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The Sacred, the Sacrilegious, and the Elegiac in Dennis O’Driscoll’s Poetry:

“Missing God” and Other Poems

Contemporary Irish poet Dennis O’Driscoll’s poetry has often been linked with Philip Larkin’s work in its general outlines and themes. As George Szirtes points out, O’Driscoll’s literary territory “is a place that at first sight appears to be bordering on Larkin country. . . Like Larkin he generally addresses himself to ordinary lives, to their ambit of hopes and disappointments.” O’Driscoll’s poetry seeks, as Szirtes has it, “not . . . to tell people how they should feel but to try to understand, to share and to give shape to [peoples’] feeling” (Szirtes, “Business of Being”). Notably, much of O’Driscoll’s poetry makes explicit rational and emotional connections between human beings in a world marked by personal disconnection, loss of belief in God and God’s presence, and the repetition of impersonal, bureaucratic experiences. Through its plain yet eloquent discursive style, O’Driscoll’s poetry addresses themes of love and separation, life and death, and the sacred and the sacrilegious in a colloquial manner and with an understated tone that together invite his readers to examine central moral, spiritual, and intellectual concerns.

In poems specifically addressing the question of God’s absence or presence, he articulates a perspective of discontent with anemic modern expressions of faith, one that shows a felt recognition for what has been lost as faith in a personal God and an accompanying sense of the sacred steadily recede. This perspective generates poetry in an elegiac mode as well as

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satirical poems about the routines and material excesses of contemporary life. I will examine how O'Driscoll's approach to the question of the presence of the sacred and the sacrilegious in the contemporary world yields poems rich in elegiac themes about the awareness of God's withdrawal or outright absence, the body's undeniable physicality, and the recognition of mortality. To achieve his thematic purposes, his poetry is marked by rhetorical devices such as repetition, understatement, and puns, and often the voice of a poem's speaker modulates between a straightforward and an ironic tone. Noting his tendency toward using irony, O'Driscoll has said that "the last thing I would ever wish to be is condescending" and that "one of the fundamental emotions in my poetry is empathy. I have the deepest sense of compassion for the bewilderment that people feel when forced to face, on a daily basis, all of the daunting things that life throws at them" (Owens Interview). This comment offers a corrective to the notion that his consistent recourse to irony and often satirical perspectives betray the sensibility of a cynic or one who adopts a world-weary posture.

In *Exemplary Damages* (2002), he composes poems exploring the physical body in its growth and decline and, in one major poem, "Missing God," examines the state of mind of a culture that collectively misses the sense of the sacred by exploring the positions of those who speak as former believers in God. In "Missing God" and other poems I shall examine later, the question is implicitly asked: how to live in a world that misses God's presence and consequently has a diminished sense of the sacred and numinous, a world that feels intellectually and emotionally deprived of knowledge of him and of the sense of his omnipresence and omnipotence? As a poet who is not sure what he believes but who feels "a

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profound sense of mystery” (Owens interview), O’Driscoll is acutely aware that he is writing in an era when the death of God has been widely assumed. Whereas earlier poets writing about God’s majesty and beneficence such as Gerard Manley Hopkins could confidently assert the dimensions of “God’s Grandeur” and St. Francis of Assisi could praise God’s manifold creation in his “Canticle of the Sun,” O’Driscoll chooses to explore the contemporary decline of the sense of the sacred and its once-powerful covenant between God and man.

O’Driscoll’s “Missing God” may be read as a prophetic warning, or a *cri de coeur*, but I think that these approaches misread the poem. I suggest a more useful approach is to see this poem as a formal and thematic re-making of two durable poetic conventions: first, the traditional liturgical litany of praise, and second, the elegy. In combining these two forms, and in sounding tonal variations in the poem’s development, “Missing God” becomes a memorable elegiac utterance that measures the dimensions of a powerfully felt sense of loss of the sacred, resulting in humankind’s deracination, alienation, and loss of divine guidance.

Structurally, “Missing God” is a catalogue or list poem bound together by its titular theme and its use of anaphora, or word repetition. The poem is constructed as a catalogue of many occasions in which “we confess to missing Him at times.” These times are illustrated by the repetition of the introductory phrase “Miss Him,” followed by sixteen specific examples in the succeeding stanzas. This anaphoric device is one we may recognize as a reworking of the phrasal repetitions of a liturgical ritual, specifically a spoken litany. It is, furthermore, a litany which has for subject not the praiseworthy attributes of God or a saint but instead describes different ways of noticing God’s absence in contemporary circumstances. It draws attention to

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many ways in which a sentient and intelligent person might begin to feel the loss of God's sacred presence in the world.

