

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

October 8, 2018

A weekly poetry resource

from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



God's World

O world, I cannot hold thee close enough!
Thy winds, thy wide grey skies!
Thy mists, that roll and rise!
Thy woods, this autumn day, that ache and sag
And all but cry with colour! That gaunt crag
To crush! To lift the lean of that black bluff!
World, World, I cannot get thee close enough!

Long have I known a glory in it all,
But never knew I this;
Here such a passion is
As stretcheth me apart,—Lord, I do fear
Thou'st made the world too beautiful this year;
My soul is all but out of me,—let fall
No burning leaf; prithee, let no bird call.

Edna St. Vincent Millay¹

☞ Reflections

Over the next several months, I am co-teaching a course on the Hebrew Bible; while clergy will provide summary, overview, and theological and historical context of assigned readings, my role is to assist in a more imaginative dive into sacred writing with a shared hope of inspiring responses to scripture that are receptive to ambiguity, contradiction and mystery. Though I admit I am a bit daunted by our syllabus, I feel privileged to be among such interested readers and scholars as we are led through the Bible's narrative arc, its geography and chronology, its characters and its dramas.

Our first session covered Genesis 1 and 2, the beginning of the beginning. Of course, there are literally thousands of poems, artworks, and songs that might illuminate the story of the creation of the world, but I found myself drawn to this particular sonnet by Edna St. Vincent Millay. (Of note, I included Emily Dickinson's "To make a prairie," Marianne Moore's "He Made 'This Screen,'" James Weldon Johnson's "The Creation" and two more contemporary poems—"Prayer for a Birthday" by Mark Wunderlich and "Autobiography of Eve" by Ansel Elkins—for this presentation, poems I hope to discuss in future editions of *Wellspring*.) I have made a conscious choice to subvert (for now) whatever expectation there might be to include those poets more readily associated with religious poetry—Donne, Herbert, Hopkins, Milton, for example. The hope for my work this year is to curate a range of poems that respond to scripture in ways perhaps less obvious though undoubtedly rooted in and inspired by the Bible as a foundational text.

¹ "God's World" by Edna St. Vincent Millay from *Renascence and Other Poems*. Public Domain.

Whenever I teach formal poetry, I am teaching as much about shape as I am about form—that physical structure that *holds* a poem, the word we use to talk about the length of the lines, rhythm, rhyme and repetition. That is, the shape of a poem on the page. Many of you may know the work of the poet Jack Gilbert and his essay titled “Craft of the Invisible”; it had a profound influence on me, particularly his way of insisting that form is the vehicle that carries the heart of a poem and his use of the Oxford English Dictionary’s 62nd definition for form: “the hole in which the rabbit sits.”

Millay’s poem is a formal one—a sonnet²—and to put it plainly (and perhaps in oversimplified language), the function of form is that it offers us the illusion that a subject is containable. It arranges what is otherwise unwieldy; it sedates, so to speak, what is untamable, insurmountable, inaccessible, vast. It is the poet’s attempt to understand what transcends and surpasses us. It could very well be that there is nothing so vast as God’s world; representatively, Millay’s fervor is bound within the sonnet’s confines, her rapture muted by the inevitable failings of language itself, the impossibility of ever “get[ting] thee close enough!”

Millay’s poem might also be considered an ecstatic one. The Greek word *ekstasis* translates literally as “standing elsewhere,” as in, “to be beside oneself” and I am moved by the interesting tonal shifts in the poem, particularly from one stanza to the next—the first exclamatory and indeed ecstatic, the second more resigned, even sorrowful, “the world too beautiful this year.” The poet’s use of white space between stanzas strikes me as a poignant silence, a pause in the threshold, and a subtle turn from ecstasy to agony. Toeing the fine line between pleasure and pain, her passion for the beauty of the natural world is inextricable from the suffering such passion invokes and nearly unbearably so, “as stretcheth me apart.”

In considering this poem as part of a larger presentation on the first chapters of the Hebrew Bible, I find Millay’s poem a *response to Creation* more than an *illustration of Genesis*, an interesting distinction to consider as the course continues and as other works are illuminated by this scriptural lens. In this case, the response consists of an ambiguous and restless marriage between sorrow and bliss, awe and resignation, the human desire to contain what is of course far beyond human language. It is in that tension where my interest lies: it is the nature of both theology and of poetry to explore the capacity (albeit the inadequacy) of our imagination and our language to convey the wonders of God.

☞ About the poet

Edna St. Vincent Millay (1892–1950) was the third woman to win the Pulitzer Prize in poetry. Known for her feminist activism, she was also widely regarded as a master of the sonnet.



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² This sonnet is rare in its use of two seven-line stanzas rather than the familiar Italian or Petrarchan sonnet (consisting of eight lines, then six) and the English or Shakespearean sonnet (constructed in three four-line stanzas before a final couplet.)