

SOME DIFFERENCES BETWEEN POETRY & STAND-UP

1 Intro

I'm delighted to contribute to UbuWeb, my virtual home, or at least timeshare. The name of my talk is "Some Differences Between Poetry & Stand-up Comedy."

2 Walking

- *One difference is:* Poets get to stand-up; stand-ups get to stand up & walk around: You see Bill Cosby come on stage, what does he do: he sits down. Actually Bill Cosby is not a good example. Stand-ups sort of *run* on stage. They claim the space. They relate to the audience. They pace back & forth like caged lions. Poets just stand there. And *they don't have* a stage. They have a shelf. Or a ledge. Stand-ups perform in theatres or TV studios or night clubs. Poets read in coffee-shops—or on panels. Poets don't have stages: they have saucers. They don't have sets or sound effects: they have espresso machines. Poets don't have curtains. And curtains are one of the best things stand-ups have. TV cameras & microphones are 2 others.

3 Microphones

Okay: Now this is a big difference between poets & stand-up comedians

- Stand-ups know what a mike is; stand-ups come onstage and *grab that mother*, stand-ups pace back & forth with that mike, then at the end of their act they fire it down or whoosh it in the air or fire it down: that's what Chris Rock does: he fires it down. He also repeats himself a lot. Yeah he *fires* it down. He *fires* it down. Here's a poet with a mike. Here's a poet coming in stage in a coffee-shop. By the way, this is a poem called *Preamble*:

PREAMBLE

Okay
Okay
Okay

[DEEP BREATH]
Whoooooo

Is it okay?
Is that okay?

[TAP MIKE]
[TAP MIKE}

Okay?

[SHUFFLE PAGES & START WALKING AWAY WITH THEM]
 [TURN BACK TO AUDIENCE]
 [RETREAT SOME]

[TURN TOWARD AUDIENCE BLINKING & STILL SHUFFLING:
How did I get here?
 Uh hi William
 [HUGE BREATH MORE HUNTING THROUGH PAGES]

Okay.

4 Knowing your stuff

- Stand-ups know their stuff. Stand-ups spend hours learning their stuff. They watch other stand-ups, like footballers watch plays over & over & over: I guess.
- Stand-ups don't read from a script. Stand-ups don't bring their PAGES with them on stage. Stand-ups don't shuffle through their *pages* and read all their old work.
- Poets explain their poems. *Stand-ups* don't explain their jokes.
- Poets don't know their stuff. *I don't know my stuff!* I mean I *read* a poem about a poet coming up to a microphone. *Come on!* Every now and then some poet comes along like Beth Anne Fennelly who knows all her poems off by heart – it's very theatrical. White poets usually don't *do* theatrical. White poets don't so much *like* that.

5 Timing

- Poets *think* they know all about time: meter, iambs, syllabics, *caesuras*. And all that. Stand-ups *know* all about time. Stand-ups *handle* time. The only people better at handling time than stand-ups are convicts & mothers. Poets *think* they know about time; in fact time *scares* them. Silence scares them. Poets think they know about rhythm too but I won't *insult* you by continuing in that vein.
- Here's a poem where I attempt to understand what I as a poet find characteristically difficult to understand:
- It's called "Things I'm Good At."
- [*Long silence*]

THINGS I'M GOOD AT

Smiling at children

[I intend to add to this list]

6 Subjects

I read an interview with Scottish comedian Billy Connolly in the Irish *Sunday Independent* (with Stephanie Merritt, 12/5/04), the *Sunday Indo* as we call it, and Billy Connolly said:

But the way I see life generally is in a bizarre light and some people are very shaken by that. I'm up there at the edge of things on stage, dangerous subjects like Iraq and life and death and religion, I take very strong stands on things.

Maybe poets also see things in a bizarre light. *Maybe* we too are “up there on the edge of things,” taking on “dangerous subjects, taking “strong stands.” But I think most poets take “strong stands” simply by getting up to read in the first place. In front of people. In front of person. In front of the other reader, the guy who organized the gig, and one other person nobody knows. Yeah.

“I've never had a problem with the public,” Billy says, “it was always the papers. The public always loved it, roared and howled and laughed, but the newspapers do this highhorse bullshit as if they're our moral guardians. Who said that was their function in life?”

