

THE NOVELTY OF THE ANCIENT TRADITION OF POETRY

Helen Pinkerton Trimpi

*Grace Notes: Poetry from the Pages of
"First Things,"* edited by Paul Lake and
Losana Boyd; preface by Joseph Bottum
(New York: First Things, 2010)

This is a remarkable anthology. The editors Paul Lake and Losana Boyd have chosen poems by seventy-five poets from issues of *First Things* over the past twenty years—already a highly selected body of poetry. As a journal of “religion, culture, and public life,” *First Things* need not cater to any school of poetry or fashionable popularity poll. All the poets included understand the art of poetry—that is, as a medium capable of serious statement about human experience in one of the many forms available in the English-language tradition. There are no poems that do not make sense—no exhibitionist confessions or pretentious experiments in “vertigo” or “self-deconstruction.” Moreover, nearly all the poets prefer traditional English meters, and some are masters of it.

Grace Notes is especially strong in satire, wit, and ironic observation, perhaps

Helen Pinkerton Trimpi

reflecting the satirical penchant of coeditor Paul Lake, author of the powerful political fable *Cry Wolf* (2008), or, more likely, indicative of the “God’s plenty” of subjects for satire in our contemporary culture. Several poems put to good use the dramatic monologue to make a satirical point, as in Oliver Murray’s “Bearing Up,” where in the persona (or voice) of a family member Murray eviscerates the hypocrisy of a church burial ceremony for an atheist. R. S. Gwynn’s “American Crust” uses the dramatic voices of three levels of American society to self-satirize all three with clever wordplay.

A less acerbic satire is Timothy Steele’s inventive “Caesar for a Day,” where his witty exchanges with a neighbor boy, who is acting the role of Shakespeare’s Caesar in a school play, allow him to touch upon contemporary life with both gentle humor and sharp steel. Steele has mastered one version of the plain style—the so-called easy style of Samuel Johnson—that so many contemporaries aim at but fail to achieve, because they do not understand meter and rhythm in principle or in execution, and Steele does. His verse exhibits the “fusion” of meter and rhythm that he has described in his writings on prosody thus: “meter gives rhythm memorable shape and stability while, at the same time, rhythm animates meter with spirit and variety.”

The language of “Caesar for a Day” is rich and accurate, the observations pointed and sometimes aphoristic, sometimes conversational, as good satire traditionally is. The boy’s acting role as Caesar illuminates his character as well as Shakespeare’s conception of the Roman leader. He is “learning how states veer / Off course when they succumb to greed and fear.” Through this seemingly casual anecdote Steele affirms the continuing value of literature: “The world still offers its bewildering mix / Of good and evil, and

we still engage / Issues of friendship and of politics, / Exploring them in books or on a stage,” because we hope that “the trials of others, being known, / Will help us meet and understand our own.” Simple—but extremely important to recognize in the present decay of the study of literature in our schools and universities.

Catharine Savage Brosman’s “Plus Ça Change” gently but firmly critiques the hypocrisies of the “renaissance” of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina: “the money flows / from FEMA and insurance. Who’s to blame / if politics and graft are still the same?” Other excellent satirical pieces are these: Bryce Christensen’s “Bayside Immortals,” a portrait of San Francisco’s “Lost Boys,” who “worship Peter [Pan], child who won’t be man.” Dick Davis in “Admonition for the Seventh Decade” mocks himself through six tetrameter couplets, and enjoins himself: “Find a modicum of quiet; / Quash the long uncivil riot / That goes on inside your heart; / Clear the drunks out, make a start.” Likewise, Stephen Scaer self-mockingly compares his use of time with Luther, Erasmus, and the law writer D’Aguesseau in “Time Management,” concluding ruefully: “Today I slept late, took a walk, / sipped coffee on my ragged lawn, / checked the mailbox, saw the clock, / and noticed half my life was gone.” Another self-satire is David Mason’s epigram “After the Dinner,” where, answering a drunk friend who calls him a “selfish ass,” he agrees, analyzing himself as on an “imaginary rack,” where he is his “own tormenter, wearing black.”

Michael S. Glaser’s “Poetry of Witness” takes the hide off a poet who wrote a hypocritical poem on the Holocaust. Atar Hadari’s “Satan in the Desert” uses Gospel material to satirize Satan as a cheap business man tempting Jesus in the desert, and David Middleton’s epigram “At the Paradise Bar”

observes the elasticity of time “stretching toward Heaven. / The Sign reads ‘Happy Hour—4 to 7.’” One of the cleverest of the satires is A. M. Juster’s “Rejection Note for *Paradise Regained*,” where, in five tetrameter couplets, he caricatures a contemporary book publisher who urges Milton to “take a chance / on self-help or a gay romance” or a “phony” conspiracy: “Marketing knows you’ll see the light, / and thinks Da Vinci is just right.” Juster’s “Revisionism” in six lines skewers divorce lawyers, who claim “six-figure fees / can fix what God has blundered.”

