

CHAPTER 22

Poetic Religion: Forms of the Visionary Imagination

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The relationship between religion and poetry is as ancient as either of these cultural forms alone. In religious traditions the world over, creation begins with an utterance, with creative, generative language. Rituals and liturgies are defined by poetic expression. Poetry voices spiritual states such as ecstasy, despair, prophecy, and outrage with an energy and a clarity unmatched in other literary forms. The best way to see how this works is to look at several examples of religious poetry. It will also be important to ask the question, is religious language simply poetry? But before turning to these examples and attempting to answer this question, it will be useful to clarify a cluster of terms that will help this discussion, particularly the terms *poetry*, *vision*, and *imagination*.

POETRY: LANGUAGE CHARGED WITH MEANING

First, poetry. Although it is commonplace to regard poetry as the expression of emotional states of the poet, it is more useful to regard poetry as the manipulation of language at the levels of sound and meaning. This means that although a poem can consist of the expression of a great variety of feelings and concerns, the thing that makes it poetry is the way it involves itself with the musical, syntactical, and semantic aspects of language itself. Music is the sound words make in poetry. Syntax is the ordering of words in a poem. Semantics refers to the meaning of the words. Because the musical and meaningful components of language play such a central role in religion—in religious literature and scripture, as well as expressions in ritual and liturgy—religion and poetry have a longstanding involvement with each other, across history and cultures.

American poet Ezra Pound (1885–1972) made two provocative claims that might guide us in considering the relationship between religion and poetry. First, in a work titled *The Spirit of Romance* (first published in 1910), Pound claimed, “The study of literature is hero-worship. It is a refinement, or, if you will, a perversion of that primitive religion.” By primitive, Pound means what we might nowadays call primordial or archaic. He means a religious expression that reaches back to the origins of human culture. Second, in an essay titled “How to Read” (initially published in 1929), Pound insists, “Great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree.” Poetry, in Pound’s estimation, is the greatest, most enduring kind of literature.

VISIONS AND THE IMAGINATION

In discussions on religion and poetry, it is commonplace to speak of vision. Vision, in the religious and poetic sense, is an unusually complex concept. In a religious sense, a vision refers to an ecstatic experience of a divine being or some divine reality. That experience can involve seeing things, feeling things, and even intuiting things in the mind. In the poetic sense, a vision can include psychological and sensible realities, things both imagined and seen. Although vision is one of the senses, it also manifests in the imagination. For instance, visions can be understood as something suddenly and actually seen, but they also can be experienced as hallucinations (induced perhaps by taking an intoxicating substance, drink, or sacred psychoactive plant) or as dreams.

Scripture and religious literature is filled with visions, dreams, epiphanies, and manifestations, from the Burning Bush that Moses sees on Mount Sinai, to the Transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor, to the vision of the seven-headed Hydra in Revelation, to the complete cosmic vision Krishna reveals to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, to the visitation of the archangel Gabriel to Muhammad in the Qur'an, to the oral accounts of the astral travels of shamans in traditional societies. Visions are extraordinary phenomena that can authenticate religious experience and convictions, as well as authorize religious doctrine. However, they are often approached with caution and skepticism, even by those who experience them, because they tend to arrive involuntarily and involve often spectacular potencies as well as what we nowadays would understand as psychological agitation and distress.

IMAGES

In terms of religion and poetry, then, how might visions and visionary states best be understood? Aristotle's (384–322 BCE) understanding of vision and image makes a good beginning. As words are to language, so images are to vision. In *De Anima* ("on the soul"), Aristotle claims straightforwardly, "The object of sight is the visible" (II.7, 188). Put another way, vision is what we see. Seeing as envisioning, which can be regarded as an intensification of sight, enables the imagination. Aristotle proposes, "As sight is the most highly developed sense, the name *phantasia* (imagination) has been formed from *phaos* (light) because it is not possible to see without light" (*De Anima*, III.3, 217). The imagination, then, is a projection of the light of the world into the theater of the mind.

And the imagination, according to Aristotle, is what makes us human. It's what gives us a soul, according to his thinking. He writes, "To the thinking soul images serve as if they were contents of perception (and when it asserts or denies them to be good or bad it avoids or pursues them). That is why the soul never thinks without an image" (*De Anima*, III.7, 223). Aristotle's position on the necessity of vision can be summed up by that last phrase: the soul never thinks without an image.

IMAGINAL

Henry Corbin (1903–1978), who was a scholar of Islamic mysticism, was keenly interested in the reality of visionary states. Corbin wrote about experiences of "visionary apperception," in which, as he states in *The Man of Light* (1978), the person experiencing the vision "really and actually sees light and darkness, by a kind of vision that depends on an organ other than the physical organ of sight" (62). Corbin is speaking of the

imagination. He coined an adjective to qualify this vision that depends on the imagination, calling such visionary states *imaginal*. Imaginal states, according to Corbin, refer to the *mundus imaginalis* (Latin for the “world of the imagination”), a “concrete spiritual world of archetype-figures, apparitional Forms, Angels of species and of individuals” (42). For Corbin, these visionary states, projected in and through the imagination, are completely real. Corbin believed the imaginal to be a magical, mystical state in which vision “secretes its own light” (102). When Dante, in his great visionary poem *The Divine Comedy*, journeys through Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise, which he relates as something that really happened to him, he was traveling through the demonic and angelic realms of the imaginal.