7 Audience

- So that's another difference between poetry and stand-up. Billy Connolly says: “The public always loved it, roared and howled and laughed.” That doesn't happen with poetry. The public doesn't love it, & roar & howl & laugh. And the papers don't give a hoot either.
- Stand-up has an audience. A stand-up has to *respond*. To respond to George Bush. Respond to racism. Respond to the guy in the front row who shouts out at you. Nobody shouts at poetry readings—except maybe Michael Basinski. *Most* poets don't shout. Poetry is very *hushed*. A stand-up has to respond & take the audience's response. A stand-up has to love that clapping & be prepared to *kill* or *die*. A poet is *afraid*.
- Poets go to stand-up; stand-ups don't go to poets. Which is why I think I'm safe here this afternoon. Poets go to poets. Poets & stand-ups & all sorts of people go to stand-up.
- People like stand-up.
- This is the essential difference between poetry & stand-up: **Stand-up is fun—maybe even more fun—for other people besides the stand-up.**
- Stand-up makes people laugh.
- You see George Carlin walking out on stage into an absolute sea of people, he's walking on water and he's surrounded by people: they all want to be there. They bought tickets! George Carlin's happy *even if he doesn't look it!* Poets don't walk out on stage. Poets don't do HBO Specials. Poets don't say: *And then I did my HBO Special* or make references to *my last HBO Special*. They just stand-up. I mean from wherever they're sitting. Then there's one less person in the audience.

Nobody is happy. The poet is a little bit happy because it's his or her turn. Nobody in the audience is happy. The only time everyone is happy is when it's over.

- And the applause, when it comes, doesn't sound like flocks of wild geese taking off. Or explosions of giant popcorn. Or the spontaneous combustion of a green house. It sounds like this:

APPLAUSE

THANK-GOD-HE'S-DONE
 THANK-GOD-HE'S-DONE
 THANK-GOD-HE'S-DONE
 THANK-GOD-HE'S-DONE
 THANK-GOD-HE'S-DONE
 THANK-GOD-HE'S-DONE
 THANK-GOD-HE'S-DONE

- That's a poem
- Actually I'm quite good at clapping & like it a lot

8 Endings

- And that's another thing: poets don't know how to end. They're always saying "Do I have time for one more?" Or "I'll just read one, no two, well maybe three more." How about *none* more? How about DON'T?? Stand-ups don't say *Do I have time for another joke???*
- Stand-ups just stop. Chris Rock *fires* the mike down on the *stage*. The house lights go up. And thousands of red white & blue balloons fall over the audience.
- Everyone knows it's over. The stand-up runs off-stage. The audience gets up and leaves. Poetry audiences just *stand* there. With the poet!
- And when it's all over: stand-ups not only *know* it's over: they know if it's *gone well* or not. Poets *wonder*.

9 Anyway here's a poem.

- It's very sexist
- If this was a theatre: the lights might change now
- I'll just change my tone

MEET STEVE

This is Steve. Don't let the Anglo name fool you. Steve's name is really Stefan. And don't let that fool you either. Steve looks a lot like Franky G. in *Wonderland*. Uh-huh. Steve is a fireman and a realtor, both full-time.

Steve is a good-tempered man. He's not one to whine. Steve is the sort of guy who puts others' needs before his own. You know the type: he'll bring you chicken noodle soup in bed even when he's got the flu himself. He's just kind & generous & considerate. I know guys like Steve are a dime a dozen but for me there's just something kinda special about Steve.

Steve is also a part-time Dell technician. If you spill ginger ale on your laptop for example, Steve's your man. Steve runs a workshop from his backyard. There's very little he can't fix. Computers, cars, plumbing, electrical work: all fun & games to Steve. Steve is willing & able to help with light construction, insulation, window winterizing, any sort of painting & decoration, and of course—hauling out the garbage. He's a good cook and, from his time in the Navy, knows how to keep a kitchen—and a house—spick and span. Steve might be the only man you ever meet who'll gladly clean a toilet—and do a more thorough job than you.

