Visions and Revisions

Visions and Revisions:
The Word and the Text

Edited by

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Time for you and time for me,
And time yet for a hundred indecisions,
And for a hundred visions and revisions,
Before the taking of a toast and tea .
– T.S. Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', 1915.

The word that can be uttered is not the eternal Word.
– the Daodejing (the principal text of philosophical Daoism).

'The suggestion that truth, as well as the world, is out there is a legacy of an age in which the world was seen as the creation of a being who had a language of his own.' – Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, 1989, p. 5.

'In our stammering after a transcendent God we must speak, for the most part, metaphorically or not at all.' – Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 1985, p. 140.

'Remythologizing has primary reference to how God co-opts human language and concepts, both in short spurts (e.g. metaphors) and longer stretches of discourse (e.g. narrative, apocalyptic).' – Kevin J Vanhoozer, *Remythologizing Theology: Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship*, 2010, p. 64.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.…The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. – John 1:1,14.

If the unheard, unspoken
Word is unspoken, unheard;
Still is the unspoken word, the Word unheard,
The Word without a word, the Word within
The world and for the world;
And the light shone in darkness and
Against the Word the unstilled world still whirled
About the centre of the silent Word.
– T.S. Eliot, 'Ash-Wednesday', V, 1930.

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Introduction:
Ways of Seeing, Ways of Reading

> Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see. To see clearly is poetry, prophecy, and religion – all in one.
> – **John Ruskin, *Modern Painters* III (1856)**[1]

> Where there is no vision, the people perish. – **Proverbs 29. 18**

Literature, in both its most rational and fantastical forms, like religion, represents a distinctive way of seeing the world. For John Ruskin – social critic, Puritan aesthete and wayward pilgrim – the literary canon has been defined by two classes of creative individual: thinkers and seers. The visionary – who sees with clarity and records the experience faithfully – is, in Ruskin's terms, a most precious kind of writer. We may demur at such a stringent opposition between thought and vision but Ruskin's typically hyperbolic distinction finds a significant precedent in Christian-Romantic thought. William Blake – another great man of words and pictures – famously argued that the way a person looks at the world is a fair index of their spirituality:

> And I know that this world is a world of imagination and vision. I see everything I paint in this world, but everybody does not see alike. To the eyes of a miser, a guinea is more beautiful than the sun, and a bag worn with the use of money has more beautiful proportions than a vine filled with grapes. The tree which moves some to tears of joy is, in the eyes of others, only a green thing that stands in the way. Some see nature all ridicule and deformity (and by these I shall not regulate my proportions), and some scarce see nature at all. But to the eyes of the man of imagination, nature is imagination itself. As man is, so he sees; as the eye is formed, such are its powers.[2]

Ruskin and Blake highlight the spiritual significance of sight (which for Ruskin, at its best, is 'poetry, prophecy and religion') but they are also both fascinated by the sequel to seeing: interpretation, the act of understanding and representing what the observer has witnessed. And both writers, in their complex, often dissident fashions, are theological thinkers.

Although this historically diverse collection – one which ranges from Anglo-Saxon Hagiography and Medieval Wisdom literature to the early twenty-first century writings of Marilynne Robinson and John Irving – is *not*, primarily at least, concerned with prophetic writing of the vatic, revelatory tradition, each essay does address alternative visions of reality.

[1] The Library Edition of *The Works of Ruskin*, ed. by E.T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols. London: George Allen, 1903-1912, v, p. 333.

[2] William Blake, Letter to Revd Dr Trusler, 23 August 1799. Extract included in *Romanticism: An Anthology*, edited by Duncan Wu, 4th edition. Oxford: Blackwell, 2012, p. 245.

The twelve contributors to *Visions and Revisions: the Word and the Text* explore imaginative writing in the light of the Christian gospel. Their conclusions, critical assumptions and methods are, however, far from identical.

The collection contributes to a long and evolving history of theological-literary criticism. Britain, from one perspective, typifies the irresistible movement away from institutional religion to a world in which, in Callum G. Brown's terms, 'a formerly religious people have entirely forsaken organised Christianity in a sudden plunge into a truly secular condition'.[3] Yet such secularization has not, apparently, dimmed an interest in either the specifics of religious belief or in the ways in which poetry, fiction, drama and autobiography engage with, for example, God, biblical writing, miracles, heresy, judgement and the life to come. If there was ever a time when such an audacious interdisciplinary pursuit was regarded with awkwardness or thought of as a marginal area of research, such an era has passed. Indeed, a decade ago, John D. Caputo – a key figure in the field of continental theory and theology – suggested that the so called *sacred turn* came as a surprise only to the 'learned despisers of religion' ('no one outside the academy thought that it had gone anywhere at all').[4] Three major international journals are dedicated to the area – *Literature and Theology*; *Religion and Literature*; *Christianity and Literature* – and the twenty-first century has witnessed a plethora of major edited collections and monographs in the field. In fact, the term 'field' is perhaps too narrow since it includes a vast array of hermeneutical approaches: historicists vie with deconstructionists; sceptics contest confessional readings; sociological interpretations are challenged by narratologists.

The twenty-first century has witnessed religious clashes and controversies; it is, in brutal truth, an era of violence in which 'religion' does not always play the benign role for which the faithful pray. As Marilynne Robinson wryly notes, 'it is true that religions differ less from the world at large than one might hope'.[5] Significantly, however, we might suggest that this profusion of contradictory (and sometimes loquaciously argumentative) interpretations finds a hospitable place to debate and to recognize difference in the interstices between literature and theology.

The essays in *Visions and Revisions* have been commissioned by the Christian Literary Studies Group (CLSG). Functioning as an academic literary society, though not only this, the CLSG began in the mid 1980s as one of several professional groups of the InterVarsity Fellowship. Many of the contributors have spoken at the annual CLSG conference and a number of them have published essays, reviews or work in progress in its journal, *The Glass*. The present collection has its origin in a recent conference at

[3] Callum G. Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularization, 1800-2000*, Routledge, 2001, p. ?

[4] John D. Caputo, *On Religion*, Routledge, 2001, p. 66.

[5] Marilynne Robinson, *Absence of Mind: The Dispelling of Inwardness from the Modern Myth of Self*, Yale University Press, 2010. p. 11.

