

Shining: Poetry and Theology as Sister Arts

Dinah Livingstone considers the scope of the human poetic genius.

Today March 25th is the feast of the Annunciation, also called Lady Day. In the church's calendar exactly nine calendar months later on December 25th Mary gives birth to Jesus in the Bethlehem stable. In one tradition Bridget or Bride, the great Celtic goddess of poetry who became the Christian St Bridget was Mary's midwife. The angel Gabriel flew her from Ireland to Bethlehem to help deliver Jesus, the incarnate word. Not far from here is the church of St Bride, Fleet Street. It is called the journalists' church and many other writers, including poets, have been associated with it too. If you need help in delivering your copy or are stuck with your poem you can pop in and say a prayer to St Bride.

But do you actually believe that St Bridget was flown to Bethlehem to deliver Jesus when his mother was in labour, or indeed that Jesus is now sitting on a throne in the sky on his father's right hand with his enemies as a footstool under his feet? I doubt it somehow. However, we will be spending today with poets, saints and supernatural beings so I thought we could begin this morning with the ancient prayer: Into their company we pray you admit us.

Lady Day comes at the beginning of Spring. Each year in May I go to Suffolk to stay with a very old friend. Last year, as usual, I went for a walk and came across a group of May trees in flower pouring out their superabundant white blossom. Each tree was its own shape, itself, utterly beautiful, *shining*. Thomas Aquinas called beauty *splendor formae*, 'the shining of shape'. I gazed at one tree in particular and as it shone for me I felt a kind of ecstasy not just of the eyes but of the heart. But as a linguistic animal living within a particular culture, I was not only overwhelmed by the tree's sheer physical beauty but my experience included my memories and the May tree's connotations. Somewhere in my mind were May Day, the workers' holiday and promise of a better world; the march from Clerkenwell Green; maypoles and the interweaving dance of life; 'sweet lovers love the spring' ... and also 'Mayday! Mayday!' the distress signal – for humanity and the Earth herself. Philosophers tell us that no 'is' can imply an 'ought' but the heart has its reasons and when a shape shines, it is as if its beauty *aches*, which may stir yearnings for how things ought to be, for love and peace.

Perhaps this could be called a 'poetic moment' and perhaps all sorts of such moments occur in our lives but what about an actual poem? Frequently, I think a poem begins with a moment of seeing, an insight, but in order for it to be a poem, seeing must

become saying. All the crowding thoughts accompanying the insight must be *shaped* into a body of words. The whole poem needs a shape, whether a set form like a sonnet or a form that finds its own shape like the May tree, and internally the poem is shaped by its rhythmic and sound patterning. But a poem is made of words with meanings. It comes alive when it is insightful and if general or abstract statements are grounded, embodied, fleshed out, in particular details, when it is 'incarnate word'. A poem's genesis may be just one insight but then others coalesce with it, gravitate towards it and 'thicken' it, as matter coalesces to form a star. The star – the heavenly body – shines with light. When a poem is an intelligent body of words, well-articulated, thick with connections, its shining of shape becomes shining of meaning.

Actually I did write a poem about the may tree but I won't quote it now. I want to turn to poems that tell a story, narrative poems and to begin with one you probably know, which is about sin and redemption. Yes it's the *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge. The poet indicates he is telling a story by using, with some variations, a ballad metre, also called common measure. It is a long poem which helps convey the Mariner's long ordeal. It is a story, indeed a tall story, with supernatural elements. The mariner's grave sin is to shoot the albatross, which results in his ship being cursed and becalmed. Then:

Water water, everywhere
And all the boards did shrink;
Water, water, everywhere
Nor any drop to drink.

Then they see the terrible skeleton ship, crewed by a woman and her mate, Death:

Her skin was white as leprosy,
The Nightmare LIFE-IN-DEATH was she
who thicks man's blood with cold.

All the mariner's fellow-sailors die of thirst and he is left 'alone, alone, all, all alone, /alone on a wide wide sea' to suffer his own nightmare life in death. Then comes his salvation when he sees the beautiful water snakes and his dead heart feels a spring of love. His heart's blood has been 'thicked with cold'. Now his heart melts:

Within the shadow of the ship
I watched their rich attire:
Blue, glossy green, and velvet black
They coiled and swam; and every track
Was a flash of golden fire.

