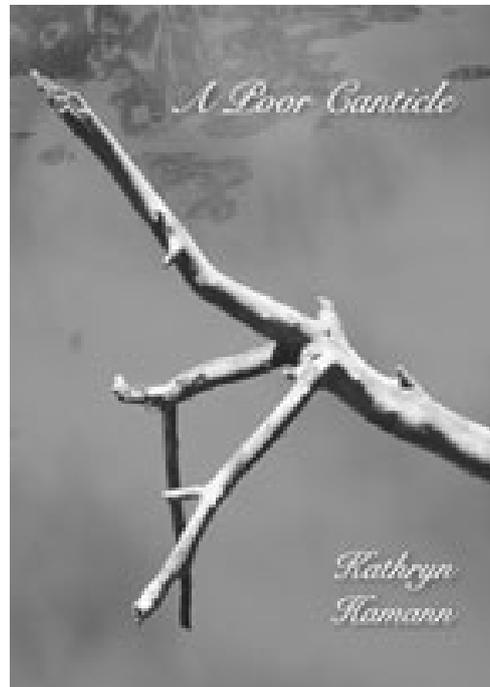


A POOR CANTICLE



Kathryn Hamann, ***A Poor Canticle.***
Shardlight Publications, 2009. 44 pp.

This is one book every theologian should have on their bookshelf. *A Poor Canticle* is the sixth anthology by Kathryn Hamann published by Shardlight. How many of your friends and students could benefit from 'Duck Wisdom'?

If you lack the gravity
to make a big splash
settle for amplified honking.

Well, you can learn that one by heart (though you are deprived of the lovely black and white illustration). Most of the other poems in this handy soft-cover 45 page book are longer and graver.

However, the given poem and a prior, equally-short evocative verse which is, significantly, an acrostic of Love, can be seen as preface and forward; these initial pages are correspondingly Latin numerics. For me the whole is a combination of work of art, a theological resource, and spiritual inspiration. The poetry is both lyrical, and prose-poetry somewhat in the style of T.S. Eliot and yet uniquely exploratory.

Like Eliot, Hamann weaves into the natural rhythm of speech, words rich with spiritual connotation, and images dense with theological import. The significance of 'Brother Ass' would of course be clear to any friend of St Francis; Hamann herself is a member of the Third Order. This poem is a good example of her skill at juxtaposing sense impression and symbol to communicate both spiritual experience and theological insight. One cannot really select a part of this particular poem for illustration, because the whole is needed to convey the message so that the reader (or hearer) may 'wake . . . and live by sight'.

Kathryn's poetry reflects her own life's journey. Behind the argument with Epictetus in 'Diatribes', we may recognize her work with children with a disability; one may sense the suffering of someone with cystic fibrosis, but beyond that a spiritual freedom impossible to circumscribe which is the window to transcendent beauty.

For me in this particular anthology, it is other poems such as this, like 'Hemorrhage' and 'A Leper Speaks' that evoke her deep engagement with the 'other' which are most extraordinary. With a very fine poet-pencil line she seeks with the eye of faith the contours of suffering, degradation and transformation. One is drawn in to identification with the leper embraced by Francis; an experience that gives rise to understanding of his song which is simultaneously joy and sorrow:

His song spills over me
pooling in pitted skin.
And my body rises a little
as if it would give thanks . . .
and what is left of throat, lips

adds a cracked harmony.

Agony and joy cross . . .

at their meeting point . . .

I see the face of my God.

.....

I am a man who has learnt

the one, the best,

the song without price.

The Resurrection itself is acknowledged. Hamann quotes Aquinas: 'Joy is the noblest act of man', and in , 'Joy comes in the morning' there is the reassurance that:

. . . you shall be given

joy – the deep vein

the inexhaustible treasure

that lay in the heart of pain.

I like this clear-cut verse which speaks the simple wisdom of deepest insight won by the humane act. His kiss received by the leper, Francis can say:

. . . graced by your generosity

I have a Brother,

better than myself.

We find a similar irony in 'Friar Wolf' where it is the 'fierce lambs' who are tamed, something that surprises and satisfies while on the other hand, the irony of 'The Prayer of the Merchant' is chilling.

Humility as the deep wisdom of 'Lady Poverty', Francis' charism, is the anthology's underlying extended metaphor. Take the time to read this book slowly and relish the deft play of words that allows such brevity to make its

point. Overall the poetry does have a prophetic ring and it is almost to be expected to discover Job's 'Whirlwind' where we find the personal crux of becoming 'small':

. . . around this irritating littleness
that is truly me
may your love
pearl.

By now you will have some idea of the unique manipulation of words and fresh images to be found in Hamann's latest anthology, finishing appropriately with a 'Retreat Canticle' of praise with 18 short verses such as this one:

Praise
for the breath symbiosis
of lung and leaf.

In fact this poem of praise would make a good prayer for group participation.

Finally, Conrad Hamann's delightful quirky pencil sketch of a blissfully sleeping cat with an accompanying verse returns us gently to the beginning of the path of Francis' story that the anthology takes.

I recommend *A Poor Canticle* to friends of St Francis, poets, parents, pastors, teachers, theologians and simply as a an aid to prayer and meditation. I am grateful for the opportunity to write this Review and to become better acquainted with such an inspiring creative Australian poet.

Reviewer: Bet Green is theologian and artist.