DREAMS

For most people, this realm of the imagination is also the realm of dreams. People have been fascinated by dreams for as long as we’ve expressed ourselves in the forms of religion and poetry, both of which are deeply informed by dreams. Elliot R. Wolfson, a contemporary scholar of religion, suggests in his book *A Dream Interpreted within a Dream* (2011), “[t]he dream incarnates human imagination in a distinctively excessive way” (179). Wolfson has devised an inventive term for capturing the excessive production of imagination that happens in dreams: *oneiropoesis*, which comes from the Greek roots for dream (*oneiros*) and making (*poesis*), which Wolfson calls the “involuntary poetry” of the dream state (74). Our curiosity about dreams, claims Wolfson, compels us to scrutinize and interpret them, leading us directly into a concrete spiritual realm of archetype-figures and symbolic language, actualized and made real by our attention. Wolfson writes, “Of the many ways that the imaginal superfluity can be detected, I will here mention two: first, a dream may embody competing sensibilities, defying commonsense assumption that a thing cannot be the same as its opposite; second, the *omnia* of dreams may augur the reverse of what we regularly expect them to be” (179). This is a complex thought Wolfson is expressing, to be sure. Put somewhat simply, what he means is that the excessive qualities of dreams and the imagination largely feel meaningful and true, even though they cannot be understood easily (because they defy common sense), and that, oftentimes, dreams and visions hide a deeper, more mysterious meaning under their apparent surfaces, yielding unexpected, contradictory, and disturbing meanings.

ETERNAL VISIONS

William Blake (1757–1827), the great English poet, believed that vision, including dream, is the perception of the human in all things. S. Foster Damon (1893–1971), one of Blake’s great interpreters, writes in *A Blake Dictionary* (1965), “Blake’s visions were not supernatural: they were intensifications of normal experience” (436). In his Laocoön engraving from 1815, which includes numerous aphorisms along with a drawing of an ancient priest of Poseidon, Blake himself insists, “The Eternal Body of Man is The Imagination.... It manifests itself in his Works of Art (In Eternity All is Vision). All that we See is Vision from Generated Organs gone as soon as come. Permanent in The Imagination” (*Poetry and Prose*, 271). For Blake, vision and imagination are the great work of humankind, the only thing we do that has any permanence. Just as Aristotle insists that the soul never thinks without an image, so Blake believes that eternity is a state of constant, permanent vision.

VISIONS AND POETRY: FORMS OF THE IMAGINATION

What are some examples of visionary poetry? How does poetry represent visions of nature, prophetic visions, visions of absence, and visions of divine unity? What happens when the imagination concentrates and electrifies in language meaning and sound, and rhythm and music?

VISIONS OF NATURE: WORKING LIKE A SEA

Consider poets looking at the natural world, in which they see divine powers concentrated, such as these lines from the first book of *The Prelude* (1805), a long autobiographical poem, by William Wordsworth (1770–1850):

Ye presences of Nature, in the sky
Or on the earth, ye visions of the hills
And souls of lonely places, can I think
A vulgar hope was yours when ye employed
Such ministry—when ye through many a year
Haunting me thus among my boyish sports,
On caves and trees, upon the woods and hills,
Impressed upon all forms the characters
Of danger and desire, and thus did make
The surface of the universal earth
With triumph, and delight, and hope, and fear,
Work like a sea?

BOOK FIRST, LINES 490–501, 54

In these lines, the poet is reflecting on his childhood when he wandered without purpose or care through the countryside of rural, pre-industrial England where he grew up. So powerful is his memory of this time, he projects his experience of the natural world into a grand vision in which he suggests that all the features of that world—woods, hills, and weather—summon an energy he can still feel surging through all the emotions he felt then as a boy and feels still as a man, feelings of triumph, delight, hope, and fear. Put another way, the poet sees the natural world as something alive with visionary power, something that a literary critic of the twentieth century, M. H. Abrams, called “natural supernaturalism.” This was a creative attitude characterized by English-language poets of the Romantic era (roughly the early nineteenth century) in which they saw the natural world not only suffused with the grandeur of divine power but as that divine power itself.

Although Wordsworth lived in a Christian culture when he wrote *The Prelude*, his poem expresses not so much a Christian vision as one that might better belong to something called pantheism, a concept that all that exists is ultimately identical with the divine reality, specifically that the natural world itself represents and reflects this divine reality. In his poem, Wordsworth experiences this feeling of unity with the divine as he remembers what it was like to be a boy running freely in the natural world, whose power he experienced directly as nourishment and inspiration.

VISIONS OF NATURE: CLOUDS

A similar but more explicitly Christian vision is expressed in Gerard Manley Hopkins's (1844–1889) poem “That Nature Is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection.” The title alone is a mouthful! It signals, complexly, that this is to be a poem about the resurrection of Christ as reflected in nature. The title includes a reference to the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, who believed that “Everything becomes fire, and from fire everything is born” (28). Hopkins, who was born into the Church of England but converted to Catholicism and became a Jesuit priest, begins his poem wildly:

Cloud-puffball, torn tufts, tossed pillows | flaunt forth, then chevy on an air-
build thoroughfare: heaven-roysterers, in gay-gangs | they throng; they glitter in
marches.

