

SON ET LUMIÈRE: RE-ENCHANTMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL OBLIGATION

IN MICHAEL SYMMONS ROBERTS' *DRYSALTER***Abstract**

A particular Western secularisation and disenchantment narrative proposes that the post-Enlightenment promotion of rationalism, science and technology entails the abandonment of “the great enchanted garden” (Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, 240), the sacred understanding of the world and “the fulness thereof” (*KJV*, Psalm 24:1). Drawing on the work of Max Weber, Friedrich Schiller, C.S. Lewis and Rowan Williams, this paper investigates disenchantment and re-enchantment through the application of the senses of sight and hearing in English poet Michael Symmons Roberts’ prize-winning 2013 collection *Drysalter*. This paper focuses on five separate but interrelated poems placed throughout the collection, all set in “Paradise / an old zoo, abandoned / by its keepers” (*Drysalter*, 20)—and, I argue, collocated with Weber’s enchanted garden, Eden, and planet earth. I suggest that these poems use ‘sight’ as a metaphor of a rational and enlightened, but partial, human understanding of the world, and offer ‘hearing’ (of nature’s enchanted voice or sound) as the necessary complement that permits true, full comprehension and stewardship of creation. With its echo of Schiller, Roberts’ final ‘Paradise/Zoo’ poem resurrects extinct bat species through a “son et lumière” show, and demonstrates that re-enchantment can only take place in the simultaneity of “son”, nature’s sound, and the “lumière” of enlightened human understanding. It is in the holding together of these two understandings where Christian responsibility towards God’s creation lies.

Key words

Enchantment, re-enchantment, dis-enchantment, environment, stewardship, Eden, creation

Introduction and overview

Michael Symmons Roberts' 2013 150-poem collection *Drysalter* is bookend by two mirror-image poems: 'World into Fragments' and 'Fragments into World'. These opening and closing poems present, first, the unmaking of the world, then its re-making, to a soundtrack. 'World into Fragments'ⁱ is our world's destruction to cacophonous accompaniment: detailing "white noise", "too much shrill", "ear-splitting" (3). *Drysalter*'s final poem 'Fragments into World' describes melodious singing into being a new creation: "A note resolves, hum becomes chime" tells the opening line. The poem ends with "no one dares to sing a note" (152), not wishing, perhaps, to compete with, or corrupt, the perfection of creation's song.

Within the context of this larger chorus of *Drysalter* I focus particularly on five separate poems, which I refer to as the 'Paradise/Zoo' poems: 'Elegy for John Milton', 'The Tourists', and three poems each titled 'The Original Zoo'. The action of all five poems centres, with its Edenic overtones, in "Paradise / an old zoo, abandoned / by its keepers" (20) to which two tourists return and explore derelict enclosures, and are confronted with the consequences of generations of neglect and loss. These poems not only cohere as their own sequence, but act as a microcosm of the larger conceptual arc of dis-enchantment to re-enchantment of *Drysalter*. Through these five poems, I explore the thesis that Symmons Roberts' poems seem to propose: the natural world is inherently enchanted; and dis-enchantment introduced by humanity's propensity to rationality not only occludes creation's voice, it ultimately results in humanity's dereliction of duty towards creation.

Enchantment and disenchantment

Max Weber, writing in 1920 called the pre-modern world "a great enchanted garden"ⁱⁱ. Prior to that, in a 1917 lecture, he described the "fate of our times as characterised by rationalisation and intellectualisation and, above all, by the 'dis-enchantment of the world'"ⁱⁱⁱ— a term whose

origins lie in the phrase “Die entgötterte Natur” from Friedrich Schiller’s 1788 poem ‘Die Götter Griechenlands’, the ‘The Gods of Greece’. That phrase is variously translated as, for example, “the dis-godding of nature” or the “de-magicisation of the world”^{iv}. Schiller’s poem, according to Sarah Lyons, reads as a “lament for a sacralised vision of the cosmos, teeming with divinity and spirits, obtained before modern reason alienated us from nature and ourselves; [Schiller’s] classical gods are metaphors for an authentic religious experience”^v. Towards the end of his poem Schiller concludes that the only possible re-enchanting, or re-godding, of nature is through a combination of music and image: “Now only in the fairy land of song”, Schiller reasons, “still lives the image for which we yearn”.

