

view of the state of the modern world: “We never needed this journey.” We do, however, need this book. Get it and read it.

— Carol Niederlander

Marjorie Maddox. *Weeknights at the Cathedral*. WordTech, 2006.

Religious poetry in the last century has posed a particular difficulty for its authors and its potential readers, but the reason for that difficulty has often been misunderstood. Typically, critics have argued that in an “increasingly secular” age, the worldview and even the language intrinsic to religious poetry can no longer account for modern experience. Outside of a fairly narrow circle of thinkers belatedly beholden to what we might call a “Victorian” vision of history, however, most people can see that our world is becoming more religious, not less so; “secularization,” insofar as it can be said to exist, represents a particularly western diffusion of the religious rather than its disappearance.

The real source of difficulty arises from the understanding of literature that we have inherited from the early romantics. They saw literature as already endowed with a certain aureole of the revealed, the inspired, and the numinous—one that presents itself as either an alternative or semi-autonomous counterpart to Christianity. It is a secular scripture not because it is un-religious, but because its cultural position is modeled on the form (rather than the content) of the Christian understanding of scripture and prophecy. T.S. Eliot mused that devotional poetry seems to ignore the rest of human experience, but he might just as well have said that it seems to violate devotion to the idol of art by primarily expressing devotion to God. Art, too, can be a jealous god, and critics are its punitive swarms of locusts. It has, in a fashion, become more jealous in the last few, “postmodern,” decades. During this time, the modernist use of fragmentation, which was intended to appropriate for the concrete symbol the potency of traditional sacramental signs in the Catholic Mass, has come to be used as a means of resisting signification, undermining at last the romantic understanding of the literary

as a parallel form of religion.

Marjorie Maddox grapples with this problem in this, her second full length collection. That she frequently fails to conquer it makes her work all the more interesting and instructive. The book is divided into three sections, the first of which flirts with the common contemporary practice that David Yezzi has diagnosed as “unrealist” verse. In poems with incongruous titles like “God and Hide-and-Go-Seek” and “God Trick-or-Treating,” Maddox juxtaposes the unrepresentable personhood of God with the furniture of modern life by setting him plop in the middle of domestic and familiar scenes *as if* he were natural to them. In “Trick-or-Treating,” for instance, she begins,

You dressed like a clown and surprised us all,
Wobbling in your size-twelve shoes, across front lawns
Toward Seventh Street and back.

At least two theological principles recommend this poetic method. The Christian theorization of God’s infinite transcendence and intimate omnipresence, wherein God is at once absolutely familiar and absolutely foreign, and also the theory of the divine “economy,” where revelation is given in partial, often anthropomorphic, language to make it suitable for the human intellect, both suggest that just such absurd juxtapositions are necessary. Indeed, Maddox’s imagery is absurd and silly precisely to make us conscious of this venerable necessity. The Incarnation of Christ gets described in language that itself juxtaposes naturalist and theological lexicons, one presumes, in order to awaken us to its spiritual mystery:

Once, he stretched skin over spirit
like a rubber glove,
aligning trinity with bone,
twining through veins,
till deity square-knotted flesh.

Like Wallace Stevens before her, Maddox’s play with juxtaposed imagery tackles matters of great seriousness with the unserious touch of the comedian. Yezzi’s “unrealists” (he targets Dean

Young, for instance) pile incongruous image upon image precisely to undermine the possibility of taking any claim to the meaningfulness of human experience seriously; they fragment to subvert everything—including their own act of subversion. When Maddox asks “How to Fit God into a Poem,” she clearly takes the question as a real one; God’s sur-reality is what makes the question significant and absurd in the first place. If Maddox’s “God” poems generate substantial theological interest, they seem less successful as poems. Her efforts to put “God in the Suburbs” do not succeed because his presence there remains too much one of absurdist juxtaposition; one is left wondering if Christian faith is actually possible in the suburbs, or just a funny prospect.

