

DUNN: THE LONG AND SHORT OF HIM

by **X. J. Kennedy**

The Donkey's Ears: Politovsky's Letters Home

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The Year's Afternoon

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both by **Douglas Dunn**

At this beginning of a new millennium, can that rough beast the long poem be slouching back toward Edinburgh, London, and New York to be reborn? Lately, the phenomenal sales of Heaney's *Beowulf* and Ted Hughes's Plath memoir could make us think ourselves back in Victorian days, when a hefty narrative poem freighted every coffee table. Now here comes Douglas Dunn with *The Donkey's Ears*, a tightly rhymed poem of 172 pages, its story told in a sequence of letters by Eugene Sigismondovitch Politovsky, chief engineer of the Russian fleet that sank under Japanese fire in 1905 in the devastating battle of Tsushima. Now who in God's name is going to read such a thing? Anyone who will pay attention to one of the finest and most rewarding long poems of the twentieth century.

Auden, Pound, Heaney, Snodgrass, David Jones, Heath-Stubbs, MacDiarmid, Austin Clarke, and Basil Bunting may now move over and make room for Douglas Dunn on the bench of those modern poets of longest wind and highest aspiration. I don't come to this opinion lightly. I confess to an irrational fear of long narrative poems, ingrained in me by an early, forced exposure to Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and Longfellow's *Evangeline*. Yet Dunn won me over, and if I began reading queasily, soon I was caught up and carried along by the verve of his lines and the voice of his central character.

The Donkey's Ears is, to say the least, a dumbfounding feat of sustained rhyme and meter. Dunn has chosen to cast the work into pentameter quatrains, rhyming *abba*, like this:

Tar-sticky bumboats chugged the anchorage
Among the bunting and rehearsing bands,
White hankies waved goodbye from women's hands
As caught deserters wailed in the dockyard cage.

The danger inherent in such a course is that the whole thing will become sing-songy and the reader will start feeling like a tick-tocking metronome. Dunn overcomes this threat by energy and sheer skill. His control seems never to flag; the intensity lasts. Now and again he will throw in a metrical stutter or an off-rhyme, and yet the basic pattern remains constant. I stand in awe, and wonder whether by the time he was finished he could talk in quatrains the way Pope reportedly could talk in heroic couplets.

The story unfolds in a series of letters from the engineer, Politovsky, to his wife and Muse, Sophie, back in Russia. Her imagined presence supplies the narrator with an audience, and her real absence a center for his longings. The title *The Donkey's Ears* refers, by the way, to the twin peaks of some islands near where the Japanese scored their famous naval victory. Not knowing Politovsky's letters, translated as *From Libau to Tsushima* (1906), I don't know to what extent Dunn drew from his source. Did he work through the letters methodically, turning them into stanzas? That might have been a feat in itself; and from the wealth of detail, it would seem that he relied on the letters heavily. Yet Dunn must have had to imagine generously. One invention to which he owns up is making Politovsky a poet, and this high-handedness seems well justified, for it helps account for the engineer's glooms and his keen sensibility.

Dunn, because of the very nature of his story, had a few strikes against him from the start. This handicap he has triumphantly overcome. Here is a sea story without battles, not even the famous final one, which the narrator couldn't report because he was killed in it. Unlike a Patrick O'Brien novel, this isn't a tale of heroics on the high seas, of pursuit races and skirmishes. The action is mainly internal and psychological, as the flagship *Kniaz Suworov* makes her slow and inevitable way from England to the Donkey's Ears, at last to confront the enemy and be destroyed. Aside from a visit with a cannibal king and stops at a few ports where the crew and junior officers sample the local whores, very little happens. Nor is Politovsky, our narrator, condemned to great physical suffering or privation. He lives rather comfortably, tended by a servant, eats passably well. What he must bear are daily frustrations, overwork, boredom, the sense of the absurdity of his life as he faithfully does his job under a meddling and incompetent admiral on a doomed battleship, serving a Tsar in whom he doesn't believe. In the end, he prepares a uniform in which to be buried at sea, and the narrative quietly stops. But in the course of the poem a hemisphere is circled, and we foresee the coming Bolshevik revolution.

The Donkey's Ears tells us a good deal about the crumbling Tsarist regime. Revolutionary tracts circulate on board; on another ship of the fleet,

mutiny breaks out. Politovsky blames this unrest on “our caste, / Our hopeless leadership.” He loses patience with his fellow officers, a pack of self-indulgent fops: young nobles who drink too much, loll around out of uniform, and shunt their work off onto him. He’s a Hamlet in his isolation, relieved only by the memory of Sophie, his distant Ophelia. (She speaks only one ambiguous syllable in the whole book: the telegraphed word “Well”!) Politovsky breaks out in soliloquies:

Why do I love it when the sea’s the stuff
Floods all my present life with work and grief?
And yet I’d give much for a new birch-leaf
Bursting out of the gardened Spring’s rebuff

To winter, or, in landlocked Samarkand,
Flowers round a fountain when the morning’s fresh
And watered breezes play around my flesh.
The truth is that I love both sea and land.

I think the truth is that I love too much.
A heart can only love as much as heart
Can love. Im not a saint. I drink, and fart.
I lie at night, and imitate your touch.

