

TRACES OF THE FUGITIVE GODS

By **James Matthew Wilson***The God of This World to His Prophet: poems*By **Bill Coyle**

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*The Optimist*By **Joshua Mehigan**

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IN BILL COYLE'S 'FALLEN', THE NARRATOR and, presumably, his wife stroll the main street of their city, which crabapple blossoms have littered "like confetti." This "simile quickens" launching the "ill at ease" meditations governing the rest of the poem:

... we feel ill at ease

in this belated beauty
since, if it is confetti,

it means that we have missed
some great thing seen by most: [...]

Belatedness besets this poem, and Coyle's first collection as a whole. The narrator asks, "If there was a celebration, / what was the occasion"? His query receives only further questions in response:

We've lived here all our lives,

but if we are no longer
at home here, should we linger?

Where can we turn, and to whom,
if this is not our home?

Lyrics of the dramatic moment just missed, capturing tableaux of aftermath that refuse to reveal their significant "before" run rampant through contemporary poetry. Paul Muldoon's work has been largely constructed on such quasi-cinematic

obliquity. But whereas Muldoon has become the famous postmodern trickster of poetry, depicting after-images of a reality that can never be experienced at first hand, Coyle's interrogation is intended more seriously. From the first, title poem onward, Coyle attempts to represent in verse what has been revealed by the divine. This is difficult because, as in 'Fallen,' the poet has lived his whole life in a world, though saturated with the confetti of Christianity, from which the moment of revelation seems to have passed, and therefore to haunt unverifiably his peripheral vision. Coyle's sense of belatedness may seem appropriate for a marginal variety of modern experience, just as religious poetry has been traditionally relegated to the devotional, set outside the mainstream and more properly "aesthetic" concerns of poetry. It pierces, however, to the heart of modern literary history. The conventions of romanticism privileged poetry as a kind of hieratic speech, its language promising a revelation both of the poet's genius and of truths that lay behind and beyond what P.B. Shelley called the "painted veil," the natural objects of this world. Poetic language signified the transcendental perfection that made our world meaningful. The tired diction of late Victorian verse can be chalked up to the ossifying of this hyper-signifying language into convention and cliché.

The modernist "revolution" in art did not overturn this arguably neo-Platonic vision, but sought to refresh it. Poetic language had become so clogged with conventions that modernists wanted to use a language sufficiently vatic to retain its signifying power. Hence the prevalence in much modernist art of the symbol, imposing itself upon, and in spite of, literal fact. While most modernist artists were not Christians, they anxiously remade art into a zone where a Christian Platonist vision of universal truths incarnated in the beautiful could persist in a world increasingly given over to industrial modernity.

As Wyatt Prunty argues in his important study, *Fallen from the Symbolized World: Precedents for the New Formalism* (1990), the decline of modernism after the disillusionments of World War II rendered symbol and allegory suspect. They required a belief in a transcendent order beyond "normal" human experience. Post-War poets could neither affirm nor assume such an order, and so they fell back, from the claims of equivalence represented best by metaphor, upon tentative "simile-like tropes." The exploratory, noncommittal language of simile allowed poets freely to make associations between disparate objects in the world, without belief in some transcendent and unchanging truth. Prunty observes that the mainstream of poetry, whether in free or formal verse, has lingered in this convention ever since.

To be belated, as Coyle's poem confesses, means not only living in the postlapsarian world of human history but finding that world apparently grown too dangerous for belief, too incredulous for revelation or metaphor. The challenge of this condition for Coyle appears especially great because of his commitment to formal verse and his acceptance of most of the assumptions of contemporary

“post-symbolist” poetry. Contemporary formal verse, while renewing meter and rhyme, tends to exclude the confident neo-Platonism of the romantics and the vatic symbolism of the modernists. Coyle’s poetry begins in the empirical, tentative, simile-laden world of the well made lyric, but shows that world to be richer and more fraught with the symbols and allegory of Christian Platonism than theories of modern secularization or the cautious skepticism of most contemporary poetry would admit. The title poem, written, like ‘Fallen’, in tense trimeter couplets, sets out this ambition in literally prophetic terms. The “God of this world,” a variation on a traditional epithet for Satan, commands his prophet both to decry the decadence of modern life and encourage further decadence. In the darkest times, the vision of depravation no longer incites one to repentance but encourages a continued decline into despair:

Go to the prosperous city,
for I have taken pity

on its inhabitants,
who drink and feast and dance

all night in lighted halls
yet know their bacchanals

lead nowhere in the end.

