

A Slow Genocide: Dave Lordan on Poetry in the West

Interviewed by: Liam Sweeney

I met Dave Lordan at the Library Bar, the second floor of Central Hotel Dublin, in July of 2011. I'd heard Lordan deliver his poem, "Hope," at a reading for the Stinging Fly, a leading literary magazine in Ireland, a few weeks earlier. It took only a moment before the room snapped to attention. Lordan seemed to be channeling Ireland's dark side. Bellowing and grunting, each line sounded more dirty and desperate than the next, until the poem culminated in actual hope—the kind that requires utter despair for it to be realized. The room had been drawn taught.

Lordan's poetry is visceral. It clocks you in the teeth and you come away laughing. For this rare gift he has collected his fair share of prizes, like the Patrick Kavanagh award and the Ireland Chair of Poetry Bursary award. He also writes propaganda for the very far left, and is a Marxist activist. We met to discuss the roles of poetry and propaganda in the 21st century.

Interviewer

So, what kind of Marxist are you?

Dave Lordan

I've always been politically active on the Marxist left. Wouldn't consider myself an academic Marxist. I'm anti communism, anti war (Iraq) etc. etc. in the epistemological tradition of Leninism (post Trotskyism). But to be honest with you it's been more about practical campaigning rather than who was right in 1950. I enjoy academic Marxism but it doesn't get more people to the street.

Interviewer

Have your politics had an effect on your writing?

Dave Lordan

It's a truism and it's obvious that most writing that sets out to be political is awful. It's very difficult to engage people's empathy or spirituality with an argument. I would argue that propaganda is more important than literature, but it's not literature and it couldn't be.

Interviewer

How do you demarcate the two? Where are the lines drawn?

Dave Lordan

Well, the literary lobby is very good propaganda for themselves. If you look at something like the Booker prize, or any prize (its all about the prizes) everyone seems convinced that these are very important things. Yet there is actually no true value. How do we know the Booker prize is important? There've been 120 Nobel Prize winners. How many can you name? I would say literature as we know it—how it is distributed and understood—is very much connected to the technological level of society, and, you know, poetry or the attempt to express oneself in the form of words goes as far back.

Interviewer

And so how do you see technology as changing the role of the writer?

Dave Lordan

There are three original impulses feeding into poetry. One is an erotic impulse: to pass out of yourself and into the other, meaning an imitative impulse. The first poets, a lot of them, were people who naturally wanted to imitate the birds singing or the cries of animals. This is about physical pleasure, it's about singing in the shower, right? You sing in the shower because it actually makes you feel good. That is erotic; you are doing it for the hell of it, for the pleasure of it.

The second impulse is related to religion, which is the magical impulse of it, the development of sympathetic magic. Chanting certain things, saying things in a certain order. By casting certain spells we can influence the world. We can change matter or we can kill our mastodon or whatever it is.

The third impulse is the social need to record the history of the tribe, to give identity to the tribe. Alongside the literature machine—the prize system, the academic system, the reward system—all the basic functions, the original functions of the poet, have been shoved aside. Nobody needs us now for memory. Nobody really believes in magic.

I think it's important when we consider contemporary writing, well, what has it actually been for the majority of human history? And for me these days, and for a long time, with my reading of contemporary literature and modernist literature and postmodernist literature, and even romantic literature, I find it is all about failure, it's all about the failure of literature itself. It's all about not actually being able to become the other, not actually being able to influence the world and not being needed to record. All of the needs that emerged in the deep depths of human history anthropologically are no longer necessary. So what does the writer now become in context of society? I mean, obviously enough you lay the golden egg. You're a producer of commodities. So of course you have underground writing and bohemian writing, but in terms of the general public, and in terms of what is generally publicly conceived of and received as writing we are talking about objects that are produced by pretty regular people every couple of years. A massive PR campaign goes in, they're sold, they win this prize and that prize, and then they get another go at it a couple of years later. The whole thing about literature festivals is that they are very integrated, unconsciously (sometimes consciously). I'm not laying blame, I'm just observing that these things are. By virtue of the fact that they exist they have become integrated into power structures and into this sense of regularity. The same

thing happens at the same time every year. This festival happens at the start of June, this'll be the certain writer or poet. Next year it'll be a different writer but really it'll be the same writer, because they'll be doing more or less the same thing, saying the same thing as last year. Obviously there are great experimental writers and there are great committed writers writing today, but nobody knows about them, not in the same way that they knew about Camus or Auden. So the writer as someone who is a public opposition to the status quo, to the power structures in our society, in western liberal democracy, this idea has really been more or less erased.

