

Regent College

The Poetic Process and the Spiritual Life:  
Reflecting on the Common Language of Poetry and Prayer

INDS 560: Christian Imagination

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## Introduction

The tradition of integrating poetry with Christian spiritual practice is as old as the Bible itself. Throughout the Psalms, for example, we see poems of “joy, lament, and praise” filled with “heartfelt pleas, petition, and praise to God.”<sup>1</sup> Meanwhile, history is rife with religious and spiritual poetry reflecting on the nature of God, and on what it means for us to relate to God as human beings. As a practice of attentiveness, “poetry rehearses us [and] verses us in seeing the curses and blessings of presence in such a world as this” – including the presence of Christ through his incarnation.<sup>2</sup> The gift and discipline of poetry – in particular, of *writing* poetry – bears great similarity to the gift and discipline of prayer: both call us to pay attention to the particularity of the present, to contemplate the mysteries we all experience in life, and to find expression for our emotions and experiences. As “a marvelously resonant site for Christian self-expression, aesthetic experience, and personal prayer,” poetry has great potential as a spiritual discipline to deepen our knowledge of God and grow us to greater maturity in faith.<sup>3</sup>

### Establishing the Relationship of Poetry and Prayer

Poetry and prayer share a common language:<sup>4</sup> as we read and write poetry that reflects on such themes as theology, spirituality, and creation, we become more attentive to the character and presence of God in our lives in much the same way we do through prayer.<sup>5</sup> This attentiveness is evident in the poetic work of nineteenth century English Jesuit priest Gerard

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<sup>1</sup> Malachy M. Williams, “Perceptions of Adult Christian Creative Arts Practitioners in Leadership from NY, NJ, and PA about the Practice of Music, Art, and Dance in Cultivating Christian Spiritual Formation” (Ph.D. Diss., Biola University, 2017), 150.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Rumsey, “Through Poetry: Particularity and the Call to Attention.” *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts*, ed. Jeremy Begbie (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 56.

<sup>3</sup> Francis X. McAloon SJ, “Reading for Transformation through the Poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins,” *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 8, no. 2 (October 29, 2008), 183.

<sup>4</sup> David Lonsdale quoting from William T. Noon's book *Poetry and Prayer* in “Poetry and Prayer: A Survey of Some Twentieth-Century Studies,” in *Poetry and Prayer: The Power of the Word II*, ed. Francesca Bugliani Knox and John Took (Routledge, 2016), 27.

<sup>5</sup> Ed Block, “Poetry, Attentiveness and Prayer: One Poet’s Lesson,” *New Blackfriars* 89, no. 1020 (2008): 162.

Manley Hopkins. For example, in “As Kingfishers Catch Fire,” Hopkins draws close attention to the *imago Dei* found in all living creatures:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame;  
As tumbled over rim in roundy wells  
Stones ring; like each tucked string tells, each hung bell's  
Bow swung finds tongue to fling out broad its name;  
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:  
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;  
Selves—goes itself; myself it speaks and spells,  
Crying *Whát I do is me: for that I came.*

Í say móre: the just man justices;  
Kéeps gráce: thát keeps all his goings graces;  
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—  
Chríst—for Chríst plays in ten thousand places,  
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his  
To the Father through the features of men's faces.<sup>6</sup>

In this poem, Hopkins has taken in the world around him in “passive reflection before active exposition:” he has noticed the kingfisher, the dragonfly, and each mortal thing that images Christ, playing “in ten thousand places.”<sup>7</sup> His poetry “considers itself addressed by creation, called to attention.”<sup>8</sup> Likewise, as we grow in prayer – which Kathleen Norris defines as “the beyond-words experience of coming into the presence of something much greater than oneself”<sup>9</sup> – we are reoriented to God, becoming attentive to His presence in our lives and in the world.

We can furthermore see significant parallels between the spiritual disciplines of contemplation and meditation with “the transformative potential of making and reading poetry.”<sup>10</sup> As Adele Calhoun puts it, contemplation involves practices such as “taking time to truly see and gaze on life, others, art and Scripture” or “reflecting on experiences so as to benefit

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<sup>6</sup> Gerard Manley Hopkins, *Mortal Beauty, God's Grace: Major Poems and Spiritual Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, ed. John F. Thornton and Susan B. Varenne (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 23.

