



Images of Christ in Contemporary Poetry

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Jesus the Christ is a powerful presence for those of us who believe, but he is in no way limited to our apprehension. The power of the presence of Christ reverberates in Western civilization and thus in Western literature and the arts. The Spirit of the Christ is abroad, but often we do not have eyes to see or ears to hear.

What I am about to do is to over-stimulate the reader. First, however, it is necessary for the reader to relax and decide to give the images a chance. The quotations in this essay are to be savored and contemplated, not skimmed and assimilated. They need time to work their evocative power. That is the promise and the problem of poetry (and of most art forms). I am not hanging an exhibit of poetic images to rush by, but am rather suggesting some sources of evocative inspiration that may enlarge our discernment of the Christ.

Many artists feel that the church is usually 50 years or more behind the current mode of artistic work in what it uses and that to which it refers. That is not untrue in the world of poetry. The church's use of poetry, outside of hymn texts, is minimal in our age. Yet poets continue to find the image of Jesus to be a provocative one. Some of the finest contemporary poets deal with religious themes in portions of their work. It is my conviction that knowledge of these works can stimulate a believer's faith, enlarge her or his vision of the breadth and depth of religious meaning, and open one to the continuing work of the Spirit of Creation. Poets, as do other artists, open up life and thus create enhanced living, discernment, celebration, and involvement. Too many times, we have hidden these resources from ourselves.

Our quotation from poetry in sermons or discussion groups often stops almost 40 years ago with Auden and Eliot. We are lucky to recover the considerable work of Gerard Manley Hopkins, the "father" of modern poetry for some, from the 19th century. Often our use of poetry is that of second rate poets (or worse). Some of this may be out of ignorance at the treasures available for us in major writers; some may be from sheer laziness. Poetry is not always "easy,"

but that is because life is not easy and rarely apparent on the surface. In *The Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard speaks of ethical development as becoming apparent to God. The discernment of the poet, who is often scrupulously honest, can evoke in us through the poem that apparentness of life which can inspire our emulation in thinking and living.

Ministers who preach and laity who are concerned about growth in faith both need the stimulating realization of how others have experienced the Christ. We also need to find ways to open ourselves to discern the impact of the presence of Christ and the life of Jesus the Christ upon our lives and the life of the world. Poems can help us explore these depths and evoke in us

memories of our own faith experience which we have not been able to thematize before.

Finally, as an aesthetic experience of feeling and thought, poetry carries its own warrant as a formed expression of our common existence. Thus the reading and contemplation of the poetic becomes part of the tapestry of our life experience.

In this essay, I want to provide a glimpse of some of the images of Christ in contemporary poetry. I have chosen to use poems which have been written in the last 25 years, many in the last decade. Most of the poets I have chosen are generally recognized as major current writers. However, I am only providing a glimpse at one dimension of their work to whet the appetite for more. It is a gallery of images with all the problems of individual taste, selection and brevity. Nevertheless, O taste and see!

I. THE STRUGGLE FOR LIFE AND THE CONFESSIONAL

There is a type of contemporary poetry which has been broadly characterized as “confessional.” These poets write poems that recapitulate in poetic form the inner struggles of their selves. The poems are intently and intensely personal. Often the imagery is striking. Feeling is paramount. For some of them, images almost run wild in a type of free association of consciousness and what arises from the subconscious. These are poems hot with the depths of suffering. Some of the most famous of these poets have been tormented souls who have committed suicide, as in the case of the first two I mention here: Anne Sexton and John Berryman.

