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# God and the Poet

SALLY READ

## Why poetry?

As a young woman, I worked as a mental health nurse with elderly people from all over Europe. For many of them, World War Two was a still-living reality. Spoken during afternoon tea, Hitler's name could create an abyss of silence, or a simple, desperate wailing. Other patients had less dramatic stories and were simply depressed. Others had organic brain conditions that meant the patient next to them looked like a ginger cat, or memories that were so damaged they couldn't remember if they were married or had children. Some had lost the ability to recognize objects like coins. Some had a lifetime of listening to unwanted voices, and were white with weariness. Every day we were grappling with chaos and its consequences.

On the short tube ride from Camden back to the center of London every morning I read poetry. I read as I sat, as I walked and people pushed past me. Sometimes I had to finish a page on the station platform and was late into work. One volume I always had with me was T.S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. I could make little real sense of it, and yet I knew it contained the deepest sense. Its wisdom, lyricism and startling images reminded me of something I almost knew.

With my nurse-manager's blessing, I started up a poetry group with some of the patients. I'd spread out as many books as I could on the table, and give twenty minutes or so for them to choose something to read aloud. Sylvia Plath's poems were often chosen, and when they were there was always trouble. A woman from London stood up and yelled at me about *Among the Narcissi* and its depiction of age. I was taken to task by my boss for the upset caused by a reading of *Mary's Song* (which is about the Holocaust). One Irishman asked me to read Yeats' *Easter 1916* and cried quietly as I did so. Those who couldn't remember what they did yesterday could recite stanzas of Kipling, Wordsworth or Edward Lear. Lines of Shakespeare lay in the drained gutter of memory like a golden key. Many nodded when we read Stevie Smith, and repeated the line *Not waving but drowning*. One lady scrawled the words on a piece of paper and put it in her handbag. The few initial protestations of "I don't understand poetry" were silenced in the face of poetry understanding them too well.

By then I was writing my own poetry, and my only ambition in life was to give form and music to chaos as the poets we were reading had done. As an atheist, I saw poetry as the transformative engine through which life could be made bearable.

I began attending workshops for aspiring poets, and soon became aware of rules to which I would need to adhere if I were to be published. End rhyme (*So long as men can breathe or eyes can see/So long lives this, and this gives life to thee*) was out. Abstract ideas were verboten. "Nature poetry" was generally seen as old hat. The more every-day, urban, and subjective, the better, the world of poetry at the beginning of the century seemed to say—or at least the groups which I attended. There was even a vaguely tongue in cheek "List of Banned Words" that circulated, which from memory included *transcendent, Jesus, and soul*.

Still, I managed to “become” a poet, publishing three books of poetry. On the U.K.’s Poetry Archive I’m quoted, from before my conversion, as saying: *Poetry gives voice to what has no voice, and form to what has no form...* I was still trying to give voice and form to what I’d witnessed as a nurse, and in my personal life. But, in my more honest moments, I knew that contemporary poetry largely did not inspire me. In fact, a few fine poets were grappling with the transcendent and breaking the “rules”—sometimes with stunning results, but often with what seemed a foray into fog and a sort of philosophical vagueness. As an unbelieving writer, I was left with a sense of clipped wings.

### The Poet

Then, during the Spring of 2010, at the age of thirty-nine, I came to believe in God, and simultaneously knew him as a Poet. As I sat on my bed on the first tentative night of belief, perhaps it was my sense of being *seen* by a Creator that gave me this knowledge. I had never guessed that it was possible to be so *beheld*, and for that beholding to know and give such meaning to a life. I felt as though I’d been pounding on a suffocating roof, only for it to be abruptly lifted, and infinity to come into view.

God is, of course, a poet in the usual sense: the Bible holds swathes of poetry.

But I also saw that every poem I had written attempted to *see* in ways that were not ordinary. Through image and metaphor I was trying to grasp the interconnectedness of everything. Gerard Manley Hopkins saw connections everywhere—in skies, cows, trout, and fields. Sylvia Plath’s genius also lay in her astonishing ability to see elements touch, reverberate, and collide: in *Nick and the Candlestick* shadows are shawls, homicides and plums! I think of Keats’ green hill hidden in an April shroud representing melancholy. And the wild and darkening night as a symbol threatening to tear Emily Bronte away from whom or what she loved. Through poetry I (like a multitude before me) was trying to articulate silences and offer another dimension; to make the reader see as they had never done, and to understand anew.

As I stood at the back and watched during Mass in those early days, it became clear that liturgy made similar use of metaphor, connection, and representation. At Mass the poetry lives: the incense rises like prayer; the altar is like a table for feasting. But the symbols of the Church, I would learn, go further. The blood issuing from Christ’s side *is* mercy; the Church *is* the Body of Christ. But we go further. The wine is like blood; but it *becomes* blood, and the bread is like flesh, but *becomes* flesh. Sitting at many tabernacles and knowing Christ’s real presence, I realized that Christ the Word made flesh *is* a poem: the definitively ineffable (God) given form and human voice, and walking in the world. God is a poet, Christ is the poem.

### God’s Grandchild

I spent the first years after my conversion to Catholicism lamenting, vaguely, that the pact between God and artists had broken. Once faith was emptied, at least in part, from the world then the ignition went out of the creative engine. Many poetry readers and visitors to modern art galleries feel cheated by what they encounter—poetry with no apparent form or resonance; art “installations” that might be as artless as Tracy Emin’s unmade bed.

