



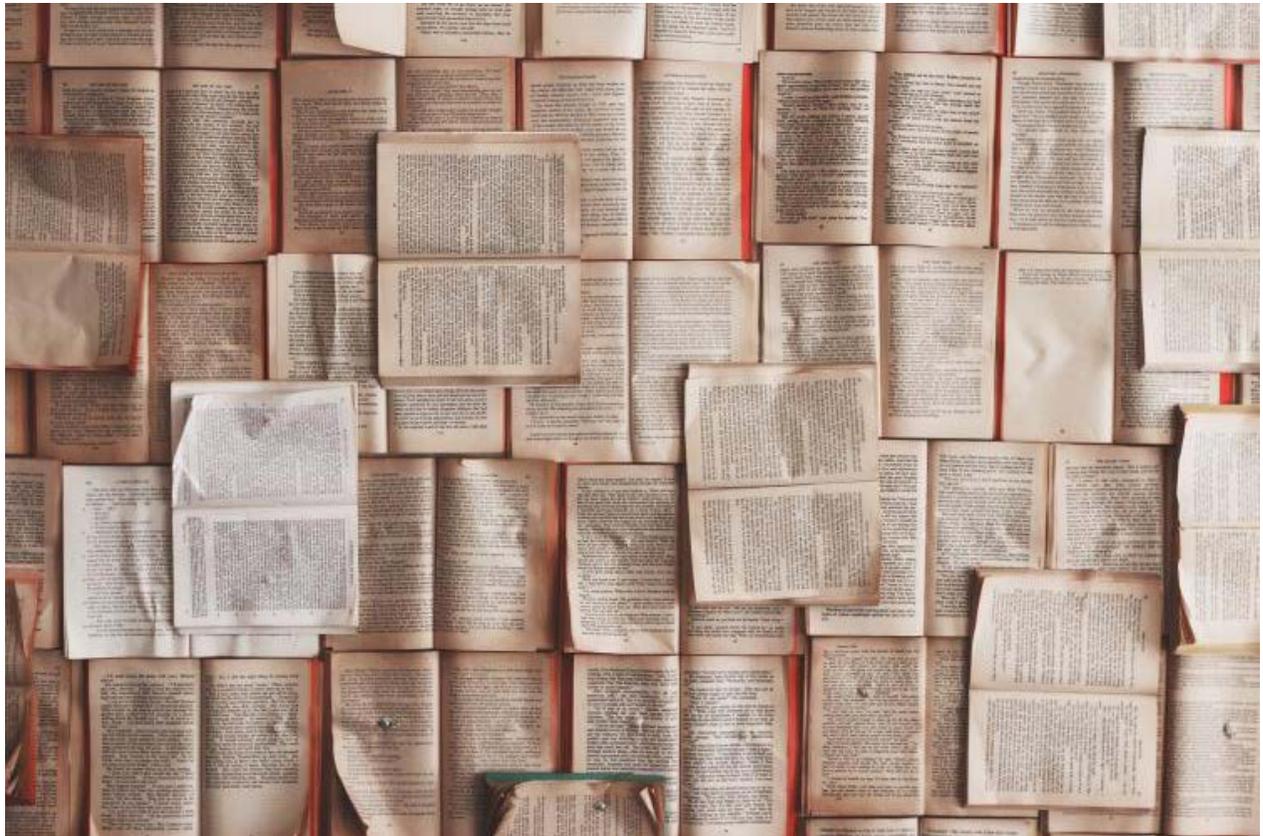
ARTS & CULTURE POETRY AUGUST 21, 2017 ISSUE

Christian Poetry v. "Christian Poetry"



Joseph P. Hoover

July 28, 2017



Patrick Tomasso via Unsplash

It is the devastating curse of all latter-day Christian poets to be two wildly unfortunate things: a) Christians and b) poets.

The problem with being a poet is clear and perennial, captured perfectly in an onscreen quotation in the movie “The Big Short”: “The truth is like poetry. And most people [deleted] hate poetry.”

(I think only some people hate poetry, not most, and that many of those who claim to despise it, or to “not get it,” are not being entirely honest with themselves. But still. It is an uphill battle.)

