

“In between traditional nature poetry and agitprop, what is there?”: Modern Irish Poetry in Three Studies

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In response to this conference’s call for reflection upon the difficulty of communicating the intensity and enormity of ecological issues we are currently facing and the resulting disconnection between the amount of information at our disposal and our ability to act, this presentation takes a fresh look at poetry as a medium and space which might act as a catalyst facilitating this connection. It is a collaborative presentation which brings together graduate and undergraduate research inspired by a course on Irish poetry at the University of Victoria. We believe that it is no coincidence that this particular geo-aesthetic context inspired our thinking on poetry, climate and hope. For hundreds of years, Irish poetry has resonated with deep love for the land and natural environment and at the same time has been bearing witness to the loss of this connection in the wake of ruthless colonial exploitation. Focusing upon poetry as the space to contemplate, concentrate and re-imagine before we might be able to act, we have been inspired by Seamus Heaney’s definition of poetry as articulated in his essay “The Government of the Tongue.” Referring to an episode in John’s Gospel, he writes: “In one sense the efficacy of poetry is nil—no lyric has ever stopped a tank. In another sense, it is unlimited. It is like the writing in the sand in the face of which accusers and accused are left speechless and renewed.” He emphasizes that poetry does not promise that “now a solution will take place.” Instead, in “the rift between what is going to happen and whatever we would wish to happen, poetry holds attention for a space, functions not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves.” We believe that it is the awareness of this space and rift in time which should be re-appreciated as the forgotten gift of poetry and its true leverage as we face the climactic disaster and are too often left speechless by the scale of what is happening.

The first study focuses on Heaney’s opus of “Squarings” (1991) which maximizes the contemplative scope and space for the reader in its 48 douzains. In this sequence, the zone of consciousness emerges as supremely receptive and reflective of its environment extending both in terms synchronic (combining the airy and earthly, elements temporal and atemporal) and diachronic (deconstructing the imposed architectural structures and tracing the supra-individual ontology toward the feel of the clay on the kitchen floor). This expansive meditation becomes a supreme lyrical rendering of Bill Plotkin’s observation: “Psyche is not separate from nature, not separate from the world; rather, psyche is an attribute of each thing in the world”.

A curated anthology as a final class assignment was designed with the aim to maximize our recognition of poetry’s contemplative and transforming potential with less emphasis on the scholar’s interpretative intervention. Two samples of this project will be shared and discussed: “Sacred Earth” focusing on spirituality and sacredness as sought in nature by poets from Patrick Kavanagh to Paul Muldoon, and “A Change in the Climate” mapping the shifting nature of contemporary Irish poets’ connection to the land as affected by the global climate change.

References

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