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Faith in Poetry: Students on Classics of Spiritual Poetry in the English Tradition

"What is it sets Homer, Virgil, & Milton in so high a rank of Art? Why is the Bible more Entertaining & Instructive than any other book? Is it not because they are addressed to the Imagination, which is Spiritual Sensation, & but mediately to the Understanding or Reason?"

William Blake,
Letter to Rev. John Trussler, 1799

Poetry is a boundless resource for faith, and the Bible itself, as Blake reminds us here, towers above all other contestants in its power with this genre. Yet poetry often finds itself without a natural home in modern worship, largely because the poets nearest us in time, those of the twentieth century, have not given us an easy entrée into their world: their work is as difficult and as fragmented as the century itself. However, even modern poetry can bear richly for the spiritual life, and the ISM is a superb context in which to explore its "music of ideas," as I.A. Richards described T. S. Eliot's daunting Symbolist verse¹. At the turn of the past century, the English religious poetic tradition suddenly veered into the "closed system" of the Symbolists, whose movement constituted "one of the most thorough and serious attempts in history to push poetry in the direction of music."² Music, in fact, had always permeated the tradition, which runs from the early medieval Caedmon's Hymn, to Langland's liturgicalism, to Mary Sidney's dazzling Psalm translations, to John Donne's settings of his own poetry for use at St. Paul's, to Herbert's "Church Music" ("Sweetest of sweets, I thank you"), to John Milton's invocation of the "Heav'nly Muse" to "sing" his epic, to Blake's "Songs of Innocence and Experience," to Hopkins's "sprung rhythm" (readable only as musical bars), and finally to Eliot's "Four Quartets," which are sonatas in words. We are fortunate, then, that the ISM provides us with a unique setting in which to study English spiritual poetry, and to rediscover what poets since Caedmon had always taken for granted: that poetry opens doors of faith and experience that theology *alone* cannot.

Poetry allows unparalleled access to spirituality, and personal religious experience. Those of us involved in the "Classics" course have discovered, as Beverly Zell



puts it: "the way in which these poets write from the depth of their own experience, from the core of who they are. I could not help but think that their words resonate and touch us because they speak honestly about the human experience. This insight is helpful to me as I think about preaching. Is the preacher who speaks from her center, who is writing to express her own faith in depth better able to reach her listeners? Is she - by the grace of God- able to open the door for others to think more deeply about their faith?"

What has astonished us again and again is how these poets break down the barriers imposed by time and history to speak to issues still unresolved today, as Derik Jones suggests in his reflection upon "The Little Black Boy" from Blake's "Songs": "The little black boy understands that the negative emphasis placed upon his skin will disappear 'like a cloud' at the first sight of sunshine 'when our souls have learned the heat to bear.' Here Blake is suggesting that when the clouds of hatred are cleared (and they will be cleared through the grace of God) we will all live in an understanding of those things that are truly important in life. Blake's talk of evil clouds clearing in 1789 is reminiscent of Martin Luther King's dream in 1963 where he knew that one day 'his four little children would be judged not by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.' Is that not what we all dream of to this day, for the clouds to be rolled away and that dream to be realized?"

Perhaps what has struck us most often is the startling frankness, the complete honesty of these poets in the most trying times of their faith. Andrea Dixon notes that John Donne's Sonnet 1 epitomizes "the literal and painful paradox of indecision" (a quality captured compellingly in Benjamin Britten's setting of the poem, played for us by Jared Johnson). "The terrified speaker is allowed to look heavenward from time to time, and the thought of God temporarily lifts him out of his misery, but the submission he implies is less than complete. The line, 'By thy leave I can look, I rise again,' is meant to reflect the joy of dependence upon God, but the odd note here, of course, is that one need never await leave to think of God. The phrase actually reflects those breaks in doubt when God is inexplicably accessible, the angst lifted. One cannot help but think of Gerard Manley Hopkins's sonnet, 'My own heart let me more have pity on,' and the reminder to himself to:

call off thought awhile

Elsewhere; leave comfort root-room; let joy seize
At God knows when to God knows what; whose smile
's not wrung, see you; unforeseen times rather—as skies
Between pie mountains—light a lovely mile.

Donne allows himself no such relief, no such kindness. His lines instead reflect a breakdown of communion, a stubborn hesitancy on his own part. Christ, after all, can invite union, but he cannot force it."

These expressions of faith and doubt have also moved Stacey Lane to ponder: "In 'Good Friday, 1613. Riding Westward' we see Donne's doubt in an almost angry, challenging tone - 'O think me worth thine anger; punish me;/ Burn off my rusts and my deformity;/ Restore thine image so much, by thy grace./ That thou may'st know me, and I'll turn my face.' We also see in the poem a strong, overpowering image of turning and a sense of hope...This poem seems extremely confident, which is in sharp contrast to the questioning, despairing tone of most of his holy sonnets. Which, then, is Donne's real view - the questioning anxiety one sees in his sonnets, or the hope and peace that one sees here? I do not think that it is an either-or, but rather a fusion of the two. The fact that Donne can write a poem like 'Good Friday' and also poems like Sonnet 14 or Sonnet 19 shows that Donne truly has both faith and doubt. And that the two can go hand in hand."