Oxford with the title 'Visions and Revisions: Putting God into Writing'.[6] In the opening essay, 'Believing in Poetry', Michael Edwards considers the relationship between credal religion and the aesthetic practice of 'believing' poetry: 'In what sense,' asks Edwards, 'can one believe in poetry if one believes above all in, say, Christianity?' This complex question – typical of a writer who has written such groundbreaking studies as *Towards a Christian Poetic* (1984), *Poetry and Possibility* (1988) and *Of Making Many Books* (1990) – is used to identify ways of seeing that connect with the specifics of Christian faith:

> The Christian poet can exercise his belief in his poetry by exploring […] immanent transcendence, this otherness which emerges in the daily and sets value on place and time, but not necessarily by being conscious of his belief and manifesting it. A Christian poem is not as a matter of course a 'Christian poem'. Because poetry goes along with the desire to see clearly and to see anew, he can be legitimately concerned for poetry – he can believe in it – since his way of believing, his search for the new earth and the new man, will find a response in the way in which poetry works.

Many of the essays in the collection attend to specific writers: Jonathan Roberts, for example, thinks about Blake via Saint Paul; Deborah C. Bowen explores the fiction of Salman Rushdie; Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz reappraises David Lodge, Ian McEwan and Julian Barnes; Roger Kojecký explores William Golding's (fictional) epiphanies; Marie Holdsworth focuses on 'the dynamic evolution of thoughts on God within one particular place, namely the home' in relation to novels by Sara Maitland and Hilary Mantel; my own chapter reads the tragic-comic fiction of another contemporary novelist, John Irving. Three essays focus more precisely on questions of genre: Paul Cavill explores Anglo-Saxon hagiography; Walter Nash examines Medieval Wisdom literature; and Sharon Jebb Smith addresses the lack of joy in contemporary 'serious' fiction.

The contributions by Richard S. Briggs and Valentine Cunningham engage with questions of interpretation. Briggs' essay takes as its starting point the work of the contemporary theologian Kevin J. Vanhoozer, whose study *Remythologizing Theology. Divine Action, Passion, and Authorship* (2010), prompts a discussion of divine speech: 'What do *we* mean by talk of God's speaking,' asks Briggs, 'or, in particular, by reading Biblical descriptions of the speaking God at face value?' In 'The Aw(e)ful Neccessity of Bible Re-reading' Valentine Cunningham, explores similar hermeneutic territory. The 'literary turn', he notes, is

> the oldest there is, certainly for Judaeo-Christianity: the religion of the Writings, the Books, the Book. The religiosity whose knowing and professing to know God, whose representing of God, are done in words, in verbal constructions,

[6] The CLSG's website, with accessible past issues of *The Glass*, will be found at *www.clsg.org*.

> in story, in narrated form. This God is known as He speaks and is spoken, and as He is written down, to be read, to be caused to speak for readers.

If *Visions and Revisions* has a single purpose, it is, I suspect, this 'oldest' of turns: to read, faithfully, with the hope of greater understanding. To paraphrase Flannery O'Connor, it is a modest hope but 'perhaps a necessary one'.[7]

Andrew Tate

[7] Flannery O'Connor, 'Novelist and Believer', *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*, edited by Sally and Robert Fitzgerald, Faber, 1984, p. 168. In this essay, originally delivered at Sweetbriar College, Virginia, March 1963, O'Connor concluded with some reflections on the possibilities of 'religious fiction' which, she argued, will not occur 'until we have again that happy combination of believing artist and believing society'. In the meantime, she suggests, novelists will have to do their 'best' in the world as it is. This might be a 'modest achievement' but it is 'perhaps a necessary one'.

Believing in Poetry

Michael Edwards

1

'Believing in poetry': the usefulness of the phrase is to make one reflect on the relation between its two meanings. Can one distinguish, ultimately, believing in poetry, crediting poetry with a distinct and important function, from living one's belief, especially religious, in poetry, in the act of writing or reading? In what sense can one believe in poetry if one believes above all in, say, Christianity? In being something other than the assertion of religious platitudes, or novelties, in verse, how does the poetry of a believer arise from his belief, and how does it embrace and modify his sense of what poetry is? In short: how should one believe in poetry? How might one believe, in poetry?

Poetry begins in wanting to make contact with the reality, the truth, of all that surrounds and inhabits us: with the exuberant diversity of a world prodigiously larger than ourselves, or with whatever single being or object claims our attention. Yet as we approach the world with our words, and with the sounds of our words, we become aware, if we are listening intently, that the world remains silent. Poetry, which desires communion and speech, is a privileged way to perceiving the refusal of the world, at first, to respond, to offer its meaning. It is in the interest of poetry to acknowledge this arresting dumbness, and to ask what the silence itself means, and how it contributes to poetry and to the understanding of poetry. However one makes sense of it (a fallen world, for instance, implies, during the whole of the long moment that is history, the absence of original, immediate and joyful meaningfulness), the silence alerts one to the fact that language, and especially poetry, is indeed a matter of sound, of pace, cadence, tone colour, repetition and variation, and that poetry is an oral and an aural art, beginning in the mouth and the ear and governing the rhythms of the mind's body and the body's mind. The silence also obliges one to take close notice of the person, object, event, emotion, idea, that one hopes to reach with language, poetry being equally an art of attention. One then discovers that, even prior to poetry, language, as must often have been said, adds to what it names human sounds, human rhythms, human breathing, and that, if words fail to break into the silence of the world, they mingle, with that singular taciturnity, bodily and mental activities which are no less than vital. When poetry intervenes to redesign language and to bring to the fore the way it sounds – to make one conscious of all that seems superfluous if one is focusing on meaning – words and world meet half way. The poet is aware, if he concentrates fully on the otherness, for its own sake, of what he perceives, that his language and the desired real collaborate, that as he gives words to the world, the world gives him words. Shadows and moss-covered paths become 'verdurous glooms and winding mossy ways',

which exist both in a Hampstead garden and in Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale'. The two existences are inseparable: it is thanks to the poem that a pleasing alliteration perfects the 'ways' by perceiving them as 'winding', and that the shadows deepen – are truly *seen* – through the unusual use of a plural, 'glooms', and through the voluptuousness of the adjective 'verdurous'. The place is further flooded by human perception when light is said to be 'blown' by breezes among the shadows, the metaphor arising nevertheless from the scene observed, where lights really do seem to shift as the foliage stirs, rather than imposing the poet's vision. If we are drawn, as readers, into the poem which alone enables us to see (with the mind) in that particular way, we are drawn also into poetry, into the common enterprise among poets of saying the world and thereby enabling it to exist advantageously in our discernment of it, as we remember the 'green shade' of Marvell's 'The Garden', and compare the classic simplicity and suggestiveness of a green shade which gives rise to a 'green thought' with the romantic strangeness and complexity of Keats's 'verdurous glooms'. And what moves the reader is that, while Keats begins with the idealizing impression that life and light are to be found only in some higher world, as that of the 'Queen-Moon' and her 'starry fays', in the very act of attending to the natural presences that encompass him, and of searching for appropriate language, he warms to the here and now, to the quiet magic of the visible shadows and the touchable moss, and of the roving light which, coming 'from heaven', opens the small space of the garden to the large space of the night sky.

