SPACE, PLACE, NARRATIVE IN JOHN QUINN'S POETRY

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EDITURA UNIVERSITARĂ
Bucureşti, 2020

Colecția FILOLOGIE

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Editură recunoscută de Consiliul Naţional al Cercetării Ştiinţifice (C.N.C.S.) şi inclusă de Consiliul Naţional de Atestare a Titlurilor, Diplomelor şi Certificatelor Universitare (C.N.A.T.D.C.U.) în categoria editurilor de prestigiu recunoscut.

Descrierea CIP a Bibliotecii Naţionale a României
VLAD, FLORIAN ANDREI
Space, place, narrative in John Quinn's poetry / Florian Andrei Vlad. - Bucureşti : Editura Universitară, 2020
Conţine bibliografie
ISBN 978-606-28-1142-6

82.09

DOI: (Digital Object Identifier): 10.5682/9786062811426

Editura Universitară
Editor: Vasile Muscalu
B-dul. N. Bălcescu nr. 27-33, Sector 1, București
Tel.: 021.315.32.47
www.editurauniversitara.ro
e-mail: redactia@editurauniversitara.ro

Distribuţie: tel.: 021.315.32.47 / 07217 CARTE / 0745.200.357
comenzi@editurauniversitara.ro
O.P. 15, C.P. 35, București
www.editurauniversitara.ro

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It is difficult to acknowledge all those who, directly or less so, contributed to the writing of a book, and a thorough record of these people and their influence is almost always incomplete. In this particular case, things are much easier. Acknowledgments are due to the author of three poetry collections featuring a series of poetic expeditions across the worlds of innocence and experience, in which glimpses of real people in real places and constructed spaces have their ways of intruding. Special acknowledgments are also due to Professor Adina Ciugureanu and Professor Michaela Praisler for reading the manuscript and making valuable comments.

The genesis of these poems links them to places as diverse as Horse Lake and Zigzag Creek, Oregon, sometimes in quest for monsters such as the mythic Ogopogo in Lake Okanagan in the same part of America. Klan Country may be less unspoilt and scenic than the above-mentioned Oregonian sites, but is part of a Trans American journey, and such places as Mala Ivanča, Serbia, Ahwaz, Iran or Mt. Fujimidai, Japan, although scattered over the globe, coexist in John Quinn's "chronotopic poetic imaginary," as it were.

The poet has shared his poems with us, but he has also challenged us to explore remote places on our own, once the reading of these poems is done. He invites us to explore the

wilderness and its wildlife, in addition to his poetic vision. This volume focuses on the poems, but the real world the poems evokes can now be experienced more easily than in the past, with online resources providing images, videos and specific information, previously available only in specialized encyclopedias. For this additional invitation, more acknowledgments are also due to John Quinn.

That Kind of Bear / Genul acela de urs is, in a very distinct way, at the beginning of this comprehensive reading of John Quinn's poetry. In 2006, a group of academics from Ovidius University undertook to translate a number of the American poet's pieces, having appeared in a number of journals, such as *Wordriver Literary Review, American Literary Review, Gray's Sporting Journal, Confrontation, Interim, College English, The Nebraska Review, Midwest Arts and Literature*, and quite a few more others.

The bilingual title of the collection shows what it is. The volume served as the starting point in the exploration of the previous volume, and the translation of the individual poems by a number of my colleagues (Lucia Opreanu, Ludmila Martanovschi, Ileana Jitaru, Nicoleta Stanca) increased my ability to deal with some of the difficult parts of the texts under examination.

I want to express my gratitude to the poet for a number of things that helped shape this volume, while also acknowledging the importance of the support I got from a very cohesive team of academics: my colleagues from the English unit of the Department of Modern Languages and Communication Sciences, the Faculty of Letters of Ovidius University, Constanta.

INTRODUCTION

Poetry, like any artistic endeavor, at times heroically attempts to encompass God's plenty. A poet like John Quinn is a keen observer, thinker, painter in words of "still" and "live life," singer, doer, traveler. He is also a hunter in a very special way. Quinn's special poetic art voices personal involvement in explorations and journeys across half of America, that last half of America that Frederick Jackson Turner linked with the forging of the American pioneer spirit in the settlers' westward expansion throughout the 19th century.

