



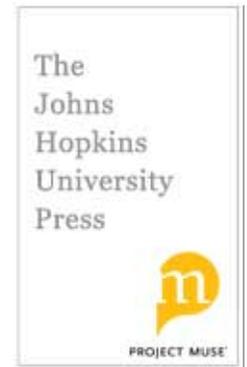
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Saint Sinatra and Other Poems by Angela Alaimo O'Donnell,
The Garbage Eater: Poems by Brett Foster (review)

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jarring given that his discussion of what should be titled *The [First] Book of Urizen* (there are two versions of the title page) closely follows Jerome McGann's view that Blake incorporated the discoveries of late eighteenth-century biblical scholarship into his own parody of biblical form. Similarly, Rowland relies on Erdman's edited version of *The Everlasting Gospel*, but, at least in this case, he reproduces the transcription of the text from Blake's notebook in an appendix. Rowland also never discusses which Bibles Blake may have used or what visual interpretative traditions he may have drawn upon. He makes a few references to the work of Marsha Keith Schuchard, but he never acknowledges the direct biographical connections linking Blake to Moravianism and early Methodism through his mother, preferring instead to generalize Blake as a "protestant and a non-conformist" who "harked back to a way of reading the Bible that is more characteristic of the early centuries of Christianity and of medieval scholarship" (7, 9). *Blake and the Bible* provides useful in-text reproductions of all the Job and Enoch Illustrations, but, for reasons that might rest more with Yale University Press than with Rowland, the text lacks parenthetical references to its beautiful color plates, which are not arranged in the order in which they are discussed. Finally, Rowland has the tendency to classify Blake as a theologian rather than an artist. Blake's "purpose," he writes, "was not an aesthetic act narrowly conceived. For him the text was a means to an end: to bring about the conversion of minds, heart, and lives" (1). And again: "The author of *Jerusalem* is no critical interpreter, but rather a theologian of a grand vision of human redemption, albeit in his idiosyncratic version of systematic theology" (3). These statements may be true, but, as Blake often wrote in his annotations to Lavater, they left me "rather uneasy" (*The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, 1988, 586).

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Saint Sinatra and Other Poems. By Angela Alaimo O'Donnell. Cincinnati: Word Press, 2011. ISBN 978-1-9363-7035-1. Pp. 102. \$19.00.

The Garbage Eater: Poems. By Brett Foster. Evanston, IL: TriQuarterly Books, 2011. ISBN 978-0-8101-2745-6. Pp. x + 78. \$16.95.

These two collections by a fine pair of professors of English—Angela O'Donnell of Fordham University and Brett Foster of Wheaton College—display virtuosity in style and innovation in subject matter. The titles alone warn us of surprises to come: *Saint Sinatra* and *The Garbage Eater*. Frank Sinatra is a saint? And what is a garbage eater? And why write about either one, particularly through the eyes of faith?

O'Donnell's book is dripping with saints. Some are conventionally canonized—Peter, Thomas, Francis, Teresa—but others, including the titular Sinatra, stretch the boundaries of the word in wild and finally welcome ways. Thus we have Saint Eve and Saint Martha and Saint Lazarus from the scriptures, and Saint Emily and Saint Edna and Saint Seamus from literature, and even, from the world of music, that most sour of saints, Salieri. What, then, is a saint? Is it anyone for whom we hold affection or pity or a sense of human identification? It seems to me that these poems could not have been written without Blake having said for us that everything that lives is holy. And it perhaps takes a playful sacramentalist like Angela O'Donnell to really believe it—or at least to believe it in her poems. That is why, when it comes to writing literature, Catholics have all the fun.

"Croon to me, Baby, / blue-eyes smiling," says the speaker in "Saint Sinatra." "You, Sicilian Saint of Song, // the one girls pray to when we lie / awake, pictures of boys in our heads, // each of them holy-card pretty as you..." (13). Here, in the opening poem, we have an unabashed erotic psalm, a pop-culture Song of Solomon. And somehow, it works. Not in overwrought lasciviousness, but in adolescent innocence, we celebrate the flesh. "O Hoboken Hero of Eros," the speaker prays, and we pray with her (14).