The trouble with the “Christian” part is also clear. There is an assumption that Christian poetry will be freighted with unlovely writing, a fog of generalities, lyric observations that cut straight to the Big Answer—*just love God*—without clipping into any of the harrowing crags of that climb. The straight line of faith that seamlessly blasts through all the rocks of doubt, trial, hurt, oddity, epiphany—it doesn’t necessarily make for great art. It can be as foreign to life as plastic to cavemen.



I think people secretly want to read literature that just destroys their souls in the finest possible way.

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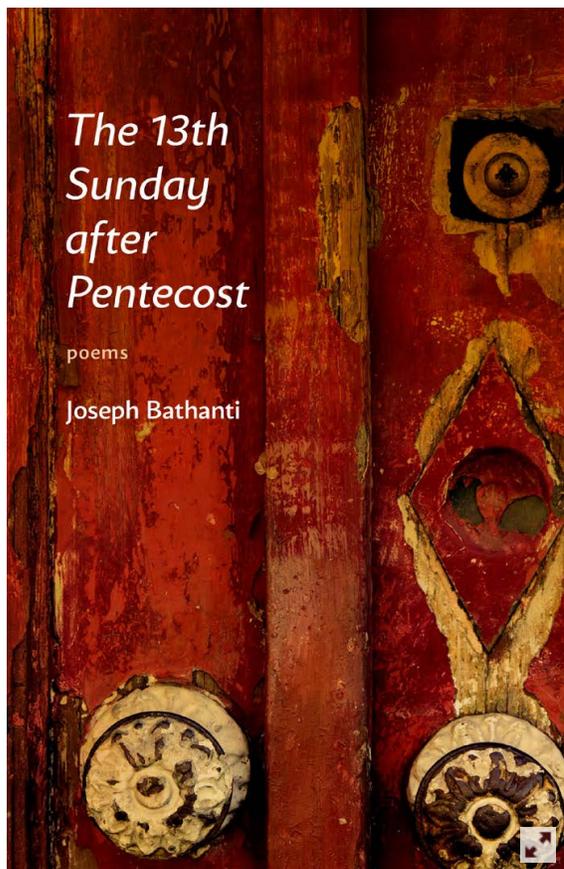
I think people secretly want to read literature that *just destroys their souls* in the finest possible way. And if it is *good*—if it destroys, resurrects, ascends in any hearty fashion—they generally do not care much what creed or confession it springs from.

But to some people, what faith a work springs from really does matter. Conferences and periodicals like this one have been taking up for the past few years the question of whether, for instance, “Catholic” has anything unique to add to literature. Is there any kind of special metaphysics in Catholic writing? Is there even such a thing as Catholic literature, and if so why does it matter? One thing is clear though: One’s religion is not necessarily a death sentence to creating good literature.

The following reviews look at books of Christian poetry—regardless of what exactly that phrase means—that have come out over the past three or four years. The reviews have been written not only by me, but by two **America** interns, Emma Winters and Anna Marchese, and an O’Hare Fellow, Teresa Donnellan.

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Joseph Bathanti's "The 13th Sunday after Pentecost"

2016) in an Italian-American, working-class neighborhood with crisp, clear details about life as a growing boy. The narrator recalls baseball games, the “delicate” cookie he “always chose and ate ceremonially,” and Mass in Latin. As he moves through adolescence in the second section of the book, the subject matter becomes more complicated as the narrator explores his burgeoning sexuality and confusion amid social upheaval. The title poem is a tour de force of the 1960s, hitting issues from the abortion debate to Martin Luther King Jr. to Vietnam, all while situated in the living room of working class family that is “Bewitched by Vatican II.”

—Emma Winters

“

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I wonder if David Craig was a little disturbed that his publisher, Wipf and Stock, begins his bio on the back flap of *Mercy Wears a Red Dress* (Wipf and Stock, 2016) with “David Craig, who’s been called the best Christian poet writing today....”

The best Christian poet. My God, the pressure! Who can deal? You read a line like: “My Parents Bought Me a tall cardboard store one Christmas” and you think: Wow. This is not the best Christian line of Christian poetry being written today. Nor the next line, nor the next! And not that they aren’t good. But the best? Who can measure? The bio is plain unfair to Mr. Craig, because it sets him up to be debunked, rightly or wrongly, at every turn.

