

FALL 2022



# AD FONTES

A JOURNAL OF PROTESTANT LETTERS

**COLIN CHAN REDEMER**

*Eliot in Evangelical Americana*

---

**PHILLIP J. DONNELLY**

*Grammars of Grace: Dante's Poetics of Sanctification*

---

**RICHARD RANKIN RUSSELL**

*Shakeshafte & Other Plays* by Rowan Williams

---

*Also featuring poetry from James Matthew Wilson, Rhys Lavery on The Waste Land, and more.*

---

# Table of Contents

---

- 1 FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK**  
Rhys Lavery
  
- 3 VOTARIES: THE TRADITION OF THE BLUE FLOWER IN NOVALIS, MACDONALD, LEWIS, AND ROBINSON**  
by Hannah Hubin
  
- 10 ELIOT IN EVANGELICAL AMERICANA**  
by Colin Chan Redemer
  
- 16 THE HEART WOULD MAKE ITSELF KNOWN**  
by James Matthew Wilson
  
- 17 GRAMMARS OF GRACE: DANTE'S POETICS OF SANCTIFICATION**  
by Phillip J. Donnelly
  
- 22 AND NOW, COMEDY: A LITERARY-BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION OF CHURCH HISTORY**  
by Andrew Messmer
  
- 30 LAST RIDE OF THE ROSE NOSE**  
by Oliver Brauning
  
- 31 SHAKESHAFTE & OTHER PLAYS BY ROWAN WILLIAMS**  
Reviewed by Richard Rankin Russell
  
- 34 THE FLOWERS OF EVIL BY CHARLES BAUDELAIRE, TRANSLATED BY AARON POOCHIGAN**  
Reviewed by J.C. Scharl
  
- 38 "AND PAIN WILL BE THE THING THAT SAVES US"**  
by Tom C. Huntley
  
- 39 THE WASTE LAND: A BIOGRAPHY OF A POEM BY MATTHEW HOLLIS**  
Reviewed by Rhys Lavery

## About

---

**AD FONTES IS A QUARTERLY JOURNAL PUBLISHED BY THE DAVENANT INSTITUTE.**

Ad fontes, "to the sources," was a rallying cry of the Reformation. The Reformers bequeathed to us a heritage, rooted in the Scriptures and their wide-ranging humanistic studies, which sought to address the hard questions of theology, philosophy, and culture in a way that was true to the revelation of God's word and God's world. *Ad Fontes* channels this ethos into a modern context, seeking to explore our questions alongside the great cloud of witnesses and the many exemplars who have gone before us.

**ADFONTESJOURNAL.COM**

info@adfontesjournal.com  
PO Box 358, Landrum, SC 29356

**SENIOR EDITOR:** Rhys Lavery  
**ASSISTANT EDITOR:** Michael Riggins  
**POETRY EDITOR:** Colin Redemer  
**EDITOR-AT-LARGE:** Onsi Kamel  
**PROOFREADER:** Michael Jones

# From the Editor's Desk

What is a properly Christian understanding of literature?

A finicky question to ask, at first glance. The benefit of literature to the soul is obvious, surely—our sermons are replete with illustrations taken from great novels (all too often Jean Valjean and those candlesticks).

But watch out: answering the question in this way is a classic move made in the dialogues of Plato by the sophists—those itinerant polymaths in ancient Greece who sure *sounded* wise, but became somewhat evasive when you tried to get them to really define the important terms which they invoked so freely. When asked a fundamental question (say, “what is beauty?”), the question discussed in Plato’s *Greater Hippias*), rather than seek to answer principally, the sophist gestures at some apparently obvious examples (“a beautiful girl—that’s what beauty is!”), and attempts to embarrass his questioner for even asking, before moving on in a shower of laughter and applause without having actually answered the question. Providing a Christian *account* of literature requires more than simply pointing to Christian *uses* of literature.

A few stronger answers often rear their heads: “empathy” is perhaps the most in vogue at the moment. Yet the promise of fiction-induced empathy is often illusory, as Augustine well knew, who, in the *Confessions*, saw the perversity of weeping over the wanderings of Aeneas whilst lacking contrition over the wanderings of his own soul. To modernize: cosyng into the relationships of *The Office* while failing to maintain your own once-close friendships in your mid-30s is perilous to your very soul. And yet this is how our entertainment saturated age goes: our stories frame reality to such an extent that they *become* our reality, for there is no greater framework of meaning in which to place them, in no small part because our real life bonds of fellowship have dissolved. The world becomes navigable only by shared literary references, and we come to navigate it only alongside those who get said references: every reaction is a GIF, every politician is Voldemort, the point of movies is memes and the point of memes is twaddle. If fiction’s chief benefit is empathy, we should be the most empathetic epoch in history—but open up your Twitter feed and see if that’s the case. Of course, in some ways we are. Joe Rigney has spoken convincingly of empathy as a besetting sin of

our time, overriding Christian concerns for truth and other such stones in the shoe. And yet, powerful as our intemperate empathy can be, it is highly selective. Not all are deemed worthy of it.

Earlier this year, The Davenant Press published a new edition of *Serious Comedy* by Patrick Downey—a masterful overview of tragic and comic writing in the Western tradition. All cultures, Downey says, “live out of their stories,” and the stories out of which we live (following Aristotle) are tragedies, since they are a sufficiently serious thing on which to build a life—and therefore cannot afford to be mocked. By contrast, Plato, although a masterful writer, saw writing as basically playful—*life* is the serious thing, not literature. And yet, paradoxically, Plato knew we could never escape the need for myths and stories, which appear time and time again at some of the most important moments of his dialogues.

Downey posits that it is only in light of Scripture—serious enough to build a life on, yet comic enough to promise us that life in everlasting measure—that all other writing can be set in its proper place. Christians know that The Author has entered the story, and told us in his own words how it will end. We know that no human writing, then, lays hold of the whole of Reality, and so none of it demands to be taken with *deadly* seriousness. And yet we know that there *is* a Reality to be grasped, and so we may recognize a writer’s apprehension of the part even if he misses the whole. Any

properly Christian account of literature must surely begin here: the attempted grasp of reality.

By accident rather than design, this Fall 2022 issue of *Ad Fontes* has taken a literary focus: Hannah Hubin introduces us to an overlooked influence shared by our greatest modern Christian writers; Phillip J. Donnelly considers how Reformed Christians might beneficially read Dante; Andrew Messmer illuminates how different eras of church history correspond to different literary genres. This autumn marks the centenary of T.S. Eliot’s masterwork *The Waste Land*, and so we have given both an essay (from Colin Chan Redemer) and a review (from myself) over to this poem, penned by one of the greatest poets—and greatest *Christian* poets—in history. We also have reviews of the collected plays of Archbishop Rowan Williams, and a new translation of Baudelaire, alongside a varied selection of original poetry from James Matthew Wilson, Oliver Brauning, and Tom C. Huntley.

These essays, reviews, and poetry are no concerted effort to answer my opening question. Yet each perhaps evidences what we’ve begun to tease out here: that man cannot help but reach out to grasp reality—and, more often than not, that grasping ends up becoming what we call literature.

Rhys Laverty  
Senior Editor  
October 2022



DAVENANT  
HALL

## Reimagining Theological Education

Are you a pastor, student, educator, or layperson looking to go deeper into Christian wisdom? Check out our termly classes and two degree programs, starting from just \$149 per course.

[DAVENANTHALL.COM](http://DAVENANTHALL.COM)

## ESSAYS

# Votaries: The Blue Flower in Novalis, MacDonald, Lewis, and Robinson

HANNAH HUBIN

*'It is not the treasures,' said he to himself, 'that have awakened in me such unutterable longings. Far from me is all avarice; but I long to behold the blue flower. It is constantly in my mind, and I can think and compose of nothing else. I have never been in such a mood. It seems as if I had hitherto been dreaming, or slumbering into another world; for in the world, in which hitherto I have lived, who would trouble himself about a flower?'<sup>1</sup>*

Georg Philipp Friedrich Freiherr von Hardenberg, better known by his pen name Novalis, passed away on March 25th 1801, aged twenty-eight, leaving behind the unfinished novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*. Novalis was a German Romantic poet, author, and philosopher. Whilst familiar to scholars and the very well-read, he remains fairly little known—and yet his great unfinished novel has been a profound (albeit similarly lit-

tle known) influence on some of the greatest Christian storytellers of the last century and half. Novalis was a literary gardener, planting the image of “the blue flower,” and along with it the Germanic concept of *sehnsucht*, in the collective imagination. From the unfinished story of Heinrich came a tradition of description—a way of explaining desire and longing passed down from one writer to another, making its way from Novalis in Electoral Saxony in the late 1700s, through George MacDonald and C.S. Lewis in nineteenth and twentieth century Britain, to Marilynne Robinson in Iowa in 1980. A fresh look at the writings of these literary luminaries allows us to trace the tradition of the blue flower and *sehnsucht* from Romantic poetry to the modern novel, demonstrating how Novalis’s concept lends image and shape to a recurrent theme in the work of all three: “a longing of a kind that possession”—in this world—does “nothing to mitigate.”<sup>2</sup>

1. Friedrich von Hardenberg, *Henry of Ofterdingen: A Romance*, version by Project Gutenberg (Cambridge: John Owen, 1842), <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/31873/31873-h/31873-h.htm>.

2. Marilynne Robinson, *Housekeeping* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 12.

LOVE IS NO LONGER MERELY PRACTICED AND PURSUED; IT IS FINALLY GRASPED, FULLY KNOWN, FACE TO FACE. THE LONGING THAT IS THE BLUE FLOWER IS THE LONGING FOR PERFECTION—FOR THE LAST FULLNESS OF THINGS.

### I: NOVALIS

[The Blue Flower] is the fundamental motif of all writings of Novalis. [U]sing [the flower's] own image metaphorically, we might describe the role of the Blue Flower in Novalis' works as follows: The motif of the Blue Flower slumbers as a *seed* within the early writings of the fragmentary thought: it *blossoms* within the tales, hymns and songs, and it ultimately *matures as fruit* in *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*.<sup>3</sup>

The story opens with the protagonist Heinrich, at home with his parents, sleeping. When Heinrich first encounters the flower—one that “bears the face of his unknown beloved”—it comes to him as a dream.<sup>4</sup> He beholds a field with a variety of flowers, yet “what most attracted his notice, was a tall, light-blue flower, which stood nearest the fountain, and touched it with its broad, glossy leaves. Around it grew numberless flowers of varied hue, filling the air with the richest perfume. But he saw the blue flower alone, and gazed long upon it with inexpressible tenderness.”<sup>5</sup> Here, his mother wakes him, ending the dream. In discussing the dream with others, he is told both that “dreams are froth, let the learned think what they will of them... you will do well to turn your attention from such useless and hurtful speculations” and also to “take notice particularly of a little blue flower, which you will find above here; pluck it, and commit yourself humbly to heavenly guidance.”<sup>6</sup> The remainder of the unfinished novel tells of how Heinrich chooses the second path and not the first, pursuing the blue flower for the rest of his days.

3. Frederick Hiebel, “The Blue Flower” in *Novalis: German Poet—European Thinker—Christian Mystic*, 111-18 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1954), accessed May 8, 2021, [http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469657554\\_hiebel.24](http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5149/9781469657554_hiebel.24), 117.

4. Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael William Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Rodney Livingstone, and Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2008), 238.

5. von Hardenberg, *Henry of Ofterdingen*.

6. von Hardenberg, *Henry of Ofterdingen*.

Austrian writer Frederick Hiebel (1903-1989) explains that “both, love and religion, are the ‘flowers’ of the supernatural world that help, in a higher sense, to awaken us.”<sup>7</sup> It is this awakening desire that Heinrich pursues to the close of the story. This is the desire for virtue (the practice of love) and for the *telos* or end of all virtue (God himself, who is love). Although the book was never completed, a few lines preserved from the end of Novalis’s notes explain that Heinrich eventually finds and picks the Blue Flower, and through it, turns from stone into Man (capital M).<sup>8</sup> Hiebel writes, “The picking of the Blue Flower thus is not the attainment of a treasure, but the experience of change into a higher order of man. This change is the birth of the perfected man... Whoever possesses it attains happiness and wisdom. In the legendary sense, however, happiness and wisdom do not mean wealth and learning, but rather true humanity.”<sup>9</sup> Love is no longer merely practiced and pursued; it is finally grasped, fully known, face to face. The longing that is the blue flower is the longing for perfection—for the last fullness of things.

It is with the concept of fullness that the novel would have ended. According to one of the characters towards the close of the story, “The dream is World, the World is Dream.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, the dream that Heinrich receives becomes the real world, and the seemingly real world to which he awakes is less true than his dream. What began as faint and seemingly falsified at the beginning of the novel is the entire reality as the story continues—just as what looks like a reflection, as in a mirror, becomes the true image in 1 Corinthians 13. This is to say “that the world of fable has become reality, that it is an enhanced dream, and that this dream be-

7. Hiebel, “The Blue Flower,” 116.

8. Hiebel, “The Blue Flower,” 116.

9. Hiebel, “The Blue Flower,” 116-117.

10. Quoted in Hiebel, “The Blue Flower,” 113.

comes an enhanced world... ‘The dream is World, the World is Dream.’ The dream of the Blue Flower, at the outset of the first part of the novel, becomes the world of the tale told at its very end.”<sup>11</sup> In other words, for Heinrich, as for Novalis, desire is verified, and the true and full longing of the dream is more real in the end than the first waking world.

**THIS RESPECT FOR DREAM, FAIRY,  
AND FANTASY STORY PASSED FROM  
NOVALIS THROUGH MACDONALD  
TO C.S. LEWIS, J.R.R. TOLKIEN, AND  
OTHERS—AUTHORS AND POETS  
WE RECOGNIZE SPECIFICALLY FOR  
THEIR LOVE OF DREAM.**

## II: GEORGE MACDONALD

In 1842, the Scottish novelist George MacDonald discovered the works of Novalis through German translation projects. According to William Raeper, “The life and thought of Novalis so gripped MacDonald that he returned to him again and again, finding some deep affinity in the spiritual, sad and simple poetry of the afflicted German.”<sup>12</sup> Yet the inheritance of ideas Novalis passed down to MacDonald did not merely leave a mark on MacDonald’s writing; in many ways, it *was* MacDonald’s writing. Michael J. Partridge explains,

Novalis’ novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* was the story of a journey and the search for a mysterious blue flower. It was a symbolic parable (‘Erziehungsroman’) that, in many ways, prefigured *Phantastes* and *Lilith*. Representing in dramatic form a step by step ascent and deliverance from the bonds of this earthly life. However, with MacDonald the quest was an inward one. Like MacDonald’s Scottish novels it was also deliberately set in a removed but recognizable past.<sup>13</sup>

11. Hiebel “The Blue Flower,” 113.

12. Quoted in Michael J. Partridge, “George MacDonald & Novalis,” *The Golden Key* (The George MacDonald Society, 2014), <http://www.george-macdonald.com/resources1/novalis.html>.

13. Partridge, “George MacDonald & Novalis.”

One of the most significant elements of Novalis’s writing for MacDonald was the validity of the dream. “MacDonald prefaced *Phantastes* with some quotations from Novalis including, ‘A fairy story is like a disjointed dream-vision... nature itself...’. It was a dream exploring the hidden unconscious inner meaning of the soul.”<sup>14</sup> This respect for dream, fairy, and fantasy story passed from Novalis through MacDonald to C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, and others—authors and poets we recognize specifically for their love of dream. “One of MacDonald’s favourite sayings came from Novalis, ‘Our life is no dream; but it ought to become one, and perhaps will,’ which he quoted in *Phantastes*, *Lilith*, *The Portent* and elsewhere. Novalis also wrote, ‘We are closer to things invisible than to things visible.’ His belief was that the heart was the key to the world and life itself, and that all men and women were on a journey Homeward.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, for George MacDonald, all men are on a journey to the blue flower.

## III: C.S. LEWIS

“That night my imagination was, in a certain sense, baptized; the rest of me, not unnaturally, took longer. I had not the faintest notion what I had let myself in for by buying *Phantastes*.”<sup>16</sup> C.S. Lewis’s introduction to George MacDonald was itself a step along the path to the blue flower, for he writes after reading him that “all the confusions that had hitherto perplexed my search for Joy were disarmed.”<sup>17</sup> This search for joy was nothing less than a lifelong pursuit of the blue flower.

