

Transfigurations of Love

Beauty, Desire, and Union with God

We live in difficult times, in a dry season when language seems threatened, broken by misuse and increasingly emptied of meaning. This has much to do with the sheer excesses of communication under which we find ourselves staggering; gone are the days of receiving real letters, and taking measured time to respond to what was important. Of course, we should not fool ourselves. The fragility of language has long been a subject of concern among those of our writers who care for it and tend its future. Thus, T.S. Eliot reminded us of this already in the early 1930s, describing our plight in “Burnt Norton” with a biting image:

...Words strain,
Crack and sometimes break, under the burden,
Under the tension, slip, slide, perish,
Decay with imprecision, will not stay in place,
Will not stay still.¹

If language remains one of the central treasures of our lives, it is a fragile and wounded gift.

In our day, the sheer oversaturation of communicating is wearying, leaving us strangely isolated despite the rapidity and extent of it all: the wide reach of the media conveying an unending stream of images, advertisements, and entertainment; the expanding world of “social media,” with a barrage of apps promising to “connect” us in ever new ways; and of course, all this enabled, to an expanding degree, by the internet, which like the cosmos, according to physicists, is expanding outward toward some kind of imagined infinity—whatever one can surmise of this, under such unimaginable circumstances. In the midst of this increase, though, we seem lonelier than ever, with many among us desperately longing for something deeper, truer, and more abiding than the promise of our storied lives seems able to deliver.

Of course this is not new, even if the causes and forms of our self-alienation appear to be so. Augustine, that luminous theologian whose writings shaped western culture at the waning of the classical age, described our plight with a vivid metaphor: we live, he wrote, as creatures turned from the source of their true identity, lost in what he memorably described as “a place of dissimilarity” (lat. *regio*

¹ T.S. Eliot, “Burnt Norton” 5, *Four Quartets*, London and New York, 1943.

dissimilitudinis).² It was a phrase he'd pillaged from the Platonists, an image reflecting—if not shaping—a central conviction of medieval theological sensibilities, and nowhere as significantly as in the monastic communities that carried the western heritage through the Middle Ages. With the coming of modernity, marked by the watershed event of the Protestant Reformation, all this began to change, giving way to a cultural shift that, I would argue, served to sharpen this sense of estrangement. If Augustine intended his metaphor of the “place of dissimilarity” to refer primarily to individuals’ alienation, the phrase came to describe an anguished cultural transition, as the long era of Christendom with its theological certainties began to crumble and give way to the rise of a vigorously contested *saeculum*.

Let me explain this shift by means of an example taken from the period just before the Reformation, in this case a claim made by the visionary theologian of the early 15th century, Julian of Norwich. Illustrating the method of what she called her “showing,” she described how the visions she received “happened” to her—and thus, how the reader might learn to follow them:

All this was shown in three ways: that is to say, by bodily vision, and by words formed in my understanding, and by spiritual sight. But I neither can nor may show the spiritual vision as openly or as fully as I would like to.³

At first glance, all this sounds simple enough: first, Julian was given something concrete to “see,” many of them quite conventional images given the piety of her day—like the bleeding head of Jesus, his body languishing on the cross, and so forth; second, she received a verbal explanation of what it meant; and third, she gained a “seeing” transcending language, beyond even seeing itself, that reached a deeper, more intimate realm of experience. We might describe it as an inner certitude, a spiritual assurance; she would have understood this, with her contemporaries, as something akin to *unio mystica*.

If such a schema would have been scarcely contested in her day, this is far from the case in ours: assertions like this seem untenable given the intellectual assumptions and cultural mood of late-modern sensibilities, particularly within the academy where theology still has its formal locus. Is this progress? Many among us, including those in the teaching ranks of our theological faculties, would presume this to be the case. From Augustine’s vantage point, however, all this might simply represent a form of cultural “dissimilitude,” to recall his image, one leaving us estranged from ourselves, empty of hope and bereft of an inner assurance.

Now let us move ahead some four centuries to a period shaped by the gathering momentum of the European Enlightenment. In an age of dramatic cultural dislocation—an era of political revolution, the travails of which were mirrored in deep intellectual and cultural shifts—the shoemaker-poet Friedrich Hölderlin wondered about the gains, and losses, all this suggested. In a poem of haunting foresight he asked in a blunt form without any shadow of irony: “What use are poets in a destitute age?”⁴ What he meant with this query exposed, to his mind, the

² Augustine, *Confessions* VII.x (16).

