‘Must not attempt escape / from here and now’:
Maurice Scully reading Brian Coffey

1: ‘Humming [the words]’: Scully reading Coffey

Maurice Scully reads rapidly. His tone is light without quirkiness, expressive without melodrama. As befits a poet whose unit of composition is, as he has often claimed, ‘the book’,[1] he doesn’t allow his listeners time to brood over individual passages, lines or verbal effects. He describes this as an inclusive manoeuvre:

> Including the reader in another sense I’m rather keen on at this stage, in the sense of live reading, so the readers can get over the chimera of supposed ‘difficulty’ and just quite literally go with the flow and enjoy the experience and sense the form of the thing in the air, right there. (*Metre* 141)

At the ‘continuings…’ symposium in October 2005, Scully read the seventh section of Brian Coffey’s poem *Advent* (1975). He made Coffey’s poem his own to the extent that its ‘form […] in the air’ resembled closely a reading from his ‘trilogy’ *Things That Happen*,[2] or more recent work such as *Humming [the words]* (forthcoming in 2007). Scully transferred to his reading of Coffey the same speed, the quizzical tone, the concern that the reader should experience the work ‘right there’ rather than be stalled by ‘difficulty’ that are hallmarks of his own performances.

Coffey himself was concerned with issues of performance and annotated poems for his own readings and recordings. Unfortunately, recordings of Coffey reading his own poems are not readily available, though the University of Delaware holds a cassette recording of selections from *Advent*, amongst other audio material. Some annotations for a reading of *Advent* also survive, and were published by hardPressed Poetry in the first issue of the magazine *The Journal* in 1999.[3] Scully’s poetry appears in the same issue, so

[1] Maurice Scully, ‘Interview’, *Metre* 17 (Spring 2005) 134-143, 141.

[2] *Things That Happen* comprises four volumes: *Five Freedoms of Movement* (1987, revised edition 2002), *Livelihood* (2004), *Sonata* (2006) and a coda, *Tig* (2006). *Livelihood* is by far the largest of these, being made up of five books and three interstices.

[3] Brian Coffey, ‘Reading *Advent*’, *The Journal* 1 (1999) 36-40.

it is reasonable to conjecture that he was familiar with Coffey's annotations, but hard to say to what extent they may have influenced his own performance, since the notes are for the most part not discursive, simply a series of oblique slashes to indicate pauses and breaks.

Scully's poetry sometimes resembles Coffey's on the page, too. 'The Pillar & the Vine', describes insect or spider eggs in free-fall:

tiny

eggs

fell

lightly

moving

in the

wind

around the

edge of the

base of the

stopped

stone pillar[4]

This resembles the opening of section 7 of *Advent* not just in its shape but in its careful complication of distinctions between organic and non-organic matter:

White fir

palm salt

cry chill

[4] Maurice Scully, 'The Pillar & the Vine', *Livelihood* (Bray, Co. Wicklow: Wild Honey Press, 2004) 5-8, 6.

soil sand

glass sea

gorse bee

shell maid

health white[5]

These aural and visual resemblances suggest the value of an exploration of Coffey's influence on Scully, and indeed on other Irish neo-modernists of his generation.

Coffey and his contemporaries Denis Devlin and Thomas MacGreevy have often been claimed as precursors of the neo-modernist poets who started to publish in the late 1960s, 1970s and 1980s: writers such as Trevor Joyce, Randolph Healy, Geoffrey Squires and Catherine Walsh. This assertion, initially voiced by Michael Smith of New Writers Press, has become something of a critical commonplace, repeated a number of times by John Goodby in his book *Irish Poetry since 1950* (2000) and endorsed by the structure of Alex Davis' essay on poetic modernism for the *Cambridge Companion to Contemporary Irish Poetry* (2003). Renewed critical attention to Coffey, Devlin and MacGreevy has begun to challenge their status as founding trinity. The original, rather *ad hoc* constitution of them as a group, in Samuel Beckett's 1934 survey 'Recent Irish Poetry', is being examined and re-read.[6] Coffey arguably presents a more interesting case with regard to Irish neo-modernists than either Devlin or MacGreevy. He continued to publish important work late enough in his long life to be their contemporary as well as a precursor; his characteristic idiom seems closest to that of the younger poets. He shares with Scully, in particular, an observant, engaged, but non-interventionist *persona*.

