

Afterword

Spirituality in Poetry of Place

In 1958, the Swedish poet Tomas Tranströmer (1931-2015) published a poem called "Solitary Swedish Houses." The final two stanzas:

Autumn with a gang of starlings
holding dawn in check.
The people move stiffly
in the lamplight's theater.

Let them feel without alarm
the camouflaged wings
and God's energy
coiled up in the dark.

In 2004, Tranströmer published his collected poems. The last poem:

Birds in human shape.
The apple trees in blossom.
The great enigma.

Birds in poetry, as in these two poems, are often taken as signs or messengers of spiritual significance. However, the quite different terms "God's energy" and "the great enigma" also play similar roles in both poems. Robin Fulton, the translator of Tranströmer's collected poems, including the two poems above, offers this analysis:

The reader will notice how specifically or overtly religious allusions in the early poetry soon disappear from succeeding work. This has been interpreted as a process of secularization: I would rather see it as a way of trying to do without the shorthand of everyday religious terminology in order to try to

define for oneself those areas in which a sense of immanence may be experienced . . . a series of contrasts, or similes, or just luminously clear images, are grouped as if around a central space where some kind of epiphany is happening. Such poems end by returning us, perhaps abruptly, to an active world, but they leave us with the feeling that a strangeness has crossed our path.

Not only the later work of Tranströmer, but much of the poetry of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, seems to follow Fulton's notion of "doing without the shorthand of everyday religious terminology" in favor of defining for oneself the nature of spiritual experience. How this has come to pass is a complex question, but we can pursue here how the question applies to poetry of place.

We at *Windfall* have received many poems devoted to the imagery of particular places, but lacking a "central space" or motivating force that can align imagery into a purpose. Images alone cannot supply the energy that a good poem requires. Especially in the poetry of place, the poet must bring a recognition of the uniqueness of a place to his or her own experience of it. A spiritual dimension gives power and meaning to the epiphany of place.

In our *Windfall* afterwords and readings we have often emphasized that in poems we look for a *genius loci*, a spirit of place that all places individually possess. The Latin phrase suggests that the source of this idea is ancient Rome, though it goes back much further into ancient Greece and is likely found among indigenous people in many parts of the world. According to historian Robert Turcan, the Romans professed little in the way of theology in their rituals celebrating the hundreds of deities that proliferated over their long history:

There was really no such thing as a Roman religion, in the sense that one or another monotheistic faith exists in our own day. Ancient Rome knew about religious procedures or, rather, the processes and formulas required in any given circumstance to

ensure the effectiveness of divine assistance. For the Romans, religion was not a belief, a feeling or, *a fortiori* mystique: It was purely utilitarian practice.

The Romans lived under two constraints: in fear of danger and in hope of future success in business or harvest. The appropriate deities required almost constant propitiation in terms of sacrifice and observance of rituals. Roman deities of family and field were the earliest and most important. The gods of the family household were the Penates and the Lares. The Penates looked after the storeroom and the interior of the home (in the deep past, the floor had covered the dead). Turcan defines the Lar as “a kind of demon of the ancestors and the continuity of the tribe as well as being the familiar spirit of the household.” Every morning the master of the house burned incense to the family gods on the altar of the hearth. Catullus gives the sense of the Lares in poem XXXI when he returns to his villa at Sirmio (close to his home town of Verona) after a long absence:

The mind puts down her load and, tired with travel,
We come to our Lares and rest in our own beds.
This is really all we undertake these toils for.

—translated by C. H. Sisson

For not only the Romans, but for ourselves, home is the most immediate place in our lives, and yet we receive few poems about home at *Windfall*. Surely ten thousand thoughts and images come to us from this source, if we give our attention to them. What is the *genius loci* of your home place in the Pacific Northwest?

Another early form of *genii loci* for the Romans was as gods of the field and the forest. “Every place had its Genius (*genius loci*) or its own god,” says Turcan. “Plains were attributed to Rusina, hilly crests to the god Jugatinus, hills to Collatina and valleys to Vallonia.” Turcan gives us an idea of how many gods were honored in the process of farming:

One . . . had to pray to Sterculinius for animal manure,

Vervactor for turning over fallow land, Redarator for the second ploughing, Imporcitor for the third, Obarator for a new turning of the soil, Occator for harrowing, Sarritor for weeding, Seia for the germination of seed, Segetia for the corn to grow, Nodutus for the stem to have nodes, Volutina for the sheath of the corn-ear, Patellana for it to open, Hostilina for the corn to be of the same height (to make harvesting easier), Lacturnus for the ears to be milky, Runcina for killing the weeds, Matuta for the ripening, Messia for the harvesting, Convector for loading, Noduterensis for threshing, Condito for garnering, even Promitor for taking the grain from the granary, but chiefly Tutilina for preserving it. Even this list is by no means exhaustive.