³ See Ch. 9 of the Long Text; *Revelations of Love*, Translation Elizabeth Spearing, Introduction and Notes A.C. Spearing, Hamondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1998, p. 54.

⁴ “Und wozu Dichter in dürftiger Zeit“. Friedrich Hölderlin, “Brot und Wein”, *Gedichte*, Stuttgart: Reclam, 1977, p. 111; author’s translation.

roots of the “modern” malaise, pointing to an inner alienation that had left us without “bread and wine,” to recall the title of the poem. For he sensed amid the “progress” of the Age of Enlightenment rumblings presaging the collapse of a heritage that had shaped European society since the early mingling of classical and Christian cultures—exemplified nowhere as vividly as in writings of that mature convert to the faith, Augustine of Hippo.

Hölderlin described all this by means of a vivid image of the gods receding from us into distant places, impatient with our spiritual indifference and this-worldly ambitions:

But friend! We’ve come too late. Yes, the gods are still alive,
But now they’re above us, in a different world than ours.
They’re still endlessly active there, but seem unconcerned with
Whether we’re alive, these heavenly beings who’d cared for us.
For a weak vessel is not always able to grasp them, and we’re
Rarely able to endure the full measure of the divine.
Our life has become at best a dreaming of them. [...] ⁵

Perhaps Hölderlin was right, and Nietzsche after him, in sensing that modernity was facing a “twilight of the gods,” leaving us little to do but to dream about the departed divine. Of course, theirs was a poetic vision, an image brooding over a seeping spiritual indifference that had rooted itself deeply in the society of their day, to the point that the very notion of a “land of dissimilarity” no longer made sense. Hölderlin even went so far as to suggest, in the lines that follow, that our plight might be best compensated by sleep as we find ourselves “waiting, always waiting” for the gods to return.

I

Viewed from such a vantage point, the fiber of modernity seemed to be a plight caught between dull indifference, at one extreme, and impatient confusion, at the other. Few of those charged with the public work of theology could imagine any longer what Julian of Norwich meant with her language about “spiritual vision,” described in her “Showings” as our being “oned” with God, an experience of an inner joining, of becoming—to recall her language—“one substance” with God. To clarify what she meant by this, she followed a long tradition by borrowing words and images loaded with erotic power: we are to “cleave” to God, to become joined with God as “one,” and to seek God “until we truly know him who has enclosed us in himself.”⁶ Now whatever else one might say of such language, what is clear is that she presumed an uncontested reliance on the language of bodily desire, on erotic imagery to speak of spiritual things. She presumed, following a long theological tradition reaching back to Antiquity, that the body was the primary locus by which we might sense of something beyond it—and in this case her metaphors point to a transfiguration of our experience, such that the body became a kind of “text” describing experiences that point to a spiritual reality that is

⁵ Friedrich Hölderlin, “Brot und Wein”.

⁶ See Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Love* (Long Text), ch. 6.

somehow “within” and yet beyond the body itself. All well and good, one might well conclude, but can any of this hold meaning for us who seem to live in an age estranged from such language and experience?

I can address this question only in a provisional manner here, but having posed it I would like to explore what this might mean by returning to Augustine. Why this? In part because he found himself as we do, if in quite different cultural circumstances, living through the dissolution of one age and at the still undefined brink of another. For him, this meant facing the receding of the ancient gods that had long shaped the Romans’ cultural imagination, and giving some account for the arrival of a new age shaped by the revelations of the Christian God. Might this cast light on the dissolutions of our own age when that God, long anchored at the heart of western culture, seems to have receded—even while we, in our churches at least, continue making gestures in our worship as if little or nothing had changed? I am above all intent on probing what it might mean to see the body as metaphor, as a vehicle of expression and experience capable of “sensing” realities that exceed what it “knows” in a narrowly physical way.

Here I can only sketch one possible scenario, and in brief form, turning in this case back to Augustine and his *Confessions*—and, more specifically, the “hinge” book—Book 10—where he turns from the long narrative that had preoccupied him in the first nine books to offer a long meditation on *memoria*, or memory. This turn is the outcome of what had preceded, since Augustine here pauses to give an inner account of the outer consequences of his struggles and successes, his failures and discoveries. What he is after is the root-pulse of conversion, hidden in the depths of his inner self. And thus he turns from what one expects of an autobiography—this being one of the first such attempts in Late Antiquity—to take account of his healing, pointing to the secret workings of his soul within the span of his life *in Deum*.

