

Imagination is the Creator of Worlds

Salley Vickers says supernatural beings are imaginative representations of the unseen realities which affect us at the deepest levels.

We live in a world where there is a high premium placed on empirical evidence or scientific testing. Yet today we have research programmes to test the efficacy of prayer, and experiments conducted into whether those who die can survive death; and an area of the brain has recently been identified which can be demonstrably shown to be activated when we are in love. But none of those empirical tests get to the bottom of prayer, or the way that those who have died continue to haunt us, or the continuing mystery of the affections of the human heart. The best such experiments can do is to register that there is a physical co-relative, a counterpart, to what I like to call 'intangible realities'. The poet, William Blake, as so often, puts his finger on the limitations of a purely physical description, or rather, the lost alternative of the account of physical phenomena.

The atoms of Democritus,
And Newton's particles of light,
Are sands upon the Red Sea's shores,
Where Israel's tents do shine so bright.

Democritus was a pre-Socratic philosopher and in the sixth century BC (though it's unclear that Blake would have known this) 'science', which of course merely means 'knowledge', was a common subject of poetry and philosopher/scientists habitually wrote their thoughts in a poetic form. But what Blake's epigrammatic lines indicate is that we now live in a world which assumes a separation between the material and immaterial.

The poet Francis Thompson left when he died an unpublished poem which many of you may know:

O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee.

Does the fish soar to find the ocean,
The Eagle plunge to find the air,
That we ask of the stars in motion
If they have rumour of thee there?

Not where the wheeling systems darken,
And our benumbed conceiving soars,
The drift of pinions, would we harken,
Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.

The Angels keep their ancient places;
Turn but a stone and start a wing!
'Tis ye, tis your estrangèd faces,
That miss the many-splendoured thing.

But (when so sad thou canst no sadder)
Cry; and upon thy so sore loss
Shall shine the traffic on Jacob's ladder
Pitched between Heaven and Charing Cross.

Yea, in the night, my soul, my daughter,
Cry; clinging Heaven by the hem;
And lo, Christ walking on the water,
Not of Genesareth, but Thames!

The poem is about faith, in this case the capacity to perceive, and thus to 'see' in the everyday, what cannot be perceived by every day vision; to see the marvellous, the remarkable, within the ordinary and, importantly, then to interiorise it. But it could just as well be a poem about the imagination. The capacity to transpose the image of the vision of Jacob's ladder, from its original site in Ancient Israel in a story in the Old Testament, to a twentieth century London railway station, or Christ walking towards his disciples across the Sea of Galilee to our cold Thames, is not merely a matter of faith, or belief, it requires also an act of creation. Nobody, not even the devout and mystical Francis Thompson, believes that there were winged beings mounting and dismounting a ladder constructed somewhere in the sky above a Central London terminus. The Israelites may have believed this marvel actually occurred in their forefather Jacob's history, but then they lived in a culture where the visible and invisible were more of a philosophical continuum.

What Francis Thompson does is to create, through the medium of poetic language, a place within us, within our imaginations, where the image of that heavenly ascent and descent has a reality of a different kind from that which we use to negotiate a railway journey via Charing Cross, but is still, nonetheless, a coherent and describable reality. Anyone reading or hearing that poem will have some sort of picture in their mind: of angels, ladders, railway stations, water, and mixed in with all of these, and most importantly, another element, an emotional element which, to use the poet's own image, clings to the hem of the poem,

something to do with passion, which is also suffering, and also with suffering's impassioned answer. In other words, through the process of the poem Francis Thompson gives form and substance to 'things not seen'.

Shakespeare was very interested in this 'realising', or making real, faculty of the imagination. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* he has Duke Theseus compare the 'lunatic, the lover and the poet' who, he tells us, are 'of imagination all compact':

And as imagination bodies forth
The form of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name. (V.i.)

Bear in mind that when Shakespeare has Theseus use the word 'nothing' he is not intending mere froth or frivolity. Few words were as potent and significant to Shakespeare as 'nothing'. 'Nothing will come of nothing' says King Lear to his daughter, Cordelia, but the whole body of that awesome play is born out of those awfully ironic lines. Everything, but everything, comes from that 'nothing' in 'King Lear', rather as everything comes out of the void in the story of creation in Genesis.

