

THE DARK MOUNTAIN FESTIVAL

Mario Petrucci Sunday August 21st 2011, 11.30am – 1pm

STAYING AWAKE:

Poetry as source of sustenance and suspicion in the Sustainable Age

Poet, ecologist and broadcaster Mario Petrucci lays bare our habits in art and economics, making plain the various eco-unfriendly beds we have made for our species. Through Lorca, Rilke and Woody Allen, via the Salmon of Knowledge and the tragedy of Chernobyl, he explores how art – and particularly poetry – can lead us to our truest selves. Introducing fresh and remarkable concepts to the sustainability debate, Mario illustrates his ideas with powerful film and performances of original poetry.

START... set scene: Art / Sustainability - show excerpt [2] AMAZONIA 6 mins.

[Finn and Finnegas...]

Finnegas, an old poet, fished for seven years in a pool where a certain Salmon swam. Whoever ate that Salmon would acquire all knowledge. At last he caught it and, rejoicing, gave his young apprentice, Finn, strict instructions to cook it just right and not, on any condition, to taste it.

[BTW - Finn is an excellent name, isn't it, for someone in a story about a fish?]

Now, being a boy, Finn daydreamed, staring into the dark woods. A blister rose on the fish. Terrified of failing his master, he pushed a thumb against the blister, to press it back in. Three hot drops of salmon oil dripped onto his thumb which, instinctively, he thrust into his mouth. And so Finn, the boy – not Finnegas, the old poet – gained wisdom.

I've started with this wonderful Celtic story, releasing it here, into this pond like a small fish – a tiddler – trusting that each time we return to it, it will have grown. Let me do the same with a short excerpt from a poem by Lorca:

Green, how I wish you green.
Green wind. Green branches.
The ship upon the ocean –
the horse among the mountains.

from: *Romance Sonámbulo*
by **Federico García Lorca**
(tr. Mario Petrucci)

THANKS... then make it clear: **I haven't got all the answers!**

What is wrong with us? We need a diagnosis...

Our civilisation (whatever *that* means) suffers from four, seemingly incurable diseases...

1. Memes [Richard Dawkins]

- A self-replicating unit, a splinter, of culture.
- Propagates from generation to generation, often mutating as it goes.
- E.g.: famous folk melody; TV catchphrase; a political idea that makes a neat headline.

The idea of a meme is probably, itself, a meme.

Memes are a simplification, of course, of how cultures really work; but they do help us see that what we think and do is often automatic. Memes aren't *necessarily* bad; but I list the destructive ones, those that lead to unsustainability, as my **first disease**.

2. Radical Inertia [my own idea, but a modification of Ivan Illich's thinking]

Resistance to change, encountered whenever a way of doing or seeing things is deeply ingrained in us. [Not just *ideas* – infrastructure, laws, etc.] We'd come up hard against Radical Inertia if we tried to abolish schooling, or TV. Our weak response to the imminent disappearance of oil is largely down to Radical Inertia. That's my **second disease**.

Note: *Radical Inertia* is far tougher to overcome than mere inertia, as it's associated with established, deep-rooted practices.

3. What I call the 'Framed Question' ...third disease** in politics and culture.**

- A question with an agenda.
- Posed so that only certain 'answers' are possible – everything else is excluded.
- Happens because many assumptions are invisible to us...
[e.g. TV in every home; the idea that economic growth is *always* a good thing].

“Shall we build 5 or 10 nuclear power stations in our term of government?”

“How can sustainable energy meet our target of 5% growth in the energy sector?”

4. Finally (the fourth disease)... UNACCOUNTED POSITIVE FEEDBACK

A classic illustration is: e-mail and the paperless society...

Self-evident that e-mail reduces resource use... yes?? But is that really so, when the total picture is taken into proper consideration? E-mail issues/problems include...

- Widespread shifts in user expectations
- Vast increase in traffic
- Printing out of e-mails

- Computers, computer operators, network servicing and... ELECTRICITY!
- E-mail ethos entrenches and expands a high-turnover, quick-click mentality (thus supporting indirectly, perhaps, other forms of consumption and waste)

So, is e-mail an overall brake (**negative feedback**) on resource use or an acceleration (**positive feedback**)?

