
Pro Rege

Volume 46
Number 2 *Fine Arts Issue* 2017

Article 8

December 2017

How God Enters My Poems

David Schelhaas
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege



Part of the [Creative Writing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Schelhaas, David (2017) "How God Enters My Poems," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 46:
No. 2, 9 - 16.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol46/iss2/8

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Dordt Digital Collections. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Dordt Digital Collections. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

How God Enters My Poems

Dave Schelhaas

The poet William Stafford has a very short essay titled “A Way of Writing,” in which he explains his writing process or, perhaps, one process he uses to get started on a poem. Sometimes, of course, a poet has a pretty good idea of what he’s going to write about—at least in broad general terms—before he begins a poem. But sometimes a poem for Stafford begins like this: The writer sits down with no subject in mind and opens his mind. “We can’t keep from thinking,” Stafford says. So we must simply be receptive and uncritically take what comes. “One thing will lead to another,” he writes...[:] “the world will give and give.”

With many of the poems I have written, I have known what the subject of the poem is going to be as I begin to write it. So sometimes I know before I start that it is going to be about God or faith, etc. But sometimes I employ Stafford’s method. I want to write a poem but need a subject. So I stare out the window until I see something to write about. Or I sit and think—about what I’ve been reading, about a discussion I’ve had recently, about a sermon I’ve heard.

Here is the story of a poem that came out of a conscious use of the Stafford Method. I was sitting in my study, a converted upstairs bedroom which has a couch running along one wall. It was a bright fall day, and the sun was streaming through the double windows on the south side of the room, streaming through the nearly bare branches of the linden tree that stood about fifteen feet away. The shadow of several leaves was clearly delineated on the back of the couch. From that, this poem:

Leaves in the Wind

Dark linden leaves flutter on the umber couch in my study,
shadows cast by the morning sun. Sunbeams draw my eyes
outward to the tree where only a few leaves still hang
and into the blue sky beyond, where God sits, somewhere,
laughing, perhaps, or puzzled, as he deals out rain and wind and snow
around the globe. Here, he’s spreading out buttery sunshine—
and leaves, of course, which are raining down everywhere after last night’s frost.
Weather, war, the starving hoards, he must
get tired of deciding things.
And all those prayers that fly at him like leaves in the wind,
words, words, words in a thousand different languages,
some confident and faith full,
some doubt full and timid as shy boys at a dance.
How does he do it?
Does he grab one here and there
to answer and let the rest float on by?
Oh, I know what the Book says but
it is not always enough.

The evidence of things seen
 beggars glib conclusion.
 Do you think you know God? That you can
 go after him like a big game hunter, net him with
 large Latin words—omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient—
 and cage him in a catechism?
 I sit here all day fiddling with words,
 trying to put them into some sort of tune,
 an arrangement that harmonizes
 God, the world and
 my question-cluttered mind.
 Better to go outside and rake
 my leaf-littered lawn.

Now the point I want to make about this poem today is that when I started this poem, I had no idea what it was going to be about. It ended up being a poem about God, but not the most faith-filled poem I have written. Nevertheless, I would call it a God-poem, and it became one because after I had gone from my couch to the tree to the blue sky, the only place left for me to go was to God. And the reason I went there is that the phrase from Psalm 2, “God sits in the heavens and laughs,” was sitting somewhere in my mind. From then on, I just had to follow the words to see where they led me. This is not to say that I didn’t do a fair bit of revising before the poem came to its present form, but the tone and content, especially of the long first stanza, were there after the first draft.

How did God get into the poem? Not by my intent. I would explain it this way: Because I have lots of Scripture texts floating around in my mind, they are going to get out from time to time. I suppose I could also say that there are some theological issues that are floating about in my raggedy mind unresolved.

Here’s another poem with a slightly different journey.