Lewis writes of his first Heinrich-like “dream” of the blue flower when he describes the view out of his nursery window. “[E]very day there were what we called ‘the Green Hills’; that is, the low line of the Castlereagh Hills which we saw from the nursery windows. They were not very far off but they were, to children, quite unattainable. They taught me longing – *Sehnsucht*; made me for good or ill, and before I was six years old, a votary

14. Partridge, “George MacDonald & Novalis.”

15. Partridge, “George MacDonald & Novalis.”

16. C.S. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy* (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 1955), 181.

17. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, 180.

of the Blue Flower.”<sup>18</sup> In claiming this devotion, Lewis joined the ranks of Novalis and MacDonald in his dedication to the blue flower—the longing, the dream that becomes reality in the end.

The Cambridge Dictionary defines this German *sehnsucht* as “longing” or “yearning”—the pursuit of the blue flower, a pursuit that became for Lewis at six years old a deeply religious one.<sup>19</sup> In his spiritual autobiography *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis describes his pursuit as “an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. I call it Joy. . . [I]t might almost equally be called a particular kind of unhappiness or grief. But then it is a kind we want.”<sup>20</sup>

**THE LIFE OF THE VOTARY IS NOT A Gnostic ONE; INSTEAD, FOR LEWIS IT IS THE BEAUTY OF THE PHYSICAL, TANGIBLE WORLD THAT EVOKES THE BEAUTY OF THE BLUE FLOWER, LEAVING HIM JOYFUL—AND STILL WANTING.**

The idea of Joy is integral to the blue flower for Lewis. As he writes in *Till We Have Faces*, “It was when I was happiest that I longed most.”<sup>21</sup> It is in experiencing Joy in the world that he was most drawn away by a desirable dissatisfaction. In other words, it was through reality that he encountered Heinrich’s dream that would become the world. He describes the blue flower as “that unnamable something, desire for which pierces us like a rapier at the smell of a bonfire, the sound of wild ducks flying overhead, the title of *The Well and the World’s End*, the opening lines of *Kubla Khan*, the morning cobwebs in late summer, or the noise of falling waves.”<sup>22</sup> The life of the votary is not a gnostic one; instead, for Lewis it

is the beauty of the physical, tangible world that evokes the beauty of the blue flower, leaving him joyful—and still wanting. To possess the physical, tangible world is not to possess the blue flower—it is only to possess the desire, however delightful, for it.

That desire for the flower is the desire of a homesick man for his own country. As Lewis famously writes in *Mere Christianity*,

If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world. If none of my earthly pleasures satisfy it, that does not prove that the universe is a fraud. Probably earthly pleasures were never meant to satisfy it, but only to arouse it, to suggest the real thing. If that is so, I must take care, on the one hand, never to despise, or to be unthankful for, these earthly blessings, and on the other, never to mistake them for the something else of which they are only a kind of copy, or echo, or mirage. I must keep alive in myself the desire for my true country, which I shall not find till after death; I must never let it get snowed under or turned aside; I must make it the main object of life to press on to that country and to help others to do the same.<sup>23</sup>

Elsewhere, Lewis describes this pressing on as pursuing the bright shadow of holiness.<sup>24</sup> It is the long work of receiving the Joy granted to him and, through this, keeping his vision steadily upon the Joy of the world it promises. This means neither ignoring the Joy nor idolizing it but keeping the continual tension holy men must hold.

On the one hand, Lewis was not one to despise “blue flower moments” for not fulfilling him *in* the moment. The life of the votary is not devoted to a mirage. For Lewis, “Joy was not a deception. Its visitations were rather the moments of clearest consciousness we had, when we became aware of our fragmentary and phantasmal nature and ached for that impossible reunion which would annihilate us or that self-contradictory waking which would reveal, not that we had had, but

18. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, 7.

19. Cambridge Dictionary Online, s.v. “sehnsucht,” accessed April 4, 2022, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/german-english/sehnsucht>.

20. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, 17–18.

21. C.S. Lewis, *Till We Have Faces* (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 1956), 74.

22. C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim’s Regress*, version by Faded Page eBook #20150649, 3rd ed., 1933, file:///C:/Users/eucat/Downloads/20150649-a5.pdf, 9.

23. C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co, Inc, 1943), 120.

24. Lewis, *Surprised By Joy*, 179.

that we *were*, a dream.”<sup>25</sup> Like both Novalis and MacDonald, Lewis’ pursuit of the blue flower led him to an understanding of the present life as a dream and the coming glory as the true waking.

At the same time, Lewis was not to mistake the moment of *sehnsucht* for the moment of picking the blue flower at the end of the story. As he ends his spiritual autobiography, he writes,

[Joy] was valuable only as a pointer to something other and outer. While that other was in doubt, the pointer naturally loomed large in my thoughts. When we are lost in the woods the sight of a signpost is a great matter. He who first sees it cries, ‘Look!’ The whole party gathers round and stares. But when we have found the road and are passing signposts every few miles, we shall not stop and stare. They will encourage us and we shall be grateful to the authority that set them up. But we shall not stop and stare, or not much; not on this road, though their pillars are of silver and their lettering of gold. ‘We would be at Jerusalem.’<sup>26</sup>

The bonfire, the ducks calling overhead, the fairy stories of MacDonald, Heinrich’s dream of the flower: these are all signposts pointing to the coming Jerusalem. They are markers, not the destination.

What, then, of the time before Jerusalem, when the dream is not yet world? Here again is a tension, for what-is-already and what-is-not-yet leave man with both blessing and burden. Lewis writes in the preface to the third edition of *The Pilgrim’s Regress*,

[T]hough the sense of want is acute and even painful, yet the mere wanting is felt to be somehow a delight. Other desires are felt as pleasures only if satisfaction is expected in the near future: hunger is pleasant only while we know (or believe) that we are soon going to eat. But this desire, even when there is no hope of possible satisfaction, continues to be prized, and even to be preferred to anything else in the world, by those who have once felt it. This hunger is better than any other fullness; this poverty better than all other wealth...For this

sweet Desire cuts across our ordinary distinctions between wanting and having. To have it is, by definition, a want: to want it, we find, is to have it.<sup>27</sup>

Unlike Heinrich, whose pursuit of the longing is fictionalized, Lewis never picked the blue flower—at least, not on this earth. Throughout his life, the blue flower remained just out of reach, possession always marked by desire.

#### IV: MARILYNNE ROBINSON

It is the blurred distinction between wanting and having that Marilynne Robinson engages in her novel *Housekeeping*. She writes of the protagonist’s grandmother Sylvie that, “When she had been married a little while, she concluded that love was half a longing of a kind that possession did nothing to mitigate.”<sup>28</sup> For little Heinrich, love (the height of all virtue) in this world is intrinsically connected to desire for something—or Someone—that cannot be possessed here. For Sylvie, as for Lewis, desire cuts across the ordinary distinctions.

Robinson describes how Sylvie’s husband gave her a pendant on which a circle of seahorses was painted. “It was the seahorses themselves that she wanted to see as soon as she took her eyes away, and that she wanted to see even when she was looking at them. The wanting never subsided until something—a quarrel, a visit—took her attention away. In the same way her daughters would touch her and watch her and follow her, for a while.”<sup>29</sup> Even when possessing the joy of the seahorses, Sylvie desires to possess them more. It is a delight that is a wanting, a wanting that is itself a delight, as Lewis attests. These seahorses serve in the novel as Lewis’ green hills, as Robinson’s own blue flower. For Novalis, MacDonald, and Lewis, present possession of beauty never mitigated the desire; rather, it intensified it. Until this dream becomes the world at the end, the dream will continue to break forth upon the world for those who live as votaries.

25. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 222.

26. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 238.

27. Lewis, *Surprised by Joy*, 7-8.

28. Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 12.

29. Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 12-13.

Robinson goes on to describe further the ideas of longing and need in her comparison of craving and having—reaching again for *sehnsucht*.

To crave and to have are as like as a thing and its shadow. For when does a berry break upon the tongue as sweetly as when one longs to taste it, and when is the taste refracted into so many hues and savors of ripeness and earth, and when do our senses know any thing so utterly as when we lack it? And here again is a foreshadowing—the world will be made whole. For to wish for a hand on one's hair is all but to feel it[...]Though we dream and hardly know it, longing, like an angel, fosters us, smooths our hair, and brings us wild strawberries.<sup>30</sup>

**FOR ROBINSON, AS FOR LEWIS, TO HAVE THE BEAUTY OF THIS WORLD IS TO CRAVE THE BEAUTY OF ANOTHER. MAN RIGHTLY DESIRES MORE BEAUTY FROM THE WORLD THAN THE BROKEN WORLD CAN LEND; HE IS SOMETIMES NEAREST TO THE TRUE THING WHEN HE WANTS IT, FOR HE DESIRES MORE FULLY THAN HE RECEIVES IN PART.**

For Robinson, as for Lewis, to have the beauty of this world is to crave the beauty of another. Man rightly desires more beauty from the world than the broken world can lend; he is sometimes nearest to the true thing when he wants it, for he desires more fully than he receives in part. Man knows joy best in the moments of blue flower longing, when he desires what he does not possess and knows most fully what is withheld from him. The thirst is better than all the world's slaking, for the thirst keeps us following the signposts.

The danger that must be noted here is in the potential of losing Lewis' tension—of either ignoring or idolizing thirst itself, the moments of longing. The berry breaking

upon the tongue must be a signpost to Jerusalem—significant, yet no city itself. The call to follow the flower is not a call to asceticism, nor worldly gain, but to seeking first the kingdom of heaven, believing that the true dream will be added unto us. For Robinson—as for Lewis, MacDonald, and Novalis—that dream is more real than reality. It is the ultimate reality—the foreshadowing of the redemption of the world, of the stone man becoming Man again. The dream is world, the world is dream, and it is in dreaming that man best knows the world. For Lewis, this life of dreaming is characterized by serving as a votary of the blue flower; for Robinson, it is characterized by being fostered by longing. Nevertheless, Robinson is the inheritress of the great tradition of Germanic poetry, of the images of longing passed down from poet to poet.

## V. OVERSLEEPING

Thus far, we have traced the tradition of the blue flower and *sehnsucht* from romantic poetry to the modern novel and seen how Novalis's concept lends image and shape to “a longing of a kind that possession”—in this world—does “nothing to mitigate.”<sup>31</sup> Yet every tradition meets resistance, especially in modernity. Walter Benjamin writes in his essay “Dream Kitsch,” “No one really dreams any longer of the Blue Flower. Whoever awakes as Heinrich von Ofterdingen today must have overslept.”<sup>32</sup> Romanticism is ever besieged by those who question the validity of the dream and the dreamer. The reasons for this are manifold; progressivism will always doubt the old philosophies, and modern thinking questions the substance of that which is not seen. There is nothing industrial about the blue flower, nothing economic. Instead, it is, as the poets have noted, a joy tinged with something of grief. It requires of its followers the acknowledgement that they are not fulfilled and cannot fulfill themselves.

To give oneself over as a votary to a dream is foolishness to the world. To believe that the dream will in the end *become* the world—with desire fulfilled and every stone man made man again—is as foolish as faith, because it

30. Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 152-153.

31. Robinson, *Housekeeping*, 12.

32. Benjamin, *The Work of Art*, 236.

**THERE IS NOTHING INDUSTRIAL ABOUT THE BLUE FLOWER, NOTHING ECONOMIC. INSTEAD, IT IS, AS THE POETS HAVE NOTED, A JOY TINGED WITH SOMETHING OF GRIEF. IT REQUIRES OF ITS FOLLOWERS THE ACKNOWLEDGEMENT THAT THEY ARE NOT FULFILLED AND CANNOT FULFILL THEMSELVES.**

is faith. By faith Novalis told of the boy who followed the blue flower of his dream and committed himself to heavenly guidance. By faith MacDonald followed the boy, writing and retelling his own series of dreams for the sake of the world he believed would come. By faith Lewis followed MacDonald, preferring this unsatisfied desire beyond any satisfaction the earth could offer. By faith Robinson followed Lewis, trusting that the best possession is found in the craving for the blue flower and that, at the end of all desire, the world will be made whole.

Lewis describes this tradition of faith, writing of the role of *sehnsucht* in *The Pilgrim's Regress*:

It appeared to me therefore that if a man diligently followed this desire, pursuing the false objects until their falsity appeared and then resolutely abandoning them, he must come out at last into the clear knowledge that the human soul was made to enjoy some object that is never fully given—nay, cannot even be imagined as given—in our present mode of subjective and spatio-temporal experience. This Desire was, in the soul, as the Siege Perilous in Arthur's castle—the chair in which only one could sit. And if nature makes nothing in vain, the One who can sit in this chair must exist. I knew only too well how easily the longing accepts false objects and through what dark ways the pursuit of them leads us: but I also saw that the Desire itself contains the corrective of all these errors. The only fatal error was to pretend that you had passed from desire to fruition, when, in reality, you had found either nothing, or desire itself, or the satisfaction of some different desire. The dialectic of Desire, faithfully followed, would retrieve all mistakes, head you off from all false paths, and force you not to propound, but to live through, a sort of ontological proof. This lived dialectic, and the merely argued dialectic of my philosophical progress, seemed to have converged on one goal; accordingly I tried to put them both into

my allegory which thus became a defense of Romanticism (in my peculiar sense) as well as of Reason and Christianity.<sup>33</sup>

That which Novalis, MacDonald, Lewis, and Robinson defend in their devotion to the blue flower is nothing less than Christianity itself: the faith that every desire, in the end, will be fulfilled, that the world and all its beauty serve as signposts here, that the dream will become the world, and the world will be whole. We would be at Jerusalem.

Insofar as Christianity will always be under siege, so will the blue flower. As Heinrich asks at the beginning of *Heinrich von Ofterdingen*, “[I]n the world, in which hitherto I have lived, who would trouble himself about a flower?”<sup>34</sup> To live as these poets have done—as a votary wholly given—is to live wholly for another world. To dream of the blue flower is not to oversleep but to insist upon staying awake, keeping vigil through the night with confidence in the coming dawn.

*Hannah Hubin (B.A., New College Franklin) is a writer, poet, and lyricist. Her projects include All the Wrecked Light: A Lyrical Exposition of Psalm 90 and the online visual poetry project Brown Brink Eastward. Hubin teaches humanities, writing, and Latin just south of Nashville and is currently pursuing graduate studies in Biblical languages.*

33. C. S. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, 10.

34. von Hardenberg, *Henry of Ofterdingen*.

# Eliot in Evangelical Americana

COLIN CHAN REDEMER

*“Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent: Σιβυλλα τι θελεις; respondebat illa: αποθανειν θελω.”*

*For I myself once saw the Cumean Sibyll with my own eyes, hanging in a jar, and when those boys asked, “Sibyl, what do you want?” she answered, “I want to die.”*

T.S. Eliot once wrote that “if the word ‘inspiration’ is to have any meaning, it must mean just this, that the speaker or writer is uttering something which he does not wholly understand—or which he may even misinterpret when the inspiration has departed from him.”<sup>1</sup> In this he was close to Plato, who in his *Apology* exaggerates the point. Upon inquiring with the poets about the meaning of their most important works it turned out, “almost all the bystanders might have explained the poems better than their authors.”<sup>2</sup> From this he concludes that poets are inspired by Muses—which is to

say that understanding exists in the mind of the god, not the poet who merely writes. While these sound like harsh words, we should keep in mind that Eliot and Plato (both poets themselves, after all) agree that the poets write with inspiration, something many wish could be said of the contemporary (to say nothing of the Christian) art scene. If inspiration leaves us, what is left for Christian artists to do?

In my twenty-second year I helped lead a ministry which received an invitation to attend a “Christianity and the Arts” event. Invitations had gone out to all the local ministries, and with a wide enough net that it was sure to draw a crowd. “The Arts” calls to mind the greats—Michelangelo, Bernini, Rodin, or perhaps Da Vinci, Rembrandt, Constable, or Bach, Chopin. Each age and culture touched by Christ seems to produce art which is brilliant and vibrating with the divine music of the heavens. Yet what, in the early 2000s, in the United States of America, among evangelicals, could this question mean? What are we even capable of bringing forth?

