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Hearts Go Walking: Conversations between poetry, prayer and theology

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1) Introduction

(a) Poetry

Definitions of poetry are, by their very nature, elusive. Given that qualification, two that appeal to me manage to cover a spectrum which ranges from the graceful to the prosaic. Shira Wolosky has stated that: ‘poetry is language in which every component element – word and word order, sound and pause, image and echo – is significant, significant in that every element points towards or stands for further relationships among and beyond themselves. Poetry is language that always means more.’ (Wolosky 2001: 3) By contrast another member of the literary theorists’ guild, Terry Eagleton, offers what he admits is a dreary and unpoetic definition but fears it may turn out to be the best we can do: ‘A poem is a fictional, verbally inventive moral statement in which it is the author, rather than the printer or word processor, who decides where the lines should end.’ (Eagleton 2007: 25)¹ Nevertheless, in these two dissimilar understandings of poetry some key elements in this artform begin to emerge, such as words, images, lines and pauses; and it is in studying the poetic form of poetry about prayer that we are able to listen into some of the conversations between poetry, prayer and theology.

In addition to understanding the nature poetry it is worth reflecting upon the role of those of us who read poems. The poet and critic James Fenton observes that ‘Readers of poetry

¹ According to Roger McGough, poetry is ‘that way of seeing the world and describing it in unusual ways’ (McGough 2005: 120). D E Saliers believes ‘The poetic utterance is a kind of ritual in language, marking a difference between simply being overwhelmed and inarticulate, and striving to witness to the extremity.’ (http://www.emory.edu/SENATE/FacultyCouncil/Committees/DFL_Lectures/saliers%202002.pdf)
divide into two kinds: those who, confronted with what appears to be like a code insist
they must crack it, and those who are happy to listen to the spell, without enquiring too
closely what it might mean’. (Fenton 2001: 234) As we read and listen to poetry we
should ask ourselves whether we are drawn in by the sense of mystery which we want to
uncover and reveal or by the sense of mysticism in which we want to wrap ourselves and
just ‘be’. Of course, these two approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive. It is
perfectly possible to enjoy both forms of poetic engagement but the way, or ways, in
which each of us reads and listens will condition not only our conversations with poetry,
prayer and theology but our also discussions with others about those conversations.

(b) Prayer
Definitions of prayer can be as equally elusive as those of poetry. One poet who has
written on both is W H Auden. In the last major prose statement of his faith written
around 1970 and in the language of his time Auden commented that: ‘As an antidote to
pride man has been endowed with the capacity for prayer, an activity which is not to be
confined to prayer in the narrow religious sense of the word. To pray is to pay attention
or, shall we say, to ‘listen’ to someone or something other than oneself. Whenever a man
so concentrates his attention – be it on a landscape, or a poem or a geometrical problem
or an idol or the True God – that he completely forgets his own ego and desires in
listening to what the other has to say to him, he is praying’ (quoted in Kirsch 2005: 159)
Auden’s insight into the nature of prayer has been restated more recently in John
Pritchard’s practical handbook on prayer, when he remarks that what he calls prayer
starts with recognizing those ‘moments when something stirs within us and to savour
them. Not to let them be flooded and forgotten, but to notice them and hold them, tenderly, just for a while. And for the time being – that’s just enough! Just recognize those moments for what they are, or might be. Signals of something else.’ (Pritchard 2002: 3)

This process or state of being whereby we can listen to something or someone else is part of the common ground between prayer and poetry but there are other shared aspects as well, for example a sense of wonder and of excitement are also fundamental to poetry and prayer. During his time as Bishop of Durham, Ian Ramsey was asked how he would teach someone who worked in the local mines to pray. He replied that he would try and find out the miner’s enthusiasm – for his children or his car or anything – because ‘enthusiasm is so often the gateway to adoration’ (quoted in Mursell 2001: 373). A similar point is made by Kenneth Leach in his book *True Prayer* when he writes about the link between prayer and being open to the wonder of creation: ‘In prayer we open ourselves out to God, and this process is one of liberation and awakening … It is the human experience which is the starting point of prayer: a process of growing awareness of why people love us and forgive us, and of openness to the wonder and glory of creation, of nature, of the elements.’ (Leach 1980: 3-4) More recently Robert C Fuller has written about how wonder has an important role to play in cognitive development and is an important transformative experience, quoting Einstein’s view that ‘The most beautiful thing we can experience is the mysterious. It is the source of all true art and all science. He to whom

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2 Cf ‘Prayer is an act of the will, not of thought or feeling, and we do not understand this because in our modern culture we have intellectually lost touch with any usable meaning of the word … the great spiritual writers of classical and premodern times meant by ‘will’ some thing more like our deepest desires, or sometimes, our hearts: at any rate where our treasure is.’ (Turner 2002: 98)
this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer pause to wonder and stand in rapt awe, is as good as dead; his eyes are closed’ (quoted in Fuller 2006: 110).

