

# THE GLASS

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# Editorial

Like the future, which is after all the locus of all hope, the spiritual world is a mystery, and those who tell us they can see into these interesting regions may, if they speak aright, command attention. In Jewish tradition prophets could be at odds with priests – ‘I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats’ declared Isaiah, speaking in the voice of God (1:11). Power and the Holy Spirit were more manifestly with a Samuel or an Elijah than with the sons of Eli at Shiloh. But search the prophets and you will find that they often share a source with the ministers of the Tabernacle and Temple. The patriarchs and Moses are claimed by both in a tradition which mediates the presence and the will of God.

The evolution of prophecy from Biblical to modern times provided a theme to the CLSG conference last autumn, and we are grateful to the contributors on that day for four articles on prophecy in this issue.

Valentine Cunningham’s article, a paper given at the previous conference, locates Jacques Derrida, perhaps surprisingly, in a tradition that reaches back to the Torah. Our first article is the last chapter of Michael Edwards’ *Ombres de lune*, and in it he discusses how those who read the Law and the Prophets might read and write in our generation. It is a topic that is central to our project in Christian literary studies.

*Roger Kojecký*

# Lunar Shadows: Reflections on Literary Creation

Michael Edwards

'De la poétique chrétienne', Chapter 13, pp. 269-289 of *Ombres de lune: réflexions sur la création littéraire*, Éditions Espaces 34, 2001. It is a paper originally given on 14 January 1992, at the centre de recherches 'Lecture de l'Écriture', Université de Lille III, directed by Jacques Sys. It was published in *Graphè*, 2, 1993, and is here kindly translated for *The Glass* by David Barratt.

## 1

I HAVE SUGGESTED IN THE COURSE OF THIS BOOK THAT THE PHENOMENON OF repetition, which allows us to probe in all sorts of ways the action and being of poetry and other forms of literature, for me takes its origin in an 'explanation of the earth' (Mallarmé) which is not Orphic but Christian. It is time now to look at this theological idea more closely.

In the light of the presence of the Bible in European literatures and elsewhere, in the light of its influence – whether we judge it a good or a bad thing – on so much writing, whether of prime importance or even of little, we have plenty of undoubted reason to decide that here surely is a field of study worthy of our attention and practically limitless. Biblical themes abound. Biblical stories disguise themselves in all sorts of ways. Characters re-appear in all sorts of climes: conversion in Puritan autobiography; the revolt of Satan in Romantic poetry; Herodias in 'decadent' literature ... the prodigious possibilities will certainly satisfy the zeal of researchers. However, in tracing these external links between the Scriptures and literary works, we may get a hint of some more intimate relationship, which runs from the Biblical vision of the world to the very being of literature, because what seems to interest the Bible, beyond the manifold interests of books or of people, is what they are. It could be that literature is, from this point of view, either an attempt at metamorphosis, or on the contrary, a Luciferian insurrection, a murderous seduction of the reader.

Hence the interest of a Christian poetics, having as its ambition not the evaluation of texts according to their conformity to the spirit of the gospels, whether great or little, but the realising of what literature is in Biblical perspective. It is not a question of noting nor of judging, but of trying to understand. It's not a question, either, at least in the poetics I envisage – though I recognise obviously that there exist other ways of envisaging – of looking for the modalities of a Christian literature, or the rules of praxis. Christian poetics does not limit itself to Christian literature, any more than the Bible addresses itself exclusively to faith.

It is true that such research – necessarily passing through our experience as

readers yet orientated towards the otherness (altérité) of that which goes beyond us, attentive at the same time to the teaching of the Bible and to the givens of literature – in spite of everything still runs the Satanic risk of swallowing the real, of transforming it into some personal system, of reducing it to some solipsistic spectacle. Besides, and the lesson is hard to swallow, we only understand what it is given us to understand (since ‘every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights’), and the approach of a Ben Jonson in his *Discoveries* seems the right one. It is to ‘gently stirre the mould about the root of the Question’ (#123). There, you might think, is a flagrant example of English empiricism, of the prudence of insular people, and it is certain that Jonson refused to ‘make ... parties with the present’, to join up to one or other fashionable theory, and that he was suspicious of ‘fierce undertakers’. But if he disturbs the earth, that is where the root of the question lies, and I see with Jonson also the continental desire, if you like, to understand the problem in its profundity.

I might add in passing that a history of Christian poetics would be highly profitable, and it would doubtless be necessary to prepare for it by studying each successive example. It would reveal what we already know, that Christian poetics effectively has a long history, and in a country like England, for example, the history of literary theory, from Sidney to T.S. Eliot and beyond, very nearly merges with the search for a Christian poetics. *De poetica christiana*: the title doesn’t figure in any ancient text that I know of, but the project crosses the centuries.

## 2

Where to start? Without doubt, at the beginning, since the most tenacious concept of the relationship between Christianity and literature, and even other art forms, sees in the artist – in the poet or he who *makes* – an analogy of God. Thus, man is capable of creating, thanks to his origin in a Creator God; a literary work is the creation of a man in the same way, more or less, that the universe is the creation of God. Yes, we’re in the presence here of a commonplace, but the property of commonplaces is often to be profoundly true, either because they conform to the reality of things, or because they naively express our most hidden desire. I have come to believe that whoever dedicates his life to the study of commonplaces would have every chance of becoming wise, and even finding himself having really new ideas. One can see the interest of considering God Himself as an artist. The universe becomes a cosmos drawn out of chaos. What we would have formerly called Nature (and I shall continue to use that word) becomes itself a work of art, and it would seem that for God the natural and the artistic or the artificial are not distinct categories. As Augustine held, even the Son of God is *Ars Patris*, the Father’s art.

We must make a great effort to imagine a world constituted thus, where everything that enters into human experience comes from art, where everything that man sees or touches, all that he makes, is penetrated with harmony and takes part in a universal consonance. It is the world hinted at in the narrative of Genesis, which moreover presents the first ‘Adam’ if not exactly as a creator, at

least as someone to whom the task is assigned of continuing or achieving the creation of God. He names the animals; he adds human language to the divine Word; he makes the earth habitable for his race.

The first human beings in the narrative did not engage themselves in art as we know it, but it is difficult for us to admit that an Eden, a perfect terrestrial garden, would be without poetry or music. This difficulty could very well come from our fallen nature, and signify no more than our desire to defend our possession. But it could also be that poetry and music are not incompatible with unfallen Nature, already artistic within itself, and that they have as their function, if not to enrich it, at least to express it. The art of the first human beings would resemble that of the citizens of heaven, those hymns of praise that do not cease, according to certain Bible passages, to resound through the world of highest reality. Perhaps it is even in that celestial music that a Christian poetics could begin, since it is certain that whatever the motive of the Father's art in engendering the Son and in making the universe, the motive of his creatures' art is to praise. Art would be in the first place, and in the first of all places, the art of praising; it repeats the world by its praise.

However, it is only too evident that of this unfallen happy world, which we can only painfully reconstruct in our imagination, we are profoundly ignorant. It is not humble wonder but Renaissance *hubris* which pervades the celebrated comment attributed to Tasso, 'Non merita nome di creatore, se non Iddio ed il Poeta'. For us, to bring the writer and God too close is first of all a danger, and if there is nevertheless a comparison to make, it is waiting beyond the satanic temptation to create a world which rivals the divine world, and would avoid any idea of a common measure – the fact is clear but it still needs constant remembering – between all human 'creatures', even the mightiest, and Him who thought the starry night.

A totally artistic nature also astounds us. To envisage, now, the 'gran teatro del mundo', we feel anguish more than happiness. Characters in a divine work, we nevertheless want to become ourselves dramatists, architects, painters, musicians. Doesn't God's creation suffice? Why then do we set ourselves to distinguish art and nature, if not because nature does not satisfy, even as a work of art, and that art exists, for us, precisely as a response to the insufficiency of nature, as the possibility of another nature or even, when our disarray touches the bottom, of a sort of anti-nature? That's why it is difficult for us to imagine an art that would exist in Eden, and the difficulty says a lot about our condition. We don't see there an art founded on the imagination, if it is true that to imagine always presupposes a gap, an absence. In the fullness of being, in perfect presence, there is no need to imagine anything. We would not expect to listen to narratives, to enter into a world parallel to the real one (a term I employ as an economy of expression), to become aware of the birth within ourselves of a new being.

Hence the importance of Adam and Eve's morning prayer in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where

neither various style  
Nor holy rapture wanted they to praise

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Their Maker, in fit strains pronounced, or sung  
Unmeditated (Book V, 146-149).

We can suppose with Milton – we feel it in every syllable – a huge nostalgia, the aching aspiration of the writer, mortal and exiled, for this ‘style’, for these ‘just harmonies’, in prose, in poetry or in music, which come without effort, for this ‘eloquence’ of an art that flows naturally. For these first humans of Milton, like the Genesis Adam who names creation, if they are acquainted with art, do not produce it like artists. Man effaces himself behind his laudatory eloquence; poetry and song disappear in what they effect. We see neither Adam nor angels desirous of elaborating some personal work, of exploring their own *Weltanschauung*.

But it certainly is *our* desire. And it is sufficient to meditate on the ultimately incomprehensible account of Eden to understand that it is impossible to regain the beginning, and that this exclusion from origin – whether it’s a matter of a real origin in time or of any other origin that we are capable of imagining – is what separates a celestial or paradisaic poetic, in the most unfortunate way, from a poetic such as we are obliged to envisage on a fallen earth. Our beginning is neither at the creation of the world, which could make of us God’s continuers, nor in Eden, where our art would be the Word of the universe, the voice of creation responding to its Creator, but rather in the Fall of man, whether that also be an event in history or simply a manifest fact of the human condition. For us, it is the cherubim with flaming swords that have invented art.

So where are we, in effect? In a world, to use another commonplace, of ‘greatness and misery’ (Pascal), where the universe only appears as *cosmos* in brief moments, in almost furtive glimpses, always distressing in the long run, and sometimes intolerable. The work of God itself is defective, and we don’t have to accuse ourselves of irreverence (or congratulate ourselves) in thinking it, since St. Paul also declares this, in speaking of the ‘vanity’ and ‘corruption’ of creation (Romans 8:20-21). It is God himself who ‘submitted’ his work to this temporary imperfection at the moment of the Fall. So it is true that God is the Artist *par excellence* and the model for all artistic activity; it is also true that He does not let us penetrate the fullness of his work. Under a dying sun and on a planet in part hostile to us, we also verify the interdiction in trying to imagine human life, such as we lead individually or in society, as a work ruled by harmony and justice. Or, by any other quality which we are pleased to associate with artistic perfection, because we *do not know* what art is. We search, and everyone has a different view. Not only do we not have access to this ‘goodness’ that God saw, day after day, in creation, but even its significance is hidden from us.

It hardly needs to be added that our art is also flawed, and in the full depth of that word. It is enough that a writer begins to write to feel again the ‘pain’ inflicted on Adam and to understand a little of the reason. The Christian writer immediately measures the distance which separates his language from Edenic speech. The study of foreign languages is also precious, convincing us of the punishment of Babel – but equally, of the benediction which goes with it, and which makes of a foreign language an otherness at once closed

yet brimming with possibility. Foreign literatures reveal in themselves the generous multiplicity which accompanies the loss of the *one*, at the same time as making especially evident the irremediable misery of an art founded on words, incomprehensible from one place to another, or even from one epoch to another in the same place. And if we absolutely insist on comparing ourselves, as creators, to the Creator God, it is good to reflect upon another dimension of His creative activity, which we can see since the coming of the Messiah, namely that if He created the world by his Word, then He has created it through the Crucified. At the very heart of God's creativity, it would seem – yet even to speak of this in our state of ignorance and distance is doubtless a sort of transgression, of stupidity – there is a love which goes right to death. The divine art is a sacrifice. It is to be feared that we have never yet written a 'good' poem, and that our motivation is quite other.

We are on the outside; we come after. Our literature is engaged in the disparity between our reality and that which we are obliged to consider another reality, perhaps heaven, the dwelling place of God, the invisible world at the same time hidden and yet revealed by the visible world. Our relationship with that world is no longer either simple or direct, as is suggested by one of the unfathomable figures which wait for us in the writings of St. Paul. 'Now we see by means of a mirror, in a manner obscured.' One recognises the famous and certainly controversial passage of the first letter to the Corinthians (13:12). It is necessary to ponder this enigma at length: it seems to propose that reflection, in a fallen world, effectively begins by *reflection* – that we speculate by looking at a darkened image of reality which, without in any way distorting it and even less rendering it absent, re-presents it as it is but curiously inverted, and as if sustained by a new day.

It is true that the Genesis narrative gives us to understand, by one of those well-known expressions to which we must constantly return, that for its author, the first human beings already found themselves in a 'figurative' relationship with God, since He had created them in his own image, according to his likeness (1:26). We should be, even in the beginning, rhetorical representations of God, and it is to be supposed that we are still able, banished as we are, to be conscious of this comparison. Other Biblical passages even prompt us to think that all our reality is crossed by a sort of divine rhetoric. The light we see is the figure of the 'true' Light, which is Jesus; the wind which we feel, the air we breathe, is that of the Breath; the poor words we utter, that of the Word. What is literal for us is figurative for God. But we must also believe that in an original world, humans in their fullness would rejoice in this dependence, whilst for us the real is lacking. We grasp what escapes us; we perceive at best the figurative and search for the real.

It is the Fall which decides literature and is foundational for poetry. Literature does not begin in misery but in what remains of the Edenic experience, in this wonder, this desire to call and call to the world, this need to praise the innumerable riches of our condition, which lie at the origin of so many works. It begins in the praise of language itself. But it soon meets a fallen language and a fallen world, and problematic and unfortunate relationships

among words, beings and things. It intervenes in a reality which is insufficient, mortal and unachieved.

The Fall is a determinant, and not just for literature. It is important to take it seriously in every domain, in every discipline of thought. One temptation that recurs constantly in Christian thought is to suppose that all is well, really, since the world is governed by God, to say 'Peace, peace' when there is no peace. A tragedy which opens up on disorder; a literature of the absurd, a system of thought which denies causality, which changes truth into a 'mobile army of metaphors', which reduces history to a narrative, which imprisons us in the *episteme* of our age, which pounces on logocentrism: all this can seem the negation of a world whose reality, coherence and justice are guaranteed by a God of love, who created us capable moreover of understanding his universe and of imagining it. However, in the perspective of the Fall, the most desperate discourse, the most destructive, only plumbs our misery and what is more, falls well short of Biblical discourse. The recent history of philosophy, or of a certain sort of philosophy, from Hume to Derrida, is the history of successive perceptions of what we have lost. It is true that the force of such discourses is to be found in the Christianity which they most often deny, and that there is a danger, as Pascal said, of knowing our misery without recognising our greatness – of seeing the effects of the Fall without understanding them in the inability to see the Fall itself.

## 3

And one realises that a Christian poetic will not stop at the Fall, any more than literature itself will content itself with deploring the fallen world or wallowing in it. Another figure of St. Paul, which is to be found further on in his letter to the Corinthians, allows us to advance. At the moment of burial, he says, the body is sown 'a natural body' (15:44), and so far the only odd thing is the metaphor – of sowing. It is resurrected, however, as a 'spiritual body'. Not only is this an astonishing oxymoron (we would expect in our laziness the term 'spirit'), but in re-uniting categories which for us are incompatible, it marks the distance which separates us from another reality, speaking of the possibility that we ourselves and our world shall be transformed in order to attain it, and it places this possibility in the future. For the relationship between the world of exile and the world of salvation is far from fixed. Reality is not double, once for all; there is a providence of God who works this world, created and destroyed in the light of its re-creation. It is to this forward movement, it seems to me, that literature and all the arts respond. It is the promise of a transfiguration of the world which constitutes the *raison d'être* and also the hope of all artistic endeavour, even though it may be indifferent or hostile to Christianity.

To look at this a little further, I would like to compare some diverse poetics in a preliminary manner and doubtless too rapidly, in order to place in relationship certain ways of conceptualising the *place* of literary activity. These poetics correspond, if not completely to different theologies, then at least to different ways of showing the relation of our short life on a mortal earth to



the eternal life of God. Medieval poetics begins with the vertical relationship between the human world and the divine. It presupposes a stable reality, where we strive upwards. Art, which includes the 'useful' arts of the hunt or navigation as well as the 'pleasant' art of the theatre, is, in the thinking of Hugh of Saint-Victor or Bonaventura, illuminated by an inferior light which is nevertheless capable of raising us, though only by analogy, towards the light of God. Renaissance poetics puts art into relationship with time, but only time past. In Sidney's *Defence of Poetry*, for example, poetry rises above a nature of bronze in order to deliver us another nature, this one golden which suggests, in its ideal of perfection, lost Eden. A modern poetics – but I hasten to recognise the 'romantic' nature of such a concept, and therefore the possibility, if not the quasi-certainty that it belongs to its own age and suffers the age's inadequacies – would put again art in relationship to time, but not time past. It is to the future that art directs itself, and if it is not too arrogant to suggest it, such an orientation seems to me to conform more to Biblical theology. Essentially poetry does not place us in the hierarchy of lights of Pseudo-Dionysius. No more does it lead us towards Eden, to the beginning, to Creation. It leads us forward towards the Re-creation, towards the end which is also a new beginning, towards Paradise. It dreams of a 'new heaven and of a new earth' (2 Peter 3:13).

Is it really necessary to understand poetics in the perspective of a new creation? Perhaps not, nor do I wish myself to become a 'fierce undertaker'. I simply notice that in turning towards the future, it would seem to align with the expectation of a Messianic return which governed the hope of the first Christians but which often fades under the influence of scepticism, whilst a poetic based on ideal forms would, on the contrary, betray a vision of history where the Second Coming is quietly set among inactive dogmas. It is also a matter of according, or not, an eternal value to the perishable, and what is at stake is after all our earth and our destiny. To believe in 'heaven' and the immortality of the soul is to accept that the rest will be destroyed. To believe in the resurrection of the body and the creation of a new earth and new heaven is to dare to hope that the earth on which we are, it is true, only strangers and pilgrims will not be abolished but renewed. If Christians are right to criticise the view according to which life on earth is the sole reality, then in an inverse sense they themselves could be deceived into disdaining the earth. This can be seen, moreover, in quite small things: in the idea, for example, that man is a puny being from the fact that Adam was created from the dust. Since the Fall, yes: our humility depends on the origin of man in the soil. Our end, though provisional, is to return there. But before the Fall the earth participated, as did all of simple matter, in a creation that God declared good. Excluded from Eden, we do not know the nature of this goodness. We don't know, either, the manner of the new earth and heavens where it will have its place. All that we know, according to Paul, is that the new world will surpass this one just as much as a blade of wheat surpasses a grain.

What we now call literature would thus be situated, as we and our universe are, between the Fall and the new creation. It contradicts what is, it seeks order in what has been disordered, it aspires to unity beyond dispersion. All art,

moreover, seeks to re-assemble things and to adjust them according to the root *ar*, which I cite not as an etymological proof, which would never be adequate, but simply as a given which is rich in its suggestiveness. The art of a literary work runs from the skill with which we bring together those elements which go well together, as in agriculture or medicine, to the perhaps even visionary power which allows us to apprehend affinities, to bring into oneness the debris of the garden. Literature is above all the search for a new world. It does not describe it, it writes it. It does not efface it, either, but transforms it, repeating it by granting it the word. Without itself being grace and without in any way participating in the creative and re-creative power of God, it tries, not to produce an entirely different universe but – always on condition of embracing the discipline of the real – to open up the only universe we know to its own possibility. Poetry, in the fullest sense of the word, is the art of the possible.

A literary work, it seems to me, always anticipates the future, not in seeing in advance really what is going to happen, but in proposing a world at the same time itself and yet other, and which constitutes, at least for the Christian, the sign, and the sign only, of the new earth. And of this new earth, I am convinced that we also see signs in everyday life, in beings and things even before they are subsumed by art. We enter here the always difficult domain of personal experience, but I find it necessary to speak nevertheless of these glimpses, which are also perhaps of graces, in order to be able to reinforce the idea of a recreation of the earth, and also in order to derive the least natural element of art – its power of difference, its tendency towards otherness – from nature itself. It is nature which accords us these supranatural visions, and instead of citing a poem, which could have been T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, where certain passages are employed, in a deliberately prosaic way, it is true, to draw up lists of hints, I prefer to quote, almost at random, this phrase from the journal of Dorothy Wordsworth, sister of the poet: 'As I lay down on the grass, I observed the glittering silver line on the ridges of the Backs of the sheep, owing to their situation respecting the sun – which made them look beautiful but with something of strangeness, like animals of another kind – as if belonging to a more splendid world' (29 April, 1802). Every moment of life, I believe, is open to this invasion of the *other*, to this wounding of the possible, on an earth where, each night and each day and in the commonest fashion, the moon which is memory reminds us, in the shadows, of the loss of origin, and the sun which is new world comes over and again without ever truly coming, so as to speak, in this strange repetition and this obligation to wait, of a final Coming.

It is good also to return to an Aristotelian poetics, and even to those aspects of it which are most well known, in order to recapture its modesty. Aristotle's great usefulness for those of us who are seeking to understand literature from a Christian perspective – where intoxicating ideas of transformation, of the supernatural, of heaven, not to mention calling or inspiration, must necessarily intervene, but greatly risk inflating us with a perfectly comic pride – is to have begun in a thought attentive to what is and eager not to dig an abyss between the arts of mankind and what could be called, without abusing the term too much, the art of nature. He remarks in his *Physics* that art, whatever its ulterior

ambition, begins, banality of banalities, by 'imitating nature' (194a/21). Having thus recognised that the world exists before we ever deign to think about it and that it already has procedures by which to teach us, he is able to propose in his *Politics* that art remedies the defects of nature (1337a1-2), and in the *Poetics* itself, that poetry, always under the sign of mimesis, is superior to 'history, since it describes not what has been, but what could be' (1451b). Thus it reaches into the world of universals, and for a poetics more aware of the gap between poetry and nature, this passage into the hypothetical, this crossing towards the possible, also opens poetry to its vocation of re-thinking the world, of venturing beyond what is.

This idea of the gap, when well weighed, is essential for a poetics which holds nature fallen. Art imitates nature in various ways which will always be worthwhile to re-examine, but art is also and already something else. A poem transforms the world in words. It transforms language itself, in remodelling its syntax, in enhancing its rhythms, in making audible its sonorities. Many things are at play in this difference which is also a *différance*, to use this fashionable term which speaks, nevertheless, of the pain of our waiting in a world which is both no longer and not yet. We have to be aware of the imitation, of the presence, however difficult, of 'nature' in art, but we must also sense the absence of this nature and the possibility which is offered. Thus we grasp the Fall, in this inaccessible fullness, in this consonance with which we are not acquainted, and that is our misfortune, in our life day by day. Sometimes it takes just the beginning of a verse line, a few bars of music, a glimpse of one corner of a picture in another room for us to feel ourselves in exile and for us to be conscious of what we have lost. But we also grasp the promise of renewal. This same picture, this same piece of music, this same verse can speak to us of a possible, of a brand new state of the *I* and its world, of a whole universe become other. Poetry is always, as Sidney wished it to be and even outside Christianity, 'the divine consideration of what may be'.

Decline and re-creation also serve to elucidate, it seems to me, certain fundamental elements of poetics which never cease to defy our intelligence. The imagination, for example. It's not a question here of psychology, nor do I claim to know whether or not the imagination is a faculty of the mind. I simply speak of its operations, and I notice this: if we need to imagine, it's because the world is not sufficient, not because of the greatness of our soul nor the depth of our being nor the passion of our aspirations which would burn up a reality inferior to ourselves as in romantic scenarios, but because of this thought which comes to us sometimes, that we are not at home and our universe is not our home either, so to speak. Without the Fall, or some other explanation which we must suppose for our unhappiness, we would not continuously have this desire to re-invent the earth, to invent times and places, narratives, events, characters, other than those of life outside literature, to prize the difference writing makes between the world and the book. Melancholy would not await us at the threshold of a poem; death would not accompany us inside. Far from living in the real and imagining the unreal, as I have already begun to say, we live in the figured, the less-than-real, and the real is what we are pushed to imagine.

Without the promise of a new creation, we couldn't imagine forward, or at least our imaginations would be sterile. Thanks to it, the imagination, which is the search for the true world and the true self, is in some sort established.

And beauty? Here I feel particularly naked, since I see that this is a subject which I had never tackled before reflecting on Wordsworth's 'Living presence' and it needed many long years before I became conscious of this absence. Is this because the context in which we are usually encouraged to study beauty presupposes a world elevated above ours like the ideal above the imperfect, following a dualistic and dangerous line of thinking? But what could be objected to Sidney, for example, who sees in the poetry of the Psalms David's love of 'heavenly poesy, wherein almost he showeth himself a passionate lover of that unspeakable and everlasting beauty, to be seen by the eyes of the mind, only cleared by faith'? Or to Newman in 'Poetry', who declares in commenting on Aristotle – though it could have been Plato – that 'the poetic spirit is filled with eternal forms of beauty and perfection'? Only that to stop there, in the conviction that beauty raises us towards an absolute, we run the risk again that I indicated, of neglecting what lies around us. Neoplatonism is tenacious (Newman said of Pope that an internal principle of poetry furnished him with 'the archetypes of beauty and radiance'), and never ceases to enchant Christian thought. It would be regrettable if the beauty of art persuaded us to disdain what is on an earth disfigured but yet from the hand of God.

