

London Grip Poetry Review – Murray Bodo

Poetry review – ***CANTICLE***: **Thomas Ovans** is pleasantly surprised by the scope, depth and approachability of **Murray Bodo's** poetry

Canticle

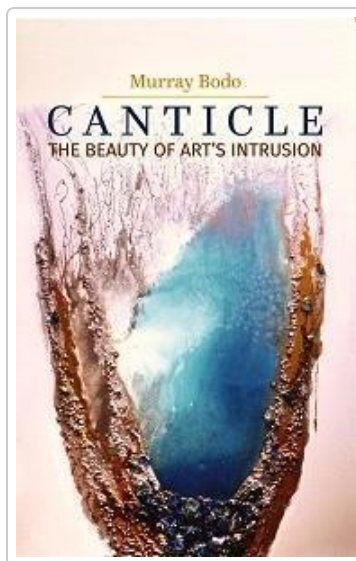
Murray Bodo

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When the London Grip editor passed me this book, I asked myself what I should expect to find in a book of poems entitled *Canticle* and written by a Franciscan friar? On noting that the author, Murray Bodo, has published some half-dozen previous collections it became reasonable to expect that the poems would be skilfully crafted. And indeed that expectation is fulfilled: Bodo's poems are mostly



composed in well-made syllabic verse. But should one assume that his subject matter would largely be meditations – perhaps rather rarified – on spiritual rather than everyday subjects? There might of course be some suitably Franciscan appreciations of the created world; but these would surely be occasional diversions from theological reflections accessible mainly to academics or the highly devout.

What one would probably *not* expect is a down-to-earth four line comment on 1 Corinthians 9 where St Paul likens his own spiritual life to the strivings of an athlete in training. Bodo suggests that this places too much emphasis on physical activity and not enough on quiet observation and contemplation.

How eager to walk and run,
How slow to praise the sunrise.

The body sweats and strengthens,
The soul grows flabby thighs.

Bodo encourages us to look both *at* and *beyond* the mundane; but he usually starts from a place that most of his readers will recognise. How many of us have sat in a lecture or some other presentation and let our minds wander: “Through the windows at your back / I see an ancient oak tree.” But such wanderings need not be aimless or unfocussed. An initial realisation that “This is wisdom, this spreading / tree behind you as you speak” can open out into an enduring insight to take away.

The tree remains, you will leave,
your words peripheral to

the wisdom you speak of
which, like the tree, is silence

between what you say and what
we see and hear the tree say

Even though Bodo is attentive to backgrounds that seem to lie beyond routine experiences he is not indifferent to the human foreground that most of us inhabit. He inhabits it too and understands it – even if he is not so confined by it. Thus he can sympathise with the woman who left her dog in a bar because “you couldn’t carry / her and all the booze/ you needed to stay alive.” He can feel for the couple who moved from the wife’s beloved

little “doll house” and then “drifted apart” in the “big house/ with room to hide/ in distant rooms.”

Bodo also understands the layperson’s religious uncertainties. After the disruptions caused by Covid he identifies with those who may be “Wondering will God still be there // Where we believed God was.” He also knows that some will come to recognize that “We never saw God but only / Believed those who told us they had” – highlighting a need for the faithful to support one another. Thus the people who rang the church bells and kept the buildings ready for re-opening when the risks of Covid had abated were “sort of saying God is there // whether we come or not.”

It is those who betray this human need for cooperation and mutual support who stretch Bodo’s patience. In ‘Tropical Depression’, responding to the divisive messages which have run through recent political debate in the USA, he laments “All week, lies drench social / media”. He declares that dark times will pass but not until

.... half of We
the People dare to ask “What
is it in us that makes us
want to believe the lie ...”

Elsewhere, one of the lies – and by implication the liar – is plainly identified as Bodo speaks of

... America’s White House
congratulating itself
counting the successes of
imaginary ballots.
(‘The Lie’)

In ‘anti-canticle’ he speaks equally bluntly of the implicit and familiar lies about rights and freedoms that are allowed to persist as long as enough of us can be persuaded to talk about something else

how does god hear
on a hot afternoon

when bodies fall in
city streets and schools

while we sit here
by the swimming pool

complaining about
the price of gas?