As with farming, so with any other process in daily life. The stages of human procreation, for instance, from seduction to birth required acknowledgement of just as many deities. Roman life might seem to us particularly overburdened with polytheism, though for the Romans themselves it constituted a form of mindfulness, so that one was made aware of every aspect of any daily undertaking. Are we so different? Maybe today's farmer pays homage to the farm bureau, the agricultural agent, and a lending institution for one season's crops, not to mention Monsanto, god of Roundup Ready seed. And, of course, little has changed in terms of weather and other exigencies affecting one season's crops to the next.

As with many ancient people, the Romans were filled with supernatural awe by forests, because, as Turcan says, "The forest belonged to the gods." It was considered almost a crime to clear a forest, and when it had to be done, a sacrifice such as a pig was required in expiation. When a site had to be dug under to grow crops, more sacrifice was required and had to be renewed each day that work continued. Would that our own logging and drilling companies had to weigh their extractions against a sacrifice more real than money!

In the city of Rome itself were many temples and festivals dedicated

to the deities with which we are most familiar as mythological figures: Jupiter, Juno, Venus, Mars, Vesta, Flora, and others. Individual citizens regarded some of these as tutelary, and their figures would join the Lares and Penates on household altars. However, the great temples were the foundation of a more civic or population-wide form of ritual. The *Genius populi Romani* was the guardian spirit of the Roman people, often identified with Jupiter, the ruler of the gods, to whom supplicants appealed to avoid harm and seek good fortune on behalf of the Roman polity.

The advent of Christianity in the Roman Empire was a blow to populations whose foundational outlook was place-based polytheistic. The transition to a single, invisible, essentially absent god of monotheism was too much for the polytheistic sensibility to bear. Long after the Roman Emperor Constantine made Christianity the state religion (c. 380 CE), and even into the modern era, many people continued to maintain family gods in secret or to honor gods of the field and forest in the guise of local saints. Some sixteen centuries of Christianity as the state religion has produced many wonders of artistic, architectural, musical, and poetical achievement. But, as George Steiner says, "To all but a very few the Mosaic God has been from the outset, even when passionately invoked, an immeasurable Absence, or a metaphor modulating downward to the natural sphere of poetic, imagistic approximation." The absent God forces us to approximate an image of him, or in a monotheistic religion such as Islam, to ban such images of God altogether.

In 1886 Friedrich Nietzsche famously announced in *The Gay Science* that "God is dead." Heidegger says that Nietzsche was not announcing the death of God as a deity, but that "the pronouncement 'God is dead' means: The suprasensory world is without effective power." Nietzsche realized that the many centuries in which God was understood as the foundation of the universe were coming to an end. Western culture was already putting its "faith," as it were, in science, technology, and individual achievement. Steiner:

In polytheism, says Nietzsche, lay the freedom of the human spirit, its creative multiplicity. The doctrine of a single Deity, whom men cannot play off against other gods and thus win open spaces for their own aims, is “the most monstrous of all human errors.”

Science and technology acknowledged only a lesser kind of life in such fauna as animals, birds, and fish, and an even lesser kind in flora, and no life at all in the rest of creation—the mountains and rivers and rocks, minerals, and soil on which all flora and fauna live. The downside of a heaven-based, abstract religion with an absentee God is a devaluation and debasement of the physical, local, present, concrete here and now. The local world perceived by our senses is denied importance.

In Nietzsche’s own nineteenth century, the Romantic movement in several European countries arose to oppose the overwhelming paradigm of science and technology without returning to medieval formality in religion. In England we are familiar with the avatars of Romanticism, poets such as William Wordsworth, John Keats, and John Clare. In France the poet Gerard de Nerval published in 1854 a sonnet which summarized the appeal to Nature, against the prevailing trend of “free thinkers” (i.e., “free” in the sense of post-religious):

GOLDEN VERSES

Eh, what! everything is sentient!

—Pythagoras

You, free thinker, imagine only man
thinks in this world where life bursts from all things?
The powers within prescribe your freedom’s wings,
but you leave the universe outside your plans.

Respect the mind that stirs in every creature:
love’s mystery is known by metals too;

every flower opens its soul to Nature;
“Everything’s sentient!” and works on you.

Beware! from the blind wall one watches you:
even matter has a logos all its own . . .
do not put it to some impious use.

Often in humble life a god works, hidden;
and like a new-born eye veiled by its lids,
pure spirit grows beneath the surface of stones.

