

Images of Lent in Contemporary North American Culture

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Even in the colonies, we continue, as I write this, to mourn the passing of Princess Diana, hounded to her death by an unfeeling media, which now threatens to hound her back to life—or would were it not so busy laying blame. It is one of the interesting aspects of our mourning for Diana that it has provided such an occasion: not so much for repentance, for asking how we might have contributed to the accident that took her life, but for casting aspersions—“we” were not to blame in any way; “they” were.

Will it turn out, when all the blame is cast, that only Diana was innocent? If so, it will not be because she was, in any ordinary sense of the word, but because finally, just before the end, she was happy. It is true to this point, however, that only radical populist curmudgeons like Alexander Cockburn, in *The Nation*, have dared suggest that Diana was “guilty,” that, for example, she used the royal family as much as it used her. Cockburn actually goes on to wonder what the princess might have expected to gain from “the appalling al-Fayed family.” Cockburn’s conclusions: “their money gave her comfort,” just as “her style gave them allure,” not to mention “a most useful cover for corruption.”¹

We cringe at such suggestions because we *want* Diana to have been happy at her end, whatever the cost. We prefer, however, there to have been no cost. That is the nature of what more than one pundit has called our “Oprahfied society”: we measure ourselves no longer in terms of duty or discipline but in terms of self-gratification, which should never be long delayed.

This is not, then, a culture that has much use for Lent—other than as a butt of jokes. Consider the rabbit crucified on a tax form that appeared on the cover of *The New Yorker*’s April 17, 1995, issue. Laugh simultaneously at the IRS, the Easter bunny, and the crucifixion. Or, you’ve heard the one about the pious Catholic boy who spends his wedding night in prayer. When the next morning his bride asks him why, he replies, “It’s Lent.” “To whom,” she wants to know, “and for how long?”

This joke reminds me, oddly, of Sandra McPherson’s wonderful “Unitarian Easter,”² for the poet enters the church hoping “the confetti / Can jazz up a burden.” It does not. For all the happy charm of the occasion,

The pastor, for instance, calling birds, head back,
Or dancing an old French dance, hopping and kicking.

The congregation winding around the chancel,
Carrying damp, strapping forsythia sprigs, slanting them into a vase
Beside the kotoist, her song plucked and bent, a few blossoms raining on
the strings.

The moment of touching silence that follows.

For all these light enchantments, there is no ease of the poet's burden, for the service vouchsafes "no comment / On the matter of God." There is, finally, only enchantment, and a shallow tranquility that does not wish to be disturbed. There is no sense of how being disturbed may lead to healing or how discipline may become joy. There is no real chance to lay one's burden down, because there is neither challenge nor opportunity to repent.

This desire not to be disturbed is the way of much of today's popular Christian imagery. Robert Morgan notes that this is a purpose of all popular art—"to confirm the beliefs and expectations of its audience."³ What the audience believes, or wants to believe, about Jesus, for instance: that he's a man outside history; indeed, his invitation to us is to join him there. We wish to believe this, because outside history means outside suffering. Theodore Prescott notes that "since the late nineteenth century popular Christian artists have tended to avoid the [moments of] drama . . . in the Christian narrative and chosen instead softer, more comforting moments to depict."⁴ He cites Heinrich Hoffman's *Christ in Gethsemane*, which though it dates from the turn of the century remains popular today. The illustration shows Jesus kneeling before a large rock. The landscape is general; Jesus' relaxed attitude suggests he might as well be in his own back yard. "His hands are clasped, but not in anguish or tension. His attitude and expression is watchful, expectant and waiting. Evidently he has already discerned that it is the Father's will that the cup will not pass from him" This does not disturb him, however; nor should it disturb us! "[I]t is hard to believe that this man has just been sweating drops of blood. Any sense of struggle and agony has been excised in favor of obedient repose."⁵

So, when the best of contemporary poets mine art for religious themes—as they often do—they tend to reach back into art history for paintings that have wrestled with those moments of drama that continue to perturb us. These older images may also have become familiar to us, but they do not bore.

Mark Jarman's "Last Suppers"⁶ begins actually with one of the most familiar images in Western art, Da Vinci's "Last Supper." But, as often as this image has been reproduced, it remains lonely, Jarman thinks. Its loneliness is apparent no matter where it hangs, though it may be

Loneliest when hung in a church annex,
Like a No Smoking sign . . .

The image *is* lonely because it is "so intimate in its dismay, / Familiar as a family's daily warfare."

What has happened? It's as if dinner has ended
With Father drunk again and Mother silent.
The daughters are enlisted to clean up.
They leave. And the sons begin to fight.

But the dismay reaches even deeper. "Christ has forecast his betrayal. / . . . And the meal / Is not finished, still has to be eaten."

