

Interview

Maurice Scully was born in 1952 in Dublin. During the 1970s and '80s he was involved with a number of influential neo-modernist magazines and chapbook publishers, and also organised numerous readings and literary events. His publications include *Love Poems and Others* (1981), *Five Freedoms of Movement* (1987, revised 2002) and chapbooks of work-in-progress from Staple Diet, Tellet, Poetical Histories, Form Books and Wild Honey Press. *Livelihood*, "a work in five books and three interstices, compris[ing] the middle volume of a trilogy", was published by Wild Honey Press in 2004. Sections of *Livelihood* were published in the 1990s by Pig Press, Reality Street Editions and Writers Forum. His book for children, *What Is the Cat Looking At?* was published in 1995. Kit Fryatt interviewed Maurice Scully in December 2004 and January 2005, initially by e-mail, and then, when the poet's computer broke down, by post, then by e-mail again.

You were born in Dublin in 1952 and educated at Trinity College Dublin. Could you tell us a bit more about your background and education? Livelihood seems preoccupied with a kind of decay, not alarming or morbid but quite irrevocable nonetheless, which seems to me characteristic of Dublin even now.

I lived with relatives on a farm in Co. Clare as a very young child and then every summer to the teenage years. That was the pre-electric, even pre-tractor years. Oil lamps, horse drawn machinery. Strange and beautiful to a child. At age 10 I was sent to boarding school in the Ring Gaeltacht in Waterford for two years. The bilingual experience was very intense, returning home at holiday time speaking one language while thinking in another and noticing the overlap or lack of it. My parents were not Irish speakers. I think it was a sort of accident that I was sent there. My mother had been a French and English teacher, and loved both literatures. My father didn't speak Irish at all. He was an accountant. I

was sent to an Irish-speaking secondary school in Dublin, again a sort of accident. It was a rough regime, Christian Brothers, and difficult to like. I sent myself to TCD.

Decay, you say? Gosh. Is “process” the prettier word? I can vouch though that Dublin was a decaying place then and probably, as you say, has a taint of it still. My hope was poetry or “writing” could be different.

Yes, “process” is much nicer, though it risks being misunderstood as another contribution to the hoary polarisation of “process” and “product” poetry. I don’t myself find those helpful terms, since most poems seem to be both, or one or the other at different times, and I don’t think that academic distinction is what you meant anyway. What’s important, for you, about the process of producing poetry?

That each piece goes to where it’s led me and that I’ve done my best with that. Most poetry that’s worth it has a strange, wild energy of its own that the poet hardly “controls”. Difficult to describe.

You started publishing poetry, editing magazines and chapbooks, organising readings in the 1970s, a period often memorialised as rather a golden age for neo-modernist poetry. Was it? Do you think the audience for your poetry has grown or changed since then? Do you care about audiences? Are you happy with the terms post- or neo-modernist anyway?

I have no sense that the ’70s was a literary Golden Age, Modernist—or otherwise—in Ireland.

My first book was published in 1981 by Dermot Bolger’s Raven Arts Press. RAP had a particular audience and I guess that audience read that book [*Love Poems and Others*]. But that’s the last book I was able to publish in Ireland until now. All the other work was published elsewhere, mostly UK. So the RAP audience must have thought Maurice Scully either dead or dried up.

I don’t give a fiddler’s for the terminology end of the art. If it serves clear scholarly discussion of the work, fair enough. But it doesn’t serve me to make any work.

I think it’s perhaps more a British perception—the 1970s as the time before Maggie snatched the Arts Council’s milk. But as you say, even a post-Thatcher Britain offered more publication opportunities for Irish poets who didn’t fit the remit of, say, Gallery Press. Is the situation in Ireland improving now?

It is improving. Wild Honey Press. *Metre* magazine itself. Maybe it's not fair to compare such a small island with one so much bigger. And such different literary traditions.

The new print-on-demand technology could work to the advantage of poets too. There are pros and cons, but it's an exciting change, where small print-runs are no problem now. Also distribution over the net in place of the often sad sale-or-return arrangement with bookshops. Could be a welcome change too.