Poetry enables the world to speak, to enter human language while remaining itself; it draws the world towards us, as it draws us towards the world. And in doing so, it changes the world, or it changes the way we perceive it. From reading not simply my own poetry but that of a wide diversity of poets, from different periods and from various countries, it seems that the one universal effect of poetry is this modification of reality, whatever the world views of the poets concerned and whatever their poetics, and that to believe in poetry is to value its ability at once to close with the real and to re-create it. Even everyday language possesses this re-creative capacity, when spoken and listened to with care. One only needs to say, while noting the rumours and overtones of the words, that, at night, a furtive hedgehog crosses the lawn, to see anew, and suddenly, the relation of a wild, shy creature and a domestic garden, the wildness and the domesticity held in the gaze of the stars. It is true that when Hardy writes, in 'Afterwards', of a 'nocturnal blackness […] When the hedgehog travels furtively over the lawn', he enters far better, by the rhythm of the line and by the accuracy, the tender incongruity, of 'travels', into the movement of a small animal advancing within a vast obscurity.

Poetry gives access to a world in the process of changing, and a poem is a kind of password opening the way to what is. Which means that the poet is engaged, not theoretically but in practice, line by line, with an urgent philosophical problem: how to reconcile the sovereignty of the real, the

obligation to respect the autonomy and otherness of a world that hugely surpasses us, with the need to modify the real, to hold in regard human inventiveness, the role of humans in the economy of reality. If to be said is to be transformed, the poet's responsibility is to transform the real, not into what he would like it to be, but into itself, according to the promptings of its own nature.

Hence the importance of lines 315 to 317 of Pope's *An Essay on Criticism*:

> But true *Expression*, like th' unchanging *Sun*,
> *Clears*, and *improves* whate'er it shines upon,
> It *gilds* all Objects, but it *alters* none.

The passage has often been discussed; I discuss it at length in *Poetry and Possibility*, but realize now that there is more to be said. The lines are exemplary in that the comparison with the sun, while it exalts the status and the work of poetry, enables Pope to suggest that 'true *Expression*' both closes with the thereness of the object of its concern and clears and improves it: that genuine poetic language honours the actuality and the possibility of the real, what is and what may be. Having seen, however, that the sun, like poetry, renders the visible world more beautiful, one can surely add that, again like poetry, it changes our emotions, as sunlight sweeps across a landscape or a cityscape, and that, by adding only itself, it quite literally changes what is there: the colours are different, the scene is graced with shadows, allusive reflections appear on stretches of water. The windows of the building opposite ours in the rue de Rivoli in Paris can be ablaze with sky; when the sun is low and strong, pedestrians crossing the street are unaware of the elongated, wavery Giacometti-like sculptures into which their shadows are being formed. The sun *'alters'* no objects in the sense that it leaves them as they are, yet in changing their appearance it decidedly alters what they are for us, and in touching our emotions and the thoughts that accompany them, it changes, for the time being, how and even what we are. This seems to me exactly the effect of poetry, and why we can and should believe in it.

2

The generosity of the sun, the generosity of a poetry at once recognizing the precedence of the real and committed, by saying it afresh, to renewing it, form the link to the kind of wider, religious belief that I find persuasive and to which I shall turn. To understand poetry in this way also leads one, however, to reflect beforehand on a number of other matters, important and intimately related. It suggests, for example, a different distinction between imagination and fancy from that proposed by Coleridge in chapter 13 of *Biographia Literaria*. Assuming that imagination and fancy are not two faculties but the names for two ways of perceiving and re-perceiving the real, fancy occurs when the poet (or the practitioner of any art) creates another world, a world of his own, which may be attractive and even enchanting

but whose relation to the reality in which we pass our lives is tenuous and, in the perspective chosen, unimportant. Imagination, on the other hand, is active when the poet (or any artist) discovers an outlook on our shared reality which illumines it anew – which discerns, for instance, in the everyday and the ordinary, the transcendent and the rare – and whose effect is to attract us, not away from reality but towards it. As a process of *invention*, according to both the present meaning and the etymology of the term, imagination is at work when what is created gives the impression of having been found, of being, however unexpectedly, really there. Imagination is convincing, is related not to enchantment but to wonder, and is the highway to perceiving the depth of what is. Mercutio's forty-two lines on Queen Mab in the opening act of *Romeo and Juliet* are perfect fancy, and serve as a foil to the truth of imagination in the poetry of the lovers. In the midst of his exaltation during the balcony scene, Romeo notices his surroundings:

> Lady, by yonder blessed moon I vow,
> That tips with silver all these fruit-tree tops –

Not only does Shakespeare himself pause to remark the exact nature of the trees in Juliet's garden: they are fruit-trees (the carefulness of the voice at the repeated *t* serving to mark this closeness of attention so typical of Shakespeare's theatre), but in causing Romeo to observe the presence of the moon he also enables him to discern above all the mysterious poetry of the real, where moonlight transfigures the tops only of the trees and so makes one aware of the darkness beneath. Imagination names the poetry of moonlight and of shade in the transfigured garden along with the everyday and seasonal reality of the trees which are being transfigured. Imagination changes the real, but it is, indeed, the real that it changes.

It seems to me desirable, this being the case, to think of the imagination as transitive. Rather than inviting one into the renewed world of the poem, as if one might relish that perfectly formed otherness while denying it any influence on the self and its world once the book is closed, the work of imagination leads one towards the rediscovered real, towards a world apprehended both in its thereness and in its possible. Transitive imagination corresponds to another distinction which I formulate in French as the difference between *connaître* and *savoir*. *Savoir* implies the possession of information about something, which one knows at a distance; *connaître* involves knowing something directly, entering into contact with it and, ideally, experiencing it as a whole with the whole of one's being. (One lazily assumes that *savoir* occurs in the sciences, whereas the humanities encourage one to *connaître* the object of one's attention; one only needs to read a few works of criticism to realize how often literary professionals are, or have made themselves, incapable of knowing intimately and humanly.) The distinction in English might be expressed by *knowing* and *knowledge*, having knowledge of something being to remain in the estrangement of the

intransitive, knowing something – as in the apt Hebraism *to know a woman* – allowing a transitive exchange between subject and object. To make the distinction in English is also to become aware of one of the strengths of the language, to which I shall recur. *Knowing*, because of its relation to the present participle of the verb, already suggests an act, a movement of mind and of will towards something, and the involvement, in this process, of time, of the ever-changing milieu in which one lives. And if *know-ing* precludes thinking of oneself as a timeless consciousness, the point is made even more forcibly by the word *being*. *L'être* in French is the verbal noun from which verbality has been in effect removed; the *be-ing* of anyone or anything in English speaks of his or its active though oblivious implication, moment by moment, in the passage of the real, of an apparent abstraction becoming incarnate.