The Francis Thompson poem talks of angels, and angels are a good example of the way a meeting of faith and imagination gives rise to this special kind of super-substantial reality. And they also happen to be a subject which has quickened my own imagination. Because I am known for having written a book about an angel, and because similar other-worldly beings, ghosts, visions, even God himself, drift in and out of my books, people sometimes ask if I believe in angels and spirits. The question is interesting because behind it is an implicit either/or: is what I write about something I believe in as an actuality or am I merely having a bit of a fanciful play? As if there are only these alternatives.

In my novel *Miss Garnet's Angel* I retell a very old story alongside the contemporary story of my heroine Julia Garnet. The story is that of Tobit, one of the Nephthali tribe, which along with nine other of the twelve tribes of Israel was carried off in 722 BC by the conquering Assyrians into captivity. Old Tobit exiled in Nineveh, according to the story which has been passed on via the Hebrew scriptures, continued to exercise his Jewish piety by burying the dead, an activity outlawed in the story by his Assyrian captors



Titian: *Tobias and the Angel*. Accademia, Venice

(although in reality the Assyrians, like the Jews, did bury their dead and it seems unlikely this was ever an actual historical embargo on the Jewish immigrant population).

However, as the story goes, as an indirect result of his subversive, pro-Jewish burial activities, Tobit becomes blind and incapacitated, and as a consequence sends his only son, Tobias, on a journey, to the far off land of Media to collect a family debt. Before Tobias sets off for Media, his father, fussing about his son's safety, as conscientious fathers will, urges him to hire a serving-man from the market place to accompany him on the hard and dangerous journey he's about to undertake. It's a more than a step and a hop to Media from Nineveh so you can imagine the sort of fellow Tobit has in mind: physically strong, capable, courageous, level-headed, steadfast, loyal, in fact exactly the qualities that Tobias needs to accomplish his mission successfully, the qualities which will make him into a mature man.

And Tobias finds just the right person, going by the name of Azarias, and he, or his people, is even known to Tobias's father from the old days back at the temple in Jerusalem; except that he is not Azarias at all, we are told, in our privileged position as audience, but the Archangel Raphael, one of the seven great archangels who go in and out before the

face of the Holy One. Or is he? Is this so-called archangel in disguise perhaps just the bundle of qualities which young Tobias needs and will acquire as he makes his testing journey into maturity? Is the story not saying, in a fanciful fashion, that the passage to manhood is a perilous one, and that to make it successfully some more-than-ordinary help may be needed, and if we look for it, is on hand?

The idea that this, at one level, is an initiation story is borne out by the fact that once embarked on the journey the issue of the family debt is quickly side-tracked. Away from the father, Azarias introduces a whole new factor into their quest – a potential marriage between Tobias and a young kinswoman, called Sara, who, rather like the debt, has apparently been forgotten until now but is conjured into sudden significance by the angel. Or you could say, that once the young man gets away from the rather stifling home atmosphere, and begins to assert his masculine authority and independence, his mind turns naturally to sex and marriage and the other family obligation falls to the back of his mind.

The girl, Sara, turns out to be cursed. A savage demon, Asmodeus, is lodged inside her body and has murdered seven men who have tried, and failed, to penetrate her virginity; but with the help of Azarias, alias Raphael, Tobias is able to find the necessary spirit to banish the demon and penetrate and finally marry the girl, and even collect the family debt and cure his father's blindness. Only after all this does Raphael reveal himself as an angel.

In my twentieth century version of this story I recast the demon as a form of sexual neurosis and the story of Toby and Sarah, the twentieth century cousins, as the overcoming of evil and guilt by the power of love. I dress the drama in contemporary clothes: sex, guilt, child abuse, psychotherapy but these are just other ways of defining what is differently described in the old story.

