

# explorations



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## REVIEW

**Justin Quinn. 2015. *Between Two Fires. Transnationalism & Cold War Poetry*.  
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The Cold War is a commonplace and deceptively transparent term that we have become easily accustomed to and use with a sureness that borders on oblivious automatism. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes apparent that neither of the two parts of this metaphor can be taken for granted. The metaphor's tenor – "war" – does not seem to be accurate if we take into account the vast transformations in culture, ecology and geopolitics it ushered, whereas the vehicle – "cold" – reveals under closer inspection a hidden hotbed of actually "burning" conflicts spawned all around the globe as a result of implementing far-reaching policies by the actors involved. It was in reality neither silent nor victimless, not to mention its contribution to the global warming, which can be identified today as one of its long-term effects. This now worn-out phrase stuck because it succinctly captured a state of diplomatic tension in which the post-war superpowers found themselves in, catalysed by the looming nuclear threat.

At first, when the phrase was employed by George Orwell (albeit not capitalized) in his 1945 article for *Tribune*, it had a markedly novel ring to it, its innovativeness consisting in the recognition of the vast scope of repercussions produced by the new global axis of power. Taking cue from political forecasts by James Burnham, Orwell asked his readers to think geographically on an unprecedented scale and muse on the "ideological implications – that is, the kind of world-view, the kind of beliefs, and the social structure that would probably prevail in a state which was at once unconquerable and in a permanent state of 'cold war' with its neighbours." His perspective differs from the rhetoric embraced in 1947 by Bernard Baruch, a multimillionaire and then advisor to President Harry Truman, who defined the Cold War in much more personal and tribal terms. "Let us not be deceived," Baruch warned his audience, "we are today in the midst of a Cold War. Our enemies are to be found abroad and at home. Let us never forget this: Our unrest is the heart of their success." The difference between the two accounts rests chiefly in the fact that the latter subjectively interiorizes the bipolar dynamic. Orwell uses the metaphor in an attempt to be objectively descriptive and see the conflict as a super-

structure transforming societies on a large scale, whereas Baruch endows it with a personal yet militaristic dimension, sharpening the divisive optics of “Us vs Them.”

What we encounter here, in a nutshell, is a tension between figurations originating in a literary sensibility and ones rooted in a political agenda that consciously antagonizes the two sides of the conflict. The former approach consists in trying to develop cognitive maps that would help navigate the dangerous waters of the Cold War, without resorting to factional politics. Poetry, as it turns out, is the area where this effort becomes clearly discernible, as is masterfully demonstrated by Justin Quinn in his latest critical book titled *Between Two Fires*.

The eponymous “Two Fires” have been traditionally seen as being separated by an unpassable divide, USA opposing USSR in a global-scale strife. However, Quinn claims that poetry, and broadly understood literary discourse offer proof that the Iron Curtain was in fact quite porous and allowed different voices, theories and strategic positions to permeate and travel, courtesy of a myriad of intermediators: translators, critics, politicians, spies and poets themselves. What is more, he convincingly argues that by tracing the numerous direct and indirect exchanges occurring between, say, Beat poetry and influential Czech writers like Jan Zábřana and Miroslav Holub, it becomes possible to reveal that *all* these literary programmes, despite their apparent differences, are in fact structured to some degree by the overpowering conflict. It thus emerges as the catalyst of crucial tensions in poetry, namely ones between the private and the public, the autonomous and the contextualized, as well as the global and the local.

The book treads a fine line between viewing poetry as self-contained on the one hand and as a nexus of social, cultural and political tensions that cut through it on the other. Poetry’s value, it transpires, emerges from disallowing itself to be reducible to any of the two. To be able to survive the pressures of political agenda of either McCarthyism or socialist realism, poetry can neither sever its ties with the surrounding reality, nor endorse a particular policy in order to gain short-lived publicity benefits. Seen from this perspective, successful poetry does not give in to either of the two kinds of pressure, but rather resists both by positioning itself in-between as a hybrid entity, thus sidestepping the dualistic logic enforced by Cold War rhetoric.

