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Poetry as Modern Prayer: Language's Orientation Towards One Another

Benedict Reilly

Fordham University, breilly26@fordham.edu

**POETRY AS MODERN PRAYER:
LANGUAGE’S ORIENTATION TOWARDS ONE ANOTHER**

BENEDICT REILLY *

Abstract: Historically, we have looked to religion for answers to the deep questions of life, but an increasingly solitary valuation of logos has left secular society unsatisfied with traditional answers. Grounded in analysis of the personal value of poetry and adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, I first argue that there is an abstract, life-sustaining attribute of *humanness* which we should point towards. Then, calling upon Amy Hollywood’s notion of “Secular Death,” I explain that this humanness comes from a valuation of ideas which extend beyond the realm of what is logically valuable. Recognizing the aversion of contemporary society to previous sources of humanness, namely prayer, I conclude by asking each individual to be a poet, using the tools of language to pull human persons towards one another.

Introduction

From the first grunt
To the first word
To the first sentence
To the first paragraph
To the first poem
To each other

This was my first poem. It was published on Twitter Thursday, May 6, 2021.

I find poetry so beautiful because its medium, language, is not only entirely intent on bringing people together, but is also the sum of all human development and direction. First, we grunted. The grunt was the first verbal attempt to indicate a relationship with others. The words, sentences, and paragraphs that followed allowed people to get closer to each other, to exchange thoughts and ideas. But the first poet wanted a connection even closer than this sterile and rudimentary baseline. The first poet wanted to plunge into the deeply human experience that connects all of humanity. They wanted to share, at least partly, in emotions. Poetry is an attempt to look others in the eye and say: ‘We may not know exactly what you are thinking or feeling, but we understand what it is like to be alive.’ The COVID-19

* Benedict Reilly is a junior at Fordham University pursuing a B.A. in Humanitarian Studies and Theology. He is currently a Duffy Fellow at the Fordham Center on Religion and Culture, where his research explores locations of and perspectives on Divinity in the Bronx.

lockdown has brought the necessity of this connection to the forefront of my mind. Combined with the social trends of secularism and scientification, COVID-19 has made most visible the unfortunate decrease in the resilience and vibrancy of intentional communities that value a shared sense of humanity. In particular, the religious communities in my home city of New York were battered by restrictions on meeting size beyond those placed on commercial businesses. Imposed by then-Governor Andrew Cuomo, these additional restrictions seemed to suggest that the value added to New York by these religious communities is less important than what private businesses might otherwise provide.

I do not believe that this shift necessarily means that modernity and shared humanity are incompatible. Looking to the horizon, I find hope in the persistence of intentional communities that invite people to participate in deeper relationships with each other and with humanity.

Poetry and Adoration

While walking back to Fordham University's campus one Thursday evening, I noticed that the front door of a local parish, Our Lady of Mount Carmel, was open. This seemed unusual, so I stopped in to pray. I paused in the foyer, looking through the windows of the doors to the nave to watch at least three dozen people participating in the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. I almost turned around then, intimidated by the largest adoration group I had seen since youth catechism classes. I felt like an intruder, a passerby who had not been invited. I interpreted the front door as an invitation to share only in the space, not in the community, of the church. In the end, however, I sat in the back pews for a few moments of silent adoration. Perhaps this experience has stuck with me because it showed me that prayer is a bit like poetry: both draw people together.

I want to revisit this anecdote for several reasons. First, it highlights the importance of looking for *people*, rather than *spaces*, as we emerge from this pandemic. Upon reflection, I find it odd that seeing the people praying behind an open door made me hesitant to accept the invitation. This faltering stems primarily from the decentering and monadizing nature of social distancing, which has gripped us for over a year. This experience has been decentering in the sense that we have been removed from the social values we once considered central to our being, and monadizing in that we are each hardening into our own separate and

indivisible entities.² Since the pandemic began, I have attended mass in-person only four times. Even the few masses that I did attend felt hollow and sterile due to the distance between parishioners and the lack of the communal activities like singing, which elicits the same emotional response as poetry.

