

Faith Poetry as Songtravel: An Appreciation

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This essay examines an emerging movement in faith poetry, a movement that is offering us poetry of high energy and expansive metaphoric capacity. Each of the five poets considered here gives us, within the poem itself, a faith narrative that engages in dialogue one or several of the narratives (grand narratives or small) that have dominated intellectual life since the Enlightenment: evolution, modern physics, social, and ecological concerns. Instead of focusing on the doctrine of a specific affiliation, these poems show us faith as a lively process, faith in vital conversation with modern culture. In effect, such poems are songs that are travelling, as they move into new linguistic (and ideological) territory. They are multifaceted, even multi-voiced, and their prosodic maneuvers include synaesthesia in rapid montage, a dialectic with contending concepts along with “dialogic” language (as Bakhtin describes it) which—in a poem—becomes a sort of collision of tongues. These are faith-full, complex poems that reward and invite rereading.

I. Faith Poetry: Introduction

When a civilization undergoes a seismic shift, everything moves, but things move in different directions, art, science, religion, and other aspects of culture each developing its own narrative of change or trauma. The result may be many little narratives, as Jean-François Lyotard observed, and the loss of any trusted metanarrative or big story, mythic or political, that once offered a comprehensive explanation of beliefs and values.¹ Many scholars refer to the resulting

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¹ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 34.

multiplicity as “pluralism,” and Gesa Thiessen argues that a pluralistic intellectual climate may very well provide opportunities along with challenges for both theologians and artists.²

These opportunities and challenges are evident in the work of recent poets (those writing in the last fifty or sixty years), and most especially in poems that engage the still-problematic issue of religious belief. Perhaps because we are hundreds of years beyond (or “into”) the Enlightenment, one hundred fifty years beyond (and certainly into) Darwin and Freud, and because we cannot seem to get beyond cultural and military conflicts—perhaps, for these reasons, poets now perceive the diverse ideological and linguistic landscape as an urgent invitation rather than a puzzling loss. Among today’s poets, the perception of loss or change is apparent, but these writers are very much involved in that change. Because they are accustomed to history-in-motion and ideology-in-motion, they can engage some of the little narratives, also some of the new narratives or languages (scientific, secular). All of these narratives are on the move, and faith languages (doctrine, practice, interpretations of doctrine) are interacting with contemporary history. (And my preference, by the way, among the synonyms for ideological “model,” will usually be restricted to “language” and “narrative.”)

My argument is that faith narratives travel. Faith poetry is a song that travels. If the sea splits, and faithful liberated people travel to a new place, some of the old poems (Egyptian hymns, perhaps) will travel with the people, but the imagery and language, the prayers to a sun god, will begin to change.³ Faith will find new words; the Psalms may incorporate new “grand narratives,” maybe narratives about shepherds and Hebrew kings, and always the songs will celebrate God’s continuing faithfulness. A few millennia later, faith poetry is still travelling. Such poetry will say something about the religious belief of the community, and speak also to the challenges and distress of the recently travelled ideological wilderness.

The distinguishing feature of the poems examined and appreciated here is their agile prosodic response to the ideological volatility

² Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen, “The Twentieth Century,” in *Theological Aesthetics: A Reader*, ed. Gesa Elsbeth Thiessen (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2005), 203–205.

³ For traces of the sun god in Psalm 104, see Carroll Stuhlmueller, *Psalms 2: A Biblical-Theological Commentary*, vol. 22 of *Old Testament Message* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, 1983), 109.

of recent history. These poems invite close reading, and close rereading. They are multifaceted, and they borrow significantly from rhetorical strategies often associated with fiction (or prose argument). For instance, along with engaging the continuities of faith, the poems examined here will also linguistically recall and metaphorize the anxious narratives of doubt. By way of braiding these narratives (“evolution,” for instance) into the lines, some faith poets employ the wit and balance of dialectical argument. And there is one poetic form that famously uses dialectic features as a major structuring element: the ode. In his study of the conflicted history of the ode, Paul Fry describes how this traditional form expanded and changed, especially as it travelled the spiritual space between Greek religions and Christianity.⁴ In addition to dialectic maneuvers, the new faith poets often employ a “dialogic” language. That is, they adroitly place in close proximity words belonging to different styles of speech: colloquial, academic, scientific, or words deriving from commerce or the professions. Mikhail Bakhtin, who identified this rhetorical ploy, discusses its prominent use in the fiction of Dostoevsky.⁵ When poets incorporate this very condensed, dialogic style into poetic structures, they are essentially using diction as metaphor.

