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The Shape of Song in a Flood of Words: Benedictine Education and Poetic Truth
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"In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." (John 1:1)

It is a fairly reasonable bet that so long as there are tweed coats, Birkenstock sandals, Volvo station wagons, misplaced modifiers and irony there will also continue to be English Departments.

The self-inflicted vandalism of literature in the 1980s known as deconstructionism was as dramatic as it was ineffectually French. It made a few theorists obscenely rich by the standards of humanist's bank accounts, and it sent some impressionable graduate students off muttering to themselves before bewildered undergraduates, but its implosion was as quick as it was predicable. If, after all, words could devour their own meanings then there was nothing left to do but close up shop and truck off the vast store of anthologies and critical editions and bury poetry beneath a desert in Utah like so much spent nuclear waste. It would have bubbled up above the ground, though, forming a lush oasis. It would have bubbled up you see, because various isms notwithstanding, the beauty of words can never be hidden for long.

It may be easier in a Post-Structuralist world to find a course in Caribbean Women Writers than one in, say, Milton, Chaucer or Joyce. But even as the attention shifts to the colonized rather than the conqueror, one can live with the hope that hope that even Homo Britannicus will withstand the anthropological interrogations of cultural materialism and the indelicate scrutiny of Queer Theory, and live to stand with ever new shades of irony before yet one more generation and, harrumph, "justify the ways of God to man" Or, at the very least make mention of God's inherently patriarchal ways to women.

What I wish to consider here is more than just the survival of English Departments and the teaching of literature. I wish to explore the specific connection between Benedictines and literature, considering as I do the shape of poetry within this world of ours, how the life of the Benedictines is itself like poetry, and why Benedictine institutions -- monasteries, convents, schools and colleges -- may have a special responsibility to foster literary studies.

Let's begin by considering Saint Benedict's suspicion of words to which the title of essay alludes. Twice in his Rule Benedict uses the Book of Proverbs to caution that "in a flood of words you will not avoid sinning." It is not, of course, individual words, or well-articulated speech or poetry against which Benedict cautions his monks. It is rather the thoughtless and careless proliferation of words to which the wise abbot gives warning.

We can imagine that as an abbot, Saint Benedict no doubt found each morning that his in-box was once more flooded with e-mails, only two out of two dozen of which had anything to do with the proper business of the monastery, and none of which were edifying. He held firm in keeping a television out of the monastery, but some of his monks were pulling 57 different cable channels on their laptops and had exchanged their rosary beads for cell phones. Then there was the rest of the Internet, called appropriately "the Web." There were radios, CD players and DVDs, not to mention the usual non-electronic sources of prater, gossip, political argument, idle conversation, crude humor, and the general blather that had driven him to a cave in the wilderness to begin with.

By recognizing all of this as a flood and calling it so, Benedict did not wish to discourage those who had wise things to say, but those who thought they always had to say something wise. He would not refute the beauty of language, but neither was he naive about its capacity to distract, to do violence and cause severe pain for the speaker, the listener and the one spoken about. To be sure, Saint Benedict loved language and would have it used with the same reverence and care, say, as the monastery's plough, only more so. For its potential for good or for harm far surpasses that of any other tool in the monastery. It is, after all the means by which God fashioned the world and speaks sacred scripture; words were how Benedict fashioned his Rule, and the manner of all articulated prayer. No sacrament can take place without it. Used well, therefore, it is no less than a means by which we can ascend towards heaven, not in the towering babble of an ill-conceived internet construction project, but in songs of praise, repentance, forgiveness and love.

Let us turn then to the historical connection between Benedictines and English literature? We may hope here for a litany of Benedictine poets. But we will be disappointed. For such a litany would be, I fear, disappointingly brief. Even so, it would begin with two Benedictine monks. Any credible anthology of English Literature begins with the Venerable Bede, the historian, intellectual, scripture scholar, and, indeed, an important literary figure. For his Ecclesiastical History, even as it presents a remarkable record of the Anglo Saxon conquest, the spread of Christianity, and growth of the English Church among the rugged landscape and personage of that isle, contains evocative literary ingredients. Who can forget the image of the Saxon king who describes the limitation of his pagan religion by noting that it tells only of the brief flight of the bird from the time that it has inadvertently flown in one window of the castle hall and haphazardly found its way out the opposite window? From whence the bird came or to where it goes, we know nothing. So too, he observes, is our knowledge of human existence. Since Bede and his monks can speak of "what was in the beginning" and "what ever shall be" he reasons, we will adopt this Christianity that they bring. Conversion by way of metaphor.