John Quinn is an American of the 20th and of the 21st centuries, though, in which what were once frontiers are now landscapes yet to be mapped by poetic imaginations. The poet roams and wanders from Alaska to Oregon, to the Far West and the Southwest, from Northern Iowa all the way to Henderson, Clark County, Nevada and further south. He also sharpens his individual sense of self and his sense of belonging to a collective American identity by definitions in relation to cultural alterity. The places he territorializes, making them his own, the spaces he creates and the variety of narratives he either tells, hints at or implies, amount to revealing a lot about the poetic experience, more specifically about the consolidation

of a narrative of the self, and Richard Kearney fittingly describes this essential aspect:

> the enduring identity of a person, presupposed by the designation of a proper name, is provided by the narrative conviction that it is the same subject who perdures through its diverse acts and words between birth and death. The story told tells about the action of the "who": and the identity of this "who" is a narrative identity (Kearney 91).

John Quinn's poetic narratives of travels and their attending poetic cartographies sketched in places as diverse as Japan, Iran, Croatia record notable features of sameness and difference. His is not necessarily the work of a poet turned social and cultural historian, although touches to that effect are subtly disseminated in his poems. More interested in the private than in the overtly social, John Quinn's meditative tendencies are those of a man who spends a lot of time far from the madding crowd. The way John Quinn frames and fashions his travels through space is instrumental, to a large extent, for what Tim Cresswell considers to be a structure of experience, poetic or otherwise, meant to reveal aspects of individual identity as well (Cresswell 6).

Defining what is special about a poet at a time having behind long traditions and a considerable diversity of authors of all orientations is almost impossible. Any such endeavor is based on expressions of sameness and difference, considering the common grounds and realms explored and artistically dealt with, as well as specific differences.

Such comparisons and contrasts invite references to specific poetic frameworks, even if generalizations which might ensue are likely to miss what is special or unique. Thus, defining John Quinn in the broadest possible terms offered by differences between modernist and postmodernist tendencies is far from easy, but worth considering as a significant starting point in mapping his poetic universe. One such landmark may be offered by Jennifer Ashton, who distinguishes between open and closed texts, determinacy or indeterminacy of meaning, as well as between degrees of reader involvement in the artistic processes:

> Where, for example, the modernism of Eliot has been identified with the autonomy of the text (or what postmodernism calls the "closed" text) and the determinacy of its meaning, the postmodern text is "open" and its meaning is indeterminate. And where the participation of the reader was thought to be irrelevant to the text in modernism, it has become not just relevant but crucial to the text in postmodernism (Ashton 1).

Assessing John Quinn's poems in terms of their autonomy as a modernist hallmark is just as useful as considering that any literary text, once cut off from its author and allowed to float, more or less freely, in a different time and different culture, asserts its "independence," or at least its relative autonomy. This is something that both creators and readers take for granted, to a certain extent. In the light of the statements made above, the degree of determinacy of any poet, John Quinn included, would invite a reading of their

postmodernist dimensions, although, to be fair, measuring indeterminacy is a challenge no one would be able to meet.

The relative degree of determinacy or indeterminacy depends on the background knowledge that those engaged in the process of artistic communication, poet and reader, share, and, if the poem invites the reader's participation, so much the better. Unfortunately, for those readers who have not beaten the tracks and have not followed the trails that John Quinn feels very much at home on, the background knowledge is minimal, and the fascination of the remote and the unknown, stimulating the imagination to supply what is vitally missing, is maximal.

