# Practicing Silence

# Practicing Silence

*New and Selected Verses*

Bonnie Bowman Thurston

FOREWORD BY BR. DAVID STEINDL-RAST, OSB

PARACLETE PRESS
BREWSTER, MASSACHUSETTS

2014 First printing

*Practicing Silence: New and Collected Verses*



ISBN 978-1-61261-561-5

The Paraclete Press name and logo (dove on cross) are trademarks of Paraclete Press, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Thurston, Bonnie Bowman.
[Poems. Selections]
Practicing silence : new and selected verses / Bonnie Thurston ; foreword by Br. David Steindl-Rast, OSB.
pages cm — (Paraclete poetry)
Summary: «Although the literary form is poetry, this is a book about the spiritual life. Think of it as an armchair visit to a monastery. Focused around monastic themes, it speaks to the spiritual seeker and curious bystander alike by presenting a range of spiritual experiences in accessible language. The poems are grouped according to a monastic logic. A section on visits to monasteries is followed by poems on questions of vocation or spiritual calling that such visits often raise. Then the reader will follow the horarium, or monastic day, and encounter some fruit of lectio divina, the practice of prayerful reading of scripture. The poems on interior prayer will speak to contemplatives in any religious tradition. The collection closes by exploring the experience of anchorites and solitaries. "— Provided by publisher.
ISBN 978-1-61261-561-5 (paperback)
1. Spiritual life--Poetry. 2. Monastic and religious life--Poetry.
3. Hermits—Religious life—Poetry. 4. Contemplation—Poetry. I. Title.
PS3620.H888P73 2014
811›.6—dc23 2014016657

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1



Published by Paraclete Press
Brewster, Massachusetts
www.paracletepress.com

Printed in the United States of America

# Contents

## *LECTIO DIVINA*

## INTERIOR PRAYER



## ANCHORITES, HERMITS, SOLITARIES

# Foreword

BR. DAVID STEINDL-RAST, OSB

This book of poems by Bonnie Bowman Thurston stands in an ancient poetic tradition, one that antedates the Protestant Reformation by a thousand years. St. Benedict (AD 480–543 AD), "like a new Moses," his monks said, struck water from the rock of earlier monastic culture; it sprang forth, became a river with many branches, and brought refreshment, healing, and fruitfulness wherever it flowed. Its life-giving water is still flowing strongly today.

John Henry Cardinal Newman spoke of this tradition as the poetical element in the Church and said, "Herein then . . . lies the poetry of St Benedict: in the absence of anxiety and fretfulness, of schemes and scheming, of hopes and fears, of doubts and disappointments."

Silence and inner stillness are the positive signs of this "absence of anxiety," and of the whole list of inner turbulences that follows. But, why? Because stillness is the precondition for listening, and listening in turn is both the essence of Benedictine spirituality and the source of spiritual poetry.

The first word of St. Benedict's Rule for Monks is: "Listen!" All the rest is anticipated and contained in this initial imperative. To listen, every moment, to whatever we encounter, to consider it a word of God, and to respond to that word, that is Benedictine obedience. It is indeed a poetic attitude, since God's Word is not understood as command, instruction, or information, but as a song of praise sung by the Cosmic Christ at the core of every living thing.

Monks who see their vocation in life as joining this chorus of praise, find in it what Meister Eckhart calls "*Gelassenheit*" (defined by Heidegger as "the willingness or ability to let things be as they are," in their uncertainty and mystery). The broad, expansive intellectual and emotional freedom that springs from this attitude has poetic potential. It allows us, as John Keats once put it, to be "in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." This characterizes Benedictine life at its best. The poems in this book witness to it.

We can also recognize this inner freedom in Bonnie's understanding of her own poetic calling when she admits (in her poem "*The Anchorite – Explains Poetry*"):

I do it because
there's nothing else
I can do.

