

Four Poems

by Dave Lordan
introduced by Michael O'Sullivan
and translated into Italian by Rubina Valli



Dave Lordan and the Poetry of Shame, Outrage and Trauma

Michael O'Sullivan

The Chinese University of Hong Kong
([<osullivan.mga@gmail.com>](mailto:osullivan.mga@gmail.com))

Citation: M. O'Sullivan (2022) Dave Lordan and the Poetry of shame, outrage and shock. *Sijis* 12: pp. 231-251. doi: 10.13128/SIJIS-2239-3978-13759

Copyright: © 2022 M. O'Sullivan. This is an open access, peer-reviewed article published by Firenze University Press (<https://oajournals.fupress.net/index.php/bsfm-sijis>) and distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Data Availability Statement: All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

Competing Interests: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

His precursors are the visionary Blake, the humorous wordsmith Joyce, the irreverent Beats, the otherworldly Bolaño, the gritty realists Behan and O'Casey. He belongs to a group of poets who might not exist in Ireland in any real sense; to the group of political poets who document the grind and desperation of the local but with a voice that channels the universalism of world literature. His work is ever conscious of the desperation, exploitation, and psychologically damaging nature of the cycles of oppression that bear down on people in all walks of life in Ireland. His is the most important, most enduring poetry of resistance in Ireland today. As Dave Lordan writes in "Like Dodos round my childhood": "We are form-perceiving beings. Needing form to navigate. Needing to navigate. Needing need". And in being true to his word he never lets up. His list of works, his bibliography, now runs to 46 works and counting and covers multiple genres: poetry pamphlets, books of poetry, audiobooks, short fiction, essays, CDs, videos and short films, drama, songs, sound art, edited works, produced works. His genre-bending is itself a political act posing the question of why we might choose to limit ourselves to the canon of received forms. Political poetry with a strong class consciousness and a subversive spirit does not get taught very often in Irish schools. Paula Meehan has only appeared on the Leaving Cert list this year (as the only living poet on the list) and Lordan is a poet of the younger generation; he is a poet who matured as a writer during the Celtic Tiger years and whose entire body of work to date offers us the most compelling account of Ireland's Rip-Off and Recession years, of its Best Small Country in the World to do Business-years.

Some national traditions give greater room to their socialist poets, to their political poets. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri recognise the importance of socialist movements for a kind of writing and philosophy; they describe a philosophy for those "who live in poverty" around the notion of "social solidarity". They remind us that the "real essence of the poor, in fact, is

not their lack but their power" (*ibidem*); "although the poor are defined by material lack", for socialism they are "never reduced to bare life but are always endowed with powers of invention and production" (Hardt and Negri 2009, 180). Lordan's oppressed and ravaged are most likely poor but they are invested through his writing with the same elementary and perhaps indestructible powers; the neglected childhood friend of "Invisible Horses" rises up out of his poverty amidst the alcoholism of his father and the persecution of his mother as "The Undeafed Forward Flow of Hope and All-inclusive Energy" (Lordan 2010, 51). Europe has its socialist philosophies; English writing has Tony Harrison, Raymond Williams, Eric Hobsbawm and the whole new generation of writers responding to them; American writing in English, where class and race coalesce like nowhere else, has Rankin, Hayes, and Alexie and the whole delirium of the brave taking us from Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright to bell hooks and Toni Morrison. But where is this group, this writing vanguard in Ireland today? Where are the poets who document the voice of the oppressed like these poets and writers do? Ask any schoolboy or any schoolgirl where they are and they will be non-plussed to tell you. Dave Lordan is the leading poet of his generation at documenting the brutal effects of class warfare on Irish society over the last twenty-five years.

Lordan's work is always pitched alongside the kinds of perennial need and urgency that arise from exploitation, violence, bullying, barbarism. Reading him now in "Invitation to a Sacrifice" alongside journalism on the victims of war crimes perpetrated by Russian soldiers in Ukraine we find a voice equal to the range of human depravity recorded again today, a depravity no less real in a world lived more than ever in the virtual:

There's a woman stumbling in a field
of snow.
Crying out
Crying out
Crying out...
Her two hands clutch
a wound above
her left breast.
Tears burn holes.
Spots of blood
leave a trail
in the snow.
Somewhere behind her
in the growling whiteness
whiteness that scours the eyes
like salt
there are dogs.
Behind the dogs
there are drunk men
keeling over
with the mirth
of drunken teammates
in the snow
then up
again and
whistling. (Lordan 2010, 15, lines 1-24).

