John Burnside: Poets and Other Animals

John Burnside’s poetry made an immediate impact on readers through its intense focus on mysterious states of landscape and mind. The “spirituality” that lies behind them is not conventionally Christian, but radical and often disturbing. Here he discusses some of the sources of his prolific output, and his concern for a Northern ecology based on a changed relationship between self and world.

Keywords: Ecology; religion; Gnosticism; environment; violence.

Burnside is one of those Scottish writers who created a new perspective from the experience of living outside (and then returning to) Scotland. He was born in Dunfermline, Fife, in 1955, but spent his adolescence and young adulthood in England. He gained a college degree in English and European Literature in Cambridge, but began writing poetry after a long spell of working in information technology. His interest is genuinely wide-ranging: he is attracted to philosophy and ecology, he was formerly a software engineer and, due to his Catholic upbringing, he is drawn to the study of spiritual and religious thought as well as the more specifically defined subject of literature.

There are many labels that critics like to hang on Burnside – green poet, nature poet, mystical poet, Scottish poet, religious poet – but he refuses to be identified as any of these. Perhaps the only generalisation that is safe to make in terms of describing his complex genius is that environmental awareness has a wide-ranging significance in his work and that it takes account of political and economic problems related to the industrial and agricultural exploitation of the ecosystem, transcendental beliefs and cultural issues, as well as a universal respect for the natural world. Unlike other, mainly American, environmentally responsive poets, he has a specific interest in the northern periphery of Europe. And unlike those Scottish writers who like to defend their European identity (focusing on the cultures and societies of mainland Europe), Burnside takes a fresh view of Scotland’s geographical position, and considers it in relation to other northern territories such as the Scandinavian Peninsula, Iceland, and the Arctic region. He is not really intent on (re)creating a cultural association between these places (as, say, George Mackay Brown, who liked to see the north of Scotland as a hub between northernmost countries to the east and west), but has an interest in the territory itself: in geography, landscape, plants and animals. One of his objectives is learning from indigenous people who
live in harmony with the land. This is closely related to his idea of “living as a spirit”, which he has also described elsewhere, but the following interview points out new links between Burnside’s environmental awareness and Gnosticism. The different dimensions of life (biological, intellectual, social and spiritual) appear in unity, and communicate his desire to create harmony between the self and the environment. Burnside’s use of the Fife landscape partly stems from Dunn’s groundbreaking work in Northlight but the presence of other formative influences (including Ted Hughes and García Lorca) have been pointed out in his work too.

Burnside started publishing at a relatively late age but, since then, his books have followed each other with fierce intensity. He was selected for the New Generation Poets campaign in 1994, and has won or been nominated for so many awards that listing all is not possible here. His poetry includes The Hoop (1988), Common Knowledge (1991), Feast Days (1992), The Myth of the Twin (1995), Swimming in the Flood (1995), A Normal Skin (1997), The Asylum Dance (2000), which won the Whitbread Poetry Award and was shortlisted for both the Forward Poetry Prize and the T.S. Eliot Prize, The Light Trap (2001), The Good Neighbour (2005) and Gift Songs (2007). His copious work extends to prose fiction, including The Dumb House (1997), The Mercy Boys (1999), Burning Elvis (2000), The Locust Room (2001), Living Nowhere (2003), and The Devil’s Footprints (2007). With A.L. Kennedy, he is author of Dice, a television series produced in Canada.

I met him in his office at St Andrews on a Friday morning, exactly a week after the 9/11 attack, which he refers to here. The interview first appeared two years later in Scottish Studies Review 4(1).