Interviewer

So propaganda can change the world, but a strong novel can't any longer?

Dave Jordan

You ask a question about the novel. I'm not sure if it's possible to be radical and write a novel—yeh understand? It's almost at this stage like asking if its possible to be a horse and lay an egg, yeh know what I mean? I think the novel as a form, particularly in its contemporary form, more or less always realism, more or less always (with variations, obviously) yeh know, a conversation between middle class people about how disappointing the world is, right? I review a lot of novels and with exceptions, yeh know, Aravind Adiga I think is an important exception, the Indian writer, and there are always exceptions, but generally when I read a novel it's basically a middle class person who's disgusted with the world and how things have gone wrong, and how the *world* has gone wrong and this story has been told over and over again. So if you're looking to literature for answers to depressing metaphysical questions of our age, right, which generally tend to be the same as depressing political questions (will this species survive the 21st century) you're more likely to find an answer to how your typical white collar person

will get over his discountenance with how depressing existence is. I'm just making sweeping generalizations of course.

Interviewer

You mentioned the "depressing metaphysical questions of our age." Can you expand on that? What are they?

Dave Lordan

We're living in a culture and an age, generally, in which everything has been reduced to its unit cost. K? So people who cost too much have become expendable. That's why we withdraw money for drugs funding and therefore end up with a lot of junkies dying on the boardwalk. That poem, "Hope" is basically written just walking down the boardwalk. I reckon if Bosch were to come back he'd set up his easel on the boardwalk. It's a genuinely grotesque situation. The consequences of objectifying human relationships is, well, what do you want to call it? A slow genocide? Whatever. People die. And they're reduced to animals. They're animalized. When funding is withdrawn from communities, when support is withdrawn, you reach the Darwinian goal, the law of the jungle, in which most don't survive. So often what I write about, and the people that I write about, and in a lot of ways the people that I grew up with and, ehh, kind of escaped through my education were the like. Because there is a distance between me and the people on the boardwalk, right? I'm not one of them. By logic I probably should be one of them, okay? But by chance I'm not one of them. So there is a distance and you have to actually not be one of these people in order to write about them, in general (even though you can say that Bukowski was one of the people he wrote about).

Interviewer

By logic you should be one of them? Is identifying with what you see on the boardwalk an important part of your writing process?

Dave Lordan

Ehh, yeh know I did grow up during the recession and obviously I was unemployed and running around on the street and all that sort of stuff, so I'm not sure, it might be less identification than memory. And I think the space that I am working in, and one of the things I really like about poetry, partially a consequence of the fact that it's so unimportant, right, is that it does offer you a place for a counter narrative to the general.

Interviewer

What narrative? What do you view as the difference?

Dave Lordan

I mean you can turn on the news in this country on any channel any day of the week and you're gonna have people telling you that you're gonna have to have austerity, gonna have to cut this, have to cut that. I'm living hopefully and generally more out of my feelings. I mean what do I actually feel? How does this make me feel? It sounds like a stupid question. Eh, we're trying to write out of that, rather than write intellectually. But sure I can write leaflets for demonstrations and propaganda for demonstrations and again probably for the future of humanity or whatever you want to call it or in general or objectively or metaphysically or whatever, writing good propaganda is probably more important than writing a good poem. Because I don't really entertain the hope that I can convince the audience at the Stinging Fly reading that they should do something about politics. Maybe I believed that ten or fifteen years ago that I could have done that but I don't believe it now. But I do believe that by knocking on doors in working class Dublin I can actually convince people. I don't have a belief that anything is happening when I write a poem, other than that I am telling the truth from my point of view in my words. And...ehh...whereas I'd be quite prepared—and I think the distinction is good and its good we're

teasing it out—I'd be quite prepared, writing a leaflet or an essay (yeh know I write political essays and all this sort of stuff) to use other people's words, because it's a totally different purpose. In poetry I'm really trying to make my own individual mark, speak my own individual truth. And really that's what it comes back to. I don't have any belief that my poetry (other than the fact that it probably gives maybe a mild moral boost to the people on the far left that they have a poet who identifies with them) other than that I don't think it has any power to be honest.

Interviewer

But doesn't poetry have a role in a healthy culture? Doesn't it serve a role that propaganda can't touch?

