

Proposal 15

Transubstantiated Poetry and Embodied Theology

Poetry is itself an embodiment, and it is not. Poetry is a made thing, and it has a structure. However, poetry is not the expression or symbol of an idea. It does not *mean*. Its power is conjured between the audience and the poet. It is mysterious and sacramental. Much as some Christian doctrine holds that the Eucharist is the transubstantiated Body of Christ, poetry transcends its physical substance of words, syntax, white space, rhythm, and music. It is itself. This paradox realizes poetry's attempt at conveying Truth.

In the same way that we engage in the theological pursuit by examining the human being in the flesh, so we must consider the "madness" of poetry: the words, syntax, and music that enable the intersection of ineffable theological experience and the poetic moment.

As a practitioner, I propose to ask the group to consider my own work from this perspective. Although much of verse-making is instinctual, subconscious, and mysterious, there are discussions possible about craft and its role in audience/poet theological exchange, including the poet's (mis)reading. Below is my poem, "The Diener," which focuses on the human body and on the concept of *creating*. This poem was published in 2008 in *The New Yorker*; however, I plan to present at least one, unpublished poem-in-progress for the group to consider possible choices in wording and structure. I hope not to elicit critique—although all responses are welcome—but to invite participants to "get inside" the making of a poem, that is, the making of theology as perhaps they have not experienced it.

The Diener

We hated the early anatomists
for showing us how fragile we are,
how God's image is composite:
the liver the bright bruise of a sunset,
the thyroid wrapped around our throats
for luck. They saw our brains folded
against our foreheads and knew our hearts
pump dumbly on through the wash.
And wily guts take the brunt of it,
pushing to get rid of while we insist
on taking in and taking in and taking in.
Theirs was heresy, that is, a choice
to reach the Artist by testing the art,
human suffering always the requisite cost.

Change, what keeps all of it the same,
the Teacher says, no new thing
under the sun. What we make, let's make old
instead, older than the first tool,
which smelled much like the body—
the first blacksmith must have thought—

not quite like displaced blood, but blood at home
in its place among other parts in their places,
and that must be how we began to confuse
the power to examine and change
with the power to create, to be discrete agents,
why we like to see ourselves as whole,
despite the diener piling legs on a cot,
despite the pruned artery, tied and cut.

(*Diener* is not often found in dictionaries.
It is the person who runs the morgue
and is the term used frequently in hospitals.
At its root it means “servant.”)