



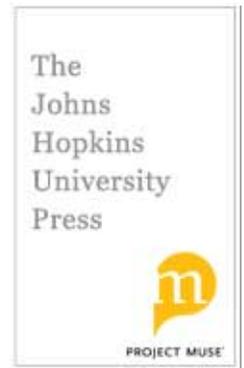
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Abstract

This article describes the importance of a visionary experience that Amy Clampitt had while visiting the Cloisters in New York City in 1956. Immediately afterwards, Clampitt began writing poetry for the first time, and her letters describing the experience evoke what is most distinctive about her later work: wonder before the world's richness; an embrace of temporality and flux; the understanding that perception is the surest route to mystery. Clampitt remained an incarnational poet even after she left the church, committed to the claim that, as she put it, "whatever we know of incorporeal reality is to date inseparable from the channels that received it."

Keywords

Amy Clampitt, incarnational poetics, mystery, nature, visionary experience

Grace, un-selfing, and poetry

In 1956, the poet Amy Clampitt had a visionary experience while visiting the Cloisters in New York City.¹ At the time, Clampitt wasn't a regular churchgoer, and she wasn't a poet either. Raised a Quaker, Clampitt had grown frustrated with what she saw as the faith's increasingly generic Protestantism. As she put it, her Quaker brethren had "lost track of precisely who they were, or had been: they no longer sat in silence to await the promptings of the Inner Light but relied on a pastor, as well as a choir, to guide them" (*Predecessors* 98). Quakers, she believed, had become too evangelical, and "what to the evangelical denominations mattered above all, and to the practical exclusion of very much else, was of course the Second Coming." Like other evangelical believers, Quakers were too concerned with the end times and not enough with how God's presence might be experienced in the here and now, sacramentally: "They omitted baptism and would have

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bridled still more at the idea of Communion, even when the wine was only grape juice.”²

As for her writing, Clampitt did not yet have much to show the world. In 1951, she had quit her job at Oxford University Press in order to devote herself full time to the novel that she had been working on at nights. This novel, according to Willard Spiegelman, was “thick with description and commentary but thin on plot and characterization” (Spiegelman xv). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Clampitt could not find a publisher—the novel remains unpublished today—and the would-be novelist eventually went back to work, this time as a reference librarian at the National Audubon Society. Early in 1956, Clampitt gave up the hope of seeing her novel in print, asking her agent to “put the manuscript on the shelf”—a decision that caused “some slight ego-mortification” (48). At this point, Clampitt was in the position that many youngish writers find themselves in. She thought that she was a writer; at some deep level, she knew that she was a writer. Yet the outward world, and her own work, refused to recognize this inward fact.

But then, in March of 1956, Clampitt visited the Cloisters and everything seemed to change. Immediately afterwards, she began to regularly attend Episcopal services. Soon, she was baptized into the faith. For a brief period, she even considered becoming a nun. Just as importantly, she put her novel aside—though she would return to it and other works of prose over the next few decades—and began writing verse. Clampitt called the event at the Cloisters a “conversion in the radical meaning of the word” (Spiegelman 65), and it truly was a transformation. Before, she was an indifferent believer; after, she was a fervent one. Before, she was a writer of prose; after, she was a writer of poetry.

Clampitt describes her experience in a letter she wrote to her brother a few days after her visit. One day in March, she tells him, she decided to pay a visit to the Cloisters, one of her favorite places in the city. “On a sunny afternoon,” she writes, “as this one was, its location high on a bluff above the Hudson, facing the Palisades, is bathed in light, both direct and reflected” (Spiegelman 49). The Cloisters, then and now, are one of the city’s marvels. On the day that Clampitt visited, the Cloisters seemed a Wagnerian total work of art: the garden shined forth with “some hothouse daffodils and crocuses and narcissus . . . already in bloom,” and every step revealed a new treasure, whether “painting, sculpture, stained glass, metalwork, enamel, and so on, dating to the middle ages” (49).

And then there were the tapestries. Clampitt previously had enjoyed these works, telling her brother that she especially admired the “really glorious treasure [that] is a roomful of these which have to do with the mythological hunt for the unicorn” (Spiegelman 49). Yet, despite the admiration and even love she felt for these pieces, Clampitt tells her brother that she had always regarded tapestry as a “minor art, a sort of inferior brand of painting.” The tapestries, while striking, did not seem a distinctive form with its own rules and challenges. They were paintings, only less so.

But on this particular occasion, Clampitt was able to enter into the form more fully. Tapestries, she saw, were not simply “an inferior brand of painting.”

