

WHAT USE ARE POETS IN TIMES OF NEED?

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*Today is a day for giving up;
tomorrow, for whatever comes after dying.
No need for clichés about
love and courage and soul
and the faith we have
in the nature of stars.
No, today is a day for human
no-nature,
yellow and orange and red—
the feel of fallen leaves on naked skin.*

*Somewhere in the branches of rain
there is a feathered song*

signifying nothing but Wren;

*so too, you,
in your nudity.
Stripped down of meaning
like milkweed on the wind,
impregnating the air
with your presence.*

*There are at least twenty-one ways
to sing whatever name
you will have on your lips tomorrow;
nine of them sound identical to silence,
and the rest
well, there's no need, yet, to go into that...¹*

IN THE INTRODUCTION TO HIS FIRST BOOK, *DREAMTIME*, MORIARTY ASKS A QUESTION ORIGINALLY asked by Hölderlin and later by Heidegger. It comes from the poem “Bread and Wine” and asks, “What use are poets in times of need?” I’ve been haunted by this question ever since. It got to the heart of what my life has been about. I often wondered what was the

¹ “Twenty-One Ways to Birth a Heart” from *Twenty-One Ways to Birth a Heart*. Hiraeth Press, forthcoming.

purpose of the work that I was doing. I wanted to know if I would be more effective in creating change if I were to chain myself to a tree or blow up a dam. Can poetry change the world? This is what I wanted to know. Poets in the widest sense are not only those who write and speak poetry, but are storytellers, mythmakers, philosophers, scientists, teachers, musicians, artists, and shamans—those involved in the ongoing creation of culture. It is also at the heart of what I have been doing at CIIS (California Institute of Integral Studies) and where I hope to go from here.

Ours is certainly a time of need. We're standing at the edge of the Cenozoic era in Earth's history with species becoming extinct on a massive scale at an ever quickening rate and the life systems of the planet degrading.

*Poetry begins in the earth, emerges
in the clear dark water from the mountains,
so I, wanting to know the sunlight on my back
and feel the cool slap of water on my feet,
will take these strong spring currents and
weigh them against the steady words of the heart.*

*There is a moment that follows the writing
of every good line of poetry, the kind
with roots deep in the breath –
breath, that perfect invisible image of poetry,
dialogue is breathing, a conversation between
winds of air briefly adopted by lungs,
changed and reflected back to the world,
maybe to disappear but sometimes
to join in the currents of some storm
which blows in, changing everything.*

*Line after line the poem is forged through listening;
so take these words and weigh them against
the strong spring currents and maybe
catch a glimpse of them as they pass,
floating atop the buoyant power residing in the voice.*

*This is not the time for poems of happy love –
this is the time for poems to set the heart on fire
and in those flames reveal the uncharred remains
of what could not be burnt.²*

Instead of thinking of this moment in terms of its terror I suggest we think of it more creatively, as a planetary-scale ritual of initiation involving the full Earth community and the initiation of the human being as a species into the integral functioning of the ecology of the planet. The use of poets in times of need is that they are cultural therapists and, in the words of John Moriarty, are “healers who, healed themselves, heal us culturally, heal us, or help to heal us, in the visions and myths and rituals by which we live, and to do this effectively they must in

² “Uncharred” from Kirkey, Jason. *Songs from a Wild Place*, Boulder: Hiraeth Press, 2007.

some sense be...temporary ones, not eternal ones, of the Dream.” The Dream is what the Poet communicates and creates. They change the way we not only think but also our very way of being in the world. In doing so poets give birth to a new story that speaks to the needs of the time. So what is the new story we want to construct? That is still an open ended question but I would argue that its fundamental attribute must be that it integrates us into the Earth community and into the cosmos at large.

This integration, however, must begin at the level of the watershed. The watershed is the organizing principle of the life community. We cannot know our place in the universe if we do not know our place in the watershed—our local and situated place. We cannot know the universe story if we don’t know the smaller stories, poems, and folktales which constitute our personal story and the story of our place.

Every drop of rain that falls and seeps into the land is drained into the watershed and travels out to sea. It takes about two million years for a single drop of water to make the complete circle from rainfall to groundwater, to river, to ocean, to cloud, and back to rain again. All the water, every single molecule, makes that journey. This is why the care of our water is synonymous with the care of the local Earth community. The watershed defines the community of life which grows up around it and marks the boundaries of the region.

Each watershed has its own Way, distinct to its personality. It tells a story by its “being.” To follow the Way of the watershed is to follow the Dao. The watershed freely manifests in alignment with its deep principles which naturally follow the course of the Dao—“the flow, drift, or the process of nature,” as Alan Watts describes it. The Dao is the principle pattern or energy which things naturally follow. Poetry is the language of the Dao. It is spontaneous but cultivated and disciplined; free-flowing but shaped as form—poetry is wild. Writing, speaking, hearing, or reading the poetry of our place can help us discover the entry point at which we find our own particular way of belonging.

*The sound of the Riverway
through the water-mind, curves
riparian—rushes and willow shoots;
aquatic thoughts—terrestrial articulations;
so like the terrain of which I live, breathe,
eat, imagine, love; my water-thoughts
conducive to blackberries and the powerful wings
of red-bellied birds who eat them.*

*Where the water goes
I will go:
out to the broad-back sea
or into the soil and sunlit air,
pouring down in torrents on trees,
sinking soft into branches and leaves,
trickling pattering rushing drizzling,
all the world aglow in its radiant sheen—
then returning for a time to the Riverway.*

As the water goes, so the world goes.