Nevertheless it is perhaps with the idea of the One, while saluting Plotinus himself, that we must try to renew our thinking. Forms certainly exist within nature, and the form of a poem, a novel is not *other* from the mere fact of being a form. Art imitates nature not only when the sculpture of a tree, for example, counterfeits the aspect of the tree – looks like a tree – but when the work of art learns from the natural work the existence of form and how to achieve it. Art imitates the formal project of nature. (I add, and I suppose it is obvious, that this will not lead us into an 'organic' theory of art.) But if we feel that the forms of nature, beauty which does not depend on us, are really superior to the forms of which we are capable, that the painter of landscapes, among others, can never rival a landscape – and it seems to me that our health intellectual, moral and spiritual is at stake here – we can equally well be persuaded to the contrary. We are not jumping into paradox or contradiction here, although paradox and contradiction stand at the heart of poetics just as of the human condition, since the very particular superiority of art lies in the evident unity of its forms taken individually and in its capacity, as soon as we are inside a poem, a building, a quartet, to make manifest, as long as the spell lasts, the coherence of a world and the unity of the whole. The humblest objects which fall under the senses can give us access to this vision, or better, to this intimate conviction of the reign of the One – I am thinking of Yves Bonnefoy's salamander – but I do not know whether we would be as sensitive to this kind of revelation without the practice of art, which seems to have for its role just this ability to multiply such moments in our life.

In the measure in which it attains unity, a work of art does not put us in real contact with the unity of things, but it allows us to understand that such a unity,

somewhere, does exist. This idea is far from being exclusively Christian (Shelley wanted to believe, according to his *Defence of Poetry*, that the poet ‘participates in the eternal, in the infinite, in the one’) but is it absolutely out of the question that the unity of a work – that this very desire for unity – may be in agreement with monotheism, and that despite the existence of polytheistic and atheistic works of art, this belief in the *one* may be a feeble shadow of a faith in a unique God, whose Being alone can guarantee, after all, the unity of a multiple universe?

And the beauty of unity in art differs from the beauty of unity in the world before art. A beautiful dog is *one*. A beautiful apple is plenitude. But a still life has another plenitude; even the photograph of a dog has *another* unity. The fine portrait of a woman is not a woman, and it is thanks to this difference that instead of speaking only of the world which we already know or think we know, art can open up for us another world where form, beauty, unity are the effects of another intelligence than nature’s. The significance of this world for anyone who sees it will depend on the idea he holds about human life and its finality. As a vision of Eden in the perfection of a work, beauty is a sudden sentiment of loss. As a vision of Paradise to come beauty is a sudden sentiment of renewal, a glimpse of the possible. And what is more, this other, artistic beauty, which goes beyond what is in order to conjure up what may be or even what will be, does not remove us definitively from our here-and-now, since it allows us to see this same otherness in the beauty of nature. The beauty of a tree, seen in a certain light, speaks to us of a lost tree and of a possible tree. Natural beauty too opens at the same time onto a presence and an absence, at the moment when this structure of lines, these colours which seem to be trying to find each other, this object, this scrap of matter sustained, magnetised, by a sort of grace, themselves come to resemble a work of art. The property of art is to make us see nature.

It is true that any idea of the One cannot recommend itself a great deal to current philosophies, and coherence itself has been often presented for some time as some sort of metaphysical or bourgeois mystification. The fundamental incoherence of great works tends to appear, and for many is, their true worth. Doubtless there would be a lot to say on the subject of a certain complacency before the incoherent which would be as much an effect of pride as its opposite: the pleasure that we can take in reducing everything to a system of which we are ourselves the master. Incoherence, like coherence, has, however, its place in a Christian poetics. Before a work of art just as before the work of God, we are faced with beauty, but also with the flaw in beauty, with its shadow. To admire the order in a work only to discover afterwards the intrinsic disorder in it, only to surprise even, if you will, the way in which the work deconstructs itself, is to perceive that art, that the world, do not suffice, are only promises, and that we are always waiting on an unfinished earth.

I have traced a ternary vision of things, which I believe is to be uncovered in the Bible, and which sees everything, moreover – cosmology, history, anthropology, and even theology as discourse on God – as forming across time and within

the experience of God himself, if it is possible to think that, a series of triads. Christian cosmology runs from creation to the Fall and then to the new creation. Earthly history from Eden on to a 'cursed' earth and on to Paradise, passing by other sequences founded on the same model: Israel, the dispersion of Israel, Church; the temple of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, the formation of the Church as a new temple. The history of our race passes from man as innocent to sinner and then man redeemed and glorified; from Adam to Adam cast down to the new Adam. God Himself draws near to us as Creator, as Judge and as Redeemer. Everything is based on a process of life, death and new birth. Everything is centred on the centre itself, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

I note that the process is dialectical, since a limitless conflict sets its first term against a second and this second term against a third. Our *grandeur* is in perpetual struggle with our *misère*. Sin combats grace, the 'old man' always resists the 'new man'. The end supposes the beginning, even entirely transcends the origin. Unlike the first human beings, Christians are invited to participate in the very body of Christ, to become participants (I write this without understanding it) in the divine nature. Adam's *felix culpa*, if it be true that we are authorised to speak like this, permits us to know the depth of the love of God in the death of the Son. I note also that this configuration of everything is not an interesting form to contemplate but a dynamic to live, and that for us it remains incomplete. Epic heroes in our own way, which is quite modest, we have been thrown, we too, *in medias res*.

This descending and ascending destiny of the earth, of its inhabitants and of the diverse reality where it bathes seems to me essential for Christian reflection on literature. Moreover, literature itself, or whatever sort of art, can be at the origin of such a vision. I remember a first intuition came to me in conversations on Greek tragedy (with a university friend whose contribution outstripped mine by far), and that I saw all this for the first time with clarity whilst listening to, or rather in remembering, Beethoven's Sixth Symphony. I would like to believe that if I speak of this dialectic in Christian terms, which are certainly the only ones capable, for me, of getting to the bottom of the question and of explaining it, the dialectic is nevertheless pertinent in a general way, by the simple fact of being true. It is susceptible of being re-interpreted and expressed differently in an atheistic poetics, or any other which would look at the same reality under its own light. It makes it possible for the Christian reader to move beyond Christian literature.

For it permits us to go everywhere in literature – always with discretion, because it's not a matter of invasion. It opens up another way to study tragedy and comedy, which represent in Western literature the two most rigorous and obstinate attempts to disclose and incarnate the dialectic form of the human condition. It illuminates narrative, or rather this search, in every genre, for fiction, which seems to come from the propensity of literature to resist a world of exile and death, and to make a new one out of it. It illuminates writing itself, and the manner, especially visible in poetry in which writing exalts the real, refuses it, and seeks to change it, to put in place the progressive transformation of things, to open world and words to their potential. It incites

one to re-examine translation, from the perspective of Babel and Pentecost, and language itself, in its dialectical progress from the language of Adam, skilled in naming the animals, to the sceptical, ambiguous and contradictory language of the serpent, and then to the 'other tongues' of the Spirit (Acts 2:4). That God Himself is – or has begotten – the Word (*Parole*), that He is, in one way or the other, Himself an author of writings, pushes the source and secret of poetics a great distance away from us, by an astonishing and rather redoubtable ascent for the Christian writer, but it also means that the search for a Christian poetics cannot avoid sounding out the Logos.

This sort of dialectic spirituality or spiritual materialism also invites us to study everything with which literature engages, all those vast ranges of existence on earth which are present in the minutest act of writing. It illuminates the self, history, and time, as much in themselves and in their relationship with the general movement of things as in their relationship with writing. The unfinished character of dialectics, the fact of finding ourselves in a world where '*it is finished*' (John 19:30) but where the finishing is *also* to come, illuminates equally the unfinished nature of writing and of reading, too. We will never be able to stop reading, since the sense of books is not given once for all. Hermeneutics slides into the clearest of texts. According to the writer of the Fall narrative it even intervened between Eve's understanding and God's words, at least, after the serpent had invented it. We will never be able to stop writing, because the sense of the world is not given. 'Of writing many books,' says Ecclesiastes, 'there is no end,' (12:12), nor of their re-writing, either. It is true that to underline the sadly provisional nature of our writings, the fact that every success is a failure and that the writer is the very one who knows he does not know how to write, can also open – by the change of sign we meet everywhere whenever we make up our minds, like Dante forcing himself towards the centre of the earth, not to stop before having reached the bottom – on the possibility of books, on the joy of multiplicity, on the mercy which accompanies punishment and which makes each generation, born from the failure of the last, bring with it new ways of seeing, other modes of being.

The unfinished nature of the world can also make the unfinished nature of writings precious, and even the fragmentary nature of many. I see that the two works, of St. Paul and of Pascal, which have without any doubt most influenced me, are letters and bundles of notes. Certainly one envies those fortunate writers capable, it would seem, of mastering at one fell swoop both their language and their thought, but one also understands the advantage there is in hesitating, the truth which only allows itself to be glimpsed in the act of seeking, of 'toiling' as Adam, of always drawing near to the goal like the old world turning in its seasons. And the unfinished teaches us what is most important to think concerning literature, namely that it cannot in itself effect our salvation, that it is impotent in itself to re-create the world. Between imagination and grace, between the power of poetry, which is to renew our consciousness of the world, and the power of the only Master of the new, there lies the difference between our will and God's will. Art leaves us in the world of the in-between time, where other and more efficacious energies are waiting to orientate us and fulfil us. But it throws its own light on to this world, it makes us feel the surprise of

the in-between place where our destiny plays itself out. Hence the importance of the famous words of the Abbé Suger in the church of Saint-Denis: 'videor videre me quasi sub aliqua extranea orbis terrarum plaga, quae nec tota sit in terrarum faece nec tota in coeli puritate, demorari' – 'I seem to see myself living, as it were, in some strange region of the universe, which is neither completely in the silt of the earth nor completely in the purity of heaven' (*De Administratione*, 33). They marvellously describe the happiness of art, the impression of not being situated any longer on a mortal earth, where pain, sickness, mourning, reign, without however being able to fully reach a true transcendent. This, it seems to me, is the limit of art, the last word of poetics.

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## MEMORY'S DANCE

Major intensive events  
occur sporadically,  
happening only after  
much thought  
and preparation

Graduation days,  
university,  
getting married,  
or the passage  
of lifelong career.

In hindsight, memory  
trivializes our recollections;  
collective  
in presentment,

Fifty, sixty, seventy years  
of nostalgia  
reduced to seconds.  
Once hosts, we become  
mere guests.

*Paul Truttman*

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# Derrida Before the Law

Valentine Cunningham

'DERRIDA' – THE WORK OF JACQUES DERRIDA – IS COMMANDED BY A RHETORIC OF command. What Jacques Derrida does is lay down the law. Derrida's reading and criticism, his philosophy, his ethics and politics – his ethico-politics and politico-ethics – are all and always a matter of the law, of legislation: all based in a sense of particular laws and universal law, of the ubiquity and necessity of law. His interpretative effort is a profound and wide *Hermeneutik* of the legal, a huge effort to illustrate laws in operation in texts, in ethical encounters and political practices, in theory of all sorts, in practices of every kind.

Derrida is the grand legislator of deconstruction – the self-acknowledging legislator of the deconstructive world. His voice and rhetoric are the voice and rhetoric of command, dictation, ordering. *Il y a, il n'y a pas*, he keeps saying. *Il n'y a pas de hors-texte*, for example, his most famous Diktat (in the *Grammatology*).<sup>1</sup> *Il n'y a aucun de sens* (no way at all) of going beyond the concepts of metaphysics in order to unsettle metaphysics; he does not believe 'qu'il y ait aujourd'hui à choisir' between the Two Interpretations of Interpreting, the onto-theologocentric and the deconstructive (there's no way you can separate the two).<sup>2</sup> 'What comes to pass in a sacred text is the occurrence of a *pas de sens*'; the sacred consists of this *pas de sens*, the no-way way.<sup>3</sup> *Pas de sens*: the path of prohibition; no way for this or that; the barred path; *pas*, the step, that is in itself a not, a no-no; the step that's a non-step. *Pas*: not; not that; not this; no step or stepping that way. For Derrida necessity, compulsion always rule like this. It's just normal with him to declare that this or the other thing must be, or must not be: *il faut, il ne faut pas*. I must, you must, a text must: *je dois, on doit, le texte doit*. Writers and writing are for Derrida proposers of law. To write is to legislate. The critic and interpreter are under law: the laws of interpretative activity, the laws of the text that is being interpreted. The work of reading and writing, like the work of translation, is obligatory, a matter of obligations, of musts. At work in these operations is what Walter Benjamin called the *Aufgabe* – the task – in this case *Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers* – the task of the translator.<sup>4</sup> *Aufgabe*, the work that's imposed, compelled. 'From the very title [of his essay] ... Benjamin situates the problem in the sense of that which is precisely before oneself as a task ...'. That's Derrida in 'Des Tours de Babel', his extended meditation on and around Benjamin's essay. And, Derrida goes on, this imposed task has the force of law, of *loi*. *Loi*: it's one of the most ubiquitous words in 'Derrida'. The demand is a legal one. 'Translation is a form', a genre in fact, and 'the law of this form has its first place in the original' – i.e. the text to be translated lays down the law – textual law, translation law. 'This law first establishes itself, let us repeat, as a demand in the strong sense, a requirement that delegates, mandates, prescribes, assigns'.<sup>5</sup> So the reader, the translator, is before the

law of this task. That's a law. We are all 'essentiellement *devant la loi*'.<sup>6</sup> Genre and genres, of course, have their law(s): *la loi, les lois du genre*.<sup>7</sup> The last part of *Jacques Derrida par Geoffrey Bennington et Jacques Derrida* [double text of *Derridabase* by Bennington and *Circonfession* by JD] (1991) is titled 'Actes (La loi du genre)'; the c.v. that it includes is to be interrogated according to the law of genre, and just to keep you mindful of the sway for Derrida of the legal and the legislating, 'Jacques Derrida' lists a whole lot of other items, iterability, indecidability, and so forth, above all *la différance*, which also have their laws.<sup>8</sup>

Nothing, in fact, that Derrida interrogates – and his investigative scope got wider and wider as his career continued – is imagined as being without its laws. The legislative force/demand of the textual, ethical, political subject and object is found everywhere to be repeated and replicated, without fail, and it is to be dutifully respected and obeyed. Genre, text, translation, giving, friendship, hospitality, monolingualism – whatever the analytic *menu du jour* – nothing escapes the embrace of this pervasive legalism. Derridean legalisms proliferate unstopably. He can't think without thinking law. 'Well, before beginning [to talk of monolingualism], I will risk two propositions. They each take the form of a law...'<sup>9</sup> Take a linguistic operation as fundamental as the sentence, which Derrida does in his essay on *Romeo and Juliet* (in a wonderfully, and characteristically, proliferating analysis, beginning with aphorisms, which are for Derrida an essence of Shakespeare's play). Aphorisms are sententious. They exemplify the essence of naming, namely the sentence. They have the *caractère de sentence*. *Sentence* is multivalent; it is moral saying, judgement, a quality of judgement. So aphorisms are like death sentences – judicial, legal utterances. So a sentence always pronounces a sentence, is always sententious, legalising, legislating. The sentence has its laws; it is law.<sup>10</sup> (Kafka's story 'In the Penal Settlement' comes to mind, in which the sentence imposed on a guilty man is a sentence, a writing, a *Schrift*, inscribed on his body by a pen that's a knife.)

### Judaizing

This being inevitably before the law is patently Jewish. The legislator here is Derrida the Jew, Reb Derissa, Derrida the Jewish saint, or Holy Jew (as Héléne Cixous has recently labelled him in her *Portrait de Jacques Derrida en Jeune Saint Juif* (2002)).<sup>11</sup> This is Derrida standing before Sinai, and positing all interpretation, all philosophy as standing there. He is excited by Emmanuel Levinas' suggestion that this is where we all stand (in Levinas's elliptical question: '*A recognition of the Torah before Sinai?*') because this is where Derrida has consistently suggested we all are, before the law, before Sinai.<sup>12</sup> Sinai is a place of universal authority, of as it were the Torah for everyone. We are all of us, then, readers and writers, in effect Jews, as Derrida puts it in 'Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book': 'the situation of the Jew becomes exemplary of the situation of the poet, the man of speech and of writing'; 'in question is a sort of Judaism as the birth and passion of writing'.<sup>13</sup>

Law has an ‘implacable universality’, as Derrida puts it in *The Gift of Death* (1992). And the sanction for this notion is in and at Sinai, the old covenant, the regime of the Jewish Jahwe (in what T. S. Eliot in ‘Journey of the Magi’ labels ‘the old dispensation’). The phrase ‘implacable universality of the law’ comes in Derrida’s extended discussion of Kierkegaard’s haunted reading of the Akedah, the story of Jahwe’s commanding Abraham to kill his son Isaac.<sup>14</sup> The lawgiver of all the laws that Derrida sees instated and making their demand, their ultimate sanctioner, is this Abrahamic Jahwe. Not accidentally, Walter Benjamin’s model of the text-to-be-translated is the Bible, the sacred text for Jewish Benjamin, as for Derrida (and, for that matter, for Freud). For Benjamin, the requirement of the *Aufgabe*, its *Forderung*, finds its only correspondence (its *Entsprechung*, its correlative, that which gives it meaning) in ‘a thought of God’, and Derrida agrees. The *Aufgabe*, the task of the translator – this model/allegory/example of all reading – is the response to the divine *Gabe der Sprache* (the gift of speech, of tongues) and the *Gebung des Namens* (the giving of the name) at Babel. And so ‘Benjamin named God at this point, that of a correspondence authorizing, making possible or guaranteeing the correspondence between the languages engaged in translation’.<sup>15</sup> Law, all the laws of Derrida’s preoccupation, come from – or are as if they came from – the Jehovah of Sinai, the Jehovah of Babel.

### Coming Elijah

Reb Derissa, rabbinical teacher and midrashi, lawgiving interpreter of the Law and the laws, casts himself, of course, as the prophet Elijah. He’s proud to be known as Elie Derrida. Elie, Elijah, is his circumcision name, to be fantasised over, jested about, but always seriously pronounced. Elijah, the herald, with Moses, of the arrival of the Messiah (which is why a seat is kept waiting empty for him at every orthodox Jewish Passover celebration). Elijah, for Jews, always coming, never yet arriving; always on the way, expected, anticipated, but not yet appearing (like the American evangelist Alexander Dowie in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, dubbed Elijah; ‘Elijah is coming’ the flyers scudding along the Dublin streets announce, but he never comes in the real-time of the novel, only putting in an appearance in the dream-sequences of the Nighttown episode, the non-arrival arrival). So Elijah is the aporetic prophet: the prophet in suspension, stuck, as it were, on the border of the old dispensation. Still in suspension, coming but not coming, the prophet *in aporia*, and so the prophet *of aporia*, the prophet of the aporetic Messiah. The Messiah, as Derrida has it in the *Politics of Friendship*, always under erasure – called upon, summoned, and also repressed – a sentence that has (no) more sense (‘Plus de sens’).<sup>16</sup> He’s the archetype for Derrida of the friend who is no friend, the friend who is (also) the enemy – the *veiled* one (like Moses with the veiled face, like the Holy of Holies veiled by Moses), ‘given, ordered and ordained [*donné, ordonné*] by God’, not yet unveiled, not yet *donné*.<sup>17</sup>

Elijah the (not) arriving herald of the (not) arriving Messiah – unlike of course in the Christian story, in which both the prophetic herald and the Messiah himself actually arrive – is a main undergirding case of the perpetual

Derridean law of aporia. Aporia is for Derrida the law of law, the law of all the laws. Aporia: centred in the grand Derridean metaphor and case of *différance*, Derrida's coinage, the aporetic word itself, invented to contain emblematically in one sign, both the *différent* and the *différé*. The law of law in a word. In other words, here is at work the grand deconstructive principle of *shibboleth* – as explicated in Derrida's reading of Judges 12, the narrative of the Ephraimites killed because they can't pronounce the word *shibboleth*. *Shibboleth*: the unsayable/sayable word, the principle of aporia in action – in action (in Derrida's reading) in Spain during the Spanish Civil War where the Republicans say 'No pasaran', they shall not pass, the word of the barred passage.<sup>18</sup> *Shibboleth*, the word of the perpetual barred passage to meaning and life and salvation, the aporetic word. Aporia, the law, the shibboleth ('primordial' as Derrida has it in the *Adieu* to Levinas<sup>19</sup>) of all the thresholds that Derridean analysis momentarily invests in (pharmakon, hymen, tympanum, margin, supplement, nostrils, buccal cavity, parerga, brisure, and all the differential rest). *Shibboleth* pronounces in its unpronounceable way the law of the no-way way, of oxymoron, of paradox (the law of all the words and notions in *para-* that litter these discussions), in other words the law of the legal limit which can never be sustained. Genre, the generic system of organising writing, is a prime illustration of the way legal/legislating limits, in this case the limiting of literary kinds, can never work. The 'law of the law of genre' is the necessary defiance of the law of genre: this law proposes contradictorily, aporetically, illimitable limitation.<sup>20</sup> Genres, like texts as Derrida sharply puts it, overflow all boundaries assigned to them. And what's binding on genres is what binds all such legislative occasions. For example, the law of hospitality (a 'divine law', what's more) is that the *hôte* [host] is always also the *hôte* [guest].<sup>21</sup> This law is all at once conditional and unconditional.<sup>22</sup> The law of the sentence is to be both a performance and a suspension of performance (the death sentence on Romeo and Juliet condemns them to death and also 'arrests death', suspends its coming).<sup>23</sup> What happens at Sinai is likewise aporetic (and, of course, foundationally so): God gives the tablets of the law; at the same time the tablets are broken. It's an aporia which multiplies, for Derrida, into all of modern politics as well as modern philosophy and religion. Sinai's active ambivalences are colossal. They signal all at once welcome and rejection, the duality of the *hostipitality* Derrida sees infecting all human, as well as all human-divine, relations: *hostipitality*, his nonce word embracing the aporia of the linguistic and the ethical as both hospitality and hostility.<sup>24</sup> For at Sinai the divinity itself is revealed as both host and *hostis*, welcomer and enemy.

In a time that it is already difficult to hold as *one* and to bend to the homogeneity of a narrative without internal rupture, the name *Sinai* cannot but signify, obviously, at once the place where the Torah was given, the sacred anointing oil of messianity, the ark of the covenant, the tablets of the covenant written by the hand of God; but then also the tablets given by God after he retracts the evil with which he had threatened the stiff-necked people (first rupture or interruption), then the tablets cut anew after God had in some sense again interrupted all theophany by forbidding, in the passing of his glory, the vision of his face in a face to face, then the place of

the re-newed Covenant, then the veiling and unveiling of the face of Moses. So many interruptions *of self*, so many discontinuities in history, so many ruptures in the ordinary course of time, caesuras that nonetheless make up the very historicity of history.<sup>25</sup>

Sinai, the sign and site of continuing violence and conflict.

But today Sinai is also still in relation to the singular history of Israel, a name from modernity. Sinai, the Sinai: a metonymy for the border or frontier between Israel and the other nations, a front and a frontier between war and peace, a provocation to think the passage between the ethical, the messianic, eschatology, *and* the political, at a moment in the history of humanity and of the Nation-State when the persecution of all these hostages – the foreigner, the immigrant (with or without papers), the exile, the refugee, those without a country, or a State, the displaced person or population (so many distinctions that call for careful analysis) – seems, on every continent, open to a cruelty without precedent.<sup>26</sup>

As at Sinai, so also at Babel, where God's divine endowment of tongues is also a gift of confusion of tongues – the speakable which is also, most ironically, the unspeakable; the translatable that's also the untranslatable (God petitions for translation, as Derrida has it; but in vain).<sup>27</sup> Which is like all text in the Benjamin vision embraced so ardently by Derrida – only translatable as non-translation, in an aporia whose model is an *Interlinearversion* of the Bible (the sacred text of course providing for the Jewish commentator the limit-case for the task of translation).<sup>28</sup> In other words, what these favoured Biblical cases of Derrida uniformly reveal (and instigate) is the contradiction, the impasse, the impossibility, of all of the prevailing laws that he invokes and inspects. *No pasaran*. All laws are already as broken as the broken tablets of the Mosaic. The Mosaic reigns, in effect, as the merely mosaic. 'Thou shalt not kill' says the Law, and the very announcement of the impossibility of doing that radically contains its possibility. 'The face of the Other forbids me to kill; it says to me, "Thou shalt not kill"', even if this possibility remains presupposed by the interdiction that makes it possible.<sup>29</sup>

### **The Force of Law**

All of which is dramatically exemplified in Derrida's reading of the fragment of Kafka's *The Trial* known as the 'Before the Law' episode.<sup>30</sup> 'Before the Law stands a doorkeeper. To this doorkeeper there comes a countryman and prays for admittance to the Law'. He's never admitted, even after years of importunate waiting. He's kept perpetually at the threshold. He stands for Joseph K, Kafka's hero, for Kafka, and in Derrida's reading for Derrida himself, for the reader as such, for the very act of reading. All of these are always before the Law, as endlessly posited by Derrida. Like the countryman, the Law, the reader of the Law, and the reader of this text about reading the Law, are all stuck; they're held in a perpetual aporetic condition, suspended in perpetual *différance*, before the door of the Law. The doorkeeper 'withholds the pass' forever (p. 203). The guarded door, or threshold, is the *hymen* of the

Law (p. 209). *No pasaran*. The Law is a *différance*: an affair of veto and also non-veto (p. 203). The Law ‘places the man in its own contradiction’: the contradiction of its order, the interruption of its relation. This is a ‘terrifying double-bind’ (p. 203). To have *rapport* with the Law you have to deny yourself *rapport* with it: *il faut ne pas, il ne faut pas* (translated as ‘it must be that one does not; it must not be that one does’, fn. 18, p. 203). The Law produces sin. The Law both prohibits and is itself prohibited (*interdit*). And Derrida quotes Romans 7 (fn. 17, p. 203). It’s bind of *différance* the countryman is held in until death (p. 211). As he dies, the doorkeeper shouts in his ear that the gate was ‘made only for you. I am now going to shut it’. The sentence is of course the countryman’s (death) sentence. It’s an aphoristic verdict, with all the aporetic horror Derrida finds characteristic of aphorisms: ‘cette sentence (arrêt ou jugement)’ (210, and fn. 24, p. 210). The sentence of the law is an arrest, a stop, a halt, a dead-stop. An aporia.