This concept of song is where enchantment’s roots lie. The Latin root of the word ‘cantus’ means incantation or song^{vi}. And, as David Brown writes, such “enchantment can, of course, very easily suggest spells and magic”^{vii}. C.S. Lewis in his Narnia books illustrates this concept with “a magic deeper still”^{viii} that precedes and supersedes human knowledge. From these definitions it might not be too great a step to consider Genesis’ use of the repetitive, incantatory “And God said” and “And God called” as the ‘enspelling’ of creation.

If enchantment is a form of ‘in-singing’, then dis-enchantment is erasure, loss, or ‘overdubbing’ of that original song—or perhaps a collective inability to hear the song. Charles Taylor suggests that rationality and the scientific method have replaced a pre-modern sense of order where “we were not at the top”^{ix} with, in Lyons’ words, “the nature of modern subjectivity... [one] largely impervious to religious possibility” (874). Dis-enchantment, then, is not only the antonym but indicates a certain evolving, or updating, of a pre-modern, attuned-to-the-sacred, mindset. Lyons reminds us that ‘dis-enchantment’ has further connotations: as “disillusionment, disappointment, or embitterment” and becomes a byword for “modernity and its discontents” (879). This sense of pessimism is “often evoked as shorthand for a particular narrative of Western secularisation” (873) and environmental degradation.

Sound and sight in the 'Paradise/Zoo' poems

Between those bookending poems of *Drysalter* there is a sense, as Symmons Roberts himself says, "that everything which happens [in the collection]...takes place in a world of brokenness"^x. *Drysalter*'s world is clearly a broken one. It is also a fallen one: in 'World into Fragments' everything has come crashing, noisily, down. And when the cacophony has stilled all we are left with—in the final lines—is sight:

And when it stops
we see for real, as if through mud and spit. (3)

Fallen as spiritual concept is physical reality. Nature's enchantment corrupts into noise, and then dissipates completely. "We", humanity, can now only rely on what can be seen, what can be rationalised and explained.

'Elegy for John Milton', the first of the five 'Paradise/Zoo' poems not only describes the death of Milton, it echoes the early chapters of Genesis. It, too, details the abandonment of an enchanted garden—perhaps Weber's. Paradise is lost. Milton's death is symbolic:

[He died:] at odds with England and its gods, the blind
revolutionary and his good old cause
defeated (20)

He died at odds with, as Weber's diagnosis might suggest, the "fate of our times". As the blind poet dies, the brokenness begins; Milton's cause the sustaining of paradise. As in 'World into Fragments' cacophony portrays the end of enchantment; only this time it is a triumphant human cacophony of "sellers, buskers, beggars". Vainly, nature competes: a burst of "dog duets before they, too, are drowned out by street noise of "car alarms, twenty-four-hour news, / evacuations, bomb scares, marching troops" (20).

In just three stanzas Symmons Roberts has moved us 400 years: from Milton's 1674 death to the 21st century. The symbolic Eden/paradise image becomes a contemporary issue. The original stewards have left. Metonymically, all humanity has caused: "the silent garden / run to seed" (20). This is a silencing of, and referencing, what Milton himself describes as the

calling forth—the enchantment—of creation in *Paradise Lost* Book VII:

Heaven opened wide
Her ever-during gates, harmonious sound
On golden hinges moving, to let forth
The King of Glory in his powerful word
And Spirit to create new worlds.^{xi}

The poem finishes with a kind of wreath laying. The last stanza is given to naming, in a liturgical fashion, the flora, the weeds, taking over the derelict zoo. Here there is a parallel with Michael Longley's equally elegiac poem 'The Ice-Cream Man'. Naming the flowers in both poems read as a recitation of a spell, an attempt to re-conjure creation. Possibly with some success: the weeds in the abandoned zoo are "on the edge of evolving into song" (20)—in mourning, perhaps, for Milton. Or leaving us with a feeling that paradise may be re-enchanted, be regained.

In a voyeuristic, contemporary, set up, 'The Tourists' opens with two sightseers, armed with a guidebook, discovering paradise:

Baedeker's *Eden* guides us, calls it
coolly 'the original menagerie', viz. prototype
of every caged collection. We enter. (24)

As all good guidebooks must, *Eden* would have been written when the zoo was in full song—the world filled with the sound of enchantment, when the guidebook could "call" and be heard. Now in this fallen, dis-enchanted place the tourists do not hear; they only read and they see.