(c) Theology

In his teasingly entitled book God: A Guide for the Perplexed Keith Ward begins his theological exploration into the nature of divinity by looking back to ancient Greece and the stories of the Illiad. He says the gods written about in that work ‘are poetic, symbolic constructs of human imagination.’ So for example, ‘The Muses, the nine goddesses, are not pretty young women who live on top of mount Olympus with their parents, and come down to earth every now and then to write poems and sing songs. The Muses are imaginative symbols of the creative energies of wisdom and beauty which seem to inspire rare individuals (but maybe most of us very occasionally), and which come and go, as if from beyond the control of the conscious mind.’ (Ward 2002: 5) Ward argues that an understanding of God after Descartes and Newton has to put aside any notions of the Great Designer in the Sky and search for the divine in art and imagination. Wordsworth’s ‘Lines composed a few miles above Tintern Abbey’, 13 July, 1798 point us in the right direction:

I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with joy
Of elevated thoughts: a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply infused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,
And the round ocean and the living air,
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:
A motion and a spirit, that impels
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
And rolls through all things.

Thus, for Ward, ‘The authentic religious sense is to discern infinity and eternity in the bounded and transient, to see in all particular forms of beauty a Beauty which is unlimited in perfection and everlasting in value.’ (Ward 2002: 13)

Once set upon this poetic journey Ward draws upon Schleiermacher’s understanding that religion is ‘the sensibility and taste for the infinite’ and is in essence about ‘intuition and feeling’; and upon Rudolf Otto’s location of religion’s essence in the feeling of the ‘numinous’ or the ‘submergence into nothingness before an overpowering, absolute might.’ Ward’s initial explorations reach a conclusion with Martin Buber’s religious language of ‘I-Thou’ to speak of God. From Ward’s perspective Godtalk ‘is a specific way of being in the world, of apprehending it, as a relational event or a series of relational events, as a form of meeting which is personal and yet so much more and so deeply other. If that sense of meeting is added to the sense of infinity, of mystery, dread and beauty, which sometimes and often by surprise, comes upon us, then there exists the feeling for the gods … If one is to speak about God, this is the place to begin, not with
abstract definitions or endless arguments, but with the sense of the sublime, the infinite, the numinous, the feeling for the gods.’ (Ward 2002: 33)

From this very general introduction we can already see that there is potentially a great deal of common ground between poetry, prayer and theology. The importance of wonder and openness, a sense of the ‘other’ and of enthusiasm, a feeling for relationships and how to speak of such things in words and images are shared by all three.

2) Starting Conversations

In his volume on poetry and prayer Richard Griffiths asks the question: what is it about the processes of poetry that is able to produce the same sense of joy, illumination and unexplained sensations as a great piece of music? His answer is that it’s: ‘the way in which surprising and compelling juxtapositions of images and ideas are produced, the way in which poetry cuts across the logical processes of prose … by images similes, by metaphors, by allusions.’ (Griffiths 2005: 12-13) And he quotes R S Thomas’ rhetorical question: How shall we attempt to describe or express ultimate reality except through metaphor and symbol? Once again there are important connections between poetry and theology at this point. As the theologian David Brown has commented ‘Metaphorical language is thus of special importance in identifying truth, since it offers not only the

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3 ‘… in our time, when metaphysical enquiry is frequently misconceived by friend and foe alike, as a form of freewheeling speculation, it would seem to be the poets and novelists, rather than the philosophers, who are best placed to communicate the universal significance of contingent particulars.’ (Lash 1979: 20)

4 The original presentation involved a handout with the poems discussed in this section. For copyright reasons references here are to a published form of each poem, although many are available through internet search engines. Where such links exist, a suggested connection is provided (accessed May 2nd 2013).
possibility of unexpected connections, but also the plurality of possible discourses.’ (Brown 2000: 369) It is through David Brown’s observation about the plurality of possible discourses that I hope to extend the kind of conversations between poetry and prayer started by Richard Griffiths. In his volume, Griffiths identifies two forms of prayer: (a) public prayer; and (b) private prayer but my aim is to broaden out that very basic distinction and suggest that poetry (and specifically poetry about prayer) can takes us into a much richer vein of conversations about prayer.

