

ADRIAN DUNCAN
in conversation with
ROB DOYLE
27 March 2020

ROB DOYLE: Hallo Adrian. I've spent the last two days reading your very fine new novel *A Sabbatical in Leipzig*. Before we talk about the book, how is it there in occupied Berlin? What's the city like now?

ADRIAN DUNCAN: It's in lockdown now similar to the UK, but it's been like this for the last 10 days. People walk in twos on the street, schools closed and playgrounds and all pubs and (heaven forbid) clubs too.

ROB DOYLE: Yup. Same as it's been here. Doubt I'll be able to

fulfil my intention of moving back to Berlin in a month's time as it stands.

As I was reading *Leipzig*, it struck me that one of several elements that it has in common with your previous (and first) novel *Love Notes from a German Building Site* is the fact that you don't shirk from, but rather seem to relish, describing the minutiae of a reality many novelists tend to avoid, namely work and the working life. What is it that has drawn you to explore this across your two books to date?

ADRIAN DUNCAN: Yes, in both work is central. I think in *Love Notes* Paul (and Evelyn) have shown dissatisfaction with the type of work they found themselves in; it was as if their curiosity was lateral – across disciplines as it were. Evelyn knows in what direction she would like to go (art and art curation), whereas Paul really doesn't. In *A Sabbatical in Leipzig* Michael and Catherine quite like their disciplines and they enjoy the narrowness of them and the depths this narrowness offers their thoughts. This is a fascination for me. Commitment to a discipline and curiosity in it and an acceptance of its limits in counterpoint to a curiosity beyond the limits of a discipline – in my case it happens to be Engineering and Art that best develops this tension, but it is also two worlds I know well enough.

ROB DOYLE: Interesting. It seems to me that that sense of your narrators' commitment to a discipline and channeling their curiosity into this discipline is reflected in the form of your novels, which likewise have a 'narrowness', in the sense that there's this rigorous, meticulous focus on certain memories, images, works of art ...

In an interview you gave that went out today, you use the word ekphrastic to describe *Leipzig*: it's an artwork

in which other artworks are discussed. Specifically, Michael your narrator, who is an elderly Irishman living in Bilbao, reflects with I would say fascination or even obsession on a piece of music by Schubert, certain sculptures by Richard Serra, and a short story he is translating from German by Robert Walser. He doesn't seem a particularly culturally omnivorous man (he hasn't heard of Hegel, barely knows who Kierkegaard is, etc.), yet he is fixated on these works in particular. Why is he drawn so powerfully to certain artworks?

ADRIAN DUNCAN: Yes, that's entirely fair to say. I think Michael's looking is a sort of meditation on objects that for him comprise a collection, or series of collections. Some of these objects are inherited, bought, loaned (Benjamin's 'Unpacking my Library' is an important text for me in terms of thinking about objects, not just books) and I think Michael wants to stay with them and eke as much meaning as he can from them, because I think he realises they contain far more meaning than he can divine. The book is merely his thoughts over this particular hour on this particular day and it is not to say he wouldn't have different thoughts or a different arrangement of thoughts about these few objects on the following morning. I think what's most interruptive about this day is that he has decided to decimate the experiences he has hitherto had with these pieces of Schubert's music by playing them simultaneously.

You'll remember me talking at length a year or so back about (the Australian author) Gerald Murnane and his writing – there were two ideas that really struck me about his work:

1. that it is okay for your narrow set of compulsions to be utterly sustaining, and,
2. that these compulsions 'wink' at you, drawing you closer to them somehow.

I think these ideas allowed me to enter into a state of fixation. It was as if Murnane said to me: It is okay to be fixated and to write about that.

ROB DOYLE: Aha. I was going to ask you about Gerald Murnane, as naturally I thought of his work while reading your novel, remembering how passionately you spoke about him in Berlin, which persuaded me to read him. I think what you're going after is quite daring, in the sense that, as I see it, it took Murnane most of his career to fully jettison the familiar elements of a novel and give himself over to these 'narrow sets of compulsions'. Whereas you're at it just two novels in!

