

CHICAGO POETRY PROJECT  
SEASON FIVE

POETRY OF THE RELIGIOUS TURN

Contemporary American religious and political culture is vexed by its misapprehensions of the meanings of “nature” and “creation.” Although these terms have numerous points of contact, in metaphor especially, they cannot mean the same thing. “Creation” is manifestly religious in its meaning. It’s as much a doctrine as it is anything else. “Nature” is neither religious nor doctrinal. As a concept, it tends to be approached in our imaginations through science, which, methodologically at least, rules out the author of creation – the creator – as a matter of course. (Which is not to say that the scientific method, or science itself, is godless; rather, that divine causation does not begin the scientific understanding of nature.) In spite of these differences, especially in the realm of politics, these terms are conflated to mean something equivalent. Practically speaking, this equation has been problematic in all the parts of life politics affects – from law to art, from science to government – but it has been disastrous to our ecology, which we have regularly stripped of its resources as a sign of our dominion over it. Nature is judged to be the product of creation; as creation’s crown, humans – something a number of American Christians, for instance, believe – are given by God a mandate to dominate and use nature as we see fit. In terms of a Christian vision of creation, redemption so completely orients one’s understanding of cosmology, it’s increasingly difficult to see nature as anything but a holding tank for life prior to death’s deliverance or to the revelation of the Second Coming.

In reality, this system of thinking is not as binary – “Either you protect the environment or you destroy it” – as politicians continue to play it. Evangelical fundamentalist Christian understandings of creation, to take one example, are not the only ones available to American political culture. The fundamentalist doctrine of inerrancy, to take another similar example, is not the only hermeneutic by which scripture might be interpreted. Rather, there is a spectrum of ideologies, admitting points of view held by a variety of believers – not just Christians – and non-believers alike. Even so, by insisting on a binary vision, one that suggests God and nature are equivalently in favor of American political pursuits, rendering critics of these pursuits putative enemies, the men in office continue to wield considerable, persuasive power over American religious and political culture.

American poetry culture is similarly vexed by a misapprehension, one similarly expressed in the form of a binary logic. There is a sense about poetry, one particularly prevalent in the internet and on the Blogs, that it is currently divided between a free-&-liberated Us, practicing a theoretical assault on the towers of meaning and reason; and a constipated Them, writing sonnets to sobriety or Alexandrians to quiet manners. In this reasoning, there is a conflation of experimentation or innovation with meaningfulness. Free-&-liberated poetry is by its very nature meaningful, or so we are urged to believe.

Mannered, constrained, mainstream poetry is created to be frivolous, forgettable, or worst of all, *easy*. Too often, it seems, valuable, meaningful poetry is dismissed by the would-be avant-garde because of its source in the mainstream; just as often too much self-professed avant-garde writing is so ordinary as to be indifferent, concerning itself with surface appeal and affiliation, rather than with making something interesting. As a result, American poetry is as open to satire as our politics, miring it in fatalistic ironies that have the plangent effect of an old man farting quietly in his trousers.

For its fifth season, the Chicago Poetry Project turns its attention to religious poetry, which regularly confounds our habitual perceptions of what poetry is, of what it can do, or where it comes from. Two of the most apocalyptic poems of the twentieth century, Ronald Johnson's *ARK* and James Merrill's *The Changing Light at Sandover* came from different coasts, different camps, but were written by two poets with remarkably similar understandings of literature. Two of the universally acknowledged best – and most religious – American poets, Walt Whitman and T. S. Eliot, wouldn't likely suffer each other in the same room. One of the most bewildering contemporary poets, Fanny Howe, claims herself to be “an atheist Catholic,” while one the most spiritually astute, Nathaniel Mackey, has created a poetic Gnosticism of mythological idiosyncrasy even priestly disciples balk at. Religious poetry survives our misapprehensions of poetry because it musks misunderstanding with the liturgical odors of language and guides our insight with a kind of black light, luminous but blotting.

In showcasing the nine poets on our roster for this fifth season, our purpose is to insist on the primacy of religious poetry to the vitality of experimentation in writing in English, and, likewise, to demonstrate that poetic expression is one of the most valuable kinds of knowledge in our religious cultures at large.

Peter O'Leary  
Curator, Season Five  
Chicago Poetry Project