O happy living things! no tongue
 Their beauty might declare:
 A spring of love gushed from my heart,
 And I blessed them unaware...

The water snakes *shine* for him, *move* his heart so that it comes back to life. He takes the first step in rejoining the dance of life, the 'coiling and swimming' of 'happy living things'.

The poem was first published in *Lyrical Ballads*, a joint collection by Coleridge and Wordsworth. In his *Biografia* Coleridge says of the Lyrical Ballads that the plan was that his 'own endeavours should be directed to persons and characters supernatural, or at least romantic, yet so as to transfer from our inward nature a human interest and a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of imagination that *willing suspension of disbelief* for the moment, *which constitutes poetic faith*.'

If you go down Whitehall by bus, and look out at the grand government buildings, you will see statues of bosomy women in Greekish costumes representing Law, Agriculture, Art, Science, Manufacture and Literature. When your bus turns the corner of Parliament Square and goes past Westminster Abbey, on either side of its Great West Door you will see statues of rather less flamboyant women representing Mercy and Truth, Justice and Peace. These are all *personifications* of human activities or qualities. In ancient Greece such personifications often became gods. These gods, says William Blake, were created by 'the ancient poets', they are 'poetic tales' for, he goes on to say, 'all deities reside in the human breast.'

A much earlier story with supernatural elements is *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, written in four beat alliterative verse, the old English *epic* form by William Langland towards the end of the fourteenth century at the time of the *Peasants' Revolt*. In its climactic Section 18 the dreamer dreams of Christ's Passion and Harrowing of Hell. When Christ dies on the cross, 'the lord of life and of light there laid his eyes together'. Then he descends into Hell and confronts the Devil at Hell's gates. The poem makes vivid use of personification, here of Mercy, Truth, Righteousness (that is Justice) and Peace from Psalm 85. In the poem they appear as quarrelsome sisters arguing about the events of that day (Good Friday), the darkness over the Earth when Christ dies and now the strange light at the gates of hell. Mercy explains how salvation is about to come to humanity. Truth replies rudely:

'What thou telleth,' quoth Truth,' is but a tale of
waltrot
[waltrot: rubbish]
 ... hold thy tongue Mercy!
 It is but truffle that thou tellest: I, Truth,
woot the sooth.
[woot the sooth: know the reality].

Peace explains to Righteousness that 'Jesus jostled well and joy beginneth [to] dawn...' Righteousness retorts: 'Why ravest thou? Or art thou right drunk?' Then Christ arrives and challenges the devil at the gates of Hell, in a terrific confrontation of life against death:

Thou art doctor of death, drink that thou madest!
 I that am lord of life, love is my drink,
 And for that drink today I died upon earth.

When it becomes clear that Christ has defeated the Devil, released hell's captives and is rising from the dead, the sisters kiss and make up as in the psalm (also a poem):

Mercy and Truth have met together
 Righteousness and Peace have kissed each other.

Contemporary readers of the poem believed in the harrowing of hell but many probably understood perfectly that Mercy, Truth, Righteousness and Peace were not real people and came from the poet's imagination. Most modern readers of the poem, including Christians, may not believe in the harrowing of hell but, suspending disbelief, can still get carried away by the poem's power. We can't help cheering this heroic victory of love, light and life over darkness and death. As Hopkins puts it: 'the achieve of, the mastery of the thing!'

There is a shining light as Christ appears at the gates of hell. The Proto-Indo European word for 'god' is *Dyeus*, which is related to the root *div* meaning 'shining' and descends into words meaning 'god' or 'divine', in Greek Zeus, Latin Jupiter – Shining Father – also Latin *Deus* and in modern Latin languages (*Dio, Dios, Dieu*). And our word 'divine'. God is a Shining One.

I suggested how poetic vision is a kind of shining and how if it results in an actual poem, that poem may shine too. Now I suggest that theology is a sister art to poetry and is concerned with the apprehension of a Shining. Theology deals with visions of shining transcendent person(s) or a whole supernatural realm. That is not to say that these Shining Ones are pure fantasy floating about detached from any of the reality of our lives on Earth. They are usually personifications of real forces in the cosmos or actually or potentially in ourselves. If we call God 'the ground of being', this is a personification of the creative energy that makes anything exist at all. If we call God Love, that is a personification of the love we are capable of ourselves. Human beings create the gods with their poetic genius or imagination. Through 'the willing suspension of disbelief, for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith', these visions can tell us many deep things but there is no reason at all to regard them as supernatural. As William Blake puts it in his *All Religions are One*:

As all men are alike (though infinitely various), so all Religions, have one source. The true Man is the source, he being the Poetic Genius.