Regardless of all this, the book bears in heavy doses wisdom, truth and humor. In “So Much Light Green Encroaches”: “Where there is no need, there is no God.... We are a cry for Him.” And: “We invented Chocolate Milk”/ and air hockey. So anything is possible.” “Mary Receiving The Pierced Body” begins, “In this version, His last wound is a comma, no/

boundary: a bloodless mouth, closing, opening its hole;" Craig is at turns wry, critical, observant and devout, many of his poems intermingling all of these qualities, with a grounded flair.

—Joe Hoover

While *The Needle's Eye: Passing Through Youth*, by Fanny Howe (Graywolf, 2016), is a collection on adolescence, the work here embodies the ecstasies of old and young age alike. Howe intertwines dissimilar lives, from the infamous Tsarnaev brothers (the Boston Marathon bombers) to Saints Francis and Clare, to nomads from 14th-century folklore. It is a mysterious mixture that places half of the reader in the realm of the mystical and the other in the reality of suffering.

"A Thought" is one snapshot of the faith and confusion accompanying every aging being:

"We try to domesticate our spirits like children./ We chase and chastise them until they change./ We spend our lives trying to release them again."

Howe's admiration of Simone Weil rings throughout the work, which could double for a biography of the philosopher.

"Like Grown-ups" presents the reader with Weil's rejection of the Spanish anti-fascist movement she once embraced: "One day, seeing a child deliberately killed by a member of her own brigade, she renounced war for good and returned to her pacifist position. When a child is killed for someone else's idea, the idea is finished."

—Anna Marchese

The poems in Marie Howe's *Magdalene* (W. W. Norton and Company, 2017) place the "woman with the 7 demons" everywhere from biblical passages (the woman caught in adultery), to modern life (a mother driving children to pre-school.) While Howe undoubtedly knows that Magdalene's reputation as an adulteress or prostitute is a long-standing misreading of Scripture, she nonetheless dwells on her sexualized reputation. The poems speak of a woman isolated in her own body, watching things unfold, always searching for her identity. In "The Affliction": "When I walked across a room I saw myself walking/ as if I were someone else...// So when I looked at you, I didn't see you/ I saw the me you thought you saw, as if I were someone else." Nothing can fill what she wants, because what she ultimately wants is not even a thing. "I was driven toward desire by desire./ believing that the fulfillment of that desire was an end./ There was no end."

"Magdalene Afterwards" lists all the women that she might inhabit, the descriptions cascading down both brutal and lovely. "Remember the woman in the blue burka forced to kneel in the stadium/ then shot in the head? That was me./ And I was the woman who secretly filmed it. //

I was hung as a witch by the people in my own town/ I was sent to the asylum at sixteen." In the same poem she also evokes a poignant scene so simply: "When I enter the classroom, all the children call my name at once." In this collection, Howe manages a delicate trick. She writes with truth and devastating clarity about, among other things, women in "a man's world"

and, you could say, a “man’s religion.” But the truths nonetheless still fall on the side of love and devotion for the founder of men and religion, Christ.

—Joe Hoover

When Catholic writers talk about their poetry or fiction, they often declare their intention to stay away from anything “gauzy,” “sentimental” or “pious.” (Piety is especially loathed in some circles. Apparently, being “pious” is the worst thing in the world a Christian can be.) In *Heresies*, by Orlando Ricardo Menes (University of New Mexico Press, 2015), the poet all but carpet bombs holy sentimentality, but without, for my money, destroying the holy.

The heresies, I think, are the way he upends the old stories. In “St. Lazarus the African Instructs Those Who Seek His Healing,” we witness a hardened Lazarus calling out Jesus: “Where was Jesus to whip those slavers to the bone/ Where was Jesus to walk my people home across the swells?/ I will not abandon you with paradoxes, false hope, hollow blessings.”

His poems crackle; they are alive. In “St. Primitivo, Patron of Heretics, Exhorts His Catechumens,” Menes demonstrates that he knows his Catholic game: “Utility is holier than ritual/ Put those fonts to good use as bird baths,/ those missals as mulch, those catafalques as oxcarts./ You want to be pious?/ Hang laundry from the paschal cross./ Grow basil in a pyx.”

