



New Guide to Poetry and Poetics

by James Aitchison

Rodopi, Amsterdam, 2013

309 pp. Paper, 65 / US\$ 91

ISBN: 978-90-420-3763-2

Reviewed by Rob Harle (Leonardo, 2014)

I must admit when I first saw the title of this book, I was a little sceptical as to whether anything much 'new' could be said about poetry and poetics, especially in respect of an analysis of how the latest neuroscience findings applied to the creative poetic impulse. The book covers a huge amount of ground and does discuss some new and important aspects of the nature of poetry creation.

New Guide to Poetry and Poetics has 19 chapters and an excellent Index and extensive Bibliography. It is, in one sense, a truncated history of modern poetry that brings to the reader's attention some quite obscure writings and quotations from famous poets. Chapters are arranged so they discuss all aspects of poetry making and appreciation, starting with creative impulses and how poems begin and assessing the relevance of the conscious and unconscious mind. Then it moves onto Imagination, Poetic Vision, Madness, Emotion and Thought in poetry. These are followed by Chapter Nine, Meaning in Poetry (p. 147), which, in my view, is the most important chapter in the book, I discuss this chapter further on. Then the book covers discussions on Imagery, Rhyme, Rhythm, Technique and Poetry and Reality and finishes with a chapter of how reading poetry engages and then connects the reader and the poet.

Aitchison set himself a mammoth, ambitious task in writing this book - given the scope and complexity of the issues involved, he has managed to achieve his goal fairly successfully, and the resultant book is an important addition to the literature. I have two criticisms of the book: the first, perhaps a subjective one, is that he concentrates too much on the traditional, famous 'greats' of poetry - Wordsworth, Keats, Yates, Coleridge, Eliot and so on. Very little mention of contemporary avant garde, post post-modernist poets gives the book a kind of "been there done that" feel. Poets, such as Charles Simic, Les Murray and poetry of non-English origin, Japanese haiku for example, do not get a mention.

The second criticism is more important: the book purports to show how the latest findings in neuroscience, involving as they do brain and mind, inform the process of poetics and how and why the poet produces a poem. This area is discussed fairly narrowly and superficially. Again a few of the popular gurus in this discipline, Damasio, Sacks, and Dennett are discussed, and I suspect other readers will gain no real in-depth insights into how the brain actually works in the process of artistic creation. For example the cholinergic-aminergic neurotransmitter system of the brain, discovered by

Hobson is not mentioned. I have done fairly extensive research in this area myself, and I believe Aitchison's understanding of how the brain functions in creative mode would have benefited from reading my published papers in this regard.[1] Also my unpublished thesis, *The Myth of the Freudian Unconscious and its Relationship with Surrealist Poetry* [2] would have been quite an eye opener for Aitchison, especially as he discusses Freud in some detail and, to his credit, shows the absurdity of certain aspects of Freud's *doctrine* regarding literature and creative writers.

In chapter nine, *Meaning: Meaning in Poetry* Aitchison engages his finest analytical powers in indicating just how absurd much of modern literary theory and theorists are. "*Literary theorists' fear of meaning, and the language in which they express that fear, show that much of modern literary theory is irrelevant to literature...*" (p. 147) [my emphasis] I would love to quote this whole chapter, impossible here of course. Suffice it to say this chapter throws a cat amongst the pigeons, and in a sense challenges literary theorists to "put up or shut up"--perhaps to get a new job and stop earning money under false pretences. Aitchison's criticism of the absurdities of Barthes' and Foucault's deluded intellectualism and post-modern intellectual masturbation has never been better stated in all my reading and research. This book is worth its publication for this chapter alone. "*[T]he current crisis about meaning in literature is a crisis for the theorist and not the poet, whose main allegiance is to the creative impulse and the creative imagination*" (p. 150).

New Guide to Poetry and Poetics is well written and an enjoyable, interesting read. There are some highly contentious issues discussed, or in some cases, claims asserted--for example, that poetry comes from the brain/mind of the poet, not as ancient lore would have it from the gods or Muses or divine intervention. This kind of scientifically based assumption is open for discussion, without doubt, and is not a criticism of the book *per se*. I thoroughly recommend this book to all poetry students, teachers of literature, practising established poets and especially literary theorists.

References

[1] Harle, R.F. "Creativity, Chance and the Role of the Unconscious in the Creation of Original Art and Literature." 2009. *Technoetic Arts: A Journal of Speculative Research*. University of Plymouth, UK. Vol. 8 no.3 2011.

[2] Harle R. F. "The Myth of the Freudian Unconscious and its Relationship with Surrealist Poetry." Deakin University. 2000. Available: www.robharle.com.