Death – even natural death – is something that many of us are reluctant to talk about; but Bodo is not afraid to confront his own mortality and the questions it brings. “It’s not so much the fear of death,” he says, “as leaving the way it is with us unfinished, unresolved.” And he surely voices our common regrets and puzzlements when he admits

I’ve not done fully what is mine
to do – which is what death
is – I suppose

(‘Waking Dreams’)

Wry humour can be a good companion when grappling with such thoughts:

Native Peoples say, When Owl
calls your name, you die.

That’s why he tries to avoid
All those sneaky maple owls.

Or if he sees one, he howls
before the old boy names him.
(‘Owl’)

Although Bodo might easily be labelled an “Eastern intellectual” he grew up in (and has very fond memories of) the rural South-West of America and this explains his affinity for birds and animals – and his willingness to converse with them – that is evident in many of the poems. And if there is any suspicion of cultural appropriation in the Owl poem it is offset by the anecdote he shares in ‘Arizona Language Lesson’. Finding himself in a McDonalds in Window Rock, Arizona he gets into conversation with some Navajo teenagers. When they learn that he is a teacher and that “Native American” literature is part of his syllabus they gently explain

You read too much – We’re Indians
Or Navajos, Diné. Not

Native Americans, okay?
Okay. Guess I am out of touch.

But there are no hard feelings and the youths treat him to a burger. “When in Window Rock ...”

Bodo also shares intriguing glimpses of his writing processes. In 'Night Writing' he tells us "Ever since I was a child / I've been falling into the stars" which is of course "a funny feeling because / usually, stars are up and I'm // down here..." When he wakes in the night he has to check that he's still

... down here
flat on my back not caring where

as long as up is up and down
is down, nothing moving but

time and my bedside pencil's
dreamlike calligraphy

As well as being a night time writer he also describes himself as being sometimes a morning poet who must wait to see how "words rearrange themselves ... when waking is close to dreams." But whatever writing methods he uses they clearly yield poetry that is clear, direct and accessible. Some of the poems in *Canticle*, however, are more complex: Bodo sometimes makes wonderful and intricate patterns as narrative and image double back on themselves, mimicking the ways that memories of different times slide in and out of focus. In an autobiographical poem called 'To Go to Assisi' we watch

... a young man walking
up Mill Road to teach
where he was taught to
walk away always back
down the road where
the black-suited boy
was walking up Mill
Road toward himself
walking down till
they meet and walk
in dizzying circles
until they break
the circle and they
become one walker
of more roads ahead

...

And even then the dance and the story are not done but continue for a couple more nimble stanzas.

I have focussed so far on poems I feel justified in commenting upon. But of course, as we might have

expected from the first, *Canticle* contains poems expressing a lifelong Christian faith and describing private religious experience. About such poems I can only say whether or not they convey (to me) the experience the poet asks his reader to believe he experienced. And in fact I can accept that Bodo did indeed hear a woodpecker tapping at a tree at the same time as he himself was telling his rosary beads and that he was taken by the thought that

Bird and I are making
noise that punctuates how

loud our urgencies.
(‘Rosaries’)

I can accept too that the religious life can sometimes involve familiarity and routine. ‘Epiphanies in Ordinary Time’ begins by telling us

Somewhere is nowhere when it’s
just where you usually are
the same pages of prayer
with no new revelations.

Bodo however invites me to believe that even in such undramatic moments

... you suddenly hear
in a baby’s cry what once
you tasted in bread and wine

Then somewhere becomes nowhere
you’ve ever travelled ...

The central poem in the book is the long ‘Canticle of Her Who Dwells Among Us’ which, Bodo tells us in an end note, he has “tried for years to refine and clarify”. Even then the poem can only speak in its own terms; and the best that Bodo can offer as a prose summary is to say it has “something to do with celibacy, with woman, with the Virgin Mary, and ... the feminine face of God.” In the section of this poem that works most powerfully for me the poet is on a sunny beach watching the couples stroll past. He then confides “He no longer has to pretend he’s here alone.” He goes on

They’re walking the beach together. *She’s smiling and the people who pass them going the opposite direction don’t*

even notice he's no longer pretending she's not there.

Here is a priest no longer denying that, in some spiritual sense, he needs – and has – a female companion even though, in a literal sense, he is denied one by reason of his vow of celibacy. In this and other poems included in *Canticle* Bodo is seeking to share profound mysteries of love and faith which I feel are out of my reach. But, since he has shown that he can speak convincingly of familiar human situations, perhaps I can dare to let his poetry draw me at least a little way towards matters that lie beyond my current comfort zone.



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