

EDITORIAL

For the ESSE (The European Society for the Study of English) Conference, held in Turin in late August, David Malcolm and I organised a seminar entitled “Sound Is / As Sense: Sound and Meaning in Modern and Contemporary Poetry”. In our Call for Papers we stressed that “sound – rhythm, metrical organisation and disorganisation (even metrical irresolutions), phonological orchestration, and rhyme (and its variants) – is a key aspect of the meaning of a poem”. When I asked Paula Meehan – I contributed a paper on her sequence “Six Sycamores” to the seminar – to comment on the main thesis, she pointed out in her reply that “[t]here is very little in my work that is not to do with sound magic.” Nonetheless, the special double issue of the scholarly journal *An Sionnach*, published in autumn 2009 to accompany the launch of Meehan’s latest poetry collection *Painting Rain*, celebrates and critiques, as guest-editor Jody Allen Randolph points out, Meehan’s “poetic choices, her playwriting, and the social and ethical commitments that underlie both.” However, the eighteen essays and one interview confirm our thesis that “discussions that do not take sound into account are [...] limited.” Only Eric Falci, in his essay on “Meehan’s Stanzas and the Irish Lyric after Yeats”, shows anything like an interest in the theme of our seminar. But in the final section of his paper he still feels the need to defend his approach against potential objections of being “deeply, damagingly formalist” and having “failed to think about the broader themes and stakes of her work.”

However, many poets seem to support this thesis when they call for critics to use an approach that represents a synthesis of the What and How. As a recent guest blogger for *The Best American Poetry*, Brian Henry spoke for many compatriots when he concluded that he has “never understood why any poetry critics focus primarily on subject matter.” Comparing poetry with other arts, Henry asks his readers what I regard as two crucial questions: “Do art or music critics focus on content to the exclusion, or even subordination, of style or technique? Or do they try to explain how content and technique interact?” Henry then quotes in support Angus Fletcher, who holds that “[t]hematic approaches to poetic effect are always bound to mislead.” If I did not feel confident about this approach, I could use Henry’s plea with which he closes his essay: “I’m not calling for a focus on the How to the exclusion or diminishment of the What, or even for an assessment of both elements individually, but

for a consideration of the ways in which the How and the What inform and enable each other in poetry.”

In her short essay “Slitting the Songbird’s Throat to See What Makes It Sing”, Meehan makes it quite clear that for her “[t]he transmission of poetry across generations remains [...] an oral transmission.” This belief and her technique of writing poetry are thoroughly grounded in childhood experience: “When I was a child I had to learn off by heart a verse of poetry in English and Irish every school day. Mostly I had no idea what the words meant but it did give me a source of power later when I came to make poems myself, a store of line lengths and rhythmical patterns I have drawn on ever since. The hearing of poetry is a crucial part of the oral transmission, and a great source of comfort. I remember my body rocking to the stress patterns in a poem and reconnecting to a very old pulse (my mother’s heartbeat?).” It is interesting to note her attempt at offering a mytho-organic explanation. In her resumé she takes Brian Henry’s thesis one step further as she expresses her belief that “[w]e are in danger of elevating meaning to a fetishistic level at the expense of the real experience of poetry, a very physical experience.”

That physical experience is based in the acoustic resonance of poetry even for the silent reader. The dominance of the conversational mode has led to a denigration, even on the part of poets, of the musical mode of poetry. Without actually wanting to resurrect the music of Tennyson or Pope, a music which belongs to them and their periods, I would say that present-day poetry would do well to recur to poetry as rhythmic structure and patters of sound instead of chatting along amiably in what is only nominally verse. The experience of poetry as sound demands craftsmanship, a training in rhythm, metre, and phonology (the colour of Rimbaud’s vowels!), something to be recommended to young poets if they want their poems to move beyond the page.

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