The to-and-fro between utter respect for the real and the need for poetry to transform it according to its possibility also throws light on translation. The relation between the translator and the poem to be translated resembles that between the poet and reality: regard for the other person's work meets the fact that to translate it will be necessarily to change it, if only into another language – but that 'only' is the gulf between two worlds. The translator determined to remain faithful, to the poem he translates and to the poem into which he translates it, will recognize that the translation of a poem is indeed a poem, that he must be attentive to the needs and also to the promptings of his language, to the suggestions of the new poem over which he hovers as it slowly emerges, and that he would do well to be as receptive and as inventive in the midst of his own language as the poet he is reading. Every good translation, which identifies the quiddity of the original and transforms it accordingly, is itself an original work, and of a particularly interesting kind, since it belongs to no one, being collaborative and, in a way, impersonal. Which makes one reflect that every good poem, by being faithful at once to what is and to itself, by modifying the world in keeping with the views of itself that the world engenders, is original in much the same way, being the result of a collaboration, not only with the world, moreover, but with that odd and other intelligence which does much of the work and comes up with so many good ideas and whose ancient name, the Muse, has never been bettered.

The claims of reality on the poem and the poem's modifying power, along with the world's initial muteness and resistance, become even clearer when one writes poetry in a foreign language. Any English person, for whom the real speaks English, discovers, in picking up even a smack of French, that for others this is not so; whole epistemologies and ontologies hang on the fact. Yet in giving one another way of saying and thereby meeting the real, French also shows one vividly that the real is being changed by language, as the sounds and historical roots of *the night sky* yield to those of *le ciel nocturne*, while to hear a poem announcing itself gradually in French is to see the world stir under one's fingers.

Yet doesn't the English language, by its possibly unique formation, its hybrid nature, already suggest this twofold function of poetry? The Germanic component names in general the ordinary and familiar world in which we move, whereas the Franco-Latin component names the ways in which we reflect on the world. In this dual relationship between words and things, the Franco-Latin rises towards the mind and invites us to speculate, the Germanic gives us the weight of the world and obliges us to keep our feet on the ground. In comparison, even abstract words of Germanic origin can appear more real: *brotherhood* or *oneness* over against *fraternity* or *unity*, while those of Franco-Latin origin evoke an otherness beyond abstraction: *fidelity* or *felicity* as against *faithfulness* or *happiness*, and can radiate with an uncommon splendour: *inoperancy*, *cogitation*, *sublimity*. Our poetry deploys Germanic monosyllables which seem to grip the reality of the sensual world, as in the opening line of Hopkins's untitled sonnet *'I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day'*, or which convey the feel of experience, as in Mephistophilis's famous reply in act 1 of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*: 'Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it'. English poetry also moves from one component of the language to the other so as to mark the passage from reality-as-lived to the consideration or the transformation of reality, the most telling example of the former occurring in the world's best known line: 'To be or not to be, that is the question', a particularly fine example of the latter being the concluding lines of Charles Tomlinson's 'The Sea is Open to the Light' (from *Written on Water*), in which a rockface descends in the sea:

> to meet in the underdeeps
> the spread floor
> shadowed where the fish
> flash in their multitude
> transmitting and eluding
> the illumination.

The genius of English takes one to the centre of poetry, the Germanic element corresponding to the poet's effort to reach the exact reality of all he perceives, to say things as they are, the Franco-Latin to his realization that the very fact of naming the world, of drawing it into the renewed language of poetry, modifies it, and to his sense that this discovering of possibility, this transforming of the way we know ourselves and our worlds both visible and invisible, constitutes the end, the finality, of poetry. And not only the health of poetry is involved, since a kind of existential health consists likewise in recognizing the authority of the real and working to change it. The English language provides a model for language in general, for poetry, and even for living; its composite nature may also partly explain the success of English poetry, which often puzzles foreigners as coming from a nation above all commercial and pragmatic. Believing in poetry, as I understand it, is acknowledging and approving its faculty of realistic re-creation, which entails a further belief in the capacity for change in the world and in the self.

3

Language anticipates poetry; poetry arises, in this perspective, from the nature of language, and its concern to name but also to rename the world seems to me not a matter of theory but of fact. Christianity, the religious belief to which I hold and of which alone I have some competence to speak, turns on the same need both to engage intensely with the world and to see it and live it anew, to be truly oneself and yet to change. It is not an esoteric doctrine, but a way of explaining and defining what we actually sense, the gladness of life, the sorrow of life, and the longing for renewal. In commending both respect for the real and attentiveness to the possibility of the real, it stresses the here and now, an interaction with where we are. I have suggested somewhere that the Beatitude which most applies to poets is 'Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth' (Matthew 5:5), where the meekness is a sobering challenge and where the assurance of inheriting not heaven but the earth, testifies to the value of *terra nostra*, hints to the poet that by humility he may succeed in seeing truly the world around him and having it present in his work, and, rather than admonishing one to neglect the earth in favour of elsewhere, promises the earth, in the form of the new earth and new heavens foretold in the Bible. The Bible's insistence on change, on the conversion of the individual and of his vision of the world, and on all that transcends the visible and the ordinary, never fails to emphasize that change and transcendence are *here*, that what opens for us onto this immense otherness is the world as we experience it day by day. A rather English though perfectly Hebraic realism has Martha object, when Jesus is about to do no less than bring Lazarus back to life and orders the grave to be opened: 'Lord, by this time he stinketh' (John 11:39), and at the end of the same gospel, which opens in the unimaginably otherworldly beginning where the Word was with God, certain disciples discover that the risen Jesus has lit a fire on the shore of Lake Tiberias, has placed fish and bread on it, and is inviting them to breakfast (John 21:9,12).