Down roughcast, down dazzling whitewash, | wherever an elm arches,
Shivelights and shadowtackle in long | lashes lace, lance, and pair.
Delightfully the bright wind boisterous | ropes, wrestles, beats earth bare
Of yester tempest's creases; | in pool and rutpeel parches
Squandering ooze to squeezed | dough, crust, dust; stanches, starches
Squadroned masks and manmarks | treadmire toil there
Footfretted in it. Million-fuelèd, | nature's bonfire burns on. (67)

If you're not used to reading poetry, this will seem difficult, perhaps insane! And even if you are comfortable with poetry, Hopkins's poem presents special challenges: he appears to be making up words (*shivelights*, *shadowtackle*, *rutpeel*, *footfretted*) and he builds his poem out of tongue twisters. (Try reading the poem aloud.) And yet you'll notice the many pleasures the poet has concentrated in this poem in its sound alone: the flow of sound from *pool* to *ooze* to *squeezed* to *dough* to *toil* is marvelous. And the assertion that “million-fuelèd, nature's bonfire burns on,” in the context of this poem, is hard to dismiss.

Hopkins's poem is wonderfully intense. It avails the two oldest forms of poetic authority: religious affirmation and praise. Critics could indulge themselves in a detailed interpretation and analysis of Hopkins's poem (which goes on for twice the length of what is already quoted), which might be fruitful. But above all, a new reader can see that Hopkins, in a high-hearted style, is affirming and praising. But what? What is he praising? Nothing more, nothing less than a blue sky in which a great procession of clouds is passing by. Or more simply, clouds. He's praising clouds! Hopkins's poem is a good example of how in a great poem all language can feel religious and inspired.

VISIONS OF NATURE: THUNDERSTORMS

Hopkins is not alone in praising clouds. Wordsworth begins one of his best-known lyric poems with the line, “I wandered lonely as a cloud.” And poets, like almost all artists, love thunderstorms as expressions of dynamic power. Consider these lines from *The Bridge*, a visionary long poem by Hart Crane (1899–1932), an American modernist poet. Modernism in literature was a twentieth-century movement that sought to break with traditional literary forms and content to embrace language and subject matter characterizing life in the modern world. In “Cape Hatteras,” the fourth section of *The Bridge*, Crane imagines the pilot of an airplane (and it's useful to know that airplanes were very much a new technology when this poem was written in the late 1920s) rising up into the heights of the sky into a thunderstorm, finding himself in the heart of its gathering energy. Crane, like Hopkins, is a poet of giddy expressive extravagance. Initially, he compares the clouds the

pilot sees to blimps (another flying technology of the era), referring to one cloud as “O thou Dirigible, enormous Lounger / Of pendulous auroral beaches,” which gathering with other clouds makes a storm, of “scouting griffons” rising “through gaseous crepe / Hung low”

... until a conch of thunder answers
Cloud-belfries, banging, while searchlights, like fencers,
Slit the sky’s pancreas of foaming anthracite
Toward thee, O Corsair of the typhoon, —pilot, hear!
Thine eyes bicarbonated white by speed, O Skygak, see
How from they path above the levin’s lance
Thou sowest doom thou hast nor time nor chance
To reckon—as thy stilly eyes partake
What alcohol of space ... ! (35)

Finding himself in the center of the storm, the pilot (whom Crane calls Skygak, which is a made-up word for a steeplejack who walks the high steel girders of a skyscraper under construction) watches the flashes of lightning (“searchlights, like fencers”) to find himself suddenly overcome by thunder, which Crane figures as the “sky’s pancreas” slit open to gush out its “foaming anthracite,” surely one of the most bizarre but riveting images in American poetry. Anthracite is a form of coal; it foams the way thunder booms. Unified with the storm itself, the pilot dives into a free fall, his eyes “bicarbonated” white by speed, to plunge toward Earth through an “alcohol of space.” It’s a wild ride! And the pilot has been transformed in this scene, unifying with the storm while freefalling in a machine.

PROPHETIC VISIONS: FEARFUL SYMMETRY

Visions of nature challenge and unify the poet to a feeling of the divine. Nature poetry is one of the oldest forms of poetry that exists. Nearly as old, often more powerful and frightening, are prophetic poems. Prophecy is a mode of communication between a divine reality and a human audience. The poet as prophet sometimes speaks to God for the people but just as often speaks to the people for God. Prophetic poetry frequently includes premonitions, which are forewarnings or presentiments of something unpleasant that might happen.

William Blake was a prophetic poet whose visions completely informed his poetry. His *Songs of Experience* (originally published in 1794) includes a poem titled “The Tyger,” probably his best-known lyric. It begins:

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

In Blake’s expansive and idiosyncratic mythology, the Tyger represents the wrath of the heart, a revolutionary energy broken forth from chaos transformed into pouncing flame. Thus the Tyger burns bright in the forests of the night. This opening quatrain of his poem is cunningly wrought: four lines in which the first and second lines rhyme emphatically (bright/night), where the third and fourth lines rhyme obliquely but with magical authority (eye/symmetry). What is fearful symmetry, after all, and what might it have to do with the eye, which is to say, with vision?

Listen to the rhythm of the stanza: four lines with four beats apiece, with a stressed then unstressed syllable (this is called a trochaic meter; the poem is in trochaic tetrameter). TYger TYger BURNing BRIGHT. In English, this is the meter of magical incantation. “Double, double toil and trouble; / Fire burn and caldron bubble,” sing the Stygian witches in *MacBeth*. “Twinkle twinkle little star,” you coo to a baby in the crib. In both cases, you are invoking the presence of a reality in which magic, sorcery, and divinity are in play.

Blake’s poem invokes the creation of the Tyger, forged in primordial fire, flashing suddenly through the chaos. The Tyger has come, like Christ in the gnostic Gospel of Thomas, to set the world on fire. The poem is a series of interrogations, proceeding from the opening, seemingly unanswerable, question, “What immortal hand or eye, / Could frame thy fearful symmetry?” Imagining the cosmic blacksmith who could have created such a beast, Blake asks:

What the hammer? what the chain,
In what furnace was thy brain?
What the anvil? what dread grasp,
Dare its deadly terrors clasp?

