AFTER CHRISTENDOM

Yet All Shall Be Well by Daniel J. Heisey (Augusta, MO: Sacred Winds Press, 2012)
In the Saguaro Forest by Mark Amorose (St. Simons Island, GA: Kaufmann, 2012)
'The Portals of Sheol' and Other Poems by Bryce Christensen
(Torrance, CA: White Violet Press, 2012)

David Middleton

In *Notes towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), T. S. Eliot stated, "The artistic sensibility is impoverished by its divorce from the religious sensibility, the religious by its separation from the artistic." Eliot also said, in *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939), "The Church has perpetually to answer this question: to what purpose were we born? What is the end of Man?" Such concerns should lie at the heart of the work of the Christian poet, although the poet, in his language, tropes, and forms, approaches his subject not primarily by direct theological argument but rather in those ways that define the nature of his art.

Daniel J. Heisey has collected twenty-five short poems under the title *Yet All Shall Be Well*. The poems are set in England, on the European continent, and in the United States. The title of the volume suggests that, like the visions or "shewings" of St. Julian of Norwich (1342–1416), Heisey's verses record moments of special insight. St. Julian's well-known words, spoken to her by Christ in a vision (and quoted by T. S. Eliot in "Little Gidding")—"All shall be well, / and all manner of thing shall be well"—affirm the foundational Christian belief in a providential ordering of the universe, including the meaningfulness of the ongoing historical journey of human beings.

Yet All Shall Be Well opens with poems set in London. In one of these, "Comedy," a middle-aged scholar, reading at night, is lost in shadows and uncertainties. Falling asleep before the "puzzle" of a "country house murder" is solved in a Dorothy Sayers novel, he also misses the coming out of night's first stars—and Dante's: "I dozed in my easy chair, / And thus never saw the stars." Heisey's understated tone and simple diction reveal our human perplexities: being apprehensive and not knowing or else missing signs and answers through weakness or inattention. Two poems, both entitled "London," chronicle change and decay in

---

David Middleton is poetry editor for *Modern Age*.

that or any city: graffiti, Joseph Conrad's secret agent and anarchist Verloc beside his "cosy hearth," and the addresses of the well-intentioned and well-mannered bear of children's books, Paddington Brown, or the upper-class Bellamys in *Upstairs, Downstairs*. Still, perhaps all shall be well: "Though time and time again / Empires may decline and fall, / May suns still shine upon / Roses climbing a brick wall."

Three poems are about poets, religion, and poetry as an art. As a Benedictine monk, Heisey would naturally be interested in poets in holy orders. "G. M. H." considers the case of Gerard Manley Hopkins, a "romantic" who found "painful peace" in "a lonely landscape's inscape," while the speaker is content with "tea and marmalade" and perhaps with being a lesser light among poets. In "R. S. Thomas," the Anglican rector and poet of the title, Welsh in heritage, is seen kneeling in his cold, bare church in a place where the Romans once ruled: "A bard capturing the spirit of the Welsh / In haunting establishment English." Both Hopkins, a convert to Roman Catholicism from an Anglican family, and Thomas, a Welshman in the Anglican church, are, in a way, outsiders, linked by being poet-priests and by Hopkins's own debt to Welsh poetry.

Similarly, though not an outsider in the same sense as Hopkins and Thomas, the American poet and Hartford Insurance Company executive Wallace Stevens practiced what he called "the scholar's art" when he was away from the world of business. Yet Heisey sees these two worlds as intertwined. Heisey imagines Stevens as a poet

> Who meditates nightly,
> Who mediates daily
> Between the world of forms,
> The realm of the invisible ideal,
> And the world of mutable time,
> As real as electric lamplight
> On a glass-topped desk
> Bearing actuarial tables,
> The glass thick green, clear yet
> Reflecting projections,
> Separating the substantial oak,
> The executive's essential desk,
> From the dated volume of mutability,
> Of mortality made incandescent,
> Against which even on timeless
> Quiet evenings in Hartford
> Old poets find no indemnity.
> ("Wallace Stevens")