Anne Sexton is crucial for our discussion because she, more than any other major modern poet, has struggled with the destructive aspects of the masculine image of Jesus. It has been a struggle where the image of Jesus at times merged with that of her father and grandfather from whose death-hold she had to escape. Death is an almost constant theme in her poetry, wonderfully relieved at points by images of love and some gloriously modern psalms, as in “O Ye Tongues” in *The Death Notebooks*: “For God was as large as a sunlamp and laughed his heat at us / and therefore we did not cringe at the death hole.”¹

Sexton struggled with Christ. The struggle runs throughout her poetry. Her correspondence with Brother Dennis Farrell, a monk, and with others showed this struggle outside the poems: “No matter what I write, I plead with it

¹Anne Sexton, *The Death Notebooks* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

[religion, Christianity] to be true! Even if I can't believe it-nevertheless I want it to be true”² (1961). In 1970 she wrote to Brian Sweeney: “Yes, it is time to think about Christ again. I keep putting it off. If he is the God/man, I would feel a hell of a lot better. If there is a God, Sweeney, how do you explain him swallowing all those people up in Pakistan? Of course there's a God, but what kind is he? Is he our kind?”

In a poem concerned with the division of her mother's estate, Sexton speaks of Christ as staying on his crucifix so that love can praise his sacrifice. In this poem, “The Division of Parts,”³ she cannot convert and recognizes the demonic dimensions of some conversion in tough times: “...Christ knows enough / staunch guys have hitched on him in trouble, / thinking his sticks were badges to wear.” Her struggle for belief is further set forth in a poem, “With Mercy For the Greedy,”⁴ written to her friend Ruth who urges her to go to confession. In this context she

starkly and sympathetically portrays the suffering of a human Jesus as she views a crucifix: “He is frozen to his bones like a chunk of beef. / How desperately he wanted to pull his arms in! / How desperately I touch her vertical and horizontal axes! / But I can’t. Need is not quite belief.”

One could do worse than to read Sexton to contemplate the real humanity of a suffering Christ, who was yet a man dedicated to God’s mission for him. This aspect is portrayed most strongly, and perhaps most scandalously, in her powerful poem, “In the Deep Museum” in *All My Pretty Ones*. Sexton speaks of Jesus waking in the tomb, beset by rats, to whom his body becomes a gift, and he undergoes another death to be merged into the earth. Thus we are given an ironic resurrection: “...Oh, not in air — / in dirt. Under the rotting veins of its roots, / under the markets, under the sheep bed where / the hill is food, under the slippery fruits / of the vineyard, I go. Unto the bellies and jaws / of rats I commit my prophecy and fear. Far below The Cross, I correct its flaws. / We have kept the miracle. I will not be here.” This is at once a secularized Christ, a human Jesus, but also a deeply sympathetic attachment to the image, the possibility.

As time goes on, Sexton struggles with the masculine nature of Jesus. She is haunted by the tragedy which sons bring to their forgotten mothers. In “Consorting With Angels” in *Live or Die*⁵ she speaks of herself finally freed from sexual identification in a dream: “I’m no more a woman / than Christ was a man.” In “Suicide Note” from the same book the death search identifies her with Jesus: “Once upon a time / my hunger was for Jesus. / O my hunger! My hunger! / Before he grew old / he rode calmly into Jerusalem / in search of death.”

In 1972 Sexton published *The Book of Folly*⁶ which includes a sequence of poems titled “The Jesus Papers.” Here we are given an extremely human Jesus

²Anne Sexton, *A Self-Portrait in Letters*, ed. Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977).

³Anne Sexton, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960).

⁴Anne Sexton, *All My Pretty Ones* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1962).

⁵Anne Sexton, *Live or Die* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1966).

⁶Anne Sexton, *The Book of Folly* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972).

with all the ambiguity of a human life. The images in the poems often get out of hand, but the sympathy with the struggle of human living and its ambiguity is real. Reading these poems helps us not literally but evocatively to realize better a depth of incarnation. These are not poems of a traditional believer, but they are poems of one haunted by the Jesus figure. Here Jesus dies as a human, suffering for and before God as a last act of faithfulness: “Jesus Dies.” “I am busy with My dying.... We are the same men, / you and I, /...I want to kiss God on His nose and watch Him sneeze / and so do you. / Not out of disrespect. / Out of pique. /...I will do nothing extraordinary. / I will not divide in two. / I will not pick out My white eyes. / Go now, / this is a personal matter, / a private affair and God knows / none of your business.” The tragedy of this death for Jesus’ mother and the subservience of a harlot saved by Jesus haunts Sexton. The last poem in the sequence, “The Author of The Jesus Papers Speaks” ends: “When the cow gives blood / and the Christ is born / we must all eat sacrifices. / We must all eat beautiful women.” In her later writings, Sexton came to an accommodation with God, signified in the title of the posthumously published, “The Awful Rowing Toward God.” The turn was seen in a book published just before her death, *The Death Notebooks*.⁷ In a poem titled “The Fury of God’s Good-bye” she laments

that loss as an explorer who had gained the world but lost her map.