On paper (heh heh!) e-mail seemed like a good Green idea; but what if, eventually, it proves to have increased our ecological impact overall?

... *That* would be a case of Unaccounted Positive Feedback. *[my idea & coinage]*

*** **KEY POINT**> Socio-economic DENIAL is a synergy of all these factors.

By heightening our awareness of the detailed texture of perception, by revealing private and collective thinking – by making the habitual and familiar unfamiliar – great art can inhibit all of the diseases I’ve outlined.

Not trivial art, of course: that’s a disease too. I mean art in radical, authentic mood. Art that pierces. Art that can ramify, into the culture, the integrity and insight of those few individuals who are still, in some ways, more fully awake.

Rilke said: “What is your most pressing injunction, if not for transformation?”

[The Ninth Elegy; my translation].

* Because great art transforms, it dents Radical Inertia. *[A salmon leap of insight & motivation.]*

** Because great art opens us to wider truths, and reveals ourselves to ourselves, it supports what we need to break up the Framed Question and shed light on UNACCOUNTED POSITIVE FEEDBACK. It can challenge the dominant ideology.

*** Also, great art can be meme-proof, because it can’t be pinned down to one-eyed meanings: that charge of the Cyclops herd.

True, art alone CANNOT banish these diseases. But it CAN assert the individual. Augmenting the unique self: this is art’s unique selling point.... it helps us to become Lorca’s ‘ship upon the ocean’, his ‘horse among the mountains’.

Civilisation: a balance between the individual and the herd. Economics and advertisements want herds; good parents (and astute lovers!) want individuals.

Aside: OK, but what about the **collective** and **collective mobilisation**? Well, we must ask what *kind(s)* of collective do we want, if any? We have a ‘collective’ right now, a ‘**shoal mentality**’, engendered through the memes of adverts, consumer habits, etc. That has to be broken down first, into individuals who are more aware and robust. Aware individuals have a better chance of engaging in meaningful collectives and of assessing the appropriateness, scale & type of those collectives.

Now, poetry is my chosen form of art. So, naturally, I’ll be focussing on that. But you can apply my thinking, I hope, to all forms of art.....

What are the benefits and problems, then, of (art/ poetry) in times of Crisis?

A. PARTICIPATION, SOCIAL INSIGHT & REFLECTION

Individuals and institutions often turn to poetry in moments of crisis or intensity (weddings; state funerals). Poetry might therefore offer an art-form suitable for widespread participation and social reflection (that's useful, when trying to communicate important new ideas such as Sustainability – or Unsustainability).

But wait. This public role for poetry is problematic. State art is rarely great art, and public catharsis often brings sentimentalism and kitsch to the surface. More importantly, if poetry is used rhetorically, in a common cause, or to promote the ideology of a particular party (even the Greens), doesn't that undermine what I praised a few moments ago: the fostering of the individual against the herd?

So, I must challenge my own image: isn't great art about creating dis-ease, shouldn't it trouble and shake us? But have the subversives in literature been mostly silenced? Do our writers increasingly *sell* – rather than tell – stories? What's more, in Britain – for all our bluster about poetry thriving, and for all the fuss on National Poetry Day – one often feels that poetry is at best marginally relevant to popular consciousness and business. As Woody Allen said:

Life doesn't imitate art, it imitates bad television.

And yet, I've seen for myself how the right poem, in the right place, at the right time, can still shift our worldview, sometimes quite deeply. Poetry is:

- the lightning flash by which we glimpse some shallowness in our Zeitgeist
- those strangenesses running through the everyday, the (apparently) banal
- the strangely familiar truth in something unfamiliar or strange
- that moment the cactus blossoms or the dark fish rises, sparkling, to the surface

Historically... Poetry helped to give voice to those upheavals in consciousness into which Einstein's Relativity was born. It brought home the stench of Trench Warfare.

Perhaps we need that, now, for Climate Change? Those future scenarios have no precedent: how on earth do we imagine them, or feel their possibilities? Fresh images and stories can spring from literature to help us: blades of grass in desert sand.