The ability to squarely face given reality with all its limitations is an essential aspect of genuine inner freedom. It culminates in an awareness of the void inside us. Thomas Merton (another contemporary

poet in the Benedictine tradition) calls unflinching confrontation with this emptiness a sacred attitude: "The sacred attitude is one which does not recoil from our own inner emptiness, but rather penetrates it with awe and reverence, and with the awareness of mystery. This is a most important discovery in the interior life." A few lines from "*Through and Beyond*" demonstrate how Bonnie has made this discovery:

> One must be faithful
> to her own, particular
> darkness and doubt,
> walk the way of unknowing,
> live through and beyond
> habituated fears.

Only by approaching darkness and doubt "with awe and reverence," as Merton put it, will we discover the light that shines "in the darkness"—shines not merely into, but *in* the darkness for all those who "will say to the darkness, 'Be my light.'" (Psalm 139:11)

Eyes attuned to this light will see it shine through all created reality, the dark no less than the brilliant. Awe and reverence will characterize the way such eyes look at the world. They will be humble eyes, poetic eyes. Again, according to Cardinal Newman, humility is the prime condition for poetic vision: "The poetical demands, as its primary condition, that we should not put ourselves above the objects in which it resides, but at their feet. We understand them to be vast, immeasurable, impenetrable, inscrutable, mysterious."

When St. Benedict exalts the virtue of humility, he has this down-to-earth attitude in mind. He is aware of the close relationship between the words *humble*, *humus*, *human*—and, not to forget, *humor* that makes us human. In humbly grounding ourselves by kneeling down, we touch the spot where earth becomes transparent to the transcendent. Mary Oliver does so in her well-known poem "*The Summer Day*." While she claims not to know what exactly a prayer is, she does know "how to fall down into the grass, how to kneel in the grass." That's enough and more than enough. Another poet, Rainer Marie Rilke, rejoices that "in a hundred places the world is still enchanted, still retains its pristine freshness, its interplay of pure energy that no one can touch who does not kneel and revere it."

We sense reverence of this kind as we read Bonnie Thurston's poems. The same reverence that made Elizabeth Barrett Browning see "every common bush afire with God" is sensed when Bonnie exclaims:

> This whole
> remarkable world
> is on fire.

Monastic poetry celebrates this fire as the *Lumen Christi*, the light of Christ that shines in our darkness, the way the Paschal candle illuminates the Easter night. The mystic poet Angelus Silesius said of the brilliance of this fire:

> God's Radiance is too bright to enter human sight.
> The only way to see, is to *become* that light.

Meanwhile, one of the most poetic passages of the Prologue to the Rule of St. Benedict calls it "the light that makes us divine." Ever since I was a novice, it puzzled me that English translations call it simply "the divine light." Had Benedict wanted to say no more than this he had the Latin word *divinum* ready to hand. But he chose the rare word *deificum*. He still belonged to the early Christian tradition of both East and West that did not hesitate to say: "God became human so that we may become God" (St. Irenaeus). Only once, much later, did I meet an official translator of the *Regula Benedicti* and had the opportunity to ask him why he had not translated *deificum lumen* in its obvious sense. To his credit, he frankly admitted, "I simply didn't dare to do so." But then he added, "*Today* I would write 'the light that makes divine.'" I count it a great blessing to have lived long enough to witness theologians beginning to accept what poets knew all along.

Turning the pages of this book, you will find the light that shines in darkness beaming at you as from its author's radiant eyes. Bonnie has spent decades in studying—with both mind and heart—Thomas Merton's writings. Among my most treasured memories are moments of looking into Merton's eyes. In reading some of Bonnie's poems, "Za Zen in Gethsemani Abbey" for instance, I feel again those eyes looking at me. And I remember a poem by Mark Van Doren, with whom Merton studied at Columbia University before he became a monk.

