

STAYING AWAKE:

Poetry as source of sustenance and suspicion in the Sustainable Age

Can poetry lead us to a more sustainable conception of ourselves, and of our selves within economic and artistic institutions? Award-winning poet and educator Mario Petrucci embarks on a remarkable journey, from Lorca and the Salmon of Knowledge, through Peruvian Rainforests and the tragedy of Chernobyl, back to the various beds we have made for our species.

FESTIVAL INNOVARTE - British Council

Dr. Mario Petrucci

with Espido Freire

Madrid, 23rd November 2010

Introductions/ welcome

1. Part I. Art as consciousness of Sustainability.

- [a] Talk on the theme and introduce main ideas.
- [b] Read 3 / 4 poems with very brief context.
- [c] Introduce & show excerpts from *Heavy Water* (Chernobyl);
Amazonia (Natural History Museum / Peruvian rainforest)

2. Part II. Art in Education: across the disciplines.

- [a] Poetry Society Eco-poetry (schools study & writing packs);
- [b] Royal Literary Fund (Creative Writing packs)

3. Part III. Sustainability - a challenge.

4. Part IV. Discussion (Espido)

+ Audience Questions

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)

It's typical of poetry, that through a strange and yearning poem about love and death, Lorca provides me (many decades after his passing) with a perfect verse to begin my talk. That's how poetry works! It stretches across time, moving us in dark and potent ways – but I'm sure I don't need to preach Duende in Madrid!

I thank everyone involved in this festival. I'm honoured to be invited, and to share a stage with Espido. I'm particularly in awe of the interpreter: it's a rare gift (almost Italian, in fact) to be able to listen and talk at the same time!

So, we're going to discuss:

STAYING AWAKE:

Poetry as source of sustenance and suspicion in the Sustainable Age

PART I: Art as Consciousness

1. Finn and Finnegas

I'm going to share, with you, a wonderful Celtic story [**Finn and the Salmon**]. I'll just release it here, into this pond, like a small fish – a tiddler – trusting that each time we return to it, it will have grown. Here's the story...

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.

[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.

2. Memes, Radical Inertia, Framed Questions

Our civilisation suffers from three, seemingly ineradicable pests. Each of them represents a lack of wisdom....

First, the meme [Richard Dawkins]. A meme is a self-replicating unit, a splinter, of culture. It propagates from generation to generation, often mutating as it goes. A famous folk melody; a catchphrase on TV; a political idea that makes a neat headline: all memes. 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 pest.

Then there's my idea of Radical Inertia. [A modification to Ivan Illich's idea.] Put simply, this is resistance to change, encountered whenever a way of doing or seeing things is deeply ingrained in us. We'd come up hard against Radical Inertia if we tried to abolish schools, or televisions. Our weak response to the imminent disappearance of oil is largely down to Radical Inertia. It's my second pest.

Finally, there's what I call the 'Framed Question'. This is a question with an agenda, posed in such a way that only certain 'answers' are possible – everything else is excluded. Framed Questions happen because many of our assumptions are invisible to us: the 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?" These are Framed Questions – my third pest in politics and culture.

*

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

Not trivial poetry, of course: that's a pest too. I mean poetry in radical, authentic mood. Poetry that pierces. Such poetry can multiply, into the culture, the insights of those few individuals who are still, in some ways, fully awake.

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

[*The Ninth Elegy*; my translation].

Because great poetry transforms, it dents Radical Inertia. Because great poetry opens us to wider truths, it breaks up the Framed Question. In a way, it's also meme-proof, because it can't be pinned down to one-eyed meanings: that charge of the Cyclops herd.

True, art alone can't banish these pests. But it can assert the individual. Augmenting the unique self: this is art's unique selling point. Every civilisation is a balance between the individual and the herd. Economics and advertisements want herds; good parents and astute lovers want individuals. 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".

3. The benefits and problems of Poetry in times of Crisis

Am I saying, then, that poetry is just a form of pesticide? Of course not. 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 (useful, when trying to communicate important new ideas such as Sustainability).

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 pests, rather than exterminating them? If so, where are they? 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. The best art *moves us, stirs us*.

Poetry is that moment the cactus blossoms. [c.f. cover of Espido's *Irlanda*] Or it's the lightning flash by which we glimpse some shallowness in our *Zeitgeist*. Or it brings out a strangely familiar truth in something unfamiliar and strange. 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.

4. The Crunch

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

Perhaps. Most of us 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 pin down. Economists may use metaphor all the time (financial *crash*; economic *meltdown*; *landslide* victory), but when it comes to dealing with a historic view or a humble fish in economic terms, they're stumped. They simply lump them 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. [Perhaps we need a new branch of economic theory – 'Metaphoric Economics'??]

