Kit Fryatt

The Poetics of Elegy in Maurice Scully's *Humming*

Humming (2009) was Maurice Scully's first book-length publication since the completion of the eight-book 'set' *Things That Happen*, begun in 1987 with *Five Freedoms of Movement*, and finished in 2006 with *Tig*. The collective title of that extensive project alludes to Paul Celan's Bremen Prize acceptance speech: 'It passed through and gave back no words for that which happened [*was geschah*]; yet it passed through all this happening.'[1] Celan refers to the Holocaust, which in its enormity abolishes any language which might have been available to talk or write of it. Scully's deflected quotation is typical in its concern to register and record horrific experience without appropriating it. It is also characteristic in its interest in the unspoken and the unspeakable, which is maintained in *Humming*. The book is subtitled '[the words],' suggesting a libretto, 'as if to say,' as Meredith Quartermain notes in a review, 'here are the words to the music that you must already be humming'.[2] But that music is non-existent, or at least, idiosyncratic: it must be intuited by each reader from the words. And if we are to read *Humming* as the text of an imaginary song-cycle, then it is worth noting the implied accompaniment: not a musical instrument or ensemble, but a quintessentially unassertive hum. In interview with Marthine Satris, Scully remarks: 'The title could be taken to be anything from the background radiation of the universe to the babble of languages irradiating our planet, to the buzz of bees pollinating plants across the earth.'[3]

'Humming the words' is also an idiomatic phrase, and an oxymoronic one. Singers 'hum the words' when they have forgotten, or do not know them; in this sense, humming begins where verbal communication ends. 'Humming' may also imply temporization or equivocation, for which Scully's reserved, non-interventionist attitude to the world might be

mistaken. These poems explore and document speech as it becomes meaningless through repetition and overuse or conversely, points at which the previously unspoken achieves articulation. But there is one unspeakable constant, and it is death. Not mortality or mourning, about which *Humming,* in its wry fashion, has a great deal to say, but extinction itself, of which by definition we cannot speak. The book is an elegy, dedicated to the memory of the poet's brother Brian, who died in 2004. It is in many ways a traditional one, working within and commenting upon the constraints of the genre, but especially compared with other modern Irish examples, it may strike the reader as unusual.

Humming has nine parts: two entitled 'Song', followed by a 'Ballad', a central 'Sonnet', another 'Ballad', two more 'Songs', and concluding with 'Jam' and 'Coda', which form a pendant to the symmetrical design of the first seven parts. Within these parts are poems with titles such as 'Sonnet Song', 'Ballad', and 'Song', as well as a majority of untitled pieces and two exceptions to the lyrical nomenclature, 'Snow' and 'For Seven Auditions'. The impression given is of a configuration at once nested — a 'Sonnet Song' or a 'Ballad' within a 'Song' — and exploded, since many of the poems so named are deconstructed versions of the common lyric forms. That simultaneous feeling of containment and dissemination is reflected in many of the book's master images: crystalline or cellular structures, honeycombs, pollination, ripples. *Humming*'s arrangement — the analogies with a musical score are irresistible, if in practice curiously imprecise — reflects the intricate patterning created by apparently random action in the natural world. The appeal to nature's cycles and systems, whether as a source of consolation or of horror, has been fundamental to the European elegiac tradition since Bion and Theocritus.

Peter Sacks, in *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats*, begins his discussion of the conventions of the form by drawing attention to the linked figures of weaving and floral tribute, in which he sees the remnants of archaic vegetation ceremony.

