editorial

The Necessity of Poetry

The SOF London Conference entitled *In the Beginning was the Word: Religion as Poetry and Story?* took place on March 25th in St John's Church, Waterloo. This *Sofia* issue begins with the talk given at it by Mark Oakley, Canon Chancellor of St Paul's Cathedral in London. He began his talk by addressing people who are wary of poetry:

> I know that the word poetry is scary for a lot of people because it can have bad memories of boredom or humiliation at school as you tried to understand or recite a poem, and sometimes then maybe you've tried to come back to poetry in later life but don't know quite where to start and when you did it all seemed pretty incomprehensible.

He compared poetry to a trip to a foreign country, say, Belgium: 'You'd know when you get to Belgium you were going to be confused, or at least occasion–ally at a loss, and you'd accept that confusion as part of the experience.' That is rather like the poet Brecht's *Verfremdung*, – we could roughly translate it as 'the shock of the strange' – which can be part of the pleasure. The poet Wordsworth says: 'The end of poetry is to produce excitement in coexistence with an overbalance of pleasure.' Indeed, small children take huge pleasure in poems and understand meta-phor at once. That also goes for the birth of our species. Martin Spence's article 'Language and Faith' discusses how we humans used symbols from the very beginning. I went into an infants' school and one of the poems we read began:

> There was a lady loved a swine.
> 'Honey,' said she.
> 'Pig hog, will you be mine?'
> 'Oink!' said he.

We divided the class into two groups, one saying the lady's words and one the swine's (of course, everyone wanted to be the swine and grunt). But the children immediately got the message that you can't force someone to be your friend.

My four-year-old grandson adored reciting a poem like 'Drake's Drum' – a terrific poem about memory – with all the actions:

> Yonder looms the island, *[points]*
> yonder lie the ships, *[points the other way]*
> with sailor lads a-dancing heel and toe
> *[jumps up and does a little dance]*
> and the shore lights flashing, *[hand flashes]*
> and the night tide dashing. *[hand dashes]*
> He sees it all so plainly as he saw it long ago.

That boy is now a cool twelve-year-old and when, as I am wont to do, I burbled some poem, he groaned and said: 'You must admit, Gran Dinah, you are pretty embarrassing for a kid!'

Perhaps adults who become wary of poetry, or indeed fanatical poeticophobes, never get over their adolescent embarrassment or even, as Oakley puts it, become 'cursed with literalism, simmering down the richness, the ambiguities, the resonances into something black and white and then often weaponised.' So to enter into the richness, life more abundantly, requires both a growth out of adolescent hang-ups and a recovery of the joys of early childhood. Poetry is not only an adventure into a strange land but also a homecoming. The language we learn as our mother tongue is poetic from the start, replete with symbolism. We are not only rational animals (or aspire to be) but poetic animals (and need to be). That is the kind of animal we are.

As Thomas Aquinas put it: 'Grace does not destroy nature but perfects it.' Likewise, poetry is not an unnatural or alien language but a richer one, our everyday language enriched. William Blake was firmly rooted in the English dissenting tradition and is buried in the Dissenters' Burial Ground, Bunhill Fields (in his *Witness against the Beast* E. P. Thompson suggests that Blake's mother may have been a Muggletonian). In Blake's poem *Jerusalem:*

> The Fields from Islington to Marybone,
> To Primrose Hill and St John's Wood,
> Were builded over with pillars of gold
> And there Jerusalem's pillars stood.

The New Jerusalem, the beautiful city of kindness, is not somewhere else, up in the sky, but here where we are in our own London transformed. That is why the poet lists all those familiar London names. So here Blake's theology is very Thomist: grace does not destroy nature but perfects it. Likewise, poetry is grace.

Salley Vickers was ill and unable to speak at the SOF London Conference but Janet Seargeant read out her script. Salley has asked for publication of her talk to be delayed and it will be published in the Sep-tember or Christmas *Sofia*. It is well worth waiting for.