For a number of years as I walked or biked to work in the morning, I would look for a poem—something to jump-start a poem. If I found something, I would reflect on it the rest of the way to work, and as soon as got to my office, I would type out a rough, rough draft of the poem. That’s what happened with this poem. I rode by the Naked Ladies for several summers before I recognized the poem lurking there along the curb. Many versions later I had made this poem:

*July 20—The Naked Ladies (Amaryllis Belladonna)**

Ten naked ladies dally on the terrace
 slender and supple in their
 pale pink skin.
 Arms raised to heaven
 they are nonchalantly naked
 as they dance in languid steps
 to the rhythm of the breeze.
 They have never toiled or spun
 only frolicked in the sun.
 Ten naked ladies shiver on the terrace
 blotched and wretched in their
 weather-wrinkled skin.
 By hot winds harassed
 they silently struggle
 to hold up each other

as they bend to the curb.
They have never spun or toiled
Yet their sun-dried skin is soiled.

Ten naked ladies left their bones on the terrace
dry broken reeds at
the edge of the pool.
The life that they cherished
gone to smoke like the grass.
The dance and the struggle
reduced to the rattle—
like old gossips' prattle—
of dry broken reeds.

Consider the lilies.

**Amaryllis Belladonna*—a variety of lily which gardeners call naked ladies because the flowers bloom on stems that have no surrounding leaves.

I suppose the word *lilies* was enough to take me into the Scriptures, though what I do with “consider the lilies” is quite different from Christ’s message in the sermon on the mount. In fact, though I don’t like to be didactic in a poem, I suspect that in my poem, I sort of unconsciously conflate the parable of the wise and foolish virgins with the phrase “consider the lilies,” and thus “consider the lilies” seems like a warning.

But again, you see that a life of laying up Scripture combined with a strong sense of the presence of God results in God appearing a poem that was going to be about some flowers.

Often I know from the beginning that the poem I am writing is going to be about God. Take this poem, for example:

The God of Material Things

“We put on Jesus with the flesh and bones of our race, taking him in with our mother’s milk.”
—Father Daniel Berrigan

Bold Daniel speaks for me.
So that now I wonder whether
his metaphor of mother’s milk
is more than metaphor, whether
by some covenantal mystery
an unseen substance in my mother’s milk
sent transubstantiated faith in Jesus coursing through my veins.

This I know: as soon as I could see,
I saw God everywhere. He was always hanging around the house.
Never a meal but there sat God,
smiling and blessing and keeping his elbows off the table.
Sunday morning he was in his holy temple
and all the earth (except the crying children) kept silence before him.
On endless Sunday afternoons he sat with my dad
and grandpa, smoking those terrible cigars that grandpa smoked

and spelling out the mysteries of faith.
In my room at night as I read the fat children's Bible
full of pictures and stories of David, Daniel, and those other giants,
there was God holding the flashlight and reading with me under the covers,
though sometimes as I got older the batteries failed
and darkness filled the room.

Years have passed, graduations, marriage, children, and still,
More often than not, I see him hanging around.

Sometimes he shows up after Sunday dinner, joining in
with his clear tenor as we sing
the songs from the old blue hymnal.
Or I'll be teaching when suddenly something a student says
or even—I know this sounds wrong—something that comes
out of my own mouth sounds to me like
God talking.

And some of the people I run into,
these college kids with their pierced eyebrows
and tattooed shoulders
who want to tutor at the grade school,
that elderly couple I saw walking down Main Street
arm in arm and laughing to high heaven,
the preacher who gives a sermon that's a poem,
and my wife, just her smile for instance—
it's got to be God zipping through all these people,
God in their blood and bones and brains,
dealing out hope and peace and kindness and truth and
all those other spiritual gifts
that aren't really any
thing until they're some
thing, some material
thing, some done
thing, some seen or heard or smelled or touched or tasted
thing.

It's true I don't see him everywhere these days
but still, well, like this morning,
I was weeding the perennials,
dew-wet in morning glory light,
the wren singing his perky little heart out,
and suddenly, there was God again,
like a rabbit popping out of the strawberry patch,
God, just for a moment,
taking my breath away.