This raises a question: Is the pyx made more holy by holding the basil, or the basil more holy by residing in a pyx? Either answer works.

—Joe Hoover

Written by Angela Alaimo O’Donnell, *Still Pilgrim: Poems* (Paraclete Press, 2017)—sonnets on faith, family and life—presents the female gaze from the get-go, in the first two lines of the prologue poem: “To be a pilgrim is to ring the stones/ with the clean music of your best black heels.”

The poems focus on the “still pilgrim,” a woman of faith navigating the secular world. Religious phrases and ideas dispersed throughout the collection convey the pilgrim’s careful consideration of herself and her surroundings.

“The Still Pilgrim Makes Dinner” examines grief, memory and tradition as the writer contemplates the absence of her mother while making a meal she learned from her. “For ashes, flour upon my head./ For prayers, the rise of scented smoke./ My mother, who is five years

STILL



PILGRIM

ANGELA ALAIMO O'DONNELL

POEMS

"Still Pilgrim: Poems"

dead,/ Lives in this meat, these eggs I broke,/ This dish she taught me
how to make,/ This wine I drink, this bread I break.”

Another compelling idea, unconscious bodily prayer, appears in “The Still Pilgrim in Love”: “A sweet and subtle kind of praying/ the body does, the lungs; fine art/ of taking in and letting go.”

Still Pilgrim offers a striking glimpse inside the mind of a wholly spiritual woman, who finds the sacred in the ordinary.

—Teresa Donnellan

Requiem for David, by Patrick T. Reardon (Silver Birch Press, 2017), centers on the author’s relationship with his brother David, who killed himself later in life. Many of the poems fall between old black and white photos of David and Patrick growing up. The book leads off with the telling “1951...foreign” “a mother who had kids and then couldn’t deal with it.” His mother in fact had 14 children, which fact sums up almost perfectly the bewildering mystery of the Catholic faith. The church that justly blesses and defends the birth of each one of those 14 is the same church that will glory in the very fact that *14 children* are born of one distressed womb. It is no surprise that from this family wrenching literature like this was also born.

The poems are so raw, simple and direct as they grapple with broken lives that many of them are difficult to read. Reardon’s writing is spare and not rooted in images so much as a cascade of feelings. He describes two kinds of communion he had with his brother: “We were skin of blood, blood of blood./ We were the same raw slash.” And, later, “Your death/ Your death/ Tore me/ Open like/ The baby/ Was coming/ Out.”

—Joe Hoover

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Joseph P. Hoover

Paul Totah's *The Gospel of Everyone* (Resource Publications, 2017) allows readers to experience revelation in real time. Based on Luke's Gospel, the book gives voice to the main players of the Gospel, but it also tells stories from the perspectives of minor characters—people Jesus healed and those who watched his ministry. Totah bases his writing on the imaginative practices of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola, and this shows in the richly detailed scenes Totah presents. All those in the narrative, including Jesus, come off feeling

fully human. The paralytic, who was lowered before Jesus by his friends, says that this allowed him to see himself as “a man loved, still able to love.”

—Emma Winters

Regina Walton's gift in *The Yearning Life* (Paraclete Press, 2017, winner of the Phyllis Tickle Prize in Poetry) is to take simple objects and moments and describe them without trying to spiritualize them: “The privilege of holding a pencil—/
Light embrace, circumscribed choreography/
as the tangled boughs sway and sigh into winter.”

The poems are light and clean, the images live as if they have always been there. In “Sleight”:

“Before it was a card trick, a disappeared/
quarter reborn from an unsuspecting ear,/
sleight meant skill.” The poem goes on to trace how “Craft turns crafty, art sours/
to artifice, tricks and cleverness,/
To beguiled applause instead of/
A shaft through the heart.”

Her lines have a way of gently easing onto the page and into the soul. Their grace and wisdom (and sly humor) are simple and truthful. “Happy Accident” asks, “Was it a set-up,/
All the way up?// The serpent has no comment, now.”

