

Close Reading

August 8, 2022

Essays

Murray Bodo's Canticle

By Peggy Rosenthal



Franciscan Fr. Murray Bodo is not slowing down. At age eighty-five, he has just published his eleventh book of poems. (For his previous poetry collection, and all his other writings, see [my earlier post](#).)

Titled *Canticle: The Beauty of Art's Intrusion*, this new volume ranges widely. The first section, called "Radiance," includes poems on love and on light (the light of God, the light that moves through our life, light as gift). The "Canticles" section includes a meditation on gun violence ("if god is everywhere / then we're killing // god every day"). The "In a Time of Covid" section touches on the pandemic and on politics. In the section called "Visitations," poems engage deer, sparrows, and the mystery of language itself. The "Profiles" section includes poems on some friends and on going to Assisi (the home, of course, of St. Francis, where Bodo led pilgrimages for decades). The section

titled with the book's subtitle, "The Beauty of Art's Intrusion," includes poems on St. Francis. And finally, the "Reprise" section is, in part, a reprise of Bodo's own life.

There's clearly too much here for me to cover in this post. So I'll touch on some dimensions of these poems that especially move me. One is the rich, full silence that many of the poems evoke—especially when musing on the mysterious relation of mind to the outside world. Take, for instance, "A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud," which begins:

There is a tree in the place
where the imagination
transforms tree to piñon tree.

There is a rock that rests next
to the tree, a rock made of
petrified wood in my mind.

And all of this is under
a cloud that does not diffuse
in the place of memory.

Or another in Bodo's series of tree poems, "Lecture," on the mystery of silence in relation to speech:

This is wisdom, this spreading
tree behind you as you speak

It is silent-saying, deep-
rooted in life-giving soil...

The tree remains, you will leave
your words peripheral to the wisdom you speak of
which, like the tree, is silence...

And the poem "Dedication," which opens the volume:

What you're still holding
 must be unsayable
 clear as glass, milky as isinglass

layered like love
 like life
 between dreaming and waking

between forgiving
 and giving for

The wordplay in those last two lines makes me smile, as it does in other poems—like “the outpouring / in-pulling God” in “Waking Dreams.”

In previous books, both prose and poetry, Bodo has returned to his childhood in Gallup, New Mexico and his going off to seminary in Cincinnati at the age of fourteen. Now, at eighty-five, he wonderfully conflates his youth with his present life. Take the long poem “To Go to Assisi.” Here, at one point, his young self is walking up the road to St. Francis Seminary, walking toward his current self—

walking down till
 they meet and walk
 in dizzying circles
 until they break
 the circle and they
 become one walker
 of more roads ahead
 having befriended
 each other
 their self in the other
 no longer strangers
 happy that they like

what they see: who
 they were in what
 they became and
 and who they became
 in what they were

What a gift, it seems to me: to happily merge one's current self with one's youth some seventy years ago.

And finally, I can't end without addressing the poem whose closing line is the book's subtitle: "The Beauty of Art's Intrusion." The poem, "The Beautiful Christ," reflects on Velazquez's painting "Christ Crucified," which is reproduced on the facing page (the only visual image in the book). After describing the painting, with its Christ drooping his head and his "almost feminine shock / of hair," the poem moves into Bodo's relation to this painting in his youth:

I prayed my adolescence
 holding this holy card close
 in a protective embrace

 ambiguous ambivalence
 in holding it to my heart
 my head drooping, hair fallen

 kissing the violated feet
 holding the unholdable
 beauty of art's intrusion

Art's intrusion. In a sense these two words don't belong together. "Intrusion" carries a negative connotation—butting in where you're not wanted. Yet in Bodo's vision, art's intrusion into our lives is positive: it is "beauty." So there's a paradox here—one that, taken all together, the poems of this volume ponder.

Peggy Rosenthal has a PhD in English Literature. Her first published book was Words and Values, a close reading of popular language. Since then she has published widely on the spirituality of poetry, in periodicals such as America, The Christian Century, and Image, and in books that can be found [here](#).

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