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Believing in Poetry
lyric poems and the search for religious resonance

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CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Believing in Poetry:

lyric poems and the search for religious resonance

Mark Oakley

Summary

The two books focused on in this Critical Analysis were written to ascertain whether in the present United Kingdom, and other parts of the world, lyric poetry might be as compelling a vehicle as liturgical or doctrinal language for exploring a human resonance that could still be termed 'religious'. The various forms of creative curation utilised in the books, attempts to open reflective spaces for the general reader, are identified as models of an imaginative reading practice that is both personal and dialogical. Lyric poetry, with its containment of epiphanic experience and its reach towards a distilled and broadened comprehension, is revealed as a welcome, and often surprising, channel for encountering a religious resonance that persists, and remains recoverable, in our 'secular' societies.

Published works

The Splash of Words: Believing in Poetry (Canterbury Press, 2016)

My Sour-Sweet Days: George Herbert and the Journey of the Soul (SPCK, 2019)

Supervisors

Professor Andrew Hiscock

Professor Tony Brown, Professor Helen Wilcox

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I hereby declare that this Critical Analysis is the results of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. All other sources are acknowledged by bibliographic references. This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not being concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree unless, as agreed by the University, for approved dual awards.

I confirm that I am submitting the work with the agreement of my Supervisors.

Part 1

The genesis of the two books: poetry's timeliness

(I)

The Splash of Words: Believing in Poetry (2016) and *My Sour-Sweet Days: George Herbert and the Journey of the Soul* (2019) were written with an element of experimentation. By assessing their impact on readers, would it be possible to ascertain whether in the present United Kingdom, where mainstream religious and liturgical language is either largely unknown or thought to be unappealing, lyric poems might instead be an attractive vehicle for exploring a human resonance that can still be termed 'religious'? Is poetry a contemporary 'vocabulary for the soul', expressing the perennial restless yearning of human subjectivity at the same time as enlarging the repertoire for individual and social being by deepening perception or motivating the will?

Lyric poetry has a long history of expressing explicit and personal religious belief and struggle in many cultures and faiths.[1] From at least the second-half of the twentieth century, however, the language of Christian belief in Western culture has become faint, fractured or forgotten.[2] This makes a poetry of belief less common in the public domain as it is no longer accessible to its readers as a shared currency and is a much more nuanced and complex challenge for poets who still wish to create work that opens onto the metaphysical.

Although often having a reputation for being an erudite pursuit for a small clique of specialists, lyric poetry generally appears to have had a certain renaissance in public life in recent decades. The belief that poetry is somehow too difficult for the average person to appreciate, often attached to memories of unfulfilling poetry study at school, seems to have been overtaken by the other widespread but contradictory belief that some poetry is readily accessible and essential for the exploration and expression of human experience.

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[1] Though this is the case, doubts have also been expressed through those years as to the suitability of poetry as an appropriate vehicle for the expression of religious belief. Boswell tells us that Samuel Johnson, for instance, presented his 'dissertation upon the unfitness of poetry for the awful subjects of our holy religion […] with uncommon force and reasoning'. James Boswell, *Life of Johnson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), p.1293.

[2] The timing and causes of secularization in Britain are debated, as is helpfully shown in Steve Bruce and Tony Glendinning, 'When was secularization? Dating the decline of the British churches and locating its cause', *The British Journal of Sociology* 61.1 (2010), pp.107-26.

Those who appreciate poetry have often done so for its ability to prompt recognitions within the self, as well as fine-tuning an attentiveness to the world, to language and, in lyric poetry especially, to the ambiguities of the 'I' we use of ourselves.[3] Those such as Gregory Orr in his *Poetry as Survival*, for instance, acknowledging the mysteriousness and volatility of our inner lives, praise poetry for removing the crises of subjectivity's extremities to the symbolic and vivid world of language.[4] Poetry, he continues, actively makes and shapes the model of our situation rather than passively enduring it as a lived experience. His own work centres on a clear premise that: 'I knew that if I was to survive in this life, it would only be through the help of poetry'.[5]

Poetry is often welcomed, then, for its work in unfolding the multiplicities of human existence, and extending our sympathies, by paying close attention to the details of experience. As well as its focus on the perennial maze of subjectivity, however, it can look outwards too. The current time is one in which there is a sense of the dismantling of parts of society's scaffolding that we have often taken for granted. These might include liberal democracy and a shared concept of 'truth', the understanding of human resilience and purpose exposed by the ravages of a pandemic such as COVID-19, and the future of the overheating planet earth itself with its threatened life forms. At the same time, global social media give us permanent access to so many words, whereas, ironically, a marketing, competitive and polemical culture makes us doubt them all as never before.[6]

In such a political and social climate, the making (ποίησις) of poetry is again being understood by some as a constructive and distilling ordering in the unchartered dislocations of

[3] The dissonance felt between the self we live in and the self who relates to others, is nicely captured by Ralph Waldo Emerson in an essay in which he points to our 'painful secret': 'a man is only half himself; the other half is his expression'. Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'The Poet', in *Essays and Poems by Ralph Waldo Emerson,* with an introduction and notes by Peter Norberg (New York, NY: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2013), p.234. Likewise, John Ashbery writes in 'As One Put Drunk into the Packet-Boat', *Self Portrait in a Convex Mirror* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 1976), p.1:

Did they notice me, this time, as I am,
Or is it postponed again?

[4] Gregory Orr, *Poetry as Survival* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2002).

[5] Ibid., p.8.

[6] 'The moments when I am most in need of words are exactly the moments when I lose faith in them'. Kei Miller, *Things I have Withheld: Essays* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2021), p. xiv.

encroaching chaos, a source of potentially formative wisdom in a world distracted by information.[7] The poet David Constantine, for example, recently stated:

> Poetry keeps on saying what it is we risk losing, what we are losing and what we might do about it. It is a celebration of things that are threatened, things without which life isn't worth it.[8]

There is evidence for poetry's confident public re-emergence in recent years.[9] There has been a notable rise in the number of poetry reading groups, such as that written about in Charlotte Moore's book *The Magic Hour*.[10] The placement of poets-in-residence in increasingly diverse settings (for example, from Manchester Cathedral and English Heritage to Selkirk and Derby County Football Clubs, South Bristol Community Hospital and Medway Secure Training Centre), and the prominence of contemporary poets in public broadcasting (for example, Simon Armitage, Carol Ann Duffy, George the Poet, Gillian Clarke, Benjamin Zephaniah, Michael Symmons Roberts, Jackie Kay, Roger McGough), as well as social media and performance (for example, Elyse Hart, Rupi Kaur, Kae Tempest), are all significant developments which point to a striking new public attention to poetry.[11] Projects such as that

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[7] William Carlos Williams' work 'Asphodel, That Greeny Flower' includes words that voice this feeling well:

It is difficult
to get the news from poems
yet men die miserably every day
for lack
of what is found there.

Christopher MacGowan, ed., *The Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams, Volume II, 1939-1962* (New York, NY: New Directions, 1988), p.318. Jahan Ramazani has argued that poetry will never be satisfactorily defined but 'the news is one of the most prominent discursive others against which it defines itself'. Jahan Ramazani, '"To Get the News from Poems": Poetry as Genre', in Erik Martiny, ed., *A Companion to Poetic Genre* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2012), p.15.

[8] Alison Flood, 'David Constantine wins Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry', *The Guardian*, 18 December 2020.

[9] It is difficult to be precise as to when exactly such public interest was intensely renewed, but it can be argued, as David Kennedy does, that 'as the 1990s gather momentum something has certainly been happening to British poetry. Suddenly, the quietist art is hot news'. He notes that *The Times Literary Supplement* reported, at the end of 1993, that 'Poetry is booming, everyone agrees'. David Kennedy, *New Relations: the refashioning of British poetry 1980-94* (Bridgend: Seren, 1996), p.236.

[10] Charlotte Moore, *The Magic Hour: 100 Poems from the Tuesday Afternoon Poetry Club* (London: Short Books, 2020).

[11] Jim Higo, who runs the 'open mic' evenings called 'Away With Words' in Hull, has written that: 'Performance poetry's increasingly high profile coincides with a growing realisation that, far from being dull and pretentious, when done well it is inspiring, relevant, stimulating and most importantly, entertaining'. Jim Higo, 'Why performance poetry is on everybody's lips', >https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/1FfKxFqx1spNvbHKLNFCXph/why-performance-poetry-is-on-everybodys-lips<

between Elizabeth-Jane Burnett, the National Trust and the Arts and Humanities Research Council, inviting the public to contribute to a 'crowdsourced poem' to lift spirits after experiencing the Covid pandemic, are also popular.[12] Poems are printed each week in national newspapers, and poetry competitions are very prevalent for a wide range of interests (for example, in early 2021, The RSPB and The Rialto Nature and Place Poetry Competition, the Kent and Sussex Poetry Open Competition, and the Human Cell Atlas Poetry Challenge).[13] In 2021, Manchester Metropolitan University opened the first public poetry library in the North West of Britain, joining the National Poetry Library in London (1953), the Scottish Poetry Library in Edinburgh (1984) and the Northern Poetry Library in Morpeth (1968). Wales, however, continues to lack one.[14]

Statistics from UK book sales monitor Nielsen BookScan show that poetry book sales grew by just over 12% in 2018, for the second year in a row. In total, 1.3 million volumes of poetry were sold in 2018, adding up to £12.3 million in sales, a rise of £1.3 million from 2017. Two-thirds of buyers were younger than 34 and 41% were aged 13 to 22, with teenage girls and young women identified as the biggest consumers. *The Guardian* newspaper, reporting these facts, commented that a 'hunger for nuance amid conflict and disaster were fuelling the boom'.[15] Similarly, in 2018, according to an arts participation survey conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts and the United States Census Bureau, there was the highest percentage of poetry readership in the United States in more than fifteen years.[16] Dina Gusejnova, an Assistant Professor in International History at the London School of Economics, has also commented on the surge of interest in poetry she has observed in students: 'Throughout history,

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[12] Steven Morris, '"A surge of hope": public helps create poem celebrating spring 2021', *The Guardian,* 21 April 2021.

[13] For example, poems are regularly published in *The Guardian*, *The Times*, *The New York Times* and *The Irish Times*. Carol Rumens has published some of the poems she selected in *The Guardian*: Carol Rumens, *Smart Devices: 52 Poems from The Guardian 'Poem of the Week'* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2019).

[14] The current English Poet Laureate, Simon Armitage, has recently begun a popular ten-year project to highlight and preserve the work of libraries. He is reading poems across the nation in a variety of venues, from the large city libraries to those serving rural and remote communities. See: >https://www.simonarmitage.com/a-b-libraries-tour-2021<

[15] Donna Ferguson, 'Poetry sales soar as political millennials search for clarity', *The Guardian*, 21 January 2019.