They were something altogether different, something perhaps even more complex and resonant than the paintings she had previously held above them. She writes,

But on that afternoon, while I wandered in and out, visually speaking, among the little wild strawberries, the bluebells and daisies and periwinkles and dozens of other flowers (so faithfully rendered that nearly all have been botanically identified) which are woven into the background of each of the scenes of the hunt, for the very reason that it was a composite work rather than that of a single individual—and not only composite but anonymous; not only the weavers, but the designer and even the place of origin are unknown . . .—[for that reason] I found it more satisfying than painting. (Spiegelman 49–50)

It is worth pointing out two aspects of this description. First, there is Clampitt's admiration for the tapestry's classicism. The tapestry is not the reflection of a particular artist's ego; it is something grander, something more "composite" and "anonymous." The tapestry is so powerful, Clampitt suggests, because it is so communal, because it arises not from a single person but from many persons giving themselves over to the craft that they have mastered.³ The tapestry seems to express, to quote T. S. Eliot, one of Clampitt's touchstones, a "continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (Eliot 40).⁴ Yet the fact that the tapestry had impersonal origins did not mean that the image itself was lacking in warmth; far from it. The letter expresses, above all else, Clampitt's deep admiration for the precision and specificity of the natural scene depicted on the tapestry. The flowers are not just seen by the weavers and designer; they are witnessed, seen deeply and truly. They are not just represented but are, visually speaking, *named*, rendered with such attention to botanical detail that they could be identified centuries later.

As I will argue, "seeing the world and naming it" is a good shorthand for Clampitt's own poetic project. At a dinner party in the 1980s, James Dickey cuttingly described Clampitt as a poet who wrote about flowers (Spiegelman xi). Despite the obvious and gendered condescension of Dickey's comments, he was telling the truth: Clampitt *was* a poet who wrote about flowers, but she was a poet whose writing about these flowers expressed her deepest aesthetic and spiritual commitments. For Clampitt, to see the world and to name it, to notice not just "nature" but the precise and specific details of nature, was to engage in true artistic perception—but also, as we'll see, to engage in true Christian perception. Why true Christian perception? Because, as Clampitt writes elsewhere, Christianity rests on a simple premise: "whatever we know of incorporeal reality is to date inseparable from the channels that received it" (*Predecessors* 106). Christianity, in other words, is an incarnational faith, and so engaging with the world through the senses can become an act of holy attention. As Robert Boschman puts it, Clampitt's poetry "evinces an eco-theological sensibility"—that is, it is theological insofar as it engages closely with the world and its ecology (176).⁵

Now, back to the Cloisters. After seeing the tapestries for the first time, as it were, Clampitt sits down on a stone to listen to the "regular Sunday program of

transcribed medieval music” (Spiegelman 50). And it is at this moment, as the music begins to play, that Clampitt feels overcome, suffused, and made new by that which exceeds her—in short, when Clampitt enters the visionary moment proper. As she writes, “The *Kyrie*, which of course is a cry for mercy, and the sun on the stone, a purely physical phenomenon, seemed while I listened to have some affinity, almost to be one and the same thing.” The cry for mercy seems to become materially embodied: it is not just a voiced cry but a cry that is felt, absolutely and physically. And this feeling of one’s self and one’s body being filled with the cry for mercy leads Clampitt to a recognition. For the moment, she writes her brother, she had “entirely forgotten [her] own existence.”

Clampitt admits to her brother that this was not the first time in her life that she had experienced such self-forgetting. But her self-forgetting at the Cloisters seemed different not just in degree but in kind:

It is the sort of thing that has happened to me a few times in my life, but always before in moments of great excitement and with a kind of incredulity surrounding it like an iron ring. This time there was no iron ring, no excitement, no surprise even, but a serenity so complete that I hardly thought about it just then, I simply took it for granted. (Spiegelman 50)

What does Clampitt mean in saying that, this time, “there was no iron ring”? I suspect she means that this feeling of self-forgetting did not mark itself off as different from the rest of her experience but rather seemed to illuminate the rest of her experience; the feeling was not limited to this one moment at the Cloisters but flowed outward. Her serenity is “complete,” and it is a serenity that expands to encompass her whole being and the whole world. She goes on: “Possibly this is what is supposed to take place at baptism—but if baptism it was, it wasn’t of water, but of light.”⁶

