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## Review of Powell's "Old and New Testaments"

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Powell, Lynn. *Old and New Testaments*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995. 68 pages. Hardcover \$17.95. Paperback \$9.95.

The poems in this book fulfill the prophecy of the title: they are as rich in biblical allusions as one might anticipate. The first poem, "Nativity," begins like this:

Some parents shy away from the body,  
but we hush up about the cross—  
rereading our daughter the story about Jesus  
we most believe in: mother  
and father kneeling after the hard birth,  
humbled by the exhaustions of love.

This stanza prefigures the religious struggle that will surface throughout the volume: the narrator does not apparently embrace the faith of her fundamentalist childhood, but neither does she dismiss Christianity easily—or at all.

Indeed, tension arises in the book because she has chosen to rear her children (for whom "God is great and good") in the pale of Christian understanding, attempting to preserve some aspects of her tradition while eliminating some of the more violent and difficult. In "Judgments," for example, she removes the message that "Great-Grandma" has included with her daughter's "Picture-the-Bible Coloring Book": "Jesus / died to save you from your sins. Love & kisses." And later in the poem, she is glad to see that her child—shocked by animal sacrifice—"slowly, with lavender / cools the covenant / salves the unsuspecting lamb."

The daughter's presence, in a work so grounded in family life, is fitting. But she is not the most compelling little girl: Powell herself is. A close engagement with the book reveals that the shadow of a little girl

stands behind every shifting voice. As a result, it seems to me, the psychological center of the volume is this bright, sensitive child growing up as a true believer—fully participating in her Christian fundamentalist subculture. But whether the speaker is mother or sister or mate, we hear those shifting, adult voices as instances of whom that little girl would become.

This centering may have less to do with the quantity of childhood memories than with their stunning acuity, an accuracy which allows her details to resonate, to become cumulatively richer as the book progresses. Powell portrays only too well the emotional strain of many of us who, at fundamentalist church camp, waited for "The Calling" of God: "Jesus noticed me and started to knock. Already saved, / I looked for signs to show me what else He would require." And she recalls the innocent energy and devotional fervor in "Sword Drill"—here the narrative may be cast in irony, but the sincerity of the Bible racers, as well as the thrill of victory, is real, as the little girl stands "clutching / the coveted words, unsheathed / in time." Possibly most engaging and unsettling, though, are the vignettes juxtaposed in the triptych "Immersion." In section one, the child's emotions swing from guilt that the pictures she has drawn with her finger in the "pew's pink velveteen nap" will not quite disappear, to the spiritual fervor precipitated by an evangelist's trumpeting, the music "toppling a domino in my chest that branched its quiver down / my arms, belly, legs longing to come all down the aisle / while his fingers flashed." In the poem's second section, Powell achieves a splendid coupling of the holy and the profane in her powerfully incarnational image of a child, who, having assured her mother, "I can wait till after," cannot, and instead urinates in the baptismal pool, though her legs were "clenched / not to choose what went right on and chose itself..." The poem concludes with still another merging of worlds, as the stock hymn-book image "crimson stain" becomes what the young girl, at the onset of puberty, must guard against, since "Clorox could cleanse a spot, but not some boy's smirk, his thinking..."

Although the narrative is the strength of the book, it would be a disservice to ignore Powell's technique. Her consistent if somewhat flat story-telling voice is almost transparent, but a welcome accent occasionally comes through. And her rhythm is the rhythm of good prose. The book is better than any of its poems.

Our attention to the fundamentalist trappings should not obscure the real religious power of the book—particularly when Powell is most thoroughly and biblically incarnational. The old stories become new

when she recalls them especially when she participates in the gospel scenes. The effects of the old and the new are compounded when, in "Nativity," she becomes the manger that held the baby Jesus; when in "FORASINADAMALIDIE," [sic], she and her mate, slicing apples in the kitchen, become the Edenic couple; and when in "Raising Jesus," she not only compares her duty to that of Mary, but becomes, by a stunning turn, the woman with an issue of blood (Matt. 9:20), "reaching for Your hem, craving that miracle."

This is a deeply religious book, centered in a single point; it is not, however, the "still point" of Eliot's "Four Quartets." At the center of Powell's turning is most engagingly, the vision of a questioning little girl.

—William Jolliff