Bede's single most important literary contribution, however, was to introduce us to the first poet in the English language, Caedmon, an illiterate cowherd employed at the Abbey of Whitby who miraculously receives the gift of song. Caedmon's real miracle, of course, was to use the meter and language of the oral pagan songs he knew to give voice to Christian themes, and to fashion the first extant poem in the English language, a hymn to creation written some 1300 years ago that begins thus:

Nu sculon herigean
Meoteodes meahte
weore Wuldor-Faeder swa he
ece Drihten
Now we must praise
The Measurer's might
the work of the Glory-Father when he,
eternal Lord,

heofonrices Weard
and his modgepanc
wundra gehwæs
or onstealde
heaven-kingdom's Guardian
and his mind-plans,
of wonder of everyone,
the beginning established.

Afterwards, Caedmon the singing cowherd becomes a monk at the Abbey of Whitby and lives a life devoted to serving God and writing hymns. We don't learn exactly how long Caedmon lived, but we hope it was a good long while since, alas, he is not only the first anthologized Benedictine poet in the English language . . . but the last.

The reasons for this are themselves more historical than poetical. To be sure there is little English poetry extant at all from Caedmon's first hymn until the thirteenth century. The most famous work of this old English period is, of course Beowulf. Since its author is unknown, we can imagine that he might have been a Benedictine, though the pagan ingredient of Fate seems just beginning to give way to Grace, and the poet's Christianity seems to be inchoate.

With the Norman invasion the English language itself goes through a substantial conversion, but during England's richly Catholic Middle English period, the most memorable Benedictine is the nun on Geoffrey Chaucer's road to Canterbury. The other most significant poet in this period besides Chaucer is an anonymous poet whom we call the Gawain poet because he or she wrote Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Since he also composed three very religious poems, we could again speculate that his poet was Benedictine, but since the poem Pearl is a long lament upon the death of the speaker's daughter, it seems unlikely.

We should at least mention, before our brief litany ceases, the poetry contained within the prayers of St. Anselm. Though not written in English nor regarded by many as poems, these prayers are rich in poetic device and achieve a beauty that it makes it possible to add to Anselm's many other descriptors the title of poet.

Even so, if we are searching the English landscape or literary anthologies, we need to concede that if there was a great Benedictine poet after Caedmon, his or her verses have been lost. At the same time we would need to acknowledge that Benedictine monasteries were responsible for the copying and preservation of sacred as well as

non-sacred texts, that they recognized early on the value of preserving human poetry, whether it was expressly Christian or barely even allegorically so.

The meager presence of Benedictine poets in England is not at all surprising. For after the reign of Richard II in the 14th century England itself is rather lost. After the brief expansionist triumphs of Henry V, the fifteenth century becomes mired in the famed Hundred years War, chronic civil strife, punctuated by all-out battles, over which family had rightful claim to the throne. When enough Yorks and Lancasters had finally been killed and the red rose united with the white the great Tudor reign commenced. And just as England was recovering enough to begin to manifest some of the fruits of the renaissance that the European continent had been enjoying, Henry VIII, Defender of the Faith, needed the Pope's permission to dispense with the dispensation he had received for his divorce so that he might marry yet once again.

We recall the sad history that follows. Thomas More's head was the first of many Catholic heads to fall as Henry the Defender of the Faith anointed himself the Supreme Head of the Church in England. Alas Europe's great reformation arrived upon the shores of England ahead of its renaissance, and by the time poetry flourishes for the first time in modern England, in the great Elizabethan age, the Benedictines were largely vanquished.

One would find not only no Benedictine poets in the abbeys of sixteenth century England, but no abbeys at all, the monasteries, convents and priories having been confiscated and used as estates for nobles loyal to Henry. We might meet occasionally a displaced vagabond monk upon a back road, but what we would find within the monastery walls is what Shakespeare, in a bold and haunting line from Sonnet 73 called "Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang," an extraordinary image to describe the bare branches of late Autumn by which we behold "that time of year" in the speaker's face. The line nearly invokes the voice of the ghost of Caedmon resounding off the ruined walls of Whitby.

There was in the nineteenth century Gerard Manley Hopkins, the Catholic convert and extraordinary poet who, well after his death acquired a substantial literary reputation as a pre-Modern and is now generously anthologized as such. Hopkins was very nearly a Benedictine monk, but chose instead to be a Jesuit, one of only two Jesuit poets in the English canon. Cardinal Newman, who received Hopkins into the Church, remarked to him in a letter: "You would not have been happy as a Benedictine." I continue to disagree with Newman on this. Suffice it to say, that the Benedictines could scarcely have made Father Hopkins any less happy than did the Jesuits. He would have been spared, in any case, being "fortune's football."