What effect does this baptism, this moment of un-selfing and serenity, have for Clampitt? First, it leads her not to withdraw from the world but to see it more clearly. As she writes, “the whole hilltop, the whole world was fairly brimming with radiance. I walked around for a while, looked at the people, and walked to the subway, rather tired, and yet rested too, and pleased with everything” (Spiegelman 50). She leaves the visionary state more able to appreciate the miracle of everyday existence. Again, we get the sense that Clampitt’s visionary experience is not cordoned off or set apart (the “iron ring”) but expansive and unfolding: this small moment makes the whole world new. Second, this experience leads Clampitt to recognize that what felt like an abolishment of the self was actually something quite different. After she has had a day to reflect upon her experience, Clampitt claims, she sees that this

was not a temporary extinction of personality, but the opposite: for the first time in my life, without even knowing that I knew it, I had been without fear. This is the

negative way of stating it. The positive statement has ramifications which are still unfolding, and for all I know they will go on unfolding forever. (52)

This unexpected, undeserved, and seemingly impossible lifting of fear, Clampitt comes to think, has real religious significance. Shortly after her experience at the Cloisters, Clampitt had a bitter, nasty fight with a friend that led to a scene of mutual—and totally unexpected—forgiveness. Writing to her brother, she explains that this reconciliation seems to have grown out of her visionary experience at the Cloisters:

I am no less certain that there is a very real significance behind what took the outward shape of a private quarrel and reconciliation; and the best single word I can find for that significance is Grace. Where does the strength to overcome one's hate and anger come from? One can say that it comes from within, but ultimately this is not true at all; alone one can do nothing; ultimately it must come from without. (61)

To be touched by grace, Clampitt suggests, is not to have ourselves disappear. It is to feel ourselves made new through love—a love that abolishes not selfhood but fear, that leaves us, as she puts it in another, earlier letter, with a “stillness before the unknown” (22).

And this imparting of grace leads Clampitt to write poetry. When she sat down to describe the experience at the Cloisters for the first time, Clampitt tells her brother, she found herself unexpectedly writing in verse:

Quite as though they had a will of their own, the sentences broke in a way that was not my usual style at all. Rather frightened, I must admit, for the moment, I let them break. The next thing I knew, they had begun to reach out for rhymes. This frightened me almost more, until I discovered that finding a rhyme could be almost as natural a process as the resolution of a dominant chord: I didn't have to look for them, they simply came. (Spiegelman 52–53)

“Quite as though they had a will of their own”; “they simply came.” If Clampitt's experience at the Cloisters had seemed a moment when she was given a wholly unanticipated gift—namely, grace—then her coming to write verse seemed a similar gift. Through grace, Clampitt knew, she became a committed believer; through grace, she thought, she became a poet.

Poetic and religious wonder

Now, the narrative that I have been sketching—Clampitt goes to the Cloisters a wary believer and a tortured novelist; she emerges a committed Christian and a confident poet—is far too tidy. After all, while Clampitt did proclaim her experience a conversion, the conversion did not quite stick. After her period of intense devotion, Clampitt drifted away from the Episcopal Church, eventually breaking

with it in the 1960s over the Vietnam War.⁷ After the war, religion largely drops out of her letters—and, at least in terms of regular worship, out of her life. And while Clampitt believed in 1956 that her experience at the Cloisters had turned her into a poet, her first full-length collection of poetry was not published until 1983—almost thirty years *after* her visionary experience, and almost twenty years after she became estranged from the church.

Yet, in spite of all of this, what Clampitt felt at the Cloisters and what she experienced in her period as an ardent Christian believer remained with her. In fact, what is most distinctive about Clampitt's poetry—its patient witness to the mystery of existence; its commitment to moving from fear to wonder—can be seen as one way that Clampitt honored that religious experience, even after she had left the church behind. Throughout her life, Clampitt emphasized that, for her, “religious feeling was everything” (Spiegelman 5).⁸ Her letters regularly criticize Christian believers' focus on dogma. She described religious dogma as the “machinery that came later”; after all, “Jesus himself had no interest whatever in dogma—what dogma already existed, he seems to have been against” (55). What came first, before dogma? Grace and love—more specifically, Christ's love, that “unseen unifying principle in which by a kind of necessity I seem to have come to believe” (67). For Clampitt, Christianity is not about dogma but about feeling, and this feeling is primarily a feeling of being loved. The truth of Christianity is a love story between Christ and the world—the world in all its material, temporal nature.

Clampitt's poetry likewise loves the world in all its material, temporal nature. Her poetry is everywhere tethered to life's weight and texture; not for her the pure imagination. As she writes in “Marine Surface, Low Overcast,” the world's loveliness, its “galleries of sheen, of flux,” is something “no fabric/for which pure imagining,/except thus prompted,/can invent the equal” (*The Kingfisher* 13). It is only in responding to the world, honoring its material feel and temporal dimensions, that the imagination can match the sheen and flux of the world. James Longenbach has argued that Clampitt “came to terms with the landscape of the Midwest by reconceiving its formlessness as a virtue” (120). For her, the world's variety—its formlessness, its flux—was something to be celebrated rather than corralled or reduced. In “Cloudberry Summer,” she describes “the filling tide-/pool of surprise” that she experienced when looking at the “undersurfaces” of cloudberry one summer. The experience was short-lived: “days later” the white petals had fallen and “the whole unstable, illusory van of pleasure/had moved on” (*What the Light Was Like* 12). But this instability doesn't mean that the pleasure wasn't real. Or, rather, it suggests that the *pleasure* was deep and lasting (after all, it made possible the poem that we are now reading) even if the *source* of that pleasure proved fleeting.

