The poetic space of the liturgy

What if we suspend our disbelief, collapse our ironic distance, and allow ourselves to go in?

by Mary Barnett in the September 2024 issue
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(Shifts in the Walls at Night, by Deb Sokolow)

Ten years ago when I was young and green—merely 58—and very suspicious of anything religious, I took a class at Yale Divinity School with Christian Wiman that looked through the lens of poetry at faith and then back through the lens of faith at poetry. Allergic to dogma, I hungered for space. I began to experience certain poems as virtual sacred spaces I could enter and exit. I pried open the book of poems like the door of some abandoned church and slunk in.

People I liked went in there with me. I read the poems in a small class with a good teacher. My listening was listened to. Love was involved in the whole enterprise.

So was death. Some of us were not well. When the finite parameters of life are brought into focus, the hunger for truth ramifies. The pit opens, and we care enough to look. We can’t afford to be ironic. We want to know what will save us.

Wiman—a poet, a believer, and a cancer patient—was also an authority we trusted. He had carried his own cross. He assured us that there was meaning to be found, however long it took, in each poem he’d chosen—without telling us what that meaning was. Finding it would require our agency, as well as our vulnerability and a tolerance for ambiguity.

He insisted we read the poems aloud. For me, a former dancer and choreographer, reading the poems out loud heightened a spatial dimension: the space in the room, the space I experienced in the poem, and the expanded sense of space within my own body. There was an uncanny sense of volume that hadn’t been there before. There were clearances, resonances, and the sense of an echo.

The poem was a voice, a voice heard in a room. This class feels more like church than church does, I thought, glancing over at my equally thunderstruck classmates as we all bungled out into the hallway buffeted by waves of inner intensity, simultaneously riding a greater swell, unwilling to speak and break the spell.

We were a diverse group: several young evangelicals, a Mormon, two Catholics, a committed atheist, a disgruntled fundamentalist, a fourth-generation Boston Unitarian, and a sprinkling of 20- and 30-something Methodists, Lutherans, and Episcopalians. How had this class and these poems managed to disrupt our

customary attitudes of belief, disbelief, and distance and leave us so stunned—so full of a spirit more holy, however we might have defined it? Was it possible this was less about the specific poems and our admittedly inspiring teacher and more about the genre and structure of poetry itself? Who was doing the talking? Why were we listening?

I've been haunted by these questions in the years since that class ended. I have since become an Episcopal priest with a parish to lead. How was that class able to liberate the voice of God from all our attempts to control it? Why was it so persuasive? And who was "it"? Might these insights pave the way for other resurrections in this church I care so passionately about?

In an essay in the *Paris Review*, Michael Edwards argues that the Bible is meant to be read as poetry. He writes:

> To believe in the Bible—or rather, to believe the Bible, and allow oneself to be convinced that it is the word of God, in whatever way one considers it—is to believe what it says, with a supernatural faith that resembles, at an infinite distance, the confidence with which we read a poem, accepting that its reality is found in it and not in our exegesis.

My heart pounds. The same could be said of the liturgy.

In a world where progress often depends on breaking things up into smaller and smaller bits for all sorts of good, effective, digitally manipulative and analytical reasons, we need practice remembering the wholenesses we care about. We need practice honoring the boundaries that contain these holy spaces so their essential mystery, their life-affirming and life-altering power, doesn't just bleed right out.

And this is why I care about this. It isn't that I believe poems must be read in church, although I do recommend trying that now and again. It's that the liturgy is itself poetry. It's just poetry that's misunderstood.

We often confuse the more formal elements at the liturgy's periphery with the poetry and mystery at its center. As a result, we consecrate the wrong thing.

As an Episcopal priest, I see how we frequently confuse the more formal elements of the liturgy with the centrally poetic and mysterious interior. As a result, we often

consecrate the wrong thing. We sanctify the periphery—the rubrics, the rules, who can do what, when and exactly what it all is supposed to mean—instead of the center, the holy space of sacrament itself. Unlike the periphery, the interior is a wilderness we cannot control. This interior space must remain idiosyncratic and nondogmatic because it requires our image-making participation to come fully alive. Just as fundamentally, it needs clear boundaries. Call it wild, but keep it stable. Otherwise we risk foreclosing what the liturgy can actually do.

