

LYRICISM AND KNOWLEDGE IN THE STUDY OF RELIGION

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“In a tantalizing way many individuals have experienced just enough creative living to recognize that for most of their time they are living uncreatively, as if caught up in the creativity of someone else, or of a machine.”
(D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*)

How to give an account of the life of poetry—lyrical language—in the field of religion? Its official place is mostly as an accessory, an accoutrement. Poetry as epigraph. As preface. As ornamental illustration. In this way, poetry has offered not just borrowed beauty, but evidence of literariness, of a certain form of well-bred education. A stylized gesture of selection.

The unofficial place of poetry in the field of religion, however, is less sterile. It is what many of us text friends (or, if you like, the more respectable “colleagues”) early in the morning, what we read softly to ourselves when we can’t stand any more technical analyses or flat renditions of information. It is what many of us return to at heightened or elemental moments—love, wonder, sickness, death. (It was, for instance, the only thing I could read for 5 weeks during quarantine.)

So what induces such a self-conscious—wrong word—*controlled* deployment on official registers? Here’s one thought: lyrical language is the claimed expressiveness the field wants, but has mostly given up in its (also highly stylized) emergence as a field of study. It is, in other words, what you sell to afford

your expertise. Lyricism becomes threat, its pleasures and thickness of meaning shaved down to a canon of acceptable uses, parlayed into the exoticism and mystical air of “other languages,” and sometimes even becoming, in this whittled form, its own delicate dispatch.¹

I tripped into this field. I entered a biblical studies classroom at the age of 26—an actress, sort of, and a well-intentioned but disillusioned Brooklyn public school teacher. I was still an adolescent, so numbed and melancholy from a long series of acute disasters, personal and collective, that I could barely even register that they were there. I was just simply *curious*, not seeking a career, not even wanting a degree. I felt intuitively obligated to old Christian things, without knowing why, in which ways, or to what ends.

I was also a self-fashioned poet: a creative writing major in college, who had been enabled, fortunately, by a professor who saw writing—and specifically my writing—not as an exercise in perfection of technique as much as a venue for an almost perverse attachment to life, even and especially at life’s strangest, most inscrutable turns. She’d register me in her MFA sections, and scribble encouragements that now seem outlandish (like “Send this to Alice Quinn at the *New Yorker*”) in the white space next to my Anne Sexton knock-offs, poems caked in my rage and depression. At the same time, she regularly dropped some of the most efficiently terrifying writing advice I’ve received to date. Once: “Write from what you love, not from what you hate.” In this, she taught me the art of grieving.

So it was a sharp turn into the literary world after graduation as I sent my poems out for review, with the attendant waiting and rejections. I got a job for a non-profit poetry organization in Manhattan, working alongside students in Columbia University’s MFA program, and met Alice Quinn who, I learned, did not want my poems for the *New Yorker*. I mispronounced names, earnestly quoted lines back to their writers, and asked, with real confusion, “What do you mean by ‘language poets,’ aren’t all poets language poets?” to George Plimpton himself, longtime editor of the vaunted *Paris Review*, at a cocktail party in his apartment. (Hint: no, they are not.)

I was “unsophisticated.” I had not been initiated into the elite forms of knowledge and careful postures that the literary world assumed.² Writing, for me, had

1 See, for instance, the introduction of the Latin—*inter alia*—in a reviewer’s remark on what I’d forgotten in a piece under review: the elegance of the letters, the soft strangeness of the sounds against the specter of my shoddy bibliography. The missing names spill from her mouth like integers. A recitation, a repetition, a bar, among other things.

2 I suppose I was like Carolyn Dinshaw’s amateur, or living out Jack Halberstam’s “queer art of failure,” but it was less exciting than all of that, and much more about class. I got my first job after my PhD as visiting faculty at Amherst College, famous for its poets (Emily Dickinson, for one) if not also its crackling fireplaces, and a school I could have never

always been what you might call spiritual. It would be easy to say that I was not “prepared” by my professors to survive the literary world. It’s true: they were, to their credit, more discerning than that. And I did not survive the literary world—or rather, I knew something in me *would* not survive there, and so I made a fast exit. Ironically, it was not long after that I found myself plunged into another world with an even steeper price of entry, and an almost endless list of words and names I would flub and forget, usually in public. But what field of study could better accommodate a perverse attachment to life than religion? What is history if not an attempt to fish out or pronounce life’s strangest, most inscrutable turns? It was at a conference six months after my defense when I heard for the first time: *What you write is beautiful, but it is not history*. Many versions followed.

