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The awful truth through the eyes of a poet

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Abstract

In this paper, an analysis of three poems addressed in a series of articles in “Poets on Poetry” Robert W. Blake examines the importance of writing poetry when dealing with the human story. It is the ability to look at humanity’s dark side in the eye and register an unedited emotional response. George Bowering’s “Martin Luther King” is angry, disillusioned and cynical as it presents the day after reaction of the author to assassination in the political world. In “Footnote to the Amnesty Report on Torture” Margaret Atwood gives a gritty punch in the gut response to the horrors of state sanctioned torture. Finally, Dumont sums up the feelings of the oppressed native against the established colonial based establishment in “The Devil’s Language”.

Keywords: Poetry Analysis, Bowering, Atwood, Dumont

詩人の目を通して見た恐ろしい事実：
詩における暗殺，拷問，人種差別

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The unblinking eye of the poet is absolutely necessary in experiencing the emotional truths of the human condition; especially true when viewing the kaleidoscope of tragedy and suffering that exists in the world today. This statement is only exponentially more important when considering the nightmare of events that occurred in the 20th century. George Bowering, Margaret Atwood and Marilyn Dumont are examples of poets who explored the themes of assassination, torture and racism through institutionalized discrimination. In his series of articles in “Poets on Poetry” Robert W. Blake examines the importance of writing poetry when dealing with the human story. It is the ability to look at humanity’s dark side in the eye and register an unedited emotional response. George Bowering’s “Martin Luther King” is angry, disillusioned and cynical as it presents the day after reaction of the author to assassination in the political world. In “Footnote to the Amnesty Report on Torture” Margaret Atwood gives a gritty *punch in the gut* response to the horrors of state sanctioned torture. Finally, Dumont sums up the feelings of the oppressed native against the established colonial based establishment in “The Devil’s Language”. These poems all examine moral dilemmas, as Blake argues, “When one writes poetry, one reconstructs reality”(16) and therefore provide a perspective that may not have been there before. The connection between the right words helps explore humanity’s demons and our moral compass for dealing with them.

George Bowering’s poem “Martin Luther King” is a raw response to murder in the political realm, while also highlighting the manifested cynicism this type of action naturally brings to the surface. The poem was written on April 5, 1968, the day after the assassination of Dr. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis, Tennessee. King was the unequivocal leader of the Civil Rights Movement and through his leadership African Americans made much social progress towards equality in America against centuries of injustice. Despite this progress a white man murders King. What went through George Bowering’s head that day, as a white man, is hard to say, however, the content and phrases of the poem shed some light on the matter.

The words are angry, disillusioned, and cynical. The speaker of the poem goes into a rant of past examples of assassination during the turbulent 1960s. In the first line, the question, “But where is the flesh of Lumumba...” (l 1) is an allusion to Patrice Lumumba the first democratically elected prime minister of Republic of the Congo. He is executed secretly on the night of January 17, 1961 and buried in an unmarked grave. The next two references are to American assassinations, which have links to the poem’s namesake, Martin Luther King. Bowering refers to a friend living in Oregon, which is “part of America, where Malcolm was shot”. (l 8) Malcolm X is shot and killed on February 21, 1965 while giving a civil rights speech. The indirect wording of “I give to Oswald...” (l 10) alludes to Lee Harvey Oswald who on November 23, 1963 assassinates President John F. Kennedy, who is a key ally of King’s in the Civil Rights Movement. The final example is “El Che” (l 19) who is Ernesto “Che” Guevara who is executed by Bolivian troops on October 9, 1967. All of the assassinations are in recent living memory for George Bowering and each flow into his poem when Martin Luther King Jr. is gunned

down in 1968. A sense of intimate knowledge of these events is present as the poem progresses. Robert Blake asserts that “in a way poetry is a witness” (17) and these real life examples of violence create an emotional response from the reader, these are not words of poetic creativity; they are from the evening news.

