

'The role of the artist is under threat'

Ahead of her participation at this year's edition of the Malta Mediterranean Literature Festival, poet Astrid Alben speaks to TEODOR RELJIC about both the potentialities and pitfalls of welding poetry to scientific discourse, the increasingly fraught role of the artist in an economically challenged society, and the crucial role of translation in disseminating cultural diversity



Teodor Reljic

Both your poetic and editorial work leans strongly – at least in part – to the melding of poetry and science, particularly on fundamental elements such as ice and light. What is it about this tendency that you find attractive, and would you say it's particularly urgent now that climate change is an active global threat?

The sciences, and scientific instruments in particular, have fascinated me for as long as I can remember. Science explores and interrogates reality. For me that's an invitation to distrust and play with the familiar. I am drawn to areas of distrust, of what I might discover. As a poet this excites me. As do building sites.

You can read my fascination with science in my early work: in 'The Saddest Tree in Kew', for example, an MRI of the spine works as a metaphor for long telephone calls and a string of DNA resembles, "all things / broken and struggling to mansize and being there." These references to science can be used as new ways of expressing a human emotion.

On reflection, science hadn't made me think about poetry in a new or different way. It hadn't helped me engage with the central question: what makes a verbal message a work of art?

Using new technologies and scientific discoveries as metaphors in my poems wasn't enough for me to engage with the art form in a way that taught me something new about it, or about myself. To be honest, using these scientific metaphors made me feel a bit of an imposter. Like serving instant noodles instead of making your own. Artists and scientists are curious by nature, wanting to understand how things work.

Poetry is a voice but it is also a technique. I wanted to strip it back to the basic building blocks, in a similar way that physics strives to strip natural phenomena back to its basic building blocks. The more you can hear beyond the rhythms and the melody of poetry, the more variations in structure manifest, almost like mathematical shifts. These variations intrigued me and I started experimenting: "High up in atmosphere vertigo intact inside vodka & lime / stashed lifejacket under front seat checked foot underneath / me spins planet Earth." (Vodka & Lime, Plainspeak)

My interest shifted from scientific discoveries to scientific methodology. I became less interested in linear narrative and mesmerised, obsessed you could say, by the textures and layers that poetic language offers, in the way that the shifting daylight relates to architecture. I began to look at syntax as the science of poetry. Without the rule of syntax over language nothing we say has any mean-

ing. The things we say, the emotions we express, and the messages we want to convey would be gibberish. How far can I stretch syntax without my poems slipping into nonsense? This sense, this idea of stretching things, meanings and ideas to their breaking point, it's where we are in many respects with the world – the gap between the haves and have nots, man's industry and climate change, religious (in)tolerance...

In your poetry the recurring persona of – indeed – the 'Poet' features quite regularly. Is this figure more of an interlocutor or an avatar, and how does this convention help you shape your desired confluence of ideas, images and rhythmic propulsion?

Yes, especially in my new collection, Plainspeak, where I have given my alter ego a free rein. My alter ego 'Poet', helped to shape the ideas and images of the poems, which deal with place, ancestral ties, solitude, flight, insomnia and the embattled absurdities of daily life. 'Poet' also helps propel the rhythm and allows me to play around with different arrangements and intonations. Alter egos have always fascinated me – Zbigniew Herbert's Mr Cogito, Henri Michaux's Plume, Paul Valéry's Mr Teste, Fernando Pessoa's heteronyms, among others – like a cat recognising its own image in the mirror for the first time. Alter egos allow you to sidestep the limitations of the self in favour of the possibili-

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ties encapsulated in the promise of the other. The alter ego is a breakaway from the self, yet perversely also an acceptance of the self. It was Lacan who said that, "The unconscious is the discourse of the Other," and these poems do this.

My alter ego emerged when I was young, around six years old, when I told my father I wanted to be a boy when I grew up. This boy I never got to be grew up alongside me and even though I called him 'Poet' he's an irritant, more dramatic and braver than me. It is through my dialogue with him (or is it through his dialogue with me?) that I can play with formal boundaries, linguistic identity and the lyrical poetic voice. The presence of 'Poet' allows me to tell multiple narratives while retaining the freedom of abstraction.



Astrid Alben



Collateral Damage

by Astrid Alben

Poet hadn't yet made Earth the jobless vigorously typed
not yet news bulletins absolutes weren't yet accident prone

lunatics all wore the same garments no one cockgobbled
a shame not yet sodomites thought love declarations were

daylight saving lies coughed politely from the wings. Words
standing still before Poet stood still a harelipped giant bowing

his head before the mountain in so doing paying homage
to the mountain patiently rivers run down its sides.

Your tripartite role of 'poet-editor-translator' appears to communicate something about the way poets have to navigate their careers nowadays. Would you say that each of your disciplines 'feeds' the other, helping you to sustain yourself and your on-going body of work?

My previous job as artistic director of the art and science initiative PARS (www.parsfoundation.com), and more recently my role as CEO of the Poetry Translation Centre is what pays the bills. I translate poetry from Dutch and Flemish. It's often a good way to consider my own craft as a poet, and I feel an obligation to share these works with my English contemporaries who would otherwise not have access to them.

A recent compensation survey of the literary translation sector showed that being a literary translator is no shortcut to riches. Average hourly rates put translators among the lowest paid workers in the EU. Yet where would we be without translation? I mean, imagine if only German speakers could hear the work of Kraftwerk or Hildegard von Bingen. Writing

poetry doesn't bring in much of an income, either. In truth, most artists don't make a living by being an artist and many take on other work, such as a facilitator in the cultural sector. As austerity continues to chew on the bones of parity, artists are increasingly forced to apply their skills not as artists but as social carers and educational workers. Artists are needed more than ever to challenge the status quo. Yet the role of the artist is under threat.

I did a residency at the Rijksakademie of Art in Amsterdam about ten years ago and one of the other artists in residence, Sonia Cillari was working on an installation that she entitled, *The Artist Needs to Rest*. It's true, we do!

Are you looking forward to participating in and performing at the Malta Mediterranean Literature Festival? What are your expectations of the event, and what kind of atmosphere do you think the event will have?

I am thrilled to be participating in and performing at the Malta Mediterranean Literature Festival. An important part of the festival is the

translation workshop, where the participating writers get to translate each other's work ahead of the performances. Just imagine twelve writers from countries as wide apart as Cameroon, India, Venezuela, Syria and Spain convening in Malta to translate and share their work. Malta has a strong literary and translation legacy, I imagine as a result of its geographical location and strategic history as a religious haven and trading post, and I am proud to be part of that. From what I know of Valletta, the city oozes hospitality, grandeur and plenty of places to meet for conversation. I imagine the festival to be a space for sharing work, conversation and solidarity. I am also looking forward to good food, the wine, making new friends and meeting people attending the festival. I enjoy it when people come up and say hello. I hope plenty will.

Astrid Alben's *Ai! Ai! Pianissimo* was published by Arc Publications in 2011. *Plainspeak* is due out by Prototype this coming October. She will be one among the international participants at this year's edition of the Malta Mediterranean Literature Festival,

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tival, which kicks off tonight at 8pm with a discussion entitled 'Is Universality a Myth? The case for literature' at the Undercroft, Valletta. The festival will culminate with its traditional three evenings of readings, screenings and interviews at Fort St Elmo, Valletta on August 22, 23 and 24 at 8pm. For more information and a full programme, log on to: <https://www.inizjamed.org/>