Clampitt's poetry is always directed towards the world: looking at it clearly, naming it carefully—like the weavers of the Cloisters' tapestry. Here she is on the gooseberry:

The gooseberry's no doubt an oddity,
an outlaw or pariah even—thorny

and tart as any
 kindergarten martinet, it can harbor
 like a fernseed, on its leaves' under-
 side, bad news for pine trees,
 whereas the spruce
 resists the blister rust
 it's host to. That veiny Chinese lantern, its stolid jelly
 of a fruit, not only has no aroma but is twice as tedious
 as the wild strawberry's sunburst
 stem-end appendage: each one must
 be between-nail-snipped at both extremities. (*What the Light Was Like* 13)

Notice the care with which Clampitt inspects and then renders the gooseberry. She places it within several different contexts: first, she describes it as an “outcast” to the natural world; then, she imaginatively places it within the human world, likening its prickliness to that of the “kindergarten martinet.” She describes its physical appearance (“veiny Chinese lantern”) as well as its lack of aroma. She even explains the relative inconvenience involved in gathering the gooseberry: it must “be between-nail-snipped at both extremities.”

Here and elsewhere, Clampitt pays close attention to nature's abundance, to its oceans and animals and plants. She delights in such riches and she delights in naming them. In “Botanical Nomenclature,” Clampitt dramatizes the many ways by which we might name—and, in naming, experience—the natural world:

Down East people, not being botanists,
 call it “that pink-and-blue flower
 you find along the shore.” Wildflower
 guides, their minds elsewhere, mumble
 “sea lungwort or oysterleaf” as a label
 for these recumbent roundels, foliage blued
 to a driftwood patina
 growing outward, sometimes to the
 size of a cathedral window,
 stemrib grisaille edge-tasseled
 with opening goblets, with bugles
 in miniature, mauve through cerulean,
 toggled into a seawall scree,
 these tuffets of skyweed
 neighbored by a climbing tideline,
 by the holdfasts, the gargantuan lariats
 of kelp, a landfall of seaweed:

Mertensia, the learned Latin
 handle, proving the uses of taxonomy,

shifts everything abruptly inland,
 childhoodward, to what we called then
 (though not properly) bluebells . . . (*The Kingfisher* 16–17)

The inexhaustible variety of the natural world offers inexhaustible opportunities for perception and description. Different groups have different ways of naming the flower, from the casual description of the non-professional (“that pink-and-blue flower/you find along the shore”) to the “learned” classification of the botanist (“*Mertensia*”), from the figurative richness of the poetic voice (“mauve through cerulean,/toggled into a seawall scree”) to the simplicity of the child’s voice (“bluebells”). The lavishness of nature calls forth a lavishness of language.⁹

As Helen Vendler puts it, Clampitt “revive[s] us by the way she can lose herself in the *visibilia* of the world” (402). Just as the Cloisters allowed her to lose herself only to find herself more deeply—moving away from the egotistic self and towards a healthier, holier self—so too does engaging with the world perceptually. Clampitt is always looking at what she calls in “The Outer Bar” the “unlicensed free-for-all that goes/on without a halt out there all day, all night,” a free-for-all that provides endless pleasure for the mind and the eye: “Your mind keeps turning back to look at them—/chain-gang archangels that in their prismatic/frenzy fall, gall and gash the daylight/out there, all through the winter” (*The Kingfisher* 7–8). In an essay on John Donne, Clampitt writes of her admiration for the poet’s “way of apprehending the stress of being—reality as a process, a condition to be entered rather than observed” (*Predecessors* 32). Clampitt found this sense of being as process, being as a participatory condition to be entered into, within Christianity and within her poetry. For the poet and the Christian, to quote again from her letters on the Cloisters, “the whole world [is] fairly brimming with radiance.”

