

The poetry of Sam Hunt and the practice of Spiritual Direction

*...featuring excerpts from an interview with New Zealand poet
Sam Hunt in October 2010*

By

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INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of 2009 surprising things happened when I took a group of teenage literacy students wading in Sam Hunt's book of poems, 'Doubtless', published in 2008.

The students - from VisionWest Training Centre, a second chance school for youth run under the auspices of Glen Eden Baptist Church in Auckland – were given the following brief: they had to pick a poem from Sam's book; next try letting their minds drop into their hearts; then imagine they were floating in a deep pool with the words of the poem floating around them.

They were to scan the poem with a 'listening-eye'. The expectation was that a word, or a phrase, or a sentence, or a verse, would float towards them, bump into them, and invite them to look more closely.

They were to contemplate what 'shone a little more brightly'.

I was teaching them a form of Lectio Divina, the 12th century Christian art of 'holy reading'. But instead of gazing at traditional holy scripture, they were wading in poetry from the human heart, but which according to Sam, more often than not seemed to 'drop from above' (heard in a radio interview) before making it onto the page.

Delightedly every student who gave 'listening-reading' a go, encountered a sense of being known, of being met, or understood in some way.

Students were shown how to tap, break open and explore the invitations and images that emerged from Sam's special places, relationships, thoughts and memories. They sketched, and wrote their own poetry as they went.

Soon they could apply 'listening-reading' to other writers, to art images, and finally they started to read and hear the messages offered by the movements, colours and textures of Nature herself.

By the end of Term 2, a collection of student writings and artwork fluttered like newly hatched butterflies on the classroom wall.

For me, finding God in poetry has been rather like a child who goes to Sunday School for a year or two, may even get confirmed as a 12 year old, but who doesn't find a personal relationship with Jesus until Billy Graham comes to town in their teens.

I read poetry in the form of nursery rhymes as a small child, and learnt poems off by heart through primary and secondary school as required. But it wasn't until I started reading the poems of Sam Hunt with students, that I discovered that poetry - more specifically lyric poetry - could be a tool for the transformative action of the Holy Spirit.

This essay offers a glimpse into the mystery of poetics and how and why it can link the human with the divine.

One idea seems key: That poetic awe is "capable at any moment of becoming not less, but more, than poetic awe. It is often with a profound sense of transfigured awe that the artist or mystic perceives the truths of super-nature, or on a higher level, of God."

So says Leanne Payne in her book *'Real Presence'* in which she discusses the Holy Spirit in the works of C.S. Lewis.¹

So where to start in terms of exploring the possible prophetic nature of poems? I started with the ancient Greeks: the foundational writers of the canon of western literature.

Greek scholar, H.D.F. Kitto says *'poiesis'* was understood by the Greeks as first a verb, an action that transforms and continues the world. They believed Logos or divine reason connected to inspired poets in a way that informed human acts, thoughts and feelings, ushered in new eras of thought and understanding.²

Poetics fell into disrepute at some point in the early church due to the pagan connection with the genre, so I have included some background on Greek poetics from Kitto and M.I. Finley.

I drew also from Alan Altany writing about Thomas Merton's transformative poetics; Orthodox priest David Goa on Liturgy and Logos; polymath George Steiner on "presence" in art and literature; linguist Edward Sapir on the technicalities of poems.

Eventually I felt reasonably sure of a set of features found in poetry that *'speaks'*.

Sam Hunt graciously agreed to comment on my list – and excerpts from an interview with him is the special part of this essay. Sam along with Goa and Merton links the action of poems to that of *The Mass in Liturgy* - the common element being the transformative action of *The Word made flesh - 'I am' – and the verb 'to be'*.

Several months after the interview, T.S. Eliot's book *"Selected Prose"* put the nature of Poetics more firmly in my grasp. I've added some pertinent quotes.

And Carolyn Pinet's³ review of Jorge Guillen's *'Cantico'* came vividly into focus too...she nicely ties up this essay's key ideas that poetry can be a canticle or a liturgy where ordinary, secular reality is recreated as extraordinary and sacred..and "an act of creation in constant renewal".

¹ *'Gleams of celestial strength and beauty can strike like arrows out of the words and the silence of the poet's work'*, Payne. Leanne, *Real Presence, the Work Of The Holy Spirit in C.S. Lewis*; Cornerstone Books, 1979. p 137.

² H.D.F Kitto, *The Greeks*; Pelican, 1951(p8-9, 202-203)

³ Carolyn Pinet, Cardinal Stritch College, Milwaukee, *The Sacramental View of Poetry and the Religion of Love in Jorge Guillen's Cantico*, Hispania Vol. 62, No. 1, Mar., 1979

SAM HUNT

For nigh on 40 years Sam Hunt has made it his business to share the journey of his heart with ours, pouring out his unique brand of poetic anointing in schools and universities, prisons and pubs, on radio and in print, at symphonic and rock concerts, in film documentaries like 'Catching The Tide – Sam Hunt's Cook Strait' (1988), and more lately as singer-poet on music videos with composer-musician David Kilgour.

The poet doesn't hit the road so often these days, yet his canon of work - past and new - still beats its wings. There are odes and elegies, requiems and invocations, benedictions and lamentations, prayers and praises, confessions and absolutions.