As we might expect, the huge feat of *The Donkey’s Ears* took Dunn a while. Back in 1983 he printed a piece of it in *Encounter*, then returned to it ten years later and apparently devoted another seven years to it, off and on. While working on this magnum opus, he occasionally wrote shorter poems, and now has gathered them into a new collection. Lately *The Year’s Afternoon* won a plummy recognition, being chosen by the Poetry Book Society. In its Bulletin for Winter 2000, Dunn recalls the book’s gestation: “It was a relief to have other writings to work on as an alternative to a poem that struck me many times as unfinishable.” Indeed, it must have been a blessed vacation to write in his own first person and not in Politovsky’s. As Dunn tells us in his author’s note to the long poem, “At times I felt that I had become my narrator, and I didn’t much care for the experience.”

The Year’s Afternoon is a meditative collection, mostly subdued, down-at-the-mouth, and (like most books of verse nowadays) self-centered. Reading it is a bit like spending an evening with a friend whose dog has just been run over. In several of the poems, there’s a mood of falling darkness, of middle age advancing toward an arthritic finale. The title of the book,

according to Dunn, echoes John Donne's phrase "the year's midnight." Dunn appears to be pausing, catching his breath, taking stock of things. He writes of solitude, loneliness, and the satisfying torment of being a poet. He seems to have withdrawn to a remote place, to recover from a painful divorce—an absent wife "employs her lawyer," he has lost a wedding ring, "having lost it / Because of poetry, being married to it." He appears to share his inmost thoughts and feelings. He takes pride in having grown up in an underprivileged household, "to have bathed / In a tin bath in the living-room." (Perhaps this attitude jibes with that of Flag Engineer Politovsky, who vents his contempt for those overprivileged and incompetent nobles who staff the fleet.) He remembers his youth as a runner, occasionally breasting the tape, and compares that lively time with the sedentary writing of verse. He looks back over his past work (there's a poem about the locale of *Terry Street*, his excellent, somewhat naturalistic first collection). He remembers his cherished elder friends Norman MacCaig, Sorley MacLean, and George Mackay Brown, whose deaths all in the same year he mourns as a bitter loss to Scottish poetry ("Three Poets"), but one which he believes should inspire others to new dedication:

Drink, then, with a full heart, with gratitude, saying
Their poetry aloud as if we are praying
To the Muse of our country, asking her to guide us,
To keep us true and triple, not to divide us
Into pathetic factions set on matricide.
Lady, guide us. Re-teach us dignity and pride.

Thinking of "Contemporary Scottish Poetry" (in a poem of that name), Dunn tosses off a barbed epigram:

Wahnt ony bizniz? shouts a whore
Fun-furred among her pack of whures,
One leaning on a puke-stained door —
A far cry from the Lammermuirs.

Coming from the man who assembled *The Faber Book of Twentieth-century Scottish Poetry*, it's a devastating blast. Along these lines, a bitter satire, "Art Is Wonderful," limns the downside of the artist's life, the gross commercialization of his product, the backbiting of his competitors. It ends in a view of those verities (LIBERTY. ART. BEAUTY. TRUTH) which make the artist's work worthwhile, and his life difficult.

The poems embody much talk about poetry, specifically Dunn's own. To my mind, a poet's own work is a wearisome thing for him to dwell upon. Few can rise to the level of Yeats's "The Circus Animals Desertion" and often there's a danger in mulling one's own reputation and one's own strivings. Such thoughts can muddy the poet's view of the world. I would wish that poets (Dunn among them) more often observed the Zen proverb, "A knife does not turn around and cut itself." But let me not accuse Dunn of ignoring exterior reality. In some of the best poems in the book, he takes a clear-eyed look at it, and at the same time relates it to himself. "The Wasp House" discerns "an empty city swaying in the wind" in an abandoned paper nest.

it was like watching
A civilization diminish and fall.
Air-archeology is what we work with,
Sifting through what isn't there
As if their secret's one we have to find,
A loss that feels like a non-event,
A life as weightless as their wings.

And "A Complete Stranger" tells of riding in a train in front of which a woman throws herself. Her death causes the carriage to jolt, shocking the poet's arthritic knee: "I knew her only as an anonymous thud"—then the train blows its horn as if mourning her. Dunn has long been sensitive to the way people suffer while strangers turn their backs: see his *Terry Street*, and in this book the memorable poem "Scott's Arks," in which a woman servant does the wash, unaware that Scott's expedition is sailing away to perish in Antarctica.

There are moments of terrible flatness, near banality: "Deeply, I regret having pissed on the book. / Much worse, though, is I think I've doused a daisy / Which didn't deserve it." Yeats may have been right that a poem needs moments of dullness, that the bright spots may gleam forth, but how dull can a poem safely get? Equally unlucky, there are moments of overwriting, as in "Agates," in which semi-precious stones are called "Chateau d'Yquem-coloured" — a reference to that dessert wine so high-priced that few of us will know what colour it is. But I niggle. Dunn is a poet to contend with. He has been a fine, unpretentious, rewarding poet for a long time and now I suspect him of greatness. It behooves us to let him have his head.

Well, to hell with us. Dunn will have his head in any case, for he

declares, “I am free to do as I like” and “Now I can do whatever I damn well please.” In some pages of *The Year’s Afternoon* he appears to be marking time, though let me not close without admiring another two stand-outs in the collection: “A European Dream,” an account of a surreal nightmare trip to the Continent, and “Woodnotes,” about the strange experience of seeing one’s double waving to him. *The Year’s Afternoon* is a book well worth your time, but even if your time is limited set aside a couple of evenings for *The Donkey’s Ears*, possibly the best-sustained long poem of its age, a work that deserves to stick around for the next few centuries.