



Poética, tradición y disidencia estética en la poesía contemporánea

Entrevista a James Byrne

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RESUMEN

El poeta inglés James Byrne (Buckinghamshire, 1977) conversó sobre su poética con Alí Calderón. Actualmente, Byrne enseña poesía en Cornell University. Ha escrito *Everything that is Broken Up Dances* (2015), *White Coins* (2015), y *Blood/Sugar* (2009). Actualmente es el editor internacional de Arc Publications y de la revista de poesía *The Wolf*.

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ABSTRACT

English poet James Byrne (Buckinghamshire, 1977) discussed his poetics with Alí Calderón. Byrne currently teaches poetry at Cornell University. He has written *Everything That Is Broken Up Dances* (2015), *White Coins* (2015), and *Blood/Sugar* (2009). He is currently the international editor for Arc Publications and the poetry magazine *The Wolf*.

Alí Calderón

We can think that there are certain universal principles in poetry, but that there also exist –according to each country and language’s literary tradition- certain peculiarities to value a poem. From there I ask, what values does a good contemporary poem has?

James Byrne

I grew up with the British curriculum which is, in and of itself, extremely limiting. William Wordsworth, Philip Larkin, Wilfred Owen, all those great men.

There may have been a Hughes poem that lit up my fifteen year old eyes, but that was the closest it got to contemporary. At school, poetry was taught as some kind of anti-imagination memory test, which turned me off.

When I moved to London a few years later, I found the Poetry Library in London. It opened me up to something denied at school; a range of aesthetic modes and forms, the full artistic palette. This helped me consider that there are various ways to write something ‘good’, depending on how you use the palette. I still believe this.

Maybe the word ‘value’ attempts to suppress the imagination. What is valuable in art? Russian oligarch, Roman Abramovich owns more Picassos than any one individual. Do you think he cares about Picasso’s ‘blue period’?

Of course, most of all, I am interested in language—its ideas, its song(s), its musicality, its mystery, its valuelessness. What one country might value in terms of poetic aesthetics could be less important than another and national demographics of any aesthetics are questionable, because all nations have their poetry wars and propagandist agendas and nationalist interests. Whilst these things be considered they might also be contested.

Could ‘good’ in this case mean being of use, as in *doing good*? Poetry as activism.

Alí Calderón

What is dated? What has stopped being prestigious in poetry writing?

James Byrne

The cliché of what goes around comes around wagers in here. I would have thought that overly talky, bland egocentric confessionalism or prosaic logic-chopping (to use Pound’s brutal term) might have seen its day, but there are, of course, many lauded poems published

every year like this; entire books. So there must be a demand for it. And there's certainly a conglomeration of literary corporatist prizes ready to pin on their rosettes. Some people even tune up their poems to receive these kinds of accolades, which seems absurd to me. Like an orchestra tuning up for the gallery and not the symphony or even the string quartet.

I suppose the sonnet never goes away in English speaking languages.

Is rhyme a crime? (full, head-on-collision rhyme has, at least, long been suspicious).

It seems to me, just when you rule something out, it can reappear, as if cultivated to appear new. Still, what can we write about beyond love, sex, death and nature? And how much material there is in these subjects!

Alí Calderón

If we assume that tradition is not inherited but chosen, Who are the poets you learned to write poetry from and what did they teach you?

James Byrne

Vladimir Mayakovksy taught me ludic play and satire. Paul Celan, that you could write in another language and change it. Mina Loy invited to hear perfect pitch. Of what it is to create, as she advocated, 'the sound of an idea'. British poets Ted Hughes and Geoffrey Hill first suckered me in, to then warn me away with their British tribalism. Peter Redgrove asked me to celebrate the mystery of dream. The revelation of not knowing.

Many contemporary poets constantly make me learn more about poetry. Actually, there are so many good poets writing today, there's no excuse to be down on poetry in a contemporary sense. You just simply have to find the great poets. Of the many I could mention who write in English, I have been influenced by Forrest Gander, Valzhyna Mort, Sandeep Parmar, Sylvia Legris, Niall McDevitt, Bhanu Kapil and Ilya Kaminsky in recent years.

Alí Caderón

From the technical point of view, what are you interested in doing in poems?

James Byrne

Everything for the poem. But, generally, I'm interested in music, collage, image, film, rupture, disorientation, flux, eavesdropping and jumpcutting.

(note: these are not technical terms necessarily. So I might add...the line (as weight/breath), the stanza (as room/space), the break (as tear/hinge)).

Alí Calderón

According to your perspective, where is poetry going?

