

SEPARATE SPHERES, SHARED ORBIT: IN SEARCH OF THE WOMAN IN GOD AND POETRY

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A confession: I am a practicing conservative Catholic who, in college, wrote about how God is like a woman.

To be more precise, I wrote an undergraduate thesis about “The Feminine Face of God” in selected prose works by Merlinda Bobis, borrowing the title from a book by Patricia Hopkins and Sherry Ruth Anderson (Bantam, 1992). I chose this subject because I wanted to work on

something that few student-researchers had done before, and spirituality has always been a point of interest to me, mostly because I identify as a ‘cradle Catholic,’ i.e., someone born and raised in the faith. (Even my early “academic output” —which really just meant my high school report for a social sciences class—had something to do with the issue of gender in the priesthood.) For my literary analysis, however, I applied a theoretical framework that, in hindsight, felt closer to New Age feminist philosophy than actual Catholic theology. I felt rather strongly about women’s studies at the time, and all my independent research pointed to non-Catholic sources, which, in the spirit of “reading against the grain” that is the trademark of postmodern literary theory, was highly encouraged by mentors who trained us in this brand of scholarship.

My thesis earned one of two “best thesis citations” for literature majors in the year I graduated (2004). It was a distinction I shared with a good friend and classmate but for which we never received any official certificate, so I suppose the measure of its “best-ness” was not exactly binding. It did, however, start me on the road to Catholic literary studies, which I honestly never heard about until I was asked to teach a Catholic literature course in 2013.

Granted, I did take up a Modern Catholic Writing course ten years prior under noted literary critic and editor Joselito B. Zulueta, who is himself a staunch defender of the Catholic faith and a respected Catholic scholar in his own right (his master’s thesis was on the Catholic Baroque Imagination in the fiction of Nick Joaquin). But until I had to design a course plan and come up with my reading list for my own classes, I had never considered the possibility that my faith and my chosen academic discipline could intersect. They had always felt like separate spheres that were never meant to share orbits, and meant to represent two halves of myself: one was an expression of spirituality I find beautiful, and the other, an academic discipline I found

fascinating (and one that allowed me to build a career on). What did they have to do with each other? Apparently, everything, but I did not know just how much until I read Mary Reichardt's *Exploring Catholic Literature* (Sheed & Ward, 2003) and realized there was an entire field dedicated to Catholic literary studies in universities abroad. Through her I was introduced to the writings of theologians and scholars Andrew Greeley, Joseph Pearce, and Michael Himes, whose inner lives are not at all separate from the literature and culture they study.

This pleasant discovery that resulted from my research solidified my decision to work on Catholic literature for my doctoral dissertation, and I wrote my first book, *Slivers of the Sky: Catholic Literary Readings and Other Essays* (UST Publishing House, 2016), with this exact purpose. In the Preface, I said:

[...] A sliver is a small slice or a slender section, and my critical practice provides a peek at the often overlooked aspects of greater texts (symbolized by the sky). This, to me, is consistent with the field of critical inquiry, where the gaps in the text are teased out rather than filled in, and where the overlooked subtleties and nuances are played up in order to highlight an important literary point. Often, then, because slivers are all we see of the sky, more questions are posed than answers, and problematization is valued over prescription.

The essays in this collection represent the myriad of interests I have dabbled in my academic career thus far, ranging from feminist readings of poetry to postcolonial analyses of novels to postmodern inquiry of unconventional texts—although the bulk of the work here reflects my primary research interest, Catholic writing. Some of these have been presented at conferences, while a few others have been published in an anthology here and a journal there. Many, however, are unpublished essays, and my only wish is that the reader will find some new insight to take away from my own

readings of the texts and, hopefully, fall in love with literature—which, I maintain, is still criticism’s ultimate end. (iv)

The book became a finalist at the 36th National Book Awards in the category of Literary Criticism/Literary History in English. (It did not win, but it still felt nice to make it to the shortlist.)

