



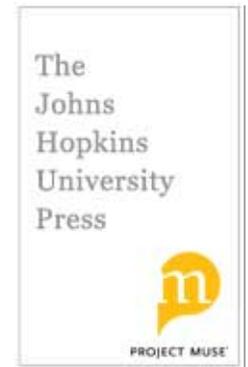
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*John in the Company of Poets: The Gospel in Literary
Imagination* by Thomas Gardner (review)

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how deliberately and masterfully Willis has ordered his poems until the very end. And so we say goodbye to Willis, whom we have come to know as a person and poet over the past nearly one hundred pages, and also to his cherished landscapes, which we have come to admire through his well-crafted, faithful descriptions—faithful in more than one way.

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John in the Company of Poets: The Gospel in Literary Imagination. By Thomas Gardner. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2011. ISBN 1-60258-315-3. Pp. xiv+222. \$69.95.

Thomas Gardner's *John in the Company of Poets: The Gospel in Literary Imagination* presents readers with a fascinating cross-disciplinary study, which measures close readings of The Gospel of John alongside poems, corresponding to various sections of the gospel. Due to his unique approach, it is difficult to compare this study to any previous literary studies, nonetheless the success of the study lies heavily in the unusual methodology. Although this organizational strategy feels strange at first, this innovative approach, which serves as the critical underpinning of the study, proves to be quite compelling when it works and, at the very least, thought-provoking when it does not.

Throughout the study, Gardner serves as an interpreter of John, clarifying the gospel for readers, while illustrating why so many poets have been drawn to this work. Analyzing the gospel in chronological order, Gardner continually couples poems to passages in the Gospel of John in order to highlight how "John's arrangement of his materials draws readers deeper and deeper into the claim that Jesus is life itself" (4). Gardner argues that John is the most poetic of the gospels, in both structure/arrangement as well as language, which explains why poets—whether explicitly Christian, such as Gerald Manly Hopkins, or not, such as Elizabeth Bishop—are drawn to John more than any of the synoptic gospels. As the gospel unfolds, the connection between the poems and the gospel becomes strikingly clear.

As Gardner explicates the gospel, readers are able to understand Jesus' ministry. However, while some readers may pick up this study strictly for analysis of the selected poems, Gardner argues that it is impossible to divorce these poems from their biblical counterpart. Of course, this turns out to be a good thing, since Gardner's close-reading of the gospel is extremely enlightening. As both a scholar and a poet, he provides unique insight into the Gospel of John. As a scholar, he gives a very thorough and researched reading of the gospel. Yet as a poet, Gardner

demonstrates that “poets are our best readers,” as he is able to breathe life into the most tired passages of the gospel such as John 3:1-8, Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus, a passage which is familiar to most readers (2). Christ’s interaction with Nicodemus is so often repeated that it has grown tired for many John scholars, yet Gardner, paying attention to the language, is able to give new meaning to the passage, going so far as note the alternative translation of born again as “born from above” (43). By close reading this famous encounter, John 3:1-8, readers have a better understanding of the context surrounding Nicodemus’ conversation with Christ, as well as his subsequent appearances in the gospel. This is paired up nicely with Charles Wright’s “A Journal of the Year of the Ox,” as Gardner notices how the wind is used as spirit, that Wright has taken John 3:6 “That which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” and has transposed it “to the world of composition” (48).