These prosodic features help to identify the distinctive energy and expansively metaphoric capacity of the faith poetry that is the subject of this essay. These structural features may be related to another characteristic of these poems: all of the poems express or probe a concern for faith as process rather than as doctrine. Yet many excellent faith poems do speak primarily of doctrine, and they have often been acknowledged, appreciated, and read (or sung), largely on the basis of their doctrinal denomination or (the broader term) their “spirituality.” In addition to hymnals, anthologies of fine-to-splendid religious poetry have been published, for instance, collections of women’s spiritual verse, or collections of Christian poetry generally or specifically Catholic poetry.⁶ Identification of doctrine or spirituality

⁴ Paul H. Fry, *The Poet’s Calling in the English Ode* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1980), 37–48.

⁵ Mikhail Mikhaïlovich Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, Tex.: University of Texas Press, 1981), 267–275, 301–308.

⁶ See, for instance: Jane Hirshfield, ed., *Women in Praise of the Sacred: 43 Centuries of Spiritual Poetry by Women* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994); Marilyn Sewell, ed., *Cries of the Spirit: A Celebration of Women’s Spirituality* (Boston, Mass.: Beacon

greatly facilitates definition (and selection, for anthologists), but this may sometimes be too definitive. In his preface to a Methodist hymnal of 1780, for instance, John Wesley offers very specific instructions (actual “workshop” suggestions) to anyone seeking to write *only* as well as Shakespeare or Milton; then he pounces: “of infinitely more moment than the spirit of poetry, is the spirit of piety.”⁷

Nevertheless, in our time the spirit (languages, styles?) of poetry as well as the languages of the sciences and psychology are interacting with religious languages (piety, devotion, doctrine?). Further, the imagery and style of current faith poetry derives much of its energy from its kinetic engagement with faith-in-motion or faith as process. Although David Tracy’s primary concern in *The Analogical Imagination* is theology, he also discusses the process of faith—how it enters a human community. He examines the origins of faith (and art), especially the gradual, necessary incorporation of that faith into the “classics” of art and into the language of theology. An initial encounter with God, whether experienced by an individual or a group, must become accessible, Tracy affirms, must enter the artistic structures and the language structures (poetry, narrative, scriptures) of the community.⁸

David Tracy’s monumental argument is not directed at defining contemporary poetry, yet his theological discussion can help us discern the basic features of this poetry. Most of the faith poems considered here will imply an “encounter” moment, but also they will progress toward a linguistic embodiment of that moment in one, or several, of the more prominent “new” narratives, especially those narratives or languages that once caused so much alarm (and doubt and grief) in modern history. I look at these poems briefly, sometimes using paraphrase rather than quotation. My purpose in this “appreciation” is to describe the special richness, the complexity, of this distinctive variety of faith poetry, a poetry of radical response to our (radical?) historical era.

Press, 1991); David Craig and Janet McCann, eds., *Odd Angles of Heaven: Contemporary Poetry by People of Faith* (Wheaton, Ill.: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1994); David Craig and Janet McCann, eds., *Place of Passage: Contemporary Catholic Poetry* (Ashland, Ore.: Story Line Press, 2000).

⁷ John Wesley, Preface to *A Collection of Hymns for the Use of the People called Methodists* (1780), in *Hymnology: A Collection of Source Readings*, ed. David W. Music (Lanham, Md.: The Scarecrow Press, 1996), 141–143.

⁸ David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 107–135.