The genealogical lines of descent often traced in Irish literary criticism, whereby, for example, Irish poets are seen as 'heirs of Joyce' by critics with backgrounds and

[5] Brian Coffey, *Advent, Poems and Versions 1929-1990* (Dublin: Dedalus, 1991) 111-150, 140.

[6] See Sinead Mooney, 'Kicking Against the Thermolaters', *Samuel Beckett Today/ Aujourd-hui* 15 (2005) 29-42; Sean Kennedy, 'Beckett reviewing MacGreevy: A Reconsideration', *Irish University Review* 35: 2 (Autumn/Winter 2005) 273-288.

approaches as different as Neil Corcoran and Andrew Duncan,[7] are less than helpful in exploring Coffey's relationship to younger poets, given the near-contemporaneity of his later work with theirs, and their quizzical, challenging attitude towards hierarchy and authority. Rather than attempt the problematic task of identifying 'influence', I want to read back through Scully's 'trilogy' (comprising *5 Freedoms of Movement*, *Livelihood*, *Sonata* and a coda, *Tig*) to find points of contact with Coffey's later poems, particularly *Advent*. Two such points of contact seem of particular interest: the first thematic, the second structural and attitudinal.

Both Coffey and Scully write extensively about domestic life, an emphasis that may at first seem odd, given modernist reservations about identitarianism, expressed with exasperated brio by Scully in the *Metre* interview:

> As a prentice poet in the '70s the 'I' was very big in Irish poetry. It still is? Me, my, I. I love you. You love me. And Mumsy and Popsy down on the farm show my Roots are Real & deck me out with Colourful Relatives I can't wait to write about. A really strange hand-me-down Identikit. (141)

Scully attacks poetry which uses family history to make claims of autochthony and authenticity, but there is also an implication that in its preoccupation with 'Mumsy and Popsy […] Colourful Relatives', Irish poetry has evaded its responsibilities. Irish poets cast themselves as children, recipients of a 'hand-me-down Identikit'. Their subject matter and formal approach to it are inherited, precluding both formal experiment and the concern for futurity expressed in *Advent*. In Coffey and Scully's work alike, however, the poetic voice is adult, often parental. Though both poets also write about parents from the perspective of a son, the speaking voice is still adult, responsible, preoccupied by care. As such, it must negotiate power and authority, a process which draws attention to the two poets' similarities of structure and outlook. Both document the destructive effects of

[7] The phrase 'heirs of Joyce' is used to describe Irish neo-modernist poets on the jacket copy of a special issue of *Angel Exhaust*, edited by John Goodby and Maurice Scully. *Angel Exhaust* / *Súitéar na n-Aingeal* 17, ed. Maurice Scully and John Goodby (Spring 1999), back cover. However, the idiosyncratic style of the blurb suggests that it was written by one of *Angel Exhaust*'s regular editors, Andrew Duncan, rather than Scully or Goodby. See also Neil Corcoran, *After Yeats and Joyce: Reading Modern Irish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) vii.

human imposition of order upon the world, and seek to derive pattern from their poetic material, rather than impressing pre-ordained form upon it. At the same time – as the excerpts from *Advent* and *Livelihood* above illustrate – both poets explore and complicate notions of the organic and the artificial; nature and culture.