[16] Jennifer Hijazi, 'How young writers are leading a poetry comeback', PBS, 11 July 2018, >https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/poetry/how-young-writers-are-leading-a-poetry-comeback<

readers have been drawn to poetry in the context of political crises which fragment and challenge society'.[17]

Some series of poetry books have proved particularly popular, especially those that offer a poem to be read each day.[18] Those placed into a thematic sequence, such as the series edited by Daisy Goodwin (for example, *101 Poems That Could Save Your Life*) or Anthony and Ben Holden (*Poems to Make Grown Men Cry*) have wide appeal.[19] Poems are posted in public spaces (for example, the London Underground, or outside Durlston Castle, Dorset, or in projects such as Nottingham's 'Words for Walls' installations) or inscribed into the walls of new buildings (for example, the Scottish Parliament building, the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, London City Hall, a takeaway restaurant in Dilworth Street, Manchester, and the Wales Millennium Centre).[20] They are written to be read at the inauguration of a new President of the United States and at the U.S. National Football League's Super Bowl.[21] A poem written by Michael Rosen to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the National Health Service in 2008 was later to gain national prominence due to the poet's own hospitalisation due to Covid-19.[22]

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[17] Dina Gusejnova, cited in 'Why is poetry having a moment?', *LSE on-line news*, 13 December 2019, >https://www.lse.ac.uk/News/Latest-news-from-LSE/2019/L-December-2019/Why-is-poetry-having-a-moment<

[18] For example, Allie Esiri, ed., *A Poem for Every Winter Day* (London: Macmillan, 2020).

[19] Daisy Goodwin, *101 Poems That Could Save Your Life* (London: HarperCollins, 2003). Anthony Holden and Ben Holden, *Poems That Make Grown Men Cry: 100 Men on the Words that Move Them* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2014). Carys Walsh's recent *Frequencies of God: Walking through Advent with R.S.Thomas* (London: Canterbury Press, 2020) is another example of such a volume appealing to a specifically Christian audience.

[20] 'Poems on the Underground' was launched in 1986, following an idea from the American writer Judith Chernaik. Some of the poems are collected in Gerard Benson, Judith Chernaik, and Cicely Herbert, eds, *Poems on the Underground* (London: Cassell, 1998) and other published collections by the same editors. More examples of poems in public spaces can be found in Julia Forster, 'Critical Openness: A Study of Poetry in Public Places', >https://www.agendapoetry.co.uk/documents/JuliaForster-Essaypdf.pdf and at >www.poetryinpublic.co.uk<. Poems have also been displayed in public through QR codes. See Theodoros Papatheodorou and Ioannis Dimitriadis, 'Exhibiting Poetry in Public Places Using a Network of Scattered QR Codes', in *Arts and Technology, Third International Conference,* ArtsIT 2013, Milan, Italy, 21-23 March 2013, Revised Selected Papers, pp.9-16.

[21] The creation of the 'U.S. National Youth Poet Laureate' in 2017 was a significant development. The first person to be appointed, Amanda Gorman, read her 'The Hill We Climb' at Joe Biden's inauguration, 20 January 2021. Robert Frost was the first 'inaugural poet' at the inauguration ceremony of John F. Kennedy in 1961. Two years later, on 26 October 1963, Kennedy dedicated a library at Amherst College in memory of Frost, at which he stated: 'When power corrupts, poetry cleanses' (John F. Kennedy, 'Poetry and Power', in *The Atlantic*, February, 1964). See also: 'Amanda Gorman to be first poet to perform at Super Bowl', *The Guardian*, 27 January 2021.

[22] See: Lisa Allardice, 'Michael Rosen: "This book is about what it feels like to nearly die"', *The Guardian*, 13 March 2021. His poem, 'These are the hands', referred to in this interview as 'an unofficial anthem for health-workers', was placed over Rosen's hospital bed during his induced coma.

Poems are taken to festivals as part of a 'Poetry Pharmacy' and prescribed to people who present their various conditions.[23]Although an editorial in the *British Medical Journal* in 2013 mentioned the fact that poetry is routinely excluded from the journal 'because we are frightened of opening the floodgates',[24] some doctors and therapists argue for engagement with it within the healing process.[25]

Poets have also been called on to help repair communities struck by tragedy. ITV reported on Tony Walsh as the 'poet whose words helped bring the people of Greater Manchester together' following the public recital of his poem 'This is the Place' at the memorial for the 22 people killed at the Manchester Arena bombing.[26] Similarly, a recent collection of poems by American poets in response to the Covid-19 pandemic was described by one reviewer in the *New York Journal of Books* as a collection of 'creative healing'.[27] In a similar vein, the editorial column of *The Guardian* newspaper stated: 'Perhaps it is only through poetry, dealing as it does in language compressed, transformed and transfigured, that sense will ever be made of the Covid-19 pandemic – at least internally and emotionally'.[28] Pursuing this idea, the poet Sean Borodale collected the thoughts of patients, visitors and staff of Cambridge University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust, as to what it means to live and work 'beyond the mask' during the pandemic. He placed the responses into a poem to celebrate the International Year of the Nurse and Midwife and gifted it the hospital community.[29]

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[23] See: William Sieghart, *The Poetry Pharmacy: Tried-and-True Prescriptions for the Heart, Mind and Soul* (London: Particular Books, 2017) and William Sieghart, *The Poetry Pharmacy Returns: More Prescriptions for Healing, Courage and Hope* (London: Penguin Books, 2019).

[24] Delamothe T., 'What's in a Name?', *British Medical Journal*, 2013, p.347: f7543.

[25] See, for example, Davies, E.A., 'Why we need more poetry in palliative care', *British Medical Journal, Supportive and Palliative Care*, 8 (2018), pp. 266-270, and the studies on reading and health carried out by the Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society at the University of Liverpool.

[26] 'Poet who helped unite Manchester after the Arena bomb attack awarded honorary doctorate', 19 July 2018, <https://www.itv.com/news/granada/2018-07-19/honorary-degree-for-poet>

[27]Andrew Jarvis, > https://www.nyjournalofbooks.com/book-review/together-sudden-strangeness< The review is of Alice Quinn, ed., *Together in a Sudden Strangeness: America's Poets Respond to the Pandemic* (New York, NY: Knopf, 2020). See also: Clare Bucknell, 'What Do We Want From Poetry In Times Of Crisis?', *The New Yorker*, 22 December 2020.

[28] 'Poetry has the power to express the grief and dislocation of our times', *The Guardian*, 30 January 2021. For an interesting examination of how poetry can respond to social suffering and atrocity, see Dale Tracy, *With the Witnesses: Poetry, Compassion and Claimed Experience* (Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2017).

[29] 'Poet Sean's invitation to write about nurses and midwives', 2 June 2020, >https://www.cuh.nhs.uk/news/poet-seans-invitation-to-write-about-nurses-and-midwives/<

Josie Billington's book, *Is Literature Healthy?*, argues that literature has a role and power analogous to that of psychoanalysis in amending and aiding deprivations in human thought function.[30] In a chapter entitled 'Reading in Practice: Finding the Poetry', she reports on a reading group in a mental health drop-in centre in a northern city. The group read an early sonnet by Elizabeth Barrett Browning out loud. After all the hesitations about what to say, the group found a kind of 'pre-language, getting in earlier to visceral feelings'.[31] There was a moment, she comments, 'when the normal, obvious language of the participants is put under pressure by the imagined event, when it is inflected by the language of poetry'.[32] The group's work confirms for Billington 'what poetry is really for: to make what is deeply inner and private, and rarely expressible in normal life, both more personally felt and more publicly sharable'.[33]

Pursuing this idea that various forms of poetry might contribute to better mental health, research done on Shared Reading groups in four boroughs of London by the University of Liverpool's Centre for Research into Reading, Literature and Society likewise highlights the fact that such groups, often engaging with poems, do not just talk about feelings but are rather engaged in '*doing* feelings':

> Shared Reading allows the strong language of literature to get to people emotionally – to get under their defences and depressions, their defaults and their pre-formed opinions, to the emotions and memories of their core selves. In doing so, it shakes up mental patterns, and helps people get away from set attitudes or disappointing outcomes.[34]

The research shows that the participants' set defaults and habitual responses were broken by literature's bringing into focus the 'specific' and the 'felt', avoiding casual generalisations in self-reporting and attending to the unsettling or resonant triggers in the text. Reading poems

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[30] Josie Billington, *Is Literature Healthy*? (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[31] Ibid., p.87.

[32] Ibid., p.87.

[33] Ibid., p.88.

[34] P. Davis, F. Magee, K. Koleva, T.M Tangeras, E. Hill, H. Baker, *What Literature Can Do*: *An investigation into the effectiveness of shared reading as a whole population health intervention*, Guys and St Thomas Charity (University of Liverpool, 2016), p.8.

often awakened capabilities by prompting ‘mental, emotional and imaginative mobility’.[35] Interestingly, one of the witnessed values of the group’s work included:

> the value of inarticulacy, or struggling into articulacy, to achieve something even more powerful than what is called ‘confidence’. Those people who seem to have less (in terms of formal education, or ready-made reading experience, or happy confidence, or status) often give more in this context, in the challenge to confront human troubles as well as human joys.[36]

(II)

In the light of all this, the nature of poetry’s purpose or usefulness is evident, but how it functions, using the ‘full compass’ of language, remains a complex and disputed matter.[37] Is it imitative or transcendent? Is it, as expressed in M.H. Abram’s book on English Romantic poetics, a mirror or a lamp?[38] Does it have a duty of public utility and responsibility? Is it, as Horace thought, primarily to instruct as well as please?[39] The debate will continue and, by doing so, will confirm the fact that poetry’s nature and purpose are as impossible to define with final clarity, or in paraphrase, as poetry itself resists such reductive closure. Instead, Eric Falci helpfully frames the importance of poetry:

> as providing a space of attentiveness and linguistic play, as a site where the vicissitudes of individual experience might be made considerable and shareable, as a locus wherein the complexities of mental and affective life might be mapped, and as a means of constructing an imaginative and textual relation with the dead and the past.[40]

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[35] Ibid., p.56.

[36] Ibid., p.56.

[37] John Henry Newman, cited by Walter Jost, ‘Philosophic Rhetoric: Newman and Heidegger’, in Gerard Magill, ed., *Discourse and Context: An Interdisciplinary Study of John Henry Newman,* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University, 1993), p.70.

[38] M.H.Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: romantic theory and the critical tradition (*New York, NY: W.W.Norton, 1953).

[39] See: T.S.Dorsch, *Classical Literary Criticism: Aristotle: On the Art of Poetry; Horace: On the Art of Poetry; Longinus: On the Sublime* (London: Penguin Books, 1965).

[40] Eric Falci, *The Value of Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), p.17.