I still feel as strongly about women’s writing now as I did in my undergraduate years, and writing about spirituality in literature, specifically in poetry, has brought me a renewed purpose in an academic career I had thought about leaving behind.

The paper I appended here is actually part of a longer, unfinished project on Philippine female poets writing in English that have a distinct spiritual imprint in their verses. My project seeks to probe and posit a theory of the sacred as reflected in contemporary women’s poetry, and through comparative analysis—paying close attention to the poet’s choice of imagery—my intention is to show how silence, in its many forms, has helped shape the concerns of the spirituality of the female lyric persona.

I do not think I would have ever reached this point if I had not written that undergraduate thesis, *New Age Feminist* as it was, and so far, this has been a wonderful journey towards wholeness, an organic result of “things coming full circle.”

THE SANCTITY OF SILENCE: THE LYRICAL ARTICULATION OF SPIRITUALITY IN DINAH ROMA'S *NAMING THE RUINS*

The term *sacred* implies a quality that is distinct from what is earthly, or profane. Sociologists and anthropologists (such as Emile Durkheim and Mircea Eliade) configure it as a category necessary for religion to thrive in society—that cultures constructed symbols designated to lead believers to a tangible encounter with the Divine (Anttonen 2000). The sacred is what is distinct from the ordinary, the everyday, the humdrum, and something that is elevated in worth and endowed with supernal importance.

On the other hand, Catholic theology teaches that what is sacred is what is offered to God, or pertains exclusively to God. St. Thomas Aquinas speaks about the two aspects of holiness, namely separation and firmness: “Sanctity, says the Angelic Doctor, is the term used for all that is dedicated to the Divine service [. . .] Such must be pure or separated from the world, for the mind needs to be withdrawn from the contemplation of inferior things if it is to be set upon the Supreme Truth—and this, too, with firmness or stability, since it is a question of attachment to that which is our ultimate end and primary principle, viz., God Himself” (Pope 1910). Thus the sacred can also be taken to mean a preoccupation with all things not of the world, but of a concern for what lies beyond the tangible as the path to what is divine.

Arguably, the art of poetry can be seen as an articulation of this path to the sacred and can be in itself a sanctified craft. In lyricism is found the motivation to speak about intertwined realities, concretized in imagery and metaphor, that language symbolically embodies. To take after priest-sociologist Andrew Greeley (2000) and theologian Joseph Pearce (2006), there is no better milieu to return to religion than today’s globally postmodern

era, because it serves a fundamental and pressing need to hearken back to Order in an age of the denial of Truth and Unity.

This short paper is part of a longer work on the articulation of spirituality among contemporary Philippine women-poets writing in English and focuses on just one collection of award-winning poet Dinah Roma, whose latest work, *We Shall Write Love Poems Again* (UST Publishing House [USTPH], 2020), was named the Best Book of Poetry in English at the 39th National Book Awards. She won the same award in 2004 with *A Feast of Origins* (USTPH), while her 2011 collection *Geographies of Light* (USTPH) contains the poems that earned her the 2007 Carlos Palanca Award for Poetry in English.

The particular work in focus, however, is one that the USTPH did not publish: Roma's third poetry collection, *Naming the Ruins*, published by Vagabond Press (an Australian press) in 2014. This choice is not only to project a semblance of impartiality but also because her verses in this work have a distinctly perceivable inclination towards the transcendental and the mystical.

In listening to Roma's poems, an articulation of the sacred that harnesses the power and privilege of silence as the path to the spiritual can be heard, and this brief analysis dissects how this quiet, this stillness, that pervade in her verses is the path towards an approximation of the sacred.

By championing the enduring power of poetry, it is hoped that this paper, and the longer work it is a part of, will be able to underscore that this form of literary utterance becomes the most fitting vehicle to affirm the necessity of faith.

Transcendental Silence in Dinah Roma's *Naming the Ruins*

The pronouncements of silence in Roma's poems in *Naming the Ruins* are clearly brimming with transcendental wisdom—that is, they hint at concern for a life beyond this one.