This is a great example the effectiveness of Gardner’s critical apparatus. When it works, Gardner’s own commentary fades into the background and the poems themselves emerge quite clearly. His analysis of the gospel makes the text so clear that the connection often times the connection between the gospel and the poems becomes obvious. Readers can engage with the material, seeing how the poems speak to the biblical source material. One example which stands out is Gardner’s reading of John 3:9-21, including one of the most famous verses in the New Testament John 3:16, which Gardner pairs up with Henry Vaughn’s “The Night.” Other notable examples include John 5:1-47, Jesus’ healing on the Sabbath, which is read with Wendell Berry’s “Sabbath Poem” or the story of Pilate, John 18:28-19:15 which fits perfectly with John Berryman’s “Ecce Homo.” These poems lend themselves perfectly to Gardner’s approach. However, perhaps the best example of the useful of Gardner’s critical apparatus can be found in John 6:1-40, The Bread of Life, which is paired alongside Elizabeth Bishop’s “A Miracle for Breakfast.” Gardner describes the significance of Christ’s actions in feeding the 5,000, noting “Jesus is the true bread the manna pointed toward. The work he performs ‘gives life to the world’ forever” (78). This poem is paired alongside Bishop’s “A Miracle for Breakfast,” a world in which “there are no miracles ... or if there are, they occur somewhere else” (79). Yet, through his analysis, he shows how Bishop has “found her way to another sort of miracle, still possible in her hungry world. Bishop’s imagination is stirred to life by the Gospel story” (79). The inclusion of this poem, in which a man in a NYC breadline distributes his coffee drop by drop and his biscuit crumb by crumb to others, juxtaposed alongside Jesus’ miracle is an example of the strength of this study. He pairs up this seemingly contrasting image, this lack of miracle in a destitute setting, which creates a seemingly cynical and mocking poem, alongside one of Christ’s most famous miracles to show how Bishop uses her source text. She is not mocking the miracle instead, “the poem takes quite seriously the Gospel’s call” (81).

The highlight of this study is Gardner’s reading of John 11:1-53, the death and

resurrection of Lazarus, which he reads alongside Paul Mariani's "Pieta." Gardner's analysis focuses on both Mary and Martha's separate interactions with Jesus, as he notices how each chides him, "Lord, if You had been here, my brother would not have died" (John 11:21). This is the phrase repeated in Mariani's poem, which tells of the speaker's recollection of a New Year's Eve party in which he meets a woman whose son died of AIDS. The woman recalls how everyone avoided the dying young man, except for the priest, who cradled his body. Reading this poem in context of Christ's famous resurrection of the dead, the connection becomes clear. Mariani's poem describes the priest who is "willing to walk across death's threshold into / that room," which as Gardner notes, is "Jesus before the tomb of Lazarus" (113). By crossing this threshold, the priest brings "healing and life," which is "what Jesus does" (113). The pairing is quite striking and represents the strength of this study: by looking at these poems alongside these biblical texts, we receive a new context for their meaning. After reading this chapter, it seems impossible to ever read/teach Mariani's poem now without mentioning the story of Lazarus.

Of course, the corollary to this organization strategy is that the apparatus can be suffocating. Although the selection may seem random, there are several twentieth-century American poets, including multiple works by Elizabeth Bishop, T. S. Eliot, and Emily Dickinson—who was the subject of Gardner's previous book, *A Door Ajar*—as well as seventeenth-century British poets John Donne and George Herbert. The organizational strategy of keeping readers focused on the gospel of John maintains the collection's focus. Yet there are poems that feel forced into the collection in order to fit the critical framework. For instance, while Gardner pairs Dickinson's 1715 ("A word made Flesh is seldom") with John 6:41-71, Christ's teaching after the feeding of 5,000 where he states, "the bread also which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh (6:51). While the poem fits in here, one might feel that it may be more appropriate as part of a discussion of John 1:1. In the same note, there are poems that do feel like they belong in the collection. Although for the majority of the poems, the correlation is clear, for others such as John Donne's "Holy Sonnet XIV," which is paired with John 7:1-8:59, Jesus' teaching during the Feast of Tabernacles, try as the reader may, it is difficult to see a clear connection between these two texts, which represents a drawback in the book's structure.

Overall, Gardner's collection represents a remarkable feat. The interesting structure allows for readers to get a better understanding of the Gospel of John as well as compelling readers to notice how poets were drawn to the Gospel of John for its structure and language as much as its subject matter. The study is both extremely enlightening and engaging. Furthermore, Gardner's approach makes this study quite readable, which in and of itself is a feat as Gardner ditches the academicese to which we have, unfortunately, grown accustomed in scholarly studies. Due to its cross-disciplinary nature of combining biblical and literary studies, and Gardner's wide range in poetry selection, it should interest a fairly broad audience. Overall, this study could be beneficial to biblical scholars, those

interested in British and twentieth-century American poetry, or for general interest *Christianity and Literature* readers.

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