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Poems of Devotion: An Anthology of Recent Poets ed. by Luke Hankins (review)

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(Review)

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exhalations are the sudden condensation, the idea of anticipation being key. Later, drawing on an image reminiscent of prayer, “the empty cup waits/like folded hands” (96). Myers’s startling and often beautiful leaps of language provide much delight and pleasure for readers.

Within “Good Friday at the Alamo,” with its weaving together of history and the speaker’s Holy Week visit to the title site, many of the book’s subjects, its structural and poetic elements, and its broader concerns coalesce. Readers encounter the details of the famous site as “the rubber flip-flops of tourists make a sound/ of polite applause for the dead” (77), while the speaker posits that Davy Crocket’s gun is “like the tibia of Mary Magdalene at Toulon” (77). With the poem’s movement from the particular details of the speaker’s experience to those beyond himself he states, “Somewhere outside of time we all cry out/from the dark of our mouths, *Crucify Him!*” (77). There is movement beyond the personal which culminates with the speaker’s passionate request, “Oh, tour guide, tell them we have a history/of violence. Tell them we have a history // of need” (77). The use of the collective “we” shows that as readers we are also implicated, and here Myers serves as the poetic and prophetic voice announcing our need.

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Luke Hankins, (ed.). ***Poems of Devotion: An Anthology of Recent Poets.*** Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2012. Pp. xxviii + 208. \$24.70. ISBN 978-1-61097-712-8.

Luke Hankins has assembled a rich, varied anthology of devotional poetry, most of which was written between 1950 and the present, including 77 poets, the vast majority of the poems originally in English, with translations as well from French, Polish, Magyar (Hungarian), Dutch, and Hebrew. Hankins’s introductory essay, “The Poem as Devotional Practice: The Lasting Model of the 17th-century Poets,” asserts the importance of “poetry as a means of meditating” (xvi), reminding us that “the composition of a poem can itself be an act of devotion” (xvii). The central argument of Anthony Low’s *Love’s Architecture: Devotional Modes in Seventeenth-Century English Poetry*, Hankins argues, transcends the study’s period and geography of focus: devotional poetry at its most powerful is often exploratory, an “agonia,” a “wrestling with God,” and not rhetorical or theatrical posturing in language to achieve a foregone conclusion (xviii–xix). We readers cannot know, of course, or verify the inner states of poets who write the poems we read; Cristina Malcolmson, for example, in her study of George Herbert refers to the “sincerity effect,” the way in which Herbert’s poems achieve the *appearance* of sincerity and the genuine: true art, after all, is often in a work’s seeming artlessness. God alone sees hearts fully.

Still, Hankins compellingly describes a process to which many poets, including the secular Robert Frost, attest: “No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader.” The act of creation, for religious and secular poet alike, necessitates openness and often struggle. Without surprise, there is no lasting or moving art: no revealing, no discovering. Hankins insists this is particularly true of devotional verse. Perhaps, though, the true devotional act transcends or mysteriously precedes the spoken word or finished poem. R. S. Thomas, for example, describes a radical openness to the divine, a “waiting,” in his poem “Kneeling,” as in the communion of saints imagined around him listening, too, for God in prayer:

Prompt me, God;

But not yet. When I speak,
 Though it be you who speak
 Through me, something is lost.
 The meaning is in the waiting.

(20)

Or, as Thomas includes by asking in “Threshold,” the poem that follows in the anthology,

What

To do but, like Michelangelo’s
 Adam, put my hand
 Out into unknown space,
 Hoping for the reciprocating touch?

(21)

The poetic maker, made by God, imitates his Maker’s making: making is part of our reflection of the divine, an aspect of both incarnation and creation, a way back to the creator, an intimate gesture.

For Hankins, devotional poetry is an act of meditation seeking understanding: “We make because we are made. We are made because God loves to make” (178). In the final “Appendix: An Interview with Luke Harkins,” Hankins describes an assault he endured in 2011, his assailants screaming, “faggot!” Acknowledging the “pain of the fractured bones in my face” (176–177), Hankins describes quickly writing “The Way They Loved Each Other” in response, attempting to understand with radical charity the inner lives of his assailants, their motives and their interactions with one another. (This reader regrets the omission of the poem in this

anthology, or at least in its appendix; though we are given a web reference, the humility here feels misplaced.)

The God we find in these poems is not the God one meets in greeting cards or anthologies that offer a “quick morning pick-me-up,” though such things do have their place in the world. The two poems by Yehuda Amichai put us in the poet’s sense of awe before God. “Relativity” is a poem of incommensurability; after a series of often comically impossible comparisons, Amichai concludes, “Someone told me he’s going down to Sinai because/he wants to be alone with his God:/I warned him” (39). “Near the Wall of a House” startles us with God’s vast, incomprehensible nature; the poem ends, “Love is not the last room: there are others/after it, the whole length of the corridor/that has no end” (38). Hankins includes poems in the categories of “confession, petition, praise, and meditation,” asserting that poems engaged “with theological concepts or mysteries” in the more abstract (xix) are rarely written by poets today (xx). (One could make the case that living poets like former Archbishop Rowan Williams, not included in this anthology, do in fact write such poems, and powerfully. See, for example, “Great Sabbath.”)