Despite the discouraging hollowness of the COVID-19 masses held there, I make my way to the tiny (and often empty) Blue Chapel of our main academic building at least twice every week. Ironically, I find solace in conversations with friends as we confess that we find ourselves in similar straits—returning to this empty, yet sacred, space to seek humanity in a place where people are not physically present. How odd is it that we consider this small, rarely visited, top-floor room sacred in itself, but without anyone to fill this space, its sacredness might never be recognized? Especially now—as the unlit sanctuary lamp conveys a dismal reminder of the absence of this space’s previous caretaker—I struggle to find humanity in the emptiness of the Blue Chapel.

I must contrast my experience in Fordham’s Blue Chapel with that of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Parish, where, despite the Parish’s requirement of silence and social distancing, humanity persists in the presence of those who invite others to join in a spiritual communion. Although my experiences upon entering the open doors of the Blue Chapel and Mount Carmel were certainly different, there is a humanizing value of the doors’ invitation that reminds me too of the power of poetry. Indeed, whereas the presence of other persons is ultimately important for recognizing our shared sense of humanity, the invitation also plays a role, even when no one is present to extend the invitation. The paradox of the invitation of all and yet specifically each can be seen in a saying used frequently at Accepted Students Day by the president of Fordham University, Joseph McShane, S.J.: ‘we are called to look each student in the eye and tell them that they are the most important student that has ever stepped foot on this campus in its 180 years of existence and then look at the next, say the same thing, and have it still be true.’ Poetry does just what Fr. McShane describes: it tells each listener and reader that he or she is particularly worthy of sharing in the writer’s deep emotions. Similarly, Our Lady of Mount Carmel’s open door during

² In Leibniz’s philosophy, a monad is the most simple constituent part of the universe, whose properties cannot be changed by forces external to it. See Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz & Nicholas Rescher. "Index of Key Terms and Ideas." In *G. W. Leibniz's Monadology*, ed. Nicholas Rescher (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1991).

adoration allows people like me—who had never before been inside—to feel uniquely invited into a sacred spiritual communion. The invitation of poems, like church doors, forms symbolic connections between those in the inner community and those in the greater community. Though personal experiences with poetry and adoration impact only those reached by their limited scopes, they draw individuals in with the intention of orienting them outwards—toward the broader human experience shared by all people. The gesture of leaving the door open and inviting others in reminds those participating that this shared experience brings those present closer not only to one other, but also to all of humanity.

Both poetry and adoration also pull individuals towards a center: each other. Indeed, just as adoration draws the participants towards God—who, the Church teaches, accompanies us at all times—poetry pulls readers towards the poet. The value of poetry, adoration, and similar others-oriented practices emanates from their ability to hone the skills that not only make us good persons, but too reveal our fundamental humanity, our *imago Dei*. Decreased participation in religious practices like Eucharistic adoration and the Mass leads those without religious dispositions to look towards a more common, shared tool of connection: language. It is the principle driver of organized society, but its uses extend far beyond organization. The writer, most particularly the poet, is the secular priest.

Value Beyond Logic

Hannah Arendt's description of Adolf Eichmann in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* comes to mind as a particularly helpful tool for understanding the power and importance of language in maintaining and fostering a personal relationship with others. Eichmann was notably inarticulate, not so much due to a lack of education or oratory skills, but because of his strict adherence to "language rules."³ He refused to engage with the ideas and emotions of others, relying entirely on the sterilizing language of the Nazi Party. An eviction became a 'change of residence,' a concentration camp became 'labor in the east,' and murder became a 'final solution.' In this way, his strict adherence to language rules was a manifestation of his inability to recognize the humanity of others, rendering him unable to reflect on the evil

³ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Viking Press, 1963), 86.

inhumanity of his own actions. As Arendt notes, “[Eichmann’s] inability to speak was closely connected with an inability to think, namely, to think from the standpoint of somebody else.”⁴ Eichmann’s inhumanity came primarily from an unwillingness to engage with the thoughts, ideas, and emotions of others. Language rules posed a barrier for Eichmann. They operated as thought-terminating clichés which disabled the cognitive dissonance necessary to foster emotional attachment or empathy. These strict and limiting language rules seem to both stem from and reinforce a perspective in which Eichmann views himself, the Nazi Party, and Nazi culture as more human than humanity itself—a view that negates the need to connect with those superficially placed below him and which therefore cripples his ability to express his own humanity.