<sup>7</sup> Rumsey, “Through Poetry,” 52.

<sup>8</sup> Rumsey, 52.

<sup>9</sup> Block drawing from Kathleen Norris's book, *Amazing Grace* in “Poetry, Attentiveness, and Prayer,” 170.

<sup>10</sup> Lonsdale, “Poetry and Prayer,” 34.

from their happening,” while meditation can include “mulling over, chewing on and ruminating over God’s Word and its application” or “meditating on people; seeing them as God sees them and expressing delight in them as he does.”<sup>11</sup> These two disciplines are critical ingredients to the poetic process as well.<sup>12</sup>

Yet again, we can see how the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins reflects these themes of meditation and contemplation in his poem, “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the Resurrection:”

Cloud-puffball, torn tufts, tossed pillows | flaunt forth, then chevy on an air-  
Built thoroughfare: heaven-roysterers, in gay-gangs | they throng; they glitter in marches.  
Down roughcast, down dazzling whitewash, | wherever an elm arches,  
Shivelights and shadowtackle ín long | lashes lace, lance, and pair.  
Delightfully the bright wind boisterous | ropes, wrestles, beats earth bare  
Of yestertempest's creases; | in pool and rut peel parches  
Squandering ooze to squeezed | dough, crust, dust; stanches, starches  
Squadroned masks and manmarks | treadmire toil there  
Footfretted in it. Million-fuelèd, | nature's bonfire burns on.  
But quench her bonniest, dearest | to her, her clearest-selvèd spark  
Man, how fast his firedint, | his mark on mind, is gone!  
Both are in an unfathomable, all is in an enormous dark  
Drowned. O pity and indig | nation! Manshape, that shone  
Sheer off, disseveral, a star, | death blots black out; nor mark  
Is any of him at all so stark  
But vastness blurs and time | beats level. Enough! the Resurrection,  
A heart's-clarion! Away grief's gasping, | joyless days, dejection.  
Across my foundering deck shone  
A beacon, an eternal beam. | Flesh fade, and mortal trash  
Fall to the residuary worm; | world's wildfire, leave but ash:  
In a flash, at a trumpet crash,  
I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am, and  
This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, | patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,  
Is immortal diamond.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Adele Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us*, Revised Kindle edition (IVP Books, 2015), 1,200 and 4,259.

<sup>12</sup> Lonsdale quoting again from Noon’s book in “Poetry and Prayer,” 27.

<sup>13</sup> Hopkins, *Mortal Beauty*, 52-53.

Hopkins reflected that his own life was “determined by the Incarnation down to most of the details of the day.”<sup>14</sup> This is evident in the poem above in which (focusing in on the second half) Hopkins moves from his experience of suffering (“all is in an enormous dark / Drowned”) to the hope we find through Christ’s death and resurrection (“I am all at once what Christ is, | since he was what I am”) and the beauty we find within ourselves as “immortal diamonds” made in his image. Hopkins has taken the time to deeply contemplate – “to gaze on his life” – and known himself to be a “Jack, joke, poor potsherd,” but also to meditate (in other words, to ruminate on God’s Word) and as a result births the final lines of truthful hope in this poem. Indeed, to this day, “the unique particularity of [Hopkins’] poetry continues to invite its reader to taste the bitter and the sweet of our human condition.”<sup>15</sup>

Poetry moreover “has the capacity to mediate the presence of mystery,” preparing us “to hear the word of God.”<sup>16</sup> It allows us to voice questions and experiences of paradox, while still holding what we know to be true, as we see in twentieth century poet Denise Levertov’s “Suspended:”

I had grasped God's garment in the void  
but my hand slipped  
on the rich silk of it.  
The 'everlasting arms' my sister loved to remember  
must have upheld my leaden weight  
from falling, even so,  
for though I claw at empty air and feel  
nothing, no embrace,  
I have not plummeted.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen McInerney quoting from Hopkins’ *Sermons* in *The Enclosure of an Open Mystery: Sacrament and Incarnation in the Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins, David Jones and Les Murray* (Oxford: Peter Lang AG, 2012), 39.