In this book a marvelous poem appears which evokes Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. The poem uses the image of Jesus bearing a burden on his back and carrying it through a pathway filled with tempters. The burden seems to be a "man" or humanity. The poem, "Jesus Walking," concludes: "To pray, Jesus knew, / is to be a man carrying a man."

Thus in the struggle and the confession there is a deep sympathy with Jesus. Sexton is haunted by the crucified. In *The Awful Rowing Toward God*⁸ published after her death, Sexton seems finally to give herself over to God, but a God who always holds the trump card because God makes the rules of the game. In a poem which one feels Luther and Kierkegaard would understand, "The Sickness Unto Death," Sexton writes of her utter lostness and deep feelings of guilt as "God went out of me." She wanted to "crawl" toward God but could not. Then she poetically writes of eating herself, a confessional, of tears washing her, then "and Jesus stood over me looking down / and He laughed to find me gone, / and put His mouth to mine / and gave me His air. / My kindred, my brother, I said / and gave the yellow daisy / to the crazy woman in the next bed." These poems become confessions of faith as defined in "Small Wire": "My faith / is a great weight / hung on a small wire / ...God does not need / too much wire to keep Him there, / just a thin vein, ...and some love...even a small love. / So if you have only a thin wire, / God does not mind. / He will enter your hands / as easily as ten cents used to / bring forth a Coke."

Whether in unbelief, struggle, or thin wired faith, Sexton wrote full out. As she said in "The Saints Come Marching In," "Saints have no moderation, / nor do poets, / just exuberance."

⁷A. Sexton, *The Death Notebooks*.

⁸Anne Sexton, *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975).

John Berryman is another of these "confessional poets." His psyche was more rooted in the faith than Sexton's. However, his struggle was a struggle against the evidentness of his own sinfulness, his own lack of confidence, and his own questioning. Berryman was an alcoholic, outrageous at times. His poems, especially the *Dream Songs*, are major achievements in modern poetry. His religious based poems are not always his best. They do, however, display an intense person gripped by the divine with whom he is wrestling and at times sure he has lost already. Berryman committed suicide in January, 1972. How strange it is that the tormented souls often give us the closest glimpses into the divine. Berryman is self-absorbed in his work. His poems often read better aloud than in silence. They can verge on being entertainments. The impact of his knowledge of his own "sin" is strongly framed in the last lines of a poem written in 1971 and published after his death, "Surveillance:" "The only really comforting reflection is not / 'we will all rest in Abraham's bosom' & rot of that purport / but: after my death there will be *no more sin*."

In poem 234 of *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest*,⁹ Berryman speaks of Jesus the carpenter's son as one who shows a madness, a new vision, as one misunderstood. "The child stood in the shed. The child went mad, / later, & saned the wisemen. People gathered / as he conjoined the Jordan point / and he spoke with them until he got smothered / amongst their passion for mysterious healing had. / They could not take his point: / —Repent, & love, he told them frightened throngs, / and it is so he did. Did some of them?..."

In *Delusions, Etc.*,¹⁰ Berryman speaks of the uncertainty of life in scientific terms. He

writes of “collapsars,” probability, of things flying apart, of mass dispersing; then in this poem “Certainty Before Lunch,” he concludes: “...My Lord, I’m glad we don’t / on x or y depend for Your being there. / I know You are there. The sweat is, I am here.” Truly this is a psalmic lament in modern form!