To begin "Missing God," O'Driscoll writes about the present as a time when God seems irrelevant because of the advancements of science. Soon, the poem turns toward the reasons for missing God, or for God's apparent absence: the evidence suggests that ours is a faithless or, more properly, faith-enfeebled time. For O'Driscoll, missing God is missing an enveloping sense of his sacred presence in the material world. In the poem, one notes that God has not withdrawn of his own accord but that no attention is paid to his presence any longer and that nothing is regarded as sacred or sacramental; that is, there is no shared cultural sense of the interconnected realms of matter and spirit. Why is this? In part, the poem suggests, it is because of the seemingly outmoded nature of belief and the supplanting of God by science (or the uncritical worship of science). Add to this post-Darwinian substitution of the methods of science for the sacred the twin processes of ignoring God and making God irrelevant, processes fostered by the forces of modernity, especially marketplace efficiency, and the situation is as follows:

His grace is no longer called for  
before meals: farmed fish multiply  
without His intercession.  
Bread production rises through

disease-resistant grains devised

scientifically to mitigate his faults.

Yet, though we rebelled against Him

like adolescents, uplifted to see

an oppressive father banished—

a bearded hermit—to the desert,

we confess to missing Him at times.

O'Driscoll's poem is a rejoinder to the faith-centered, celebratory poetry of Hopkins, a corrective investigation offered to measure some of the ways many people now live without faith or with a severely diminished sense of God. Perhaps it is even composed as a kind of direct reversal of the faith-filled, God-sustained ecology depicted so well in Hopkins's "God's Grandeur." In Hopkins's poem, the world is still "charged" by God's sacred and sustaining presence, despite all the breakage and waste caused directly by England's embrace of the factories of the Industrial Revolution. Hopkins writes:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God

It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;

It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil crushed.

Why do men then now not reckon his rod?

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod.

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And all is seared with trade, bleared, smeared with toil. . .

In answer to Hopkins, writing antiphonally across a century and more, O'Driscoll's "Missing God" registers a dramatically different tone: using many details that resonate with Biblical and parabolic language, he notes that a spiritual dryness, or *acedia*, has overtaken many people. This *acedia* is a sense of the traumatic loss of the numinous, the sacred and transcendent, and the brim-full sense of beauty and grace that belief in God once supplied. In sum, O'Driscoll's "Missing God" is a twenty-first century response to Hopkins's "God's Grandeur," a Victorian poem which ends with assertions of God's sustaining love for all creation and which is invigorated by Hopkins's devout vision and verbal artistry.

As I have mentioned, in "Missing God," O'Driscoll makes a poem in the form of a catalogue, more specifically, a recast litany, a survey of contemporary situations of God's absence and the felt loss of God. I next want to examine this postmodern litany as it merges with the forms of elegy. First, we observe that the poem's apparently casual form is ingeniously structured: after the first two discursive stanzas, each of the next sixteen stanzas begins with the repetition of the two words "Miss Him" followed by the poet's evocation of particular places, observations, and events. In this way, O'Driscoll makes a trope of repetition by rewriting the ancient forms of the psalm of praise and the poetic litany, in which the poet lists the attributes of God, of a saint or, especially, of Mary. Hopkins was inspired by such a litany to Mary; the prayers of the Catholic Church include recited litanies to Mary ("Tower of Ivory," "House of Gold," "Star of the Sea"), to Joseph, and others. In his poem, O'Driscoll adapts that form to

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his purposes by tying the listener's fragmentary aural memory of a chanted litany of praise to a new series of notes sounding God's absence and the demise of the sacred.

The first four stanzas, linked by the repetition of "Miss Him," feature vocally sounded words and our reception of them. The third stanza records the words heard at a wedding:

Miss Him during the civil wedding  
when, at the blossomy altar  
of the registrar's desk, we wait in vain  
to be fed a line containing words  
like 'everlasting' and 'divine.'

Then, in the scientific realm of the fourth stanza, a scientist "explains the cosmos through equations, / leaving our planet to revolve on its axis / aimlessly, a wheel skidding in snow."

