

Modern Age

A CONSERVATIVE REVIEW

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Atlas, Christ, and Poets' Subjects

James Matthew Wilson

No One Leaves the World Unhurt

By John Foy

(Autumn House Press, 2021)

Subjects in Poetry

By Daniel Brown

(Louisiana State University Press, 2021)

Among the more distinguished book lists in an age largely marked by precipitous cultural decline is that of the *New Criterion's* annual poetry prize. Now into its third decade, the series has published books by such distinguished writers as Deborah Warren, Adam Kirsch, Bill Coyle, and Moria Egan. Most of its winners have demonstrated that serious work of poetic craft rooted in the English and Western literary traditions continues despite a number of headwinds, not least of which is the capture of the arts by, alternately, a reveling in literature's internal potential for unintelligibility and a fixation on the extrinsic fashions of identity politics.

The authors of the two books under consideration here, John Foy and Daniel Brown, won the *New Criterion* prize in 2016 and 2008 respectively. Foy, a financial writer in Manhattan, has now published three collections of poems, with the latest, *No One Leaves the World Unhurt*, being the winner of the Donald Justice prize in poetry. Brown, a former music scholar, has authored two collections of poems, an important study of Bach, and now *Subjects in Poetry*, his first

extended foray into literary criticism.

In journalism, it is the gravest of errors to bury the lede; what matters most in a news story must perch right at the crown of the column. Most good collections of poems do the opposite, as is the case with Foy's new book. The poet leaves it to the reader to discover what principles drive his work.

In the book's later pages appears one of Foy's most impressive poems on the unpromising subject matter of two boys who have hauled a television set "out of a neighbor's garbage pile" and carried it away to their fort, which "was a refrigerator box." They treasure it but also bash "the screen in with a baseball bat." They protect it with a similarly scavenged iron poker and dissect it in a sense of awe akin to Aeneas descending into the underworld:

Each component was invested with
the mystery of those things we didn't know,
but each held out an incremental hope
that we might learn, one day, just what it was.

We divvied up the ripped-out circuit boards
and figured other boys would covet them.

All Foy's books include traces of meter and rhyme, but in *No One Leaves the World Unhurt* proper measure predominates, as in this fairly steady blank verse. The narrative provides an instance of a naïve encounter with the strange and compelling depth of the world, as well as the beginning of disenchantment with that world. The television seems precious and only in retrospect is discovered for mere junk; the envious enemies they anticipate never come. The parts cease to be treasure and at last appear as just so many broken parts. The rest of the volume is an exploration of a world that still seems primed for adventure, magic, and strangeness but against whose sundry disappointments we steel ourselves with irony and mirth.

Another poem in blank verse defines the alternatives such a vision of life proposes to us. "Cross and sphere" contrasts the central crucifix hanging "Deep inside St. Patrick's" Cathedral, in New York City, with the statue of Atlas, standing outside, just across 5th Avenue, in Rockefeller Center. The "Son of Man above the throng" gives us a vision of the world that sorrows before sin but holds out hope of redemption, where all the mystery of youth will be confirmed as final reality. In contrast, Atlas looks "like Mussolini just a tad," and represents modern New York's obsession with power and avarice that has no end but rather becomes an endless agon of futility. Atlas is Atlas but also Sisyphus, whose labors have no ceasing.

Foy's sympathy is with the Christ. As in his previous books, this one is haunted by the images of Catholicism and features certain poems that, at the least, stand on the brink of awe before Christ's suffering. But "Cross and Sphere" refers to both Atlas and Christ having their "brands." The world we live in is that of Atlas, where the weight and greed of power crushes everything and turns it toward commercial use.