But rather than being "religious" poems "about" God, these works offer, in the words of TS Eliot: "something larger than its author's conscious purpose" .. "more, not less, than ordinary speech can communicate".⁴

Sam Hunt uses the grand language of Nature and potent archetypal signals: a sense of tide and movement, of rivers and mountains, journey and homecoming, of tangled weeds and light on water shining, of glimpses through woods and wild possibilities, of not just his mother "out there on the other side of the world" or his brother's "great coat flapping," but our mother and our brother. (*Glimpse P 258*)

In another poem, Sam hints at the need to "give voice" to the world. And it's the real things and things of mystery that he gives voice to and through: in 'Doubtless' God floats in cloud, boat and moon, in toi tois that wave like angels, and in 'dreams of hawks' and 'high plateau' – dream-like images that seem to carry a greater 'presence'.

This fits the first of my series of pointers, to poems that - to use Sam Hunt's phrase – "contain the DNA of God".

Pointer 1: Reading C. S. Lewis with Leanne Payne, I gleaned that the poet's gift is to be a muse for God, with God as the object of the poet's love, not just a carrier of living images⁵.

Sam says "being a muse for God" is – in the tradition of the ancient Greeks - doing the work of "making something" .

"It makes sense – in the sense that – put it this way round - might be putting it so far round the other way it won't be recognisable but the thought of not writing poems on a pretty regular basis – one may reject them in the end – but that doesn't matter – it's the making of them – doing the old consecration trick – making the verb 'to be' – to not to have that would be unimaginable – I can't imagine loving – or I can't imagine a lot of things in my life if that weren't there.

⁴ T.S.Eliot, *Selected Prose*; Peregrine Books, 1953

⁵ 'The poet's gift is to be a muse for God, with God as the object of the poet's love, not just a carrier of living images.'... see Payne's discussion on the close relationship between religious and poetic awe. Payne, Leanne, *Real Presence, the Work Of The Holy Spirit in C.S. Lewis*; Cornerstone Books, 1979. p 136-137, 142, 152.

“And I’ve had barren times – when you go into the barren times – and there are no poems, there are no illuminations and there are no consecrations or transubstantiations – there’s nothing - you’re in the desert – 40 days and 40 nights stuff – in my case it was 10 years - only because I had the poems but I couldn’t find the verb – I couldn’t find the doing word – which was I really ultimately realised in an odd sort of cosmic leap was the verb ‘to be’...

...“the hardest verb of all to understand...has its own rules, has its own grammar, has its own exceptions as against the other verbs to run, or cook a meal...which I always found interesting.

“For me once I understood that and largely my father to thank for those sort of funny conversations we used to have”...“Dad had done all the classical studies training for his law and he always used to say about the verb ‘to be’ – strange to say from my agnostic father – but explaining to me at an early age the importance of the meaning of the verb ‘to be’ prepared me for the later understanding of the idea of consecration – ironic isn’t it that the agnostic parent prepared the child for the non-agnostic experience.

The only bit of the whole Catholic Mass that ever made sense to me - certainly by the time I’d finished my relationship with it - was the consecration..”

“..As I said to Pat Dunn the Bishop of Auckland quite a good friend mine, and if I die, if he outlives me, he’s going to say a prayer in this room here.

“I said the only bit I want is the consecration. I don’t want any of the rest – the farewells at the end - just the consecration. But he said there’s a ceremony and you’re strong on ceremony.

“And he’s right. If my father hadn’t gone on about the verb ‘to be’ at about Alf’s age (his son) – and what a funny verb it was – I think the whole understanding , or belief or sense of credibility of the consecration story - I don’t think it would have hit as hard as it did. It hit hard because I knew we were talking about something – that’s not ‘like’ something - but in a very odd peculiar way it ‘is’ something. Put it this way the word ‘like’ is wrong – maybe there’s no right word for it. Like trying to find the right word for aroha – words very, very hard to find.

“I loved what Ezra Pound, I think it was Ezra,.. said ‘poetry is the language that can’t be translated’ – in other words it ‘is’, it can’t be ‘like’. Like doesn’t come into it. It ‘is’. Like when the Pharisees asked Christ who he was – he didn’t say well I’m actually like the son of David.”

‘Like Christ saying ‘I am’, it (the poem) is.”

If you took one of the great Yeats poems – like The Second Coming – or Alpiz Lazuli – or The Collarbone Of A Hare – and someone said to me ‘could you write 200 words on what Yeats was saying here’, what he meant, I’d be lost – I’ve got every idea – but it’s all contained in the poem, it’s all there, that’s where it is. It doesn’t belong elsewhere.

If you take for example a Theodore Roethke poem – Wish For My Young Wife” it’s only a few lines.

*My lizard, my lively writher,
May your limbs never wither,
May the eyes in your face*

*Survive the green ice
Of envy's mean gaze;
May you live out your life
Without hate, without grief,
And your hair ever blaze,
In the sun, in the sun,
When I am undone,
When I am no one.*

"Well what's he saying there? He loves her? To paraphrase it diminishes its importance - I think it diminishes its sacredness. Yeah I don't need someone to paraphrase Schubert's..

But back to the Mass: *"The Mass is very much a great poem – to me it's a poem before it's anything else – and that's its greatest compliment. I'm not demeaning it I'm saying, no, it's that big".*

"It always interested me the Mass – in terms of the occasion and the poetry – yes, occasion and poetry go together.

"When I used to go to Mass and especially as an altar boy because you're that much closer to the action - you're so much closer to the table in the upper room - that it gave me a good chance to actually see what was happening. Now it wasn't a question of 'does the bread really become flesh or did you taste the wine and was it in fact blood'? – I've written a lot of poems on the subject"

"But certainly the transubstantiation is interesting – because it makes sense – to me - it always has made sense to me.