In the story in the book of Exodus Moses sees a burning bush, 'blazing yet it was not consumed'. And God calls to him out of the bush: 'Moses, Moses!' Then God tells him: 'I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.' When Moses asks God his name, God replies: 'I AM.' Usually pronounced 'Yahweh', this form of the Hebrew verb 'to be' can be translated as 'I AM'. It could also be a causative form: 'I cause to be', or a future: 'I WILL BE.'

When I saw the shining May tree it was *as if* the tree was talking to me. It was an intense moment: but I did not actually believe the tree *was* talking to me or a supernatural being was speaking out of the tree. In the Exodus story Moses is driven by his vision to demand the release of the enslaved children of Israel from Pharaoh: 'Let my people go.'

The bush *shines*, or rather, *blazes* for Moses. It is like a furious fire of Being which also speaks. God who is 'I AM' and 'I WILL BE' is a personification of both being and becoming. With the sense of 'I WILL BE' some theologians have called God a 'leading idea' or 'emergent property' in us. In the poetic tale of the Exodus the divine speaker in the burning bush becomes the leading idea, the I WILL BE, then the I AM, of Israel as a free people, led out of slavery to the promised land by Yahweh 'in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night'.

Now let's look at some New Testament poems and poetic visions. Jesus has been described as a subversive poet but his preferred form was the little story or parable, mostly about the reign of God he had come to announce. Its ethic is a superabundant generosity. The dutiful elder son must not resent the fatted calf killed for his prodigal younger brother. Go the extra mile, love your enemies as well as your friends. Jesus thought this reign of God was about to come on Earth 'in the lifetime of some of those standing here present'. He was mistaken. But his gospel – good news – for the poor and distressed, his poetic vision of that inclusive and kind society on Earth remains a leading idea, an enabling dream.

Now I want to look briefly at two actual poems in the New Testament and then a poetic oracle. And just a reminder that these poems are *translations* of the original Greek. First, the Christ poem in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Most scholars agree that Paul himself wrote this letter but disagree about whether he wrote the poem or is quoting (perhaps with modifications) what may have been an earlier Christian hymn. If Paul is quoting, then the poem may have been written years before the letter itself. Paul wrote his letter from prison, probably from

Ephesus around 54-6 AD. The poem is introduced by the words: 'Be of this mind which was also in Christ Jesus, who:

Though he was in the form of God,
he did not regard being equal with God
as something to cling on to,
but emptied himself
taking the form of a servant,
born like a human being.
He was found in human shape
and lowered himself,
became obedient till death – death on a cross.

Therefore God raised him high
and gave him the name
that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus
every knee should bend
in heaven, on earth and in the underworld,
and every tongue confess
that Jesus Christ is Lord
to the glory of God the Father.

The poem is an excellent example of the shining of shape we mentioned earlier. It is highly structured. It has two verses, each with three parts consisting of three lines. The first verse is a descent down to the depths of humiliation and death, and the second verse an ascent up again to the heights on the other side. So it is a kind of V shape: down then up. At the poem's turning point, the nadir, we have a classic example of the poetic power of being specific. We have 'death', but not just any death, not a quiet death in bed, specifically, 'death on a cross'. But after this turning point it is not a case of being back where he started. In each verse there is a transformation: in the first verse the divine hero descends, becomes human and dies, in the second verse this man ascends and becomes Lord. It is very dense: a lot coalesces in this lucid shape so that it shines with meaning.

A poem should be fresh and the startling idea in this poem is that this is not a normal hero. He is a sort of super-heroic anti-hero – 'a stumbling block to the Jews and to the Greeks foolishness.' A Greek hero aspires to become glorious by noble deeds, to fulfil himself, make a name for himself, perhaps become a superman. As the later Anglo Saxon hero Beowulf puts it:

*Ure æghwylc sceal ende gebidan
worolde lifes; wyrce se þe mote
domes ær deaþe; thaþ bið driht-guman
unlifgendum æfter selest.*

Each of us must expect an end
to life in the world; let him who can
win glory before death; that is best
afterwards for the departed warrior.

