

Kolin, Philip C. *Reading God's Handwriting: Poems*. Saint Simon's Island GA: Kaufman Publishing Company, 2012. Pp. 108. \$16.95 cloth.

PHILIP C. Kolin is a widely published scholar, with some forty books to his credit, ranging from studies of Shakespeare and Edward Albee to a widely used textbook on business publishing. He is also the author of several previous volumes of poetry. After his poetic debut, *Roses for Sharron* (1993), Kolin's strong interest in matters of faith became particularly manifest in *Deep Wonder* (2000). Depicting the lyrical subject's relationship with Christ, following his experience of loss and ensuing pain, *Deep Wonder* is a poetic record of an intimate, emotional, and profoundly personal religiosity. The two books that followed, *Wailing Walls* (2006) and *A Parable of Women* (2009), intertwine Kolin's emphatic interest in social issues—as they become manifest in individual human lives—with religious themes. The poet's most recent volume of verse, *Reading God's Handwriting: Poems* marks yet a further development in Kolin's creative address of religious concerns, in that it combines the lyrical subject's passionate, personal faith (which we saw in *Deep Wonder*) with the keen perception of social and interpersonal problems that characterize *Wailing Walls* and *Parable of Women*. Theologically, Kolin is consistently Catholic. Accordingly, *Reading God's Handwriting* is firmly rooted in the teachings of the Catholic church, its traditions, ecclesiastical life, and the Bible. Amidst all this, however, Kolin's poetic voice remains unique as an expression of his personal religious passion.

On opening the book's cover (which features a reproduction of Philippe de Champaigne's oil painting, *Moses with the Ten Commandments* [1648]), the reader encounters the passionate dedication, *To Christ, my chevalier*, a fittingly Hopkins-esque introduction to Kolin's volume. For in the Preface, he announces, in line with Hopkins's incarnational theology, that "God's handwriting" manifests itself through Scripture as well as in "the Book of Nature." Accordingly, the collection's leading theme is the divine authorship of all things, understood both metaphorically and literally. For Kolin, the whole world is a book, while man's task is to engage in *lectio divina*—reading and meditating on its contents.

In the poem-Prologue titled "Omega" (the first of the volume's seven parts) we find the theme of the circularity of time:

God writes the fullness of history  
 In endless circles, Omega's door opening  
 And closing in a curved room.

The intentional omission of the word Alpha in this poem (cf. Revelation 22:13 "I am the Alpha and Omega") signifies another parallel with Hopkins, the timelessness of God's creative act. The universe *has been* and *is being* created; as such, it is filled with God's "handwriting."

In this vision we find, too, Christianity's fundamental polarity: "the faithless live in black holes, / Captives stuffing their pouches / With nothing." The "nothing" is the absence of God, in other words, the refusal to read God's "fingerprints." Focusing on biblical or everyday situations, Kolin's poems rehearse this drama of faith and denial. In the poem, "On His Comfort," for example, God's "spice of compassion" confounds his opponents—"wolves and hirelings / Makers of slicked snares." If evil means the absence of God, the wicked "shall be as though they had not been." In "Habakkuk's Soliloquy," the poet emphatically laments with the prophet:

Men's whorish desires  
 Increase faster than the names  
 Of sins to fulfill them.

The dichotomy carries on to our own times. In the first of four poems of the Advent series, the lyrical subject observes "people dressed / In polluted rags," whose "sins will carry them away / In fashionable windbreakers." The poem's irony suggests a rift between habitual churchgoing and authentic faith, which—much like love—is full of passion and drama.

Profoundly theocentric—another similarity to Hopkins—Kolin's poems often employ terms pertaining to language in order to depict God. In "Lectio Divina" God is described as "the only noun that counts," with everything else being an "adjective." This evokes another tenet of the Christian faith, the notion of God as the necessary Being while the Creation is his attribute. Kolin's poetry is deeply rooted in Scripture. Lamenting human sin with Habbakuk, projecting the sufferings of Job, listening to God's voice with Ezekiel, or looking at Joseph through Mary's eyes, he engages in "the composition of place" that is so central to Jesuit meditational practice, in order to remind us of the great narratives of the Bible that for centuries inspired Western minds.

Drawing from both the Scripture and the Catholic tradition, a number of poems are devoted to the mother of Christ. For example, in “St. Anne’s Oratory,” Mary is “Embroidering a lily” when Anne “stitches a torn” (cf. p. 23); while the poem “Gabriel and Mary” extols Mary’s innocence:

She had not known  
Even the touch of man’s fingerprints  
Upon the smooth velum of her skin.

In a fashion typical of Jesuit meditation, characters from the Bible here correspond to common human situations and attitudes: Joseph represents “thousands of tearful feet” escaping terror; while Martha reminds us of church women obsessed with schedules and cleaning, even “starching everyone’s voices” in a church choir, who, like her, have their priorities wrong (“The Martha Within”).

While the noun “Christ” appears twice and only in one poem, Christ is the book’s central figure—the “only noun that counts”—whether present, expected or longed after. He enters history as the “Boarder Baby,” “breathing heaven’s air / In the womb of time”:

Just a tear ago  
He did not see time  
As a caravan of woes  
But as a crystalline orb  
Sphering matter and motion  
Into a finished eternity.

Here again we find the motifs of time’s circularity and God’s timeless perspective, whereas “a tear after,” Christ enters time as man. After the Ascension, the reader accompanies Mary to “all the scrolled places he left his voice: / The rivers, the lakes, the sea / Where once he walked along the shore.”

Several poems depict people entangled in the situations and challenges of modern life; for example, we find a land broker fearing the “sorrows he had sown” (“The Grandfather From Pilsen”; or, in the intriguing poem “The Spiritual Mother” a nun-nicotine addict “inhaled providence, / Exhaled history;” until “her words burned away and / Only the smoke could be heard.”

Kolin's poems range from the rigorously succinct to the lavishly baroque. An example of the first is the poem "Visiting Hours" depicting a man who keeps a vigil at the bed of his comatose wife. The other sort of poem might be represented by "Mary's Aviary," which describes the birds that Mary could have seen in Nazareth; it employs motifs from baroque visual art.

Springing from a dynamic relationship with God, Kolin's collection reveals a faith that is deeply personal and apolitical—albeit now and then we find echoes of history, as for example in the poem "Praying the Icons," where a Russian woman venerates a sacred image at a time of revolutionary terror. In some ways the religious passion of *Reading God's Handwriting* brings to one's mind the Christian poets of the seventeenth century, such as Donne or Herbert. Kolin's volume is likely to appeal to people of faith but also to a broader group of readers. It makes one wonder, in our secular age, have we really resolved all the questions pertaining to faith?

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