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WHAT HAS POETRY TO DO WITH EVANGELISM?

by Sharon Fish Mooney

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"Babblings"

We pray they'll never stop,
loving their low, babbling sounds,
brooks flowing over rocks,
babies after baths, skin glowing.
But at the other end of time
when life begins to ebb, flows
toward sea-dreams of immortality
envisioned under lids of wrinkled skin,
we may babble too, dementia-drenched
low murmurings of incoherent speech,
and fear no one will care or understand.
It's then we need to trust that One
who comprehends imperfect words,
can one day untie tangled tongues,
and blend dissonant mortal murmurings
into sweet harmony and hymns of praise.

When C. S. Lewis was asked to discuss the question, "Is Theology Poetry?" he began with a definition of theology as "the systematic series of statements about God and about man's relationship to Him which the believers of a religion make."[1]

One conclusion he drew was that if theology, specifically Christian theology, was poetry, it was "not very good poetry."[2] Pantheism, pagan animism, and the cosmology of the scientific outlook that Lewis considered Christianity's chief rival (where life begins by the "millionth millionth chance" and ends in "nothingness"),[3] may all yield worldviews that appeal more to the poetic mind and imagination bent on myth-making, but all lack a true and comprehensive appreciation of a reality rooted and grounded in historical facts.

For today's poetically minded Christian desiring to share the historical facts of their faith, it is good to ask two related questions: What has poetry to do with theology? What has poetry to do with evangelism?

POETS OF MYTH

Plato thought poetry had something to do with both. As Helmut Thielicke noted, Plato's "theologians" were "poets of myth" who "testified to and proclaimed that which they viewed as divine" and theology became "significant as the means of proclaiming the gods, of confessing to them, and of teaching and 'preaching' this confession,"[4] that is, evangelization. These gods (and goddesses), however, originated in the minds of their myth-makers. Plato's insistence (voiced through Socrates) on censoring poetry and banishing the poets from the city (but keeping the philosophers), might not have been a bad idea in light of the Hellenistic worldview. Some of his arguments seem quite biblical and mirror a number of Paul's; for example, that the poets appear to know everything when, in fact, they know nothing.[5]

The ears of the Ephesians were wide open to those who preached anything and everything and Timothy was charged to tell these new believers not to wander into myths but to cling to the rational truth of the gospel (See 1 Tim. 1:3–4 and 2 Tim. 4:3–4). The poets in Plato's *Republic* also appeared to have jettisoned reason, appealing to the baser instincts in people by stirring up their emotions[6] (cf. 1 Pet. 4:3–4).

Yet it was to some of these very same poets Paul appealed in his evangelistic address in the middle of the Areopagus (Acts 17). For Paul, the myth, though not a true representation of reality, could, nevertheless, be of great value as a means to point people to truth. Tolkien would have agreed, believing that all the other "myths of the world" were mixtures of truth and error; "truth because they are written by those made by and for God – error because written by those alienated by God." The Bible, Tolkien noted, was "the one true myth," a "true accounting of truth."[7]

Paul reached back in time to Aratus, a Greek poet (c. 315–c. 245 B.C.), who wrote the following invocation in his hexameter poem, *Phaenomena*[8]: "Let us begin with Zeus, whom we mortals never leave unspoken. / For every street, every market-place is full of Zeus. / Even the sea and the harbour are full of this deity. / Everywhere everyone is indebted to Zeus. / *For we are indeed his offspring*" (emphasis added).[9] Drawing on this Hellenistic poem, the focus of Paul's argument in Acts 17:28–29 is on the Stoic philosophical belief that Zeus was not a man nor even a god in human form, but an animating force. If this were true, then erecting stone or silver or gold idols to this god (or any other god), and worshipping at a homemade altar or shrine, did not make sense, as these gods could not be sculpted, nailed down, or confined to a place. From this observation and Paul's wonderfully sensitive introduction, where he lets the Athenians know he has taken the time and effort to become well acquainted with their customs and rituals as well as their famous myth-makers, Paul begins to make known to them the *true* nature of the god they have worshipped as "unknown"; this is not Zeus or a god by any other name sprung half or fully formed from the minds of men, but their Father and Creator, God of heaven and of Earth, who calls them to repent of their sins

and vain imaginings and believe in the actual historical event (the resurrection of Christ) that has made it possible to understand reality truly.