Lesotho figures strongly in Livelthood. Could you tell us more about the country and its people?

Lesotho is a tiny mountainous kingdom, about half the size of Ireland, surrounded by South Africa, inhabited by mostly one tribe, the Basotho who speak Sesotho. Its skies are clear and vistas indeed vast. When we were there it was a country under a good deal of political and social stress. I taught English in two schools. For the first year in a girls' school near a rough-and-tumble border town, for the second in a more isolated village secondary school. A little money in Africa goes a long way so we travelled a lot. I loved my students and I loved teaching there. The Basotho kids were great. I remember when it came to teach them Shakespeare for international exams I thought it was totally daft. But, in fact—it happened to be *Macbeth*—they ADORED the play. It was full of things they understood completely: witchcraft, murder and mayhem on the path to power, political chaos, vengeance... they translated some of the witch scenes into Sesotho and enacted it for us as an out-of-school treat, howling with glee. Dance and song are an integral part of daily life. In a way difficult to imagine here. One of the things you miss coming back to Europe is that nobody dances in the street... unless they're drunk or stoned or want money.

Livelthood contains lots of "guest appearances". What roles do allusion, quotation and, well, theft, play in your work?

I use a sort of what I think of as a to-hand æsthetic. Wherever I am whatever books (or sounds or people and so on) I'm surrounded with can become part of the elements I'll use to make the work.

Where I work now there seems to be a lot of dogs. So I've taken up their barking and tried to see what could be made of that. Some years ago where I lived there was a lot of traffic—sirens and so on—so the sound of that was taken up. The guest appear-

ances can come through any sense (though hearing is a dominant one, yes) as well as any texts that take my fancy. Places ditto. Africa, Italy, wherever I've been, filtered through too, but not as travelogue. It was just *there*, part of what-is.

A world is an open place & Mr Artist is open to that. Is that possible?

Hope so. Can I then ask about influence, or precursors? There seems to me to be an awful lot of Thomas Kinsella in The Basic Colours for instance—both actual parody, as in the poem beginning “ah whoom! goes the orchestra” and a general feeling of matter being put in place by the speaker and then springing out again, or degrading away from him. That reminds me of the Kinsella I like best—New Poems and A Technical Supplement. But generally Irish neo-modernists don’t quite approve of Kinsella, do they? He has delusions of organic form, blood and memory and all that.

What Irish neo-mods approve or don't doesn't bother me. *New Poems* and *A Technical Supplement* are among my favourites too. I don't think Kinsella was an “influence”, but I have read him and still do.

Eoghan Ó Tuairisc / Eugene Watters's *The Weekend of Dermot and Grace* was a fine example. I read it at about age 28 and was greatly struck by the fact that I'd not so much as even heard of it till then, though I'd been reading contemporary Irish poetry avidly for about 10 years. That such an obviously ambitious and major work should have been removed from the visible landscape was indeed a lesson.

When I was very young I was interested in the long lines and prose elements in Anthony Cronin's poetry. When I was younger still I was into Dylan Thomas. Couldn't stomach him now. Boy, how far back do we have to go?

The Weekend seems to be one of those poems that pops up occasionally, excites people and vanishes again. Ó Tuairisc didn't write much else in English and had some pretty forbidding things to say about monolingual critics of Irish writing, which no doubt puts some academics off, but doesn't really account for the neglect. Isn't it the very ambition of the work, maybe, that's disconcerting? People read it as bombast, or a dubious kind of mythologising, or they object to its gender politics? Is there generally a lack of ambition in Irish (or other) poetry?

Well, Eoghan Ó Tuairisc did write a murder mystery in English, a

history of music hall in Victorian Dublin, translations, both poetry and prose. He was working on autobiographical prose in English, of an unusual density and vigour, when he died in 1982.

I think there is some very ambitious poetry being written in Ireland now, as elsewhere. Of my own generation here, the work of Randolph Healy, Billy Mills goes far beyond the borders of the usual. Of the generation a little younger than mine, Catherine Walsh's work travels far and that of the older generation Trevor Joyce and Geoffrey Squires. Just off the top of my head. In the UK, Australia, US—lots of exciting work. No lack of ambition.