Meanwhile, Copenhagen left the ecological crisis largely unresolved. Our civilisation has shown itself to be an ageing junkie, chasing its next fossil-fuel fix. You have to wonder 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 cannot seem to shake?

I'm a poet. Naturally, 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 claim poetry as our saviour. 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. And, 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 was brought by poetry to the kinds of tolerance, empathy or plural perspective I propose.

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. If not revolution, it favours 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.

5. The Poems

Perhaps now the poems should have their say. Let me read you a few excerpts from my books, which illustrate (I hope) some of my ideas. You have translations in your handouts.

Are we genuinely worried, yet, about oil running out? Sometimes, art persuades 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
(available via www.mariopetrucci.com)

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)

Part of the value of art is to generate fresh stories, new narratives.

We have an incredibly negative view of the future in popular culture. In cinemas and novels everywhere: Apocalypse.

This poem – taken from my most recent book – is set in a globally-warmed Britain plagued by rains. No petrol; crumbled cities. Life has returned to the land.

Negative? Well, a boy is working with his uncles to bring in the harvest. The inhabitants of his world have retained their spirit, their thirst for good stories that get them through the day.

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 Press, 2010)

Poem 4 **what pours**

[Connections]

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 personal and vital 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)

6. Poetry and Film

Film, like music, can be immensely potent in stimulating and motivating the public. You're about to see excerpts from two environmental films, constructed (unusually) around poetry. I scripted both. The film-makers were looking for something more than a documentary. Why 'more'? Aren't the facts enough? Well, facts are crucial, but they're not the only thing that sways us. I won't comment afterwards. The films should speak for themselves.

I realise it's difficult to read the Spanish text (in your handouts) whilst watching the screen. I hope that isn't too distracting. But what I most want you to witness tonight is the effectiveness of the medium.

The first excerpt is from: **(a) *Amazonia***

This footage was shot during a scientific expedition through Peruvian Rainforest.

Lucy + Jorge Orta / David Bickerstaff. Natural History Museum.

[the clip lasts about **6 minutes**]

The second excerpt is from: **(b) *Heavy Water: a film for Chernobyl***

Based on first-hand accounts of the appalling accident in Pripyat, April 1986.

Seventh Art * Phil Grabsky / David Bickerstaff.

Stop clip at **about 6 minutes** [the end of **MAY DAY**]

SHOW BOTH films now, one after the other...

PART II: Poetry in Education – across the Disciplines

Let's take a brief look at Education and Art.

Remember, we are Finnegans as much as Finn. We fish for the Salmon, hoping to be enlightened ourselves – but it may be an unassuming child temporarily in our care who brings truth to the world.

In education and science, we 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.

Here are two creative writing resources I've made, targeting schools and the young – but good for adults too! This is just a very quick glance (do find them later, online)...

(a) **The Ecopoetry Study Packs** Poetry Society

Poetry : the Environment
Biomimicry : Poetry
The Green Poetry Pack

[Explain 'Biomimicry' briefly]

Home page + quick look at pdf (**Green Poetry Pack**)

(b) **CREATIVE WRITING ↔ SCIENCE** Royal Literary Fund

Home page + glance at sample pdfs (1 or 2)

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

PART III: SUSTAINABILITY – a challenge

(see 'Sustainability – Long View or Long Word?' Social Justice 29:1/2, 2002)

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, more radical notions of sustainability rarely climb onto the agenda.

And so, we 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. Yes, a burglar is good if he burgles fewer houses than the rest.

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

I know: not all sustainability is like *that*, and it's good when *anything* happens to genuinely help the environment; but my point stands. The problem of sustainability

isn't just one of implementation, but also of interpretation. We may be too concerned with how we comply, when perhaps we should challenge.

A major problem here is the near-term view embodied in our economic and political systems. Also, our economic models are still founded on the assumptions and values of the free market, where (apparently) we're all motivated by scarcity and competitive self-interest. Cost-Benefit Analysis is a key means to make socio-economic decisions, while the not-so-distant future gets discounted (through the interest rate) to almost zero monetary value. This system has become global, trapping us in Radical Inertia and tripping us up with endlessly Framed Questions.

Of course, 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. 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.

Remember, 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; creativity generates a dialogue that catches on. Poets, as much as politicians and institutional representatives, must spur fresh dialogue. Yes, as with politics, you'll 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 the 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 our 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.

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 and wisdom to put it back in our mouths?

Mi pulgar: su pulgar.

