

Carole Mertz

Kip Knott discusses his collection, *Tragedy, Ecstasy, Doom, and so on*, and influences on his ekphrastic writing.

Carole Mertz: Thank you, Kip, for taking time to talk with me about your current work. You use a variety of poetic styles in *Tragedy, Ecstasy, Doom, and so on*. Some of the poems are short and imagistic, others are longer and more narrative. Who are some of the poets who have influenced you?

Kip Knott: My earliest poems weren't really inspired by any poets because I wasn't reading any poetry at the time. My favorite book before I started writing poetry was *Brideshead Revisited*. Being raised Catholic, I was almost morally bound to like it. But beyond that, I just loved the richness of Waugh's prose. To the younger me at the time, that was LITERATURE. I also loved all of James Herriot's books, primarily because they were about things I was familiar with: farms, farming, and animals. So I guess you could say that my first poems were influenced by Evelyn Waugh, James Herriot, and my grandparents.

What changed everything for me was when the professor of my first poetry writing class told me that one of my poems was too much like a James Wright poem. I told him that I didn't know how it could be because I had never even heard of James Wright. So he gave me a copy of *The Branch Will Not Break* to read. My mind was completely blown! I absolutely loved it! So I read everything else Wright had written, plus anyone who was associated with Wright in any way, which led me to Robert Bly and Galway Kinnell. Wright, Bly, and Kinnell, through their translations, became gateways for me to writers from other countries, writers such as Tranströmer, Rilke, Lorca, Machado, Jimenez, Ritsos, Li Po, and on and on.

But even though I loved all of the new poetry I was reading, I still wasn't convinced that I wanted to keep writing poetry. But then one day I picked up a copy of *The Kenyon Review* that was on the lit mag table in the writing lounge where our creative writing classes were held and I read Jane Kenyon's poem "Twilight: After Haying." When I got to the lines, "They talk and smoke / and the tips of their cigarettes / blaze like small roses / in the night air," I started to cry. I had never read anything as beautifully simple and precise as that before. She was describing something I had seen a hundred times before, but I had never seen it—or felt it—like that. I thought, "If poetry can do this, can let people see the world this way, then I want to be a poet."

CM: Your title *Tragedy, Ecstasy, Doom, and so on* borrows a quote from Mark Rothko. Did the creation of your title precede or follow the collection of poems for this 2020 volume?

KK: I had an earlier version of this book, *Temporary Agnostic*, which was a finalist for the 2018 Barry Spacks Poetry Prize with Gunpowder Press. Though it was getting some attention, I felt something was missing.

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

I had a poet friend read the manuscript, and she felt that there was too much “navel gazing” going on in the book. So I decided to set it aside for a while and write some new poems.

I’d seen a documentary several years earlier about Mark Rothko, an artist I knew little about and whose work had never really made an impression on me. With some searching on YouTube, I found the very documentary, which was from *Simon Schama’s Power of Art* series. For whatever reason, I found myself in tears by the end of the episode. Something about where I was in my life at that moment made me see and feel things in Rothko’s paintings I had never seen or felt before.

I began to research Rothko’s life and fully immersed myself in his work. I wrote a very short ekphrastic poem based on the Rothko Chapel in Houston. Then I wrote another based on an early Rothko, titled “Entrance to Subway.” And then I wrote another poem. Soon I had 19 poems based on his life and works. I realized they could be broken into two groups, one concerning Rothko’s evolution as an artist, the other on more existential themes about identity and the fragility of existence.

These sequences became “Seven Sadnesses” and “The Twelve Stations of Mark Rothko,” both of which addressed the same themes as the poems in *Temporary Agnostic*. When I placed them in the middle of the book, I saw that all the other poems seemed to orbit around the Rothko themes.

Rothko wrote, “I’m not interested in the relationship of color or form or anything else. I’m interested only in expressing basic human emotions: tragedy, ecstasy, doom, and so on.” I realized those final words perfectly described the poems in my collection, so I changed the title, and the manuscript was accepted immediately by Kelsay Books.

