

Dan Burt

In conversation with

SASHA DUGDALE

Sasha Dugdale: As readers of your memoir and earlier books of poetry will know, you cleave very close to the events and circumstances of your life in your writing. Does that mean that you began writing late? And is the muse for you an elegiac and retrospective one?

Dan Burt: I began writing late, almost too late. I was sixty-two when I first tried to write poetry, sixty-four before I dared show it to anyone. The answer to the second is no, my muse is not elegiac.

SD: But the rest of your life up until that point? Was there any hint that you would become a poet? Were you writing at all?

DB: Yes, but only legal and business prose. From when I learned to hold a pencil I wrote nothing remotely literary, excepting two haikus for my undergraduate college weekly. For thirty-plus years after leaving law school in 1969 a pen was rarely out of my hand, but it scribbled nothing Calliope inspired. My compositions all were legal and business documents – memos, opinion letters, arguments to regulators, draft legislation, regulations, briefs and legal pleadings for courts, fises and international tribunals, contracts, corporate minutes to implement plans.

Though my subjects when I began to write were people, places, and experiences that had stamped me, lengthening charnel shadows had not driven them to mind. I wrote about my past to understand my present, but for-bears and spots of time were not the spur to write.

Impostor syndrome was my muse. After first reading the Romantics at twenty, Yeats and Eliot a year later, poetry became my passion. On graduating from college my grail was to write at least one poem that had a chance of lasting. Three times in the decade between graduating from college and starting my first law firm I left lawyering to try and write, and each time quickly funk'd it.

Nevertheless from twenty-five I professed to the few deep loves with whom I shared my longings as well as my body that I would write poetry when I had wealth enough. Only one of them believed me.

At sixty-two I could no longer pretend I'd not enough to do whatever I wanted. Now that time had come – put up or shut up. Had I been a poseur for four decades, claimed an aspiration I deemed purer than lawyering to puff myself up? Was I merely a hypocrite pretending to superior moral character than my fellow counsellors at Jarndyce & Jarndyce?

With old age the impostor syndrome that long had haunted me became unendurable, a constant dybbuk. Rather than accept I had long been what I most loathed, a fraud, I sat down to try and write a poem.

SD: *Late Self-Portrait* is a hybrid collection: the poems are interspersed with short prose pieces that cast light on moments of importance in your life. I was particularly struck by the prose interludes relating to art and artists, because they show such deep love and understanding for the visual arts. In one you describe the work of Frank Auerbach as 'compulsive reworking'; every morning scraping off the paint he had applied the day before until the image 'embodied what he called "the raw truth"'. You are also a constant (and perhaps compulsive?) reworker of your poems. Many of the poems in this collection are honed, redrafted versions of earlier poems or scenes from your life. Do you share Auerbach's sense that raw truth in art is to be uncovered by stubbornly ploughing the same patch of land until it yields up its treasure?

DB: The answer is, wholeheartedly, yes. But it was years before I understood, then aspired to his aim.

Manifold revisions of briefs, draft legislation and regulations are standard practice in US large case litigation and federal regulatory law practice, my job in private and government for forty years. It was not unusual to go through ten, sometimes twenty, drafts of a legal document in sessions akin to manuscript meetings with an editor, except with five to ten lawyers round the table. Revising quickly became a habit.

Though the aim of legal documents is persuasion not truth, the revision habit acquired in drafting them accompanied my attempts to write poetry. At first it seemed merely a natural way to try to turn a well-formed verse. But after perhaps a decade I began to realise I was writing to interrogate the ghosts of the experiences that had shaped me, and that incessant revision was how to find the spells to summon them; editing to resurrect rather than convince.

Two men, John Kerrigan and Frank Auerbach, taught me that revision was the key to calling ghosts. John, then holder of the Shakespeare chair at Cambridge and a Fellow of St John's, my college, introduced himself to me shortly after he read my first published poems. Almost instantly he became an essential and invaluable editor whose critique I sought before sending pieces for a publisher's consideration.

