

NATURE NATURING

Eva Hooker. *Godwit*. 3, A Taos Press, 2016.

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The “godwit” after which Eva Hooker names her book of poems is a family of birds, migratory waders that haunt the tidal shoreline, probing their beaks into the mud for mollusks and aquatic worms (the Latin name of the genus, *Limosa*, means “muddy”). (Sir Thomas Browne, in his notes on the natural history of Norfolk, wittily accounted the godwit “the daintiest dish in England; and, I think, for the bigness, of the biggest price.”) The OED’s blunt onomatopoeic dismissal of the name’s etymology—“Probably originally imitative of the bird’s call”—can’t erase the suggestiveness of the name. Folk etymology would derive it from “good wight,” or good creature. A more imaginative reading finds in “godwit” both the deity and his knowledge: “God’s wit,” or “God knows.”

Such an interpretation, if etymologically suspect, is absolutely germane to Hooker’s collection, for this is a book of nature poems that is simultaneously a book about knowledge and about God. Nothing particularly new about that conjunction in English-language poetry: Joseph Addison bade us observe how “The spacious firmament on high” and all the rest of the furniture of the natural world “their great Original proclaim”; Wordsworth found in nature “The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse, / The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul / Of all my moral being”; and Hopkins was continually wondering at how God manifested himself and his purposes in the spectacles and relationships of nature.

Hooker is neither a rationalist deist like Addison nor a Romantic in the Wordsworthian vein. Rather, like Hopkins, she is a Roman Catholic poet (indeed, she’s a Sister of the Holy Cross who teaches at St. Mary’s College in Notre Dame, Indiana). Her status as a member of perhaps the oldest Christian fellowship (and in some ways, among the most conservative), however, doesn’t make her poetry any less formally challenging or intellectually and musically rigorous (as was the case, one reflects, with Hopkins’s in his own day).

The first section of *Godwit*, “Of God Salt,” is a series of botanical pieces introduced by “Prairie, Under Full Moon,” a powerful poem which confronts the reader with a vision of the open prairie as an experience of sensory and spiritual mystery and wonder:

As if Jacob's ladder were built sideways,
Angels roam restlessly

Anxious to deliver
their burden. They make crossings of weird

gravity and synaptic light.

The poems that follow focus for the most part on individual flowers and plants ("Columbine, Wild," "Blazing Star, Wild," "Salt Flower," "Solomon's Seal," etc.), entwining meditations about the soul or consciousness and its immersion in the world with a great variety of botanical lore—rather in the manner of the more condensed plant-poems of Louis Zukofsky's *80 Flowers*. But where Zukofsky treats his flowers for the most part with a kind of scholarly detachment, Hooker finds in them metaphors for the relationship of the individual soul with its natural surroundings, and with its sometimes mysterious creator. A meditation on the lady slipper orchid ("Analogy of the Bee and Soul") unfolds as an epic simile of how "the soul of woman" "crawls, wanting back and wanting / forward, a / simultaneity, a work of the eye." "The Shut Rose" alludes to a whole shoal of predecessors, from Dickinson through Keats and Jorie Graham, to present its haunting image of faith: "Whom not having seen, I love: // Who withdraws from us[.]"

If the poems in "Of God Salt" have their dark moments, a darkness occasionally illuminated by flashes of insight is the predominant mood of *Godwit's* other two sections, "Dark Is the Shadow of Me" and "There Is Work to Do Within Nothingness." These sections are made up of dense, oblique, and deeply pondered poems, shot through with allusions to various literary and philosophical texts, but buoyed along by a persistent, patient lyricism. At times I'm reminded of Ronald Johnson's *The Book of the Green Man*, a similarly allusive nature book. But where Johnson disposes the fruit of a fundamentally scattershot reading in the English nature-writing tradition on the armature of a Thoreauvian interest in close natural observation, Hooker is engaged in a far deeper phenomenological and spiritual journey.

Hooker's is a nature poetry inflected by Heidegger and St. Augustine, aware at all points of the "wound" in creation, of our separation from nature's creator. As she writes in "Working Methods,"

Then you wept.
You knew, in that instance, *breakage*,

*whatever its cause, is the dark complement
of the act of making:*

one implies the other. Like soapstone: metamorphic and without melt.

If poetry at moments seems like it might afford us the ability to overcome our Sundered natures (if only momentarily), Hooker reminds us darkly that that very overcoming is predicated upon the “breakage” that constitutes the terms of our earthly existence.

Baruch Spinoza adopted a couple of terms from scholastic philosophy, *Natura naturans* and *Natura naturata*, to express his sense of the modes of God and nature as a whole (which he believed were one and the same, *Deus sive natura*, “God or nature”). Roughly speaking, *Natura naturata* is “nature natured,” or the visible or otherwise sensible elements of nature as already created; *Natura naturans* is “nature naturing,” nature as an active, ongoing principle. For all its medieval roots, the terms is strikingly proleptic of the shifts in the conception of the natural world that would come about in the nineteenth century, especially with Darwin’s theory of evolution. Nature would no longer be seen as a static (if immeasurably complex) set of categories, but as a *process*, continually changing and shifting.

Addison’s deistic vision of the heavens and earth, a kind of mechanical orrery set in motion by a beneficent creator, is *Natura naturata*. Hooker’s vision of the natural world, “metamorphic / and without melt,” is *Natura naturans*, nature naturing itself in continual change and complexity. One holds one’s breath in wonder—as one does at times in Johnson’s ceaselessly joyous celebrations of the natural world—but one mourns the human brokenness and spiritual separation that underlie Hooker’s vision of the populated world.