B. ONE-EYEDNESS

I said earlier: "that charge of the Cyclops herd"...

In my experience: good poetry has plurality as a heart, and so negates the banal circulation of ideas. As the Australian poet Les Murray said:

"Only poetry recognises and maintains the centrality of absolutely everywhere".

...or poetry generates Lorca's *Green wind* that eventually makes contact, all to all.

C. THE ‘WHAT IF?’

All art is a kind of ‘what if?’: always, at some level, imagined (even when ‘realist’).

Good art encourages/ trains us, through its ‘what if’, to recreate ourselves, our world.... to see patterns from the outside & to shift them.

Bertolt Brecht: “Our theatre must encourage the thrill of comprehension and train people in the pleasure of changing reality. Our audiences must not only hear how Prometheus was set free, but also train themselves in the pleasure of freeing him.” [quoted in: ‘The Necessity of Art’ p.18]

But be careful!!! What if we set Prometheus free to burn down the world? There’s massive context – and an ideological element – to liberation and action.

On the other hand, look at current forms of ‘theatre’. I mean, cinema & TV and the series & soap operas so many are addicted to. Those involve passive consumption, in the main. For me, TV and cinema are now mostly about spectators rather than participants, in spite of any number of ‘reader-response’ theories... (*explain*).

TV, in particular, mostly reinforces behaviour as opposed to challenging it. It’s meme-ridden. Art has to break away from all that. **Ernst Fischer:**

“Art must show the world as changeable. And help to change it.” [‘The Necessity of Art’ p.59]

“Art enables man to comprehend reality, and not only helps him to bear it but increases his determination to make it more human and more worthy” [ibid. p.58].

... Though one has to ask not only whether women are included in Fischer’s second statement (which, surely, he intended?) but also *what* the artist considers ‘worthy’. We’re returned, again, to ideology and memes. If an artist isn’t deeply aware of the memes of her time, she will probably be subject to them and perpetrator of them. So, artists and poets need to get cracking. But they face considerable challenges:

“A highly complex society with its multiple relationships and social contradictions can no longer be represented in the manner of a myth.” [‘The Necessity of Art’ p.22]

Has one vital outlet for poetry therefore been cut off to the modern poet? I’m not sure. But let’s not miss a crucial part of Fischer’s comments: if the world does go into an eco-tailspin, it might be art (in all its folk forms) that helps us {quote} “to bear it”.

The Crunch

Let me turn now to those key players in Sustainability: business and government. Can poetry have any impact there?

We know, in our marrow, that a site of natural beauty or an inedible fish can’t be reduced to a currency equivalent. As with a great poem, such things aren’t so easy to quantify, to ‘frame’. Economists use metaphor all the time (financial *crash*; economic *meltdown*; *landslide* victory), but when it comes to dealing with a historic landscape or a humble fish in economic terms, they’re mostly stumped. Often, they simply lump such things together as ‘intangibles’...

Intangibles. The very word implies that something difficult to price is somehow unreal. By exploring the eternal or symbolic values of a landscape, or of a fish, poetry can redress this. [Need for a new branch of economic theory – ‘Metaphoric Economics’?]

Meanwhile, Copenhagen and Cancún left the ecological crisis largely unresolved. Our civilisation has shown itself to be an ageing junkie, chasing its next fossil-fuel fix. How many of us (artist, scientist, politician, journalist, banker) really *feel* the quicksand? Is enough being done to lift eyes to horizons, encouraging us to work responsibly, imaginatively, communally towards that sea-change in society that might pre-empt the sea-rise? And, in those places we *can* see through the haze, how on earth do we overhaul those institutions and systemic behaviours we can't seem to shake?

I'm a poet. Predictably, I'm going to say that poetry can reach where measurement and linear logic can't. Of course, I'm going to tell you that poetry has the ability to walk fruitfully in uncertainty, danger and paradox. [Keats knew this all too well – he called it 'Negative Capability'.] Clearly, I'm going to suggest that if we risk immersing ourselves in challenging films and books, and emerge stronger and wiser, perhaps (perhaps!) we're then more able to face complex realities such as Climate Change.

