



In Conversation

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Poets of the Anthropocene

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Q. How does the idea of ‘environments of change’ affect your work (at either macro or micro levels), and how does living in changing times impact your creative production?

A. This is a potentially huge question, as you know. In terms of my academic ‘work’, I might respond to the question/theme by referring to the manner in which universities have been changing over the past ten or so years in Ireland. I remember, during the period I was Vice-Head of CACSSS, attending a management meeting which was discussing various policy documents. I will never forget the first sentence of one of these documents, which read: “Change is a constant”. It is an amusing example of oxymoron, of course. But it is also a statement that rather profoundly summarises contemporary life in the university sector, and I would imagine in every department of public and commercial life. This is not the right forum for me to go into any sustained analysis and critique of the ubiquitous and omnipresent forces behind that idea of ‘change’. But I will say that I deeply believe that there are things we must defend as professors, scholars and students (thinking of those terms in all their many senses). One of these is teaching. There are signs, within this arena of constant change, of a downgrading of teaching. Again, no one is directly responsible for this. The forces at work are general, social and cultural, epochal even. But in an environment in which successive governments have decreased the funding of undergraduate students, it is no wonder that we would begin to register a certain refocussing away from teaching towards more lucrative sources of revenue. In such a situation, we must remind ourselves again and again that as a university we stand or fall on the quality of and our collective commitment to teaching. Not just the kind of teaching that brings visible results; in an environment of constant change we

need to reaffirm our commitment to those aspects of teaching and learning that are difficult to evaluate, or even invisible or essentially incalculable. The postgraduate scholars, who do a good deal of the university's teaching, have clearly a huge part to play in this regard.

You asked about my 'creative production', and although I regard teaching as an essentially creative art, I cannot help but also think of my writing, academic but also perhaps more centrally my creative work as a poet. As far as academic 'creative production' goes I am currently researching and composing a monograph on how teaching relates to monsters (understood as all those things and events dominant society would erase and efface). I have already covered the context for such a project. As far as my poetry is concerned I have grown ever more concerned with the question of how poetry might respond to climate change and the human impact on the natural environment. Anybody who thinks about poetry almost inevitably thinks, at least in part, of nature poetry. Attending poetry readings and poetry launches, and reading the latest works by poets I know and many I do not know, I am often struck by how dominant nature poetry, in all its varieties, still is in the Irish poetry scene. Of course, there is also a strong tradition of what we might call political poetry in Ireland, and great poets like Yeats and Heaney and Boland can be seen to combine the two strands in brilliantly innovative ways. Yet that still leaves a question for me, which can be expressed in many different ways. Let's put it like this: what should the poet do now that we live in the Anthropocene and have woken up to the fact that humans are responsible for creating the sixth mass extinction event in the history of the planet?

The World Wildlife Organization last week announced that human activity (farming, industrial production, urban living, and so on) was responsible for reducing animal life on the planet by 60% in the last four decades. The destruction we are unleashing upon the biosphere, in which we ourselves exist, shows no signs of relenting. Indeed, it frequently appears that modern techno-capital societies just do not know how to respond to the catastrophe unfolding. Will there be any life left on the Earth in fifty years' time? In such a catastrophic situation, notions of sustainability (well-meaning as they may be) are just not adequate. It is not a continuation or a slight reduction (of fossil fuels, of deforestation, of plastic and chemical pollution) we need, it is a wholesale change in the way we run human societies, human markets, human production (in every sense of that phrase).

Q. You mention the huge impact humans have on the Earth nowadays; how would you like your creative work to impact the environments of change that we live in?

A. The question can be formalised: what is the role of the poet in the Anthropocene? or, and artists and poets would often not particularly discriminate between these two questions, what would constitute a viable aesthetic response to the Anthropocene? The question on one level sounds ludicrous. Surely we do not need poetry here, we need an almost inexhaustible string of brilliant inventions and solutions to a mounting array of apparently insurmountable problems. But Yeats and others found poetry and art important during the Rising, the Civil War, and more recently the Troubles. Milton when faced with turbulent times responded through poetry. So did Wordsworth. So did Shakespeare. It is a feature of human beings that they will no doubt go on trying to record and make sense of their situation even right up to the very end. And desperate as the situation is, there is still some hope that we are not yet facing the end.

How poetry and the other arts usually address the problems they confront is to reimagine their traditions within the current, challenging climate. This, it seems to me, must therefore involve a rethinking of nature poetry now that it has become clear that the human world is the driving force in nature. The definition of the Anthropocene involves the fact that we (us humans) *are* nature. Nature is no longer the opposite of human culture, human art, human technology, human desire. The opposition between nature and the human, that has been such a foundational one throughout human history, has collapsed. This has huge implications and it is the job of the artist and the poet to describe them and address them. To give one example, traditional nature poetry has often been favoured by those who wish to keep the realm of poetry separate from the realm of politics. Surely, such logic runs, we are outside of the muddy, ever changing world of politics when we are writing or reading poems about daffodils or bird song or sunsets beyond quiet fishing villages? Not any more, I am afraid. Not in the period of the Anthropocene. Nature is now the most political of subjects, and it is a subject in which we can no longer hide from ourselves.

Poetry of course has little effect in the world. Its 'impact' is negligible. But I do believe that, along with all the other arts, it allows those who engage with it to expand and readjust and refigure the way they think. Personally, I find the current changes to the environment (a very mild way of referring to environmental catastrophe!) overwhelming. I find it difficult to get my head around even the basic facts and statistics and reports. It all seems so appalling, and it can also feel that no one has an answer to the problems we now face. But we cannot hide our heads in the sand, and poetry forces me to look, register, and try and describe what I see. There are a series of consequences, for example, that people seem

reluctant or even unable to express: a terrible sense of loneliness as the animal world dies around us; a haunting sense of uncertainty about the future; an anxiety about the immediate future leading people to build walls and revert to old certainties. These consequences, and many others like them, are worth expressing in art, in poetry. A commitment to such expression is perhaps the only 'impact' I can authentically seek.