Funeral flowers, he writes, ‘like the poetic language to which they are so often compared serve not only as offerings or gestures for respite, but also as demarcations separating the living from the dead’.[4] Scully’s use of the motif takes this demarcative function beyond even the remote *human* past:

> A Neanderthal burial site found in the 1950s
> in a large cave near the village of Shanidar
> in the Zagros Mountains of Iraq contained the
> body of a man who had been laid to rest one
> early June day 60,000 years ago with bunches
> of carefully placed flowers: the first time
> flowers are known to have been used in a funeral
> ceremony.
>
> Analysis of the pollen deposits which of course
> are now all that remain of the plants shows that
> the tributes included cornflowers, hollyhock,
> ragwort, grape hyacinth, yarrow, St Barnaby’s
> Thistle...[5]

This is the traditional, indeed, the original (‘the first time’) bier of pastoral elegy, with its catalogue of flowers. The separation of the dead subject from the elegist who weaves the textual framework is extreme even by the standards of a genre which uses the bier as a focus for anxiety, ironically submerging or allegorically subliming it at least as often as it is plainly evoked. It is a spatial separation, as indicated by the journalistic notation of place, and a

temporal one, with linear time (‘1950s’, ‘60,000 years ago’) implicitly contrasted to seasonal cycles which make possible pollen analysis and thus a determination of the time of year of burial. Perhaps most unsettlingly, however, the dead subject and the elegiac voice belong to different, if closely related, species. This distant predecessor symbolizes and in a sense substitutes the poet’s brother, even as each of the very few individual details given about the latter mark differences between modern humans and their extinct ‘ancestors’:

> My brother is dead. I found him at the end of his bed.
> His brain weighs 1565g, his heart 465
> the document says & helps me know what a whiff
> of actuality feels like from those who know the facts of life.
>
> [...]
>
> My brother is dead. His wristwatch laid face up beside his bed.
> (‘Ballad (Argument)’, *Humming*, p. 35)

Humanity is defined by both physical facts, here represented by heart and brain weight, and the technological capacity to measure them, while the wristwatch takes the place of pollen deposits as indicator of cyclical time. A later iteration of the motif makes the idea of time’s mockery explicit: ‘Take yr wristwatch off and lay it on the bed— / good—its three hands—*haa, ha-ha & ha-ha-ha* / circling circumstance under heaven.’ (*Humming*, p.93) The bitterness of tone, in evidence in the bathetic internal rhyme of ‘bed/dead’ and the sarcastic admission that an autopsy report is a superior form of ‘actuality’ to the speaker’s lived experience, only partially conceals an anxiety about the possibility of knowledge of the

world, which is heavily circumscribed. The speaker does not 'know', he is 'help[ed] to know', not 'actuality', but what 'a whiff of what actuality *feels* like' [emphasis added], further mediated by those 'who know the facts of life.' Consciousness is alienation.

In *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*, Jahan Ramazani identifies irony and deflection as crucial strategies in modern Western elegy: even the term itself is 'apparently oxymoronic', suggesting 'both the negation of received codes ("modern") and their perpetuation ("elegy")'.[6] Rejecting the compensations and comfort of mourning, modern elegy undoes not itself but other generic categories too: '[i]n becoming anti-elegaic, the modern elegy more radically violates generic norms than did earlier phases of elegy: it becomes anti-consolatory and anti-encomiastic, anti-Romantic and anti-Victorian, anti-conventional and sometimes even anti-literary.'[7] The modern elegy also grieves the disappearance of ritual surrounding the dead, the increasing social invisibility of death in the industrialized West; it mourns the 'dying of death' even in countries and cultures, such as Ireland, which have preserved a relatively large repertoire of traditional funerary practice. 'Ireland,' Ramazani writes, 'is Western Europe's last national enclave for traditional mourning ritual, and Irish poets from Yeats to Patrick Kavanagh and Heaney mirror this social conservatism in their elegies [...] Yet even as they reflect the persistence of mourning ritual contemporary Irish poets like Heaney continue to lament its "attenuation".'[8] Impulses of denial and rejection — parody, satire, denunciation — are held in tension with a sort of self-reflexive nostalgia, in which elegy itself is mourned. A moment's reflection on 'Lycidas' or 'Adonaïs' will prompt the reader to question the novelty of this contradictory state; since my space is limited, perhaps it is sufficient to say that in modernity it has, under the influence of the great elegies of the past, become the default setting.