Without doubt, I'll reassure you that whether its author is alive and well, or long dead, we can always find poetry to remind us that...

observation	is more than measurement ;
valuation	is more than pricing ;
understanding	is greater than a statistic ;
and response	is more complex and subtle than a policy ...

If poetry is so much more than its words, surely finance can be more than money?

But I can't do it. I can't claim poetry as saviour. Because, as I've said, poetry can itself be suspect. Sometimes, the few public rods poets struggle to construct seem to be for their own backs. Also, as well as exposing memes, poetry is quite capable of creating and entrenching them – as in the IWW, with its swathes of awful (but influential) patriotic verse. Infamously, neither Chairman Mao nor the young Stalin (who loved poetry) was brought by it to tolerance, empathy or the plural perspective.

So, let me ask, instead, that we accept – before the sharpest teeth of ecological change begin to bite – that art weaves precious strands into the collective and individual fabric of belief and hope. It allows for movement and flux; for vision, and even prediction. If not revolution, it favours (at least) revelation. Great art reboots consciousness.

Most importantly, it celebrates the world (including the world of possibility) *as it is*. And carried in the currents of poetry – even in its darkest elegy – is a celebration of language. And language will always be a major means by which we recognise each other, and are awake to ourselves.... to see our "**ship upon the ocean**".

Important note. Many of my points stress the RECEPTION of art, and what I've referred to (somewhat grandly, almost glibly) as 'GREAT ART'. But I must also emphasise art's creation: that private renewal, transformation and mystery that creativity involves – which *is* creativity. In being creative and responsive to the Cosmos, each becomes a fishing rod for possibility and insight. In creative states, the WATERS OF SELF are experienced, perceived and *swum* (as well as fished) differently. Indeed, in creating (or responding to) art, we gain respite from the habitual, the banal. Art is an attempt to share that experience, that sacred swim, with others (including the *implied* other); and all art, genuinely made, by ANYONE, when it reaches beyond EGO, and *however* it's received (if at all) by others, constitutes great art for the consciousness enriched by its engendering.

Perhaps now the poems should have their say. Let me read you a few excerpts from my own work, which illustrate (I hope) some of the ideas I've been talking about...

Is society *genuinely* worried, yet, about oil running out? I don't think so. So, perhaps we need art to help persuade us to imagine something we wouldn't otherwise face.

In *Donkeys*, the tone is humorous. The future's a place where, once again, animals are the main mode of transport. But who are the 'donkeys' here, really?

DONKEYS

The short-term view was a four-stroke fool –

now the car's extinct the mule must rule.
For having squandered that liquid sun
it's back to a horsepower precisely of one

where filling up means buckets and attention to dung.
The kind of Ferrari you get down our way
does nought to sixty kilometres (per day)

on two bales of hay. We made for our backs
a cross like the donkey's – but painted black.
Well. If this is entropy then its laws are an ass

that ekes us through the eye of the Energy Pass.
Down empty freeways our donkeys now plod –
they knew all the while. Hence that asinine smile –

the endless nod.

from: Poetry : the Environment

Poetry Society (online study pack) by Mario Petrucci

[Optional] DODONA

(omit if films shown ??)

Oak stands alone.
Spread thinly behind perspex
and barbed wire. Boxed
precisely to her reach.

Her bole, fissured deeply.
Hooped with steel. Probes
glitter among her twigs.
Cables intertwine, trail back
to the computer-rack life support.

Drizzles of atomised water
daily wheedle her; still she suffers
the haze of fumes, abhors
their heat - defies all
chemical incentives.

And so they stand, and pay
to watch. To listen.

It is almost like the First Times -
they clamoured to her, Oracle.
Her leaves rustled, and a hero died;
her boughs whispered, he lived.
Dodona, they would murmur. *Dodona*.
No one here speaks her name.

Now, all these children. Endlessly.
And she so sick, nothing good
to tell. Their little hands - pink
watersnails pressed to her aquarium.
Their faces - oh these faces -
mandalas of eyeball, mouth
aswim in the sess, the fog
of machinery.