Since literary anthologies offer us only a thin connection between Benedictines and poetry for the past 1200 years, we may either abandon hope or blink and look again. I suggest the latter. In fact, if we leave our eyes closed and open our ears we shall hear a most obvious and profound connection, which will then help us to see that -- anthologies notwithstanding -- Benedictine life and poetry are not only connected, but intimate.

The songs we should attend to are those that the "late birds sang." in those "bare, ruined choirs" of sixteenth century England, the most sacred verse ever written, the Psalms. Not long before Shakespeare penned that haunting line that compares the bare branches in winter to the ruined monasteries on England's landscape, Sir Philip Sidney, the poet, soldier and courtier's courtier was penning a Defense of Poetry. A defense against whom? Why, against the Puritans and their ilk, the fundamentalists of their day, those who believed that the Tudor monarchy had not gone far enough in its purification of the church. They would purify England of much more than its monasteries and papist idolatry. Unlike those medieval Benedictines who recognized the value of a wide range of literary expression, the Puritans were all-too-willing to destroy and prohibit all literature that was neither biblical nor strict Protestant catechism. While the likes of Sidney had not spoken up to defend the holy houses where the Psalms had been chanted, the Psalms themselves, ironically, serve as Sidney's first defense for poetry. Sidney invokes the Latin word *vates*, or prophet, asking rhetorically:

"And may I not presume a little further, to show the reasonableness of this word *vates*, and say that the holy David's Psalms are a divine poem? If I do I shall not do it without the testimony of great learned men both ancient and modern.... Even the name of Psalms will speak for me, which being interpreted, is nothing but songs; then that it is fully written in meter . . . principally, his handling of his prophesy, which is merely [entirely] poetical: for what else is the awakening his musical instruments, the often and free changing of persons, his notable *prosopopoeias* [personification], when he maketh you, as it were, see God coming in His majesty, his telling of the beasts joyfulness and the hills leaping, but a heavenly poesy, wherein almost he showeth himself a passionate lover of that unspeakable and everlasting beauty to be seen by the eyes of the mind, only cleared by faith." (Defense of Poetry).

It in no way diminishes the sacred office of the monastic cloister, nor the psalms themselves, to point out that those who pray the psalms four times a day are also reciting poetry out loud that frequently. And not just any poetry, but some of the most remarkable verse ever written. It is no small matter that the monastic cloister is one of the last places on earth where poetry is still recited on a daily basis.

When I ask English majors to name the other major on campus, besides Classics, with which they share the closest intellectual affinity, they suggest a half dozen other majors without ever mentioning Theology. So I instruct them that all literary analysis -- from allegorical interpretation to contemporary feminism -- employs the same essential exegetic techniques used by Jewish and Christian scholars interpreting sacred scriptures for the past two-and-a-half thousand years.

This is why Kathleen Norris, describing the potential impact of the Psalms upon a contemporary reader, sounds so very much like an English teacher, trying to rouse sleepy students towards the relevance of ancient poetry. "To the modern reader," she notes:

the psalms can seem impenetrable: how in the world can we read, let alone pray, these angry and often violent poems from an ancient warrior culture? At a glance they seem overwhelmingly patriarchal, ill-tempered, moralistic, vengeful, and often seem to reflect precisely what is wrong with our world. And that's the point, or part of it. As one reads the psalms every day, it becomes clear that the world they depict is not really so different from our own; the fourth-century monk Athanasius wrote that the psalms "become like a mirror to the person singing them," and this is as true now as when he wrote it. (vv 7-8; *The Cloister Walk*, pp 93).

Anyone who has lived within a monastic cloister for six or seven decades or visited for six or seven days can testify to the way in which a verse, a phrase, an image, a refrain or a word from one of the psalms penetrated their weary psyche in a way only poetry can, in a way that only God's poetry can. In fact, the best poetry is always a kind of prayer.

In the 1863, while this country of ours was still torn asunder by the blood and battles of the Civil War, a River Boat Pilot ferried a boat up the Mississippi River, and among his passengers was a group of German Benedictine nuns, wearing bonnets instead of habits. They were on their way to Atchison, Kansas. After dinner one night the pilot asked them to sing for him and his crew, and there on those muddy waters of the new world the nuns broke into song that pleased him so well that he offered them extra rations. The historian does not record what they sang, but my guess is that it was one of the same songs that David had sung to comfort Saul all those years ago, the same songs that had inspired Caedmon, and that England's landscape had been largely emptied of.