In *Humming*, the satiric and denunciatory function of elegy is directed at precisely the social conservatism that Ramazani identifies in the Irish product. In the first of the book's

sections entitled ‘Ballad’, a lyrically-described rural scene devolves into a parody of a repetitive, lazy critical idiom:

white gables, visibility for miles, an occasional
car casually on route, spider cosy in one spot.
Not much doing, a quiet day humming beauty
permanence beauty permanence

packed tight with a
wealth of imagery
beauty permanence
pervading nostalgia
beauty permanence
remains on the level
of the deeply commun-
icative
beauty permanence
rhythms delicately
balanced title poem
a gem
beauty permanence
north of Ireland—
frighteningly accur-
ate—richness exuberance
beauty permanence

Beauty Permanence plc—

('I was closing the machine when its edge', *Humming*, p.31)

Complacent commercialization of a Romantic ideal of immortal beauty is connected to the subject of much recent Irish elegiac effort, the political situation of the 'north of Ireland'. The lack of comment is itself significant: any reader familiar with the ways in which 'experimental' Irish poetry has been defined against a 'mainstream' preoccupied by 'family, nation and tradition', and as 'a "poetry of process" rather than "a poetry of product"',[9] will recognize the targets of Scully's satire. But it's also a curiously recursive and self-implicating attack: 'packed tight with a/wealth of imagery', insofar as it means anything at all, might well be applied to Scully's intense registering of visual detail, as might 'frighteningly accu-/rate'; his anger at the debasement of a once-radical aesthetic standard into critical cliché is inevitably pervaded by nostalgia; the ambiguous lineation of 'rhythms delicately/balanced title poem' is mischievously self-reflexive. Scully has all but enrolled himself into what he elsewhere calls 'the Gem School'.[10] The very meaninglessness of the consolatory mode makes it universally applicable and inescapable. What Ramazani, writing about Seamus Heaney, calls the 'elegist's harvesting of beauty from death' presents an ethical problem which is not to be solved by mere parody or denunciation.[11]

It is a particular problem for Scully, whose poetics are predicated upon an ethical stance of self-effacement: 'a poem is beautiful to the degree it records an apt humility in the face of complexity it sees but fails to transmit',[12] he wrote in a 1983 editorial for *The Beau* magazine; *5 Freedoms of Movement* (1987), the first book of what would eventually become *Things That Happen*, represents his initial attempts to put the theory into practice. But elegists are inevitably egoists: the death of another prompts reflection on, and usually anxiety about achievement and ambition. Ramazani notes a tendency towards more explicit

description and discussion of the elegized subject in the modern elegy, citing Yeats, Auden, and Ginsberg, but it is still a rare elegy that tells us more about the mourned person than the mourner. (Ramazani, p.6) Apart from the disquietingly intimate, yet clinical, details quoted above, we learn almost nothing about Brian Scully from *Humming*; he is actually named only in the dedication. Nor do we discover anything about his relationship with his brother. Not to name is a consciously anti-elegiac gesture: as Sacks notes, repetition of the name of the mourned subject 'takes on, by dint of repetition, a kind of substantiality, allowing it not only to refer to but almost to replace the dead.'[13] The withholding of a personal name signals the scope of Scully's project, as he suggests in interview: 'I've enlarged the frame and focus of the normal elegy to ... focus on life and living culture as well as on death and loss.'[14]

The book is conversely, full of self-portraiture, variously ironized:

Talents: one highly developed
sense of victimhood
an insomniac nature
patchy concentration
ditto education
2 ears, sensitive, eyes, ageing
a bedrock inability to earn a living. ('Sonnet', *Humming*, p.26)

In a transition audacious enough to constitute parody of the convention whereby the death of a contemporary becomes an occasion to assess achievement and take stock of ambition, the poet turns directly from his brother's body to an evaluation of his poetic accomplishments, focusing specifically on lack of recognition by a literary establishment:

I am 52. How old are you? I'm old enough to take a knife
to any letter from the Arts Council for instance regretting et cetera
because they know I think by now—now that I'm older than
they are & longer on the job—I know perhaps a fact or two of life.

But wait! It's the middle of the night & time to wake up
I mean the middle of yr life & further along the ledge
past the diggers & set foundations parent birds attack.
You will discover starfish ingesting molluscs & ugly
dishonesties between people. You will have been a poet. Why?