When the stars threw down their spears
And water’d heaven with their tears:
Did he smile his work to see?
Did he who made the Lamb make thee? (24, 25)

The crucial prophetic questions Blake asks are “What dread grasp / Dare its deadly terrors clasp?” and “Did he who made the Lamb make thee?” In Blake’s poetry, in addition to being a symbol of bucolic unity, the Lamb of course is Christ. Is it possible that the revolutionary, chaotic Tyger could have been made by the same divine master who makes the Lamb for the world? And are we prepared to grasp the deadly terrors of the implications of this possibility?

S. Foster Damon, writing about Blake’s poem, observes, “At last, when the Tyger’s form is completed, the stars throw down their spears in terror and water heaven with their pitying tears” (414). In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake’s satirical masterpiece, he includes among the “Proverbs of Hell” these two convictions: “The roaring of lions, the howling of wolves, the raging of the stormy sea, and the destructive sword are portions of eternity too great for the eye of man,” and, “The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction” (36). With these sayings, Blake means, among other things, that the wild forces of experience, which we can envision in the forms of powerful predatory animals, violent weather, and the tools of war, are greater than any learning we might acquire from books or universities.

The authority for Blake’s poetry came directly to him from religious, visionary inspiration. In his prophetic poem *Milton*, the poet sees “in the nether regions of the Imagination” (114) the poet John Milton (1608–1674), whom Blake revered, descend from eternity to earth in the form of a falling star. As the star falls and enters the earth in Blake’s garden, it enters the poet’s left foot (the first foot to step from the Garden of Eden), filling him with Milton’s poetic and prophetic authority. Initially, Blake is not sure what has happened to him in this vision. He writes:

But I knew not that it was Milton, for Man cannot know
What passes in his members till periods of Space & Time
Reveal the secrets of Eternity (114)

Over time, these secrets would be revealed to Blake. Initially, however, he understood that when Milton entered his left foot, he had been inspired and had received all of Milton's prophetic and poetic powers.

PROPHETIC VISIONS: A ROUGH BEAST

In a similar mode, the famously important poet William Butler Yeats (1865–1939), who learned a great deal of his craft from Blake, composed a poem of lasting prophetic urgency and dread, “The Second Coming” (first printed in 1920). This poem could well serve as a model for the reinforcing powers of religious and poetic rhetoric to shape an expression of lasting, ominous persuasion. The opening stanza of the poem is iconic:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Notice that the first two lines conclude with a Blake-like off rhyme, where *gyre* rhymes obliquely with *falconer*. A gyre is a circle made by something in motion; in this case, it would be pronounced with a soft g, like “jire.” Yeats follows these lines with another pair of lines in off rhyme: *hold/world*.

The poem begins with a vision of a predatory falcon leaving the ring of its master's control, a sign of things falling apart. Typically poets are discouraged from using the passive voice because, in the passive voice, the subject of a sentence is acted upon rather than doing the action. In Yeats's poem, the repetition of the passive verb “is loosed” saturates the poem in a sense of helplessness toward anarchy and the blood-dimmed tide. The concluding two lines—“The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity”—could as easily be used to characterize our present age as it did Yeats's own age nearly a century ago when he wrote this chilling poem.

The second stanza of “The Second Coming” ratchets up the apocalyptic intensity. Apocalypse, in the Christian sense specifically, but by extension in a general religious sense, refers to revelatory events of the end times, specifically the second coming of Christ:

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of *Spiritus Mundi*
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born? (187)

Yeats's poem laboriously amplifies its spooky foreboding. The title refers, of course, to the Christian expectation of the return of an exalted Jesus, foretold at several points in the New Testament, including Paul's letters, the gospels, and the Book of Revelation.

The first line of the second stanza of this poem alludes directly to the Book of Revelation, the concluding book of the New Testament, filled with visionary rumors and anticipations Yeats's poem cunningly reworks into a frightening, prophetic dream. The poet sees a sphinx in the desert, a beast who serves as a sign of the end times announced in the poem. The sphinx stirs in the desert, its gaze "blank and pitiless as the sun," and begins "moving its slow thighs." The adjective *slow* might cause the reader to shudder: the whole grotesque energy of the poem is concentrated in that word. This monster is not roused to wild fury like Blake's Tyger; instead, it moves meticulously and purposefully while indignant birds whirl furiously above its colossal shape.

For Yeats, apocalypse is not a sudden event but a horrible, nightmarish slow burn, which nevertheless cannot be stopped. Like Blake, Yeats employs a menacing, unanswerable question to conclude his poem: "And what rough beast, his hour come round at last, / slouches toward Bethlehem to be born?" Though we don't know what it will be, Yeats is announcing that whatever it is, it won't be pleasant.

In writing this poem, one of the most famous poems in English written in the twentieth century, Yeats was relying in part on magical and esoteric ideas that he combined into a grand theory of creativity, which he recorded in *A Vision*, a work of poetic mythology whose grandeur is matched only by its peculiarity. Esotericism refers to wisdom traditions characterized by hidden truths, secret knowledge, occult laws of nature, extraordinary psychic powers, and, often, hierarchies of gods, spirits, demons, and masters.

