POETRY 'IN TIMES LIKE THESE'

MICHAEL LONGLEY

I feel greatly honoured and deeply moved to be awarded the Feltrinelli International Prize for Poetry. This European award comes to me at a time when war has returned to Europe. I take the title for my talk – during which I will read some of my poems – from a poem by W. B. Yeats: 'On being asked for a War Poem'. The poem begins: 'I think it better that in times like these / A poet's mouth be silent'. Yeats wrote this poem in early 1915, partly as a reaction against all the bad patriotic verse prompted by the First World War. But, in fact, he would go on to engage profoundly with that war in his poetry. He discovered that he could not 'be silent' about 'times

like these': about a European cataclysm, which included violence and civil war in Ireland.

To return to our own times – but again with a backward look. Vladimir Putin's wicked invasion of Ukraine obliges me to name that glittering quartet of Russian poets who were hounded and tormented by his murderous predecessor Joseph Stalin. I am referring of course to Anna Akhmatova, Boris Pasternak, Marina Tsvetaeva and Osip Mandelstam. In Stalin's terrors and purges, millions perished through starvation, execution, imprisonment, torture, slavery. In a 1925 poem Akhmatova writes:

> There are such easy ways
> to leave this life,
> to burn to an end
> without pain or thought,
> but a Russian poet
> has no such luck.
> A bullet is more likely
> to show his winged soul
> the way to Heaven;
> or else the shaggy paw
> of voiceless terror will squeeze
> the life out of his heart
> as if it were a sponge.

In that nightmarish darkness our four poets' unbreakable integrity and spiritual incorruptibility blaze out like a

sunburst. But they paid a terrible price. Mandelstam died in a labour camp. Tsvetaeva was driven to suicide. Pasternak (who was forbidden to travel to Sweden to receive his Nobel Prize) died in opprobrium. As her distinguished translator D.M. Thomas points out, only Akhmatova 'lived long enough to receive the openly-expressed love of her countrymen and to find joy in the knowledge of poetry's endurance.' He asks a profound question: 'Can it be by chance that the worst of times found the best of poets to wage the war for eternal truth and human dignity?'

The same question might be asked of Vasyl Stus, one of Ukraine's most celebrated and defiant poets during Soviet rule. He joined protests against the arrests of Ukrainian intelligentsia, and was expelled from his PhD studies and refused publication. He campaigned tirelessly for free speech and cultural pluralism. Arrested and charged with 'anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda', he was sentenced to five years in a labour camp and a further three years' exile. In papers smuggled from prison he proclaimed: 'I had no intention of bowing my head down, whatever happened. Behind me was Ukraine, my oppressed people, whose honour I had to defend or perish.' Stus wrote many poems in prison, saying of his work that 'the debris of torment / might give birth to flowers'. He was arrested again in 1980 and thrown into isolation in 1985. He died shortly afterwards on hunger strike. Stus's

poems are much-quoted today. He also wrote: 'There is a fight; I'm on the battlefield./ Where all my soldiers are the words I wield.'

Tyrants fear the word. Around the world they imprison journalists and intellectuals, writers and poets. If I were to name one repressive regime I would in fairness have to name them all, but that would make too long a list. I shall confine myself to a personal story. In 2017 I was humbled to share the PEN Pinter Prize with Mahvash Sabet, an Iranian poet condemned in 2010 to twenty years in prison simply because of her Baha'i faith and her work on behalf of the Baha'i community. Her poems can be desolate: 'No one listens, no one hears this wingless bird.' In my address (which I called 'Songs for Dead Children') I did indeed call Mahvash 'a songbird trapped in a cage.' I said that her incarceration by the Iranian authorities was a sin against the light. Miraculously, by the time I gave my address in London in 2017 Mahvash had been released. Through a video link she was able to join our gathering like a burst of birdsong. But recently I have received heartbreaking news. The Iranian thought-police are again on the rampage. Dozens of Baha'i followers have been arrested, among them Mahvash Sabet. Yes, simply for what she believes, the winner of the 2017 PEN Pinter Prize for an International Writer of Courage has once again been

incarcerated in Iran. Let us all cry out for her release. May her quiet voice silence the taunts and lies of the bullies:

> I have written a message on a nasturtium leaf
> And hung it on my door, like a charm.
> It says: 'There's a warm heart waiting here,
> And a mother's open arms.'