Fifteen years before I wrote this poem, I spotted the quotation by Father Daniel Berrigan in a magazine called *The Christian Home and School*. I copied it into a notebook and eventually used as an epigraph to the poem. It was the spark that ignited the thought process that led to the poem.

Obviously, I intended to write about God in this poem. But I had no idea what I was going to say about God or the quotation except that it was going to be about the material manifestation of God. And while I never really seriously believed that God came into us through our mother's milk—and I doubt that Berrigan did—I thought it would be a useful device to explore the idea of the presence of God in ourselves and in creation, that great mystery we call, in some cases, the indwelling of the Spirit or, in other cases, the immanence of God. My point is that from the start I knew that this poem was going to be about God being made manifest in my life.

In his memoir, *Hannah's Child*, theologian Stanley Hauerwas describes his writing process as a writer of theology this way:

Writing is hard and difficult work because to write is to think. I do not have an idea and then find a way to express it. The expression is the idea. So I write because it is the only way I know how to think. I write, moreover, because I have something to say. That I have something to say is not a personal achievement. I have something to say because I am a Christian. I also have readers who are obligated to care about what I write. They are called Christians. What an extraordinary gift. Audience makes all the difference . . . I believe that God has given me something to say. I have been given the work of trying to imagine what it means to be a Christian in a world that Christians do not control.

. . . I nonetheless hope that when readers read what I have written they find it hard to resist thinking, "This is true."

Recognition of truthful speech begins when readers identify the words they encounter as an honest expression of life's complexities . . . [S]peaking honestly of the complexities of life requires words that speak of God (235).

There's so much I like about these words; I suppose that's because they express so much of what I believe about writing poetry. First, writing is thinking. We don't know what we are going to say until we have said it. Second, a writer has to believe that he has something to say. Third, I have something to say because I am a Christian, because God has given me something to say. Fourth, I have readers (a few) who care about what I say and recognize it as truthful speech, that is, speech that wrestles with the complexities of life (as well, of course, as the wonder and joy and beauty of life.)

That's it. God gets into my poems because he is in me, not only in the Scripture that has become part of the fabric of my being but also because in some mysterious way, Jesus lives in me, he's part of my blood and bones and brains.

Here's a poem where, again, God appeared unexpectedly:

A Very Short Dream

Then suddenly, Ted,
standing at the curb, inspecting
the street which was under repair.
Ted with his eyes squinting,
right hand in his pocket playing with his change,
glasses hanging from a chain around his neck,
tie tucked under his vest.
Ted in all his Tedness.
I had spotted him just as I crossed
Main Street in Sioux Center, Iowa,
and now, here he was,
standing curbside in Grand Haven, Michigan.
So I pulled over to say "Hi."

My colleague for many years, never a close friend
but always a presence in the faculty room,
Ted had emerged from some wrinkle in my brain
after an absence of thirty years
to chat with me a few minutes.
Articulate in every detail—
cigarette cough, wrinkles, buffed finger nails.
He offered me a Strohs,
ran back to his house to get it,
and disappeared.

Awake, I wonder who or what produced
my little you-tube interactive video with Ted
and filmed it in such precise detail.
And why Ted and not someone else, like my long-departed mother?
Do evolutionary scientists in their persistent materialism
believe they can solve the mystery of my dream?
After they have sliced it into
random electrical brain impulses,
after they have observed and described,
will they have explained how or why Ted stumbled into my dream
or where he came from?
Can they provide an answer that answers?

I am heart-pierced by the mystery of it all,
the exquisite detail, magnificent technique.
What or who,
other than God the brain-maker,
could pull this off?

We see God only rarely
and then out of the corner of an eye
when amazement shatters what we thought
we knew of reality
and rekindles our confidence that he
is at the heart of everything.

Peace seeps like a sedative
through the streams of my body.
I yawn, turn my pillow
and lay me down to sleep,
perchance to dream.

