

Christine De Luca's Poetics of Gaze and the Power of Intellect

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Christine De Luca, née Pearson (<http://christinedeluca.co.uk>), is a Scottish/Shetlandic contemporary poet, who was born and brought up in Shetland. She studied in Edinburgh, where she lives with her husband, who is of Italian descent. She currently holds the title of Makar, the city of Edinburgh Poet Laureate. She writes both in English and (more often) in Shetlandic, a 'dialect' that includes elements of Old Scots and Norse. To this day, she has published six collections of verse (*Voes & Sounds*, 1994; *Wast wi da Valkyries*, 1997; *Plain Song*, 2002; *Parallel Worlds*, 2005; *North End of Eden*, 2010; *Dat Trickster Sun*, 2014); one novel (*And Then Forever*, 2011); several books for children and a book on a small island, Havera, in Shetland, in collaboration with various artists. A bi-lingual edition of a wide choice of her poems translated into French by the poet Jean-Paul Blot was published in 2007. For no fewer than four times, her poems have been elected in the twenty best poems of the year by the Scottish Poetry Library. She also often appears at poetry festivals in Scotland as guest poet. The fact that she writes in either Shetlandic or English might suggest a different approach according to the language that is being used but, as a matter of fact, this is not the case: all her production expresses her perceptive precision, her feelings for nature on a minute or extended scale and her social sense spreading from her family experience to wider society at home and abroad regardless of the chosen language.

In an interview given when she received the title of Makar, she stated:

I have a dual identity. To begin with, I kept the two aspects of my life quite separate. But that's all gone now – I write in whichever language comes to the poem. I might write about Edinburgh in dialect and then write about Shetland in English. My work involves both languages equally, and that's something I would like to help with – people feeling good about their mother tongue.¹

1 See URL www.edinburghnews.scotsman.com, published on 23rd May 2014; last accessed on 21st August 2017.

Moreover, in her preface to her collection *Parallel Worlds* (Luath Press Limited, 2005) containing three poems commissioned by BBC Radio Scotland to celebrate national Poetry Day, she affirms that:

By writing in Shetlandic as well as in English I wish to pay homage not just to the people and landscape which formed me, but to the language – or dialect – which allowed me expression. In an era in which the world is ever more Anglophone and cultural difference less distinctive, I feel it is important that we build our various identities confidently on home soil. So, while I am comfortable with all my various identities – as an European, as a British citizen and as a Scot – the identity with emotional reality for me is the Shetland one. Identities stack like Russian dolls and peeling off the layers to get to the heart is essential. (*Parallel Worlds*, 13)

Many of the volumes of poems she has written so far (between 1994 and 2014) have been awarded literary prizes. In 1996, she received the Shetland Literary Prize for her first volume of poems entitled *Voes & Sounds* (Shetland Library, 1994). Her third poetry collection *Plain Song* (The Shetland Library, 2002) interestingly went together with a CD of De Luca personally reading her poems. Her novel *And Then Forever* (The Shetland Times Ltd, 2011) has been well received and appreciated, as well as her children's stories in Shetlandic. The latter are published by Hansel Co-operative Press, a firm of which she was one of the founders in order to encourage publications in Shetland and Orkney in their own dialect/language. The same publisher also produced a CD of De Luca's children's stories together with other authors' of similar kind of fiction.

In 2013, *Havera. The Story of an Island* (Shetland Amenity Trust, 2013), a book co-edited by Christine De Luca and three other artists for text, photography and music, came out. She has also been responsible as author and/or editor for various poetry pamphlets and anthologies. In 2004, Hansel Co-operative Press published her pamphlet, *Drops in Time's Ocean*. This work recounts the story of De Luca's family through eight generations. Recently, she has translated in Shetlandic and published various children's classics including works by Roald Dahl and Julia Donaldson.

Her poems have been translated into numerous languages including Italian, French, German, the Nordic languages not forgetting Icelandic and Finnish and, perhaps more surprising, Welsh, Bengali and recently Turkish. She has been awarded many national and international literary prizes.

In 2007, *Mondes Parallèles. Poèmes des Iles Shetland Edition Bilingue*, edited and translated into French by Jean-Paul Blot (Editions Fédérop), won the Prix de Poésie du Livre Insulaire at the 9th Salon International du Livre Insulaire in Ouessant.

She has worked together with many painters, designers and musicians of different nationalities. She has appeared, reading her poems, at many

festivals in different countries, towns and cities. She has also participated in various BBC radio programmes. She has been invited to take part in several poetry meetings in foreign countries such as France, Italy, Iceland, Norway, Finland, Poland Canada and Russia.