The significance of poetry is caught in the interplay of the writer's practice, the resulting textual and oral occurrence, and the activities of reading and hearing. By way of rhythm, sound, rhyme, figuration, rhetoric, genre and diction, poetry enlivens and estranges. Poetry may recount an experience, but reading it is also the in-process enactment of another one, leading a reader to conclude that, whereas he or she may not immediately understand the poem, there is an unignorable sense that the poem somehow understands them or is there to reach them. Its ambiguity, density and affective intensity all exceed and elude the reader's self, making the consequence of the poem unknown but worthy of pursuit towards something felt to be more 'authentic'. It is impossible to skim a poem because of this creative reading. Indeed, in reading as in writing, to use Valery's image, 'a poem is never finished, only abandoned'.[41] Poetry is to be lived with rather than rushed through. Each poem is poised towards the future. It lives, says Giorgio Agamben, 'in the possibility of enjambment'.[42]

The difficulty of a poem is there precisely to create, through non-coercive attention, some energising and residual counterforce that pushes us to reassess or reimagine the terms of our self's worldview or our contemporary world's understanding. Its potential to engender insight is an initially dislocating challenge to the established and reductive platitudes of language, thought and feeling. It is, therefore, believed Joseph Brodsky, 'the only insurance against the vulgarity of the human heart'.[43] Robert Frost believed that the imaginative transformation of human life is the means by which we can most comprehend it. He observes that a poem:

> ends in a clarification of life – not necessarily a great clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion. It has denouement.[44]

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[41] Paul Valery, cited by W.H.Auden, *A Certain World: A Commonplace Book* (New York, NY: Viking Press, 1970), p.423.

[42] Giorgio Agamben, 'The End of the Poem', in *The End of the Poem: Studies in Poetics* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), p.110.

[43] Joseph Brodsky, cited by David Kennedy, *New Relations: the refashioning of British poetry 1980-94* (Bridgend: Seren, 1996), p.247.

[44] Robert Frost, 'The Figure a Poem Makes', in Hyde Cox and Edward Connery Latham, eds, *Selected Prose of Robert Frost* (Macmillan, 1968), p.18.

In his inaugural lecture as Professor of Poetry at Oxford University, Seamus Heaney developed the idea of the work of a poem being that of 'redress', perceiving in the self or in society where there is unbalance and placing a counter-reality in the scales. This is 'a reality', he says,

> which may be only imagined but which nevertheless has weight because it is imagined within the gravitational pull of the actual and can therefore hold its own and balance out against the historical situation'.[45]

He continues:

> this redressing effect of poetry comes from its being a glimpsed alternative, a revelation of potential that is denied or constantly threatened by circumstances'.[46]

This is Heaney pursuing thoughts he had voiced a few years earlier, that poetry is the 'revelation of the self to the self, a restoration of the culture to itself'.[47] Poetry can contribute a complication, where the general lure is towards simplification, and an honest complexity instead of an easy but deceptive clarity.

The poet Wallace Stevens wrote to a friend saying that 'we should like poetry the way children like the snow'.[48] Whatever this might mean, it surely draws us to noting the warm-chill of poetry's distilled air, a language form that can help re-imagine our landscape, seeing the wonder of our own breath again and exciting us into some possible new adventure within the self's or society's understanding. The possibilities of lyric poetry, to those who read or write it, can be as enticing as a fresh morning's snowfall outside the small, contained window of one's daily life.

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[45] Seamus Heaney, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* (London: Faber, 1995), p.3.

[46] Ibid., p.4.

[47] Seamus Heaney, 'Feeling into Words', *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber, 1984), p.41.

[48] Holly Stevens, ed., *Letters of Wallace Stevens* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), p.349.

(III)

The Splash of Words: Believing in Poetry (2016) was written to explore how poetry, through its renewed place in the public arena and its various functions as 'one of the enlargements of life',[49] might connect to, or help 'redress' in its readers, that sensibility often referred to as 'religious'. 'Religion hasn't been allowed to ride in poetry's front seat for a long time now', observes Graeme Richardson, and there are those for whom poetry is, and should be, a religion-free zone.[50] Indeed, some have argued that poetry is the contemporary world's replacement of religion or is, as T.E. Hulme termed Romanticism, 'spilt religion'.[51] Simon Critchley, for instance, in an essay on the philosophical significance of poetry, writes:

> I would claim, rather grandly, that the critical function of poetry is the acceptance of the existence in a world without God, that is, without transcendent or cognitive guarantees for our values [...] having no other ground on which to stand, we fall back on the power of the imagination.[52]

My own reading of poetry suggests to me that this is very often *not* the view of poets and certainly not of their readers.[53] Whilst frequently disinclined to sign up to a religion's defined certainties, a poet's rich understanding of multiplicity and depth entails a natural openness to the possibilities that life's mystery is a 'given' one and not one that has arrived through pure chance, and that 'meaning' is symbolic of such a possibility. A 'religious' person, here, can be of the mind that religion is at its best when questioning answers rather than answering questions.

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[49] Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and Imagination* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1965), p.viii.

[50] Graeme Richardson, 'Face to Face with Everything', *The Times Literary Supplement*, 5771, 8 November 2013, p.7.

[51] T.E.Hulme, cited in Patrick McGuiness, ed., *T.E. Hulme: Selected Writings* (Manchester: Fyfield Books, 1998), p.71.

[52] Simon Critchley, 'The Philosophical Significance of a Poem (On Wallace Stevens)', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society,* New Series Vol. 96 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p.288.

[53] There has, for instance, been a notable academic interest of late in the relationship between religion and poetry. In 2011 alone, there were conferences entitled 'The Power of the Word: Poetry, Theology and Life' (University College, London), 'Du profane dans le sacré: quand le religieux se politise' (Université Paris-Est), 'Des poètes et Dieu' (Institut Catholique de Paris) and 'Poetry and Religion: Figures of the Sacred' (Institut Catholique de Paris).

For some, such as the philosopher Gianni Vattimo, there is a renewed religious sensibility that is discernible in the contemporary world, but which is imprecise and not 'definable with any rigour'. Religion, for him, is largely the business of re-presenting the core contents of consciousness we have forgotten or buried:

> the religious problem seems to be always the recovery of an experience that one has somehow already had. None of us in our Western culture – and perhaps not in any culture – begins from zero with the question of religious faith [...] it is less a case of recollecting the forgotten origin by making it present again than of recollecting that we have always already forgotten it, and that the recollection of this forgetfulness and this distance constitutes the sole authentic religious experience.[54]

In Vattimo's thought, faith is the paradoxical enterprise of remembering our amnesia. This is an image sometimes used by poets for their own work, such as the Nigerian poet Gbenga Adesina:

> It was my antidote to forgetting. I think now of Allen Grossman's words, "Poetry is a principle of power invoked by all of us against our vanishing."[55]

Such an approach led George Oppen to voice a variation on Shelley's belief that 'poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world', by noting instead that 'poets are the legislators of the unacknowledged world'.[56]

Poetry and faith, here, have similarities of purpose. They both concern themselves with parts of our human consciousness and experience that refuse to be interred and which require recovery. The principle that trustworthy intimations we experience of life and love have an objective metaphysical source, often unearthed by creative language, is at the heart of theism. Likewise, the significant sense of the numinous, the awareness of our own imperfection and propensity to injure, and the natural feelings of gratitude for our life, relationships, community, and the beauty of the world, though often out of daily sight, these are frequently recovered with

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[54] Gianni Vattimo, *Belief* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1999), pp.21-22.

[55] Gbenga Adesina, in Matthew Thorburn, 'A Poet of the Intimate Spaces : An Interview with Gbenga Adesina', *Ploughshares*, Emerson College, 14 May 2017, >https://blog.pshares.org/a-poet-of-the-intimate-spaces-an-interview-with-gbenga-adesina<

[56] Cited by Jay Parini, *Why Poetry Matters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), p.1.

relief and a sense of renewal. The language utilised for this recovery must be of a different order from that which maintains repression.

It might be argued that, although her work divides critics, the popularity of Mary Oliver's poetry provides evidence that poetry is able to fulfil this awakening task for many people today. Described by *The New Yorker* as 'a poet who had "Greatest Hits"', and one of America's best-loved and best-selling poets, Oliver can reintroduce the inner world of the subject to the observed natural world, invoking natural mystery with a meaning, and exposing the poverty of an inattentive or competitive life. She has been praised as the poet who 'helped us stay amazed'.[57] When asked about her work by Maria Shriver, she said that the act of remembering was, indeed, key:

> Maria Shriver: When you talk of the spiritual, though, you're not talking about organized religion?
>
> Mary Oliver: I'm not, though I do think ceremony is beautiful and powerful. But I've also met some people in organized religion who aren't so hot. I've written before that God has "so many names." To me, it's all right if you look at a tree, as the Hindus do, and say the tree has a spirit. It's a mystery, and mysteries don't compromise themselves—we're never gonna know. I think about the spiritual a great deal. I like to think of myself as a praise poet.
>
> Maria Shriver: What does that mean?
>
> Mary Oliver: That I acknowledge my feeling and gratitude for life by praising the world and whoever made all these things.
>
> Maria Shriver: Is that the poet's goal? Or is the goal to make people look at nature in a different way? Is it to touch their soul? Is it for them to feel delight?
>
> Mary Oliver: All of those things. I am not very hopeful about the Earth remaining as it was when I was a child. It's already greatly changed. But I think when we lose the connection with the natural world, we tend to forget that we're animals, that we need the Earth. And that can be devastating. Wendell Berry is a wonderful poet, and he talks about this coming devastation a great deal. I just happen to think you catch more flies

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[57] Rachel Syme, 'Mary Oliver Helped Us Stay Amazed', *The New Yorker*, 19 January 2019.

with honey than with vinegar. So I try to do more of the "Have you noticed this wonderful thing? Do you remember this?"[58]

Whatever else they may be, then, poetry and religion are both manifestations of, in Clive Bell's words, the 'emotional significance of the universe', and so have profoundly common interests.[59]

In personal correspondence with the poet Sean Hewitt, I asked whether he sees himself as a religious poet in any sense. He replied:

> I think I might distinguish between being a 'religious' person and a 'religious poet'. In my poetry, I remain a non-believer, but the process of writing retains its religious characteristics. When I write, I often use the poem, and the writing of it, as a way to get toward something I don't know, or to think through the process of what it would be like to get there. In some of the longer poems […] I think I am asking 'what do I do with this idea of God, all its connotations, all the ways it asks me to think, when I don't believe in God?' I think all my poems are essentially secular poems, but they approach the secular world by asking – 'what would it be to think about this world in religious terms?' I think that sort of thinking – worrying the static forms of the world, bringing them alive, or spiritualising them, in the poem – I think that's where all my imaginative energy goes.[60]

For the purposes of this project, by 'religious' I refer to the intuition that life has a gift-like quality, and that existence has a transcendent source with which or whom we might find some peace, balance, or connections in the world, as we undergo life's complexities. This intuition also captures the sense that, ultimately, reality may well be trustworthy because of the enigmatic but invitational mystery that gives noticeable resonance to words such as 'sacred', 'holy' or 'divine'. As Rowan Williams has pointed out, 'in spite of everything, we go on saying 'God'.[61] I also refer to religion as the consequent belief that the human self somehow becomes

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[58] 'Maria Shriver Interviews the Famously Private Poet Mary Oliver', 9 March 2011, >https://www.oprah.com/entertainment/maria-shriver-interviews-poet-mary-oliver/3<

[59] Clive Bell, *Art* (New York, NY: Stokes, 1924), p.56.