"The word made flesh - what are we talking about here? I think he's making it fairly clear where we're going – we're not going to the races, we're not going for a picnic – you know..

Orthodox priest and writer, David Goa draws the action of words and The Word in the Mass closely together too: "In the ritual we see the knitting together of memory and hope; indeed, they are knit together as the "Word out of silence" which transfigures the life of the world. Past and future coalesce in the present, in the transfigured presence."⁶

This description of Goa's was so close to words I'd jotted down when I first started to think about the features of Sam's poems – their sense of memory and hope, past and future meeting in the present.

For Sam the Mass is a transformative, transfigurative poem and his comments around the verb "to be" suggests this mystery is at heart of his work..

Old flames

*The cabbage tree was, they said,
Dead. There was nothing they
Or anyone could do
Now or any day –
How sorry they
Were, and sad.*

⁶ Goa, David, The Word That Transfigures, *The Canadian Journal Of Orthodox Christian Thought and Theology*

*But the cabbage tree heard them – they never noticed it shaking its head:
It shook so hard
Stars were said to have spread
From where the cabbage tree stood:
A blossoming, new constellation
Across that night sky south.
Someone said just
Yesterday,
Some fires*

You can't put out. (p79)

'Cloud Song' has a 'sky' feeling too.

*I find myself
 Taking photographs
Of clouds*

*When I'm not
 Dreaming of clouds
I wish I were
I wish I were
Some other place where clouds
Were the only thing happening*

*Or getting back to you
And what would you say
 You would say*

*The only thing on the menu
We have this evening, sir,
 Is cloud. (P58)*

I slightly nervously proffered the thought that Christ might be found walking through his poems?
"Yes I think you're right – I agree with you".

"What I'm saying about Christ is based on my mythology that I've grown up with - you do write from your place not just environmentally but your place spiritually in terms of your mythology in terms of the images you use."

Sam loves the New Testament but he's at pains to distance himself from Christian labels of any kind:
"Public worship is interesting, and I go occasionally".

So how does Sam experience God in terms of being a muse for God: *"the fact is when you are making contact with let us say for now the unknown – you realise something different is happening – I guess it's like good anything.. like a beautiful wine..*

"I've always found with poems something came on the room – lots of different situations I can think of –my grandfather knew a lot of Byron...

"..from an early age I had the attitude – this may sound a bit subservient - always had the feeling that – said this before in the odd situation - that every poem hopefully of some quality that you happen to write – is a gift – it's not necessarily going to happen...it's not a given."

Pointer 2: Sam says true poetry must express “real” things - rather than be ‘about’ God. And that seems to be a vital piece of the divine poetry puzzle.⁷

“I constantly refer to it actually – I’m just thinking about on Friday night (a show) – in the poem : ‘when a man pats a dog the world is that much better a place.’ I should do that poem more often.”

Sam wonders aloud the real things of man, and of mystery, like an ancient cantor, admitting to profound heartache and aloneness - *“silence that has crashed around a man too long now”* .. but he’s lifted too, through experiences that seem to hold him in the realm of light, hope and love.

*“we’re all of us
Daughters.
So bless his
Holy Name, Amen,*

*We’re all of us
Abandoned.*

*And the sun
Shows no*

*Sign of sinking and love
Is not a word much*

Used or practised in these parts.

*We are, though,
Daughters. (p30)*

Thomas Merton called poetry that talks about ‘real’ things “transformative” poetry: a “poetics of disappearance of the sacred in favour of a direct humanized and intimate experience, an intimate meeting of the holy and the profane with an emphasis on a synthesis of a new creation or union of both the flesh and the spirit.”^{7, 8}

“The mystery of Christ is at work in all human events, and our comprehension of secular events works itself out and expresses itself in that sacred history, the history of salvation, which the Holy Spirit teaches us to perceive in events that appear to be purely secular.”

The ‘real’ isn’t always about human relationships: Merton’s “Song For Nobody”, a poem depicting the “reality” of a yellow flower’s existence in God, had me page shuffling to Sam’s own two yellow flower poems for comparison: ‘Yellow’, and ‘What Do Dandelions Think?’

⁷ *“The mystery of Christ is at work in all human events, and our comprehension of secular events works itself out and expresses itself in that sacred history, the history of salvation, which the Holy Spirit teaches us to perceive in events that appear to be purely secular.”* Altany, Alan, Thomas Merton’s Poetry: Article: Emblems of a Sacred Season; Thomas Merton Society

⁸ *“This is Lewis’s mysticism...Incarnational Christianity is supernatural, and Christians are called and empowered to be extensions of the Incarnation. In this and in this alone – the “mysticism” that acknowledges the Presence of God with us, within us, empowering us – do we find all substitutes for the Real unmasked and stripped away. Lewis not only understood, but experienced, all reality as sacramental, as incarnational – that is as a channel through which God’s grace can be known and received...”* Payne, Leanne, Real Presence, the Work Of The Holy Spirit in C.S. Lewis; Cornerstone Books, 1979. p163, 164.

Quirkily, the yellow theme put me in mind of The Golden Tongue of St John Chrysostom, whose name is attached to the ancient liturgies of the Eastern Orthodox Church...and Theseus' reliance on a ball of yellow string to help him find his way in and out of the labyrinth.