<sup>15</sup> McAloon, “Reading for Transformation,” 187.

<sup>16</sup> Lonsdale quoting from Karl Rahner's article "Poetry and the Christian" in "Poetry and Prayer," 32.

<sup>17</sup> Denise Levertov, *Evening Train: Poetry* (New York: New Directions, 1993).

Though Levertov admits that she “claw[s] at empty air and feel[s] nothing,” poetry has given her the means of acknowledging the mystery and grace that at the same time she has “not plummeted.” Poetry deals with that which we cannot fully grasp, leaving room for two seemingly opposed realities to coexist. As Enda McDonagh writes, prayer is ““awareness of and response to the ultimate reality we call God,”” while poetry is ““the formal and concentrated and above all beautiful human expression of the reality, including the tragic reality, of this world.””<sup>18</sup> Prayer may be a response to mystery, but poetry (which may well be offered in the form of a prayer!) gives expression to it.

### **Writing as Revelation**

The beauty of writing is that through it, “we learn from our very attempt to express what we thought we knew, for the words we use are older and wiser than we are. Embodied in the mysterious gift of language, our thoughts are reflected back to us in a way that reveals truths that were, until the moment of composition, hidden from us.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, in writing poetry as a spiritual discipline, we may find ourselves encountering truths about God and ourselves that we otherwise would not have seen. Moreover, “the practice of the arts in cultivating faith formation can provide opportunities for self-reflection, self-awareness, awareness of others, and the otherness of God.”<sup>20</sup> We can see this, for example, in Donna Owens’ reflection on her experience with arts-integrated spiritual practice, as she engaged in “daily meditations on the Psalms in words and images as spiritual practice by reading a Psalm, creating a mandala, and then writing a poetic response.”<sup>21</sup> Owens reflects that through this discipline, “daily happenings, interactions,

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<sup>18</sup> Lonsdale quoting from Enda McDonagh’s book *The Gracing of Society*, 35.

<sup>19</sup> Malcolm Guite, “Through Literature: Christ and the Redemption of Language.” *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts*, ed. Jeremy Begbie (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 32-33.

<sup>20</sup> Williams, “Perceptions,” 156.

<sup>21</sup> Donna C. Owens, “Meditations on the Psalms in Words and Images: An Arts-Integrated Spiritual Practice,” *Journal of Poetry Therapy* 30, no. 4 (October 2, 2017), 228.

and observations found their way into my words and images, in what I perceive as a more mature and integrated response.”<sup>22</sup> Poetry helped to intensify her awareness of her daily life and respond in light of the poetry she both read and wrote.

There are many forms of expression that can be found in poetry, as we can see throughout the Psalms of the Old Testament, which express joy, lament, and praise – often all within one Psalm. Biblical lament is a particularly powerful form of poetic writing, as demonstrated through an empirical study conducted with Zulu women “who had experienced the trauma of sexual abuse [and] learned to use the model of biblical laments to compose and perform their own poems.”<sup>23</sup> The results of this study showed that,

if abused (or traumatized) women are given the opportunity to compose their own poems of lament, the very act of being able to describe what happened from their perspective is affirming of their dignity, intelligence, personhood and individuality. For many, it is like “discovering a new world” (Ntsimane 2008, p. 121). Second, handing over the unjust situation to God’s retribution enables sufferers to move forward, with a sense that justice will be done. And third, their remembrance of truths about God (e.g., God is my rock and my protection) also gives them hope for the future.<sup>24</sup>

Writing lament poems allowed these women to voice their honest prayers to God, affirming their personhood, and directing their trust and hope into the hands of God. One participant’s lament response, shown below, offered her the chance to assert her agency and “her right to justice,” bringing “her complaints to God” and acknowledging “positive things she knows about God.”<sup>25</sup>

Why me?  
What have I done to deserve this?  
What have I done to be rejected by you, Lord?  
Why have you turned your back on me?  
Why let my enemies celebrate my fall?  
Why can’t you show them your power?

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<sup>22</sup> Owens, "Meditations," 229.

