

*The Poets' Jesus*, by Peggy Rosenthal

reviewed by [Jill Peláez Baumgaertner](#) in the [October 11, 2000](#) issue

Edwin Mims published *The Christ of the Poets*, an examination of images of Christ in English and American poetry, more than 50 years ago. The subject has not been touched by critics since that time, so Peggy Rosenthal's book, which attempts to fill in the gaps of a half century and also to reflect current multicultural interests, deserves special commendation. Rosenthal's range is ambitious. Her sweeping opening chapter covers the first 18 centuries of poetic interest in Jesus, stopping to pay particular attention to the fourth-century Syriac poet Ephrem and his remarkable nativity hymns, whose reference to Jesus as mother predates by eight centuries Julian of Norwich's use of the metaphor.

Rosenthal moves on to consider Hildegard of Bingen, the Franciscan poets, the 16th-century mystical poets and the 17th-century Mexican poet Sor Juana. She discusses Luther's impact on the development of 17th-century verse, swings through Milton, and touches on Chinese poets educated by Jesuits. The Enlightenment is of no particular interest to her, since Jesus almost entirely disappears as a figure in poetry at this time. But the Romantic poets pique her interest. They make Jesus into a hero, a trend culminating in the work of Walt Whitman, in which Jesus becomes the "great egalitarian," as divine as humanity is divine.

Jesus often appears in modernist poems as either the Christ of nostalgia or as a parody of the Jesus presented in the Gospels. A disillusioned, doubting antihero, the Jesus of the modern poets is often baffling and ultimately unknowable. This sense of loss in modernist poems disappears in the work of postmodernists, who consider words themselves ultimately meaningless. In their context, the concept of Jesus as the Word of God becomes drained of meaning. But for the postcolonial African poets, the image of Christ crucified still remains significant. Trying to define themselves against the Western culture that produced the image, these poets use the cross to speak to those who understand the politics of sacrificial suffering.

Rosenthal identifies both T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* as seminal influences on the poetry of the second half of the 20th century. Their picture of "Jesus Absent" finds particularly strong expression in the work of the

Nobel Prize-winning poet Czeslaw Milosz, whose experience in occupied Lithuania created his subsequent impatience with the "self-indulgent introspection" of so much American poetry. Feeling most keenly the presence of God's absence leads Milosz to the "Jesus Forgotten," not a Jesus to be doubted, but one who is distant and definitely beyond the mind's ability to grasp him.

Rosenthal calls W. H. Auden the major voice in 20th-century poetry in his attempt to address the problem of a Jesus who has been dismissed by a people who have become "absent to his presence." On the other hand, Kathleen Norris presents a Jesus who is present, but never in an expected form.

Contemporary Christian poets, Rosenthal contends, rarely draw directly on the Gospels for subject matter. Instead, they are concerned with "the sacramentality of the ordinary." For Richard Wilbur, for example, in "Love Calls us to the Things of This World" or "A World Without Objects is a Sensible Emptiness," the incarnation is a pervasive but unnamed presence. In fact, indirection is the only way for poets like Norris, Wilbur or Auden to communicate to an audience made nervous by religious reference. "Even if the poets' Jesus was traveling light," Rosenthal writes, "free of grand doctrinal statements, editors and readers would see him carrying the baggage of a suspect dogma."

In spite of these restrictions a few poets do not shy away from a frank gospel identity for the Jesus of their poetry: the French poet Charles Peguy, the Korean Ku Sang, Wendell Berry, Andrew Hudgins, Scott Cairns, Vassar Miller and, most especially, Denise Levertov, whose conversion occurred as she was writing "Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus." These writers, Rosenthal argues, see Jesus as the earliest Christian poets did, but they are not as interested in doctrinal controversies or typology. Instead, they have discovered a unique aesthetic in the incarnation itself.

Rosenthal's arguments are convincing, her examples compelling and her knowledge of contemporary poets impressive. Her clear prose style and her avoidance of the distancing parlance of current literary theory make this a valuable study not only for the scholar of literature but for the general reader who would like to see the old familiars in a fresh context and, in the process, be introduced to new and provocative images of Jesus. It is the poet, she insists, to whom the task of revitalizing a worn-out theological language has fallen. No one else can do it.