—Joe Hoover

In *A Gathering of Larks: Letters to Saint Francis from A Modern-Day Pilgrim* by Abigail Carroll, the author, having recently injured her foot, is faced with a new type of poverty, that of not being able to help herself. She tells Francis “To be frank, I never understood / your choice to beg (why not / at least grow your food?) until / I broke my foot / and the fridge / went low.” Although she acknowledges the fruitfulness of her injury for her spirituality, the subject also struggles with the restrictiveness of being hurt. Talking to Francis, she says “It seems to me / a kind / of sin, / this slap in the face / to all that's wild and green, this chronic / staying in...” The communion of saints becomes real and literal as the speaker addresses Francis seeking comfort, guidance, and community.

—Emma Winters

Joseph Bathanti sets **The 13th Sunday after Pentecost** (LSU Press, 2016) in an Italian-American, working-class neighborhood with crisp, clear details about the decadence in small moments of a growing boy. As a boy the narrator recalls baseball games, the “delicate” cookie he “always chose and ate ceremonially” and mass in Latin. As he moves through adolescence in the second section of the book, the subject matter becomes more complicated as the narrator explores his burgeoning sexuality and confusion in the swath of contemporary issues. The title poem is a tour de force of the 1960s, hitting issues from the abortion debate to Martin Luther King Jr. to Vietnam, all while situated in the living room of working class family that is “Bewitched by Vatican II.”

—Emma Winters

In his new book, **Saint Paul Lives Here (In Minnesota)** (Resource Publications, 2015) Zach Czaia, a Catholic teacher in Minnesota, grapples with his discovery that a priest he knew in high school sexually abused students. From the outset, Czaia holds both injury and forgiveness in equal weight, recognizing “Flesh is funny--how saveable and markable it is, / how it rejuvenates but won’t forget.” This tension comes into focus as the narrator offers a tepid forgiveness to the abusive priest, saying “It is enough / for now, this forgiveness in the third person.” As a teacher, Czaia cannot get his student to stop throwing dictionaries, and this sense of early adulthood confusion spills into his personal life. “You are walking up the mountain with your friend / without a useful metaphor.”

—Emma Winters

Maurice Harmon moves through the disturbing and the inspiring, giving voice to imperfect people in **Hoops of Holiness** (Salmon Poetry, 2016). While Harmon writes without judgement about individuals, the book as a whole pokes sharply at the Church and its relationship to sexuality. For instance, in the title poem a school-age boy reflects that “They were being shaped for Heaven, / rescued from Hell, / denied their natures, / every sexual thought a sin,” and a priest notes “His body had a life of its own, / sex always mingled with slime.” The libretto that finishes the book offers an equally bleak view of the Church, featuring a boy brought to a Catholic boarding school who slowly grows isolated due to the school’s harsh regime. This dark tone is shared in other parts of the book as Harmon mixes Irish folklore with banshee-like woman showing up to take a town hero to his death and another making a man puke out all his indoctrination. Still the book finds its tender moments, such as in the woman who wants “To make a home, to make it right, / turned to prayer to clear the air.” In all the scenes from his book, realistic and imaginative, Harmon depicts the world with crisp images.

—Emma Winters

Hammer is the Prayer: Selected Poems by Christian Wiman, (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016) is a major book from one of the most acclaimed poets of our time. The title poem sums up Wiman’s gifts in all their blistering power:

“There is no consolation in the thought of God, he said, slamming another nail / in another house another havoc had half taken...To hell with remembrance, to hell with heaven, hammer is the prayer of the poor and dying.” The poem ends: “peace came to the hinterlands of our minds, / too remote to know, but peace nonetheless.”

—Joe Hoover

Selected Christian Poetry Collections and Periodicals that Feature Poetry:

- America
- Christian Century
- Commonweal
- Dappled Things: A Quarterly of Ideas, Art & Faith
- Emmaus
- First Things
- Image: Art, Faith, Mystery
- The Paraclete Poetry Anthology (Paraclete Press, 2016)
- Pilgrim: A Journal of Catholic Experience
- Plough Quarterly
- Presence: A Journal of Catholic Poetry
- St. Peter's B List (Ave Maria 2014)

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