The poem "Once in Kentucky," was the fruit of the first visit the professor paid to his former student at the Abbey of Gethsemani. I would like to close this foreword by quoting it. For, in reading the poems in this book you may well have an experience not unlike Mark Van Doren's. With a smile that "sorrows," Bonnie will taste her joy, then hand it all to you—as much of it as you can carry home with you into a place so different from the monastery. For a moment, you will stand eye to eye with her; and when you have long forgotten the lines of her poems, you will still remember those eyes.

In our fat times, a monk:
I had not thought to see one;
Nor, even with my own poor lean concerns,
Ever to be one.

No. But in Kentucky,
Midway of sweet hills
When housewives swept their porches and March light
Lapped windowsills,

He, once my merry friend,
Came to the stone door,
And the only difference in his smiling was,
It sorrowed more.

No change in him, except
His merriment was graver.
As if he knew now where it started from;
And what the flavor.

He tasted it, the joy,
Then gave it all to me:
As much, I mean, as I could carry home
To this country,

To this country whose laughter
Is a fat thing, and dies.
I step across its body and consider,
Still, those eyes.

(*Once in Kentucky* [1] by Mark Van Doren)

# Author's Note

While poetry can be a form of prayer, it is not autobiography or history or theology, and poems must stand or fall, succeed or fail, as poems. However, unless one is a strict New Critic or holds a narrow version of the objective theory of art, background information can illuminate a body of written work. And thus the following brief note:

Thomas Merton wrote that "things unknown have a secret influence on the soul." Known things can also have, if not secret, *surprising* influences on the inner life. (And what takes up residence within shapes one's outer life.) This has been the case with monasticism and my soul. I first encountered Christian monasticism nearly forty years ago while writing a doctoral dissertation on Thomas Merton and visiting All Saints Sisters of the Poor Convent (then Episcopalian) in Catonsville, Maryland. I had no idea the influence those two experiences would have on my life. Monastic history, theology, and spirituality, particularly the anchoritic (hermitic or solitary) traditions, got so deeply under my skin that they took up residence in my heart.

I am not a monastic and have no vocation to cenobitic life, knowing only too well the nightmare I would be to a novice mistress and my sisters. But for more than twenty years of widowhood, I have experimented with living more or less as a solitary in the old Celtic mode.[2] Without formal vows, I try in a quiet way to conduct my "ordinary" life monastically, and I can attest that living a monastic spirituality "in the world" is challenging. Various aspects of this experiment have resulted in some of the poems collected here, which are organized according to what I hope is a sort of monastic logic.

Each section is prefaced by a quotation from *The Rule of St. Benedict*,[3] the foundational document of Western monasticism, which sets the tone for and indicates something of the importance of the theme of the section. The selection of poems begins with "Monasteries" because a visit to a monastery is often a person's first introduction to that life and spirituality. Seeing how others choose to live their lives can raise the question of vocation, of one's own calling. The poems in "Vocation" trace a movement toward monastic commitment. The monastic life itself is structured by the *horarium*, the daily schedule of liturgical prayers (Offices) in Choir (the monastic chapel or church). "*Horarium*" gently leads the reader through a monastic day, from Vigils, offered before the sun rises, to Compline, the last Office of the day, which precedes Great Silence and the darkness of night. As part of the rhythm of the monastic day's *ora et labora* (prayer and manual labor), St. Benedict

insisted on periods of prayerful reading of Scripture, *lectio divina* (sacred or "divine" reading), represented here by poems that are reflections on scriptural texts. Finally, authentic spiritual life, in whatever context it is lived, is primarily personal, interior, and hidden. This is reflected in "Interior Prayer." The final, brief section of the book explores the expression of monastic life known as the anchoritic, or hermit life.

Although its literary form is poetry, this is a book about the spiritual life. While largely focused on the ancient Christian spiritual traditions of monasticism, these poems, I hope, might speak to both the spiritual seeker and the curious bystander, offering some small light in great darkness, which (*pace* St. John the Evangelist's understanding of God), ultimately, we must come to trust.

