

A Reading of Murray Bodo's *Canticle*

In the last poem in Murray Bodo's *Teaching the Soul to Speak*, the pilgrim poet prays, "O holy words/stay with me/draw me into/your buoyancy." That book was published in 2020. This new volume, *Canticle*, (2022), is proof that holy words have stayed and that they have come alive in a buoyant way. It seems there's something new and surprising on each page. The new book contains many well-crafted, short lyrical poems; but it also offers longer poems, most notably in the "Canticles" section of the book. The different sections work together to give us a full portrait of this unique collection, which I see as a wide-ranging and exuberant and beautiful song of praise, both religious and secular, that gathers up an array of human sorrows and joys and failings and successes and lifts them to the heavens as it expresses gratitude to and for all living things, in the manner of St. Francis's *Canticle of the Creatures*.

"Radiances," the section that opens the book, offers poems that relate to trees and light. Attention to these can bring us to a place of "astonished radiance." Then there are "urban trees" that have their own unique radiance and power. Aerated by the wind, trees, in the pilgrim poet's imagination, become "God's breath before/the creation of the world." He considers the trees around him, the woods that become his "daily refuge." But it's not just any refuge. It's one that shelters him, even shows "concern" for him as a friend would. We learn through this attention to trees that, though the world of human beings may be "unraveling," we can count on nature to restore our trust in what is. One almost wants to walk with the pilgrim poet through "rain-freshened foliage" and experience the same healing that he does. From trees we shift to the "realm of light" that helps us to see in new ways and even to contemplate our own death, when God "turn[s] out the light." Light, in the end, is a gift, another element we can count on to keep coming back.

Trees and light are radiances that launch us into “Canticles.” This part of the book has only five poems, but one of them is six pages long. Its very length signals that it is a significant song of praise. I see it as the heart of the book because it encompasses so much that he will continue to sing about in different ways in the shorter poems that follow it. “Canticle of Her Who Dwells Among Us” begins with a quotation from St. Francis: “Mother of God,/ you are virgin made church.” Rather abruptly we move from those enigmatic and holy words to a memory of childhood when we learn of an experience he had of seeing a girl “shyly naked.” This starts what I see as a deep and honest and open probing into his own history that led him to the virgin Church.

Interestingly, we learn that one experience that “seduces” him is what he *hears* (her chant), not what he sees. What “held him captive” were sounds of the Latin hymns “Kyrie” and “Agnus Dei.” From these sacred sounds, including Gregorian chant, we move to the sounds of children playing soccer “beneath this friary in Rome.” We have traveled from childhood to a later time in his life. As he puzzles out what it might mean to see Mary as “virgin made church,” he wonders if the children outside shouting might be the children of “the pregnant/woman Apocalyptic” who is thought by many to be Mary, the mother of God and the mother of Church. Still in Rome, we travel with our pilgrim poet up a small hill where he stops for a cappuccino “to crow a mid-awakening” in a more lowly manner than being at St. Peter’s. Again, we follow what he *hears*.

Then things change when we move to section II of this long poem, part one of which we see a clear *image* of a beach near the ocean. There we find a cabana that is “yellow and blue, red and white,” which seems to be about as far from things religious as one can get. He paints a lovely picture of what he had to deny in order to “wed him as a virgin made/Church.” Couples are walking around, those who “*were* couples” and then are alone “in their straw hats.” He

fantasizes what it might be like to be part of a couple. He imagines himself and “her” as they notice each other. He sees that the people on the beach “*don’t even notice he’s no longer pretending she’s not there*” Does this mean that she is not there, so there’s no need to pretend? Does he bring himself back from a fantasy? Earlier he says he has to pretend he’s there alone. It seems he’s moved on from pretending to not having to pretend.

There is no pretending in the scene where he “prays and weeps and watches his tears flow” and keeps probing, trying to understand better how he came to be who he is and why he followed the path he chose. As we all know, the work of self-understanding is difficult, revelatory, and ongoing. Such a journey inevitably takes us to our childhood. The pilgrim poet, Bodo, intimates that Mary, virgin made Church, is forever entwined with experiences of his boyhood.