These poems on religion and poetry are followed by poems on faith and doubt. In "Low Mass" the speaker regrets that "Weakly I believe and poorly." And yet amid the candles and the bell he finds, in silence and humility, signs of hope—in "Impressions numinous" amid which "Silence becomes my eagle's wings; / Kneeling, *non sum dignus*..."—and in Hopkins's "dappled light" a few "fragments of Glory." A darker poem is "Clouds," whose title and theme recall the anonymous late-fourteenth-century English guidebook to contemplative prayer *The Cloud of Unknowing*. There the cloud of unknowing is a giving up of oneself to God in a manner beyond rational understanding in order fully to know Him. In Heisey's poem, the darkness is of a different kind as the speaker, quoting from Poe, finds himself "Retracing steps through a mirrored maze, / Forgetting what's gone before; / Endless nights suspecting, past the haze, / There's 'darkness and nothing more.' "

Later, in "Scripps" (the title being the name of a would-be Christian writer in a modern play), and recalling Sir John Betjeman's poem "Lenten Thoughts of a High Anglican," the speaker takes communion amid Stedman Caters—"a change rung on church bells" (Heisey's note): "Though my devotion may be frozen, / . . . / Yet like Betjeman, receiving, I look // For my longing, piteous romance with God; / Under Stedman Caters my gazes grope, / Amidst incense vapours seeing some poor clod, / My very self, hoping anew for hope." Thus, like Eliot in "The Dry Salvages," so Heisey hears, even in these unlistening times, "the sea bell's / Perpetual angelus."

In the poems of *In the Saquaro Forest*, Mark Amorose, a teacher at Tempe Preparatory Academies in Arizona, hears such an angelus in the natural world and sees human history as a movement toward, and then in modernity a falling away from, Christendom and the coming nearer of the Kingdom of God. In his preface, Amorose finds in the Saguaro Forest of the Sonoran Desert in Arizona evidence that the natural and supernatural orders are at one. A saguaro is a tall green cactus whose arms seem raised like those of a king over his people or like those of a supplicant to heaven. This "paradox of the green desert," as Amorose calls it, is central to the poems in this collection: "A Saguaro Forest surrounds us all. The world is the Saguaro Forest—a place of beauty and wonder, ever pointing beyond itself to the greater beauty and wonder of its First Cause and Final End, while at the same time confronting us with the discomfort and danger of its thorns, reminding us that this is no Eden, that for the present we partake of paradise only by Hope."

In the Saguaro Forest is divided into four sections. Section 1, "The Invisible Things of God," is a sequence of poems about how invisible things are present in—and are understood by way of—things visible. The first poem, "Christendom," evokes a natural-supernatural world that Christian art once captured, that even paganism foreshadowed, and that modernity has lost: "There was a time when earth was poetry, / when heaven spoke in stone and painted glass, / when saint and angel haunting gate and pass / were palpable—when all was mystery."

Another mystery is marriage. In one of his finest poems, "Indissolubility," Amorose argues that the traditional metaphor for marriage—the tying of a knot—should be replaced by one of weaving:

Marriage is poorly figured when we say,
"We tied the knot." A knot can be
untied
this side of death, both going their own
way;
a marriage only ends when one has
died.
So let us say, instead, "We sewed the
stitch."
For stitches pierce to make a permanence,
a taut and sturdy two-in-oneness which
is sundered only by death's violence.

Just so, in matrimony's paradigm,
witnessed before the crucifixion's altar,
the Bridegroom was not knotted to the
tree,
but pierced with needle nail-strokes for
all time:
he wed the Church in order to exalt her
to heaven's indissolubility.

This artful interweaving of metaphors embodies the very essence of the poem.

Section 2, "This Valley of Tears," consists mainly of poems that address problems of modernity from the perspective of a devout Roman Catholic and poet of Christendom. The volume's title poem, "In the Saguaro Forest," posits against its own epigraph from Eliot's "The Hollow Men"—"This is the dead land / This is cactus land"—the green Sonoran desert as a symbol of our postlapsarian state of being: "... For is not all of life / a compromise of paradise and pain, / where every peace is counterpoised by strife?—where mountain's gleaming peak is locked in ice, / and rose wears thorn till Eden comes again." Other poems in this section address the mass killings during World War II in the bombings of Tokyo and Dresden and the dropping of the atomic bomb on Nagasaki. The many hidden killings inside the "dark satanic mill" of an abortion clinic are equally condemned ("Outside a Clinic").

