



Poetry Editor Rachel Custer
Editorials on Issues of Poetic Practice

Songs on the Way to God: A Theory of Poetics



2020 Pamphlet Series

Copyright © 2020 by BUTTONHOOK PRESS
An imprint of OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters

All rights reserved on behalf of Rachel Custer.

Set in Garamond and formatted in *Create Space*.

Printed in the USA as a novelty and O:JA&L event souvenir
for the 2020 AWP Conference in San Antonio, Texas.

Cover Image: *Evocation* by Odilon Redon (1840-1916). Pastels on paper.
46 x 61 inches. By 1916. Public domain.

Rachel Custer

Editorials on Issues of Poetic Practice

Songs on the Way to God: A Theory of Poetics

I don't always feel confident with the jargon of poetic craft, that foreign language exclusive to literary spaces I so often cannot afford to join. I confess I have never learned to scan a poetic line. Where I'm from, with all that entails, I never had the chance. The nearest discernible poetry community is an hour and a half away from my rural Indiana home. Online spaces can feel overwhelming, filled as they are with academics and activists jostling for position, and the expectation of initiation into and agreement with certain critical schools of thought. My tiny high school barely had a football team, much less access to the types of arts programs found in more urban spaces.

It doesn't matter; besides the ability with which an artist is born, learning craft has nothing to do with what we call it. As artists, craft is an action verb - a thing we *do*. It is a way of seeing and processing the world. It grows organically from who we are, mostly, and is an extension of and response to all those things that have made us. Craft is how we take the things that make (and remake) us, and use them to make something else. If creativity is the godspark in us, and I believe that it is, craft is a sort of ritualization of how we come to God. The commandments, as it were, that reveal the way in which we approach creativity. The path to poetic Truth.

I'd like to talk about three ways I conceptualize poetic craft: as an approach to the Holy; as embodied ritual; and as localized narrative.

Craft as Approach to the Holy

Moses met God in the form of a desert bush that burned but was not destroyed. From the center of the bush, a brilliant metaphor for an encounter with the divine, came the Voice: *take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy ground*. The Bible can

be read partly as an instruction manual for how to come to God. How to stand in the presence of the holy with our dirty, tired feet.

I increasingly think of poetic craft this way, as both approach to the divine and the way of approach. Within the first five words of my religion's holy book, we learn that God is an artist: *in the beginning, God created...* The story of first importance is a lesson on the artistic craft of God Himself. Human beings are the pinnacle of God's creation, being made in His own image. Each of us is a living self-portrait of the generative God.

It is unsurprising, then, that we create. Crafted in the image of our Creator, we find joy in seeing our own image reflected in the art we make. We look at it and say, like God did, *it is good*. In this first story, though, while God creates, the focus is not on the created thing. It is on the process of creation itself, with a focus on the artist and the artistic act.

Here, for me, is a lesson: poetic craft is the *process* of creation, and how we undertake it. It is the taking off of our shoes before the poem. If writing a poem can be an encounter with and expression of the divine - and I believe it can - the poem as resulting object is, at most, only equally important to its creation. Important, but we err when we make an idol of the created thing. More and more, I define art as the walk up the mountain, as the removal of sandals, as the awe before a fire that burns but does not destroy. The poem itself is simply the naturally resulting object a being created to be creative creates. Craft, then, is the climb toward a meeting with God.

All this seems very heady, I guess, but I would suggest that a theory of poetics is perhaps the most essential craft "tool" a poet can possess. It is this theory that undergirds what we so often call "voice" - that thing that makes a poem *my* poem. Essentially, it is a systematic theology of writing, an answer to the question, *why do I write*. I would further suggest that a theory of poetics is like a worldview, in that everybody has one. Some are purposefully examined and formed, and some are unacknowledged or even elevated to the status of objectivity, but we all have them. Craft is the honing of a poetics that brings us closer to the Truth.

I need this systematic theory because I write my best work when I don't think much about craft. I write my best work when I barely think at *all*, but allow myself to get out of my own way. Some part of me almost *channels* that voice inside of me that tells me what is true. The *spiritus sancti*. Sometimes, this is a truth I don't know until I finish writing it, but I recognize it instantly. Those are the most enjoyable poems for *me*, as a writer. To understand my own craft, then, and to prepare myself to exercise it, I must think deeply about how we come to know what's true, what truly exists somewhere in a place more solid than these shadowlands.^{1 2}

Herein lies my distaste for jargon. When we reduce craft to a series of "moves" we make, to counting syllables and emphases and internal rhymes, or to breaking line here or a stanza there, we elevate the importance of the poem itself. While I wouldn't argue that the poem as an object is *unimportant* - after all, God spends the entire rest of the Bible seeking to save His creation - it reduces the divine to the quotidian. I think of God reading an instruction manual called *how to assemble your giraffe*.