Roma's verses lend themselves quite easily to Catholic reading because explicit allusions to Catholic spirituality can be found there. For example, the choice of Catholic vocabulary is found in poem titles such as "Rehearsing the Sacraments" (which is a poem warning a woman about the perils of marriage) and "The Liturgy," as well as in the lines of the opening poem "Coda" that speak about the immense and painful silence that pervades after a separation, as it is equated with the emotional and geographical distance that come with being liberated from a relationship: "The first call / after the pain exhausts— / the voice valiant / in the distance. [...] The words are uttered, / each syllable freed / for what it is. / The sound of heartbeat, / crisp on the verge / of song / not of misery, / nor of joy, / but the silence / of great cathedrals / as the last note / falls / in praise."

"The Liturgy" is written after Olena Kalaytiak Davis' "Six Apologies, Lord," and Roma's version is a prayer enunciating the emotional pain the persona goes through in accepting God's will in her life, incremented by her failure to reach the promise of peace and mercy she has been seeking:

Don't say I haven't tried, Lord.
Don't say I haven't bruised my knees
pleading once more for mercy.

Have you not heard the gasping
in the night as I pulled
at my hair from the tearing

of flesh? I waited long for you
to become Love Incarnate,
Lord. Have I confused heaven

and hell again? Where are the lush fields
of the Song of Songs? Its bliss,
feasts? [...]

The poem is rich with Catholic imagery, that of the religion that teaches how suffering is the path to salvation, with the persona yearning for the reward of the resurrection that comes after the incomparable tragedy of being nailed on the cross: “Only prayer / tending my soul as the world pays / for its mortal heart—each day, Lord, / unknowing of the ascent / from the crucifixion.”

Key to the prayer is the speaker’s acknowledgment that she has exhausted all her efforts to comply with the demands of her spirituality by following the commands of her religion, and it is only in silence that she hears the answer of God: “I grit my teeth, Lord, until I knew. / ‘Be still,’ You said. ‘And know / I am God.’ I know. I am still. / To Know, and Be Still.”

The poem “Grace” recalls God’s ultimate outpouring of love (Himes 2001), rightly termed so in Catholic teaching, and the persona contemplates how nature opens up to the ultimate gift of self until everything circles back to where it began: “The green slender strains/ From its own flourishing, / The burden of sap: [...] The slow shedding back / To root, the gift / Giving to nothingness.”

In “The First Four,” dedicated to the Typhoon Haiyan (Ondoy) victims in 2013, revealing a persona who charged with an awareness of suffering around her:

[...] The sun will shine on them as
everything else begins to move. Away from the

chaos, detritus. Back to life. Yet they shall remain,
even if buried, tallied. Unto themselves, they
remain. In gestures that forever teach us we are
both of the dead and dying.

iv.

We are both of the dead and dying. What of the
missing? Those that torment. The faces forever
submerged in water. The cord that is not cut but
pulls us back into the sea, where they might have
gone.

Even the enjambments signal the forced splice of thought continuity, as if the persona's consciousness is jarred and seeks to reach out to the victims themselves—only, for whatever circumstances, she could only do so in poetry. Ultimately, the poet seems to say that spirituality implies a connectedness to the plight of others as the artist crafts in words her empathy for their unspeakable tragedy, of a loss for which words will not suffice.

In "Paralagra," the persona observes the mat weavers of Basey, Samar at work ("Untimed by history, keepers of the sea, / soothing sleep into threads / of stories eyes have no vision for. / What their fingers intimate / I feign in the meters of these lines"). This fascination for craft shows that, as with the view of God's immanence (cf. Aureus 2000 and Greeley 2000), everything is engraced, and artistic craftsmanship is an approximation of the creative power of God.

