

29 *SINCERITY* – CAROL ANN DUFFY (Nov 2020)



I've come to Carol Ann Duffy late, though better late than never. She is SO good that she deserves at least two months' consideration. I pondered gleefully over "Little Red Cap" in a previous posting (No. 4 *Poems and Storytelling* Oct 2018), a poem that is archetypally Duffy: sassy, funny and subversive.

If you remember, it is an ironic recasting of herself as Little Red Riding Hood. At "sweet sixteen", the persona was *willingly* seduced by her "wolf" ("what little girl doesn't dearly love a wolf?"), the serially unfaithful (according to Duffy) Liverpool poet, Adrian Henri, with whom she lived until 1982. She later took up with the Scottish poet Jackie Kay and became Poet Laureate from 2009 – 2019, writing plays, children's books and lots of brilliant poetry. She is on the exam syllabus here in France now, but I'm afraid that she had not really figured on my own very haphazard radar until fairly recently.

So, let's start with her most recent volume, *Sincerity* (2018) and work our way backwards. What I love about her is her wry, exuberant, thoughtful, challenging, surprising, angry, downright funny, sensitive *voice* – and her even more sensitive ear for words: *language*. Here is her final poem of this collection, the eponymous "Sincerity".

It doesn't give up its 'meaning' that easily. On the whole, Duffy is quite easy to read, but here the references sound private, deliberately opaque even.

Sincerity

So. I stand still,
 quiet as a soul,
 to watch the song thrush
 hoodwink the grass
 of a worm.
 I am all sincerity.

 As when
 I go to the dictionary. . .
 and there be I,
 the only one
 in the back pew at the Latin mass;
 lost in translation.

Or I look up
 from the hill at Moniack
 to see my breath
 seek its rightful place
 with the stars,
 with everyone else who breathes.

This deserves some close scrutiny, the more so in that it is the title-piece and situated very deliberately at the end of this volume.

What we notice immediately are the broken lines, randomly spaced as if these are the vehicles for spontaneously generated thoughts or impressions. Yet, here is the dodge! Poetry is rarely so innocent and ingenuously free in its ordering. The three ‘stanzas’ contain six lines each; there is a discipline at work which makes the spontaneity a little suspect and the claim for total ‘sincerity’ (at an artistic level) becomes a little dubious.

What exactly IS ‘sincerity’, and why, anyway, should a poet feel the need to proclaim her own sincerity? Isn’t art of its nature an effort of sincerity, of trying to establish the inner truth of people and things rather than their duplicitous appearances or strategies?

My friend Ag, who is a ‘checker’ by nature, warned me that ‘*sincerus*’, from the Latin, is to do with something which is literally “without wax”; sculptors added wax to hide blemishes or faults. Art *could* therefore be about ‘cover ups’, leading to the conclusion that perhaps total ‘sincerity’ may be hard if not impossible as far as ‘art’ is concerned.

Song-thrushes, besides singing beautifully (quite ‘artfully’ and creatively) employ a ruse to make worms think it is raining (or so Mr Lewis used to tell us on our nature walks) – they hop on the ground imitating the sound of pattering raindrops. The worms come up to the surface (but why? Why don’t they stay within the shelter of good earth??) expecting a nice drink of rain (?)and, hey presto! the thrushes gobble them up. Clever ruses to feed off...

So, Stanza 1 might be a gentle reminder that art is partly to do with trickery... of sorts. And Stanza 2 backs this up with an apparent non-sequitur about dictionaries (useful in getting at the truth about words...more or less...?) and then the Latin mass...? Well, the mass in Latin is certainly opaque enough if you don't know much Latin. Does that amount to trickery (or *insincerity*)? The reference to "*lost in translation*" also refers to the film of Sofia Coppola, which the director tellingly described as a story about "things being disconnected and looking for moments of connection".