Of course it's not all hard work & decency with Steve. He's a demon in bed. You know the sort of strong, powerful guy who's also very gentle. Very passionate, very sexual, very loving, very affectionate. He's one of those guys who can't stop cuddling. The only thing he likes more than a cuddle is a good chat. Or better still a simultaneous cuddle & chat. He's a hell of a listener, is Steve. Probably his strongest point however is his insatiable appetite for sex.

And he's a wonderful father. You know, one of those very gentle, loving men who spend time with their children, trying to put the little tykes first. I'm not saying it's easy but he's always there for them, even with the fireman and realtor jobs, the workshop in the garage, and bubblebaths with me. He's just a truly great father. You know the type.

Well I guess you probably know a million guys like Steve so I won't go on and on about him. That's it from me.

- This is the poem that got me thinking about poetry & stand-up. I read it at Cúirt International Festival of Literature in Galway in 2004 and someone came up to me well my *brother-in-law* came up to me after, and said: *that poem reminded me a bit of, of, of ...eh, comedy!*

10 So I got to thinking too about the *similarities* between poetry & stand-up

11 Paradox

- For example: They are both *paradoxical*: Poetry is not poetical; Stand-up is not funny. Margaret Cho is not funny. Richard Pryor is not funny. Richard Pryor is *horrifying*. Chris Rock is not funny. He just tells it like it is. He betrays the secrets of all the communities he belongs to: marriage, family, the African-American community, men: he splits on all of them. He's not funny but he's *good*. Victor Borge is funny. But Victor Borge is not a stand-up. Victor Borge is a *poet*. Poetry is not poetical. I could prove this point—using my own work—all day. But
- that would be very annoying.

12 Women

Another thing about poetry & stand-up is: Women. I don't know if you've ever noticed but a lot of stand-ups are not women. Same with poetry. Especially in the old days. Must have something to do with opening your mouth in a public space. Opening your mouth *to speak* in a public space. Lots of people, well women, have written about this. The last one I read was Erica Jong in the *New York Times Sunday Book Review* (12.12.04) in an essay called "An Art Like Everything Else," where she says:

For my generation (which graduated from college in the mid-60's, before the 60's became "The Sixties"), poetry was a mandrake root-male, a large gnarled phallus buried in the earth. Pull it out. Its virility was unmistakable. Female writers didn't exist on our critical radar except to be mocked.

- Also: a lot of jokes are about women. Ever notice *that*? Sure you have. A lot of poems too. Eavan Boland has written about this.
- It just goes to show: There is a strong & heavy relationship between MUSE & AMUSE.

13 So: To my conclusions about poetry & stand-up:

- You could say that in some ways, even many ways, poetry is a lot like stand-up comedy. Though perhaps not *enough*.
- You could also say that in some ways, even many ways, poetry is a lot like a lot of other things. Though maybe not *enough*.
- That's the whole point of poetry. It's a lot like and unlike a lot of things. Poetry is a living manifestation of its own preoccupation with metaphor. It

is the great invader; the great parasite of other art forms. The last thing we want poetry to be like is poetry. A poem that's like a poem???? Let's not go there. Instead:

14 Here's a poem that is a little like a telegram:

STOP

THAT'S ENOUGH **STOP** I HAVE FOUND EVERYTHING I'M INTERESTED IN
STOP FREDERICK DOUGLASS FAMINE FLUXUS CONCRETE VISUAL
 SOUND KINETIC CYBERNETIC POETRY HOPKINS SWENSON TOLSON
 HUGHES ITALY MAINE NATIVITY CHILDBIRTH METAPHOR EXAMPLE
 KOSOVO IRAQ **STOP** IRAQ **STOP** IRAQ I HAVE TO HIBERNATE NOW A
 THOUSAND YEARS I AM MOVING INTO THE INTERNET I AM MOVING INTO
 THE FUNNY FURRY HILLS OF MY BLOG **STOP** I AM FLEEING FROM LIFE
 OUT THERE INTO LIFE IN HERE **STOP** WHERE EVERYTHING IS FLUID &
 SLICK & SHADY & DUSKY & FLAT