The fifth stanza concentrates on the human voice, evoking the rich liturgical and cultural history of the sung and spoken praise of God:

Miss Him when the radio catches a snatch  
of plainchant from some echoey priory;  
when the gospel choir raises its collective voice  
to ask *Shall We Gather at the River?*  
or the forces of the oratorio converge  
on *I Know that My Redeemer Liveth*

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and our contracted hearts lose a beat.

To complete this section of vocal memories and aural associations, in stanza six, the poet writes:

Miss Him when a choked voice at  
the crematorium recites the poem  
about fearing no more the heat of the sun.

The naming of plainchant from “some echoey priory” and the two hymns brings forcefully to mind and ear the investment that human beings have traditionally made in singing life-affirming praise songs to God. Hearing them sung now, without a culturally-affirmed sense of the presence of God, makes “our contracted hearts lose a beat.” It is because something essential, the sense of the sacred, is missing. The “choked voice” of the next stanza reflects the emotional difficulty of speaking lines about “fearing no more the heat of the sun” when we confront our mortality at a funeral. These lines from Shakespeare’s *Cymbeline* offer some limited consolation to the speaker, but he is “missing God” and the sacred nevertheless.

In the rest of the poem, O’Driscoll catalogues a litany of places, cultural spaces, and private moments in which modern or postmodern men and women might indeed “miss God.” The reader is asked to contemplate the cumulative effect of the sixteen stanzas of O’Driscoll’s litany, to experience the poem’s repetitive structure and elegiac cast, its quiet tonalities which announce intellectual and emotional recognitions of loss. I suggest that as the poem gathers

force in its elegiac repetition and as it carefully enumerates sites of the missing sacramental sense of God's presence, it has the incremental effect of making the reader feel this state of being bereft of something valuable more powerfully. That is, just by making such a profoundly suggestive and thought-provoking catalogue of times and places when we miss God's presence, the poem paradoxically calls that missing status into conscious thought and feeling. In other words, the poem's construction of a litany of cultural spaces in which God once was thought to dwell allows the reader to reevaluate and revisit those sacred places in which the sense of the *sacramental* presence of God could once be summoned into consciousness. It suggests, furthermore, that we might be missing God because we now feel the poverty of our limited imaginations, or feel the lack of the storehouse of images that belief in God once supplied to our imaginations.

For example, in lines such as

Miss Him when we stand in judgement

On a lank crucifixion in an art museum,

Its stripe-like ribs testifying to rank.

the problem of our faulty human perspective as contemporary observers of a crucifixion scene comes into play. We see that we may run the risk of mis-judgment; as "we stand in judgement" we might see the crucified body of Christ as defeated and merely broken flesh, rather than glorious in "rank" because that crucified body is radically salvific for human life. The paradox is in those "stripe-like ribs testifying to rank": the grim fact of the crucifixion

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subverts our knowledge of Christ's highest rank as the son of God by putting our human standards of rank and judgment into play. That is, in "stand[ing] in judgement" on this "lank crucifixion," we miss God if we miss the point that in the crucifixion Christ made a stunning departure from his kingly, divine rank and chose instead a human, sacrificial victimhood.

The next four stanzas, full of images to please the senses, also open the door to a unification of the sensual and the transcendental, of outward sign and inward disposition. Many of these are sacramental images, if we could see them as such. O'Driscoll writes extremely evocative images of an altar-like dining table, such as:

Miss Him when the linen-covered  
dining table holds warm bread rolls,  
shiny glasses of red wine.

O'Driscoll then joins a symbolic bird, the dove, to the tolling of a monastery bell, again creating images which evoke Christianity's traditional store of sacred and sacramental images:

Miss Him when a dove swoops  
From the orange grove in a tourist village  
Just as the monastery bell begins to take its toll.

The best examples of the loss of powerful, sacramental images that link human and divine come in the next stanza:

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Miss Him when our journey leads us  
Under leaves of Gothic tracery, an arch  
Of overlapping branches that meet  
Like hands in Michelangelo's creation.