The notion of “hybridity” I wish to employ here has been elaborated on, among others, by Bruno Latour in his seminal work *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991). Although the tension he addresses is the one between nature and culture, the model he proposes to unpack this dualism seems fitting for the present analysis, facilitating an illuminating parallel. In his account, the intellectual efforts of the “moderns,” as Latour calls them, have been focused on meticulously separating the natural from the cultural, “splitting the mixtures apart in order to extract from them what came from the subject (or the social) and what came from the object” (76). This “Great Divide,” however, comprises a mere smokestack behind which lurk all kinds of hybrids, or “quasi-objects” that cannot be subsumed under any of the two categories because of their mixed provenance. Similarly, as Quinn shows, the Great Divide separating Americans and Russians is a powerful rhetorical device that masks the proliferation of mixed-breed intermediaries operating in the twin empires’ shadows. As much as the totalitarian puppeteers would like to bring their cultures under control by solidifying the said dualisms, the underground work of mediators subverts any such endeavours. The middlemen include “translators, editors, critics, fans, moonlighting university professors, spies, and defectors” (53), and Quinn provides compelling accounts of their operation

across and along the Iron Curtain. The synaptic nodes they have created – a vast cultural network of public-cum-private hybrids – extend all the way across imperial fault-lines and create often surprising points of contact. “*Between Two Fires*,” as the author puts it, “employs a transnational critical practice with allegiance to the autonomy of literature, aware of its ideological position, and shows the way in which poems, or literature in general, enlarge and enrich themselves by crossing checkpoints and border crossings in the period 1948-89” (57). In doing so, the study follows those networks, bringing under scrutiny “the routes that were followed, the obstacles along the way, the unexpected turns, the darker, treacherous territories, and the refulgent moments of lyric poetry as it survived and prospered during difficult times” (61). In this sense, Quinn’s scholarly endeavour is, refreshingly, both geopolitical and attentive to poetry’s craft.

Instead of overestimating breaches, demarcation lines and guarded frontiers, Quinn traces all kinds of rhizomatic, oblique, isomorphic or mirroring connections, juxtaposing poetic programmes, practices and pursuits from the anglophone world with those from beyond the Iron Curtain. What emerges from this skilful survey is that the Cold War can be reconsidered as a literary machine that has acted as a prism refracting literary policies and aesthetic attitudes, and thus shaping the literatures from the period. In this sense, in the face of the Nuclear Holocaust, no “monocultural” national poetic or canon can be understood in isolation insofar as they are locked in the orbit of the Cold War, a black hole of sorts, which drew everything around it into its gravitational field, transforming and distorting its satellites.

Such an account could be refined by employing the theory of “hyperobjects” developed by Timothy Morton in his 2013 study. He postulates the existence of macro-scale objects that are simply too complex for humans to be able to conveniently discern and compute. Always receding before our grasp, they are nevertheless observable through their effects. The paradigmatic example given by Morton is that of global warming – something we can deduce from the changes it produces, but not by confronting it directly, whether in humanities, natural sciences or everyday experience. According to Morton, hyperobjects are “viscous,” meaning that they “stick” to whatever they touch, and “nonlocal,” meaning that those points of contact do not actually reveal them (1). The Cold War can be regarded as a hyperobject because it has shaped the physical and psychological landscapes on a global scale, all the while not crystallizing in any single event, actor or idea. Crucially, as Quinn argues, contemporary debates confronting poetry’s autonomy and its ideological indebtedness have a distinctly Cold War provenance (36). The first properly global struggle (thus moving beyond our intuitive comprehension) is responsible for creating “a fear for the aesthetic in the face of political pressure” (171), effectively blurring any “purification” processes (Latour’s key term) that would attempt to distil the public from the private, matters of *polis* (state) from matters of *oikia* (household). As a result, writers were forced to dangerously swing – as Mandelstam aptly put it – “back and forth” in endless ambiguity (102), finding its own saving grace in what Quinn calls “manoeuvrability” (9) or “strategic ambiguity” (85). Such risky “spycraft,” which involves “subterfuge, stratagems, and suppositions” (90) has imprinted itself on poetry from both sides of the Curtain, leaving nobody and nothing unaffected, and thus demanding heightened attention if poetry is to be saved as a “value in itself, not the vehicle of value” (160).

In “An Object-Oriented Defense of Poetry,” Morton’s 2012 essay, he notes that “to write poetry is to perform a nonviolent political act, to coexist with other beings” (222).