('Ballad (Argument)', *Humming*, p.35)

The autopsy 'document' becomes the Arts Council letter, the scalpel a letter opener. To 'take a knife to' the letter might mean simply to open it, or to shred it in frustration. The violence implied by the latter reading is echoed in the attacking birds and predatory starfish; in turn, predation in Scully's poetry is often connected to finance, which links back to the Arts Council's refusal. And this infernal complex of brutality, mortality, and money is the condition of 'hav[ing] been a poet': elegy turns inevitably and swiftly to self-elegy.

For a poet who aims at an 'apt humility' with regard to his surroundings, 'to interact with the world ... Not to meditate *on* the world, but to be *in* it',[15] elegy's attempts at control and mastery over nature and death, expressed as 'the pathetic fallacy of nature's lament',[16] must seem particularly uncongenial. *Things That Happen* might be understood as a prolonged wrangle with the idea of and necessity for order in art, with poetic *number* seen as at once 'something primal.... Symmetry'[17] and as an aspect of authoritarian power: 'Order—the giant

/ spinning in his / skin—' (*Livelihood*, pp.140-1). Though less prominent in *Humming,* such coercive forces still occasionally emerge:

> Two palace guards on watch—white gloves, red lanyards—under big
> bearded naked hero-sculptures with clubs & spears about to do in
> the brains of their defeated under-gods among the hinges and springs
> Stop. Tourists go passing in & out these gates in the sun—*lanyards*
> click-click *pedestal* click-click *rooftop chimneypot bird's flash* click
> *epitaph* click oh click click I was touring the lattice now that all the
> little cars were grey ah yes he said she said/hey they said I'm/we've
> got a new book out have you seen it? they said
> ('Two palace guards on watch—white gloves', *Humming*, p. 73)

It may be noted that the context again is votive, funerary ('defeated under-gods', 'epitaph') and productive of anxiety about literary success ('we've got a new book out'). In fact, Scully's discomfort with an understanding of the 'poet as imperious editor'[18] of his surroundings does not preclude the appearance of elegiac conventions in *Humming*: formalized or rhetorical questioning, repetition, multi-vocality, absorption of the individual death into a natural cycle. Indeed, the 'Song' that begins with the threatening presence of the 'two palace guards', the blandly consuming 'tourists', and self-important newly-published authors soon shifts to a pastoral scene of floral tribute:

> *Direct you to the flowers*
>
> *The evidence*

Printing their pollen-pictures forever on the world

Direct you to the flowers

[...]

Come back then to the flowers

[...]

Down derry derry—

Dance co-foragers to the flowers—

Collect—deposit

Find the flowers—

work the flowers—

farm the flowers—

Collect—deposit

Return—start again (‘Song’, *Humming*, pp.74-5)

The ancient—and indeed, non-human—origin of the custom in the Neanderthal burial is recalled in ‘*pollen-pictures forever on the world*’, while ‘*Come back then to the flowers ... Return—start again*’ are archetypal examples of the verbal repetitions (‘Yet once more’) which (inadequately, and deliberately so) substitute for natural cycles.

In Sacks's psychoanalytic scheme, repetitive elegiac questions serve a tripartite purpose: to release affective energy, to deflect guilt by turning the elegist's focus 'outward to the world', and to approach, armoured in incantatory prophylaxis, the horror of mortality: 'Among the questions behind the ceremonious screen of questions, therefore, also lies the naked Why will no-one or nothing save us from death?'[19] Scully begins *Humming* with a series of apparent propositions which for the most part do not coalesce grammatically into questions:

> Look: if the coin had landed on its edge making the
> spaces to heads and tails the space of all probability
> patterns lit up to date stretched to an evanescent blur
> (one little thought experiment deserves another)
> then *you* this, *me* that, *plink*!
>
> (knock)
>
> [...]
>
> If—rock of constancy, rubble of contingency—
> (pass the salt) giving the bracket its due, its
> space, its elastic content, bustle & itch
> (where's my sandwich?)
>
> [...]