If naming particulars is one way of honoring the world’s material richness, then acknowledging how naming fails—how the world surpasses our ability to understand it—is another. In “Lindenbloom,” Clampitt describes the transient beauty of the linden tree’s blooming: “Before midsummer density/opagues with shade the checker-/tables underneath, in daylight/unleafing lindens burn/green-gold a day or two,/no more” (*The Kingfisher* 44). When we read across these lines, we understand that it is the “green-gold” that is burning—that, in other words, the color shines brightly—but Clampitt breaks off the line to suggest that it is the linden itself, and not just a property of it (color), that burns with beauty. Just as Hopkins’s “kingfishers catch fire” and “dragonflies draw flame,” Clampitt’s flowers are alive with fiery thisness (Hopkins 129).¹⁰ This instant of floral enkindling reminds the speaker of a similar ecstatic vision that she had in the past. The linden offers “intimations/of an essence I saw once,/in what had been the pleasure-/garden of the popes/at Avignon”: the sight of “a million/hanging, intricately/tactile, blond bell-pulls/of bloom, the in-mid air/resort of honeybees’/hirsute cotillion.” One instance of appreciating nature’s splendor brings with it the memory of other, similar instances.

But what is emphasized at the poem's end is not so much how one blooming suggests another, but how each blooming exists in excess of our attempts to comprehend or name it:

[the] aromas

so intensely subtle,
 strollers passing under
 looked up confused,
 as though they'd just
 heard voices, or
 inhaled the ghost
 of derelict splendor
 and/or of seraphs shaken
 into pollen dust
 no transubstantiating
 pope or antipope could sift
 or quite precisely ponder. (45)

The flower's intoxicating odor is so overwhelming that it seems to call for some kind of a supernatural explanation, whether ghostly or angelic. But whatever explanation we might offer, no matter what efforts we might go to in order to "sift" or classify the "splendor" we see before us, the flower will elude our grasp.

As she claimed in her post-Cloisters letter, the world in Clampitt's poetry is "brimming with radiance"—so much so that it overpowers our attempts to name or contain it. This is why so many of her poems move towards silence. "Beethoven, Opus III," for example, describes the near-deaf composer "rehearsing the unhearable," and we are led to believe that his musical achievement was, in some strange way, a result of his wrestling "with a sound he cannot hear" (*The Kingfisher* 65 and 62). This privileging of the unhearable or unnamable explains in part why Clampitt's last collection was entitled *A Silence Opens*. Just as all theology approaches silence in the face of God's otherness, Clampitt suggests that all poetry must approach silence in the face of the world's otherness. As she puts it in the first poem of *A Silence Opens*, "Syrinx," there is a "higher form of expression" that her poetry often gestures towards, a poetry that "break[s] free of the dry,/the merely fricative/husk of the particular, rises/past saying anything" (*A Silence Opens* 3–4). It's not that Clampitt urges removal from the world. Rather, she suggests that true participation in the world, a real acknowledgement of its unending flux and sheen, will result in humbled silence.

This point—that one way to honor the world is to admit one's insufficiency in the face of its wonder—is likewise made in "Triptych," a three-poem meditation on Holy Week that lies near the center of *The Kingfisher*. Vendler describes the sequence as treating "the human inclination to cruelty and to victimage, sometimes in the name of love, sometimes in the name of art, sometimes in the name of

religion” (400). Vendler is right to claim that these poems are about cruelty, and she is also right to say that these poems identify the cruelty at the heart of much religion: the way that Christianity too often “render[s] adorable/the torturer’s implements”, providing humanity with “an ampoule of gore, a mithridatic/ounce of horror” and trying to make meaningful our inherent bloodlust (83, 85). These three poems, and especially “Good Friday,” suggest that religion is most damaging when it is most orderly—that is, when it distorts the world by trying to tidy it up, making the ugly beautiful or the violent a source of comfort. As Boschman writes, “what Clampitt calls ‘the evolving ordonnance of murder’ seems to be as embedded in systems of thought of belief as it is in the food chain” (190). Religion participates in the very violence that it seeks to contain. Indeed, its attempts at containment are themselves forms of violence.¹¹

But the poems in “Triptych” are also about all that exists *outside* this desire to order and contain. “Palm Sunday,” for instance, begins, “Neither the wild tulip, poignant/and sanguinary, nor the dandelion/blowsily unbuttoning, answers/the gardener’s imperative, if need be,/to maim and hamper in the name of order” (83). Yes, the gardener—and, by implication, humanity—feels a desire, even an imperative, to maim in the name of order. But the wild tulip and the dandelion, in their slovenly beauty, remind us of that which exceeds this imperative. Not violence but peace is given the last word in this sequence. “Triptych,” after all, ends not with “Good Friday” but with “Easter Morning,” when “after the hammering/of so much insistence/on the need for naming” we are given not human violence but quiet, natural grace: “after the travesties/that passed as faces,/grace: the unction/of sheer nonexistence/upwelling in this/hyacinthine freshet/of the unnamed/the faceless (87)” The poem seems to end with what Boschman calls “the metaphysical reality that at times seems to glimmer at the edge of nature” (175). This glimmer, this “grace,” by its very nature, cannot be named, but it is the job of the poet to gesture towards it, to make it felt if not understood.

