

## I. POETRY AND ITS ROLE IN A CATHOLIC CULTURE

### WHAT IS POETRY?

(if we're going to discuss the role of poetry in a Catholic culture, then it's good to settle on some definitions of what we're talking about)

Wordsworth:

“emotion recollected in tranquility”

William Carlos Williams:

“a small (or large) machine made of words”

Robert Frost:

“Poetry is when an emotion has found its thought and the thought has found words.”

“Poetry is what gets lost in translation.”

Salvatore Quasimodo:

**“Poetry is the revelation of a feeling that the poet believes to be interior and personal which the reader recognizes as his own.”**

Carl Sandburg:

1. Poetry is a projection across silence of cadences arranged to break that silence with definite intentions of echoes, syllables, wave lengths.
2. Poetry is an art practised with the terribly plastic material of human language.
3. Poetry is the report of a nuance between two moments, when people say, ‘Listen!’ and ‘Did you see it’ ‘Did you hear it? What was it?’

Meena Alexander:

The poem is an invention that exists in spite of history... In a time of violence, the task of poetry is in some way to reconcile us to our world and to allow us a measure of tenderness and grace with which to exist... Poetry's task is to reconcile us to the world — not to accept it at face value or to assent to things that are wrong, but to reconcile one in a larger sense, to return us in love, the province of the imagination, to the scope of our mortal lives.”

**What do we, in our own lives, know about poetry? What role does poetry play in our lives, and in our culture as Catholics? (hint: probably more than, and a larger role than, we think)**

If you say, "I don't read any poetry," but you go to Mass, think again. If you say, "I don't read any poetry," but you pray the Liturgy of the Hours every day, SERIOUSLY think again!

**You read and hear the Psalms on a regular basis, which means that a) you DO read poetry, even if you think you don't, and b) you know more about poetry than you think you do.**

**What is it that we intuitively know about poetry from reading the Psalms? We could begin by asking, which of the above definitions of poetry apply to the Psalms?**

- Made of words, thought and emotion rendered into words, art with language as its medium, blah blah blah, all those kinds of definitions totally apply.
- Since we read them in translation, we do have that experience of glimpsing something fleeting that we can't quite fully apprehend (which is a hugely spiritual experience, actually -- in the Psalms we are continually seeing "in a glass, darkly").
- Quasimodo's definition, which I highlighted above because it particularly spoke to me: the Psalms articulate private human experience which is, in fact, universal. Reading the Psalms is a way of reading ourselves (as well as the mind of the Trinity, into which we enter when we pray the Psalms, so there's something vertical going on in our experience, as well as horizontal -- think of it as a *cruciform* reading experience).
- Reading the Psalms, we do -- as Meena Alexander's definition suggests -- reconcile ourselves to our position before God, our position as His mortal creatures, subject to His will. They give us a way to come to terms, imaginatively, with our own mortality and frailty, with our surges and lapses of faith, our various moods toward God (I love you, I'm mad at you, I'm in total despair but am willing to entertain that someday I will not be, etc).

**What other things *might* we know about poetry, based on our reading of the Psalms? Perhaps the best way to answer this question is to look at a specific and (I hope) very familiar Psalm:**

## **Psalm 51**

*Have mercy on me, God, in your kindness.  
In your compassion, blot out my offense.  
O wash me more and more from my guilt  
And cleanse me from my sin.*

*My offenses, truly I know them;  
My sin is always before me.  
Against you, you alone, have I sinned;  
What is evil in your sight I have done.*

*Then may you be justified when you give sentence  
And be without reproach when you judge.  
O see, in guilt was I born,  
A sinner was I conceived.*

*Indeed, you love truth in the heart;  
Then in the secret of my heart teach me wisdom.  
O purify me, then I shall be clean;  
O wash me, then I shall be whiter than snow.*

*Make me hear rejoicing and gladness,  
That the bones you have crushed may revive.  
From my sins turn away your face  
And blot out all my guilt.*

*A pure heart create for me, O God,  
Put a steadfast spirit within me.  
Do not cast me away from your presence,  
Nor deprive me of your holy spirit.*

*Give me again the joy of your help;  
With a spirit of fervor sustain me,  
That I may teach transgressors your ways  
And sinners may return to you.*

*O rescue me, God my helper,  
And my tongue shall ring out your goodness.  
O Lord, open my lips,  
And my mouth shall declare your praise.*