They fit us in towards the beginning, just after the opening act which was a duet singing some version of

1. T.S. Eliot, “Virgil and the Christian World,” *The Sewanee Review* (Winter 1953), 3.

2. Plato, *Apology*, trans. G.M.A. Graube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1997), line 22b-c.

“Awake My Soul,” the arrangement of which is lost to my memory, but rest assured this long predated both Mumford and Sons’ bluegrass rendition and Hillsong’s Coldplay-esque riff on the rock opera. But already, by looking over the lineup, there was more than a hint of what “art” meant in this community and this moment. Art was something made by others which was reproduced for an audience. The others, the makers of art, were professionals out there, not members of the community. One need not be a follower of Walter Benjamin to note that this is a primary feature of art today. Jacques Barzun said that, aided by media and technology, we no longer need to make art, nor do we need to go to it—art now comes to us.<sup>3</sup> The ability to now present and represent the masterpieces of Art to the public coincided with the determination that Art was something other than the doings of the people themselves. It wasn’t created by the community; it was something we imitated, albeit with lower production value.

**EVERY HUMAN MAKING PARTAKES OF  
POETRY IN THAT IT EXISTS BY EXTENSION  
OF THE HUMAN RATIONAL ABILITY. THE  
STAGE CRAFTER MUST DESCRIBE THE  
STAGE HE CRAFTS, AT LEAST TO HIMSELF,  
JUST AS MUCH AS THE SCULPTOR  
MUST ASK HERSELF “WHAT SHAPE AM I  
UNCOVERING IN THE STONE?”**

Now keep in mind, the college ministry I helped lead was deeply unorthodox. Not in terms of theological positions—we tried to hew closely to the Bible and to the Creed—but in terms of strategy. While most ministries were handing out cookies on the quad and inviting freshmen to have punch in the dorm, and the occasional “cool kids” Christian club was inviting students to have moderate quantities of beer and talk about Jesus at frat parties, we eschewed both and handed out soap,

which we had made from scratch and which had been stamped with our email address. When asked why we did this we explained “freshmen tend to need a shower,” and then we invited them to come make more soap with us. We would require that they donned appropriate eye protection and then we’d study Leviticus together while we waited for the sodium hydroxide to saponify the castor oil. We took risks and attracted risk takers in return. Often of the sort who were interested in the Gospel but not particularly interested in thinly veiled group therapy sessions.

Art comes in various forms. These forms vary. The variance is so great, at times, that it isn’t clear what the relation between the various arts is. We take it for granted that portraiture and the symphonic composition are both “arts.” It is worth pausing to ask what unites these activities along with dance, sculpting, mosaic, song, and the rest. Turning to the Greeks we find a helpful start. *Ποίησις*, or *poesis*, is a poem or a creation, a fabrication or a production. This expansive definition has often been summarized by saying *poesis* means “making.” W.H. Auden disagreed, however, insisting that a “poem” was not just any making but a making with words. He can be forgiven for being flinty on the point. Artists tend to love their own creations as parents do their children. However, there is something particular about *poesis* as poetry. Every human making partakes of poetry in that it exists by extension of the human rational ability. The stage crafter must describe the stage he crafts, at least to himself, just as much as the sculptor must ask herself “what shape am I uncovering in the stone?” Our minds work by reflection on reality, and that reflection is bound up in language; it is a conversation from the self to the self about what we have sensed. This contemplative process is properly philosophical, but we are not just minds passively observing the ether. We are embodied; we find ourselves thrust into time, and time means change. To have a body—to have a rational mind in a body—to be in time and change, this is the human condition. *Poesis*, art, is the human response to the inter-related realities of our human condition. And art begins with words, even when the words take form in motion, construction, vibration, or constriction. As active beings with the rational faculty we have no choice but to poetize into reality. In poetizing we speak into being even

3. Jacques Barzun, *The Use and Abuse of Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 8.

before we begin making—even if we never make it so. Words, languages—we must never forget that they are so much more than information.

One way to think about the ministry I was a part of would be to say we were a group of artists. We were Christians, and we knew something about art. Specifically the art of soap making. But, for a public presentation like this, something a bit grander was called for. And, unlikely team of artists that we were, we endeavored to rise to the challenge. There was Reid. Reid was an engineering student raised by Y2K preppers in the Arizona desert. He had soft eyes and a quiet, calm demeanor. In soap-making he had been indispensable at calculating the needed ingredients and ensuring safety protocols were followed. There was also Andy and Ian. Andy was a philosophy major by day, and a gamer by night. Andy could think on his feet, and could play the percussion well enough to make Stephen Hawking tap his foot. Ian was a high school student and a family friend. He had just come to town to check out the college for the week, but he could play the guitar and wasn't afraid to be put in the hot seat. Then there was crazy Michael. Libertarian eccentric and computer engineering student, he had a heart of gold and nerves of steel. His hobby was downhill longboarding at eye watering speeds with no helmet. Beyond them there were the various members of the ministry who volunteered as labor, and, of course, me. Once we knew we were going to present we knew we needed to come up with a plan. We knew that "Christianity and the Arts" was as like as not to produce what we would now call *cringe*. Those of us who dabbled in art knew that we did not have the technical abilities, taste, or proper formation to produce the kind of first rate art which we admired most. So as Auden put it in another context, we were left to ask "with caution and humor—given our time and place and talents, what, if our faith and love were perfect, would we be glad to find it obvious to do?"<sup>4</sup>

We settled on something long tried and true. Theft. Rather than write our own song or poem we would steal and remix the words of a great and scandalous poem.

4. Quoted in Roger Kimball, "The permanent Auden," *The New Criterion*, May 1999, <https://newcriterion.com/issues/1999/5/the-permanent-auden>.

*The Waste Land* by T.S. Eliot. I had been studying Eliot for my degree and had taken a shine to his early masterpiece with more than a tinge of sophomore self-satisfaction. It seemed, however, to be an ideal poem for a number of reasons. Not least of these was its structure. It begins in melancholy, as all who've read it remember ("April is the cruellest month..."), running right through to the end of the first part. It has a theatrical buildup in the middle portion and it ends in a crackling cacophonous catastrophe, which, in retrospect, can also be pleasantly funny, like an unexpected joke at a funeral. But another reason it was the ideal poem was the epigraph which I've included at the top of this essay. Eliot initially intended to have the epigraph to the poem be a selection from Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, but Ezra Pound convinced him this was not weighty enough for the aspirations of the poem. Eliot then settled on the current line from the *Satyricon* by Gaius Petronus. *Satyricon* is a play about the Cumaean Sibyll who was "blessed" with eternal life but forgot to ask for eternal youth. At the height of the play the main characters find her, now a shriveled old spider, and the only thing left to her is a death she longs for but cannot bring about. This was a fitting image in its time for the sterile decadence of imperial Roman paganism of the first century AD. And Eliot placed it there to make a shocking statement about the state, and possible fate, of Christian culture in modernity.

These qualities made it seem a suitable candidate to be staged. And Eliot's later conversion to Anglicanism (to say nothing of his conversion to English-ism) gave the poem enough cover to warrant its worth as something presentable in a "Christianity and the Arts" night. I put this idea, the idea that we could somehow stage a rendition of the poem, to Reid and the guys. Reid immediately saw the potential in it and got to work designing something for the setting, the mood. He also made a schedule to keep us all aware of what needed to be done to pull it off, what volunteers would be needed and when. Meanwhile Andy and Ian put their heads together for some Beatnik-esque music to which I would read the poem. All agreed and we got to work.

The morning to build the set came soon enough and volunteers were at Reid's yard in shorts and shirtsleeves.

In front of us were PVC pipe, chicken wire, used machine-flattened cardboard boxes, and palm fronds. There was also a small platform about three feet by three feet on four wheels. The stage, Reid informed us, was not going to be accessible to us until the moment we arrived, so we had to build whatever background we hoped for on this rolling platform so we could wheel it in when we got there, which means we'd only have about a minute between acts to get it set up and—as all artists but God have learned—we had to do our work inside the constraints we were given. All day we sweated in the sun building under Reid's direction. PVC pipe connected to PVC pipe with hot glue. Up went a long and narrow pyramid with four sides, the base just fitting on the three by three platform, each corner sending up a pipe that, over six feet off the ground, joined together with the others. Around these was wrapped chicken wire onto which we attached the cardboard. Another wrap of wire to hold that in place and then, from a ladder, several palm fronds were attached to the top of the construction. We had made, with considerable effort, a tree. I would be lying if I said it was beautiful, but it was a tree and we had made it and the shared effort we had put in, as a group, made it admirable to us. The event was the next day. We were ready.

Auden wrote that “behind the work of any creative artist there are three principal wishes: the wish to make something; the wish to perceive something, either in the external world of sense or the internal world of feeling; and the wish to communicate these perceptions to others.”<sup>5</sup> By this he meant that the products of art are intended to be reflected upon. They cast us back to our essential vocation as contemplative beings. This is part of why there is a close connection between the arts and worship, the arts and *liturgy*. The place that we worship in has to look *some* way. The ordained minister must wear *some* thing. The tones we use will be thus or thus and someone ought to consider what is fitting for the season that the congregation is in. We make in order to elicit proper responses in the breast of the audience—to enable and induce, but never to guarantee. Our making is also an act of self expression—a stating of our inner

world, to the best of our knowledge, into the external, shared world of space and time. In doing this we expose ourselves in a moment of vulnerability, but we also, if we are adept, expose something true in *general* which is to say something shared. Great art does this regularly; it is the source not just of reflection and awe, but also of critique. If art that critiques is less timeless than the art of the sublime that is not to say it is valueless. Critique is often required to reorient people to the sublime; critique can clear a path. Eliot put it this way: “a poet may believe that he is expressing only his private experience; his lines may be for him only a means of talking about himself without giving himself away; yet for his readers what he has written may come to be the expression both of their own secret feelings and of the exultation or despair of a generation.”<sup>6</sup>

What, given this, was our tree? What was the song Andy and Ian were cooking up? What was the remixed version of Eliot's masterpiece of modernism? Were they private statements about ourselves or were they more? And given that this art was aimed at performance, were they anything until they were put together on the stage as the unity each had been designed to be? I had not learned back then to even ask these questions and I do not now know the answer. But in spite of our having fallen short of the ideal, the night came.

I remember my palms sweating, and my heart thumping as we stood backstage. Each moment a fractile of agony which we had to endure. The preceding act seemed to take an eternity. The tell tale signs of stage fright bubbling up inside. What would people think of our odd creation? But then the word came and there was no time to wonder and the rush of events pulled us onto the stage. I walked out with Reid as two or three volunteers wheeled the tree forth, surprised at the effort it required of them. Reid said a few words about the tree as a symbol in Genesis and Revelation then bowed and walked off stage. Meanwhile Andy and Ian set up at the mics behind me with a guitar and a djumba. With Reid gone, there I stood, holding my dog eared copy of Eliot, waiting for the music to start.

5. W.H. Auden, *The Oxford Book of Light Verse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1938), vii.

6. Eliot, “Virgil and the Christian World,” 3.

Slowly a rhythmic melody began thrumming and a pleasant but quiet knocking came from the drum. I began to read.

The playbill for the night, for our portion of the presentation, read “When we look at trees, we see beautiful monuments of the glory of God. Not only are the trees pleasing to look at, but they also provide a habitat for other forms of life.” Our plan, so far as we had one, was for me to read three selections of the poem. Our desired effect was for the mostly evangelical (and mostly unreflectively bourgeois) audience to experience the force of Eliot’s poem as it had been experienced at its first publication in 1922. Conceived in the wake of World War I and spurred to completion by the death of his father, *The Waste Land* was nothing if not darkly controversial. Was it a bohemian bit of radical nonsense or was it a willful and high brow attempt to reassert conservative values in the face of the meaninglessness of all that modernity had wrought? Ranging as it did over several languages, voices, scenes, styles, and images, Eliot was never perfectly clear either in the poem or in its wake as to how it was intended or ought to be read. And, as an artist, he has a right not to say; in fact that might be the wisest position. However, over the course of a century the shocking and improper side of the poem has given way to its status as a quarry for ever more esoteric research into the arcana of which it is constructed and for pedants, often of the New Critics school, to conjure its “meaning” in terms that only those inducted into its mysteries can obtain. Simply worshipping Eliot and basking in a radiance that understands him is not necessarily the best response to him. Hart Crane, a poet and Eliot’s contemporary, responded by making poetry of his own that applied what he had learned and experienced in reading Eliot, while taking his own aim. Crane is not a man to be imitated in all things, but here he seemed correct to me and still does.

To recreate the effect of Eliot I had to surprise the audience and leave them wondering. In an effort to accomplish this, and to mimic his method, I mined his poem as he had mined the history and culture of the globe, but not for meaning, for *content*. It also made sense of the time constraints: presenters were given five minutes, conveniently, the amount of time it took to sing an

evangelical praise and worship song. Reading the whole of *The Waste Land* could take a half-hour. I focused, then, on three selections. As the guitar and drum caught the rhythm I skipped the famous opening and began my reading eight lines in: “Summer surprised us, coming over the Starnbergersee...” and I read on, keeping pace with the music for about a minute until I arrived, nearly unbroken to the penultimate line of the second stanza, “Looking into the heart of light, the silence.” Here I paused and looked back at my accompaniment who abruptly stopped. We looked at one another silently. Then Ian began a few moments of slow guitar solo in the style of Django Reinhardt, punctuated, at its end, by a loud smack of the drum from Andy.

“DEATH BY WATER” I yelled holding one hand up as the guitar picked up pace, galloping now, the drum working to keep up. And nervous giggles and surprised shouts could be heard in the audience.

Norman Mailer, in his generally scathing review of *American Psycho*, wrote “Art may be needed now to provide us with just those fearful insights that the uneasy complacencies of our leaders do their best to avoid. It is art that has to take the leap into all the truths that our media society is insulated against. Since the stakes are higher, art may be more important to us now than ever before.”<sup>7</sup> Or as one wag on Twitter put it relative to algorithmically generated images: A.I. art is really art because people get mad at it. I don’t fully subscribe to this; art does more than shock, but it does also shock, and it does so particularly harshly to audiences and in ages that forget themselves. And this is a part of the prophetic function of art. Artists are not prophets in the proper sense; but both prophets and artists, when they are performing their task well, are inspired. Inspiration always shocks the one to whom it comes.

The gasps, giggles, and yells came because, as I began “Death by Water,” the fourth section of *The Waste Land* which is a mere ten lines and which I read as loudly as I could in full, the tree itself came crashing down across the stage. Just as “Phlebas the Phoenician” “forgot the cry of the gulls and the deep sea swell” so too

7. Norman Mailer, *Mind of an Outlaw: Selected Essays* (London: Random House, 2014), 438.

the audience had forgotten that an “Art Night” might actually contain *art*. Or at least an attempt at it. They had forgotten that while the tree is pleasing to look at, *they also provide a habitat for other forms of life*. And out from the fallen tree crawled crazy Michael, wearing a bee costume a size too small. He leapt onto the stage and danced in circles before bending down to return the tree to its standing position, right as I read “Consider Phlebas, who was once handsome and tall as you.” At the end of this section both I and the music paused again. The audience relaxed, feeling they must now be in on the joke. Michael and I looked at one another, the whole room silent, waiting for how we would end, or otherwise waiting for us to bow and walk off stage. I wondered, would there be applause for this odd performance? I nodded to Michael and, with all the gravitas I could muster while looking at a man dressed in a child’s fuzzy black and yellow bee costume, I read the title of Eliot’s final section, which deals with judgment.

“What the Thunder Said.” And Michael started to move, the music had stopped, but we weren’t done. “After the torchlight red on sweaty faces/After the frosty silence in the gardens/After the agony in stony places...” Reaching down, Michael pulled out the baseball bat which had been taped under the platform upon which the tree sat. As I read the word “agony” he pulled back and took his first swing, the music kicked back in as the tree fell, shattered; I read on, the music chaotically banging away, no longer rhythmic or beautiful. The nervous laughter was gone, as was the gasping—what was happening was simply unbelievable as Michael leapt onto the tree which lay on the ground. He looked like a WWE professional wrestler attempting to subdue a helpless victim. Bits of ripped cardboard went flying into the audience, and a piece of PVC pipe hit me too, as I finished reading the stanza. He stood, I stopped reading, and the music ended. We bowed, shook hands, and walked off stage.