Eichmann’s belief that he is more human than humanity stems from a teleological view of history, a concept first identified and critiqued in Herbert Butterfield’s famous historiography, *The Whig Interpretation of History*. Butterfield identifies a dominant strain of history-writing that views the span of history as a forward march towards a “glorious present,” and to the future.⁵ An interesting part of the teleological view of history is that it demands evangelism in the name of moving the world forward. This evangelical perspective of progress was the driving force for imperialism and forced conversions, both of which sought to eliminate ways of life considered inferior in order to replace them with those deemed appropriate in the eyes of the “glorious present.” Within the context of modern theological, philosophical, and spiritual discourse, it seems as if there is a mass of people who might subscribe to the same dangerous teleological mindset that limited Eichmann and the Whigs, just with a different concept of the “glorious present” (and, hopefully, less gruesome results).

In the Western philosophical tradition, one important ‘end goal’ involves the use of logic (*logos*) to evaluate and systematically prove certain truths: the end-goal can be identified by the word “logos”—the idea that which we can evaluate and prove systematically: A to B to C to D, our answer. The Greeks counterweighted *logos* with *pathos* (emotions), but this is often sidelined in contemporary discussion. Think, for example, of

⁴ Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 27.

⁵ Hubert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1931). See also Simon Blackburn, “Whig view of history,” in *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

“facts don’t care about your feelings.” Our modern, secular world prides itself on being more logical than those which came before it and those contemporaries it looks back on. However, I contend that we too need to re-develop a desire for emotions, faith, and the incomprehensible, all of which can often seem frivolous in our current value system. Within this worldview, it seems we have developed past the need for emotions, faith, and the incomprehensible—the intangibles of *pathos* which become frivolous in our systematic framework of value.⁶

Humans still face a question to which our A to B to C process can offer no logical or comprehensible answer: death. As Harvard Divinity School scholar Amy Hollywood notes in her “Secular Death,” “only the incomprehensible is comforting in the face of how hard death is.”⁷ Indeed, the Bible, Quran, Torah, and Upanishads were once sources of those incomprehensible answers, those that exceeded just pure logic. Hollywood specifically cites the Psalms as the source of answers provided by Abrahamic religions because of the high “range of human emotions” that they contain by virtue of their poetic form. Describing herself as “Post-Christian,” Hollywood takes into account the secularization of society and asks: “What’s the aging hipster’s version of the Psalms?”⁸ In other words, she asks if we set aside the religious as no longer valuable, where do we look for solace in the face of death? Anecdotally, Hollywood offers the absurd example of Edward Lear’s poem for children, “The Owl and the Pussycat,” which provided comfort to her father as he awaited death in hospice. It is a childish and nonsensical poem that suggests no obvious explanation for why her father would find peace in it. But, precisely because it seems absurd to place value in such a poem, this example exemplifies that there is more to the human experience than that which fits within the neat box of “logic.” As Hollywood seemingly implies, sustenance for life comes in valuing that which goes beyond logic, like theology and poetry. In their incomprehensibility, “The Owl and the Pussycat” meets the Psalms.

⁶ Amy Hollywood, “Secular Death,” *Harvard Divinity Bulletin* 44, nos. 3 and 4, (Summer/Autumn 2016).

⁷ Hollywood, “Secular Death,” 9.

⁸ Hollywood, “Secular Death,” 4.

Finding incomprehensible comfort in a time that seems strictly logical is difficult, so I suggest we turn to the beloved character and theologian Shug Avery from Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* for support:

My first step from the old white man was trees. Then air. Then birds ...it come to me: that feeling of being part of everything ... And I laughed and I cried ... It sort of like you know what, she say, grinning and rubbing high up on my thigh ... Oh, she say, God love them feelings. That's some of the best stuff God did ... God don't think it dirty? I ask. Naw, she say. God made it. Listen, God love everything you love—and a mess of stuff you don't. But more than anything else, God love admiration ... I think it pisses God off if you walk by the color purple in a field somewhere and don't notice it.⁹