II: *'our debts & our spirited / baby daughter': Familiar perspectives*

'Missouri Sequence', a work often considered to mark Coffey's return to poetry after a long 'silent' period – though its compositional history is more complex than this suggests – resonates with the sound and movement of the poet's children: 'one each minute / past my desk they go' (*Poems and Versions* 69-88, 69). Though merry, the children persistently remind the poet of his duty of care. Their play is equally a manifestation of genius and of unease: 'Tonight the poetry is in the children's game: / I am distracted by comparisons' (69). The comparisons he proceeds to draw situate the poet between Ireland and America, living 'far from where / my mother grows very old', but near Byrnesville, a community that has received many Irish immigrants. The poet's children 'know nothing of Ireland / they grow American' (70) but it is his reflection on their adopted national identity which reminds him: 'we must leave America / bitter necessity no monopoly / on Irish soil' (71). This speaker's situation is displaced, but it is not one which lends itself to facile celebration or theorization of 'liminal' spaces. As father and son, he has specific responsibilities which lie on both sides of the Atlantic, and he is forced to make a choice which he resents. The choice, as it turns out, has nothing to do with essentialist identity, or with its rejection and the assumption of a displaced or liminal identity – it is simply the result of being 'charged with care of others' (72). The poet's resentment of it, however, flings him back into identitarianism: 'rejecting prudence to make of conflict / a monument to celtic self-importance.' (71)

'Missouri Sequence' deals self-reflexively with the recovery of poetic facility – we observe the poet 'writing verses at [his] desk' (82), 'making poetry' (83). In this process his children play an ambiguous role. Much as their game of Follow-My-Leader, which begins the sequence, is both poetic in itself and a distraction for the poet, so they are themselves both stimulating and ensnaring:

The room is filled with children's lives
that fill my cares who turn again
to sudden starting words
like birds in cages. (73)

In the third poem of 'Missouri Sequence', the speaker, among children recently released from school for the summer, resolves to 'show the poet as hunter, / one who would not let me be / among the children.' (78) The delicate phrasing aligns the poet with the muse figure he goes on to describe, and both with a 'hunter'. Depending on how we read the line-break, the muse is both one who persistently assails him ('would not let me be') even in the distracting company of his family, and one who removes him from that familiar context ('would not let me be among the children'). Towards the close of this poem, the speaker reflects on the intimate connection of poet and 'true muse fleshed': 'is a torment of oneself / cannot be done without' (80), and here the children become, decisively, a distraction, a scattering of concentration:

Her I would have stayed with
but the children shouting
in their scrambling play
rushed on me scattering
me everyway. (80)

Nonetheless, the speaker's future depends on his discovery of equilibrium – not a bland compromise or trite reconciliation of opposites, but a painful integration of the 'true muse' into the familial self, a process tracked in the final poem of the sequence:

This much is certain
he will not forget her beauty,
he must not attempt escape
from here and now. (81)

The more scattered references to family and children in Scully's *Things That Happen* display a similar ambiguity. In *Zulu Dynamite*, the second book of *Livelihood*, we find a portrait of the speaker which gives us an idea of how personal, familial and social identities might be subject to erasure: '*a charcoal sketch*/////unemployed, passable

education / late thirties, father, husband, poet *erase erase erase*'(*Livelihood* 107). As in 'Missouri Sequence', with its critique of 'celtic self-importance', this is not an apolitical process, for all it might also be domestic:

> everything run through this tensely amalgamated
> shadow-corps so that so many young practitioners
> don't even know how much's been filtered out or that
> anything has been *erase / erase* in the first place (107)

Where Coffey's critique of 'celtic' identitarianism rests with the self, Scully suggests his speaker's entanglement in wider social processes which have become naturalized, so that 'younger practitioners' don't see them as constructed at all (the tongue-in-cheek paranoiac tone, incidentally, is typical of *Livelihood,* and *Things That Happen* as a whole).

Scully's attitude to the familial as poetic material is set even before the beginning of the text of *Livelihood*. The book has as one of its frontispiece illustrations a drawing of birds by Leda Scully, the poet's daughter, done when she was eight years old. Any sense of sentimentality generated by the inclusion of this drawing is mitigated by its quality: though naïve in style and treatment of anatomy, it demonstrates a precocious ability in handling visual space. The artistic accomplishments of the poet's children are a minor, but distinct theme in *Things That Happen*, and as in 'Missouri Sequence', the poet finds himself awkwardly positioned between seeing them as genii of art and hindrances to his own artistic expression.