The question that drives Augustine’s “confessions” is a simple if demanding one: where are we to find this “God” who might well have once aroused our hearts, but now seems far removed from us? What he makes clear—and this is a constant theme in theology from antiquity to the dawning of modernity—is that it is not the mind’s acuity that matters, but rather the heart’s arousal. One of his close readers living roughly a millennium after his death and thus a contemporary of Julian’s, the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, put it this way: “God cannot be comprehended by our intellect or any man’s—or any angel’s, for that matter. But only to our intellect is he incomprehensible, not to our love”—and its transfigurations, I would add. The author of the *Cloud* goes on to describe here how, in love, we find ourselves “joined” to God like this: When this happens, it does so “always [as] a sudden impulse, coming without warning, springing up to God like some spark from a fire.”⁷ But how does it “spring up to God” except through the experiences we have of bodily love, with all its passions and desires, transfiguring our longings and unions? What other language should we borrow than

⁷ See *The Cloud of Unknowing*, Translation (to modern English) and Introduction Clifton Wolters, Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1961, p. 63 (ch. 4).

that which conveys the intense experiences of love as we come to know them in our bodies?

Augustine, of course, begins this account—as one might expect from a theologian in Late Antiquity—not by turning to knowledge. After all, he knew nothing of Kant’s valiant—if awkward—attempt to speak of religion “within the bounds of reason alone.” Rather, he begins with love, which of course makes sense, since in the first instance none of us, with our natural yearning for union, looks elsewhere than this to understand our deepest nature. But what is staggering about Augustine’s argument, given his personal history and the prevailing philosophical trends of his day, was his refusal to sever the body from the spirit in this quest—as many had done before him and were to do after, following the powerful allure of monastic life. And in this, we find the hallmark of his genius as a constructive arbiter of the classical tradition of Platonism, which had long favored the soul over the body and envisioned “redemption” as a freeing of the soul from the “prison” (lat. *sema*) of its body (lat. *soma*).

Augustine’s embrace of the incarnation is what ultimately persuaded him to resist such a dualism, since this teaching affirmed the joining of matter and spirit, body and soul. It was also this doctrine that expressed God’s mediating desire to come close to what was far off, an overcoming of the Platonic notion—and somehow all-too-human presumption—that a divine being must be transcendent and utterly beyond our “natural” experience.⁸ The question Augustine goes on to frame is this: if an incarnational love is God’s way with us, what kind of love does this suggest for us? And what would it mean to say that we love God and do so—as he puts it here—not with “an anxious feeling” but rather as “a matter of conscious certainty”?⁹ What could he have meant with this, and what might we make of such a claim?

What this musing leads to—or derives from—is one of the classic accounts of the *unio mystica* as found in the ninth book of Augustine’s *Confessions*, which is where I begin this exploration. Here, Augustine traces his life from the communal life he and friends established at Cassiciacum to the death of his mother Monica, a defining experience that grounded him in the heart of the faith. What is striking about this experience, first of all, is that it arose out of a prolonged conversation the two had had, on a day less than a week before Monica was to die. He described a momentary experience of union that came after a kind of “ascent” of the mind through the things of this world, and a corresponding “ascent”—as he conceives it—into the mind’s ultimate union with the divine:

⁸ Augustine elaborates this discovery in the final pages of Book VII of the *Confessions*, which is given over to his “conversion” to and finally from Platonism. See especially VII.xviii (24).

⁹ Augustine, *Confessiones* X.vi (8); here and elsewhere in this paper I have followed Henry Chadwick’s translation, with some slight adjustments: see Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, Translation, Introduction and Notes Henry Chadwick, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

The conversation led us toward the conclusion that the pleasure of the bodily senses, however delightful in the radiant light of this physical world, is seen by comparison with the life of eternity to be not even worth considering. Our minds were lifted up by an ardent affection toward eternal being itself. Step by step we climbed beyond all corporeal objects and the heaven itself, where sun, moon, and stars shed light on the earth. We ascended even further by internal reflection and dialogue and wonder at your works, and we entered into our own minds (*interius cogitando et loquendo et mirando opera tua, et venimus in mentes nostras*). We moved up beyond them so as to attain to the region of inexhaustible abundance (*et venimus in mentes nostras et transcendimus eas, ut attingeremus regionem ubertatis indeficientis*) where you feed Israel eternally with truth for food.¹⁰