Her latest collection of poems *Dat Trickster Sun* (Mariscat Press) came out in 2014. It was translated into Italian, *Questo sole furfante*, by Francesca Romana Paci and published in 2015 (Torino: Nuova Trauben). At the moment, De Luca is working with Paci on a collection of poems dealing with *ekphrasis*, a recurrent theme in her poetry, commissioned under the Edinburgh Makarship. These latest poems will be inspired by twelve works of the Italian-Scottish sculptor Eduardo Paolozzi.

In 2015, some of her Shetlandic poems (once more translated by Paci) were published in *Polisemie dell'isola* (edited by Franca Ruggieri, Roma, Anicia), the proceedings of a conference, at the Università degli Studi Roma 3, in which she also presented an article on Shetlandic culture and history. Her poems were read and praised by Piero Boitani at the launch of the book in 2016.

In 2016, De Luca was invited, with her translator, to Sardinia to take part in the Sassari Festival, *Ottobre in poesia*. In May 2017, she lectured and read some of her poems from *Dat Trickster Sun*, along with other old and new ones (also translated by Paci), during the Poetry Vicenza 2017 Festival, organised and promoted by Marco Fazzini, himself a poet. Three of her poems (*Glims o Origin, Owre Clos fur Comfort foula fae Spiggie, Faa Fae Grace*) were published in the book *Poetry Vicenza 2017*, edited by Marco Fazzini (Pisa: Edizioni ETS).

During her stay in Vicenza, Christine De Luca visited the Cappella degli Scrovegni in nearby Padua. Back home, she wrote the poem, *Story-Telling*, which is published here for the first time with the Italian translation by Paci.

Story-Telling is a short and effective poem endowed with the intense concentration of experience typical of contemporary poetry.

The Caffè Pedrocchi and the Scrovegni Chapel, two of the outstanding artistic and cultural features of Padua, are perceived and represented by the poet in precise topographical terms, by means of which she manages to offer the reader a variety of perspectives. A sense of disorientation, omnipresent in the poem (as elsewhere in her poetic production), corresponds to the confusing maps hanging on the walls of the Caffè Pedrocchi and is conveyed by the mistaken and thus deceptive topographical context with which the observer is presented with "cardinal points the wrong way/round". Indeed, in the poem entitled "Disorientation" from her collection *Dat Trickster Sun* (2015, 10), she uses the same topographical image of a confusing map to express the loss of the sense of place and position by a human being:

Strange how she had you upside down,
 her east and west confused; and
 the map – she thought it fibbing, till
 emerging, in a bright morning,
 to a world transfigured, made new.

In a note to the poem, she explains: “She could be me but it could be any traveller. I had arrived from Paris to a little town in eastern France late one evening. I take a certain amount of pride in orientating myself [...]. However, the next morning, as I set out to visit old friends, I found I was going in completely the wrong direction” (2015, 10).

Similarly, the ‘upside down’ perception in *Story-Telling* transmits the idea of the disoriented individual in the real world as imagined by the reader together with the poet. In the poem’s representational process all is perception and all is focused on perception: everything depends on the eyes of the beholder – in turn those of the poet, of the implied reader and even the eyes of the figures in the Scrovegni Chapel frescoes – the fabled figures who with their silent expressions convey their passions, their histories, their mythological realities.

The forcefulness of Giotto’s inspiration becomes for the poet and the onlooker a dark mystery suggesting profundity and otherworldliness, a theme immediately developed in the silence of observation. The poet understands this and succeeds in making the reader of her poem understand that we are all our own myth-makers in our perceptions of our surroundings and reality: “in the topographical silence we transcend | our flat earth, our upside-down world”.

At the same time, De Luca’s lexical choices bring the reader to feel the disorienting amazement provoked by the upside-down maps at Pedrocchi’s and by Giotto’s variety of gazes with their famous and distinctive black-contoured eyes revealing the emotional depth of the characters’ human stories. The reader is struck by the intensity of the diction together with the brevity of the poem.

The Italian translation recreates effectively De Luca’s ‘tight’ lexis as well as rendering in fresh dynamics the sense and imagery of the poem. Clearly, De Luca and Paci often talk and discuss together about the language of De Luca’s poetry: there is not a superfluous word either in the original poem or in its translation. De Luca’s clarity and precision of diction help the reader transcend the realm of the tangible, even that of the artistic, making him/her cross the boundary between the visible and the invisible, plunging him/her into the unfathomable yet very real world of the creative powers of the human intellect – indeed reminding us, in our changing times, of the concept of intellect in Dante.