Children in Scully's poems often have a better eye for colour and visual space than adults: 'Talking colours with my son – he's five, I'm / thirty-nine/he's right, I'm an idiot' (*Livelihood* 236). In interview, Scully pays tribute to the 'childlike intelligent directness' of Paul Klee, adding, 'My children have taught me a lot' (*Metre* 140). Nonetheless, children have to be excluded from the poet's workspace: early in the first volume of *Things That Happen, 5 Freedoms of Movement*, we find the poet wedging a 'brick or two against the broken door to keep my little daughter out'.[8] The poem goes on to form, however, out of surrounding noises, what Scully calls the 'penetrating signature of…everywhere I've lived' (*Metre* 142), including 'a baby's babbling' (*5 Freedoms* 15).

[8] Maurice Scully, *5 Freedoms of Movement*, rev. ed. (Buckfastleigh, Devon: etruscan, 2002) 15.

As in Coffey's poetry, children function, Romantically, as possessors of purer and less inhibited vision than adults, as obstacles to the poet's composition, and as the very material of poetry itself: 'children's lives/ […] turn again/ the sudden starting words' (*Poems and Versions* 73)

Much of *Things That Happen* takes place in a domestic space, and readers frequently find themselves with the poet in his workroom, among his 'shaky' shelving and other 'lumber', from which inquisitive children have been perforce, but imperfectly, banished (*5 Freedoms* 72). The domestic does not provide Scully with a retreat from political concerns; indeed, even the presence and energy of the poet's children become politicised. In *Zulu Dynamite*, the poet, living in an African country (Scully lived and taught in Lesotho during the 1980s) reflects on his rich neighbours:

> & the new occupants of
> the refurbished house are entertaining guests
> for the first time under the somewhat soulless
> glitter of its new chandeliers. every morning
> for the past two months now their workmen woke
> us a little too early for neighbourly good cheer,
> while the owners slept elsewhere. (97)

A place's 'penetrating signature' is not always matter for celebration, nor can it always find its way directly into poetry. Much of the material of *Livelihood* is sonic – there are repeated motifs of rain on a corrugated iron roof and a writing implement upon various surfaces – but the sound of these refurbishments, carried out while the house's owners were 'elsewhere', needs social and political context in order to become meaningful.
The poet notes the hierarchical, allegorical significance of the neighbours' display: 'their daughter is animated. she is wearing an / elaborate dress. expense as a category, neither / beautiful nor ugly, an exclusionary placard' and contrasts it with his own situation:

> my wife & I worry about our debts & our spirited
> baby daughter. & the difficulty of getting out of
> this mess & learning the language & dodging the main
> streets at rush-hour so as not to run into anybody
> we might owe money to.

'Spirited' and 'animated' are synonyms, yet the poet's daughter, set within the ampersand-riddled framework of her parents' 'debts' and 'dodging', seems alive where the neighbours' daughter is blandly galvanised, animated only in the sense that a drawing or a clay model might be. This effect is magnified in the next stanza, in which the same adjective is used to describe the dinner guests:

> their guests are animated, courses served on silver
> platters, father at the head of the table, he
> seems not very much older than myself (but don't
> let's confuse fascination for envy), there is talk
> & movement &/but, from here it is utterly silent –
> listen – & sad. ghosts…

This is at least potentially sententious – implying that the poet's precarious life is preferable to bourgeois comfort, which leaves those who enjoy it psychically dead as either 'animated' zombies or 'sad. ghosts' – but something else is at work in the speaker's defensive tone. Denying that he is envious, he raises the possibility of envy; acknowledging that in age at least he is similar to the complacent *paterfamilias* across the road, he implicitly questions the extent to which his assumption of the duty of care for his 'spirited baby daughter' also places him in a position of patriarchal authority. This concern is mirrored in the structure of the poem, which is framed by two claims. At the beginning of the poem the speaker states, '[sometimes the facts almost *are* the emotions', and concludes, 'sometimes the facts and the emotions blur.]' With the first claim, the poet asserts that the political facts of class and inequality coincide with his feelings about them; with the final, far blander claim, he seems to have assumed some of the authority he began by critiquing.

III: Resisting 'AW. DAH.'

The characteristic speaker of both Scully's and Coffey's poems must confront his own negotiations with and assumptions of structures of authority. The dominant mood of both poets' work, however, is one of resistance to hierarchy and unease with the propensity of humans to interfere with and restructure their surroundings for their own convenience.