Next, we follow the poet to a “cell/above Amalfi.” He tells us of the sound of the sea which he hears as a “ringing” and of his own yelling producing a “mad echo.” These sounds rising from the ocean and joining with the wind reminds him of St. Francis’s *Canticle* in which he praises “Brother Wind” and “Sister Water.” From this memory, we are given another image in which someone (she) put the petals/of a geranium “into a Dixie cup,” such a memorable image. In fact the last four sections of this long poem are full of such images: “still salads/and the live/cornfields,” “cats...beside the railroad tracks,” “coffeehouse/cappuccinos” and others. From Amalfi, we’re transported to his desk where a “cactus/burns/next to....”the penguins/of celibacy/on the polar ice cap.” We’re invited to reflect on what to make of the cactus and ice cap juxtaposition before the poet wraps up this long and winding poem with what seems like a revelation, an affirmation of the journey he is on. He reminisces, having learned that who he is and what he has and what he knows is enough. He straddles the divide between being in the

water and out. And in this straddling he realizes that he is only able to “see” Her (Mary) in the sights and sounds all around him.

So in “Canticle of Her Who Dwells Among Us,” we come full circle with the pilgrim poet, having experienced many of the twists and turns of his search for understanding. In his rough but beautiful journey from St. Francis’s words (“Mother of God,/you are virgin made Church”) to his childhood memory of the little girl to a kind of awakening, he seems to come to an enthusiastic acceptance of his choice of “virgin made church.” He can do this now because he is able to see Her in “the eyes he loves,/in eyes that love him.” In a sense he realizes that what comes with choosing Her, rather than the “she” who put the petals of the geranium in a Dixie cup, is the revelation that the only way he can “see” Mary is through that “she,” through the couples on the beach, and through the seductive sounds of the Gregorian music.

So far, I have focused on only two of the seven sections of this book. There’s more to come in what I see as this big and beautiful (dazzling?) collection of poems. From the pilgrim poet’s personal and courageous exploration of his calling, we are almost shocked out of his personal journey and into the news of the day: “In the Time of Covid.” Prior to this section, he had presented us with such a strong and convincing foundation of deepened faith that we trust him to lead us through the very difficult reality. We are living in a pandemic and thousands of people are dying. Who better to address such hard times than the pilgrim poet we’ve followed through his own tough journey?

If he is indeed a leader or a guide, we learn soon enough that his reflections on being alive during the pandemic align with our own. He has few answers, mostly questions. We trust him. He is a keen observer who tells us what he sees in this time of the pandemic. In one poem he speaks for all of us, I think, when he points to the “uncertainty of life” and the fact that we don’t

know how God could possibly be here during this horrific time when God's "houses are closed up/all ceremony suspended." Those who depend on liturgy for the sustenance of our faith are being asked to give up what feels like the most important hour of our week. Despite all the hardships of living in this time, we tell ourselves to hang on to what remains and reflect on what we know in faith. From "time to time" we see God as we always did, *in love*.

Observations similar to this one are what make up this section of the book. There's the experience the pilgrim poet has of listening to church bells in the time of Covid. He wonders who rings them. Who rings the bells in a church where no one goes? He surmises that whoever decided to ring them believes "God is there" whether we are physically there or not. So that's something else we can count on when death is looming everywhere because of the pandemic, a time when we all feel isolated and the hope that distance doesn't interfere with the bonds we'd formed in the "before." Everyone we know seems to be longing to see someone they love in person. "In the Time of Covid" doesn't bypass what was going on politically, the ex-president's refusal to accept the outcome of the election. Following a reminder of this scary situation in our leadership is a poem called "How Fascism Begins" that warns of the danger of the "famous man" who doesn't listen to the voice of the people. One consolation is "the promise of blue skies." Then there are the "buntings and cardinals" that still look for seeds, which indicates hope for spring. There is hope that justice will prevail, and Democracy will win out. Even with these hopeful words, though, the pilgrim poet wonders if it's naive for us to believe the deep divisions will go away and "Sunlight" will reign.

From our fragile hanging on of hope, we move to "Visitations," a section of the poem that shows us what the speaker learns from the various visitors. Each visitation presents a new image or memory that is often instructive to the speaker. The list of visitors include a deer,a sparrow,

words, “you”, Uncle Benny, he (who may be Jesus), desire (to bring God closer), sorrow, and his calling. He hopes the deer can aid in restoring order and restore our necessary rhythm. Watching the deer closely, we are reminded of what the deer can do for us and how important rhythm is to our well-being if the deer’s rhythmic grace is joined with ours. The lone sparrow also brings a tinge of hope as it waits for a mate that may or may not come. And in the voice of Uncle Benny who asks that his tragic story be kept alive, we see another sign of the presence of hope. But, to me, the most interesting visitor is “words”. In “Trying Too Hard to Name,” the speaker questions his attachment to words, his dependence on words. In a moment of insight, he realizes words can “do more.” They made possible the new understanding that what words cannot do is not a sign of failure but of success as it opens us to believing that “it is finished” is not the end.