Now, to come home. In the north of Ireland our civil war lasted for thirty destructive years. We christened this mayhem the 'Troubles'. The Troubles belong to the dark history of European conflict. Three and a half thousand people died, many more were wounded, many were displaced. It will take generations for the wounds to heal. From the beginning, my poet-friends and I resisted the temptation to hitch a ride on yesterday's headlines, to write the poem of the latest atrocity. Perhaps Yeats's example was in our minds. We also learned from each other how complex the situation was (and is), how inadequate the political certainties. We knew there was no point in versifying opinion and giving people what they wanted to hear. We believed that poetry, the opposite of propaganda, should encourage people to think and feel for themselves. We hated shallow or opportunistic writings which we came to call 'Troubles trash'. We believed that, even when generated by the best of intentions, bad poetry about the

sufferings of fellow-citizens would be an impertinence. We also disliked the notion that civic unrest might be good for poetry, or poetry a solace for the broken-hearted. A civil war puts everyone in the front line and there is no split between the public and the personal. In January 1976 ten workmen were taking their usual route home from a factory. Their bus was stopped. The gunmen asked each of them his religion. One man, a Catholic, was told to run away up the road. The other ten were lined up and machine-gunned. That scene of carnage was shown on television screens around the world. By pure chance I met in a Belfast pub the following day the cameraman who had filmed the bloody aftermath. Just a few weeks ago, nearly fifty years after the massacre, I wrote this short poem – perhaps about not being silent, or about the need to speak with care and attention:

THE FOLLOWING DAY

I met him in The Crown
By chance the following day,
The cameraman whose film
Had shown around the world
Our blood-drenched tarmacadam,
And when I asked him how
In nightmare's aftermath
He could compose himself,
'I take out my light-meter

And I focus the lens,'
He said the following day.

My Troubles poems mainly respond to certain terrible events, but sometimes to more direct political challenges. In 1976 I met in a pub Betty Williams and Mairead Corrigan of the Northern Irish Peace People, shortly after they had won the Nobel Peace Prize. I congratulated them on their great honour and promised them a poem for their movement's newspaper *Peace News*. That evening, unbelievably, I chanced upon an appropriate poem by Tibullus: 'Quis fuit, horrendos primus qui protulit enses.' I translated Tibullus's opening lines as: 'Who was responsible for the very first arms deal - / The man of iron who thought of marketing the sword?' The poem continues:

I want to live until the white hairs shine above
A pensioner's memories of better days. Meanwhile
I would like peace to be my partner on the farm,
Peace personified: oxen under the curved yoke,
Compost for the vines, grape-juice turning into wine,
Vintage years handed down from father to son,
Hoe and ploughshare gleaming, while in some dark corner
Rust keeps the soldier's grisly weapons in their place.

Alas, the gunmen and bombers ignored the Peace People's proposals and the pastoral quietude of Tibullus. The violence continued for too many years.

A French writer once asked me: 'What side are the poets on?' The true poets resisted demands to take sides. They listened to one another. Poem spoke to poem. Poet spoke to poet. Together the poets lived out the cultural intricacies of life in Northern Ireland. Poetic conversations continue to this day. When the Good Friday Agreement was painstakingly achieved, I felt it had an almost poetic complexity. What we call the Peace Process is after all a *process*. It is a long way from being over. In August 1994 it was rumoured that there might be an IRA ceasefire. At the time I was reading the passage in the *Iliad* where the old king Priam bravely visits the mighty Greek general Achilles to beg for the body of his son Hector whom Achilles has killed in combat. Priam in his fragility awakens in Achilles memories of his own father and rekindles the gentler emotions he has had to suppress in order to be a great general. The *Iliad* is probably our greatest poem about war and death, and this episode is, for me, the soul of this astonishing work:

CEASEFIRE

I
Put in mind of his own father and moved to tears
Achilles took him by the hand and pushed the old king
Gently away, but Priam curled up at his feet and
Wept with him until their sadness filled the building.