Who shall say which is 'better', or more true or real? And who, or what, is Raphael, really? In my novel, he is the only character who appears in both stories but he appears, too, in other guises, not only as Azarias, the hired hand in the Tobit story, but also in the forms of various characters who act in helpful ways in the contemporary one. Because what I am trying to show, taking my cue from the old story, is that angels or other seemingly otherworldly beings, are not so much other beings, but states of otherness, or, states of being other, however you like to put it. They are whatever helps us to rise above what we are, or have been, which in most people's lives is usually accomplished through the agency of other people. So, it is not a question of whether or not I believe in angels but that angels provide a time-honoured form

for dramatising what today we have only rather nebulous and abstract concepts for. You might say I am playing with these old ideas, but the play is a serious one. As Shakespeare knew, and Hamlet tragically forgets, the play's the thing – the play is real.

Let's look at another Biblical story featuring so-called angels, that of the three anonymous guests who pitch up unannounced at the dwelling of Abraham and Sarah. I expect you have seen these visitors depicted on Byzantine paintings, sitting rather stiffly, their wings not altogether accommodated by the seating arrangements, along one side of a table while Abraham and Sarah humbly wait on them. These are the first of a number of divine visitations which lead finally to the naming of Jacob and the establishing of the kingdom of Israel.

It is interesting that there are three strangers because while they are three they are also one. In the Biblical context it is hard not to think of the Christian Trinity but I suspect the Christian Trinity only takes that form because, as the ancients knew, the number three is a numinous one, being both creative and inclusive. It forms part of most modern psychological theories: id, ego, super-ego – shadow, ego, self, but also three is a fundamental number for life: man, woman, child. No matter how genetic science evolves, for life to continue there will always be needed a sperm, which is male, to enter an ovum, which is female, to produce a new human life.

The author of the Book of Genesis tells us clearly that these three strange beings are aspects of the Lord and it seems also pretty clear that the very late conception of their child, Isaac, is an oblique consequence, or corollary, of Abraham and Sarah's act of unpremeditated hospitality. Sarah is, or has been, barren. In economic terms this is a problem for the wife of a future patriarch but let's forget the outer situation and concentrate on the inner. The Jewish God, Yahweh, is often depicted as being either up on his high horse or being a bit of a wet-blanket, but here we have a charming example of the way he rewards the elderly Sarah by making her laugh: 'Sarah laughed within herself saying, After I am waxed old, shall I have pleasure in my Lord, being old also?' (Gen.18: 12).

The ambiguity of 'Lord' which occurs in the King James translation (seeming to imply that it might be either her husband or her God she is referring to) is suggestive. In entertaining the strangers she gives access to something larger and her husband, whose ministrations have so far left her barren, is now imbued with the numinous procreative abilities of her god. It is a lovely moment of spontaneity – a kind of jubilant precursor, and antithesis, of the Last Supper,

and in many ways as significant in its outcome.

'Entertain' means to hold or keep among. The three vital presences, angels, or aspects of the Lord, are nurtured, given bread and wine, the basic food-stuffs of life. Furthermore, they are given these goods in ignorance of who or what they are, under the law, not of exchange, but the other law, which is also as old as civilisation, the law of hospitality which gives without thought for the cost or for any return.

As with the Tobit story, it isn't necessary to see these mysterious guests as winged beings from another realm, even though in this form they make gravely beautiful subjects for paintings. In the Ancient Greek Bible, the so-called Septuagint, which is our oldest extant, and probably accurate, translation of the Old Testament scriptures, they are not described as *angeloí*, which anyway merely means messenger, but *andres* which means 'men'. They are men, we understand, but at the same time they are aspects or reflections, call it what you will, of divinity not so much because of what they are in themselves but because of what they constellate in Abraham and Sarah, a generosity of spirit which is prepared to share what it has even under conditions of dearth. The inner dearth of the couple, their inability to conceive a child, is, through this uncalculated action, made fertile – and it is through this act of unpremeditated generosity that the strangers, the 'men', become not men but 'angels'.

Both stories, the story of Abraham and Sarah and the Tobit story, take a common human difficulty, in the one case infertility, in the other frigidity, and give it not only a wider poetic appeal but also offer a dramatic account of how the difficulty may be surmounted – through trust, courage, self-forgetfulness, qualities – virtues, I would rather say – which while entirely human are not easily commanded without the aid of some other, 'higher', state of consciousness, and which, in turn, are generative. Gods and goddesses, angels and spirits, ghosts and demons are imaginative representations of the unseen realities which affect, and have always affected, human decisions at the deepest levels. They are given the forms of independent external presences, but this is only a way of assuring us of their objective if hidden reality.