[60] Sean Hewitt, personal correspondence, 7 July 2020.

[61] Rowan Williams, 'Trinity and Revelation', in *On Christian Theology: Challenges in Contemporary Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p.131. Williams also argues that when an individual perceives that the power of art resides in it not being designed so as to fit our own specifications for being pleased, there comes 'a hint that when we apprehend that something is not there solely for me, that it has an overplus of significance,

more itself by not being self-focused. Charity and care for the neighbour, the stranger or the vulnerable, is at the heart of the worldview that understands each human being to be equally created with wonder and a given dignity.[62] 'Poetry's special status among the literary arts', writes Seamus Heaney:

> derives from the audience's readiness […] to credit the poet with a power to open unexpected and unedited communications between our nature and the nature of the reality we inhabit.[63]

This openness to the unexpected that we expect in the poet means that there can be no ideological closure when it comes to the possibilities of God or metaphysical speculation. Indeed, as Kae Tempest comments, through poetry 'you are learning a new sensibility. Or, maybe more aptly, remembering an old one'.[64]

Obviously, religions come in many forms and with an enormously wide and diverse set of credal beliefs. However, for this purpose in *The Splash of Words* I was more interested in the primary and somewhat restless instinct within many human beings that is recognisable before any later possible commitment might be made to the doctrine and ethics of a particular religious philosophy or community, the yearnings that precede and outlast conceptual formulations. Such a basic religious drive rejects immediate fundamentalisms of secularism or religion in favour of a more un-boundaried search. It is rooted in the perception that a person will 'forever be surprising | A hunger in himself to be more serious',[65] that 'the trouble is I don't believe my unbelief',[66] and that the world would be a poorer place should the rumour of

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this very fact has a metaphysical dimension'. Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Continuum, 2005), pp.13-14.

[62] In his recent biography of William Wordsworth, Jonathan Bate asks why we should still read Wordsworth today. One of the reasons, he writes, is because 'he expressed humankind's longing for the infinite and our sense of "something far more deeply interfused" - the "oceanic feeling" – in a way that was not dependent on religious dogma'. He then reminds us of the title of the eighth book of Wordsworth's *The Prelude*: 'Retrospect: Love of Nature leading to Love of Mankind'. Jonathan Bate, *Radical Wordsworth: The Poet who Changed the World* (London: William Collins, 2020), p.485.

[63] Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue; The 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and other critical writings* (London: Faber, 1988), p.9.

[64] Kae Tempest, *On Connection* (London: Faber, 2020), p.75.

[65] Philip Larkin, 'Church Going', *Collected Poems* (London; Faber, 1998), p.98.

[66] Graham Greene, cited in Leopoldo Duran, *Graham Greene: Friend and Brother*, trans. by Euan Cameron (London: Harper Collins, 1994), p. 97.

God ever disappear from the face of the earth. It is not belief-systems that I am focussing on in my work, but the unignorable truth within so many that we become religious when we first recognise our capacity to be pulled in, moved, called out or compelled by something outside of ourselves. Religion is primarily, therefore, as David Dark notes,

> that with which we have to do (or the way we do everything we do or think we do). It is certainly often an opiate for the masses, but it can also function as the poetry of the people.[67]

The wisdom of the religious traditions, according to this searching religious spirit, is still worthy of a closer reading and engagement because of the transhistorical nature of this human instinct. This primary religious sensibility is, I believe, still very much alive today, but it is inhibited or paralysed by being without any native or learned language for it to be expressed or shared easily. My books test the assumption that to bring it alongside the contemporary celebration of poetry might be of some significant value.

Although, as David Jones identified over fifty years ago, the English language is now littered with fading religious signs and symbols that once gave greater connotations and depth to it, it is far from clear that the death of religious certainties for many people entails the loss of religious aspiration.[68] As Michael Symmons Roberts asks:

> Is our language drained of religious significance, but our yearning for the metaphysical or religious as strong as ever? Has our language become more secular than we are? [69]

Using mainly Christian imagery to give voice and body to this religious intuition, as that which I have inherited, and which is often still partially known by those in the Western world, I sought to explore further the bridge that connects poetry and religious resonance. I was drawn to the space between myth and conjecture, and to the fact that religions use poetic language and forms very widely in their scriptures and worship. Might it be, I wondered, that people can renew an interest in lyric poetry at the same time as tracing the instincts that, to use imagery of Les Murray, God might be in the world as poetry is in the poem, and that ‘there’ll always be religion

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[67] David Dark, *Life’s Too Short to Pretend You’re Not Religious* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2016), p.17.

[68] David Jones, Preface to *The Anathémata* (London: Faber & Faber, 1952), pp. 23-24.

[69] Michael Symmons Roberts, ‘Contemporary Poetry and Belief’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary British & Irish Poetry,* ed. by Peter Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 694-706 (p.696).

around while there is poetry'?[70] Are poems and religions both wells from which timely and timeless perceptions are drawn for human refreshment and growth, even if those poetic intimations have the elusiveness of 'a pheasant disappearing in the bush'?[71]

Part 2

The methodology of the books: helping to hear our thoughts

(I)

Jane Davis, the founder of 'The Reader Organisation', the national charity that promotes shared reading, summarises from her work in reading groups around the country, the need that has contributed to the public re-emergence of poetry:

> The people who come to evening classes are only ostensibly after culture. Their great need, their hunger, is for good sense, clarity, truth – even an atom of it. People are dying – it is no metaphor – for lack of something real to carry home when day is done.[72]

The task I faced as I set out to write *The Splash of Words* was to decide which poems might invite a reader's response that would bring their own experience to mind, alongside the surprising, truthful and searching thoughts they would not have had without the encounter with the particular poems. I used lyric, rather than narrative, poems because of their relative brevity and emotional density, and their tendency to be epiphanic. I hoped that a response to the emotional or conceptual surprise of the poems, along with the varied forms of my own dialogue with them, would hold the potential of initiating some intuition or awareness of the 'realities' religion habitually attends to.[73] I did not approach this as a project with an explicit 'post-

[70] Les Murray, 'Poetry and Religion', in *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1998), p.267.

[71] Wallace Stevens, *Opus Posthumous: Poems, Plays,* ed. by Milton J. Bates (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1990), p.198.

[72] Jane Davis, '"Something Real to Carry Home When Day Is Done": The Reader in Future.' *English: Shared Futures*, Vol. 71, ed. by Robert Eaglestone and Gail Marshall (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2018), pp.210-216. The theologian and poet, John Milbank, also pursues the idea of poetry being 'the most intense of real interventions'. He argues that, 'Of its essence, poetry makes, but it makes only to see further, and to establish something real in the world; real, because it further manifests the ideal and abiding'. John Milbank, *The Mercurial Wood* (Salzburg: University of Salzburg Press, 1997), p.xii and p.xiii.

[73] One might compare this approach to that of David Jasper: 'One way of describing it is to construe poetry as a prolegomenon to religion and theology. It is a field or space into which religion might be called as appropriate, though often in strange and, to itself, unaccustomed ways'. David Jasper, *Heaven in Ordinary: Poetry and Religion in a Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2018), p. 6.

secular' agenda, but rather as an attempt to reach the deeper resonances that seem to persist within human subjectivity through the generations.[74] These, I believe, are what David Jones was referring to when he writes that humanity 'has still retained ineradicable longings for, as it were, the farther shore'.[75]

When the radio producer Tim Dee reflected on the choice of poems that listeners have asked to hear on the BBC radio programme *Poetry Please* – the longest running poetry request show on any radio station in the world – he noted that the top ten choices reveal something important about the inner territories we want words to help us navigate:

> The top 10 list is beautifully weathered: it contains poems of doubt and trepidation, reflections on human vulnerabilities and on a world denied the certainty of God; there are cautious announcements of love, some rescue remedies and annotations of what remains, footnotes for fallen lives and echoes of the song of the earth, and much tenacious hunger for life.[76]

This is a remarkably similar list of subjects to those that religion identifies, interrogates, and consoles. It lends weight to the idea that bridges can be built to enable conversations between those who reach for poetry for its general work of distilled or refreshed perception, and those who have, in the past and present, sought that distillation through religious faith.[77] This dialogue is full of expansive and illuminating possibilities. It was exactly this kind of conversation that I sought to kindle in *The Splash of Words*.

The Italian word *gazofilacio* refers to the treasure-store of poems one can keep in the mind, accumulated through the years as important resources for a life to draw on. I had such a

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[74] See, for example, the interesting essays contained in *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology*, ed. by Philip Blond (London: Routledge,1998). Introducing its theme with the premise that 'Somehow it is part of reality, part of the nature of the unaddressed, to announce itself despite its proscription' (p.3), Blond argues that 'those who claim that they have never experienced anything but their own potency and ability (or lack thereof), have perhaps failed to understand the very thing they feel so confident about – their world. For it is the claim of theology that other possibilities abound in the world for its inhabitants, possibilities that are presented to those who would care to address them' (p.3).

[75] David Jones, *Epoch and Artist*, 2nd ed. (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), p.113.

[76] Tim Dee, 'The poetic pulse of a nation', *The Guardian*, 28 September 2013.

[77] Rowan Williams has described 'bad religion' as that which teaches you to 'ignore what is real'. On the other hand, faith 'is most fully itself and most fully life-giving when it opens your eyes and uncovers for you a world larger than you thought – and, of course, therefore, a world that's a bit more alarming than you ever thought. The test of true faith is how much more it lets you see'. Cited by Adam Phillips, *On Wanting to Change* (London: Penguin Books, 2021), p.119.

storehouse, as well as poetry notebooks I had put together over many years, but I needed to discover more poems. I was granted a three-month sabbatical and went to research in Poets House, the national poetry library in New York. I searched for lyric poems I might explore that would capture, not coerce, something of the spiritual pursuits of religion. I chose poems that originated in a variety of places, including Great Britain, Ireland, Norway, the United States, and Afghanistan. Though most of the chosen poems were written in the twentieth century, some are included from previous centuries, and a few are in translation.

