

*Sightings* 10/13/05

## Poetry's Religious Turn

-- Joshua Adams

Just as there is no end to the diversity of American religious practices, nor the wellspring of theories designed to analyze and define them, there is no exhausting the endurance of religion as subject matter and creative force in American poetry. From the first revolutionary ferment in the nineteenth century, which centered on the twin lights of Emily Dickinson's introspective Calvinism and Walt Whitman's prophetic Transcendentalism, American poets have taken the sacred alternately as starting point, sustenance, destination, or foil.

This is surely part of the reason why the Chicago Poetry Project -- founded in 2001 by John Tipton, with a nod to the famous Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church -- has chosen to entitle its fifth annual reading series "Poetry of the Religious Turn," featuring a group of poets whose engagements with religion span a wide range of approaches and commitments. But neither the mere presence of religious themes in American poetry nor the religiosity of American poets themselves accounts for devoting a year's worth of readings to the subject. So why the "religious turn," and why now?

As curator and poet Peter O'Leary explains in his essay on the upcoming season, the decision to focus on religion is an ambitious gambit: It rests on the proposition that such a move might save American poetry from itself. According to O'Leary, religious poetry provides a way of thinking past the ossified divisions that have cleft the literary world since the 1970s. He suggests that, to the extent that religious poetry "regularly confounds our habitual perceptions of what poetry is, of what it can do, or where it comes from," it can reset the terms of the debate between avant-gardists and traditionalists that have preoccupied many poets and critics of the past generation.

At least in the context of the last thirty years, then, the "religious turn" in poetry is a turn to something new. But, as is often the case with such gestures, it is also a return to something old, namely, tradition. Besides Dickinson and Whitman, a host of twentieth-century American Modernists were shaped by their adoption of or struggles with religion. T. S. Eliot is an obvious example, considering his journey from Eastern exoticism to Anglo-Catholicism, and so is Hart Crane, who recapitulated the Whitmanian vision of America in modernity with the aid of an adapted Christian Science.

But there are less likely candidates, too, many of whom became signal influences on an avant-garde whose current inability to grapple with religion prompted the Project to organize this series in the first place. Ezra Pound, who took a dim view of religion in the West, nevertheless considered himself a kind of Confucian. Robert Duncan's poetics began in theosophy and remained linked to the occult throughout his life. Allen Ginsberg, whose psalmic "Howl" caused a sensation fifty years ago, fashioned prophecy out of the plain speech of the stubbornly empirical William Carlos Williams. And one of Sylvia Plath's more memorable poems, "Lady Lazarus," betrays an engagement with religion as well.

The poets who will be reading at the Poetry Project this year carry forward the different approaches to religion that were once prominent in American poetry. Susan Howe, perhaps the

best known of the invitees, has fashioned her work out of history -- including the lives of Emily Dickinson and the pragmatist philosopher Charles Sanders Pierce -- only to have her poems disrupt the stability we assign to historical narratives, creating in their stead a metaphysics assembled from lyric.

Nathaniel Mackey, who speaks of Duncan as a signal influence on his poetry, frequently uses figures of ritual possession in his work. His continuing long poem, "The Song of the Andoumboulou," dramatizes this scenario; the poem is both a direct address to West African spirits and a channeling of the cosmology of the Dogon tribe. Kevin Hart, one of two Australian poets on the docket this year, brings the same phenomenological approach to his poetry that he did to masterful critical studies of philosophers Jacques Derrida and Maurice Blanchot. His poems cluster, like crystals, around the shadow of the immanent in the world.

The 2005 season of the Poetry Project may not initiate a religious revival in American poetry generally. But it will perform a perhaps more valuable service, showcasing how much innovative writing depends on its own past, and how much that past has drawn on religion as a source of inspiration. Our literature is richer for this acknowledgment.

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