Here's 'Yellow':

*It is the yellow of
(guessed it) the
dandelion:*

*bees have
died for it mis-
taking the sun.*

*That's how one
Such story goes.
Yellow as that.*

*Probably
True, the story.
Any*

*Story about
Dandelions and yellow
Has got to be*

*For you,
Remember it.
Be
Ready to die for it.*

Yellow as that. (p249)

And here's Merton's 'Song For Nobody'.

*A yellow flower
(Light and spirit)
Sings by itself
For nobody.*

*A golden spirit
(Light and emptiness)
Sings without a word
By itself.*

*Let no one touch this gentle sun
In whose dark eyes
Someone is awake.*

*(No light, no gold, no name, no color
And no thought;
O, wide awake!)*

*A golden heaven
Sings by itself
A song to nobody.*

Pointer 3: The poet's actions are outward rather than introspective, connecting and working with Nature and people and God and have the stamp of love.⁹

In 'Doubtless', as already suggested, the threads of human brokenness can be tracked, and the feeling can be overwhelmingly desolate, but using the language of Nature and love, Sam's poems seem to do the work of 'spiritual direction: they notice what's going on, name, own and respond to it. The poet is not introspective, in remembering, he moves forward.

Rangitikei river song

*...no longer keeping eye
For crumbling edges,
Lovers or the weather.
Listening, rather, to the river:
Hawk and high plateau,
rivermist below. (V3 p13)*

And the following lines, an excerpt, written in memory of Sam's mother's youngest sister, Hilary - again finds its potency in the language of the movements of Nature and the feeling of love.

The poem tells how his beloved aunt had dreams about Sam walking out on stage the whole of her last year: and of his visit to the farm where she'd lived -

*.. "I could only watch
The river flow past the farm,
The Tasman mountains heave through the mist,
The poplars hold the light apart.
And I thought for
A moment I saw
Hilary wave from the farmhouse door." (p103)*

Hilary died in her thirties leaving five children.

There are other "direct" mystical experiences in a small New Zealand town:

That feeling-of-being-in-the-country

*...Everyone creating their own sort of light
Throwing it out their kind of way
And you think of that community
And the communion of saints.*

⁹ The poet's actions are outward rather than introspective, connecting and working with Nature and people and God and have the stamp of love.

- "The conscious mind, turned inward on itself, destroys creativity" Payne, Leanne, Real Presence, the Work Of The Holy Spirit in C.S. Lewis; Cornerstone Books, 1979. p149, 151, 155.

- "His mystical awareness became united with a greater personal involvement with the events of the world. His own dark night had begun to find some degree of resolution in a conscious union with a God who was more radically incarnational than ever before to Merton and a union with the experiences of people all over the world, past and present. He came to see that the sacred was beyond conceptualization and was to be found in the center of history and the profane. As a poet of the sacred, Merton came to see the sacred, not as an object or idea, but a relationship and an interpretation of human experience in any and all seasons." Altany, Alan, Thomas Merton's Poetry: Article: Emblems of a Sacred Season; Thomas Merton Society

- talking about Plato's way of knowing, "included the ways of divine inspiration, of the poet and the prophet, of the dream and of the vision, and most important of all – the way of love .. The way of picture, metaphor, symbol, myth and –with love – the way of Incarnation: that way which brings myth and fact together. Payne, Leanne, Real Presence, the Work Of The Holy Spirit in C.S. Lewis; Cornerstone Books, 1979. p148.

*I never felt less
like wearing dark glasses
than in Reporoa this morning. (p133)*

Asked whether this felt like the communion of saints Sam says: “not ‘like’, it ‘is’ the communion of saints - you’re right there in the upper room”.

Pointer 4: On the subject of introspection, Payne and Lewis say avoiding that pitfall can “bring man out of himself and also be revealed to himself”.¹⁰

Sam says he can only own to a “subconscious wish to be part of some larger consciousness”.

“But I’ll never write a poem trying to talk to anyone else...I’m talking to myself.

“By talking to myself properly and convincingly enough I may get somewhere else – I may even get somebody listening to the poem.”

Sometimes he writes about how God might be feeling:

‘Oterei rivermouth’

*“I get to think that God
Is somewhere there between the river mouth and sea
Glistening*

*Helplessly
With only a broad sky a bored dog and me
listening. (p249)*

Pointer 5: All the experts seemed to say that “poetry must be shaped with the utmost skill using the conscious mind”¹¹

Edward Sapir, a late 19th Century philosopher and linguist lists three aspects that shape poetry: the poet’s own inspiration, his technical skills in obeying the matrix (phonologies etc) of his language, and an underlying absolute language that underlies all languages.

He talks about the ideal form of poetry where the poet, so skilled in the knowledge and handling of the matrix of his language, that the form disappears allowing the larger, deeper, more intuitive, unknown, absolute language to come forth.

“Some artists – the Whitmans and the Brownings impress us rather by the greatness of their spirit than the felicity of their art,” where as other poets “like Swinburne may be more technically literary but their poems are built out of spiritualized material not spirit, and is too fragile for endurance.”

Sam Hunt: “Great poetry is when what’s being said and how it’s being said are inseparable.”

¹⁰ This poetry has the ability to “bring man out of himself and also be revealed to himself”. “In this sense, imagination can be a means of grace.” “It calls the real I forward” Payne, Leanne, Real Presence, the Work Of The Holy Spirit in C.S. Lewis; Cornerstone Books, 1979. p135, 142.