The third stanza takes us to Moniack, west of Inverness, a personal reference, surely, as she imagines trying to situate her place in the universe, but more importantly, "with everyone else who breathes". This reminds me of Seamus Heaney's "Outside History", a somber reflection on how as a poet, he is called to reject the distant beauty of stars and choose rather to be part of the mire of human history:

There are outsiders, always. These stars –
 These iron inklings of an iron January,
 Whose light happened

thousands of years before
 our pain did: they are, they have always been
 outside history;

They keep their distance. Under them remains
 a place where you found
 you were human, and

a landscape in which you know you are mortal.
 And a time to choose between them:
 I have chosen:

"Sincerity" poses more implicit questions than it provides answers for. Is the writer rejecting in some sense the *artifice* of art? Her "breath" is seeking "its rightful place" amongst the confusions of being "lost in translation". Words are slippery things and I think that the poem, allusively, evasively, suggests that "sincerity" is never going to be easy for any writer. Just think of the addition of the letter 'y' to 'craft' (craftsmanship, craftwork) leading to 'crafty' (dodgy, shifty, untruthful). One has, perhaps finally, just to "stand still" and link up "with everyone else who breathes".

The very first poem of this volume is similarly opaque, or slippery (have no fear, there are many, which are easier and more directly accessible).

Clerk Of Hearts

As they step from the path onto the boats,
 I am there at my place under the trees,
 Listing the Categories. Humility, Shame.

My dealings with life have been so long ago,
I imagine I resemble shadow or watermark.
I am unanswered prayer like poetry. *Dread.*

Whatever I did – it might have been that – now,
I watch each one depart, perceive their hearts;
old diaries I read at a glance. *Acceptance. Disdain.*

They will forget, but I take Time, devoted,
clerk of hearts. Sometimes I stand on the bridge
as they drift away, being more and more dead. . .

a kingfisher arrowing upriver, joy as colour;
then thunder above, a boiling of last words,
and their crafts vanishing into the heavy rain.

Who is the “I”? It might be fair to assume it is the poet, standing aside, finally, reviewing her “craft”, her poetry. If so, she appears as a ghostly figure, “listing the Categories” – perhaps the themes of her writing as they “drift away”. The poem works by suggestion (“I imagine I resemble shadow or watermark”) evocatively creating a sort of farewell. “Hearts” can hint at the inner workings of these “Categories” she is sending off.

Whatever I did – it might have been that – now
I watch each one depart...

Again, this seems to be almost a private joke with herself – as in, “Did I really *do* anything?”

I’m not sure who “They” refers to in the 4th stanza. It could be people, readers, or else it could be her precious Categories, who seem like departing friends. She, however, the poet or persona, takes for herself “Time”, who is called “clerk of hearts”. Is she, then, taking for herself the job of “clerk of hearts” with the help of “Time”?

There’s no real saying. If we look carefully at the sentence, “Sometimes I stand on the bridge as they drift away, being more and more dead...”, it isn’t really clear whether “I” or “they” are “more and more dead...”

Against this sombre farewell, the last stanza shifts to colour and life with the image of a “kingfisher arrowing upriver”. The ending hints at “joy” as well as “thunder” and a “boiling of last words”. Is this the incoherence of approaching death? “Crafts” is highly ambiguous – as we were seeing earlier. “Crafts” are boats as well as a reference to the artistry of arranging words.

If this is about the approach of old age or death (“vanishing into the heavy rain”), then the role of being a “Clerk of Hearts” is an important one, reserved for herself by the speaker here. And she is therefore claiming for herself the job of Recorder of these “dealings with life”.

The tone is not cheerful. The only positive “Category” is “Acceptance”. The others are sombre and wry.

“Who, then, “will forget”? The job of a poet is to memorialise and, obliquely, that is what Duffy is claiming for her ultimate task. I guess “Time, devoted” is the *real* clerk of hearts, here - the syntax is not clear, but the poet also is deeply implicated, as well as “Time”.

Let us pass to some less cryptic offerings. Here, topically enough, is “Swearing In”: light-hearted (?) invective aimed at a certain president.

Swearing In

Combover, thatch-fraud, rug-rogue, laquer-lout;
twitter-rat, tweet-twat, tripe-gob, muckspout.

Sleaze-serf, poke-knave, bribe-berk, bedswerver;
Hand-mangler, kids-mitts, thumb-sucker, fist-jerker.

News-maggot, lie-monger, tongue-twister, crap-grubber;
smell-feast, guzzle-chops, snout-ligger, burger-blubber.

Tie-treader, tan-faker, draft-dodger, piss-douse;
fraud-hawker, golf-plonker, bigot-merchant, shite-louse.

Mandrake Mymmerkin, welcome to the White House.