Coffey and Scully use material that is immediately to hand – often domestic material, as we saw above – as the subject matter and structuring principle of their poetry, and their shared attitude to this material is one of non-intervention, non-manipulation, a 'Waiting Posture', as Scully terms it in the last poem of *Steps* (*Livelihood* 241).

Advent is necessarily a poem which assumes a 'Waiting Posture': its voice, which is elegiac but also problematises elegy, observes and describes, but rarely intervenes in the poem's action. The poem's basic metre is a loose hexameter, minimally punctuated. Inverted commas are used to indicate direct speech and quotation, otherwise Coffey uses space and line breaks to indicate pauses. His syntax is fluid and can bear multiple, ambiguous interpretations. For example, this passage from the seventh section, describing a birth which encompasses the certainty of death, can be read in numerous ways:

> Look When parents raise an infant girl or boy
> to whom or what they pray as god what will be
> already they share hearts soaring mourning hearts
>
> Eden it kills us a promise no state here but of dust
>
> (*Poems and Versions* 141)

'Raise' in the first line might be literal, an act of lifting up the child to a sky-god, in which case the lines convey a ritualistic image. It might also mean 'to bring up', suggesting a much more attenuated and mundane temporal process: parents rearing children in their religious traditions. This ambiguity illustrates in microcosm *Advent*'s treatment of time, which subverts linear and realist assumptions about its nature. The moment of waking might be prolonged, as it is at the beginning of the poem, whereas historical eras and even geological time may pass rapidly: 'Tyrannic roaring wrenched roots gulped screams / millions of days and nights and unrecorded' (*Poems and Versions* 113). How we read 'raise' affects our sense of what it means for parents' hearts to 'soar' and 'mourn': is it stark ambivalence, felt at a moment of ritual charge, or a pattern of changes occurring over a longer period of time? It also might affect how we perceive the passage's sense of reciprocity and futurity. Is the future present in the moment or act of raising a child ('what will be / already')? Do we understand parents

and children to 'share hearts soaring mourning hearts', perhaps foreshadowing the deathbed scenes of the sixth section?

Coffey's reading notes give us a clue of how one performance might have sounded:

> Look When parents raise an infant girl or boy
> to whom or what they pray as god / what will be
> already they share / hearts soaring mourning hearts
>
> Eden / it kills us / a promise / no state here but of dust
>
> (*The Journal* 40)

That 'Look…god' is presented as a single sense or breath-unit provides some tentative support, I think, for my intuitions about temporality above, while the emphasis on 'what will be / already they share' suggests that Coffey wanted to convey both a sense of futurity residing in the present and a certain reciprocity between parents and child. The breaks in the last line, meanwhile, suggest an outworn, breathless reading, meditating on the nature of death and the fall of man. The unpunctuated original, however, might bear a more politicised reading, which we might annotate as follows: 'Eden: it kills us / a promise: no state here / but of dust'. The myth of Eden 'kills us' because it presupposes (or 'promises') the Fall and death. Moreover, the notion of a paradise and its promise of idyllic life without the need for social organisation ('state'), are politically dangerous because they promote fantasies of indigeneity and nostalgic return like those exploited by the tyrant 'Kilroy' in the poem's third section:

> So spun so coiled his reasons round them
> Fed them spell of *Selves Alone*
> *No sun sets on us This world our home*
> *Our country right or wrong* and correctly
> Led them though crashing gods into eyeless night
>
> (*Poems and Versions* 124)

This explicit attack on demagoguery is the more effective because Coffey acknowledges the appeal of essentialism and nostalgia in the previous section. At the beginning of the poem's second section, the speaker's contemplation of a scene which is

poised between the natural and the made prompts him to interrogate humanity's compulsion to personify its surroundings and its capacity to create nostalgic Golden Ages:

Willow raincloak
fountain poplar
jet water wind arching
rooted dance

Why is it when we venture far in among ancient beeches
"Hush" we say what greets a sudden presence

As if we had been waited for expected

[…]

But how it was far back when first fires glowed
ere ever aisling bode unfeared in ruined time