<sup>23</sup> June F. Dickie, “Lament as a Contributor to the Healing of Trauma: An Application of Poetry in the Form of Biblical Lament,” *Pastoral Psychology* 68, no. 2 (April 1, 2019), 145.

<sup>24</sup> Dickie, "Lament," 154. This quote also draws from the book, *Oral history in a wounded country. Interactive interviewing in South Africa*, in R. Ntsimane’s chapter, “‘Why should I tell my story?’ Culture and gender in oral history.”

<sup>25</sup> Dickie, "Lament," 153.

Lord Almighty, I know you're a living God. You make things happen.  
Prove it to them.  
I will forever raise your name.<sup>26</sup>

By uniting poetry and prayer, the practice of Biblical lament can give powerful voice to our sufferings and help us to move towards hope.

### **Conclusion**

As Jesuit priest Karl Rahner writes, “if human persons are attuned to the word of poetry, then they also have the capacity to hear the word of God’s self-revelation.”<sup>27</sup> Poetry, like prayer, calls us to pay attention: to ourselves, to the world around us, and to God. It gives us the space to hear these words of “God’s self-revelation” and to grow in our understanding and acceptance of the mysteries of our daily lives. It allows us to be honest – with ourselves, with God, and with our communities – about our questions and about the suffering, disillusionment, and disorientation we have faced in our own lives and witnessed in the world around us. It offers us a space through which we can take ownership of our stories and declare what we know to be true: that Christ has died, Christ is risen, and Christ will come again.

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<sup>26</sup> Dickie, 153.

<sup>27</sup> Lonsdale drawing from Rahner’s “Poetry and the Christian” in “Poetry and Prayer,” 32.



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Poetry as an art form predates written text. The earliest poetry is believed to have been recited or sung, employed as a way of remembering oral history, genealogy, and law. Poetry is often closely related to musical traditions, and the earliest poetry exists in the form of hymns (such as the work of Sumerian priestess Enheduanna), and other types of song such as chants. As such poetry is a verbal art. Many of the poems surviving from the ancient world are recorded prayers, or stories about religious English poetry and prose burst into sudden glory in the late 1570s. A decisive shift of taste toward a fluent artistry self-consciously displaying its own grace and sophistication was announced in the works of Spenser and Sidney. It was accompanied by an upsurge in literary production that came to fruition in the 1590s and 1600s, two decades of astonishing productivity by writers of every persuasion and calibre. The groundwork was laid in the 30 years from 1550, a period of slowly increasing confidence in the literary competence of the language and tremendous advances in education, which for t Another characteristic of the poetry of prayer, as by now the reader will have guessed, is sublimity. We do not confine ourselves to words or to rhetorical devices we would use while ordering a sandwich or talking to the next door neighbor. Why do I make a point of this? Isn't the meaning of the prayer the same, regardless of the form? Well, no, it isn't for we are not talking about abstract answers to a math problem, but the minds and hearts of real people of flesh and blood, and those people are made to be moved by beauty. When you are translating the poetry of prayer from one language into Now, his poetry is still poetic, so to speak, but it was a shift from poetry as a formal, structured poetics to something more common and emotive. He wanted to explore how ordinary events and feelings could be understood in extraordinary ways. Such is the accessibility of poetry and such would be the accessibility of Wordsworth's subject matter: common life and language. Lastly, Wordsworth's theory about writing poetry is often summed up as writing from the spontaneous overflow of emotion reflected in tranquility. The poet should contemplate the simple things, nature or rural life, but he should allow himself to be emotionally affected by the deep significance of such things The conformist aspect of poetic language, of which archaism is an important part, is what we normally read into the adjective 'poetical', if we want to use that adjective in a slightly derogatory way. Gray reflected the assumptions of the age when he wrote (in a letter to Richard West, quoted at the beginning of this chapter): 'Our poetry has a language peculiar to itself; to which almost every one that has written, has added something by enriching it with foreign idioms and derivatives: Nay, sometimes words of their own composition or invention'. The poetic diction of the Augustan age was also noted for favourite expressions such as watery store, fleecy care, feather'd race.<sup>9</sup> These are periphrases for 'sea', 'sheep', and 'birds' respectively.