The juvenilia of most men contains an element of the unruly. The wisdom of Paul to Timothy to “flee the evil desires of youth” takes time to sink in. I was no exception even if I did spend quite a bit of time trying to pursue the things of God. But the mermaids were still singing for me. I will never forget the young man who got on stage after us. He was billed to sing Point of

Grace’s 2001 hit “You Will Never Walk Alone.” He was trembling violently and (fittingly) he wasn’t alone. A sense of fear hung over the place as everyone, including me, wondered for the first time that night “what will happen next?”

This is a healthy response to decadence. Jaques Barzun wrote,

All that is meant by Decadence is ‘falling off.’ It implies in those who live in such a time no loss of energy or talent or moral sense. On the contrary, it is a very active time, full of deep concerns, but peculiarly restless, for it sees no clear lines of advance. The loss it faces is that of Possibility. The forms of art as of life seem exhausted, the stages of development have been run through. Institutions function painfully. Repetition and frustration are the intolerable result. Boredom and fatigue are great historical forces.<sup>8</sup>

Looking back, I will not claim to comment on the meaning of the event. But I will echo a theme I have noted in Eliot’s work. One proper response to decadence is the slap across the face. The wake up call. A culture that is static, and sterile, that refuses to present itself and instead merely represents itself is declaring in thousands of subtle ways “I want to die.” As believers in the risen Lord we are required to resist that impulse whenever we see it and as strenuously as possible. Death comes as a result of a curse. Christ descended, died, and rose, to break that curse. He died that we might have abundant life. And in life we live in hope and expectation and longing for newness, freshness, youth, vitality, vigor. We must stir up that longing, we must look ahead and train our eyes, our ears and our every bodily sense to the wonder of “what will happen next?”

I still consider it a question worth asking.

---

Colin Chan Redemer is Vice-President of *The Davenant Institute*, Poetry Editor of *Ad Fontes*, co-founder of *Davenant Hall*, and Adjunct Associate Professor at Saint Mary’s College of California.

8. Jacques Barzun, *Dawn to Decadence: 1500 to the Present: 500 Years of Western Cultural Life* (London: HarperCollins, 2000), xvi.

# The Heart Would Make Itself Known

BY JAMES MATTHEW WILSON

---

The heart, turned inward, cries out for a form,  
A shape, that's worthy of its mortal pulse,  
And finds the bodies that come back unwarm,  
Nothing to make another's breast convulse  
But just such props as gulls and sea and sky  
Or other things that almost seem to lie.

Grow silent. Study now and see what comes.  
Allow the dark to guide you like a palm  
Set firmly on the nape; to what it hums,  
Just listen. Do not try to speak. Sit calm.  
Perhaps such senseless stillness may impress  
On us the heart's desire for holiness.

But at that thought, a drum beats in your head,  
Bassoons and basses blow or pluck their strings,  
And visions summon up the rising dead  
Who wear their ragged clothes, who still wear rings  
Because the flesh is like the tarnished cup  
In which all sacred wine must be borne up.

The landscape painter, in a field of green,  
Will squiggle in the figure of a girl;  
However blurred, we know what those strokes mean:  
The human form, rather than light or pearl  
Or other precious vagaries, alone  
Can make the heart to other hearts be known.

## ESSAYS

# Grammars of Grace: Dante's Poetry of Sanctification

PHILLIP J. DONNELLY

The most obvious part of Dante's *Divine Comedy* to which a Reformed reader might respond skeptically is the *Purgatorio*. The setting of this middle third of Dante's epic is a location that most Protestants would say does not exist and which might seem, at best, a dangerous distraction or, at worst, a denial of God's grace. And yet the questions which the doctrine of purgatory aims to answer are questions to which Protestants nevertheless also presume answers. For example, if no Christian dies in a state of moral perfection, and yet without holiness no one can see the Lord (Heb. 12:14), how is a Christian, in the interval between death and the vision of God, made ready for that vision? A Protestant might suppose that this transformation happens in an atemporal instant of eternity rather than through the kind of temporal sequence that purgatory involves. If that is the case, however, then Dante's *Purgatorio* resembles instead the kind of sanctification process that Protestants understand to happen on *this* side of death. As a result,

the text offers profound spiritual benefit to Reformed believers seeking to grow in holiness here and now.

*The Divine Comedy* is not a dogmatic outline of what lies beyond death. Rather, each of its three narrative movements (canticles) offers a revelation to *living* readers about their present condition. The journey through hell in the *Inferno* reveals the true character of various vices as corruptions of the good for which humans are made. By contrast, *Purgatorio* reveals, through the ascent of Mount Purgatory, not simply the vices but a manner of responding to divine agency that makes growth in virtue possible—it shows how to go from vice to virtue. *Paradiso* reveals how humans participate in the vision of God in fulfillment of our highest powers and our greatest joy. *Purgatorio*, then, is arguably the most practical section of the poem for anyone interested in being set free from vice and growing in virtue.

## GRAMMARS OF GRACE AND SPIRITUAL READING

Canto 9 of *Purgatorio* describes how Dante the Pilgrim (the character rather than the author) is taken up to purgatory in a passive condition (i.e. asleep), transported by a character whose name means “light” (*Lucia*). Dante the poet thus depicts salvation as being only by grace through faith in Christ, the light. However, the Pilgrim’s ascent up Mount Purgatory, his growth in virtue, happens through response to this divine grace, embodying the relationship between what Protestants call justification and sanctification. Dante dramatizes the process of sanctification through what I call “grammars of grace”—that is, verbal modes of rendering (grammars) that draw attention to the dynamics of divine self-giving (grace). For Dante, such poetic practice is based on a vision of the unity of truth, goodness, and beauty found in Christ—a self-giving reality in which believers are called to participate. Dante’s dramatization works by drawing on the late-medieval practice of “spiritual reading” or “fourfold exegesis”—or what the theologian Bonaventure might have called “triune reading.” In order to show how such “grammars of grace” operate throughout Dante’s poem, this essay focuses on Canto 10 of *Purgatorio*. We shall first consider how the medieval practice of “spiritual reading” that Dante had inherited provides an analogy for the unity of truth, goodness, and beauty. Ultimately, I suggest that *Purgatorio* 10 dramatizes participation in that same unity in a manner that draws readers to participate in that self-giving reality.

Spiritual reading has its roots in the New Testament and in patristic writers like Augustine, but it was Gregory the Great (in his commentary on the book of Job) who arguably first articulated the principles that would become spiritual reading, or fourfold exegesis. By the time scholastics like Aquinas or Bonaventure were writing, they could assume four senses were at work in any given passage of Scripture: 1) a literal sense, 2) an allegorical (i.e. Christological) sense, 3) a moral sense, and 4) an anagogical (i.e. eschatological) sense.

These categories are worth briefly considering, as they are often misunderstood by modern readers. The confusion is due partly to the modern tendency to presume

that “literal” means “tangible.” By contrast, medieval writers used the word “literal” to indicate something more like the obvious “literary” or “grammatical” sense of a text. The literal sense could refer to historical actions when a narrative provides testimony about an event; however, the literal meaning of a parable would be its obvious teaching, not merely the tangible things to which it refers (e.g. a vineyard and its tenants). This is why Aquinas, for example, counted metaphor as part of the literal sense.

**THE DIVINE COMEDY IS NOT A DOGMATIC OUTLINE OF WHAT LIES BEYOND DEATH. RATHER, EACH OF ITS THREE NARRATIVE MOVEMENTS OFFERS A REVELATION TO LIVING READERS ABOUT THEIR PRESENT CONDITION.**

No less confusing, however, is the modern tendency to mistake the term “spiritual” as a synonym for “figurative” or “unreal.” In the tradition that Dante inherited, the spiritual sense indicated the eternal realities revealed through the literal sense of a given passage of scripture—those eternal realities could include the Christological, the moral, or the anagogical sense.

A third point of possible confusion is that medieval writers used the term “allegory” to indicate what Reformed biblical interpreters would call “typology”: that is, an interpretation of a given passage (whether Old or New Testament) in the light of Christ. In addition to the Christological sense of any given passage, there was also the moral interpretation—what a given passage reveals about how Christians should live. The final sense was called “anagogical” (from the Greek word for “leading up”)—referring to what a given passage reveals about the future realities of the New Creation. Reformed exegetes supposedly disavowed late-medieval “allegory,” but what they typically rejected was excessive allegorizing; in fact, they often continued to rely to some extent on typological interpretation and moral interpretation (often calling it all “literal”).

Thus, for medieval writers like Dante, “spiritual” does not mean “disembodied.” Just as the typological connections of allegorical interpretation are concerned with concrete particulars, so also moral interpretation concerns the embodied practice of virtues, and anagogical interpretation concerns the life of not simply souls but resurrected bodies as they participate in the vision of God. These three levels of interpretation are called “spiritual” not because they are abstract or disembodied; rather, they are called spiritual because they reveal the means by which the Spirit of God mediates his presence to humans through the sensible realities of concrete particulars.

All of the above was commonplace in the exegetical traditions that Dante inherited. What is not often appreciated, however, is that the three “spiritual senses” are, I suggest, analogous in practice to the three transcendentals: the True, the Good, and the Beautiful. In effect, just as the three transcendentals are different aspects of a reality that is ultimately one, so also the three spiritual senses are rooted in and depend on the literal sense of Scripture. The medieval theologian whose work suggests such a view is Bonaventure, in his small but dense work *De Reductione Artium ad Theologiam*—“Retracing the Arts to Theology.” He does not make the point explicitly, but he implies that the same unity among what he calls the “allegorical,” the “moral,” and the “anagogical” aspects of Scripture directly parallel the unity of the True, the Good, and the Beautiful.

Ultimately, Bonaventure’s account shows that “spiritual reading” is not a “system” or “method” of interpretation in the modern sense. It is not a “system” because it does not provide a complete map of the necessary and sufficient causes of all things. Nor is it a modern “method” because it does not guarantee the production of specific results. Rather, it offers a vision of Christian maturity in which we participate in Christ’s life in a way that unites truth, goodness and beauty. How does this lead to “maturity?” Consider this: most people begin life with a tendency to favor one transcendental to the exclusion of the others, mistaking it for the whole of reality. The lover of truth risks becoming a dogmatist; the lover of goodness risks becoming a moralist; the lover of beauty risks becoming a hedonist or an aesthete. Maturity,

then, means learning first to discern in Christ the fullness of truth, goodness, and beauty and *then*, through the process of spiritual reading, to experience the unity among them. In this view, readers can learn to discern the fullness of reality in Christ by being formed in the habit of moving from allegorical to moral to anagogical interpretation—all rooted in the literal sense.

**THE THREE SPIRITUAL SENSES ARE ANALOGOUS IN PRACTICE TO THE THREE TRANSCENDENTALS: THE TRUE, THE GOOD, AND THE BEAUTIFUL. JUST AS THE TRANSCENDENTALS ARE DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF A REALITY THAT IS ONE, SO DO THE SPIRITUAL SENSES DEPEND ON THE LITERAL SENSE OF SCRIPTURE.**

#### HUMILITY: AN EXAMPLE

In Canto 10 of *Purgatorio*, we see Dante the Pilgrim undertake just such spiritual reading and are thus invited to participate in it ourselves. In Canto 10, Dante the Pilgrim has crossed the threshold into purgatory proper. Having confessed his faith in Christ which alone saves him from destruction, he begins ascending the seven terraces of the Mountain of Virtue, each devoted to purging one of the seven root vices (“deadly sins”), the first being pride. Dante looks up at the face of the mountain and sees a stunning piece of artwork—a sculpture depicting the Annunciation. Dante (the poet) presents here what rhetoricians call “*ekphrasis*,” a vivid description of a work of art within a narrative:

And standing there, before we took a step,  
I realized that all the inner cliff,  
Which, rising sheer, offered no means to climb,

Was pure white marble; on its flawless face  
Were carvings that would sure put to shame  
Not only Polyclete but Nature too.

The angel who came down to announce on earth  
The peace longed for by weeping centuries,

Which broke the ancient ban and opened Heaven

Appeared before our eyes: a shape alive,  
Carved in an attitude of marble grace,  
[A form] that could have spoken words.

One would have sworn that he was saying "Ave!"  
For she who turned the key, opening for us  
The Highest Love, was also figured there;

The outlines of her image carved the words  
*Behold, the handmaid of the Lord*, as clearly cut  
As is the imprint of a seal on wax. (*Purgatorio* 10.28-45,  
Musa trans.)

Dante does here what he does throughout the *Purgatorio*: he makes a direct connection between an experience of beauty, an encounter with truth, and formation in virtue (i.e. goodness). Dante repeatedly uses visual images, as well as song, to help the Pilgrim ascend Mount Purgatory. In this case, the stunning beauty of the white marble sculpture embodies the story of the incarnation (Truth becoming flesh), as well as modelling the virtue of humility. The challenge faced by the Pilgrim, and the reader, is how to practice, rather than merely observe, this virtue. The poem implies that the Pilgrim learns to do this by enjoying and inhabiting the biblical story as one's own story through the kind of spiritual reading outlined above.

This sculpture, however, is just one in a set of three. The narrative goes on to describe a second sculpture depicting the return of the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem—a depiction so vivid that it defies the senses. Among the many people singing and the smoke of the frankincense, there is King David. Dante describes him: "Before the holy vessel [the Ark]/Leading the way in dance and reveling,/his skirts tucked high, the *humble* psalmist came,/at once appearing more and less than king" (*Purgatory* 10.63-66, Esolen trans., emphasis added).

Beyond that sculpture is a third depicting a legendary story from Roman history about the Emperor Trajan. The sculpture shows the manner in which he responds to an appeal from an "old widow" who is "at his horse's rein" (10.77). Instead of narrating the exchange, Dante gives us imagined direct dialogue:

The poor old woman [...] seemed to say, "Justice, Lord! Avenged my Son!  
He's murdered, and the sorrow breaks my heart,"  
And he responded, "Wait till I return,"  
and she as one whom grief still hurries on [says],  
"What if you never do return, my lord?"  
"The man who takes my place, he'll see it done" [he says].  
And she, "What will his good deed do for you?  
He performs his, and you forget your own."  
[Thus he replies], "Take comfort. I must do  
my duty in this place before I move.  
Justice demands it, pity holds me here." (10.82-93)

By choosing to address the widow's request before he leaves, Trajan exemplifies the humility of a political ruler who unites justice and mercy in responding to those under his authority.

On the terrace of pride, then, the artwork depicts its opposing virtue, humility—exemplified by Mary, David, and Trajan. Dante could assume that his readers would have known all three of these stories, two of them biblical and the third a well-known legend. In putting them together, Dante reveals something further about the character of humility. Initially, the three sculptures might seem simply to reveal humility at work in each respective mode of spiritual reading: each sculpture might seem to correspond to one of the transcendentals. What we find, however, is that, in the same way that truth, goodness, and beauty are ultimately one, so also each story depicted by a given image engages all three spiritual senses. Nevertheless, each story also has its characteristic aspect that is most apparent, in the same way that each person begins life favoring one of the transcendentals. Again, maturity consists in learning to discern and participate in the implied unity among the transcendentals.

Thus we find: a) Mary's moment of declared willingness to bear the Messiah is crucial in making possible the *Christological* (typological) reading of the Old Testament—that is, her humility co-operates with the moment of the incarnation of the divine *Logos*; b) the story of David emphasizes *moral* interpretation, as he is the only character explicitly identified as a moral example of humility; c) finally, Trajan's actions connect to *anagogical* interpretation in that his decision to grant the

widow's request unites justice and mercy in a manner that prefigures the last judgment and implicitly locates Trajan under that judgment (line 89). Lest we have any doubt regarding Trajan, he will later appear in Canto 20 of the *Paradiso*, in the circle of those who are distinguished by the virtue of justice, as they enjoy the vision of God. Whether we are talking about Mary turning "the key" for others to enter heaven, or David leading others in celebration, or Trajan administering justice, all three stories involve an action for the good of others.