¹¹ This kind of poetry must be shaped with the utmost skill using the conscious mind, Payne, Leanne, Real Presence, the Work Of The Holy Spirit in C.S. Lewis; Cornerstone Books, 1979. P 149, 150, 157, 164.

How do we know when it's great? *"Whether it's alive – whether the heart is beating, whether it's flesh and blood", said Sam.*

From Four Plateau Songs (for Tom turning 11):

*"A man asked me
Last night in the house bar
Just how it was
I could remember Poems.*

*I told him I could not forget them,
They're flesh and blood.
And your best poem? He asked.
I told him Tom.*

At first read many of Sam's poems can feel full of holes, gaps, spaces, seemingly unconnected bits that flap like a curtain in the wind...a sense there's another land behind the moving curtain.

But it's this "allusive" movement T.S Eliot talks about, that allows "presence" to come through the words and spaces, or the silence of the text, connecting us with what CS Lewis calls the "deep heart".

At that moment there's a shift, a transfiguring and transforming action, an experience of the waters being parted, of bread being broken, and of entering into the aliveness or 'he real'.

T.S. Eliot says this "allusiveness lies in the nature of words", rather than the "fashion or eccentricity of a peculiar type of poetry."

And he talks about how the poet must surrender his own emotion as he listens for what must be said.¹²

Sam Hunt's poem 'New Words' speaks of this listening, sculpting, self-sacrificing process:

'New Words'

*New words, the words I have not
Told, they gather for the night.*

I send them out each day, each tolling on its own. They reach

*I know not where. They bounce back
Reeling, some ready to break,*

*Some merely echoing. They
Bring back their news of the day*

*Told in each one's way. They come
Back tired, relieved to be home.*

These words, the words I have not told, they settle for the night.

¹² "Tradition and the individual talent" *"What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."* T.S.Eliot, *Selected Prose*; Peregrine Books, 1953 p25.

*Then, and only then, I light
the lamp, work on them, work late;*

*Coax and grill. Interrogation
Does not let up til dawn.*

*Some nights, a few surrender,
Tell me all I need know—her*

*Dreams, the rhythms of her heart.
That's when there's a poem in it.*

Pointer 6: "Gleams of celestial strength and beauty" can strike like arrows out of the words and the silence of the poet's work;

Descriptions of Nature's glistening images take timelessness to the higher realm of what Sam calls 'ephemeral' and 'mystical-infused text.'

Sam describes this moment of recognition of reality, as "where light literally enters the temple – enters the person's consciousness".

The larger beauty emanating from the spaces between Sam's words – is part of the silence Goan, and Merton, CS Lewis, T.S. Eliot and Hunt talk and write about.

A beauty in silence that speaks different things to different people, recalls different memories, different hopes, offers different invitations.

...Every time it rains like this:

*Rain from early morning falling
Thick with light: the whole
Wide world of our bay
Has given in: rain: and nothing any
Friend or fisherman can do..
(V1, P36)*

Sam says he intentionally visits silence: "I go down to Kopua (Hawkes Bay Cistercian Monastery) once a year – every 18 months or so.

You can go up for matins - I like to take in all the little chants – I set my alarm clock – I like to wander up the driveway in a winter's morning – at 2 o'clock in the morning hear this chanting coming out –bl.. good music.

I go for that – and more – elected silence – to actually choose to go into a silent situation. I wrote a poem recently – I'll show it to you later – new poem wrote it last week - one of the chords. Last line is 'when words don't matter.'"

So from 'Chords' published 2011:

*28
Pure distraction.
Or song of destruction.*

Until I got the words

I thought it a love song.

*Good
to get it wrong.*

*easy to confuse
distraction for destruction,*

*And love for what a
fuck up it is,*

*And, now and then, isn't.
And words don't matter*

Goa says: "Word and silence are at the heart of the liturgical life, both in their power to evoke (sacred memory) and in their eschatological call".¹³

An echo of Merton's protest poems - the sound of the prophet picking up on the pain of the world and giving voice, as he listens in the silence.

THE LANGUAGE OF LOGOS: NATURE, POIESIS, LITURGY

The golden thread of Logos or God speaking, can be traced through the interlinking history of poetics and worship.

The grandly religious ancient Greeks originally coined the phrase 'poiesis' which is derived from the ancient Greek term ποιέω. It means "to make" and a poem was considered to be "a thing made" and the poets were the creators.

Their lyrical, or heart-felt poems, using the language of Nature and myth, were considered to be divinely inspired and helped the people do the deeper explorative work of the soul.

Furthermore, and like Sam Hunt, the Greeks understood poiesis as first a verb, an action that transforms and continues the world.

At their height, poems with a lyrical thread, along with many hymn-like passages of choral singing, were performed in great dramas in worship festivals.

Classics scholar, M.I. Finley says these dramas "concentrated on the most fundamental questions of human existence, of man's behavior and destiny under divine power and authority."¹⁴

Productions of 1000 performers could draw a crowd of 14,000 - not a bad religious turnout for a polis with a population of, generally, about 20,000.

M.I. Finley: "It is of course impossible to recapture the feelings of these vast audiences, many of whom sat through three long days of difficult and complex poetic drama. But one can register the phenomenon and contemplate its implications"¹⁵

¹³ Goa, David, The Word That Transfigures, *The Canadian Journal Of Orthodox Christian Thought and Theology*

¹⁴ M.I. Finley, *The Ancient Greeks*, Copyright Finney 1963, p103

¹⁵ M.I. Finley, *The Ancient Greeks*, Copyright Finney 1963, p106

The sponsorship of the production by wealthy patrons was called leitourgia or liturgy – poetry and the involvement of people in liturgy was part of the communal response to the sacred.