In “Easter Sunday” and “Lindenbloom,” Clampitt shows how the world’s radiance exceeds our ability to name it. In these poems, the world is less like a tapestry to be labeled than a piece of music to be overwhelmed by, just as Clampitt was by the *Kyrie* while visiting the Cloisters. This connection between world and music—and between poetry and music—was an important one for Clampitt. In an essay on Robert Frost, for example, she once lamented that whatever music contemporary poetry might have, it was “a vibration in the brain rather than the ear” (*Predecessors* 152). Her own poetry most definitely vibrates in the ear, as in the internal rhyme of “frenzy fall, gall and gash” from “The Outer Bar,” or in “the unreflecting seethe and chirr and/whimper of the prairie” in “Westward” (*Westward* 29), or in these lines from “Black Buttercups”: “the blue world reeled/up past the pussywillow undersides of clouds/latticed by swigging catkins soon to haze/with pollen-bloat, a glut/run riot while the broken pond/unsealed, turned to mud/and, pullulating, came up buttercups” (*What the Light Was Like* 27). One gets the sense that Clampitt often wrote to luxuriate in the music of language, to feel her ear and body move to the beat of words like “latticed” and

“pullulating.” It is no accident that two of Clampitt’s most anthologized poems are poems about music: “Beethoven, Opus III,” which describes Beethoven’s music as “a disintegrating surf of blossom/opening along the keyboard, along the fence-rows/the astonishment of sweetness” (*The Kingfisher* 65), and “Syrinx,” which concerns “the aeolian/syrinx, that reed/in the throat of a bird” (*A Silence Opens* 3).

Clampitt, both before she came to the church and after, admired its rituals: the way that sensory things like incense or wine might make present the mystery that was at the root of religious experience. Above all, she appreciated the sacramental nature of Christian music. Like Hopkins—the poet without whom, Clampitt claimed, she wouldn’t have been a poet—Clampitt’s work is at its most sacramental when it is at its most musical. That is to say, her poems are most sacramental when the words don’t so much refer as make present, through their music, their extraordinary meaning, when they delight in the vibrations they make in the ear—and when those vibrations don’t just refer to meaning but *are* meaning. In 1978, writing to her friend Sister Mary John, the abbess of St. Mary’s Abbey in Kent, Clampitt had this to say about the relation between religion and music:

You wrote, anyhow, a lot about dancing, and how as a “responding motion” it is also an expression of religious feeling. This is a thought I’ve had more and more lately—I remember saying to Hal [her partner Harold Korn], as one of those jokes that underneath are perfectly serious, “*Life is dance.*” As I’ve mentioned, I think, we listen to a great deal of music, and often we start moving around the room in response to it—an unstiffening, on my part, that has been a long time in taking place but is not too late, even so. (Spiegelman 194)

Religion and poetry, music and dancing: all bring about an unstiffening, a responsiveness by which meaning becomes embodied.

Unhanding unbelieving

To see how Clampitt’s poetry exhibits what she sees as the heart of Christianity—its real, patient participation in materiality that acknowledges both the wonder and the suffering of existence—I want to look at one final poem: “The Sun Underfoot among the Sundews,” the first poem Clampitt ever published in the *New Yorker* in 1978. Here is the poem in full:

An ingenuity too astonishing
to be quite fortuitous is
this bog full of sundews, sphagnum-
lined and shaped like a teacup.

A step

down and you’re into it; a
wilderness swallows you up:
ankle-, then knee-, then midriff-

to-shoulder-deep in wetfooted
 understory, an overhead
 spruce-tamarack horizon hinting
 you'll never get out of here.

But the sun
 among the sundews, down there,
 is so bright, an underfoot
 webwork of carnivorous rubies,
 a star-swarm thick as the gnats
 they're set to catch, delectable
 double-faced cockleburs, each
 hair-tip a sticky mirror
 afire with sunlight, a million
 of them and again a million,
 each mirror a trap set to
 unhand unbelieving,

that either
 a First Cause said once, "Let there
 be sundew," and there were, or they've
 made their way here unaided
 other than by that backhand, round-
 about refusal to assume responsibility
 known as Natural Selection.