I actually had a look online for the strange-sounding Walser story '4', by the way, but couldn't find it.

All this leads me right to my next question, which is about this whole question of form, and the lack of compromise in your books in this regard. They demand a certain kind of attention, and may dismay readers who come to them expecting the familiar novelistic architecture of plot, suspense and so on. It's not that the novels are without incident or human interest, but there's an austerity to them. Would you agree with that?

ADRIAN DUNCAN: The story '4' does exist – i.e. I certainly didn't fabricate it!! I think it only appears within another 6 that comprise a set.

This austerity in tone is something that interests me greatly. I have a particular interest in the idea of a design, or style, or form being 'neutral'. I think when I enter into a character's mind (while I write) that there is a sort of neutrality I am aiming to achieve. This is not so as to suck life from the surroundings or to make the narrator seem me-

chanical, but I aim or hope by being neutral that the writing that comes from this allows the reader to project more unobstructedly onto what it is that's being attempted to be said. I think in my drawing back into a 'writing-state' that is neutral or perhaps 'austere' then I think the underlying energy of the character I am trying to bring to form can more fully appear – I think, and this might sound strange, but I think it is fairer on the character's sub-being, their force as it were, if I retain a kind of neutrality, and I think this does affect the prose style too.

ROB DOYLE: Yes, I was pretty sure the Walser story existed. I sought it out because I wondered if it might prove a sort of key to your novel, or to your narrator's consciousness ...

But this is interesting, your idea about 'neutrality'. It reminds me of V.S. Naipaul – a very different writer – saying he wanted to write 'without a style', so that his language was a sort of limpid screen through which reality could be regarded.

I wanted to ask you, following on from this, about your relationship to narrative generally. It seems to me that *A Sabbatical in Leipzig*, which deals so much with memory and the past, is not quite the story of a life, but it is a portrait of one, constructed of inwardly contemplated images, recollections. I suppose the question is, how do you relate to narrative? Do you trust that by cleaving close to the 'fixations' you spoke about, enough of a sense of a life's narrative (and the attendant emotions) will emerge, accrue, to guide the reader as it were through these memories and images that are held up for contemplation?

ADRIAN DUNCAN: In terms of narrative I aim only in the work for something (or somethings) to change within the narrative arc. Plot is not something that really interests me

so much because I never plan anything I write and if I see a plot forming I tend to turn the other way and see where else there is to go. The writing has to be a type of exploration for me, a discovery as to what the thing it is, is about. Sometimes this doesn't come off and I have to abandon things, but sometimes it appears from a place I could not have imagined and that excites me. In *Leipzig*, it took me a while to realise what the discovery was and it only occurred to me when I visited Bilbao itself and I realised that the point of the work, or its discovery, was this period in Leipzig that Michael struggles to frame but troubles him greatly, and it occurred to me that if he could somehow make an ounce of sense further of that period of time, then that would be the change enough to justify his thoughts (as a narrative) on this day. (I should say that the fact that a novel MS comes out of this exploration is not more important to me than the exploration itself!)

I was thinking about these different forms of narrative recently when I was reading your own (excellent) new novel: *Threshold*. Travel was a big part for me in this book, Leipzig, Dresden, Bilbao, etc., but these journeys are sort of spread over the text as moments. In *Threshold* the act of travelling is a strong narrative driver – but also within that there is an essayistic crisscrossing of this narrative drive. How did that form emerge to you and was it inherent in the writing of the novel itself?

ROB DOYLE: I know that you travelled to Bilbao to get inside your character as he meditates and remembers in an apartment in the city. Likewise, I of course did travel to all the places described in *Threshold*, even if the only character I was trying to get inside (or get out of) was myself, or a persona of myself. I'd say that whereas for you it seems to be a particular image, or perhaps perception, that pro-

vides the initial spark of inspiration, for me it's often a place, or the idea of a place. In *Threshold*, the exploration of a place generally becomes an extension of the exploration of myself – my fascinations, terrors, doubts, neuroses, obsessions, inspirations – which is the underlying engine of the book. It's not merely that the cities and countries in question – Berlin, Paris, Sicily or wherever – are a colourful backdrop to these investigations, but rather they stimulate and are inseparable from the investigations. Usually there is some other mission driving a journey – the narrator goes there to research something, or to write a novel, or whatever. As for this mutant essayistic-fictional-jazzy-freestyle form, that's just the way I've been going in the past half decade or so, determined to wield a style that is capacious and flexible enough to hold all my impulses and expressive fancies without requiring me to waste time fulfilling conventions that don't excite me.