In his later poems Berryman lost some of his inventiveness, but there is still a kind of power in his confession as in the last lines of “The Facts & Issues”: “...It is plain to me / *Christ* underwent man & treachery & socks / & lashes, thirst, exhaustion, the bit, for *my* pathetic & disgusting vices, / to make this filthy fact of particular, long-after, / faraway, five-foot-ten & moribund / human being happy. Well, he has! / I am so happy I could scream! / It’s *enough!* I can’t BEAR ANY MORE. / *Let this be it.* I’ve *had* it. I can’t wait.” But in the midst of this is a certain pathos and irony.

One of my favorite Berryman poems on the Christ is “Ecce Homo.” Here is the struggle to hold together the human and divine in Jesus. “Long, long with wonder I thought you human, / *almost* beyond humanity but not. / Once, years ago, only in a high bare hall / of the great Catalan museum over Barcelona, / I thought you might be more— / a Pantocrator glares down, from San Clemente de Tahull, / making me feel you probably were divine, / *but* not human, through that majestic image. / Now I’ve come on something where you seem both— / a photograph of it only— / Burgundian, of painted & gilt wood, / life-size almost

⁹John Berryman, *His Toy, His Dream, His Rest* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1968).

¹⁰John Berryman, *Delusions, Etc.* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972).

(not that we know your Semitic stature), / attenuated, your dead head bent forward sideways, / your long feet hanging, your thin long arms out / in unconquerable beseeching—.”

II. THE STRUGGLE BEFORE GOD AND THE ECSTATIC MOTHER

William Everson can be classified with the confessional poets, although his roots are in the San Francisco Renaissance following World War II. Already an acknowledged poet, in 1949 he became a Roman Catholic and in 1950 joined the Catholic Worker Movement. He became a lay brother in the Dominican Order in 1951 and took up monastic life. In these years he wrote under the name Brother Antoninus. On December 7, 1969, at a poetry reading, he stripped off his robes and renounced the monastic life for the passionate love of a woman, again writing as William Everson. His poetry is dominated by what he has called the thread of “the love of God.” However, it also rages with the struggle of a sinful self. The images in his poems explode with the power of struggle and sometimes ecstatic vision.

His struggle is with God, a God who convicts and who showers mercy, as in “A Frost Lays White on California” from *the Hazards of Holiness*:¹¹ “‘No pride!’ cried God, ‘kick me I come back! / Spit on me I eat your spittle! / I crawl on my belly! / What is revulsion to me? /...Whatever you need. /...Drop down on the ground. / I will lick your hand.’” He sees the suffering of Christ in nature as in a cut cedar in the poem “Passion Week”: “Bleed cedar. / Little cedar, / Lanced, / Axe-opened, / The ache of sacrifice. / Pour out, / As Christ, / Those pearls of pain, / Bequeathed. / O bleed / Little cedar, / Bleed for the blooded Heart, / For the pang of man... / The earth’s / Old ache.” The creation becomes the suffering Body of Christ in the poem “In All These Acts”: “In all these acts / Christ crouches and seethes, pitched forward / On the

crucifying stroke, juvescent, that will spring Him / Out of the germ, out of the belly of the dying buck, / Out of the father-phallus and the torn-up root. / These are the modes of His forth-showing, / His serene agonization. In the clicking teeth of otters / Over and over He dies and is born.”

*The Rose of Solitude*¹² is a long poetical sequence of love poems in which Brother Antoninus suffers through the passionate encounter with a woman and forms a philosophical-theological-erotic love poem. It marks a kind of spiritual-physical poetry that reminds us of the medieval mystics. The sequence portrays the growth of love as the coming of the feminine principles into his masculine life and includes the ecstasy and also the suffering involved in the process of love and the Christic process of redemption. “O Christ & Lady / Save me from my law! / O Christ & Lady / Save me from my seed! /...O Christ & Lady / Save me from my curse! /...O Christ & Lady / Save me from myself!” In the woman are combined the grace of Christ, the death struggle of redemption, the agony of sin, and the spontaneity of love and grace. “She is all passion, all fire and devotion. She is all woman, in love of God bitten by the rapture of God. / She sounds through my mind thirsting the inconceivable excellence of Christ. / I hear her

¹¹Brother Antoninus, *The Hazards of Holiness* (New York: Doubleday, 1962).