In his momentous text ‘Force of Law: The “Mystical Foundation of Authority”’ (1989/90), Derrida argues with passionate force that the law is always and inevitably horribly forceful. A law of law is that it has its force: the *force of law*. The law is sustained by force, by violence, and this legalised violence is of its nature as unjust as any violence. Which is a challenge to the idea of law as maintaining right, rights, righteousness (*droit, les droits, droiture*), to the righteous desiring of law, and the law-abiding/law-abider’s *je dois*, I must. Law, Derrida points out, is always in effect illegal, legally unfounded at bottom, at the historical point of origin; historically it’s always put and held in place by imposed force. It is also unstable, subject (historically again) to constant revision and rereading, to midrash. It is morally and hermeneutically aporetic. Sinai is, for Derrida, a fundamental case of the law’s fundamental moral aporia, the injustice of a judicial system held in place by force, by the strongest originator there is, namely Jahwe. Derrida’s questioning of the lawfulness of Law leads him thus to question the justice of God’s Law, to query the Jewish-Biblical, the Old Testament claim that this lawgiver, at any rate, and these particular laws of his are always righteous and just.<sup>31</sup>

The Jewish Biblicist (and literary historian) Regina Schwartz is expectably outraged by this, and will have none of Derrida’s case. His argument is simply irrelevant to the Law of Jehovah, she claims. What makes Jehovah’s Law unique among legal systems is that it is always ‘just’. In Exodus and the Talmud and beyond, it is ‘not ... aporia, but ... the radical identity of the law and justice that characterizes revelation in the Hebrew Bible’. That is the radicalism of the Biblical vision – a unique vision. This law *is* justice. It is transcendent in the Just God who sanctions it. That the primary evidence for this is the say-so of the very law-giving texts which announce their laws and their lawgiver as Just does not at all perturb this protester. And Schwartz is not, of course, refuting Derrida’s case that Jehovah’s law is unjust, but merely denying it.<sup>32</sup> Derrida’s case is deeply endorsed by the Christian tradition, which refused and refuses the justice of large parts of the Law of Jehovah (the stoning to death of adulteresses, for example, levirate marriage, the

killing of men with damaged testicles, as well as the whole practical sacrificial system, the saving blood of bulls and goats and so forth), a refusal beginning with Jesus rewriting the Ten Commandments and the Torah into a mere two laws about loving God with all your heart and your neighbour as yourself. But to say otherwise than the Torah, than Schwartz herself – as Jesus did in opposing the Pharisees for a legalism which betrayed and hindered justice, as the Christian Gospels and Epistles do in displacing the old dispensations of the Law – is to be anti-semitic: ludicrously anti-semitic, in fact, as Schwartz has it.<sup>33</sup>

### Pauline Aporetics

The issue of Christianity and law is, of course, not simple – this ‘anti-semitic’ rewriting of Judaic Law by the Messiah who arrived and arrives, a messianistic rewrite which would seem to provide strong examples and models of revision and resistance to Derrida’s judaized readings, and models of reading. The big question, as Derrida suggests, is just how much of a rewriting of the Law, of law, the New Testament actually is. It’s a discussion in which Romans 7 must feature hugely – the Christian text of ‘Pauline aporetics’ which interests Derrida so hugely. ‘*Before the Law* perhaps gives rise to, in a kind of movement or trembling between the Old and New Testament, a text which is both archived and altered, such as the Epistle to the Romans 7’.<sup>34</sup> Referring to the Kafka story as a ‘scene of reading’ – an ‘exegetical demonstration’ set in Chapter 9 of *The Trial* (‘In the Cathedral’) as ‘a prodigious scene of Talmudic exegesis’ – Derrida talks of the ‘metonymical hand-to-hand engagements which it could have had with’ Romans 7.<sup>35</sup> The priest of Chapter 12 of *The Trial*, interpreter, as Derrida has it, of the story’s ‘second exegetico-Talmudic wave’, is ‘a kind of St Paul, the Paul of the Epistle to the Romans who speaks according to the Law, of the Law and against the Law, “whose letter has aged”’; he is also the one who says that “apart from the law sin lies dead”: “I was once alive apart from law, but when the commandment came sin revived and I died ...” (Romans 7)’.<sup>36</sup> And Derrida’s spotting of the aporetics of Romans 7 does not rely on selective quotation. The whole, curious, chapter is a self-stymying fencing with the Law, indeed a kind of ‘trembling between the Old and New Testament’. ‘Know ye not, brethren, (for I speak to them that know the law,) how that the law hath dominion over a man as long as he liveth’ (v. 1), but the Jewish-Christian brethren are now ‘dead to the law’ (v. 4), ‘delivered’ from it, it ‘being dead’ (v. 6). But still they ‘serve it’, albeit in a new spirit. So the law’s dominion is over, but also clearly, and aporetically, not. ‘Is the law sin? God forbid’ (v. 7). But actually it is, since it gives knowledge of the sin it prohibits, and so gives that sin life. ‘I had not known sin, but by the law: for I had not known lust, except the law had said, Thou shalt not covet ... without the law sin was dead ... I was alive without the law once: but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died’ (vv. 7-8). So the commandment, ‘which was ordained to life’, is found to have been ordained to death (v. 10). So, again aporetically, life: death, which is which? Furthermore, how do the holiness of the Law and

the holiness, justice and goodness of the Commandment show themselves? (v. 12). Evidently, by sponsoring sin. And it's a very curious argument for the goodness of the Law that it is actually not good. I do not do what I would do, and I do what I hate (v. 15); so by doing what I would rather not, i.e. by sinning, transgressing, breaking the Law, 'I consent unto the law that it is good' (v. 16). In other words my good consent to the good of the Law is shown in my transgressing it. And so the chapter goes on. The presence of the Law is marked by the co-presence of good and evil ('I find then a law, that, when I would do good, evil is present with me', v. 21). The law of the Law is to generate its opposite. The Law of God is, in fact, a law of sin (v. 24). The 'law of God', and the 'law of sin', are parallel and coterminous, sustaining each other (v. 25). The legal situation the Apostle finds himself in is terribly self-cancelling. It is indeed aporetic. 'O wretched man that I am! who shall deliver me from the body of this death? (v. 24): he might as well be asking who shall deliver him from these unstoppably burgeoning aporias.

So Derrida does have a point about the aporetics of St. Paul's relationship with the Law. Fuel indeed for his case that Christianity, the New Testament, the new dispensation, merely continue his reading of the old dispensation. For Derrida there's no Christian-era evading of the Torah model of the Law, of the perpetual aporetics that he sees Torah-law as being stuck in. For him God is always aporetic – whether Jewish, or Christian, or Greek. Arrestingly, in the *Politics of Friendship*, he seizes on Aristotle's use of *aprosēgoría* to describe God: an aporetic God characterised by *aprosēgoría*, non-allocation, non-address, and so the one who undoes the friendship he offers, the hostile host, the non-friendly friend. An aprosegoric divinity – the non-speaking speaker, the non-addressable addressee: this God of the Greeks, Derrida thinks, parallels the Jewish deity as he really is, and also 'characterises the Christian'.<sup>37</sup> It's a direct thrust, this, at the Judaeo-Christian deity who, orthodoxly considered, both speaks and is spoken to.

### Unforgiving

But does this large insistence on the aporetic, not least as it is applied to the Christian, reach right down to the bottom of the ethico- (and ethico-political) Christian matter – for all the force we have to grant a Derridean Romans 7? Take the crucial area and idea of forgiveness, the ultimate act of traditional Christian giving and hospitality, and one which came naturally to preoccupy Derrida in the course of his late examinations of the roles of the Gift and Hospitality.<sup>38</sup> Once again Derrida finds aporia to be of the essence. Only the unforgivable can be forgiven, is how he formulates the business of forgiveness, and so, for him, forgiveness is stymied from the outset in its forgiving intentions. It's another grand impasse. Christianity, of course, believes in, and offers, forgiveness. Christian religion is based in the idea of forgiveness. Derrida knows all about that: about forgiveness in its traditional theological sense – the erasure and forgetting by God of the sinner's offence, crime, sin. But he denies that definition of forgiveness; won't accept that forgiveness works like that, has that force and scope. He



refers to recent events in South Africa involving public forgiveness rituals inspired by the Christian idea, namely Bishop Desmond Tutu's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Tutu is roughly dismissed. His idea that real forgiveness is possible is rejected as based in a flawed grasp of the real aporia of forgiveness. That reading of forgiveness is a Christian, and Anglo-Anglican Christian, delusion and misreading (42-3). Ridiculously, blindly non-aporetic, it must yield to the rationale of Derridean aporia.

This dismissal is characteristic. Whenever the possibility of going beyond the force of law is hinted at in the Old Testament or/and dwelt on by explicit suggestion in the New Testament (those places Christian midrashi seize on as proleptic indicators of a coming let-out or exit clause from Old Testament legalism) Derrida resists, argues the opposition down, or simply turns his analysis aside. Cities of refuge, for instance – those designated Jewish places of safety for involuntary and accidental killers, providing escape from the law and lawful revengers, in effect qualifying the absoluteness of the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill', and taken by the writer to the Hebrews as a model of the Christian's escape from the rigours of Judaic legalism ('we who have fled for refuge': Hebrews 6:18) – are an admitted problem ('extremely enigmatic'), but one the (legislating) analysis simply refuses to take into account.<sup>39</sup> Derrida's way with Kierkegaard's reading of the Akedah is even more telling.<sup>40</sup> Jehovah's order to Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac on Mount Moriah is arbitrary, and therefore immoral and unjust. It's an order that transgresses ethical order (p. 59). It's a (secret) speaking that's unspeakable (p. 59). The demand is immoral, and Abraham's obedience to it is immoral. Abraham the most moral and most responsible man is also the most immoral and most irresponsible man (p. 72). The law of God, law itself, are characteristically forceful, violent; here is revealed the 'implacable universality of the law' (p. 76). Mount Moriah begins here its career as a place of 'perpetual violence': it's the site of Jerusalem's Temple Mount, a site of continual and continuing bloody struggle for Judaism, Islam and Christianity (pp. 69, 70). The very idea of sacrifice – giving a death, the gift of death – is 'unjust' (p. 71). 'There is no language, no reason, no generality or mediation to justify this ultimate responsibility which leads me to absolute sacrifice' – sacrifice at the demand of the lawgiver, sacrifice out of a sense of 'imperative duty' to the law and the lawgiver. As for the 'ram caught in the thicket' that's miraculously provided as a sacrificial substitute for Isaac, that won't do either. Substitution is, Derrida claims, an impossibility (he's thinking hereabouts, not least, about hostage taking and hostage exchanging in the Middle East, and the link he keeps wanting to make between hosts and hostages along the host-hostile axis that so concerned him in his later writings). There is never real substitution (p. 58). 'Sacrifice' is 'unique, irreplaceable, and most precious' and therefore not to be substituted for. Historically Isaac died and dies; on the Temple Mount the sacrifice of Isaac continues every day (p. 70). What Derrida is resisting, of course, is the idea of atoning, substitutionary sacrifice which animates the whole of the traditional Judaic sacrificial system – that way of living with and surviving the rigorous

demands of the law – and the complexly proleptic Christological reading of the Abraham-Isaac episode as typical of the sacrificial, substitutionary death of Christ: God the Father demanding the sacrificial death of his only son as a substitute for the sinner's death; Jesus as the ram, the type of the substitute; Jesus as the burnt offering, the law- and lawgiver-appeasing holocaust sacrifice. Certainly, for Derrida, there is no let-out of a Kierkegaardian kind built into the story, no Gospel truths of any sort on the horizon (81). (Kierkegaard was keen on relating the episode to Matthew 6 and Jesus' attacks on the public piety of the ostentatiously law-abiding 'hypocrites' who trumpet their almsgiving in the streets and the synagogues – whereas real reward will come from the God of Abraham, who transacts with the orthodox law-abiding Abraham in secret, and sees the truly pious act done 'in secret'.)

There is, evidently, no escape for Derrida in Christianity's modified legalism, its post-Jahwistic, its achieved messianism – the eucatastrophe (to use J.R.R. Tolkien's apt word) of the Christian Divine Comedy. Derrida is simply stuck – aporetic indeed – with the legalised impasse exemplified in a particular Jewish joke he relishes. It's a joke told by Théodore Reik, who, it is said, wrote extensively on 'the Great Atonement'. Derrida offers it as a 'sort of postscriptum' to his obituary of his friend Sarah Kofman, with whom he 'peddled' such 'good Jewish jokes' – she quoted it as almost the last word of her book *Pourquoi rit-on? Freud et le mot d'esprit*, a book she finished writing on September 25, the day of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement.

Two Jews, long-standing enemies, meet at the synagogue on the day of the Great Atonement. One says to the other [by way of forgiveness]: 'I wish you what you wish me'. And the other replies, giving tit for tat: 'See, you're doing it again!'

Derrida glosses it:

An unfathomable story, a story that seems to stop in its tracks, whose movement consists in interrupting itself, in paralysing itself in order to refuse any future, an absolute story of the unsolvable, a vertiginous depthlessness, and irresistible whirlwind that draws forgiveness, the gift, and the giving back of forgiveness right to the abyss of the impossible.<sup>41</sup>

### **My Sort-of Postscriptum**

Should Derrida's reading of law and legalism be read otherwise? Can it? Is a new-dispensational reading possible? Well, yes, up to a point, certainly – a textual, theoretical, practical way beyond the Derridean legislation (for belief, faith, reading) of the perpetual aporetic; a *sens* or path opening out beyond the aporetic barrier; a Christian reading of the door, of Christ as the door, and myself as the door, the door at which Christ stands and before which I stand and which is an accessible, a crossable border or threshold. Which are possibilities actually glimpsed from within the Jewish world, from a Jewish viewing-point – as, of course, the Christian reading of the Jewish scriptures orthodoxly thinks they can and should be. As in Martin Buber's reading of 'Before the Law', dwelling on what he calls the Kafkan 'metaphysics of the door', and accounting for the negativity of the novel *The Trial* and of this

inset story and its momentarily barred threshold as a version of the Jewish *Emunah* experience, the experience of the wilderness, which involves the (curious) speaking of a hidden deity, of a divine revelation of, and within, divine occlusion. An emphasis, if that is possible, on the positives of aporia. A kind of post-Romans 7 Paulinism: the affirmative, despite everything that's preceded it, of the opening of Romans 8. 'There is therefore [*therefore?* that extraordinarily challenging claim for the *consequence* of the aporetics of Chapter 7, what follows from it] therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death.'

- 1 <sup>1</sup> *De la grammatologie* (Éditions de Minuit, Paris, 1967); *Of Grammatology*, trans. [badly!] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore & London, 1974).
- 2 'La structure, le signe et le jeu dans le discours des sciences humaines', *L'écriture et la différence* (Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1967), pp. 412, 427-8. ('Il n'y a aucun sens à se passer des concepts ...' miserably and misleadingly mistranslated in the English versions of this lecture as 'There is no sense in doing without the concepts ...', as in 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Humanities', *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London & Henley, 1978), p. 280.
- 3 'Des Tours de Babel' (1985), in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (Routledge, New York & London, 2002), 133.
- 4 'Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers' (1923), 'The Task of the Translator', *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (Fontana, London, 1973), pp. 69-82.
- 5 'Des Tours de Babel', in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar, pp. 114, 115, 116.
- 6 "'Il faut bien manger'" ou le calcul du sujet', *Points de suspension: Entretiens, choisis et présentés par Elisabeth Weber* (Éditions Galilée, Paris, 1992), p. 270.
- 7 'La loi du genre', *Parages* (Éditions Galilée, Paris, 1986), pp. 249-287.
- 8 'Geoffrey Bennington et Jacques Derrida', *Jacques Derrida* (Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 1991), p. 295.
- 9 *Monolingualism of the Other; or The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford University Press, Stanford California, 1996), p. 7.
- 10 'Aphorism Countertime' (1986), trans. Nicholas Royle, in Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (Routledge, New York & London, 1992), p. 418.
- 11 Hélène Cixous, *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint*, trans. Beverley Bie Brahic (Columbia University Press, New York, 2004).
- 12 *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (1997), trans. Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael Naas (Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1999), p. 65.
- 13 'Edmond Jabès and the Question of the Book' (1964), in *Writing and Difference*, ed. cit., pp. 65, 64.
- 14 *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1995), p. 76.
- 15 'Des Tours de Babel', *Acts of Religion*, pp. 116-117.
- 16 *Politics of Friendship* (1994), trans. George Collins (Verso, London & New York, 1997), pp. 173-4, 33.
- 17 *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, p. 4.
- 18 'Shibboleth' (1984), in *Midrash and Literature*, ed. Geoffrey H. Hartman & Sanford Budick (Yale University Press, New Haven & London, 1986), pp. 307-347; revised as *Schibboleth: Pour Paul Celan* (Galilée, Paris, 1986), from which extracts appear, trans. Joshua Wilner, in *Acts of Literature*, pp. 373-413.
- 19 *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, p. 6.

## THE GLASS

- 20 'The Law of Genre', trans. Avital Ronell, in *Acts of Reading*, pp. 220-252.
- 21 *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, p. 42.
- 22 One of the points of *De l'hospitalité* (1997) endorsed in the Le Monde interview, 'Le principe d'hospitalité', in Derrida, *Papier Machine: le ruban de machine à écrire et autres réponses* (Éditions Galilée, Paris, 2001), pp. 273-277.
- 23 'Aphorism Countertime', *Acts of Literature*, p. 418.
- 24 *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, p. 51.
- 25 *Ibid*, pp. 63-64.
- 26 *Ibid*, p. 64.
- 27 'Des Tours de Babel', *Acts of Religion*, p. 118.
- 28 'The Task of the Translator', *Illuminations*, ed. cit, p. 82.
- 29 *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, p. 6.
- 30 'Before the Law' (1982), trans. Avital Ronell, in *Acts of Literature*, pp. 181-220.
- 31 'Force of Law: The "Mystical foundation of Authority"', in *Acts of Religion*, pp. 230-298.
- 32 Regina M. Schwartz, 'The Revelation of Justice', in *Derrida and Religion: Other Testaments*, ed. Yvonne Sherwood & Kevin Hart (Routledge, New York & London), pp. 337-347.
- 33 *Ibid*, p. 340.
- 34 'Before the Law', *Acts of Reading*, fn. 17, p 203.
- 35 *Ibid*, p. 217.
- 36 *Ibid*, p. 219.
- 37 *Politics of Friendship*, pp. 222-223. This aprosegoric deity – and for that matter the aporetic deity – must owe a good deal to Beckett's apathetic, athambic, aphasic, ataraxic deity (as, particularly, in Lucky's theological rant in *Waiting for Godot*).
- 38 'On Forgiveness', Part Two of *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley & Michael Hughes (Routledge, London & New York, 2001).
- 39 *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*, p. 45.
- 40 *The Gift of Death*, pp. 69ff.
- 41 'Sarah Kofman (1934-94)', *The Work of Mourning*, ed. Pascale-Anne Brault & Michael Naas (University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 2001), p. 184.

## JUDAS

He betrayed me, you know;  
history is a liar if it says otherwise.  
When I put my hand in that dish  
and his eyes met my eyes,  
I knew his wish;  
the steady unblinking gaze that ordered: 'Go!

Do it now.' I knew what I must do,  
I, the accomplice chosen to prepare  
his triumph, would then tell the Pharisees,  
and they would come for him, and there  
they'd know his power; down on their knees  
salute Messiah revealed, the one, the true.

Why didn't that happen? Why  
didn't the glory strike when I kissed his cheek?  
Why were they not kneeling, the fools?  
I saw then, he was weak,  
or beaten. He threw the game. The rules  
of play said, then the man must die.

The money? You say my 'fee'.  
Yes, that was a piece of our plot,  
a yarn to spin for the clergy's benefit;  
but motive? It was not  
a question of cash. Nothing to do with it.  
I was betrayed. I. He betrayed me.

*Walter Nash*

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# **‘Would to God that all the Lord’s people were prophets’: Prophetic Voices**

**Christopher Rowland**

**W**ITH THIS QUOTATION FROM NUMBERS 11:29 WILLIAM BLAKE ENDED HIS famous ‘Preface to Milton’, slightly emending the Authorized Version’s ‘Would God that all the Lord’s people were prophets’. Readers of Blake will need no reminding of the importance of prophecy in his work, but its importance as a persistent thematic of Christian history is less often recognized, except as a marginal and even heterodox challenge to the fabric of Christian orthodoxy. It is interesting to note the way in which the ordinal of the Church of England takes the key prophetic concept of the watchman and applies the prophetic vocation to the priest/presbyter (‘they are to proclaim the word of the Lord and to watch for the signs of God’s new creation. They are to be messengers, watchmen and stewards of the Lord’), something which had already begun in the second generation Christian text 2 Timothy (2 Timothy 1:6). The relegation of prophecy to the past has been part of the way in which prophetic inspiration has been handled within both Judaism and Christianity. The pages of both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are full of references to prophecy and its role as both an inspiration to new prophecy and as the basis for the convictions of the present, as writers believe that what had been written aforetime was now being fulfilled in their experience (Isaiah 51:10-11; 1 Peter 1:11-13; Luke 10:24; 1 Corinthians 10:11).

## **Aspects of modern prophecy**

This essay begins with a consideration of three prophetic figures from late eighteenth and early nineteenth century England as a way into a discussion of Biblical prophecy. These figures are William Blake (1757-1827), Joanna Southcott (1750-1814), and Richard Brothers (1757-1824). Study of their work has been an important part of a research project based in the University of Oxford on prophecy in England in the modern period.

Joanna Southcott was an English prophet who had a considerable impact in her own time, when she attracted some ten thousand followers, including several Church of England clergy, and beyond. She was concerned with the second coming, the building of God’s visible kingdom on earth and, most famously, left a box of prophecies to be opened in a time of national trial and tribulation by twenty-four Church of England bishops. (This box remains unopened.) After her death, Southcottians divided into various groups, some remaining faithful only to Southcott’s message, and some following one or more of the several succeeding prophets, the last of whom was Mabel Barltrop, known as Octavia, who founded the Panacea Society

in Bedford in 1919. The focus of the Oxford research project has been on the unpublished primary resources relating to the succession of prophets and other inspired persons dating back to the late seventeenth century (what The Panacea Society calls 'The Visitation'). The archives of the Panacea Society offer an abundance of un-researched material. It is hoped that the project will contribute to the study of the place of prophecy and millennial thinking in the modern West, and look at the use of the Bible by a largely unexamined but significant heterodox religious tradition.

Southcott, Blake and Brothers prophesied in a time of war and political upheaval (Southcott died the year before the battle of Waterloo). While the social upheaval brought about by the French Revolution was, in its initial stages, a promise to many, and a massive threat to those in power, many erstwhile sympathizers began to despair at what happened in France. As the 1790s wore on, dissent was stamped on. Blake was one of those ambivalent about the energy released by revolution, as the ending of his prophecy 'Europe' suggests. The prophecy of all three figures took place therefore at a critical moment.

Joanna Southcott believed she was called to fulfil the role of the woman whose seed was 'to bruise the serpent's head'. A decisive experience for Southcott took place in 1794, as she was reflecting on Revelation 21. In her reading, Southcott believed herself to be called to identify with John's experience of being summoned up to heaven (Revelation 4:1, c.f. 21:10), and seeing the New Jerusalem descending. Southcott distinguished between Scripture and her prophetic or inspired interpretative role. While she affirmed that all truth was contained in Scripture, all had not been made clear until the right time. In this she based herself on Biblical precedents like Daniel 12:9. She believed that Christ came as the Paraclete in her, whereby God used prophets to clarify what in Scripture had not yet been fully explained.