This last stanza contains images of beauty on the human and divine scales; the medieval Gothic tracery and the Renaissance painting are both intended to celebrate God's grandeur and loving generosity toward humanity. Our journey leads us, in a fine image, under leaves of Gothic tracery, an arch. To "meet like hands in Michelangelo's creation" is to evoke an optical image of balance and equilibrium in the fanning out of the branches of the Gothic arch. This phrase also invokes Michelangelo's great tableau of creation on the Sistine Chapel ceiling in which Adam's hand reaches toward the Creator's hand, showing human dependence on God for the touch of life.

Although it is more plain in its diction, the next stanza offers a satisfying glimpse of the presence of God in the everyday, and our sense of missing God when we are reminded of his removal from liturgical occasions of worship using incense. "Trudging past a church" when the sense of smell is brought directly into play, catching that residual "blast of incense" is like a perfume to compare to "the fresh-baked loaf/ Which [the Polish poet and Catholic believer] Milosz compared to happiness".

Miss Him when, trudging past a church,

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we catch a residual blast of incense,

A perfume on par with the fresh-baked loaf

which Milosz compared to happiness.

The sensually rich and intellectually appealing images of these four stanzas are central to the poem's meaning. These stanzas evoke the latent human desire, overpowering at times, suppressed at others, for acknowledging God's sacred presence in the material creation. These central stanzas suggest by their variations on the theme of "missing God" how intensely humans feel the imaginative lack once supplied by faith and by a sacramental view of the relationship between physical objects and their spiritual meaning.

If our yearning for God and the sacred can be reawakened and reanimated, then "Missing God" is a poem which sustains the tone of an elegiac lament over God's suppression from our lives. It catalogues those occasions while rousing the reader's feelings of loss and regret and ends with an act of recovery, of re-examination of the position stated at the poem's outset: "His grace is no longer called for before meals." The poem could be read, then, as an elegy in which "we are marching for work," to quote the idiom of O'Driscoll's long poem, "The Bottom Line," but still full of the feeling of God's absence, especially the lack of transcendence fostered by contemporary commercial culture. In this view, "Missing God" becomes a postmodern litany and a cultural elegy, a poem which records the evidence of our spiritual and emotional dispossession and which catalogues many instances of the colorlessness of a God-less existence. By making us powerfully aware of what we have discarded and therefore lost,

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“Missing God” does the imaginative work of a cultural elegy, mourning the loss of God’s presence in the world and the accompanying sense of sacred transcendence. It is an elegiac and sensitive poem, a startling poetic achievement.

But does some part of the poem paradoxically suggest that a recovery of the numinous and sacred is possible? Among its many surveyed situations is the possibility that one can recover a sense of God’s presence, even in the midst of this landscape of belatedness and doubt. I turn to the last stanza of the poem to make this point. This stanza warns us that it may already be too late for this attempt at recovery:

Even feel nostalgic, odd days,

For His Second Coming,

like standing in the brick

dome of a dovecote

after the birds have flown.

This last stanza suggests that it can also be a case of humanity’s arriving too late, of missing God because the mentality that could once sustain belief in the sacred has disappeared. It has found sacrilegious substitutes in material acquisitions and mergers: “acquisitions” such as vaguely spiritually-inspired kitchen furniture (“a matching set of Mother Ann Lee chairs”) or “mergers” such as the unfulfilling sexual rendezvous of stanza eighteen’s lovers, “shrugging [their] shoulders outside the cheap hotel.” Emphasizing human spiritual belatedness and loss

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of the sacred as the poem's overarching themes, such a reading points out that the speaker's "nostalgia," explicitly named in the last stanza, is for a future event that, though once promised, will now never arrive: Christ's Second Coming. To feel nostalgia, as the Homeric poem tells us about Odysseus's *nostos*, is to feel a powerful yearning for home, but in this case, it is a yearning for an empty home and an abandoned shelter, for what has irrevocably passed from the scene: "like standing in the brick/ dome of a dovecote/ after the birds have flown."

If the poem's main body conveys many missed connections and a gathering sense of loss, in the last stanza its elegiac tone grows and the poem ends with the speaker standing bereft in a dovecote "after the birds have flown." This final scene emphasizes the speaker's feelings of belatedness and loss of the sacred. It appears that now God is behind an impenetrable curtain, or that the sacramental sense of the universe is simply rendered irrelevant. Instead of finding God, the poem suggests with its survey of our mental and material maps, we "miss Him" by worshipping marketplace idols, fetishizing fretful busyness, or retreating from the spiritual arena entirely out of indifference or the sacrilegious substitution of other, more appealing gods.