In Gaston Bachelard's terms, it becomes like an object that we can't open. In *The Poetics of Space*, the philosopher describes the intimate immensity in beloved objects. "Chests, especially small caskets, over which we have more complete mastery, are objects *that may be opened*," he writes. "When a casket"—he means a small chest, not a coffin—"is closed, it is returned to the general community of objects; it takes its place in exterior space." We walk on by, unastonished. But beloved objects—a locket, a treasure chest, or (as Bachelard describes evocatively) the memory of a bureau from childhood that opens to reveal, way in the back, your late mother's favorite cardigan, still redolent of Chanel No. 5—are all objects that can be held and held dear and can also be opened with our imaginations. "There is always more in a closed than in an open container," he writes.

Bachelard also contrasts the life force of a poetic image with the comparatively flat language play of metaphor, quoting verse by O. V. Milosz: "I say Mother. And my thoughts are of you, oh, House. / House of the lovely dark summers of my childhood." A house protects like arms enfold, but this verse is more than a simple metaphor that likens one thing to another. Within this mother/house, a mysterious inner space has opened up. I feel the shade. Smell the wood. I wander down corridors searching for my own summers. A prosaic exterior can no longer limit the depth of meaning. Geometry is transcended because a new dimension, the dimension of intimacy, has opened up, and I am invited to go in. In and in and in.

One morning several years ago I went to a sound installation at the Met Cloisters in New York City. Janet Cardiff's piece *The Forty Part Motet* consists of 40 high-fidelity speakers playing 40 different voices singing "Spem in alium" ("In No Other Is My Hope"), a 16th-century choral motet by Thomas Tallis, in an empty chapel. The place was packed. People stood transfixed in the center of an oval of 40 speakers, eyes closed. A woman wept in the arms of her husband. I felt oddly convinced I knew why she was crying. Later, heading home on a packed subway, I recognized someone from the event, her face still shining.

“I wanted to be able to ‘climb inside’ the music, connecting with the separate voices,” Cardiff says in her artist’s statement. “As well I am interested in how sound may physically construct a space in a sculptural way and how a viewer may choose a path through this physical yet virtual space.” It’s a map to somewhere you can’t get to any other way. Even if you don’t know exactly where “somewhere” is.

Eventually, of course, this sense of volume will dissipate. We close the chest. We walk on by. What was consecrated, set apart, fills back up with everyday chatter and movement, the stowing of prayer benches in church, the gathering of coats at a concert, the random scraping of chairs and shuffling of notebooks in a poetry classroom, the ongoing rush of life. We’ve participated in a formally shaped experience that framed depths we couldn’t parse, and because of the frame we can find our way back. We may even be able to carry that space with us. In “Clearances,” Seamus Heaney writes:

> He called her good and girl. Then she was dead,
> The searching for a pulsebeat was abandoned
> And we all knew one thing by being there.
> The space we stood around had been emptied
> Into us to keep, it penetrated
> Clearances that suddenly stood open.
> High cries were felled and a pure change happened.

The word *emptied* at the end of the fourth line drops off into a nothingness that anguishes: the loss of his mother. This reality can’t simply be digested and filed away. Instead, this luminous no-more enters into us to keep, changing the shape of who we are. The pattern of form in a poem, what we can in a sense most easily hold onto, is also revealed by what is missing. The text is arranged against the blank whiteness of a page, as if poured through a sieve, revealing the silence that waits in the background. Clearances—formally held, indigestible and yet finally incorporated into a larger sense of self—become consolations.

“The love of form is a love of endings,” writes Louise Gluck, in the final line of her affecting poem “Celestial Music.” It’s a heartbreaking realization, yes, and for the poet, also a joy. We too will end, but a poetic understanding invites us into the luminous nowheres we contain and posits us in the volume that comes after. The pit opens, and we don’t have to be afraid to look.