In addition to the obvious moral dimensions of each story depicted by these sculptures (that is, what they reveal about the human good), each one also offers a revelation of Christological truth and anagogical hope. With respect to truth, Mary literally receives the divine Word; David responds to the word of divine promise (and presence) indicated by the ark of the covenant; Trajan responds to the voice of the widow. In the case of Trajan, Dante arguably implies that the voice of the widow, as the voice of justice, is the messenger of God. In this way, all three stories reveal that the distinguishing feature of humility is the ability to hear and obey God's voice—thereby showing the deep unity between goodness and truth (with respect to this particular virtue).

Where does this leave the anagogical sense—the spiritual sense which reveals the supreme beauty, or glory, whose enjoyment is the highest human purpose? As the Apostle Paul explains, human participation in the Kingdom of God consists in justice, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17). What we find in these episodes is an explicit reference to each aspect of this eschatological reality, which is enjoyed only partially in this life: Mary's humility enables her to communicate peace; David's humility enables him to communicate joy in worship; Trajan's humility enables him to rule with justice and mercy (i.e. righteousness). In this sense, all three characters reveal different ways that humility enables participation in these different aspects of the Kingdom of God. What these stories reveal is that to the extent that we fail to communicate the anagogical realities of justice, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, the root of our problem is pride.

In this respect, the ultimate gift of this passage is to provide readers with three ways to diagnose our own pride,

bringing us back to the moral sense. Elsewhere, Dante describes a proud person as one whose chief love is the "[hope] for supremacy... through abasement [or degrading] of another" (*Purg.* 17. 117, Mandelbaum trans.). The examples of Mary, David, and Trajan reveal the character of humility, even as readers are drawn into the virtue through the engagement of the affections as well as the understanding. The larger point to appreciate, however, is that each sculpture does correspond respectively to truth (typological sense), goodness (moral sense), and beauty (anagogical sense), but it also does more. Each one also models the deeper unity among the transcendentals, showing the underlying unity that informs each appearance—thereby implying how one moves from a preoccupation with one of them to a participation in the reality that unites them all.

The practical questions now become apparent. When God's word comes to us, how do we respond? Like Mary, in a manner that brings peace to others? When we worship, do we rejoice like David, or do we hold ourselves in reserve, like Michal? When people under our authority think about how we treat them, do they thank God for our justice and mercy, as with Trajan? Such questions can become occasions for self-revelation but also occasions for increasing our desire for the good that these virtues embody. Thus, these sculptures, and the lines of poetry describing them, do more than simply provide examples of a given virtue. Through the opportunities for recognition, these tangible and verbal renderings provoke a re-ordering of the desires that constitute virtue. In this way, the poem models the process of sanctification, or growth in virtue, specifically because it depicts the process of ethical formation (goodness) as inseparable from the imaginative participation (beauty) in divine revelation (truth). Such grammars of grace make the *Purgatorio* a benefit to all Christians who are concerned to grow in holiness.

---

*Phillip J. Donnelly (Ph.D., University of Ottawa) is Professor of Literature in the Great Texts Program and the English Graduate Program at Baylor University and is the author of The Lost Seeds of Learning: Grammar, Logic, and Rhetoric as Life-Giving Arts.*

# And Now, Comedy: A Literary–Biblical Interpretation of Church History

ANDREW MESSMER

## INTRODUCTION

If one were to ask the average Western Christian to divide church history into its major stages, they would likely demarcate the patristic, medieval, Reformation, and modern eras. But what is the logic behind each era? What makes each different from the other, and what explains the transition from one to the next? And if one were to uncover the logic behind the Church's past, would this help us understand our current moment—and perhaps even discern our future?

In this essay, I would like to suggest that such a logic does exist and that the Church's development follows the basic pattern of other living or institutional organisms. To do this, I will bring together the literary insights of Louise Cowan and the historical insights of church historians and show how they cohere with

one another. Cowan has explained the logic and coherence of the four classical literary genres by showing their interrelated, cyclical nature. Church historians, meanwhile, have noted that certain biblical books have shaped the Church's four major eras. When their respective insights are brought together, we can see that Cowan's description of the development of the four literary genres coincides with the defining biblical books of the four eras of the Church. If this is correct, this would allow us to understand, not only where the Church has been, but also where it is in the present, and (possibly) what lies in its future.

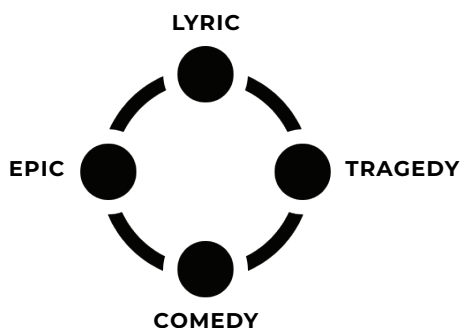
## CREATION'S FOUR-PART CYCLE

The world is full of cycles. The day begins with morning, progresses to midday, slips into evening, and then turns into night. The moon waxes, becomes full, wanes,

and then disappears into a new moon. The year begins with spring, reaches its high point in summer, slips into fall, and ends with winter. Even the human life cycle follows the same course: we begin as children, grow into adults, enter into our senior years, and finally die. Each of these daily, monthly, yearly, and lifetime cycles has four parts which follow the same basic pattern: each cycle begins with birth, progresses to fullness, falls into decay, and ends with death. This is the predictable—and necessary—course that all organisms follow, even the non-celestial or biological. For example, civil structures such as institutions, corporations, and nations follow this same four-part cycle. However long they may last or however many variables they may include, they all begin, peak, decay, and eventually perish. In summary, and to borrow from Plato and Aristotle, anything that is “becoming”—as opposed to “being”—will follow this cycle, simply because the phenomenological world is always changing. As will become clear throughout this essay, I am suggesting that the Church—an institutional organism of sorts—is following this same four-part cycle.

#### A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF THE FOUR GENRES

In her edited volume on classical comedy, literary critic Louise Cowan provides a graphic that arranges the four classical literary genres along a wheel.<sup>1</sup> The image that she provides is too detailed for our purposes here, so I produce only a basic model:



1. Louise Cowan, “Introduction: The Comic Terrain” in *The Terrain of Comedy*, ed. Louise Cowan (Dallas: The Dallas Institute of Humanities and Culture, 1984), 9.

The wheel runs clockwise, beginning with epic on the left side (nine o’clock) and ending with comedy at the bottom (six o’clock), at which point the cycle begins again.<sup>2</sup> As for the genres, epic is about new beginnings: it has a hero who defeats the villain and establishes order; epic’s emblem is a new city. Lyric is about the love shared between lover and beloved, especially in a garden: it knows no time and has no plot, but rather celebrates the eternal now of the lovers’ embrace; lyric’s emblem is a kiss. Tragedy is about the calamitous fall of a nobleman: it begins high and ends low, and the destruction is swift and irreversible; tragedy’s emblem is a funeral. Comedy is about the fortuitous rise of a common man: it begins low and ends high and has the ability to provide hope in the midst of darkness because of its transformative vision of how things could be, should be, or even will be; comedy’s emblem is a wedding feast. The point of the wheel is to demonstrate visually the internal movement of the four genres. Taken together, the four genres reflect the four basic gestures that humans can create with literature.

**EPIC CORRESPONDS TO MORNING,  
LYRIC TO MIDDAY, TRAGEDY TO  
EVENING, AND COMEDY TO NIGHT.**

Part of the genius of Cowan’s wheel is that it closely follows the four-part cycles that we noted above: epic corresponds to morning, waxing moon, spring, and childhood; lyric to midday, full moon, summer, and adulthood; tragedy to evening, waning moon, fall, and seniorhood; and comedy to night, new moon, winter, and death. Cowan’s arrangement of the four literary genres is not arbitrary, but rather reflects the natural cycle of life: creation’s four-part cycle is reflected in the four literary genres, and it may even be the explanation of their origin.<sup>3</sup> Also important to notice is that

2. For the purposes of this article, I have explained the wheel slightly differently than Cowan. She began with lyric and ended with epic, whereas I begin with epic and end with comedy (although gesturing toward epic and lyric).

3. As Cowan says in her Preface, “it seems that genre patterns are patterns in reality which the poet apprehends and then imitates in language.” Cowan, *Terrain of Comedy*, vii.

each stage builds on its predecessor(s) and prepares the way for its successor(s). Epic can exist only if there is a previous upward momentum that impels the characters to a new conquest and prepares an ordered place where lovers can rest. Lyric can exist only if there is an ordered city where lovers can embrace one another. This embrace then sets the stage for a calamitous fall. Tragedy can exist only if there is a height from which to fall, preparing the way for endurance during difficult times. Comedy can exist only if the tragic fall has already occurred and provides the momentum for future conquest. So much for Cowan and cycles; now it is time to look at the development of church history according to its defining books.

### IMPORTANT BIBLICAL BOOKS THROUGHOUT CHURCH HISTORY

Church historians have argued that three biblical books have played a significant role in shaping church history's three major ages: Genesis—especially the opening chapters—was influential during the patristic era, Song of Solomon during the medieval era, and Romans—again, especially the opening chapters—during the Reformation era.<sup>4</sup> Regarding the importance of Genesis in the early church, Andrew Louth notes the following:

The early chapters of Genesis had arguably a greater influence on the development of Christian theology than did any other part of the Old Testament. In these early chapters the Fathers have set out the fundamental patterns of Christian theology. [...] One of the most popular genres of scriptural commentary among the Fathers was commentary on the six days of creation, the Hexaemeron.<sup>5</sup>

As for the importance of Song of Solomon in the Middle Ages, Ronald Murphy writes that “More ‘commentaries’ were written about the Song in the Middle Ages

than about any other book in the OT; from the 12th century alone we have some thirty works.”<sup>6</sup> According to E. Ann Matter, between the 6th-15th centuries, nearly one hundred commentaries on the Song of Solomon have survived.<sup>7</sup>

As for the importance of Romans in the Reformation era, Gwenfair Adams writes that, “During the sixteenth century, as far as we can tell, there were more commentaries written on Romans than on any other book of the Bible; from 1500 to 1650 there are at least seventy. In many ways, the Reformation hinges on Romans.”<sup>8</sup>

In fact, Gerald Bray, in his influential work on biblical interpretation throughout church history, used Genesis 1, the Song of Solomon, and Romans to illustrate hermeneutical practice during the patristic, medieval, and Reformation eras, respectively.<sup>9</sup>

### THE OVERLAP BETWEEN LITERARY GENRES AND IMPORTANT BIBLICAL BOOKS

The significance of the findings so far is that Genesis (and certainly its opening chapters), Song of Solomon, and Romans (certainly its opening chapters) overlap precisely with the first three parts of Cowan's genre wheel: they occur in the correct order and correspond to the correct literary genre. Thus, the opening chapters of Genesis are epic, Song of Solomon is lyric, and the opening chapters of Romans are tragic. This is the logic of church history that I referred to above: the Church

6. Ronald E. Murphy, “Patristic and Medieval Exegesis — Help or Hindrance?” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 43, no. 4 (October 1981), 514.

7. E. Ann Matter, *The Voice of My Beloved: The Song of Songs in Western Medieval Christianity* (New York: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1990), 3. Ann Astell's comments are also very revealing. Speaking on 12th cent. reflection on the Song of Solomon, she writes: “The voluminous Christian commentary tradition, which stems from Hippolytus and Origen in the early third century, temporarily exhausted itself in the ninth century, only to experience a new flowering during the twelfth-century renaissance. At that time, Anselm of Laon, Bruno of Segni, Bernard of Clairvaux, Rupert of Deutz, Honorius of Autun, Philip of Harveng, Gilbert de la Porree, William of St. Thierry, Gilbert of Hoyland, John of Ford, Thomas the Cistercian, and Alain de Lille all produced *expositiones* of the Song, the sheer bulk of writings attesting to the peculiar fascination the Song of Songs had for the medieval psyche” (*The Song of Songs in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 8-9).

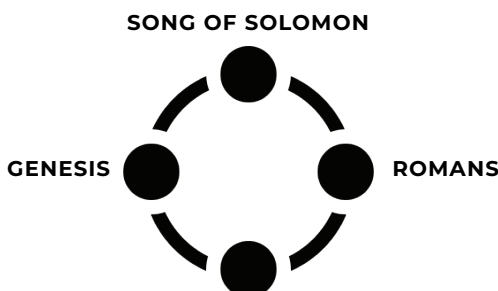
8. *Romans 1-8*, ed. Gwenfair Adams, in *Reformation Commentary on Scripture* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2019), xli.

9. Gerald Bray, *Biblical Interpretation: Past & Present* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 12, 115-128, 159-164, 212-220.

4. Since at least the fourth century, the Psalms and Gospels have played a particularly important role in church liturgy and theology as well, but their influence has been steady and even-handed and has not shaped an era as the other books have.

5. *Genesis 1-11*, ed. Andrew Louth, in the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2001), xxxix. Later Louth implies the importance of the opening chapters of Genesis by writing: “After the first three chapters of Genesis, the seam of patristic comment becomes much thinner.” Louth, *Genesis 1-11*, li.

has progressed, and still is progressing, through the same basic cycle that other organisms do. Summarizing the argument thus far, this is what the wheel looks like:



We should here consider the overlap between Genesis, Song of Solomon, and Romans with respect to epic, lyric, and tragedy. The patristic era focused on the opening chapters of Genesis—and all the other portions that speak of “ultimate” beginnings, such as John 1, Ephesians 1, Colossians 1, Hebrews 1—because they were living in an age of new beginnings. They overcame the darkness of pagan Rome with the light of the Gospel. It was an age marked by apologists, (victorious) martyrs, expansion into new lands, and the first—and most important—ecumenical councils of the Church. The center of patristic theology was arguably the Father’s victory over evil through the Son, which is found in the texts mentioned above.

Once the new (heavenly) city of the Church had been established, the Church’s focus shifted to God’s eternal love for his bride. This was the task of the medieval church, and attention naturally fell on the Song of Solomon. Their inner focus was directed upward, as they saw themselves as the one embraced by their lover. It was an age marked by high-ceilinged cathedrals, Gregorian chant, and mystics. The center of medieval theology was arguably Song of Solomon 1:2a: “Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!” (ESV).

However, the Church came to realize that its purity can only be found at the beginning and end of history, and that during the intermediate period, sin makes us un-

worthy to be found in Christ’s arms. Thus, the Church had to address our tragic plight and acknowledge our complete unworthiness to be embraced by God. We are not God’s intimate lover, but rather unfaithful spiritual whores who desperately need the unmerited grace of God. This is why the opening chapters of Romans were so important to the Church during the Reformation. It was an age marked by the doctrine of total depravity, predestination, and disdain for the flesh. The center of Reformation theology was arguably Romans 3:9b: “None is righteous, no, not one.”

**THE OPENING CHAPTERS OF GENESIS ARE EPIC, SONG OF SOLOMON IS LYRIC, AND THE OPENING CHAPTERS OF ROMANS ARE TRAGIC.**

#### COMEDY AND THE BIBLE

This brings us to the modern era. If the argument has been correct this far, then we should expect a comedic book (or a portion of it) to shape the next era of church history. First, we must discuss the classical genre of comedy, and then discern whether any biblical books fit into its category.

#### Classical Comedy

As Cowan has noted, defining the characteristics of comedy is no easy task: “Far more than other genres, comedy invites a skeptical attitude toward any effort to isolate out of its multiplicity a single principle of classification.”<sup>10</sup> Since comedy is “the least exclusive of all literary forms,” the defining marks of comedy are not found in structural or thematic constants but rather in its vision.<sup>11</sup> Cowan argues that Dante is the supreme comedian, and thus his tripartite vision of hell, purgatory, and heaven correspond to the three basic kinds of comedy: infernal comedy, dark and based on justice;

10. Cowan, “Introduction”, 1.

11. Cowan, “Introduction”, 2, 4.

purgatorial comedy, pathetic and based on mercy; and paradisaal comedy, joyful and based on grace and forgiveness.<sup>12</sup> Other important elements of classical comedy are its power of transformation, its enabling of endurance, and its affirmation of human life, especially through its emblematic sign: a wedding feast. In short, comedy “is a correlative for the hope—and then, finally, one realizes, the experience—of being loved.”<sup>13</sup>

### Comedy in the Bible

Regarding specific examples of comedy in the Bible, Louise Cowan and Daniel Russ offer many examples, only some of which can be mentioned here. Cowan states that biblical infernal comedy—“less the world of sin than of abomination”—is occasionally found in the Old Testament, such as in the stories of Sodom and Gomorrah, the false prophets in Pharaoh’s court, Jezebel, and the Tower of Babel, but that its use is limited.<sup>14</sup> She broadly refers to the Old Testament as purgatorial comedy, but without providing examples.<sup>15</sup> Russ, on the other hand, provides several, such as the stories about Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob, Joseph, and others.<sup>16</sup> Interestingly, they do not highlight any examples of paradisaal comedy.