When I complained how difficult I found composition, how many revisions a poem went through before I dared show him a draft, John loaned me two books of Yeats's drafts edited by Jon Stallworthy. They shocked me; Yeats's first drafts of some of his most famous lyrics gave no hint they could metamorphose into poems that passed into the memory of the race. As Stallworthy traced their evolution through subsequent drafts, I began to comprehend how continual revision might reveal the core of an experience buried in a first draft.

But it was Auerbach's practice and comment on his art that allowed me to understand that what my incessant revisions were trying to unearth was the beating heart of an experience, what he called 'the raw truth'. His constant scraping and repainting aimed at creating a living thing, not simply a portrait or image of a landscape but an independent life form. When I read that I understood at last that my incessant delving was for the same being, however imperfectly I might exhume it.

SD: In one of Rilke's letters to a young poet¹ who is also studying law he says that 'this complete contrast in your two occupations strikes me as positive: for the more distinct the world of the intellectual, intentional and deliberate is, both in its nature and its practice, the more likely it is that one's inspiration is protected, that which rises from nowhere, the spirit coming from deep within.' The harmony Rilke hints at here hardly characterises the counterpoint between poetry and life's business in your work. I'd even ask whether the matter of surviving (more openly brutal at the bottom of the food chain, cloaked in Ivy League civility higher up) doesn't actually needle you into poetry? Certainly some of the memorably sharp images in your work are portrayals of man's inhumanity to man (in the boardroom, on the butcher's sawdust).

DB: No, harsh experiences I've had are merely cadavers to dissect. While I explore them, they haven't led and don't now lead me to write. They're intensities that smelted my character; spots of time that extruded in a poem allow me to understand who I am and how I came to be that way.

Rilke's view that poetry is the product of 'one's inspiration' is not mine. I'm sceptical about the concept of inspiration, of 'the spirit coming from deep within', and believe it's a name simply for craft repeatedly applied to a powerful experience till its mainsprings are revealed. The poet is no more a vatic voice than the painter, say Rothko or Barnett Newman, is a fabricator of emotional transcendence. For me it's facts that matter, arrayed as compellingly as possible to present the throbbing core of experience.

Practicing as a lawyer was valuable when I turned to poetry because it attuned me to facts, precise meaning of words, intense concern for logic and how to build a compelling argument. But large case litigation and international financial engineering are exhausting trades, and while my practices were in full spate, it left me no time for the contemplation poetry requires, or the energy for crafting it.

The law that Rilke is talking about is the gentlemanly calling that was the life of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century counsellors and company secretaries, not the high-pressure world of post-war, big-firm international law practice. Wallace Stevens lived the law practice experience Rilke saw as conducive to writing poetry; I did not. Stevens practiced as an in-house lawyer in a large New England insurance company, a nine-to-five job that left

ample, unpressured time to continue the poetry career he carried with him into the law.

What at root needled me to write poetry was that it seemed the best way to understand the core of what shaped my society and me. Yes, I loved the play of words, the drive to concision, the melodies, but more than all else I wanted to understand why I and the world around me are what we are; trying to write poetry seemed the best way to do that.

SD: You mention in one of your prose pieces that the experience of spending time surrounded by art in Kettle's Yard, the Cambridge home of art collector and curator Jim Ede, and being allowed to take paintings from his collection back to hang in your own room (what a generous and utopian practice that was!) gave you a foundation for loving and living with art and it has remained one of the constants of your life. In my own thinking and poetic practice I draw heavily on the visual arts, and I wonder how this absorption in image-making has shaped your understanding of poetry, not just as a craft, but as a way of seeing.

DB: I'm finding this the most difficult of your questions so far to answer. The answer to the first part of the question ('how art I live with has affected my craft') comes more readily to mind than does the second: understanding how art shapes my poetry 'as a way of seeing'. Lastly, though you don't specifically ask about the effect of living, as I do, with some exceptional art, I find that fact impossible to ignore.

Auerbach created the paintings and charcoals hanging on my walls over the last seventy-five years. I've owned some of them for thirty. Their presence focused me on the necessity and immense importance of unremitting revision, because that was how he, famously, achieved his results. It spurred me to revise constantly, in some cases over years, digging for the beating heart of a poem. Examples of poems that have undergone multiple revisions spanning years are 'Cabaletta', 'John Winthrop's Ghost' and 'After Eighty'.