# Practicing Silence

# MONASTERIES

"All guests who present themselves
are to be welcomed as Christ,
for he himself will say: *I was a stranger and you welcomed me* (Matt 25:35).
Proper honor must be shown *to all, especially to those who share our faith*
(Gal 6:10) and to pilgrims."

—*Rule of St. Benedict* 53.1–2
(italics in original)

## *Their Light Shines in Darkness*

Out of Egypt
He called His sons.
They migrated
to the islands
at the western
edge of the earth.
Seed of the word,
the classical
and the Christian,
flowered in that
far, foreign soil.
Celtic gardens
preserved its fruit,
illuminated
the waning world
as continents
went slowly dark.

## *Suppliant*

In the monastery
the note said this:
"pick up your tray
at the kitchen door."

Like how many million
suppliants of ages past,
I am to wait at the portal
for Benedict's brethren
to fill my begging bowl.

I do not know exactly
why this makes me smile,
why I am comforted
to be among the indigent
waiting for crumbs to fall
from the monastic table.

But in history's white light
I see myself as I am,
loitering at heaven's back door
empty-handed and hungry,
waiting with the multitudes
for some disciple
to bless, break, and give
God's good bread.

## *All Saints Convent*

In an indifferent world,
Detached from the sands of time,
Your house stands on a rock
And gathers the faceless ones
Around a table
Where the undeserving
Are honored guests.

We come from darkness,
Bring our hungers and thirsts.
We join you, kneel at dawn
Under a single, amber light,
No more strangers,
But sisters in the Silence
Who speaks us all.

## *Lucubrations*

Our Lady of the Angels Monastery
crozet, virginia

Nestled at the base of the Blue Ridge
they begin the day at night,
as earth takes on its contours
pray their way from darkness to light,
allow another self to emerge,
the one healed of its own evil.

They wait in stillness before mystery.
Theirs is the pregnant quietude,
the darkly brilliant expectancy
of Christmas night
when the numinous depths
will deliver a virgin mother.

Their life is useless to everyone but God.
It demonstrates subtraction
is a process of freedom:
the less we own, the more we have.
It encourages increasing receptivity:
the less we grasp, the closer God comes.

Like children by a mountain brook,
they play at the edges of articulation,
amidst an oceanic symphony,
listen for the quiet burble
of a small stream's word,
and, sometimes, hear it.

## *Monastery of the Holy Spirit*

CONYERS, GEORGIA

Just before I arrived
the monks had haircuts.
Heads shaved, robed,
singing in choir,
they looked like a flock
of elderly birds.

The next morning
after Lauds
(I swear this happened),
a pure white dove
landed on a ledge
in the guest house.

Masculine prayers
ascend to the Spirit.
She descends like a dove
on this brood of His love,
like Christ the hen
gathers them in
to the warmth of Her breast,
to the peace of her nest.

## *Strays*

I appear at the kitchen door,
spiritual equivalent
of a wet dog from a storm,
tail tucked, trembling.
You open your lives, this life,
provide prayerful provision,
a vigorous toweling down,
a large bowl of kibbles.
I curl up and sleep safe
on the rug by your heart,
the chapel that warms His,
and so, restored, return
to the weary world rejoicing,
perhaps to provide
a bracing swig
from the fiery word,
perhaps to lead
a lost one home.

# VOCATION

"What, dear brothers, is more delightful than this voice of the Lord calling to us?"

—*Rule of St. Benedict,* prologue, 19

## What Do *You* Do?

For far too many years
the teaching, velvet barred
robe, mortarboard, hood,
were a great cover,
an ingenious disguise,
a rubber nose and mustache
attached to fake glasses,
except the charade was
so deadly serious,
legitimate, respected,
gainfully employing words
to hide what matters most:
the empty silence
behind everything else
which infrequently
releases a metaphor
like a single puff of smoke
from a signal fire
just over the brow of a hill,
just at the edge of perception.
Or perhaps it was only
the merest wisp of cloud
returning to wind.
It hardly matters which.
Asked, "what do you do?",
"watch for smoke signals";
"observe evaporation"—
are completely accurate,
utterly unacceptable answers.