As with so many other poems, I had no idea that God was going to enter this poem. But he did. He showed up because I had no place else to go so I went to where my mind, my subconscious, took me. I must confess that I had been reading Marilynne Robinson's *Givenness* around the time I wrote the poem, a collection of essays in which she again and again argues with neuro-scientists and new atheists about their reductionist philosophy that tries to exclude any sense of a soul or a spiritual world. That probably played a part in my thinking. In fact, I think I stole the phrase "persistent materialism" from her.

In this final poem, I simply wanted to write about picking raspberries in my garden after a day of work:

At Peace in the Tumult of the World

After the office, the traffic,
after the news hour and the newspaper,
I change my clothes
and move into the garden, where,
after the late summer rains,
raspberries once again weight
the heads of these rickety canes,
pulling them earthward,
earthward pulling me.

My fingers know
where to grasp the long
bowed necks of the canes.
I tip them up, take and eat
of the fruit, ignoring the stains,
plucking and plucking the lush red
berries that gush when I crush
the soft flesh with my teeth,
every berry made up of many
smaller berries wedded into one,
each berry a round red tongue
singing soundless songs,
each a cup that drank the late summer's rain
so I can drink its wine.

My thirst assuaged, I stand
erect again, hands stained, heart healed,
at peace in the tumult of the world.

As I began writing, I thought of the pleasure I find in picking raspberries, how it relaxes me after a day's work. My mind went to the busyness, noisiness, and newsmess of the workaday world and then to the peace in the world of the garden. Of course the minute I used the word *garden*, I had created a powerful connotative image that took me all the way back to Eden.

Then I began to describe the act of picking raspberries. The raspberry canes are heavy with berries, and so they are bowed to the ground. The speaker in the poem ("I") must bend down and lift them up in order to pick the berries. Later when I revised, I was struck by the visual power of the phrase "pulling them earthward." I recognized the power of the word "earthward" and so put it at the beginning of the next phrase, "earthward pulling me," thus repeating "earthward," a really strong visual and aural image. Earth pulls both canes and speaker.

So far, my mind had worked more or less logically in the writing process, but in the second stanza, fourth line ("I tip them up, take and eat"), something unexpected happened. As soon as I wrote "take and eat," I recognized that the poem had moved in a religious direction. "Take and eat" is a fine phrase to describe picking and eating a raspberry, but of course it immediately draws the mind of any Christian to the celebration of Holy Communion. Suddenly I realized that this might be a poem about the Lord's Supper. Where did that phrase "take and eat" come from? My mind, of course. Perhaps my uncon-

scious mind. If I had written “pick and eat,” the poem we are looking at would probably not have been written. But somehow “take and eat” ended up on the page. As Stafford says, “One thing will lead to another.”

Although I didn’t get all the words right in my first draft, I rather quickly moved through a description of the speaker picking and eating raspberries, influenced by the “take and eat” phrase. Eventually four different metaphors for the raspberry emerged, all of them in some way suggesting Holy Communion. First, the berry is “flesh,” that is, the body of Christ that the character in the poem takes and eats. Then, the berry, made up of many smaller berries all “wedded into one,” suggests the Church, the body of Christ, made up of many members. Third, the berry is a tongue that sings songs of praise, and fourth; it is a cup from which the wine can be drunk. Sometimes I struggle to make the metaphor; sometimes it falls on the page as a gift.

There’s really no religious language in this poem, and yet through the power of metaphor and connotative words like *garden, flesh, cup, wine, stains, take and eat*, the poem had become a God poem. This use of metaphor begun by accident and then, when I recognized it, more consciously employed became the means by which God entered the poem.

So a quick summary as to how God enters my poems: First of all, from earliest days I read the Bible and memorized Bible texts. Second, he enters my poems because he has entered me—lives in me, and I live with a sense of his presence. Third, metaphors appear that suggest some aspect of the biblical story. Fourth, I see him in the creation because I believe that as angels have declared, “the whole earth is full of his glory,” and I write about the things of the earth, the world, the creation.

Indeed, he is the God of material things.