The Christian poet can exercise his belief in his poetry by exploring this immanent transcendence, this otherness which emerges in the daily and sets value on place and time, but not necessarily by being conscious of his belief and manifesting it. A Christian poem is not as a matter of course a 'Christian poem'. Because poetry goes along with the desire to see clearly and to see anew, he can be legitimately concerned for poetry – he can believe in it – since his way of believing, his search for the new earth and the new man, will find a response in the way in which poetry works. He won't believe in poetry as an idol, or 'for its own sake'; he won't see it as it appears in a modern, inflated view of its importance, as the only form of salvation left to us, as the last resort of religious scepticism. But he can follow his desire to renew poetry, to explore its limits, to write in ways that have not been tried before, since this answers to the religious demand for continual change, creativity, the sensing of the future as opening rather than closing, as becoming larger

and not smaller. More pointedly, he can and should be concerned for what we call, out of sad necessity, poetry's aesthetic element, for what the Anglo-Saxons called *songcraft*, a term which expresses the work and study of poetry more strikingly than *poetics* or *the art of poetry*, which underlines the relation between poetry and the voice, and which affirms jubilantly the poem's desire to be fully achieved in all dimensions. He is encouraged in this by reflection on the word *towb* or *tov* as it occurs at the beginning of Genesis, where God sees the elements of the world as He creates them as *towb* and the totality of creation finally achieved as very *towb*, and where the first humans, by disobeying, find themselves no longer in a world held together and entirely permeated by *towb*, but as isolated consciousnesses which take cognizance, at one and the same time, of *towb* and of evil. We translate *towb* by *good*, but it seems clear that when God surveys what he has made He finds it, at the same time, beautiful, and that in a lost world of oneness and goodness, the good, the beautiful, the true, the real, participate in a single wholeness. Poetry is our attempt to re-create that wholeness from where we are, from our experience of division and conflict. This is why truth is present in poetry not in the form of assertions but of convincing enactments of experience, and why ethics in poetry involves, not moralising, but finding and singing the otherness of others and of the world about one and discerning the other in oneself: not expressing oneself but listening for what *one* has to say. The beauty of a poem is not supplementary or optional: it is an intrinsic quality of the poem, the light which enables it to be. Poetry is a privileged approach to an original fullness (to that unity of values that Keats senses at the end of 'Ode to a Grecian Urn'), especially if one reaches also for the being that sustains truth, beauty and goodness, and even more so should one be moved by the love in which everything is at one. *Towb* would seem even to illuminate the ancient and mostly tiresome debate about the 'pleasure' of poetry, since pleasurableness too is implied in the poem, just as God seems to take pleasure in what He makes, according to the careful phrasing of the Hebrew (imitated in the Authorized Version): 'And God saw the light, that it was good'. A poem causes an intimation of the *towb*, of a perfect plenitude, to appear, however fugitively and inadequately, which is why poetry so often seems more rich and more real, even, than life.

The search for the new in the old, for the extraordinary in the everyday, also encourages the poet to listen to the creativity of language and, even more, of poetry. To write with due deference is to wonder where the poem that begins to emerge wants to go, to wait patiently and impatiently for the world that the poem seems to be revealing. Poetry is research, a poem is a question, one explores by means of the work under way. A poem gradually effaces and re-creates our sense of things, rather as a foreign language removes our world and offers the glimpse of another, or rather of the same world become other, become both strange and true. A foreign language is like a huge poem which transforms the universe. The slow – or very rapid – discovering by poetry, by successive acts of writing, is most consequential in terms of the self of the poet. I think I can appreciate the desire to speak, in a poem, out of

what one is, and I know the opportuneness of assuming a persona, as an *I* or, maybe more interestingly, as a *you*, but poetry also enables one to recognize the unfinished nature of the self and to sense, as words come and the world changes under their influence, the possibility of the self, the other *I* which is trying to surface.

All of which means that a poem is an act, whether we are writing it or reading it, and that poetry, which is about living, is also a way of living, as is belief. Even the word *belief* is not the best word, since it can deflect attention to the fact of holding to certain truths as a matter of conviction, whereas *believing*, with its suggestion, as in *knowing* or *being*, of moving actively through time, evokes the fleshing of beliefs in what one does and how one is. Even the creeds are European-style statements of what one understands to be the facts, with an opening assertion: 'I believe in God', which recalls rather disturbingly what James in his epistle (2:19) says the devils already do. 'I believe God' would seem preferable, since the form of the phrase supposes a transitive act of believing, which endeavours to make contact with the (in this case) rather daunting object of its attention and which is ready for all that such a contact might imply in terms of the realities of living. Within the bounds of this believing, the Christian poet can explore and continue to explore, on the understanding that Christianity is larger than his capacity to think it.

4

I am aware that I appear to be suggesting that the English language, with its twofold take on the world, leads to an accurate view of poetry, as at once seeking the world and seeking to renew it, and that poetry leads to a proper understanding of Christian belief, as living the transcendent in the everyday, as a continual transformation of the actual by the grasping of the possible. While I am not quite daffy enough to assume that Christianity can be deduced from the characteristics of English, and although I realize that the wish to gather all one's thinking into a coherent pattern could lead to a certain amount of forcing, I do believe that all language, which inevitably modifies what it names, and poetry, which, however varied the aims of the poet, always changes, by its very nature, our apprehension of things, are related interestingly to a religion which offers the world and its transformation: a new birth and the 'new creation' which accompanies it (2 Corinthians, 5:17), new heavens and a new earth. A Christian is justified in thinking that, from his point of view, language and poetry, which give on to the new, the possible, have evolved to that end, or have been given to us for that purpose.

I also note, finally, that we are surrounded by signs of a world being transformed, of the latent transformability of what we know as the real: by foreign languages, by dreams, and by all the forms of art, where not only poetry but narrative, theatre, painting, sculpture, photography, music, dance, architecture, transfigure our way of undergoing the whole of our experience, not by imitating but by new-creating, by proceeding not according to *mimesis* but to *anaktisis*.

Serious literature: 'Sullen we lie here now'

Sharon Jebb Smith

1

For some time now, I have wondered about the seriousness of the literary world. For the term 'serious literature' seems to mean exactly that. In our culture serious literature is not just grave, but humourless and depressing. It hasn't always been so. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Swift, Austen, Thackeray and Dickens all wrote serious literature which is incisive, and thoughtful, with profound insight and comment on politics, social context and religion, but which was also often lighthearted, uplifting, even humorous. And the seriousness of the novel is not built into its DNA if *Tom Jones* or *Robinson Crusoe* are anything to go by. But it is more than just the seriousness of serious literature which concerns me. It is the lack of vivacity. Contemporary serious literature is becoming increasingly bleak, joyless, and anxious. The contemporary novelist often seems unwilling (or unable) to convey much hope, redemption, or joy in their narrative.[1] Nor does the contemporary reader or critic of serious literature seem to look for these qualities. Books which win literary prizes are often praised as gritty, bleak, unflinching. Humorous literature may be included in the award lists if it is 'dark' or 'melancholy', such as the 2010 Man Booker Prize winner, *The Finkler Question* by Howard Jacobson. But literature which includes or emphasises the positive does not seem to attract approbation and seldom wins the literary prizes.[2] The unrelentingly bleak nature of the genre of 'serious literature' seems to be the apotheosis of a trend that has been developing for decades, dominating modern and contemporary literature.

