The Poems of Rowan Williams

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In Review

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Rowan Williams
Eerdmans

Rowan Williams, archbishop of Canterbury since 2002, is the first Welshman in 1,000 years to hold the office. A theologian of some renown, he has stirred up controversy

with his outspoken position in support of the ordination of gay clergy and various other liberal causes. This man of erudition, eclectic intellectual interests and bold statements and actions also writes poetry, an unusual and sometimes risky pastime for a theologian anchored more in dogmatics and systematics than in the imagistic. This volume collects all of the poems from the archbishop's two previously published books of poetry and adds a few new ones.

After Williams's Lambeth address to the world's Anglicans in 1998, one observer reported that the speech "was seen as the most erudite, though the least understood." With a few notable exceptions, the same conclusion can apply to many of his poems. These are works of great substance, but it often feels as though Williams is standing just outside the world he is trying to inhabit as a poet.

In spite of this handicap, Williams does manage breakthroughs in a handful of poems. In "Penrhys," the sacred broods in ancient artifacts, while the public housing projects are firmly rooted in the dismally mundane, which the young teenage mothers, as thin as the statue of the Virgin nearby, typify.

> Thin teenage mothers by the bus stop
> shake wet hair,
>
> Light cigarettes. One day my bus will come, says one;
> they laugh. More use 'n a bloody prince,
> says someone else.
>
> . . . The babies cry under the sun,
> they and the thin girls
>
> Comparing notes, silently, on shared
> unwritten stories of the bloody stubbornness
> of getting someone born.

In "Gethsemane" the poet finds the contorted olive trees an apt emblem for what took place in that garden, and at this site of Jesus' agonized prayer he envisions a kind of wailing wall where "quick and tight" prayers can be delivered.

> Into the trees' clefts, then, do we push
> our folded words, thick as thumbs?

somewhere inside the ancient bark, a voice
has been before us, pushed the densest word
of all, abba, and left it to be collected by
whoever happens to be passing, bent down
the same way by the hot unreadable palms.

In some of these poems Williams's language is as full as that of Dylan Thomas or Gerard Manley Hopkins. "September Birds," for example, combines the cadence of line and phrase with rich sounds:

Down in the small hollow where the currents shift
slowly, and drop with the thinning sun, the crows
float, crowding the shallow slopes of air,
and vague as specks of stubble fire: the sun
has scattered them from thinning flames, has clapped
a hollow hand, once, twice, a glowing wooden gong,
a log that cracks sharp in the ashes, and
has given wings to the charred dust.

Nature as both emblem and messenger is a strong theme in these poems, and it might have been for this reason that Williams found himself in the middle of a media storm shortly after he was selected as archbishop. His poetry attracted the attention of a Welsh honorary order, the Gorsedd of Bards, which bestowed on him a bardic name in a druidic ceremony. Williams has insisted that he was involved not in a pagan organization but rather in one that promotes Welsh language and culture—and, of course, much of Welsh culture grows out of the rugged landscape.

These are not, for the most part, easy poems. Many are laborious, and much of the subject matter will seem remote. The language is rich, sometimes too much so; Williams has a tendency to pile adjectives upon adjectives. In addition, Williams does not always show mastery of the free-verse line in which he usually chooses to write. Many of his line endings, which should be reserved for the strongest words and images, for example, are wasted opportunities.

Williams reveals a devotion to the poetry of the early T. S. Eliot, and echoes abound. Trying to outwrite Eliot is as chancy as trying to write prose like Hemingway or to emulate the comic-grotesque style of Flannery O'Connor. It just cannot be done without sounding amateurish. In the main, however, Williams reveals a considerable

poetic talent, somewhat untutored, but all the more remarkable for coming from the pen of a theologian accustomed to rigorous abstract thought.