How can I write this so you will hear me? What theories shall I marshal to make my plea persuasive? How much do I need to know before I can be read?

We’ve heard it before, and often: the becoming of religion as a modern field of study demanded, among other things, distance between those analyzing and those doing, a distinction between observer and participant. Lyricism threatens this carefully assembled creature, the Religion Scholar, with captivation and un-self-consciousness. Lyricism is, in Mark Doty’s words, a “slipping ... into the interior landscape of reverie.”³ It might be literary elegance (“musicality”) but it is more definitely getting carried away, the lostness of a child daydreaming.⁴ By necessity then it is a refusal to wear the proper bearing of detachment. In other words, lyricism looks too much like devotion.⁵

What’s more, lyricism resists the commodification of ideas. It obstructs information-making, knowledge in quantified form. It is not strictly productive, at least not in the neo-liberal sense. Lyricism is also anti-procedural. It is not a method, and Religious Studies defines itself through methods.⁶ Indeed even where poetry and Religious Studies might seem to express compatible interests, Religious

gotten into let alone afforded as an undergraduate, only to realize just how far out of the echelons of literary culture I had truly been.

3 Mark Doty, *The Art of Description* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2010), 22–23.

4 I am not a singer, but lately I’ve had dreams about singing. In one, I found myself in a concert hall, a half a step from the stage, dressed for the occasion. The songs I was supposed to sing I hadn’t heard in ages. To my surprise they were all in my range, and I only remembered the words once I was singing.

5 Indeed that patron saint of the study of religion, Émile Durkheim, associated art of all kinds with the forms of religiosity for which he was generating scientific explanations. “It is a well-known fact,” he declares, “that games and the major art forms have emerged from religion, and that they long preserved a religious character.” *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 283.

6 Dear Greg, is this you, me, or both of us?

Studies distinguishes itself by devising clunky and elaborate systems. Take, for instance, “description,” or better yet, *comparison*: where lyricism invites imagination, the open-ended likening of disparate things through metaphor, Religious Studies invents a machinery, dedicating no small amount of meticulous work and exorbitant worry over its ideal execution.⁷

Lyricism is creative play, the conceptual opposite of “discipline.” So of course it undermines disciplinarity. But before we resign ourselves to our compromises, a perceived maturity or inexorable trade, we might consider the stakes: “It is creative apperception more than anything else that makes the individual feel that life is worth living,” psychologist D.W. Winnicott writes in *Playing and Reality*. “Contrasted with this is a relationship to external reality which is one of compliance, the world and its details being recognized but only as something to be fitted in with or demanding adaptation.” Compliance gives way to a sense of “futility,” of deadness, according to Winnicott, but more than that, against creativity’s health, “compliance is a sick basis for life.”⁸

What dry dialects we learn in order to carve out tight and tiny spaces for our expression. We then dismiss the disorderly speech of others because we cannot stand our own. Our acquiescence, our loyalty to prescription, preserves us from the embarrassments of our genuine pleasures, our uncut creativity—or worse, our irreverent unprofessionalism. But in so doing, such learned austerity also blots out any hope to encounter our own private grammars, the depths of what we know, not to mention (dare I say it?) choking off the very life we wish to name.

7 Most recently: Bruce Lincoln, *Apples and Oranges: Explorations In, On, and With Comparison* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), Oliver Freiberger, *Considering Comparison: A Method in Religious Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), and Aaron Hughes, *Comparison: A Critical Primer* (Sheffield, UK: Equinox Press, 2017).

8 D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Routledge Press, 1991), 87–88.

Prayer of the Grieving
(for Liz R.)

I can't access the dream –
and you're in it.
I can't find the door
to the open yard
or the knob disappears
as soon as I grab it.
The forest where I've buried you
has no path.
Who even remembers
that once I came back
with black-rimmed fingernails
and smelling like ash?
I rake sand,
come up empty.
Light fires
with no heat.
Where in the dark
are you, you bad god
when the sky will not reveal you?