

Poetry as the Thing Itself

MARTHA SERPAS

I write poems set in my Southern Louisiana home, eighty miles south-southwest of New Orleans in Lafourche Parish, a small town called Galliano. Cajun country, settled by diverse peoples—Acadians, Houma Indians, Germans, Italians, and scores of others—has produced original, syncretic architecture, cuisine, music, language, art, and dance. Before the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, I might have had to explain why I could very well outlive my hometown, how the land has been disintegrating. Now most people are aware of the devastating effects of pollution, poor planning, and oil industry dredging on Louisiana's coast. The Gulf is eating my home state so fast—twenty-five to forty-five square miles a year—that future generations will never know the communities where I grew up. Southern Louisiana is the fastest disappearing landmass in the world.

Environmentalists will tell you about the impact on migrating birds and other marshland inhabitants. "Eat all the crab you can now," because most so-called Maryland crabs come from Louisiana, and the crab industry is facing extinction. A third of domestic oil flows through Port Fourchon, threatened and sinking. A few miles from the port is a bridge, and from that bridge, no higher than a hill, one can get a fairly long view across the flat marsh. Nearby lakes, just twenty years ago, were land. The remains of a cemetery are dropping into the brackish water one cement vault at a time. Gray crosses and gaping holes where bodies were exhumed are visible at low tide.

These are the subjects of my poetry, and poetry and theology for me are correlatives. The disintegrating land that I describe is indistinguishable from other disappearances—of the physical body, of ego, of faith, of certainties, of community.

Poetry and theology are both beholden to the physical world and strive to transcend it. They also are the victims of similar critiques: they are judged unreadable, abstruse, pedantic, out-of-touch. Often the same damning label is used—hopelessly *academic*. Those adjectives describe poor theology and failed poems. Without an engaged audience, either pursuit is reduced to the private musings of a single mind. The mind is a friend to poetry and theology, but is not the primary source of either. Poetry and theology must share a partner in their enterprises, and that partner is the audience or reader. The audience is intrinsic to the poetic and theological event, a co-creator of the thing itself.

Prayer, writes Simone Weil, is absolute unmixed attention—and so is poetry. Both are joyfully and grievously in-the-moment, all-consuming, and both direct the heart to the Word. The Word is the *means* to the Divine end and the Divine itself. The Word is not a signifier but the thing proper: it is both vehicle and tenor at once.

Passion for language is a creative force in both poetic and theological endeavors. We are inescapably embodied and indebted to our senses; to convey any experience is to rely on sensory description. Poetry, I believe, can help theology avoid the graves of cliché and old metaphors. Fixation on any image or fixture as an end in itself is idolatrous and reminds us why grave and *graven* have similar roots.

Poetry is fluid, ready to accept a new rhythm and a better phrase if either will further the cause

of precision. The poet (and the theologian) trusts in a guiding Truth beyond her volition. As Richard Hugo writes, “You owe reality nothing, and the truth of your feelings everything.” For our purposes, I would offer, “This reality is not what the theologically minded poet is struggling to reach.”

Poetry strives for the clearest, most specific image. Poetry knows that metaphor is not a lesser reality, a poor substitute—as in “oh, that’s just a metaphor”—but points beyond an accessible reality to a greater Truth. Paradoxically, poetry is considered fiction. Certainly, poetry is a made thing, an invention, yes, but hardly without verity. Metaphor alone can offer us some approach to the Divine, and again, paradoxically, metaphor can never fully convey the Divine. Still, it remains our best bet.

In this way, poetry is sacramental. I await a book by Scott Cairns, a Greek Orthodox poet, on this subject. He has addressed the transubstantiated nature of poetry with great eloquence. Poetry does not represent; it is not a symbol. Poetry does not explain, and it does not point or show. Poetry does not exist to depict the thing; it is the thing itself. Its power is conjured between the audience and the poet.

Poetry is mysterious and respectful of silence. Without silence there is no music, and without music there is no poetry. Poetry is composed, after all. Poetry is shaped; poetry sings. It owes more to music and to sculpture than to prose writing. For me there is no possibility of untangling the poetic and theological impulse. Their vibrancy rests in the imagination, and they both call us to rest in the imagination, not as an escape, but as a return home.

In my poetry, I have borrowed from Simone Weil’s writings on decreation. I use the dissolution of the land as metaphor for the dismantling of the self, which, for Weil, is a necessary suffering to achieve union with the Divine. Because, despite my impulse to educate and urge change, I am an elegist. What I praise is already gone.

The land and the people in my poems serve as vehicles for theological longing and suffering: tragic destruction is required for new creation. I try to conjure my home’s sounds and colors in the immediacy they still hold for me, a present-tense paradox of abundance and loss existing in the same time and space, not a representation of a part of the temporal world, but a transformed reality.

Reburial at Sea

Leeville Cemetery, LA

They must have heard it coming—

the relentless marsh water

throwing itself against their vaults,

salt-heavy and exhausted, day

after day, the old bricks
warmed in the noon sun.
It must have sounded like regret, like
a bunkmate's throaty breathing
getting louder and closer
as the deckhands roll from sleep.
It must have set the marsh struggling,
high tide's long, muddy arms
that lift bodies into a bath
or onto the quilted Gulf.
It must have kept them company,
the persistent lapping, the slow rock down—
when one holds still, the world's
rough motions calm into shining ripples.
They must have been comforted
that change is possible for the dead.

Martha Serpas has published two collections of poetry, Côte Blanche (New Issues, 2002) and The Dirty Side of the Storm (Norton, 2006). Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in The New Yorker, The Nation, The Christian Century, and Image: A Journal of the Arts and Religion. She was visiting professor of religion and literature at Yale Divinity School in fall 2005 and currently teaches at the University of Tampa, where she is an associate professor of English. She is co-poetry editor of Tampa Review.