Centuries ago, Dante Alighieri called poetry *God’s grandchild*. In the poet’s tour of hell, he is actually being confronted with the consequences of usury, but it is made clear to him that industry or art of any kind that evades labor is fatally defective—our sweat is needed, Virgil says, in order to advance. But even more: artists are called to a creative process much like the Father’s initial act of Creation:

First, artists begin, like God, with formlessness—that is, with chaos: *the earth was a formless void* (Genesis 1,2). Poets begin, as God began, in contemplation (God is, after all, pure contemplation). Have

we, I wondered, become so disdainful of the transcendent that our contemplation as artists is necessarily limited? Perhaps our inspirations and conclusions have for too long been shackled by our belief that there is nothing more than ourselves. If we contain within ourselves both the question and the answer (and within a poem there is always, in some manner, a query and a response) then the poem will suffocate.

Second, the Creator of the world labored: *God made* (Genesis 1,7). He gave the chaos form and named it. Only then did he rest. Whatever sweet inspiration the poet may receive, there is no escaping the hard labor of writing, drafting, and revising.

So, what about the poem as crafted work?

Let's be honest: many lament the fact that poems don't rhyme anymore. There's a sense among the general readership (often rightly so) that poets are dishing up chaos into chaos, or simply chopped up prose. It's true that there has been a belief among poets (and many great poets, like Eliot) that the standard forms of yesteryear are too simplistic to bear the weight of the complexities of existence. But it does seem that some poets have thrown the baby out with the bathwater of traditional forms. Authentic free verse, if that's what a poem calls for, should have everything to do with labor and form. It asks the poet to find a *unique* form, just like a sculptor finds a shape within a block of marble.

When most people speak of rhyme they mean end rhymes. In fact, many of the ancient greats, including Homer, including God himself, do not use end rhymes. The psalms—the most sublime poems of all time—do not rhyme, as most would identify the notion, in the original Hebrew. Rather they use devices such as parallels, the repetition and reformulation of images and ideas, to give new dimensions to our understanding.

Rhyme is a complex thing. It can exist within lines, not just at the end; it can suggest itself through half-rhyme. It can elucidate and expand a notion through the rhyming of ideas, just like in the psalms. And music can also be conjured by uniting ideas or feelings through alliteration, assonance or rhythm (*And death shall have no dominion*, Dylan Thomas; *Not waving but drowning*, Stevie Smith; *I will not, cannot go*, Emily Bronte). In true poetry there is always music—and it is both elusive in the writing, and inescapable in the reading. When caught, it highlights the connections between different elements. Visual images work in the hearer's mind in a similar way, and rhythm, and word choice. Even the ordering of words plays its crucial part. Poetry is about surprising the reader with a reality that they had not hitherto grasped. It is another way of seeing and hearing. Which is why the Bible is full of poetry. And it is why true poetry—whether “traditional” or not—is always about graft.

Perhaps, I wondered, some poets had been so intent on deconstructing tradition that they had forgotten about the essential nature of this music and form? But no. I think the lack of music and form in some (by no means all) contemporary poetry is also about the problem of contemplation that I talked about, above. Contemplation goes a long way in creating the music—and that is a mystery for which I have no formula.

In the final stage: *God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good* (Genesis 1,31). The poet who has contemplated and labored will finish with a crafted entity that makes its way in the world. If a poem is authentic (and this is rare enough in any age) it will pass into eternity.

Has the pact between poets and God been broken? There is mystery in the writing of poetry that almost any poet, religious or not, will attest to. Theodore Roethke felt the vivid presence of what he perceived as his dead poetic antecedents when the muse struck, and he fell to his knees in gratitude. Others will

speak of poems coming from “nowhere.” All I can say is that prayer and poetry are sisters in contemplation—both require absolute attention and detachment from the world and its clamorous concerns. In any age, if a writer is too caught up in the world’s gaze, the world’s applause, and the world’s reward then the work will ultimately fail. Like Adam, we are given a great gift, and then asked to till. Like Adam, we’re called to do so in the gaze of God alone.

### A Catholic Poet

A Catholic poet doesn’t necessarily write about God. And yet a poet can only write well about what obsesses her. In my early years as a Catholic I could only write about this new and all-involving love affair with my Creator. As someone known for outrageous and sometimes graphic poems, I had no idea what my future in poetry would hold—would I be read, would I be published? I tried to labor for God alone, and wrote the poems in my first collection as a Catholic for feast days, to give image to my own thirst for God, and to illuminate what I gleaned of a hermit’s contemplative life and solitary night-time prayer (I am attached to a hermitage as “poet in residence”).

Through those years of formation, I wrote in the voices of Saint Anne, Saint Mary Magdalene, Saint Peter, the bleeding woman who Christ healed, and a soldier who nailed Christ to the cross. I wrote of Saint Elizabeth, Saint Veronica, and to Saint Joseph. Most of all I wrote about Our Blessed Mother, especially at the moment of the Annunciation, during her pregnancy, and as the mother of a young child.

*My soul magnifies the Lord*, Our Lady sang. And the converse is also true—there is not one part of our existence that is not given meaning and clarity by the incarnation, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He is the reader that makes sense of our existence. He gives voice where there is no voice, music where there is no music, and form where there is no form. In these ten years since my conversion, my poetry has united, in an obvious way, with the poetry of God—Christ himself.

My relationship with poetry has always been intense (idolatrous, I would say, when I was an atheist), and the ruminations I have tried to outline here have been sometimes slow and painful. For a time I even rejected the label of “poet.” I wearied of poetry’s lack of readership. I loved the immediacy of readers’ responses to my non-fiction. But, in mysterious ways, I kept getting called back to poetry. There is a sacred vein there that I can’t turn my back on. There is music in poetry that might—like prayer—confuse people at first with its seeming indirectness. Like prayer, it asks us to listen without struggle and the need to immediately understand; and to try to see the world, in some small way, as God sees it. It seems to me that the Catholic Church is the natural home of the poet and the natural home of poetry readers: Catholics live poetry every day of their lives.

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