One of the most beautiful and unusual poems, which may be loosely designated as satire, is Joseph Bottum’s “The Hidden Life,” on the classical theme of the choice between public and private life. Addressed to Dana Gioia “upon his taking a public office,” the poem could have been a satirical epistle (of which *Grace Notes* has none), since it employs the plain or conversational style of that form to state the issue. The poet does not didactically try to persuade his friend of the alternative to the public life; rather, through four stanzas of rhyming tetrameter and trimeter, he offers suggestive details of the “hidden,” retired, contemplative or cloistered life. Especially effective is the poet’s use of each stanzaic transition point to repeat the suggestion (in a varied refrain) that his listener “may follow” the “quiet voice that tells / of small, secluded things,” or follow “Beyond the gate / a garden opens on,” or through doors to “high bookshelves in a firelit room,” or, last, in the firelit room, to “the traceless works of childless men: / All printed there to read.” “And you may follow where they lead / or you may look away.” The use of the varied refrain is especially skillful in this rhythmically elegant poem

Small but charming is Julie Stoner’s “Terra Firma,” an ironic riposte by a mother to her youngster, who claims sophisticatedly that in

a world of impending disasters there is no reason to do his chores: “the world might end, and / all your puny labors will be as nothing. / Still you can’t go out with your friends until you’ve / folded the laundry.” Not quite a satire, Avery Cardinal Dulles’s *jeu d’esprit* “The Eve of S. Agnes—Green Bay, 2008, John Keats for Today’s Reader,” parodies Keats’s opening lines in a football context with such invention and wit that it cannot be quoted in part and must be read complete to appreciate.

One more great strength of *Grace Notes* is the number of fine devotional poems: meditations, prayers, and hymns. Among these, arguably, is the most memorable poem in the anthology: Timothy Murphy’s “Augustine’s *Confessions*, 10.27.38.” A direct almost blunt adaptation of St. Augustine’s prose account of his coming to an understanding of the divine “beauty” through sight, hearing, and touch, Murphy’s poem shows a superb mastery of speech rhythm in “fusion” with a varying scheme of iambic trimeter and pentameter on a theme that he has made wholly his own: the beauty of God and his personal difficulty in coming to understand that beauty. Recognizing “late” that divine beauty “lay within,” that he has been “bereft of sight” and has a “deafened ear,” he “thirsted, hungered, yearned.” Then: “You touched me, and I burned. / How late I came to you, / to beauty ever ancient, ever new. / How late I came to you.” The refrain is notable for its power.

Another devotional poem may, also arguably, be the best in the anthology: Richard Wilbur’s “Psalm.” His mastery of form, sequence of thought, and assonance in a poem that uses the theme of religious music is extraordinary. Wilbur’s syllabics (5, 7, 5) exhibit that difficult meter at its finest. Each in turn—the lute, harp, horn, flute, fife,

drum, and cello—is called upon for a special sound to add to the recognition and thanks for differing aspects of life. Opening with “Give thanks for all things / On the plucked lute, and likewise / The harp of ten strings,” it concludes appropriately with “Then, in grave relief, / Praise too our sorrows on the / Cello of shared grief.” But these quotations do not even begin to represent the quality of Wilbur’s mastery of sound in this poem.

Rhina P. Espaillet’s seven translations of St. John of the Cross are also of a high order. The best is “I Went In, I Knew Not Where,” St. John’s meditative masterpiece on the search for transcendence of the limits of human knowledge. Espaillet’s seven-line stanzas of accentual trimeter and tetrameter with some variations are unified by a refrain, “Past the boundaries of knowing,” that encapsulates the theme of the poem and ties it to the substance of each individual stanza. Quite different, her translation of St. John’s short moral poem, “The Sum of Perfection,” is an excellent example of a trimeter epigram. “Forget created things, / But their Creator never; / The core attend forever; / Love Him from whom love springs.” This is “much in little”—to quote the title of a very different poem by Yvor Winters (and an old Latin tag).

Another interesting devotional poem is Moore Moran’s “Holy Thursday.” Writing in the context of the traditional reason-versus-faith debate, the poet concludes with a personal appeal: “Be more, Lord, than my hope, Your innocence. / Reason has never known / how to live with its own / immaculate, hard-hearted arguments.”

A subtle variant of the usual devotional poem is an unusual sonnet by the late Alan Sullivan. His “Annunciation” is a rejection of a divinity. The type is famously illustrated by Wallace Stevens’s “Sunday Morning.” But here Sullivan rejects Gaia, a current favorite

divinity of our era, and affirms a return to the Christian God. After a remarkably precise and effective description of “moths that sip / tears from sleeping birds,” communicating thus a virus that kills the birds, the poet addresses Gaia: “Goddess, you have drunk too many tears, / and I shall worship you no more. Your drug / ceases to numb my hopes or soothe my fears / that something else exists beyond your bug / and bird—the Lord all beings dimly seek / incarnates in your realm of claw and beak.”