He goes on to speak of entering into divine wisdom where life is suspended in a state of rest, somehow beyond time and space:

And while we talked and panted after [this], we touched it in some small degree by a moment of total concentration of the heart (*atingimus eam modice tot ictu cordis*). And we sighed and left behind us ‘the first fruits of the Spirit’ (Rom. 8:23) bound to that higher world, as we returned to the noise of our human speech where a sentence has both a beginning and an ending... That is how it was when at that moment we extended our reach and in a flash of mental energy attained the eternal wisdom which abides beyond all things. If only it could last, and other visions of a vastly inferior kind could be withdrawn! Then this alone could ravish and absorb and enfold in inward joys the person granted the vision.¹¹

What shapes this experience is Augustine’s understanding of the arc by which God created us in a restless state, rooting in our “mind” a longing for fullness and rest at once—and, for Augustine, this was imaginable only as the apex of our experiencing an “intellective” union, only describable in and through the physical. What is important here, at least for the purposes of this talk, is the continuum Augustine acknowledged by which one “climbed” step by step up through the physical to the spiritual, pointing to a “total concentration of the heart” as the gift of this experience.

In a celebrated passage from Book Ten—devoted to *memoria*—Augustine returns to this theme to elaborate it further, offering a brilliant play upon the expectations of readers who were trying to make sense of their lives amid the tangled web of classical and Christian cultures. In this passage, read in its entirety, Augustine reminds us of the truth that the modern balladeer Bob Marley described as “one love”:

When I love you, what do I love? It is not physical beauty nor temporal glory nor the brightness of light dear to our earthly eyes, nor the sweet melodies of all kinds of songs, nor the gentle odor of flowers and ointments and perfumes, nor manna or honey, nor limbs welcoming the embrace of the flesh; it is not these I love when I love my God.¹²

In this opening answer to his question what it means that he loves God, Augustine seems to side with the dualism carried by the platonic heritage of his day, elevating the spiritual above the physical and thus envisioning the soul as higher than the body.

This is only the opening thrust of his argument, of course, a rhetorical tactic meant to stake out the generally accepted ground held by philosophy in his day. What follows exposes the decisive ground-shift Augustine helped to bring into theological discourse of this age—which would shape Christian thought, to a greater or lesser degree, well into modernity. Having conceded that all the beautiful

¹⁰ Ibid., IX.x (24).

¹¹ Ibid., IX.x (24, 25).

¹² Ibid.

things he loved were not what he loved when he loved God—“It is not these I love when I love God”—he then bends the argument in a startling way:

Yet there is a light I love, and a food, and a kind of embrace when I love my God—a light, voice, odor, food, and a kind of embrace of the inner person, where my soul is floodlit by light which space cannot contain, where there is sound that time cannot seize, where there is a perfume which no breeze disperses, where there is a taste for food no amount of eating can lessen, and where there is a bond of union that no satiety can part. This is what I love when I love my God.¹³

This is a remarkable turning point in the argument, reflecting the fundamental conversion Augustine himself had experienced, one by which he had come to see the unity of love running through all human experience—that of the body and soul alike. Far from repudiating the body with all its desires and delights, as his earlier tutelage at the feet of the great Manichaean teachers of North Africa had persuaded him to do, he came to see that there was but one love that shaped us as humans—as social creatures with each another and, in a metaphorical sense, as spiritual beings in our relationship with the divine. He goes on, then, to face the “cultured despisers of religion” in his day—i.e., philosophers, like himself at a younger age, who viewed the incarnation as a repugnant teaching—in order to clarify what he meant by speaking of this continuum of the physical with the spiritual, or what was “outer” and “inner” to the mind:

Amazement grips me. People are moved to wonder by mountain peaks, by vast waves of the sea, by broad waterfalls on rivers, by the all-embracing extent of the ocean, by the revolutions of the stars. But in themselves, they are uninterested. They experience no surprise that when I was speaking of all these things, I was not seeing them with my eyes. On the other hand, I would not have spoken of them unless the mountains and waves and rivers and stars (which I have not seen) and the ocean (which I believe on the reports of others) I could see inwardly with dimensions just as great as if I were actually looking at them outside my mind. Yet when I was seeing them, I was not absorbing them in the act of seeing with my eyes. Nor are the actual objects present to me, but only their images. And I know by which bodily sense a things became imprinted on my mind.¹⁴