As Avery recounts her journey away from the old 'White God,' part of our communal journey towards secularism, she does not claim that God is the trees or the color purple, but rather points us to the idea of God being most present when we are in awe of creation. She tells us that the wonder previously reserved for a distant God should be experienced by sensing things of the earth, like the color purple. I like to think that Shug is telling us that God's most awesome creation is not Godself, but rather the human experience, however we might choose to live it. Through this concept, Shug asserts that the absurdity of our existence equals the absurdity of God, and that the Divine attributes of God can be found in the human experience. To bring us back to Professor Hollywood's question, as the aging hipster approaches his or her own mortality, the incomprehensible place he or she must look for comfort, the incomprehensible thing that his or her poems attempt to theologize, can only be found in engaging with human existence. To come to terms with death, one must recognize the absurd value of human life.

Conclusion: The Central Paradox of Poetry and Prayer

As I think about how we can best capture the value of humanness, I often refer to Imani Perry's question, "How many more Pietas?" Discussed in an interview about the murder of Black men and boys in the context of Perry's *Breath: A Letter to My Two Sons*, the religious image of the Pieta—Mary holding the body of the murdered Jesus of

⁹ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple: A Novel* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich) 1982.

Nazareth—can extend beyond an explicitly religious context.¹⁰ Though the language of ‘Pieta’ is obviously religious in origin, referring to the famous image of the mother Mary holding the body of the murdered Jesus Christ, the point she is making can be taken out of a religious context. Perry recognizes that the value of each Black life lost to police violence is equal to that of Christ: absurd, near ultimate; however, her use of the plural “Pietas” shows that we can understand people as ends of ultimate value without diminishing the individual value of each human person.

Perry’s work illustrates the central role that language has in that deeply personal, yet universal, relationship with humanity I have thus far discussed. It demonstrates the paradoxical connection we are called to have with each other, but also with the rest of a much larger community, one that exceeds the pure rationality of logic. How can we value each person ultimately without diminishing the value of the other? Her language creates a sense of shared motherhood, perhaps the strongest human connection we can envision—through her words, we begin to sense the anguish of Gwen Carr at the loss of her child, Eric Garner, and we feel an inkling of Mary’s similar pain as she lost her own Son, Jesus the Christ. We must share in the fear of every mother and father of a Black boy. We must share in their (and our) human experience.

We are caught in the web of interconnectedness identified by Martin Luther King and profoundly spun by poets thereafter. In this web, we find the often overlooked analytical skills of the poet. Poetry’s analytical side is a little more hidden than its emotional—yet the boundary between analytical and emotional is in no way fixed. Analyzing poetry is easy enough, but in order to write poetry, the poet must analyze the world. A poet cannot just focus on the river, such as the one depicted in “It Is Well With My Soul” by Horatio Spafford, but instead must find the patterns in the river that mirror the Crucifixion, the last judgment, the human experience, the poet’s own life.¹¹ A poet is mindful of ideas, questions, answers, and people outside of the usual realm of discussion, always looking for a pattern that brings them into conversation with one another. The analytical nature of poetry and the sympathetic stance of the poet make poems radically inclusive—no one is excluded from emotion.

¹⁰ Imani Perry, “More Beautiful,” interview by Krista Tippett, *On Being*, The On Being Project, September 26, 2019, audio.

¹¹ Horatio Spafford, “It is Well With My Soul,” 1873, Hymn.

Like the universal sense of emotion that poetry seeks to touch, no one is excluded from prayer. God's omnibenevolence bestows a level of concern for both the interconnectedness of the community and the value of the individual. As society calls less upon the power of prayer, however, it is important to look too to poetry to actualize that profound humanness that is difficult to locate and which is the necessary connector between individual value and universal meaning and intelligibility. This humanness is not an attribute that we can exhibit "more of" on our own, at least in the sense that seeking to increase one's own humanness without orienting oneself towards other persons is impossible. Language, particularly poetry, was created with the intention of bringing us closer together, of opening doors, and therefore not only points the listener towards the central features of humanness, but also, in doing so, pulls each human towards the other, making us more human.

I am most certain that the world needs more poets, more people who look at the world and see all of humanity in each person, and each person in all of humanity, without contradiction. The world needs more people that think sympathetically and systemically with an intentional direction towards each other. The world needs you, and I pray the world needs me.

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