The ancient Greek Stoic philosophers (300BC) identified the Logos as the active force in poetics - they understood it as ‘the divine animating principle pervading the Universe’ – or ‘the active reason’.

Wikipedia: The Judaic-Hellenic philosopher, Philo (20BC-AD40), adopted the term Logos into Jewish philosophy.

It made its way into the Gospel of John as the Divine Logos through which all things are made. Justin Martyr (150AD) identified Jesus as the Logos linking the ancient Greek idea of Logos as ‘Reason’, with the Holy Spirit;

Early translators from Greek, Jerome and Augustine in 300-400AD later talked about the Logos as the ‘living word.’

Logos appeared in the poesis of the musical practices of the Jewish synagogues, which allowed the cantor an improvised charismatic song.

At the heart of that Liturgy was the Shekinah Glory, the transformative presence of God which parted the Red Sea, guided the people in pillars of cloud by day and fire by night, prophesied through Moses, and praised and rejoiced through Miriam.

And I thought of the manna, the living bread, the Shekinah that fed them. It had to be eaten fresh daily as an ever present living symbol of God’s love: these living, feeding, guiding, speaking, transfiguring symbols of journey were given as the people needed them.

Fr Pierre Poulain, links ancient Greek and early Hebrew Christian thinking on Logos: “ Logos meant both the Word of God, creating the world and guiding its history, and the Divine Reason, immanent in the universe and participated in by all rational creatures.”¹⁶

But while poems in classical metre and style were composed by Christian writers, “from Clement of Alexandria and Gregory of Nazianzus, to Sophronius of Jerusalem, the pagan associations of the genre, as well as the difficulties of the metre, made them unacceptable for general liturgical use.” (Wikipedia)

Instead, the improvised song of early Christian services became a simple refrain, or responsorial sung by the congregation, and that formed a new liturgical foundation. This evolved into the various Western chants, the last of which was the Gregorian which reached its height in the great cultural and spiritual renaissance of the 8th century.

From the 10th century the lyric poem could be spotted in the vast number of nature-based hymns, many initially, by such holy poets as St Francis of Assisi, St John Of The Cross, St Theresa of Avila, Hildegard of Bingen and Julian of Norwich.

¹⁶ Fr. Pierre Poulain (1960); *Twentieth Century Encyclopaedia of Catholicism*, Hawthorn Books, USA (15 vols published individually over a number of years)

From the 1500s through to the 1800s the Romantic poets, including Shakespeare, Wordsworth, Shelley, Byron and Keats, and the Jesuit priest Gerard Manly Hopkins kept poetry alive in fields of living light using the language of Nature to describe 'real' things, relying on intuition rather than reason.

At the same time the church's human need for a living liturgy brought to birth the Reformation – and it was poetics that stepped forward to effectively mid-wife the church into the new era keeping it intact and on course.

J. Maltby in *Not Angels but Anglicans*¹³ said the Anglican Church: 'with the Prayer Book at its heart, flanked by its warring protestant Puritan sister and Catholics - inched its way like a sure-moving shadow, its aesthetic voice of beauty and holiness continuing the strands of theologies of both Puritanism and Catholicism'.

Modern historian and author, Owen Chadwick explains in the preface of *The Reformation*¹⁷, that the European reformers in particular, wanted a major sweep out of a wide range of ceremonial rites and their "cries for reform of errors of doctrine, of morals of society and the exactions of churchmen," sounded throughout northern Europe.

"Liturgies are not made, they grow in the devotion of centuries; but as far as a liturgy could ever be the work of a single mind, the 1549 Common Prayer Book flowed from a scholar with a sure instinct for a people's worship", said Chadwick .

Cranmer "made an office of Mattins and an office of Evensong by "working directly upon the old Breviary offices of Vespers and Compline. At the solemn moments of sacramental rites he often retained the words and outward signs of the medieval rite, above all in the consecration prayer of the Eucharist, which was strongly reminiscent of the canon of the Roman mass.

"But the diverse elements upon which he worked, traditional or Protestant, were taken up by his careful scholarship and transmuted into a beauty, at once delicate and austere, of liturgical prose and poetry", Chadwick said.¹⁸

C.S. Lewis says: "For poetry too is a little incarnation, giving body to what had been before invisible and inaudible."

Later in the 1900s, the Modernist movement – an off shoot of the Romantic era - had a questioning spirit and sought to make sense of a broken world. It produced the symbolists and Imagists like T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.

1923 Maria Rilke, the great German Imagist, re-created the idea of a poem as "a thing made" with his 'object poem'. He attempted to describe with utmost clarity physical objects, the "silence of their concentrated reality".

¹⁷ O. Chadwick, *The Reformation*, Penguin Books, 1972

¹⁸ O. Chadwick, *The Reformation*, Penguin Books, 1972, p119.

The German philosopher, Martin Heidegger refers to the transformation associated with poetics as a 'bringing-forth', using this term in its widest sense. He explained poiesis as the blooming of the blossom, the coming-out of a butterfly from a cocoon, the plummeting of a waterfall when the snow begins to melt. The last two analogies underline Heidegger's example of a threshold occasion: a moment of ecstasis when something moves away from its standing as one thing to become another. (Wikipedia)

Payne: "in poetic awe the poet sees a blade of grass as it really is – this poetic awe can become more. And the manner in which the revelation comes can be like an intuition of The Real Presence".