Livelihood is the second volume in a trilogy, according to your note, and it collects poems previously published in The Basic Colours, Steps, priority, and the chapbooks Prelude, Interlude and Postlude, not to mention all your appearances in magazines and anthologies. Did you plan it this way, or did the structure emerge? Is the difference between imposing structure on your material and letting it develop important to you? I ask this because you seem very uneasy with order in poetry, the way in which in order to represent the world the poet actually has to commit a kind of violence upon it. I think of that figure in Interlude and elsewhere, the giant "turning in his skin", the giant who says or is "AW. DAH.", who seems to be an allegorical representation of the propensity of art to involve itself catastrophically in the world.

No, I didn't at the outset plan it that way. It just "grewed". *The Basic Colours* is not a collection of poems. While writing *Livelihood* I was not thinking in terms of *poems* or *collections*, but in terms of a *book*. That design. The dynamics in, through and between pieces, and the culmination and diminution of threads, motifs.

The giant turning in his skin is the warrior's spasm, Cúchulainn. Awe-inspiring and a bit ridiculous. The AW. DAH. as command or as things in their place, can't be welcomed in without wiping its feet on the mat.

*Is it a patriarchal force as well? It's possible to read it as a child's whine at having to submit to a father's command "Aw, Da!". Does poetry (or certain kinds of poetry) form a part of or contribute to "AW. DAH."? What strategies do you use to ensure that yours doesn't? You pull off a rather difficult trick in *Livelihood*, it seems: attempting to capture the world around you without necessarily assimilating it to the self. Your speakers often remain still and peaceful, but involved and engaged; they are observers who don't fall for the seductive lie of detachment, that "I am a camera" attitude.*

Oh—ha, ha—I hadn't seen that, yes—good—Aw, Da, can I play my Playstation for another fifteen hours, please, Da, aw Da, please? The "rage for order" is not for me. Plenty of others seem eager. And believe it both possible and worthwhile. No question of "capture" of the world. What a grotesque trophy anyway. What the "trick" is... well, it seems to me to be connected with humility in face of the material.

Related to that, what do you think are a poet's responsibilities? There are several poems called "Responsibility" in Livelthood, and you repeatedly gloss the Yeatsian dictum that "in dreams begins responsibility". There are echoes of "Amongst School Children" everywhere too, but I imagine your take is rather different from Yeats's.

There is a responsibility to the art itself, where nothing's for sale, and no gimmick, no noise works. Every writer is in there, faces that. No getting away from that. Titles of "poems" are a bit slippery in *Livelthood*. They can be "serious", tongue-in-cheek, oblique, picking up a motif from elsewhere or pointedly omitting it and... sometimes a few of those things at the same time...

The first "Responsibility" in the *Steps* part is an angry, spitting little piece, isn't it? If the first line ["the fid; stirps"] sends a reader to the dictionary, so be it. The second line ["not to write very cold poetry"] in a literal sense I still believe in, that's evident in what I do—stop me if I disagree. Combined of course with a sort of madman's take (in a lucid moment) in the Ireland I grew up in... "little nude screams".

The second "Responsibility" piece is set in Africa, the little village of Ha Thulo for what it's worth, and sets the predatory gathering of "knowledge"—the *Oxford English Dictionary of Spraints*, *The Pretoria Encyclopædia of Mortgages*—against the insouciance of a girl washing her clothes in a rusty old wheelbarrow, absolutely delighted with herself. It's the x-factor of the "developing world" that our Overdeveloped Pig World can't pick up at all. Other "Responsibility" pieces *passim*. And different, different.

What I like about Yeats is his will to change. Right up to the end. The rhetoric can be just too hard to swallow, for someone of my generation anyway, sometimes.

While I'm on children, your attitude to them is Romantic—(I was thinking of one of your "RETICLE" poems in Steps "Talking colours with my son - he's five, I'm / thirty-nine, he's right/I'm an idiot")—you empha-

sise their acuity, thoughtfulness. And actually, it occurs to me that though your poems are often satirical, and there are flashes of exasperation, the reader leaves Livelihood with a sense of optimism at human capacity in general. How do you stay cheerful? Do you ever want to write a real jeremiad?