II. *Songtravel: An Appreciation*

Faith poetry may seek to travel dialogically in the company of scientific theories, and it may well address issues of religious belief itself in a world of shifting ideologies. In the brave new pluralistic world of many stories, many narratives, how does the faith poet re-language what may be non-languageable (and what may, according to some “scientific” data, not even be “out there” awaiting re-language-ment)? Before looking at faith songs that have begun to travel into the new linguistic landscapes, we can helpfully recall Wallace Stevens. Literary critic Nathan Scott identifies Stevens as a profoundly religious poet, yet one whose work, Scott says, indicates that transcendence becomes known only “with and under the immanent.”⁹ But of course this “immanent” aspect is precisely the difficulty: how to recognize God’s presence when the languages (descriptions, theories) of immanence have themselves changed. When material “reality” is described as waves or strings, and when organic and inorganic history is described as “evolution” (and when “reality” requires quotation marks)—then God’s manner of becoming immanently present is problematic in the extreme.

And yet, faith poetry seems to be bilingual (that is, bi-narrational and probably multi-narrational). Certainly some of the best faith poets of recent decades are moving a narrative of religious belief into creative proximity with scientific narratives that once alarmed or grieved poets and non-poets. Imagery and sound (sound-echoes, rhyme, off-rhymes) are vital to these poems, but ideas (of faith, of science) are also significant in the wit and play. Idea confronts idea, concept on concept sometimes colliding, sometimes coalescing. In the poems of Wendell Berry, for instance, the language of Christian faith is energized by its dialectical positioning; that is, it receives both critique and support from its poetic embodiment in the language of evolution (and, sometimes, ecological theory). Evolution itself derives a sturdy normality from the language (and imagery) of rural faith and seasonal change.

Perhaps the communal, interactive languages in Berry’s poetry are related to his appreciation of “community” in all things. He respects the interrelated communities of family life, responsible management

⁹ Nathan A. Scott, Jr., *The Poetics of Belief: Studies in Coleridge, Arnold, Pater, Santayana, Stevens, and Heidegger* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1985), 144.

of farm (also wilderness), and the entire creation's relationship to God; there is, he writes, "another expansive metaphor of farming and marriage and worship."¹⁰ In the botanical and ecological modulations of his poetry, the elements of this "expansive metaphor" surge and snap with morally expressive tension. In one of the "Window Poems," for instance, there is "the ghost of an old forest," and soon a subtly biblical language is dialectically in debate with the language of evolution; there will be "a resurrection of the wild," a "rising up," and "the second coming / of the trees" will reclaim the landscape—one that human activity has destroyed.¹¹

The tone of this apocalyptic scenario is almost lyric, peaceful. The bemused speaker is quietly alert to the astonishing possibilities of the cosmic habitat even when he will no longer be in it. He notes the passing of both "calamities" and "pleasures"; these radical changes also mean: "The wind will do without / corners."¹² This wonderful stretch of imagination receives the most casual speech; the remark is made in the same tone of voice that a person might use to indicate, perhaps, doing without the salt in one's plans for the pancake recipe. And in Berry's poem the implications of this observation about the wind give huge enhancement to the spiritual dimensions of both the scientific language and the faith language: it is a good creation, even if evolution (or we ourselves) will soon phase out the human moment. The idea that other created things also enjoy their being is psalmic. The creation—with its various languages, sound, movements—is a community; even the wind knew that we were here, and maybe enjoyed skateboarding around all our right-angled buildings? But all created things undergo change, and so the wind will learn to forget our "corners" (and perhaps be quite delighted in God's space—now free of humans).

The evolutionary narrative here, and the faith narrative, are talking to each other. They talk to each other also in the poems of Pattiann Rogers, though in her poetry the conversation is more relaxed, almost as though science and religious belief have been engaged in meditative dialogue, and in a cosmic harmony of praise, since the beginning

¹⁰ Wendell Berry, "Discipline and Hope," quoted in "Landscapes of Flesh: On Finding More Faithful Metaphors for the Body and Its Goods" by Joel James Shuman, in *Wendell Berry and Religion: Heaven's Earthly Life*, ed. Joel James Shuman and L. Roger Owens (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 136.

¹¹ Wendell Berry, "Window Poems" (12), in *The Selected Poems of Wendell Berry* (Washington, D. C.: Counterpoint, 1998), 45.

¹² Berry, "Window Poems" (12), in *The Selected Poems*, 46.

of the universe. While there is a muscular ethic in Berry's poetry, there is often a quiet pity in the reflective lines of Rogers, a sympathy for the inevitable suffering in a world of change. Most often, the language of science (evolution, or biology, or physics) progressively translates itself into an increasingly explicit faith language.