Representing a third great traditional form, the editors have chosen several beautiful poems that take death as their theme, either as elegy, epitaph, or meditation. Wiley Clements’s epitaph, “At Arlington,” on a soldier dead at seventeen, notes that whether he was “brave / or terrified or both” we do not know, but “the only life he had to give he gave.” Dana Gioia’s elegy “Majority” is structured by the evocation at different ages of his child who died as an infant, concluding thus: “Now you are twenty-one. / Finally, it makes sense / that you have moved away / into your own afterlife.” Sally Thomas’s thoughtful “Choice” elegizes the death of an aborted child. In a voice that admonishes the speaker, the poem picks up successive details of the life of the child as she would have appeared at different ages (similar to Gioia’s poem), with a powerful conclusion, when the poet asks: “When was it you began to hear / silence? They don’t tell you / about that voice, clear, insistent, steady / as a heartbeat, asking, How weren’t you ready?” Interestingly, the poet and novelist Janet Lewis recorded an experience similar to Gioia’s and Thomas’s of a relationship to a dead child, in her story “Goodbye Son” (1943). Her evocation of successive visions of a still-born child concludes with the appearance of a young soldier going off to war.

Another fine poem on death is Anthony Lombardy’s “To My Grandfather.” He uses family memories of his grandfather to cope with his father’s slow dying, then asks his grandfather: “I see my father hesitate. / Oh, do not let him stay too late / in the world you left too early.” Another is A. E. Stallings’s “Aegean Story: Euboia, Greece,” a slight but touching elegy for a fisherman’s son, age twenty-three, who was washed overboard in a storm. In excellent tetrameter quatrains, Stallings focuses on the father’s search and finding of his son, concluding with the detail of a gold cross “incorruptible and pure,” by which the lost son’s body was identified. Another successful elegy using well-defined natural details is Max Sutton’s “Remembering John Bunce.” Other notable poems on death are Robert Shaw’s “Finding the Diary,” about a parent’s death, and Joseph Epstein’s “Edward Shils in Heaven,” a humorous elegy for a friend.

There are a number of poems, as might be expected, occasioned by observation of the natural world, of which Les Murray’s “Eucalypts in Exile” is the richest in its sharp and knowledgeable observation of the adaptable Australian native tree in other parts of the world. Surprisingly but perhaps suggestive of our current mores, there are no love poems in *Grace Notes*, although there is an amusing tribute to a marriage by T. S. Kerrigan, “The Monahans.” There is one effective poem of praise, Deborah Warren’s “Hercules’ Eighth Labor: The Man-Eating Mares of Diomedes,” and a wry narrative character study by Robert B. Shaw, “The Better Part of Valor.”

A provocative poem on a work of art is Diane Bonds’s “‘Hotel Room’ (Edward Hopper, 1931).” From Hopper’s painting of a woman in a “cell-like room,” seated on a bed reading, Bonds develops the theory that “any woman reading / is an annunciation.”

Then, alluding to Vermeer's "Girl Reading at an Open Window" (1659), she surmises further that "Vermeer knew this: / reading is parthenogenetic, magic / doubling of the self fertilized by words." She cites details in his painting that support a comparison of Hopper's scene to the iconography of Annunciation scenes in art, concluding: "consider whom / she resembles most: Mary clinging to her book / as she withholds her gaze from Gabriel."

This interpretation of Hopper, Vermeer, and traditional Annunciation scenes is interesting, but is it true that reading words "doubles the self"? Isn't reading rather an opening of the self to the experience of other selves—an addition of difference not a doubling of the self? And wasn't the meaning of the Annunciation paintings that show Mary closing her book or turning from it that she is acknowledging and accepting the angel's infusion of grace?

Another poem on a work of art that falls short of what it could have been is Lawrence Dugan's "Victory Near the Plaza," on Augustus St. Gaudens's equestrian statue of General William Tecumseh Sherman at

the entrance to Central Park, in which the Civil War hero is led by the figure of Victory. The great potential of the subject, Sherman's real military genius and the significance of his victory for the Union and the artist's embodiment of it, is not fully explored. Dugan praises "the dark sincerity / Of angel and warrior" but fails to clarify the theme.

Adding considerably to the breadth of *Grace Notes* are translations from the Portuguese of Luis de Camões by William Baer; from the Latin of Gerard Manley Hopkins by Philip C. Fischer, and of Horace's *Satires* by A. M. Juster; and from the Old English of the *Beowulf* poet by Alan Sullivan and Timothy Murphy. In addition, "The Libertine against Abortion" is an adaptation of Ovid's *Amores* by Joseph Bottum, who was editor of *First Things* at the time of publication. In his preface, Bottum writes that *First Things*'s "great strategic plan was to restore the place of new poetry in the public discourse of America." Besides succeeding in this effort, mainly by the quality of the satirical and devotional poems included, this anthology is and should continue to be a pleasure to read in the future.