It was whilst in New York that I also wrote an extended introduction to the book, written, I hope, in a generally accessible style, that tries to spell out the dual meaning of the book's subtitle: 'Believing in Poetry'. The opening quotation by Michael Longley – 'If I knew where poems came from, I'd go there' – seemed an apt beginning.[78] It invokes mystery as to the origin of poetry and hints that poems come from some 'beyond' place which may, in some sense, be visitable. The quotation, it seems to me, is charged with the perception of poetry being a desired art, a form that forms us – saves us even – from an unaware or unfeeling life. It reminds us of the two emotionally transportive realities that give energy to the arts in general – the experience of meaning and the meaning of experience. It alerts us, also, to the fact that Longley believes poetry not only to be mysterious in its source and resource, but to be essential to our human wellbeing or mending. In this vein, David Jasper writes:

> If you want to use a religious term, then my encounters with poetry are, at best, most appropriately described as moments of salvation, experiences of healing that bind up wounds and keep us on the road. Poetry is the best thing for such healing, its salt cleansing even while it irritates, its balm also as smooth as olive oil when needed. Only through the poetic process does the stuff of religion begin to make real sense to me.[79]

To read a poem, and to experience the multi-faceted and unpredictable response to it, is to understand that the philosopher Jacques Maritain's observation, that 'things are more than they are and they give more than they have', very much applies to poetry as a medium.[80] The

[78] Michael Longley, quoted in Kate Kelloway, 'A Hundred Doors by Michael Longley – review', *The Guardian*, 20 March 2011.

[79] David Jasper, *Heaven in Ordinary: Poetry and Religion in a Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2018), p. 10.

[80] Jacques Maritain, cited by Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005), pp.60-61.

response to a poem can also further trigger the awareness that this observation applies well beyond the poetic form to the whole of existence itself, shaping an intuition of both poetry and the world having a sacramentality to them, each signalling to truths beyond themselves.

To build on this theme, I chose 'Paternoster' by Jen Hadfield as the first poem to explore. It exemplifies the epiphanic lyrical form I mention above. The poem begins by making the reader believe it is a poem about a horse saying its prayers. Gradually, however, the reader recognises that the poem might be about human beings who have similar hearts that are 'hardened daily', and who 'plough' through 'the day' in a 'harness' of relentless work, leaving us 'half-sleeping'. The names of flowers placed within such pained recognition creates a fresh awareness of unnoticed or unknown forms of life and beauty. The 'epiphany' of the poem lies in its ability to make us specifically aware of what we are generally unaware, not only regarding our own lives, but those realities of our world that live unseen by us. The jolt felt by the contemporary reader encountering the report that 'It is on earth as it is in heaven' provokes an internal inquiry as to what this can possibly mean, and whether it has some spiritual significance only understood by a more imaginative and attentive engagement with the world we find ourselves in.

My response to Hadfield's work is a good example of the often uneasy but, hopefully, creative balance between the compelling nature of a poem and the non-coercive reading practice that I hoped to encourage. This balance can only be maintained by understanding the relationship between what I have written, and the reader's own generative response to the poem and my text, as an exercise of dialogical imagination. It is a shared but multiplicative practice in which a creative curation by the author becomes a curated creation in the reader.

Hadfield's focus on the natural systems of life, a sense of 'presence' and surefooted mystery in the world, her 'ecopoetics' and approach in 'being honest about the present tense you live in',[81] all open up a wide space for scrutiny as to the possible miraculous gift-like quality of our environment, as opposed to the conclusion that the world is here by chance, without cause or reason. The poem is warmed by attention not argument, and imagines a horse at prayer, recognising the hoofprint in his heart and its need for healing, and relishing his bucket of food. It is the animal that leads us into human recognitions. One line, 'It is on earth as it is in heaven', with its echoes of the Lord's Prayer, surprises us into imagining that the earth is

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[81] Jen Hadfield, cited in Mark Oakley, *The Splash of Words: Believing in Poetry* (London: Canterbury Press, 2016), p.3.

some reflection of a purposeful design beyond our sight or comprehension. By surveying what it means to live in an enchanted natural world that has become so unnatural to us that we can ignore or devastate it to the point of extinction, Hadfield points us to the primary gift of the 'present', with that word's dual meanings both in view, and motions us to life's uncontainable excess.[82]

This poem initiates an attention tuned to feelings of human intimacy and connection. Themes of creation, chance, trust, pain, prayer, and the source of goodness, all swirl around in a first reading. These varied topics are brought into the 'space' of response, amongst other thoughts and emotions, and bring into partial view the fundamental religious intuition that this is not a world simply of our own making. 'Paternoster' alerts us to a perception that the world contains within it a beauty and mystery whose 'blessings' we too often miss, and that we somewhat diminish ourselves in a narrow utilitarian or materialistic negligence. It is a poem that models what I hoped to achieve in the book as a whole – a presenting, not of certainties about any 'religious metaphysic', but, rather, of the possibility being plausibly alive in human experience that there *might* after all *be* such metaphysical truths. As Rowan Williams comments:

> the poetic process is first a kind of apprehending of the environment that blurs conventional boundaries of perception – not to dissolve the actuality that is there but to bring out relations and dimensions that ordinary rational naming and analysing fail to represent […] It is the level of awareness at which metaphor is inescapable, the level at which my sense of an object and its intrinsic life are indistinguishable.[83]

Following 'Paternoster', some poems were chosen because they point to similar generative possibilities that lie in the art of attention.[84] Other poems were placed in the book because of their challenge to conventional characterisations of religion. 'Don't Give Me the Whole Truth' (Olav H. Hauge), for example, seems to take the form of a prayer of someone not interested in a self-contained and conclusive set of doctrines but wanting, instead, a small

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[82] Compare: 'The seething poetry of the incarnate Now is supreme', writes D.H.Lawrence, noting the present's 'quivering momentaneity'. David Constantine, *A Living Language* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2003), p.51.

[83] Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity*, p.28.

[84] This is the title of a perceptive book on the subject: Donald Revell, *The Art of Attention: A Poet's Eye* (Minneapolis, MN: Graywolf Press, 2007). Poems chosen for this purpose include 'North Haven' (Elizabeth Bishop), 'God-Box' (Mark Doty), 'Messengers' (Louise Glück), and 'The Starlight Night' (Gerard Manley Hopkins).

glimpse of the truth of the world, just enough to stabilise a life's journey. 'Sunday School, Circa 1950'(Alice Walker) and 'Missing God' (Dennis O'Driscoll) both give voice to the loss of former religious certainties, whilst recognising that the exchange between questioning and reverence is still fruitful and that some of us, like 'an uncoupled glider', ride the evening thermals missing belief's tug.[85] Some poems focus on self-scrutiny and the problem of human behaviour or reflect on human pain and the inevitable questions of meaning that emerge from it.[86]

Other selected poems lead to thoughts of death, transformation and the boundaries of life and our curtained understanding of it.[87] A small number of poems explicitly take up the theme of relating to God, of 'prayer' and of what might be meant by this word by those who cannot believe in a capricious or interventionist God.[88] It was important, too, that poems of love were included because for many religious communities this is often the first, or only, metaphor worthy of pursuit when trying to speak of God, due to love's resilience, creativity and costly fidelities, all aspiring beyond the notion of life simply being a 'survival of the fittest'.[89]

After choosing the poems, I wrote my reflections on each of them in the hope that a relationship of trust with the readers would be created by not being hermeneutically overly insistent but, at the same time, would offer some introduction to the poet and the poem as a diving board from which they might take their own interpretative dive. I approached each poem text as a self-sufficient literary work and not there simply to be trawled to discover what its author might have 'meant'. There are textual meanings without authorial meanings, and I

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[85] Dennis O'Driscoll, 'Missing God', in Mark Oakley, *The Splash of Words*, p.113.

[86] 'Prayer Before Birth'(Louis MacNeice), Song VIII (W.H.Auden), 'Procedure' (Jo Shapcott), 'The Sentry' (Wilfred Owen), and 'The Going'(Thomas Hardy).

[87] 'Bird' (Liz Berry), ('Do not go gentle into that good night' (Dylan Thomas), 'Untitled' (Emily Dickinson), 'Landay' (Anonymous), and 'The Journey' (Mary Oliver).

[88] 'Prayer' (Carol Ann Duffy), 'Holy Sonnet XIV' (John Donne), 'Raptor' (R.S.Thomas), and 'Lightenings viii' (Seamus Heaney).

[89] 'Wedding' (Alice Oswald), 'Love (III) (George Herbert)', 'To the Harbormaster' (Frank O'Hara), and 'Demeter' (Fiona Benson).

wanted to give space to the reader to discover some of these. I tried not to be too technical in my exploration, avoiding specialist literary or theological vocabulary.[90]

What became clear to me as I wrote the book was that my response to each of the poems was being shared by me in a variety of creative forms of narrative. There was no one template for my imaginative engagement with the poetic texts, but rather each begins a creative interplay that cannot be categorised simply as literary criticism or theological commentary, although each chapter contains elements of both. Sometimes I wrote a response with a sermonic tone, by which I mean I use the traditional dynamic of a sermon's communication to, first, attract attention, then inform the listeners and, towards the end, to seek to move them into some emotional or active response to any fresh understanding that might have opened in them. My chapter on Olav Hauge's 'Don't Give Me the Whole Truth' is an example of this. At other times, my chapters are more meditative in style, often with more attention to the individual words and phrases of the poems, with a tone of a retreat address that tries to prompt the readers' own engagement within a less defined interpretative space (for example, my chapter on Carol Ann Duffy's 'Prayer').

Sometimes my response to a poem is more exploratory in its work, asking, for instance, whether a poem might be read in a very different way from which the poet might have intended it to be read. In my chapter on Frank O'Hara's 'To the Harbormaster', I imagine his love poem to another man as a prayer to God. As the Christian community publicly interprets the erotic poetry of the bible's Song of Songs, so I invite the reader to join in an allegorical interpretation, seeing the poem as an analogy for the search for God at the risk of breaking away from the poem's original context. At other times, a chapter aligns more to the genre of spiritual autobiography, in which I show the importance of the poem to my own life and belief. My chapter on R.S.Thomas's 'Raptor' is of this type.

The use of these various forms of exegetical and imaginative reading of my chosen poems inevitably leads to the question of who I imagine I am referring to when I use the generic 'we' in my text. This is somewhat, perhaps inevitably, unresolved. At times, when my writing has some affinity with apologetics, I seek to place myself alongside the reader's humanity, not

[90] Skye C. Cleary's warning comes to mind: 'Academics are notorious for using dry, technical language with lots of dreary hesitations, stiff qualifications, absurd jargon and passive phrasing. Sometimes this can be useful for getting into nuanced ideas, but more commonly it mystifies, confuses and covers up weaknesses like a bad comb-over.' Skye C. Cleary, 'Putting our heads together', *The Times Literary Supplement*, No. 6174, July 30 2021, p. 26.

expecting any religious commitment except enough interest in them to have picked up the book and be open to learn aspects of a Christian worldview. At other times, my use of 'we' can suggest I am seeing myself alongide people who have a Christian faith and who wish to understand the rôle poetry plays within the language and narratives of their faith. On reflection, I believe that this can sometimes make a reader feel an observer, or onlooker, of a belief system and, at other times, it can make the reader feel a recognisable faith is being addressed within them or, maybe, challenged. Perhaps this internal mobility that is provoked by my use of 'we', at one moment assuming a shared faith and at others merely a shared humanity, is indicative of the fractured religious sensibilities of many in the Western world today – and not least in me as the author.