Too old to fight.
No spring left. The lobes
of her leaves grow
crisp and shrivel. Afternoon
passes like an era.
Computer beeps - then emits
the insistent signal.

Shaft of the world tree
breaks

flashes of cameras
a scuffle bodies swept along like logs
arms rolling branches

Too late, they see
there was no logic in wood
no need for it - except

to shade them from the chimaera
that begins to strike root
ineradicably

in their sleep.

(by Mario Petrucci) from: **Bosco**

I've a confession to make. I used to teach physics!

On the wall, I had a huge chart showing everything in the universe: from the cosmos itself, down to the tiniest particle, the 'quark'. And slap in the middle of it all, with a beautiful symmetry, sat the human – at 1 metre.

That chart helped my young students to imagine the universe and their place in it. Does our young civilisation need similar help visualising energy?

Energy's measured in Joules. But when we're told how many Joules it takes to melt the North Pole, or to heat our home, does it *mean* anything to us? I wanted to create a *verbal* equivalent to that wall chart – for energy. For Sustainability.

ORDERS OF MAGNITUDE

One hundred thousand trillion joules
to turn an ice cap into mush

One hundred thousand billion joules
to erase a major Eastern city

A hundred thousand million joules
to run a car to death

One hundred million of the same
for Fire Brigades to reach the kitten

Ten million just to keep
December from cold feet

A hundred thousand joules for a mug
of tea – A hundred joules

for a second's worth of War and Peace
Ten to raise a hand – to lift

an average apple to the lips
A single joule to shout the command

Half a joule to pull the trigger
Just one tenth to push the button

Almost zero to have the thought.

from: Flowers of Sulphur (p. 72)
by Mario Petrucci (Enitharmon Press, 2007)

[Optional] (omit if films shown ??) ‘Perception’ can be made personal by conjuring moments of ‘lived history’ (real or imagined) for people to identify with. In the next poem, we get a reminder of something often forgotten in an urban context (poem is set in rural Italy)...

RECKONING

Nonno, that night you
led me right up the garden
to your deckle edge of meadow,
the distant bulb dim as moonlight.
Look, you said. The field
was black. Beyond – black water.
You relaxed those marbled fists
to rake an invisible horizon.
On one side, us –

on the other

*Her. You think your life
is yours? An inflexible finger
jabbed at soil. No more cousins
than She allows. She gives:
She takes. When I am gone – you
slit your throat with a thumbnail
– who will bury their
hands in Her?*

from: **Flowers of Sulphur** (p. 32)

[Optional] (omit if films shown ??) ... and here the ‘perception’ is something we might think about most days (germs) cast in a fresh light:

IN TOUCH

That ocean divides. Yet the yeasts on my toes
have stowed away on yours – at the heel

of a day crammed with doings, shoe-snug,
they waft up to you our distinctive tang.

There’s a suspicion in the breath I catch
single-handed, just after brushing my teeth,

of that must my tongue first muscled in on
when our kissing strayed across the Channel

and a hybrid gas hibernates in my warp
of sheets, in my nightclothes – a smell that’s

somewhere between us, nuzzling to my body
warmth, or nosing the weft of denim that

spanned four shoulders of our lumbering
golem through hugger-mugger November nights.

Those secret hordes make us a common host:
cling, spawn, multiply in and under these skins –

our bodies’ soft continents.

from: **Flowers of Sulphur** (p. 14)

Sometimes, poetry connects things together so simply and directly, we can't resist it.

That's one way poetry breathes air into an issue: using what's vital or irresistible to us, as a means to connect us back to the world.

In the tiny space of this poem, a newborn son generates a fierce connection with nature...

what pours

from that so-fast
treading there
just under

where rib
might be – your
one tight curd in muscle

throwing itself back &
through & always
back angry

with life
it fills with or
empties hung in

you as a red wasp
in almost too
small

a web?