It is the first employment in this 'Paradise/Zoo' set of explicitly religious vocabulary. Yet the tourists are immediately confronted with a distinctly un-Edenic vista: a ruined ecosystem. The delineation and orderliness between every species in the animal kingdom has blurred and mutated. First described as "broken cages / ravaged by years of unchecked flora" in 'Elegy for John Milton', 'The Tourists' details further the dereliction of paradise:

Sad o sad the state now: reptile tanks
shattered by flame and frost, great apes
long evolved into salesmen, medics, bankers. (24)

The creatures contained within, which the guidebook indicates should be there, have disappeared. Reading *Eden* becomes a kind of reverse naming of the animals—a perverse calling creation out of being. The named creatures have disappeared—"Snow leopards—a must-see, says the guide— / have seen the lights of town and sloped" (24). The tourists cannot reconcile what they see in the guidebook with what they see in front of them. With the enchanted song of nature extinguished, now even their sense of sight is unreliable.

Yet these day-trippers privilege their ability to see. The mesmerising trees are captured on film; the zoo sign is framed in typical tourist fashion. It is as if the tourists overcompensate for their deafness to the natural world: their camera cannot create, merely re-create, document each disappeared species.

Further exploration reveals the aquarium is in better shape than the cages and tanks. It holds both water and sea life, although that sea life is barely recognisable:

In the long-abandoned zoo, evolution has run wild.
Emperor, rockhopper, galapagos and little blue
are distant echoes in these fins, tails, gills, these minute
bee-tight fish-birds swarming, feeding on reflections. (29)

The sounds of the penguins' names are the only remaining echoes of creation in what swarms now, starling-like. Here the shortfall between human obligation to look after the natural world and what has actually happened is represented by a physical one:

I press my face against the aqua-tunnel wall,
so thick the glass that all is warped by it, and watch
them swell and swarm around me, darting at my lips. (29)

The barrier's glass magnifies the crime. Such a distorted view that humans have of the rest of nature, and the separation we have from it, prompts a moment of existential crisis in one of the tourists. He wishes he could give in "and become one speck in a sky-storm, / single pointillist pen-stroke in a murmuration" (29). Something within the tourist has stirred.

"Murmuration" is not only the collective noun for starlings, whose swarms are evoked by the penguins' movements, but provides that sense of a barely-audible, but clearly present,

voice. For the first time since the “dog’s duet” there is a suggestion that nature’s voice is about to be heard. Momentarily the tourist wants to “swim with them” and restore—baptismally—his place in the natural world. But the glass is impregnable. The divide too great. Such realisation can only result in physical surrender: the tourist outstretches his palms. The poem ends anticlimactically and pathetically, the protagonist lamenting, emphasising once more the visual: “Then before my very eyes they shimmer into smirr.”

After his solo aquatic reflections, the tourist—in ‘The Original Zoo II’—re-joins his companion to explore the tanks and cages. Working their way down one long corridor-like sentence, the tourists are confronted with the future of their own species. Enclosures for reptiles and mammals evolve into human habitats: These areas too, as with the animals’ cages, show degradation and loss. The humans have upped and left, nothing but a note on the boardroom table saying: “we base our estimates on current trends” (42) to confirm their existence.

In the wider context of the ‘Paradise/Zoo’ poems this half-written memo is a powerful prediction, and stark warning, of what—environmentally—might happen next. The lone tourist’s flicker of existential realisation returns:

And all along we look the harder at
each micro-climate, waiting for a flicker in
the leaves, a cough, a call, some sign that we
might match the brute strength of our homes. (42)

For the first time since Milton’s death and the loss of paradise, the tourists both see and hear. Desperation precipitates a willingness to listen. It is a pivotal moment in the ‘Paradise/Zoo’ set: the shock of confrontation with the loss of their own selves has awoken an intrinsic but hitherto dormant instinct to listen for a sound from the natural world.

Symmons Roberts sets up an intriguing conclusion. On one hand the tourists intently seek assurance from the natural world; on the other, they want such assurance to be on their terms, a comparison with the robustness and longevity of their enlightened physical and conceptual constructs. That the tourists wait for “some sign” is given a separate stanza suggests

that this might be a fresh approach, an appeal to something beyond human rationality. A hint of recognition that as a species we are vulnerable too. This poem returns us to Weber: firstly how might we listen again to nature's enchantment; secondly, how can we use hearing, along with enlightened sight, to re-enchant our garden?

