

Anna Belozorovitch interviews Theo Dorgan



Tell me about the first time you met poetry. How did it enter your life?

Well of course, we studied poetry in school, in both the English and the Irish languages, and we had to learn the poems off by heart — so I quickly became aware that poetry is a special way of organizing language, and because of the mnemonic necessity I learned that poems are organized so as to be memorable in ways that a passage of prose was not.

I still have many of those poems in my memory, the music of them never fails to hold me.

I did not think of writing poems until I was 18 or so when, perhaps because of the felt pressures and pleasures of life, the overwhelming fullness of life you might say, I found myself trying to respond in language, specifically in lyrical language.

How do you think does poetry interact with time? Does poetry have a special power over it?

An adequate answer to these questions would fill a book, a very big book! Briefly, poetry is language fully-engaged with time as we all experience it, or as we should all experience it, that somehow also lifts out into a more capacious sense of time. Poetry sets itself and its sense of amplitude against the tyranny of linear time. A poem is something like an oxbow lake in a river, self-contained but also part of the river's flow.

One inhabits a poem, I think, at least if it's properly constructed and achieved. The poem, you might say, is an architectonics of time and energy, sufficient to itself. One might wander there, and be lost to time's imperatives for a while, exploring that small universe in all its dimensions, temporal and spatial. At the same time, a poem is made in words, which both come down to us as rich and heavily-freighted inheritance and at the same time are open to the nuances & pressures of the living moment. Language is a living entity, and at the same time a process, its relationship with time is complex and multi-dimensional, and this is necessarily true also of the poem.

Power over time? Well of course poems have the power, if they are well and truly made, to survive their occasions, which is to say to traverse the fields and depths of time, to disclose to unborn generations, sometimes, what might not have been clear at the time the poem was composed, what

might not have been clear to the poet herself or himself, even. And then, a poem may alter the past by reconstructing the matrix by which we access the past.

It's probably better to think of poetry having a power of its own *in* time, rather than *over* time.

Do you think there was a change, during the last decades, in the impact poetry has on the world, on our lives?

In Ireland, people pay more attention to poetry now than was the case in the recent past. In part this is because there are more poets now writing and publishing here than was ever the case. In both languages. Too, far more women are publishing poetry than was once the case, which means testimony from the once-silenced half of humanity is entering into the world we share. Inasmuch as poetry is witness, I would say there is a greater depth and variety of witness than was the case for quite some time. Perhaps more than ever before. The shrinking of religious observance and belief has something to do with this: in the absence of an unquestioned orthodoxy, people are more willing to search for questions and answers, for instances of meaning, in literature and, especially, in poetry. Because of its highly-constructed, high-energy compactness of form, poetry seems an approachable way to seek out both challenge and meaning in life. Of course, this mainly holds true for those whose tropism is towards contemplation, towards the courage of questioning.

Do you think poetry has the same role as before and if not, how did it change?

Part of the business of the poet is to work towards clearing the wells and springs of language. In a globalised world, politics and commerce work to denature language and empty it of meaning. The poet and her poem stand in clear opposition to this process.

Your partner, Paula Meehan, is also an important Irish poet. What does it mean for you as a couple that both of you write poetry? Do you meet through poetry or do you find separate space for each one of you in it?

Each is the other's best, most severe reader.

We have clear and distinct sensibilities, different strategies towards poems, different ways of working a poem, and different deep preoccupations. But of course, since we live our lives with, by and to a certain extent through each other, we have what you might call a privileged access to each other's work. Ours is a comradesly relationship in poetry.

Each of our issues have a theme, and the next one will be "resistance": what do you think resistance means when speaking about poetry? How does poetry "resist" and what can it help to resist to?

Poetry, that is to say making a poem, is an act of resistance towards mortality. A poem resists the commonplace language of the day, it seeks for roots, etymologies, the arcana of feelings, the unexpected, the singular *and* what we hold in common — all this in the face of a discourse that would reduce us to passive consumers, to cowed and terrified mortal beings. Poetry resists itself, inasmuch as the energy of a poem comes from its ecology of word resisting word, of language refusing its own shortcomings and inadequacies, the sprung tension of a boat under sail, working with and against the forces of wind and sea. Too, the poet, if she or he is honest, will resist being co-opted to an eschatology, and epistemology or an ideology that purports to explain the meaning

and value of life; the poet knows, or should know, that nothing definitive can ever be said of our human predicament. Our lives, and the life of this one and only world we share, are mysteries. We make small gains, which the life-deniers are always trying to negate; the poem insists on nurturing and guarding those small gains, a profound act of resistance in itself. As our great poet Michael Hartnett said, “the act of poetry is a rebel act.” Every free act of the imagination, every gesture, phrase and poem, is a small revolution, a proud and unbowed vindication of our status as free beings — that is to say, every poem is an act of resistance in the face of death, negation and extinction.