In terms of language and vision, Quinn's poetry may owe some of its factual simplicity and colloquial flavor to some of Robert Frost's poems of ordinary human experience recollected in Wordsworthian tranquility. At the opposite pole, in terms of the fascination with the animal denizens of his trodden paths and of the glimpses that point to myth and its healing power rather than to ordinary human experience, a comparison with some aspects of Ted Hughes's poetry is also to be taken into account. This clearly applies to some of the poems in *THE WOLF LAST SEEN* (1980), *EASY PIE: AVIAN POEMS* (1987) and *THAT KIND OF BEAR* (2006), which will be the focus of the current exploration of John Quinn's poetic world. One of the hallmarks of his art, which gives flavor to even the shortest and apparently simplest creations, is Quinn's sense of humor, the ability to find that significant detail that will give the reading experience that extra dimension that will urge the reader to stay hooked and move on to the next piece.

Reading John Quinn's poems in an age where the internet can send you almost anywhere in the world, in search of images and information, can lead to the exploration of breathtaking places and various species, among which the birds from the Avian Poems feature prominently. The poems are Quinn's artistic response to those places and creatures, but getting to know them, at least by means of the online resources at one's disposal, is likely to heighten one's ecological awareness and one's willingness to explore the real wide world beyond the www.com. The natural world simply is, but good poems like those explored in this volume turn the perception of the natural world's bewildering diversity into a meaningful experience, where sometimes unexpected contrasts, similarities and incongruities will lead to special effects, achieved not by modern technology, but by the poet's verbal art. This art, in response to real, imagined and imaginary places, inhabited by the wolf, osprey, bear, the emblematic figures of the three collections, but also in response to real places and its denizens, contributes by its creative and formative capacity to a better understanding and perception of the world as constructed by culture as a broad anthropological phenomenon.

Derek Schilling is aware of this formative capacity of literary representations to enhance our knowledge of the real world as well, part of a comprehensive effort, which spatial literary and cultural studies nowadays undertake,

> […] to formulate "objective," verifiable knowledge by anchoring the coordinates of fiction to the geo-historical world of reference, variously known as the "zero-world," "geospace," or "actuality"(Shilling 215)

Archibald MacLeish's "A poem should not mean, but be" is probably as famous a poetic statement as "Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard/ Are sweeter" or "Beauty is truth, truth beauty" from Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn." The American modernist Archibald MacLeish in his "Ars Poetica" and the British Romantic poet appear to convey similar, if not identical, poetic "declarations of independence" about the immutability and autotelic status of great art, which looks down on the permanently changing world of the mortals "below." One might add to this Shakespeare's statement on the "marriage of true minds" in his Sonnet 116. The friendship the poem evokes, like a poem itself that does not mean but *is,* in this elevated attitude to immortality, "is an ever-fixed mark,/That looks on tempests, and is never shaken;/ It is the star to every wandering bark,/ Whose worth's unknown,/ although his height be taken."(Shakespeare 1019).

Any statement, however poetically beautiful or memorable it may be, is both incomplete and imperfect, and its beauty can easily be dismissed as untruth. So is MacLeish's famous definition of poetry in the last line of his "Ars Poetica." The beginning of the artistic piece appears to offer competing descriptions about what a poem is and what it looks like.

Thus, like a fruit, a poem should be both "palpable" and "mute," these qualities being open to interpretation. In the "Modernist" context in which they poem was published, its being mute may be seen as detached from any ideological, political compulsion, floating in the ethereal sphere of pure art.

Later on, as MacLeish became involved in the world below, a poem's being cut off from one particular context came

to be challenged increasingly, up to the present time, where everything is ideological, everything is political, with poets and poems saying things about spaces, places, people and shared human experience.

Whether a poem is motionless in time, as MacLeish claims in the same "Ars Poetica," is difficult to ascertain. Some may see a poem as an attempt to stop time and in so doing sketching a motionless picture of that moment. Others may see it as traveling in time connecting people from various places, spaces, cultures.

H.G. Widdowson, although long associated with an apparently contextually-free literary stylistics, was quick to note, as far back as three decades ago, that defining feature of poems as not autotelic and floating above, but moving and being relevant to people's lives: "Although they may express an individual, even idiosyncratic, perception, they are not private but public statements and so make some claim to be relevant to other people's lives" (Widdowson 11). Thus, they are palpable like fruit both in their claim to materiality and appeal to the senses and in their being palpable as far as they touch and express whatever everybody is likely to have felt or thought, but to have failed to express so memorably.