Hah! Who doesn't? But it would be boring I think.

Growing up I wanted to be a painter and painted and looked at paintings a lot. I still love it as an art. Klee gets an honourable mention at the end of the *Steps* section. That childlike intelligent directness with materials that Klee cultivated is very close to my heart. My children have taught me a lot. I want to fully acknowledge that. Often my students too. My eldest daughter is an artist. We have good chats. I enjoy that a lot. Enough to cheer up any cranky old fart! The graphic element is important in my books: cover, format, frontispiece, the "poetry" bits even. I incorporate it as I'm writing it. The book is the unit. The graphic in the other sense too of making symbols on paper. I still write on paper. Quaint, eh? It seems to mesh with the rhythm of thinking. Beats a screen hands down. For me anyway.

Well, we've had to resort to paper in conducting this interview... It makes sense, doesn't it, to use the same material in composition that your audience will use in reading? But to return to the "graphic"—there's a presiding symbol in Livelihood, the Sumerian logograph signifying "legal", "trial", "decision" or "peace", which appears both as a figurative drawing and a formal signifier. It's tremendously resonant, I think, of your concerns with language, and also concrete being, what you called earlier the "what-is". Could you say something more about that?

In writing *5 Freedoms of Movement* I chose the section photos so that each could be a sign for each section, as well as the titles. Cover and end-papers ditto. And ditto the book I'm working on at the moment. The graphic is part of the composition, not supplementary decoration, part of the meaning of the text. Brush to paper, fingers to keyboard, the meditative linkage of thinking through the body resonates. A *good* part of life, good to live through.

Your publications have appeared in numerous different formats—that's obviously partly to do with the number of different publishers you've dealt with, and to a certain extent beyond your control, but the difference between, for instance, the A4 format of the 1987 edition of 5 Freedoms of

Movement and the dinky 2002 etruscan books edition is remarkable. Did the change in format influence your revisions in that case? Do you have any comment to make on revision (either pre- or post-publication) in general?

The change in format in the example you cite did not in any way influence the revisions. The revisions, in that case consisted bringing more to light what I was after in the original.

I'm not a dash-it-off kind of poet. I'm in my 7th year on my current book, and that's not particularly abnormal. There are different levels of revision: verbal, formal, organisational and even the direction a whole book may take. Working on a text for such long periods demands intense concentration, to be able to reread through a possibly long, dense text as if you are a (sympathetic—or not so!) stranger, and go in that mode, following and directing at the same time, in a subtle balance. It's hard work. Every poet knows this.

You often use a colloquial "you", with its verbal form somewhere between the imperative and the habitual present tense, instead of the lyric "I". It's noticeable particularly because it doesn't imply an addressee but it's not that mushy "you" deployed by so many contemporary poets to indicate intimacy, it's almost the opposite of that. How far to you want the reader to feel included, and how detached is the speaker?

Hmm yes. As a 'prentice poet in the '70s the "I" was very big in Ireland. It still is? Me, my, I. I love you. You love me. And Mum'sy and Popsy down on the farm show my Roots are Real & deck me out with Colourful Relatives I can't wait to write about. A really strange hand-me-down Identikit.

It's very hard to answer the last part of that question as the levels of detachment and inclusion—as you imply I think—shift. Shift a lot. And may be shot through with some reductive ironies. But who am I to say? I do use autobiographical material at different times mediated to different degrees, depending on what's needed or what I'm able to do. Including the reader in another sense I'm rather keen on at this stage, in the sense of live reading, so the readers can get over the chimera of supposed "difficulty" and just quite literally go with the flow and enjoy the experience and sense the form of the thing in the air, right there.