But the sun
 underfoot is so dazzling
 down there among the sundews,
 there is so much light
 in the cup that, looking,
 you start to fall upward. (*The Kingfisher* 14–15)

The plant is enchanting in a "double-faced" sense. It is both attractive ("delectable" and "afire") and dangerous (the sundew is a carnivorous plant), and Clampitt longs to acknowledge—and, in some way, celebrate—both facets. Sundews are both deceitful and miraculous, a "sticky mirror/afire with sunlight," a "webwork of carnivorous rubies."

The most striking lines in the poem come when the speaker tells us that the sundews are "a trap set to/unhand unbelieving." In "Cloudberry Summer," Clampitt also uses the verb "unhand" to describe the kind of unmooring that immersion in the natural world can bring about. There, she bends to look at "a paired leaf-clasp" on the stem of a flower:

and as the wavering
 appendage of a single barnacle
 is multiplied, on observation, to a kind of choir

(what are they doing? Merely
seizing any passing thing that may be
edible), thereby

tending to unhand
one's sense of balance, I saw, immersed
in undersurfaces, the filling tide-
pool of surprise. (*What the Light Was Like* 12)

In both poems, then, unhanding means a kind of disorienting—a reminder that the world is too wild and wondrous to be easily handled.

After describing this moment of unhanding, the speaker lists two possible explanations for the sundew's existence: first, that the sundews are the easily explainable result of divine creation (“a First Cause said once, ‘Let there/be sundew’”); second, that the sundews are the easily explainable result of natural selection (“they’ve/made their way here unaided/other than by that backhand, round-/about refusal to assume responsibility/known as Natural Selection”). Confident Christianity, or confident Darwinism; creation, or evolution: these are the two options, and both present problems. For the believer in providence, how to explain the “double-faced” nature of nature, its grounding in deception and violence? For the believer in Darwinism, how to explain the “ingenuity too astonishing/to be quite fortuitous”?¹²

Both of these explanations fail, Clampitt suggests, because they simplify that which is unimaginably complex. To look at the natural world with real attention is to find it “astonishing,” “delectable,” and “dazzling.” In short, it is to be reminded that the world exceeds our best efforts to understand it. The sundew's ingenuity of design seems to go beyond mere usefulness. Its cup overflows with light; it is marked not just by utility but by impossible and seemingly unnecessary beauty, millions upon millions of lights. To truly look is to “start to fall upward”—to move from explanation, whether theistic or naturalistic, and towards wonder. In looking at the sundew, Clampitt feels touched by something beyond the sundew and beyond herself. Indeed, as in her experience at the Cloisters, she begins to see even the violence of nature not as something to be feared but as something to be astonished by. It is important to note that Clampitt says the sundews are a trap set to unhand unbelieving—in other words, a deception. So, if the sundews seem to indicate the insufficiency of providential or naturalistic explanations, that doesn't mean that they *actually* disprove them. But what such easy causal explanations do accomplish, undoubtedly, is to prevent the “fall upwards,” the astonishment at the sheer wonder of it all.

Boschman reads “The Sun Underfoot among the Sundews” as an examination of “the old Puritan dilemma over what to do about wilderness, what to make of nature at its rawest and most unconstrained and all-encompassing, how best to account for it and yet maintain—or in Clampitt's case, regain—a God worth believing in” (187). “The either/or” of Natural Selection or God, Boschman

argues, “is not straightforward, although the diction reveals which alternative Clampitt tends towards”—namely, the “theistic choice” (189). This is well put, though I would add that the poem is *also* about how all accounts, whether Darwinian or theistic, fail to accommodate the sundew’s complex blending of beauty and violence. “The Sun Underfoot among the Sundews” suggests that all explanations fail when faced with the natural world’s astonishing mysteries.

For Clampitt, the true Christian viewpoint, just like the true poetic viewpoint, doesn’t abolish mystery but revels in it. Christianity teaches that the world isn’t antithetical to God but the object of His loving action. As Clampitt writes, it teaches that “whatever we know of incorporeal reality is to date inseparable from the channels that perceive it.” The way to transcendence isn’t through abstraction from the world but through participation in it. To fall upwards, we must look downwards—seeing the world, hearing the world, and wondering at its mystery.