If you dedicate your little book to Mammy and get
a prize—size matters—you know how it is—
a million years of isolation and neglect...as if you
deserve pampering *as by right*. Just write, right?

(knock)

[...]

If the Way of Art is a Hard, Hard Way
as you heard some old Tin-Can say (dot)
loud sing cuckoo—grows seed—blows mead
and blossoms the wood now—

If.

If.

If...

Sing Cuckoo! (‘Sonnet Song’, *Humming*, pp.11-12)

The manner is modernist, parodic, and fragmented, but the matter is profoundly traditional: the elegist turning attention from intimate address (‘*you* this, *me* that’) to a world of ‘probability’, ‘bustle & itch’, which despite perceptible ‘patterns’ seems indifferent to the

mortal fate of individuals. He is anxious about artistic labour and legacy, derisive of a literary culture which rewards familial pieties (but where does that leave a book dedicated to a brother?) and through a mixture of neglect and 'pampering' encourages lassitude (resting on one's laurels, perhaps). Literary inheritance is represented by Middle English pastoral lyric and, by implication, the many parodies it has attracted, the latter, whether by Ezra Pound or The Fugs, tending to make crudely explicit the ever-present intimations of mortality in the original. 'Just write, right?' meanwhile suggests a similar modernization of the final line of the first sonnet of *Astrophil and Stella,* whose author is the subject of an early example of the specifically funereal pastoral elegy in English. Elizabeth Bishop's parenthetical '(*Write* it!)' from that most comprehensive of modern elegies, 'One Art', may also be a precursor. 'Sonnet Song' has a refrain of 'knock' and 'knock-knock', about which the poet comments: 'The refrain is knock-knock (you know, from those stupid knock-knock jokes). There are fourteen knocks — that's it really.'[20] The echoic formula of the knock-knock joke forms a trivial, puerile counterpart to the solemn ritual of elegy. Scully's question is a projective *If*? rather than a despairing *Why*? but it serves the same established purpose: to release contradictory feeling, to focus attention upon the shifting patterns and cycles of the material world, to approach death — awful, banal death — protected by commonplaces which might fill the terrible silence that is returned to our 'who's there?' Rarely content with plangency, and distrustful of anything that might approach sentimentality, Scully adds this bathetic (but still interrogative) pendant to 'Sonnet Song':

> Then a stray piece turned up called
> THE DOG.
>
> **THE DOG**

The dog is barking in the laneway again.

Who owns that dog? Do you?

Do you? (‘Sonnet Song’, *Humming*, p.13)

The first of *Humming*’s ‘Ballads’ offers another set of variations on elegiac questioning. It evokes traditional ballads in which a story is told in question-and-answer format, such as ‘Lord Randall’ (Child 12) or ‘Edward’ (Child 13), or in which questions play an important part in the narrative (such as Child 95, ‘Lamkin,’ or the many ballads in which riddles and paradoxes are proposed). Such ballads frequently concern violent death, or a narrow escape from it, and situate it in a familial context. The ballad trope whereby successive family members present themselves to the protagonist (see for example Child 95, ‘The Maid Freed from the Gallows’) is also relevant here, as a form of the elegiac procession (which in the pastoral mode is composed of shepherds, nymphs and animals):

I walked along and what did I see? Tomorrow’s yr father’s anniversary.

[...]

Turn the room around and what do you see? Is it yr mother’s anniversary?

Who died in a cave of darkness, who died in a cave of light.

[...]

Turn the beach upside-down what do you see? It must be yr sister’s

anniversary? By forces too large for all of us she's drawn into the cave.
Greed tugs a string, the thing is done, it's over. In time and space.
The plants inter-leave. I see. Revolve. Carry me home.

ha ha *ha ha*

Sink yr desk in the dark. So much for study now. Later, magpies in trees.
It must be yr brother's anniversary. A drill cuts through wood, go & do
what you do in life and do it thoroughly, one circle, then another, the
bee's wings, the drill-bit spins, through steel, then rock, do go, then
slice, ice, down, dice, divine, die and die well. Good.

ha ha *ha ha* (*Humming*, p.25)