Fortunately, jargon is unnecessary for the artist, if not for the critic. It is jargon that has been created to explain the craft of poetry, not the other way around. Craft exists as a larger, independent truth - the thing to be explained - in the same way the objective concept of, for instance, addition, existed prior to the word that named it. Craft is the objective truth of poetry; jargon is merely the language human beings have created to attempt to define and explain it.

So what is the basis for my poetic craft? Why do I write? I write to approach God, to exercise that spark of the divine Creator within myself. To feel my bare feet in the hard dirt of holy ground. Where exactly I place my sandals is the lesser concern.

Craft as Embodied Ritual

Praise God from Whom all blessings flow.

Praise Him all creatures here below.

Praise Him above, ye heav'nly host.

Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

I can't read those words without singing them, and they always sound the same in my head. That "a" in "amen" drawn out, short "a" intoned like a plainchant. If I listen very carefully to my memory, I can hear Harold F's baritone, behind me and to the right. Or my own father's rich harmonizing, from the end of the pew to my left. I can feel the hard wood of the pew in front of me beneath my hands. See the exact shade of red carpet beneath my feet.

How do I explain to you that the doxology lives in my body?

A doxology is a short hymn of praise to God. In the Wawaka Church of the Brethren (as in most Protestant churches), *the* doxology has always been a specific, ritualized series of events. After offering is collected, and a prayer of thanks offered, the organist strikes a single chord. It's always the same one, deep and rich and magnetic. Everybody stands together, as if drawn, as if volitionless before the Lord. There's a freedom in doing things exactly the same way every time, in knowing what's going to happen. A chord struck, and your body responds exactly as it always has. A type of muscle memory of praise. Everybody knows exactly when to begin singing.

Ritual can be useful in approaching art, as well. It's damn hard to come to the blank page; we all know this. How does one approach something so huge as the entire Truth? Sometimes, the only way I can move myself from sitting and thinking about writing a poem to standing before the poem itself is by coming up with the equivalent of that single preparatory note. Sometimes, inspiration will strike, and I'll *have* to write immediately. Mostly, though, I need something to live inside my muscle tissue that will respond when it hears that note. I need things to pull me up from the pew.

I write on my laptop, mostly. And I'm bad about doing it regularly. But once I have my laptop on my lap, it's easier to open it up. Once I open it, it's easier to open a new file. And once I put a couple hundred words on the blank page, it's easier and more enjoyable to write. I begin to hear the harmonies, the reassuring beauty of a voice I know, the story of a people who have joined to

sing praise. It is always easier to stand when something is pulling you.

It's always easier to sing when everybody else is singing. In practical terms, then, the way to embed that song in your body is to listen to the others singing. I am far from the first person to say this, and it's been said better ways, but the single best way to ritualize inspiration is to read the writing of other poets. Read *everything*. Find the music in the phrasing on the back of cereal boxes. Look for the interesting turn of phrase in the police blotter. Read history textbooks.

All that being said, read for truth and beauty and readily discard the noise.

Sometimes, during the doxology, a toddler might take exception to our ritual. A hundred and fifty people all beginning to sing loudly and at once can be disconcerting when one isn't expecting it. So the toddler, surprised, might begin to cry or shout. Generally, our church embraced and enjoyed having children in the church. If all are not welcome, then what in God's name is the point of church?

So it is with art.

The parent might get up and carry the toddler out to calm him. Or she might sit through the song, shushing him and looking slightly embarrassed. The congregation would manage through the noise. Some of us would probably even have smiled or laughed; children are a joy and a blessing to any church. A future and a hope. The toddler would cry, surrounded by praise and people who loved him.

What we would not do was stop singing. What we would not do was alter the song.

Read everything, but do not mistake fit-throwing for a hymn.

Craft as Localized Narrative

From the century-old farmhouse where I grew up, Sweet Corn Charlie produce stand is just over 20 miles west across straight backroads. Cornfields line both sides most of the way. The Amish

ladies smile as they count out thirteen ears of corn - a baker's dozen - and ring up the fat green tomatoes and homemade apple butter I couldn't pass up. The ladies are so friendly, and the drive is so nice, I don't mind that I just drove half an hour one way to pay three times the going price for a dozen ears of corn. In Indiana, Land of Perpetual Corn.

