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Book Review: Elizabeth Irwin

DIAGNOSTICS: POETICS OF TIME

by Joseph A. Amato

Press, New York, New York, 2017, 126 Pages

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As a young poet, I remember reading *Poetics* by Aristotle. I wanted to follow, unerringly, the authority of the ancients and their dictums on the writing of poetry. How to write a review of Joseph A. Amato's poetry book: *DIAGNOSTICS: POETICS OF TIME*?

It is an intriguing title, but what is preface, and what is denouement of this volume of poetry?

This is one of three published books of poetry Amato has composed, although his writing credits in non-fiction are considerable. The poem restores the core yearning of poetry to be shared, published and words heard. Joseph Amato reaches his readers on this almost pilgrimage including pieces of his own personal history.

Diagnostics: What is this to a historian? Amato is not a medical doctor, but has a Ph.D. in history and here, is engaged in writing poetry. The inaugural poem of the volume, "Prelude", announces: "(Names) carry us out of dark places. (They) are the Communion of Being". These poems, being on marriage and the experiences of a life-long journey, are not unlike Chaucer's tales and are (poems of pilgrimage) presented as a passage of shared time and movement. The collection occupies a progression in the lifetime of a serious writer. The stage is set.

Amato's voice is almost casual, almost conversational yet potent: "As if alive forever in its death." Its end is in its beginning.

The rush of poetry inspired me, stirred me on my second reading, as the collection is almost a guide to the human experience of art but in literary ideation and imagery and the individual expression of the experience of this writer in archetypal strains. But this is not the reason to read the volume.

There is no stuffiness in the tone, rather a primordial archetypal tune spun like skeins of wool dyed in various colors and stitched, binding the reader in his/her own poem in a pattern of reaction to a subliminal emotion. In order to follow the thread, one has to agree like tenses. There is a combination of word order that precipitates the readers' expressions as well. I was engaged with this poetry in my own story. Pencil in are my own word graffiti-like lines that can be seen still on train cars. My volume of *Diagnostics Poetics of Time* is bombarded with pencil-in notes. Beside my focus as a reviewer, poetry was spilling out of myself – the presence of the author/teacher induced my occupation as poet, like a gift perhaps given by the shared Creator whose presence is interwoven into a continuum of time, space, motion and emotion throughout. I really dig Amato's poetry.

The first two sections speak of the relationship between what are our certainties and our uncertainties?

The initial poem speaks of "Cottonwood Seed," and it seems it was the "seed" of this trek we begin as well. He praises spring and creation and starts this process of creativity like spring's young emergence. Amato uses the words of "silk canopy". Yet, I have thought cottonwood seeds exploding and taking habitation in my screen doors and windows, annoying only since childhood, slipped away. I am challenged to open my mind to a poetry imagining a single activity in nature and remembering what these seeds heralded, by the child in me. I harvested these seeds and fed them to my "dolly" as medicine (probably ate a few myself).

Turning the page, "A Dead Cardinal" is preface to the bookend and backdrop of "How

random the death of beauty/And how random the beauty of death.”

The reality, boosted by these two lines, defines the cycle of natural life which moves us on to the certainty of these ideas. He gives examples and attaches his focus of “A Moment, A Morning” on the beginning and the end. Time is introduced as thematic of the collection, “Poetics of Time”. Its end is in its beginning. A blending of the issues of death and life, transposed to seed, normalcy and medical diagnostics. The elements blend like cancers. What kind of and which image is first? As we explore the experience of childhood (“Lake Breeze” and “At Aunt Mabel’s Cottage”) the narrator of the poem expounds on the passing of childhood and immersion into the rumple of experience. The Blakean adventure, “Songs of Innocence and Experience” is a reminder of poetry’s attitude toward the human span in poetic language so we can feel it, perhaps. Poetics, what is this to a Historian? Maybe it is the bite of the aesthetic and the grammar of necessity. It is a gathering of disparate elements into the relevance of the whole wonderful product. So I am going to look at the end cluster, leaving the middle of Joseph Amato’s book as a suggestion, a prompt, until I finish much like one builds the frame of a house, before the electricity comes in. Though that is not the end.

Amato turns to prose in the last phase of this book of sensate poetry. It is as though he might need to explain the preceding poems. And, I enjoyed the prose, the memoir of “real” time. Certainly, it inured me to him as a human being, and I could sympathize with the actual experience of his life and the family origin and NOW in present time. “Everything we think, make, and love has an end.” These are juxtaposed to each beginning and end, from NOW and to WHEN, the prognosis. “...Now is ever rife with Next.”

He concludes that medicine is a necessary evil and that he owes his life to medicine. This passage includes a serious marking of time, due to health issues, but he reconciles himself and his need to take care of medical realities. Medicine “has mollified pain, given the suffering hope, and driven remorseless and adventitious death from the door.” This end-piece talks of temporality and death, gratitude and health, and, I add, good writing! He is sharing himself in skewered intimacies with his readers: “I assume that time baffles. Surely the past is not fully read, the present understood, or the future written by our design.” And “diagnosis and prognosis (are) bound by guess and surprise.”

Amato has had his struggles with diagnostics, poetics of time and concludes in the poem, “Conversion to Medicine Tells” that, “I entered a religious order/praying to be spared pain now/ and ever after.” We’ve entered his poems again in the last words of the book.

I think that the conclusion of a poem should answer the question posed by its title. And this book of poems by Joseph Amato accomplishes that and much more and will certainly live on through time...and whatness. It is a text “rife” with possibility and pain and I think one should read it, relate to it and write from it.

~Libby Casey Irwin is a poet, who earned her M.F.A. in Writing from Hamline University. Some of her poems have been published in various literary journals. She has four manuscripts of poetry (as yet unpublished) and was a finalist in the Mentor Series of the Loft Literary Center, where she is a member. Libby writes about family and is an advocate of writers who suffer with emotional challenges.