Southcott made an enormous impact on early nineteenth century England when at the age of sixty-four she claimed to be fulfilling the visionary prophecy of the Woman clothed with the Sun of Revelation 12, the one to bear the man child. She had actually claimed to be the Woman clothed with the Sun in her first book in 1801 (*The Strange Effects of Faith*, 1:42). What happened in 1814 was the unfolding or revealing of the meaning of the visionary passage about the man-child. Up to that time it was understood to refer to her followers, but later she wrote that the man-child would be an actual child, called Shiloh (Gen 49:10). Her death came shortly after what appeared to be the terminus of her pregnancy.

While Joanna Southcott believed herself called to be the woman who would give birth to the male child of Rev 12, Richard Brothers believed himself to be that messianic child. At the start of his prophetic vocation, he had visions, as well as conversations with God. For Brothers rational reflection on these experiences was crucial as he sought to integrate his revelations into a theological scheme. Brothers claimed to be the one called to restore the Jews to their homeland. His prophetic ministry formed part of a response to a British government committed to a war with the French

Revolutionary armies during a time of food shortages and political unrest. He took an anti-war stance and refused to swear oaths of allegiance, based on Matt 5:9 and 34. These principles were combined with a stated intention to seize the throne of George III in 1795, before leading his exodus to Israel in 1798. Brothers also bitterly denounced the slave trade by using the apocalyptic and bloody images of Revelation. His prophecy was widely distributed and its readership included the 'polite' and educated as well as those deemed credulous or 'enthusiastic'. Not surprisingly his activities drew the attention of those in power. Later in his life, from an asylum, his prophetic understanding moved from the urgent and violent rhetoric of millenarian doom, to a vision of a postmillennial quasi-utopian vision. Like Southcott, Brothers placed himself at the centre of his own apocalyptic drama: the king at the centre of the New Jerusalem, one who had what may be understood as a 'walk on part' in the acting out of the eschatological drama.

The poet, artist and engraver, William Blake, also was a visionary, and he also thought of himself as standing in a tradition of prophets, this time of the Bible, especially John. He recognized the prophets of the Bible as kindred spirits, and his own prophecies mimic their style. Blake's prophecies were not intended to predict what would happen, for they were written after the events that are described, as we shall see. He briefly expounded his views on prophets in a marginal note in 1798 in a book by the Bishop of Llandaff, which had criticized Tom Paine's critique of religion:

Prophets in the modern sense of the word have never existed. Jonah was no prophet, in the modern sense, for his prophecy of Nineveh failed. Every honest man is a prophet; he utters his opinion both of private and public matters. Thus: If you go on So, the result is So. He never says, such a thing shall happen let you do what you will. A Prophet is a Seer, not an Arbitrary Dictator (Annotations to 'An Apology for the Bible... by R. Watson', 1798, in Keynes, 1972, p. 392).

Prophecy is not a role reserved for a privileged elite for, as Blake's Isaiah puts it in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, 'the voice of honest indignation is the voice of God'. That being said, he also had a strong sense of his own peculiar role to open the doors of perception and understanding.

Blake's drawings and illuminated books are saturated with apocalyptic images. John's apocalyptic vision especially is a central component of many aspects of Blake's visionary world, even when he departs from some of its more violent and vengeful themes. Revelation informs his understanding of his own political situation, as it has done for many others before and since; it is a dominant part of his mental furniture. There are numerous verbal allusions to Revelation throughout the illuminated books, particularly in *Jerusalem*. Some are quite explicit, but the link with the Biblical book is seemingly rarely deliberate and not at a self-conscious level. Like Southcott, Blake was no commentator on Revelation, as he believed himself to be a prophet like John. Revelation is woven into the fabric of his own prophetic vision. For example, in 1798, in his annotations to his copy of the Bishop of Llandaff's 'Apology for the Bible', Blake wrote, 'To defend the Bible in this



year 1798 would cost a man his life. The Beast and the Whore rule without control' (Keynes, 1972, p. 383). He explicitly traced a continuity between his own mythical world and the vision seen by John.

Rahab triumphs over all; she took Jerusalem Captive a Willing Captive by delusive arts impell'd To worship Urizen's Dragon form, to offer her own Children Upon the bloody Altar. John saw these things Reveal'd in Heaven On Patmos Isle, & heard the souls cry out to be deliver'd. He saw the Harlot of the Kings of Earth, & saw her Cup Of fornication, food of Orc & Satan, pressd from the fruit of Mystery (*Four Zoas*, 8.597ff.).

There are differences between Blake and prophets like Joanna Southcott and Richard Brothers. Like Brothers, Southcott was in some ways an inspired interpreter of Scripture, who offered the definitive meaning of the Biblical text long shrouded in obscurity. Brothers, as we have seen, applied the exercise of his reason to the understanding and explication of his prophetic experience. There is little of Joanna Southcott's tentativeness about the authenticity of the divine inspiration in Blake's work. Blake's relationship to the Bible was less interpretative and altogether more free-ranging. The Biblical images and themes form the inspiration of his prophecy, but he never devoted himself to the detailed interpretation of the Biblical text (the 'Job' engravings are somewhat of an exception). The Bible was a prophetic springboard not an object of study and explication. Southcott and Brothers in different ways actualize the text whereas Blake expands it and builds upon it in a different manner: being a prophet in his own way is central for Blake. His prophetic works are rather offspring of the Biblical visions, and go their own way in reconfiguring the Biblical text. Obvious Biblical images are launching pads for new versions of the Biblical narrative of salvation, whose exact Biblical contours are left behind, even if their spirit is largely maintained.

Blake was, perhaps surprisingly, less politically involved than Southcott and Brothers, though it was not for want of trying. We should not ignore the charge of sedition levelled against him for his remarks to a British soldier about the King of England in 1800. Unlike both Southcott and Brothers he was not part of any wider mass movement except for a brief, though marginal, attachment to radicals in London in the early 1790s. Blake's works seem at times more self-consciously obscure in their complexity, reflecting the obscurity for the interpreter of his Biblical exemplars. There is also none of the utopian spirit of Brothers' work. What there is, however, is an understanding of human psychology suggesting that he had a grasp of the complexity of the nature of redemption, and of the interweaving of the individual and political in bringing that about.

### **Biblical antecedents**

What do these modern prophets look like in the light of the Bible? Most of the features we find there may be found in the writings of these three figures. We find a strong sense of vocation, with dramatic, often visionary, initiations (passages of Ezek 1 and Rev 1:13-17; Rev 4 and Mark 1:10). There are different

attitudes to prophecy, on the one hand foretelling (in the sense of predicting the future in Mark 13; Luke 21), and on the other, 'forth telling' (in the sense of social or religious commentary (Matt 23 and Rev 13 and 17, more akin to what we find in Blake's prophecies). There are oracular riddles (the riddling is most evident in a text like Is 7), and 'acting out' of their vocation or the fulfilment of earlier prophecy by embodying in their lives their prophetic message (1 Samuel 15; Isaiah 20; Ezekiel 3, 4; Revelation 10 and Luke 9:51-53, 13:33). We think of 'classical' prophecy as primarily connected with words. As the prophet proclaims, 'Thus says the Lord' and speaks as the agent, with God's voice. The emphasis on the words is underlined by the stress on the words of the prophets as the oracle of God; they are words to which reference will be made. This applies to both Judaism and Christianity, notwithstanding the different emphases of Judaism and Christianity. In the former, the prophets are seen as interpreters of Moses (Aboth 1:1), being the successors promised by Moses in Deuteronomy 18:15. In Christianity their words were not understood and only became transparent with the coming of Christ (1 Peter 1:11-13). Behind the words which are now extant, however, are figures with careers, the memory of whom indicated dramatic political involvement. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in the case of Elijah and Moses. In Jewish tradition, Moses was a king and legislator. Often their actions were eccentric and their demeanour unconventional. The prophetic calling, like the shaman in other religious traditions, came about through some dramatic experience of the divine, often a vision. This is true of Isaiah and Jeremiah's experiences (Isaiah 6, Jeremiah 1:11, 13, Amos 7).

All historians of Judaism agree that the exile of the Judeans in Babylon at the beginning of the sixth century was a defining moment for Jewish religion, when much of what we know now as the Hebrew Bible was collated and the beginning of a sacred scripture is to be found. Although there was prophecy after the Exile, that gradually disappeared as the emphasis on the cult and on the written scripture (of which the oracles of prophets were included) developed. The demise of prophecy had something to do with this but it may well have been the case that there was a power struggle after the return from Exile between these dissenting prophetic voices who hoped for something better and those who saw the fulfilment of divine purposes in the rebuilt Temple and the re-established religious life in Jerusalem. As Judaism became a religion of the book, the living voice of prophecy diminished and may well have been discredited (Zechariah 13). Those who did claim to have visionary experiences wrote up those visionary claims in the name of some great figure of the past. Therefore, pseudepigraphy became a way in which claims to know God more immediately, in the manner of prophets of the past, could gain a hearing when the living voice of prophecy had to compete with the growing authority of the Scriptures, including the words of the historic prophets.

Two contrasting appropriations of prophecy in post-exilic Judaism indicate the situation. In the first we find the words of Scripture, including the prophetic writings, have become the subject of exegetical exploration in order

to discern the complexities of the obscure oracles of the past. This is well illustrated in Sirach 38 where the possibility of new insight is acknowledged, but such knowledge is based on the interpretation of the words of the past.

The wisdom of the scribe depends on the opportunity of leisure; and he who has little business may become wise. How can he become wise who handles the plough, and who glories in the shaft of a goad, who drives oxen and is occupied with their work, and whose talk is about bulls? .... Yet they are not sought out for the council of the people, nor do they attain eminence in the public assembly. They do not sit in the judge's seat, nor do they understand the sentence of judgment; they cannot expound discipline or judgment, and they are not found using proverbs. But they keep stable the fabric of the world, and their prayer is in the practice of their trade. On the other hand he who devotes himself to the study of the law of the Most High will seek out the wisdom of all the ancients, and will be concerned with prophecies; he will preserve the discourse of notable men and penetrate the subtleties of parables; he will seek out the hidden meanings of proverbs and be at home with the obscurities of parables. He will serve among great men and appear before rulers (Sirach 38:24-25, 32-39:4).

In the Qumran Scrolls, particularly the commentaries on the prophetic books of Habakkuk and Nahum, we find that two very distinctive uses of Biblical prophecy emerge. In the Habakkuk commentary we have the sense that an understanding of Scripture is offered, in which the meaning of the original has seemed obscure and needs to be puzzled over by later interpreters. In a passage from the Habakkuk commentary (1 QpHab 7) the writer contrasts the prophetic oracle with the interpretations offered by the Teacher of Righteousness:

God told Habakkuk to write down what would happen to the final generation, but He did not make known to him when time would come to an end. And as for his saying *that he who reads may read it speedily*, interpreted, this concerns the Teacher of Righteousness, to whom God made known all the mysteries of the words of his servants the prophets.

Very different is the way in which the visionary texts like the call visions of Ezekiel and Isaiah (Ezek 1 and Is 6) become not mere oracles to be understood but a stimulus to experience. Visionary interest in Ezekiel 1 (referred to in Jewish tradition as the *merkabah*, the 'chariot', because Ezekiel's vision was thought to have been of the divine throne-chariot, with its wheels and movement) is clear from a number of ancient apocalyptic writings, some of which antedate the Christian era. The Book of Revelation is evidence of that visionary practice in the first century A.D. What seems to have happened is that readers of Ezekiel believed that what Ezekiel had seen could itself be the object of visionary insight, as the reading of the first chapter led to a meditative imaginative practice. Reading Ezekiel 1 was severely restricted by ancient Jewish teachers because of its use by visionaries and the dangers to faith and life which such visionary activity posed. There may have been a 'seeing again' of that awesome vision of Ezekiel which could become itself the object of analysis and speculation. The reconstruction of the content of this visionary tradition in the late first century is not easy. We know Paul was

influenced by apocalyptic ascent ideas (2 Corinthians 12:2ff). His apocalyptic outlook enabled him to act on his eschatological convictions. Texts which resemble Revelation 4's vision of God and the throne, and which can be dated to the same period, include: 1 Enoch 14:8ff (at least third century B.C. and probably much older); 4Q405 20 ii 21-22 (probably first century B.C.; translation from G. Vermes, *The Dead Sea Scrolls in English*, p. 228); Apocalypse Of Abraham (probably from the end of the first century A.D. and contemporary with Revelation, translation from H.F.D. Sparks, *The Apocryphal Old Testament*, p. 381).

Neither the exegetical approach to the prophetic texts nor the visionary appropriation claims to be prophetic (at least in a direct sense). There is nothing to suggest that the Jewish mystics who believed that they could see visions of God like Ezekiel did not seem to believe that they were prophets. This is where John of Patmos is different. He is clearly part of this visionary tradition based on Ezekiel, as Revelation 1 and 4 especially indicate, but his mystical experiences are regarded as having greater authority. They are prophecy, and not just private mystical experiences. In this regard John is in line with a widespread conviction evident in the pages of the New Testament that prophecy was not just a thing of the past but also of the present. This is well exemplified by the programmatic statement in Acts 'In the last days I will pour out my spirit on all flesh' (Acts 2:17). Here spirit and prophecy is a mark of the eschatological Kingdom of God. Prophecy was central to memories of Jesus and his predecessor (Luke 4:16; Mark 15). The early Christians believed that the eschatological salvation was not wholly future, since the New Aeon had broken into the Old in the resurrection of Jesus. But the experience of the new age was not confined solely to what had happened to a figure in the recent past, for the experience of the Spirit, such a dominant feature of early Christian religion, cannot be understood apart from the eschatological perspective. In the New Testament, the Spirit is frequently linked with prophecy.

Such prophetic elements have their roots deep within the tradition from, and about, Jesus. The baptism had importance for the beginning of Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom of God, confirmed in sayings, such as Luke 12:50, Mark 11:30. The baptism account has affinities with the call-experiences of prophets like Isaiah, Ezekiel and Second Isaiah (Isaiah 6:1, 42:1, 64:1; Ezekiel 1:1). Mark's version presents it as a personal experience, in which a vision of the Spirit and a divine voice proclaim the nature of his relationship with God.

Elsewhere in the gospels, Jesus is presented as thinking of himself as a prophet (Matthew 13:57, 12:39; Luke 13:33). He was thought to be a prophet by his contemporaries, as certain reports about reaction to Jesus indicate (Matthew 21:11, 26; Luke 7:16; John 6:14). Indeed, it is significant that at his trial, Jesus is asked to prophesy by the soldiers, as if there were a view abroad that he was an inspired person with a claim to a divine commission (Mark 14:65). Like the ancient prophets, Jesus condemned his generation for their unbelief, and places himself in the long line of prophets who have done the

same (Luke 11:49-50). Like them, he is rejected by his contemporaries (Mark 6:4; cf. Jeremiah 15:10, 20), and his criticisms are directed at those who have made obedience to God a sham (Luke 11:46). Like them, he preaches doom (Matthew 11:20ff.) and with authority (Mark 1:22). It is the conviction that he has to speak God's word to the people, which takes Jesus up to Jerusalem (Luke 13:31-3). In doing this, he expects suffering and death as the prophets had suffered before him (Luke 11:49).

One other theme which should be considered under the heading of Jesus the prophet is a concept which makes only an isolated appearance in the Synoptic Gospels, but is very frequent in the Gospel of John: Jesus as the emissary of God (e.g. 5:23, 7:16, 12:44, 13:20, 14:9, 15:23). In Luke 10:16 (cf. Matthew 11:25-7) Jesus speaks of himself as the one sent by God. Its Jewish background and the isolated parallel in the other gospels demand that we consider the possibility that this theme may indeed express Jesus' own conviction about his role as God's agent. The basic principle of the Jewish institution of agency, the situation where an individual is sent by another to act on his behalf, is that an agent is like the one who sent him (*Mekilta* Ex. 12:3; cf. M. *Berakoth* 5:5). This notion makes its appearance in the Synoptic tradition (Luke 10:16, Matthew 10:40). Such an understanding of his role would coincide with his belief that he was the herald of God's eschatological kingdom, and would also reflect the directness, which is evident in the prophetic type of call, which we find in the baptismal narrative.

The New Testament Apocalypse is a book of prophecy and commends the importance of the prophetic ministry (Revelation 1:3, 22:7, 22:18). Its importance lies in the way in which it both takes up and crystallizes earlier prophetic texts; allusions to a wide range of prophetic texts, especially Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, are found in almost every verse, but never in the form a direct quotation or, as far as we can discern, conscious allusion. The Book of Revelation, or the Apocalypse (to adopt the words which open the book, 'Apocalypse of Jesus Christ', 1:1) is often seen as an example of 'apocalyptic' as opposed to prophecy. A neat distinction is often made between prophecy and 'apocalyptic'. H.H. Rowley's oft-quoted dictum is often used to characterise this difference, but the connections are much closer than this neat summary allows, and the differences more explicable as a result of the fact they reflect different moments in the history of prophecy in ancient Judaism. While there are peculiar characteristics in the Biblical 'apocalyptic' texts (e.g. dreams, and dream-like imagery), Daniel and Revelation, there is little to suggest that they belong to a fundamentally different type of religious outlook as compared with prophetic texts. Understanding the ways of God takes different forms, even in texts which are labelled 'prophetic' or apocalyptic. In the Hebrew Bible also, visions jostle with proclamatory pronouncements by a human agent in which the word of God is spoken. The Apocalypse is a continuation of what has gone before.

The thought-forms and outlook of Revelation were more typical of early Christianity than is often allowed. The fact that we possess little directly parallel visionary material elsewhere in the New Testament accounts for some

of the differences, but they are superficial. Beneath the surface we have here convictions about God, Christ and the world which are not far removed from the rest of the New Testament.

The revelatory component in Paul's life stands like a central pillar of his whole career. Indeed, it is the visionary world which best explains that cataclysmic upheaval in Paul's life. In Galatians Paul speaks of the moment of disclosure as an apocalypse (1:12). He affirms that he did not receive his commission by any human agency but 'through a revelation of Jesus Christ'. Paul alludes to prophetic call narratives in his autobiography in Galatians 1:15, where he alludes to Jeremiah 1:5 and Isaiah 49:1. His self-designation as an apostle echoes the language used from time to time of the prophetic commission to act as God's agent (Isaiah 6:8-9, 48.16; Jeremiah 23.31; Ezekiel 2:4; Zechariah 2:11; Malachi 4:5). The apocalyptic experience (Galatians 1:12 and 1:16, cf. Acts 22:17) enabled him to act on his eschatological convictions, so that his apocalypse of Jesus Christ became the basis for his practice of admitting Gentiles to the messianic age without the Law of Moses. The hinterland of Paul's visionary experience is nowhere better evidenced than in 2 Corinthians 12:2. In a confession which events have squeezed out of him, the apostle speaks in oblique fashion about an experience fourteen years before when 'a man in Christ' was snatched up into paradise or the third heaven.

Paul does not however resemble only the visionaries of his own day. In 2 Corinthians 3 he contrasts his apostolic ministry with the ministrations of Moses, the archetypical prophet. Here Paul is not only placing his activity on a superior plane to that of Moses but subordinating the latter's pivotal role in the divine economy to himself and asserting the temporary nature of it. What starts off as a contrast ends up as an assertion about the present transformative glory which belongs to those who are ministers of the new covenant. Paul sees himself and his companions as mystical guides who are like stewards in the divine palace with the privilege of administering the divine secrets (1 Cor. 4.1).

Access to divine secrets is typical of the apocalypses, and forms a central feature of the authority granted to the Teacher of Righteousness at Qumran (cf. 1 QpHab 7). Such mysteries did not only relate to the details of eschatological salvation and the reordering of conventional wisdom about its fulfilment but also to the central item of the Gospel. The apostles are engaged in an enterprise on a cosmic scale (1 Corinthians 4:10) as God's fellow workers (3:9). Indeed, the apostle sees himself as an architect working according to a divine master plan, parallel to Moses himself (Exodus 25:9, 40 cf. 1 Chronicles 28:18 and 2 Corinthians 3:16). Indeed, that to which the apostles are bearing witness is itself an apocalyptic event (Bockmuehl 1990). Such ecstatic experiences are not exclusive, however.

What we find in earliest Christianity is the world of prophecy and apocalypse functioning as the basis of its messianic convictions. One feature of the struggles in early Christianity seems to have been claims to authority which were authenticated by appeal to direct divine mandate, a feature which

rapidly became more circumscribed in a later age which was more suspicious of the prophet and visionary. The distinctive ethos of early Christianity may be discerned in the ambivalence towards human reason which presupposes the need for divine revelation in the apocalypses (such themes underlie 1 Corinthians 1-2). Early Christian literature is not only pervaded with visions and revelations, however. The very structure of the theology of major witnesses to early Christian theology suggests that an apocalyptic framework provided its intellectual structure, relating both to the sense of the fulfilment of what was expected, and the revelation of that which had been unseen or mysterious.

The importance of studying Blake, Brothers and Southcott (and many other prophetic figures who are less well known and perhaps even more eccentric) is that it reminds us that prophecy is a constituent part of Christian history. What the prophets, their strange vocations and the peculiarity of the ways in which they act it out, all remind us is that we do not understand the Bible unless we come to terms with this form of religion, which is so difficult to subdue to neat theological systems. At the heart of its sacred texts Christianity enshrined the prophetic. There may have been attempts to domesticate it, either by relegating it to the past or the distant future, but the texts which themselves become the witness to God offered men and women the resources for apprehending a similar kind of call, and similar discomfort, as the conviction 'who can but prophesy' drove the prophets to dissent and unconventional patterns of life.

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## **OLD MAN IN ADVENT**

Old man in Advent, watch the weeks go past,  
count the moon down, sense how the tides are making;  
feel, in the fall of sleep, or thrust of waking,  
your heart's appalling lurch towards its last  
beating and breaking.

Calendar, cards, red candles on the sill -  
despite your paper flesh and falling sinew,  
keep the old rituals; there's a child within you  
pleading for hope, a young Redeemer still  
willing to win you.

Remembering life, remembering many days  
endured in fretted patience, like an illness,  
turn from that trouble, give your heart to stillness,  
bring mind home from its traffickings, its ways  
consumed in shrillness.

The world is strident with the noise of hate.  
Fold headlines down, switch off the set, perceiving  
the sempiternal din of guns and grieving.  
Our souls are almost dead; then mark the date  
and pray, believing

somewhere, somehow, beyond the printed strife,  
the screened confusions, in a darkness lying,  
bedded in straw, in some foul shippon lying,  
something is born to bring your soul to life,  
and ease your dying.

*Walter Nash*

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# Prophecy and Utopia: Richard Jefferies and the Transcendentalists

Roger Ebbatson

THE INEXORABLE PROCESS OF SECULARISATION DURING THE NINETEENTH CENTURY paradoxically summoned up a renewed and powerful revival of the prophetic stance, embodied for instance in Thomas Carlyle, Ralph Waldo Emerson or John Ruskin, and in subsequent generations inherited by William Morris, Edward Carpenter, Winwood Reade or H. G. Wells. However, it may be argued that the messianic or prophetic voice is characteristically muffled, undeclared or ambivalent in the period of modernity. According to Walter Benjamin, before 'prophecy of warning has been mediated by word or image it has lost its vitality'. And Benjamin goes on, in terms peculiarly applicable to the prophetic elements in American Transcendental thought or the writing of Richard Jefferies examined here: 'To turn the threatening future into a fulfilled now ... is a work of bodily presence of mind'.<sup>1</sup> I seek in this paper to trace the countervailing impulses within American Transcendentalism between community and isolation, and to demonstrate how its utopian and prophetic possibilities were refracted in the work of the nineteenth-century English nature-writer, Richard Jefferies (1848-1887).