Perhaps few writers manage to be as bleak as Samuel Beckett, despite his irony and black humour. Described as both the last great modernist and as a post-modernist, his entire body of work is a corpus of negation. Whether it be the tramps in *Waiting for Godot*, or the elusive series of narrators in his

[1] The popularity in the early twenty-first century of 'misery literature' – or mis lit – non-fiction accounts of troubled lives with primary topics of abuse, rape, and death, is on the wane now (2012).

[2] Daisy Godwin, one of the judges for the Orange Prize in 2010 said this of her experience of reading the longlist: 'I felt like a social worker by the end of it.… A lot of them started with a rape … there was child abuse … there are an awful lot of books out there which had not a shred of redemption in them.' *http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-1258607/Very-little-wit-jokes-Womens-book-prize-chairwoman-bemoans-abundance-misery-lit.html#ixzz1rkYBi9lh* accessed 27/5/2012.

trilogy of novels, his characters refuse comfort, seeking instead nothingness and silence. By the end of the trilogy, the narrators seem to be disembodied, displaced and depressed. It is reminiscent of Dante's 'accidiosi', people who have given themselves over to acedia, now lingering in the swamp-like Styx. To Dante they admit:

> Sullen we were – we took
> No joy of the pleasant air, no joy of the good
> Sun; our hearts smouldered with a sulky smoke;
> Sullen we lie here now in the black mud.[3]

Perhaps it is an analogy that has a wider application. Beckett's dark vision was somewhat more unusual in his day, but it seems that this sullenness has become the norm in the world of serious literature, and academia has embraced this, believing apparently, that the Styx dwellers are more worthy of study and perhaps less superficial than those who inhabit more Elysian fields.

There are many questions which arise out of this situation. Is serious literature locked into this negativity? And why does it seem naïve to utter the words 'happy' or 'life-affirming' (the equivalent perhaps of the words 'beauty' and 'pretty' in the world of visual art) in the context of English literature? But the particular questions that I'd like to address in this essay revolve around the response of faith to this negativity. Must the Christian author live by the same vision, or deal in the same bleak currency? Is there a way of revisioning 'serious' literature from a Christian perspective? Does Christian theology have anything to say to this literary bleakness? And have there been any helpful responses to these issues by Christian authors?

I believe that the answer to the last three questions is in the affirmative. Christian theology and theologically inclined writers have a lot to say to this topic. Marilynne Robinson has said that our worldview (what she calls our 'collective fiction') is 'full of anxiety, empty of humor and generosity'(1998).[4] This worldview, she says, has given the writer little to build on and little of interest to explore' (79). Robinson is thus identifying this literary bleakness with a general culture of anxiety; a perspective with which I would concur. Given this effect and the increasing pervasiveness of anxiety, surely Christians should be exploring it in the light of their Biblical and theological roots. For both have plenty to say about anxiety. As the Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs Balthasar (d. 1988) commented in *The Christian and Anxiety* (1952), the Bible 'accepts anxiety as a fundamental given of human existence'.[5] But this does not mean that it is good to be anxious. There are,

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[3] Dante Alighieri, Canto VII, *The Divine Comedy*, Vol. I, trans. Dorothy Sayers, UK:Penguin Books, 1949, p. 113.

[4] Marilynne Robinson, 'Facing Reality', in *The Death of Adam*, New York, Picador, 2005, p. 79.

[5] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian and Anxiety*, San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1994, p. 40.

however, varieties of anxiety as Balthasar argues, and a clear view of divine revelation will allow for proper distinctions to be made.[6] This essay will explore Balthasar's distinctions, setting him and Georges Bernanos alongside Marilynne Robinson and C. S. Lewis, as three writers well positioned to help us explore the topic from a literary and theological perspective.

2

As we have already observed, Marilynne Robinson is aware of, and rejects, the contemporary culture of profound anxiety. Her treatment of this in *Gilead* (2004) is subtle, but pervasive. However, there is no negation of the suffering that is inherent in a life. The elderly and soon-to-die Reverend Ames writes letters to his young son, in order to give him some understanding of who his father was. He is a man who has known much suffering in his life, with the loss of his wife and child as a young man and many decades of solitude before he married again. 'My own dark time … the time of my loneliness, was most of my life', he writes.[7] He has known his Gethsemane – a time of dark suffering every life must endure, he believes.

Even as he writes, Ames struggles with fresh fears: that he will not know his child as an adult; that his wife will have a life of material scarcity after his death; and that his sermons will be wasted. Most of all, he struggles with his desire to judge and condemn Jack Boughton who not only hurt his father (Ames' lifelong best friend) as a teenager, but continues to do so as a middle aged man. Ames struggles to have the grace that he believes in, and he finds the forgiveness that he preaches eludes him until almost the end.

And yet, *Gilead* is a book that is ultimately uplifting. Towards the end of the novel, there is a suggestion that Ames reaches acceptance. As he nears his death, he senses his own insignificance and finds it liberating: 'We fly forgotten as a dream, certainly, leaving the forgetful world behind us to trample and mar and misplace everything we have ever cared for. That is just the way of it, and it is remarkable.'[8] His suffering has not made him downcast. Of his 'long night' he says, 'I do not remember grief and loneliness as much as I do peace and comfort – grief but never without comfort; loneliness but never without peace.'[9] And peace is a hallmark of his long life as a minister: 'prayer brings peace, as I trust you know', he writes to his son.[10]

Moreover, his letters are also permeated with references to hope, grace, laughter and blessing. Laughter is particularly prominent, right from the opening pages of the book, when he is struck by the laughter of young men,

[6] Interestingly, when Balthasar wrote the book in the late 40's or early 50's (it was published in 1952), he was quick to point out that any recent theological thought on the topic had been preceded by the poets; for him, Bloy, Bernanos and Claudel in France and Gertrude Le Fort in Germany. Ibid., p. 34.

[7] Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead*, London, Virago Press, 2004, p. 50.

[8] Ibid., p. 218

[9] Ibid., p. 81.