II
Taking Hector's corpse into his own hands Achilles
Made sure it was washed and, for the old king's sake,
Laid out in uniform, ready for Priam to carry
Wrapped like a present home to Troy at daybreak.

III
When they had eaten together, it pleased them both
To stare at each other's beauty as lovers might,
Achilles built like a god, Priam good-looking still
And full of conversation, who earlier had sighed:

IV
'I get down on my knees and do what must be done
And kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son.'

Latin and Greek poets have helped me to bring 'times like these' into my poetry. Homer has haunted me for more than sixty years. As a schoolboy I relished the Bronze Age music, the bumpy hexameters, the clash of the broad vowels, the way lips and tongue are vigorously exercised, hammer and tongs. And I adored the stories. In middle age I returned to the

Classics after a neglect that had lasted for a quarter of a century. From the outset, in my Homeric poems I pushed against the narrative momentum. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are page-turners. We go on reading to find out what happens next. But in my poems I 'freeze-frame' passages to release their lyric potential. Homer has enabled me to write belated lamentations for my father and mother, as well as to comment obliquely on the Northern Irish Troubles. And I have interwoven Homeric landscapes with the Irish landscape. In my poem, 'Moly', I describe myself reading and translating Homer in the west of Ireland, his epics of war and peace. I refer to wildflowers and to Inishturk, an island off the western coast. Perhaps Homer's mysterious plant, moly, is a symbol for healing:

MOLY

Translating the *Iliad* at Corragaun –
Book Twenty – Achilles' rampage –
I turn to the *Odyssey* for relief
And stroll from my sheepskin armchair
Down the overgrown pebbly path
To search among goose-grass and centaury
And scarlet pimpernel for that milk-
White flower with black root, so difficult
For mortal man to find, occult herb
And antidote for spells – Circe's spells –
Nobody knows exactly what it is

But I shall recognise it if it's here
(Its name among the gods is Moly)
And Inishturk becomes Ithaca.

I now want to express further gratitude to the country that has awarded me this prize. I want to put on record what Italy has meant to me and my poetry during difficult times. Since the 1980s my wife and I have been regular visitors to Italy, the guests of our friend Ronald Ewart. His lovely old *casa* is in the middle of Cardoso, a hill-top village in the Garfagnana region of Tuscany. Near the *casa* there's a magical walk along a wooded path to a waterfall. In my poem 'The Waterfall' I imagine this Cardoso locale as the ideal place for reading my poems, and perhaps as representing some qualities I would like them to have:

THE WATERFALL

If you were to read my poems, all of them, I mean
My life's work, at the one sitting, in the one place,
Let it be here by this half-hearted waterfall
That allows each pebbly basin its separate say,
Damp stones and syllables, then, as it grows dark
And you go home past overgrown vineyards and
Chestnut trees, suppliers once of crossbeams, moon-
Shaped nuts, flour, and crackly leaves for mattresses,
Leave them here, on the page, in your mind's eye, lit
Like the fireflies at the waterfall, a wall of stars.

One day when I was leaning out of the bathroom window to admire the surrounding mountains, I spotted an elderly neighbour tending his vines beyond the last houses. This seemed such an ancient image, and it became associated in my mind with an ancient feeling. Old Cesare reminded me of my father, then of Laertes, the father of Odysseus. In the *Odyssey* Laertes is in mourning for his son Odysseus. At first he doesn't realise that Odysseus is standing in front of him, alive and well - until:

> ... Laertes recognized his son and, weak at the knees,
> Dizzy, flung his arms around the neck of great Odysseus
> Who drew the old man fainting to his breast and held him there
> And cradled like driftwood the bones of his dwindling father.

In fact, my Homeric adventure began in Cardoso**,** in Italy, with that poem. Cardoso also deepened my enthusiasm for Italian poets such as Montale, Ungaretti, Quasimodo and the underrated Pascoli, laureate of the Garfagnana region. I really enjoyed translating a short lyric by Giovanni Pascoli:

UP THERE

The skylark far away up there in dawnlight
Sky-wanders: arias fall on the farmhouse
While smoke sways raggedly this way and that.