¹²Brother Antoninus, *The Rose of Solitude* (New York: Doubleday, 1967).

feet like rain-clashes run the flat streets to do His will. / All ache. Her heart the glorified Wound. Her soul curls back on its pang as the toes of the Christ clutched back on that Nail. / In the stigmata of His gaze her love coils like the flesh on its iron, the love-ache of the opening. / When she utters the Holy Name you could never doubt God died for the love of man.” In its most vivid terms love and woman come to carry the metaphoric gift of the drama of grace in Christ.

The lead poem in *Man-Fate*,¹³ “Tendril in The Mesh,” was read the night Everson renounced the Order, but certainly not his faith. In his love and passion he seeks Christ’s ministrations: “Evince in me the tendril in the mesh, / The faultless nerve that quickens paradise afresh. / Call to me Christ, sound in my twittering blood, / Nor suffer me to scamp what I should know / Of the being’s unsubduable will to grow. / Do thou invest the passion in the flood / And keep inviolate what thou created good!”

In a collection of poems published in 1980, *The Masks of Drought*,¹⁴ Everson frames the collection with a Christic poem at the beginning and another less evident one at the end. The first, “storm-surge,” tells of a long dry spell followed by a torrent of rain, and the creek risen, whose raging waters cut a channel to the sea, becomes the metaphor on Christmas Eve for God’s inbreaking grace in Christ: “And the sea, ripping a channel / Out to the future, the space beyond time, / On the eve of the coming, when Christ, / The principle in the purpose, / Splits the womb in his shudder of birth.” The breaking waters of birth merge with the natural flood and the flood of grace. Surely there is much theological reflection which could surround the trenchant statement that Christ is “the principle in the purpose.” The final poem of this collection, “Spikehorn,” presents a haunting image of great beauty in its picturing. A yearling buck shot through the lungs bolts out of the woods toward a stream and dies in a meadow. As the seasons pass the body rots and is eaten even as it is watched over by Everson and his wife and two bulls. It grows in significance like a ritual object until it is gone, washed by the rains. The impress of the body remains in the ground until, “In the body-print of the buck / The first green grass

quicken the bronze.” And the spot takes on the holiness of the Christ between the dark, dense regions of sin and death (the woods here) and the lively, quickening resurrecting waters of the rain and river. “...there in the immemorial clearing, / The great listening mountain above for witness, / The sacrificial host between the river and the woods.”

Robert Bly’s poetry contrasts with what we have been reading. I often feel his writing as a gentle luminosity. His writings include poems, translations (widely acclaimed) and prose pieces. In a major essay in *Sleepers Joining Hands*,¹⁵ “I Came Out of The Mother Naked,” Bly speaks mythologically of the feminine principle. Using Erich Neumann’s *The Great Mother*, he posits a cruciform image of the Great Mother in which the vertical axis moves between the Good Mother and the Death Mother, and the horizontal axis between the Ecstatic Mother and the Stone Mother (Medusa). Bly states: “All my poems comes from the Ecstatic

¹³William Everson, *Man-Fate* (New York: New Directions, 1974).

¹⁴William Everson, *The Masks of Drought* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow, 1980).

¹⁵Robert Bly, *Sleepers Joining Hands* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

Mother.” For Bly all creativity comes from the feminine consciousness. One senses in Bly the willingness to let himself loose in nature, to ride the stream, to feel the ecstatic. Christ also lives for him beyond the theological arguments of divine-human. In the poem “Water Drawn Up Into The Head,” he writes: “We know of Christ, who raised the dead, and started time. / He is not God, and is not called God. / When the waterholes go, and the fish flop about / in the caked mud, they can moisten each other faintly. / That is good, but best / is to let them lose themselves in a river. / So rather than saying that Christ is God or he is not, it is better to forget all that / and lose yourself in the curved energy.”