But O'Donnell can also work her magic of the flesh in more traditionally pious ways, as in this opening stanza from a crucifixion poem, "The Vigil":

How did he do it?
 Open those good hands,
 spread his five fingers wide
 to receive the blunt nails?
 Hear the crack of bone,
 delicate wingwork of phalanx and carpal?
 Hang the weight of His whole self
 from those soft clay doves
 and trust them to hold?
 To hold? (63)

Those "soft clay doves" are worth the entire poem, of course, summoning both Incarnate Son and Holy Spirit in one spare, surprising image that has been prepared for by the unobtrusive "wingwork" earlier in the stanza. And the repetition of "to hold" is just right.

O'Donnell is at her playful best in an annunciation poem, "*And the Angel Left Her...*". This, like many of the poems in the volume, is what Leonard Nathan would call a ragged sonnet—some with the insistent beat of a jump-rope song. Mary receives the news amid "the hiss and tick of radiators warming / the house":

She knows it won't be long before she shows.
 What to do with all this sudden silence?
 Phone her boyfriend: *Joseph, I have news!*
 Text St. Anne: *Dear Mother, I'm afraid.* (89)

I admire the way that Mary becomes one of us without becoming less herself. The radiators, telephone, and text message update her presence in a way that is slightly whimsical but no less holy for that. It is we who are put into her shoes more than she into ours.

Perhaps the best poem in the volume—the one, at least, most quietly mysterious—is “St. Eve in Exile.” I think that O’Donnell recognizes its importance by placing it as the first real poem in the volume after the Sinatra preface. Eve addresses her creator, or the male persona of her creator, or Adam as the literal ground of her being, in ways that brim with confidence even as she names the ways she will disappoint him (or them): “And I am not she, / the girl You called Your own. // My mouth a cavern. / My chest an empty cave. // I am dry and dusty. / I am not wet or well” (17). I felt unnerved by these lines as I read them, and even now I sense in them not so much a rejection of the other as a refusal to be defined and owned. And not so much a refusal as a statement of what irrefutably *is*. When God made woman, when Adam chose Eve, they created and touched upon *terra incognita*. And Eve is *terra incognita* even to herself—in exile from herself, as it were. Perhaps I read too much into these lines, or guess too wide. The poem ends: “You cut me in two. / I take half the blame” (18). Eve perhaps takes half the blame because she has been complicit in her own limitation as one who has been made for Adam—which would make this a more conventionally feminist poem. But I sense that it is something more.

Something more is what I find myself desiring in the poems of Brett Foster. I am almost ashamed to admit this, because he gives us an almost endless variety of difficult verse forms, ingenious subjects, and clever shifts of language. Foster is obviously very skilled as a poet—each line is clean and carefully considered. But the poems carry with them a flatness of affect that makes their emotional impulse—their visceral purpose and origin—difficult to locate. Robert Cording, in advertising an upcoming poetry workshop, says, “The best poems move along the knife-edge of sentimentality without becoming sentimental.” This I believe to be true. What I sense in *The Garbage Eater* is that Foster very much wants to avoid sentimentality—so much so that he often errs in the opposite direction. The result is a kind of poem that is artful and intelligent but does not often engage the heart.

The title poem, “The Garbage Eater,” takes the dare of speaking in the voice of a young man who is part of a gnostic cult that literally eats out of the garbage:

Fear of dying, fear of death:
 those phobias came easy, shaped
 nightly by a little boy’s breath

talking out a clockwork afterlife
with parents till I fell asleep. (3)

“Clockwork afterlife” is apt—and we sense, too, that the word *clockwork* may describe the workings of the young man’s present life and way of speaking.

