

Candle Bearers

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By

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ABSTRACT

The anonymous priest at the centre of *Candle Bearers* is suffering an attack of divine writer's block. The serialized poems of this thesis follow the priest as he struggles to translate the voice of God through repetitive ritual, social engagement, and private contemplation, before ultimately resigning himself to the ineffability of divine perfection.

Based on the triune pattern of art suggested by St. Thomas Aquinas, and informed by the prosodic theories of Dennis Lee and others, the poems of *Candle Bearers* enact a polyphonic narrative progression: as time progresses, new speakers and new forms shape the text. The increasing variety and liberty of forms – which include triolets, sonnets, haiku, free verse, and others – situates the priest in a cascade of increasing dissonance, a sonic manifestation of his disconnect from both the community and God.

Through this careful manipulation of form, these poems explore themes of speechlessness and revelation. Combined, they serve as an *ars poetica*, recreating for the reader the process through which the thesis itself was written. Ultimately, this exploration and experimentation of form is an attempt to write silence, to make silence a concrete object rather than an abstract concept. In so doing, *Candle Bearers* seeks to reinvigorate the dying metaphor of poet-priest, and prove common ground between craft and ritual.

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“Confessions #2” is a found poem, made up of quotes taken from Clara Bow (6, 15, 18); Louise Brooks (7, 12); Marlene Dietrich (4, 9, 13, 14,); Jeanne Eagels (19, 21); Greta Garbo (1, 2, 3, 5, 10); Louise Glaum (11); Jetta Goudal (17); Clara Kimball Young (16); Myrna Loy (8); and Pola Negri (20, 22, 23).

Sara-Jane Gloutenez inspired “Confession #5.”

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ARTIST STATEMENT

How does one write silence? What rational method could allow a writer to speak of irrationality? I find, in Catholicism, the ideal language to explore this problem. Catholicism is at once cosmic and practical. Poetry is at once practical and cosmic.

My poetry thesis, *Candle Bearers*, depicts a Catholic priest in an outpost parish who is suffering from a kind of “divine writer’s block.” Between the tedium of ritual and the social demands of pastoral care, the priest has become unmoored in his role as intermediary between God and Man; the voice of God has become incomprehensible, untranslatable. Poets often face this same problem.

Candle Bearers is an *ars poetica*, a piece of writing about writing. When devising this thesis, I knew I wanted to write poems which have a definite trajectory. It would be what I dubbed a “film-in-verse,” a body of poetry which hints at narrative through the canny use of form and prosody and a series of linked and referential images. The poems are like scenes in a film, each with a distinct composition and lighting, which may intensify or dim, may linger on a single object or leap from face to face, may cut quickly from one angle to the next. A metonymic, polyphonic music. Once all the scenes of this “film” are compiled, the reader might understand the work of the priest and the poet alike: to practice the craft-ritual, to engage with the community and integrate the community into one’s self, and to negate the self in the service of the Word.

There are models for this kind of project, in particular John Steffler’s *The Grey Islands* (1985), H.D.’s *Helen in Egypt* (1961), and Edgar Lee Master’s *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), but nothing that used the genre to explore form and polyphony as I have done. The narrative implication, coupled with a self-referential structure, draws the reader’s attention to process,

while the various registers of voice and poetic forms work as a survey of poetic activity. Unlike other works, the structure of the thesis itself serves as the *ars poetica*, rather than the content.

This use of form and polyphony (that is, many registers and metres) is meant to enact a physical response in the reader. Whereas most theorists have focused on poetry as an art which imprints itself on the reader's emotion or thought, I continue to be interested in the way prosody can physically impact the reader. The most exciting moments in poetry seem to feature some sort of physical response – the heart beats quicker, the hairs on our arms stand on end, maybe at a very effective moment, we cry. Even the most functional process of articulation demands a physical response: movement in the lips, the tongue, the throat, the diaphragm. And through manipulation of these processes, a poet can make a reader run out of breath, choke on their own tongue, breathe a sigh of relief, all actions which we would connote as either positive or negative, and would make the reader *feel* a certain way, even if it has nothing to do with the actual content of the poem. Catholicism teaches that the body must be taken as a whole – intellect, emotion, and anatomy (Hardon 91); I would be remiss to ignore actual physical reaction. Here is what I have tried: careful consideration of both the metre and the visual shape of each poem, including negative space; a reasonably limited wordstock, so that the poems might allude to each other, even in places where such connections should seem only tenuous; consideration of forms, not just as restrictions of language, but as a graphic language in their own right.

Thus, as *Candle Bearers* opens with the priest, whose voice is marked by a tercet stanza and an eight-syllable metrical line. These two features – the tercet and the syllable-count line – are not common to English poetry, and force the reader into a rigid, constrained sonic pattern, one which matches the priest's own sense of constraint. In the second section, the reader is

subjected to a variety of voices by way of the Confession poems. “Confession #3,” for example, employs the form of an elegiac couplet – again, a very difficult line to perform in English, one which approaches the formality and humility inherent in the confession ritual. Meanwhile, “Confession #5” and “Confession #6” make use of an interruptive conversational style as a means of imprinting the anxieties of their speakers, and the mounting frustration of the priest, on the reader.