The power of Leonardo's image is how "in making the picture right, he makes it mortal," so that even a replica affords a glimpse into the real-life of Jesus and the

twelve. Moreover, it reaches out of that life in an “embrace to clutch us close,” so we “feel the pressure / Of our belief or nonbelief.”

Devise Levertov’s “Salvator Mundi: Via Crucis”⁷ begins in Rembrandt’s painting of that name. The poem opens this way:

Maybe He looked indeed
much as Rembrandt envisioned Him. . . .

Rembrandt has also captured “the pressure” Jarman describes, what Levertov, in turn, calls Jesus’ “burden of humanness”

that He taste also the humiliation of dread,
cold sweat of wanting to let the whole thing go,
like any mortal hero out of his depth,
like anyone who has taken a step too far
and wants herself back.

It is this aspect of Jesus’ last days that speaks most powerfully to us, the poet believes. Not the physical torture, not the faithlessness of friends, not even the anticipation of death

was incarnation’s heaviest weight,
but this sickened desire to renege. . . .

This desire, this temptation—as Levertov points out—is a condition of Jesus’, and our, mortality. This, too, is an important Lenten theme. Indeed, it is one of the purposes of the season to remind us of our own “burden of humanness.” In one of David Citino’s Sister Mary Appassionata poems,⁸ the good nun reminds her science class, and the reader, that in this universe,

We know from physics every clock
winds down, each woman and man lies down
one more time than necessary for sleep or love.

So, “the key to happiness,” if there be such a thing? What few of the boys and girls in her class have yet, in their depraved adolescence, come to:

. . . . Knowing every second
of every day what do with the hands,
when to loose or hold the tongue.

For Lent is also about discipline; it is about the repentance that leads to a life of discipline that meets temptation with obedience and waits in hope. Though we do not find many Lenten hymns written in the last half of the twentieth century, one of the most powerful of all these hymns in *The Presbyterian Hymnal* comes from the mid-sixties.⁹ (It is true: Presbyterians sing it to a tune from the mid-1500s.) This is David Romig’s “When We Are Tempted to Deny Your Son,” which was in fact written “to

help fill a need for more Lenten hymns.”¹⁰

Romig’s themes are temptation and obedience.

When we are tempted to deny Your Son,
Because we fear the anger of the world,
And we are few who hear the insults hurled,
Your will, O God, be done.

When we are tempted to betray Your Son,
Because He leads us in a harder way,
And makes demands we do not want to pay,
Your will, O God, be done.

The language of Lent, then, is the language of sacrifice, of “fear” and overcoming fear, of the “harder way” of God’s “demands.” But behind this language is the sense that sacrifice will reward. In the poem, “The Way of Pain,”¹¹ Wendell Berry writes not only of Abraham’s sacrifice, “the Voice required of him,” and of “Christ crucified . . . sacrificed to flesh and time / and all our woe.” He also thinks of both as ways of thinking of the relation between pain and love, for it is “by pain we learn / the extremity of love.”

The contemporary artist Frederick Brown is likewise interested in the redemptive nature of suffering—and in a way that looks beyond the suffering to its reward. Thus, as Richard Wilkinson points out, “even in a painting of anguish like *The Temptation of Christ*” (1986-87), Brown’s bright primary palette manages to “communicate exuberance and hope.”¹²

Brown, who began his artistic career at the age of thirteen drawing illustrations for his southside-Chicago AME church, continues to paint biblical subjects. Indeed these have proved some of his most popular paintings. Of the six of his works acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, two (*The Ascension of Christ* and *Genesis*) have religious themes.

Brown’s retelling of the *Temptation of Christ* does not pass over Jesus’ suffering. (Wilkinson’s description of Brown’s kneeling Christ as “emaciated and chalk-faced” is accurate enough, but it fails to portray how Jesus’ “x-rayed” arm and skull-like face act as *memento mori*.) Neither does the painting ignore the reality of evil, the temptation that causes that suffering. Satan is a horrific figure with a head full of horns and hands like claws. Yet, there is this story, and there is the story beyond this story. Part of that story beyond is told by the two crosses that appear toward the upper and lower right-hand corners of the large canvas (90” x 96”). But part is told by the intensely colored Caribbean landscape, which partakes more of fertile sea than barren desert. And part is in Christ’s aura and halo, which reflect the bright yellow and red brilliance of a sun that shines out God’s goodness. This Christ is no wan subject of temptation but is alive and passionate in temptation’s defeat.

Passionate in a very different way are the dying Christs of the *Crocefisso* paintings of William Congdon. Though Congdon did much of his painting in Europe, his work is clearly American, his roots in abstract expressionism. Congdon’s conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1959 did not sever his connection with those abstract expressionist roots, particularly its belief in the power of painting to create myth. But unlike

Mark Rothko or Barnett Newman, for example, Congdon has not been so much interested in creating myth as exploring it, particularly the myth “explicit in the form and content of the Cross.”¹³ Nor has Congdon’s work ever become completely abstract. Perhaps because he has “felt the weight of Christ on my pictures, on my creative freedom,”¹⁴ Congdon’s art has always had contact with the world.