The pattern of loss by now is predictable: each area either home to a weirdly-evolved species, or the empty cage of an escaped or extinct creature. When they get to the bat enclosure in 'The Original Zoo III', the tourists expect more of the same. They "steel themselves to witness / what this jungle has become since we last looked" (68). When they last looked—they have been here before after all—in tune with enchantment they could both see and hear: they recall the bats' "loquaciousness" and high-pitched "frequency":

I remember Fruit Bat Forest by repute:
a hangar sealed round perma-night,
equatorial and fetid, thick with insect clouds
that hide the Livingstone's, Rodrigues, Seba's
endless loops of flight, loquacious
at a frequency above us. (68)

But then the volta, and a shift in tone, and a surprising discovery:

Instead, we find darkness is no darkness,
but a son et lumière, the bats reborn as beasts
of light, high above the stench of rotten fruit. (68)

The tourists suddenly realise the anticipated darkness of the enclosure is replaced by a flood of light and sound—a "son et lumière" show in which the, presumably extinct, bats are restored in new reality. The language echoes Psalm 139, "the night shall be light about me... even the night shineth as day"; the image is faintly evocative of the 'bat-sign', where, as a call for Batman's help, his bat logo is projected via a modified searchlight onto the skies above Gotham City. Here the "son et lumière" is less a cry for help, and more a display of magnificence. The tourists watch a light show in which the bats are both audible and visible. It is a fuller sensory manifestation of the creatures—and of creation—in which even "the stench of rotten fruit", albeit well below, is still present.

Conclusions

The how and why of the projection equipment's appearance is only important within a disenchanted framework. Brown argues that such rational explanation is but one way to understanding. "The question remains", he ponders, "why proof should be seen as the only way of experiencing the divine impact on our world. Instead of always functioning as an inference, there was the possibility that a divine structure is already implicit in certain forms of experience of the natural world" (21-22). To seek a rational explanation for the vision of the "son et lumière" show is to deny an understanding and appreciation of what it is doing. It is an operation—in all senses—that combines sight and sound, the machinery for enchantment and dis-enchantment to co-exist.

For here, at the conclusion of the 'Paradise/Zoo' poems, is Symmons Roberts' presentation of re-enchantment: it is the fusing of human rationality with an innate, unquantifiable, sense of *something* experienced. Rowan Williams argues something similar about this dualism: that "human reasoning in its proper and fullest sense requires an awareness of our participation in the material processes of the world and... a sense of its own involvement in what it cannot finally master"^{xii}. Sight does not replace sound, nor vice versa. For Symmons Roberts, like Schiller in 'The Gods of Greece', re-enchantment can only operate in the fusion of song and image. The song of enchantment and the image of human understanding come together in a re-creation that is necessarily *in a different form* to that which is lost.

Williams' argument pushes towards Christian environmental responsibility as an approach that "has somehow to hold these two languages together": language of dis-enchanted rationality and of enchanted understanding. Matthew Dickerson and David O'Hara draw on Lewis' essay 'Talking of Bicycles' to illustrate this:

For those in the disenchanted age with respect to nature, the purple [of faraway mountains] may be written off or explained away in terms of optics and physics and the properties of light. For the re-enchanted, the physics of light is not dismissed or ignored,

but neither are the feelings brought about by the shade of purple and all its connotations simply because they can be explained.^{xiii}

A dis-enchanted conversation about the natural world necessarily cannot stray far from evolutionary science. Nor do Symmons Roberts' poems: the "unchecked flora //...on the edge of evolving into song"; "great apes / long evolved into salesmen, medics, bankers"; "In the long-abandoned zoo, evolution has run wild."; the evolutionary process portrayed as a list of habitats from sand to branches through ape and monkey cages to human habitats of "box rooms with unmade beds". That this collection's poems simultaneously hold nature's enchantment *and* scientific, evolutionary, explanations of creation is, in all senses, "son et lumière", is Williams' "two languages".

Present, still, under the "son et lumière" is "the stench of rotting fruit". The machinery might re-enchant but it cannot erase consequences of improper environmental stewardship. With this in mind, this 'Paradise/Zoo' sequence, indeed the whole of *Drysalter*, considers where "current trends" may lead; and it insists on a balance of our reliance on enlightened understanding with Schiller's urge to re-god nature.

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