Some of the art I lived with led me to try to reproduce in lyric poetry the immediacy of its images. The drive to create poetic siblings of the landscape in Kiefer's *Der Rhein*, the figures in Rego's 'Father Amaro' series, or Kiff's haunted self-portraits drove my attempts to supply a visual image of old ladies ('Blue Rinse Matrons'), an unloved mother ('Death Masque'), a sixty-four-year-old lover ('Yvonne de Galais').

In 'Philoctetes' I refer to the works dressing my walls as 'unquiet post-war art', frequent images of a dim, at best, ironic, take on humanity. Of course, I chose these works in the first place because they were congruent with how I saw the world, so it was predictable that pessimistic themes would sound in my poetry. But the art where I live did more than confirm my take on human character. To see my convictions reflected in the work of leading artists gave me the courage to use verse to voice my judg-

¹ Letter to Elisabeth Ephrussi, 20 May 1922, from a forthcoming book called *How to Begin*, edited and translated by Karen Leeder.

ments about that reality – as in, for example, Kitaj's *The Jew, etc.* and my poem 'Traitor'.

Some of my poems about the art around me are the direct result of seeing it every day. For example, 'Modern Painters' is about Auerbach's painting *Head of Gerda Boehm*. 'Martha, Mary and Magdalene' is a somewhat ekphrastic poem about a Paula Rego triptych of the same title. In these, the poet's and painter's vision are one.

The third way art I see daily reverberates in my poetry is as aspiration. Kiefer's *Der Rhein* hanging in a vacation home in Maine is a stinging, irrefutable commentary on the poisonous consequences of the Nazi regime's nationalist theology. In my London flat John Virtue's tall landscape of *Wellington's Column* in Trafalgar Square, seen from the National Gallery looking down Whitehall and silhouetted against black storm clouds, incontrovertibly tolls the end of empire. Rego's *Wedding of the Last King of Portugal*, the king standing on a tub of his native soil in the great hall of a Bavarian castle as he weds an Aryan beauty, captures in almost garish colours the follies of a dying royal dynasty.

These and other works encompassing grand, sad historical themes provoked me to try capturing in poetry the pall history casts over the present. With this aim in mind I wrote 'November 9, 2016' about Trump's first election. 'Compounds' was my attempt to grapple with Holocaust denial; the aftermath of Kennedy's assassination engendered 'The Greatest Generation'. I did not dream, writing these pieces, of approaching the reach and power of the paintings that inspired them. But absent their oil and pastel progenitors around me when I rose in the morning, and kicked slippers off at night, I'd not have tried.

However, none of the explanations above about art's effect on my craft and theme capture its most profound effect on me. The art I live with, or travel to see, like Soutine's baker's apprentice at the Barnes, offer the example of beauty and vision in the midst of chaos and killing. Without this daily reassurance of civilization's possibility, I'd lack the will to write at all.

SD: In 'Paula Rego – At the Opera (Prose Eulogy)' you write touchingly about your friendship with Paula Rego and your regular trips to see *Rigoletto* together. You describe rather beautifully the artist's total immersion in the opera: 'transported, tearful painter marrow-deep in a tragedy she understood in her bones', and you go on to say that for you the mainsprings of her work are intensity, autobiography and *saudade* (a Portuguese word I understand as a deep melancholic yearning for the absent, rather like *toska* in Russian). I wonder if this isn't also a description of the mainsprings of your own art?

DB: The answers are yes, no and yes, provided you accept my rendering of *saudade* in answering the third.

All my poetry aspires to the condition of intensity. The more intense an experience the more likely a person will recall, be marked by, and over the years understand it. In short, intensity speaks forever and is sooner or later heard.

Intensity is an inextricable part of the experiences that interest me most, those that leave perdurable scars – failure, loss, arrogance, unhappy loves, deaths come too

soon, blighted careers, the miseries that swamp lives lived taking chances. I write poetry to understand the core of the experiences that marked me, and publish it so others may in turn understand and be marked by them in however small degree.