Jefferies once declared, 'I am nothing unless I am a metaphysician',<sup>2</sup> but whilst this is in some senses true, his central theme, transliterated via English Romanticism and American Transcendentalism, is undoubtedly the influence of natural objects upon the human mind. The entire body of Jefferies' work is concerned with men and women in a natural setting, and his treatment of the theme ranges from agricultural journalism to pantheistic mysticism cast in prophetic terms. Despite attaining a degree of popularity and esteem with the reading public, Jefferies remained a solitary individual: 'Who loves Nature can make no friends, everyone repulses, all seem different', he observed in his diaries.<sup>3</sup> Jefferies therefore seems in a way to stand apart from contemporary observers of the rural scene such as Thomas Hardy, but his work does offer some deep affinities with Transcendentalism, a movement whose idealism, prophetic toning and utopian philosophy led to a view of the universe as a type of cosmic psyche. In rebelling against Locke's epistemology, and in their neo-Kantian distinction between Reason and Understanding, the Transcendentalists veer towards pantheism and a belief in what they term 'Universal Spirit'. Philosophically speaking, Emerson argues, 'the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul'. Thus, 'all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME', is to be 'ranked under this name, NATURE'.<sup>4</sup> The key document is Emerson's 1836 essay on 'Nature',

which proposes that the universe is composed of nature and soul, and memorably alerts the reader to the mystical connotations of this distinction:

Standing on the bare ground, – my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, – all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and parcel of God.<sup>5</sup>

According to the doctrine propounded here, 'Every natural fact is a symbol of some spiritual fact'.<sup>6</sup> Transcendentalism perceives as its central principle the unity in which each individual's identity is contained within the all. F. O. Matthiessen has pertinently noted Emerson's 'delicate pleasure in his senses, and his even greater pleasure in soaring beyond them'.<sup>7</sup> The core of Emerson's thought lies in its complex projection of isolation and community, and it has been well said that Transcendental models of individuation

... cannot be completely reconciled with theories of social relationship; for the demands of self-reliance, especially the intuition of the 'divine' depths of the self, often pull one out of the social orbit into an intense introspection.<sup>8</sup>

For Emerson, or for Thoreau at Walden Pond, Transcendentalism desiderated a solitary existence in contradistinction to those more communally oriented experiments in utopian living such as George Ripley's Brook Farm project of 1840. The essence of Emerson's concept of nature, to summarise, is his conception of an all-encompassing relationship between mind and nature, with its profound implications for human societies. It was the prophetic role, as he understood it, to stand against the utilitarian tendencies of the age, and it is this posture which relates him to the English nature-writer.

### **'I fetish Nature'**

In Richard Jefferies' 1883 spiritual autobiography, *The Story of My Heart*, the open spaces of the Wiltshire Downs in southern England enable him to project himself towards the earth in a redemptive or utopian gesture:

Lying down on the grass, I spoke in my soul to the earth, the sun, the air, and the distant sea far beyond sight. I thought of the earth's firmness – I felt it bear me up; through the grassy couch there came an influence as if I could feel the great earth speaking to me.<sup>9</sup>

Later in the book, when he moved to Sussex, Jefferies discovers a 'green hollow on the side of a great hill, a green concave open to the sea', and he writes: 'Silence and sunshine, sea and hill gradually brought my mind into the condition of intense prayer'. These experiences tend towards the annihilation of time in which he can seminally affirm, 'Now is eternity; now is the immortal life'.<sup>10</sup> This is surely messianic in its tendency. Such writing, like that of the Transcendentalists, stands in stark opposition to the materialism and teleology of the Victorian doctrine of progress, and to the literary realism

which projects and critiques that materialism. In seeking a transcendent or prophetic dimension opposed to contemporary values, Jefferies draws upon the potent tradition of Romantic nature philosophy. As Esther Leslie expresses it, in this mode of thought the human being stands in the midst of the natural world, 'incessantly communicating with nature through all organs of sensory perception and through the intuition of the mind'. She adds, 'Mystical, magical forces course through this energetic nature, structuring all that exists and leaving decipherable marks.'<sup>11</sup>

Both Emerson, with his investment in the 'Here and Now', and Jefferies, with his sense of 'the Beyond', seek a utopian alternative to nineteenth-century positivism, an alternative which would later be theorised in the philosophical essays of Martin Heidegger. In particular, Heidegger's sense of the 'clearing' in which being becomes manifest is directly related to this structure of ideas, a concatenation in which the quotidian reality of the everyday is transformed, so that as he phrases it, 'In the midst of beings as a whole an open space occurs. There is a clearing'.<sup>12</sup> The work of the artist, in this reading, is fundamentally utopian – indeed, all art is, 'in essence, poetry', an activity which takes place in 'the open region which poetry lets happen', so that beings 'shine and ring out'.<sup>13</sup> Jefferies' vantage points on the Wiltshire or Sussex heights are saturated with a sense of space and light. In such 'alternative' writing, as Heidegger puts it, 'Light can stream into the clearing, into its openness'.<sup>14</sup> Heidegger's notion of 'pure space and ecstatic time' is liberatory for mankind, a sense of liberation which the philosopher shares with Emerson and Jefferies: the earth becomes, in this body of writing, not a resource for agricultural or industrial exploitation but rather a 'dwelling-place'. In an essay written shortly before his tragically early death, 'On the Downs', Jefferies wrote:

Stoop and touch the earth, and receive its influence; touch the flower, and feel its life; face the wind, and have its meaning; let the sunlight fall on the open hand as if you could hold it. Something may be grasped from them all, invisible yet strong. It is the sense of a wider existence – wider and higher.<sup>15</sup>

And towards the end, in his notebooks, Jefferies would ruminates:

I fetish Nature. Sea, sunshine, clear water, leaves. If I can see why not – if they cannot see I cannot help that – I see the sands and the stars, and subtle cosmical material far up, and feel through, and the more I touch these the greater grows my soul life and soul touch.<sup>16</sup>

In his fragment entitled 'To the Planetarium', Walter Benjamin offers, I suggest, a gloss on this type of celebratory response to landscape, arguing that what distinguishes ancient from modern man is 'the former's absorption in a cosmic experience scarcely known to later periods' and he goes on:

The ancients' intercourse with the cosmos had been different: the ecstatic trance. For it is in this experience alone that we gain certain knowledge of what is nearest to us and what is remotest to us, and never of one without the other. This means,

however, that man can be in ecstatic contact with the cosmos only communally. It is the dangerous error of modern men to regard this experience as unimportant and avoidable, and to consign it to the individual as the poetic rapture of starry nights.

Thus, Benjamin stresses that such rapturous communion is not simply individualistic, 'unimportant and avoidable'; to the contrary, he avers, 'its hour strikes again and again', as was made manifest 'by the last war, which was an attempt at new and unprecedented commingling with cosmic powers' in a form of degraded sublimity conjured up in almost Biblical terminology:

Human multitudes, gases, electrical forces were hurled into the open country, high-frequency currents coursed through the landscape, new constellations rose in the sky, aerial space and ocean depths thundered with propellers, and everywhere sacrificial shafts were dug in Mother Earth.

At this historical conjuncture, as the logical consequence of the industrial revolution, the 'lust for profit of the ruling class sought satisfaction' through this ecstatic union, and thus 'technology betrayed man and turned the bridal bed into a bloodbath. In this catastrophic process, the ancients' rapport with nature gave way to a different response, so that 'In the nights of annihilation of the last war the frame of mankind was shaken by a feeling that resembled the bliss of the epileptic'.<sup>17</sup>

More than a century earlier, Hegel had propounded the conditions for what he termed a 'new religion', marked by many of the elements that would characterise the thought of both Jefferies and the American Transcendentalists. This prophetic religion, Hegel suggests, is one 'which already announces itself in revelations to single individuals', and would be 'discerned in the rebirth of nature as the symbol of eternal unity'.<sup>18</sup> It is the stress upon the individualistic character of the response to nature which both validates and undermines the utopian tendencies of Jefferies' strain of thinking, tendencies which may be framed with reference to Ferdinand Tönnies' concept of the shift from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, from a world of organic fellowship (which some Transcendentalists attempted to revive) towards a bourgeois society where individuals become units in the chain of production. Is Jefferies' thought, despite its pantheistic ecstasy and prophesying intensity, an anguished response to this crisis? Certainly he was never to espouse or join one of the many alternative communitarian projects in Victorian Britain, his utopia remaining an idiosyncratic model with apparently no followers.

There is, however, another aspect to Jefferies' thought which stands in opposition to this solipsistic version of Transcendentalism. In some of his sociological and agricultural essays he devotes much thought to issues of land ownership, and comes close to espousing a type of organic socialism. The eighteenth and nineteenth centuries saw the growth of ideas about a more equitable distribution of land ownership and a consequent alteration in society posited upon the thesis that the peasants had been progressively alienated from the land they worked. This dispossession, reaching its climactic in the enclosures, would lead dialectically to the evolution of a

range of social alternatives ranging from the Chartist communes of the 1840s to Ruskin's quasi-feudal Guild of St George in the 1870s.<sup>19</sup> These movements, like Jefferies' own thinking, owe their origins to elements of English Romanticism. In his 'Thoughts on the Labour Question', published posthumously in 1891, Jefferies gives a daunting picture of human labour and the 'Divine Right of Capital':

The fierce sunshine beats down upon the white sand, or chalk, or hard clay of the railway cutting whose narrow sides focus the heat like a lens. Brawny arms swing the pick and drive the pointed spades into the soil. Clod by clod, inch by inch, the heavy earth is loosened, and the mountain removed by atoms at a time. Aching arms these, weary backs, stiffened limbs – brows black with dirt and perspiration. The glaring chalk blinds the eye with its whiteness; the slippery sand gives beneath the footstep, or rises with the wind and fills the mouth with grit; the clay clings to the boot, weighing the leg down as lead.<sup>20</sup>

The 'director' or 'financier' is depicted 'Rolling in his carriage': 'One man whipped with Hunger toils half-naked in the Pit, face to face with death; the other is crowned by his fellows sitting in state with fine wines and the sound of jubilee'.<sup>21</sup> As Diana Morrow points out, in an acute analysis of this piece, during the 1880s Jefferies would assume 'the mantle of transcendental nature priest' at the same time as he forged political links with the New Liberalism. She argues that in his later transcendental essays and *The Story of My Heart*, Jefferies writes prophetically, as one who

deplored the prevailing mechanistic, commercial ethos of the times, and envisaged a future when man, inspired by the abundance and beauty of nature, would cast off the constrictions of the present and fulfil his potential.<sup>22</sup>

This late thinking, Morrow demonstrates, began to have a practical effect after Jefferies' death, exerting a crucial influence, for instance, upon the formulation of Lloyd George's subsequent programme of land reform.

### Post-diluvian hope

In this important sense, therefore, Jefferies' writing possesses both visionary and practical elements, and it was this potent conjunction of qualities which was to trigger one of the most significant of all literary utopias. In the spring of 1885 William Morris was returning from a visit to the north of England, and on the train he read what he designated 'a queer book' which he greatly enjoyed: 'absurd hopes curled around my heart as I read it'.<sup>23</sup> This book was Jefferies' fantasy-romance, *After London* (1885), a work which Morris 'was never weary of praising', as J. W. Mackail recalled, because 'it put into definite shape, with a mingling of effusive romance and a minute detail that was entirely after his heart, much that he had half imagined'.<sup>24</sup> In a letter to Mrs. Burne-Jones, Morris welcomed the 'destruction' of civilisation: how often it consoles me to think of barbarism flooding the world, and real feelings and passions ... taking the place of our wretched hypocrisies'.<sup>25</sup> This consolation, I suggest, derives at least in part from Richard Jefferies, and a

reference in the letter to 'the days of Noah' clearly alludes to a significant feature of *After London*, the great lake which inundates southern England. The first part of Jefferies' romance deals with 'The Relapse into Barbarism', the recession of England after some aboriginal calamity, so that the landscape is once again cloaked in forest, the towns evacuated, mechanical inventions lost and forgotten, and a great lake flooding the 'South Country'. The book's action centres upon the career of a young man, Felix Aquila, and his progress around the lake. The theme of a 'dispeopled' England, the quasi-medieval social order, and the quest-theme all resonated with Morris, and served crucially as determinants in the composition of *News from Nowhere*. In *After London*, the destruction and flooding of the city has led to the creation of a desolate landscape in which the blackened water 'bears a greenish-brown floating scum, which for ever bubbles up from the putrid mud' in a scene dominated by a low cloud hanging over the 'oily liquid'.<sup>26</sup> The dystopian elements here and in Morris's account of 'the change' may both owe something to Dickens' powerful depiction of the American 'New Eden' in *Martin Chuzzlewit*:

A flat morass, bestrewn with fallen timber; a marsh on which the good growth of the earth seemed to have been wrecked and cast away, that from its decomposing ashes vile and ugly things might rise; where the very trees took the aspect of huge weeds, begotten of the slime from which they sprung, by the hot sun that burnt them up ... this was the realm of Hope through which they moved.<sup>27</sup>

However, Jefferies and Morris are, in the last analysis unlike the satirical Dickens, 'pilgrims of hope', looking towards a renovated future society, and both of their romance texts partake of the crucial elements of the literary utopia as defined by Michel Foucault:

Utopias afford consolation: although they have no real locality, there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up ... countries where life is easy, even the road to them is chimerical.... This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the fabula.<sup>28</sup>

Jefferies and the American Transcendentalists, to sum up, are equally marked with traces of that crucial connexion between man and the spatial world permeated with the prophetic desire for transcendence. In the final notebook entries for the early summer of 1887, written when he was mortally ill, Jefferies avers, 'The transcendental soul I understand'.<sup>29</sup> The insistent quest in these final ruminations for what Jefferies terms 'the Beyond' signify what Homi Bhabha has designated a 'spatial distance' which 'promises the future'. Bhabha's carefully inflected argument goes on:

The imaginary of spatial distance ... throws into relief the temporal, social differences that interrupt our collusive sense of cultural contemporaneity. The present can no longer be simply envisaged as a break or a bonding with the past and the future, no longer a synchronic presence.... We are now confronted with what Walter Benjamin describes as the blasting of a monadic moment from the

homogeneous course of history, establishing a concept of the present as the 'time of the now'.<sup>30</sup>

In his scattered and gnomic closing remarks, Jefferies rejects what he classifies as the 'Transcendental excitement of the soul' in favour of a sense of 'touch' which he associated with the sense of his days on the Ridgeway: 'The *transcendental repose* is most'.<sup>31</sup> In this complex moment of revelation, consciousness itself functions as the 'index of transcendental ideal beyond spiritual': 'Sun Life is the recognition of the Beyond not in everything but by everything, as the sea now roaring'. Again, 'Sun Life, the sea, contemplation leads to the Beyond most', to what Jefferies designates, 'The immense Mind beyond Mind'. At the end, Jefferies makes a final prophetic gesture away from his intense individualism and towards that communal utopia which he both sought and evaded throughout his life:

I feel myself so very very stupid: I cannot see or understand. If not settle the infinite  
I may start a social band.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, *One-Way Street and Other Writings*, trans. E. Jephcott and K. Shorter, Verso, 1985, pp. 98, 99.

<sup>2</sup> *The Nature Diaries of Richard Jefferies*, ed. S.J. Looker, Grey Walls Press, 1948, p. 282.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217.

<sup>4</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Introduction', *Nature, Addresses, and Lectures*, Routledge, n.d., pp. 10, 11.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup> F.O. Matthiessen, *American Renaissance*, Oxford University Press, 1968, p. 52.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Steele, 'Transcendental Friendship', in *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Porte and Sandra Morris, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 121.

<sup>9</sup> Richard Jefferies, *The Story of My Heart*, Dartington, Green Books, 2002, pp. 18-19.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31, 39.

<sup>11</sup> Esther Leslie, *Synthetic Worlds*, Reaktion Books, 2005, p. 35.

<sup>12</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. D.F. Krell, Routledge, 1993, p. 178.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 168, 197.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 442.

<sup>15</sup> 'On the Downs', in *Jefferies' England*, ed. S.J. Looker, Constable, 1945, p. 93.

<sup>16</sup> *The Notebooks of Richard Jefferies*, ed. S.J. Looker, Grey Walls Press, 1948, p. 283.

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin, *One-Way Street*, pp. 103-4.

<sup>18</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, 'On the Relation of Nature to Philosophy in General' (1802), in *Between Kant and Hegel*, ed. George di Giovanni and H.S. Harris (Albany, NY: SUNY), 1985, p. 11.



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- <sup>19</sup> See Dennis Hardy, *Alternative Communities*, Longman, 1979.
- <sup>20</sup> Richard Jefferies, 'Thoughts on the Labour Question', *Richard Jefferies Society Journal* 8 (1999), p. 19.
- <sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- <sup>22</sup> Diana Morrow, "' Thoughts on the Labour Question": An Alternative View', *Richard Jefferies Society Journal* 8 (1999), p. 25.
- <sup>23</sup> *The Letters of William Morris*, ed. P. Henderson, Longman, 1950, p. 236.
- <sup>24</sup> J.W.Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, Longman, 1899, vol. 2, p. 144.
- <sup>25</sup> *Letters*, p. 236.
- <sup>26</sup> Richard Jefferies, *After London*, Oxford University Press, 1980, pp. 37-8.
- <sup>27</sup> Charles Dickens, *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1844), ed. P.N. Furbank, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1968, p. 442.
- <sup>28</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 194.
- <sup>29</sup> *Notebooks*, p. 281.
- <sup>30</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge,, 2004, pp. 5-6.
- <sup>31</sup> *Notebooks*, p. 284.
- <sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 286.

# Uses and Abuses of Prophecy: Five Russian Authors

## Philip Gorski

**I**N RUSSIA THE IDEA OF THE AUTHOR AS PROPHET – THE IDEA THAT A WRITER COULD BE *more* than a writer, a combination perhaps of secular saint, ascetic hero, holy fool and martyr – has been accepted, if not assumed, throughout both the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. This paper is a brief discussion of some portrayals of the prophetic figure in Russian fiction, and a consideration of some of the hazards encountered when an author undergoes what might be described as ‘suffering the prophetic fit’.

The unique Russian context of entrenched and long-established censorship combined with a pervasive and mystical Orthodox Christian culture provided fertile ground for a view of the written word – and its disseminators – as both endangered and *sacred*. From within this context, Pushkin makes his appearance with a poem that has been described as the ‘Ur-text’ of the nineteenth and twentieth century Russian prophetic lineage, *Prorok*, or *The Prophet*, of 1826.<sup>1</sup>

My interest in this poem focuses upon the strategic use that was made of it by Dostoyevsky. *Prorok* alludes directly to the book of Isaiah, especially in the ripping out of the poet’s formerly sinful tongue by a six-winged seraph. This is then replaced with the symbolically wise tongue of a serpent, thus equipping him for the regenerated, prophetic vocation envisioned in the final stanza.

Arise! O Prophet, and my call hearing,  
Do as I bid, by nothing deterred,  
Stride over the earth, searing  
The hearts of mankind with righteous word.<sup>2</sup>

This poem helped to set a firm precedent, with the idea of the poet as prophet retrospectively sealed by the growing authority of Pushkin’s own reputation. And it was this reputation that Dostoyevsky made highly creative use of in his own aspirations towards prophethood.<sup>3</sup> In particular, he fixed the poem as the climax of his enormously popular poetry recitals conducted in the latter part of his life. Accounts left by those who attended his readings bear witness to the intensity of the performances. The literary historian Semyon Vengerov was impressed:

Dostoyevsky looked like a prophet in the full meaning of the word.... Each person was spellbound by his penetrating, strangely burning gaze that stared far out into an interminable remoteness.<sup>4</sup>

Another witness gave a more ambivalent account: ‘I have never experienced the

like of such reading since. Though one cannot call it reading or acting, either – it was life itself; a sick, epileptic fever fantasy'.<sup>5</sup>

These feverish invocations of the prophetic spirit reached their culmination in Dostoyevsky's celebrated speech at the unveiling of the Pushkin Monument in Moscow in 1880. Pushkin, in Dostoyevsky's words, created 'a whole series of positively beautiful types he found among the Russian people... (whose) beauty lies in their unquestionable and palpable truth'.<sup>6</sup> Pushkin, however, also possesses what Dostoyevsky called a 'universal susceptibility and responsiveness', and – by virtue of his nationalist genius, 'infused his spirit into the spirit of other nations'.<sup>7</sup> Paradoxically, it is Pushkin's very Russian-ness, which, according to Dostoyevsky, seemingly enables him to understand non-Russians as well, if not better, than they do themselves.

Dostoyevsky, however, goes beyond this euphoric celebration of Pushkin as a national poet, in order to harness him to a project that is very much of his own making. Pushkin is a 'prophetic phenomemon' because of his 'Russian strength' which reveals itself in an 'all embracing humanitarianism and universality'.<sup>8</sup> This universal striving is without question, benign and brotherly:

It was not with hostility (as should have been the case, it would seem) but with friendship and complete love that we accepted the genius of other nations into our soul...making no discriminations by race...knowing how to eliminate contradictions...and in so doing revealing...our readiness and our inclination for the general unification of all people of all tribes of the great Aryan race.<sup>9</sup>

By this point in the Pushkin speech, Pushkin himself has fallen out of sight, having been used as a springboard to launch Dostoyevsky onto his own prophetic plane. The issue is now the destiny of Russia, and its mystical ability to subsume within itself, and also transfigure, the experience of all of humanity. He continues:

To a real Russian Europe and the lot of all the great Aryan tribe are just as dear as is Russia herself, as is the lot of our own native land, because our lot is universality, achieved not through the sword but through the strength of brotherhood and our brotherly aspirations towards the unity of people.<sup>10</sup>

Dostoyevsky's speech is a powerful appropriation and remaking of Pushkin in his own image, with his own brand of mystical slavophilism thus legitimised through a sleight of hand. Pushkin is elegantly re-invented as a precursor to Dostoyevsky's own self-appointed role, that of prophet of the world historic mission of Russia. It is very much a case – to re-employ Isaiah Berlin's metaphors – of Pushkin the fox (who in reality knew many small things) being appropriated by Dostoyevsky the hedgehog (who increasingly knew only one big thing, the certainty of Russia's salvific destiny).

Dostoyevsky's overture to the Aryan races was, as we know, no slip of the pen. The hint that non-Aryan races are not included in his vision of universal brotherhood is amply elaborated upon in his widely circulated *Diary of A*

Writer, in particular his now notorious article 'On the Jewish Question'. In this feverish essay, which toys with a whole gallery of popular anti-Semitic legends, there is another, closely related prophecy that Dostoyevsky makes, in this case concerning the Jews.

The Jew offers his services as intermediary and trades in the labour of others. Capital is accumulated labour, the Jew loves to trade in the labour of another...yet the top level of Jews gains a stronger and surer hold over humanity and strives to mould the world to its image and essence. The Jews keep shouting that there are good people among them as well. Oh Heavens! Is this really the point? We aren't even talking about *good* or *bad* people now.... We are talking about the whole and its idea; we are talking about Yiddism and about the idea of the Yids, which is creeping over the whole world in place of 'unsuccessful' Christianity.<sup>11</sup>

Dostoyevsky's anti-Semitism is nowadays widely acknowledged. But what seems clearer upon closer examination is how intrinsic it was to his prophetic worldview. The discourse employed is not the casual, reflex language of prejudice that one encounters with regrettable enough frequency throughout Russian literature. It has been elaborated into a theory, and is interwoven with a prophetic vision in which the Christian idea and the Jewish idea are seen as being in almost apocalyptic conflict. Although, as Joseph Frank, his biographer, has argued in his defence, Dostoyevsky's attitude towards the Jews is at times ambivalent and often complex, oscillating between a hectoring, menacing tone on the one hand, and grand conciliatory gestures on the other – the past and the present nevertheless being simultaneously explained, and the future prophesied, upon the basis of a pervasive and recurrent anti-Semitic theory of both Russian and world history.<sup>12</sup> The prophetic dream of the Christian unity of all – so prominent in his fictional works – in which the Russian 'God-bearing' nation has the prime, messianic role, is *contingent* upon a solution to the Jewish question that is addressed more openly in his Diary. Unlike his friend Soloviev, for instance, for whom Jewish particularity was a cause for celebration, in Dostoyevsky's thought, a necessary condition of his utopian vision – sometimes implicit, sometimes manifest – is that the Jews must experience *metanoia*. More so, even, than the other recipients of Dostoyevsky's hostility – the Poles, the kulaks, the Roman Catholics, the socialists, the Turks and rootless Western intellectuals in general – it is the Jews and what he calls the 'Jewish Idea' – which are the major stumbling block to the realisation of the unity prophecy.