But Lordan doesn't leave it there; like the poets he admires – Shelley, Moore, Blake – he gets to the roots of the torture and trauma, analyses it, describes it in the moment, and leaves the reader uncomfortable with the questions it raises:

If you could relieve this woman now,
 If you could perforate the veil
 between
 stretch a giant hand
 and raise her from this picture
 would you?
 You would?
 And then what would you do with her? (Lordan 2010, 16, lines 11-18)

– lines that recall Shelley's from "The Mask of Anarchy":

When between her and her foes
 A mist, a light, an image rose,
 Small at first, and weak and frail
 Like the vapour of a vale. (Shelley 1832, lines 102-105)

Lordan's psychological realism makes him also the most searing contemporary voice of trauma in Irish poetry. His depiction of trauma through bullying and physical and emotional abuse, practices Irish society has only recently begun to deal with in its schools, respond ahead of time to the current stream of talk on mental health and well-being. Poems such as "Bullies" should be compulsory in all Irish schools:

Unlike mom I can't seem to stop myself remembering
 although I sometimes wonder if such cruelty
 as I can recall going through and witnessing
 could really have been allowed to exist as it did, that is
 with the complicity of thousands in an average Irish town. (Lordan 2010, p. 46, lines 11-15)

It is this sensitivity to suffering, trauma and need that now, reading back, lends Lordan's work an almost prophetic quality. A poem like "Spite Specific" also formally echoes the kind of post-atrocity trauma Paul Celan captures in "Deathfugue" where repetition and anaphora lead to the gradual dissolution of meaning until fragments coalesce to produce a haunting, spectral atmosphere. Lordan's poem describes the horrors of the Irish workhouses and Mother and Baby homes in Ireland that only officially closed in 1998 where "unmarked" graves of "countless children" have recently been found (Lordan 2010, p. 54, lines 20-21). Lordan's poem appeared in 2010 and it wasn't until Catherine Corless's painstaking work on the records of these homes was published in newspapers in 2014 that the scale of the tragedy came to light.

Lordan is there with Harrison, Rexroth, and Nicholas Wong, with the socialist poet, the poet of incarnations, the poet of ravaged cities unable to speak in their own tongue. His is a poetry of what Hardt and Negri call "common life", what marks "all the figures of collective creation that put to work cooperation and collaboration, the network that, once set in motion, can extend infinitely [...]" (Hardt and Negri 2009, 176). Or, as Lordan puts it:

Each one of us is imprisoned in time
 and oppression.
 Each suffers alone in their own separation.

Our music's how we contradict.
We sing and strum, we bang and drum and chant,
callin out through each other's bars
of the freedom
the human is promised

though we know not the hour
nor the land. (Lordan 2021, p. 88, lines 54-63)

Works Cited

- Hardt Michael, Negri Antonio (2009), *Commonwealth*, Cambridge, The Belknap Press of Harvard University.
Lordan Dave (2010), *Invitation to a Sacrifice*, Ennistymon, Salmon Poetry.
— (2021), *Medium*, Dublin, Frontline Press.

Four Poems

Dave Lordan
traduzioni di Rubina Valli

Convergence Centre Genoa. Friday 21 July 2001
i.m Carlo Giuliani, murdered by paramilitary police.

A hundred yards behind us
 the Mediterranean heaves its waste
 against a limestone barricade.
 Condoms, nappies, bottle tops,
 all that unnecessary detritus
 rising to mock our gas stung eyes
 like the unlearned lessons of past mistakes.
 Rumours sicken our panic,
 spreading through the camp
 as fast as microbes
 through the lungs of sleeping babies.
 "Three are dead- one a child".
 "There's police in the ambulances".
 "If you're hurt, don't go to hospital- you'll be arrested".
 "They'll gas us while we sleep".
 "The camp security are FBI".
 Tonight no-one will leave this camp
 of thirty thousand unarmed rebels
 for hostel or hotel room,
 for fear of rampaging Carabinieri.
 We are surrounded.

Every fifteen minutes
 a helicopter circles the camp
 thirty metres overhead
 and stops dead.
 Out of spite they deafen us,
 blind us with a power lamp
 to keep us awake, on edge.
 To film us all and file us.
 Anger whips across us like a desert wind.
 En masse we raise two fingers,
 bare our teeth and scream obscenities,
 wish we were the Vietcong.

