POETRY OF SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

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POETICS ESSAYS

“Facing Altars: Poetry and Prayer” by Mary Karr

Part of my trouble in embarking on a project like this—one that touches both my deepest spiritual convictions and my deepest poetic convictions—is finding a place where the two can meet and mingle in a way that satisfies not only my desire to recreate my genuine spiritual experience for what it was, but also my expectation of creating poetic language that extends that experience to my readers in a way that springs fully into the presence of the One I am writing back to (and toward, toward).

In her essay “Facing Altars,” Karr presents her experience of poetry as a first experience of worship: of prayer, of spiritual growth, of confession. But most importantly, poetry was Karr’s first sense of the body of Christ, of her place in the midst of a great cloud of people like herself, all reaching out for one another and for God. She writes, “Poets were my first priests, and poetry itself my first altar. It was a lot of other firsts, too, of course: first classroom/chantroom/confessional. But it was most crucially the first source of awe for me, partly because of how it could ease my sense of isolation: it was a line thrown from seemingly glorious Others to my dream-minded self.”

By Karr’s line of thinking, poetry becomes less about creating a perfect replica of the spiritual experience (which is impossible), and more about invoking the feeling of the experience—often through the lens of hindsight—in a visceral and accessible way. In creating this way, the spiritual experience grows beyond its original form to accommodate not only my first-hand understanding, but also the spiritual and emotional understanding the reader brings to the poem.

Karr puts it this way: “Poetry and prayer alike offer such instantaneous connection—one person groping from a dark place to meet with another in an instant that strikes fire.” That is my deepest wish for this project, and for my life as a poet: to become the match against which my readers may strike, and in doing so, ignite us both into the burning bush fire that is the face of God.

“Vía Vía” by Don McKay

McKay uses the terms “wilderness” and “matériel” in his poetics to describe the way a poet uses language to approach the wilderness—they encounter in and beyond nature. For McKay, “wilderness” refers “not just [to] a set of endangered spaces, but [to] the capacity of all things to elude the mind’s appropriations.”

“Matériel” relates to “wilderness” in that, in order to capture the wilderness of an experience, a poet needs things from within that experience and makes them into tools that do the work of creating the heart of that experience. The “wilderness” in my poetry is God, and the vivid, minute details I string together in my poetry to recreate an experience of God are the tools (“matériel”) that, hopefully, “retain a vestige of wilderness” and re-create in the poem the feeling of the World I encountered before language.

THE POETIC PROCESS: From Inspiration to Creation to Workshop and Back Again

In October 2017, I took a trip to the Black Hills and climbed my very first mountain with my best friend Mallory. The moment pictured above was the moment I decided I wanted to pursue a directed study with Dr. Martin that attempted to touch this spiritual experience and others like it I had had during my time at Northeastern. At the beginning of the spring 2018 semester, I made a list of spiritual experiences I’d had that had thus far defied language, and I promised myself I would give my whole heart over to try to reach and recreate the glory of those moments. Each week, I choose an experience to write about, and each week, I enter Dr. Martin’s office for our directed study feeling drained of that initial spark of inspiration.

Dr. Martin goes through his comments and suggestions line-by-line with me, and by the end of our time together, his creative energy has fed back into mine, giving me the strength to choose another experience from my list and start the process all over again.

One week, I had a powerful experience dancing with my friend Emelie (pictured left) on my birthday, then attending my first Ash Wednesday service in three years. When I decided to write the poem, I hardly had the words for the connection to Christ’s crucifixion I had felt while dancing, so I was grateful to walk into workshop and see my draft covered with Dr. Martin’s notes on what worked well and what needed fresh language to convey the experience poignantly.

I never start writing poetry on my computer—there is something far too detached about typing on a screen when compared to the intimate and grounding experience of penning words about one’s spiritual life by hand in a beloved notebook. Once I have a couple stanzas of a poem, I type them out on my computer and finish writing the poem there. The most important part about writing a draft is to just write and worry about the words later, during workshop.

To the non-English major, this markup of the draft for my Mount Baldy poem may look scary, but workshop is the most crucial step in any poet’s journey toward clarity of experience, and my favorite part about my directed study. Dr. Martin fills my drafts with suggestions and commands—on word choice, rhythm and rhyme, perspective, overall theme, etc. We talk in his office about all the poems are and could be: He shows me the feeling he got from certain lines, I tell him what I wanted the reader to feel, and we go from there to move closer to what I feel I want to convey with that particular poem.

One day, I had a powerful experience hearing the word “Rebel” during a radio show I’m addicted to. The moment illustrated here immediately knew I wanted to take inspiration when I came up with the idea for this project. Karr has such a way with creating fresh, poignant language with which to talk about her spiritual experiences. The way she weaves together gritty, everyday details and reverent encounters with God, “the other,” continually informs the way I approach finding language to describe how I feel God in a mundane experience, whether that be an experience of a place, as with my poem about the Black Hills, or a person, as with my poem about dancing with Emelie, Sinners Welcome. Is my holy Bible of poetry, the book I go back to when I need to find inspiration in how to live life as a poet of spiritual experience.

“The Wild Iris” by Louise Glück

Louise Glück is a master of subtle internal rhyme—so subtle, in fact, that one often has to go back and reread the line in order to match up the two or more rhymed words that caused one to fixate on a certain phrase. In “Snowdrops” (below), the assonance of “lived” and “is” works to link the two ideas “how I lived” and “what despair is”—and thus set up the persona’s understanding of the ways despair and joy both convey the lived experience. Glück’s use of internal rhyme, especially assonance, is one I attempt to emulate often in my own poetry, as exhibited at the start of the poem pictured to the right.

“Sinners Welcome” by Mary Karr

Sinners Welcome was the poetry collection from which I immediately knew I wanted to take inspiration when I came up with the idea for this project. Karr has such a way with creating fresh, poignant language with which to talk about her spiritual experiences. The way she weaves together gritty, everyday details and reverent encounters with God, “the other,” continually informs the way I approach finding language to describe how I feel God in a mundane experience, whether that be an experience of a place, as with my poem about the Black Hills, or a person, as with my poem about dancing with Emelie, Sinners Welcome. Is my holy Bible of poetry, the book I go back to when I need to find inspiration in how to live life as a poet of spiritual experience.

POETRY COLLECTIONS

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Abstract: The process of writing poetry, especially poetry with a spiritual focus, is far from cut-and-dry, but there are a few particular research elements that have helped me gain my footing in writing spiritually-focused poetry. Firstly, as you will see on the left, reading essays on poetics from the likes of Mary Karr and Don McKay—both of whom approach their own writing as avid readers of other poets—has taught me to give myself the time and space to reflect deeply on the possible ways poetry can reach out and touch experiences, specifically spiritual experiences, that are beyond language. Secondly, as you will see on the right, I have studied form, imagery, technique, and content through reading poetry collections from a wide variety of poets both inside and outside the Christian tradition. Finally, I took what I had gleaned from these poetic texts and poetry collections and applied those insights to my own poetry of spiritual experience. The process of creating that poetry is seen below.

When I’m feeling drained poetically and spiritually, I reread this poem of Karr’s about how her experience of holding a dying tomcat gave her a glimpse of the redeemed relationship she hoped for with God. This experience of the spiritual through the mundane is what I am writing toward.

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