James Byrne

Sales are up, which is good for publishers and the idea of a readership. However, as I've written previously, the mainstream continues to be the movement that doesn't want to move anywhere (aesthetically, it often seems terrified of complexity—this is about written art as an affront to literacy, as far as I can see—though the world at large is ever-complex).

Poetry will be fine as long as there's a planet left to publish it on. People will always want to write them, we know that much. Sustaining a readership and supporting publishers whilst doing this feels key. We cannot rely on the State, with its anti-imagination strategies and antiseptic think tanks. My worry is that publishers die off and there's all this impressive work that is out there, but nowhere to read it.

Alí Calderón

What is poetry's role in contemporary societies?

James Byrne

Perhaps this relates to the end of my previous answer: I was talking with a friend this morning about how there's funding pockets opening up in England (at a time of funding cuts) for poetic language as digital performance of performing within a social space. Poems commissioned for gaming, for VR headgear, poems on empty public spaces in deprived areas. Poems on billboards or underpasses where once graffiti ruled. Good as this may seem, it's also a movement away from the book, which is a concern. And it might be a way for State

budgets to redistribute funds away from book-based or publishing projects whilst washing their own hands by saying it's still support for literacy or literature projects. I never take the State too seriously when they pretend to be protecting literacy or education. Look at how higher education has been sold off.

Additionally, I suppose there's always the idea of poetry as having a healing function, which most people still sell or push. But that's not why I do it. I do it because I cannot stop doing it. There is no cure. It's all or nothing.

Alí Calderón

Let me make an analogy with music. When you write your poems, what singer or band would you like to sound like?

James Byrne

What a bold question! Well, I've never thought of it when writing a poem. The song and the singer is the poem itself.

Anything but Coldplay.

Just this morning, I was teaching Nathaniel Mackey's poetry and he talks about his language being led in by the rhythms and pulse of music (he's probably talking about pulse through Victor Zuckerkandl's theory in *Sound and Symbol*).

Interestingly, Mackey said he can write after receiving a rhythm from a song in a language he doesn't understand, which reveals the connectiveness of song but also perhaps the dangers of appropriating, as Mackey himself would be aware of.

Often, I find that there's a rhythm waiting for me to step into on the blank page, so I don't so much as stare at its vast empty space, I listen into the song that it wants me to play. A lot of my poetry comes from listening.

Sound itself is a kind of language in the sense that something can be transmitted by sound. But what can sound transmit to the body, to thinking itself? (this goes back to Loy's 'sound of an idea' but also Pound's 'Logopoeia'—though I prefer the idea of dancing with the imagination than the 'intellect').

Alí Calderón

When it comes to tones, themes, topics or construction procedures, what can contemporary poetry in your own language contribute to international poetry?

James Byrne

I suppose we look to the literary canon to keep score here. But what is canonised and what isn't interests me. Curriculums exist somewhere between propaganda and narrative distortion.

Usually it's the outsiders who interest me. However, to be read internationally they'd have to be translated, right?

If you look at Irish poetry (I'm half Irish), then there must be a small flock of Seamus Heaney translations in Spanish. But Michael Hartnett is the more interesting Irish poet, to my mind. Heaney is a brilliant technician, yes, but he never wrote anything mad enough, so I can't trust him. It makes too much sense.

I used to talk about this with Niall McDevitt, another Irish poet who, sadly, passed away recently. Niall was one of the great Irish poets of the 21st Century; someone who should be more internationally known, he was an internationalist himself having read in Iraq, written about Babylon, Jerusalem and Palestine, as well as frequently outwitting the English, as an Irishman living in London. But Niall wasn't invited to suchandsuch by the relevant Arts Council, etc. so you probably have never heard of him.

The most interesting poems that emerge from any one culture or language are the ones that don't necessarily replicate, essentialise or try to embody that cultural experience. They are also outsiders amid the humdrum of national frameworks and ideologies and are suspicious of these (in their writing too, often).

Bhanu Kapil is researching Margaret Thatcher's archive in Cambridge at the moment. That's the kind of 'contribution' I want to read. Sandeep Parmar has just rewritten Faust. Ishion Hutchinson sent me an exceptional essay recently about his trip to Kenya. A Jamaican poet writing about anything they wish to, beyond any kind of national or cultural framing, but choosing to contribute to this also if they so wish (as Ishion has).

Language is a moveable feast that must keep moving. It is our best contribution to a shared idea of humanity. English is only part of this. One of the exciting things about poetic language is that many of the most exciting writers are *not* writing in English.