The first line establishes this in the tradition of *chanson d'aventure*, but the encounter is not with another person so much as his ritualized memory, 'yr father's anniversary', a memorial cycle that may either be a comforting return or a disruptive revolution, which turns things upside-down. The reversed room and beach suggest the landscape of dream, or dream vision, while the cave into which the female relatives go to die might carry some connotation of Orphic mystery. The final stanza acts as a compendium of the poem's motifs: circles, bees (by extension humming and honeycombs), wood (trees and flowers), ice (crystals and snow). The hum of the drill is a man-made counterpart to the hum of bees, the dust it generates to pollen. Rich in internal rhyme, often of quite a mechanical sort ('see/anniversary/activity/memory') the ballad devolves into echolalia, which looks like it may provide some sort of resolution: the eye-rhyme of 'do/go', the rhymes 'ice/slice/dice',

the anagrammatic ‘ice/dice/divine/die’. But ‘die, & die well. Good.’ is a shade too emphatic, too tritely consolatory, and immediately mocked by the refrain ‘*ha ha*’. There remains elegiac and emotional work to do.

Some of that work is done by the central section ‘Sonnet’, to which the poet offers a useful guide in interview:

> in the *Humming* book, there’s a mirror section with some focus on mirrored reversals. The whole section — it’s about ten pages — is called “Sonnet” (within which are embedded some actual fourteen-line *poemeens*, in the spirit of grubs in their cells in a hive). A dominating motif in this book is crystallization, honeycombing, replication, bees, pollen, and pollination, plus a little bit on bureaucracy. I used the mirror idea of splitting up, echoing but separating, taking the word “mirror” itself and seeing what I could get out of it, running a bit of it anagrammatically, putting it up to the mirror, as it were, so *rim* and then *door* and *slam*. A word like “rules” becomes “slur.” I’m interested in the control that invisible rules can have. To highlight them and show them as tools of domination is something poetry can be deft at. And show that rules are not immutable.[21]

Such linguistic play suggests the eclogic and choral nature of elegy, in which the poet’s voice is fractured in acts of self suppression and self-dramatization, ‘by which mourners not only lend ceremony to their rites but also intensify and indicate their own “work” as survivors’.[22] For Scully, these ‘poemeens’, which often have an echolalic dimension, are a source of liberation, drawing attention to ‘domination’ even as they elude it:

hear

hearken

hearse

heart

hearth

heat

heath

heathen

heather

heave

heave-ho

ho-ho

heaven

ha-ha

(‘Sonnet’, *Humming,* p.48)

Here is the ‘work’ of elegy in aspirate, alliterative miniature, from a demand for auditors (hear, hearken), though sorrow (heart, hearse), the flower-strewn bier (hearse, heather), the ambiguously domestic situation of pastoral (hearth, heath, heathen), to overcoming, *throwing off* grief and promise of resurrection (heave, heave-ho, heaven), all mocked with ‘ho-ho, ha-ha’. Derisive as this may seem of elegy’s consolatory function, it might also be seen as the elegist’s ‘reluctant submission to language itself ... the enforced accommodation between the mourning self on the one hand and the very words of grief and fictions of consolation on the

other'.[23] Scully's submission to language is perhaps less 'reluctant' than most; indeed, as he notes above, its ludic properties are liberating, but nonetheless, the struggle takes place.

Sacks draws attention to another aspect of elegy's multi-vocality: its facilitation of alternate sympathy for and (self-)reproach of the mourner.[24] Scully frequently employs, in place of the lyric 'I', a semi-imperative generalized 'you' which serves a very similar purpose. This flexible voice offers interior monologue a level of apparent detachment, and can accommodate self-reflexive criticism of its own procedures:

Trimming yr fingernails, each thin crescent, each
time different, *you-you, you-you*, each the
same, each repeating surprise. Follow
the circle of yr wrist-

watch, one circuit, then one & a bit, then one &
another bit, at the very beginning beginning
beginning. Breathe. Three

four.

Can you be as tired as I am? Clap hands 5/5. Turn
the page, reverse the score. *You-you, you-you*.
Are you quite there yet? Is it alright?