There is a great moment towards the end of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* when Hermione, the wronged queen of Leontes, who, through the destructive consequences of his overweening jealousy, has been believed dead for 16 years and to all intents and purposes returns to life. She has been both dead and not dead, in a way that perhaps only Shakespeare's genius could both conceive and pull off –



The 'statue' of Hermione comes to life.

dead to the king her husband, and to her daughter, Perdita, but also alive, both to them and to us, as an image of vital life and unsentimental goodness which cannot be defiled. A story (another one!) has been put about that a statue of her has been fashioned by a consummate artist so like the real thing that it may be mistaken for Hermione herself, and the conceit is that of course it is no statue at all and is in reality the woman who has both lived and not lived in this lapse of time.

At the moment of revelation, Paulina, the architect of this creative deception (as the Greeks knew, deception and illusion are the stuff of art, which is why, with the exception of Plato, they tended to tolerate liars) says to the assembled company, 'It is required you do awake your faith.' Only then does the living woman step, as it were, out of the stone. It's a truly amazing moment – because Shakespeare really makes us feel that there has been not just a resurrection, and Hermione has been restored, but that art itself has crossed some mysterious threshold and come to life in our presence, become life itself, but a life now made incalculably more precious by being imbued with a proper awe which the very seeming loss of it has guaranteed. And it is art, both the art of the sculptor, who doesn't exist, and Shakespeare's own art, which has created both the non-existent artist and his work of art – the 'statue' which exists in this mysterious place of otherness and which both is and is not a work of art.

At that singular moment when Paulina says, 'It is required you do awake your faith', all those other elements become beside the point and drop away, and we are left with another 'miracle', the miracle being that those few words bring a dead woman back to life, not just for her husband and daughter, and the court of Bohemia, but also for all of us, for all time – or as long, anyway, as Shakespeare is read and heard and enters our being. And yet, as Leontes says, in words

of heartbreaking simplicity, 'If this is art then 'tis an art lawful as eating.'

I sometimes like to play a game and ask people whether or not they think that Hamlet is real. Obviously, there is a sense in which he is not. He doesn't pay taxes or a community charge or parking fines, but then neither do many real people who are living. You might protest that nor, for example, does John Stuart Mill, who is not living but who once lived and has died and been given a memorial service, but then, I would say, so has Hamlet, rather a splendid one, with pall-bearers and sounding trumpets. And yet, clearly, Hamlet has not died in the way John Stuart Mill has, and you and I surely will; neither is he alive in the way that you or I are, or John Stuart Mill once was.

But I think you may agree with me that there is a sense in which Hamlet's reality is as assured, possibly more so, than John Stuart Mill's, or maybe even yours or mine. What I'm driving at, through the case of Hamlet, or Hermione, or Odysseus is that reality is not defined by the single act of having been a subject of everyday life. No one can tell us exactly what Hamlet looks like as no one has ever seen him, and yet we all know something of what he is like, what his essence is. And in fact, if I said to you, 'No, sorry, Hamlet doesn't exist', you might rightly be indignant. 'Of course he exists!' you could quite properly say. 'We know him to be a sad young man who gets in a state about his dead father and then his perhaps too lively mother, who betrays the girl he loves because he has lost his own faith in the value and decency of love, and yet he also has enough decency to apologise to the son of the man he has accidentally murdered, for, yes, he is quite a violent body too. And yet he is also the 'sweet prince' who has retained an excellent friend, who is in some ways wiser than he is, but to whom he must explain that 'there are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy'.

Hamlet, in fact, is not only real, he is immortal. Although he does 'die', in a crucially important sense he can never die; and yet his creator was a mortal man. I think where imagination and faith meet is not only in the conception, the perception and the bodying forth of things unseen, but in the power of those forms created, through the medium of imagination, to surpass death. 'The imagination', to quote from my own novel, *Mr Golightly's Holiday*, 'is a creator of worlds ... from (it) have issued, gods and kingdoms, people and purposes, stables and citadels, deserts and mountain tops, the defeat of principalities, the frail victory of hope.' In that book I try to suggest how the imagination *is* the creator, or, rather, the creator's executive, how the creative principle is

perpetually at work in and, more crucially, through (for as well as being a reflective, it is an active force) the imagination, so that creation is not something which happened 'once upon a time' but is always happening, all the time, forever bringing new life to birth out of seeming nothingness, making what was unconscious conscious.

