

16th January 2021

Superfluity?

“A barren superfluity of words.”

Samuel Garth, The Dispensary (1699) canto 2

Archibald MacLeish, an American poet and writer who died in 1982, was associated with the “modernist school” of poetry. For five years he was the Librarian of Congress, a post he accepted after being prompted to do so by the then President, Franklin D Roosevelt. From 1949 to 1962 he was Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard University, and he was awarded three Pulitzer Prizes for his work. And yet, such a man at this, surrounded by words, a teacher of words and a writer of words, could say this in his work *Ars Poetica* (The Art of Poetry):

A Poem should be palpable and mute as a globed fruit.

A Poem should be wordless as the flight of birds.

A Poem should not mean, but be.

Why? Because he understood the effectiveness of the simplicity of language, and how much could be communicated by a *sparseness* of words. He communicated through beauty and not verbosity, offering space where many others cluttered their writing with too much fullness.

Reflecting on MacLeish’s approach to poetry, I got to wondering how God responds to our prayers. Does he shake his head when we try too hard because he longs for simplicity? Does he smile at simple honesty and frown at our over-use of words? Does he yearn for space and silence when we pray for too long? Does he wonder why we clutter our prayers with too much fullness?

The older I get, the simpler my prayers have become, and, indeed, in MacLeish’s image, the more mute I am. And remarkably, the more wordless I am, and less concerned about what my prayers might “mean”, the more I can “be” in the presence of my God. So, the harder I try to pray, the more I’m aware with Samuel Garth of what he called the “barren superfluity of words”. And the more I’ve decided that my God agrees!

A prayer for today

God, speak to me in the silence; may my silence give you a chance to speak. Amen.

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