That seems to be an appropriate point to ask about sound and the role it plays in your work? You've already talked a little about ambient noise—

dogs barking, sirens going off, but the note to *Livelihood* alerts us to a lot more; reeds scratching cuneiform; rain on a tin roof. There are a good few pieces entitled “Sound” in *Livelihood*, and they often, like the “Responsibility” pieces, seem to carry a satiric bite (I think particularly of those in the “Over & Through” section of priority). There are also the sounds of different languages, and in *Postlude* (I’m referring to your note again) “a stressed trans-capture of parts of Séan Ó Riordáin’s poem ‘Saoirse’”. You seem very interested in catching and capturing your speakers’ surroundings, but also alert to that danger of putting things in their place, “AW. DAH.” again, I suppose. Is multilingualism a way of evading that authoritarian tendency?

Ambient noise... oh, something wrong there, for me. OK, I know what you mean. But for me it’s neither ambient nor noise but the penetrating signature of... everywhere I’ve lived. All the (many) houses I’ve lived in, rooms worked in, they’ve all had their own highly distinctive song, sound. Composed certainly of quite mundane things, a bronchial neighbour, a confined dog, doors closing, gates clanging, traffic, street drunks—couldn’t be more mundane, but in combination, extraordinarily distinctive. Not to privilege human language and stuff it with ego but listen, in humility, the poet a contributor not an imperious editor. Or at least—that’s how I feel about it this evening.

The Ó Riordáin “trans-capture” occurs in “Variations” (as well as a somewhat different take in *Interlude* two books back). Maybe one of the differences in this work from some other poetry where literary references are made is that in *Livelihood* it is in active dialogue with the previous works and less a quotation to make my own fixed point. Certainly, there is a lot going on at the same time in “Variations”, variations played with variations, mock translation, found poetry, lyric and so on, along with a dialogue with the previous ‘*Ludes* in *Livelihood* and all that then ultimately in relation to all the other work in the book, and that book’s relation of course to the other two books in the trilogy. *Snabsmaointe*, a neologism from Ó Riordáin, is responded to with a neologism from me in English: *polysnobberies*. The dialogue between the languages implies respect, I hope. And regret. The different methods of approach are in very active relation also. Underneath it all I’m trying to work out how in this truly terrible contemporary world, one can be lyrical, without being trivial.

I really did work as a watchman on a building site. And I did have to write every hour on the hour “Site normal. Nothing to

report” and phone HQ to report that there really was nothing to report [see “Zulu Dynamite” in *Livelibood*]. Extraordinary place a building site when everyone’s gone, the machinery, still, twilight, the scaffolding, the shadows, sounds. One night I found a dead duck on a wall. A mallard, male, beautiful, still warm. Another night wandering around the rooftop admiring the lights of the city I stepped on a sheet of polystyrene that was covering a long, long drop. Jumped back just in time. Nasty way to go, that. This is the material. Not to write an autobiography, not to sketch a hero and edit amazing events, but to interact with the world... Not to meditate *on* the world, but to be *in* it...

That’s where I first read Prynne.

I used to pore over the plans in the engineer’s office. Years and years of detailed work. Quite like art really.

I’m not a multi-linguist! But I *am* a listener. Up to now, not much given to talking. It’s “bad magic”.

The first “Sound” piece in “Over & Through” has a satiric bite, yes. Self-mockery mostly. The second has a bit of that too, yes, but is also concerned with Western and non-Western attitudes to time and death. I’m still happy with the “sea/say” pun in that. Childish satisfactions, I know, but there you are.

Could I conclude by asking you to comment on your poems published in this issue of Metre?

The pieces *Metre* is using in this issue are all from *Sonata*. *Sonata* is the closing volume in the trilogy *Things That Happen* which consists of 5 *Freedoms of Movement*, *Livelibood* and of course *Sonata*, in that order and was written over a 23-year period. *Things That Happen* takes its title from a scrap of Celan. I’m still working on *Sonata* as we speak, but I think we’re nearly there now. The binding motif is the circle, so there are lots of repetitions, doublings, turnings, arcs, zeros, returns and so on.

It’s an explicitly musical book. And carries a lot of grief in its back pocket too. So what’s new?

Oh, and there’s a little note to the piece beginning “objects in mirror”: the “playing mantis” *is not a misprint and is there to play*.