

A Prayer For Everyone
Poems by Tomas O'Leary
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Review by Dennis Daly

CONFITEOR DEO OMNIPOTENTI... ET VOBIS FRATRES. Yes, I confess to almighty God and to you, my brothers and sisters, that I have sinned exceedingly well in thought, word, and deed by reading and enjoying way too much blessed Tomas O'Leary's sacramental poetry text, *A Prayer for Everyone*. And, indeed, in this collection of prayers, sermons, homilies, psalms, parables, confessions, and meditations on the curiosities of religious rites, O'Leary demonically and wittily serves up something for every appetite with sometimes skewed, sometimes laugh-out-loud humor. That is not to say that the poet does not have a serious bent. He does. He confronts "heaven's vacant lot" and life's "cannibal convention" with due Kierkegaardian dread. The difference is that he responds with exhilarating wonder and glee—a holy glee.

The title poem, *A Prayer For Everyone*, appears as the first poem in the book and establishes the poet's comic view of life and his all-encompassing philosophy. The poem takes the biblical form of the beatitudes from Christ's all important Sermon on the Mount and with a twinkling eye expands on them. O'Leary's version begins this way,

*Blessed are the absent, for they are not here;
Blessed are the near at hand, for they would
seem to be;
Blessed are the saved and the damned, for both
are born to blessing;
Blessed are the best and the worst, the wisest,
the most foolish...*

This way of looking at the world is comic not in a satirical sense, but rather in a Shakespearean sense. O'Leary unflinchingly accepts the world as it is and prays only for the blessings of inertia. In fact he ends this first poem that way,

*And blessed, ever blessed, thrice blest, the unbegun
And neverending;
And blessed, ever blessed, the blest and the unblest:
May all find rest.*

Like a bookend, the last poem in the collection reinforces this world view with the addition of an observant, if detached God. The poet says,

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*Let it end
as it begins
a pale green flash*

*in that no-ness
of an eye
calmly watching*

*with potential
wit and wonder
over all nothing.*

The poem O'Reilly's Rites gut hurts with its hilarity. Readers follow the progress of O'Reilly's internment by his pub mates and their meditations on the "awful ass" and "slobbering plague" that O'Reilly was. After they plant him O'Reilly's colleagues engage in a memorable toast to his life's accomplishments. The poet describes this rite of passage thus,

*... as we put him down
with decent cause, him dead and all, and we pause
here ever so briefly in our sorrows
to raise strong spirits to his snuffled flame
and send him winging—egregious, lugubrious, ill-famed—
past the hell he well merits...*

The poem ends with an inside joke that I won't spoil for future readers. I must say however that I'm startled that this poem has not been included in a major anthology of English literature. It certainly merits such an inclusion.

Black humor and irony rear their heads in the poem The Prodigal's Party. O'Leary takes Christ's famous parable and poetically takes us through the father's emotions of love and anger. Nothing is as simple as it seems the poet points out in the versed out subtext. The father intimates,

*Let us further assume

that I love you
without condition.
Must be nice coming back

to such a dad
after debauchery failed
finally to deliver...*

But O'Leary's not through with this forgiven ingrate. He concludes,

*You've been a rotten son.
I love you.
Welcome home.*

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Balancing the spirit world with the material world can be a tricky undertaking. O'Leary rises to the challenge with the poem *The Patient Diners*. The poet sets the ritual table with a metaphorical meal of bread and wine. Not original, of course, but quite powerful. He uses this imagery to get at the sacredness of life's every moment. Then he takes a step back and real practicalities take over. He puts it this way.

*But hey, we've now romanced the fading thread
of time itself, and pray our spirit
will turn to matter and be smartly set before us —
not that we're in a hurry to be fed,
just that we'd sooner eat it while we're not dead.*

The absurdness of life, of which his God is part and parcel, has already been digested by this poet and has become part of his sinew. The poem *So How Am I Today* seems to reflect the poet's unease, his loss of center. As in Yeats' *Second Coming* the center cannot hold. O'Leary puts it this way,

*that thin, mean edge, that hint of ill-repose,
the bother of a psyche spinning fast
in its erratic orbit around lost
evidence of a solar burst somewhere ...*

Did I mention that O'Leary rhymes with the best of them when he chooses that poetic technique (think X.J. Kennedy). He taunts and teases and sets baited traps for his unsuspecting readers. Listen to this ending sequence from the poem *Gnosis*,

*... as words ascended into rhyme;
himself, psychiatrist in earnest, blinked
a wise and vapid catch of phrase each time,
as if to say: : I'm a sphinx with which your linked,
by virtue of my timely diagnosis;
not that you're nuts — just that I know my gnosis,
and know it never must preclude psychosis."*

Now consider the first stanza (a veritable *Ars Poetica*) of the poem *Rhymer's Horoscope*,

*The point of rhyme
is to catch time
by its streaming hair
and hold it there
the split second
till time is beckoned
back to onward motion
upon the sound's ocean...*

Wonderful imagery like this from a playful but reverent intelligence can't miss. And it doesn't! *Imprimatur!*