*from: **crib** by Mario Petrucci (forthcoming)*

Art's ability to operate on several levels at once, across boundaries & dimensions... e.g.:

Before looking human, the foetus seems to rehearse all the stages of evolution: this was once thought *actual* – but now discredited. I still like the *idea* though, because it can be used to emphasise, very movingly, the powerful kinship between species. This next poem utilises that concept, bringing ecology into the body, into that most intimate act of procreation...

And yet, at the *same time*, it touches on love, fidelity, alienation, and outer space !!

everyone begins as fish &

ends so – spiralling after
egg (that other half of our
chains) & setting gills

in gristled knot that buds
legs as tadpoles do & blow-
hole ears halfway down

the back & low-set eye
alien as featherless chick –
ah we have peered into

that shared ovum whose
blasto-flesh runs its gauntlet
of fowl & fish so fused at

the tail nothing can be told
apart – is this why when i am
late i find in upstairs dark

you – on placenta duvet &
hunched round self as wom-
bed ones are? – as though

i had just returned from
all eternity to catch you
naked out sleepwalking

space without even
navel-twisted purpled
rope to hold you

from: *i tulips* (p. 28)

by Mario Petrucci (Enitharmon Press, 2010)

THEME 4 Stories / New Narratives

As a counter to Fischer, I'll assert that even if modern myths *are* impossible, art is still able to generate fresh stories, new narratives. Here is some poetry exploring alternative futures... very different 'what ifs'.

'in hay waist-deep was' is set in a globally-warmed Britain plagued by rains. No petrol; crumbled cities. A return to the land. Negative? No. Boy + uncles → harvest. The characters in his world retain their spirit, a thirst for good stories that get them through a day.

[Optional] (omit if films shown ??) The 2nd poem, in some ways, endorses an existing meme. We have, in popular culture, a poor view of what's going to happen to us. In cinemas and novels everywhere: Apocalypse. This poem, at least, specifies the issue – GM – and gives it a twist.

in hay waist-deep was

uncle who said he saw
lash of rain snap
upward viper-

sharp to bite
the coming-down
tail – another tending

eaves from top-notch ladder
felt on his back
drops

worse than
wasps to a sack
while wife with foot

hard on bottom rung
kept her face of
tinder – yet

another
watched brown
slick of cloud a few

metres up suck back its
centre like a seam
in the roasted

bean – till it
split with blue &
for an hour all air smelt

of coffee – last it came to
me i said once
i stood

in rain so
ferocious streams
front & back – down

shallow contour of
nipples & ravine
between each

half of arse –
met at my pizzle
till i knew to my balls

how it felt to piss like
Orion: i said this
happened –

but they
laughed & took out
scythes & said the hay was

dry enough

from: *i tulips* (p. 70)

by Mario Petrucci (Enitharmon, 2010)

GENE

3011: the oceans have changed colour

Worl alway same me rekon
nuttin much-change Dere alway green
melon-anana Always yelow-sea

Me granee she live-be twennysix
wit ray hair Me tel me-babee
we not die-soon We be-like granee -

we live-long An me caree-she
for look-see thru eave – for look
yelow-sea An me tel-she

wen de-Life tek-you you com
yelow like you fall-in yelow-sea An
you stopp Dat all

An me tel-she bout ol-peepol
hoo-liv wen Worl dri Me tel-she
storee bout way ting used-be

wen ol-peepol walk in air an walk
wid weel An way dem ol-peepol talk
in riddl An way dem stepp in someting

dey call Gene Yeh Dem mess-up
reel-bad someting call Gene An dem
rising-now for meet-us in yelow-sea

An me-babee say - *Dees storee
all troo? Dem ol-peepol all stopp? All
com-yelow like yelow-sea?* Butt me

know nuttin mor Cept
dey bildin tall Dey much-like carr
much-like Wor Dem tuch ev-where

dem stepp ev-where Butt
me tel-me-babee – me-tink
dem ol-peepol dem juss-walk

one Gene too-farr

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Obviously, poetry can also re-empower stories we're in danger of forgetting. e.g. Chernobyl...

Show excerpt [2] HEAVY WATER: a film for Chernobyl 11 mins.

OR... Here are two [text] extracts, simply re-telling the story more or less as told by those who were there. When this approach works, it can give people – even those in power – pause.