Most Sunday-school kids peddled
the Gospels or got lost in the deep
troughs of Apocalypse—the dead
rising, the Antichrist, the grief
or wonder, His Passion, a hundred
visions. They loved the thrill of belief;
for me, the impossible Law... (3)

I admire as well “the deep / troughs of Apocalypse.” At the same time, however, the poem seems to lapse into a grocery list of details. My interest begins to fade, only to be piqued again by the speaker’s unexpected devotion to “the impossible Law.” The poem goes on to recount the speaker’s break with his parents, his homelessness, his intentional disfigurement. And then it ends on this abstraction: “The physical means nothing beneath / the small fear of dying, which fears / only unworthiness more than death” (4). I’m not sure this is sufficient payoff for the journey, even after I have puzzled through to its possible meaning—that, for the speaker, fear of being less than the Law demands has replaced a fear of death. Interesting, yes, but oddly intellectual, and not convincingly in the voice of hectic commitment of cult members I have known (one of whom is a former student who counts himself as a member of this very group). Foster, of course, may be aiming for a private voice beneath the public one—the innermost thoughts of the cult member. Even so, the voice feels curiously disembodied. Foster might claim that this is the point—and that I am missing it. But I would also note that the voice of the Garbage Eater is recognizably similar to the voice of most of the other personae in this volume of poems.

I do not want to suggest that Foster’s poems are devoid of affection and human feeling. The third and last section of the volume contains a number of poems that address his wife and daughter in intimate and touching ways. I’m thinking in particular of “Devotion: For Our Bodies,” which begins, “Yes love, I must confess I’m at it again, / struggling in vain with my Greek declensions.” Scholarly, sure, but this is the speaker’s world. What he wants to pass along is the Greek term “knower of hearts” as it occurs in the Book of Acts: “Let me kiss it across your collarbones,” the speaker says (51)—a line, I think, worth the price of the whole book, and more to be valued than the literarily self-conscious ruminations of poems such as “Tea with Mr. Milton” or “Rondeau for Plotinus.”

Foster's habit is to produce a cerebral kind of poetry. No one would mistake his poems for Hallmark cards: this is their strength. Very few would slip them into the folds of a love letter or use them to remind themselves of the pleasures of the natural world: this is their weakness. In "Sponge Bath as Answer to the Problem of Knowledge," the speaker observes a group of art students at Stanford who are cleaning the famous bronze sculpture of Rodin, "The Thinker." And then the speaker laments of himself, "I cannot live off the life of the mind. / Should I take hikes instead...?" (11). What I wrote in the margin: Yes. That, or explore the collarbones of some of O'Donnell's saints.

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Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life. Edited by Joel James Shuman and L. Roger Owens. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009. ISBN 978-0-8131-2555-8. Pp. 266. \$40.00

Nearly fifty years ago, against the advice of everyone who thought he might one day become a writer, Wendell Berry forsook the nation's literary capital for his native Kentucky county, and ever since, from that humble seat, far from the madding crowd, he has been out-pacing his critics and acolytes by a country mile: not quite a book to mark each year by, but close.

And if you consider how consistently lucid his prose is, how vivid his poetry, how precise his diagnoses of our besetting maladies, the body of work is astonishing—especially if you bear in mind that Berry also farms by traditional methods and frequently lends his hand and voice to the public causes he believes most strongly in.

But the critics and acolytes are trying to catch up. Fritz Oehlschlaeger recently brought out a sensitive treatment titled *The Achievement of Wendell Berry* (2011, reviewed below). Mark Mitchell's and Nathan Schlueter's fine edited volume, *The Humane Vision of Wendell Berry*, is new from ISI Books (2012). *Wendell Berry and the Cultivation of Life*, by J. Matthew Bonzo and Michael R. Stevens (Brazos Press), appeared in 2008, preceded a year prior by a special issue of *Christianity and Literature* devoted to Berry (Winter 2007). My own edited volume, *Wendell Berry: Life and Work* (also Kentucky), appeared the same year. Amid this recent flurry stands another welcome, if uneven, volume, *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life*, edited by Joel James Shuman and L. Roger Owens.

This book consists of fourteen essays divided into four sections: the first of these, "Good Work," includes four pieces that consider "what have traditionally