Dostoyevsky the artist cannot, unfortunately, be separated from Dostoyevsky the polemicist. One review of David Goldstein's book, *Dostoyevsky and the Jews*, suggested that at least his art is not informed by his anti-Semitism, since he created no major Shylock figure.<sup>13</sup> However, as an artist who placed a high value upon complexity of characterisation, Dostoyevsky had in any case little interest in the manufacture of the kind of caricatures that this argument implies. Moreover, his understanding of the function of art mystically transcended the 'everyday'. As he wrote in his notebook:

Reality as a whole is far from exhausted by the everyday, for it exists largely in the form of a latent, as yet unexpressed, and still anticipated word. At infrequent intervals appear prophets who divine and express this integral word.<sup>14</sup>

The presentation of two-dimensional stereotypes would surely hamper the dissemination of this 'latent, anticipated, integral and prophetic word'. (A moment such as when Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov* chooses *not* to deny the infamous Jewish blood libels can be seen as a largely uncharacteristic but revealing *faux pas* which disrupts the otherwise seductive vision). It is the monk Zosima's seemingly benign vision of a just but 'total' society, a heaven on earth brought to fruition by the God-bearing Russian people, that is more characteristic of Dostoyevsky's method, in that it is quietly, unobtrusively predicated upon a series of ominous absences, with its 'all-embracing' character paradoxically rooted in the exclusion of particular aspects of the 'Other'. Previously excluded categories of individuals such as beggars, criminals and those regarded as holy fools are now laudably included in the Zosima-Dostoyevsky utopia, only for new kinds of hate-figure – 'kulaks', 'exploiters', 'money-lenders' – to be swiftly identified. As Zosima says, 'Whoever does not believe in God, is not going to believe in God's people'. Dostoyevsky's excoriating and justly celebrated dialogic critique of rationalistic modernity has in fact a distinctly monologic subtext, since it is Dostoyevsky himself, speaking from the heights of a self-assumed prophethood, who is able to discern, only too well, who 'God's people' in fact are, and who are *not*. The bright vision of this 'prophet to modernity' – as one very recent study has hailed him – may come with an unsuspected high price attached.<sup>15</sup>

## Tolstoy

The idiosyncratic Russian thinker Lev Shestov once contrasted Dostoyevsky's desire to become *more* than a writer, to become, as it were, greater than himself through his laudation as a prophet, with Tolstoy's realization that the earlier high estimate he had placed upon the value of fame, was, quite possibly, empty.<sup>16</sup> In his *Confessions*, Tolstoy recalls the beginning of his spiritual self-examination, and the seemingly stupid, simple, childish yet irresolvable questions that tormented him. One of these questions relates to his vocation as a writer. As he says:

thinking about the fame my own writing brought me, I would say to myself, 'Well fine, so you will be more famous than Gogol, Pushkin, Shakespeare, Moliere, more famous than all the writers in the world, *and so what?* And I had absolutely *no answer*.'<sup>17</sup>

At a point where Dostoyevsky could be said to have definitely found an answer, that of stepping onto the higher plane of Prophecy, Tolstoy only found further 'accursed questions'. Again, to adapt Berlin's metaphors, the desire of the fox to know 'one big thing' pushed him relentlessly forward, and

ultimately brought him into direct conflict with the autocracy and with the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church. Although not free from vanity, he was, however, aware of the absurdity of any claims that he was a 'Prophet'. This is amply suggested by an account of a domestic entertainment in the Tolstoy household at Yasnaya Polyana, which involved the dropping of humorous notes into what was called the 'Yasnaya Pillarbox', after which they were read out at family gatherings. Here is Tolstoy's own mock psychiatric diagnosis of himself.

The patient is suffering from a mania called by German psychiatrists *welt-besserungs-wahn* ... the mania of world improvement. The core of the patient's illness is the patient's belief that his message can alter other people's lives. *General symptoms*: discontent with the existing order, criticism of everyone except himself, an irritable verbosity, disregarding his audience. Switching often from anger to tearful sentimentality. *Individual symptom*: occupation with unsuitable and superfluous labours, like making shoes, harvesting grass etc. *Cure*: total indifference on the part of his audience to his speeches....<sup>18</sup>

Tolstoy did not, as it is sometimes claimed, consciously set out to create a new religion. He in fact believed – like those in many dissenting protestant groups in the West – that he was simply returning to the roots of a true Christianity. Neither did he set out to place himself at the head of a movement made in his own image. As for the 'Tolstoyans', he noted his reservations in his Diary:

To speak of a Tolstoyan teaching, and to come and ask my advice, is a grave mistake. There is neither a Tolstoyan sect nor Tolstoyan teaching. There is only one unique teaching, that of truth – that universal and eternal teaching so perfectly expressed, for myself no less than for others, in the Gospels.<sup>19</sup>

Tolstoy understood, perhaps belatedly, the danger represented by followers who seek leaders. In a letter to Strakhov, Dostoyevsky's biographer, he speaks of his respect and love for the author he had never met, and expressed misgivings about the adulation Dostoyevsky had received. As he says,

It seems to me that you have been the victim of a false and erroneous attitude – not on your part but on everybody's part – towards Dostoyevsky – an exaggeration of his importance, the elevation into a prophet and saint of a man who died in the very feverish process of an inner struggle between good and evil. He is touching and interesting, but one cannot set on a pedestal for the edification of posterity a man who was all struggle.<sup>20</sup>

The irony here, of course, is that although this was a judgement equally applicable to Tolstoy, 'a man who was all struggle' himself, Tolstoy has continued to be routinely venerated as a prophet, despite his own vigorous disclaimers.

This is all the more ironic since there was, in fact, a perhaps less elevated and oracular dimension to his character, one that may partially illuminate the direction that his life and work took. This is the streak of *contrariness* that ran deep in Tolstoy, and there is a word in Russian, *Ozorstvo*, which captures

some of that quality. *Ozorstvo* denotes the taking of a mischievous, childlike glee in the snubbing, or even provoking, of authority, and one might suggest that it is an incorrigible and defining quality of many of the greatest Russian writers. Rather than being a *prorok*, Tolstoy was, I suggest, *the* outstanding Russian *ozornik*.

It was this infectious quality that the reluctant prophet passed on to three of his reluctant disciples, writers who also engaged with the prophetic tradition in their own unique ways – Leskov, Gorki, and Chekhov.

### Leskov

Nikolai Leskov engaged in a continuous game of cat and mouse with the Tsarist censors, one in which his highly idiomatic prose, employing archaisms and malapropisms, also served as a strategy of survival. His dissident religious views, his sly satirical portrayals of the establishment, and his sympathetic representations of Russian religious schismatics, amounted to a decidedly risky artistic project at the time, and his often ornate form of *skaz* – or digressory tall-story telling – may be seen as fortuitously evolving out of an otherwise unfortunate political climate. The stylistic idiosyncrasy that Leskov employs for the purposes of prophetic rhetoric, both sheltered his galleries of inspired religious eccentrics from the censorship, and (so far) also regrettably confined them to Russia.

Although one cannot speak of a typical Leskov story, I'd like to examine one that is certainly representative in its *slyness*, and is of interest for its portrayal of a prophetic *schismatic*. In his story *Odnodum* – singlethought – Leskov portrays Alexander Afansayevich Ryzhov, one of Leskov's '*pravedniki*' or righteous ones, characters developed in his search for the 'three righteous men, without which no city shall stand'.<sup>21</sup> These tales represent a conscious development of the Russian hagiographic tradition which entailed a far reaching critique of the Russian Orthodox Church at the time.

The idiosyncratic Ryzhov has taken to reading the Bible on his own, behaviour regarded with consternation by the locals and the authorities. It produces worrying effects upon him, not least in his refusal, as the town's chief policeman, to take bribes, or rather, 'gifts'. As one official reports to the governor, the Bible 'is not suitable for everybody to read, among the monks it arouses the passions and amongst the laymen it disturbs the mind'.<sup>22</sup> The archpriest, in lamenting officer Ryzhov's 'unbusinesslike' behaviour suspects him of un-orthodox tendencies derived from having read the Bible all the way through. The governor too, when told of this devout reading, also despairs, for as Leskov says,

In our ancient Russian land every Orthodox knows that whoever has read the Bible all the way through and even got to Christ, can no longer be held strictly responsible for his actions, but such people are like the well known fools of God.<sup>23</sup>

Ryzhov has a particular love for the prophets, especially the Book of Isaiah. During a previous job as a postman, he would take detours into the isolation of the forest, in order to declaim his most revered passages denouncing

princes and the mighty one who 'loveth gifts and followeth after rewards'. Leskov describes Ryzhov as 'half mystic, half agitator', since his reading of Isaiah and Ezekiel convinces him it is his fate to take upon himself the vocation of prophet, and in Leskov's words 'to put to shame those who were mightiest of all'. This opportunity arises with the long awaited official visit of the Governor to the small town. When the Governor arrives at the Church, he walks haughtily in, omitting to cross himself or bow. Ryzhov is outraged, and accosts the Governor in front of the iconostasis:

'Sergei, thou slave of God, come humbly, not haughtily, into the temple of the Lord, and present thyself as the greatest of sinners – !' And with that he put his hand on the Governor's back and gravely bent him over into a full bow, then let him go and stood to attention.<sup>24</sup>

The result of this intervention is paradoxical. Rather than the expected swift retribution, Ryzhov is summoned by the Governor, out of curiosity, to an equitable exchange of views that revolves around Ryzhov's secretive prophetic writings. The Governor even agrees to read the Bible. The conventions of hagiography are employed with cunning effect, with the righteous Ryzhov winning a spiritual victory. This ending is not naïve or idealistic, but subversive, since it presents as entirely feasible what would have otherwise been an outrageous suggestion, namely that a 'mighty one' would humbly accept being held to account by the lowly prophet. This scenario, in which a dialogue ensues between weak and strong, in which the lowly exhibit wisdom, and in which strength concedes, is slyly and deliberately provocative.

Leskov's story touches upon the long-lived tension between official and popular religious expression in the Russia of this time. One is reminded of Turgenyev's tale *Living Relic*, in which a bedridden peasant woman who has experienced visions of God has it patiently explained to her by the priest that this could not have been so, for, as he says, 'visions are only granted to those of ecclesiastical rank'.<sup>25</sup>

### Gorki

This focus upon the prophetic, as a theme within unofficial religion, was also present in the work of Maxim Gorki – who was himself, of course, hailed as a prophet. The veneration of the man and his work, in which Gorki became the object of hagiography, has now deteriorated into its opposite. From being lauded as the guiding progenitor of Soviet literature, and the prophet of Socialist man, he is now widely viewed, both in the West and Russia, as a discredited puppet of Stalin's and – as an artist – a dull propagandist. One might say that his reputation has mutated from that of Prophet, to false Prophet.

And yet there was a side to Gorki's work that continues to be overlooked. This was Gorki the individualist with a hatred of *pozhlost* (banality and philistinism) and a fondness for drunks, beggars, and religious sectarians. His portraits of such people, often based on those met during his own years as a



homeless wanderer, or as an apprentice in an icon workshop, lie scattered, almost forgotten, throughout his collected volumes. In one short story after another, Gorki's descriptions of the alcoholics, wanderers, holy foolish misfits and prophets *manqué* of old Russia possess a tolerance and complexity that does not conform to his reputation as a doctrinaire. This should not be surprising, since the Gorky that lay behind the official mythmaking was a more complex figure. As Alexander Blok wrote in 1907, Gorki had an 'unconscious anarchism' which Blok believed he had ruined through his formal adoption of Marxism.<sup>26</sup> This was coupled with a religious thirst that Tolstoy recognised when he told him 'you are by nature a believer and you cannot get on without God, yet you do not believe, from a feeling of offence that the world is not fashioned as it should be'.<sup>27</sup> This became manifestly clear in Gorki's novel *Confession* and in his involvement with the *Bogostroitel'svo* – the God builders, a grouping of intellectuals that attempted to unite Marxism with a species of theological speculation, and prophesied the mystical deification of a promethean humanity. As Sergei Bulgakov once noted, the Russian intelligentsia of the time was marked by an eschatological dream of the City of God – under certain Socialist pseudonyms – which contained strong echoes of Orthodox psychology.<sup>28</sup> Gorky's own prophetic dream represents a striving for the lost life of the Church and for a Holy but Socialist Russia that, ironically, has features in common with what Dostoyevsky claimed as 'our Russian Socialism'.

Yet there was a marked dichotomy between the beautiful collective future which Gorki hoped the revolution would bring, and the awkward nonconformists he described in his work. In collections such as *Across Russia*, in his autobiographical trilogy, in his reminiscences, in *Fragments From My Diary* and in certain of his plays, his work is prophetic, but not of collective, abstract Man or of Socialist Realist art. These works celebrate, often despite themselves, quirkiness, *refuseniks*, *ozorniks* and Godseekers. As he remarks, when remembering himself as a questioning and ascetically minded young man, in *My Universities*, 'Life presented itself to me as an unremitting struggle for the possession of various kinds of trash.... The people I respected, the people in whom I put my faith, were strangely alien, alone, outsiders amongst the great majority'. Chekhov valued this dimension of Gorki's work, commenting that although his drop-outs and itinerants may have often been 'drunk and inelegant', they were nevertheless an effective means of springing what he called 'a powerful and effective leak in the dam of philistinism'.<sup>29</sup> Gorki was, despite the thin veneer of Marxian ideology that overlays some of these more vibrant works, a prophet of the kind of anti-social elements – beggars, travellers malingerers and so forth – that were supposed to disappear in the bright new future where contradictions would be eliminated. In the most resonant of his writings these people are celebrated as the salt of the earth, and hailed as 'that innumerable company of people, strangers in their own land...'.<sup>30</sup>

**Chekov**

In ending, I'd like to turn to a writer whose scepticism towards the seductive appeal of the prophetic might be said to grant him paradoxically an anti-prophetic status. Chekhov, as Thomas Mann once wrote, 'showed no trace of the literary *grand seigneur*, and even less of the sage and prophet'.<sup>31</sup> His own reservations about the author as prophet can be gauged from a remark made to Bunin, that a writer should, after completing a short story, cross out the beginning and the end, 'for that is where we men of letters most often tell lies'.<sup>32</sup> In a letter to Suvorin he addressed the relationship between the writer and the 'accursed questions':

In my opinion it is not the writer's job to solve such problems as God, pessimism etc... his job is merely to record who, under what conditions, said or thought what about God or pessimism... Drawing conclusions is up to the jury, that is, the readers. My job is to be talented.<sup>33</sup>

In the same letter, Chekhov considers the writer who takes it upon himself to 'figure things out':

It's about time that everyone who writes – especially genuine literary artists – admitted that in this world you can't figure anything out... If a writer whom the crowd believes in takes it upon himself to declare that he understands nothing of what he sees, that alone will constitute a major gain in the realm of thought and a major step forward.

There is a passage in *Dr Zhivago* where Yuri praises Chekhov's 'shy lack of concern with loud things like the final ends of humanity', and also the way he considered the 'drawing of conclusions' to be beyond his own rank. For Chekhov this liberation from the burden and pretensions of 'problem solving' can free up the more genuinely artistic, and inherently *prophetic* elements in an authors work.

But what of the prophetic in Chekhov? One might mention his ominous portrayals of the destruction of the natural environment by industrial man or, exceptionally for a member of the very male Russian literary hierarchy, his largely serious treatment of the intellects of women.

But, more subtly, there is a prophetic quality related to his *tone*. The tangible sense of sorrow encountered in Chekhov, at the lack of kindness, tolerance, and – most of all – at the failures of communication amongst ourselves, is in itself a plea for the cultivation of these qualities. In his work these attributes are eloquently absent, and there is a modest, entirely unsentimental, but prophetic suggestion that their presence might facilitate a way forward for humanity. As Gorky said, although Chekhov was too modest a writer to tell people loudly, 'please be a little more decent', he was always 'hoping against hope that this would occur to them of their own accord'.<sup>34</sup>

Despite Chekhov's scepticism about the prophetic author, he had greater patience for what might be called the *unhailed* prophetic voice that existed in obscurity and humility. Encountered throughout his fiction, they are granted an unsentimental respect, especially if they possess an

unassuming spirituality, as opposed to a Pharisaic attachment to the letter of the law. Chekhov's stories in fact contain more knowledge of the everyday religious life of Orthodox believers, and dissenters, than those of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky put together. (Chekhov had an expert knowledge of icons, he was a frequenter of monasteries who hoped to visit Constantinople and Mount Athos, and knew the hagiographies of the Russian saints well.) The ambivalent but respectful homage he often pays to the sincere believer is a register of the complexity of his own religious attitudes, arising from his doubts about, and also his love for, Russian Orthodox Christianity.

Some of the more striking examples of homage to the 'unhailed prophet' occur in what one might call 'psychiatric' stories such as 'The Wager', 'An Attack of Nerves' and 'A Case History'. The culmination of this theme, both in its portrayal of an unsung prophet and its premonition of the medicalisation of discontent, is 'Ward No. 6'.<sup>35</sup> Here, Chekhov's meditations upon folly, prophecy and madness become truly allegoric, as Leskov recognized when he wrote that 'Ward No. 6' is Russia. A potent critique of psychiatric malpractice, the tale prophetically anticipates a society in which the 'difficult' individual can be diagnosed and then removed to that symbol of rationalistic modernity, the psychiatric ward. The patient in this case is Ivan Gromov, who is suffering from an acute sense of having been wronged by the world, and who 'discourses continually upon human baseness (and) upon violence trampling down justice and truth'. The previously fatalistic doctor, whose error lies in his increasing empathy with his nonconformist patient, soon finds himself retired and then locked up also. 'Is it true, doctor' asks the medical board, 'that there is a remarkable prophet living in Ward No. 6?' 'Yes', the doctor replies, 'he is sick, but he is a very interesting man.' With these words, the doctor effectively diagnoses himself, and no further questions are needed.<sup>36</sup>

'Ward No. 6' is a parable about the risks involved in empathy and communication, and also about the catastrophes that occur when these risks are never taken, and are instead replaced by ritualized responses. Like Chekhov, Ivan the patient renounces any claim to being a sage or a philosopher, he insists that he must be merely 'an idiot' since, as he says 'I suffer and am discontented, and I am continually amazed at the baseness of mankind'. His acute sensitivity to this 'baseness' lands him in Ward No. 6, where he is even more effectively ignored than on the outside until, that is, the weary doctor begins to identify not only with Gromov's ideas, but also with the human being. The Doctor's final epiphanic words as a free man to Gromov the reluctant prophet might provide a fitting note on which to end, representing a modest but auspicious form of reciprocity that is fitting for an anti-Prophet such as Chekhov:

What matters is that you and I think; we see in each other people who are capable of thinking and reasoning, and that is a common bond between us, however different our views. If only you knew my friend, how sick I am of universal senselessness, ineptitude and stupidity, and with what delight I always talk with you. You are an intelligent man; I enjoy your company.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See David M. Bethea, 'Literature' in *The Cambridge Companion To Modern Russian Culture*, Nicholas Rzhevsky (ed.), (CUP, 1998), p.167.

- <sup>2</sup> 'Prorok', *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenie, Tom Pervyi* (Berlin, 1921), p.466.
- <sup>3</sup> For a study of prophetic claims in Russian Literature in relation to Biblical models (but one which does not address the specific question of Dostoyevsky's prophecies and 'the Jewish question') see Pamela Davidson's admirable essay 'The Validation of the Writer's Prophetic status in the Russian Literary Tradition; From Pushkin and Iazykov through Gogol to Dostoyevsky', in *The Russian Review*, 62, October 2003, pp.508-36.
- <sup>4</sup> In Gier Kjetsaa, *Fyodor Dostoyevsky: A Writer's Life*, Macmillan, 1988, p.315.
- <sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.316.
- <sup>6</sup> F. Dostoyevsky, *A Writer's Diary*, Vol II, tr. Kenneth Lantz, Quartet, 1994, p.1290.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1293.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1293.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1294.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.1294.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 915.
- <sup>12</sup> Joseph Frank, *Dostoyevsky: The Mantle of the Prophet 1871-1881*, Robson, 2002, Chapter 16.
- <sup>13</sup> Nathan Rosen, review of D. Goldstein, 'Dostoyevsky and the Jews' in *Dostoyevsky Studies*, vol. 3, 1982, pp.200-3.
- <sup>14</sup> Quoted in Segei Hackel, 'F.M.Dostoyevsky (1821-1881): Prophet Manqué?', in *Dostoyevsky Studies* Vol. 3, 1982, pp.5-26.
- <sup>15</sup> P. Travis Kroeker and Bruce K. Ward, *Remembering the End: Dostoyevsky as Prophet to Modernity* (Boulder, Colorado 2001).
- <sup>16</sup> Lev Shestov, 'The Gift of Prophecy' in *All Things Are Possible and Penultimate Words and other Essays*, (Ohio University Press, 1977), p. 152.
- <sup>17</sup> 'Isповed', *Polnoe Sobraniye Sochineniye, tom 2*, Moscow, 1957, p.11.
- <sup>18</sup> In E.B. Greenwood, *Tolstoy; the Comprehensive Vision* (J. M. Dent, 1975), p.150.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.148.
- <sup>20</sup> *Tolstoy's Letters*, vol. ii, University of London, Athlone Press, 1978, p.363.
- <sup>21</sup> 'Singlethought' in William B. Edgerton, *Satirical Stories of Nikolai Leskov*, (New York 1969).
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.89.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p.76.
- <sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p.88.
- <sup>25</sup> Ivan Turgenyev, 'Zhiviye Moshshe', *Izbrannie Proizbedennyya, tom 2* (Leningrad, 1946), pp.51-60.
- <sup>26</sup> Alexander Blok, quoted in Edith Clowes, *Maxim Gorki: a Reference Guide* (Boston, Mass. 1987), p.29.
- <sup>27</sup> L. Tolstoy, quoted in F.M. Borrás, *Maxim Gorki the Writer* (Oxford, 1967), p.161.
- <sup>28</sup> Sergei Bulgakov, 'Giroizm Ipodviznichestvo' in *Vekhi*, Moscow, 1909.
- <sup>29</sup> Letter to Prince Alexander Sumbatov, 26 Feb. 1903, in Simon Karlinsky (ed.), *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought: Selected Letters and Commentary*, (University of California, Berkeley, 1975), p.447.
- <sup>30</sup> M. Gorki, *My Childhood (Dyetstvo)*, tr. M. Wettlin (Moscow, 1954), p.13.
- <sup>31</sup> Thomas Mann, 'Chekhov', in *Last Essays*, Secker & Warburg, 1959.
- <sup>32</sup> Ivan Bunin, 'In Memory of Chekhov', in *Reading Chekhov's Text*, R.L.Jackson (ed.) (Illinois, 1993), p.70.

<sup>33</sup> Letter to Alexei Suvorin, 30 May, 1888, in Karlinsky, p.104.

<sup>34</sup> Maxim Gorki, 'A.P.Chekhov' in *Literature and Life* (Hutchinson, 1946), p.82.

<sup>35</sup> 'Palata No. 6', in *Polnie Sobranie Sochinenie I Pisem, Tom Vosmoye, 1892-94* (Moscow 1977), pp.72-126.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.107-8.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.104-5.

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## THE PRODIGAL

They know, the sea and the wind:  
The sea that wears its wisdom in the sand,  
The wind that writes its philosophy on the waves;  
The leaf has curled words, even the shell a whisper;  
They are all wise but me.

Where did I lose Eternity?  
Here in the woods of living?  
In the splendour of fleeting moments?  
In mortal fascination?  
Oh, teach me wisdom, wind that writes on the sea;  
Explain my sin, O sea, with your wordless thunder.

Heartbreaking bird, shaking summer down  
From the fiery bough, how have you found the secret?  
Why am I lost, knowing only the tears  
Of your near-knowledge? Why is the kingdom barred  
To the man who is a child in search of God?

Yet though you answer in a higher tongue,  
I know the truth, and that the Kingdom waits.  
I had strayed to the cities from the stars,  
To prisons from meadows, seeking thought in stones  
And Eternity in a smile;  
But I am returned, the prodigal of soul,  
Seeking the world I scattered, seeking the world  
That was never lost by wind or sea or bird.

*Pamela Constantine*

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# The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits: Richard Baxter's Prophetic Voice

Alison Searle

## 1

THE LAST PERSON TO BE EXECUTED AS A WITCH IN ENGLAND DIED IN 1685.<sup>1</sup> Several years later the Puritan divine and Nonconformist Richard Baxter (1615-91) published a short treatise entitled, *The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits*. This was a collection of first-person narrative accounts and letters designed to prove empirically the existence of the world of spirits by establishing the reality of diabolically inspired witchcraft. Baxter considered it to be of the same character as his popular apologetic works like *The Reasons for the Christian Religion* (1667). Baxter's text fits into the well-established genre of witch narratives or 'providence tales'.<sup>2</sup> The elements that distinguish his treatise are its timing, methodology and evangelistic fervour, which form what I have called his 'prophetic voice'. Baxter's understanding of prophecy was far from extreme; he followed the approach of conservative Puritans like William Perkins. He carefully distinguished himself from, and warned others against, the prophetic claims of Quakers, Ranters, Levellers and other radical sects. Baxter promoted the rational exploration of Biblical truth, and he has been claimed as a forerunner of the line of eighteenth-century dissent that led to Unitarianism.<sup>3</sup> His juxtaposition of rational apologetic, utilising empirical proof, alongside a dogmatic re-assertion of diabolical influence upon the material world follows the literary tradition and methodology established by Henry More and Joseph Glanvill and continued by Cotton Mather and his collaborators in America. By 1691 Baxter believed that witchcraft was becoming increasingly discredited in England. This conviction lent him an urgency and evangelical passion which renders his voice somewhat unique and challenging amongst the clerical and intellectual elite in London at the time his treatise was published. He aimed to convict the 'Sadduces and Infidels' who had been typically addressed by the genre.<sup>4</sup>

I shall begin by outlining Baxter's understanding of prophecy as it is expressed in his publications and letters. This will provide the context for a closer analysis of *The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits*. Although it was published in the year he died, Baxter had been working on the treatise intermittently throughout his life, as letters within the text and his other correspondence clearly indicate. Rational apologetic and the vatic voice are often positioned as diametrically opposed forms of utterance. Witchcraft is one of the most estranging and exotic aspects of pre-industrial British society for twenty-first century sensibilities.<sup>5</sup> The standard explanation posits that it was undermined by the application of an Enlightenment paradigm and

the development of modern methods for establishing the veracity of legal evidence,<sup>6</sup> though this has been rendered deeply problematic by recent scholarship.<sup>7</sup> Baxter, for one, inverts the traditional historical teleology. In his hands supernatural phenomena such as witchcraft and disembodied prophetic voices become the primary evidence, credibly attested by witnesses of good character, against a mechanistic understanding of the universe. This evidence itself is framed as a prophetic testimony, designed to convince contemporaries who denied the resurrection of the body and the reality of the world of spirits. Baxter intended to radically transform the lives of his audience. Intellectually, his aims were akin to those of the Cambridge Platonists. His dislike of the emerging mechanistic science, combined with a vigorous search for evidence supporting witchcraft as a crime, found judicial expression in the infamous trial of witches held by his friend, later Chief Justice, Sir Matthew Hale in Essex in 1662.<sup>8</sup> Baxter's attempt to link these elements in a prophetic tract designed to appeal to a popular audience several years after the last execution of a witch in England was his own.