She says it's important to note that "there is finally a difference in kind between an intuition of the Real Presence and the intuition of a truth in nature... But the manner in which the revelation comes and the intuitive and experiential nature of the 'knowing' is much the same".

She explains Lewis' idea about how we can touch God and He us through Nature.

'The comparison is of course between something of infinite moment and something very small; like comparison between the Sun and the Sun's reflection in a dewdrop" - "I think that all things, in their way, reflect heavenly truth, the imagination not least. 'Reflect' the important word."

And quoting CS Lewis : "As the Shining One says to the artist newly arrived in heaven: 'when you painted on earth – at least in your earlier days – it was because you caught glimpses of heaven in the earthly landscape. The success of your painting was that it enabled others to see the glimpses too. But here you are having the thing itself. It is from here that the messages came'" .¹⁹

THE SPECIAL ROLE OF THE GREEKS AND THEIR PARTNERSHIP WITH THE HEBREWS

C.S. Lewis is at pains to point out that lyric poetry - significantly for him Greek, Norse and Hebrew literature - had a specific job to do: to prepare the world for the coming of Christ and His death and resurrection – by pointing to it.²⁰

He writes of the "resemblance" and "real connection between what Plato and the myth-makers most deeply were and meant and what I believe to be the truth."

"In the strong, if half-inarticulate feeling (embodied in many Pagan "Mysteries") that man himself must undergo some sort of death if he would truly live, there is already a likeness permitted by God to that truth on which all depends".

The poet Pindar writing in the classical era provides one example of what may be interpreted as "resemblance" to Christian thinking.

¹⁹ Op. Cit Payne, Leanne.

²⁰ Lewis C.S Reflections On The Psalms, Collins, p37.

He “articulates a passionate faith in what men can achieve by the grace of the gods, most famously expressed in his conclusion to one of his Victory Odes:

Creatures of a day! What is man!
What is he not? A dream of a shadow
Is our mortal being. But when there comes to men
A gleam of splendor given of heaven,
Then rests on them a light of glory
And blessed are their days.”

The ancient, deeply held belief was that the “grave and powerful” poets were divinely inspired by their spiritual Muses, or by Zeus himself. ²¹

The poets were not intent on making money or “great actresses” out of the epic poetic productions that were played out in religious festivals, says Kitto, but on pointing mankind toward truth. ³

It was 800 years of orally held myth, that Homer (750BC) and the other ancient poet-philosophers (750-300BC) used to create the divine backdrop for the poems and dramas that grappled with ‘truth’ in the deepest scientific, religious, philosophical, social and moral matters.

I thought about Plutarch’s (300BC) account of the story of Theseus, a founder-hero, like Perseus, Cadmus, or Heracles, all of whom battled and overcame foes that were identified with an archaic religious and social order.

And how Theseus secured Ariadne’s ball of yellow string to a doorpost before he ventured in to the heart of the Labyrinth where the dreaded minotaur slept. Then after he’d fought and slain the great beast he followed the trail of the string back out.

I mused how the giant ball of Greek creative reasoning, which at its heart was religious and inspirational, was most vividly let go, first in the lyrical poems and dramas of the great archaic and classical era poets like Homer, (750BC) then in Pindar, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides (300-400BC)...

Then finally.. “running in purely philosophical channels” as the classical unity of myth and religion was replaced.. by poetry of a more personal kind that focused on the realities of the present. (*Kitto, P203*)

It was Plato (328-348) who conceived of the absolute, eternal deity, and so the Greeks continued to “prepare the world for the reception of a universal religion,” Kitto says.

“Plato’s enduring belief in the interconnectedness and unity of all things and forms remained an intrinsic part of artistic and religious expression through the religious, societal and artistic reformations to the present day.” ²²

²¹ H.D.F Kitto, *The Greeks; Pelican, 1951, p202*

²² H.D.F Kitto, *The Greeks; Pelican, 1951, p203*

“But the Zeus of Aeschylus, pure and lofty as he is, was yet too much the god of the Greek polis to become the God of mankind, just as the Jews’ God could not become also the God of the Gentiles without considerable change.”²³

“Yet it was the fusion of what was most characteristic in these two cultures – the religious earnestness of the Hebrews with the reason and humanity of the Greeks – which was to form the basis of later European culture, the Christian religion.”

“Here were two races very conscious of being different from its neighbours, living not very apart, yet for the most part in complete ignorance of each other and influencing each other not at all until the period following Alexander’s conquests, when Greek thought influenced Hebrew thought considerably – as in Ecclesiastes.”

Though the Hebrews had created religious poetry, love-poetry, the religious poetry and oratory of the prophets before the Greeks, “the Greeks created all other known forms of literature (except the novel) and perfected it,” Kitto says.

Epic poetry, history and drama; philosophy in all its branches, from metaphysics to economics; mathematics and many of the natural sciences – all these began with the Greeks”.²⁴

‘PRESENCE’ IN POETRY

Professor George Steiner²⁵, renown literary thinker, philosopher and polymath - in reference to ‘presence’ in poetry and other art forms said in ‘Real Presences’, “art is only important when it reveals and entails transcendence, the presence of God and immortality.”

