

# POETIC IMAGES, LYRIC WORDS

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My first teaching gig was at the now-defunct Atlanta College of Art, a funky penniless place where I collected theses written in charcoal pencil. As I shuffled through the stack of fixative-free papers sentences smudged into each other, leaving me to grade a beautiful mess. I made photocopies of the smeared sheets and pinned them to the wall in my little grad student housing hovel.

Most days I took a bus to the college from the wealthy R1 institution where I worked on my PhD dissertation, researching the relation of words and images with a babel of books round about me. Somewhere along MARTA Route 36 my word-image hinge toggled. At the R1, psychoanalytic, poststructural, and postmodern critics conjectured concerning the place of the image, writing in less than lucid prose with seldom an image in sight. Meanwhile, students at the College of Art assembled “dream journals” which they sometimes showed me: page after page of vivid imagery and seldom a word in sight. So much for your talking cure, Herr Doktor Freud.

As I dove deeper into the disciplinary strictures of media and religious studies, I discovered how much the scholarly method—whether approaching iconography, textuality, archival data, or ethnographic interviews—wanted me to seize the world’s images, people, scriptures, and rituals for the Kingdom of the Interior, that proprietary realm of the rational, objective, and immaterial. If a picture can

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paint a thousand words, scholarly pursuits demanded the production of thousands upon thousands of words, making images seemingly superfluous.

Objectivity, the cornerstone concept of the academic domain, is built on the denial of the materiality of language, on a belief in writing that severs the relation between the thing itself and the verbal description of the thing. Scholarly writing is meant to point to the image, thing, event, or person, but is never to be entangled with it. Only then can language be trusted, when it is over against physical images and things, and over against my subjectivity.

On one of my bus trips from there to here I started reading Maurice Blanchot's *Work of Literature* and became beguiled with his language, even in translation. It was unstable, switched subjects, played with paradox, and refused to relegate writing to a realm of easily graspable knowledge. Blanchot's writings used imagery, though didn't include pictorial images. Yet, his words never pretended to capture the otherness of the world for its own Kingdom.

Slyly upending the scholarly production of a writing separate from the world, he professed, "my hope lies in the materiality of language, in the fact that words are things too, are a kind of nature. . . . Everything physical takes precedence: rhythm, weight, mass, shape, and then the paper on which one writes, the trail of ink, the book."<sup>1</sup> This wasn't to pit image against word, but to show how words were themselves images, made of atomic matter, physical work, sonorous cogitations. Every word, down to its last florid serified "t," its cool Swiss sans-serifed "S," its rhythmic reverberations, or its clunky tedious prose, was material, only existing in the realms of sight, sound, and touch.

What Blanchot led me to realize on these bus trips, from the verbosity of academic research to the imaginative imagery of the artists, was an opening between the territories. It's not words against images and things, but words *as* things (*les mots comme les choses*). Once words and images existed in the same smooth spaces, my analytical performance began to swerve. I began to see and feel how words are part of the same domain as the things they tried so hard to ascertain, and part of the same domain as the muscles in my fingers, the bits and bytes of my word processor, the ink and paper through which these characters are affixed.

Words do not simply caption an image, capture the raw forces of bodily performance, or circumscribe myth's wily tricksters, seizing their power for the realm of the immaterial. Words can and, as I'm scratching around for an argument here, *should* extend across these domains, allowing something of the "original" image, thing, or experience to come through in the writing itself. The word-image relation became not just my object of study, but the in-between, the analogical,

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1 Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 327.

engrained itself in the very nature of my research. Somehow I had to shape my words to fit the creative expression of the images I was looking at.

Which is where the poetic came (in) to play. As I waded through Blanchot's opaque prose, I also cascaded longingly into the flows of H el ene Cixous, the Algerian-Jewish-French-feminist-playwright-writer. For a semester I sat with my friend Tim Beal, and our independent study professor Rebecca Chopp, immersing ourselves in psychoanalytic theory, and learning how feminists like Cixous, Julia Kristeva, and Luce Irigaray were subverting the patriarchal field.

It was in and through Cixous that I found a *form* of writing that began to match something of its *content*, and I learned how writing could become a bodily practice, physical and sensual. This * criture f eminine* tantalized my mostly male body. Or, rather, unveiled something already there, challenging the stability of my own self: "Being of a body with the river all the way to the rapids rather than with the boat, exposing yourself to this danger—this is feminine pleasure."<sup>2</sup> I, the observer-cum-writer could be transported through the experience, submerged in its waters, telling the tale and being true to its telling by connecting words to images, analysis to the analyzed.

Cixous charted a zigzagging course in which writing prompted us to get "to know things by letting ourselves be known by them," a relational give and take. This was not about being a "master," attempting to "demonstrate, explain, grasp. And then to lock away in a strongbox. To pocket a part of the riches of the world. But rather to transmit: to make things loved by making them known."<sup>3</sup> Not a God's-eye view but a worldly, carnal caress.

The academic study of religion beckons to many of us because of our own bodily experiences, those we have been through ourselves and those we have tasted, seen, heard, and smelled up close and personal. Our participation in the world propels us to face the weird, other, dangerous, cosmic, blasphemous, wearisome elements of this category of existence we call religion. And then we are prompted to make *sense* of it all. But we are too often taught to subtract this *sense* from the senses, ransacking some core kernel we call "meaning" for the Kingdom of the Interior.

Over the years, I have turned to the poets as much as the philosophers, the artists as much as the anthropologists. I know of no class of humans who can observe the world in the way an artist can, and so artistic work becomes primary evidence, just as the formal tone of writing can carry over something of the

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2 H el ene Cixous, "*Coming to Writing*," and *Other Essays*, trans. Sarah Cornell, Deborah Jenson, Ann Liddle, and Susan Sellers (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991), 57.

3 *Ibid.*

originary site of analysis. In reviews of books I've published, reviewers have called my writing "homely," "agreeably meandering," with a "confessional" or "warm informal" tone. Which is music to my ears.

So, imagine academic research that unfolded like this: "Writing: first I am touched, caressed, wounded; then I try to discover the secret of this touch to extend it, celebrate it, transform it into another caress."<sup>4</sup> What if poetic language could return us, as scholars and readers, to the images, the bodies, the stories, the flora and fauna, the formal repeated actions, that are part of religious life? All of those things that touched and wounded us.

What if we began to acknowledge how lyricism is not a flourish, but endemic to the thing itself?

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4 Ibid., 44.