For a period in the late nineteenth century, Yeats was a practicing magician, belonging as an apprentice to an occult society called the Golden Dawn, which was active in England at the time. In *A Vision*, Yeats presents an occult science of creativity organized around twenty-eight phases of the moon in the form of a fantasy in which a character of his own invention discovers a magical tome with "many diagrams where gyres and circles flew out of one another like strange vegetables, and there was a large diagram at the beginning where lunar phases and zodiac signs were mixed with various unintelligible symbols—an apple, an acorn, a cup" (lix–lx). Many people, including people of faith, consider astrology, horoscopes, and occult knowledge to be frivolous and misguided. For Yeats, however, these systems provided him a legible means of approaching the creative imagination, in keeping with a dictum of Blake's, in which he stated, "Mental things alone are real." For a visionary poet, the poem enables the expression of a form of reality deeper and richer than mere reality. Hence Corbin's notion of the imaginal world as really real.

Consider the influence of Yeats's poem as a demonstration of the value of the deeper reality his poem reveals. Besides inspiring several book titles—from Chinua Achebe's novel *Things Fall Apart*, to Joan Didion's collection of essays *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, to Woody Allen's collection *Mere Anarchy*—lines from the poem are staples in comic books (e.g., *Batman: The Widening Gyre*), heavy-metal lyrics ("blood-dimmed tides"), science fiction and fantasy novels, and television. In the final season of *The Sopranos* (2007), Tony Soprano's son, A. J., who is spiraling into a torpid depression, quotes from the poem to represent his inner state. Keep in mind this was a television series devoted to the mafia (and, to be fair, psychotherapy). The poem exceeds its literary origins because it feels like it accesses a greater visionary truth that continues to resonate even today.

VISIONS OF ABSENCE: DAZZLING DARKNESS

As often as poets envision spectacular things in their poetry, they express inexpressible things, approaching what they experience through the articulation of an absence, a darkness, or even something that is not there. Henry Vaughan (1621–1695), who was a poet of the Renaissance in England, in his poem “The Night,” insists that darkness is where God dwells and is therefore where he might be found. The poem begins as a reading of a verse in chapter three of the Gospel of John in which Nicodemus (a Pharisee, which is a group of observant and influential Jews active in Palestine during the life of Jesus and who often appear in the gospels as foils for Jesus’s teachings) questions Jesus on the nature of his teachings and salvation itself (See John 3:1–21). Vaughan’s poem begins:

Through that pure *Virgin-shrine*,
That sacred vail drawn o’r thy glorious noon
That men might look and live as Glo-worms shine,
And face the Moon:
Wise *Nicodemus* saw such light
As made him know his God by night.

It is an impressive setup: using the binaries of light and darkness, and the sun and moon, Vaughan suggests that in the mysterious light of nighttime God might be known. Vaughan was a poet of unusual sensibilities, even for a poet who lived during the seventeenth century in England. Like John Donne, George Herbert, John Milton, and Thomas Traherne, Vaughan is considered to be one of the so-called metaphysical poets. None of these poets ever called himself *metaphysical*. Yet their works were seen by later readers and critics to be unusually engaged with religious and philosophical themes. All of these poets were Christians, many belonged to the Church of England, and many of them were clergy members.

Vaughan had a religious experience in 1648, intensifying his Christian devotion. That said, his work is suffused with pointed mystical language and allusion, influenced partly by the work of his twin brother Thomas, who was a devoted scholar of Hermetic philosophy, an esoteric philosophy derived from and devoted to the teachings of Hermes Trismegistus, a mythical magician and sage who is believed to have lived in Alexandria in the century before the birth of Christ, and is the supposed author of the highly influential *Corpus Hermeticum*. Thomas also translated into English many of the works of Christian and esoteric mystics, including *The Mystical Theology* of Dionysius. Dionysius was a Christian mystic who scholars believe lived in the fifth or sixth century CE. His work, *The Mystical Theology*, promotes a negative theology because it emphasizes that all language about God is radically inadequate to describing God or religious experience.

In light of this influence, consider the final stanza to Henry Vaughan’s “The Night”:

There is in God (some say)
A deep, but dazling darkness; As men here
Say it is late and dusky, because they
See not all clear;
O for that night! where I in him
Might live invisible and dim. (434, 436)

In these lines, Vaughan alludes to Dionysius’s conception of God as a dazzling darkness, approached perhaps through a cancellation of his positive attributes. But notice

that Vaughan's poem expresses longing for a spiritual condition not yet attained but characterized by absence. Most men, the poet claims, see dusk as a fading of sunlight, but not yet the darkness. The poet cries out for that night in which his own light might fade to a dimness that verges on invisibility. Despite the negation in this stanza, Vaughan expresses a powerful image of God as dazzling darkness.

VISIONS OF ABSENCE: GLOOM, PANDEMONIUM, AND DARK MATERIALS

A very similar vision can be seen emphatically in one of John Milton's (1608–1674) earliest and greatest poems, "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity, Compos'd 1629." The poet is a mere twenty-one years old when he wrote it. The seventh stanza of this poem runs:

And though the shady gloom
Had given day her room,
The Sun himself with-held his wonted speed,
And hid his head for shame,
As his inferiour flame,
The new-enlightn'd world no more should need;
He saw a greater Sun appear
Then his bright Throne, or burning Axletree could bear. (254)

As in Vaughan's poem, Milton employs the image of the sun to describe a spiritual state. In this case, however, the sun is used to suggest a shame it feels in relation to the spectacular light emerging from Christ at the time of his birth, which radiates with the light of a sun "greater th[a]n his bright Throne," meaning greater even than the sun itself, and greater than a "burning Axletree could bear." An axletree is, in this instance, a heavenly pole but alludes, because of its burning power, to the Crucifixion, which becomes a theme later in the poem.