What so many of these stories have in common is the ability of the spoken word to overcome the evil forces of chaos and death.<sup>17</sup> That is, God gives promises to his people that provide them with a new way of viewing reality, which in turn relativizes their present suffering and hardships such that they are no longer ultimate, but penultimate. They believe that God’s creative word has the final say, and this is what transforms their vision and allows them to persevere (joyfully) in their pilgrimage. Transformation, endurance, and weddings (or reunions)

are constant themes throughout these biblical comedic stories.<sup>18</sup> Many more examples from the Bible could be given, but these illustrate that many of the micro-stories from the Bible are comedic and thus possible candidates for the Church’s next influential text or book.

However, it is not just the Bible’s micro-stories that are comedic, but rather its overall macro-story. Daniel Russ argues that the Scriptures “may be seen to constitute the fullest achievement of [comedy] in Western literature.”<sup>19</sup> In fact, he states that the “archetypal comic plot—order to chaos to order—is the form of the scriptural canon.”<sup>20</sup> He argues that, while Genesis contains the seeds of this comic plot, it is only completed in the eschaton: “And because this God is from beginning to end a covenant maker, betrothing himself to his people, his world will end in comedy: that marriage-feast that characterizes a ‘komos.’”<sup>21</sup>

In short, if the ultimate gesture of Scripture is comedic, and if the seeds of biblical comedy only find their fulfillment in God’s reunion with his people in the marriage feast, then the biblical book most likely to shape the Church during its next era is the one which is the most transformative, provides the most endurance, ends in a wedding feast, and makes real the “hope of being loved.”

### REVELATION AS THE CHURCH’S NEXT DEFINING BOOK

The biblical book that best fits this description is the book of Revelation, especially its closing chapters. This is not solely my opinion, but was also that of Eugene Peterson, whose “hunch” from nearly thirty years ago coincides remarkably well with the argument presented thus far. His comments deserve to be quoted in full:

Certain times pull particular books of the Bible into prominence. Augustine, looking for the ways in which the city of

12. Cowan, “Introduction”, 10–14.

13. Cowan, “Introduction”, 15–17.

14. Cowan, “Introduction”, 12.

15. Cowan, “Introduction”, 13.

16. Daniel Russ, “The Bible as Genesis of Comedy,” in *Terrain of Comedy*, 48–53; cf. 42–43. Russ does not explicitly refer to these stories as purgatorial comedy, but based on Cowan’s affirmation that the authors form a “school of criticism,” it is safe to presuppose his broad agreement with Cowan on this point (vii).

17. Russ, “The Bible as Genesis of Comedy” 46.

18. Perhaps this is why the story of the prodigal son (Lk. 15:11–24) has been so popular lately: it is fundamentally comical.

19. Russ, “The Bible as Genesis of Comedy,” 41.

20. Russ, “The Bible as Genesis of Comedy,” 43.

21. Russ, “The Bible as Genesis of Comedy,” 59. *Komos* is Greek for “a joyous meal or banquet.”

God took shape in the rubble of a wrecked and decadent Roman Empire, used Genesis for his text. In the exuberant eroticism of the twelfth century, Bernard fastened on the Song of Songs as a means of praying and living into mature love. Luther, searching for the simple clarity of gospel in the garage-sale clutter of baroque religion, hit on Romans and made it the book of the Reformation. As the twentieth century moves into its final decade, the last book of the Bible, the Revelation, has my vote as the definitive biblical book for our times.<sup>22</sup>

However, there is an important obstacle to overcome in affirming Revelation as a comedic book: most consider it an apocalypse. In what follows, I would like to argue that comedy and apocalypse are not mutually exclusive genres, but rather that the latter is a subset of the former. In other words, I think that Revelation can simultaneously be apocalyptic and comedic.<sup>23</sup>

First, and to be more precise, there is a consensus amongst biblical scholars that Revelation is best interpreted within the epistolary, prophetic, and apocalyptic genres, with the last being the most predominant.<sup>24</sup> What exactly is the apocalyptic genre? J. J. Collins' description has become standard:

'Apocalypse' is a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.<sup>25</sup>

22. Eugene Peterson, *Under the Unpredictable Plant: An Exploration in Vocational Holiness* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 144–145. Without the benefit of the research and categories presented in this essay, the accuracy and fittingness of Peterson's "vote" is simply astonishing.

23. I should add, however, that it is debatable if "apocalyptic" is the most suitable genre for Revelation, or if it is even a distinct genre that can be distinguished from prophecy. Additionally, Aristotle was the one who taxonomized genres for the West, and he never mentioned "apocalyptic", only comedy. For more doubts on Revelation being "apocalyptic", cf. Frederick Mazzaferri, *The Genre of the Book of Revelation from a Source-Critical Perspective* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1989), 382–383; Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of the Book of Revelation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 5–6, 9 (somewhat ambiguous).

24. M.G. Michael, "The Genre of the Apocalypse: What are they saying now?" *Bulletin of Biblical Studies* 18 (July–December 1999): 115–126.

25. J.J. Collins "Introduction: Towards the Morphology of a Genre," *Semeia* 14 (1979), 9.

However, as other scholars have pointed out, while Collins may have described accurately the *form* of apocalypse, he has not said anything about its *purpose* or *function*. Thus, in order to supplement Collins' description, David Hellholm writes the following: "I would be willing to accept [Collins' description], provided the following addition on the same level of abstraction: '*intended for a group in crisis with the purpose of exhortation and/or consolation by means of divine authority.*'"<sup>26</sup>

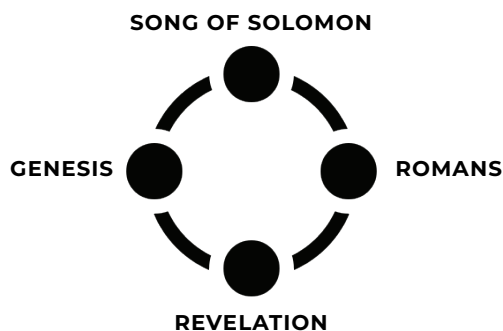
**JUST AS APOCALYPSE IS WRITTEN FOR PEOPLE IN CRISIS IN ORDER TO EXHORT AND/OR CONSOLE THEM, SO TOO IS COMEDY WRITTEN FOR PEOPLE WHO NEED TO ENDURE THROUGH PAIN, TRIAL, AND PERSECUTION.**

Thus, combining the two descriptions given to us by Collins and Hellholm, in addition to containing divine–human exchange, apocalypse includes the following three key elements: 1) it provides a new and transcendent reality, 2) it provides a vision of ultimate salvation, and 3) it is written for people in crisis in order to exhort and/or console them.

As can be seen, the overlap between apocalypse and comedy is considerable. Just as apocalypse provides a new and transcendent reality, so too does comedy through its imaginative world. Just as apocalypse provides a vision of ultimate salvation, so too does comedy though its climax in the wedding feast. Just as apocalypse is written for people in crisis in order to exhort and/or console them, so too is comedy written for people who need to endure through pain, trial, and persecution. Both genres are written during dark days but with the hope that light and goodness will irrupt in the future (epic) and usher in a new golden age of peace and prosperity (lyric). In other words, if the four classical literary genres of epic, lyric, tragedy, and comedy comprise

26. Quoted in Michael, "Genre of the Apocalypse," 124 (italics original).

the totality of the human experience, then apocalypse is best seen as a subset of one of them: comedy. An apocalypse may contain infernal, purgatorial, and/or paradisaical comedic elements—and Revelation seems to contain all three of them—but comedy it remains.<sup>27</sup> We can now complete the wheel, which takes the following form:



### IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHURCH

If the basic argument of this paper has been correct, then the Church should take the comedic vision of Revelation very seriously. If it does so, I think it will find an incredibly powerful resource with which to engage our current world.

Comedy is imaginative. What better way to engage with—and confront—a modern world obsessed with images than with the comedic ones of Revelation? Comedy is transformative and redemptive. Instead of a sinner, comedy sees a saint; instead of a pauper, a prince; instead of a whore, a virginal bride. Western culture is crying out for transformation and has completely lost itself in the process. What better way to engage with a lost and broken world than with the transformative and redemptive image of New Jerusalem? Comedy is about hope. It gives a vision that is so glorious and attractive that it is able to give strength and perseverance to those who are suffering and be-

27. Infernal comedy can be seen in the overthrow of Babylon, purgatorial comedy in the Church's endurance throughout the trial, and paradisaical comedy in the wedding feast.

ing persecuted. More specifically, comedy is the hope of being loved, especially when one knows that they are unlovable. Is not the modern world obsessed with love and acceptance and yet completely incapable of finding either of them? The only one who truly can fulfill our hope of being loved is God himself, and this message is present profoundly in the great wedding feast in Revelation.

**PERHAPS THE CHURCH HAS  
ASSIMILATED THE TRAGIC TEACINGS  
OF THE REFORMATION AND MATURED  
ENOUGH TO CHANGE TO A MAJOR KEY:  
REDEMPTION, JOY, GRACE, LIFE.**

With all of this focus on Revelation, it is important to remember what was said at the beginning of the essay about the relationship between the four literary genres: each stage builds on the previous one (or ones) and prepares the way for the succeeding one (or ones). Thus, Revelation cannot become the Church's focus in isolation from other books of the canon but rather must take a *primus inter pares* role—a first among equals. This is simply due to the nature of the moment that the Church finds itself in: in the past the first among equals has been epic Genesis, lyric Song of Solomon, and tragic Romans. For the present, it is comedic Revelation's turn. Having matured over the past 2,000 years, the Church should now bring all of its rich theological resources to Revelation, interpret it with the benefit of such a rich harvest, and apply it in the Church's mission to the world.

Having said this, however, I would like to suggest in conclusion that the Church needs to consider seriously the *tone* in which it presents the Gospel to the world. That is, without changing the message, we may need to change its presentation. To use a musical illustration: since the Reformation, the Church has learned very well the importance of playing the Gospel song in a minor key: sin, wrath, judgment,

condemnation. However, as many preachers have discovered in recent years, the effectiveness of preaching a steady diet of tragic messages from Romans is not what it once was. The default response of church leaders is often a defensive one in which we blame our listeners and charge them with apathy. This may be true, but perhaps there is another explanation. Perhaps the Church has already assimilated the tragic teachings of the Reformation and has matured enough to progress to the next stage of growth (just as it did with Genesis and the Song of Solomon). Perhaps we need to change our tone, or at least supplement it with the comedic major key: redemption, joy, grace, life.

Finally, I think that comedy presents a vision which leads the Church toward its greatest need in her current moment: ecumenism. To illustrate the point, let us liken the history of the Church—at least in the West—to a marriage. The marriage began in the early Church, and it quickly led to the honeymoon phase of the Church in the Middle Ages. However, what we found out there was that our bliss was a naïve one, and we fought. This was what the Reformation was about: we realized that we were corrupt from within and decided to split up into our several groups. This was our great divorce. But as time has progressed, we have begun to see the greatness of our own faults and realize how awful it is living apart. So now, fully aware of our own faults as well as those of others, we are beginning to see that it is better to live together than apart. What is needed to bring us back together is a comedic vision of the restorative grace of God. What we need is to renew our vows—together. This is just the kind of vision that Revelation provides us.

## CONCLUSION

The remarkable correspondence between Louise Cowan's literary genre wheel and the conclusions of church historians about church history's definitive biblical books has led us to the conclusion that there is a logical—and, once we see it, predictable—development to church history. The correspondence has been so complete that it has encouraged me to hazard the prediction that the next defining biblical book for

the Church will be Revelation, especially its closing chapters. Therefore, the Church should take very seriously its comedic outlook, which is pressing toward the epic irruption of God's kingdom and his final lyrical *shalom* in the garden-city of the New Jerusalem, “prepared as a bride adorned for her husband” (Rev 21:2 ESV). This will be the end of the cycle, and it will not repeat again, for sin and death and hell will forever be defeated.

The author of Ecclesiastes reminds us that “for everything there is a season” (Eccl. 3:1 ESV). This is true for the Church as well. In past times, the Church has lived through seasons of epic, lyric, and tragedy. Now, it is time for comedy.<sup>28</sup>

---

Andrew Messmer (*Ph.D., Evangelische Theologische Fakultät*) is Academic Dean of Seville Theological Seminary (Spain); Associated Professor at the International Faculty of Theology IBSTE (Spain); Affiliated Researcher at Evangelical Theological Faculty (Belgium); and editor of the World Evangelical Alliance's Spanish journal *Revista Evangélica de Teología*. He has written and edited books and articles in Spanish and English. His Spanish page is [www.casareinayvalera.com](http://www.casareinayvalera.com), where he writes about all things related to Christianity. He is married and has five children.

---

28. I would like to thank Warren Gage for inspiring and equipping me to write this essay.

# Last Ride of the Rose Nose

BY OLIVER BRAUNING

As Santa bites the cookie lure  
Set out by those not quite mature,  
On that same Eve, the goblins pounce  
To squeeze out evil, every ounce.

They stink the air with putrid farts  
And profane all the kitchen's arts.  
The season's spirit is its smell,  
So that's why goblins mock its spell.

The act of murder, laying flat,  
Is like a feast for creeping rats.  
Tonight is goblin Mardi Gras  
Where drinks are brought by Santa Claus.

But yet the saint falls with no fear  
Into the chimney one last year.  
That redded man in leather coat  
Rolls like a bolus down the throat

Into the paunch of each kid's house  
'Till finally felled by goblin chouse.  
They sat and stalked for hours and hours—  
Their goal to steal the fat man's powers.

They waited by the fireplace frames  
To shackle Nick, to set in flames.  
His soul now sent to Sheol quick;  
His flesh to brick does meld and stick.

Eleven days that soul remains  
Constrained in Rahab's cold domain,  
Her swollen belly. Here's the home  
Perpetually ofimps and gloam,

Which shimmer while a curse they chant  
As Santa's magic they decant  
Into a flasket formed of clay.  
Consumed, the Myran drops to pray.  
"Oh Christ, you captor of my soul,  
Remove at once this noxious bowl,  
Replacing it with lively stew!  
When eating I commune with you.

If you avenge me on this heath,  
The blood of goats will stain my teeth  
For, when I own my flesh and power,  
These taloned goblins I'll devour!"

No banquet could his dread assuage,  
Our tortured hero long engaged,  
Except for one so gay in blood  
It drowned all goblins in a flood.

To make his situation clear  
Our hero wants, not milk, but beer.  
So is his form twirled up in knots.  
But look! A glint—a chariot!

Three magi come to fix the curse  
Who bring a sleigh that's more a hearse.  
They lay the spirit in his bed,  
Then scout the kingdom of the dead.

They gift a meal cooked to revive,  
A loaf of stollen. As they drive  
The odor lingers in his nose  
Crocheting meaty skin to bones.

His mortal body on the twelfth  
Awakes to find itself an elf.  
He judges, resting on the sleigh,  
"Why don't we fight another day?"

I'm feeling ready for some chores.  
Let's purchase freedom for some whores."  
"We love your mirth," the kings reply,  
Downpouring presents from the sky.

The holy saints now speed through air  
Propelled by reindeer used as mares.  
Such laughter rings from out the clouds  
As makes a mudbound cricket wowed  
When it, released a second life,  
Returns to play its sorry life.  
The just are built by royal smell,  
But goblins joke themselves to hell.