Augustine’s antidote to this “indifference” carries the full weight of his argument, since he here attunes himself to what it might mean to grasp the true nature of the self, with all its complexities—and possibilities. In facing this reality, which is to say, in facing himself, he traces a path that swerved away from a cynical or despairing resignation to the “land of dissimilitude.” A long and complex discourse follows in which he deepens his meditation on what memory is, and what lies beyond it. In essence, he suggests that memory does not simply hold images. Rather, it carries traces of the “realities” themselves—and in this he remains, after all, Platonist to the core—in the sense that the mind holds something essential about what it perceives on the basis of the body’s receptivity. That is, all recognition—all re-cognition, or re-remembering—has to do with memory. All well and good, but what is the point of this argument, which strikes modern ears as strange if not finally incomprehensible?

What Augustine is after here, beyond the mind’s capacity to hold something essential about what it recalls, is his sense that something inherent within us seeks to understand nothing less than the self. But this is not simple, nor is it easy; so great, after all, is the “dissimilarity” into which we have all fallen. For when all is

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., X.vii (15).

said and done, he concludes, “I find my own self hard to grasp. I have become for myself a soil which is a cause of difficulty and much sweat,” here echoing a text from Genesis 3.17f.¹⁵ And yet, as he goes on to say, “It is I who remember, I who am mind. It is hardly surprising if what I am not is distant from me. But what is nearer to me than myself? Indeed the power of my memory is something I do not understand when without it I cannot speak about myself.”

At this pivotal juncture, Augustine gives voice to a theme that resounds throughout classical literature, viz., the eudemonic appeal, which is to say the question about what brings us happiness. What he refuses to do, in shaping this argument, is to renounce the body with its varied physical experiences—and above all, those we think of as “ecstatic,” by which in an excess of joy we seem to “stand outside” ourselves. How does he describe this? To love the happy life is “simply joy grounded on truth.” This would have startled his first readers, unprepared as they were to base any argument about happiness on the experience of joy. It might seem a stretch, too, for the “cultured despisers of religion” in our own day who refuse the Christian view of human sinfulness and its “remedy” in practices of forgiveness.

Precisely at this point Augustine makes a decisive turn, considered in both intellectual and spiritual terms, a poetic turn unprecedented among Christian theologians of his day who also found themselves invited to discern their path at this crossroads where the ancient Platonic tradition met the “modern” revelation of Christian truth. His argument might well startle us as well, wearied as we are by attempts to lay forth intellectual arguments at just this point—that dimension of knowing Julian of Norwich would later describe as “words formed in our understanding.” No, Augustine refuses to articulate an intellectual argument here, since this could not possibly lead us to “simply joy grounded on truth.” Rather, he chooses the path of aesthetics to answer the question of who we truly are—and I would argue that this is a constructive decision of inestimable importance.

Looking back on his turn to Christianity, Augustine takes the treasures he had gathered of classical wisdom—read: Platonism—and gave them a decisively new shape inspired by the doctrine of the incarnation, the mediating heart of Christian teaching as he had come to understand it. What he claims here takes us to what he considered belonged to transfiguring power of love: above all, the conviction that God is within us, in our “memory,” before and beyond our knowing, there making for himself “a resting place,” or as he described it “a kind of sanctuary [which God] has built for [him]self.”¹⁶ But note well: this is a claim, not a fact, and yet one rooted empirically in what he had experienced—and presumed all could experience. But it is a claim, he suggests, that takes us back not to our intellect, not to an academic argument, not to conceptual thinking, but to the “transfigurations” of love—the excess that belongs to the joy we experience in and through our bodies. And here, the work of metaphor finds its deepest mooring, for what we know of the inner finds expression primarily through the outer, just as the spiritual finds itself squarely rooted in the physical.

¹⁵ Ibid., X.xvi (24).

¹⁶ Ibid., X.xxiv (35).

Augustine gives expression to this in an eloquent prayer that brings his introspective journey to its climax:

Late have I loved you, beauty at once so ancient and so new. Late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all. You called and cried out loud and shattered my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and now I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours.¹⁷

The startling eloquence of this prayer steers us toward the bodily texture of our lives—and, more to the point, to the heart of our love. For it is this love, with its transfiguring power which we experience in and through the body's capacities for joy, that establishes our longing for "peace," from the instability (and insatiability) of the body's desires. In order to gain it, however, we must be "touched," wooed, caressed, and, yes, "set on fire"; nothing else will bring us to this point, which Augustine sees as the inner shape of our redemption.