As we have seen, this cultural elegy illustrates that a once-alive sense of God's sacramental presence is now obscured by human busyness and indifference until we find ourselves "missing God" permanently. One might ask, perhaps in desperation, what consolation does this contemporary elegy envision for a lost sense of the transcendent and the sacred? In Hopkins's terms, does "there (still) live the dearest freshness deep down things?" and are we blind and deaf to it? Does the Holy Ghost still "over the bent world brood with

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warm breast and with ah! bright wings” or is this metaphor for God’s presence a piece of a departed and now-derogated civilization? In “Missing God,” the once God-sustained universe is flattened and emptied out. With the transcendental and sacramental senses atrophied, the question becomes: what values can be discovered in the life of the everyday, in the works of our now human-centered days? Perhaps other, more recent O’Driscoll poems on similar subjects will provide some insights.

In his most recent volume, *Reality Check* (2007), O’Driscoll includes a poem titled “The Call” which is similar in subject matter but which varies in tone and modes of address from “Missing God.” It explores the contemporary difficulties of calling on God for mercy and hope, of finding divine support for human endeavors. In a semi-sacrilegious and satirical way, it casts God in the role of a busy, staff-protected businessman, “lines busy,” with “no menu of options offering access to the top” and “his supplicants fobbed off with white-collar ‘clerical workers’” who “undertake to pass on petitions, insisting the final decisions fall totally outside their sphere.” Humanity’s calls for succor go out to such a reduced and caricatured God, and he is notable for his silence, absence, and removal from the human sphere.

O’Driscoll’s speaker in “The Call” notes that we are disillusioned by this failure to meet us face to face, by God’s “abdication from fair play” “when all we ask/ is mercy for patients sweltering feverishly through blue / surgical gowns, a softening of his line on chronic pain, / repeal of whatever law ordains that those dealt a poor / hand must suffer the consequences for life, a birth scar.” In addition to touching directly on the problem of evil, this poem addresses God’s apparent indifference to human suffering and questions his continuing interest in our

species: does he “still dote[s] on the very hairs of our skeptical heads?” Or “is he no longer on speaking terms with mankind,/ dismissive of the species as a bad day’s work, leading/ his campaign trail to more docile outposts of his empire?” Worse yet, and in a satirical, semi-sacrilegious tone, the speaker asks, “Has he ceased believing in his mission statement, lost faith/ in his epoch-creating role?”

Continuing the trope of casting God in the role of a cosmic businessman, the poem asks, “Can this universe have spun out/ of his control, his conglomerate diversified so much that/ a personal touch, a hands-on customer service, is unviable?” Here the business metaphors combine to make a powerful plea: “We want him to summon a mass gathering like an extraordinary/ meeting of shareholders, feed facts to the multitudes this time.” This satirical register and marketplace diction marries the economic discourse of O’Driscoll’s “The Bottom Line” (1994) to the more overtly elegiac spiritual concerns of “Missing God” (2002) so that a portrait of God as a hidden God, a *deus absconditus*, emerges at this point of the poem. Far more concrete and corporeal are the images O’Driscoll uses in the last stanza of “The Call”:

If he has died, where are the oozing wounds to which our doubting  
fingers can be applied? What are the chances he may rise again?

The allusion to the Biblical figure called “doubting Thomas” is startlingly apt because the speaker suggests that we test our severely doubt-ridden faith by “touching” Christ’s wounded side. These lines’ direct approach to the physical facts of Christ’s body (“oozing wounds to which our doubting/fingers can be applied”) is typical of his treatment of bodily infirmity in

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*Reality Check's* "Fifty O'Clock." The last lines of "The Call" return us directly to the territory of sacred absence and spiritual belatedness limned by the sixteen sites in the stanzas of "Missing God":

Once, his beatific smile graced all our houses like an ancestral  
photograph or the graven image of a charismatic President or King.  
Now the blanched patch left in its place must be brushed out,  
the wall painted over, a hall mirror found to occupy that space.

These nostalgic last images speak of God's absence from the home and hearth, of a once-sacred "space" now marked by a "blanched patch" on the wall which can only be painted over and occupied by "a hall mirror." To further the poem's extended metaphor of the sacrilegious substitution of man's image for God's image, that mirror will invariably reflect the Narcissus-like face of the beholder. It will not direct his attention to an image of Christ, however anthropomorphized that sacred image may be.