Sleeper stirred summoned in dream and swift to wake
heart cold hair like quills white in mist white with dawn
and present She stood shook mist from ash white curls
eyes green and turquoise bare smile
with what would he waking match her call but blood

(*Poems and Versions* 117)

Variations in typography in *Advent* usually imply an exploration of boundaries between nature and culture, and the lines that begin this section are no exception, juxtaposing the names of trees with natural materials manipulated to human use ('raincloak', 'fountain'), giving examples of the ways we make metaphors of natural movement ('arching', 'dance'). Among 'ancient beeches' the speaker confronts the otherness of nature, discovering that human beings are not the world's primary presence, but expected guests. This manoeuvre, while it encourages a becoming humility on the part of mankind, inevitably personifies nature, forcing something aniconic into the iconic shape of a 'presence'. Trying to imagine prehistory, the speaker collides with a much more recent 'presence', the allegorised Ireland of eighteenth-century *aisling* poetry. Although he wishes to evoke a time 'ere ever aisling bode', the sky-woman interposes herself and her demand for blood-sacrifice, 'with what would he waking match her call but blood'. The personified image comes to dominate our thinking about nature while 'bright earth lay

hushed' (*Poems and Versions* 117). Sentimentally, we celebrate the earth as queen and mother, 'Alma Bountiful […] Alma Mother of all', while wreaking ecological ruin. The image of a maternal earth eventually declines into the love-object of a sonnet sequence or the heroine of a fairytale, the opportunity to recognise the otherness of our surroundings definitively lost, because we have become enthralled by allegorical images or 'idols':

> Laura false advent idol in quiet sufferance of gaze
> herwards distracted while earth went on yielding fruit
> by rules straitwaistcoated natural bounty in decline
> See where thorns thicken grow through what sad centuries
> while in idol grip beauty sleeping awaits unopened rose
> Laura disclosed no better than wood or stone
> yields a joy futureless that points to void beyond
>
> (*Poems and Versions* 119)

Scully's approach to the allegorisation of nature is more self-reflexive and ironic, but he shares many of Coffey's reservations about making nature meaningful in personified human terms. A 'sonnet' (Scully's sonnets are never fourteen lines of pentameter: perhaps another point of contact with Coffey's distrust of an idolised Petrarchan Laura) from *The Basic Colours*, the first book of *Livelihood*, rewrites 'Among School Children' to suggest the nature of some of these reservations.

The speaker, a teacher, takes a group of students outside to look at a tree. He names and anatomises its parts, suggesting an eccentric conception of the way things – and perhaps by implication nature and human culture – relate to one another: 'underneath you know / is where the Roots go / to live & hold the Ground together' (*Livelihood* 28). He employs a Yeatsian vocabulary of bole and leaves, and with his remark 'look at the Top / How compliant it is to the whether', parodies a complaisant Ledean body. Yeats's Leda epitomises the natural body imposed upon and given political significance by culture; similarly the chestnut tree at the close of 'Among School Children' leaves the radical otherness of nature behind to become assimilated to meaning. Scully's persona is scathing about the human capacity to impose significance on natural forms, and yet he finds an anthropocentric position impossible to abandon: the breezes move the leaves 'for literate / old Yahoos like us to note / & have sophisticated doubts about' (28).

Scully's pupils, rather like those in the school which Yeats visited, are learning 'everything / In the best modern way'[9] – this education, the complacent speaker implies, is their ticket out of poverty and labour: 'this will cover your cracked earth in clover / this will keep you out of the mines / believe me, forever' (28). Their bodies, however, seem to stage a revolt against their conversion to imprintable Ledean matter: 'hands, arms, eyes / organize & activate' (28). This prompts a breakdown in their teacher's certainty:

> it breaks up
> into pieces the
> truth
> did you
> know that
>) the yellow castle) the terrace of life
>) the germinal vesicle
>) the
> I see nodded each student in the dance
> intent, pretending, chipping at the fact
> to teach me something, something quite different
> I see I think). (28)

