

Palpably Human - An Evening with Douglas Dunn
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Born in Inchinnan, Renfrewshire in 1942, the poet Douglas Dunn first came to public attention in 1969 with the publication of his debut collection *Terry Street*; one that was to mark the beginning of a highly distinguished poetic career, earning him, among other literary prizes, the Somerset Maugham Award, the Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, the Hawthorden Prize and the Whitbread Book of the Year. Hailed by critics as “the most respected Scottish poet of his generation”, he was recently honoured with an OBE.

So the opportunity to attend a poetry reading by Douglas Dunn here in Malta, as part of the 16th edition of the University of Malta’s ‘Evenings on Campus’ was one not to be missed. The reading was held at the Old University Courtyard in Valletta, a setting which, aided by the play of lights on a white back-drop, proved conducive to the intimacy that such occasions call for.

Douglas Dunn's work, as is evident on a reading of the recently published *New Selected Poems 1964-2000*, presents us with a poetry as versatile in style as it is in subject matter. His is a poetry that traverses the subtleties of human feeling and circumstance in tones that vary from the pleasantly light-hearted to the achingly grief-stricken.

Dunn set the mood for the evening as he took his place behind the lectern and commented that he was much more comfortable on what he described as an “egg cup” chair where he sat during a brief introduction. Indeed, Dunn's humorous strain was not only evident in the comical anecdotes that preceded a number of poems he read through the course of the evening, but also in some of the poems themselves. 'A Poem for a Birthday' recalls, in its celebration of the trivial, the “butter-fingered wizard” whose £30 worth of “rank incompetence” was outwitted by five-year-olds and a white rabbit.

Similarly, in 'Extra Helpings', a poem with a nursery-rhyme ring to it with which Dunn chose to bring the reading to a close, the listeners were amused by a rhythmical tune reminiscing his gluttonous days at primary school: “Dear God, I'd die/For Shepherd's Pie/In 1949 or 1950”.

The shorter poem 'Thursday', surely comical in its own right, may well have been less so for the academics in the audience whom Dunn, himself an academic at the University of St Andrews in

Scotland, half-seriously reminded of their dull “touches of howevering and thereforing”; “touches”, he concedes that confirm them as “ancient bore[s]”.

Readings from the 1985 collection *Elegies* brought the audience in touch with the more personal, heartfelt poems of a man who suffered the loss of his young wife. 'Land Love' introduces two very important motifs that surface in Dunn's exploration of love, namely, time and place: “We stood here in the coupledness of us”, reads the opening line. The immediacy of “here” and the rootedness of the couple's love in the pastoral scene creates a tangible sense of place.

The previously vacant space they now inhabit gathers all that matters into what Dunn, in a poem which he read most evocatively on the evening, calls a “private anywhere” ('Love Making by Candle-Light') – where love dwells, the suggestion is, land takes on meaning.

Time, after his wife's demise, is no longer what the conventional measures of time force it to be: the past and the present conflate as the now dead wife lives on “in the fields of life”. This is, it seems, the only solace the grieving poet can find after he learns that the question “Why?”, as he read in the poignant poem 'Reading Pascal in the Lowlands', must perforce remain unanswered: “Nature is silent on that question”.

Shedding yet more light on a poetic versatility, Dunn read the more recent highly introspective poem 'Woodnotes', which captures the contemplative mood of his latest publication *The Year's Afternoon* (2000). In a deliberate escape from the peopled world, he finds, in self-inflicted exile, the duplicate of himself, only to learn “what a dead man learns” – a bitter suggestion indeed. Here, the now older poet is overwhelmed by thoughts beyond his ability to express: “a big upsweep/Of thoughts I can't describe but I wish I could”. Poetry it seems, is no longer an adequate vent. Indeed, it has now been eight years since Dunn last published a book of poetry.

The “year's afternoon”, however, has been long enough and Dunn's next collection is due to be published next year. It seems clear from the poem 'Instructions to a Saintly Poet', one that will feature in this awaited collection and that Dunn read at the start of the evening, that the strengths of poetry have been reconfirmed, as the words at the close of the poem attest: “find solace”, they instruct, “in what you imagine”.

From the jocular moments of failed conjuring by the “slipshod sorcerer” in 'A Poem for a Birthday' to the affectingly sincere desires in 'Land Love', Dunn regaled his audience with a varied selection

of poems, a tempting invitation to read his poetry.

Prompted by a question from a member of the audience towards the end of the evening, Dunn lamented the meagre readership of poetry. What happens, he wondered, to the literature graduates who acquire the skill not only to read but to be articulate about poetry?

Perhaps it is indeed such evenings, in which poetry speaks more truly than it might on the page, that are needed to keep us in touch with poetry, which does not exist simply to be studied but rather, and better still, to bring us closer to, what Douglas Dunn calls, the “inner invisibilities” within.

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