In his view, art can attune itself to the effects of the hyperobjects' agency, becoming a fine instrument for recording and experimenting with causes and effects. In the perspective developed by object-oriented ontology, causation is primarily aesthetic, which means that art is naturally predisposed to offer such insights, and cannot be relegated to the rank of a delightful yet useless icing on the cake of reality. This corresponds with the account provided by Justin Quinn. Instead of reducing poetry to a decorative ornament on the ideological picture, or sealing it shut from the world as a purely literary artefact, he both reveals its hybrid nature and dependence on a dense network of supporting actors, as well as argues for its ability to resist instrumentalization by foregrounding its craftiness (in both senses of the word, i.e. as an "artifice" that is "clever"). Reasserting poetry's own field and methods is paramount if it desires to retain a hold on our imagination, firing it and transforming for the better.

In the end, just like other dualisms, form and content converge since "[c]hoices are involved in poetic form that encompass the world beyond the lines of poetry" (194). Thus, it is through a fine balancing of craft and what Quinn calls poetry's "peremptory love and arrogance" that it can become "capable of encompassing both the joys and sorrows of the individual spirit and the complexity of politics, in the Cold War and beyond" (194). To be able to show this, Quinn has had to combine all his strengths and skills, weaving them tightly: only as a poet, translator and scholar, not shying away from honestly making his own life history a part of the picture, could he strike a fine balance between authoritative criticisms of models of transnationalism, close reading of poetry's delicate movements across languages, and a fair examination of political dimensions lurking behind poetics oscillating between dissidence and compliance. His perceptive conclusions – especially in terms of reappraising monumental figures like Brodsky, Heaney or Ginsberg – come across as ethically sincere and balanced, something that may have been facilitated by his own minoritarian status. Ultimately, he also demonstrates how stifling monoculturalist or centre-periphery formulas may be, welcoming instead the efforts of the real makers of cultures: those who allow them to spread along lines of flight, and contaminate them with a healthy dose of virus-like foreignness, respecting but not fetishizing otherness.

"It was inevitable," Philip Mirowski observes," that historians would eventually reconsider and reevaluate the concept of a 'Cold War' as organizing principle" (61). Indeed, it emerges as a transformative process that has permeated literary life, penetrating all of its aspects, and making even the decision to avoid the political a political act, as is shown clearly by Quinn in Zábřana's case (70). The long-term consequences of this can be seen as twofold: ontological and ethical. On the one hand, it now becomes possible to discern the operation of innumerable mediators bridging the post-war political dichotomy, whose ceaseless work aimed not to separate but link, for – as Latour shows – all networks rely on hybridity and mediation. As Graham Harman claims, "for Latour, translation is ubiquitous: any relation is a mediation, never some pristine transmission of data across a noiseless vacuum" (77). As much as some would like to see the Cold War as a lethal void, it was in fact seething with "impure" connections. Secondly, the negation of this – consisting in manic "purification" of the said hybrids – has often constructed unfair perspectives. "We warm to the story of an Irish writer in his struggles against a British oppressor," Quinn observes in an interview, "but are made uncomfortable by other writers whose work implies that we are the oppressors." Similarly, defenders of poetry's purity – like Heaney – may have been too comfortable with America's

“outrageous practices” in Latin America (191). Such uneasy implications make Quinn’s work particularly relevant for reassessing poetry’s relevance today and the challenges it now faces.

The opening towards contemporary times signalled at the end of the book marks an important aperture. After all, imperial proxy wars are still waged, e.g. in Syria, while literary scholarship still has much to learn about poetry’s complex relationship with hybrid historico-political developments, which are as hot today as they were at the peaking moments of the Cold War. The rewards from reading *Between Two Fires*, apart from sheer delight at its compact argumentation and solid interpretations, include painfully topical lessons. After all, more than ever, today’s writers and critics are demanded to hone their navigational skills while steering between the Scyllas and Charibdises of hybrid warfare and terrorism, global warming and neoliberalism, as well as populist, post-truth politics and the need for metaphorical inventiveness needed to map the new “accelerated evolution” of globalism (32), all the while struggling to reassess poetry relevance for making sense of 21<sup>st</sup>-century realities.

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