Among the many challenges of writing this thesis was that this deliberateness of form demanded I write a poetry which, in the early sections, privileged form over content. These poems use a lot of pyrotechnics; they’re full of voice and linguistic tricks and metre and form, but on an individual basis they fail to thoroughly integrate sound and sense. I hold such integration to be the mark of successful poetry, but only by writing this form-conscious poetry could I impress upon my readers what the priest would be experiencing at this point in the narrative: frustration, confusion, verbal exhaustion. The poems become active by way of their inaction, a paradox which echoes the paradoxes which mystify the Catholic faith.

Candle Bearers follows a triune structure informed by the Holy Trinity, the *ricorsi* of Giambattista Vico, and the Aquinian conception of art. By way of summary: we begin at “Advent,” with the priest in isolation, mechanically performing rituals to little result. In “Ordinary Time,” the priest engages with the community, only to be frustrated by the variety and volume of voices. Finally, in “Lent,” he realizes that the voice of God will not be found in one extreme or the other, nor in a middle ground between isolation and integration, but in a third way which is completely beyond the dichotomy – a monstrous integration of the two, at once both and neither God and Man. This third section has been heavily influenced by the concrete unanswer of Zen Buddhism, and the realization that, in Japanese language and poetics, the

adjective can conjugate as a kind of semi-verb, thus allowing for greater emphasis on the object itself, rather than action, and turns the object into an action itself. As the thesis ends, we find the priest patiently waiting, praying for this third way to reveal itself. He knows he needs the presence of silence, rather than the absence of noise. This third way is, for me, the achievement of an objectively perfect poetry which exists in the negative space between tenor and vehicle, when we find an apt word for the ineffable. Such an achievement is obviously impossible.

The word “catholic” can also be interpreted to mean “universal.” In preparing for my thesis, I allowed myself to absorb as broad a range of materials as attracted my imagination. Naturally, my survey included a variety of poets, especially poets who had also served as clergy. That list includes R.S. Thomas, Thomas Merton, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, and offers further insight into the similarities and differences between the two callings. (Hopkins notably burned all his poetry before entering the seminary, believing it impossible to be priest and poet; he would begin writing again shortly thereafter). I read much poetic theory and a variety of Catholic texts. I also eagerly pursued articles on pop science and psychology, blogs by Catholic priests and parishioners, texts from or about other religions (especially Buddhism), old world ballads, prayers and koans and advertising slogans. Nor was my range of influence limited to the written word: film, visual art, and music were ever present, and mined for ideas about structure and form. My goal was to create a kind of mental landscape which would be catholic in every sense of the word.

Two theoretical works were of particular importance. At Dr. Lynes’ suggestion, I read Dennis Lee’s *Body Music*, a treatise on prosody and a good guide on how a poet should proceed using metrics in practice. This essay offers tangible advice on how to emphasize metre without being self-conscious or precious, which was necessary to create the polyphonic effect of the

middle section. Lee articulates the precise sensation I have tried to capture and reproduce with *Candle Bearers*, and which my priest strives to experience: “You feel yourself flexed by a tremor which you’re bound to acknowledge, whether or not you know what it is... and it collapses our familiar categories of inner and outer, subject and object” (6). This is true of poetry, and it is true of faith. But what happens to the body and the mind and the soul when that tremor cannot be felt?

It was not until I had nearly completed my first draft that I discovered – by way of an artists’ talk on the concept of apophathy – the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. He is not an obscure figure, perhaps, but one I had never studied. Culturally Catholic, and committed to the values of silence and mystery, Wittgenstein legitimized the theories I had been developing about the link between Catholicism and poetry. Indeed, the story of his own life had many similarities to the life I had invented for my priest. A hermit by choice and disposition, Wittgenstein argued that much of life is simply unexplainable, and not only could one be certain of their own uncertainty, but could find a sense of completeness in it. I cannot say Wittgenstein’s philosophy helped me conceive of this thesis, but his influence was undoubtedly there throughout the editing process and lent my ideas more precision and clarity.

I can say that my ideal poetry, the poetry I have tried to accomplish with *Candle Bearers*, has a perfect coincidence of structure and sound, and beyond that, a certain physiological consequence for the reader and writer alike. This “physiological consequence” occurs when the reader or writer feels their own body – including their mind and emotions – illuminated, clarified and sharpened by the poem. That moment is that same moment described in Catholicism as “revelation.” It is ineffable and inexplicable, an almost-imperceptible flare of candle light, lacking substance or precise definition. Nonetheless, revelation is definitely felt when one

encounters a successful poem, and should not be discounted from poetic discourse because of our failure to put a precise language to it; indeed, this lack of precision is exactly the point, for it is only when words fail do we fully understand the weakness of words and, by extension, the achievement of the poet. Experiencing and identifying such a moment forces readers to submit to irrationality and faith, if not in the divine, than certainly in the power of poetry itself.

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DEDICATION

Companions of the Flame

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