

Sacred Image, Sacred Language

- Valerie Martinez

Something startling has happened to the word “icon”—Marilyn Monroe; Michael Jackson; Madonna; those clever little symbols, everywhere on a computer screen, that take us to our cyber destinations. But the word “icon” originally comes from the Latin, then Greek, *eikon* which derives from *eikēnai*—to resemble—and means a sacred image, a representation. Originally, then, an icon is an image that names and thus resembles or represents a sacred figure—the image of the Virgin Mary, for example, rather (and obviously) not the Virgin herself. I’m fascinated by the arc from the original meaning of the word—the sacred image—to the contemporary (and often pejorative) usage meaning a representation (often corrupt) of fame, capitalism, materialism, and more. If we take a leap away from the original definitions, perhaps it’s easy to see how current uses of the word—a figure who represents, a pictorial symbol—have some relation to its origins. Even so, the computer “icon” takes the idea of “representing” to its most superficial level. Now far from what we usually think of as sacred, the “icon” simply represents an item we want to access.

From the “deep and meaningful” to the depths of the superficial—it’s an incredible range. When and if “icon” is applied to poetry, it is used to signify everything from the most reverent images to the emphasis on “surface” and “depthlessness” in postmodern work. That said, I want to argue, here, that the icon—the sacred image—has always been alive and well in poetry, and the idea of the “sacred” (whether religious or not) is shared, significantly, by pre-Modern, Modern, AND postmodern poets. I want to affirm that modernism and postmodernism share a heady reverence for the way that images and language work. And I’ll emphasize the idea of reverence, in poetry, whether it refers to images or in terms of the power of language—the nexus where Modernism and Postmodernism meet.

I am less interested in distinguishing and distancing postmodernism (and here I’ll focus on Language Poetry) from other poetic movements—we have plenty of this, in my opinion—but in looking at where they intersect. I believe

that the future of American poetry lies both in tradition AND innovation, and that an historical examination of the icon in poetry provides us with a provocative look at how the sacred plays a fundamental part in the making of poetry.

Historically, poetry has been much about the language of icons in the original sense of the word. We have hundreds of years of poetry in which figures sacred to one religion or another appear as images—from the writings of Taoism:

Mysteriously existing
Before Heaven and earth.
Silent and empty.
An unchanging oneness.
An everchanging presence.
The Mother of all Life. (Freke 17)

to the writings of the Dakota:

Every object in the world has a spirit
and that spirit is *wakan*. Thus the spirits
of the tree or things of that kind,
while not like the spirit of man
are also *wakan*.” (Freke 17)

From Robert Herrick’s “Whips:”

GOD has his whips here to a twofold end,
The bad to punish, and the good t’amend. (Herrick 456)

to Christopher Smart’s “Psalm 58:”

Though Christ himself the pipe should tune
They will not to the measure tread,
Nor will they with his grief commune
Though tears of blood he shed. (Smart 135)

and Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “God’s Grandeur:”

Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.”
(Hopkins 139)

In the same way, the icon (as sacred image) continues to appear in the work of contemporary poets. Here are more than a dozen icons in Pat Mora's "Litany to the Dark Goddess:"

Toci, Our Grandmother, Woman of Wrinkled Uterus,
Teotenantzin, Beloved Mother of the Gods,
Tzizimichiuatl, Infernal Mother,
Tonantzin, Our Venerated Mother,
Tonantzin of Tepeyac, Patroness of Midwives and Healers,
Virgin
Virgin of Tepeyac, Virgin of Guadalupe
Virgin of Roses the Color of Blood." (Mora 57)

And here are excerpts from Li-Young Lee's "Nativity:"

Later, a man lying awake,
he might ask it again,
just to hear the silence
charge him, *This night*
arching over your sleepless wondering...

...each must make a safe place of his heart,
before so strange and wild a guest
as God approaches. (Lee 9-10)

In all these poems the image names its correlative, a sacred figure, and the language around it (like an afterglow) depicts, describes, and associates it.

Throughout history we also see the use of the image in a more literal sense, less about a sacred figure, more about naming, giving language to the "things" of the world. Even so, there is something of the sacred even in this. The act of giving language to what we see or what the imagination sees may seem absolutely natural (we do it in speech every day) but its appearance in a poem (or any piece of writing) strikes me as revelatory.

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TIFERET: A JOURNAL OF SPIRITUAL LITERATURE