Only read these two excerpts if the film is not shown...

ONE WORD

There was life – a life
before. A girl of sixteen
a rigger of twenty-four
meeting for cakes and
nothing else. A girl who
made herself late just to
see what a handsome man
waited for her. After
work. Beneath the clock
close by the Post Office –
Volodarsky Street. And
ah that night they shared
champagne and madeleines
under stars in Gorky Park
until their hands gravitated
and both dared whisper
yes. Yes they said – then
touched lips as though it
were some law of physics.
One year together before
finally they kissed – and
nothing more. Who would
believe it? Who would
change a breath of it? –
even if a voice of doom
boomed in from the planets.

'Every day I found a new man.' Ludmila Ignatenko

(wife of a Chernobyl firefighter who died from radiation sickness)

Do not kiss him they said, starting back, as though
he were an animal in its cot cocking its head to listen

but understanding nothing. *Do you understand? Are you
pregnant? No? And find him milk. Three litres a day.*

I poured that whiteness into him. Felt I was feeding
a goose its own feathers. He retched and cursed –

the thin dribble each side of his mouth worse than a child.
Each time you hold his hand is a year off your life. Can you

*hear us? His bones are more active than the Core.
Understand? That is no longer your husband.* I boiled

chickens until the bones sagged, fresh, handfuls of parsley
chopped so fine it would melt between finger and thumb,

pot barley, apples (from Michurinsk they told me) pared
and pulped, everything minced and sieved, every trace

of rind or pip removed, no husk shell or pod and all of it
spewed back down his chest as though he could not take

a single particle more....

... Those reptile eggs of eyelids, turned always towards me.
Until I said *Go. I love you. But Go.* Up to that moment

I still believed I would save him. Milk, soup, kisses. As if
he could digest the touch of my lips, feel my making of broth

in his dissolving heart-chambers. When his breath shut,
when he began to cool – then – I called for family. It was

almost a miracle, the Doctors said. Four times the fatal dose
and he nearly turned round. I felt myself the wrong side

of a door – a partition thin as plywood, thinner, as though
you could hear everything that was going on inside.

His mother hugged me. The brothers kissed me. *Now we
are your brothers.* Have you ever been the wrong side

of that door, knowing all you needed was the key and you
could walk straight in? That's how it was. We were that close.

by Mario Petrucci

both excerpts from: Heavy Water: a poem for Chernobyl (Enitharmon, 2004)

3 ideas to finish:

[1] SYNERGY: Poetry and Film

Amazonia + Heavy Water: a film for Chernobyl

[[As you've just seen – now & at the opening of my talk...]]

[2] Poetry in Education – across the Disciplines

We are Finnegas as much as Finn. We fish for the Salmon, hoping to be enlightened ourselves – but it may be an unassuming child who brings truth to the world.

Education and science tend to favour specialists. Ecology teaches us that self-contained disciplines don't work. When we create educational resources that travel across and between disciplines, we give young people crucial skills for the future.

I've been active with creative writing resources targeting schools and the young – but good for adults too! Such things are beginning to happen, but still uncommon...

(a) The Ecopoetry Study Packs

Poetry Society

Poetry : the Environment

Biomimicry : Poetry [Explain 'Biomimicry' briefly]

The Green Poetry Pack

(b) CREATIVE WRITING ↔ SCIENCE

Royal Literary Fund

Emphasise this is crossing (artificial?) barriers between literature & science...

FINALLY... [3] SUSTAINABILITY – a challenge

The modern notion of sustainability began, you might say, in the 1970s. A terror swept into economists: the world was limited, and with environmental decay and population increase we'd soon run out of it. Mix that fear with Radical Inertia, and it's easy to see how sustainability came to mean something like this:

“With proper management and accounting, we *can* have a future after all – and it looks pretty similar to what we have now”.

