

Darkness Between Stars, John F. Deane and James Harpur (The Irish Pages Press)

The authors' own Introduction to this beautifully produced hardback book notes that Deane and Harpur

have known each other for many years and shared readings, discussions and introduced each other's work, finding friendship and mutual encouragement in discovering that [they] were both fascinated not only by the life of poetry but also by the divine, the sacred, 'God'.

It is this fascination, and the writing out of it, which underpins this 'joint selection' of poems: although there are poems about a wide range of subjects, they are, the authors suggest, 'poems in search of God', poems which 'bear witness to [...] probings into the ineffable'.

This raises two issues. Firstly, I hoped for more of a poetic conversation, and not a selection of poems by each author, the one followed by the other; perhaps even new work, produced in collaboration or as a direct response to the other's work. Secondly, an issue the authors are all too clearly aware of, that faith rooted in specific religion is somewhat out of fashion, as is the idea (put forward in the Introduction) that poetry 'springs from our argument with God, or the absence of God.'

I find the idea of poetry somehow being inspired by the divine or a muse, somewhat antiquated, as I do 'the search for meaning, for certainties', which the authors suggest (again in their Introduction) has never been more important, particularly as a result of Covid, but also generally. I am not alone, however, in accepting the notion of truths, plural, rather than Truth, isolate and declamatory. Recent developments in the sciences, engineering, the arts, psychology and sociology have shown us how much knowledge is tentative and of its time, rather than fixed, final and certain.

It would be wrong to suggest that Deane and Harpur are in any way dogmatic, evangelical or theologically certain: both write poems that question and consider, even when addressing the divine directly, both doubt and debate. Although Harpur's poem 'from St Symeon Stylites' is about and perhaps spoken by St. Symeon, we might consider the poet's voice too, admitting that

Most days I think I'm split in two,
A spirit yearning for the light
And a body of delinquent appetites.

That phrase, 'delinquent appetites' seems to be both enticing and full of self-disgust, and although the poem is full of lonely, resistant prayer it ends up with a doubting question: 'Sometimes I wonder if I pray / To keep the Lord away?'

Deane often explores his belief and doubt through revisions of the Gospel stories. 'Words of the Unknown Soldier' notes, in very un-soldier-like language, how 'he

stumped us, this Jesus of yours, with his / walking on water, fandango, entrechat, glissade', whilst the lengthy sonnet sequence 'According to Lydia' brings a feminine point-of-view to bear on key moments, finally countering imagined 'onslaughts of foolishness' with the beatitudinal 'blessed is the one who does not lose faith in me.'

Mostly, however, both authors choose to see or encounter the divine reflected or present in the physical world around them. Bones, birds, star clusters, woods and corn circles are all cause to stop and consider man's place in the grand scheme of things. In fact, man's relationship to the natural world, and even more specifically the 'Christian failure to incorporate the reality of evolution and its consequences' is what Deane suggests has 'alienated thinking people' from "'traditional" religious tenets and activities.'

'Poetry, God and the Imagination: a Dialogue', actually a 2018 email correspondence, ends the book, and in many ways it is the best part, offering up a frank and thoughtful discussion to the reader. Deane's Catholicism, or at least his Catholic upbringing, is very much on show as he suggests that 'To accept evolution is inevitably to deny the doctrine of "original sin" and even that of the "Immaculate Conception". I don't know about the latter as that veers off into ridiculous discussions about human purity, virginity and sexlessness, but the former was always explained to me, by the Baptist church I attended as a child, as a matter of relationship to God, not a physical genetic inheritance!

The discussion is wide-ranging, covering the spiritual, the poetic and writerly, as well as religious institutions and mystical theology. Surprisingly, Deane turns out to be 'a devoted follower' of Teilhard de Chardin, the author of a cosmic theology informed by both evolution and philosophy, whilst Harpur prefers 'a multi-construct Christ figure' although he admits to mostly trying to focus on his 'own interior silence'.

Both seem to agree that religion is 'rooted in mystery, epiphany and personal experience' and rather worrying that 'that's what it shared with poetry.' Or should, because Deane is adamant that 'too much contemporary poetry [...] seems vapid and imitative, saying nothing and saying it well.' In the same way, he notes that 'it has always amazed me how the churches got it wrong', although later he redirects the discussion because 'we are not going to get too far with the theological and rational surveying of the world and poetry.'

Later on there are mentions of Simone Weil, Richard Rohr, Yeats and Hopkins, but the main drift of the conversation seems to be towards a critique of poetry that society thinks can be measured in financial terms, and then a suggestion that the mystical, inspired or ineffable is a counter to this. Whilst I agree that Western neoliberal capitalism and the measuring of anything only in terms of profit, potential or otherwise, is wrong, poetry has always had more cultural than financial value. I do not, however, want creative writing made mystical. Language is what we use to think and talk to each other, it is how we process the world; when we recognise how fluid and full of possibility it is, we can create anew. Whilst much of the poetry here is beautifully worked, thoughtful and intriguing,

it does not in the main evidence what many of us would think of as a 'radical approach' which Deane suggests is needed. The re-mystification and obscuration of poetry and how it can or might be written does no-one any favours.

Rupert Loydell

(1035 words)