Dizzy with the sudden loss of innocence
 A few are like drunken actors
 directed by a lunatic.
 They tumble round on set,
 make up their lines,
 mumble the first words
 that come into they're heads
 till they're out of their minds.

A Cailin cries for her anarchist brother-

Centro di convergenza Genova. Venerdì 21 luglio 2001
In memoria di Carlo Giuliani, assassinato dalle forze dell'ordine

Cento metri indietro
Il Mediterraneo getta i suoi rifiuti
Contro una barricata di cemento
Condom, pannolini, tappi di bottiglia
Taniche di benzina e Tampax
Montano a schernire i nostri occhi pizzicati dal gas
Come lezioni non apprese dal passato.
Le voci nauseano il nostro panico,
dilagano per il campo
veloci come batteri
nei polmoni di neonati addormentati.
“Tre morti – uno è un bambino”
“Ci sono poliziotti sulle ambulanze”
“Se sei ferito non andare in ospedale – ti arrestano”
“Ci gaseranno nel sonno”
“Gli agenti di sicurezza sono spie”
Stanotte nessuno lascerà questo campo
Di trentamila ribelli senza nome
Niente ostelli o stanze d'hotel
Per paura dei carabinieri furenti
Siamo circondati.

Ogni quarto d'ora
Un elicottero ruota attorno al campo
A trenta metri
E si blocca.
Per disprezzo ci assordano,
Ci accecano con torce da campeggio
Per tenerci svegli, al limite.
Per filmarci e schedarci tutti.
La rabbia ci frusta come un vento del deserto.
In massa alziamo due dita,
scopriamo i denti e urliamo oscenità,
magari fossimo Vietcong.

Storditi da un'improvvisa perdita d'innocenza
Alcuni sono come attori ubriachi
Diretti da un pazzo.
Rotolano qua e là sul palco
Inventano le battute
Borbottano le prime parole
Che gli saltano in mente
Fino a perdere la testa.

Una tipa piange per il fratello

missing in action.
We comfort her, try to construct
a normal Friday night scene.
Someone cracks open a bottle of wine,
passes round a stack of paper cups
his mother gave him.
Another offers round the last of his cigarettes.
But there's no hope of small talk
when the dancing fires
reflected in our eyes are burning buildings.
I take a drink, and then another.
It tastes good, works like medicine.

The oldest have the blankets
and are already sleeping.
We huddle together
and make the best of our
Mattress of cold concrete
our makeshift cover
of jackets and Bandana's.
Spray spits in off the sea,
and sends shivers up my spine.
My bladder aches with cold.
I know I'll get no sleep tonight.
You take off your glasses
and tell me to mind them.
My heart wraps itself in this warning
and I am moved to tears by the pathos
of broken glasses.
Whatever happens tonight,
batons or bullets, tear gas or tanks,
I will mind your glasses.

I lie back and stare straight up
into the bottomless night.
I think about how Love
is what makes Death so awful
and Death is what makes
Love so urgent and so painful.
The black sky is a poisoned sea
where nothing lives,
The stars are burning islands
decorated with skulls.

Disperso in azione.
La confortiamo, cerchiamo di costruire
La scena di un weekend normale.
Qualcuno spacca una bottiglia di vino da bere
Fa girare una pila di bicchieri di carta
Che gli ha dato sua madre.
Qualcun altro offre la sua ultima sigaretta.
Nessuna speranza di chiacchierare
Quando i fuochi che ci danzano negli occhi bruciano edifici.
Prendo un sorso, e poi un altro.
È buono, come una medicina.

I vecchi hanno le coperte
E dormono già.
Noi ci stringiamo
E facciamo quel che si può
Col nostro materasso di cemento freddo
Le nostre coperte improvvisate
Di giacconi e bandane.
Tremo. Sono esausto.
La vescica mi fa male dal freddo.
So che non dormirò stanotte.
Ti levi gli occhiali
E mi dici di starci attento.
Il mio cuore si aggrappa a questo compito
E sono commosso fino alle lacrime dal pathos
Degli occhiali rotti.
Comunque vada stanotte
Manganelli o proiettili,
starò attento agli occhiali.