Amorose also laments that steeples of churches are no longer the highest structures in a city; now the tallest buildings are "basilicas of commerce" ("Steeples"). He remembers, too, looking down on New York City from such a building, one of the Twin Towers, at a place "where beetle traffic crawled on tiny wires" and swearing "to look upon such savage sights no more" ("Manhattan"). Ultimately, our problems can be traced to a faith that has gone from the green wood to the dry that yet may become green again: "Never did trial's fire find Christian wood / so sere and brittle: years of compromise / have desiccated us, sucked out our good. / But still one green and hidden hope remains: / as branches of the Vine, cut down, we rise— / the sap of Life still trickles in our veins" ("The Dry Wood").

Section 3, "The Communion of Saints," and Section 4, "First-Saturday Sonnets," may be taken together as a series of significant figures and events in Christian history and in the New Testament that offer light to a darkened age.

A sonnet about Mary and Jesus, the central figures of the "First-Saturday Sonnets," opens "The Communion of Saints." In an elegantly developed metaphor, Amorose imagines Christ as the sun and Mary as the moon who "reflects her solar Lord into our dark." Mary would prefer to circle, Christocentrically, around "her Sun" but revolves instead around this fallen earth for our own good ("Fair As the Moon"). Other poems in section 3 praise Christians who stood against threats from barbarians or followers of other religions: St. Leo the Great, who saved Rome from Attila the Hun (AD 452), and Charles Martel, who, in the Battle of Tours (AD 732), led a French Christian army that defeated invading Muslims.

The last poem of section 3, "Alfred Delp, Priest and Martyr," shows Amorose at his best. Delp, a Jesuit priest and a vocal opponent of Nazism whom the Gestapo would have freed had he renounced the Jesuit order, is led to his execution by hanging in the Plötzensee Prison on February 2 (Candlemas) of 1945:

> Inside the concrete walls where men
>   decline
> to beasts, one rises up. He hears the ring
> of steel on stone. They come for him;
>   they bring
> the word he's waited for. He falls in
>   line.
>
> How high the pulpit towers where he'll
>   preach
> his final sermon from a gallows' rope
> and end his Advent watching! How the
>   night
> is impotent against such brilliant hope!
> For in the blackest hour the Lord can
>   breach
> all darkness with a candle's sudden
>   light.

Section 4, "First-Saturday Sonnets," takes its name from the Roman Catholic devotional practice, closely associated with Fatima, of making confession, taking Communion, and saying the rosary on the first Saturday of five months in succession. These sonnets take us from the Annunciation, the Nativity, and the Presentation in the Temple through the Ascension, the Assumption, and Mary's heavenly coronation. The final poem, "Envoi: to Mary Crowned Queen of Heaven," is addressed directly to Mary as both queen and muse: "Take at my hands this paltry crown of prayer / fashioned from my too-worldly meditation, / and grant, my queen, this mendicant a share / in thy supernal rose-crowned contemplation. / . . . / O mystic rose, my source of inspiration, / make me assistant at thy coronation."

Mark Amorose reminds us that, as Eliot said in *The Idea of a Christian Society*, "we have to remember that the Kingdom of Christ on earth will never be realised, and also that it is always being realised." Likewise, in Amorose's uncompromisingly traditional Christian verse, the world is indeed a Saguaro Forest in a Sonoran desert, a paradoxical mix of the arid and an ever-growing green.

Eliot also argued that a spiritually healthy culture must be based on "the permanent things" (*Idea*). In *'The Portals of Sheol' and Other Poems*, Bryce Christensen, who teaches English at Southern Utah University, writes verse that celebrates, defends, and acknowledges as inevitable these things, the perennial truths of universal human experience, while also criticizing a modern world that would deny them.

Portals is divided into seven sections. Section 1 honors traditional family life in a country setting. Its epigraph states that "other things may change us, but we start and end with the family." In "Piscator," the poet's grandfather, using hooks baited with cheese or a worm, has more luck catching fish the old-fashioned way on a reservoir bank than do others who fish from loud, wave-making power boats with high-tech lures. The secret of the grandfather's success is experience (keeping quiet) and his knowledge of the natural order of things: "He had his secret. Nothing specific: / 'It's all in how you hold your mouth,' he said."

Section 1 closes with poems on initiation experiences. One such poem, "The Spot," finds the poet driving on a mountain road past a place where, as a boy, his grandfather tended sheep with only a dog and a rifle that was as tall as he was. When a bear approached to make a kill, the boy did what he had to do: "With weapon full your size, you stood alone. / Stock still. Right *here*—you aimed your father's gun."

Section 2 is made up of poems on the deaths of family members and friends. "At a Niece's Burial" describes the graveside service, ending with the utter rupture between life and death: "Despite the storm, a few stay on to say / what can't be said to ears too numb to hear. / The rest find cars with radios that play, / today a little softer. She remains . . . / beneath her coffin lid, beneath the rain."

Another kind of aloneness is the act of dying, which cannot be done by any other than oneself. In "Division of Labor," once the professionals—the doctors and the nurses—have done all they can for the poet's mother, it is she, unpracticed in the act, who must do what she has never done before nor will ever do again: ". . . Each hour the nurse conformed / To protocol, and checked your ligatures. / It was between the rounds at nine and ten / That you at last—the experts gone—performed / The final task, still left to amateurs." A more comforting death is that of the poet's grandfather. As the old man lies dying in a nursing home, the sterile scene becomes the world he knew so well in Utah's Sanpete Hills: ". . . the doorjambs sprout / Scrub oak, while juniper invades the lights. / A radiant creek, the hall's alive with trout / That swim beneath linoleum waves. Just bait / Your hook and cast—you won't have long to wait" ("At the End").

The epigraph for section 3 is from Matthew Arnold, who brooded on "this strange disease of modern life." Here the poems examine various symptoms of this disease and point toward possible cures. Modernity has also given birth to illusions and distortions concerning human sexuality and the dream of eternal youth with its physical pleasures. Natural law and traditional morality, however, will still prevail. The poet's note to "Sade, RIP" is instructive: "Fearful that his grave would eventually be attacked by angry Christians, he [the Marquis de Sade] stipulated in his will that his grave was to be seeded with acorns." The poem itself concludes: "Tangled oak thickets let no priest walk through— / Burial promised you sylvan relief. / With Adam and Eve, who fled from God's view, / The Great Pornographer cowers in leaf." Perhaps fear, if not guilt, prevailed for Sade in the end.

Similarly, the illusions and cheap thrills of cruise ship intrigues are exposed in "Travel Magazine—Revised" when time takes its toll: "The handsome playboy charming all aboard, / While juggling five affairs without a slip, / Succumbs to age, and cannot book a trip / Except the one across the Styx' grim ford. / Cabana couples, bronzed on isles they've toured, / All yield to rest-home pallor, and the grippe." At least one tourist, however, leaves behind the ship of pleasure for another kind of ship on which he will "... seek a berth / In pews that line a craft with skyward prow / That splits the blue above the tourists' earth" and thus head home, a pilgrim who "... sets brave sails for distant shores / Aglow with mansions found in no brochures." For both Sade and the tourist, the permanent things are, in the end, immutable and unavoidable.

One poem in section 3—"Bayside Immortals"—stands out forcefully. As Christensen's note on the poem informs us, "San Francisco has not allowed burials within its city limits in more than a century." The poem, an Italian sonnet, reads as follows:

> Please come to Mount Parnassus for the view:
> The winding streets, the flowered hills, the dock,
> The cable cars, the Ferry Tower clock,
> The Golden Gate against Pacific blue.
> Select a play, or cabaret—a new
> Production opens every night to mock
> The hang-ups of the strait-laced Christian flock.
> We're free from graveyard gloom and dark taboo:
> The Tale of Neverland's our holy book!
> We worship Peter, child who won't be man.
> We're all Lost Boys, who play with pirates, sure
> That pixie dust will—once again—beat Hook!
> We spurn the earth's restraints, to soar like Pan.
> Like him, we wonder: What are shadows for?

The subject and implications of this poem require no comment.

Section 4 is composed of a remarkable series of poems on modern physicists and the relationship between theory, practical application (the atomic bomb), and moral responsibility. "Relativity" brings together Einstein's famous theory and moral relativism in Einstein's own life. His first wife, Mileva Marić, leaves her husband by train at a station in Berlin after Einstein's affair with the woman who would become his second wife, Elsa Löwenthal. Christensen imagines

Mileva and Einstein looking at the same stars but very differently: “Her weary eyes scan the night sky, asking / If stars now burning as suns far distant / Warm alien planets where love proves lasting. / He sees the same stars and constellations: / Perseus and Andromeda both run / High above the head that dares to compress / The galaxy in one tight equation.” Yet one day, as in the case of Isaac Newton, who watched the apple fall and developed a theory that seemed unassailable—“He partook and became one of the gods”—Einstein’s theory will be eclipsed. The knowledge that Einstein discovered, however, and the power he unwittingly released, as well as his personal moral culpability, will still remain: “Newton’s divinity faded away. / Alone in the dark, his heir sees the truth: / In theory’s shadows serpents wait for prey.”

The ultimate failure of all theoretical physicists before a mysterious universe that eludes any attempt to penetrate to its core is the subject of perhaps the best poem in this section: “Clausius in Bonn.” As Christensen’s note indicates, Rudolf Clausius (1822–1888) played a major role in the formulation of the Second Law of Thermodynamics, which calculates that the universe will eventually die a “Heat Death” when all its energy is used up. In the poem Clausius mourns the death of his beloved first wife and foresees that his own theories, like those of Aristotle (the Stagirite) and Ptolemy before him, will one day be superseded: “The Stagirite we scoff at; Ptolemy, too— / tomorrow’s scientists will laugh the same / at us... Brave lamps that burn so bright when new / soon flicker low... the night outlasts our flame.” The double-edged sword of modern science—its stunning medical advances and laborsaving machines as opposed to its lethal threats to our humanity and even our very existence in the still unsolved problem of nuclear weapons—remains a grave concern.

Sections 5, 6, and 7 bring *Portals* to a close with a humorous critique of university life today and meditations on Christmas, the Logos, Easter, and the Resurrection as the ultimate answers to death and to the problems of modernity. Christensen’s deepest faith, especially as a poet whose medium is words, is in the Logos, God as the creating Word that gives the cosmos and our lives rational and moral order. This belief is skillfully presented in the sonnet “Ultimate Grammar”:

Our *is*, our *are*, our *am*—all melt away
To *was* and *were*, the markers of a grave.
The sweet infinitives we hope to save—
To sing, *to cheer*, *to love*, *to kiss*, *to play*—
Prove finite: for *to die* will end their stay.
Carousing, *feasting*—gerunds that we crave—
Collapse when *dying* claims both fair and brave.
Permissive modals *might* and *can* and *may*—
All vanish when stern *must* makes *die* our fate.
Our firmest sentences are all interred;
Our strictest syntax will disintegrate
Unless our phrases end in one sure Word:
The very parsing of our prayers will damn
All speakers not dissolved in the *I AM*.

The final poem of the book (“Undone”) takes the reader back to the first Easter. There, the women who come to Christ’s tomb to anoint his body with “unguent, myrrh, or aloes” find that their “caskets” (small chests containing these things) are no longer needed: “...two women race pell-mell, / With empty hands and bursting hearts, intent / On bringing news of angels who defied / Embalmers' plans and bid them quickly tell / Apostles what they'd left undone: the scent / Of spices wafts from caskets cast aside."

The world-transforming message with which the women return to the other disciples brings us, in T. S. Eliot's words, to the situation in which all three poets herein considered find themselves as Christian writers living and working after Christendom and yet still journeying toward the Kingdom: "We shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time" ("Little Gidding," *Four Quartets*). These poets also are on a journey of exploration through modernity toward that state of total unity of being in which St. Julian of Norwich placed her faith in those memorable words that are in the title of Heisey's book and among the last lines of Eliot's final quartet: "And all shall be well and / All manner of thing shall be well / When the tongues of flame are infolded / Into the crowned knot of fire / And the fire and the rose are one." ✝

CLAREMONT
REVIEW OF BOOKS
A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

THE
Claremont Review of Books

"When I was asked, a few years ago, to
list my most important reading matter,
I put *CRB* at the top of my list.
Every issue validates my judgment."
—**George F. Will**

SUBSCRIBE TODAY:

- $27.80 for a one-year subscription
- $55.60 for a two-year subscription
- $83.40 for a three-year subscription

To subscribe, call (909) 621-6825,
or contact **subscriptions@claremont.org**

Visit us at **www.claremont.org/crb**