It is true, as Peter Selz points out, that even the artist’s earliest depictions of the crucifixion are “stripped of the usual components of the scene: the beams of the cross are absent or are unified with the body. There is no halo, no titulus; there are no wounds or lacerations. Christ’s corpus is like a shaft of light.”¹⁵ Nevertheless, even the later ones—in which the image of the cross is only intimated—the world is clearly there, and not only in the physicality of the paint itself. Thus, in *Crocefisso no. 46*, though the cross has become a “T,” it is still anchored in a brown earth; it stands out—and up!—against a black sky. The crucifixion, Congdon is certain, is redemptive. It is the light come into darkness. Yet the darkness is real.

And it is as real to Congdon as to those roadside “artists” that place crosses in threes in fields from Prattville, Alabama, to Morgantown, West Virginia. Crosses draped with purple have become a common Lenten churchyard phenomenon. But these large crosses made of pipe and painted gold and white testify for repentance year-round.

Near Prattville, self-described “Jesus Man” W.C. Rice has created what Anne Rochell has called a “landscape of crosses.” “The first cross rises whitewashed and haunting out of the kudzu covering a wild bluff in the bend of a twisting country road. It is a warning of things to come”—at the end of the road as well as the end of life.

“As Autauga County Road 86 straightens out, the cross becomes 10 crosses, then 50, then hundreds, maybe thousands. Crosses of all sizes are pounded into the earth or laid flat amid weeds and blackberry bushes on both sides of the two lane.”¹⁶ And on the crosses as well as among them are signs: “Rich Man in Hell. Repent.” “Hell is hot hot hot.” Even, “Put up or Shut up.”

Among the crosses and the signs are also dozens of “graves,” marked with “dead” appliances and handwritten epitaphs, warning: “In hell from sex.” “You will die.” “Too Late in Hell Fire Water.”

Though he has been called a folk artist, Rice thinks of himself as a preacher. His house, filled also with messages of doom and crosses hanging from the walls and beams, is his church. And his cross- and sign-bedizened field is his sermon, “Repent.”

And you shall be forgiven. For true repentance implies forgiveness. Indeed, in a world in which our sinfulness so pervades everything we do that we can only approximate what is good, we cannot ignore the importance of forgiveness *for* obedience. Without the forgiveness that comes with repentance, we cannot move forward. In “On Slow Learning,”¹⁷ his humorous poem about paper training a pet tortoise, Scott Cairns characterizes the importance of this link between forgiveness and obedience, for

Even a well-intentioned tortoise
may find himself in his journeys
to be painfully far from the mark.

When finally, weeks later, the shamed tortoise comes out of his shell, “Forgive him,” Cairns advises.

Notes

- ¹ Alexander Cockburn, "Diana: The Plumage and the Dying Bird," *The Nation* 265:8 (September 22, 1997): 9.
- ² Sandra McPherson, "Unitarian Easter," *The Morrow Anthology of Younger American Poets*, ed. Dave Smith and David Bottoms (New York: Quill, 1985), 435 (from *Patron Happiness*, published by The Ecco Press).
- ³ Quoted in Theodore Prescott, "We See Jesus?" *Image* 11 (Fall, 1995): 72.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ Mark Jarman, "Last Suppers," *Old Angels of Heaven* ed. David Craig and Janet McCann (Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1994), 154-59 (from *Shenandoah* Winter 1991)
- ⁷ Denis Levertov, "Salvator Mundi: Via Crucis," *Odd Angles*, 189 (from *Evening Train* published by New Directions, 1992).
- ⁸ David Citino, "Sister Mary Appassionata Lectures the Science Class: Fossils, Physics, Apple, Heart," *Odd Angles*, 61-2. (from *The Discipline: New and Selected Poems* published by Ohio State University Press, 1980-92).
- ⁹ David Romig, "When We Are Tempted to Deny Your Son," *The Presbyterian Hymnal* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1990), no. 86.
- ¹⁰ LindaJo H. McKim, *The Presbyterian Hymnal Companion* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 86
- ¹¹ Wendell Berry, "The Way of Pain," *Odd Angles*, 21-2. (from *Collected Poems* published by North Point Press, 1984).
- ¹² Richard Wilkinson, "Frederick Brown: A Profile," *Image* 9 (Spring, 1995): 27.
- ¹³ Quoted in Peter Selz, "William Congdon: Five Decades of Painting," *Image* 14 (Summer, 1996): 33.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.
- ¹⁶ Anne Rochell, "Alabama's Garden of Good and Evil," *The Atlanta Journal Constitution*, 8 June 1997, M-1.
- ¹⁷ Scott Cairns, "On Slow Learning," *Odd Angles*, 39 (from *The Theology of Doubt* published by the Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 1985).