Les Murray’s poem ‘Visitor’ consists of two lines and many questions:

*He knocks at the door*

*and listens to his heart approaching.*

Who is knocking? Where or what is the door? Who is listening? Whose heart is approaching? This could be a poem about a lover waiting for his beloved to open the door or it could be a poem about self-obsession. It could be a poem about God which calls to mind the words of Christ in the Revelation of St John: *Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in and eat with you, and you with me* (Revelation 3: 20). Or it might be a reflection about how we human beings are prone to creating God in our own likeness. Yet it is not just the way in which such questions are left unanswered which makes this brief observation intriguing; there is also the way in which Murray uses some established poetic tropes to tease and tantalise – images of doors, hearts, unknown visitors and approaching mysteries are well-trodden paths but can still yield something new. It is this creative and poetic act of taking things

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5 in Poems the Size of Photographs (Manchester: Carcanet 2002, p 35)
that we’re already aware of but investing them with new meaning and significance which can bring us close to prayer.

Another Australian poet and a friend of Murray’s also writes of passing through a door – this time to enter a church. At the start of his poem ‘Cathedral Service’, Peter Kocan records:

_ I’m only here because I wandered in_

_Not knowing that a service would begin,

_And had to slide into the nearest pew,

_Pretending it was what I’d meant to do._

And this image of accidentally crossing a threshold into prayer is a recurring in these poems, which I have gathered under four headings: (a) Prayer in the world; (b) Prayer as a lover; (c) Prayer as apophatic encounter; and (d) Prayer as divine meeting. Yet despite being gathered under these headings, it is worth noting that each poem presents a different facet or insight into the world of prayer.

(a) Prayer in the world

(i) Instinctive Prayer: ‘Prayer’ by Carol Ann Duffy

(ii) Prayer and Change: ‘Careful How You Pray’ by Steve Turner

(iii) Prayer in Creation: ‘Let Evening Come’ by Jane Kenyon

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6 in Ben Witherington III and Christopher Mead Armitage (eds) _The Poetry of Piety_ (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002 p 169) and online at http://andrewlansdown.com/favourite-poems/peter-kocan/


9 in Jane Kenyon _Collected Poems_ (St Paul: Graywolf Press, 2005 p 213) and also online http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/let-evening-come/
Although these three poems all reflect upon prayer that is rooted in experience drawn from the world, they do so in contrasting ways. Carol Ann Duffy’s poem takes commonplace sounds and weaves them into a hymn-like meditation on memory. It suggests that some of the impulse to pray is instinctive and arises from deep within our human ‘being’. By contrast Steve Turner’s poem is rooted in the prophetic tradition within the Bible and is about human prayer for the world, rather than prayer arising from within the human heart or mind. Yet the two are clearly linked in that praying for change in the world may also lead to change within oneself, as in the lines:

*Might come lickin’

’nearth your door.*

Meanwhile Jane Kenyon’s ‘Let Evening Come’ shares common ground with Duffy’s poem by weaving a tapestry of everyday sounds and scenes into another prayer-like hymn. However, Kenyon draws on her own rural setting rather than Duffy’s urban experience and although both poems are rather wistful in their approach, Kenyon is noticeably more affirming about God’s presence in such encounters than Duffy.

(b) Prayer as a lover

(i) Presence and Absence: ‘Chaplaincy Fell Walk’ by U A Fanthorpe

(ii) Prayer as Gossamer: ‘Attempts on Your Life’ by Michael Symmons Roberts

(iii) Prayer out of nothing: ‘Out of the Blue’ by Micheal O’Siadhail

These three poems also share common ground in that they appear to offer reflections on a loved one, an intimate other, and through these thoughts bring us close to aspects of

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11 in Michael Symmons Roberts *Corpus* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2004 p 7)
12 in Micheal O’Siadhail *Hail! Madam Jazz* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 1992 p 118) and online at: www.intervarsity.org/mx/item/4767/download/
praying to God. For instance, U A Fanthorpe’s poem is about missing someone (a partner?) whilst on a fell walk but that sense of presence and absence in the setting of beautiful hills shares similarities with our experience of God’s presence and absence in prayer. One step removed from that haunting sense of God’s presence and absence is Michael Symmons Roberts’ description of a gossamer encounter between a sleeping soul and a winter’s night. In this mysterious and fleeting convergence there are once again some intriguing echoes of how we can encounter God in prayer. Both Fanthorpe’s and Roberts’ poems are embodied, in the sense that we are invited to stand with a person and share a physical experience but Micheal O’Siadhail’s poem is more like a collection of metaphors – a journey (‘this odyssey of ours’) with a compass (‘A needle can waver, then fix on its pole’) to new frontiers (‘shifts the boundaries of our being’) – and in these relational images we have descriptions that can speak of human experience of both a lover and of God.