Clap hands.

Insert a little translation here. Clap-clap. *The Precious*

Mirror of the Four Elements for instance.

How do you do. Touch it. Clap-clap.

('There is a pen on a notebook on a desk', *Humming,* p.67-8)

The Joycean author-god, paring his fingernails, has his self-absorption ironically confirmed in the u-shape of the trimmings, but in the questions – 'Can you be as tired as I am? ... Are you quite there yet?' – the referent of 'you' changes from the self to the implied other. When the poet returns to the imperative mode with 'Insert a little translation here' the pronoun has been destabilized: is he instructing someone else, or commenting wryly on his own impeccable High Modernist affectation in incorporating a 14th-century Chinese scientific treatise into his work? Self-indulgence blurs into self-rebuke: defending the elegy (and in the process offering an early definition of the genre as mood), Sir Philip Sidney claims it is 'to be praised either for compassionate accompanying just causes of lamentation or for rightly pointing out how weak be the passions of woefulness'.[25] If modernity can add anything to this at all, it is only an increased acceptance of self-contradiction: elegy has always done both, but modern poets find less value in the art of concealing it.

Second-person modes of address also facilitate consolatory closure, to a rather greater degree than many commentators are prepared to admit is desirable (or possible) in the modern (or modernist) elegy. *Humming* ends with a utopian vision of artistic non-intervention in its material, which is simply the world:

POEM

"This piece of paper you have just been handed is ...
Keep it. It advertises nothing, has no designs on you,
has come a long long way, to here, in silence, in the
rain, free. As you are. You are. Now:
breathe ..." (*Humming*, p.94)

Like many such statements of resolution and recovery, this frames and depersonalizes what precedes it. 'This piece of paper' is both the book the reader has just finished, and a promise of ideal future achievement: the artwork that 'advertises nothing, has no designs on you' is perhaps impossible — it may be that the perfect work is a blank, something with no designs on' *itself* as well as the reader — but it remains a goal for which to strive. Or, 'It is hard/work whichever way / you look at it.' (*Humming*, p.56) Self-contained despite its scope, within Scully's oeuvre, *Humming* fulfils the traditional elegiac function of *transition*; announcing a definitive break between the epic achievement of *Things That Happen* and the light fantastic of 2014's *Several Dances*.

NOTES

1. Paul Celan, *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felsteiner (New York: W.W. Norton, 2002), p.395.

2. Meredith Quatermain, 'Bees: Maurice Scully, Humming', *Golden Handcuffs Review*, 1:14 (Winter/Spring, 2011), pp.233-7, p.233.

3. Marthine Satris, 'An Interview with Maurice Scully', *Contemporary Literature*, 53:1 (Spring 2012), pp.1-30, p.30.

4. Peter Sacks, *The English Elegy: Studies in the Genre from Spenser to Yeats* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p.19.

5. Maurice Scully, 'A Neanderthal burial site found in the 1950s', *Humming*, (Exeter: Shearsman, 2009), p.28. Subsequent references to *Humming* in parentheses.

6. Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney,* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1994), p.1.

7. Ramazani, p.2.

8. Ramazani, p.23.

9. John Goodby, *Irish Poetry Since 1950: From Stillness into History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), pp.301-2.

10. Maurice Scully, *Livelihood* (Bray: Wild Honey Press, 2004), p.18.

11. Ramazani, p.343.

12. Maurice Scully, 'As I Like it', *The Beau* (1983), p.10.

13. Sacks, p.26.

14. Satris, p.30.

15. Maurice Scully, 'Interview', *Metre*, 17 (Spring 2005), pp.134-43, p.143.

16. Sacks, p.21.

17. Satris, p.23.

18. *Metre*, p.142.

19. Sacks, p.22.

20. Satris, p.21.

21. Satris, p.26.

22. Sacks, p.25.

23. Sacks, p.2.

24. Sacks pp.35-6.

25. Sir Philip Sidney, ‘A Defence of Poetry’, *Selected Writings*, ed. Richard Dutton, (London: Routledge, 2002), p.123.