Speaking of travel and the inspiration of place, one thing I enjoy about your novels is precisely this: neither of them so far has been set in Ireland! I'm big on this, reading as a means of getting away from a place that inherently feels a bit boring and familiar by virtue of the fact that it's where one comes from. Both of your novels to date are either largely or partly set in Germany. You've lived for a few years now in Berlin. The German language is another point of fascination/fixation in your novels. Would you say the country, or the city of Berlin, have likewise come to occupy an important role in the life of your imagination? Will you keep writing about Germany?

ADRIAN DUNCAN: It will disappoint you to hear that the next thing I'm working on is set in 1950s Ireland, but one viewed through the eyes of a Russian geometer ... !

But yes, learning German (however haphazardly and poor-

ly) has been one of the most fulfilling things I've done. One thing that strikes me is that the world, when learning a new language, seems to be viewed from a different place, or at least a different direction. I think it is this distance and strangeness of language that at once (at first) makes distance between people but also somehow brings you closer to objects or states of affairs ... ! i.e. a translated word for a squirrel – *das Eich-hörnchen* – (the small horned creature of the oak tree) gives the squirrel all of a sudden a magic-realist sense ... this is not the case in every case, but in some cases it's just so weird and actually a lot of craic.

This sense of approach is something I also really liked about *Threshold*, especially the way this Rob chap approaches artworks (Tino Seghal, documenta in Kassel, etc.). I think oftentimes art has this layer of art history that mediates it, whereas in your writing, you go straight for the bare encounter – what have these encounters given you outside of them being things that happen in the narrative ... ?

ROB DOYLE: Small horned creature of the oak tree. Fabulous!

I never made it so far with my German: just enough to go shopping at the market; have some grunted, blunt conversations, etc. But yes, it's a marvellous language to break open like that.

As for what the encounters with those works of art have given me, it's difficult to say, in that I can no longer fully separate the lived experience from the intensified and narrativised forms those experiences took on as I wrote the particular chapters in which they appear. I mean, I really did have a sort of frazzled, somewhat ontologically

destabilising experience while visiting that huge, complex Tino Sehgal show at the Palais de Tokyo, but it's a bit like tonguing the sore on the roof of your mouth, or playing with fire, or worrying about a fantasy that fascinates but also tortures: I could feel it happening, and then I leaned into it. It's not that I want to drive myself mad – I'd rather drive myself sane – but there's a fascination in going right to the brink of madness, of self-destruction. In *Threshold*, sometimes it's works of art, and sometimes it's drugs, and sometimes it's sexual experience or isolation, that occasions this brinkmanship of disintegration, ecstasy, transcendence.

One last question: can you tell me a little more about your current cultural diet? Aside from Murnane, what has been inspiring or exciting you lately, in whatever medium?

ADRIAN DUNCAN: That's easy. I've become obsessed by boxing, especially middleweight boxers from the last twenty years or so. I find middleweights (unlike say heavy-weights) to be within my physical scale, and therefore somewhat understandable, as it were. I wonder often what darkness and light means to these boxers in the middle of a fight.

I have no idea why this interests me at the moment, but maybe when we see each other again, after this strange period of social-distancing, I can bore you with an explanation! You?

ROB DOYLE: Great! Boxing is the sport I can most easily imagine becoming massively interested in, if only I put the hours in. A fine sport, a noble sport. Who was it (Norman Mailer?) that said if you can't write well about boxing, you can't write well? Anyway, my cultural interests these days include the Coronavirus, and listening to podcasts about the Coronavirus, and updating newsfeeds concerning the Coronavirus.

It's been good! I look forward to meeting again post all this. In Berlin, Inshallah.