## 2

Baxter defines Scripture as the '*Sure word of prophecy*' stating: 'To which they do well to take heed, as to a light shining in a darke place'.<sup>9</sup> Consequently, the prophet is one who declares the word of God. This is clear through Baxter's negative address to those who refuse to obey Biblical counsel: 'I do not wonder if thou art an enemy to plain preaching, and if thou say of it, and of the Minister and Scripture it self as *Ahab* of the Prophet, *I hate him, for he doth not prophecy good concerning me, but evil, 1 Kings 22:8.*'<sup>10</sup> Baxter's interpretation of preaching as prophecy places him in complete agreement with the Cambridge minister, William Perkins, who in his *Art of Propheying* (1607) stated:

Prophecie ... is a publique and solemne speech of the Prophet, pertaining to the worship of God, and to the salvation of our neighbour.... There are onely two duties of the Prophet, that is of the Minister of the word.... And every Prophet is partly the voyce of God, to wit, in preaching; and partlie the voyce of the people, in the acte of praying.<sup>11</sup>

Despite this identification of prophecy with the declaration of the Word of God, Baxter does not argue that all true prophecy ceased with the closure of the scriptural canon. He observes: 'To expect any particular mercy which Gods *Nature, or Word, or Works* do tell us that he *will give*, is sound and warrantable: And to expect any *particular* thing which by *inspiration, prophecy, or true extraordinary revelation* shall be made known to us: For this is a *word* of God.'<sup>12</sup> However, discernment and wisdom are necessary when assessing whether or not those who claim to have '*true extraordinary revelation*' are genuine prophets, or whether alternatively their '*belief and expectation* is but *self-promising* and *self-deceiving*'. Baxter warns that 'wise men' will not conclude easily that they are 'Prophets, nor take any thing for an inspiration ... which bringeth not the testimony of cogent evidence'.<sup>13</sup> Though 'such

Revelation and Propheſie be *Poſſible* there is no *certainty* of it in general.<sup>14</sup> God uſually ſpeaks through Scripture. He ‘can deliver the Marrow of the Goſpel by other means than the Writing; and he hath not told us that he will not.’ Deſpite this: ‘It is a dangerous Sin of them that leave the ordinary means and look out for extraordinary, as Spirit of Propheſy, Angels, &c. But to conlude, that God will never reveal Chriſt by an Angel, to one that hath not the Scripture, is more than we may do.’<sup>15</sup>

Baxter has ſeveral ſimple Biblical rules for aſſeſſing the truth of the meſſage conveyed by paſtors or prophets. If the prophecy is contrary to Scripture, it is to be rejected as a deceit. If it is in addition to Scripture, it needs to be atteſted by miracles. If it is about the future and not atteſted by miracles, then ‘it is to be heard with a ſuſpended belief; you muſt ſtay till the event ſhew whether he ſay true or not’.<sup>16</sup> This mixture of comprehenſiveness and caution is characteristic of Baxter’s approach to difficult iſſues. It alſo reflects his personal experience of religious upheaval and controversy in ſeventeenth-century England. The fact that individuals are known for their holineſs and confidence is no guarantee that their prophecies are true.<sup>17</sup> Baxter defines falſe prophets as thoſe who take God’s name in vain:

Fathering on him falſe Doctrine, Revelations or Laws; ſaying as falſe Prophets, *God ſent me*, and *Thus ſaith the Lord*, when it is falſe ... therefore all Chriſtians muſt be very fearful of falſe Revelations and Prophecies, and ſee that they believe not every Spirit, nor pretend to Revelations; and to take heed of taking the Suggestions of Satan, or their crazed melancholy Fancies, for the Revelations of God.<sup>18</sup>

Rather, all ‘ſober Chriſtians’ muſt ensure that they are not thus ‘deceived by their own Imaginations’. For ‘certain Experience’ – a ſtandard of rationality that Baxter often invokes in argument – proves ‘that moſt in our age that have pretended to propheſie or to inſpirations or revelations, have been melancholy crackt-brained perſons, neer to madneſs, who have proved to be deluded in the end.’<sup>19</sup>

This moderate approach to prophecy is expreſſed in Baxter’s published work on preaching and in his correſpondence. He attributed great importance to the act of preaching, though he conſidered it to be only a ſmall part of a paſtor’s responsibilities to his pariſh. His letter of advice to a young miniſter in the early 1650s affirms this:

Study to preach to them as plainly ſeriously & movingly as you can ſpeake. let both your language & tone be as familiar as is poſſible ... in preaching & private dealing, be ſure to manifeſt as much love to your hearers as you can: preach rather with tender melting affection, than with anger & diſdain.<sup>20</sup>

Baxter’s advice was firmly grounded in his own experience. His impassioned and ſuſſeſſful miniſtry transformed the ſmall Midlands town of Kiddermiſter during his time as their paſtor (1640-60). He expounded his practice in his treatiſe *Gildas Salvoianus; The Reformed Paſtor* published in 1656. This publiciſed his activities to a broad audience and was celebrated as an exemplary paradigm of pariſh miniſtry throughout the nation. Baxter’s



manual reconfigured all subsequent discussion of pastoral or prophetic ministry in Nonconformist circles after 1660. In part this resulted from the hagiographies of Puritan divines written by his friend, Samuel Clarke, which anachronistically presented Baxter's conception of the pastoral office as the standard approach adopted by Elizabethan and early Stuart Puritans.<sup>21</sup> *The Reformed Pastor* not only impacted upon Baxter's contemporaries, but has proven consistently challenging to ministerial candidates even to the present day. This testifies to the persuasive force of Baxter's prophetic rhetoric when exhorting pastors to fulfil their ministry.<sup>22</sup>

Finally, Baxter considered prophecy important in proving the authority and inspiration of Scripture. On 24 June 1653, Abraham Pinchbecke wrote to Baxter for the first time. Though unknown to Baxter, he introduced himself as a 'young scholler or minister of the gospell' and requested that Baxter provide him with 'the heads of some arguments to prove the divinity of the scriptures'.<sup>23</sup> Baxter replied on 5 July with a typically encouraging response to his correspondent, assuring him 'you neede no Apologie for writing to a stranger'. He suggests several theological treatises that Pinchbecke can read on the issue of the divinity of Scripture. Baxter questions why he desires many arguments, as 'it is not number that will prove, but strength. One strong Argument is sufficient.... The Great Argument by which Scripture is still proved Divine, is, *The Spirit*; ffor a supernaturall Revelation must have a supernaturall Wittnes & seale.'<sup>24</sup> In outlining the work of the Spirit, Baxter clearly shows the centrality of prophecy to his understanding of Biblical authority: 'that Doctrine which God hath owned & sealed most frequently & most evidently with a spirit of Prophesye, is of God...such is the Doctrine of the Scriptures.'<sup>25</sup>

### 3

In his opening chapter to *The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits*, Baxter sets out the theoretical framework within which he desires his subsequent collection of letters and narratives about witchcraft to be considered. The treatise is explicitly designed for a popular, even indolent audience. Baxter notes that his 'Collection' is only 'an Addition to sufficient Proofs of invisible Powers or Spirits, and their Actions towards Men,' because although many full and convincing books on the topic have been written 'Multitudes bred up in Idleness and Sensuality, and thereby drowned in Sadduceism and Bestiality, never see those Books.' And even if they do read them they will refuse to 'believe the fullest Evidence' as they refer to 'Persons and Things so long ago, and far off' that they have no assurance of their truth. In response, Baxter has deliberately selected many examples 'near to them, both for Time and Place,' so that if they wish, they can check the evidence for themselves.<sup>26</sup> Baxter describes the narratives he has collected as 'Histories' and counters the charge that 'very many Cheats of pretended Possessions' have discredited the authority of all such accounts. He does this by identifying two of his favourite targets for deceit and credulity as the cause of such falsehoods: 'Persons prepared and trained up purposely by Papists Priests' and 'Lustful, Rank,

Girls and young Widows, that plot for some amorous, procacious Design, or have imaginations conquered by Lust.<sup>27</sup>

Considering that he has satisfactorily dealt with all objections, Baxter moves on to establish the boundaries of human ignorance about the world of spirits and acknowledges God's ultimate sovereignty over all such creatures, whether good or evil. However, 'It is surely a wicked sort of Spirits that delight to do Mischief, and that lye and deceive Men'; and their works have an ultimately apologetic purpose in attesting to 'the Immortality of our Souls, and the Truth of Christianity'. Baxter delineates the various activities of these evil spirits, including the satisfaction of human lust and the fulfilment of other sinful desires.<sup>28</sup> His didactic purpose is clearly evident as he lists the 'great Benefits we may get by the right Use of these Histories,' which he considers an effective means of preaching to a popular audience. They show the 'Frame of Divine Government' which has uses for 'Toads and Serpents' as well as 'Devils' and 'damned Souls'. These creatures throw the glorious work of salvation into clear relief. It is terrible to be 'Bewicht, or Bodily only possesed by Devils,' how much worse then if he masters the soul through worldliness, sensuality, gluttony or pride?<sup>29</sup>

Baxter concludes his exhortation with a prophetic call to all believers to 'labour to save Souls from the Snares and Powers of Devils'. It is not to be left to Ministers: 'They are Guides in Christs Army, but you are Soldiers.... A Minister is but one Man, and not an Army, and can be but in one place at once' it is their individual responsibility to 'season a Corrupt Generation'. Here Baxter's evangelistic fervour for the conversion of souls becomes evident. He refers ministers to his *Reformed Pastor*, urging them through a series of rhetorical questions to preach passionately and powerfully:

Shall the Captains in Christ's Army see the Devourer go away with the Prey, and do little for their rescue? Is ignorant, cold, jingling, contentious Preaching, meet for them that are so greatly obliged to militate under Christ against the Destroyer, and for the everlasting saving of Mens Souls?<sup>30</sup>

Baxter's purpose is clear. He invokes a rational discourse of credible witnesses, verifiable evidence and careful reasoning in order to substantiate the cases of witchcraft he outlines, and to draw a sharp distinction between his own examples and the deceitfulness of Jesuit priests and credulous female impostors. His audience is the 'City of London,' which contains many persons professing their doubts of 'the Life to come, the Immortality of the Soul', and consequently the truth of the Gospel, 'and Supernatural Revelations'. However, such individuals state 'that could they be certain of Spirits, Apparitions, Witchcraft and Miracles' it will do more to convince them of the truth of Christianity than scriptural assertions. Baxter has thus provided 'many Credible Instances in this Book' claiming 'that there are *true* as well as false Reports of such things, is past all reasonable cause of doubting'.<sup>31</sup> He is purporting to offer extra-scriptural proofs that will convince the unbeliever or sceptic of the supernatural truth of Christianity. His text thus functions in the same way as extra-scriptural prophecy does for the believer, attesting to

the truth of the Bible, by a unique ‘*inspiration, prophecy, or true extraordinary revelation*’ to a specific individual.<sup>32</sup>

There follows an assorted mixture of personal narratives, letters and accounts all describing various supernatural activities: from voices and lights to appearances of the devil in different guises, ghosts and other apparitions. Only one of the letters in this collection was written by a woman, but it will serve adequately as an example of the kinds of material that Baxter included in his treatise. Lady Elizabeth Rich wrote to Baxter on 13 May, 1691. This was, as she observes, ‘In Obedience to your desire by Mr. *Hart*, to have it under my Hand, what he told you of Mr. *Tyro* ... I think fit, in order to your Satisfaction, to give you this Account of him.’<sup>33</sup> She had little trouble appreciating and entering into Baxter’s rational and apologetic discourse. What Mr Hart told Baxter was insufficient; he needed to have a written account in her own hand, as this was as close as it was possible to get to Mr Tyro and his supernatural experience now that he was dead. Elizabeth, however, not only complied with Baxter’s desire but attempted to ‘express ... Kindness to the Dead’ by conveying something of the deep veneration Tyro had felt towards Baxter for his character, letters, preaching and published writings.<sup>34</sup>

Elizabeth frames Tyro’s narrative with the explanatory comment that ‘he had not imparted to any Body’ what he told her, before going on to recount his words in the first person. This suggests that she may have provided Baxter with a verbatim account of Tyro’s narrative to her:

When I was one Evening returning to my Lodging, then at *Ungar*, from this House, being then in a good degree of Health, and in a serious frame, meditating by the way, I heard a voice say, You shall die, and not pass your five and thirtieth Year of Age, which Voice astonished me greatly, and looking round about me, seeing no body, put me into great Consternation and Sweat all over me, such as I never felt ... yet I cannot express how dreadful it was.<sup>35</sup>

It was the consciousness of a prophetic voice, with no body, which made Tyro’s experience so terrifying and legitimised its inclusion as a testimony to the supernatural in Baxter’s collection. Elizabeth understood Baxter’s need to receive verifiable accounts and thus gives the impression of a verbatim report in her epistolary representation of the conversation. Tyro himself was aware of the objections to which his testimony was open and attempted, according to Elizabeth’s summary, to counter such doubts: ‘You know, Madam, my Principles, and that I am no Enthusiast, and how cautious I am as to Revelations. But I am sure this was no Melancholy Fancy, but an auricular Voice.’<sup>36</sup> Because those familiar with the excesses of seventeenth-century religious claims were likely to dismiss his story, Tyro sought to verify the truth of his own prophetic experience in contradistinction to the assertions of enthusiasts. He prayed in order to ‘discover’ whether this revelation was from God ‘or a Delusion from Satan, but still the Impression remained.’ He would have been thirty five in July 1690, but he died in January 1690: thus, to all appearances, confirming the prophecy uttered by the ‘auricular Voice’.<sup>37</sup>

Baxter obviously respected Elizabeth Rich’s testimony as much as he

did that of the various letters from ministers included in his collection. She notes that even though Tyro added many other words they were 'too much for a Letter'. According to her account Tyro had written formerly to Baxter, when under 'great trouble of Conscience,' and Baxter had been of benefit to him 'to his Relief and Comfort'. It is possible that such reports to friends of Baxter's epistolary counsel had encouraged many of the other correspondents unknown to him to enter into communication. Tyro had not only written; he heard Baxter preach and was 'reading some Book of yours, daily'. According to Elizabeth, he described Baxter's *Dying Thoughts* as: '*The sweet and dear Companion of his Life*' and sent it to his former school-master, urging him to read it in preparation for death. It was the warmth of Tyro's regard for Baxter that rendered Elizabeth willing to oblige with this account that furthered Baxter's own final publication: 'I could do no less than express this Kindness to the Dead, who yet speaks out your great Worth to me.'<sup>38</sup> In this instance, a personal letter was expressly solicited by Baxter, for the purpose of publication, revealing the porous boundary between manuscript and print culture, private converse and public disputation. Earlier in his treatise Baxter had recommended books by Increase and Cotton Mather on 'the Witch-crafts in *New-England*'. His terse comment: 'They that will read ... may see enough to Silence any Incredulity that pretendeth to be Rational,' is both ironic and tragic in the light of the witch trials held in Salem, New England about a year later.<sup>39</sup>

## 4

Baxter's collection is full of narratives like Tyro's prophetic voice. It is obvious why he warns readers in his preface that he is writing the treatise to practically convince them, through an appeal to sensory evidence, of the reality of immortality and 'not to please Men with the Strangeness and Novelty of useless Stories'.<sup>40</sup> Though he carefully sought to provide factual verification for the accounts in his collection, the sheer novelty and drama of the stories constantly threatens to overwhelm his didactic purpose. Despite the overtly rational theological framework that purports to unify the collection into a single, coherent argument, the polyphony of voices embodied within the text's multiple narratives explodes such tenuous methodological boundaries. Baxter's attempt to differentiate his own deployment of witchcraft narratives from those of deceitful Jesuits, credulous compilers, enthusiastic separatist prophets and the fantasies of the melancholic is problematic. It rests on his personal assertion of authority and the pious, credible characters of the witnesses whose accounts he has collected. For us it is hard to discern any criteria by which to distinguish the narratives in his treatise from those whom he disparages as 'Enthusiasticks that Satan hath notoriously deluded, by pretended Angelical Revelation'.<sup>41</sup>

Baxter himself acknowledged the complexities of dealing with such supernatural phenomena as evidence. At the beginning of his treatise he observed that it is difficult to determine:

when it is a Devil, and when it is a Humane Soul that appeareth ... whether it be the Soul of a good Person, or a bad.... Yea, and oft whether it be a good Angel, or a bad, seeing bad ones may do good deceitfully, or by Constraint.<sup>42</sup>

Nevertheless, Baxter was convinced that his supposedly scientific or rational methodology had enabled him to present a series of verifiable accounts of witchcraft and supernatural phenomena, including prophetic voices. He deploys this appeal to sensory evidence with the intent of persuading and converting his unbelieving, atheistic audience.<sup>43</sup> Baxter believed that this particular combination of approaches made his treatise a useful and relevant form of Christian apologetic. It is on these grounds that I suggest *The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits* can be viewed as a prophetic and popular utterance to contemporaries increasingly sceptical about the reality of such phenomena.

Baxter saw a direct connection between the apologetic function and significance of instances of witchcraft and the interpretation of Biblical prophecy. William Lamont, for example, has argued that the 'same curiosity that led Baxter ... to ghosts and apparitions' later led him to a 'serious study of Revelation'; a book 'almost wholly written in terms of 'great wonders' and 'great, marvellous' signs in heaven'. It is natural enough that an 'interest in signs and providences, witches and ghosts should anticipate' his study of the apocalypse. However, the same tension between the rational and the prophetic which characterised Baxter's discourse on witchcraft also problematised his attempt to distinguish his approach to Revelation from what he saw as the dangerous interpretations of fanatics. While Baxter applied the methodological tools of '[c]autious, systematic collation [and] teams of investigators' that he had forged in his collective research into the occult, the boundaries between his readings of Biblical prophecy and those of the melancholic individuals he despised or pitied remained dangerously porous. Baxter's most remarkable discovery in his shift from a focus on witchcraft to Biblical prophecy was that traditional Protestant readings which identified the anti-Christ as Rome were wrong. Ironically, in the process of publicising this finding to the team of philosophical and pastoral investigators with whom he regularly collaborated, Baxter incurred the wrath of the Cambridge Platonist, Henry More. This surprised and grieved Baxter who was deeply appreciative of More's work on both witchcraft and Biblical prophecy. More, however, remained intransigent. He believed that Baxter's interpretation of the apocalypse had broken the Tudor Church of England tradition and 'gratuitously put weapons' into the hands of his Catholic opponents.<sup>44</sup> In fact Baxter's prophetic appeal to his contemporaries, based on the supposed evidence of witchcraft, proved less controversial than his original interpretations of Biblical prophecy.

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<sup>1</sup> I. Bostridge, *Witchcraft and Its Transformations c. 1650-1750* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1997), p. 3; Wolfgang Behringer confirms this date as the final death sentence passed upon a witch in England, Alice Molland, in Exeter in March 1685, W. Behringer, *Witches*

- and *Witch-Hunts: A Global History* (Cambridge, Politi, 2004), p. 185. Cf. B. J. Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England* (Princeton, 1983), p. 208, where the last execution is dated to 1682.
- <sup>2</sup> This term comes from J. D. Hartman, *Providence Tales and the Birth of American Literature* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1999).
- <sup>3</sup> G. F. Nuttall, *Richard Baxter* (Nelson, 1965), pp. 123-4.
- <sup>4</sup> Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty*, 206-8; Bostridge, *Witchcraft and Its Transformations*, pp. 85-107. Baxter's narrative has close affinities with the earlier publications of Henry More and Joseph Glanvill in this genre; they also shared his attempt to resist a mechanistic understanding of the universe by utilising the tools of the new science to prove the reality of the supernatural. Due to the particular historical situation in New England, culminating in the Salem witch-trials, the works of Increase and Cotton Mather in the same genre appeared later than those of More and Glanvill in England, correlating with the timing of Baxter's collection. J. D. Hartman, 'Providence Tales and the Indian Captivity Narrative: Some Transatlantic Influences on Colonial Puritan Discourse', *Early American Literature* 32.1 (1997), pp. 66-81.
- <sup>5</sup> C. Lerner, *Witchcraft and Religion* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell, 1984), pp. 162-5.
- <sup>6</sup> Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty*, pp. 194-226.
- <sup>7</sup> Bostridge, *Witchcraft and Its Transformations*, pp. 3-5, 242-3; W. E. Burns, *An Age of Wonders: Prodigious, Politics and Providence in England 1657-1727* (Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 8. Burns summarises the argument noting that this reading treats 'witchcraft and demonology in terms of a "fit" with the structures of early modern thought in other areas, particularly theocratic monarchy and the conception of society as a religious community. The decline of belief in witchcraft, then, was not brought about principally by its own inconsistencies, or its poor "fit" with reality, but by the decline of a whole series of related beliefs and cultural practices.' This demonstrates 'the necessity of integrating witchcraft with the political history of the period, pointing out how various controversies over witchcraft and witchcraft legislation fitted with the politics of the time,' p. 8. This is set out with exhaustive detail in Stuart Clark, *Thinking With Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1997). Michael Hunter offers a useful overview of the relevant scholarship, noting also the surprising neglect of concerns about 'atheism' in contemporary historiography when discussing those 'in the vanguard of skepticism about witchcraft'; this is particularly the case with Bostridge's treatment, as he pays so much attention to these figures, including Baxter. M. Hunter, 'Review Essay: Witchcraft and the Decline of Belief', *Eighteenth-Century Life* 22.2 (1998), pp. 139-47. For recent explorations of witchcraft as a phenomenon in England during this period see E. J. Kent, 'Masculinity and Male Witches in Old and New England, 1593-1680,' *History Workshop Journal* 60.1 (2005), pp. 69-92; M. Hunter, 'New Light on the 'Drummer of Tedworth': Conflicting Narratives of Witchcraft in Restoration England,' *Historical Research*, 78, No. 201 (August 2005), pp. 311-53. This general revisionist approach to the decline of witchcraft is also found in Behringer, *Witches and Witch-Hunts*, pp. 184-6.
- <sup>8</sup> Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty*, pp. 206-8, 212-15; G. Geis, 'Lord Hale, Witches and Rape,' *British Journal of Law and Society* (Summer 1978), pp. 26-44.
- <sup>9</sup> R. Baxter, *Fair-warning, or XXV Reasons Against Toleration and Indulgence of Popery* (1663), p. 6.
- <sup>10</sup> R. Baxter, *The Saints Everlasting Rest* (1650), p. 383.
- <sup>11</sup> W. Perkins, *The Arte of Prophecyng*, trans. Thomas Tuke (London, Felix Kyngston for E. E., 1607), pp. 1-3.
- <sup>12</sup> R. Baxter, *A Christian Directory* (1673), p. 158.
- <sup>13</sup> Baxter, *Christian Directory*, p. 158.
- <sup>14</sup> Baxter, *Christian Directory*, p. 909.