*The fluid mind, too, carves contours
of landscape-stories and poem-places.
The stream is barely a whisper now,
listen.
When the water goes, then the world goes
and spills out the drying mind.*

*When the water goes, we too will go.
But the Riverway remains.³*

I've come to think of myself as a Bog Philosopher (and there's a bit of self-deprecating humor in there because in the British Isles the bog is slang for the toilet!). But the peat bogs in Ireland, I've realized, are the perfect metaphor for my work. The bogs represent, in their dynamic natural processes and their ecological functioning, the new way we must find to belong to the Earth. Peat is the product of the decay of organic matter—the bogs a kind of naturally occurring anaerobic compost heap. Through the phenomenon of the bog we can learn about the ecosystem of the bog and through the dynamics of the ecosystem we can learn what it means to be a human being within the Earth community.

The bogs also represent a more mythically storied way of being. Beneath the surface of the bog the peat contains artifacts of the past both literally and figuratively. Swords, books, and bodies have all been found well preserved in the peat. More figuratively the sedimentary layers of the bog represent layers of history, layers of the past, layers of the psyche into which it is necessary for us to descend. By sinking into the peat we can come into contact with our own Precambrian minds. These two stories co-mingle together in the decaying humus beneath the surface of the bog.

When peat is burned for fuel it's like burning the memory of the Earth. The peat holds the succession of Ireland's forests and the subsequent degradation of the landscape which formed the bogs. It holds the rain, the moss, the heather. It holds the bones of the past with little concern for whether it is human or Earth history it records. In the bog it is all just bog history. Bog-deep in us, are we too still just the decaying compost of Earth matter?

A quote from Gary Snyder, talking about compost and decay as an ecological imperative and its relationship to art and poetry:

“Detritus cycle energy is liberated by fungi and lots of insects. I would then suggest: as climax forest is to biome, and fungus is to the recycling of energy, so “enlightened mind” is to daily ego mind, and Art to the recycling of neglected inner potential. When we deepen ourselves, looking within, understanding ourselves, we come closer to being like a mature ecosystem. Turning away from grazing on the “immediate biomass” of perception, sensation, and thrill; and reviewing memory...blocks of stored inner energies, the flux of dreams, the detritus of day-to-day consciousness, liberates the energy of our own mind-compost. Art is an assimilator of unmet experience, perception, sensation, and memory for the whole society. It comes not as a flower, but—to complete the metaphor—as a mushroom: the fruiting body of the buried threads of mycelia that run widely through the soil, intricately married to the root hairs of all the trees. “Fruiting”—at that point—is the completion of the work of the poet, and the point where the artist

³ “The Riverway” from *Twenty-One Ways to Birth a Heart*. Hiraeth Press, forthcoming.

reenters the cycle: gives what she or he has re-created through reflection, returning a “thought of enlightenment” to community.”⁴

So, we can think of poetry as feeding directly into the energy cycles of cultures, which are interconnected with the energy cycles of ecosystems—it re-invigorates them, heals them, constructs them, dreams them, and sometimes even destroys them.

*You, compost from which I came
to which—like lines of poetry
that feed the culture fed by
water and plants, the winged and legged—
I feed the earth and decompose,
break down, rot, fertilize, decay
into you, womb of my passion.*

*So much for the summer sun,
apples on trees, or the dew
hanging like crystals on leaves.
All things return to you—
 not a thing will be spared:
not the oak, maple, and pine;
neither wren, robin, or crow;
not the fox and deer;
 not this poem—not even the woman I love.
Everything is forfeit to the damp
 fungal mycelia of soil,
rich with earth-scent,
 the voice of the dead still
 speaking.*

*The rain falls upon the detritus of
de-composed lines: once flesh and bone and singing,
drips from the branches and leaves—
a baptismal for the holy fruits to come,
spoken in the common tongue
of mushrooms and moss; sorrel and sprouts.*

*Even as the ink of this poem sinks into the page
the paper fades, dampens, decays—
What vegetables will it become?
Who will eat this? Who will drink the vitality of change?
Who will fruit, flower, and seed?
What use are poets in times of need?⁵*

⁴ Snyder, Gary. *Back on the Fire*. Berkeley: Counterpoint Press, 2007. 31-32

⁵ “Who Will Eat This?” from *Twenty-One Ways to Birth a Heart*. Hiraeth Press, forthcoming.

So what is the use of poets in times of need? The use of poets in times of need are to descend into the composting bog of our cultures and reinvent them in a way which enlivens and sustains us by redreaming them and passing on that dream to rest of the culture. In the 21st century, at the edge of the Cenozoic, this means it is the task of the poet and culture worker to, as Thomas Berry said, “reinvent the human—at the species level, with critical reflection, within the community of life-systems, in a time-developmental context, by means of story and shared dream experience.”⁶

*Back home is wasteland
but for the things which I love.
That is why I return
time and time again,
to taste that nectar, and
feel a familiar wind sweep
through my skin as my
legs become roots.
I come because it is a wasteland;
I come because I left to find a voice,
so anything but speaking is betrayal.*

*Name me a state of mind,
and this place too;
or name me the wind,
and you the leaves.*

*What is the sound of one place clapping?
The first sound ringing
through the eardrums of our
own percussive contribution to the song,
and it takes only one voice
to add a melody
but one thousand is one thousand more.*

*Somewhere under a blanket of sky
the stars are sleeping blind,
and if we sing together
then we can wake them,
and with a single sip
from the grail of that
light punctured darkness,
those stars
will become seeds in the sky,
planted by tongues,
imagined and made real,
grown into women and men*

⁶ Berry, Thomas. *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*. New York: Bell Tower, 1999. 159

*with shadows for mouths
and stars for their eyes.
And we will see them
there on the hills,
changing worlds with their words.
And here will be a wasteland
no more.⁷*

⁷ “Wake the Stars” from Kirkey, Jason. *Songs from a Wild Place*, Boulder: Hiraeth Press, 2007.