A visit from words continues in the final poem in this section: “The Calling.” Though he has wrestled with this subject extensively earlier in the book, there is more to say. The deer appears again as if it had been waiting for the pilgrim poet. In the second stanza he conflates the deer and his father to whom the poem is addressed. When he says, “You did not move till I moved on,” we sense that he could be talking to the deer; but then we realize he is also talking to his father who, along with his mother, watched him leave “too early” and ushered in a lifetime of leavings. Words are again central to his awakening, but this event of his leaving presents again the possibility of the failure of words: “no words have ever explained” the outcome of his leaving at the young age of 14 that made constant leaving a part of his life.

“Profiles” starts with a short poem called “Beach.” The poem is a long question that, among other things, asks if a chair and umbrella “blow his soul/into the...biplane...” We don’t know whose soul and we don’t know if the question is meant to be answered in subsequent profile poems. Also, is each poem a profile? In “Cat,” the speaker tells us that “he” is dealing with the

intrusion of a cat until a bird distracts the cat and allows the person to go back to his book where he “stares down words,/waits for a thought/to fly by.” Once again, we’re faced with the poet’s relationship to words, which is important enough to muster the patience to wait for the word and the thought, or a word for the thought. In many ways his relationship with words is as crucial to him as his relationship to anything else he has pondered in these poems.

Is the “he” being brought forth the same person in each poem? Does the poet present various profiles of this person to explore different aspects of writing itself? In “Morning Poet,” the writer’s world comes into focus. Once again, words and writing are a major theme. He patiently waits for words because that’s where he’ll find out “what’s happening” around him. What is suggested here is that words have healing power as well. We don’t dwell on this too long before we’re thrust “Back to the Present,” the title of a poem addressed to “*a franciscan brother’s birthday*” in a kind of playful way, saying that if he were dyslex, he’d be 36. This poem is a kind of imagined profile of what could be as his brother leaps “into the pure/energy of all [his] loves.” Next, there is a short profile of a marriage. This one is not imagined. Instead, it is for two people the poet knows who are celebrating 40 years of marriage. So, sometimes the people are real and sometimes it’s unclear who the ‘you’ or the ‘he’ or the ‘she’ is. We feel like we’re in the real world of the poet also when he writes about doctoring. He quotes a doctor who writes prescriptions that help the speaker to take the pill that helps an old mind. And here we see that the subject of words is being considered again. The words on the prescription are “dizzying.” And in one of my favorite profiles in the whole section, “County Home, 1947,” I think of John O’Donahue’s writing of “the strange beauty of sadness” (*The Invisible Embrace of Beauty*, 16). This poem presents a parallel between an older infirm person in a home. Walls close in and there is a memory of “the knife” that cut and the person is lifted/from [your] mother’s womb.” But in

the county home there's no one to lift the person out, no mother to calm him. How could this stark analogy not inspire us to be more compassionate?

The last poem in the “Profiles” is “To Go to Assisi.” As an Assisi pilgrimage guide, Bodo obviously spent a lot of time there, Assisi having become his own beloved city. This poem’s three sections show a progression. First, there’s the scene of two boys, one in a black suit and tie, carrying a suitcase, both “out of place” as they dream of “far off” Assisi. The speaker notes that the second boy, Pedro, would be ordained before he is. Also, he tells us that Pedro died first too, though he is alive in the speaker’s mind. So, this is how the poem will move: from past to present, present to past, one time as valuable to his development as the other. In part 2, we see new scenes from the past, the first of his walking with a Friar away from college where he had spent four years before being ordained. Part 3 tells the story of what all of this leads up to for the speaker. Mill Road that leads to Assisi, figures prominently. It’s mentioned in the very first stanza and it comes up again in part 3, where we find the speaker with his first teaching assignment. As a young but more mature man now, he walks up Mill Road where he had been taught to go back down that road. When he does so he meets up with himself as a boy in his black suit and tie. An amazing thing happens. They walk in circles and then break the circle and “become one walker.” From then on, the two are not strangers to one another anymore. Amazingly, they “like/what they see.” They become one walker and time becomes one time, present is past, and past is present, emitting a light, a robust fullness that makes them “ready at last” to go to Assisi, where they’ve already been but where they find themselves anew now that they walk as one. This experience of oneness is a high point that offers another phenomenal outcome. Francis walks down the hill “away from Assisi” near the lepers. This is the place where we are invited to merge with an aspect of human development necessary to make us whole,

God's love of the poor and marginalized. This profound love, the boy-and-man-as-one seem to understand deeply, is the most authentic and life-giving "dream of Assisi."

