To Hull and Braque:
Marching to the drumbeats

Katy Evans-Bush on Ian Duhig's *Pandorama*
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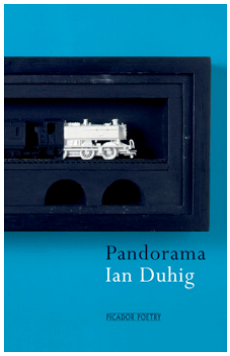

Ian Duhig's fifth poetry collection couldn't have arrived at a better time. With Pandora's box well and truly open, this book flies out among the little devils and reminds us that the ancient tradition of political poetry is thriving in contemporary England. Where Duhig's last book, *The Speed of Dark*, took medieval France and presented it as a Manichean mirror to the excesses of the Bush-n-Blair Show, this one goes a little bigger – and darker. It's about who we are, and who we are is something desperate.

'Pandorama' is what the apprentice Bert White calls his panorama display in the early 20th century classic of working class life, *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*:

> The 'Pandorama' consisted of a stage-front made of painted cardboard and fixed on the front of a wooden box about three feet long by two feet six inches high, and about one foot deep from back to front. The 'Show' was a lot of pictures cut out of illustrated weekly papers and pasted together, end to end, so as to form a long strip or ribbon. Bert had coloured all the pictures with water-colours.
>
> Just behind the wings of the stage-front at each end of the box - was an upright roller, and the long strip of pictures was rolled up on this. The upper ends of the rollers came through the top of the box and had handles attached to them. When these handles were turned the pictures passed across the stage, unrolling from one roller and rolling on to the other, and were illuminated by the light of three candles placed behind.

Without detailing every scene unrolled by Bert – with 'a suitable collection' played afterwards by the band, joined in at the chorus by his audience – one topical example may be illustrative:

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> After a rather stormy passage we arrives safely at the beautiful city of Berlin, in Germany, just in time to see a procession of unemployed workmen being charged by the military police. This picture is hintitled 'Tariff Reform means Work for All'.

Duhig's book opens with a very modern prose-poem cut-out, in 'goths': 'I love them. They bring a little antilife and uncolour to the Corn Exchange on city centre shopping days…'

But within only three poems of these creatures of contemporary decadence, he's giving us a good old-fashioned rabble-rousing in 'Charivari':

> Derived from *chav*, we call this *charivari* –
> rough music from us roughnecks plus a skit.
> Our instruments aren't made by Stradivari,
> they're anything that we can reach to hit.

And soon after that, he's playing provocateur to his target audience of poetry enthusiasts:

> You've heard that truth is beauty, beauty truth
> like one was Castor and the other Pollux –
> forgive the language of uncultured youth,
> but Cockney Keats was talking Hampstead bollocks.

Our Pandorama addresses repeatedly the links between identity and speech, song, and other sounds made by people working; and the mechanics of observation, of how we see. In the style of Bert's display, visions come, are described and sung, and are gone; echoes and hints and visions come back more shadowy and are replaced by new ones.

Like the panoramic diorama invoked by the title, this book is informed by a wide set of reference points. It ranges across the centuries, to and fro among the continents, and up and down the brow. It is demanding, and it's no use worrying about not getting allusions: Duhig makes free use of the knowledge he possesses, and doesn't try to second-guess which bits of it his readers might or might not share. The poems form a chain, linked by hints, as images and words appear again and again, chiming with and deepened by their appearances in other poems. It's like the march of civilisation, as if the subtext of the book was: 'Everything leads to something else' ('and something else again', as Paul Muldoon might add).

Duhig raids what Michael Donaghy called the 'posh shop' of Western civilisation, makes off with what he needs, and takes us on a rattling tour of his spoils. But while the shop may be posh, it was built by builders, and everything in it was made by people like 'Strata' Smith – 'a blacksmith's boy from that low stratum where/ language beats on your ears and means it'.

In this rich mix, an image of a Matisse cut-out begins a poem about boxing; the workers on the Great Wall of China echo the navvies on the Yorkshire railways; the Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci (the very figure of a Renaissance man, later buried with great honour in a Buddhist temple) introduces a perspective-box into

Ming dynasty China, and composes some ditties for the eunuchs (and in 'The Grassington Mandala', also, the religions jostle each other for space in the box). Leeds poet Martin Bell sits darkly in a pub next to a poem about the giants of Rombald's moor. Picasso and the White Cube gallery are not far away. Then again, a meteor 'is a poem… this anti-philosopher's stone/ shattered the glass houses which Aristotle built/ on Eudox's foundations, then Ptolemy gazed…' (And, borrowing the conceit of Martin Bell's 'Leeds is Hell', this same poem, 'A Summer's Fancy', begins: 'One day, soon after I'd died, I returned to Hull,/ for my sins…')

Wallace Stevens is a presiding spirit, and strangely recurring dark glasses in several poems evoke the eyes of his blackbird, while the Saxon poets and the Kalevala also make appearances, and bring Basil Bunting to mind as they come:

> *The work of the Giants, the stonesmiths…*
> *… by files grimground…*
>
> *these many meadhalls men filled*
> *with loud cheerfulness…*

Yorkshire – its giants, its moors and bleakness and power and strength and stony outcroppings – is the ever-present, physical embodiment of centuries of those who built it. The landscape becomes almost like another kind of box.