The poem finally suggests that "The Call" to God has not been answered satisfactorily because "we always find him out"; God is presumably not available to his constituents, his believers. Whether it is God's removal from the world, the *deus absconditus* noted by Pascal centuries ago, or the case of a now-uninterested and emotionally remote prime mover, humanity's sense of its traditional and sacred connection to a redeemer has been nullified in this poem.

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As my final example, I turn to the poem entitled “Intercession,” also from *Reality Check*. Although it also addresses itself to the question of the strained relations between God and humanity, it has a brusquer, more overtly satirical and sardonic tone than “The Call” or “Missing God.” This tone is detectable in the opening lines of the poem: “God and humankind meet on uncommon ground. / They just don’t speak the same language.” It continues: “He plays hard to get. They try to smoke Him from His lair with incense.” The poem relies on oppositions and contrasts written in the form of two-line stanzas to make its points about God’s inaccessibility, as in the fifth stanza: “Their loudest pleas, tempered by/ musical settings, fall on His deaf ears.”

Not all of the poem’s language is so directly oppositional, but the divide in cosmic perspective between God and humanity is drawn bluntly: “He thinks in terms of infinity. They urge research to prolong human life.” It’s a telling emotional and tonal opposition: “infinity” bespeaks the vast interstellar spaces of which Pascal wrote, while “prolong[ing]” human life has the spiritual and humane sound of a sermon promoting the dignity of human life. The fourth stanza states that “Intercession” between God and man is sorely needed because “Both sides operate to incompatible agendas. / Priestly mediation fails to close the widening rift.”

The poem ends by reinforcing the utter incompatibility between God and humanity created by this rift: “His commands are not their wish. / They yearn for riches, youth, and beauty.” This disjunction is followed by the evidence of mankind’s beleaguered opposition to God in the last stanza:

He bestows gifts of osteitis, earthquakes, infant deaths.

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They shake their fists, proclaim their disbelief.

In these lines, O'Driscoll suggests that the rift between human aspirations and God's "gifts" to humanity is widest because of the incomprehensibility, indeed, the inscrutability, of the divine plan. The rift is desperately wide, so that some form of intercession between God and man becomes a necessary mediation because "Their loudest pleas, tempered by / musical settings, fall on His deaf ears." The spiritual and emotional distance between God and humanity is greater here than at the end of either "Missing God" or "The Call" because now mankind is not "missing God" and the sacred in an elegiac or nostalgic sense but is instead positioned at painful cross-purposes with him. Human anger at God's apparent indifference to suffering surfaces when "they shake their fists, proclaim their disbelief." Perhaps this poem could also have been titled "Impasse" rather than "Intercession." That it does carry the latter title makes readers think of the absolute need for intercession and the apparent total lack of it, both sides locked in impasse. As O'Driscoll writes in the sixth and seventh stanzas,

No, they can't hear what He is saying either.

No, they can't see His side of the story.

The generation gap that separates them

Reaches back to the pre-galactic universe.

The last two lines' emphasis on the impersonal vastness of "the pre-galactic universe" places God the Creator at a distant remove, separated from mankind by what seems like an

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unbridgeable “generation gap.” This starkly drawn sense in the middle stanzas of “Intercession” of humanity’s fundamental cosmic dislocation is even greater than the loss of the sacred and the familiar represented by the absence of the smiling Christ-portrait at the end of “The Call.” It seems to equal the disparity between human and divine intentions illustrated by the human error we customarily make in misinterpreting the salvific message of the painting of the crucified Christ in “Missing God.”

Dennis O’Driscoll’s poetry about missing God and the absence or diminution of the sense of the sacred in contemporary life moves readers to recognize what a rift the perceived split between God and man has created. As we have seen, he refuses to look away from the problem in constructing his elegiac litany of places and times in which human beings may miss God and the sacred and transcendent dimensions of life, but he also offers no false hopes for a redress of the division between God and man. Despite the apparent bleakness of this prospect, his poems examining the profound human sense of loss and spiritual disconnection as a consequence of a missing or absent God are perceptive and moving cultural elegies, and stand as eloquent testimonies to the mentalities and emotions of an age of diminished faith.

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