One might well see this poetic turn in Augustine as anticipating the claim made by the contemporary English writer Jeanette Winterson's claim that "the fiction, the poem, is not a version of the facts [but] an entirely different way of seeing."¹⁸ For the poetic offers a kind of vision at once rooted in our bodied life but not reduced to this. That is, our body remains the locus of our identity precisely because of its capacity to transcend "outer" and "inner," to transfigure the physical in ways that carry us into the realm of the spirit. Through our bodily experience we come to see that our deepest—and truest—hope is for what the body anticipates but cannot and indeed need not fully deliver. And yet we can only come to know this through the transfiguring experiences we make in and through our bodies.

II

What this suggests invites us to see the aesthetic as the ultimate locus of theological work, since it is here that the physical and spiritual meet and mingle at the deepest level of our experience. What might it mean to follow this turn and accept such wisdom in our day? Let me close by turning from Augustine to the witness of modern poets, and first of all a provocative poem by Denise Levertov that speaks in its own way of the body's "transfigurations" of love. To understand this poem, we must have some familiarity with an earlier poem by the English romantic poet William Wordsworth, and recognize an allusion to one of the psalms.

First, then, let us turn briefly to Wordsworth, a contemporary of Hölderlin and one of the eminent voices of English romanticism. One of his best-known sonnets opens with lines that would once have been familiar to most English readers, even if might not remember where they were from:

¹⁷ Ibid., X.xxvii (38).

¹⁸ Jeanette Winterson, *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*, New York: Vintage Books, 1995, p. 28.

The world is too much with us, late and soon.
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!¹⁹

Whether one knows the full poem or not, I suspect few among us would dispute his point here, which is that our determined efforts to acquire wealth—and how poignant these lines read for us, these centuries later—are as beguiling as they might be foolish: “Getting and spending we lay waste our powers.” Wordsworth is here lamenting that we’ve lost our way, squandered our “powers,” forfeited our hearts—having entered that “region of dissimilitude,” as it were, where we have lost any sense of our true self. To his mind, we have laid our nobility to waste because of the way we have severed our ties with the natural world—“Little we see in nature that is ours”—and depleted ourselves with the desire simply to “make money,” as the clumsy English metaphor puts it, without any higher purpose. This hollow greed, Wordsworth felt, has alienated us from anything resembling beauty, and left us impoverished and lonely in our world.

When the English-American poet Denise Levertov sought to describe our plight during the revolutionary decade of the 1960s, as she does in the poem suggestively entitled “O Taste and See”—an allusion to the opening of Psalm 34—she frames our crisis quite differently than had Wordsworth before her. And here we enter into the conversation by which poets indwell the world at the level of its beauty in order to grasp something “more” than the joys promised by the “outer”—i.e., the measure of physical sensations that delight us. She begins with what jazz musicians would call a “riff” on Wordsworth:

The world is
not with us enough.
O taste and see

the subway Bible poster said,
meaning The Lord, meaning
if anything all that lives
to the imagination’s tongue,

grief, mercy, language,
tangerine, weather, to
breathe them, bite,
savor, chew, swallow, transform

into our flesh our
deaths, crossing the street, plum, quince,
living in the orchard and being

hungry, and plucking
the fruit.²⁰

¹⁹ William Wordsworth, “The World Is Too Much with Us”, first published in *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807).

²⁰ Denise Levertov, “Taste and See”, *Taste and See*, New York: New Directions, 1964.

This is a poem that points toward what I am calling the “transfigurations” of love, the power of the aesthetic which reminds us that the body has an outer as well as an inner dimension of perception. How else can we make sense of what transports us in hearing a passage of music, or being moved by the color and form in a painting? Here, we do well to recall George Steiner’s passionate appeal to the arts in *Real Presences* (1989),²¹ where he describes their witness in terms of the “shining forth” of epiphanies:

All good art and literature begin in immanence. But they do not stop there. Which is to say, very plainly, that it is the enterprise and privilege of the aesthetic to quicken into lit presence the continuum between temporality and eternity, between matter and spirit, between man and ‘the other.’²²

Steiner goes so far—to provoke an argument—as to see the arts as implicitly “metaphysical,” even if they function on a level we would think of as “secular” expressions—whether in the verbal arts, and above all poetry, the audible art of music, the kinetic art of dance, the visual art of painting, and so forth. Each genre of the arts gestures toward, each holds within itself, some vestige of “presence,” of real presence, which we sense without being able to define or manage. The allusion to the medieval teaching of transubstantiation is hardly accidental.