Apart from the obvious and rich poetic qualities of the Psalms, what connection do Benedictines have with poetry, and especially all those anthologized pages of non-sacred literature that England's Puritans disparaged. Setting aside the tools of deductive argument, I wish to offer here some of the ingredients that I believe are at the essence of the connection between Benedictine life and literary expression. The twentieth century American poet, Wallace Stevens (1879-1955), who had a **deathbed conversion** to Roman Catholicism, wrote a famous poem entitled "**Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird**." I will imitate Stevens' ornithological observations and best him by one, offering fourteen ways of looking at Shakespeare's late birds and the qualities of poetry; offering as I go a variety of poetic examples, and inferring all the while that the monastic life well-lived in accordance with Benedict's Rule is, in fact, a kind of poem.

1. The life of the Benedictine and poetry both express a rhythm that is dependent upon form. William Wordsworth, the prolific nineteenth century Romantic poet, wrote among his many other works, more sonnets than any other poet in the English language, over three hundred of them. In one of those sonnets he took up the question of why he confined his poetic imagination within such a rigid form.

Interestingly, he compared his freely chosen confinement to the monastic cloister: "Nuns Fret Not At Their Convent's Narrow Room," he wrote: "And hermits are contented with their cells." As he completes the comparison, we hear the wisdom of Benedict and many a contented Benedictine: "In truth the prison, unto which we doom / Ourselves, no prison is: and hence for me, / In sundry moods, 'twas pastime to be bound / Within the Sonnet's scanty plot of ground; / Pleased if some Souls (for such there needs must be), / Who have felt the weight of too much liberty, / Should find some comfort there, as I have found."

2. The life of the Benedictine and poetry are both lyrical; that is, the rhythm to which their respective forms (monastic rule, patterned language) intends is harmony. Robert Frost in his brief essay entitled "**The Figure a**

Poem Makes asks how a poem can have an individual music within the strictures of a prescribed meter. We might ask, in making our comparisons, how the life of a monk or nun can have an individual rhythm within the confines of the Rule and the strictures of the cloister. Frost's answer for poetry might or might not suffice perfectly for the measured steps of the Benedictine, but there are at least certain similarities that the vowed Benedictine will recognize:

It should be the pleasure of the poem itself to tell us how it can. The figure a poem makes. It begins in delight and ends in wisdom. The figure is the same as for love. No one can really hold that the ecstasy should be static and stand still in one place. It begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events, and ends in clarification of life -- not necessarily a great clarification . . . but in a momentary stay against confusion. It has denouement. It has an outcome that though unforeseen was predestined from the first image.

3. The life of the Benedictine and poetry both depend upon a rich understanding of symbol, metaphor and allegory. Metaphor is essentially saying one thing in terms of another, and usually joins together two unlike things. It uses the familiar and the concrete to comprehend the unfamiliar and the abstract. Without an active and cultivated capacity for metaphor there is no reason for the nun to show up to morning prayer and say: "He shall cover thee with feathers, and under his wings shall thou trust: his truth shall be thy shield and buckler (Psalm 91, v. 4).

Symbol is similar to metaphor only it means with a literal precision. Without a deep and abiding apprehension of symbol the monk need not don a black habit, light the Easter Vigil fire or bow before the cross. The meaning of most poetry is not the same as the meaning of monastic life, but they mean in the same way.

4. The life of the Benedictine and poetry both require and encourage keen listening. Silence is not incidental to the cloister or to the life of a poem. In both cases, it is not just in the words, but in the silence surrounding the words that poetic and divine Truth is manifest. [Silent Pause] Amen.

5. The life of the Benedictine and poetry are both concerned with the interior life. **William Stafford**, who up until he died in 1993, was the poet Laureate of Oregon for decades. He was also of Quaker descent, having been born on the plains in Hutchinson, Kansas, in 1914. He wrote a poem entitled simply "How These Words Happened" which illustrates as well as anything, the common attention to the interior life of which I speak:

In winter, in the dark hours, when others
were asleep. I found these words and put them
together by their appetites and respect for
each other. In stillness, they jostled. They traded meanings while pretending to have only one.

. . .
And all this happens like magic to the words
in those dark hours when others sleep.

Somebody, we all know, is always awake in a monastery or a convent, though you typically won't know this by listening. Silence and aloneness furnish the space from which the monk, the nun and the poet all speak.

