

**‘Tools of the Sacred, Techniques of the Secular:
Awakening, Epiphany, Apocalypse and Doubt in
Contemporary English-Language Verse’**

Université Libre de Bruxelles

Second Call for Papers

(Brussels, 4 to 7 May 2010)

**Conference Convener: Dr. Franca BELLARSI (member of CENA and of the Dept.
of Modern Languages and Literatures)**

Deadline: 22 October 2009

As a medium reaching far back into past millennia, poetry not only has its roots in music, dance, and the organic rhythms of the breath, but also in ritual, liturgy, healing and the sacred. From its inception, poetry has indeed been deeply intertwined with the religious—i.e. with that which, in the etymological sense of ‘*religare*,’ yokes different dimensions to one another and ties back the visible to the invisible, the ‘relative’ to the ‘absolute.’

The gradual displacement of orality by writing did not diminish the potential for spiritual revelation attached to verse. Nor did the advances of Modernity and the sacralization of Reason manage to kill entirely the Shelleyan ideal of the poet as ‘legislator of the world.’ And if in their singing of existential and historical fracture, Modernist voices could no longer embrace the Romantic poet’s powers of ‘higher vision,’ some of these voices nevertheless still sought to engage in a search for wholeness through greater reverence of the purely secular.

However, in the wake of the epistemic shift initiated by two world wars, Auschwitz and Hiroshima, Postmodernism and its linguistic turn have found it harder to accommodate the notion that the poet could ‘inspire’—i.e. breathe the spirit of life into our existence. As a result of the split between signifier and signified which denies language any unifying function, it has become far more difficult too for poetic voices to articulate a totality and a potential interconnection between the secular and the ‘sacred,’ the human and the ‘ultimate.’ From a Postmodern(ist) perspective, the concept of ‘poet as seer’ and ‘poetry as healing’ may even seem highly ridiculous and laughable to some. Yet, besides a resurgence of religious violence, the postmodern moment has also coincided with an explosion of traditional boundaries that allowed unexpected forms of religiosity to emerge out of unorthodox syncretisms and cultural cross-fertilizations.

This international four-day conference to be held in Europe’s capital city and convened by a member of CENA wishes to explore the multiple and changing forms of

engagement with the sacred and reverence of the secular in English-language verse of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. In its cross-boundary coverage of contemporary verse in English reworking or denying dimensions of the 'sacred,' the conference will not privilege any Anglophone poetic tradition in particular. Instead, it invites papers exploring contemporary poetic voices from all areas of the English-speaking world, from North America and Europe to Asia and Australasia.

Poetry will be given precedence over other genres, but papers devoted to texts breaking down the traditional boundaries between prose and verse, or exploring poetry within the framework of multimedia experimentation (including digital and performance poetry), will also be accepted. More theoretically-oriented papers spanning the field of literature and religious studies will likewise be considered. Though the emphasis of the Conference is on twenty- and twenty-first-century poetry, papers on contemporary works preserving or transforming the spiritual legacy of older poetic voices in English are most welcome, as are comparative literature papers. Contributions from active poets addressing the questions of (non-)religious aesthetics and compositional practices trying to voice the 'sacred' or its absence are equally encouraged.

The conference, which intersects with a number of CENA's research areas, will feature a series of plenary lectures by noted scholars and poets as well as a number of parallel paper sessions. Certain sessions with a predefined theme will also be integrated in the programme (please, see below).

The list of keynote speakers already includes: poet and critic Michael HELLER; poet and critic Jane AUGUSTINE; theolinguistics expert Jean-Pierre van NOPPEN.

Possible topics and areas of investigation for twenty-minute paper submissions include (but are not limited to) the following:

- Whether accepted or denied, how is the 'sacred' understood in contemporary English-language verse? What new forms does 'epiphany' or 'apocalypse' take? What is the balance between preservation and change in today's poetic approaches to these concepts?
- How are atheism, agnosticism, and humanistic non-belief generally expressed by contemporary English-language voices? What poetic forms does the absence of the 'ultimate' and 'transcendence' take?
- How do 'spiritually-inclined' poets cope with the postmodern uncertainties attached to language and its questionable power of 'disclosure'? Is 'visionary' poetry still possible in this day and age?
- Have these postmodern uncertainties only generated doubt when it comes to the links between poetry and the 'sacred,' or have they also opened up avenues for new spiritual possibilities and their expression?
- To what extent does religious violence enter contemporary poetry?
- In particular, what room does postmodern poetry make for spiritual syncretisms?
- How are *premodern* religious influences reworked in contemporary verse?
- Can postmodernist verse still be linked to shamanism?

- How have emergent or alternative spiritualities influenced contemporary poetic production in English?
- How have older notions of the 'spiritual' managed to resist extinction, resurfaced and mutated in contemporary verse?
- When it comes to the great established faiths, what is the balance between preservation and change in the spiritual verse that pertains to their tradition?
- Can we talk about 'spiritual' aesthetics in English-language poetry of the twenty and twenty-first centuries?

The programme will also include sessions specifically devoted to the following themes:

- a. The influence of scientific paradigms on verse dealing with the 'sacred' or its absence.
- b. The spiritual legacy of the Beat Generation.
- c. 'Eco-spirit' and 'ecopieties' in twenty- and twenty-first-century verse in English.
- d. Non-patriarchal versions of the sacred.
- e. The 'sacred' in digitally generated and performed poetry.
- f. The contemporary inheritors of Milton and Blake.
- g. Psychedelia and chemically-engineered visions of the 'sacred.'
- h. Poetry as a secular tool of inner healing.

A selection of papers presented at the conference will be published in conference proceedings.

Twenty-minute paper proposals should be received no later than 22 October 2009. Please kindly e-mail abstracts of approximately 250-300 words, together with a short biography, in RTF format to:

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Late abstracts will be considered as programme space permits.

Acceptance of proposals will be notified in early November 2009 so as to allow the authors of selected submissions to apply for travel funding from their universities in due course.