## *Offering*

The extroverted, critical rant
of academe did not suit me.
But I knew nothing
else, certainly not that
success at something
doesn't mean one should
give her heart to it.
So I put my head
into the lion's mouth.
But the lion did not close
its saw-toothed jaws.

With my nostrils full
of the stomach stench
of all it had eaten alive,
I withdrew my head
from the dark abyss,
blinked in wonder
at the world's bright beauty,
the green of growing things
to which, as an offering,
a resurrective *fiat*,
I gave my grateful heart.

## *Through and Beyond*

One must be faithful
to her own, particular
darkness and doubt,
walk the way of unknowing,
live through and beyond
habituated fears.

The imprisoned imagination
instinctively knows
chains that bind softly
are still chains
and holding self tightly
poisons the heart.

Many thresholds beckon,
some delightful, some devilish.
The door is always open.
One deep, grateful breath,
one small step forward
has power to change everything.

## *Forest Dweller*

Half a century later
I am tired
of being a householder,
loose the attachment
to its furnishings,
those tawdry trinkets
of the little self,
cast off mooring to place,
but keep a rootedness
in the loam of gratitude
for all that has been.

I will hold no yard sale
lest others carry away
and cling to
trappings of this life.
I will simply
cross the threshold
with only the begging bowl
of an emptied mind,
be a forest dweller,
alone with the universe
and ready.

## *Veil of Tears*

We are born crying
and if fortunate,
they weep when we die.
Between the two we
straddle the abyss,
peer over the edge
of a well of tears,
unfathomable
depths of woundedness
and numb unbelief.

Like Narcissus in
danger of drowning
admiring himself,
we stare down the shaft,
eyes straining to see
the distant mirror,
glimpse our beautiful,
distorted image
in light we obscure.

The invitation
is to shrink the self,
become small enough
for heaven to show
its own hidden face
clearly reflected
from above below
on water's surface,
to hear wafting up

through the fetid stink
and fearsome darkness
faint echoes of song.

## *Building on Sand*

At the outset one is told
to construct the edifice of self
with the best possible material,
great blocks hewn
from the cultural rock.
One builds her tower
to reach toward heaven
until, perhaps halfway
(if she is fortunate),
she understands
this building is illusion,
building on sand.

Then begins the costly
and liberating work
of deconstruction,
breaking the large,
imposing pediment
into small, smooth stones
to skip across life's surface,
send out ripples
toward concentric infinity
before sinking into the depths
where pearls lie
building on sand.

## *Late Vocation*

In the gloaming
when death comes
clearly into view
as the horizon
of life's landscape,
the call is to illumination,
to focus the shining darts
of life's lessons
as a magnifying glass
focuses rays of light.

The task of middle age
is to dispose
of the extraneous,
to focus desire's flickering
until it flames
at the incendiary point
of an undivided heart
and makes of love
a pure, bright blaze
before a falling night.

## *Dialogues of the Deaf*

"The conversations between you and us easily turn into dialogues of the deaf."

"A Christian Manifesto to the Atheist World"
Madeleine Delbrêl, *We, the Ordinary People of the Streets*[4]

I have reached a stage
of living in a world
of language I don't speak,
language spoken too quickly
to be understood
because its speakers
are in a perpetual hurry
to fill their time
not with the timeless,
but the trivial.

Eternity takes time,
is unconcerned with
bombastic assertions of ego,
the psychologically tawdry,
the spiritually sterile
on which the temporal turns.

We who make ourselves small,
bow to the beautiful
because it is and we can,
listen toward gentler voices
beneath, sometimes within,
the general clamor.