



ONE NOTE: TWO POETS, THREE BOOKS

a Review by Brian Murphy

Ponder, if you will, these two brief poems:

a crab apple dies
tomatoes chiles swell ripen
you paint I write

THE COVE

of such majesty it can't be looked at,
at whose apex there pulses, even
in daylight, a lighthouse, light-
pierced like a needle's eye.

The first is by OU English Professor Emeritus (and charter faculty member) Thomas Fitzsimmons from his most recent book *Is Two:: Becomes One* (Santa Fe: Katydid Books, 2005). This is a book of Tom's most recent poems with paintings by Tom's wife Karen (Karen H. Fitzsimmons). All the poems are haikus or haiku-like (that third line has 4, not the mandated 5, syllables). They are wonderfully polished, flashing gems of thought, a shot of or a shot into nature; and they are mostly love poems. Tom's poems are often paired with Karen's lightly lovely paintings—abstract swirls of delight. And as they are Japanese-inspired, they fit the poems with an unusual degree of snug symmetry.

These are, as I say, love poems; these poems express the

artists' love for each other, for life, for their lives and the life they have created together, and for their own art. A page or two from *Is Two:: Becomes One* would be a perfect way to begin your day, like saying a prayer or munching a perfect apple at dawn.

The second poem, "The Cove," is by Amy Clampitt: it is perfect and a perfect contrast to Tom Fitzsimmons' poem because of its cool impersonality. It exemplifies one characteristic of her poetic work—an astonishing metaphor in which a lighthouse is compared to a needle: you read this, and you never again look at either a needle or a lighthouse in quite the same way. Her poems were collected just under ten years ago, *The Collected Poems of Amy Clampitt* (New York: Knopf, 1997). And recently her letters have appeared in a widely reviewed book—*Love, Amy: The Selected letters of Amy Clampitt*, ed. William Spiegelman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

To anyone who knows the external story of her life (she wrote, as they say, "in quiet obscurity" until she was discovered by Howard Moss of *The New Yorker* when she was 58 years old and, after her first collection appeared when she was 63, was proclaimed by such eminent critics as Harvard's Helen Vendler as "a major American poet" and was then widely reviewed, feted, and admired until her death in 1994, at the age of 74), the letters tell the inner story of what, in her words, was her "answer to the immemorial problem of what to do with one's life." Many of the letters were written to her younger brother Philip (known to many readers of this *Journal* as Phil Clampitt, a Special Lecturer in biology at OU). These beautifully written letters are a fascinating record of the intellectual culture of her generation—post-Second World War in New York City: you follow her discoveries of Bergman movies, abstract art, and Salinger in *The New Yorker*. You also see her fascinating progress from her native Iowan Quaker background through a conversion to the Episcopal faith, to a nearly angry abandoning of that church as she became a Sixties radical, protesting, marching, even jailed, and voting for Dick Gregory.

There is also a thrilling passage in which she gradually discovers the poetry deep within herself and leaves behind her futile attempts at fiction.

Hers is wonderful poetry to read, and hers is an equally wonderful spirit to live with through her letters. The review in *The New Yorker* noted one of her most distinctive and refreshing features: “Her letters are suffused with an inexorable optimism, devoid of writerly melancholy or self-pity.”

Both Tom Fitzsimmons and Amy Clampitt celebrate life and love with an ecstatic lilt. We can’t have too many poets who do that!