Levertov suggests as much in her poem, reminding us that the injunction to “taste and see”—the Lord, one expects—need not be confined to the gestures of religion, which Nietzsche had already suggested were too often “tamed” and sterile under the pressures of modernity. Indeed, our presumed mastery of religion is, following Nietzsche again, what “killed” God in the first place. Against narrowing presumptions of this sort, Levertov’s ironic reference to seeing this bit of a Psalm on a subway poster suggests that religion—at least our too often flaccid and self-satisfied versions of it—is not always a solution to the problems we face. And what she is after, with her riff on Wordsworth, is not yet another lament against consumerism, even if this would not be misplaced. No, she is after something else here, pointing to another shadow in the kind of religion—or morality—that postures as faithful but misses or distorts something essential about our human condition: that the world is not with us enough, and we as “religious” people have all too often dulled ourselves to the experience of the sacred in the midst of the ordinary. She plays with this by means of a marvelous and memorable phrase, “all that lives to the imagination’s tongue,” and goes on to name a series of disparate things: grief, mercy, language, tangerine, weather.” What an odd and marvelous collection this is, beginning with those most poignant experiences of the heart—grief and mercy—and moving on to, well, a startling assembly of things that can only bring a smile.

What are we to do with all this? Here, the poet seems to speak in answer to Hölderlin’s driving question, “What use are poets in destitute times?” Levertov’s answer is simply this: ours is the work of tasting this world, taking it into our bodies, “biting” it, savoring it—and then, in a claim that echoes the ancient Roman theologian Justin Martyr’s claim that *we* are to be “eucharistized,” she suggests that all this is to be “transformed into our flesh,” including “our deaths” and things as

²¹ George Steiner, *Real Presences*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1989, p. 226.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 227.

apparently unrelated as “crossing the street, plum, quince,/ living in the orchard and being/ hungry, and plucking the fruit.”

It would be difficult not to overhear—though this, too, depends on a familiarity with the biblical story—an image of the fall reversed, or “paradise regained,” as Milton put it. If there are transfigurations to be experienced by those of us, facing the twilight of the gods, who have given ourselves to sleep, to “waiting and always waiting,” as Hölderlin put it, because we cannot “cope with the fullness of God,” what are they? And how might these move us beyond simply “dreaming” about this loss?

III

It may well be that theologians in our day are often little interested in facing the sorrows and confusions attending this loss, which, after all, might pale in significance against the hard grain of the challenges facing our world—and the need for sturdy theological engagement in discerning how we might best face them. Some, of course, will not recognize these shadows at all; they may not give themselves over to dreaming, as Hölderlin suggested might be our best strategy. But too often their voices seem to offer traditional dogmatic assertions as if these alone might turn the tide of an advancing secularism. And such an approach, whatever its virtues might be, fails to find a form of expression commensurate with the *spiritual* texture of these unmet longings. This at least is Steiner’s conviction and why he joins Augustine, if in a decidedly different form, in the turn to aesthetics and away from the narrower possibilities of philosophy or theology in staking a case for metaphysics. But the question that remains is this: what form can best carry this appeal? What is the medium most suited to convey the transfigurations of love across the spectrum of our embodied lives? What witness might invite from us that quickening of the mind—i.e., provoking “all that lives to the imagination’s tongue”—capable of re-minding us of the body’s capacity toward self-transcendence in joy?