Mi sdraio e guardo su
Dritto nella notte senza fondo.
Penso a come l'Amore
È ciò che rende la Morte così orribile
E la Morte è ciò che rende
L'Amore così urgente e doloroso.
Il cielo nero è un mare di veleno
Dove non vive nulla.
Le stelle sono isole di fuoco
Decorate di teschi.

“Victory Parade”

A birthday brunch in the city,
among early-middle-aged old friends.

A bowl-shaped scented
candle passed across the table
as a gift.

A bomb inside the
candle. A cannibal
inside the bomb.
The cannibal eating
what’s been cooked by the bomb.

A gradual in-drift of
mustard gas.

The cannibal blinded and choking on gas.

Several tanks and armoured pick-
up trucks rolling out of the gas
cloud

followed by soldiers in masks.

The soldiers find a village
shadowed by a pinewood
church. Inside it the
elders and infants and
some with-child are
hiding.

The soldiers dousing with diesel
and then flamethrowing the church.

Nothing and no-one
surviving except for
one enormous bell
superstition has caused to never be rung.

Concealed in the bell hollow:
the healing holy mummy of a crocodile.

Jerome in the desert embracing the crocodile.

The soldiers shrink,

“Parata della vittoria”

Un brunch di compleanno in città,
tra vecchi amici di mezza età.

Una candela a forma di ciotola viene passata per
La tavolata come un dono.

Nella candela c'è una bomba. Nella bomba
C'è un cannibale.
Il cannibale mangia
Ciò che la bomba ha cotto.

Si va alzando del gas tossico.

Il cannibale è accecato e soffocato dal gas.

Tanti carri armati e pick-up corazzati
Emergono dalla nube di gas

Seguiti da soldati con la maschera.

I soldati trovano un villaggio adombrato
Da una chiesa in legno di pino. All'interno si nascondono
Gli anziani e i bambini e le donne incinte.

I soldati gettano diesel
e poi fiamme sulla chiesa.

Niente e nessuno sopravvive a parte una
Enorme campana
Che per scaramanzia non è mai stata suonata.

Nascosto nella cavità della campana:
la santa salvifica mummia di un cocodrillo.

Fra' Girolamo nel deserto abbraccia il cocodrillo.

I soldati Rimpiccioliscono a un esercito di formiche
Che marcia nelle tasche di un generale (Napoleonico) a cavallo.
Rapido, il generale:

1: sfodera un telescopio
2: sonda l'orizzonte e il cielo
3: spia un ordine tatuato su un satellite
Per innalzare la bandiera nazionale sulla campana.

becoming columns of ants marching into the
pockets
of a (Napoleonic) general on horseback.

Rapidly, the general:

- 1: unsheathing a telescope
- 2: surveying horizon and sky
- 3: spying an order tattooed on a
satellite to raise up the national
flag on the bell.

A scorched hermit
leaping out of a bush to disagree on the
flag.

In the midst of a screaming
dispute both commander and
hermit
being stampeded
to mud
by legions of
cavalry
flooding in through the west
and the east and the north and the
south.

And now it is snowing the pinnacle, snowing
the black nuclear snow that smears away almost
everything

except

the singing teeth of the bomb,

the victory howls of the cavalrymen.

“Found Poem”

Heh! You found me.
That’s great.

You found me.
But I can’t tell where
we are. Can you?
A bookshop?

Un eremita ustionato salta fuori da un cespuglio
In disaccordo sulla bandiera.

Nel mezzo di una disputa accesa
Sia il comandante che l'eremita
Sono schiacciati in poltiglia da legioni di cavalleria
Che arrivano a frotte da ovest e est
E sud e nord.

E ora nevicata il pinnacolo,
La nera neve nucleare
Che imbratta quasi tutto

Eccetto

I denti della bomba che canta
gli ululati vittoriosi della cavalleria!

“Poesia trovata”

Haha! Mi hai trovato.
Che bello.

Ma non posso dirti dove sono.
Vero?
Una libreria?

If so, please steal me.

I have so often been stolen
but I have never been caught.

But maybe you've already stolen me.
Maybe you've already taken me home.

Maybe you are lying down on your bed now
Holding me open above you and gazing,

Peeling my layers away,
Drinking my nakedness in.

I've never been anything but naked
And I'll let anyone gaze
As long as they please.

Why not take a step beyond staring?
Why not step through the page and come in?

There are as many ways to enter me
As there are to enter a wood.

As many ways to take shelter.
As many ways of getting lost.