One of the most delightful poems of praise is by e. e. cummings: “i thank you God for most this amazing/day: for leaping greenly spirits of trees/and a blue true dream of sky; and for everything/which is natural which is infinite which is yes,” the poem begins, moving in praise to “now the eyes of my eyes are opened” (6). We find also poems of confession, including Marie Howe’s “The Star Market,” in which the poet records her revulsion at the “people Jesus loved,” the “people who would have/been lowered into rooms by ropes”—the poor, the smelly, the sick, and the lame—she encounters while “looking for cereal and spring water” (75). The last lines come as an utter surprise: “If I touch only the hem of his garment, one woman thought, I will be healed./Could I bear the look on his face when he wheels around?” These two poems share a sense of revelation and surprise, of being seen and of seeing newly, without sentimentality.

One strength of *Poems of Devotion* is that it elicits hunger for more such anthologies of devotional verse. Though the collection attempts to include “mystics from the East and West” (back cover), for example, one finds surprisingly few poems by American Buddhist poets like Jane Hirshfield (we have one poem by her) or poems that explore the numinous in the mundane. Readers interested in Christian poetry in the mystical traditional, particularly in Eastern Orthodoxy and to a lesser extent Roman Catholicism from antiquity to the present, will find Scott Cairns’s *Endless Life: Poems of the Mystics* (Paraclete Press, 2014) valuable. I would like to read poets like Stanley Moss, a modern Psalmist in his lifelong arguments with an absent or hidden God; or Robert Pinsky, who takes on Bible narrative with deep seriousness and spiritual intensity; or H.D. or Ezra Pound, who on occasion wrote ecstatic devotional poems; or the exquisite Anne Porter. Hankins acknowledges that he makes his choices not to be exhaustive but to “testify to the ongoing importance of the devotional mode in poetry” (xxvi), and he does so with success.

What a rich variety of poems we find in *poems of devotion*! The anthology includes not only essential “recent” devotional poets like T. S. Eliot, Thomas Merton, William Averson (Brother Antoninus), R. S. Thomas, Geoffrey Hill, Patrice de la Tour du Pin, Luci Shaw, Mark Jarman, Scott Cairns, and Yehuda Amichai, to name a few, but we also find the singer Leonard Cohen, whose lyrics are startlingly effective on their own without their musical settings. “If It Be Your Will” ends,

And draw us near
and bind us tight,
all your children here
in their rags of light;
in our rags of light,
all dressed to kill;
and end this night,
if it be your will.

(48)

The simple diction and repetitive dimeters work to make a haunting, plangent prayer. One finds also in the collection a wide range of important poets, most of whom are still living, including young writers rarely anthologized.

The category of devotional verse inevitably raises questions about the tension between art and earnestness, the latter clearly not sufficient. Though George Herbert writes that “one good groan” (“Sion”) is, to God’s ear, far superior to all human artistry, a mortal reader, a different audience, wants more. In the vast majority of the poems in this anthology, one finds that mysterious combination achieved. In “Ramadan Aubade,” for example, Tarfia Faizullah describes the challenges he and his father face while fasting in Ramadan, ending with a representation of prayer shifting, becoming what feels unexpected both to the poet and the reader. In his fasting,

Later, I tried to sing myself into fire,
but became a knife instead.
The center held briefly, then broke into
a wall of wine-red doorways.

The poem begins with a description of eating before dawn, the food beautiful, perhaps that beloved which the poet leaves behind in his dawn *aubade* and

prayer. One moves from physical to spiritual food and drink—"Bananas soaked in milk/Coconuts shaved into/moon-/curls"—the imagery vivid, arresting, and evocative.

This reviewer must, however, quibble: the footnotes are distracting, not always accurate, or provide information available in a good dictionary. Rainer Maria Rilke, though a German-language poet, grew up in Prague in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and was not "German" (70); the "assumption" to which Thomas Merton refers is probably not Mary's, as the note tells us, but instead Christ's, given the context (24); Lent is not an exclusively Catholic season (23); and so forth. Readers can look up "palimpsest," "Advent," "Pentecost," and the like on their own; an editor can expect readers of imaginative literature to make use of a dictionary when needed.

What anthologies might be of interest to those who, like Hankins, hunger for anthologies of poems of devotion? Donald Davie's *New Oxford Book of Christian Verse* (2003) remains an immensely useful book, and Jay Hopler's and Kimberly Johnson's *Before the Door of God: An Anthology of Devotional Poetry* (Yale, 2013) an excellent addition, both spanning centuries. Hankins focuses his attention on the more recent, and his choices are exciting; one returns to the poems again and again with pleasure, appreciation, and heightened understanding. Hankins, poet and editor, prepared a fine feast.

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Scott Cairns. *Idiot Psalms: New Poems*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2014. Pp. viii + 88. \$17.00. ISBN 978-1-61261-515-8.

My five-year-old reads with incredulity the cover of the little orange book I have in my hand. "Dad, why does your book say *Idiot*?" Fair question, kid; it's not a word we use in our house. Because we want to be honest with him and take him seriously, I try to explain rather than evade. I say the word means "someone who doesn't know much," and these poems were about how compared to God we don't know much. Succinct and direct, I think: parenting win. I proceed to tell a story about Socrates and the oracle, but he has moved on already.

Of course, my response greatly simplifies Cairns's book, but at the same time it—and the whole situation—captures something essential to it. This is a book of an intelligent man searching for the words to describe his experience under conditions in which neither he nor the words are adequate. Whatever he says may from one point of view sound wise but from another must really be foolish, and yet he cannot help but speak, beckoned to language by the presence of another. And these are an intellectual's poems, poems which offer meat for the lover of paradox and aporia but relatively spare fare for the sampler of dramatic scenes and sumptuous