So we gather in "cup," the poem from

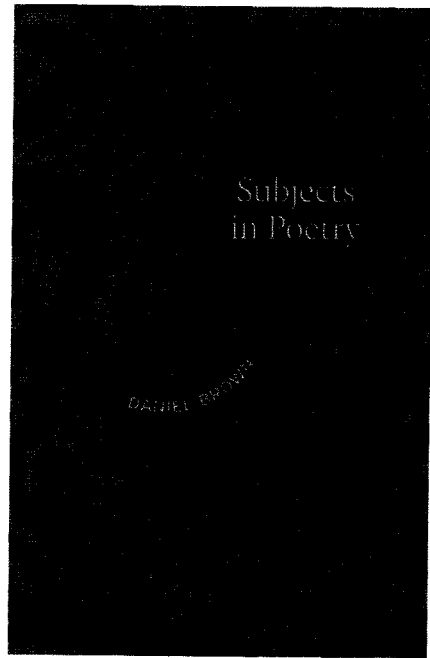
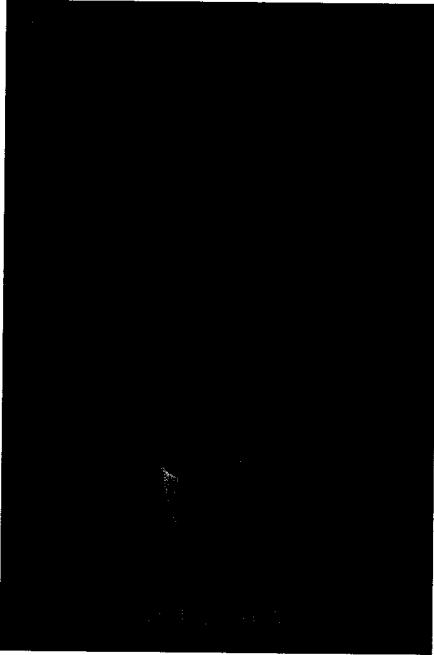
whose text the book's title comes. There, Foy writes, "I don't believe or disbelieve but think / of how we're given to barbarities." His mind settles on the figure of Christ and concludes,

The thing is, no one leaves the world unhurt.
I like to think of him, a stick in hand,
scrawling words or something in the dirt
that people might or might not understand
who come to hear what truth he has to tell
but bring no cup of water from the well.

The crowds came to hear the Messiah and to stare in wonder at his strange novelty, but many of them then went home untransformed. Most of Foy's poems explore what it is like to be on the way home, intrigued by mystery but disappointed. The results are often darkly comic, as in "The Payment Plan," where suffering is measured like the deductible for a healthcare plan, or "Report Card," where the author says he "got a C for taking care / of animals." When his dog dies, he "took her body to the car / and got an A for bitterness." The "Headless Barbie Commission" describes his own children dissecting the metaphysical innards of toy dolls, which promise so much and contain so little: "they set about their task, and Dad is glad. / They pull the heads off. (Ken is sad.)"

Some of Foy's poems take language itself for subject and play with the surprise and disappointments that words promise, whether in the titles of self-help books or in the letters of individual words themselves. His style is often deliberately stiff, adhering to rhyme and meter in a way that seems made of cardboard, as if the sonorous effects of verse also have to be punctured in the end, acknowledged as one more plastic enchantment to be decapitated.

In addition to poems on rock music and boxer shorts, a long sonnet sequence on the author's awkward visit with his wife to New York's "Museum of Sex," and still other



poems that capture the austere curiosity and scorn of contemporary New York life, one of Foy's cleverest is a long memoir of those wasted nights of youth spent watching *The Partridge Family* on TV. Entranced though he once was, he now confesses,

I'd rather drink a beaker full of Fleet
and go to get my colonoscopy
than be reminded of the matching vests,
the tambourine, and Danny's red guitar,
and how, back then, I thought it fit and meet
that such as these should sing of happiness.

Magic turns to junk and kitsch; happiness turns out to be the hawked wares of bad television; wisdom the mere pretense of middle-age druggies. Yet Foy's book is not a sad one. Staring at the futility of Atlas, you can still feel the silent interior of the cathedral at your back summoning you to seriousness.

I noticed that the cover design of Daniel Brown's *Subjects in Poetry* is very similar to my old LSU Press reprint of one of the true classics of American literary criticism, John Crowe Ransom's *The World's Body*. That is appropriate because Brown's book signals the return of a literary criticism at once humane and learned, unpretentious and most certainly unspecialized, even as it has a great deal to teach us about the riches of poetry.

Brown's subject is just what his title proposes: the things poets have to say in their poetry. A subject is what you write about, not in the sense of a theme but in the sense of the explicit thing discussed. The first part of the book is a wide if idiosyncratic survey of the different subjects some poets have written about, whether by way of expression, evocation, or addressing: that is, what feeling they would convey, what places and objects they would have us encounter, or those statements they would make to a fictive or real

interlocutor. Brown's tour of some 33 poems is a delight, his familiar style an invitation to think about what poems say and how they say it. The pleasure remains though Brown's argument frequently gets lost in interesting weeds.

Only in the middle of the book do we learn the argument behind such study. Brown rightly observes that most modern and contemporary poetry is about nothing. It has no subject. What is sometimes called the "elliptical" style of much poetry is intended to convey the subjective movements of a mind scattered and disoriented, and it takes no interest in actually saying something coherent about anything that matters.