Milton's Gloom. Notice the word "gloom" in the first line of the stanza. It resonates with the same force that Vaughan's "dazzling darkness" does. Prior to Milton's use of the word in this poem, gloom tended mainly to mean a condition of darkness or obscurity, or of creeping shadow. In this case, by comparing the light of the sun to the celestial light of Christ himself at his birth, Milton tinges the word "gloom" with melancholy, with a sense of moral struggle that henceforth the word will tend to carry. Now, it's commonplace for us to say we're feeling gloomy. Before Milton used the word in this way in his poem, no one ever thought to make the connection between gloom and mood.

Milton's Pandemonium. Inventing words or fitting words to new use, which is called neology, was a specialty of Milton's, a skill he put vividly and regularly to use in his masterpiece, *Paradise Lost* (1667), which retells in epic form the story of Adam and Eve's temptation by Satan in the Garden of Eden. Book I of *Paradise Lost* opens with a description of all of the fallen angels, foes of God in the rebellious war in Heaven, awakening to find themselves in an abysmal realm of shadow, foul smells, gloom, and despair. Satan, the archfiend and leader of the fallen angels, gathers them together to arouse them from a state of pitiable damnation to wage cosmic war against the powers of Heaven. Looking around him, Satan asks,

Is this the region, this the soil, the clime this the seat
That we must change for Heaven, this mournful gloom
For that celestial light? Be it so, since he

Who now is sovereign can dispose and bid
What shall be right. Farthest from him is best
Whom reason hath equaled, force hath made supreme
Above his equals. Farewell happy fields
Where joy forever dwells. Hail horrors, hail
Infernal world, and thou profoundest hell
Receive thy new possessor: one who brings
A mind not to be changed by place or time.
The mind is its own place and in itself
Can make a Heaven of hell, a hell of Heaven.

PARADISE LOST, BOOK 1, LL. 242–255

Milton's depiction of Satan in his poem has itself no equal. Satan is cunning, well-spoken, brooding, powerful. He appears in these lines to be embracing his new fallen fate as lord of hell with resolve and authority. Having inspired all the other fallen demons to serve him in this new war, Satan urges them all to build a horrific palace for him out of metallic ore, sulphur, asphalt, magic, and black pitch. A demon named Mulciber ("the founder of metal") leads this "industrious crew" of demons who build this palace in hell, creating "Pandaemonium, the high capital / of Satan and his peers" (*Paradise Lost*, Book 1, lines 756–757). *Pandemonium*: it means "all of the demons." Milton invented that word for his poem!

Milton's Dark Materials. In Book 2 of *Paradise Lost*, a great council of all the demons is assembled in Pandaemonium, where each of the major demons is given an opportunity to speak and to press his own cause for which course the war with Heaven should take. After all of the demons have spoken, including Beelzebub, Belial, and Moloch, Satan speaks about a world God is rumored to have created in which reside two humans, two vulnerable souls. He resolves that the best way to defeat God is to corrupt those two souls and thus quickly leaves Pandaemonium to fly to this new world across the great void of space.

While racing through this realm of primordial chaos, Satan touches the very material of creation itself, which Milton describes in a vivid language of creative, dynamic absence, worthy of the account of Creation in the King James Bible's opening chapter of Genesis, of which Milton's poem itself is an expansion:

Chaos umpire sits
And, by decision, more embroils the fray
By which he reigns; next him high arbiter
Chance governs all. Into this wild abyss,
The womb of nature and perhaps her grave,
Of neither sea, nor shore, nor air, nor fire,
But all these in their pregnant causes mixed
Confusedly, and which thus must ever fight
Unless the almighty maker them ordain
His dark materials to create more worlds.

PARADISE LOST, BOOK 2, LL. 907–916

It's a stunning vision of nothing: chaos sits with chance as ruler of the "wild abyss," which Milton calls the "womb of nature" and also "her grave." That is, the chaotic abyss is

the emptiness out of which life begins and into which life will end. Notice all the negations: this void is neither sea, nor shore, nor air, nor fire but is somehow all of these things at once and also their negation. Likewise, Milton describes the emptiness as pregnant (extending the metaphor of the womb) with all the confusion roiling in the void. It's unbearably chaotic except for the fact that God himself might choose to use any or all of these "dark materials" in order to "create more worlds." In other words, the stuff of creation is a deep but dazzling darkness that only God can handle. What a vision!

His Dark Materials is the name that contemporary fantasy writer Philip Pullman gave to a trilogy of books he wrote for young adults, which is, in its way, a retelling of *Paradise Lost* as if written by Blake's Tyger. His books are premised on an unusual but generative notion that the material of creation is emptiness, which is where the soul comes from. In Pullman's novels, an intelligent girl from another world and a resourceful boy from our world meet in an expanding universe of worlds in which they play a crucial role in the defeat of demiurgic God. A demiurge, in this view, is a tyrannically powerful God. The word *demiurge*, though present in Plato in a more positive sense, is a derogatory term derived from ancient gnosticism for the creator God of the biblical tradition. In Pullman's novels, the girl and boy protagonists defeat the demiurge in part by embracing the dynamic emptiness of creation itself. An impressive and unusual topic for books intended for young readers.