## BOOKS AND ARTS

# *Shakeshafte & Other Plays*

BY ROWAN WILLIAMS

REVIEWED BY RICHARD RANKIN RUSSELL

Readers of former Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, may be surprised that this leading theologian has also published plays in addition to his very well-received books on theology, poetry (Carcantet recently published his collected poems), and literary criticism (his book on Dostoevsky is essential reading for anyone grappling with that great Russian author). The innovative new Christian publisher Slant Books has published *Shakeshafte & Other Plays*, introduced by poet and critic Jay Parini.<sup>1</sup> Parini claims that Williams's plays ask perennial questions "with the kind of shimmering indirect eloquence that the drama affords" (xii), suggesting something of this genre's ability to inspire articulate revelations through mostly dialogue. Whereas prose fiction can hold up despite an unsuccessful descriptive passage, drama fails if the dialogue falls flat. *Shakeshafte*, *The Flat Roof of the World*, and *Lazarus* are idiomatically rendered dramatic meditations on imagined meetings with real personages: Shakespeare and the Catholic martyr Edmund Campion; the modernist

British poet David Jones; Jesus' friend whom he raised from the grave, respectively. They succeed through their vivid language, their beautifully imagined worlds, and their profound pondering of Christian faith.

*Shakeshafte*, the longest of the three, is set in Lancashire, the home of wealthy Catholic Alexander Hoghton, who left a bequest to a "Will Shakeshafte." Williams's imagination transforms this young man into Shakespeare himself, who was thought to have worked for a similarly situated Catholic family in that English county. So, this is a speculative drama—but it takes its place as part of a popular trend in recent Shakespeare commentary, such as critic Stephen Greenblatt's imaginative biography *Will in the World* (2004) and even the popular British television sitcom *Upstart Crow*, which began in 2016 and imagines the daily events of the playwright's life during the inspiration and writing of his plays, beginning with *Romeo and Juliet*.

*Shakeshafte* operates on a variety of levels—as a meditation on a rapidly reforming England under Queen Elizabeth I, as a behind-the-scenes examination of do-

1. *Shakeshafte & Other Plays* by Rowan Williams. Seattle: Slant Books, 2022, \$16, pp. 156.

mestic life (a sort of Elizabethan *Upstairs, Downstairs* or its more recent successor, *Downton Abbey*), as an exploration of the burgeoning imagination of a young man who became our greatest playwright. To take the last of these, Will Shakeshafte seeks the truth but comes to realize that he must listen to a multiplicity of voices and narratives in order to reproduce reality successfully. Hastings, who is the hunted *Campion* in disguise, offers Will his version of the truth—the Catholic faith—and invites Will to go and be trained on the continent as a priest so that he might return to England later and spread the faith, but Will rejects that truth in favor of the polyphony of voices he longs to hear and reproduce.

**WILL SHAKESHAFTE SEEKS THE TRUTH  
BUT COMES TO REALIZE THAT HE  
MUST LISTEN TO A MULTIPLICITY OF  
VOICES AND NARRATIVES IN ORDER TO  
REPRODUCE REALITY SUCCESSFULLY.**

Fittingly, the Shakespeare intertext that haunts this play is the late romance, *The Tempest*, which, although not his most well-known at a popular level, is likely the Shakespeare play with the richest literary afterlife. You remember the story: the aging magician Prospero, exiled and islanded, must choose whether or not to divest himself of his magical powers or not in seeking to obtain his kingdom again. As one of Shakespeare's last plays, it is often interpreted in part as the mature playwright's meditation upon his own craft. In Williams's imagination, young Will Shakeshafte is a sort of embryonic Prospero—almost as far removed from breaking his staff and renouncing his powers as possible. Instead, by drawing on allusions to that rich, otherworldly drama, Williams suggests how Will is starting to conceive of himself as a weaver of words, a poet-mage, in seeking to depict the truths of humanity.

Will seems to be willing to apprentice himself to what he conceives of as the true stage—that of the drama—rather than what he comes to believe is the false “stagecraft” of both the Catholic *Campion* and his huntress, the Protestant Queen Elizabeth. Both dress their part

and don their makeup accordingly, but Williams suggests each believes a monolithic version of the truth that cannot admit the complexity of being human—our beliefs, desire, loves, and hates. As he plaintively asks, “once you choose which voices you listen to, once you decide what clothes to wear, what beliefs to put on in the morning, how can you say that one of them is truth?” (57). The play ends with Margery, Will's one-time lover, imagining him going back to the Midlands to apprentice himself to his father, a glove-maker, but *Shakeshafte* has brilliantly suggested that his real apprenticeship—to the theater—began in Alexander Hoghton's house in 1580–81 when he began to peer behind the curtain of both faith and politics and dream of complex narratives that would go behind those deathly certainties of his time in order to reach the truth.

The collection's second play, *The Flat Roof of the World*, takes as its subject the Welsh poet David Jones. There has been a considerable recent revival of interest in Jones's work—his exceedingly difficult verse reached its apogee with *In Parenthesis* (1937), a startling mélange of fragmented and broken lines meant to suggest the horrors of WWI, a fitting written companion to Picasso's massive and disturbing anti-war canvas *Guernica*, also painted in that year. Another long sequence reflecting on his post-war Catholic faith, *Anathemata*, followed in 1952. New editions of his poetry have been published recently along with several monographs and chapters in scholarly books. Jones served in the Royal Welsh Fusiliers from December 1915 through March 1918, and the war's bewildering array of weapons, such as mustard gas, aerial bombardment, machine guns, and tanks, permeate his poetry and haunt *The Flat Roof of the World*, suggesting the truth that Paul Fussell articulated in *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975): European consciousness became lastingly cynical after those horrors. In his quest for meaning, Jones joined the Catholic artistic community headed by Eric Gill after the war.

*Flat Roof* shares with *Shakeshafte* a search for truth on the part of its protagonist, and here that search is epitomized by Jones's Catholic faith. Over against Gill's utilitarianism, which even extended to his desire to get his daughters married off and pregnant as soon as they were grown, Jones draws on Gill's language of “making”

**LAZARUS CRITIQUES THE LACK OF FAITH HELD BY A MODERN VICAR, WHO CANNOT EXPLAIN CHRIST'S LANGUAGE IN THE PHRASE "I AM THE RESURRECTION AND THE LIFE."**

and "doing," yet employs those terms to evoke the transcendent. He muses about wandering into a Catholic mass held in a barn during the war, noting, "they were all *doing* something, all right, yes, *making* something . . . just a something, a pattern where all the paths light up and the whole thing—breathes, or whatever. That's what I want to do, I thought. . ." (83).

Jones articulates his search for the truth through invoking repeatedly the central image of the play—his walking through the fog at dawn on the battlefield, "Where nothing had edges or boundaries, and things were still possible, where you were walking high . . . The roof of the world" (87). Whereas Gill wants to separate and divide everything and everyone into categories, Jones desires a theory that will connect us all. But the Great War became the central event of Jones's life and prevented him from ever having a successful sexual relationship (with Valerie in the play's present of the 1950s) or marriage (to Petra, one of Gill's daughters, in the 1920s). He simply cannot imagine being whole, being healed, and he perversely seems to enjoy living in the "wound" of that horrific war ("I knew what I wanted was the wound," as he says on p. 119), even as he believes he is still mentally "[w]aiting for the word that changes things. The effing word. The Efficacious Word" (93). That word is the *Logos*, the Christ.

Christ's words on the resurrection drive the action of the last drama in this collection, *Lazarus*, the shortest of these three plays. This drama critiques the lack of faith held by a modern vicar, who cannot explain Christ's language in the phrase "I am the Resurrection and the Life." He proclaims these words at the funeral of a dead seventeen-year-old boy, where he is questioned about their meaning by a character named simply "First Voice," a middle-aged guest attending the funeral. The play then subtly contrasts the vicar's inability to articulate his faith with that held by the Second and Third Voices. The Second Voice seems to be Lazarus's enraged wife, who shouts at the late-arriving Christ and blames him for not arriving on time to save her

husband, while the young male Third Voice serves as eyewitness to Lazarus's resurrection. Third Voice gives us a very human Christ—"shivering as if he had a cold or flu" (132) on the way to the cemetery with Lazarus's wife—who nonetheless is fully supernatural. He emphasizes the power of Christ's voice at the miraculous moment: "Then just, 'Come.' Like that, flat, short, dropping like a stone in the dust. 'Lazarus, come forth'" (133). The storm that rises in that moment parallels the one narrated by the First Voice who had a nightmare about his aunt coming to life in the coffin (134). And *Lazarus* brings together these voices from the past and present through Christ's still, small voice saying, "I'm what's left. You may go away, I won't" (135). Here we find the *Logos* that David Jones sought. It is articulated by the formerly skeptical First Voice, reciting John 1, "The Word was with God and the Word was God," as he imagines being in a storm with water pouring down, "[a]nd all those big plain words just sitting there. . ." (135). As the silent Lazarus and taciturn Christ sit at the table in Lazarus's house, his wife and the others silently listen. And so do we, while the play ends and the speakers stand and silently look at each other, as the recorded voice that began the play reads "I am the Resurrection and the life," followed by a wooden gong struck three times to emphasize the booming thunder of the preceding thunderstorms, which cuts through the isolation and death that surround us in our daily lives.

Movingly and memorably across multiple times and places, *Shakeshafte & Other Plays* reminds us that the search for truth is ongoing and finally embodied by the One who spoke the world into being and gave us the language to write such imaginative literature.

*Richard Rankin Russell is Professor of English and Graduate Program Director at Baylor University*

# *The Flowers of Evil*

BY CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

TRANSLATED BY AARON POOCHIGAN

REVIEWED BY J. C. SCHARL

Intellectuals love to quibble about precisely when an era began—or ended. When exactly did Rome fall? At what point did the collapse of the USSR become inevitable? What demarcates the “High Middle Ages?” Such questions tickle the ears but conceal another un-speakable question: “Has our own age already ended?”

The poetry of Charles Baudelaire (1821–1867), now in a new translation by Aaron Poochigan, is fascinating for many reasons, not least because it delineates the edge of an era.<sup>1</sup> Whether the edge is a beginning or an end depends on what we believe constitutes civilization. But either way, Baudelaire’s volume, titled *The Flowers of Evil*, indicates a shift in our beliefs about art, the artist’s role, and the relationship between the individual and society.

French poetry has a reputation (unearned) of being lofty, inaccessible—a mark of impossibly elevated taste. I think of the moment in *Groundhog Day* where Andie

MacDowell’s character reveals that she studied French poetry before becoming a producer for a local news station; the biographical tidbit serves to exalt her beyond the realm of Lesser Mortals, making her a Beatrice to Bill Murray’s Dante.

In Poochigan’s new translation, this great modern French poet becomes not only accessible but urgent reading for anyone who wants to understand where our civilization came from—and where it is going.

## “ONE DAWN WE SHIP OUT”

“Charles Baudelaire was the first modern poet,” says Dana Gioia in the introduction to Poochigan’s translation. There is no other way to describe Baudelaire: he is the father of all who make verse in these days.

What, though, *is* a modern poet? Modern poetry (which, to clarify, is not limited to the category called “Modernist”), is presumably poetry that belongs to the modern era—and here the spectral question rises again: *what is modernity?*

1. *The Flowers of Evil* by Charles Baudelaire. Translated by Aaron Poochigan. New York: Liveright, 2023, \$27.95, pp. 400.

Since I must offer something, I offer this: modernity is *The Individual Against*. Against nature, society, God—modernity positions the individual as a solitary force. Modernity is the *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog*, alone above the mysteries, mediating them for himself. It is *Nighthawks*, huddled together yet profoundly solitary in a tiny commercial oasis against encroaching darkness. It is a figure strong, silent, above judgment or obligations, with the courage to wrest meaning from the abyss. “To thine own self be true,” modernity says, quoting Polonius, forgetting that Polonius, in the course of *Hamlet*, is a fickle, untrustworthy knave whose loyalty twists in the wind.

Modernity is neither fully good nor fully evil. If Solzhenitsyn is right and “the line between good and evil runs through every human heart,” how much more must it run through every era. Here poetry is a great help, for if we understand the anguish of the poet, we may be able to better interpret the cry of our age’s sundered heart.

#### “ONWARD! WITHOUT KNOWING WHY”

Modern poetry encompasses nearly all poetry since Baudelaire, because that poetry places itself in conversation with Baudelaire, in either submission or challenge. Modern poetry cannot escape the demands Baudelaire placed upon language.

Of course, some poets have *not* entered into conversation with Baudelaire, but these are few and often peripheral. Possibly one of these voices will be heralded by the future as a prophet, but choosing to ignore the agonies and triumphs of one’s age is a dangerous path for artists. Poetry that endures always has what David Jones called the quality of “now-ness.” In the hands of great artists (Homer, Shakespeare, Dante all wrote poetry dripping with their ages), the “now” transcends and transforms the stuff of history—petty regional conflicts, provincial comedies, passing political infighting—into the stuff of eternity.

That is what we see in Baudelaire. *The Flowers of Evil* contains just a few dozen poems, a startlingly slim vol-

ume to have birthed modern poetry. But in it, Baudelaire exposes the back alleys and slovenly bedrooms of nineteenth-century Paris as the most sordid chambers of the human heart.

Baudelaire lived and wrote in nineteenth-century France. A native of Paris, he died in his mother’s arms only a few miles from where he was born, aged forty-six. During his lifetime, his verse attracted little attention—save from the French government. Soon after *The Flowers of Evil* was published, the government tried Baudelaire for obscenity. Baudelaire lost; he and his publisher both had to pay fines; six of his poems were suppressed. He died a decade later. Soon after his death, poets and artists began to recognize that this failed French writer had done something significant: he had given the modern age a voice.

From all this, we might expect *The Flowers of Evil* to be an ecstasy of free verse, a stylistic rebellion against the structures of classical art. Nothing could be further from the reality. Baudelaire’s poetry is meticulously formal, adhering—sometimes scrupulously—to the laws of classical French poetry.

Poochigian’s translation follows Baudelaire’s lead, rendering the poems into rhymed and metered verse. This alone makes it an astonishing accomplishment. French, being a syllable-timed language, has a different approach to meter than English, which is stress-timed. In addition, there are many more rhymes in French (a more directly Romantic, or Latinate, language) than in Germanic-rooted English. Poochigian’s choice to retain, as closely as possible, Baudelaire’s formalism gives English readers a startling new vision of Baudelaire’s world, in which the pillars and arches of classical structures soar over halls full of rot and ruin.

Consider, for example, the opening lines of the repulsive and fascinating sonnet Poem 32:

Once, sleeping with a horrid Jewish crone,  
(we lay like corpses), I began to dream,  
beside that flesh bought for a given time,  
of someone beautiful who once was mine.

This is the absolute collapse of romantic love. The chivalric ideal that had dominated the European imagination since Charlemagne, lingering far longer in poetry than in society, here shows its stinking remains: “Love,” that guiding star, has fallen into lust and led the poet to the bought bed of a disgusting old woman. This is desolation; these two bodies that “lay like corpses” cannot bring forth life. This is the exact opposite of romantic chivalry. There, a wholly chaste love brings forth the fruit of noble deeds. Here, physical lust is sterile; its carnality brings no new life.

#### “TELL US WHAT YOU HAVE SEEN”

Baudelaire’s poetry plunges us repeatedly into gruesome physicality, the poet’s sanity held together only by the classical structures of the poems and his strange, ghastly version of Catholicism. Baptized a Catholic, Baudelaire never escaped the shade (or shadow?) of the Church. “Nothing on earth is interesting except religion,” he wrote, and his verse bears this out. The speaker of Baudelaire’s poems, especially in the section *Spleen and the Ideal*, cries out as if stretched on a rack, torn between his obsession with the body and his certainty that the body is decay, his imaginative longing for religion and his fear that religion too will prove rotten. In poem 48, “The Perfume Bottle,” the rack stretches so far that the speaker fears he will rip:

Vertigo wrestles the already vanquished soul  
through the abysmal recess of human smell

and drops it to the bottom of an ancient pit  
where, just as Lazarus once tore his winding-sheet,  
a ghostly corpse comes back to life—the specter of  
a long-dead and seductive, rancid sort of love.