In our poem Christ begins 'in the form of God' but *empties* himself, *lowers* himself and dies in disgrace as a criminal. He becomes *inglorious*. Then in the second verse he is raised high and given 'the name

that is above every name', that is to say, the supreme divine name LORD, which is a way of referring to God's own name YHWH. This was already his 'form' at the beginning of the poem but the difference is that now he is the man Jesus and the name of *Jesus* becomes a divine name – 'the human form divine'.

This mythical cosmic epic resonates both in personal and political life. In personal life it describes a quest for psychological health, the integrity of the personality. It is a classic *katabasis*: going down to the lowest depths to reassume what is found there, perhaps release what was imprisoned, and carry it back up. The quest may not succeed. Orpheus, for example, descended to the underworld but failed to bring his wife Eurydice back up. Christ Jesus becomes 'the firstborn of the dead', the prototype, figurehead, namesake hero of a new humanity, recapitulated as one body 'in Christ'. This is a poetic vision of a society that does not exclude anyone; Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free, *all* are equally gathered up, liberated 'in Christ'. It is a vision of humanity – every human being – counting above, mattering more, than all the thrones, dominations, principalities and powers that shape our society. These invisible powers that 'post o'er land and ocean without rest' and rule our lives now, such as Money and the Market, are seen as becoming *subject* to humanity, serving people's needs rather than controlling them.

My second poem, written perhaps forty years later and also about a divine descent, is the prologue to John's Gospel, whose first line is the title of our conference today: 'In the beginning was the word.' In its first three verses in the Greek, *Logos*, the Word, could be either 'he' or 'it'. Tyndale, the greatest translator of all, has 'it' here, so I've kept it for today to give you a little shock of the unfamiliar.

In the beginning was the Word
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
This was in the beginning with God.
All things became through it
and nothing that has become
became without it.

That word 'became' will recur again at the poem's crux in verse 14. But here the poem goes on:

In it was life
and the life was the light of humans.
And the light shines in the darkness
and the darkness did not overcome it.

Once more we have shining light. Then we get John the Baptist, as witness to the light. Then comes the crux of the poem:

And the Word *became* flesh and lived among us:
The Word that was in the beginning, that was God,
enters the world of becoming. He becomes Incarnate Word, the divine poem translated into human terms.

and we saw his glory,
glory as of a father's only son,
full of grace and truth.

Now the Word is definitely personified, he is 'a father's only son'. Then again comes John the Baptist, who thus appears on either side of the poem's crux and situates the Incarnate Word in a story. Then at the end of the poem:

From his fullness we have all received,
grace upon grace.

The Word spreads and fills 'us all'. Then in the conclusion, at last we are given his name:

Grace and truth *became* (or came about) through
Jesus Christ.
No one has ever seen God.
God the only-begotten Son
who is close to the Father's heart
has made him known.

The Incarnate Word, God the Son, *enlightens* us. At the beginning of the poem the Word could have been just 'it', at the poem's crux the Word is *embodied*. But the poet withholds the actual name, Jesus Christ, until this point when, as 'God the only-begotten Son' who is also the Word, he speaks God, making him known.

The crux of the poem 'the Word was made flesh and lived among us' is like a candle throwing out a cosmic circle of light, back to the beginning: 'in the beginning was the Word', in whom 'was light', and out to 'fullness' and our enlightenment. At the heart of the poem: the Word becomes human, God becomes human. The heart of the matter is human. If you also read this Prologue as a metaphor for writing a poem, in the beginning there is an insight, or call it an inspiration, in the realm of the imagination, then that is embodied in a poem, and when that poem is read out and spreads, its title is announced.

Now, finally, the poetic oracle that comes at the end of the book of Revelation:

I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down
out of heaven from God, dressed as a bride for her
husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne
saying:

See the home of God is among humans,
and he will dwell with them
and they will be his peoples,
and God himself will be with them;
he will wipe away every tear from their eyes.