Those who have traveled with John Quinn by means of his poems through space and time, across concrete places at definite times, all over America, especially west of the Mississippi, in a celebration of the great outdoors, are aware that his poems both *mean* and *are*, in addition to being palpable. In order to grasp both their beauty and their meaning, one has to start somewhere in space, place and time and find,

like Ariadne, one thread to move through a poetic universe firmly anchored in the world as we see it, either straightforwardly or through the artistic vision of some of a society's "makers" (what the word "poets" originally meant in Ancient Greek).

Although the author of this volume has not seen those parts of America that John Quinn has been wandering across, an exploration of the poet's texts provided an impulse toward the discovery of fascinating realms, both imagined and reconstructed by means of poetic words. These realms appear to have the vividness of the here and now, even if the reader has never been to those terrestrial places and spaces which are transfigured in the poems.

Quinn's ars poetica, unlike that stated in the eponymous poem by MacLeish, is better approached from the perspective of the traveler through both tangible and elusive chronotopes. His poetry both *is* and *means*, combining the art of allusion and understatement with vivid descriptions of real places and God's creatures, both weird and less so. Does space fall prey to time?, as Bertrand Westphal appears to assume in his *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* (Westphal 10), thus commenting on the special outcomes of space-time intersections. One may safely argue that poems of traveling and exploration, including concrete spatial and temporal coordinates, both freeze the concreteness of moments and places. In John Quinn's poems that this book explores, both constructed space and concrete, empirical place gain strength from their intersection with time, thus allowing the text to both mean and be (in time, space, and place).

The way to aspire toward inclusion in Quinn's "interpretive community" involves, as a starting point, close reading of the texts proper, through an analysis and interpretation of their position in relation to other texts within the economy of the volumes they were published in, in terms of imagery, thematic framework, style. But it also involves getting to know as much as possible the geography, history, customs associated with the places and spaces in America and elsewhere that Quinn has been experiencing.

What follows is part of this endeavor, which may start from a respectful acknowledgment of what young MacLeish firmly believed in the 1920s, with the dramatic reappraisals that he went through during a long literary, military, political journey across the subsequent decades well into the second half of the twentieth century. The difficult question a traveler of the poetic universe of John P. Quinn has to deal with is where to start in this vast literary cartography, in which time, place, space, history are closely intertwined.

The idea to start with the close reading of the poems proper is there all right, but where exactly should one start? With his first published poem? With one important collection that shows the coordinates of further creative developments? It is obvious that one has to take into account, when one wishes to understand as much as possible a poet's creative work, the intricate interactions with literary predecessors, with their contemporary "friends" and "foes," but, very importantly for an author like John Quinn, with the people and places that shaped his life narrative, in which Oregon, and important

people (see, for instance, the central figure in his poem, "In Oregon") he associates with his roots and life narrative.

In addition to roots, it is also important to note the poet's "situatedness" in his home state, his country, but also his links to the rest of the world through his travels of exploration and poetic topography, and Bill Richardson's observations ring true as far as an author like John Quinn is concerned:

> We are "situated" beings, so that a large part of whatever meanings we establish for ourselves has to do with our "being in the world," and objects and entities—including the living beings that we are—do not just exist "in space" but, *qua* Heidegger, constitute space itself and are inconceivable without space; furthermore, we are aware of this facet of our existence and are often self-conscious about it (Richardson 2).

Our being situated in the world will make our experience of traveling beyond anyone's terrestrial limitations, by means of the artistic explorations through which John Quinn turns perceptive artistic flashes of places, spaces and their denizens into poetic stories, a very valuable undertaking. The poems show, reveal, respond, mean. They might mean different things to different people, but there is a lot that the author himself is bound to share with his readers in the special realm of poetry.

In addition to meaning, feeling the poem in the reading experience is just as important as the apparently straightforward process of "deciphering" the poem's significance and referential framework. The experience of engaging with the poem, though, is central to poetry, thus