My aspiration in the narrative forms I used in the chapters was to make the poems accessible, knowing how hesitant people can be approaching poetry, often feeling they lack the capability to read a poem 'properly'. I wanted the reader to believe that they might benefit in understanding from spending time with the poems because they carry some of the potential resonances I have been discussing in this paper. I sought to facilitate connections between the poems and the reader's own experience, and then to bring the Christian belief narrative into the framework to show how such a 'trialogue' can bring fresh perceptions on any recovered or distilled recognitions.[91] Interpretation is driven by our desire to grasp the existential import of what we are trying to understand. It involves the patient and personal integration of the words into a meaningful whole with the rest of life's knowledge. My commentaries set out to be gentle guides for such a hermeneutical exercise.

In some chapters, such as that on R.S.Thomas, I wrote more personally in response to the poems. By looking at his poem 'Raptor', I hoped that 'overhearing', as it were, the interplay between the poem and my own response to it, and other poems by Thomas, over many years, would dissolve some preconceptions that religious faith is the same as subjective or epistemic certainty. To bring Thomas's unpredictable image of God as an owl into the centre of the book, and so of a God who can see in the same darkness that leaves us unseeing and unsure of ourselves, was important to me. I hoped to enable readers to perceive that, for a good number of religious people, faith is not the same thing as certainty but, in fact, the very opposite of it.

[91] 'Trialogue' was the name given to a series of conferences, from 1997-2019, started by Jill Hopkins, Murray Cox, Stephen Prickett and Rowan Williams, in which world literature, Christian theology and insight from mental health work, were similarly brought together for mutual enrichment and development. See Jill Hopkins' obituary, *The Guardian*, 1 July 2020.

This asks of the reader some consideration as to what faith, belief and worship are, rather than what they have taken them to be because of the way they are frequently presented by the institutions and ambassadors of religion, as well as by their antagonists. Perhaps religious faith is a spectrum, not a fixed entity? If faith is not actually about surety but about feeling your way towards a greater trust in life, by way of hints and guesses, then might the word 'faith' become resonant for the reader?

Sometimes I set out to reveal something of the recognisable humanity of a poet, such as in my chapter on U.A. Fanthorpe, in which I explored a little of her deeply expressive love poetry to her partner Rosemary Bailey (who later kindly wrote to thank me for this chapter in the book). Love in its many forms, as Fanthorpe believed, is often the greatest movement of all towards a belief in God. Would the reader now be helped to understand this and even share in it to some degree? I then focused, verse by verse, on her poem about the historical Jesus and our own loving, but limited, 'makeshift lives'. I shared my thoughts, accessibly theological or experiential, on her lines that shake up preconceptions of how a person of faith might understand the figure of Christ. This was an attempt to introduce her work to a new audience but also to show how her depiction of a creative Jesus, who also struggled to find the words for the most important things in his life, can lead to a fruitful 'double-take' in the reader because the Christ she presents is so removed from any traditional piety. The poem has the potential to unsettle received portraits of Jesus Christ, and to open an inquisitive encounter that is humanly closer to loving and limited lives, such as that of Fanthorpe and Bailey, or those of the readers, than may have been ever thought.

Shanti Daffern, a Ph.D. student in English at Peterhouse, Cambridge, is someone who has come to believe that 'the poem is the operative force in encountering the religious resonance, rather than vice versa'. She wrote an appreciative email to me that helpfully pinpoints, with reference to my chapter on Thomas Hardy, the methodology I was seeking to apply:

> In *The Splash of Words* you talk about Hardy's poem 'The Going'. That's a poem I studied at A-Level so believed I understood it really well: but it was only in reading *The Splash of Words* that I came to see its religious resonances […] I loved the way you highlighted that 'why', turning the whole poem into an interrogation (I think again of the psalms), making it feel not a distinct category from the religious poetry but part of that same unfolding question: why do things happen? how do we experience loss?

> where is consolation? what is love? It's very deftly handled, nothing as direct as how I have just paraphrased it, but you lead your reader superbly into asking those kinds of questions, which are the very same questions faith asks.[92]

A poem reaches us most radically where our words fail us. My own reflections were offered in the hope they would feel like the friend in the room whose prompting, but inconclusive, conversation is an encouragement to find those words within ourselves through dialogue with the poems. As Carol Rumens points out in her own anthology with commentaries, the precipitating language of poems is only significant when it is pressed into the service of 'bigger human stories'. She argues that our contemporary culture needs poems that narrate not only transformation but also 'vision and encounter':

> I like a poem to express, a certain grounded idealism and, however questioningly, the sense that an objective truth exists. 'Sacred' would seem a dodgy word, but, for a humanist, it invokes not *theos* but *daimon,* the mysterious presence that is god-*like.*[93]

My intention was to show that 'sacred' need not be a 'dodgy word'. In fact, it might be emotionally, intellectually, and hermeneutically, restorative.

'Somehow there is an appeal to God or the gods at the basis of the poetic imagination', argued Seamus Heaney.[94] He was reflecting in an interview on Catholicism's contribution to the arts, concluding that:

> What should be said in terms of poetry […] is that Catholicism gives from the very beginning a wonderful sense of radiance, of boundlessness and also of significant placing within the boundless […] the sense of the imperial behind the usual and the sense of an economy of merit and an economy of deserving and of virtue, the sense of a chord that would transcend the impositions or the imperfections, the sense that there was somewhere else to appeal to that was watching but not speaking – all that I think is deeply, deeply important for poetry.[95]

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[92] Personal correspondence, 22 March 2021.

[93] Carol Rumens, *Smart Devices: 52 Poems from the Guardian 'Poem of the Week'* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2019), p.xii.

[94] Seamus Heaney, cited by Hans-Christian Oeser and Gabriel Rosenstock, 'Interview with Seamus Heaney', *Cyphers*, Spring/Summer 2014, p.13.

[95] Ibid., pp.12-13.

My choice of the lyric poems in *The Splash of Words* was an attempt to alert, not convert, the reader to these various 'senses', to see how productive or transformative they might be, not only in a general appreciation of the poems themselves but towards some deeper affective comprehension. I hoped to show that poems offer a perplexing but possibly credible counterforce to the largely secularised imagination of contemporary culture. A chosen collection of poems can both claim to represent the literary values of a particular time, whilst also being a site for the definition and propounding of new values,[96] and the choice of the thirty poems was to help readers recognise the lives and world we inhabit, which includes that perennial web of metaphors and symbols known as 'religion' and its focus beyond the self. Religious language takes time to learn its own meaning. The religious pursuit, resolved against one-dimensionality and immediate clarity, makes its way through philosophy, ritual, poetry, and community, towards an imperfectly understood, but discernible intimation of a truth. Whether this truth is objective or subjective is rigorously debated, but it is framed and named as 'God'. Whatever conclusion is made by the readers, I hoped that the thoughtful 'double take' provided by the chosen poems might give this concept of God some renewed, remembered, or reconstructed, resonance.

Rowan Williams has argued that the procedural secularism of today has a functional, instrumentalist perspective that is suspicious and uncomfortable about 'inaccessible dimensions'. On the other hand:

> the non-secular is, foundationally, a willingness to see things or other persons as the objects of another sensibility than my own, perhaps also another sensibility than *our* own, whoever 'we' are, even if the 'we' is humanity itself. The point is that what I am aware of, I am aware of as in significant dimensions not defined by my own awareness […] Imaginative construction, verbal or visual, works to make present an aesthetic object that allows itself to be contemplated from a perspective or perspectives other than those of the artist's own subjectivity. Art makes possible a variety of seeings or readings […] The non-secular character of art […] is its affirmation of inaccessible perspectives. It would not be too glib to say that this somehow constituted art as a religious enterprise.[97]

[96] An exploration of this is found in: Andrew Michael Roberts, 'The Rhetoric of Value in Recent British Poetry Anthologies', in Andrew Michael Roberts and Jonathan Allison, eds, *Poetry and Contemporary Culture: The Question of Value* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), pp.101-122.

[97] Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), pp.13-14.

Williams believes that the secular realm will always be unsettled by the difficult, disruptive, de-centring bids to the imagination, to resource and renew motivation, emerging from a religious sensibility. This sensibility is often fenced off in a private, and largely misunderstood, domain, but I wanted the poems in *The Splash of Words* to question just how removed such a sensibility is when language dives deeper, and we allow ourselves to celebrate 'poetry as divination'.[98]

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(II)

Two years after publishing *The Splash of Words*, I was approached by SPCK publishers to write a Lent book using the same format, with forty chosen poems followed by reflections, and to focus the book on the work of one poet. They asked that the reflections might be short enough for one to be read each day by people 'with busy lives'. They wanted the book to introduce the work of a particular poet to a more consciously Christian audience, though once again a readership not used to encountering poetry, and to help readers comprehend how poetry, as argued in *The Splash of Words*, is the native language of faith. I consequently wrote *My Sour-Sweet Days: George Herbert and the Journey of the Soul* (2019).

I chose George Herbert as my focus because in his work 'Christianity and human nature, language and personal depth and musical skill, most perfectly coincide'.[99] Herbert's ingenuity and creative range of poetic forms, his unapologetic attention to the subject of God in the poems, whilst also being honest about the contradictions of experience and the inconsistencies of the self, all gave weight to the idea of him being an appropriate subject for such a Lenten project. His lyric poems often have a strong epiphanic quality.[100] Although some of Herbert's vocabulary and imagery may not be understood by the contemporary reader, it was his attractive mixture of simplicity and subtlety, his passionate but often playful experience of God, his scrupulousness in voicing the sour and the sweet in life, that I thought would make his work accessible to those who had not encountered his work before. Helen Vendler referred

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[98] Seamus Heaney, 'Feeling into Words', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978* (London: Faber & Faber, 1980), p.41.

[99] Peter Levi, ed., *The Penguin Book of English Christian Verse* (London: Penguin, 1984), p.20.

[100] See, for instance, his poem 'Love (III)' in which only 'Love' is used to describe the divine, startling the reader out of the many other images often associated with God. 'The Pulley', likewise epiphanic in style, suggests that human restlessness is a divine gift to encourage the search for God and reframes an understanding of 'wearinesse'.

to Herbert's 'startling accomplishment in revising the conventional vertical address to God until it approaches the horizontal address to an intimate friend.'[101] This quality is attractive and intriguing.

I had discovered in conversations following the publication of *The Splash of Words* that many people of faith, including ordinands and clergy, often knew very little about Herbert except for a hymn or two known to have been written by him. Some of them had also been put off reading him by a book that had been published in 2009, with notable publicity, entitled: *If you Meet George Herbert on the Road, Kill Him: Radically Re-thinking Priestly Ministry*.[102] So, it seemed good to restore Herbert's reputation and introduce some of his poems to a new and ready audience while, at the same time, prompting in people of faith a renewed celebration of the poetic imagination.