Why? Combining Israeli farming techniques with the rich Indiana soil, the family that runs Sweet Corn Charlie grows the best damn sweet corn in the world, that's why - and it's ready two months before anybody else's. I would drive twice that far if I had to.

But it's more than that. When you live in a place known for one thing, like this place is known for corn, you don't want that thing. Its everywhere banality. Its surrounding of you. You don't want the moderate sweetness outsiders settle for, even exclaim over.

You don't want the ubiquitous thing.

You want its pinnacle. Sweet corn as spiritual experience. As much as anything, you want that something wondrous that can only be found here. In the land of shadows, you want *the thing itself*.

Small towns are made of stories, and a person might as well be the stories people tell about her. (Did you hear about that time Rachel Custer stole her parents' car...?) Narratives surround you like fields of tall corn. They call to you. They box you in. Stories thicken the air like pollen and make you sneeze.

In this place where narratives are ubiquitous as corn, what a writer wants is to quest for the pinnacle; that is, the narrative's central truth. The sweetest bite. Every poem I write is a quest for truth, and an understanding that truth is worth traveling to find.

For a long time, I wrote the last line of every poem first. I was more comfortable knowing where I was going, taking the two turns and the straight back roads and ending at the produce stand I'd always known. That, too, is a quest. No road is ever the same road twice. In the summer, in Indiana, you'd swear you can see the corn grow day by day.

Truth is like that, too. You look up at a different moment, and see a yellow house you've always seen, but a different window is lit against the dusk. A woman stands there and she is crying and her life demands a poem. This is to say that truth can be found along a road you've always driven. In fact, it is more likely you will notice its difference there.

So I'd start with the end, knowing where I was going, and I'd be distracted by the window along the way. When I started with the end, the journey led to the beginning. Eventually, I began to feel more comfortable taking a lake road, meandering westward through what truths I found, trusting that I knew this place well enough to end up where I needed to go. The journey led me to the end.

At its most essential, then, poetic craft is a way of re-seeing the world I've always seen, a way of living strangely amongst the familiar. It is a journey through a story I'm telling myself. Craft is a way of living in the world.

Craft is setting out from a house you've always known, traveling to a produce stand where you've always gone, and when you raise your eyes to the crying woman's window, finding the truth in why she cries.

Craft is nothing more or less than how well we pass by endless fields of small truths, to find and tell a truth worth traveling for.

About the writer:

Rachel Custer is the Poetry Editor and a reviewer and editorialist at O:JA&L. Her first full-length poetry collection, *THE TEMPLE SHE BECAME*, is available from Five Oaks Press. Other work has previously been published or is forthcoming in *Rattle*, *OSU: The Journal*, *The American Journal of Poetry*, *B O D Y*, [*Pank*], and *The Antigonish Review*. On February 13, 2019, Rachel Custer became a recipient of a 2019 Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Rachel Custer is the poetry editor at O:JA&L.

Acknowledgements:

OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters originally published this pamphlet as an online editorial in March 2019.

OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters
Annual Calls for Submissions of Themed Writing

Visit our Submittable site to review our submission guidelines.

<https://oalartsjournal.submittable.com/submit>

Call for Flash Discourse: Micro-Flash

2020 theme: "Aubade"

Call for Flash Discourse: Super-Flash

2020 theme: "Nocturne"

Call for Flash Discourse: Half-Flash

2020 theme: "Epiphany"

Call for Flash Discourse: Double Flash

2020 theme: "Naturalism: Tranche de Vie"

Call for Mixed Forms: Haibun

2020 theme: "Sacredness of Common Things"

Call for Narrative Poetry, all forms and styles

2020 theme: "A Long Obedience"

Call for poetry: Elegy

2020 theme: "Cultural Icon"

Alternate theme: "Public Servant"

Call for Poetry: Dramatic Monologue in Blank Verse

2020 theme: "Poor Excuses"

Find O:JA&L on Duotrope.

<https://duotrope.com/listing/23013/open-journal-of-arts-and-letters>

Subscribe to the O:JA&L Youtube Channel.

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC19x->

[YtPvwobM08RobpSGrg](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC19x-YtPvwobM08RobpSGrg)

Complimentary:

OPEN: Journal of Arts & Letters
EXPERIENCE / REFLECT / CELEBRATE