—translated by C. F. MacIntyre

Today it’s mostly traditional indigenous people who continue to treat everything as living and sentient. In discussing her Potawatomi language, Robin Wall Kimmerer explores the implications of seventy percent of its words being verbs, compared to the thirty percent of English words that are verbs. She considers the Ojibwe word *wiikwegamaa*:

A bay is a noun only if water is dead. When bay is a noun, it is defined by humans, trapped between its shores and contained by the word. But the verb *wiikwegamaa*—to be a bay—releases the water from bondage and lets it live. “To be a bay” holds the wonder that, for this moment, the living water has decided to shelter itself between these shores, conversing with cedar roots and a flock of baby mergansers. Because it could do otherwise—become a stream or an ocean or a waterfall, and there are verbs for that, too. To be a hill, to be a sandy beach, to be a Saturday, all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive. Water, land, and even a day, the language a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world, the life that pulses through all things, through pines and nuthatches and mushrooms. This is the language I hear in the woods; this is the language that lets us speak of what wells up all around us.

For some poets today attention has returned to the sensory world as under polytheism, only without gods. Even when attempting to speak of the absent God, the poet relies on sensory imagery, as in Norwegian poet Rolf Jacobsen's "God's Heart," published in 1956:

We don't know God's heart,
but we know
something that pours out over us
like rain over our hands.

We don't see His eyes,
but we see
invisible light over everything
as on a summer night.

We don't hear His voice,
but we find
roads everywhere and signs in our hearts
and paths with hushed light.

—translated by Olav Grinde

Jacobsen's poem would appear to illustrate Steiner's point that God's absence motivates us to find a "metaphor modulating downward to the natural sphere of poetic, imagistic approximation." While not going as far as Kimmerer's "animacy of the world," Jacobsen conceives of God's presence in imagery drawn from nature and our inner life.

If a cursory survey of contemporary poetry—or, for that matter, of the many poems we receive at *Windfall*—is any indication, most poets, like Tranströmer at the beginning of this afterword, are in Fulton's words, "trying to do without the shorthand of everyday religious terminology in order to try to define for oneself those areas in which a sense of immanence may be experienced." Consider the following poem of "immanence" by William Stafford, published in 1966:

LISTENING

My father could hear a little animal step,
or a moth in the dark against the screen,
and every far sound called the listening out
into places where the rest of us had never been.

More spoke to him from the soft wild night
than came to our porch for us on the wind;
we would watch him look up and his face go keen
till the walls of the world flared, widened.

My father heard so much that we still stand
inviting the quiet by turning the face,
waiting for a time when something in the night
will touch us too from that other place.

In the concluding line, the phrase “that other place” summarizes a place that is earthly in nature: an animal step, a moth, the quiet, the flexible “walls of the world,” and above all, the night. Phrases like “that other place” and “the other side” are signifiers of a spiritual realm that has been made spontaneously manifest in the visible world. These phrases evoke a mystery that resides at the core of human existence. We have many words for expressing the mystery of living on Earth: the unknown, the unknowable, the invisible, the imperceptible, the enigmatic, the numinous—all associated with mystery, the sense that humans can’t know everything by conscious means alone and must rely on intuition and depth experience (whether suffering or ecstasy) to grant reality to what is unknown or unknowable.

In the twentieth century, depth psychology rose apparently to deal with the loss of the gods. Where did the gods go? In his “Commentary on ‘The Secret of the Golden Flower’” Jung says they went inside of us, from where, unacknowledged, they re-emerge as neuroses. Jungian analyst James Hollis shows the difference between conscious

apprehension of reality as opposed to the unknowable (“unconscious” is by definition what we don’t know):

Our sciences are self-limiting imaginal systems, even when they are open-ended. The matters we know conform to matters which we can know, that is, which are within the confines of our capacities to know. Our sciences ask only the questions we are capable of knowing. When, however, we are visited by images which come from another place, from mysterious origin, we are opened to something larger than heretofore possible.

Consciousness is transformed by the encounter with mystery as invested in images theretofore foreign to it. In the world of contemporary deconstructionism, we believe that all knowledge is interpretation and all interpretation is subjective, prejudiced by unconscious determinants such as class, gender, and *Zeitgeist*, and that no interpretation is final or authoritative. Thus, when the cosmos reveals itself to us, it is by way of the image foreign to consciousness. And it is through this encounter with the numinous that the power of the archetypal imagination makes growth possible.

Tomas Tranströmer’s day job was also as a psychologist, so he may have been open to the kinds of experience that Hollis refers to. His poems are replete with transformations that have the air of strangeness, as if encountered in a dream, or in a moment of spiritual immanence. Consider his poem “The Half-Finished Heaven” in light of Hollis’s characterization of such encounters:

Despondency breaks off its course.
Anguish breaks off its course.
The vulture breaks off its flight.

The eager light streams out,
even the ghosts take a draft.

And our paintings see daylight,
our red beasts of the Ice Age studios.

Everything begins to look around.
We walk in the sun in hundreds.

Each man is a half-open door
leading to a room for everyone.

The endless ground under us.

The water is shining among then trees.

