Double take: Poetry reading

by Peggy Rosenthal in the February 27, 2002 issue

Poetry doesn't have to be solemn. In a series of poems first published in 1990, U.S. poet Scott Cairns invented a comic character named Raimundo Luz, a Portuguese postmodernist "radical theologian" whose autobiographical verses Cairns pretended to be translating. In these poems, collectively called "The Translation of Raimundo Luz," Cairns has Luz breezily discourse from various poses, so that through him Cairns can play with layerings of contemporary attitudes and voices.

In "My Imitation," Luz reports on his experience following the classic Christian journey toward "imitation of Christ" (and the book *Imitation of Christ*, by 14th-century monk Thomas à Kempis). While some poems are meant to be mulled over in quiet solitude, others—like this one—beg to be read aloud. Tone is everything here. The fun comes from the disjunction between the speaker's deadpan reportage and our recognition, in his flatly presented details, of deeper truths that he appears not to notice.

Luz starts off his imitation of Christ, appropriately, with a string of dispossessions. Each begins by sounding like standard gospel fare, then takes an incongruous twist that makes us smile. "I sold my possessions"; yes, sell all you have, the gospel tells us. But "colorful pencils" sound inappropriately trivial as one's prized possession—unless Luz is a simpleton or a child. "I gave all my money . . ."; yes, sell all you have and give to the poor. Oops, no, Raimundo chooses "the dull," as if dullards had the greatest need (of those colorful pencils perhaps?). Now his possession is poverty itself, so he's ready to give that away as well—"to the president"—and we chuckle that, yes, the president (any president) could use some poverty. "I became a child again"; yes, to such as these belongs the kingdom of God. But now the twist is that the child is only "relatively" innocent. And the final dispossession: of "guilt"—again "to the president." We grin knowingly: here's something the president (any president) already has in abundance.

We're coming to see Raimundo Luz as an ingénue. In his relative innocence he speaks more wisely than he knows. All these dispossessions, we can see looking

back, are in fact marvelously appropriate as an imitation of Christ's radical self-emptying at the incarnation: Christ Jesus "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness" (Phil. 2:7). Colorful pencils in this context now look like heaven's creative joy, which Christ gave up for our sakes.

I won't make my analytical way through the entire poem like this. Comedy is the hardest literary mode to talk about, and to keep commenting on all the jokes would be to kill them.

I want to note, though, the underlying rhythmic pattern that carries us through Raimundo's imitation of Christ. To the iambic pentameter that is the poem's base meter, so subtly crafted that we think we're hearing prosaic offhand remarks, Cairns starts adding a trimeter line that looks like a little tail, a twist, a double take.

And I want to pause over the poem's center verse: "I floated the wide river on a raft. / I set Jim free." After the biblical scenes Raimundo has taken his turn with, it seems a wild leap of comic congruity to land in *Huckleberry Finn*. But then we notice: Luz is Huck, the innocent boy who challenges society's conventions by doing radical good despite himself. So next the poem forces us to ask (though all these mental steps of our interpretive process happen nearly simultaneously): In imitating Huck, is Luz imitating Christ? And all at once the apparent incongruity of Huck's raft floating through the Gospels dissolves. We see Jesus as the radical innocent overturning conventions, setting us free from whatever attitudes, opinions, supposed certainties enslave us.

Then we leap, as if from island to island on the river, to the one-line stanza: "I revised every word." Every word of what? we want to ask. But the poem dismisses our desire to pin it down. Instead, it makes us ask—since by now we know that Cairns is giving us, through Luz, a reinterpretation of Jesus' own life and meaning—how is "revising every word" what Jesus did? And all the gospel revisings rush in: "You've heard it said, 'You shall not murder/ commit adultery/ swear falsely' . . . but I say . . ."; "The greatest among you must become like the youngest"; "I give you a new commandment: love one another." Suddenly this one short line of the poem is exploding with the entire gospel message of Jesus the radical revisionist.

The poem then takes us to exactly where revising every word took Jesus: the crucifixion. Without a blink, Luz folds his inadvertent jokes into his disarmingly bland Passion narrative. "A poet is an antenna capturing the voices of the world," said

Polish poet Anna Swir. Scott Cairns manages to capture, in the persona of Raimundo Luz, a range of voices that we'd expect to clash in dissonant static: a deadly serious account of Christian suffering, a teasing distance that makes light of it, a matter-of-fact shrug that says, sure, beatings and mockery and defeat are the Christian life. What do you expect?

Finally, "I forgave everything," Raimundo simply announces. In his innocence, he takes Christ at his word. Forgive 70 times seven. We laugh at Raimundo's extravagance (which he has "regretted" but not abandoned). But we know the joke is on us: if we aren't equally extravagant, we're not imitating Christ.

Through all the fun of "My Imitation," the poem's point is its challenge. How do I imitate Raimundo Luz imitating Christ? Do I set Jim free? Do I revise (reenvision, look anew at) every opinion I hold dear? Do I forgive everything?