This translation, or merging of languages, occurs in the poem "On the Way to Early Morning Mass." The persona participates in the changing universe (as though she were physically inside a bird's egg, for instance), becomes several life-forms as she travels toward, then arrives at, the celebration: "the service continuing on / the continuing."¹³ Other poems of Rogers widen the cosmic and spiritual reach. In "The Possible Suffering of a God during Creation," for instance, God's own anguish is continuous—at every death (or disintegration) of bugs, bones, particles of rock, God participates in an evolving pattern of origins and destructions, or "the imperfection of the unfinished. . . ."¹⁴ God, or "a God," is painfully involved (apparently evolving) with his creation.

In addition to developing the narratives of cosmic expansion and evolution, modern science has extended its vocabulary of data and evidence into the area of human relationships. Louise Glück's poetry sequence, *Ararat*, places a conflicted modern family within a very long history, indeed a faith history, of such conflict and perhaps even divine distress. The struggle is embodied not only in "verbal" poetry, but massively symbolized in the enormous and silent imagery of the book's title: the mountain Ararat. The mountain also implies the presence of the invisible, buried Noah's ark—which tradition "says" may have come to rest there after ferrying to safety Noah's own troubled family (and thus the troubled human family of his descendants), all of them saved by God (the involved parent) from God's own exasperation and judgment. Indeed, a reflective voice in the poem "Mount Ararat," after considering the emotional woundings and the many deaths in her family, declares a connection between human and divine behavior. The poem concludes with a mildly accusatory reference to "the Jewish god / who doesn't hesitate to take / a son from a mother."¹⁵

¹³ Pattiann Rogers, "On the Way to Early Morning Mass," in *Firekeeper: Selected Poems*, revised and expanded edition (Minneapolis, Minn.: Milkweed Editions, 2005), 204–206.

¹⁴ Rogers, "The Possible Suffering of a God during Creation," in *Firekeeper*, 42.

¹⁵ Louise Glück, "Mount Ararat," in *Ararat* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990), 30.

God (capitalized or not) is dynamically engaged with human history; he is part of the tense conversation. And such conversation is also part of a long tradition extending to the very beginnings of biblical literature. God and human beings may not speak the same language, but they talk—even argue and protest and judge—especially in times of crisis. In *Ararat* God “speaks” by means of a listening silence (a listening Silence?). When the speaking is more than silence, the voices become many, as in Glück’s collection *The Wild Iris*. Here several varieties of flowers speak, and yet they address the big “human” questions broached in *Ararat*, the issues of grief, suffering, death, love; the entire community of non-human (especially botanical) creatures seems puzzled by the giant, apparently capable, beings who walk, suffer, and pray among the trees and flowers. In *The Wild Iris*, the conversational preference is questions. (Is there an average of one question per poem?) The big narratives as well as the little ones translate themselves into queries—thus keeping the issues new, provocative (and “wild”?).¹⁶

Since the scientific theories of evolution and of modern physics expand the idea of time onwards and backwards to monstrous proportions, it is no wonder that the mortal human experience seems like a mere (alienated) blip. And yet, the faith poets that we have considered so far have in effect used “time” against “time.” More precisely, they have used the concept of time to civilize and humanize time—to “translate” the science or language of time into the human language of relationship. After all, it is the passage of time that allows for generation (life) itself, and for generations; time gives us the family relationships which are basic to individual identity, to growth, to acknowledging friends, to watching children grow up. Wendell Berry perceives community in the interactive metaphor of family, farm-life, and God’s relationship with creation itself. By implication, Berry extends this relational and very evolutionary view backwards and forwards into time. (And yet, the forests anticipate getting their own back, and the wind can do without our “corners.”) In most of her poems, Rogers unites all time by giving it a single consciousness, either human or divine, and then she conceptualizes the organic and inorganic as one family of evolving, time-generated relationship. (For Rogers, even 13 billion years is, well, just “home.”) Louise Glück begins with relationship issues, with the modern overly-analytical family