In *The Morning Glory*¹⁶ Bly brings together prose pieces including one “Christmas Eve Service at Midnight at St. Michael’s,” in which he gives us this evocative image of the host and Christ, the calming possibility of this reality. “Just after midnight, [the priest] turns to face us, lifts up the dry wafer, and breaks it—a clear and terrifying sound. He holds up the two halves...frightening...for like so many acts, it is permanent. With his arms spread, the cross clear on his white chasuble, he tells us that Christ intended to leave his body behind...it is confusing...we take our bodies with us when we go. I see oceans dark and lifting near flights of stairs, oceans lifting and torn over which the invisible birds drift like husks over November roads...The cups are put down. The ocean has been stirred and calmed. A large man is flying over the water with wings spread, a wound on his chest.”

In his recent collection *The Man in the Black Coat Turns*¹⁷ Bly writes of grief and the masculine experience. In “Crazy Carlson’s Meadow” we glimpse a Christ who suffers: “There is no room even for Christ. / He broke off / his journey toward the Father, / and leaned back into the mother’s fearful tree. / Then he sank through the bark. / The energies the Jews / refused him / turned into nails, and the wine of Cana turned back to vinegar. / Blessings on you, my king, broken / on the poplar tree. / Your shoulders quivered / like an aspen leaf before the storm of Empire. / You fell off then, and the horse galloped away / into the wind without / you, and disappeared / into the blue sky. Your horse never reached your father’s house. / But the suffering is over now, all / consequences finished, / the lake closed / again, as before the leaf fell, all forgiven, the path ended.”

III. THE FORMED

In contrast to the abandoned flow of images in some of the “confessional poets” and the free association of images in Bly, in Louise Glück we receive a tightly formed poetry almost of objective observation and quiet reserve. Her imagery and choice of words are compelling. The poems are tightly wrought. Two of her poems present images of the nativity. They become as precise and as evocative in creating image and mood as older paintings of that scene; yet there is a sort of understatement. The glory of the child and the distinctiveness of that life on its own is evoked by smallness in the first. Jesus is almost lost in the scene. The

¹⁶Robert Bly, *The Morning Glory* (Santa Cruz: Kayak, 1970).

¹⁷Robert Bly, *The Man In The Black Coat Turns* (New York: Dial, 1981).

poem “Nativity Poem” appears in *The House on Marshland*:¹⁸ “It is the evening / of the birth of god. / Singing & / with gold instruments / the angels bear down / upon the barn, their wings / neither white / wax or marble. So / they have been recorded: / burnished, / literal in the composed air, / they raise their harps above / the beasts likewise gathering, / the lambs & all the startled / silken chickens.... And Joseph, / off to one side, has touched / his cheek, meaning / he is weeping— / But how small he is, withdrawn from the hollow of his mother’s life, / the raw flesh bound / in linen as the stars yield / light to delight his sense / for whom there is no ornament.” This mixture of the marvelous and the ominous is felt in the poem “Pieta” from *Descending Figure*:¹⁹ “Under the strained / fabric of her skin, his heart / stirred, She listened, / because he had no father. / So she knew / he wanted to stay / in her body, apart / from the world / with its cries, its / roughhousing, / but already the men / gather to see him / born: they crowd in / or kneel at worshipful/distance, like / figures in a painting / whom the star lights, shining / steadily in its dark context.”

Now, please, excuse a short digression from this Christ-image display. A. R. Ammons is certainly among the first rank of poets presently writing. The poems are, again, spare in their precision and evocative in their depth. When we as religious people think of Christ we bring together thought of incarnation, which is both divinity and that of the earth. Ammons’ poem “Wiring” in *A Coast of Trees*²⁰ sounds forth close to this dialectic: “Radiance comes from / on high and, staying, / sends down silk / lines to the flopping / marionette, me, but / love comes from / under the ruins and / sends the lumber up / lumber into leaf that / touches so high it nearly / puts out the radiance.” There is something of the Christ the servant in love there! Or this from *Worldly Hopes*,²¹ the poem “Limits” which argues for the opening of the possibilities of meaning in symbol, myth, song, story: “Since the / unknown’s / truer / than the / known / and since / mystery / can / make a well-known weed / unreal / and since / bent we / break on / time that lets / everything endure / changed / why not take / liberties / and love / what is not / storm the intangible / for the lore / song’s lost in.”