You can die inside me
If you want. I'll preserve you for another time.

Many are buried here
Who did not want to die.

Stick around long enough
And you will start to help
Me unbury them.

One by one, you will hear them sing
As if they were never wronged.

For I am making an enormous
Flock of them-

A flock of songs.
Songs of strength and redemption

Se è così, per favore rubami.

Mi hanno spesso rubato
Ma non mi hanno mai catturato.

Magari mi hai già rubato.
Magari mi hai già portato a casa.

Magari adesso sei steso sul tuo letto
Mi tieni aperto e guardi,

sfogliando via i miei strati,
bevendoti la mia nudità.

Non sono mai stata altro che nuda
E lascerò chiunque guardare
Finché lo desidererà.

Perché non spingersi oltre il guardare?

Perché non fare un passo nella pagina ed entrare?

Ci sono tanti modi per entrare dentro di me
Quanti per entrare in una foresta.

Altrettanti modi per trovare rifugio.
Altrettanti modi per perdersi.

Puoi morire dentro di me
Se vuoi.
Ti preserverò per un'altra volta.

Molti che non volevano morire
Sono sepolti qui.

Trattieniti abbastanza a lungo
E insieme inizieremo
a riesumarli

Uno per uno, li sentirai cantare
Come se non avessero mai subito un torto.
Perché ne sto radunando
Un enorme stormo.
Un enorme stormo di morti e dispersi.

Uno stormo di canti e inni e incantesimi
Per sostenere il mondo

For bearing the world
And repairing it: that is my work.

Enough! To tell you the truth I'm getting
a little tired of being found.

Being found seems so dull and so permanent.
Museums and catacombs are full of the found.

I long to be in motion, going nowhere.
I long to be lost in myself again.

Inside me, there's everything.
So, come on in. Or let me go. I'm rearing.

I guess I'm less like a wood
and more like the wind

and no-one has ever found the wind.

“Tita”

You just tut-tut agreeably and smirk
with eyebrows raised while being informed
over the phone by a concerned local citizen
that your grandfather,
whose teeth are longer
than the second Balkan War
and who never let the national tongue
disturb his local palate
was squinted on Aiello's
tranquilised main drag
pedaling his rusty two-wheeler up
the middle of the wrong side of the road

at the sky blackening zenith
of that tourist dousing barrage
of sleet and pea-sized hail
when the radio was hissing
with complaint from
sun and sea-bound drivers
who could not spy
through rain-swept glass
what was throttling down
the avenues towards them

E ripararlo: questo è il mio lavoro.

Basta! A dir la verità
Mi sto un pochino stancando di essere trovata.

Farsi trovare sembra così banale e così definitivo.
I musei e le catacombe sono pieni di trovati.

Io bramo il movimento, l'andare ovunque.

Bramo di perdermi di nuovo in me stessa.
Dentro di me, c'è tutto.

Allora, su, entra.
O lasciami andare.
Io indietreggio.

Mi sa che più che a un bosco assomiglio al vento
E nessuno ha mai trovato il vento.

“Tita”

Fai tz-tz con finto assenso
E ghigni
Con le sopracciglia alzate
Mentre vieni informata
Al telefono
Da un preoccupato cittadino locale
Che tuo nonno,
i cui denti sono più lunghi
della Seconda Guerra Balcanica
e che mai lasciò la lingua nazionale
disturbare il suo palato locale
è stato visto sulla pacificata
via principale di Aiello
pedalare la sua bici arrugginita
nel mezzo del lato sbagliato
della carreggiata

mentre il cielo si va oscurando allo zenit
e la muraglia di turisti si inzuppa
di nevischio e grandine grossa come piselli
quando la radio sibilava
coi reclami degli automobilisti
diretti verso il mare e il sole
che non potevano ben leggere

You said your neighbour said your Grandad
was brandishing a folded up umbrella
like a pike

that he held his ancient smited peasant face upraised
to heaven's thundering height

and he was returning a bloody armada of curses
to that bastard god
who had inflicted
on him this life.

attraverso il vetro battuto dalla pioggia
cosa macinava verso di loro sulla strada
a tutta velocità

tu dicesti che il vicino disse
che il nonno brandiva un ombrello chiuso
come una lancia

che alzava il volto antico e dissacrato
alle altezze tonanti dei cieli

e restituiva una maledetta armata di bestemmie

al dio
che gli ha inflitto
questa vita.