6. The life of the Benedictine and poetry are both richly private and fully communal. The rhythm which poetry and monasticism yields is not merely or ultimately a private rhythm. Though we do not hear the monk or poet, we often know that he or she has been there. Whenever we read a poem we are entering into a kind of communion with its author and maybe with fellow readers. We are simultaneously being let into the cloistered, private world of another human being. We ought to go there with a certain delicacy, the same delicacy with which one member of a monastic community approaches another. Such meeting within the cloister does not usually involve the outburst "Wassup!"

We recall in the Robert Frost Poem "**The Tuft of Flowers**" that the speaker, raking up the freshly mown hay that someone else has cut, arrives in the freshly mown meadow where the mower who preceded him has, amidst his cutting, spared a certain flower. The speaker feels a commune with man who has accomplished a chore while yielding to beauty. He offers the famous couplet: "Men work together I told him from the heart / Whether they work together or apart."

7. The life of the Benedictine, measured as it is in liturgical hours, fashions, like poetry, a life in miniature. In another poem by William Stafford entitled "The Gospel is Whatever Happens," he writes:

When we say, "Breath,"
A feather starts to fly,
to be itself.
When we talk, truth
is what we mean to say.

A weathervane is
courteous and accurate:
the more it yields,
the more wind lies
where it points the way.

8. The life of the Benedictine and poetry share an expressed reverence for nature. And reverence is the right word. Sentimentality is unbecoming of both Benedictines and poets. I speak of the same reverence expressed in the Psalms and by Caedmon, which still endures today, even after hundreds of thousands of poems. This reverence, in fact, became more emphatic as human beings successfully conquered nature with roads and artificial lights and machines of all kinds. Remember Father Hopkins, the almost Benedictine? It was not unusual to come out of the Jesuit residence and find him on all fours giving close and undistracted examination to a bug or a leaf, seeking what he called its inscape, its inner landscape. The Jesuits moved him about so much that he referred to himself as "fortune's football." Perhaps it was the industrial blight of 19th century Liverpool that provoked his famous and unusual canticle to creation:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God
It will flame out like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness,
like the ooze of oil Crushed. Why do men then now not
reck his rod? Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade, bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and feels man's smell:
the soil is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastwards, springs --
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent World
broods with warm breast and with ah! Bright wings.

Then there is his simple,

Glory be to God for dappled things-
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow,
For rose moles all in stipple upon trout that swim . . .
All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow, sweet, sour, adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is past change:
Praise him.

9. The life of the Benedictine and poetry both celebrate the sacredness of ordinary things. A thousand examples come to mind, but let me select randomly from the crowd four poems, one each by a president, a pope, an Irishman and a Benedictine nun. Few know that President Jimmy Carter, when he is not busy being a Nobel Prize winning ex-president, writes poetry, mostly about the things that successful poetry is usually about: ordinary things And some of it not so bad. Consider his poem "Some Things I Love" in which he lists:

Your enchantment in a lonely wood,
The light and color of a rainbow trout,
My in-basket empty and a good new book,
Binoculars fixed on a strange new bird,
Sadie's point, and a covey of quail,
The end of a six mile run in the rain,
Blue slope, soft snow, fast run, no fall,
A dovetail joint without a gap,
Grandchildren coming in our front door,
The same ones leaving in a day or two,
And life, till what rhymes best with breath
Takes me from all things I share with you.

Pope John Paul II, long before he was pontiff, wrote poetry. It is mostly too philosophical to be very good poetry, but he has his moments, like in his poem "Error" when he worries: "And people say: / our thought is bound up with the clarity of things, / our thought remains true to the power of ordinary things. / But if still so few of them are open to us / Surely our thought is not complete" (Karol Wojtyla).

Then there is the Irish poet Desmond Egan who understands and speaks eloquently of the sacredness of all ordinary things, even the old car he finally had to sell. He sounds rather like a thrifty Benedictine treasurer having conceded to the inevitable in his poem "Goodbye Old Fiat":

With . . .
your leak puddles each side of the floor
your driver's seat with the small tear over a spring . . .
oh and the visor that slowly comes down as one drives
your gears of mud your engine with the rattle
which turned mechanics' heads quicker than a nice girl . . .

is it possible
I won't sit in you anymore and watch
through your windscreen my river world
trying to squeeze words out of half hours?

. . . nor park you outside town pubs city pubs . . .
nor forget you on summer days at lovely spots

no more will I dump typewriter coat case books letters
on top of everything else in your back seat . . .