I don't think I need comment very much further except to say that by Trump's own appalling standards of abusive language, this seems to me quite *restrained*. It is actually very carefully ordered; it rhymes, is carefully set out with four doubled-epithets per line, some allusions quite easy (“tan-faker”), others more recondite, like “snout-ligger” (*ligger* is apparently urban slang for lazy hangers-on at gigs, when the musicians are setting up! I've known a few of these, though I didn't know the word back in 1972). Mandrake the Magician? A mymmerkin is, I think a little mannikin. I love “Tie-treader” and “golf-plonker”. With our younger pupils I was having to warn against *their* using words like “twat” and “berk” (“Berkshire Hunt” in cockney rhyming-slang.

Gorilla

It was at Berlin Zoo – don't ask –
where I came face to thick glass
with a gorilla.

We stared each other out.

Its eyes were smashed rage
under a pelmet of wrath.
Its nose, two boxing-gloves.
Its mouth, an unliftable curse; I wished
it were free,

down on the equatorial belt,
chilling to Morissey.
With a day's more evolution, it could even be President.

A mock-grumbly poem? There seems to be some identification of the poet's surly mood and the hills themselves, "still out there". Is that where she, the poet, is – "still out there"?

There are more gems to mull over – too many to include, but I love the allusive, "pub quiz style of "Auden Comes Through At The Séance". What a great title (and how many references did YOU pick up?! Also, "The Monkey" where she humorously gives up her Poet Laureateship (in 2018) in order to foster a "small monkey".

"There are good schools here. I have rented a pleasant house with a high-walled garden; turned vegan..."

"I sip my banana daiquiri and marvel at the possible; the road not taken etc;"

Dry as ever, Duffy arms herself quite often now with a drink. Well, why not?

Here, as a last poem for this month, is her tribute to Seamus Heaney. It is called:

Message In A Bottle

(i.m. Seamus Heaney)

You left and the craft sprung (sic!) a leak.
some eejits tried to plug it with their pens,
but, of course, this friggery failed to work.
We shipped water, bailed, listed; all at sea.

There were fights – so little at stake –
mutterings about chucking the youngest overboard;
chunterings about ducking the oldest.
Your man skedaddled one night in a lifeboat.

I sat on the end of the plank, queasy, considering
my position; sherry in a hip-flask. The moon
was – what now? A Trump orange? Feckit.
I added you to my prayers: Yeats, Joyce, Beckett. . .

We spied land, but the current urged us away. Was that
yourself walking the shore? Long-haired, thoughtful.

I think Heaney would have enjoyed this. It's playful and full of affection. The play on words, of "craft" meaning boat *and* the art of poetry, is here more explicit than in "Clerk Of Hearts" and the conceit is developed with good humour. Considering her position "on the end of the plank" with her "sherry" (rather than masculine 'rum') doesn't sound serious and neither does

the title. This is a jokey cry for help – the master mariner has disappeared and the “craft” is “all at sea”.

There are no rhymes (apart from “Beckett” and “Feckit”) , but the 14 lines recall a sonnet. Perhaps the form of the poem suggests lost bearings, somewhat. Heaney would have liked the little Irishisms “eejits”, “friggery”, “Your man...”. When we took pupils to hear him recite his poems in Paris ages ago, there was just such rollicking good humour all evening, in spite of his more sombre poems.

So, this collection is Duffy ‘without wax’, though I doubt that she ever has waxed over the cracks very much in her time. It is very much classic Carol Ann Duffy – as ever, no holds barred, “speak what we feel, not what we ought to say” stuff. As ‘sincere’ as you might wish.

Sorry, I can’t resist one last poem – “The Map”. It’s about Frank, her father, choosing chocolates, and her mother becoming irritated. It’s typically wry and revealing.

The Map

She seethed when he perused the map
on the chocolate box, his finger sliding between
marzipan and coffee cream and praline cup.
It wasn’t *masculine*.

We weans could choose –
treats were for women and children first –
he should pick without fuss
or, better refuse.

But I liked watching him
in this radical pose; his high cheekbones
and lowered eyes, a little camp;
bemused by his small moment of luxury. . .
then her shrill voice, offside:
Be a man, Frank!

Is her mother offside? Provoking? Duffy’s sympathy here lies with her father and his “radical pose”! It’s a beautifully perceived moment of tension.