He described the experience of such revelations this way: “...the shorthand image is that of the Annunciation, of a “terrible beauty” or gravity breaking into the small house of our cautionary being. If we have heard rightly the wing-beat and provocation of that visit, the house is no longer habitable in quite the same way as it was before”.

The foremost witness of how humans are receptacles for visitations of the “other” are children, says Steiner.

“The open door which a child proffers to the day and night visitants out of the imaginary is one of pristine psychological truth. The room is as yet, largely unfurnished. Wardrobes stand open to unicorns. Consolers and felonious shades can enter and move about at liberty. The story told to a child, the tale read, the ballad committed, perhaps unawares to memory, are taken to heart. In most adults this immediacy tends to diminish.

And I thought of my own first spiritual experience as I lay as a 7 year old, in my Christchurch home, terrified by the shapes of dressing gown on the door handle, and curtains at the window. I was unable to move or call out.

²³ H.D.F Kitto, *The Greeks; Pelican, 1951, p202*

²⁴ H.D.F Kitto, *The Greeks; Pelican, 1951, p8, 9*

²⁵ Steiner, George, *Real Presences, University of Chicago Press, 1989*

Then I heard God speak. From deep within but from the grandeur of all that is without, He called my name. His voice resonated in every layer and sentient feeling of my being. The effect was a sense of the deepest love..fear was completely eradicated. He knew my name and I felt I had come home”.

This fits with Steiner’s dominion of ‘aesthetics’, “in which the deepest shocks of recognition unfold patiently out of immediacy”...“It is the demarcations between outward and inward areas of felt realness. Both sides of our skin are, as it were, made new.”

He also says aesthetics is the communication of love singing its own language - in songs and chords of ‘beauty’ and ‘truth’, through the medium of words that can mediate the ‘real’ and ‘sublime’.

“Plato’s Symposium, St Augustine on discourse and dreams, Dante’s Vita Nuova, Shakespeare’s sonnets and Joyce on the epiphanies of desire are of the essence.”

“It is via language that we are most markedly and enduringly translated.”

“It is in sacred texts, in laws, literatures that civilization is housed”... “In the poem, the prayer, in the law, the reach of words is made very nearly equivalent to the humanity in man.”(p189)

But how does the divine break through into, or out of, the words laid down on the page?

In trying to figure out this line of horizon where sky meets earth, I offer C.S. Lewis’s theory of Transposition.⁵

“Where the higher “divine” meets, attends to, and transforms the lower approaching “human” .. “where the “real landscape” enters into the human landscape which is really only a “picture“ of reality.”

Or “like a candle flame as a picture of the human world - which remains burning, but becomes “ ‘invisible’ in the presence of a bright burning sun.”

In poetry that ‘speaks’, CS Lewis says the language of Nature, beauty, myth and silence provides the grand backdrop for divine action as it meets the ordinary, the human.

Steiner says of myth: “In ancient literatures and art, the religious and the mythical are fused under the common rubric of the mythological.”

..they (myths) “are the translatio, the ‘carrying over’ of mystery into myth.”

USING POETRY IN SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

Drinking of the pool of story/poem/ literature; listening, and reflecting on the images laid out; sifting and swimming through layers of meanings, we find shoals of hope. We feel recognised, and understood. These “aha” moments offer a clearer direction. They give rise to a real sense of God’s love and presence.

I started out asking ‘is there a ‘presence’ in words...particularly poetic words, not just those recognized as being ‘holy’, or ‘inspired’ in the biblical tradition?

My feeling now is that lyric poetry like Sam Hunt's, is part of a liturgy of the Holy Spirit - the literary creative, inspirational medium of poetics. A poem is a reflection of the world and the divine, carrying truth and reality in and out of developing social, political and theological thought, and ecclesial liturgies.

In this liturgical work of poetic text, the poet translates - and creatively responds to - the heard voice of God, for the benefit of the community.

Perhaps poetry that has the stamp of the divine is like a tiny lyrical computer that contains all the words and memory of the world. Like Julian of Norwich's tiny hazelnut, or Thomas Merton and Sam Hunt's poems about yellow flowers – it contains everything that is made and has its being in love.

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Appendix: A short Listening-Reading exercise using the poem 'New Words' by Sam Hunt

Activity

- a) As you read, imagine that you are floating in a pool with the words of the poem floating around you.
- b) Let your mind drop into your heart.
- c) Which "word" in the poem seems to glow a little more brightly than the others.
- d) What comes to mind as you allow the word to rest in your mind, your heart, in your body?
- e) How does it connect with your life?
- f) Write a poem about this connection.

'New Words' by Sam Hunt

*New words, the words I have not
Told, they gather for the night.*

*I send them out each day, each tolling on
its own. They reach*

*I know not where. They bounce back
Reeling, some ready to break,*

*Some merely echoing. They
Bring back their news of the day*

*Told in each one's way. They come
Back tired, **relieved** to be home.*

*These words, the words I have not told,
they settle for the night.*

*Then, and only then, I light
the lamp, work on them, work late;*

*Coax and grill. Interrogation
Does not let up til dawn.*

*Some nights, a few surrender,
Tell me all I need know—her*

*Dreams, the rhythms of her heart.
That's when there's a poem in it.*

'Relieved' by Marissa (15)

<i>Moonlit water through the darkness, the unfound, on I see such a sight White light so powerful. going wild, as the night passes. I feel relieved washing away. The man on the moon smiling down.</i>	<i>light shining seeking as I walk Sea creatures I feel renewed; I now know such wonderful things come from such obvious places.</i>
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