Baudelaire’s religious agony reaches blasphemous depths in poem 120, “The Litanies of Satan,” where the speaker begs the devil to “Grant that my soul may lie near you beneath the Tree/of Knowledge.” Here Baudelaire finishes what Milton began, painting us humans in the image of the rebellious devil rather than the all-sacrificing God.

#### “IMMORTAL SIN—A RATHER BORING SIGHT”

Yet, in allying modern man with rebellious Lucifer, where does Baudelaire see this rebellion going? There is no more modern poem than Baudelaire’s “Voyaging,” which concludes the whole collection. Here Poochigian’s careful adherence to meter and rhyme give his translation a tautness lacking in other translations. He renders the first line, “The world can sate the giant appetite,” an enjambment that seems to validate our lust. But read on:

The world can sate the giant appetite  
of children keen on stamps and atlases.  
How vast it all is in the lantern’s light!  
How pitiful in recollection’s eyes!

The world can only sate our lowest appetites, our most childish ones. It has nothing to offer our mature selves, who look through “recollection’s eyes” to see a former vastness as really quite paltry. “How strange a game!” Baudelaire writes later in “Voyages.” “The object of the quests/changes and could be everywhere at once.”

This, then, is the end of modernity: constant satiation of our basest appetites, change so rapid and so continuous that it becomes itself a drudgery. In Part IV of “Voyages,” a wizened old mariner tells the poet, “Despite disastrous situations,/we often have been bored, as we are here.” And later, in Part VI, the mariner says, “We witnessed (without even seeking it),/the whole way up and down the fatal ladder,/immortal sin—a rather boring sight.” Immortal sin, in which the poet has luxuriated for a hundred and twenty-five poems, finally bears its fruit: boredom.

Today, tomorrow, yesterday, the bland  
world gives us back our own reflection: a spring  
of horror rising out of boring sand!

#### “OUR MINDS ARE BURNING, AND WE WANT TO GO”

This is the sandy shore where Baudelaire, the Sybil of our Cumae, casts us up. He hails modernity as a bril-

liant star, with its vision of the heroic individual against society, against morality, against God—but that star is falling, and by the end of the voyage, it has been swallowed up by the sea.

All this leaves us with one last question: what are *the flowers of evil*? The answer is many-faceted and disputable, but I will offer a suggestion. Baudelaire's response to *ennui*, the horrible boredom besetting the modern soul, is to immerse ourselves in evil, contemplating it so fiercely and steadily that we come to love it, finding unexpected beauty. As Gioia writes in the new introduction, "Discovering the beauty in such objects—disease, vice, intoxication, decay—reveals the secret purposes of their troubling existence."

This is a disturbing claim. It threatens to suck us into a dualistic universe in which God and the Devil are equals, evil possessing just as much right to existence as goodness. The "flowers," then, are the unexpected beauties that can flourish only in the sickly atmosphere of this tainted world.

Understood this way, we can see Baudelaire's influence all over contemporary art, where the formerly taboo is now commonplace. "Transgressive art", or art which examines something repugnant without passing moral judgment on it, owes its existence to *The Flowers of Evil*. But Baudelaire himself might not approve of how modernity has embraced moral relativism; to him, the line between good and evil, between beauty and ugliness, remained. Art does not ask us to seek to erase that line; instead, it asks us to consider man as an inextricable mingling of divinity and diabolism.

### "TO FIND WHAT'S NEW"

If Baudelaire is truly the prophet of modernity, it seems we have come to the end of his prophecy. What marks our society more clearly than avaricious, dismayed *ennui*? What more fully describes us than a "bland/world giving us back our own reflection: a spring/of horror rising out of boring sand?" For denizens of the twenty-first century, even the flowers of evil have begun to wilt.

So, what to do? Baudelaire's biography perhaps offers a clue. At the end of his life, Baudelaire requested and received Last Rites. On his deathbed, when this whole world with all its myriad miseries and beauties was passing away for him, he turned to something beyond this world.

This might seem like a cheap answer: *Oh, Baudelaire rejected his philosophy on his deathbed, so we can ignore it*. But I do not see it that way. Instead, I believe that in receiving Last Rites, which usually includes Holy Communion, Baudelaire at last allowed into his soul the greatest mystery of the relationship between Good and Evil: the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ. St. Augustine called the Fall the *felix culpa*—the "happy fault" which, as the Easter Exsultet says, "merited so great, so glorious a Redeemer!" Why is it that Christians reflect on the Cross? Why do we meditate on the sufferings of Christ? Is it not because in those wounds, we find the greatest Beauty the universe can reveal—not simply flowers found *within* evil, but flowers made, somehow, *out of* evil?

"Voyaging" concludes:

Give us your poison and we will be well.  
Our minds are burning, and we want to go  
into the magnitude of Heaven or Hell,  
to fathom the unknown, to find *what's new*.

That is the cry of the modern soul—a dangerous one, pitching us to the very brink of Hell. But the edge of Hell may be nearer salvation than the plains of complacency, for there at least we are crying out. And, as Baudelaire found at the end of his life, God truly does hear the cry of the poor.

---

*J. C. Scharl is a poet and essayist. Her writing has appeared in many publications throughout the English-speaking world, including the BBC, The European Conservative, The New Ohio Review, The Hudson Review, Dappled Things, Plough Quarterly, and many others. She lives with her husband and two children in Detroit, Michigan.*

“And pain will be the  
thing that saves us.”

—Bob Hicok “*When Illness is Cure*”

BY TOM C. HUNLEY

---

I had to write a sex scene for my screenplay, and  
I had her say “oh baby!” as he, in a cry of sweet pain  
said “yes, baby!” but I know what he doesn’t, that she will  
get pregnant tonight, and I know this baby will be  
different than planned, someday a Special Olympian, not the  
pro prospect they’ve hoped for. Often the thing  
you say is the same thing someone else says even as that  
thing means something different, the way *saves*  
can be a baseball term, can precede *money*, can follow *Jesus*.

## BOOKS AND ARTS

# *The Waste Land: A Biography of A Poem*

BY MATTHEW HOLLIS

REVIEWED BY RHYS LAVERTY

Many of us have experienced T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* as a lurking but unknown context for modern literature. Where to begin with it? Even those of us who have read it many times over still scratch our heads at its allusions and half-quotations, even with aids like Eliot's own notes or B.C. Southam's popular guide to the *Selected Poems*.

The arrival of Matthew Hollis's *The Waste Land: A Biography of a Poem*, one of a number of publications marking the poem's centenary in 2022, provides an opportunity for both new readers and devotees to get to grips with Eliot's work.<sup>1</sup> The poem's story unfolds through Hollis's expert interweaving of Eliot's life with that of its chief editor, the mercurial Ezra Pound. Pound—credited in the poem's inscription as *il miglior fabbro*, “the better craftsman”—famously cut an initial draft to ribbons. So: no Pound, no *Waste Land*. This is despite the pair's stark differences: Eliot was awkward and restrained; Pound was brash and rash, sometimes found boxing Hemingway bare-chested in Gertrude Stein's Paris apartment.

Hollis deftly avoids giving us two truncated biographies of the writers rather than a biography of the poem itself. Throughout, he conjures a sense of *inevitability* about the poem's arrival, eerily calling to mind the Emmaus-inspired lines from its final section: “Who is the third who always walks beside you?”

We could break Hollis's account of the poem's key influences down into four areas: the social, the singular, the savantic, and the spiritual.

## THE SOCIAL

*The Waste Land* is inseparable from the First World War. Its opening evokes a lost Europe with its talk of German summers at the Arch Duke's house, before shifting to post-war London where “death had undone so many.” Hollis makes these well-known connections but exceeds the usual fare, unpacking how much the fate of Europe animated Eliot after the war, vexed as he was by the Treaty of Versailles, taking a conservative turn influenced by the work of the French monarchist Charles Maurras. He spoke of surrendering himself to “the mind of Europe,” receiving a living tradition stretching from

1. *The Waste Land: A Biography of a Poem* by Matthew Hollis. London: Faber & Faber, 2022, £25, pp. 485.

the prehistoric cave-drawings at Font-de-Gaume to Hamlet and beyond (118). And yet, despite this conservative bent, *The Waste Land* was a revolution in form—a seeming collage of voices: high and low, East and West, Shakespeare and ragtime, Greek myths and pub gossip, London trains and Augustine. Hollis pinpoints times, dates, and places which enlivened Eliot to the polyphony of modernity, yet also stresses Eliot’s insistence that the poem was an “emotional unit,” “conceived in terms of one voice” (287).<sup>2</sup> The result is a oneness which persists despite the appearance of the many, explaining how such a traditionalist became a cornerstone of modernism.

Pound was similarly animated by Europe, attempting “to straighten out his ideas on history, the rise of nations, the developments and atrophies of civilization” in his ever unfolding *Cantos* (138–139). He failed to gain any purchase with his lambasts however, his failure catalyzing a famed “literary selflessness” as he devoted himself to supporting Eliot in writing his own long poem (175). The two men were united by a common purpose here. Unfortunately, they were both equally inclined to an inexcusable anti-Semitism—Pound, it must be said, to a greater extent than Eliot. Hollis treats this vice justly throughout whenever its mention is necessary, neither excusing nor exaggerating.

### THE SINGULAR

“The critics say I am an learned & cold.... The truth is I am neither”—so Eliot confided in Virginia Woolf (242). He was right about the critics—he is still generally regarded as a cold fish, thought to eschew intimacy for an elitist web of arch literary references. Why talk about your feelings when you can quote Dante? Eliot was often damned by the faint praise of being “clever” (181). Yet one of the greatest strengths of this book is showing how deeply singular and personal a poem *The Waste Land* is. This is nowhere more evident than in the second section, “A Game of Chess.” The voice pleading “My nerves are bad tonight. Yes, bad. Stay with me” is taken from countless episodes of his first wife Vivien’s

ill-health. Hollis closely reconstructs the composition of these lines alongside Eliot’s diary entries regarding a particular bout of Vivien’s neuritis, before transitioning to the trenches (“rats’ alley/Where the dead men lost their bones”). The transition parallels Vivien’s breakdown with wartime shellshock, somewhat trivializing the former. Before readers cast aspersions on Eliot here, they should note that Vivien gave Eliot notes on the whole poem and praised this section highly.<sup>3</sup> Her note here simply read “WONDERFUL, wonderful, yes & wonderful.”

### THE SAVANTIC

Hollis also illuminates *The Waste Land* as a savantic enterprise, deeply concerned with birthing a modern poetry still in step with the Great Tradition. Pound championed Eliot as the great hope for modern verse, an alternative to the sentimentality of the dominant “Georgian poetry.” Hollis records a remark from Virginia Woolf, who noted Eliot’s interest in “making this new poetry flower on the stem of the oldest”—perhaps the most intuitive remark ever made about Eliot’s own perception of his art (12).

In the second half of the book, Hollis follows in fine detail how Pound and Eliot (along with Vivien) brought this flowering about. There is a tense moment-by-moment account of the editing of “A Game of Chess”: Pound calls the opening lines “too tum-pum at a stretch,” prompting Eliot to drop two syllables from the second line, introducing a jarring line of tetrameter among neighboring pentameters; Vivien’s English ear was essential in scripting the pub conversation between the two ladies at the section’s end, suggesting the snippets of slang, “demobbed” instead of Eliot’s clunky “discharged out of the army” (269). Eliot took their suggestions on board yet had confidence enough to push back and retain plenty, foregoing Vivien’s suggestion to show slang pronunciation through spelling (keeping “something” rather than “somethink”). To read Hollis’ account of such moments of composition is to see in real time that flowering of modern poetry on the stem of the oldest.

2. My honest advice, though, if you have struggled with *The Waste Land*, would be to listen to a recording performed by two voices, ideally male and female. It wasn’t until I heard Jeremy Irons and Eileen Atkins reading the poem together that it truly began to make sense to me.

3. Vivien’s annotations on the drafts, along with Pound’s and Eliot’s, can all be seen in another excellent book published for the poem’s centenary, a new color edition of *The Waste Land: A Facsimile & Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. Valerie Eliot (London: Faber & Faber, 2022).

## THE SPIRITUAL

Finally, Christian readers will be relieved to know that Hollis does justice to *The Waste Land* as a spiritual poem. Eliot's conversion to orthodox Christianity, with his entry into Anglicanism, didn't come about until 1927. The explicitly Christian nature of his later great works can often result in the religious aspects of earlier poems being (usually wilfully) overlooked. Yet Eliot was raised in a prestigious Unitarian family. Although Hollis omits some key spiritual influences in the young Eliot's life—F.H. Bradley's idealist philosophy, New England Puritanism, a religious experience in 1910—his spiritual framing of *The Waste Land* nonetheless ensures that it sits in continuity with his later life.<sup>4</sup>

Eliot had drifted from his cradle religion by the time of *The Waste Land*, finding in it only “petty vagaries,” but this discontent was key for his writing. A 1919 visit to Périgueux Cathedral whilst visiting Pound in France introduced Eliot to the Cathars—medieval anti-trinitarian and dualist heretics, burned at the stake for their beliefs. This discovery had a profound impact upon him. “What had Eliot to offer compared to such commitment?... The Unitarianism of his childhood seemed to him a poor man's fuddle: a culture of humanitarianism, of ethical mind games rather than a passionate adherence to Incarnation, Heaven and Hell... And in the absence of a religious conviction, his writing simply could not bear the weight” (116). Although Eliot's exploring eventually ended in a more orthodox Christianity, one of his greatest steps in its direction—like Augustine encountering the Platonists—was his encounter with the other-worldly commitment of the Cathars. The same trip took him to the cave drawing Font de Gaume, an equally profound experience. It was there that Eliot blindsided Pound by admitting that he feared a life after death (120). So struck was Pound that he returned to the moment repeatedly in his own writing (see Canto XXIX, where the Eliot character states “Now, at last, I have shocked him”). Pound, however, held a fairly textbook attitude toward religion as a modern Bohemian: “All religions are evil” (135).

In Hollis's telling, Pound's *Cantos* present economic justice as the great hope for modernity; *The Waste Land* instead hopes for spiritual direction. How could two men so at odds on such a fundamental topic as religion unite to create one of the great works of modern poetry? Despite their difference on the ultimate cure for the wound of modernity, the two were united in their assessment of the injury and that a new poetry needed to be part of the treatment. In a glorious summary section, Hollis describes how the two men

“found a way for the poem to exist within them both at the same moment, possessed by neither but possessing of both. In that instant the poem was neither ‘Eliot's composition nor Pound's' editorial, but a common project, equally imagined, inhabiting each man simultaneously and fully. The poem had become an event occurring in both men in unison, in creator and critic, in poet and reader, in two halves of a combining mind. Pound did not of course share the same life experienced as Eliot... but he understood how to experience the force of [Eliot's] feelings in the poem in which they were converging, and, crucially, he understood how to transmute them into an experience that others might comprehend” (367).

Hollis's book is a thoroughly worthy way to mark the centenary of *The Waste Land*, for readers both new and old. The book's greatest merit, though, is its restraint in drawing parallels between the context of *The Waste Land* and today. Such links would be easy, but Hollis, like a poet, shows rather than tells. *The Waste Land's* enduring relevance speaks for itself. No attentive reader could fail to appreciate the increasingly obvious fact that what we've long called “postmodernity” is really just the long expiring half-life of the same modernity which Eliot diagnosed so astutely a century ago.

---

Rhys Lavery is Senior Editor of Ad Fontes and Managing Editor at the Davenant Press, as well as a student in Davenant Hall's M.Litt program. His writing has appeared in Ad Fontes, *Mere Orthodoxy*, and the Theopolis Institute. He lives in Chessington, UK, with his wife and two children.

4. A superb treatment of Eliot's religious and philosophical development can be found in Lyndall Gordon's *The Imperfect Life of T.S. Eliot* (London: Virago, 2012).



# AD FONTES

A JOURNAL OF PROTESTANT LETTERS

---

ADFONTESJOURNAL.COM

## ENJOYED THIS ISSUE?

*Support the Davenant Institute*

---

The Davenant Institute is dedicated to retrieving the riches of classical Protestantism in order to renew and build up the contemporary church. *Ad Fontes* is but one part of our wide-ranging work. We rely primarily on small donations from readers like you to keep our ministry going. Please consider supporting us at [davenant.kindful.com](http://davenant.kindful.com).