But the sense of the spiritual is also found in non-Catholic references, such as in "Angkor Wat: The Oracle of Stone," where the persona contemplates the philosophical implications of identity and history as chronicled in the architecture of the famed temple. It is a meditation on the eternal and the temporal, on social and inner conflict, and the means to transcend them—and what is spirituality if not a concern for what lies beyond this life? It ends

with a supplication to direct her course through rebirth: “Speak to me stone:
Tell me / where I can lay down / and rise from my own ruins.”

Meanwhile, in the lyric sequence “Of Shapes,” the persona meditates on the laws of physics and the presence of divinity in humanity through interconnectedness. In “Of Shapes: One,” the poet uses the persona’s pondering over the laws of physical science—pertaining to “Motion that rules / seasons, returns—the rhythms / of longing”—to signify the origin and destination of all that exists, but that which direction is rejected: “Beings of compass, / we drill our ways against / its fulcrum unknown / to how the sight of heavens / finds its equal on earth.” It is an acknowledgment that man is one who innately seeks guidance (from a Higher Power, presumably) but who, because of free will, charts out a life contrary to it. It is inevitable, however, that the Self returns to a point where “the exultant / flesh [binds] spirit / in abandon.”

This is continued in “Of Shapes: Two,” where the persona declares that an Objective Strength beyond human comprehension will make things right again: “The center aligns. / Against all that may sunder. / Despite us, geometry governs.” The poem embodies the notion that science and mathematics as branches of higher knowledge approximate the Divine speak about the primacy of scientific inquiry in explaining everything—but, in listening to the silences, the poet says this is not possible. Rather, the mysteries are unraveled in the acknowledgment that all creation is fused and helixed, and the experience of the universe is inevitably found in each participant in the cosmos who carries another’s burden: “Nothing is not filled / by us in space. In the simplest shape, / the densest of relation. [...] By its axiom, nothing severs— / we rend to bear each other’s / precious jewel.”

The spiritual sense of finding oneself reflected in creation is found in “Reminiscing Rumi,” where the sequence “After ‘Say I Am You’” contain the lines “I am the husk before the seed. / I am tendril. / [...] I am chrysalis

at the tip of wings, / the wait between season and its blooms." In "Into the Plains of Bagan," the persona finds this same marriage of the tangible with the intangible, leading to a sense of tranquility. In its third sequence, "Old Bagan," a woman worshipping at the temple is "unfazed by the light pouring into the threshold," her face the image of "[serenity], her hands on chest / resting on the subtleties of breath. // At this hour the skies clear for prayers. / At this hour the skies ease into ballast. // In what colors do our eyes / catch the praise in clouds?" And in "Tak Bat," the reader senses an awareness of the transcendence of the here and now: "It used to be that not to look into their eyes / was to fall deep into the gesture, a welcome / into which hearts yield to a meditation / of depths, what overflows, what levels, / what lifts the gift beyond its height."

Conclusion

Roma's poems show that feminine articulation of the sacred comes to rest on the transcendental aspect of silence, and demonstrate how the very nature of poetry also affirms the sense of silence on the level of form. The lyric persona speaks, but often not aloud, only in thought. The poet has shown that a heightened sensitivity to and awareness of the Truth, revealed upon contemplations of the greatness and wisdom of the ordinary, gives birth to truly spiritual poetry. The poems feature speakers who are pensive souls fascinated with realities beyond the physical and the temporal, and who recognize that it is only through careful attention to the silences of moments that can a path to the sacred can be architected.

To reiterate, among the issues dealt with by the poet are: how the intangible merges with the tangible in the choice of imagery and metaphor, often derived from nature; how the sacred can be seen even in the diurnal domestic activities; and that a soul who is in touch with sanctity is portrayed as operating in a unified and interconnected awareness of the needs of others,

as she views service and empathy as a positive response to the prodding of the Divine Voice in her conscience.

In Roma's poems, it can be seen how the exploration of the spiritual can only be fulfilled by treading the path of silence, into which all are urged to inch closer to the Eternal and to the Divine.



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