John Donne’s epigraph at the start of the book enjoins us to “doubt wisely; in strange way / To stand inquiring right is not to stray.” But the poems in the book’s first section do not contend with doubt at all. This is a welcome departure from the legion of cliché, lesser poems in imitation of Philip Larkin’s “Church Going.” That said, it is not clear that the blithe and absurdist “apophatic” theology of Maddox’s poems present the experience of faith in a way that shows it as part of the same life of the experience of doubt or, more importantly, the experience of suburban American life. They remain “devotional” poems as Eliot understood the term: assertive of faith without really connecting it to the rest of human experience.

The more varied lyrics of the book’s second section do make this connection more perspicuously, at times even consciously harmonizing those semi-autonomous demands of the literary and the religious. “Comma,” which begins with an epigraph from the Nicene creed (“of all that is, seen and unseen”) traces the act of poetic interpretation back to its historical origin in scriptural exegesis and the definition of dogma:

what we see and don’t
split by the simple curve
of cursive, a pencil slip
or determined niche
on paper. God

Almighty,
we miss epiphany
when we step
our voice too quickly
over the light lines
punctuating the Light
of all that is,
visible and invisible,
our hurried eyes
forgetting to read
what so powerfully pauses
our lives between
the meanings.

In so brief a lyric meditation, we find God and grammar fused. “God in the Suburbs” seemed to force the divine into human experience by pious will and a bit of cleverness. “Comma,” on the other hand, suggests that common experience where the intellect, awakened to the contemplation of some mundane detail, ascends by its own power to thoughts of what put that detail into being, and made it meaningful, in the first place.

Maddox’s poetry, her own claims notwithstanding, does not usually remind one of the work of Donne, Herbert, or the other great metaphysical poets of Christian meditation. But this poem and a handful of others do harken of these great forebears. Their acts of juxtaposition, what Johnson called “violent yoking,” were rhetorical strategies that emerged logically out of lives of prayer in close contact with Christian revelation. Where Maddox flirts with “unrealist” juxtapositions, they seem conceptual rather than rhetorical, and to that degree fall flat. But when her poems’ rhetoric grounds itself on real experience, they achieve an admirable power. This is nowhere so obvious than in a handful of her otherwise superfluous “saints” poems that compose the final section of the book. In “Catherine of Alexandria,” she simply recounts Catherine’s grizzly story of martyrdom, circling about the narrative with circular tropes (“In the cycle of birth, the wheel of a halo / encircled her head ...”). Such rhetoric, as opposed to conceptual cuteness, arises out of the questions of life and death that have historically been the

main subject of poetry. Devotional poetry professes belief by ignoring these questions. Religious poetry dramatizes their centrality and answers them. In a few instances, Maddox reveals herself as the rare contemporary who can write the latter kind of poetry.

—James Matthew Wilson

A Thief of Strings. Donald Revell. Alice James, 2006.

If he were not already a professor of English, Donald Revell might be a priest whose acolytes would never weary of his sermons—because they wouldn't be sermons, but crowns of sonnets he'd dedicate to fellow clergymen like Robert Creeley. Revell's holy texts would be composed by scholars and philosophers like Jane Ellen Harrison and Johann Goethe, while his choir may be the children who have gathered "...to sing to heal/The white storks ailing in the steeples."

One might argue that Revell's life-work is to make manifest the Blakean aim to rouse the divine and in hopes of reciprocity, be reawakened by it. That said, Revell's latest collection *A Thief of Strings* does more than simply call forth those divinities and literary touchstones—it appears to be composed in the very presence of them. How else explain the ease with which Revell oscillates between his own lyric and Thoreau (in quotations):

I am not on a train.
I am out of the world
Where the children must go far to school...

"...O I should rather hear that America's first born were all slain than that his little fingers and toes should feel cold while I am warm..."

I am not on a train.
I am in Eden
Without a river to my name...

Easternmost archangel, untune my words and teach me tanager.