Far away up there the tiny eye takes in
Furrows rolling over in brown munificence
Behind converging teams of white oxen.

A particular sod on black soggy land
Flashes in sunlight like a mirror fragment:
The philosophical labourer binding sheaves
Cocks an ear for the cuckoo's recitatives.

I'll end by reading from 'Etruria': a poem set in Cardoso. The poem alludes to people who live and work there; to animals, insects, plants, food; to traditional crafts; to arts and artefacts. Although there are one or two darker images in 'Etruria', I think that it's ultimately a celebration of deep European history and deep civilisation, the opposite of war. It's also a poem about my love for Italy. This is the most profound way I have of thanking you from the bottom of my heart for the great honour you have bestowed on me:

ETRURIA

Pavese's English poems, an English setter barking –
Too hot and clammy to read, sleep, dander, so
Snap my walking stick in two and lay it out beside
My long bones in an ossuary that tells a story,

The apprentice ivory carver's yarn, for instance,
Who etched those elderly twinkling Chinese pilgrims
On a walnut, shell crinkles their only obstacle,
Globe-trotters in my palm, the kernel still rattling,

You can find me under the sellotaped map fold
Stuck with dog hairs, and close to a mulberry bush
The women tended, coddling between their breasts
The silkworms' filaments, vulnerable bobbins.

Was it a humming bird or a humming bird moth
Mistook my navel for some chubby convolvulous?
Paolo steps from his casa like an astronaut
And stoops with smoky bellows among his bees.

Gin, acacia honey, last year's sloes, crimson
Slipping its gravity like the satellite that swims
In and out of the hanging hornet-traps, then
Jukes between midnight planes and shooting stars …

The melon Adua leaves me on the windowsill
Gift-wrapped in a paper bag and moonlight
Ripens in moon-breezes, the pipistrelle's whooshes,
My own breathing and the insomniac aspen's. …

I escape the amorous mongrel with dewclaws
And vanish where once the privy stood, my kaftan
Snagging on the spiral staircase down to the small
Hours when house and I get into bed together,

My mattress on the floor, crickets, scorpion shapes
In their moonlit square, my space in this cellar
Beneath old rafters and old stones, Etruria,
Nightmare's cesspit, the mosquito-buzz of sleep.

MICHAEL LONGLEY

POESIE

Versione italiana di Paolo Febbraro

CESSATE IL FUOCO

I
In mente il suo stesso padre, mosso al pianto,
Achille prese il vecchio re per mano e piano
lo scostò da sé, ma Priamo si raccolse ai suoi piedi
e pianse con lui, colmando la tenda di mestizia.

II
Preso il corpo di Ettore fra le sue braccia Achille
si assicurò che fosse lavato e rivestito intorno
delle armi, che Priamo lo potesse riportare a Ilio,
adorno come un dono, al primo scoccare del giorno.

III
Quand'ebbero mangiato insieme, fu loro grato
come agli amanti mirare l'un dell'altro la bellezza,
Achille simile a un dio, Priamo nobile d'aspetto
e conversevole, lui che fra i singhiozzi aveva detto:

IV
«Piego le mie ginocchia, acconsento al destino
e bacio la mano che ha ucciso mio figlio».

LAERTE

Quando trovò Laerte, solo, nel giardino ben tenuto,
a zappare attorno a una vite, dentro stracci avvilenti,
rattoppati e sporchi, gambiere di pelle sugli stinchi
contro i rovi, e pure guanti, e per giunta un berrettone
di pelle di capra, segno sicuro di destituzione,
all'ombra di un pero Odisseo singhiozzò per suo padre
tanto vecchio e patetico che lì per lì avrebbe voluto
solo baciarlo e abbracciarlo e raccontargli ogni cosa,
ma ogni cosa è un elenco di fatti e poi un altro,
così preferì attendere che dal giardino sorgessero
immagini, prova d'un'infanzia girovaga dietro al padre
a chiedere d'ogni cosa veduta, i dieci meli,
tredici peri, quaranta piante di fico, cinquanta filari
di vite, promessa di frutto in diverse stagioni,
finché Laerte ravvisò suo figlio e, ginocchia fragili,
preso da vertigini, lanciò le braccia al collo di Odisseo
che addusse il vecchio debole al proprio petto, lo tenne
e cullò quelle gracili ossa come un retaggio del mare.