The aim of all my serious poems, however rarely attained, is intensity – to render a high degree of the deep emotion intense experiences create, compressed into as few rhythmical, rhymed plain words as possible. Beneath the surface of even my occasional light verse lurk intense subjects, for instance in 'Ascension Day' (WASPs in a famous watering hole snubbing newcomers) or 'Sociopath's Summa' (a cynical ethics traced in implied answers to three rhetorical questions).

Intensity is essential to my poetry's aim to recreate in the reader the experience so strong it permanently scored the writer. But that experience itself need not be inherently intense; its intensity may be relational. For example, hearing birdsong at dawn in a city is not inherently intense. But where, when, how the birdsong is heard may have left an indelible mark. Wordsworth's 'The Reverie of Poor Susan' is an example of this relational intensity arising out of surrounding circumstances.

Finally, my poetry gravitates towards intensity because I believe writers owe their readers recompense for their time spent reading them. My hope is that if readers identify vicariously in the smallest degree with a poem of mine, or recall similarly freighted memories from their lives, they will feel the time spent wrestling with my work was worthwhile.

The O.E.D. defines autobiography as writing your own history: my poems, and Paula Rego's paintings, mostly don't do that; by the O.E.D.'s definition our work is not autobiographical. When I wanted to write autobiography I wrote two prose memoirs, not poetry.

It's true that almost all my poems are about something I've experienced, done, observed or been told about by persons who lived the stories they told. However, it's only in the simulative sense, that my poetry examines events and themes in my life, would I classify it as autobiographical.

Last and perhaps most important, my life has been crowded with uncommon experiences, exotic places, actors, trades and litigation that supply ample feed stock for a latecomer to Yeats' sedentary trade.

Saudade beats in the heart of Portuguese culture; it is the verses and melodies of fado, Portugal's folk music. In songs of lost loves, countrysides, vanished childhoods, unforgettable, unrecoverable chance encounters, *saudade* captures Romantic melancholy better than any art form I know.

When I met Paula Rego for the first time, a lament by Amalia Rodrigues, the queen of fado, sounded from the boombox in Paula's studio for a love met and lost in Coimbra. Unsurprising, since Paula was thoroughly Portuguese. Her other love was *bel canto* opera, above all *Rigoletto*. Since I am a *fadista* as well as an opera fan, we got on.

But until you asked if *saudade* was a core element in my work, I'd not thought about it. Now you have it seems fundamental.

The last seven lines of my poem 'Charterman', recalling a brackish bay and watermen's long gone way of life upon

it, needs only translation into Portuguese and accompanying by a folk melody to have come from the lips of Rodrigues:

... but by slips boatmen remain, reeve
rod guides, observe the weather, rub
penetrant on rusted pliers
and pause to watch sedge sway on flats
geese rise honking from wetland choirs
the sun decline, a whirl of gnats
and The Light flick on at Barnegat.

Much of my poetry is bleak because it's about the people, places, trades and cultures I knew as boy and man, and they were bleak. A working-class childhood, racketeering relatives, grandparents who fled the Pale's pogroms that killed the kin they left behind, mean streets and meaner children in them, supplied few gentle templates. Beneath the veneers of the upper class into which my international education led me – famous law firms,

the US Treasury, Washington politics and lobbying, cultural warfare, middle eastern business, the art world – people and practices were no different than those in the macadam streets I came from. Lying, greed, corruption, drudgery, vanity, pride, arrogance, bribery, egotism, narcissism are the same draped in a blood-smeared butchers coat as in a spotless Savile Row suit.

But not all my past was grim. The sea off the New Jersey coast and the fishing and sailing captains who taught me its ways supplied intensely remembered joys; so too a teenage crush who came to love me late in life; an ancient university that took me in as a 'wild card'; and poems learned by heart I recite to myself still. I remember these long gone delights as candles flickering in a dark, harsh world, a hint from boyhood on that the world was not completely savage. The golden moments of youth and early manhood, especially time at sea and Cambridge, were salvational; yearning for them is a constant chord in my poetry, the closest my work approaches to the pastoral.