The lake is a window into the earth.

—translated by Robin Fulton

The “breaking off” in the first section suggests a significant break in our everyday experience, and then “the eager light streams out.” Art of the ages happens. People pay attention and walk in the hundreds, which makes each person a “half-open door” leading to a “room for everyone.” This latter image echoes Jung’s “collective unconscious,” which is present in each person and the same in all people. Fundamental entities, the ground, water, and lake, are symbolically revealed in a series of single-line illuminations.

“The Half-Finished Heaven” was published in a book of that title in 1962. In a 1973 interview, Tranströmer responded to a question about whether he was religious or a mystic in a way which seems to clarify the occasion of his poem:

Very pretentious words, mystic and so on. Naturally I feel reserved about their use, but you could at least say that I respond to reality in such a way that I look on existence as a great mystery and that at times, at certain moments, this

mystery carries a strong charge, so that it does have a religious character, and it is often in such a context that I write. So these poems are all the time pointing toward a greater context, one that is incomprehensible to our normal everyday reason. Although it begins in something very concrete.

—translated by Robin Fulton

We could likely find a significant number of poems written in the Pacific Northwest that manifest the spiritual immanence of particular experience. Alice Derry lives in Port Angeles, Washington. Here is part three of her poem *“Waking, Walking, Singing in the Next Dimension”*:

Each of our recent days, snow revealing them,
eight or nine thrushes storm the downed hemlock
where I scatter seed. Flurry of their bickering,
then rush to refuge in the young madrones,
bodies only for moments

like that stillness, summers at Hurricane Ridge,
when gray jays land on my outstretched palm
for a gift of raisins.

Today I wait by the kitchen window,
watching the flicker stab beak-deep into
soft suet. A sound, a change: it stops,
then barrels into the woods,
rust of its tail’s underside flashing.

Thrush feathers too—folded grey on orange,
grey on orange—blur to motion,
leaving me with my hunger.

Once the thrushes retreat
to the cedars, their high clear solos

break into the cold, each bird, one note,
drawn out until it fades, as it has to.
In the silence—what we depend on—
the treble sound again, again.

As in Tranströmer's poems at the beginning of this afterword, Derry presents those spiritually significant creatures, the birds. Unlike Tranströmer, Derry names her winter birds specifically: varied thrushes (feathers folded grey on orange), gray jay, flicker, and then thrushes again with the last word. The title of the poem is the title of a painting by Morris Graves, a Northwest painter known for his pictures of birds. The birds in the poem are eating seeds and suet, revealing hunger in the speaker. But most importantly, the birds are flying about and singing. And the singing that they make brings to the speaker an epiphany about silence, and how we depend on silence in order to have the sound of singing. The speaker is clearly present in the poem, but the focus is on the birds and how they make the epiphany possible. No particular spiritual revelation is announced, but the speaker brings heightened awareness to the imagery, which gives energy to the poem and lets us share both imagery and its power.

In September 1780 the poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, age 31, traveled to the Thuringian Forest to inspect a coal mine on behalf of the Duke of Weimar. Goethe's biographer, Nicholas Boyle, sets the scene: "On a calm evening with a majestic sunset and thin columns of smoke rising from the charcoal-burners' fires," Goethe was ensconced in total solitude in a hunting lodge on Mt. Kickelhahn, the highest peak (2,825 feet) above the town of Ilmenau. About 8 p.m. he wrote a poem on the wall, a poem that Boyle says "has become in the German-speaking world . . . the best-known of all poems, by anyone":

WANDRERS NACHTLIED

*Über allen Gipfeln
Ist Ruh,*

*In allen Wipfeln
Spürest du
Kaum einen Hauch;
Die Vögelein schweigen im Walde.
Warte nur, balde
Ruhest du auch.*

In English the poem's title is "Wanderer's Nightsong." Boyle calls the poem "untranslatable," but he offers a plain prose version:

Over all the peaks lies rest, in all the tree-tops you can sense scarcely a breath; the little birds are silent in the forest. Only wait, in a moment you will rest too.

Of course, the English cannot match the music of the original in its brevity, its short lines, and its delicate rhymes. Superficially it's a poem about a wanderer going to sleep at nightfall. But we are all wanderers, and all are destined for sleep. Goethe's epiphany was his realization of mortality in the midst of life, an insight that has found deep resonance with readers. Goethe revisited the lodge more than fifty years later in 1831, about six months before his death. He recognized his wall-writing and reportedly broke down in tears. The lodge itself burned down in 1870, and was rebuilt in 1874. Goethe's brief poem now appears on the walls in fifteen languages. Poets may be mortal, but their poems sometimes outlive them!

When you find the words that approximate the experience, send us your poems of place where some kind of illumination took place. We promise to read them with heightened awareness and appreciation!

—Bill Siverly and Michael McDowell

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