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Tonia L. Payne
SUNY Nassau Community College

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Explorations of Poetic Depths and Reverberations

Echo Soundings: Essays on Poetry and Poetics by Jeffery Donaldson

Palimpsest Press, 2014 \$19.95

Reviewed by **TONIA L. PAYNE**

Jeffery Donaldson is not only a poet with a number of poetry volumes to his name but also a critic—though he might prefer the term “reader”—of poetry. As an associate professor at McMaster University, he teaches poetry, poetics, creative writing, and, according to the brief overview on the McMaster website, he is “an advocate of Inquiry and problem-based learning in the Humanities, [whose] current research involves metaphor, evolution, and cognitive theory.” He co-edited (with McMaster professor emeritus Alan Mendelson) *Frye and the Word: Religious Contexts in the Writings of Northrop Frye* and is part of the Collected Works of Northrop Frye project. But one need only read the essays in *Echo Soundings* to understand the depth and breadth of his knowledge of poetry and poetics and to get a strong flavor of his elegant facility with the English language.

In his introduction to *Echo Soundings*, Donaldson points out the strangeness of poetry, “The way it simply assumes itself,” as he says (9). He also sets up his particular fascinations with poetry and poetic forms: the ways in which poetry works in conversation not only with readers but with other poetic works, poetic beginnings and endings, “echo and allusion” (18), and the sounding of poetry—in all senses. As he states:

Poems sound. That wonderful verb: to emit sound, to resonate, to echo,

but also to measure a depth, to detect by sounds that are emitted and then recalled. Poets and sailors have this in common: they sound the fluid element on which they float. They let out line, so to speak, line that sinks beneath the visible surface, more and more line as they go, sounding for the bottom, for the creatures that move along the bottom. (16)

Donaldson’s essays as collected in *Echo Soundings* might be said to bring up from the depths, within the poems he explores, connections, correspondences, readings that might, without his guidance, be left unheard, unseen.

I mentioned above that Donaldson might prefer the term “reader” to “critic,” as he makes a distinction between scholarly criticism, which “offers . . . analysis, interpretation, exegesis, this last term suggesting to [him] more of the operating table than the armchair,” and reading, which “implies interpretation, analysis, but is more comprehensive than that. The act of reading is an experience and there can be many readings, many experiences” (20). Indeed, it was initially startling and somewhat frustrating to encounter a lack of specific exegesis in many of Donaldson’s essays—until I began to understand that a certain faith was being granted to our reading of his readings (to use the kind of circular phrasing Donaldson tends to favor). In fact, the readings offered in these essays tend to circle back, revisit a passage previously quoted within the essay in question, illuminating it from a different angle, allowing the reader to have more than one experience of the poetic lines, and to observe Donaldson having multiple experiences of the pieces he explores.

Within the collection, Donaldson visits the work of a number of poets—several more than once— including a healthy collection of Canadian poets, especially in the assortment of brief reviews he wrote between 2003 and 2005 for the *University of Toronto Quarterly*, “Letters in Canada Annual,” as well as several important 20th-century poets from south of the (U.S.-Canadian) border. He also “reads” the work of two visual artists: Barbara Howard, whose paintings *Encounters with Whales* he considers along with the poetry of her partner (in life and art), Richard Outram; and William Bailey, whose work is considered both as subject of and corollary to the writings of Mark Strand.

Donaldson is clear in his expression of particularly Canadian points of view or tendencies of thought, stating, for instance, that “to have been born in Canada is to have been born in the land of a mythically doomed expedition [i.e., for the Northwest Passage] and means not having to leave home to go exploring there” (41), or noting that

Our poets seem especially drawn to the cave, the motif of descent, of elegy and displacement, of temporary, negotiated settlements, of seed time and harvest, advance and retreat. We feel ourselves at one remove and so can only make tentative approaches to the worlds we find ourselves in, both natural and constructed. (135)

Donaldson brings to his discussion of U.S.-American poets the same kind of carefully considered and reconsidered analysis he suggests Canadians need to apply more frequently to their own native poets: “We

need,” he says, “to become a country of second looks” (28).

For ecocritics in particular, there is rich spelunking to be done in these essays. Awareness of how poetry (and visual art) addresses concerns about the natural world and the human place within it is woven throughout the essays as intrinsically as are the stated thematic threads of echo, conversation with poets past, “the simple distinction between ‘Here’ and ‘Elsewhere’” (23). The question behind the essay “Poets in Times of Crisis”—Friedrich Holderlin’s “Wozu Dichter in Durftiger Zeit?” [What are poets for in hard times?—could be seen as the central question ecocritics ask of literary art: what can we gain from study of these works when “we specifically need, not hypothetical fictions, but decisions” (213)? Donaldson’s answer seems to be that poetry is a way of seeing not only back—hearing the echoes and ghosts of a poetic past—but of imagining forward, so that “poets go forward from where they are, imagining their place and purpose as the words they speak aloud open in front of them” (213).

Another of Donaldson’s repeated images is that of expanding, overlapping circles, of influence and of possibility. Throughout these essays, Donaldson’s awareness of poetic echoes, conscious and otherwise—as in the ghostly presences in Eliot’s “Little Gidding” and Heaney’s “Station Island,” or as when he perceives an echo of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” in James Merrill’s “Nine Lives” or repeated echoes of Wallace Stevens in the works of Mark Strand—leads the less-educated reader on a gleeful hunt for the original sources and the knowledgeable reader into his or her own hunt for ghosts, echoes, and overlapping circles of possibility in reading poetry.

TONIA L. PAYNE is a tenured professor in the English department at Nassau Community College of the State University of New York, and she is a recipient of a SUNY Chancellor's Award for excellence in teaching. Among her scholarly publications are "'We Are Dirt: We Are Earth': Ursula Le Guin and the Problem of Extra-Terrestrialism" and "How Do We See Green? Ursula K. Le Guin's SF/Fantasy and

the Environmental Paradigm Shift." She has contributed book reviews to *ISLE* and *Ecozon@*, as well as *The Goose*. Presently, her critical focus is on the interplay between literature and the environmental ethics of Western culture. Her poem "Prairie" was published in *California Quarterly*, and her short story "Birds in the Head" is forthcoming in the inaugural edition of the *Bellmont Fiction Review*.