

Living Temples and Extemporal Song*

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In "Cold Monuments" John Russell Brown reminds us of the extraordinary complexity of poetic endeavor. While it may take a village to raise a child, bringing a poem to fruition and keeping it alive involves many people transcending and uniting past, present, and future. Brown argues the genesis of a poem is more than an isolated act of one individual but rather impacted by all the writer has read, seen, heard, and experienced as the poet draws upon the memory of literary works by others, upon mundane speech heard in daily routine of life, and upon an accumulation of experiences in which many have participated. After the parturient poet delivers this synthesis of past and present, of self and other, the creation only remains alive as it is touched by the vivifying spark of the reader's imagination. Brown posits almost a symbiotic relationship between poem and audience. For its present and future life the poem depends upon the imaginative mind of the reader.

While he markedly demonstrates his point through the example of poets writing for the theater and the theater company that brings the play to life, he shows the applicability of his remarks to non-dramatic poetry as well. Focusing on those whose special concern is the preservation of the mutable, in whose living lines the physical and spiritual beauty of a beloved mortal could endure for the short time of the human continuum, Brown argues such poems would remain but cold monuments entombing decayed remains were it not for the reader whose imaginative response resurrects and transpires the poem's subject beyond the ephemeral. If the young man

*Reference: John Russell Brown, "Cold Monuments: Three Accounts of the Reception of Poetry," *Connotations* 9.1 (1999/2000): 34-42 .

of Shakespeare's sonnets or the Elizabeth of *Amoretti* or any other figure celebrated in countless paeans are to *live* in powerful rhyme, the reader must resuscitate them.

Using a different poetic model than Brown's, I would suggest an added dimension by factoring in the divine in the genesis and reception of poetry and looking at those sixteenth- and seventeenth-century devotional poets who saw their works not as monumental tributes to the mutable but rather as living temples for the incarnation, indwelling, and celebration of the immutable. For writers like Donne, Herbert, Crashaw, and Vaughan, for example, who believed a supernatural force lifted them beyond the limits of mortal self, the genesis of a poem subsumes the divine as well as human experience. Brown notes that Shakespeare in acknowledging his muse of fire and Milton in calling upon a heavenly muse to illumine and support him recognize they are not the sole progenitors of their poems. Yet in terms of the genesis and reception of poetry the implications of such invocations extend beyond the conventional and are even more far-reaching than Brown has suggested. Poets following in the footsteps of the poet-protagonist of *L'Uranie*, the work of the French Huguenot poet, Guillaume Salluste, Sieur du Bartas, believe God is the ultimate author of their verse and poems are his instruments in leading members of the Church Militant to membership in the Church Triumphant. For these poets the realm of critical reception of their work transcends the sublunary: God is the ultimate judge of their lines and life as his Word directs and patterns their words. Moreover, like David's psalms and that translation by Sidney and the Countess of Pembroke praised by Donne, verse that sings the highest matter in the noblest form tunes the audience and brings a spiritual salubrity that ultimately facilitates their incorporation into the divine harmony of extemporal song. For these poets, the effect they have on their audience is inextricably linked with the audience's and their own salvation. Their goal is not simply to give life to a mutable love preserved in poetry but to lead their readers and ultimately themselves to eternal life as they seek for their reward not a vile crown of frail bays rejected by the speaker in Donne's *La Corona* but the crown of glory purchased by Christ's thorny crown. The fame they desire is not earthly but rather that of which Phoebus speaks in Milton's *Lycidas*, the one pronounced by the eternal judge.

A poet deemed worthy by such a divine critic believes he can expect an eternal reward for his poetic endeavors because he is God's instrument in effecting the spiritual salvation of his readers. Nine-voiced and wearing a seven-fold crown, Du Bartas' *Urania* resounds the poet's responsibility to the reader, especially making clear that poetry has the power to imprint the poet's good or evil on the reader's soul (ll. 89-96). Josuah Sylvester, one of Du Bartas' English translators, uses the image of the seal and sealing wax to convey the impression the poet makes on his reader. The Preface to Crashaw's *Steps to the Temple* claims that both Augustine and Crashaw believed "every foot in a high-borne verse, might helpe to measure the soule into that better world" (75). And one might well look to the example of Vaughan's "The Match" as it responds to Herbert's "Obedience" to gain insight into the way the poet can be seen as responsible for the spiritual conversion of his audience.

While I would not disagree with Brown that the reader's imagination is necessary for the poem to have continued life, I would suggest that for a number of poets the relationship between reader and poem is even more complex when the spiritual dimension is added. Moreover, poem as monument and poem as temple are but two models for poetry; given the range of what poetry actually does, one might want to consider the applicability of Brown's comments to numerous other models.

Perhaps Brown's most salient point focuses on the consequences for the critic whose task it is to extend the life of the poem. He argues the critic must engage in the detailed analysis of the New Criticism, attending to the poem's language, structure, music, and texture. Yet the critical task, he asserts, does not stop there but extends to understanding the historical context of the poem's genesis. For poets whose poems were designed to be living temples this must mean understanding their aesthetic, recognizing the salvific mission of the poetic vocation for them was as serious as the ministerial. It also must mean understanding something of the history of religion in a more comprehensive way than we have generally applied to literature. While it is important to recognize whether Donne's leanings were Catholic or Protestant or to determine Milton's theological stance, for example, it is also important to understand how Donne, Herbert, Herrick, Vaughan, Crashaw, or Milton conform to the definition of *homo*

religiosus by Mircea Eliade. Eliade argues that the fundamental orientation of the religious person is sacred rather than secular or profane:

Whatever the historical context in which he is placed, *homo religiosus* always believes that there is an absolute reality, *the sacred*, which transcends this world but manifests itself in this world, thereby sanctifying it and making it real. He further believes that life has a sacred origin and that human existence realizes all of its potentialities in proportion as it is religious—that is, participates in reality. . . . By reactualizing sacred history, by imitating the divine behavior, man puts and keeps himself close to the gods—that is, in the real and significant. (202)

That transcendent reality of the sacred is manifest in the world and sanctifies that world, that sacred history can and must be reactualized is the core of devotional poetry. The principal events of sacred experience, especially those in Scripture are repeatable and accessible to humanity: “Thy words do finde me out, & parallels bring” as Herbert asserts in “The H. Scriptures. II” (l. 11). The poem as reactualization of sacred time and sacred space and the poem as hierophantic experience revealing the deity connect the reader to sacred reality.

Finally Brown argues that because the critic keeps the poem alive, we must understand ourselves and our world. Criticism, he posits, must “relate to present-day lived experience” or it will “fall out of touch with a poem’s present life.” This is perhaps the most suggestive of his comments because it has ramifications not only for the work of the critic but for the way we train students of literature. What are the curricular implications here for students of literature? If experiential, reader-response criticism calls for studying the spirit of the present age: how do we go about preparing our students to do this and providing them with the necessary tools for such exploration of the poem’s and their present life? If Brown begins by reminding us of the complexity of creative endeavor, he concludes by broaching the equally demanding and varied work of criticism and at least implicitly suggesting the challenge of preparing those who will be engaged in this activity.

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