Perhaps the characterization of—presumably—western modernity as “prosperous” over-simplifies the discontinuities of domestic consumer society kept afloat by devastating cabinet wars abroad. Perhaps “bacchanals,” while capturing the continuity between modern consumption and the decadence of pagan Rome, misses the way in which that consumption reflects an exasperating dialectic between “boredom” as the normative modern condition and myriad forms of “intense” hedonism as its desperate reprieve. Nonetheless, the lines have a power reminiscent of the early W.B. Yeats, suggesting, much as he did, that recognition of the tragic condition of human life leads only to further tragedy:

Tell all my children tired
of happiness desired

and never had that there
is solace in despair.

Say there is consolation
in ruins and ruination

beneath a harvest moon
that is itself a ruin [...]

The moon as a symbol of historical endurance within ruin comes directly from Yeats. Coyle's poetry does not retreat from the post-symbolist conventions he has inherited, in hopes of regaining the intense but untenable conventions of a Platonic, almost mystical, modernism. It aims to demonstrate rather that a poetry deliberately tentative and empirical may, despite itself, find the world significant. The "revealable" phenomena of human experience naturally signal both the possibility of a transcendent and intelligible order informing the world as well as anguish at its failure to reveal itself more certainly. "Kolmården Zoo" mediates between revelation and the revealable. Hearing a falcon trainer explain to some children that the falcon's feasting on small rodents "seems cruel, is really good," the speaker recoils at this acceptance of a natural order cut off from the Platonic ideal of The Good:

. . . granted, nothing is more natural
than death incarnate falling from the sky;
and granted, it is better some should die,
however agonizingly, than all.

Still, to teach children this is how things go
is one thing, to insist that it is good
is something else—almost to make a god
of this unsatisfactory status quo [...]

'The Magic Circle' experiments in drawing the transcendent and the natural into one continuous order. It depicts each of the four seasons in sonnets familiar, domestic, and empirical, which acknowledge meaningfulness in the experiences they record. 'Autumn' describes a mysterious woman appearing in the speaker's back yard. She may be Proserpine, he suggests, though "Mrs. Grandison maintains, / [she is] some nut escaped from the state hospital." 'Winter' confronts the (philosophical) materialism and incredulity that usually characterize the modern worldview with a nostalgically anti-modern complaint:

One of the saddest
developments I've witnessed in my time
has been astrology's decline from science
to fortune telling of the basest sort,
its long eclipse by disciplines that measure
not meaning, now, but distance, size and mass . . .
As if mere matter mattered in itself.

A rearguard defense of astrology may be easy to dismiss, but Coyle continues, in ‘Spring,’ to harmonize the seasons and the hibernation of bears with the meaning that matters, the myths and revelations that make sense of experience: “Proserpine / returns as well, and Christ. And may not I?”

The less successful “Remote” reminds us that it is still possible to read the world in terms of revelation, that everyday life remains saturated with such readings. The speaker of the poem falls asleep after listening to a late-night televangelist, whose summary of an episode from Isaiah kindles a dream in which the speaker finds a television remote control that controls nature, but which cannot bring back his absent wife. This is the terrain of contemporary religious experience: a curious compound for which “televangelist” is the perfect portmanteau. The Gospel continues, but with its own figurative language of a pastoral society modified, at times replaced, by our contemporary tropes of technology and consumption. My reservation about this poem lies in the way it cedes too much to that technological modernity, rendering the potent allegory of dream and the wisdom of Ecclesiastes (“*Vanity of vanities / I heard the television say*”) in a form as easily digestible in an asinine Hollywood comedy as in a lyric poem.

The collection as a whole displays a related unevenness. Powerful meditative lyrics like ‘Godhood’ (one of Coyle’s several impressive translations from the Swedish), and haunting allegories, like one speaker’s encounter with a vision of his soul on a rainy autumn night in ‘Anima,’ testify to Coyle’s importance as a poet. Some of his epigrammatic poems, particularly ‘Post-Colonial Studies’ and ‘Episodes,’ on the other hand, examine the obscurities of contemporary academic culture, and the prominence of the conventional plots of Hollywood in shaping our current ways of perceiving narrative in experience; but they do so without becoming interesting poems. Such failures are all but inevitable in a first collection. Coyle has attempted to re-invent religious poetry in a “postmodern” context in which many readers’ suspicion of Christianity blinds them to its metaphorical saturation of their everyday experience. Coyle’s book may be fashioned of the same spit and mud that cured the blind man.

Joshua Mehigan’s first collection is more uniformly successful than Coyle’s, lingering more willingly in earthly sorrow and longing. The exquisite epigram that accompanies the book’s dedication foreshadows the kinds of experience the rest of it will capture:

His voice broke when he spoke the magic word.
The rag tossed up did not become a bird.