Visions of Absence: Despair. Sometimes, even in visionary poetry, absence leads to despair. In the hands of skilled poets, this condition can suggest a form of empowerment in a refusal to recognize the despair as anything but itself. One finds this frequently in the poems of Emily Dickinson (1830–1886), for instance, as well as this untitled poem by Emily Brontë (1818–1848), who is best known for her novel *Wuthering Heights*:

The night is darkening around me,
The wild winds coldly blow;
But a tyrant spell has bound me
And I cannot, cannot go.

The giant trees are bending
Their bare boughs weighted with snow,
And the storm is fast descending
And yet I cannot go.

Clouds beyond clouds above me,
Wastes beyond wastes below;
But nothing dear can move me;
I will not, cannot go. (198)

Brontë's poem is deceptively straightforward, propelled by its simple, clear rhymes and its commanding rhythm, as well as the refrain of the last line, with its expression, "I cannot go." Why not?

Everything described in the poem ought to be urging the speaker to run and hide, to seek shelter, to find some comfort in the face of the violence and desolation the poem points to. A great storm is approaching—the trees are bending in the fierce winds. Beyond the clouds the poet sees more clouds. Beyond the waste of the moors, she sees further waste. Why doesn't she move? "A tyrant spell has bound me," she confesses, and "nothing dear can move me." The wild despair she feels, which otherwise should be intolerable, transforms

into resolve and strength to face the darkening night. Readers are left with what feels to be the poet's wish to unite with the enveloping gloomy power of the darkness itself.

Visions of Unity: The Great Swing. The feeling that the darkness surrounds us compels urgent expressions like Brontë's from poets, negotiating with their language the vivid fissure between the world of what we know and what we don't know. Distress and dereliction are the signatures of what the great Carmelite mystic St. John of the Cross (1542–1591) called "the dark night of the soul," an experience of religious despair and mystical purification that poets through the ages have intensified. But what about its opposite? What about the rapturous experience of divine union? How do poets handle the expression of euphoric annihilation, the conviction, as the great Dominican mystic and preacher Meister Eckhart (c. 1260–1328) put it, that "the breaking through is nobler than the flowing out" (443)?

Poets express visions of union very well as it happens, with astonishing language and energetic imagery. Consider the following poem by Kabir (c. 1440–c. 1518), a mystic and saint who lived in India and left behind an incisive and profound body of poetry written in vernacular Hindi:

Between the poles of the conscious and the unconscious, there has the mind made
a swing;
Thereon hang all beings and all worlds, and that swing never ceases its sway.
Millions of beings are there: the sun and the moon in their courses are there:
Millions of ages pass, and the swing goes on.
All swing! the sky and the earth and the air and the water; and the Lord Himself
taking form:
And the sight of this has made Kabir a servant. (59)

In this poem, Kabir envisions eternity as a great swing. The poem moves with the gathering momentum of a pendulum increasing its rate of back and forth motion so powerfully that in its wake all souls, all the planets, even the divine itself take form as a result. It's a momentary, colossal vision of eternity in constant motion, the glimpse of which the poet assures us "made Kabir a servant."

This scene alludes to a central teaching in Kabir's legendary life. As a revered saint, the actuality of Kabir's life has been submerged into its myth. Popular belief holds that Kabir, born in Benares the child of a Muslim weaver, exhibited early in his life a passion for religion, wanting desperately to be apprenticed to Ramananda (1356–1400), a revered saint, believed even in his lifetime to be the reincarnation of Rama, legendary hero of an epic poem, *The Ramayana*, and the seventh avatar of Vishnu, the Hindu god. An avatar is an earthly manifestation of a Hindu deity. According to legend, Kabir convinced Ramananda, a Hindu, to take him on as a disciple, despite being born to a Muslim family, because Kabir startled Ramananda on his way to bathe in the Ganges, convincing the saint of his sincerity. Kabir's life and work was defined by devotion. Arvind Krishna Mehrotra, one of Kabir's contemporary translators, characterizes the distinguishing feature of this devotion as "an inward love for the One Deity, in disregard of, and often in opposition to, religious orthodoxies and social hierarchies.... Not content to worship God from a distance, [the devotee] wants to taste Him, that 'chemical called Rama'" (xxi, xxii). Seeing the Lord himself taking form, Kabir devotes himself to the scintillating, transient vision of the cosmos and all its life as a great swing, which serves to make both him and whoever shares his vision initiates in a mysterious union with the divine.

Visions of Unity: The Merge. Perhaps the most profound and assertive example of religious union with the divine appears in Walt Whitman's (1819–1892) great "Song of Myself," a poem first published in 1855. The poem opens with a bold assertion, "I celebrate myself / And what I assume you shall assume, / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you." In the next stanza, Whitman includes two innovations that can be taken to represent the spiritual imperative he initiates in this poem:

I loafe and invite my soul,
I lean and loafe at my ease observing a spear of summer grass. (ll. 4–5; 14)

First, readers find this unusual word "loafe," with the "e" added for emphasis. What does this mean, to *loafe*? Whitman repeats the word, adding "I lean and loafe at my ease." Loafeing must have something to do with leaning and something to do with ease. He follows this provocative declaration with a punctuation mark he invented for use in his great poem: four periods in a row. Not an ellipsis, which is marked by three periods in a row and signifies something missing, either in a thought or a sequence. No, instead Whitman provides four periods, each marking a presence of some sort rather than an absence. What is present? It seems a state of profound and relaxed receptivity, a condition of celebration and invitation, in which tender friendly contact might be made with the soul.

Not long after this opening, Whitman's poem magnifies suddenly into a grand cosmic vision arising out of what appears to be erotic contact with another man whom the poet depicts as an avatar of his soul. "I believe in you my soul," he declares, continuing:

Loafe with me on the grass loose the stop from your throat,
Not words, not music or rhymes I want not custom or lecture, not even the
best,
Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice.