Samuel Beckett famously claimed that modern art and literature were the result of the "breakdown of the object": we no longer believe the mind can actually attain to reality and truth, to the object, and so the only thing left for literature to do is report the self-enclosed meanderings of a mind speaking to itself. Subjects disappear; subjectivity alone remains. On Brown's account, and I think he is correct, a great number of modern poets—among them the most prominent—have elected simply to repeat Beckett's exercise forever and ever. But whereas Beckett's work is known for its ingenious if absurd scenarios, its autistic anti-heroes whose bizarre rituals are a dark pleasure to witness, much of contemporary poetry simply flits from discontinuity to discontinuity, signifying nothing save for the supposed incoherence and disunity of consciousness found in the "postmodern" self.

Brown's volume is a plea to poets to write about something, to gain in coherence, steadiness, distinctiveness, and, in Robert Frost's choice expression, "variety," so that poetry may once again be a means of expressing and discovering reality. To have a subject is to leave the bare landscape of a Beckett play or the closed, self-obsessed, dark room

of so much modern thought since the age of Descartes.

In this Brown is not alone. I made a kindred argument in my book *The Fortunes of Poetry in an Age of Unmaking*. The best, briefest, and most authoritative discussion of the question may be found in the epic poet and polymath Frederick Turner's essay "Lyric and the Content of Poetry." There Turner argues that the study of the self proper to lyric poetry takes for granted that one actually has a formed self, a soul, worthy of exploration, but one can only have such a self if it has been stocked with a rich memory and formed with intellectual and moral character. All these things most contemporary poets lack. Turner proposes, therefore, that poets ought to learn to write about something, that they ought to take the historical, narrative, and didactic modes of poetry as the starting point of their own work, so that it is the grand world that forms the self, rather than the self in empty isolation, that becomes poetry's foundational subject.

Brown proposes much the same, with the added quality that his book serves as an explanation for why subjects are important to poetry and also as a guide for the practicing poet to put subject matter closer to the center of the vocation. Brown notes, rightly, that most poets are formed by the style of past masters. His choicest example is that of Philip Larkin, whose first book consists of poems that are mere imitations of W.B. Yeats and W.H. Auden. But then Larkin discovered his own natural subject matter in the plain, disappointing, secular, but pining life of postwar Britain. Suddenly, all that he had learned from Yeats and Auden was transmuted into an original voice—indeed, one of the most dearly loved poetic voices of modern England. What we have to say changes how we say it.

Brown's strongest arguments for taking the subject of poetry seriously are in his

demonstration that meaningful subject matter can humanize and moralize the poem. In taking our shared world for subject, the poet can reveal the fullness of the human spirit rather than, say, the random firings of synapses in the mind at thought; and, further, as the ancients well knew, to reflect on the world at large and human action within it is the chief source of literature's invaluable moral depth. We come to literature to learn what it means to be human, and poetry without a subject, as Brown suggests, is a very poor teacher in this regard.

In our day, the elliptical poetry that nobody understands because there is nothing about it to understand predominates, but Brown would have done well to have considered an opposite present tendency that has done much to impoverish our literature. In discussing the "moral dimension" of poetic subjects, Brown makes passing reference to the "poetry of difference" by which he means "a poetry giving voice to those who are societally disadvantaged, often grievously, sometimes even fatally, by their gender, race, faith, nationality, ethnicity, sexuality, or disability." One does not have to look very far to see that this kind of poetry has been in the ascendant for a very long time and, in the pages of such a prominent magazine as *Poetry*, now rules the roost. It generally couples the negative quality of being inco-

herent with the equally negative quality of being a hectoring moral plea for one mode of deviance or another. In this case, fashionable but debased cultural politics wholly substitutes for poetic achievement. Strings of unintelligible phonemes would be bliss by comparison.

Brown's study in subjects is not without its weaknesses, including the misnaming of Edwin Arlington Robinson as "Edward," and some ingenuous claims about the forms of narration in Robert Frost and the use of rhyme in Yeats. On the whole, however, this volume marks the return of a literary criticism worth reading by poets and the lay reader. It instances a genuine humanism attentive to our need for wonder, discovery, finely wrought beauty, and the mysteries of the transcendent. In contrast with the work of an older generation of humanist critics, Ransom among them, Brown's style avoids the allure of technical jargon and is consistently winsome, familiar, and humble. Literary criticism at its best should make us want to return to the great works it studies, even as we also wish to linger with the words of the critic as a joy in their own right. At this, Brown has succeeded.

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