[10] Ibid., p. 80.

a laughter which excludes him yet which doesn't offend him: 'They were passing remarks back and forth the way they do and laughing that wicked way they have. And it seemed beautiful to me. It is an amazing thing to watch people laugh, the way it sort of takes them over. Sometimes they really do struggle with it. I see that in church often enough.'[11] Laughter is a grace. As Ames puts it, 'grace has a grand laughter in it.'[12]

Ames is a man who still gets pleasure from the prairie, from the morning light, from the feeling of a baby's brow against the palm of your one's hand. 'How I have loved this life' is a recurring refrain of his. Mostly it refers to the sheer joy of physical movement, but it also makes reference to the enjoyment of this world, 'the sacred beauty of Creation'.[13] *Gilead* is a gentle and elegiac celebration of this created world.

So why then has *Home* (2008) such a different tone? In this novel, the same story is told from the perspective of the Boughtons; the recalcitrant Jack Boughton has returned home because of the breakdown of his relationship with his partner, Della, and moves in with Glory, his unmarried sister, who has returned to look after her father, the lifelong friend of Reverend Ames in *Gilead*. A profoundly sad book, *Home* portrays in painful detail a person who cannot embrace the life of hope and grace and peace which sustains old Ames. Much as Jack seems to want to, he cannot grasp faith, just as he cannot grasp any belief in himself as anything other than disreputable. There is little consolation here: Jack's situation becomes increasingly painful, just as his smiles become increasingly ironic and his laughter becomes more and more hollow. A drinking binge which culminates in a failed suicide attempt makes Glory weep almost incessantly. His dying father increasingly loses his battle to keep loving his recalcitrant son, as well as his clarity of mind. Jack leaves, with no money and nowhere to go before his siblings return to be with their father in his final days; their happiness is too much of a reminder of his own lack of it. After Robinson's essay decrying the bleakness of our collective fiction as well as our art of fiction, it is a fascinating turn to that very bleakness. It could be read as a u-turn, or as a concession to a literary world which can only find comfort in anxiety.[14]

But it is, I believe, Robinson's attempt to show the collective and individual anxiety which is a consequence of what she calls our 'collective fiction'. The pain here is a spiritual pain which cannot be assuaged, mollified or denied. It is the pain of a man who has always felt like an outsider, and who himself identifies with other outsiders. It is the pain of one who wants to belong, who wants to be able to fit into his family identity, and even the identity of his old home town, but who finds that he cannot grasp the meaning of home, neither materially nor spiritually. There is no balm in Gilead for this sin-sick soul.

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[11] Ibid., p. 6.
[12] Ibid., p. 236.
[13] Ibid., p. 280.
[14] Marilynne Robinson, 'Facing Reality', p.79.

And yet, spiritually, Jack admits, he has a 'certain spiritual hunger'. Glory, he hopes, will perhaps try to save his soul.[15] His awareness of his soul, Glory concludes, comes from the canker which is on it.[16] In contrast, Glory seems to have no sense that her soul is hungry. Piety comes naturally to her. She is an *anima naturaliter Christiana* – a 'natural Christian soul' – insofar as she doesn't question the faith which she inherited, but finds belief and practice comes easily to her, and the 'thrilling quiet of which she had never felt any need to speak'.[17] In contrast, Jack seems desperately to need to speak, yet finds himself unable to do so, unable to be heard, by his father or by Ames, no matter how much he tries. Equally, he is unable to hear what others are really saying to him, especially in relation to himself. He cannot hear Glory properly when she tells him that she likes his soul the way it is; 'you're mistaking me for someone else,' he says.[18] In his own eyes, he is a sinner, 'a drunk and a thief' with 'a streak of malice that does not limit itself to futile efforts at self-defense'.[19] Elsewhere he says that he is a 'nothing'.[20] As Rowan Williams has pointed out: 'Jack's irony is, we might say, the wrong kind of attention, an attention to himself in the eyes of others rather than to the act or the word or the relational reality itself.'[21]

This wrong attention is closely tied to anxiety. It both stems from and leads to the anxiety. Robinson reiterates this in her essay, 'Facing Reality'. For Robinson, anxiety is inextricably connected to the fact that God has dropped out of the cultural world view:

> we adopted this very small view of ourselves and others, as consumers and members of interest groups, creatures too minor, we may somehow hope, for great death to pause over us. If we do still believe in the seriousness of being human, while we have lost the means of acknowledging this belief, even in our thoughts, then profound anxiety, whose origins we would be at a loss to name, seems to me an inevitable consequence. And this may account for both the narrowness and the intensity of the fiction that contains us. It is our comfort and our distraction. We are spiritual agoraphobes.'[22]

Balthasar uses the language of the seventeenth chapter of the Book of Wisdom to make a similar point. The Egyptians of Exodus 10, condemned to darkness as one of the plagues, 'lay as captives of darkness and prisoners of long night, shut in under their roofs, exiles from eternal providence.'[23] Light

[15] Robinson, *Home,* p. 108.
[16] Ibid., p. 117.
[17] Ibid., p. 115.
[18] Ibid., pp. 299-300.
[19] Ibid., p. 300.
[20] Ibid., p. 301.
[21] Rowan Williams, 'Native speakers: identity, grace and homecoming', *http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/2136/archbishops-speech-at-conference-on-christianity-and-literature* Accessed 6 October 2011.
[22] Marilynne Robinson, 'Facing Reality', p. 86.
[23] Balthasar, *The Christian and Anxiety*, p. 45.

itself becomes an object of anxiety; 'still heavier than darkness were they to themselves'.[24] This darkness, says Balthasar, 'separates, isolates, makes lonely, incarcerates, shackles … it ruptures every communication from one man to another, and this it does effortlessly with a single chain to which all those isolated are bound.'[25] The statement applies exactly to Jack, who has been anxious, lonely, incarcerated (metaphorically and literally) and incommunicado his entire life. This situation Balthasar labels as that of sin-anxiety. This kind of anxiety is 'everything that throws a person back upon himself, closes him off, constricts him, and makes him unproductive and unfit.'[26]

This anxiety, so agonisingly portrayed in Jack, seems remarkably similar to the anxiety of misery literature, or the angst of Samuel Beckett. As Balthasar puts it, 'in that anxiety, the properties of sin delineate themselves: a turning away, flight, a rigidity of life, sterility, desolation, the plunge into the abyss, constriction, incarceration, withdrawing into self, banishment.'[27] It is here, in this withdrawal and desolation, that we can see a portrait of much that is present in our contemporary serious literature.

