

Agata Handley – The Last Man

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This handout accompanies a 15-minute presentation, which has been contributed to the conference in the form of an audio recording. The handout contains an abstract, a short bibliography and quotations from the poems discussed in the presentation. Please read it before you listen to the recording.

The Last Poet

Robert Minhinnick and the Environmental Crisis

Martin Rees has referred to the present time as “mankind’s final century”. Similarly, Slavoj Žižek has argued that humanity is heading towards “apocalyptic zero-point” where an ecological catastrophe will probably lead to our complete destruction. In his 2017 collection *Diary of the Last Man*, Welsh poet Robert Minhinnick offers readers a vision in verse form of the aftermath of just such an ultimate environmental cataclysm.

Imagining the plight of a solitary individual who survives the collapse of “civilization,” Minhinnick entwines different voices—human and non-human—operating across vast spans of time. The speaker of the poems, the “last man on earth” and Minhinnick’s poetic alter ego, moves freely through different geographies and cultural contexts, offering various perspectives on the relationship between humanity and the environment.

Drawing on critical works by Barbara Cassin, Laura Impert and Margaret Rubin (among others), the paper focuses on the role of nostalgia in the collection, where fragmentary remains of human civilization, increasingly engulfed and eroded by the natural world, act as signs of the loss of “our” world. Minhinnick’s projection of the present we now inhabit, into a future where it will exist only in the form of nostalgic memories, creates an apt context for posing questions about the role of a poet in a time of global environmental crisis, and the ways in which poetry can intervene in ecological debate.

Quotations

All quotations come from Robert Minhinnick's *Diary of the Last Man* (Carcenet, 2017).

From "Nostalgia"

The door to 10, Downing Street
is open. In I walk.

The Prime Minister's computer
has a gold screen.
Its password will be his name spelled backwards.

And here they are, the cover ups, the scandals
[. . .]
All the meaningless secrets.

And suddenly the tears are running down my face.
Those were the days, I say to myself.
Those were the great days, the last of our lives.

From “London Eye”

I come down Regent Street and there’s nobody here.

No,

no-one here.

Nobody.

The only soul my own.

In the Travellers’ Club, room after room of maps
and portraits, empty leather chairs.

This is where the world’s wanderers brought their stories

[. . .]

Then I picture the caribou-skinned aristocrats,
Knocking their pipes out on Greenland’s lava.

[. . .]

Though none have seen what I have seen
who is left to read what I must write?

I sit in the travellers’ armchair
And sip the travellers’ gin.

Yes, today might be the day
when all the astonishments must cease. (1–8; 14–15; 18–23)

From “The Sand Orchestra”

Alone, I’m always alone in these places.
Hail on the left side of my face,
sun on the right.

I come to a plateau, old
gold as a Wolves shirt,
but seek a greener
arena. And look here, a polished
Bechstein, its black sail on the horizon.

If there is alarm sand will sound it –

[. . .]

Such a music she makes,
ragged as a razorshell
across a mermaid’s neck.

Okay, after exhaustion sand summons extinction.
But what a place
to put a piano. (49 – 57; 60 – 62; 65–67)

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The presentation is a part of a larger project on Minhinnick’s poetry and is based on the article which appeared in *Text Matters: A Journal of Literature, Theory and Culture*, 9 (2019).