Everywhere in this book are boxes: the perspective box is rivalled by Cubism itself. There are memory theatres, Jeff Wall lightboxes and a Joseph Cornell box, Chinese nested boxes; there's a small town that only holds things bigger than itself, 'a Ptolemaic nest': 'the Clock Tower/ at Shipley, a modernist white cube which lords it over/ Market Square.' Even the earlier 'boxing' match comes back to mind.

In 'A Room with a View', 'now I see civilisation through new square eyes/ since buying a TV with two square metres of screen'. A train carriage is 'this steel coffin with an Abbey view'. In the same poem ('Jericho Shandy') a riff on walls recalls that Jeff Wall lightbox (and 'cornell alarm chains' recall Joseph C's assemblages). A collection-wide attention to clocks brings us, via this train carriage, to a visit with Toussaint L'Ouverture in Jura.

And the drumbeat sounds in the distance. Drums are everywhere in this book, starting with the drums of the Charivari, like the Zulu drums in the old movies, rumbling like the movement of the earth underfoot. 'Braque's Drum' takes on the Colonialists head-on. A delighted piss-take of Sir Henry Newbolt's 'Drake's Drum' – itself based on a rather Arthurian legend that a snare drum Drake took with him when he circumnavigated the world can still be heard to beat in times of national crisis or momentous event – the poem reclaims meaning itself, for the people who need it. (As we write, it's tempting to wonder if Drake's – or Braque's – drum has been beating at all recently…)

Sir Henry's myth-making poem, to give the flavour, contains this stanza:

Drake he was a Devon man, an' ruled the Devon seas,
(Capten, art tha' sleepin' there below?)
Roving tho' his death fell, he went wi' heart at ease,
A' dreamin' arl the time o" Plymouth Hoe.
'Take my drum to England, hang et by the shore,
Strike et when your powder's runnin' low;
If the Dons sight Devon, I'll quit the port o' Heaven,
An' drum them up the Channel as we drumm'd them long ago.

'Braque's Drum' can be read in this issue of *Horizon Review*. [LINK] Where the Charivari drums are intended to beat the real 'truth' into the listener, this poem begins with an epigraph from Braque (I translate): 'The drum, instrument of meditation. He who listens to the drum listens to silence.'

Georges Braque, 'e was an artist an' 'igh Cubist to the bone
(Sir 'enry Newbolt's spinnin' dahn below)
an' Stevens loved 'is Cubists an' 'e wasn't on 'is own,
(an' spinnin' right beside 'im 's Picasso)
so multiple perspective's are 'is *Blackbird*'s raison d'être
(when such a view in art was comme il faut);
hence for this fractured eye on nature we're in Wally's debt
(plus that poetry's another kind of dough).

(See earlier in the book, by the way, for a novel version of 'Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird': call it a Cubist call to arms for the workers of the world. 'Braque's Drum' is 'Wally's' third appearance in *Pandorama*.)

This poem embodies a truth we've forgotten about, in our craze for mass-produced, fame-based entertainment – where Simon Cowell, not Sir Francis Drake, is the hero we think can save us – which is this: that what we now call 'high art' used to be just as desirable to the masses – the proletariat – as to the upper classes. (Picasso's 'Guernica' was shown at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1939, 2,000 people queued every day to see it. The admission was a pair of boots to be sent to the Spanish front, and there are stories of workers giving their own boots.) The Cubists literally taught us a new way to look at everything: the world split open, like Pandora's box.

They say poetry is the thing that gets lost in translation, that it can't be paraphrased. This book offers a minutely constructed instrument for examining the way we, that is civilisation, have tied ourselves up in knots. Its elements can be identified and partially listed, but the machine has to be experienced in motion. And we, no machines, are of the earth, as those stone giants keep reminding us; while the Charivari rings in our ears:

Because the beautiful can prove untrue,
you sometimes need to heed Tom, Dick and Harry.
We're here to drum that message into you,
and that's the meaning of the Charivari.

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