The wedding is on Earth and the bride is the kind and beautiful city, the New Jerusalem marrying Christ the Lamb. There is a universal reconciliation and tears are wiped away. God himself comes down to Earth to make his home among humans, men and women. God is with us – Emmanuel. And the city *shines*. 'The glory of God is its light'. The city also has a shining river, beside which grows the tree of life: and the leaves of the tree are for the healing of nations. The whole city,

all humanity, shines. As Irenaeus was to express it in the second century: *gloria Dei vivens homo*: the glory of God is the human being alive.

Shortly after the French Revolution, London poet William Blake picked up on this climactic vision in Revelation. And in the lyric that forms part of his long poem *Jerusalem*, for Blake she is a transformed London. He lists the familiar names of London districts to stress that the reign of kindness, the beautiful city, is not 'pie in the sky when you die' but can only be realised here on Earth or nowhere:

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

Pancras and Kentish Town repose
Among her golden pillars high,
Among her golden arches which
Shine upon the starry sky.

They shine. In Blake's lyric the dreamt-of city is destroyed by human cruelty and war but nevertheless 'the Divine Vision still was seen/Still was the human form divine' and at the end of the lyric it becomes a project for the future:

In my exchanges every land
Shall walk, and mine in every land
Mutual *shall build* Jerusalem
Both heart in heart and hand in hand.

In the 2016 EU referendum London, especially inner London, voted overwhelmingly to Remain in Europe, with Blake's own Lambeth – where we are now – topping the poll at 78.6% Remain, followed by Hackney (78.5%), Haringey, Islington and Camden all at 75%. Perhaps these Londoners wanted their city to remain a place where 'in my exchanges every land shall walk'.

The vision in Revelation also inspired Nicaraguan poet and Catholic priest Ernesto Cardenal's *Oracle upon Managua*, written in 1972, shortly after the earthquake which devastated that capital city, when the dictator Somoza then embezzled most of the international aid.

After all God is also City
...city of fulfilment for each and for all
City of Communion.

And later in the poem:

And Yahweh said: I am not.
I will be. I am the one who will be, he said.
I am Yahweh a God who waits in the future
(who cannot be unless the conditions are right)
God who is not but who WILL BE
for he is love-among-humans
and he is not, he WILL BE.

As we saw, when Yahweh reveals his name to Moses in the burning bush, it is a form of the verb 'to be'

that could mean I AM and also I WILL BE. Still, it is startling and compelling to hear this poet-priest declare: 'And Yahweh said: I am not.' ...But: 'I WILL BE'. He is 'a God who waits in the future/who cannot be unless the conditions are right, for he is love-among-humans.' For Cardenal not only is the reign of God the beautiful city on Earth, but God *is* the City. God has emptied himself into humanity, he is Emmanuel, God-with-us – humanity *realising* its potential.

So God is imaginary but vitally important. As William Ockham put it with his razor, 'beings are not to be multiplied beyond necessity.' There is no necessity to believe supernatural beings are real; God, gods, angels and devils are created by the human imagination or poetic genius. I think the churches should come clean and say that. But we *can* offer these shadows of imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith.

The title of this conference is *Religion as Poetry and Story?* Question mark. My answer is *Yes and*. Poetry and poetic visions are vital and so is kindness. The New Testament poems and poetic visions we've looked at in this talk are *about* kindness. But having beautiful visions and poems does not necessarily make us kind. We also have to *be* kind. So I would say that Kindness and Poetry *in that order* are essential to the making of a humane humanity. Kindness matters and so does poetry.

We find two mirror-image types of literalist. Fundamentalist Christians think the biblical stories and visions *must* be literally true because God says so, whereas some secular humanists strenuously reject these poetic visions. Because they are *not* literally true they think they are a kind of trick. Both groups think in terms of literal or nothing. Likewise, we see some theologians wanting to keep Jesus' ethic of generosity but ditch the Christ Epic as an undesirable accretion. They want to keep the kindness but ditch the poetic visions, the poetry. However, we notice that these ethicists are not necessarily kinder than other people and they have lost so much else that makes us human. They have lost the shining, the vision that is part of our great common treasury of poetry and theology as sister arts. As Mary Wollstonecraft wrote to her lover Gilbert Imlay: Imagination is the true fire stolen from heaven that renders us social by expanding our hearts.

This is a shortened version of Dinah Livingstone's talk at the SOF London Conference on March 25th 2017. Her new prose book, *The Making of Humanity: Poetic Vision and Kindness*, due out in July, will be launched at the SOF Annual Conference in Leicester.