This form of sustainability mostly replicates existing values and memes. It's not so much a call to empowerment – to full human, social, artistic consciousness – but a slight expansion of our public and private concerns into ecological integrity. It is:

Reform	over	Radicalism
Broad Control	over	Deep Overhaul
Management	over	Liberation

This ‘Business as usual’ sustainability is a plastic idea, easily injected into the mould of existing assumptions. It absorbs the pressure for genuine change, buying time for business to do more or less what it’s always done, for a little longer. Meanwhile, radical notions of sustainability rarely climb onto the agenda.

And so, we can call a resource ‘sustainable’ because it will be lost in 50 years instead of 5. ‘Sustainable forestry’ becomes an eternal pine desert where nothing else can live. And a car is ‘green’, not because it plants trees and recycles itself, but because it burns less petrol. [So, a burglar is good if he burgles fewer houses than the others?]

[[Green Car Guide) “A green car consumes less petroleum than conventional cars...”]

Not all sustainability is like *that*, of course, and it’s good to see *any effort*; but the point stands. Sustainability = implementation BUT ALSO interpretation. The chief concern is, too often, how to comply, when perhaps it should be to challenge.

Major incompatibilities between sustainability and modern economy:

- * The near-term view embodied in our economic and political systems
- ** Economic models *still* founded on assumptions and values of the free market, where (apparently) we’re all motivated by scarcity and competitive self-interest
- *** Cost-Benefit Analysis as the key means to make socio-economic decisions (where the not-so-distant future can get discounted to almost zero monetary value)

This triad is now pretty much global, trapping us in Radical Inertia and tripping us up with endlessly Framed Questions.

Poetry, along with the rest of art, won’t reverse that. *We* have to. But art can at least lead us to examine and re-experience our assumptions. It can motivate us to be different to ourselves, and therefore to act differently in the world. At its best, it can draw us to the transcendent, the intuitive and imaginative, the radical and spiritual, the clear-eyed. It is fundamentally human. And it’s fundamentally political.

In February 2003, the tapestry of *Guernica* in the United Nations was covered up so that Powell could present America’s case for war in Iraq against a neutral backdrop. Picasso’s image became a rallying point for protest. If ‘sustainable development’ is to be meaningful, it must surely include protest, a deep reassessment of core values and systems. How can great art not be implicated in that?

Our economic and military systems are monologues in which we individuals are caught up; but creativity generates dialogues that catch on. Poets, as much as politicians and institutional representatives, must spur fresh dialogue. As we find in politics, you’ll probably get the worst as well as the best of what poetry has to offer. As Sibelius (reputedly) said:

“Choose businessmen if you want to converse, because artists only talk about money.”

But let’s supply platforms for our poets anyway. If we find that they – like (too many) politicians – have become entertainers and scoundrels, if all they do think about is money and prestige, then at least we know the entire culture is snoring around us.

Einstein, when asked how he worked, replied: “I grope”. We’re a young species – artist and industrialist alike. We’re a child, recently woken, groping through the semi-darkness, sucking a thumb for false comfort. Suddenly, we find ourselves in charge of a precious salmon on a large and dangerous fire...

Whoever first told that story of Finn and the Fish set an alarm clock for us. It’s now ringing. Ecology itself is beginning to contradict the easy script written by the industrial/ economic age. Finn’s story tells us we must wake up – ready or not – to a full realisation of our selves. We cannot make ‘sustainability’ a substitute for that – an abstract, technical goal which allows us to remain untransformed.

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Optional PENULTIMATE THOUGHTS ... ‘Making Peace’ [Denise Levertov]

But politicians and business-people are, in some ways, easy targets. Here’s a challenge, then, to the poets... to myself...

“The poets must give us
imagination of peace, to oust the intense, familiar
imagination of disaster...”

Levertov’s poem goes on to suggest that the mysterious, intelligently groping processes by which poems get written might also be the way to change warlike society. Is that what unsustainable institutions and cultures really need: to enter into explorations that are mysterious; open; creatively, intelligently groping? To nurture individuals, to become deeply receptive to those genuinely engaged with creativity?

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And so, our thumb is pressed firmly to a blister. It is oiled hot with knowledge. Have we – not just our politicians and business-people, not only our poets and artists, but all of us – have we now the courage, wisdom and spontaneity to put that thumb back in our mouths?

Discussion & Questions