For me, the highlight of "The Beauty of Art's Intrusion" is the final poem in this section, "The Beautiful Christ," in which the pilgrim poet shows obvious reverence for Christ but also reverence for the art by Velazquez that beautifully and even mystically portrays Christ on the cross. Which of course is what this section is about, art that intrudes. We usually think of an intrusion as negative, or disruptive in some way, something unwelcome. But for Bodo, art's intrusion is beautiful. After all, art in the form of music (Gregorian), is part of what lured him into the priesthood. "The Beauty of Christ" in fact ends with the words of the title of this section. In the poem, the poet refers to "holding the unholdable" "beauty of art's intrusion." Velazquez's painting intrudes on and challenges our notion of exactly what this particular representation might be teaching us. Bodo's poem calls us to take another look. Christ has what he calls a "feminine shock/of hair." When you look closely at the picture of the painting, which is included in the book, you can see that that's true. Christ's hair is falling forward in a kind of feminine way. His face does not show fear but "full-on surrender shamed to virginal withdrawal." There's something so beautifully raw about Bodo's way of seeing Christ's body in this painting. Then we learn that as a teenager he held the holy card of this painting in a "protective embrace." He relates to the figure on the cross as he holds the holy card close to his heart, his own head drooping like Christ's. In his memory of that time, he kisses Christ's "violated feet" holding what is unholdable, "the beauty of art's intrusion."

Bodo ends this collection with a section called "Reprise." A reprise is a repeated passage in music. In a sense, he is repeating and expanding familiar themes from earlier poems. We are with the poet in the process of writing. He, for example, wants the writer Jim Harrison to "help

[him] write.” Another poem is called “Night Writing” in which he refers to his “bedside pencil.” Light comes back as a theme, as does the hope of words and the worry that they will not be able to say what he wants them to say. Differences in uses of language is a focus in “Arizona Language Lesson.” Memory and imagination take root, for example, in “Burning Daylight,” a poem about playing cowboys, a memory he mentioned earlier. When he talks about being friends with the shy girl when he was five with whom he’d played Cowboys and Indians. In this poem he imagines he is a John Wayne sidekick “tall in the saddle.” This is a poem that expresses belief in “going/By going,” the journey being more important than the destination. And in another poem, he lifts up Kit Carson, a boyhood hero.

Of course, all of this is about memory too. He remembers being on a train from Gallup to Cincinnati. He recalls going to a hotel. He recalls his small icon of Mary leaning against the bed lamp but what he doesn’t remember is how he felt “alone, overnight in a hotel for the first time.” He then dreams of his high school seminary where he and his classmates “dreamed a future.” He leads us then to the loss of the dorms in that school. It has now turned into a place for the elderly who are “dying into sleepless/dreams.” Recalling memories is always to encounter loss; yet facing loss, can make our current lives more precious.

Canticle ends with “A Boy’s Night,” a poem in which the boy sits back and looks at the stars from “The sandstone hill,” another boyhood memory. The stars led him home where he “slept alone.” Then many years later he notes that he still sleeps alone, and the old stars await his longing gaze “Till the tired child heads home.” What a wonderful line to end on. We’re tempted to join the tired boy as he heads home after his long journey through important themes—words; nature; calling; art; Mary—to name a few. Fr. Murray Bodo as our pilgrim poet can rest assured

that holy words have served him well for his very sayable insights. As for the unsayable, he asks that we rely on faith.

Clearly in the spirit of St. Francis's *Canticle of the Creatures*, Murray Bodo's *Canticle* is delightful and challenging and hope filled. Sometimes we find ourselves in that blurry area "between dreaming and waking." The pilgrim poet takes us to places where we are eager to go and to places we might hesitate to go. Still, we are amply rewarded every step of the way, one lovely canticle at a time.

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