Terms associated with esoteric Buddhism ('yellow castle', 'terrace of life') now jostle with anatomical terminology – the 'germinal vesicle' is the nucleus of an ovum, the Ledean and Yeatsian 'yolk and white' in a primitive state. (The 'yellow castle' may also, incidentally, be a mischievous reference to *The Wizard of Oz* [1900], in which it is the home of the Wicked Witch of the West, who is dissolved, if not quite broken 'in / to pieces'.[10]) The speaker, at the beginning of the poem confident that he could resolve the parts of the tree into a coherent and organic whole, has become incoherent. Tutorial authority now seems to rest with the students, 'chipping at the fact / to teach me something'. Like 'Among School Children', whose closing questions are often read rhetorically, but may in fact be urgent queries, this 'sonnet' engages with urgent issues of discrimination. What is the difference between intensity and pretence or between seeing and thinking? What is the different thing the students wish to teach their teacher? How

[9] W.B. Yeats, 'Among School Children', *The Poems*, ed. Richard J. Finneran (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1991).

[10] L. Frank Baum, *The Wizard of Oz* in *The Wonderful World of Oz* (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1998) 66-68.

can the grammatical structure 'I see' contain these possibilities?

Scully's poetry works to resist and subvert forms of authority which seek to impose meaning upon the human body and upon the otherness of nature. One of the most striking and explicit articulations of his anti-authoritarian position is the 'ballad' 'The Sirens', which forms the larger part of *Interlude*, *Livelihood*'s second interstice. 'The Sirens' begins with a pedantic speaker, again, 'facing' a symbolic tree 'in bloom', and noting 'Everything *correct*' (*Livelihood* 137). The landscape which it describes, however, is one of disintegration and terror. The sirens of the title are furies or fates as well as being literal klaxons: 'thread the streets / ferry the / dead' (140). The speaker's attempts to mitigate this horror by emphasising civility, wit and urbanity gives rise to an allegorical figure:

> Whereupon there
> rose up a thing
> called
>
> Order – the giant
> spinning in his
> skin –
>
> AW. DAH. (140-1)

Scully glosses this image as follows: 'The giant turning in his skin is the warrior's spasm, Cúchulainn. [*sic*] Awe-inspiring and a bit ridiculous. The AW. DAH. As command or as things in their place, can't be welcomed in without wiping its feet on the mat.' (*Metre* 138) Cúchulain's unruly body is aligned, ultimately, with a repressive force, but the 'spasm' can also perhaps been seen as the last stand of the Ledean body against authoritarian containment and order.

I want to conclude this reflection by comparing Scully's 'awe-inspiring […] ridiculous' Cúchulain with Coffey's much more mannerly and mannered version in *Advent*. Coffey chooses to show Cúchulain in death – a Christianised sacrifice, rather than 'pagan' Warped Man:

> Recall for us Cuchulain [*sic*] turning with perfect manners from fight
> when battle glory its fierce light faded in torn frame
> bound himself to upright stone so fairly to greet

> equal foe man to man and gently decline to earth
>
> But behind mere untimeliness in tossed pretence of real order
> design mere sketch act half-willed blurred effect
> veiled by record petrified in grey stone
>
> (*Poems and Versions* 143)

Despite the differences in presentation, there are numerous points of contact between Coffey's Cúchulain and Scully's. Both are bodies strained to breaking-point by the weight of signification placed upon them: in Scully's poem the strain emerges as absurdity, in Coffey's as tragedy. What Scully calls 'AW. DAH.' might have its equivalent in Coffey's 'tossed pretence of real order' both signify imposed authority rather than genuine structure. Finally, if Scully's Cúchulain might be seen as a Ledean body 'spinning' in its rejection of authority's imprint, then we might also see the 'gentle decline' and 'half willed blurred effect' of Coffey's hero as symptoms of resistance before his petrifaction into signification. Both poets confuse authority itself with its action upon its victims' bodies, because, in truth, that is how authority works to arrogate agency to itself. Both poets mount resistance – sometimes furious resistance – to authoritarian action upon nature and on human beings, and the results are two bodies of work that feel remarkably similar in spite of difference in approach. It is perhaps this political sympathy, rather than formal resemblances, that makes Scully and Coffey contemporaries, and makes Scully's readings of Coffey unforced, natural and inclusive.