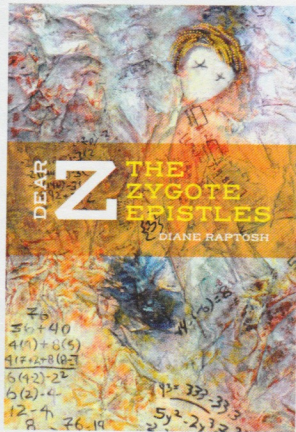


Essay: Poetry is where the action is by Diane Raptosh



Let me just say it: poetry is where the action is. Poetry as rhetoric, poetry as philosophy, poetry as art, poetry as cultural production. . . . But what is at stake in adopting one of these classifications to the exclusion of the others? The treatment of poetry as a branch of history or culture is based on the assumption that the poetry of a period is a good index to that period's overall intellectual and ideological currents. Still, as critics from Aristotle to Theodor Adorno have understood, the idea that imaginative writing is an index to its time has the potential to ignore the work's powers of invention, transfiguration, and resistance. Aristotle makes this point in the ninth chapter of the *Poetics*:

The difference between a historian and poet is not that one writes in prose and the other in verse. . . . The real difference is this, that one tells what happened and the other what might happen. For this reason poetry is something more philosophical and serious than history, because poetry tends to give general truths while history gives particular facts. . . . It is clear, then . . . that the poet must be a "maker" not of verses but of stories, since he is a poet in virtue of his "representation," and *what he represents is action* [emphasis mine].

Etruscan Press has as mainstay of its mission to produce works that "reshape the literary and cultural histories of which we are a part." As a three-time Etruscan-published writer, I know my books have found precisely the right home. The above notions built into poetics—of invention and action, transformation and resistance—are what propel all my work.

I've long been having presentiments about where this country's been headed, and it looked bleak even when many (myself included) were exulting over the historic election of Barack Obama. An armchair sociologist, I'd tracked for decades the statistics about increasing income inequality and racial divides, while training my eye on malignant cultural forces such as enforced forgetting and spectacle—brought to you by . . . that great, glowing separation machine: the TV. Based on facts and intuitions about what was likely to happen in a burgeoning new Gilded Age, I felt I had to leap into action. So I created what became the first work in my verse trilogy, *American Amnesiac* (Etruscan 2013), a book-length dramatic monologue "spoken" by a former Goldman Sachs exec. A straight, affluent white man in his sixties, he is discovered lying on a bench in Denver's Civic Center Park. Cuffed with the nametag "John Doe," he is taken to a respite home, where I task him with the difficult work of rethinking self and nation-state—driven by what I hoped was an *everyman's* egalitarian impulse toward decency for all. You're right if you're thinking that was a lot to ask of one book of poems: to alter the psychic trajectory of a country such that it would more truly esteem the *we*.

So when the power elite decided to pursue a path that snubbed this imperative, I did what I could. I wrote the trilogy's second book: *Human Directional* (2016). Here, the poems' speaker scours human consciousness "to find new tacks for striving to get by" in an age of what she dubs *pre-post hope*. To resist how a "given system for living / strong-arms its way into being / the only

possible one,” the human sign offers one sure means to begin to flourish in a compassionless landscape: to let singing *catch*. Or else to ballroom dance! Alternatively, she suggests that maybe the most we can do is to “leave the world little by little // in order to stay here at all, / waiting to put the goods in the hands of a new clan mother.” As with *Amnesiac*, I tried to make the words sing. In both books, I tried to “cop a feel of the globe / in mega-dimension.” In both, I tried to make the word *deed*. This second book in the trilogy ends with the poem “World Upside Down”—the speaker walking on her hands outdoors, sniffing clover laced in industrial bug spray. *Human Directional* ends by offering up a “splice of blue grass” in the form of the archaic noun *inwit*.

You likely already know its ancient meanings: inward knowledge or understanding. Middle English for *mind* | *reason* | *intellect* and *soul* | *spirit* | *feeling*, it is also another term for conscience and consciousness. As such, *inwit* suggests the inner senses and interior sensibility: that collection of inner faculties the poet sets store by. *Inwit* is, by my reckoning, the very womb in which the poet thrives. As I’ve watched the 21st century inch into its pupa phase, I’ve felt this womb-world—the very core of human selfhood—to be increasingly under siege, and by the usual suspects: neoliberal capitalism—its private tongues of money, its culture of cruelty and objectification; screens “growing noses” to groom us; the offshore of memory to the machine. It was thus, rooted in *inwit*, or what I call in *Dear Z* “mind’s endometrium,” that I began to wonder whether/why/whence new human beings should be brought into the world at all. It seems the central question of philosophy since the beginning of time should have been *Ought I bring a child into this everlastingly difficult sphere?* Nearly three decades ago, I answered this question in the affirmative. Twice. I would make this same choice again in an instant, for the ethos of mothering—available to all genders—taught me to love my children, yes, and to extend that level of care to all beings. That I chose motherhood (one daughter by birth, one by adoption) in no way diminishes my interest in sifting through questions around reproduction. So I opened these up as widely as possible for the triad’s finale, *Dear Z: The Zygote*

Epistles. In these verse-letters, I keep a newly fertilized zygote in a state of suspended animation and appoint a well-rounded, if a bit unconventional, clan mother (the zygote’s aunt) to introduce him/her/it to the zeitgeist. By such means, the aunt depicts for Z—“the great human *maybe*”—the wild ride of taking on and hanging onto selfhood. The cosmic clan mother/aunt, in turn, symbolizes the feminine principle trying to pierce and mend the wreckage generations of patriarchy have wrought. To this end, the aunt admits she feels “vaguely parental” toward everyone. She angles toward cultural transformation. Like John Doe, she knows *recite* and *resist* often sip coffee together. Hence, she means action: visioning worlds with the think/feeling fist that is *inwit*.

Diane Raptosh’s fourth book of poetry, *American Amnesiac*, (Etruscan Press) was longlisted for the 2013 National Book Award and was a finalist for the Housatonic Book Award. The recipient of three fellowships in literature from the Idaho Commission on the Arts, she served as the Boise Poet Laureate (2013) as well as the Idaho Writer-in-Residence (2013-2016), the highest literary honor in the state. In 2018 she received the Idaho Governor’s Arts Award in Excellence. A highly active ambassador for poetry, she has given poetry workshops everywhere from riverbanks to maximum security prisons. She teaches creative writing and runs the program in Criminal Justice/Prison Studies at The College of Idaho. Her most recent collection of poems, *Human Directional*, was released by Etruscan Press in 2016.