15 Here's one like a movie:

PITCH

Okay. So it's the mid-17th century in Holland right. There's this ah 46-year-old fuzzy-headed arthritic maid-of-all-work and she goes to work in the home of a famous painter, sort of like Vermeer, actually it is Vermeer. And the 46-year-old fuzzy-headed arthritic maid-of-all-work and Vermeer develop this extraordinary friendship based on their mutual reverence for art. Yeah. Even though the fuzzy-headed 46-year-old arthritic maid-of-all-work is totally uneducated & poverty-stricken she just has this natural talent for composition & understanding the artist's soul. Vermeer recognizes it in her & reverences her for it. I mean Vermeer reverences her reverence for it right. But Vermeer the artist (thirtyish) is married to this 25-year old woman who's already had like 5 children, 3 of whom have died and she's pregnant again. So Vermeer takes her great big pearl earrings & gives them to the maid-of-all-work so he can paint her portrait. For this patron. Who's a disgusting rapist character totally unlike the refined artist Vermeer. (Of course no-body remembers the patron's name. Van something or other.) So everybody thinks things are smoking up in the studio between the artist & the maid-of-all-work. But actually they're just mixing pigment & pointing out intricacies of light & shade. It's very beautiful. So in the end the painter gives the 46-year-old arthritic fuzzy-headed maid-of-all-work his wife's earrings. It's very realistic & shows how a simple & profound reverence for art transcends class gender & all other barriers no problem what do you think?

16 And Finally—*this is a poem:*

AND FINALLY

I have never been sorry
to hear those words
at a poetry reading.

17 But most of all poetry is like Irish Traditional Music

- Here's a traditional Irish poem & I really am going to end with this.
- You have to remember that the essential difference between traditional Irish music and poetry is that while traditional Irish music openly dispenses with the notion of originality, traditional Irish poetry pretends to value it.
- So here's a traditional Irish poem which I actually wrote myself. So it's extremely original which is actually sort of avant-garde only that's impossible. I'll end with this.
- If there was a piano I'd signal to the piano-player
- *Now! [signal to the piano-player]*

TRADITIONAL~IRISH~POEM

The next poem is a poem I got from a great fiddle-player James Kelly of Capel Street one night in Inis Oirr when he was out there playing with John Blake, a wonderful musician too. You might hear hints of a poet who has influenced us all Willie Yeats who had a castle there in Thoor Ballylee many's the grand night we had there with George and Anne and Michael a great family—that was before the summer school. And I'm indebted of course to Paddy Kavanagh from Iniskeen and Baggot Street, the sweetest melodeon player you ever did hear that used to play there up in McDaid's and Nesbitt's I was there hanging on every note. And all the great sessions around Dublin and Dundalk that are recorded on the old 78s I remember the excitement when a new batch of them would be brought home and fair play to all the men and women who collected them. It's through them I heard the music of Allen Ginsberg of Newark New Jersey and Alan Dugan from Brooklyn New York and Allen Grossman in Baltimore there and Alan Sondheim of Manhattan Island and all the Allens, a magnificent family, second only to the Alices. And Charles Reznikoff a great walker also of New York, and Harry Crane from Chagrin Falls and Sukey Howe, one of the Howes and Fanny her sister, felicitous poets both of them, and May Swenson that we all loved and Muriel too, and Langston Hughes up there in Harlem, I tried to get him to come to Áras Éanna many's the time but no dice and Gus Young in London and Trevor Joyce who published Gus and Trevor's Uncle Jimmy a truly great poet though not necessarily when he said so and Marcel Duchamp and Pierre Reverdy and Artie Rimbaud and Paul Muldoon his *Incantata* was only massive and Paul Celan with his *Todesfuge* and Paulie Durcan from Leinster Square a very prolific poet and all the Pauls, another great family. And Tom Raworth God bless him and Hugo Ball and Randolph Healy from outside Bray and Mícheál Ó hAirtneid from Newcastlewest no longer with us unfortunately but a wonderful poet and player we remember fondly and Ger Hopkins that used work up there in Newman House on his sprung rhythm and Eavan out in Dundrum many's the cup of coffee I had at her kitchen counter and Crystal Williams I played with her in the Big Red Barn one time at Cornell it was powerful and Rachel Loden in San Francisco & Gabriel Gudding with whom I wrote *The Clio Reel* some of you may know it we're still dancing to that one. So for ALL the men and women of poetry and JOHN DONNE here goes: