

# On Holy Ground

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David Middleton

*Bending Toward Heaven: Poems After the Art of Vincent van Gogh*

By Sharon Fish Mooney  
(Wipf and Stock, 2016)

*Colors of the River: Poems*

By Stella Ann Nesanovich  
(Yellow Flag Press, 2015)

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One of the most profound human experiences is that of coming to see the story of our life as both a journey—with its beginning, middle, and end—and a cycle through which we move, like those before and after us, in order to return, somewhat changed yet somewhat still the same, to the place from which we started.

Among such travelers, sojourners, and pilgrims are Homer's Odysseus making his way home across the Middle Sea to Ithaca; Moses and the Israelites passing through the wilderness from Egypt to the Promised Land; Aeneas fleeing the flames of Troy, first for Carthage, then for Italy; and sin-burdened Christian, in Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, walking the long hard road from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City.

Two new books of poetry diligently search for and find such meaningful patterning in human life. Sharon Fish Mooney creates pictures in a series of sonnets on paintings and drawings by Vincent Van Gogh, the

poems being arranged so as to tell the story of Van Gogh's life as an artist whose works embodied his most deeply held beliefs about God, nature, and man. Through her own vividly detailed, sometimes painterly poems, Louisiana poet Stella Ann Nesanovich calls up memories of her early life in New Orleans, her later life in Lake Charles, and her travels beyond the state, always evoking, and then contemplating people, places, and things both natural and man-made, including works of art.

The journeys taken in these books are down long roads converging at T.S. Eliot's "still point of the turning world," where the poets recognize that beginnings and endings are at one and that "the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time" ("Burnt Norton," "Little Gidding," *Four Quartets*).

Sharon Fish Mooney's collection of sonnets on the life and pictures of Vincent Van Gogh captures in its title—*Bending Toward*

*Heaven*—Van Gogh’s journey from being a pastor in training who served the peasants in the coal-mining Borinage region in Belgium, through the years of intense personal suffering and steady artistic development as he moved from place to place, financially dependent on his brother Theo and others, to the summer of 1890, when he shoots himself and dies.

Mooney’s poems are *ekphrastic* poems, from the Greek *ek* (“out, ex-”) + *phrazein* (“to point out or explain”). Such poems responding to works of art have been a part of the Western tradition from Homer’s description of Achilles’s shield in book 18 of *The Iliad* through Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” to Auden’s “Musée des Beaux Arts” and beyond.

It should be noted that Mooney is not only a poet but also a scholar. She has traveled to Europe to see and study Van Gogh’s works and to consult Van Gogh experts. She provides a full scholarly apparatus for her poems: a preface on Van Gogh’s beliefs about religion, the Bible, and art; apt quotations (usually from Van Gogh’s letters) at the bottom of the page of each poem as well as on pages whose numbers mark the book’s eight titled sections; and a comprehensive bibliography. In her preface, Mooney sums up Van Gogh’s beliefs: “To Van Gogh, nature was not the whole of reality; nor was nature God; Nature was poetry and unadulterated metaphor.”

In landscapes, still lifes, portraits, and especially in scenes of rural peasants, whose hard labor had long been fixed by the cycling year and its agricultural seasons, Van Gogh saw the stories and teachings of the Bible wholly embodied: birds as angels, a peasant shepherd as Christ the Good Shepherd, a girl rocking a cradle as taking the place of one of the Magi, or the voices “of bidding and of buying” at an auction of parts of an old torn-down church as like the voices of the money changers in the temple (“Auction of the Crosses”).

In one such painting, “Old Man by the Fire,” Mooney finds an image of the universal human condition. The man sits in a chair by the hearth, his head in his hands, while “A kettle hanging there / Swings like a bell that tolls the final hours / Of day or life itself.” The poem concludes:

There’s no one else in sight, no wife, no son  
to listen, comfort, or to help him shoulder  
heavy burdens that he bears alone.  
Fire turns to ash; the room grows colder.  
This study of a man, weary and worn,  
Reminds us that from dust we all were born.

And before our return to that same dust, each of us, like fallen Adam, must labor as does a weaver who works all day to buy winter firewood for his family: “The shuttle flies for hours to and fro, / Directed by strong fingers, long and deft, / Weaving red fabric on a brown oak loom” (“Weaver Facing Left with Spinning Wheel”).

In some of her poems on Van Gogh’s portraits, Mooney allows the model to speak—Sien the prostitute, who poses as the wife she says she can never be to Van Gogh; or Roulin the postman, who says that the uniform he wears defines only his public self, not the private man within. In another portrait poem, “Self-Portrait with a Dark Felt Hat,” Mooney addresses Van Gogh, asking him why he made this picture of himself “in middle-class attire” that hides his true nature: “But where’s the fire / In your gray eyes?” Here is “No artist’s smock, no signature straw hat, / No pipe, no missing ear, no slanted eye.”

Such changes in perspective continue in what might be called “double-ekphrastic” poems on Van Gogh’s paintings that are themselves imitations of paintings by masters such as Jean-François Millet and Eugène Delacroix. Mooney’s sonnet on Van Gogh’s imitation of Millet’s “The Angelus” concludes:

... The triple stroke repeats  
 Three times, nine peals to summon faithful  
 folk  
 To cease from toil and contemplate the birth  
 Of Word made flesh. Day's work is now  
 complete;  
 Now angelus bells prompt them to invoke  
 The God who blesses virgin wombs and  
 earth.  
 —“The Angelus (after Millet)”

Another angel appears in “The Good Samaritan (after Delacroix),” not directly, but as the Samaritan himself. Of the robbed and beaten man in the parable, Mooney writes, “Near death, he thought he saw / An angel, not a good Samaritan / Lifting him gently onto his own beast, / Attentive to the spirit of the law.”

Mooney's collection ends with poems based on paintings about harvesting, especially the harvesting of wheat. In a letter to his sister Willemien, written not long before he died, Van Gogh compared the harvest to the end of the journey of human life: We must “gaze upon the wheat fields. Their story is ours...to be reaped when we are ripe.” Years before, in a sermon of 1876 (cited by Mooney), Van Gogh had written about the human journey: “It is an old faith and it is a good faith that our life is a pilgrim's progress... We are pilgrims, our life is a long walk, a journey from earth to heaven.”

This “bending toward heaven” of her collection's title appears in “Starry Night,” Mooney's poem on one of Van Gogh's most famous paintings. The poem sums up Van Gogh's own journey from rejected pastor to masterful, though troubled, artist.

On fire with zeal to save the lost, Van Gogh  
 Slept on a mat of straw and preached to poor  
 Coal miners, their kin, and others of low  
 Estate. Yet sensing life had something more  
 In store for him, he left that world behind  
 To study form, anatomy; his art

Could lead to God as well as words. A mind  
 Could bend toward heaven, following the  
 heart  
 Into a flower bursting with the sun.  
 In later years he would hallucinate,  
 Yet still pursued his goal in an asylum,  
 And dreaming dreams transcendent he would  
 paint  
 White clouds, a crescent moon, eleven stars  
 Ablaze with light, reflecting whose they are.

In sonnets less successful than “Starry Night,” Mooney occasionally strains to find end rhymes or to layer syntax over lines, repeats a number of similar phrases, and can be a bit too directly sermonic (unlike Van Gogh the artist, both in theory and in practice). But, at its best, Mooney's ekphrastic verse does justice to the life and work of this major artist whom she has thoroughly studied and into whose work she has entered so deeply in spirit, heart, and mind.

IN *COLORS OF THE RIVER*, Stella Ann Nesanovich tells the story of her own journeying—both onward in time and backward through memory—from her childhood and youth in New Orleans through her later life in Lake Charles, through her reading and in her travels elsewhere. The past and the present are seen as part of “mind's slow tidal flow in time” (“Breaking the Surface”) as memories are recovered, reexperienced in vivid detail, and then placed in a significant pattern. This pattern is not only like a river or a stream but also like great circles and cycles or threads woven into a tapestry. This great finding, shaping, and interpreting of things from the past is linked to All Souls' Day, that day in the cycle of the Church's year when Christians visit and tend to family graves while the dead are lovingly recalled. In a way, Nesanovich's poems, too, are ekphrastic poems with memories like paintings on which the poet meditates, and several, in fact, do respond directly to works of art.

Nesanovich's early life in New Orleans was full of the rich and varied sights, sounds, smells, and tastes of what some have called America's most European city, with its streets named after saints and the nine muses. Nesanovich recalls eating muffedlettas made at home from ingredients purchased at the French Quarter's famous Central Grocery and having beignets and café au lait with her father and sister at the Quarter's Café du Monde:

this moment will last, the sweet delight  
will hold us forever: my sister and me . . .  
.....  
. . . and we have years  
to plan, to dream, to bite into the hot flesh  
of life  
with its tingle, its flavor, its promise  
—“Café du Monde”

But her father, this sister, and another sister are now dead, and in her elegy “Scattering My Sister's Ashes,” Nesanovich meditates on the fate of the body as she thinks on these ashes cast into a lake near Lake Charles: “The body comes down / to this: dust strewn on water, amniotic fluid / we lived in once. Submerged in ocean again, / we join the tidal cycle.”

Yet the fate of the soul is not that of the body. In a moving elegy addressed to her friend and fellow poet Leo Marcello (“For Leo in April”), Nesanovich finds a symbol of hope in a dove (a “Transfiguring sign”) that perches on the steeple of the cathedral at her friend's funeral, and she concludes, “I pictured your life / A pentacle mosaic, points of gold / Radiating grace.”

Such beauty, hope, and grace the poet also found in a church—named, in one of life's mysterious correlations, St. Leo's, where she attended early Mass in her youth. As Nesanovich remembers, there was “Always stained glass: amethyst, vermilion, / blue and emerald, sun-brightened saints,” and a

grotto dedicated to the Virgin “where candles danced in claret wells, / filled triple tiers to honor Mary, / forever cloaked in white and blue.” The poem's last lines are especially moving:

Whatever my sorrow, my desire,  
spirits lifted with Eucharist,  
censing during Benediction:  
haze of myrrh across the nave,  
words and song graced by Latin.

These poems so deeply rooted in Nesanovich's memories of her life in Louisiana are complemented by poems set in other times and places. In “Keepers of Memory,” Nesanovich finds a deep affinity with American Indian women, who, in a culture without a written language, are the tribal scribes, historians, and rememberers who “listen, record treaties in memory's ledgers,” and “carry the past, like the children / corded to their backs.”

In the monologue “T. S. Eliot at Norwich 1942,” Nesanovich follows Eliot as he visits the bombed remains of the church and cell of St. Julian of Norwich, whose words Eliot quotes in “Little Gidding,” the last of the *Four Quartets*. This sacred place is “a labyrinth of vines and dragonflies now” yet still speaks to us “in our desolate century, imprisoned / and starved for sanctity.” The poem closes with Eliot echoing “East Coker”—the second of the *Four Quartets*—and finding in this site and in the ancient rhythms of agricultural life, a source of hope:

. . . Here a bronze crucifix twisted  
by heat, a scent of apples, shocked grain,  
perhaps an end and a beginning,  
The cycles spinning, the slate of years  
unchanged in rural places beyond these  
walls.

Another writer who was born elsewhere but who made his name in the same city as

did Eliot is the subject of “Shakespeare After London.” Back in his native Stratford following his years as a playwright, Shakespeare serves as a lay reader in his home church, Holy Trinity Church (Church of England). Like Eliot at Norwich, Shakespeare sees his return in the end to his rural beginnings as part of a great pattern: “Better to rest in the village of one’s birth / than strut a foreign stage at death. / The logic of life charts a grand circle.”

These journeys, circles, cycles are all stitched together in “Today, A Tapestry Spun with Gold.” Here the lines move back and forth across the page like the warp and woof of woven threads: “memory melding places I have traveled / into one weave.” The poem’s final lines ask a question about a mystery that lies at the heart of Nesanovich’s book:

How is it memory melds so many places  
 into one, as if life’s journeys threaded  
 together in the end, creating a single  
 weave, a textile of panels pressed  
 together, a shift in landscape evocative of  
 the past?

Stella Ann Nesanovich writes poems that are fully realized, neither falling short of nor reaching beyond themselves. The poems are all the more powerful for being quiet and understated in tone. The rhythms are subtly modulated, the symbolic imagery precise, the story clearly presented, and the medita-

tive conclusion to each poem appropriate to all that comes before. Moreover, there is an attractive elegance, graciousness, and gratitude in Nesanovich’s verse, qualities anticipated in this volume’s epigraph from Eliot’s “Little Gidding”: “So I find words I never thought to speak / In streets I never thought I should revisit.”

THE POETS WHOSE POEMS have been here considered are on a journey through life both onward toward and returning to a home: Mooney, through her interpretations of Van Gogh’s life and works; Nesanovich, through memories of her own life and the recalled or imagined lives of others. As T.S. Eliot said in “East Coker,” “Home is where one starts from. As we grow older / The world becomes stranger, the pattern more complicated / Of dead and living.”

And underlying both of these books are traces, however faint or strong, of the old foundations of Christendom, especially the cycles of the Church’s calendar so deeply interwoven with the seasons and the agricultural year. As Vincent Van Gogh wrote just after he had seen a posthumous exhibit of Millet’s drawings of peasants engaged in timeless agrarian labor, “Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.”

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