My reflections on the poems are shorter than in *The Splash of* Words and are not as varied in form as in *The Splash of Words*, tending towards a more meditative approach. They take for granted that the reader either has a Christian faith or understands something of Christian belief. My intention was to show how Herbert's faith is, in many ways, contemporary with today's issues surrounding belief and that, with a little help regarding vocabulary and occasional background information, Herbert can feel very close through his poetry. His orientation towards the mystery and grace of God, whilst being open about his sporadic moods and failures, all expressed with his adept mastery of the inner voice, means that today's reader, seeking 'integrity in complexity', can appreciate how poetry's work can connect the centuries.[103] I wanted those who might be put off Herbert's work, thinking it to be some saintly, elevated and intensely devotional 'Christian poetry', to see that it encompasses a wide range of human emotions and situations − from being in love, self-doubting, or angry, to ageing, suffering pain and being capable of changing one's mind. Herbert's work, though distinctively Christian, is comparable to many of the poems I chose in *The Splash of Words* in that his poems

[101] Helen Vendler, *Invisible Listeners: Lyric intimacy in Herbert, Whitman, and Ashbery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), p.9.

[102] Justin Lewis-Anthony, *If you Meet George Herbert on the Road, Kill Him: Radically Re-thinking Priestly Ministry* (London: Mowbray, 2009). The book's premise is that for 350 years the Church of England has been haunted by a pattern of parochial ministry which is based upon an untenable fantasy derived from a romantic and wrong-headed understanding of George Herbert's ministry. He calls this pattern 'Herbertism'.

[103] Elizabeth Clarke, 'George Herbert's *The Temple*: The Genius of Anglicanism and the Inspiration for Poetry', in *The English Religious Tradition and the Genius of Anglicanism* ed. by Geoffrey Rowell (Wantage: Ikon, 1992), p.143.

are not 'about' religion but are rather 'infused with it'.[104] Although Herbert is not cited (in favour of Boethius, Dante and Milton), Michael D. Hurley has argued that the greatest poems in the Christian tradition explore, as well as express, the religious truth that is their theme:

> Poetry within this tradition is 'religious' not merely for what it illustrates, but for what it is. The pressing challenge for all poets is one of commensurability: to find or found a style adequate to their subjects. But at its height, religious poetry asks more of itself that its form might find continuity with its content; it aims not simply to delineate theological niceties, but to become itself an efficacious mode of theology. The task is severe, but its importance and possibility are vigorously persistent.[105]

One of Herbert's poetic skills is that of rhetorical climax in the use of his last lines of a poem. This gives the sense of discovery in the poetry. The poem often winds through frustrations, guilt or other chaotic and complex emotion, and leads unknowingly towards a transformed, even reversed, understanding – one that comes either as a startling surprise to him or to us. Because of this impression that religious faith is a journey, comprised of setbacks and breakthroughs, and that it has the ability ultimately to bring perspectives that are as yet unknown, deferred expansions in mind or heart, Herbert also seemed to be the right poet to focus on after *The Splash of Words*. Aimed at a more consciously religious readership, my reflections in *My Sour-Sweet Days* explored my own life experience alongside the poems and theological insights from a variety of sources. They hoped to show how in his work deeper resonances of faith, and life itself, can be gained through the medium of poetry, and that belief itself can be investigated and extended through the poem's 'own vindicating force'.[106] Herbert is the poet who, after searching the depths of experience, in poetic forms, metaphors and systrophe, knew that the reward, though partial and precarious, was 'something understood'.[107]

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[104] Edmund Miller, *Drudgerie Divine: The Rhetoric of God and Man in George Herbert* (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik and Amerikanistik, University of Salzburg, 1979), p.163.

[105] Michael D. Hurley, *Faith in Poetry: Verse Style as a Mode of Religious Belief* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), p. 3.

[106] Seamus Heaney, The Government of the Tongue; The 1986 T.S.Eliot Memorial Lectures and other critical writings (London: Faber 1988), p.92.

[107] 'Prayer (I)', in Mark Oakley, *My Sour-Sweet Days*, p. 23.

Part 3

Conclusion

I wanted to assess the consequent impact of *The Splash of Words* and *My Sour-Sweet Days* on a broad spectrum of readers, and I wanted to ascertain whether lyric poems might be an attractive vehicle, at a time when they have some renewed appreciation and utility in the public arena, for exploring a human resonance that can still be termed 'religious'. I also wanted to establish whether a variety of creative curations of poems, some confidently immersed in Christian belief and others more tentative and open in tone, might together build some interpretative bridge between the religious and the secular, making talk of 'we' somehow more possible by each in relation to the other. Might what is compelling about religious resonance for many people, renewed in a shared and dialogical 'space' of different hermenutical genres, be analogical to the often persuasive but non-coercive nature of lyric poetry itself?

It seems evident, through the response to the books and their themes, that this is indeed the case. Evidence was forthcoming that the books initiated lectures, workshops and communal reading groups on a subject of real interest and intrigue – the relationship between religious perception and poetry. They were used by people of different views, from spiritual directors to convinced agnostics, to explore both the confusions in devotion and the reverences of confusion. The books were quoted in the press, on the radio and in social media, often by people for whom religion is an unattractive concept and yet for whom the approach of the books seemed to offer a welcome perspective on it. Poets engaged with the books' ideas and invited more conversation about the sacramentality of language and the nature of spirituality, though not all of them fully agree with Les Murray when he says:

> Poetry is […] the prime channel through which I ever achieve (or am given) any apprehension of ultimate and divine things. I'm fairly zealous in its defence and in its service, and I think it presents us with some highly important insights about the very nature of religion itself.[108]

Some academics were intrigued by talk of a correlation between religious resonance and poetry that blurred the defined parameters of theology, literary criticism and psychotherapy. Several clergy responded by scrutinising their faith and their liturgical language. Various congregations, using the books in groups or in private, found themselves re-thinking their faith

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[108] Les Murray, *The Paperbark Tree: Selected Prose* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1992), p.252.

through the lens of poetry and the startling ways it is able to frame truth beyond the propositional. The poet and essayist Kathleen Norris, noting that the 'churches have ceased to be guardians of mystery', maintains that 'poetry, like prayer, tends to be a dialogue with the holy'.[109] It became clear through the response to my books that many people sensed this might be true and wanted to explore the suggestion more. The Archbishop of Canterbury's comment on awarding the Michael Ramsey Prize – that an attention to poetry launches, for many people, personal and collective responses to spirituality 'in a way that the churches are typically missing' – proved to be accurate.

'Poetry isn't a way of saying things – it's a way of seeing things', argued the American poet Karl Shapiro.[110] What became apparent through the varied responses to the books was that an important shift occurred in understanding when poetry was not viewed as an art for the elite but, rather, as an art for life, and for navigating what Thomas Hardy called, the 'wonder and the wormwood of the whole'.[111] Whereas metaphysical truths are difficult to 'see', poetry nevertheless has the capacity to reveal what is 'beyond our comprehension but not beyond our attention'.[112] To be guided as to how to develop such an attention is evidently welcomed by many people and of all ages - and it can often lead to personal transformations and even to the sense of being 'saved' by poetry.[113]

In many ways, my writing project was inspired by Wallace Stevens' belief in the power of poetry, symbol and intuition, rather than in unequivocal assertions:

> The extension of the mind beyond the range of the mind, the projection of reality beyond reality, the determination to cover the ground, wherever it may be, the determination not to be confined, the recapture of excitement and intensity of interest,

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[109] Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace* (New York, NY: Riverhead/Penguin, 1998), p.379.

[110] Karl Shapiro, 'What is Not Poetry', in Reginald Gibbons, ed., *The Poet's Work: 29 Masters of 20th Century Poetry on the Origins and Practice of their Art* (Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1979), p.100.

[111] Thomas Hardy, 'The Place on the Map', in *The Collected Poems of Thomas Hardy* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 2006), p.292.

[112] W.H.Auden, quoted in David Jasper, *Images of Belief in Literature* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), p.63.

[113] See, for instance: Amber Dawn, *How Poetry Saved My Life: A Hustler's Memoir* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2013), Zachary Kluckman, *Trigger Warning: Poetry Saved My Life* (Albuquerque, NM: Swimming with Elephants Publications, 2014), Kim Rosen, *Saved by a Poem* (New York, NY: Hay House, 2009), and Gregory Orr, *Poetry as Survival* (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 2002).

> the enlargement of the spirit at every time, in every way; these are the unities, the relations, to be summarised as paramount now.[114]

In order to 'cover the ground' of those intimations and perceptions traditionally articulated by religion, constant and continuous through history, poetry can be relied on to generate related thoughts that may otherwise be personally unavailable or that go unrecognised or undervalued in a particular society or a religious community. As I have reflected here, as both the public and private vocabulary and grammar of a religious faith is weakened, so the work of poets offers itself to access 'religious' feelings and ideas, from poetry's own particular method and resources. This work is done by creating what Philip Davis calls a 'holding ground', a significant space, for investigation and contemplation of experience.[115] Davis believes that 'the struggle to find words is a nascent form of poetry'.[116] The contemporary struggle for a 'vocabulary of the soul', beyond words that are easy but cheap, entails approaching poetry as a generative place, similar to what Sir Philip Sidney, in his *Apologie for Poetrie* (1585), referred to as 'an imaginative groundplot of a profitable invention'.[117]

A poem gives room for lost or latent thoughts to be experienced but is itself productive of new ones at the same time. The poems I chose to reflect on, with my various forms of creative response threaded with religious allusions and theological perspectives, evidently provoked some readers into experiencing a resonance that recovered or forged such thoughts, sometimes with that sense of the 'mind turned inside out'.[118] This discovery is welcomed by the reader and leads to the desire to share the poem, talk about it with others, or, for some, use it prayerfully or in a sermon. I noted how many reviewers and correspondents talked of sharing the books, as if the poems were 'good news'. As Jay Parini observes:

[114] Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel: Essays on reality and the imagination* (London: Faber & Faber, 1960), p.171.

[115] Philip Davis, *Reading and the Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 6. George Herbert's own struggle with words is a good example. See, for instance, his poem 'Jordan (II)'.

[116] Ibid. p.7.

[117] Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, ed. Geoffrey Shepherd (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1973), p.124.

[118] 'I came to that place in the poem,' as a friend said to me once, 'and clunk! my mind turned inside out, quite painlessly. "Huh?" I said, and read that bit again, and it happened again, precisely there, and I couldn't explain it to myself.' Les Murray, *The Paperback Tree* (London: Carcanet, Minerva, 1992), p.259.