¹⁶ See especially “Scilla,” “The Hawthorn Tree,” “April,” and “Violets,” in Louise Glück, *The Wild Iris* (Hopewell, N. J.: The Ecco Press, 1992), 14, 18, 20, 21.

alienated from itself and from earlier stabilities of values and faith. Then, she braids this narrative, or translates it, into a somewhat neglected time-narrative, indeed a faith narrative; perhaps we could call it a faith-time narrative, the biblical narrative of an ordinary family. This narrative is well known to most of the “western” world, and Glück shows that it still “speaks”: maybe as a silent mountain, maybe in the voices of the perplexed modern family, maybe in the voices of flowers.

Is the post-Enlightenment (rational, material) “immanent” beginning to accommodate or translate the “transcendent”? Yes, or perhaps. The issue of religious doubt has itself recently undergone transformation. Although many folks were once uncomfortable with the loss of faith and the “death” of God, now the discomfort is on the other side of the issue. Helen Vendler, for instance, acknowledges her own wariness about any poet’s claim of religious belief or of belief in some reality beyond the natural world.¹⁷ Introducing his essay on Catholic poets, Gary Bouchard sees this discomfort about religious belief as pervasive; he observes that “in our society one’s ideas and art are more likely to be taken seriously by more people if they sound secular.”¹⁸ Bouchard then discusses the work of Dana Gioia, Desmond Egan, and Sherman Alexie, especially the prosodic effectiveness of their involved ironies and paradoxes—techniques that somewhat disguise the underlying religious faith and certainly render the poetry more acceptable to contemporary readers. If for two hundred years poets have worked with the language of science and rationality, and have tried to translate a faith narrative into a recognizable modern tongue, now the faith poet must exercise some care not to alienate the secular lingua-franca of our era.

Tightly-knotted ironies are one route (one translation of faith) that can engage a contemporary secular audience, but another way is to utilize a very straightforward colloquial idiom. Mary Karr’s faith narrative is the Christianity of Roman Catholicism, a faith with a paradox at its heart. As its basic belief, Christianity affirms a paradox that makes a moot point out of the supposed conflict of transcendence and

¹⁷ Helen Vendler, *Soul Says: On Recent Poetry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 114–115.

¹⁸ Gary M. Bouchard, “Our Litany: The Varied Voices and Common Vision of Three Contemporary Catholic Poets,” in *Between Human and Divine: The Catholic Vision in Contemporary Literature*, ed. Mary R. Reichardt (Washington, D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 137–138.

immanence; if God has become incarnate in Christ, then this itself is the rock-hard linguistic and philosophical jawbreaker, the narrative-and-theological-paradox. As a response, a poet might well look toward the secular modes of direct speech, perhaps colloquialisms, as a forthright yet kinetic means of bringing such a paradoxical concept a little closer to (and “descending” toward?) the ordinary language that negotiates daily life. This strategy is Mary Karr’s choice and gift, as she brings a wonderfully lyricized colloquial voice to a classic faith narrative, theology becoming a gritty urban music, almost slang-as-song.

The dialogue of faith language and ordinary speech is represented structurally in Karr’s *Sinners Welcome*. The book is organized around five poems, each having a title that begins: “Descending Theology”; the subtitle of these icon-poems (if I may use this term) defines a key aspect of the life of Christ: respectively, “The Nativity,” “Christ Human,” “The Garden,” “The Crucifixion,” “The Resurrection.” These five poems, and how they shape the book’s statement about Mary Karr’s faith journey (including her conversion to Catholicism), have been well-illuminated by Robert Lewis in his insightful essay, which I recommend.¹⁹ Since my concern here is especially the creative flexibility of the modern secular (and scientific) “languages” themselves (and their engagement with the language of faith), I will focus on Karr’s imagery and diction—her word-choices, essentially. These not only build sound and rhythm, as we would expect in a poem, but they also carry on an intricate structural “dialogue” that echoes the larger sequence-structure of religious belief “descending” into contemporary speech.