Gifted in the impersonal narrative lyric mode that has served Edgar Bowers and Timothy Steele so well, Mehigan captures those often painful moments of solitude briefly interrupted—sometimes to expose a still deeper loneliness, sometimes an

unthinking cruelty. His characters either await some meaningful transformation or are in need of one if their actions are to become intelligible and, to that extent, bearable. They wait for a Messiah's miracle, but settle for, at best, a magician's trick. 'The Umbrella Man' demonstrates this first kind of narrative, with the salesman eager for the consolation of recognition by a customer:

... he seeks the one he knows will come:
one always just about to turn the corner,
blushing, and misty-faced, and misty-haired,
skirting the storefronts, beautifully bereft,
who has left home this morning unprepared.

'Two New Fish' details a boy with fish in a "knotted plastic bag he tossed / and caught in front of him the whole way home." The initially comic helplessness of the fish in their bag turns dark when we see the effects of the boy's innocence when apart from the codes of parental authority:

And when
within these limits neither fish had died,
the boy put down the bag and went inside.

This mundane violence complements Mehigan's sharp handling of the almost unbearable case of 'A Questionable Mother,'

The camera crews were gone home for the evening,
an infant dead, but then again, as always,
the white globes fading on above the entrance.
The estranged boyfriend stayed with family, resting.
The suspect's parents clasped hands in the foyer.
Their daughter was once more a daughter only,
yet, blood or no, unsound or no, no daughter.

As Mehigan depicts the police station where the mother is detained, we see it as an institution dedicated to the uncovering of how crimes occur: "Life's fell astonishments" are as familiar as the "cracked, hard leather chairs" of the station and are simply objects to be solved. A space opens up in the poem, however, as the mother becomes more completely a question mark. The characters in the poem and the reader alike want to know why this infant is dead, why the mother has done—*if anything*—what she has done. They want to comprehend not the material evidence, but the meaning that continues to escape them.

The search for meaning joins with the longing for love in 'In the Home of My Sitter,' one of the few poems written in the first person. A sonnet sequence

that cleverly divides the final octave and sestet into two lyric tableaux, the poem depicts “Mrs. Duane Krauss” and her fusty and sterile German–American family, which has all the outward forms of a normal domestic sphere but lacks the emotional distance which would allow the child speaker to be “at home.” After a series of brilliantly detailed images, it concludes:

Mother, my young, my beautiful rescuer!—
so late, so long, I might be waiting still,
my pure heart wondering always where you were,
if not for those four strangers on their hill,
who, loath to form a fair impression of me,
simply did not, as you must always, love me.

Like Coyle, Mehigan writes effective sonnets, many of which capture the interstices of longing and disappointment, hope and fact. ‘Last Moments of Simeon Stylites’ suggests, however, that Mehigan’s particular skill lies in capturing those moments where the rag refuses to become a bird. To the ancient desert father, he writes:

You preached no compromise. Yet now you die.
Your spoiled life joins all lives, one frozen star
more in the vain swarm—holiest by far,
yet never more than forty cubits high.

Much like Baudelaire before him, Mehigan excels at depicting the “vain swarms” of human experience. It seems appropriate that much of Coyle’s best work is in shorter balladic stanzas, which capture the vatic quality of plainsong and chant. In contrast, Mehigan is at his best when writing in iambic pentameter. His native form seems to be blank verse, though most of the poems in *The Optimist* are so subtly or irregularly rhymed that they appear to be blank on a first reading. ‘Promenade’ offers a particularly rich example; the poem is in heroic couplets, but frequently conceals this through enjambment which extends across several lines. ‘Merrily,’ the volume’s concluding poem, rhymes irregularly, but partially conceals it through the frequent interruption of questions:

Why those? And why
these flexed roots? Why that oak’s failed rendering
of coupled elephants in living wood?
Its leaves smell sour, although it feels like spring.
I could go on. *Quis homo?* It’s no good: [...]

Mehigan's poetry is often anxious and sometimes morbid because it recognizes a need for transcendent meaning in the world, even as it acknowledges that "simile-like tropes" are inadequate to answer those extra-poetic questions its verses pose. Iambic pentameter becomes a holding pattern as we wait for the "mesmerizing" scenery of existence to explain itself and to give us the reason we have been set adrift in its midst. If Mehigan and Coyle offer variant explanations, they suggest together the potential for contemporary poetry in form to become a serious means of inquiry about the forms within, and concealed behind, this world.