> The connection between poetry and religious feeling is (and always has been) deep and consistent; one could in fact argue that spiritual awareness is central to the art itself, and that all poetry aspires to the condition of scripture.[119]

I began *The Splash of Words*, as previously mentioned, with a quotation of Michael Longley's confessing that if he knew where poetry came from, he'd go there. However, the poetic experience does not allow any such permanent homecoming. As Les Murray writes, 'we can have it repeatedly, and each time timelessly, but we can't have it steadily'.[120] A poem, with its 'extra emotional lift-off',[121] – that combined force of form and implicit connotations emphasising what it does with what it says – can remind us what life is or might be. The nature of its 'holding space' is to help keep us longer in a place of recognition, a mentality or attitude, that we cannot inhabit on our own for long. Poems hold what we cannot fully retain or live up to. The poem is eventually put down and its effects sift and seek to stabilize some inevitable longer-term reframing. If these effects are founded on what I have termed a 'religious resonance', they will be centred on significant matters of ultimate meaning. They will have the potential to shape a person's inner life or public formation, prompting an orientation towards the often-forgotten mystery of 'God', of the awakened sense of life as 'gift' and the suggestion that it might, in some way, be trustworthy. Such resonance unfolds into an unignorable lure towards a recovered sense of the metaphysical, transcendence, the sacred, love, grace, sacrifice, and to a deepened attention to the world we inhabit and what matters in it.

Poems will not replace religion, with its imaginative structure of a narrative, liturgical, doctrinal and communal life. However, they have the ability to alert us to those primary intuitions and recognitions that ground religion, and which lie deep at its heart.

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[119] Jay Parini, *Why Poetry Matters* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), p.34.

[120] Ibid.p.259.

[121] Philip Davis, *Reading and the Reader*, p.121.

Appendix

(i) The reception of *The Splash of Words*

If religion increasingly gets forced into the private realm, I hoped to show in these two books that its many themes may now be engaged with in public culture, to some significant degree, in the various forms of canonical and contemporary poetry. After their publication, I wanted to see whether the selected lyric poems and my reflections had, in any way, invoked in the diverse readership a religious resonance that other modes of language had often failed to achieve.

The first thing I noticed after publication of *The Splash of Words* was how many invitations I received to give lectures and talks, and to lead retreats and workshops, on the topic of poetry's relationship with religious faith. From 2015 until 2021 I accepted 132 such invitations. Many of these were not from faith-oriented communities. I was invited to give lecture tours in Australia, Canada and the United States and I was invited to address conferences in France, Germany, Denmark and Sweden. Arts festivals asked me to participate, including Greenbelt in the U.K. (2016, 2019) and the Olavsfest in Norway (2020). I was invited by Dame Carol Ann Duffy to be a judge of the Ted Hughes Poetry Award in 2019, after she had read the book. I was delighted to be the first clergyperson to be a judge for this prize. It seemed that, if this appointment was considered appropriate, the conversation between poet and priest was thought to be of value.

On the whole, personal comments and published reviews of the book were positive, although some questioned the choice of poets and wondered why some – such as Eliot, Blake, Hill, Dante, Murray and Milton – were missing. I had deliberately sought to look at the work of some unexpected poets, and so understood this puzzlement as to why some were not included. The book received many reviews and often made similar observations to those made by Benjamin Hunt, Senior Officer at the national Office for Students (OfS), the independent regulator of higher education. He was surprised but grateful, he said, for the way the book 'uses belief as a lens to untangle poetry, and poetry as a process of understanding belief':

> As someone who defines themselves as an agnostic, but who was brought up as a Christian, I found its expression and analysis of poetry gave access to a personal spiritual dimension which I have found difficult to gain from organised liturgy […] By application of his own experiences and that of other figures, he shows poetry to be both profoundly important as an art form which transports us to other worlds, and as a

> critique of what the world, and what we, could be. I found it disclosed a meaningful spiritual experience rather than imposing it, and it gave me the space to explore this in a supportive manner.[122]

The review in the journal *Theology* was quick to identify what I had set out to do. Although commenting that sometimes my prose lets me down, the reviewer noted that: 'There are numerous ways to read and use this book and it will invite return'. Noting the forms of creative curation in the book, she continued:

> [Oakley's] greatest achievement, though, is the skilful way he draws on his own rebellions and reverence, as a priest offering the counterpoint in a world that forgets God. The reader sees how poetry opens up space, just as the words of the liturgy should, but so often fail. It's no surprise that R.S.Thomas has the longest essay in the collection. Oakley describes how Thomas keeps the rumour of God alive in a world of bad religion, when mystery is dismissed, where false gods abound. Thomas resisted what we have become, the low expectation, the degradation of humanity, and Oakley's book joins that resistance. Commending Christianity requires imagination. The poems selected here tell it slant. They tell of a delicious story, another story, that there is more than meets the eye.[123]

There was some academic recognition of the way the books seek to engage with poems to forge a fresh narration of theological and experiential reflection. For example, Professor Miriam Rose of Friedrich-Schiller-Universität, Jena, Germany, wrote in a conference paper for publication entitled: 'Poetic Church' (Mark Oakley): Eine Alternative zum ästhetischen Klerikalismus':

> In previous research the question of the relationship between religion and literature has mostly focused on how religion is treated in a work, what of religion is called upon or what theological influences are shown in a work. Mark Oakley, on the other hand, is interested in how literature helps the spiritual person to relate to reality and to learn a language for the existential / spiritual essential that is based in the movements of love and longing. This direction of investigating is to be assessed as extremely innovative

[122] An endorsement, 19 February 2021.

[123] Frances Ward, *Theology*, 120.4 (2017), p.336.

[…] he developed his own form of theological speaking that hovers between conceptual reflection, existential narration and poetic formulations and thus integrates all three.[124]

The greatest moment for me, however, was to be awarded the global Michael Ramsey Prize for theological writing in 2019. It was presented to me by the Archbishop of Canterbury who later wrote to me and said:

> *The Splash of Words* […] received the Michael Ramsey Prize because of its significant impact beyond the boundaries of those who would normally read "religious" poetry, opening up ideas of personal engagement and individual and collective response to spirituality in a way that the churches are typically missing.[125]

(ii) The reception of *My Sour-Sweet Days*

As I have mentioned, *My Sour-Sweet Days* was written for a different readership than *The Splash of Words*. It was directed towards a more self-consciously Christian audience and the range of responses has inevitably had different emphases. Some reviewers knew Herbert's work well already and appreciated the book for the way in which the reflections led to a rediscovery of his craft and candour. Rachel Kelly, for instance, author of *Black Rainbow: How words helped me – my journey through depression,*[126] reviewed it in the international Catholic journal *The Tablet:*

> In his heavenly book *My Sour-Sweet Days: George Herbert and the Journey of the Soul*, the Dean of St John's College, Cambridge writes his own reflections on 40 poems by the seventeenth-century religious poet George Herbert […] I could not get enough

[124] Miriam Rose, 'Poetic Church' (Mark Oakley) : Eine Alternative zum ästhetischen Klerikalismus' in Stefan Böntert, Winfried Haunerland, Julia Knoop, Stefan Stuflesser, eds, *Gottesdienst und Macht. Klerikalismus in der Liturgie* (Regensburg: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2021), pp. 228-238. Translation by Jörg Bauer.

[125] Personal correspondence, 12 May 2021. The Michael Ramsey Prize has a website: >www.michaelramseyprize.org.uk< On the website Archbishop Justin Welby is quoted: 'Mark Oakley's work shines with an infectious love for poetry and for theology. Written with power and subtlety, Mark shows us how poetry can change our whole view of the world. He sees poetry not just as a tool for expressing faith but as a way of understanding.' See also Ed Thornton, *Church Times*, 27 August 2019, >https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2019/30-august/news/uk/mark-oakley-wins-2019-michael-ramsey-prize<

[126] Rachel Kelly, *Black Rainbow: How words healed me – my journey through depression* (London: Yellow Kite Books, 2014).

> of his meditations, at once helpful and profound. Helpful, because they clarified words we may not use today, as well as religious references which may not be immediately clear. Profound, because Oakley's insights are those of someone with an extra-ordinary feel for language as well as a deep love and understanding of Herbert, rightly considered the greatest devotional poet in the English language. Oakley tells us that Herbert is a good companion with whom to examine the journey of our own soul. In turn, Oakley is more than a good companion for anyone seeking to appreciate Herbert more fully. I did not think it was possible for me to love Herbert any more than I already did. On this point, Oakley has proved me wrong.[127]

The book also received some appreciation from academics. Professor Christopher T. Hodgkins, founding Director of the international George Herbert Society, noted how the book was an invitation into overhearing the inner voice and intimations of Herbert's work that reach out across the centuries:

> Like Herbert himself, Mark Oakley bids us welcome into a friendly pilgrimage, through a well-chosen assortment of the poems, and with himself as a guide who wears his learning lightly. Oakley anticipates our questions, sometimes with other questions, and in the intimacy of these lyrics he opens our eyes and ears to some vast, spacious things – even 'church-bells beyond the stars'.[128]

Professor Sir Stanley Wells, former Director of the Shakespeare Institute, likewise valued the way in which the reflections work to highlight the genius of the poems to a disparate readership:

> I have greatly enjoyed and profited from Mark Oakley's book *My Sour-Sweet Days: George Herbert and the Journey of the Soul*. This scholarly but unfailingly lucid study of the profound but often dense and intellectually challenging poems of the seventeenth-century divine, draws on a remarkably wide range of reading in both secular and religious writers, ancient and modern, to provide helpful and engaging commentaries on individual poems, and their place in the context of Christian spirituality. Oakley communicates expert knowledge and articulation of the effects of poetry in a highly engaging and persuasive manner. He has a gift for articulating his

[127] Rachel Kelly, 'Challenging, inviting, enjoyable', *The Tablet*, 20 February 2020.

[128] An endorsement, 28 June 2021.

> personal enthusiasms, and the depth of his spiritual understanding, to readers and listeners irrespective of their personal religious or secular stance.[129]

I received many invitations to speak about Herbert's work. Sion College in London, for example, brought together 80 clergy over dinner to hear a talk and then facilitate a discussion on the work and poetic theology of Herbert, and similar evenings took place at Southwark Cathedral in London and Uppsala university in Sweden.[130] I also received reviews thanking me for helping people to discover, or re-discover, Herbert's poetry. An example of this came from Andrew Braddock, the Director of Mission and Ministry in Gloucester diocese:

> Mark's own style of writing is a wonderful complement to Herbert's poetry. Like the best of guides, he enables us to enter into the freshness of the poems for ourselves rather than being a guardian who admits us to their treasure only on his own terms. At the end of each section, I found myself re-reading the poems with fresh eyes and a fresh appreciation of the climate of classical Anglican spirituality to which they witness. Mark enables Herbert to belong to all of us as part of our living tradition. He leads us back to some of those spiritual roots the contemporary church easily loses sight of, revealing Herbert the radical as well as Herbert the pastor.[131]

Ideas need places in which to be brought back to life and thought again, places near to the origin that first stimulated them into being. It was reassuring to know that the generous and procreant poems of Herbert were, across the centuries, that resonant space in which ideas of God, love, and grace, were being thought and felt as if for the first time.

[129] Personal correspondence to Dr Paul Edmondson, 24 May 2021.

[130] >https://www.sioncollege.org/markoakley<

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