The general title of the icon-poems, “Descending Theology,” not only implies the Incarnation itself, the descent of a “Theo-logy” or God-Word, but indicates as well the travelling language, the God-narrative as it comes to encounter humanity and engage contemporary human narratives in dialogue. Karr’s poetry embodies this descent; she uses rhetorical maneuvers that Bakhtin described as “dialogic.” That is, the writer juxtaposes words of different usage or different “cultural” styles: academic, colloquial, or scientific. In the icon-poems (giving us God’s ongoing, incarnational greeting) the language itself enters into the greeting—as though “translating” itself into human speech. For instance, near the end of “Descending Theology: The

¹⁹ Robert P. Lewis, “‘Descending Theology’: The Poetry of Mary Karr,” in Reichardt, ed., *Between Human and Divine*, 50–68.

Crucifixion,” the dying Christ “feels / his soul leak away,” and the oncoming storm “sucks him” into light and the “rent sky. . . .”²⁰ The three words—“leak,” “suck,” and “rent”—are used within three lines of each other, yet we would not expect to hear the first two in, for instance, an oratorio of Handel. The word “rent,” however, is very classic and classy; it is used to describe the Temple curtain, “rent” during the unsettled weather at the moment of Christ’s death (Matt. 27:51; “rent” in KJV; “torn” in RSV). And no one in the twenty-first century would call attention to a storm, over the ball park (perhaps), as having “rent” the sky. The word is not casual speech. Karr’s crunching of casual-crude diction and proscenium diction here is a powerful linguistic representation of two languages meeting—and of the Word of God crucified as he comes to meet humanity in its own language.

By structuring her book’s poems around (before and after and between) the five icon-poems, Karr invites the reader to consider the Christian faith narrative as it progressively enters and inhabits a human, urban, struggling world. “Hurt Hospital’s Best Suicide Jokes” follows just after “Descending Theology: The Garden” (this is the garden where Jesus was betrayed). A group of addicts (self-betrayers?) gathers to share stories and support. At first the voice of the poem allots each person one (reluctantly supplied?) name, then one (monosyllabic) verb which snaps into a flaunted action, even confessional bravado. After the “best” joke (about a self-hanging that fails to happen), the word “Alive” spills open a scene of traumatic embarrassment: “and should our eyes meet / what howls erupt—like jackals we bawl / to find ourselves upright.”²¹ The poem’s last word, “upright”—and in contrasting, dialogic relation to the entire poem—states its case with frantic rectitude. In relation to “bawl” (an abrupt, infantile loss of control), the word “upright” closes the poem down with clench-fisted, over-determined Puritanical control. And the word “find” indicates the relationship: these “jackals” (these addicts) bawl because they have just found that their boastful self-destruction has not worked, and so they are embarrassingly “alive.” Or: “bawl” may imply an infant’s cry for attention; the addicts cry in neediness, craving to come through this alive—and be “upright.” Perhaps they are grateful and contrite; they are embarrassed and upset, because they

²⁰ Mary Karr, “Descending Theology: The Crucifixion,” in *Sinners Welcome* (New York: HarperCollins, Harper Perennial, 2009), 52.

²¹ Karr, “Hurt Hospital’s Best Suicide Jokes,” in *Sinners Welcome*, 39.

have, without deserving it, found God, been redeemed. Aside from moral strength, “upright” indicates adult posture; they are not dead, not dangling from a noose, but alive and can stand up; they are not infants bawling, but adults who can walk.

Both Louise Glück and Mary Karr gather a divine narrative and a human narrative into close harmony (or a close dissonance), Glück’s poetry incorporating symbols of the extensive history of the conversation, while Karr explores linguistically the collisional challenges of the doctrine of the Incarnation. Some form of God-narrative is perceived, by all four of these poets, to be drawing closer to the human narratives and travelling along with human history, especially in this period of ideological change. The great precedent for such songtravel, as I noted earlier, may be the poetry of the Psalms. Not only does the human narrative change during that famous literary pilgrimage, but the characterization of God also subtly changes. In his study of Middle Eastern hymns and psalms, Claus Westermann finds that the Egyptian hymns were almost exclusively contemplative songs, meditations on God’s beauty and glory; in the Hebrew Psalms (and Babylonian psalms), however, God shows a great interest in human beings, and the psalmist calls the community to praise God for his “deeds” on their behalf.²²

