical,  
and self-centred;  
forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish  
ulterior motives;  
be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some false friends  
and some true enemies;  
succeed anyway.

If you are honest and frank,  
people may cheat you;  
be honest and frank anyway.

What you spend years building,  
someone could destroy overnight;  
build anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness,  
they may be jealous;  
be happy anyway.

The good you do today,  
people will often forget tomorrow;  
do good anyway.

Give the world the best you have,  
and it may never be enough;  
give the world the best you've got anyway.

You see, in the final analysis,  
it is between you and God;  
it was never between you and them anyway.