ETRURIA

Le poesie inglesi di Pavese, un setter inglese che abbaia –
troppo caldo e umido per leggere, dormire e far due passi,
e allora spezza il mio bastone da passeggio e stendilo accanto
al mio lungo scheletro in un ossario che dice una storia,

quella dell'apprendista incisore d'avorio, ad esempio,
che impresse quegli anziani pellegrini cinesi, luccicanti,
su una noce, le grinze del guscio per unico ostacolo,
giramondo nel palmo della mia mano, il gheriglio che risuona.

Puoi trovarmi sotto la mappa riavvolta e chiusa dallo scotch
con peli di cane attaccati, e presso un rovo di gelso
che le donne accudiscono, coccolando fra i loro seni
i filamenti dei bachi da seta, vulnerabili bobine.

È stato un colibrì o una falena sfinge a scambiare
il mio ombelico per un convolvolo paffuto?
Paolo spunta dalla casa come un astronauta
e con l'affumicatore si china fra le sue api.

Gin, miele d'acacia, prugnoli d'un'estate fa, un cremisi
che si divincola dalla gravità come il satellite che fluttua
dentro e fuori le trappole per calabroni, appese, quindi
gioca e scarta fra aerei notturni e stelle cadenti.

Già appisolate in un cerchio perfetto, nel frigo
le trote si rivestono d'un grigio-carcere, ventre color cielo
accanto alle figure del piattino da burro, clematide,
artemisia che quando germoglia s'impiuma.

Il melone che Adua mi lascia sul davanzale
come un dono incartato in un sacchetto e nel plenilunio
matura con le brezze notturne, lo svolìo dei pipistrelli,
il mio stesso fiato e quello del pioppo insonne.

Come un fegato aggrumato dal buio e da un fondo di vino,
la feccia d'aceto che s'ingromma nella sua brocca
è aruspice di febbre, uva avvizzita, vipere
sul sentiero che induce a una cascata inesistente.

Sfuggo alle feste e agli speroncini del cane bastardo
e svanisco dove un tempo c'era la latrina, il caftano
che s'impiglia sulla scala a chiocciola fino alle ore
piccole, quando la casa ed io andiamo a letto insieme,

materasso sul pavimento, grilli, sagome di scorpione
in un quadro di luce lunare, il mio spazio in questa cantina
sotto pietre e travi antiche, Etruria, pozzo nero
dell'incubo, le zanzare ronzanti del sonno.

LA CASCATA

Se tu dovessi leggere le mie poesie, tutte, dico,
l'opera di una vita, a un tempo e in un solo posto,
fa' che sia accanto a questa incerta cascata
che lascia di che dire ai sassi d'ogni bacino,
pietre e sillabe bagnate, poi, quando fa buio
e torni a casa per vigneti malcurati
e castagni, già fornitori di travi, frutti lunati,
farina e fruscianti imbottiture per cuscini,
lasciale qui, sulla pagina, nella tua mente, accese
come le lucciole alla cascata, muro di stelle.

Di lassù (Giovanni Pascoli, da *Myricae*)

La lodola perduta nell'aurora
si spazia, e di lassù canta alla villa,
che un fil di fumo qua e là vapora;

di lassù largamente bruni farsi
i solchi mira quella sua pupilla
lontana, e i bianchi bovi a coppie sparsi.

Qualche zolla nel campo umido e nero
luccica al sole, netta come uno specchio:
fa il villano mannelle in suo pensiero,
e il canto del cuculo ha nell'orecchio.

L'allodola lontana su nell'aurora
vaga nel cielo: sul *cottage* cadono arie
d'opera e il fumo a brani ondeggia.

Lassù lontano l'occhio minuto tiene
solchi rivolti in bruno splendore
dietro il convergere di bianchi buoi.

Una zolla sull'umida nera terra
splende nel sole come un frantume di specchio:
mentre affastella, il filosofo contadino
porge orecchio ai recitativi del cuculo.