Please Hold

Ciaran O’Driscoll

This is the future, my wife says.

We are already there, and it’s the same

as the present. Your future, here, she says.

And I’m talking to a robot on the phone.

The robot is giving me countless options,

none of which answer to my needs.

Wonderful, says the robot

when I give him my telephone number.

And Great, says the robot

when I give him my account number.

I have a wonderful telephone number

and a great account number,

but I can find nothing to meet my needs

on the telephone, and into my account

(which is really the robot’s account)

goes money, my money, to pay for nothing.

I’m paying a robot for doing nothing.

This call is free of charge, says the mind-reading robot.

Yes but I'm paying for it, I shout,

out of my wonderful account

into my great telephone bill.

Wonderful, says the robot.

And my wife says, This is the future.

I’m sorry, I don’t understand, says the robot.

Please say Yes or No.

Or you can say Repeat or Menu.

You can say Yes, No, Repeat or Menu,

Or you can say Agent if you’d like to talk

to someone real, who is just as robotic.

I scream Agent! and am cut off,

and my wife says, This is the future.

We are already there and it’s the same

as the present. Your future, here, she says.

And I’m talking to a robot on the phone,

and he is giving me no options

in the guise of countless alternatives.

We appreciate your patience. Please hold.

Eine Kleine Nachtmusik. Please hold.

Eine Kleine Nachtmusik. Please hold.

Eine fucking Kleine Nachtmusik.

And the robot transfers me to himself.

Your call is important to us, he says.

And my translator says, This means

your call is not important to them.

And my wife says, This is the future.

And my translator says, Please hold

means that, for all your accomplishments,

the only way you can now meet your needs

is by looting. Wonderful, says the robot

Please hold. Please grow old. Please grow cold.

Please do what you’re told. Grow old. Grow cold.

This is the future. Please hold.

Structure

* Four unique voices: the poet, his wife, the robot and the ‘translator’. The voices speak in succession without the use of any speech marks or any differentiation between each one; an image of chaos is spawned, where voices speak over one another.
* The poet itself is quite straight forward and monotonous – even dull, which is why is reflected in its form. Conveying the monotony and emptiness of life by highlighting it within the poem. One single, continuous stanza.
* Ends with a much shorter, three line stanza, which is made up of short, almost identical phrases. This suggests the poet sees this cycle of daily tasks and frustrations as being perpetual, and perhaps inescapable.

Language

* Using the most violent sounding language of German helps to reinforce the poet’s anger and frustration. Direct reference to Mozart’s piece ‘A little Serenade’ – frequently played while waiting on hold, humorous.
* “he is giving me no options / in the guise of countless alternatives” The oxymoron could be seen as one of the key points within the poem because it could be interpreted as a clear indication of the potential sinister nature of increasing automation and reduced human interaction. This is due to the idea of appearance and reality in its guise.
* “This is the future” A reader’s interpretation of this phrase would likely change over time thanks to the repetition throughout the poem; initially it may be seen as informative, but as the poem goes on this phrase can be interpreted as becoming increasingly negative and creates a sense of wariness and anxiousness.

Themes

* Language and truth, breaking down of language and communication shows an interesting perspective on the impact of tech. Language is used as well to express the emotion that the narrator is feeling, including through satirical phrases.
* Power, the poem can be seen to highlight a power struggle, the power that transfers between the narrator, the robot and the narrator’s wife. The narrator is powerless to stop the march of technology and powerless to actually speak to another person.
* Society and culture, O’Driscoll considers that there are key societal and cultural issues regarding technology – that these have an impact on humanity, especially regarding human interactions with people. He poses the question through the frustration of the telephone line whether robots and automation actually help society or not.

Imagery

* Imagery of a frustrated, angry man, ranting at a phone that is in turn a robot, highlighting a power struggle.
* Desolate imagery towards the end of robots forming the singularity overtaking humanity. Empty, old room with a man sitting by his phone.