I suggested that when people asked if I believed in angels they were asking an either/or question: does she think angels are real – or not? And I have asked my own question: Is Hamlet real – or not? Behind both questions is a deeper one. What do we mean, *really*, by 'real'; and, as a corollary, what do we mean by story? (By 'story' you can assume I include myth, poem, play anything which apparently arises out of the mortal imagination but has an independent existence.) Paul and the disciples were asking people to believe a story, a hugely powerful one, that a man had died and come to life again simply because he loved enough. In fact, he, and the way he lived, defined, at least for the Western world, what real love means. It's a terrific story and if I say I wish I'd thought of it myself you mustn't suppose I'm saying anything disrespectful or sacrilegious.

Fairy stories, myths, legends, the plays of Shakespeare, the novels of Jane Austen, or George Eliot, or Henry James or Dostoyevsky survive because they are stories which not only engage us with their truths but allow something real to happen inside us and maybe this is the key. I've said elsewhere that the defining quality of great art is not that we understand it but that it understands us. But thinking about this talk, I felt I wanted to go further and suggest that a great work of the imagination expresses itself by working, and reworking, a creation within us, so that we are taken up by it and through it we too become a contributing part of a creating process, and evolve. A work of art makes us, for a while, become Hamlet, or Telemachus, or Hermione, or Raskolnikov, or whoever it may be with whom the artist has aligned our sensibilities, so that with this 'other' we weep and tremble and curse and suffer and rejoice. And as we are captured by that 'other' reality our own reality is enlarged in the mystery of the 'otherness' of others. We might also, if we reflect on the experience, recognise that we have been deeply and powerfully and often irreversibly affected by something which at one level is no thing – a thing, or things, 'not seen'.

It takes enormous faith in 'things not seen' to coax into life a story. But I think, too, that faith must work both ways. It takes faith to make the unseen seen, but it also takes faith to see and believe in that unseen-made-seen. I rather like the story of the man who, watching *Othello* for the first time, was unable to

contain himself and shouted, ‘Can’t you see he’s fooling you, you stupid bugger?’ I’m with that man, whose imagination was awakened enough to see that the darkness of Iago *is* real, deadly real, even though Iago cannot be detained in any psychiatric prison. Iago doesn’t disappear when the actor who plays him takes off his costume and goes home for a quiet pint – Iago exists, and he continues and Shakespeare is there to ensure that we see him, and that his presence occupies our imagination, if we only have eyes and ears.

This is a shortened version of Salley Vickers’ talk at the SOF London Conference on March 25th 2017. She was ill so her script was read out by Janet Seargeant, who reviewed Vickers’ tenth novel *Cousins* in *Sofia* 124.



Nurses forced out of homes by Christmas

The London Clinic, a leading private hospital based in Harley Street, has told nursing and care staff to quit their homes just a week before Christmas – as it seeks to sell off a building left to it by a grateful patient.

The Clinic owns Vernon House in Primrose Hill, which for more than four decades has provided employees with affordable housing. It allows nurses and other vital care staff to live near the hospital so that they can be on call.

But last month the Hospital gave nearly 60 staff notice to quit. One nurse who has lived in in the block for more than 10 years said: ‘They just issued us with a section 21 order a couple of weeks ago that has given us two months’ notice to leave.’

From a report in *Camden New Journal*
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A Bunch of Flowers

Mr. White, or can I call you Bob?
I promise you this:
We will take great care of your heart.
The surgeon, yes that’s me, from India,
I will lead the operation.
An anaesthetist from Syria
will put you to sleep,
a nurse from Sri Lanka
will pass me medical instruments
and we will not leave any inside you.
A junior doctor from Romania
will neatly sew you up
and a porter called Erik, from Sweden,
will wheel you back.

Does that sound alright?
I think that sounds rather beautiful, Mr Chakrabarti.
Thank you, Bob.
I look forward to hearing your heart beating strongly.

Peter Phillips

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