Steiner speaks of this experience in phenomenological terms as an experience of radiance, describing it as the “shining through” which the arts bring us in the form of “epiphanies,” embodied experiences that transfigure us in the encounter with beauty—to “breathe them, bite, savor, chew, swallow, transform” them. It is her way of seeing in utterly familiar and ordinary things an “excess,” an abundance, a “shining through” of something transcending. Levertov suggests, through a layering of allusion, that our plight is not that we have been deformed by original sin. Rather, our plight is that we too seldom acknowledge our need driven by desire: we must be emboldened to “pluck” the fruit, not to transgress some divinely instituted moral order, but out of hunger for the “more” conveyed in and through our body’s sensations. This desire lies at the heart of our original condition, and it is this that has the capacity to bring us into creative relationship with others. “O taste and see ... all that lives to the imagination’s tongue.” Everything. O, let us take our body’s experiences into ourselves, she suggests, finding the inner dimension of the outward, in the wild and in the ordinary, in the banal and in the breathtaking: “O taste and see” that the Lord is good in and through all that we

can experience, which is to say in and through all that is. And, yes, in and through the work of our bodies with their capacity to transfigure the world, and us with it. But to do this, she reminds us, we must first “[cross] the street” and dare to “[live] in the orchard and [be] hungry” before we can accept the call to “[pluck] the fruit.”

What she implies is that it is not enough simply to dare to “cross over” without desiring to “live in the orchard,” a place of fruitfulness and abundance, and there recognize our essential hunger—with its transfiguring energies. For if it is true that we are made for this, fashioned in our essence toward a union that brings us to our own particular fullness and into that “other” universal fullness we refer to as God, then our experiences that lean toward this are an essential dimension of our healing. Augustine came to know this, discerning in the glimpses of this essential wholeness how the entire shape of his profligate life served as a foretaste, as it were, of this feast. For union with God, however it has been interpreted among the mystics across the millennia, has this in common: it gathers the fragments of our lives, with all their difficulties and demands, into a whole.

In its highest form, this is what the mystics understood with the term *unio mystica*, or mystical union. But here we must acknowledge what they often noted: viz., that this was, at best, a glimpse of the full measure of our humanity, not a “state” we could somehow attain—and prolong. And, as importantly, they generally agreed in seeing this “state” as belonging to a coherent continuum, spanning the wide spectrum of the “spiritual” experiences we attain in our bodied lives. Returning to Levertov’s poem, it is important to see how important hunger is—or the absence of what we desire—in defining the arc of our human existence. But what is this hunger? Here the poet follows the lead taken by so many of the Christian mystics, who across the spectrum of their differences generally agreed that our hunger, even if it begins with the basic sustenance our bodies need, cannot be satisfied with bread alone (cf. Mt. 4. 4). The 20th c. German-Jewish poet Hilde Domin reminds us of this, framing the complexity of our hunger in this way, “We eat bread, but live by radiance.”²³ With such a claim, we find our way back to Steiner’s claim, that our lives are fundamentally shaped by epiphanies, moments when something radiant “shines through” the veil of the physical.

IV

With this aesthetic turn, we return to where we began, recalling Augustine’s warning about our indwelling what he called a “land of dissociation.” What he meant by this was a narrowing of our lives into the banalities of the “merely” physical, a reduction of bodily pleasures to the physical alone, in which the beauty we long for begins and ends with what the body knows. What he points toward, beyond this impasse, is a way of seeing and living that presumes an essential fullness in our experience, a wider sense of fullness that joins the physical and spiritual in an abiding “whole.” In this sense, the question whether the gods have departed no longer sounds a dire warning, as it had for Hölderlin, Nietzsche, and so many

²³ Hilde Domin, “Die Heiligen”, *Nur eine Rose als Stütze*, 1959; *Sämtliche Gedichte*, ed. Nikola Herweg and Melanie Reinhold, Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer Verlag, 2009, p. 27 (author’s translation).

harbingers of modernity's demise. It rather points to a union that gathers our broken lives into the oneness we yearn for, in and through the fragment of our varied lives.

Following this lead, and returning to Levertov's poem, one might well speak of a democracy of hunger, one that reminds us of the essential unity of body and spirit that survives the vicissitudes of our demise. It also points to an essential yearning we never lose for bread, first of all for our basic sustenance, but then as a metaphor that points us beyond itself to something more enduring. Call it radiance, the "shining through" of epiphany. Call it the presence, the real presence of the divine in the veil of the human. Call it the aesthetic sense that "quicken[s] into lit presence the continuum between temporality and eternity, between matter and spirit, between man and 'the other'" as Steiner puts it. Call it the power of love, with its transfigurations which root the spiritual in the physical—and have the capacity to infuse the physical with the spiritual. Call it the redemption that meets us in our body's longings and complicates them with a transcending inner fullness. Call it grace in the ordinary, a sense of union—however fleeting—which we experience in and through the transfigurations of love.