I mind how we lay in June, such a transparent summer morning;
You settled your head athwart my hips and gently turned over upon me,
And parted my shirt from my bosom-bone, and plunged your tongue to my
barestript heart.
And reached till you felt my beard, and reached till you held my feet. (ll. 75–81; 18)

Once again, the four periods extend the condition of the command for his soul to "loafe" with the poet on the transparent summer morning. In a state of intensifying passionate rapture, Whitman waves away words and teaching, claiming instead to want only the voice of his beloved, in a particularly delicious line of poetry: "Only the lull I like, the hum of your valved voice." Note the repetition of "l" sounds, short "u" sounds, and "v" sounds. What follows depicts sexual passion climaxing in ecstatic union, unchaining Whitman from ordinary vision to see the universe in a rapturous transient instant:

Swiftly arose and spread around me the peace and joy and knowledge that pass all
the art and argument of the earth;
And I know that the hand of God is the elderhand of my own,
And I know that the spirit of God is the eldest brother of my own,
And that all the men and women ever born are also my brothers and the
women my sisters and lovers.
And that a kelson of the creation is love;
And limitless are leaves stiff or drooping in the fields,

And brown ants in the little wells beneath them,
And mossy scabs of the wormfence, and heaped stones, and elder and mullen and
pokeweed. (ll. 82–89; 18)

What a moment! One of the greatest of all in English language poetry. Notice that Whitman’s vision of unity surpasses all the art and argument of the Earth—the addition of the word “argument” feels crucial here. And notice that after feeling grandly united with God, and with all men and women, he declares that “a kelson of the creation is love.” *Kelson* is an alternate spelling for “keelson,” namely the long central beam in the hull of a sailboat that gives it form and stability.

Earlier in the same poem, Whitman insists that the sexual urge is also the dynamic creative urge, declaring, “Urge and urge and urge, / Always the procreant urge of the world.” Once consumed by this cosmic vision of unifying love, Whitman relaxes back into the receptivity of his loafe, seeing the leaves and the ants, the stones and the weeds, as active components of this expansive vision.

A few moments later in “Song of Myself,” Whitman reasserts his vision in the form of new presence and authority, with one of the great guiding questions of his art:

Who need be afraid of the merge?
Undrape you are not guilty to me, nor stale nor discarded,
I see through the broadcloth and gingham whether or no,
And am around, tenacious, acquisitive, tireless and can never be shaken away.
(ll. 136–139; 20)

Who need be afraid of the merge? This is the unruly and lavish question that marks the work of the visionary poet, reaching into the unknown and guiding readers to that realm, tenacious and tireless, never to be shaken away.

Summary

Though the focus of this chapter has been instances of visionary poetry, an implied question has lurked in the margins all along: is religious language simply a form of poetry? In his Laocoön engraving, William Blake declared “Art is the Tree of Life” (271). He means, in a sense, that the moment of the creation of life—represented by the tree God planted in the Garden of Eden—is a moment of art, of poetry.

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), in his essay “The Poet,” first published in 1844, claims a primary status for the poet, writing, “The poet is the sayer, the namer, and represents beauty” (449). For Emerson, the poet not only records sacred history but embodies it because the language the poet uses is a creative language identical to that of God. “Every word was once a poem,” he insists. And, “Language is fossil poetry” (457), meaning that ordinary language, like an ancient artifact of earlier forms of life excavated from a midden heap, has at its core its original, generative form: poetry. The poet, Emerson incants, “is caught up into the life of the Universe, his speech is thunder, his thought is law, and his words are universally intelligible as the plants and animals.” Emerson’s poet sounds as much like a god as he does an artist. “The poets are thus liberating gods” (462), he concludes, adding, “Art is the path of the creator to his work” (466).

The question whether religious language is simply poetry (which could also be inverted to ask, is poetry always a form of religious language?) can't ever be adequately answered. Yet it must be said, Emerson makes a compelling case that at their cores religious language and poetry are the same. If this is so, it likely results from the principles of inspiration, devotion, or ecstatic merger encountered in the examples of visionary poetry we have looked at. Vision, revelation, and inspiration come to the poet from some Other—in the form of a deity or another person, the natural world or a vision of absence—whose authority compels the poet to record what he or she has seen in words of resonating power.

In studying the connection between religion and poetry, especially in terms of the poetic forms of the imagination, it is helpful to orient toward poetry not as the expression of an emotional or psychological state but as the manipulation of language at the levels of sound and meaning. This enables an inquiry into the nature of vision and imagination as expressed in poetry attuned to religious affirmation and vision.

Poets express religious meaning in visionary poetry. Some of this poetry depicts visions of nature in which the poet expresses unity with the natural world or awe at natural phenomena, such as clouds and thunderstorms. Other forms of religious poetry are prophetic, in which the poet uses the poem to express premonitions of powerful, impending, and even terrifying realities glimpsed in the imagination. Likewise, there are forms of religious poetry that express dread and terror at what seems to be an absence of divine presence or even, more complexly, feelings of awe in relation to creative darkness. And finally, there are forms of religious poetry that suggest states of ecstatic union with God and the divine reality, experienced as moments of transient but lasting insight.

Whether religious poetry derives from religious language or whether religious language is an echo of primordial creative expression are similar questions that will probably never be adequately answered. It suffices to say nevertheless that it is not possible to think about religious language without thinking about poetry, and vice versa.

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