Bowering digs deeper into the culture of racism and fear with references to discontent. Racism makes its appearance after Oswald with an off-collar type of remark, which asks, “what will they signify to whatever Asian America in our future?” (ll 12–13) A fear of a growing Asian population on the west coast of North America is a possible root of this comment. It is interesting as it does not have a real place in this poem about assassination, but the speaker is ranting and therefore anger is spilling out. Fear is something everyone felt during the 1960s, as there are no shortage of examples of chaos and mayhem and social upheaval. The bombing campaigns of domestic terrorist groups in the United States were not uncommon. The speaker makes a point of fear when noting, “Did I see five black men laughing as they left the YMCA today, and was I not afraid of a bomb...” (ll 15–17) which addresses the concept of being afraid. This is an irrational and ironic fear because black people were not the ones behind the bombing campaigns of the 1960s. White supremacist groups like the Klu Klux Klan and ultra left wing radical political groups were responsible.

In Margaret Atwood’s “Footnote to the Amnesty Report on Torture” the grim dark world of torture is pushed into the face of all who read or hear this poem. Quickly the myth of the torture chamber is dispelled, “no opera set or sexy chains and leather goods from the glossy porno magazines, no thirties horror dungeon” (ll 3–5) in this room. In fact the torture chamber is quite ordinary, as Atwood puts it, “more like one of the seedier, British Railway stations...” (ll 9–10) This description is frightening because it is real, we can imagine being in one of those dirty buildings. The ordinary setting makes the torture tangible and then Margaret Atwood puts a simple everyday cleaning man front and centre in this room of horror. Nobody wants to discuss torture, see no evil hear no evil is the common approach. He is just a guy with a job; pretty regular except during his daily routine he encounters the following: “every morning the same vomit, the same shed teeth, the same piss and liquid shit, the same panic.” (ll 26–28) A sense of revulsion is natural, and that is what Atwood is setting up. The simple man, represents everybody, anyone of us could be in his place, and like the him we would find ways of suppressing the horror we bear witness to. The man is “glad it isn’t him” (l 47) and “tries not to listen” (ll 57–58) but he is human and therefore afraid and ashamed. In Blake’s article “The Morality of Poetry” he cites Valerie Martin a novelist who says it is through the story of a poet or writer that she come to know what she does. Blake quotes Valerie saying, “they (poets) talk straight sometimes, right to the heart, but they have always a deep, symbolic understanding of reality that can dictate what happened on a conscious level.” (19) Atwood is making these connections in her poem. Her simple everyday man caught in the middle of an atrocious situation, he is afraid and alone, only highlight the despicable psychological impact torture has on a human being.

Unlike Bowering and Atwood, Marilyn Dumont's poem "The Devil's Language" is deeply personal as it is about her. Dumont is a Native Canadian Indian of Cree/Metis ancestry. Her poem deals with the endemic institutionalized racism in government of Canada and its effect on her people. Dumont's poem is about perception of culture, meaning Cree Indian v. Anglo European. This is directed at the "Great White way" (1 2) or Caucasian culture which as a Native Indian child she was forced to adapt to in government run schools. The word "white" is mentioned repeatedly to make sure the focus is never lost. Dumont says that, "the great white way has measured, judged and assessed me all my life." (1 4-5) Now as an adult writer she is letting the frustration of a lifetime of racist attitudes pour out onto the page. She addresses the anger of being told to shut up and not cause trouble, "one wrong sound and you're shelved in the Native American section." (1 10) Being considered dumb if you can't speak English, Dumont quite angry and rightfully so. The Native Indian struggle in Canada is not given enough attention and often dismissed by Caucasian culture. Robert Blake points out "poetry conveys the human condition... and is for telling people about things they might not have thought about before." (20) Dumont is bringing light to the Cree Indian condition.

Bowering, Atwood and Dumont all bring forth painful themes in an unapologetic emotional format. Poetry is supposed to be raw and unedited in order to reveal the human story, regardless of how ugly and horrible. In arguing about the importance of poetry Blake cited the example of Cold War era Polish dissident poet Czeslaw Milosz who wrote, "You who harmed a simple man, do not feel secure: for a poet remembers." (17) This is echoed in George Bowering's writing philosophy, which he states, "The poet is the person waiting under the tree, waiting for lightning to strike. Waiting with pen in hand." The themes of assassination, torture and racism and discrimination are painful. "Poetry is like a lens or prism through which one views the world in a heightened way." (20) The unblinking eye of the poet ensures we see what is necessary.

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