Dave Jordan

Both poetry and propaganda speak to the utopian desire for things to be better. Even Beckett contra Adorno, I would argue, was writing out of a utopian hope that the world would be a better place and a just place. Beckett, again, a member of the French resistance, and so on and so forth, was quite a political person in his own way. I wouldn't be able to write if I was convinced that there was just no hope, nothing left but the death tolls. And obviously writing a slogan or a leaflet comes from more or less the same place with a different intention. Writing poetry...for me...when I write I'm doing a very selfish thing. I don't have any illusions that it reaches other people. It might please other people, okay, if you go to a reading or they enjoy your story or whatever, enjoy your poem, it pleases people intellectually and maybe sensually to a certain extent. Does it, yeh know, appeal to the part of them that might be convinced to become a political activist? Maybe in a very small way but it's certainly not what I'm thinking when I'm writing.

Interviewer

But there is an argument...Rivera, for instance, argued that art must be political.

Dave Lordan

In the context of Ireland, where I currently exist, there is a massive disconnection between the world of literature and the world of active politics, absolutely massive, and it's not one that one person can breach at all, not even several people can breach it. I wouldn't say that poetry can never contribute directly and powerfully to a movement when it obviously does all over the Middle East. But you're talking about a very different history of the relationship between writers and political movements. In Eastern Europe poetry is very important: as a form of oppositional speech; as a form of anti-bureaucratic speech; as a way to keep alive the idea that there is something else.

I am writing about, ehh, pretty horrible things. My first book is about suicide, basically, and my second book is, ehh, generally about disgust, right? But I wouldn't be writing about those things unless I felt at some level that things could have been or could be otherwise, right? So you're right in the sense of the...the... you're writing always out of a sense that things could be better, which, I suppose...is a bit of a contradiction to what I said earlier. Because in some ways poetry can be the *best* propaganda. For that to happen it actually has to have an amassed audience. It can lift spirits. But it has to have a way to speak to people. Yeh know, you go to a poetry reading in, ehh, I don't know Lebanon or Cairo, we're talking about twenty or thirty thousand people in a stadium. Yeh know it's like a fucking Bob Dylan concert. But over in Ireland if you get twenty or thirty people to a poetry reading it's a huge event, it's a major fucking event if twenty people go to a poetry reading. So to talk about poetry having an effect beyond the life of the poet, the immediacy of the reading, in Ireland, is to talk nonsense to be

honest with you, because you actually simply do not have a means to communicate. And for me writing in Ireland today without a mass audience, without a mass political movement, and without a hope of one at the moment, all I can do is write to keep myself going. Yeh know what I mean? Obviously it would be great to say that I'm writing because there are thousands of people who need us to make a response to the death of Rachel Peabody in the flat in Ballymon because the council cut off her electricity, yeh know, I could write that poem but who's going to listen to it? Five people? Ten people? Poets are irrelevant, I think, more in the West than they are in other parts of the world.

Interviewer

Do you think there is a relationship between the success of the Culture Industry in the West and the decline of the Poet?

Dave Lordan

The overall conflation of literature and business is now almost total. Business is a whale and art is a fucking little piece of plankton. Art can't make business artistic but business can turn art into a business. I think there's also a question of...along with the general neoliberal trend there is an attempt to withdraw the idea (as a precursor to the fact) that art shouldn't be publicly funded. That instead we should have a patronage model, where good people among the rich will fund the arts out of their personal sense of beauty. For me that is regression. That is going back to a pre-enlightenment model. That doesn't mean beautiful art can't be made on that model, of course it can, the Renaissance is that model. But the dream, the utopian dream that art is common and should be commonly accessed and commonly available personally when it comes to what should we do about funding I would be more interested in every locality having an arts center that is interested in not only displaying art but in allowing people to make art, no matter who they are or whether they are educated or what. That's what I would like to see. I

think the model in which we fund individual artists with lots of money in order to promote them internationally, so that they become part of the brand image of the country, that's art becoming business.

Interviewer

Do you think, generally speaking, we Anglo artists have been wrapped up in some delusions of grandeur, we've lost our orientation to our community? We all want to be movie stars?

Dave Lordan

Ultimately, what I want to be as a writer, and to define it, I would say that I am a community writer looking for a community. One of the things that we have lost is community. So I live in an estate that is five years old, yeh know, and we're beginning to get to know people and things like that. And as you get to know people and they begin to know that you're a writer, you do get asked to do things that can benefit the community. I was recently asked to write a poem for a five-year-old child who is dying of cancer. That's community writing. Which shouldn't be dismissed, because a lot of times writing is really a competition about who's the best, according to the judges for the latest prize or Harold Bloom or whatever. I want simply to function within a community, as someone who has something to offer, that other people can't do for themselves. We really need to ask ourselves what is literature worth? What's it for. If there was never a poem written by anyone I don't see it making any difference to anyone. I believe that, I have no illusions of that at all.