[My thumb: your thumb]

AMAZONIA

by *Mario Petrucci*

Excerpt from the film directed by David Bickerstaff
Part of a special exhibition at **The Natural History Museum**
(Cromwell Road, London SW7 5BD)

A commission of new work by artists **Lucy + Jorge Orta**
with poetry by **Mario Petrucci**
Wednesday October 06 until Sunday December 12, 2010

[Gaia]

My centre is everywhere
Everything – huge and hung together

[Man]

Reality. We sense it in us
as a single course – each of us the head
of our one river. But a river
sources all water.

*We saw her. Walking
barefoot on the brink. Green leaves
for plumage, her wombs of water. Those
many legs. So close, we glimpsed the webs
between her woody fingers. Higher –
till our boots rang on ice. Close
enough to smell her. Each aroma:
loam and root. And that stink
enticing – of glacier
meeting fire.*

[Gaia]

beneath fragmentation
– the whole the centre
everywhere from pole

to pole my molecular
hard-won everything :
huge and held and

hung together

[Man]

Tug at any one thing.
The rest will move.

[Gaia]

*It all happens here –
between cloud and air
between water and vapour
between a plant and its root
between sunbeam and green
Here – between my forest
and the steam it makes
of rain the world
is that web strung
Between*

[Man]

They trust to the wind. These mild
men of vapour. Women of the future.
Each raindrop a child of dust.

[Gaia]

*There is a world in trees
furling within the rings
There lives the dearest freshness
deep down things*

from: *Amazonia* © Mario Petrucci 2010

An excerpt from
Heavy Water: a film for Chernobyl (2006)
Seventh Art Productions

A film by
David Bickerstaff and Phil Grabsky

Written by
Mario Petrucci © 2006

Film script based on:

Heavy Water: a poem for Chernobyl by Mario Petrucci (Enitharmon, 2004)
Half Life (poems for Chernobyl) by Mario Petrucci (Heaventree Press, 2004)

1.

Even the robots refuse. Down tools. Jerk up
their blocked heads, shiver in invisible hail. Helicopters
spin feet from disaster, caught in that upwards cone
of technicide – then ditch elsewhere, spill black running guts.
Not the Firemen. In rubber gloves and leather boots
they walk upright, silent as brides. Uppers begin
to melt. Soles grow too hot for blood. Still they shovel
the graphite that is erasing marrow, spine, balls –

that kick-starts their DNA to black and purple liquid life.
Then the Soldiers. Nervous as children. They re-make it –
erect slabs with the wide stare of the innocent, crosshatch
the wreck roughly with steel, fill it in with that grey
crayon of State Concrete. In soiled beds, in the dreams
of their mothers, they liquefy.

2.

It is Spring. And every thing
is on the move. In the meadow
a cricket grates its tiny washboard
but his is a tune no female knows.
A cow barges the gate whose bolt
longs to slide. Whose hinge to squeal.
Back legs give way – she slips
on a bloated udder and in its socket
her great eye rolls. It is Spring. Things
still move. Bees drop short of the hive
whose queen turns circles no worker
can decipher. A toad lifts his solemn head
at the rim of a pond of foam. Rain falls.
Is falling. This is Spring. Everything.
His skin smells the scum. Smells it again.

3.

It is May Day. The children
are eating painted eggs. Look
at the fine colours. Pink and green
for May Day. The workers
are marching. The men look
fine. The sky is fine. The grass
magnificent. This is May Day.
A child is crying. Her cry is
natural. In her genes. She cries
even though the rain falls pink
and green on May Day. The veteran
pats her parted hair – *Isn't that smell magnificent?*
She cries. And his face is a mask
for May Day. May Day. May Day.

4.

A General arrives. Fresh asphalt three layers
thick – and still he walks on tiptoe. Minces

to the edge as though it were a cliff. *God,*
I think. *That one should dance for the Bolshoi.*

The dreams. Nothing prepares you
for those dreams. Me, as a boy, breaking up
through liquid black. Always that boy-self
choking on breath. The General says – *Don't*

worry. *This world is one vast laboratory.*

And all the while I know my coat is clicking
like a cricket. My own coat – killing me.

5.

In our country it is not people you see
but the powers that bind them. And
those are invisible. See how the film
they bring back is black – their pictures
all black. They tried to repaint our village
but whichever shade they chose came out
black. Their tapes are hiss. The radio
hiss. Their videos are white noise
without the noise. Hear how the phone
clicks into silence. Notice how there are
no orders. So take this powder. Make
no fuss. Be silent as a fish. You could
have an accident. Quietly. You could
be put in a room. A quiet room
where they say – *Take this powder.* So
take it. Think like a stone. Be silent
as a she-fox wrapped around its cubs.
Listen. I saw it – sitting in a chair
in an empty house. A black calf
with hair to the ground. It was
eating stones. Its black eyes shone.

For more information on these works, or the author: www.mariopetrucci.com