Some critics feel that Geoffrey Hill may be the poet from our age whose work will endure. Hill is a careful craftsman, and the number of poems appearing over the last 30 years seems small. However, they are tightly composed, honed to a word, often using classical and modified forms of rhyme scheme. In an early poem “Genesis,” included in the collection *Somewhere There Is A Kingdom*,²² Hill figuratively riding over the creation of God concludes: “By blood we live, the hot, the cold, / To ravage and redeem the world: / There is no bloodless

myth will hold” —and thus Christ gathers meaning,— “And by Christ’s blood are men made free / Though in close shrouds their bodies lie / Under the rough pelt of the sea; / Though Earth has rolled beneath her weight / The bones that cannot bear the light.”

¹⁸Louise Glück, *The House on Marshland* (New York: Ecco, 1975).

¹⁹Louise Glück, *Descending Figure* (New York: Ecco, 1980).

²⁰A. R. Ammons, *A Coast of Trees* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981).

²¹A. R. Ammons, *Worldly Hopes* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982).

²²Geoffrey Hill, *Somewhere Is Such a Kingdom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975).

In the volume *Tenebrae*²³ Hill confronts the state of humanity almost lost on the rim of redemption. The struggle is apparent in the sonnet “Lachrimae Verae”: “Crucified Lord, you swim upon your cross / and never move. Sometimes in dreams of hell / the body moves but moves to no avail / and is at one with that eternal loss. / You are the castaway of drowned remorse, / you are the world’s atonement on the hill. / This is your body twisted by our skill / into a patience proper for redress. / I cannot turn aside from what I do; / you cannot turn away from what I am. / You do not dwell in me nor I in you / however much I pander to your name / or answer to your lords of revenue, / surrendering the joys that they condemn.” These stanzas from the poem “Tenebrae” set forth a sort of portrait of humanity barren: “Veni Redemptor, but not in our time. / Christus Resurgens, quite out of this world. / ‘Ave’ we cry; the echoes are returned. / Amor Carnalis is our dwelling-place.” “O light of light, supreme delight; / grace on our lips to our disgrace. / Time roosts on all such golden wrists; / our leanness is our luxury. / Our love is what we love to have; / our faith is in our festivals.”

IV. CODA

Restrictions of space will not allow me to explore the multiple images of Christ in many other contemporary poets generally known for their religious writings. But let me mention some of the most notable. I commend the poems of Chad Walsh, especially his *The Psalm of Christ* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963). Walsh uses a variety of traditional forms of poetry combined with theological acuity and emotional breadth. Father Daniel Berrigan tosses off poetry with great productivity. If one sifts the output, one will find rewards. The poetry of Thomas Merton is often rewarding in images of Christ that seem to flow out of liturgy and natural observation. Lesser known is the work of Catherine De Vinck, most of whose poetry has been published by Alleluia Press. These poems, poem-prayers, and poetical liturgies are worth searching out. They dance and sing, not always with precision, but surely with Spirit: “Christ the Dancer takes my hand / leads me in the cadence and pattern / of a new language I learn as I go.” The poetry of Cecil Hemley combines intelligence and precision as he explores the discordance between the world of God and the world of a fallen humanity. Finally, the work of Arnold Kenseth is consistently of a high quality. He has written one of the most satisfying poems on the condition of each of us before God and the impact of New Life. The person is a meadowed landscape in the poem turned to sticks and stone and fenced in by sin whom God recovers. The last lines of “Death and Resurrection”²⁴ are: “And out of my debris you timber heights, / And into my despair you hammer grace.”

And so it is. “O taste and see!”

²³Geoffrey Hill, *Tenebrae* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979).

²⁴Arnold Kenseth, "Death and Resurrection," *The American Scholar* 28 (1959) 359.