The poetry of Sofia Starnes continues this tradition of songtravel, especially the implication and imagery of God’s descending, becoming Incarnate, entering the dust, the flesh, the language, even the ashes of human history. The poems in her book *Fully Into Ashes* engage the moments of personal God-encounter (love, birth, deaths, deaths of parents especially), and engage also those human-perpetrated crises when narratives conflict, and wars or ideological allegiances result in catastrophic destruction, real ashes, even the Trade Center towers collapsing. Yet her poetry soars on its faith narrative, which the poet implicitly links to the Psalms. (An epigraphic phrase, very loosely derived from a psalm, appears on almost every page.) The occasions of crisis, whether described as personal or political (or geologic), are linguistically embodied in a faith narrative of praise. Her poems are psalmic and celebrational.

Traditionally the literary forms of hymns, psalms, and odes have contained an element of celebration. As Paul Fry emphasized in his

²² Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen (Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox Press, 1981), 43, 50–51.

book, the ode's irregular, elaborate features eventually gave the form its reputation as a wildly experimental genre, one that demonstrated too much "extravagance" perhaps; it was stylistically an extreme "celebration."²³ And yet, as David Tracy observes, a good description or interpretation of a religious experience (whether described in "classic" art or interpreted in theology) tends to offer "a fullness, even an excess of meaning," and if this doesn't happen, we are left with the bleak "atheological vision of a deadened univocity."²⁴ Although their statements are not precisely parallel, both Fry and Tracy are describing the difficult verbal response to mystery and crisis. We should not be surprised to find, in faith poetry that celebrates, some of the linguistic maneuvers implied by the words: fullness, excess, extravagance.

Certainly the poetry of Sofia Starnes does not offer a lifeless "univocity." Although *Fully Into Ashes* includes no odes, it does celebrate an incarnational faith multivocally, the style offering us "an excess of meaning." Dialogic language and synaesthesia travel in rapid montage, and a generative eroticism always moves toward completions, toward the fulfillment of God's embodied, enfleshed creation. The extravagant, bejeweled clusters of language are present throughout Starnes's poetry, but I will look first at "The Fret of Memory," because it demonstrates so well the relationship of (mysterious) truth and the (fullness of) language that enables us to "talk" about "truth."

In the poem's first two lines we hear guidebook speech, offering mere scientific truth (concerning "caption" and "note"). But very quickly in this "butterfly birthing ground," the objective civilized language runs into wild nature's customary brutalities: "dismantled monarchs / surrendering purses. . . ." These butterflies didn't simply die; they were destroyed, dismembered, their lives becoming other lives by means of slugs and slurps, and a fatal "kiss" that divides the insect. But in this place of small-time horror, a kind of lyric-science voice begins describing beautiful geological formations ("coal-veins, areolas, / over phosphorous rocks")—where part of the smashed insect body stays (contributing to the "areolas" perhaps).²⁵ Some butterflies migrate northward, but whether fossilized as rock-flesh or still living as winged insect-flesh, everything migrates, even memories that may

²³ Fry, *The Poet's Calling in the English Ode*, 9, 38.

²⁴ Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, 175, 413.

²⁵ Sofia M. Starnes, "The Fret of Memory," in *Fully Into Ashes* (San Antonio, Tex.: Wings Press, 2011), 32.

become poems. Near the end of this poem, “A migration of losses flocks / over the page: pinpoint deaths—.”²⁶ The poem could not have happened if “truth” (back in the middle of the guided trail) had not been swept up (or evolved) into language. In mid-poem, “truth” meets a rapid rush of synaesthetic words: visual (rock formations), taste and smell (“tang” of a cave), and something like touch and feeling (in a dank cave); here someone muses on the experience, trying to find a memory that disappears “like the hang of a vanishing truth.”²⁷ Although truth was encountered (in travel, life, insights, death, dismemberment, migrating memories), yet it is not explained—not narrated into theology or philosophy; indeed, truth vanishes into its own celebrational embodiment.