Notes

1. Clampitt is not the only 20th-century writer to have connections with the Cloisters. W. H. Auden, for instance, wrote an English-language narration for *The Book of Daniel*, a medieval liturgical play that was performed at the Cloisters in 1958. The novelist Madeleine L’Engle regularly visited the Cloisters herself—she lived nearby, on the Upper West Side—and mentions the Cloisters in *The Young Unicorns*.
2. Clampitt, as we will see, had a particular affection for sacramental celebration. Writing in 1960, she described the delight with which she, “a dogged Anglo-Catholic,” experienced “the vestments, the candles, the cross, and the words of the prayerbook, and then the sacrament itself” (Spiegelman 107).
3. One is reminded here of Geoffrey Hill’s claim of the productive possibilities of limitation and un-selfing: “‘Our word is our bond’ (shackle, arbitrary constraint, closure of possibility) is correlative to ‘our word is our bond’ (reciprocity, covenant, fiduciary symbol). ‘Mastery’ is as much as is not servitude” (Hill 151).
4. This quotation from “Tradition and the Individual Talent” is perhaps the most famous articulation of modernism’s celebration of Classicism—or, to put it another way, modernism’s critique of Romanticism. It should be noted, however, that Clampitt, like Eliot himself, had a more complicated relationship to the Classicism–Romanticism divide than her celebration of the communally created tapestries might suggest. She loved Eliot, but she also loved Keats; Virginia Woolf was one of her literary heroes, but so was Dorothy Wordsworth.
5. In Boschman’s reading, Clampitt regularly undoes the classic dichotomy between nature and culture: her poems show how “human artifacts . . . find both their source and end in nature,” thus drawing attention to “the fallacy that humans are somehow different, or above, the natural order” (178, 197). Boschman nicely links Clampitt’s frequent attempts to inhabit a non-human perspective—in “The Cove,” for example, Clampitt forces us to see through what Boschman calls “the porcupine’s prickly, vertical world view” (180)—to Clampitt’s religious sense. The ecological poet and the theological poet both strive to transcend our limited, egotistical modes of perception, reminding us that there are other—non-exploitative, non-solipsistic—ways of being in the world.
6. Again, we might see a connection with T. S. Eliot, and in particular with his description of the epiphany-by-light in the “Burnt Norton” section of *Four Quartets*: “Dry the pool,

- dry concrete, brown edged,/And the pool was filled with water out of sunlight,/And the lotos rose, quietly, quietly,/The surface glittered out of heart of light” (Eliot 118).
7. Spiegelman, citing Clampitt’s brother Philip, indicates that the break most likely happened in the fall of 1969. One Sunday during services at St. Mark’s, Clampitt writes, “a Black and Brown Caucus”—a group protesting for minority rights—“startled all the rest of us by getting up and reading a list of demands and asking those who supported them to walk out of the service” (150–51). Clampitt, after some thought, followed them, but the event left many congregants “hurt and angry and wanting to know why it happened” (151). Clampitt increasingly aligned herself less with the church and more with the radical politics the church found discomfiting.
 8. Clampitt describes the importance of feeling to her sense of religion in a 1952 letter to her brother (her regular interlocutor about religious matters). In it, she describes a tipsy and heated debate she had with some friends over drinks: “after a couple of martinis Joe Goodman and I and a girl friend of his got into a terrible argument, in which I maintained that religious feeling was everything, the girl that dogma was everything, and Joe took the more complicated position of the skeptical believer. None of us convinced the others of anything” (5).
 9. Some critics have warned against Clampitt’s tendency to reflect the sensory abundance of the natural world by overwhelming her lines with adjectives and allusions. Marjorie Perloff, for example, claims that Clampitt “loaded every rift with ore to the point that the rifts themselves are safely ignored” (175).
 10. Hopkins is everywhere in Clampitt but especially in these lines. The linden tree’s “unleafing,” for instance, surely recalls the opening to “Spring and Fall”: “Margaret, are you grieving,/Over Goldengrove unleaving?” (152).
 11. Daniel McGuinness summarizes “Palm Sunday” in this way: “‘Palm Sunday’ is a sort of sonnet, fourteen lines at least, contrasting the tulips and dandelions growing wild in the fields with the mangled palm leaves which, after the gardener’s bullying and the choir-boy’s churlish disregard, feed in their decomposition other vegetable victims of mankind’s rage for order” (112). “Rage for order” recalls Wallace Stevens’s “The Idea of Order at Key West,” but “Palm Sunday” seems to recall another poem by Stevens, “Sunday Morning,” in which we likewise hear that Christianity rests upon a violent base: “silent Palestine, / Dominion of the blood and sepulchre” (Stevens 67).
 12. Clampitt saw two modern systems of thought as taking the true measure of the world’s flux and flow: Darwinism, which saw the world and all its species as ever-mutating and ever-changing, and Christianity, which saw God as entering into time and history. She also saw Darwinism and Christianity as grappling honestly with the problem of pain—a rare thing, Clampitt believed, in human intellectual history. In her notes to “Good Friday,” Clampitt claims that Christian “theology remains persuasive because it takes suffering seriously. And so, for all its impassivity, does the Darwinian theory of natural selection, which for many nowadays has acquired an almost theological authority” (*The Kingfisher* 144).

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