I will never be sad
delighted hopeful annoyed browned-off thoughtful
again inside you
who loitered at the background of my life
bringing together like a symbol those last few years . . .

I wonder if your next driver discovering odds and ends
will realize that he has bought a haunted car?

And then there stacks of poems written by the most extraordinary Benedictine poet since Caedmon sang all of those years ago. Sister Mary Faith Schuster, poet, scholar, teacher and nun, lives these days with an aged and fragile mind in the infirmary of Mount Saint Scholastica in Atchison, Kansas. It was not very long ago that she rose before the sun each morning, "when the muses were out" and wrote at least one fresh poem every day, for decades upon decades. Poems rolled off of her typewriter as easily and as frequently as love and wisdom came off of her lips. One day, this typical offering called simply "Thank You God":

For the beautiful common
things

for the things
we can't pay for
no matter how hard
we try

for the bare trees
like dark lace
on the hills

and the new wheat
shining
and the white geese

high in the sky
and settling a moment
on our land
all in white

and the living
and the dying
and the remembering

and the loving
and the starting
each day

like a page
in that book Dante
saw

and Christ told us
about in which
our names

are written on
the margins of time
and eternity

by the loving
shaping
fingers of God.

Each of these poets is saying something more than they are saying. Jimmy Carter's list of things he loves all lead back to his love for his wife until death does them part. The young man who would be pope is worried about divine Truth being missed since most people are not monks and nuns and will not comprehend divine truth in ordinary things. Desmond Egan is not feeling elegiac for the car he must let go, but for the years of his life that he already has. And each ordinary thing in Sister Faith's psalm -- the wheat, the geese, the living and the dying, and we ourselves -- come from the creator. Each of these poems, in their attention to very ordinary things, invites the listener to transcend the ordinary. So, too, does monastic life. Here then is a splendid irony to add to our list:

10. The life of the Benedictine and poetry both invite the one who listens to transcend the ordinary by giving full attention to the ordinary. When one is spiritually empty or just plain tired or both, the ordinary things in poetry and life seem repetitious and tedious. It is the place of monastic discipline and poetry to remind us that repetition is but another word for refrain. Which is why,

11. The life of the Benedictine and poetry both employ the device of refrain.

That is, to say

12. The life of the Benedictine and poetry are both liturgical, that is they offer and repeat central images and associations to live by.

The contemporary poet, Lisel Mueller, who grew up in Germany, won the American Book Award for Poetry in 1980 with a book whose title could come straight from Benedict's Rule: *The Need To Hold Still*. In it she observes the liturgical in the landscape:

Winter weeds,
Survivors

Of a golden age,
Take over the open land,
Pale armies
Redressing the balance

Again we live
In a time of fasting,
Burlap cassocks,
Monks on their knees,
Bells tolling
in an empty sky
among the thin,
the trampled on,
the inarticulate
clothed in drafts
and rooted in shocked earth
which remembers nothing

fields and fields of them.

All of these previous similarities culminate therefore in one profound similarity:

13. The life of the Benedictine and poetry both spring from and express a sacramental view of life. "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." The Incarnation is the first mystery of Christianity, the essential method of the poet, and the reason for being for the vowed monastic. Poetry in its attempt to make ordinary words take flight, and to transcend the ordinary and mundane through images that are themselves ordinary, or at least familiar, reminds us not only of the divine Word made flesh in a barn in Bethlehem, but of God's persistent presence in all created things.

14. The life of the Benedictine and poetry are both endangered. Still, after four centuries Shakespeare's haunting line echoes. The monastic choir stalls at the beginning of the twenty-first century are not ruined, not being confiscated by monarchical regimes, but they are increasingly bare, sixteen, twelve or eight birds singing where there were formerly twice or three times that many. Poetry too has grown diminished. Few even among the learned can name five significant contemporary poets, or three or maybe even one. And much of today's literary criticism regards the literature of the past, not for its formal poetic ingredients, inherent beauty, or -- God forbid -- its poetic achievement, but as the repressing cultural and material objects of a colonizing world.

Perhaps the most relevant connection that English professors and Benedictines share today, therefore, is that they need one another. Those who, in an unprecedented flood of electronic, hostile, political and mercantile and trivial words, seek to create, study and teach literary words, and those who, in that same flood, seek to live a life punctuated by sacred word, silence and song need one another. The Word was made flesh and dwells among us. May we by what we speak and by what we teach make for that Word a lasting home.