- <sup>15</sup> R. Baxter, *Reliquiae Baxterianae* (1696), p. 202.
- <sup>16</sup> Baxter, *Christian Directory*, pp. 158, 911.
- <sup>17</sup> Baxter, *Christian Directory*, p. 911.
- <sup>18</sup> R. Baxter, *The Catechizing of Families* (1683), pp. 264-5.
- <sup>19</sup> Baxter, *Christian Directory*, p. 909.
- <sup>20</sup> G. F. Nuttall & N. H. Keeble, *Calendar of the Correspondence of Richard Baxter* (Oxford University Press, 1991), Vol. 1, pp. 146-7.
- <sup>21</sup> J. William Black, *Reformation Pastors: Richard Baxter and the Ideal of the Reformed Pastor* (Milton Keynes, Paternoster, 2004), pp. 195-222.
- <sup>22</sup> Nuttall, *Richard Baxter*, p. 70.
- <sup>23</sup> Keeble & Nuttall, *Calendar*, p. 100.
- <sup>24</sup> Keeble & Nuttall, *Calendar*, p. 101.
- <sup>25</sup> Dr Williams's Library, Gordon Square, London, MS 59.IV.51. I am grateful to the Trustees of the Dr Williams's Library for permission to quote from the manuscript in their possession.
- <sup>26</sup> R. Baxter, *The Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits* (1691), p. 1-2.
- <sup>27</sup> Baxter, *Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits*, pp. 2-3.
- <sup>28</sup> Baxter, *Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits*, pp. 4-6.
- <sup>29</sup> Baxter, *Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits*, pp. 8, 10.
- <sup>30</sup> Baxter, *Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits*, pp. 12-15.
- <sup>31</sup> Baxter, *Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits*, pp. 17-18.
- <sup>32</sup> Baxter, *Christian Directory*, p. 158.
- <sup>33</sup> Baxter, *Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits*, p. 199.
- <sup>34</sup> Baxter, *Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits*, p. 201.
- <sup>35</sup> Baxter, *Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits*, pp. 199-200.
- <sup>36</sup> Baxter, *Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits*, p. 200.
- <sup>37</sup> Baxter, *Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits*, p. 200.
- <sup>38</sup> Baxter, *Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits*, pp. 200-1.
- <sup>39</sup> Baxter, *Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits*, p. 80.
- <sup>40</sup> Baxter, 'The Preface,' *Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits*, A4.
- <sup>41</sup> Baxter, *Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits*, p. 175.
- <sup>42</sup> Baxter, *Certainty of the Worlds of Spirits*, pp. 3-4.
- <sup>43</sup> Michael Hunter and David Wootton clarify the use of the term 'atheism' in this period as 'best to encapsulate the articulate assault on Christianity ... orthodox contemporaries were prone to conflate with 'atheism' a range of positions that appeared to them to militate towards it, particularly deistic formulations of religious belief that played down the role of revelation and an active personal deity.' 'Introduction', *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* eds., M. Hunter and D. Wootton (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 2.
- <sup>44</sup> W. Lamont, *Richard Baxter and the Millennium* (Croom Helm, 1979), pp. 30, 42, 45. For further discussion of Baxter's controversies and sources of disagreement with More see J. Henry, 'Medicine and Pneumatology: Henry More, Richard Baxter, and Francis Glisson's Treatise on the Energetic Nature of Substance' *Medical History* (1987), pp. 32-4; R. Crocker, *Henry More: A Biography of the Cambridge Platonist* (Dordrecht, Kluwer, 2003), pp. 170-6.

# Book Reviews

Mark Knight and Thomas Woodman (eds.), *Biblical Religion and the Novel, 1700-2000*, (Ashgate, 2006), pp. 170, £45, 0 754 651177

Mark Knight and Thomas Woodman's *Biblical Religion and the Novel* is the product of a conference held at the University of Reading in 2000. At the time, this conference was one of the first signs that religion looked set to become a major force in literary studies, and although waiting six years for this collection means that some of the work seems less fresh (several of the contributors have published similar material elsewhere in the ensuing years), it also gives it a new context in relation to the *Oxford Companion to Literature and Theology* (forthcoming 2007) and the *Blackwell Companion to Literature and the Bible*, currently in preparation. Clearly the topic that Knight, Woodman and their contributors began to examine in 2000 is now part of the mainstream of literary criticism, and this volume is a valuable addition to recent work in the field.

In their introduction, Knight and Woodman point out that 'religion' does not necessarily have to be identified with institutional forms, nor indeed with theism, and that religious ideas and imagery can happily survive in a secular context. More profoundly, they suggest a number of ways in which the novel and religious discourse are intertwined, as the former recognizes possibilities for transcendence and a search for salvation even in its most secular modes. In a brief space, the introduction manages to raise a number of vital questions. But as in the rest of the volume, the introduction slides between discussion of the novel and religion in general, and discussion of the novel and the Bible in particular. The title 'Biblical religion and the novel' rather than 'the Bible and the novel' is presumably intended to get around this slippage between particularized discussions of intertextual connections between the Bible and the novel and generalized accounts of the influence of religion on fiction, but the effect is to leave a sense of vagueness about the aims of the collection. Like most selections of conference essays, *Biblical Religion and the Novel* is uneven, though less in terms of the quality of the individual essays than their content. The broad scope of this collection means that there is considerable variation between essays that attempt to provide an overarching narrative and essays that examine a particular author or work in detail. Some of the authors here, like Terence Wright on Bakhtin, take a theoretical approach to the topic; others, like Knight on Victorian periodicals, have produced essays relying on detailed historical research. The range of authors discussed, from Emily Brontë to Coupland and from Fielding to Winterson, is equally diverse. Perhaps most importantly, the ways in which contributors have responded to the theme of Biblical religion and the novel show notable conceptual and methodological differences. This means that the collection is not so much a unified whole as a set of individual takes on a wider concept.



The book opens with Stephen Prickett's 'From Novel to Bible: The Aestheticizing of Scripture'. Prickett argues concisely and persuasively that the rise of the novel shifted perceptions of Biblical narrative, suggesting that Biblical criticism became 'novelized' as the Bible ceased to be understood as one authoritative voice and 'became instead to be understood as constituting a debate with a plurality of competing voices' (15). The material and argument here are largely drawn from Prickett's *Narrative Religion and Science: Fundamentalism versus Irony, 1700-1999* (CUP, 2002), and given that this and his earlier studies have perhaps been the most important publications on literature and the Bible of recent years, this chapter serves as a good introduction to his chief arguments. The succeeding essay, Terence Wright's 'The Word in the Novel: Bakhtin on Tolstoy and the Bible', switches from a sweeping historical narrative to a close reading of Bakhtin's take on Tolstoy's *Resurrection*: a slightly unsettling change of pace for the reader. Wright dissects how Bakhtin's negative reaction to Tolstoy's use of Biblical language was shaped by a desire to set Tolstoy up in opposition to Dostoevsky, and was thus more complex than it might appear. Next comes Valentine Cunningham's 'The Novel and the Protestant Fix: Between Melancholy and Ecstasy'. Substantially longer than the other essays in the collection, this ranges over all three centuries and beyond in an argument about the novel's relation to the oscillation between melancholy and ecstasy, a movement that Cunningham reads as typically Protestant. It is a lively and entertaining piece, though the argument might require more explanation and defence to be wholly convincing.

After these three opening salvos, the collection moves to a chronological progression from the eighteenth-century novel to the twenty-first and seems to settle down into engagement with particular texts and authors. Thomas Woodman shows how the humour in Fielding's novel is enriched by a focus on 'the perils and pitfalls of self-interested Biblical interpretation' (p. 60), and hence how Fielding is both comic novelist and Christian moralist. Emma Mason's 'The Clue to the Brontës?: Methodism and *Wuthering Heights*' takes the same line as her recent article on Emily Brontë's poems, demonstrating that Brontë's writing is deeply influenced by the language of Methodism. Mark Knight's 'A Purely Pure Prayer Would Be Deadly: Religious Discourse in the Early Novels of *All the Year Round*' turns to less familiar novels in an assessment of the function of religious language in Dickens' periodical, especially in Bulwer Lytton's *A Strange Story*. All three of these essays on eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature are well-written, historically informed and persuasive on the importance of religious discourse.

Moving to the twentieth century, Luke Ferreter's essay on Lawrence and religion traces Lawrence's move away from the traditional religious structures of his childhood by surveying texts from *The Rainbow* to *The Plumed Serpent*. While other critics have examined Lawrence's complex relationship with Christianity at length, this is a useful summary of the key issues in his work. David Brauner's succeeding piece on reworkings of the King David story in three Jewish writers – Dan Jacobson, Stefan Heym and

Joseph Heller – is an informative analysis of post-war reworkings of Biblical narrative, as these writers share a concern with the relationship between ‘the official version of history that is transmitted through authorized texts, and the personal histories that remain unarticulated’ (p. 114). Anita Gnagnatti’s ‘Discarding God’s Handbook: Winterson’s *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* and the Tension of Intertextuality’ is also a study of Biblical rewriting, in a straightforward account of how the ‘books’ of Winterson’s novel, named after their Biblical counterparts, reflect upon and rework their originals. In contrast, Martin Corner’s piece on spirituality in Updike and Ford is not primarily interested in the Bible as such but in a general concept of spirituality, mediated through Bakhtin, and in how the bleak literal realism of Ford and Updike can leave space for the transcendent. Finally, Andrew Tate’s well-argued and nuanced reading of Douglas Coupland’s novels, ‘I Am Your Witness: Douglas Coupland at the End of the World’, considers their apocalyptic ‘visions, prophecies, predictions and anticipations’ (p. 162) and their engagement with spirituality.

*Biblical Religion and the Novel* is a slim volume but is packed with suggestive approaches towards reading the novel through or in relation to religious discourse. The varying ways in which contributors respond to the subject is a strength, in that it models different methods of engaging with this field, but also a weakness in that this collection does not present a coherent line of thought. Given the diversity of the pieces included, readers are probably more likely to cherry-pick essays from the collection on their chosen author/period than to read it as a whole. On the other hand, this diversity effectively proves Knight and Woodman’s argument, since the overall effect is to show just how rich and varied the influence of the Bible has been on writers spanning three centuries, and how much still remains to be said on the subject.

*Kirstie Blair*

**Ben Quash, *Theology and the Drama of History* (Cambridge University Press, 2005), xiv + 235 pp., £45, 0521844347**

Ben Quash’s book, critically engaging Hans Urs von Balthasar’s *Theodramatik*, is a welcome attempt to move beyond the current stage of Balthasar studies in English, in which summary accounts of the theologian’s work, often uncritically eulogistic, predominate. (A notable exception is David C. Schindler’s outstanding *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Dramatic Structure of Truth*, published by Fordham University Press in 2004, which might have been a fruitful dialogue partner had Quash been able to take account of it.)

Quash’s aim is to mobilise the resources of a ‘theodramatic’ approach to history for a theology which integrates the (sometimes conflicting) Christian imperatives both to respect the individual’s unique value and autonomy, and to recognise all individuals as members of a larger body, the Church, which

provides a Spirit-shaped structure for their lives. Quash pursues this aim through a critical comparison of Hans Urs von Balthasar's attempt to pursue theology in dialogue with the terminology of drama, and a main influence on that attempt, G. F. W. Hegel.

Balthasar follows Hegel's account of drama as a synthesis of the 'epic' and the 'lyric' genres, capable of integrating the detached, 'objective' voice of the one and the emotional, subjective voice of the other into a composition sustaining both an encompassing structure and a dynamic interaction of irreducibly different voices. Furthermore, Balthasar (and, to a certain extent, Hegel) holds that just such a 'dramatic' upholding of the unity-within-abiding-difference of 'subject' and 'structure' is also the task of an adequate philosophy of history. Balthasar's dissociation from Hegel is rooted in his vigorous assertion that this task is only possible within an orthodox trinitarian belief in God. Hegel, in his view, squanders the possibility of an abidingly 'dramatic' account of history by identifying God too completely with the world and its development. This conflation forces the philosopher into a prioritization of 'structure' that is ultimately irreconcilable with genuine individual freedom, both human and divine.

While giving due attention to Balthasar's move beyond Hegel, Quash argues – partly through a critical analysis of Balthasar's over-systematised and strongly teleological readings of secular and Biblical literature – that the theologian's own account, too, ultimately succumbs to an inadequately 'epic' understanding of history. Quash locates this forfeiture of a genuinely dramatic account of divine-human interaction primarily in Balthasar's ecclesiology, which is underpinned by a particular understanding of analogy. A Jesuit, Balthasar emphasises the abiding nature (or, in Quash's polemical terms, the frozen stasis) of the ecclesial constitution, and identifies true Christian freedom with the attitude of Ignatian *indiferencia* or Marian *disponibilité* vis-à-vis the will of God, whether revealed personally or through ecclesial authority. For Quash, this confidence that 'the particular form of the ministeriality [of the Church]' is given as long as we 'need discipline and impersonal severity', that is, 'until the Last Day' (Balthasar, *Skizzen* II, pp. 335-6), amounts to the construction of an illusory 'God's eye view' from beyond history, which betrays the irreducibly creative and unforeseeable – in short, the irreducibly 'dramatic' – relationship of each believer with God.

Although much of Quash's criticism (particularly of Balthasar's shortcomings as a reader) is acute, this culmination of his argument – particularly as an argument about the instructiveness, for theology, of *drama* – does not quite convince. The primary problem is that 'dramatic' has, by this stage of the book, become little more than a catchphrase connoting 'temporal', 'open-ended', and 'not given to systematization'. But this does not do justice to the theatre's unique synthesis of 'structure' and 'subjects' as Quash presents it in chapter one. It may be a fair objection that, as opposed to a given play, history is not yet 'written' and cannot be viewed as a whole. But in this case, Quash's critical enquiry should perhaps be concerned not so much with Balthasar as with the question whether and how drama (of which,

after all, the *in medias res* experience of the characters and of those audience members unfamiliar with the play is only one particular aspect) can be instructive for a theological view of history at all.

One component of such an enquiry, conspicuously absent from Quash's account, should be Christ's resurrection, as – in Pannenberg's terms – the irruption of the End (or eschaton) into time. This event necessarily conditions any understanding of the irreducibly 'tragic' and 'interrogative' form of the Cross, which, in Quash's reading, resists all glib systematization and thus demands a humble apophaticism regarding the 'End' of history. While confirming the gravity of death, Christ's resurrection also compels the Christian *not* to be entirely apophatic about the 'End' (cf. 1 Corinthians 15.16-19) – perhaps even to consider whether, in all humility, she must not finally concede tragedy to the pagans, and content herself with tragi-comedy.

*Judith E. Topping*

**Walter Nash (ed.), *Pilgrimages: An Anthology of Christian Verse*, sponsored and published by Feather Books ([www.waddysweb.freeuk.com](http://www.waddysweb.freeuk.com)), 2006, 176 poems (no pagination) with an introduction, notes and index, £13.99 pb., 1-84175-224-X and \$28, 978-1-84175-224-2**

Unlike some Christian anthologies, this collection of a hundred and seventy-six poems has a freshness and thoughtful freedom. The poems are, as it were, a shadow, a presence of something more than a mother and a child and a manger. This anthology exudes the shadow-presence of more than the visible and the anticipated.

The literal meaning – what the text is saying – is at a first reading established. But, prefigured in that, lies what the text is meaning. The concrete images are familiar and, as though more lights had been turned on, we see also what they represent.

This reviewer has enjoyed and profited from reading – and surely that should always be aloud – these poems.

In my lifetime of eighty-five years I suppose that I have read hundreds of poems. And this collection of the poet's art – free, innovative and window-opening – is firmly grounded on a traditional base.

In passing, may I gently remind readers that, unlike prose, poetry, if it is to enchant us and move us, must be read, must be read aloud so that its lifeblood of emotional impact may freely flow. Otherwise, as Shakespeare pointed out, it remains 'words, words, mere words, no matter from the heart.'

*Donald Drew*

**R.W.L. Moberly, *Prophecy and Discernment* (Cambridge Studies in**

**Christian Doctrine**, Cambridge University Press, 2006, xvi + 281 pp., £45.00, 0 521 85992 1

How do we discern what is going on when someone claims to speak for God? Walter Moberly explores what criteria for discernment are offered by the Old and New Testaments in a series of careful and probing studies of well-chosen Biblical passages. These are framed by an opening discussion of the nature of prophecy, and a lengthy closing examination of aspects of, and potential problems with, his thesis, which I shall describe in a moment. Two comments first: I read much of this book while spending a summer on holiday in the American South. There can be few places where the need to discern authenticity in speech for God can be more pressing; this book addresses a fundamental theological question of immense significance for the life not just of the Church but of the world in which we live. Secondly, what this book exemplifies is hermeneutically very significant, but the hermeneutics are left to do their quiet framing work in the background while exegesis and theology dominate centre-stage. Arguably it is only the closing sentence of Chapter 1 which tells us what is happening:

My own readings should not be understood as ‘reading off the plain meaning’ of Scripture (a notion which tends to smuggle in some doubtful positivist assumptions), but rather as disciplined attempts to construe the text with conceptual assumptions appropriate to a classic and renewed ‘rule of faith’ (p. 38).

Blink and you’ll miss this, but in both conception and execution this is a project which offers energising hope to the need for careful, critical but still theological engagement with Scripture. Moberly’s earlier book, *The Bible, Theology, and Faith* (CUP, 2000) offered more by way of orientation. Here, the path is steep but rewarding from the off, and the reader who engages will not, I venture to suggest, emerge unchanged by the end.

The thesis, then. In essence, Moberly argues that the appropriate (Biblical) criteria for assessing prophecy have been long misunderstood, on the ill-chosen paradigm of Jeremiah 28. There it is supposed that true prophets are in the business of proclaiming doom, and that their authenticity will be vindicated by a ‘wait and see’ approach, to see whether the prophecy comes to pass. This, of course, is practically useless at the moment where discernment is needed. Moberly argues that the reason these criteria are so unusable is because they are not criteria at all, since the story is actually about prophetic conflict and not discernment. The passage where criteria are at stake in Jeremiah is instead Chapter 23, where a true prophet is described as one who has stood in the divine council, in the presence of YHWH. This phrase, in turn, is shown to stand for the basic claim that Jeremiah speaks from a position of being one who is allowed into God’s presence, which indicates a life of moral integrity (and perhaps holiness), the absence of which in his contemporaries is one of the very points Jeremiah complains about in Chapter 23. In general, ‘To speak of YHWH and His presence and protection is self-involving language, which commits those who would speak

thus to live in accordance with YHWH's own priorities' (p. 61). In summary, prophetic authenticity rests on both the character of the prophet and the nature of the message, which, by way of patient exegesis of several passages, Moberly shows to be linked in the emphases of integrity, lack of self-seeking, and challenge to complacency and self-will.

Subsequent chapters explore variations on this theme. Micaiah ben Imlah, in 1 Kings 22, exemplifies an integrity which is primarily concerned with 'the dynamics of moral responsiveness to YHWH'. The stories of Elisha and Balaam are explored for their focus on how the ability to see/discern YHWH is inextricably linked with moral integrity and the desire to serve YHWH alone. A chapter on Matthew and 1 John explores some obvious NT resonances with the basic thesis: false prophets are known by their fruits (Matthew 7:15-16), while 1 John 4, which explicitly calls for a testing of the spirits in v. 1, delivers a very simple criterion seven verses later: 'Whoever does not love does not know God'. Then there is a lengthy chapter on Paul, focusing on 1 Corinthians 12-14 and its discussion of spiritual discernment, and 2 Corinthians and Paul's defence of his apostolic ministry. This is an interesting and densely argued chapter, including the suggestive proposal that 1 Corinthians 12:3 should read 'no one speaking by the Spirit of God ever says, "May Jesus curse."' This is not the usual translation, but it fits well with the overall argument that Paul is critiquing a self-serving use of spiritual power, and Moberly does offer independent reasons for it. All of these readings of scriptural texts are carried out with exemplary attention to textual detail and due acknowledgement of paths not taken, or views disagreed with. There is a wealth of exegetical insight here even for those not persuaded by the thesis.

The argument is thus, if one may put it this way, that we need more to assess speaking for God than an eschatologically orientated 'wait and see': we need something which can be assessed at the time, and this something lies in hand in the combination of an appropriately cruciform message, and in the life of the one who claims to speak for God, in terms of their moral integrity and ethical lifestyle. How then to avoid the opposite problem to the eschatological one, the reduction of discernment to moralism? The word 'moral' appears in scare quotes at certain points in the book, but in the concluding chapter Moberly addresses this point head on. Among several relevant factors he puts emphasis on the priority of grace as a counter to moralism. This is then tested in a searching series of 'case studies': how might Martin Luther King be understood as a prophet in the light of his sexual infidelity? Do the proposed criteria allow us to say that Osama bin Laden operates with authenticity? Can those of other faiths or no faith speak for God? Where do the proposed criteria leave, for example, the question of the Church's attitude to gays and lesbians? In all of these, and indeed throughout the book, Moberly disavows any easy or individualistic application of a check-list of criteria, but takes instead the more demanding path of exploring what kinds of self-involving transformation are called for in making judicious judgments. His sobering conclusion bears repeating:

the contemporary instinct – revealingly and dismayingly – is to construe any claim to real access to the Spirit in terms of individualism and illuminism, rather than in terms of the insights that may become accessible through moral, ritual, devotional, and social living and thinking within the disciplines of ecclesial faith (p. 253).

It is the achievement of *Prophecy and Discernment* to have established this claim without resort to moralism, and furthermore without undue hermeneutical complexity, or submission to the prevailing and cramping orthodoxies of Biblical studies construed as an academic discipline (and indeed the book is symbolically placed in the *Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine* series to make something of a discipline-defying statement).

Early on, in a delightful and incisive judgment, Moberly characterises a particular set of approaches to scripture as ‘a well-intentioned attempt to make positive sense of the relevant texts when the texts’ own priorities are not understood’ (p. 19). There is then a kind of wager that runs through the book, that Biblical texts will in due course offer up constructive theological insights on their own terms if we will but learn to apply ourselves to them with sufficient care and seriousness. It is hard to think of a more appropriate agenda for Christian reading of the Bible than this, and hard to imagine a more compelling example of just such a practice.

*Richard Briggs*

**Leonardo Boff, *Fundamentalism, Terrorism and the Future of Humanity, translation and notes: Alexandre Guilherme* (SPCK, 2006), 94 pp., £8.99, pb., 0 281 05797 4**

When one compares its brevity with its ambition this book is breathtaking. In ninety or so pages Boff undertakes to provide a definition of various fundamentalisms – Protestant, Roman Catholic, Islamic, neo-liberal and technical-scientific; to account for the existence of fundamentalism; to assess its relationship with religion and politics, particularly in the light of globalisation and terrorism; and to reach some kind of solution through a specific definition of peace, its implications and a vision for the future.

The subject, of course, is highly topical. Boff situates his analysis in the context of contemporary concerns about terrorism and war at the beginning of the twenty-first century. He notes that while ‘Islamic fundamentalism has been blamed for being primarily [sic] responsible for the sad events of Tuesday September 11th, 2001’ (p. ix), it is far from being the only kind creating tension in the world today. Boff is insistent on the importance of facing up to the variety of fundamentalisms which are ‘present in our culture, and perhaps even in some of our own individual attitudes’ (p. ix). This emphasis on the multiple ways in which fundamentalism can manifest itself, and the need to assess whether or not we are personally implicated, is a salutary corrective to depictions of fundamentalism as inevitably ‘Islamic,’ or as an abstract force that can only find expression in terrorist acts.

However Boff's tendency to compress complex issues and lengthy historical developments into short and reductive summaries weakens his argument.

The strength of his analysis lies in his attempt to explore the ethical, political and moral dimensions of fundamentalisms, and the ways in which these impact upon our lives as human beings. For example, Boff recognises that 'the hard experience of humiliation and prolonged suffering' forms the groundwork for 'political fundamentalism' (p. 29). Similarly, he points out that the 'importance of religion has been almost completely disregarded by the strategists of global politics' and this has led to 'clumsy mistakes in foreign policies towards Lebanon, Iran, the Palestinians and Afghanistan' (p. 37). Though, again, this is a sweeping generalisation, Boff's ethical and spiritual sensitivity is an important element of his critique of the relationship between politics, religion and fundamentalism.

Boff's book is useful in the way it is not afraid to ask large questions; to consider the implications of connecting issues that are not normally brought together and analysed from a political, ethical and theological perspective – poverty, suffering, warfare, fundamentalism, politics, and so on. However, both his treatment of the issues and the solution he sketches fail to satisfy.

His response to the challenge of fundamentalism consists of several elements. There is an emphasis on dialogue: reality is full of contradictions, and forcing a fundamentalist to face this may induce a 'sense of doubt and insecurity that can have a helpful therapeutic function' (p. 30). This must be pursued 'to the limitless ends of rationality' (p. 30). The model for dialogue is St Francis of Assisi – who embodies 'the kind of encounter that is based on respect and that produces peace' (p. 56). Boff suggests that 'peace is equilibrium of movement' (p. 67). His definition is founded on the scientific assumption that all 'in the universe is movement; nothing is static and completely done' (p. 67). Thus wisdom is required 'to combine positively all factors that favour life and the development of life.' It is necessary to allow for both movement and equilibrium, producing a peace 'open to incorporate new things and to creative synthesis' (p. 70).

This is an optimistic and attractive picture, but it is based on several assumptions that Boff fails to define and substantiate. He argues that 'all religions of humanity' to some extent have a common core which opens the possibility for dialogue (pp. 30, 39), without dealing with the problem that these religious values are embedded in particular and concrete contexts, and cannot be simply extracted from these for the purposes of universal dialogue. Similarly, rationality is a key component of the dialogue process he postulates, but are the ends of rationality 'limitless'? Finally, Boff recognises that individuals may cherish attitudes which promote a destructive 'fundamentalism' that fails 'to recognize the other, to recognize the other's right to exist' (p. 30). But he also assumes that in the face of possible extermination resulting from existing collections of biological weapons and the like, humanity both can and must make a collective decision to 'create decentralized relations of power', to enable all 'to dwell with the minimum of comfort' and to preserve nature (p. 30). The gap between this recognition



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of the potential for evil – though Boff generally avoids such terminology – and advocacy of an earthly utopia where ‘all the peoples embrace each other like brothers and sisters in our own common home, the Earth’ (p. 31), is not satisfactorily closed by the gesture towards the human will, rationality and the need for dialogue. These resources, in and of themselves, continue to prove tragically inadequate.

*Alison Searle*

# Notes on Contributors

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**Dr Donald Drew** graduated in both English and History at Cambridge and taught at St Lawrence College, Ramsgate. For ten years he was attached to L'Abri in Switzerland. He has written *Images of Man: a critique of the contemporary cinema* and *Letters to a Student* (2003).

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