3

In contrast, C. S. Lewis deliberately and comprehensively rejects bleakness in literature. In this he is completely in keeping with a second theological point as laid out by Balthasar:

> The first thing that must be said, and which can never be said powerfully and triumphantly enough, is that human fear has been completely and definitively conquered by the Cross. Anxiety is one of the authorities, powers and dominions over which the Lord triumphed on the Cross and which he carried off captive and placed in chains, to make use of as he wills.[28]

So sin-anxiety is no longer an option for the Christian. Balthasar is very clear on this point:

> If it is true that anxiety – about being in the world itself, about all its supposedly or really unfathomable dimensions, anxiety about death and anxiety about perhaps inescapable guilt – lies at the root of the modern consciousness; if it is true that this anxiety is the basis of contemporary neuroses and that this anxiety is supposed to be overcome through a modern existentialist philosophy by entering into it and affirming it and enduring it with determination to the very end, then to all of this Christianity can only say a radical No. By no means does a Christian have permission for or access to this kind of anxiety. If he nevertheless is a neurotic and an existentialist, then he suffers from a lack of Christian truth, and his faith is sick or frail.[29]

[24] Ibid., p. 47.
[25] Ibid., p. 47.
[26] Ibid., p. 89.
[27] Ibid., p. 90.
[28] Ibid., p. 81.
[29] Ibid., p. 86.

C. S. Lewis articulates his radical No in a range of ways, as expressed in his literary critical work, as well as his own fiction. Even his taste in reading is in accordance with this philosophy. In his own choice of reading, he prefers 'Golden' literature, as opposed to 'Drab' literature. The terms, given to sixteenth century literature in his *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century, Excluding Drama* (1954) describe two styles, one of which was characteristic of the start of that century, and the other of the end. At the beginning of the sixteenth century, the prose is:

> clumsy, monotonous, garrulous; their verse is either astonishingly tame and cold or, if it attempts to rise, the coarsest fustian.. …. Nothing is light, or tender, or fresh. All the authors write like elderly men. The mid-century is an earnest, heavy-handed, commonplace age: a drab age. Then, in the last quarter of the century the unpredictable happens. With startling suddenness we ascend. Fantasy, conceit, paradox, colour, incantation return. Youth returns. The fine frenzies of ideal love and ideal war are readmitted.[30]

Although unable to discern reasons for the development, Lewis argues that Golden literature is poetry (and by this he means all imaginative writing) in its 'innocent – as the theologians would say, its "once-born" – condition'.[31] He argues that the term 'Golden poetics' referred to both style and content. 'With the Golden manner there goes, usually, a Golden matter; ideally ardent lovers or ideally heroic wars in an ideally flowery and fruitful landscape are the staple. Verse is praised for being "sugared" or "with Nectar sprinkeled".'[32] Lewis's enjoyment is not in keeping with the sentiment of his era. His enjoyment of Spenser, Sidney *et al* because of their Golden style was as unfashionable in the 1940's when he wrote *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*, as it is for a critic today to argue for positivity in literature. He knows he is out of touch with the spirit of his age. Spenser, he says, is likely to alienate many modern readers because of 'the absence of pressure or tension' in his work.[33] This, Lewis suggests, is an intentional effect, and one which reflects the lack of tension in Spenser's mind. His poetry does not express discord and struggle, but harmony.[34] Lewis suggests that the harmony arose from Spenser's inheritance and acceptance of the Platonic and Christian dualism whereby he would have expected this world to fall short of the ideals set by the archetype, namely heaven. Spenser's tendency therefore, might be sadness or melancholy, but not doubt or anxiety. Making a similar distinction to that of Balthasar, Lewis argues:

> No poet, I think, was ever less like an Existentialist…. The Existentialist feels *Angst* because he thinks that man's nature (and therefore his relation to all

[30] C.S. Lewis, *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century Excluding Drama*, (Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 1.
[31] Ibid., p. 318.
[32] Ibid., p. 323.
[33] Ibid., p. 391.
[34] Ibid., p. 392.

> things) has to be created or invented, without guidance, at each moment of decision. Spenser thought that man's nature was given, discoverable, and discovered; he did not feel *Angst*. He was often sad, but not at bottom, worried. To many of my readers such a state of mind must appear a total illusion.[35]

Elsewhere in Lewis's criticism we find growing evidence of his rejection of contemporary literary drabness. Speaking of a growing contemporary interest in John Donne's poetry – a 'serious poetry', which he found to be neither profound nor even passionate, but 'the very opposite of gay' – he had this to say[36]:

> It would be foolish not to recognize the growth in our criticism of something that I can only describe as literary Manichaeism – a dislike of peace and pleasure and heartsease simply as such. To be bilious is, in some circles, almost the first qualification for a place in the Temple of Fame. We distrust the pleasures of imagination, however hotly and merrily we preach the pleasures of the body. This seriousness must not be confused with profundity. We do not like poetry that essays to be wise, and Chaucer would think that we had rejected 'doctryne' and 'solas' about equally. We want, in fact, just what Donne can give us – something stern and tough, though not necessarily virtuous, something that does not conciliate.[37]

Elsewhere Lewis makes the point that fifty years previously, 'serious' would have implied profound, even religious.[38] Hence he judges that a Henry James character could be found wanting in both 'seriousness' and mirth.[39] In contrast, in Jane Austen's novels the hard core of morality and even of religion seems to him to be just what makes the comedy possible.[40] Seriousness need not equal drab or tragic, despite the usage he was observing in the twentieth century.

Lewis's refusal of refusal, and his rejection of literary pessimism, can be seen in another way in his use of medieval astrology, and his understanding that the seven planets were representative of seven moods or general attitudes, as Michael Ward has pointed out.[41] Of particular interest here are the attitudes associated with Saturn and Jupiter. Saturn was associated with all things saturnine; ugliness, death and disaster. Active in promoting fatal accidents, pestilence, treacheries, and ill luck in general, he produced a

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[35] Ibid., p. 392.
[36] C.S. Lewis, 'Donne and Love Poetry in the Seventeenth Century,' *Selected Literary Essays*, Cambridge University Press, [1938] 1969, p. 112.
[37] Ibid, p. 113. It is worth noting that his comments on Donne are much more positive in *English Literature in the Sixteenth Century*, pp. 546-551.
[38] C. S. Lewis, 'A Note on Jane Austen', *Selected Literary Essays*, Cambridge University Press, 1969, p. 177.
[39] Ibid., p. 186. Elizabeth Bennet, he says, would have found Isabel Archer deficient in both 'seriousness' and in mirth.
[40] Ibid., p. 185.
[41] For more on this see Michael Ward's *Planet Narnia*, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 47.