*For in sacrifice you take no delight,  
Burnt offering from me you would refuse,  
My sacrifice, a contrite spirit.  
A humbled, contrite heart you will not spurn.*

*In your goodness, show favor to Zion:  
Rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.  
Then you will be pleased with lawful sacrifice,  
Holocausts offered on your altar.*

(*Christian Prayer*, 979-980)

### Poetic elements:

- **Discernible patterns of language**  
(in this case, pairs of lines that repeat or echo each other)
- **Line, not sentence, as unit of meaning**
- **Presence of white space/silence**
- **“Plot” or “argument” feels more like following a thought process that may be more associative than strictly logical. Transitions from one idea to another may happen in the white space between the stanzas (ie in silence and mystery) rather than being made explicit in language.**

Going in, you might not have thought to look for these kinds of things, but they're pretty easy to recognize as features that set poetry apart from prose. Now that you know about them, you'll notice them every time you encounter a psalm -- you have just become that much more proficient and sophisticated a reader of poetry, and you didn't even have to get a degree in English or learn a secret code to do it!

## II. WHAT ABOUT POETRY THAT'S NOT THE PSALMS?

### WHY SHOULD I, AS A CATHOLIC, MAKE IT PART OF MY CULTURE?

- It's part of the Judeo-Classical-Christian tradition we inherit as Catholics
  - \* poetry is the oldest literary form
  - \* poetry pre-dates written language
- It does things that prose doesn't do
  - \* as Catholic poet Dana Gioia has written, poetry “enchants” us on multiple levels: visual, aural, emotional, physical, as well as intellectual
  - \*it concentrates our attention on minutiae of human experience, makes us notice what we would otherwise blast past on our mental highway to someplace else
  - \*it demands our attention and engagement in ways that prose doesn't (generally speaking)

- To cultivate our poetry-reading faculties is to develop our minds in a way that's conducive to prayer.

### **Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening**

*Whose woods these are I think I know.  
His house is in the village, though.  
He will not see me stopping here  
To watch his woods fill up with snow.*

*My little horse must think it queer  
To stop without a farmhouse near  
Between the woods and frozen lake,  
The darkest evening of the year.*

*He gives his harness bells a shake  
To ask if there is some mistake.  
The only other sound's the sweep  
Of easy wind and downy flake.*

*The woods are lovely, dark, and deep,  
But I have promises to keep,  
And miles to go before I sleep,  
And miles to go before I sleep.*

Robert Frost

#### **Poetic elements:**

- Discernible patterns of language (how many can we spot?)
- Line as unit of meaning (even when the sentence continues, the line makes you stop and notice what it contains)
- Presence of white space/silence
- "Plot" or "argument" is a thought process: the speaker noticing how he stops and notices, the tension between wanting to stay where he is, noticing, and the need to move on (in a lot of ways -- it occurs to me -- this is a poem about what poetry is about, and how it works, that call to stop and notice what the rest of the world doesn't consider worth noticing)

Also, I've deliberately chosen a non-Christian poem, by a non-believing poet, to illustrate how poetry can be important for us as Catholics: what the poem suggests (among the many things it might be said to suggest) is something that's just *true*.

What this poem says may be, in its own way, as true as what the Psalm has to say (though obviously not divinely inspired, as the Scriptures are).

It may suggest to us, as Catholic readers, the beauty of stillness and contemplation (however dark, mysterious, or even frightening solitude may be for us), and the tension between the call to contemplation and the call to action -- whatever's in the rest of our lives.

There may be many ways to read the concrete elements of the poem: the darkness, the cold, the whiteness of the snow. Those things can resonate for us in terms of beauty, or in terms of threat (raise your hand if your high-school English teacher told you that this poem was about a guy with a death-wish, period, and that was THE meaning, no matter what else you might have thought it was about . . . ). It can resonate in both ways simultaneously, and more. Death may in fact be the backdrop -- we can't ignore it. As Shakespeare says, "Our little life is rounded with a sleep." BUT there's a lot of possibility before we get there . . .

The poem may operate on us -- our eye, our ear, our pulse rate, our emotions -- in ways that we may find hard to articulate. But I think we can be enchanted by it, and that our lives on every level will be made richer, and we will perhaps understand ourselves better, as God's creatures in this beautiful, brief, sometimes tragic life vouchsafed to us, if we let a poem like this become part of us.