Poetry may not *be* theology, but it can clearly be used to illuminate spiritual truth in ways that prose may not be able to do so as well.

THE POWER TO CONVERT

Poetry has power, including the power to convert or to cause a serious reorientation of one's beliefs and values; this can include the beliefs and values of other poets. In 1826, Robert Browning's mother presented him with a gift: Alexander Cruden's Comp*lete Concordance to the Holy Scriptures*. Browning was fourteen. That same year a cousin gave Browning the newly published *Miscellaneous Poems*, by Percy Bysshe Shelley.[10] Shelley won out. Young Robert began to question the nonconformist principles of his family[11] and was soon immersed in Shelley's *Queen Mab*, a philosophical poem (with extensive notes) where commerce and the power of monarchies and religion, specifically Christianity, are viewed as oppressors. If a society resists these influences, it can ultimately perfect itself into a utopia through human effort in cooperation with nature.[12] Following in Shelley's footsteps, Browning converted to both vegetarianism and an "active, voluble, proselytizing atheism"[13] and "talked about his unbelief to anyone who would listen."[14] One person who listened was Sarah Flower. Almost persuaded by Browning's arguments, in later years she reaffirmed her Christian faith and wrote the well-known hymn, *Nearer, My God, to Thee*.[15]

I recently had a conversation with fellow Ohio Poetry Association member Deborah Strozier about the questions I raise in this article. Deborah readily shared with me her discovery of the truths of Christianity she has been immersing herself in through Bible studies at work, at church, and through her own personal reading of Scripture. A well-published and award-winning poet who frequently writes about her own Asian-American upbringing,[16] she shared that her study of the Bible was giving her a new appreciation of poetry. Biblical allusions she had never understood before are leading her to experiment with these allusions herself as she writes out of a developing worldview that is changing both her life and her poetic interests and style. "Now that I have more biblical awareness," Deborah said, "I understand poetry on a deeper level."

Li-Young Lee, an Asian-American poet born in Indonesia to Chinese parents, has been another influence on her poetry. Lee's poems often reflect his Christian upbringing (Lee's father became a Presbyterian minister in the U.S.) and his own meditations on the nature of God.

Deborah also has reflected on Shakespeare's poetic tragedy *King Lear*. She found a stark contrast between King Lear and the father portrayed in the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32). The king withdraws his love and fortune from Cordelia, whom he perceives as his prodigal daughter, while the father in the parable demonstrates the perfect love and forgiving nature of God as he prepares a feast for his prodigal son. "We are all different versions of the prodigal son," said Deborah, "in need of a father who will welcome us home."

CHRISTIAN CULTURE

Dana Gioia, in *What Is Italian-American Poetry?* wrote that "Italian-American poets reflect the Roman Catholic culture in which they were raised" and the "mythology and iconography of Latin Catholicism often form the symbolic framework of their poetry. Even if the poets overtly reject the religion, its worldview still permeates their imaginations."[17]

Gioia goes on to say, "If Italian-Americans hope to win a broader audience for their writers, they must begin by taking their own literary heritage seriously. They must read, discuss, and evaluate their own authors. They must create and support the necessary cultural institutions to foster informed discussion—journals, publishers, readings, lectures, college courses. They must also risk making judgments about literary quality."[18]

Much of what Gioia has written about Italian-American poets should hold true for all Christian poets who have a concern for sound theology and evangelism: their poetry should reflect the biblical worldview, that true accounting of truth. That does not mean that every poem will necessarily include a biblical reference or be overtly evangelistic in nature, but it should mean that a reader or hearer of this poetry will come away with a sense of a world rooted in a reality that is meaningful, purposeful, and personal. To hone their own skills, Christians can become acquainted with well-crafted poetry that reflects Christian theism from poets of earlier centuries such as John Milton, John Donne, George Herbert, Christina Rossetti, and William Cowper, and nineteenth- and twentieth-century poets such as T. S. Eliot, Madeleine L'Engle, Luci Shaw, Anne Porter, Denise Levertov, Sarah Wells, David Middleton, Brett Foster, Mark Jarman, and Scott Cairns.[19] The following journals of poetry, art, and prose also explore the intersection of Christianity and culture: *Image*, *Ruminate*, *First Things*, and *Radix*.