CM: As you mentioned, the middle section of *Tragedy, Ecstasy, Doom, and so on* consists of a series of ekphrastic poems based on Rothko paintings. Please discuss some writers of ekphrastic poetry that you particularly admire. Are they similar in style to your own?

KK: Over the years, I’ve read all the most famous poems by Keats, Shelley, Browning, Auden, etc., that are typically held up as examples of ekphrasis. But I have to admit that I haven’t necessarily studied ekphrastic poetry in general or ekphrastic poets in particular. I’m more interested in the relationship between art and poetry and the ways that art has influenced poets.

I’ve always loved the work of the Modernist poets of the first half of the 20th C. The influence that art had on all of these poets is incredible. The ripple effect of the 1913 Armory Show is immeasurable. I think you could argue that the Show completely changed the direction of William Carlos Williams’s writing from the more formal, Victorian verse of his earlier poems to the more imagistic and collage-like aspects of his later poems. Williams probably wouldn’t be remembered in the same way had he not gone to that show.

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

Wallace Stevens was also heavily influenced by the show. While he didn't really believe in writing traditional ekphrastic poems because he didn't think it was a poet's job to reproduce another artist's work, he certainly used what he saw—both specific subjects depicted in paintings and specific styles / movements that the artists followed—to shape the form and content of poems like “The Man with the Blue Guitar” and “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction.”

Ezra Pound's writing was also directly influenced by the different styles, movements, and philosophies of the artists whose work he saw in the show. All of the major Modernist poets—Marianne Moore, Gertrude Stein, Hart Crane, H.D., etc.—were either directly influenced by the show by attending it in person, or indirectly influenced by the show through the poetry of their contemporaries who had seen it, digested it, and translated it in some way into their writing. So for me, I would say that I'm more influenced by those poets than I am by poets who are primarily known for ekphrastic poetry.

CM: What familial or other influences directed you toward poetry, and ekphrastic poetry in particular?

KK: During my childhood, my family—all seven of us!—would load into our Oldsmobile Cutlass Cruiser station wagon and drive to my grandparents' place for long weekends and holidays. By the time I was a teenager, they had retired, so I was able to spend whole summers living with them. Every day I had chores to do: one day I would help my grandfather work his huge three-acre vegetable garden; the next day I would help my grandmother can vegetables for the winter; the day after that I would help my grandfather re-shingle the roof. My summers with my grandparents taught me to be a Jack-of-All-Trades, which has served me well throughout my life.

But when it came time to write a poem, I wasn't prepared for that at all. No one in my family was a writer, so I hadn't been trained in any way about how to write creatively. When I had to write a poem about something important in my life, I decided to write about something with which I was intimately familiar: my grandfather's garden hoe, a tool that I had used for hours every summer. As a lifelong fingernail biter, I looked at the hoe and thought it looked like a fingernail that had been bitten to the quick, so that's how I described it. And, unbelievable to me, the professor really loved the poem!

From then on, I kept turning to my grandparents for inspiration. They were both amazing storytellers. They had struggled to survive and raise three sons during a depression and a world war. It was at that point that I realized I had become a miner myself, mining their stories for images, anecdotes, and characters.

The ekphrastic poems that I wrote based on Van Gogh's paintings focused almost exclusively on paintings that had to do with farming. So even when I was writing about his paintings, I was still writing about my grandparents.

CM: Some of your poems include intensely personal elements. (I'm thinking of "Bigfoot Crossing" in which you include specific characteristics of your father.) Is it difficult for you to offer poems of that nature to the public?

KK: I've never shied away from talking or writing about my personal life. As a teacher, I draw on stories from my personal life all the time as a way of putting things into a context that students can connect with. Many years ago, I was fortunate enough to work briefly with the great poet Mark Strand. While discussing one of my poems, he pointed to a detail in the poem and told me it was a bit "cornball." I told him the detail was true. His response was, "That kind of truth doesn't matter. You're not a reporter, are you? The only truth you need to pay attention to is the truth of the poem." This really freed me up to try new things.

CM: Where can people learn more about your work and your forthcoming publications?

KK: People can go to my website and find links to most of my writing available online. I'm also on Twitter—@kip_knott—and Instagram—@kip.knott.