I need to enter a house whose insides are bigger than its outsides. I could be changed in a house like that.

When we gather around the Lord's table for a heady meal of sacrifice, loss, and thanksgiving, we may be only half awake, tethered by assurances that this sacred meal obeys the laws of appearances and rationality or is pre-encapsulated by dogma. The space is homogenous, circumscribed by our various dogmas. *It is just a metaphor/a habit of piety/one of the sacraments.* Or, *It is Jesus in memory only*.

But what if? What if we allowed the *formal* celebration of the Eucharist—the liturgy—to open up with the breaking of the bread? What if we suspend our disbelief, collapse our ironic distance, and allow ourselves to go in? Not because this space has been defined for us by dogma, but because it can't be? I need to enter a house whose insides are bigger than its outsides. I could be changed in a house like that.

Kneeling at a rail, pressing the brittle edges of a flat piece of wafer on my tongue, I am held within the boundary of a ritual from time immemorial. Material edges make a frame for what is mysterious beyond measure and allow me to encounter the possibilities of the irrational without scaring the bejesus out of me. What was flat and immaterial, merely an idea, God in a wafer, becomes incarnate, three-dimensional, and transformative.

The medieval mystics had inklings about all of this. Paintings of saints functioned as icons, windows onto the interior divine, visions of God too bright to be looked at directly. When the Reformation did away with icons, saints, Mary, stained glass, relics, the whole kit and caboodle, the Bible gained some stature but lost some of its iconic status. Sunlight streamed into every corner of our holy spaces, and rational thought and judgment took precedence over imagination. What was meant to be a window became a cage. We may need to re-medieval ourselves to find our way out.

Catholics are also caught in this rationalistic dilemma. In *This Is My Body*, Robert Barron notes that fully two-thirds of Catholics no longer subscribe to the church's "official teaching that Jesus is really, truly and substantially present under the signs or appearances of bread and wine." According to a Pew research poll, "the majority of Catholics believe the Eucharistic elements are merely symbolic of Jesus's presence." We are constricting our religious imaginations even as physics is upending what we know about the solidity and stability of even the most stolid pieces of matter (like wine and bread). What mystery is this? Matter, science tells us,

is mostly made up of space, an electron’s position doesn’t exist until it is observed, and reality exists only in relationship.

Might we have overlooked the interior spaces where there is a God who could be real? “God is active in the within of things,” wrote scientist and Jesuit priest Teilhard de Chardin early in the 20th century, as if already intuiting a reality at the heart of matter that powered the tiniest transistors and fathered the stars.

When church is chock-full of what I already expect, with what I already believe, with the sound of a bunch of billiard balls colliding, there is less room for me to be transformed. I continue to see what I have always seen. If we leave the church as it is—confidently closed in the exterior space of the 19th century, where the surface is already full—it will increasingly cease to matter. People will pass it by like a closed chest, without noticing the key in the lock. They won’t realize this is a treasure chest that can be opened.

And with that, I’m back in another chest: the aumbry, that small sacred house in which the consecrated wafers, stored too long in metaphor, have grown stale. Here is a treasure chest that could be opened instead of fundamentally interpreted, an entryway into a poetically charged interior where matter is mysterious, the heart moves roomier, and a pure change happens. This is a mystery play of the highest order.

God could place a body as large as the whole world inside a millet seed and he could achieve this in the same manner as Christ is lodged in the host, that is, without any condensation, rarefaction or penetration of bodies. With that millet seed, God could create a space of 100 leagues, or 1,000 or however many are imaginable. A man inside that millet seed could traverse all that many leagues simply by walking from one extremity of the millet seed to another.

This paragraph, written by Alfred of Saxony in 1390, could describe transubstantiation, the properties of subatomic particles, or Heaney’s “Clearances.” What a miracle it would be if we looked through the doors of our emptying churches as if into the mouth of an empty cave and actually saw something. We’ve seen infinity in a grain of sand. Why not in our own bodies? Why not in a piece of bread?