TWO POEMS; TWO PURPOSES

The poem at the beginning of this article is a free-verse poem I wrote as I reflected on my mother's experience of Alzheimer's disease and mine as her caregiver. My hope is that the poem might speak to others who are going through similar caregiving experiences and might be seeking to make sense of them, and that I am giving them permission, by the poem, to express their feelings, their thoughts and their fears. Following readings of my poems on dementia (in libraries, churches, coffee houses, and bars), I have often found myself in conversations with other caregivers about the experience of caregiving and what faith has to do with it. Poetry readings can be excellent venues for conversations about matters of spirituality if you hang around after and socialize with other poets and lovers of poetry.

The poem that concludes this article is an ekphrastic poem. Ekphrasis is the Greek equivalent of the English word, *description*; this type of poem is writing that gives a verbal rendition to something visual, like a painting or a sculpture. In this fourteen-line sonnet, the poet's response enables us to more fully identify with Thomas in Caravaggio's masterpiece by the same name as the poem, and with Thomas's

experience as told in John 20:24–29. The poet, Becky Haigler, told me that her favorite reading of this poem was at a Sunday service in a Unitarian church. The church had an artists' Sunday where performers had the opportunity to present during the morning service and craftspeople had tables to sell from during the fellowship luncheon afterward. Friends of the poets in her writers' group, who attended the Unitarian church, invited her to participate. One hope would be that those who listened would be prompted to view the actual painting, be drawn to the biblical account that the painting is based on, and begin thinking of their own response to the risen Christ. —*Sharon Fish Mooney*

Sharon Fish Mooney coordinates monthly poetry nights at Tim Hortons with her husband Scott. She won the inaugural metrical poetry Frost Farm Prize (2011) and was a semifinalist for the Richard Wilbur Award for a book of ekphrastic sonnets after the art of Vincent van Gogh. She teaches nursing research and other subjects online for Regis University and Indiana Wesleyan University.

NOTES

1 C. S. Lewis, "Is Theology Poetry?" *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (New York: Macmillan, 1980), 74.
2 Ibid., 75.
3 Ibid., 79, 81.
4 Helmut Thielicke, "Theology," *Encyclopaedia Britannica, Macropedia*, vol. 18 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1984), 274.
5 *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom, 2nd ed. (New York: Basic Books, 1991).
6 Ibid.
7 J.R.R. Tolkien. Quoted in Patrick W. Curles, "Tolkien's Impact in Literature and Life," http://www.leaderu.com/humanities/tolkiensimpact.html.
8 http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/32161/Aratus.
9 For a detailed exposition of Acts 17 and the *Phaenomena* translation, see Riemer Faber, "The Apostle and the Poet: Paul and Aratus," *Clarion*, 42, 13 (1993). Available at http://spindleworks.com/library/rfaber/aratus.htm.
10 Betty Miller, *Robert Browning: A Portrait* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), 8.
11 Frances Winwar, *The Immortal Lovers: Elizabeth Barrett and Robert Browning* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950).
12 http://www.bartleby.com/139/shel111.html.
13 Winwar,30.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.,31.
16 Deborah Strozier, *Lotus Leaves* (Columbus, OH: Pudding House Press), 2009.
17 http://www.danagioia.net/essays/eitalamer.htm.
18 Ibid.
19 See "Modern and Contemporary Poets of Christian Faith," Http://www3.dbu.edu/mitchell/christia3.htm.

"The Incredulity of St. Thomas"
by Becky Haigler

The invitation seems grotesque, at start;
to touch His hands, His side, where flowed the blood.
He parts His robe; I'm drawn toward the wound.
No sign of recent violence stains the mark.
New flesh has formed. I find not any part
of gore nor bilious pus; no scab nor bruise.
My fingers tremble drawing near. I choose
to trace the spear's path toward His broken heart.

A sweet wind breathes across my sweating hand.
I gaze into the darkness and am awed:
not black and bloody like a slaughtered lamb,
but summer sky, a million stars abroad,
the universe within His belly spanned.
The cry springs from me whole, "My Lord! My God!"