An implicit faith language is also celebrated in “Leaving Pompeii,” and in this poem a good creation’s human voice sings a full embodiment (of love, death, ashes, families, cultural history). Although the poem was earlier published as “Celebration,” and this word occurs twice in the short poem, the new title provides the best entry (because it is coyly misleading) into the narrative context. We assume, as readers, that this city consists of the famous volcanically destroyed-yet-preserved ruins, even preserved body-shapes, also ruins of art, mosaics, and colorful walls depicting religious rituals. And yet, the first line: “We pause to celebrate it all,” could certainly be the living and very present-tense words of a Roman couple (two thousand years ago) taking leave of their vacation-villa (days or years before the volcano erupts). The imagery of burnt candles and “a parrot purchased / for its Latin talk” suggests a well-off good cheer, and the non-ambitious, colloquial taste of the couple: their parrot does not recite Greek phrases from Sophocles, but just the usual “Latin talk.” A comma separates the parrot from a “hibiscus” and (still in the same sentence) we see the neighbors’ newly-painted siding, mulched roses where bicycles have been left; then the sentence ends with: “children that learn / rotation on their wheels.”²⁸

The children have learned “rotation,” the appropriate cycling of bedtimes, mealtimes, playtimes (childhood itself passing, time itself passing²). And surely the poem’s context is (has cycled to?) the present day and non-Mediterranean, the couple taking a weekend, a pastoral

²⁶ Starnes, “The Fret of Memory,” in *Fully Into Ashes*, 33.

²⁷ Starnes, “The Fret of Memory,” in *Fully Into Ashes*, 32.

²⁸ Starnes, “Leaving Pompeii,” in *Fully Into Ashes*, 34.

or suburban celebration sensibly “rotating” with the work-week. However, just as the rather conventional symbolism is settling into mere framework again (the good-life of Pompeiian sensuality meets volcanic-apocalypse), time starts to morph, joyously overtaking not just a weekend or one summer season. A sentence begins, “We celebrate,” and then a wonderful diversity of dialogic diction embodies a widespread sensuousness: “trickle,” “leaked” (actually, the lake “whose bottom / leaked”), “drip,” and then sheets that someone notices have become “crinkled stiff. . . .” At this, a voice realizes that “we have / loitered too long.” Indeed, that leaky lake’s drip “keeps autumns awake.”²⁹

Plural: “autumns.” How long has this rendezvous been going on—two thousand years? Dust is everywhere, the parrot picks away, trying to find food, and the lovers hastily attempt departure; they are trying to “withdraw” (nicely sexual connotations), when a “friend” tells them what they already expect to hear: “go—” (emphasis in the poem). And the poem ends very solemnly, the night “a stranger, / dark and lean: guest / to the heart’s abundant feast.”³⁰ Is the “stranger” (night) the volcanic ash? death? all endings? The symbolism is manifold, but one implication for any dark, entering stranger is clear: night is a “guest,” and so this guest belongs (somehow) to life’s own hospitality. The heart’s feast is after all so abundant, abundant all the way to and through the flesh of the redeemed life, perhaps. Maybe this “friend” (who appears out of nowhere) is an angel, a messenger carrying the voice of God to earth. The friend’s voice performs both judgment and rescue or salvation. And even the implication of judgment here does not deny the great value of life’s abundant feast; the voice merely reminds the lovers that this part of the rotation, the cycle, is over.

The complexity and the multiple implications that blossom in the poetry of Sofia Starnes perhaps go a little further than the unfolding prosodic conversations of the other poets examined here, although the style of Mary Karr certainly approaches a dense, celebrational fullness (extravagance?). All of these poets are multi-vocal. They speak (or sing in) at least two languages, a faith language and one or several of the languages that continue to reinvent the modern world. Such poetry seeks to embody in language (the implications of) the religious experience, the divine encounter that even famous encountered persons (like Moses) claim is non-languageable, non-nameable. Hence

²⁹ Starnes, “Leaving Pompeii,” in *Fully Into Ashes*, 34.

³⁰ Starnes, “Leaving Pompeii,” in *Fully Into Ashes*, 34.

(Fry and Tracy might argue)—the excess of meaning in the verbal responses of theologians and artists. And, as I have suggested, the unexpected stretches of the imagination in these poems may very well derive from the necessity of stretching, reaching, travelling—when faith narratives need to sing their way into new linguistic territory.