(c) Prayer as apophatic encounter

(i) Silence: ‘Prayer’ by Paul Stubbs

(ii) Intercession: ‘The Stone that Flows’ by Ruth Padel

(iii) Lament: ‘I wake and feel the fell of dark’ by Gerald Manley Hopkins

(iv) Comfort: ‘Meditation after an Interview’ by Vassar Miller

Apophatic theology speaks of God in terms of what God is not, rather than what God is and it is strongly linked with mystical traditions of the Christian faith (Turner 2004: 50).

14 in Voodoo Shop (London: Chatto & Windus, 2002 p 20)
16 in If I had Wheels of Love (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1991 p 325) and online at http://cassaverba.blogspot.co.uk/2008/02/meditation-after-interview-vassar.html
In this instance, the phrase ‘apophatic encounter’ is used in the sense of being an encounter with God through prayer in a way that might be thought to be not an encounter. For example, Paul Stubbs’ poem speaks of how prayer has become for him ‘the same incomprehensible silence.’ Vassar Miller’s poem also reflects upon God’s silence but in a very different way, whilst Ruth Padel writes about her mother’s loss of faith during illness and how that drove her into a church and into praying as a last resort.

(d) Prayer as divine meeting

(i) Sacred Place: ‘The Heart Goes Walking’ by David Scott

(ii) Prayer as Possession by God: ‘Divine Possession’ by Emily Dickinson

(iii) Praying Through Christ’s Passion:
   A) ‘Septuagesima’ by John Betjeman
   B) ‘The Donkey’ by G K Chesterton
   C) ‘Friday’s Child’ by W H Auden
   D) ‘Bread’ by R S Thomas
   E) ‘Three Rusty Nails’ by Roger McGough

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17 in Piecing Together (Tarset: Bloodaxe Books, 2005 p 23) and online at http://pilgrimpace.wordpress.com/tag/david-scott/
21 in Edward Mendelson (ed.) Selected Poems (London: Faber & Faber, 1979 p 237) and online at http://timothyone.com/2006/08/18/fridays-child-w-h-auden/
22 in Collected Poems (London: Phoenix Books, 1993 p 93) and online at http://poemsandprose.blog.co.uk/2008/01/30/a_prayer_for_love~3653248/
The final section consists of poetry which speaks about encountering God. David Scott’s poem ‘The Heart Goes Walking’ is about the importance of sacred places whilst at the same time making connections with those poems that locate God in nature, everyday life and relationships. For a comparatively short poem it covers many bases because it also suggests that God can be encountered in our imagination. Emily Dickenson tackles what must be the hardest subject of all – the sense of being possessed by God’s spirit in a very real and embodied way. It starts in an understated manner with the image of God fumbling the soul of poet and reader, only for the language to adopt a more forceful nature as Dickenson explores the metaphor of being struck through such words as ‘blow’, ‘hammers’ and ‘thunderbolt’. And the last selection is a series of five poems which explore encounters with God in and through Christ’s passion. John Betjeman’s poem ‘Septuagesima’ is a precursor to the seasons of Lent and Holy Week which approaches prayer and worship from three angles: (a) as comfort; (b) as activity; and (c) as habit, hobby or enthusiasm. In G K Chesterton’s ‘The Donkey’ we are taken on a journey of imagination as we are invited to place ourselves within the events of Palm Sunday as the creature that Jesus rode upon into Jerusalem and through that act of imagination to enter into the mystical nature of those events. W H Auden’s poem ‘Friday’s Child’ works at many levels but one thing it invites us to do is to look hard and critically at our cherished images of the God to whom we pray. In ‘Bread’ R S Thomas also invites us to explore some challenging questions – this time about the Eucharist which is at the heart of much Christian liturgy – through a poem which oscillates between a silence of despair and a prayer of hope. Roger McGough’s ‘Three Rusty Nails’ speaks of how it is possible to
encounter God and the Easter message through the revelation of an everyday encounter with another person.

3) Conclusion

Hopefully this necessarily brief introduction into the possibilities of conversations between poetry, prayer and theology will encourage all of us on our own journeys and explorations into the wonder of poetry and other forms of artistic expression. Because as Robert C Fuller argues in his recent book on the subject: ‘Wonder, it would seem, is one of the principal sources of humanity’s spiritual impulse. A life shaped by wonder might, therefore, be a defining example of what “being spiritual” means at its very best’ (Fuller 2006: 15).

References


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<td>Denys Turner</td>
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