In the exploration of spirituality and faith through poetry, the poet has unimaginable scope. As Perry Marrs writes: "Shelley has suggested that the poet is the 'true philosopher.' I would add that the poet is the true theologian as well. Freed from the limitation of prose, the poet can craft language into an infinite number of modes of expression." Cooper Harriss also comments on the expanded role of the spiritual poet, quoting T. S. Eliot "(We shall not cease from exploration/ And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time)", as an instance of "what this course helped illustrate for me: the poetic act, much like the spiritual life, concerns itself

with incessant vision and revision, consideration and reconsideration ... for which we all strive but never truly attain."

Thus the poet can illuminate our theology as well as evoke our emotional responses. When asked to write about a line or passage of poetry that gave insight one would not have had without the poet's help, Kimberly Miller commented: "Hopkins's famous lines ('And though the last lights off the black west went/ Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs-/ Because the Holy Ghost over the bent/ World broods with warm breast and ah! bright wings') have evoked for me the idea of the renewing and sustaining—and even mothering—power of the third person of the Trinity. These lines also exude joy in the Holy Spirit's activity—something that can be lost in many philosophical descriptions of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit."

All of us have many passages we regard as "keepers", and we could fill many pages with these, and wish we could. But Matthew Lyles perhaps expresses this sense best of all in his choice from George Herbert's "The Windows", which, he says, "should be framed and presented to every Church minister": "Lord, how can man preach thy eternal word?/ He is a brittle, crazy glass,/ Yet in thy temple thou dost him afford/ This glorious and transcendent place,/ To be a window through thy grace." "Sinful human kind," he writes, "is like a 'brittle, crazy glass,' but God's pure light transforms us, makes us channels of his grace. We have no light but that God grants us, His power and glory."

Student seminar presentations have drawn upon composers such as Benjamin Britten (whose settings of Donne's "Holy Sonnets" and Blake's "Songs" so fascinated us in Jared Johnson's sensitive performances) and Chopin (whose music Perry Marrs performed to illuminate the desolation of Eliot). Poetry, like music, can be demanding, but this is precisely why it is so valuable. As Blake wrote: "The wisest of the Ancients considered what is not too Explicit as the fittest for Instruction, because it rouses the faculties to act. I name Moses, Solomon, Aesop, Homer, Plato." We name Blake, and his fellow poets of the English tradition.

*Kathryn Kerby-Fulton, Danielle Aberle and
Alison Gruseke, with special thanks to Joey Mokus*

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following students for their thoughtful suggestions:
Daryl Williams, John Basilius, Sarah Anderson,
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¹ Cited in James Anderson Winn, *Unsuspected Eloquence: A History of the Relations Between Poetry and Music* (New Haven: 1981) 303.

²Winn, 296.

Alumni News

ISM

Ellen Espenschied '99 was featured in a Yale Bulletin & Calendar article that described the Yale Memorial Carillon in Harness Tower, and the guild of student carillonneurs at Yale. After a highly competitive and rigorous audition, Ellen and two Yale students recently became full members of the Guild of Carillonneurs of North America, a professional organization of carillon performers and composers. Ellen continues her Yale affiliation as Director of the Yale Freshman Chorus.

Heidi Kreider '91 began a new position in August as lead pastor at Bethel College Mennonite Church in North Newton, Kansas, where the music staff includes Shirley King, Heidi's former organ teacher at Bethel College. In October Heidi performed several pieces in the Pipes Spectacular program sponsored by the Bethel AGO chapter. It was a progressive concert on three different organs, ending with a program of sacred music at the Bethel College Mennonite Church. Heidi's current address is PO Box 116, North Newton, KS, 67117; e-mail, dkreider@bethelks.edu.

Paul Jacobson '83 reports that he is now a Major Gifts Officer for the San Francisco Opera. His new mailing address is 328-B Yerba Buena Road, San Francisco, CA 94130; e-mail, PJACOBSON@sfopera.com.

Anna Song '00 is Assistant Director of Choral Activities at DePaul University in Chicago. Her address is 5400 South Harper Avenue #502, Chicago, Illinois 60615; phone, 773-753-1219; e-mail, singanna@hotmail.com.

Allison Werner '96 was ordained at Christ the King Lutheran Church in Houston, Texas on November 5. Allison was also installed as Associate Pastor of the church and Director of the Melancthon Institute. The church's address is 2353 Rice Boulevard, Houston, Texas, 77005-2696.

Carol Williams '97 has a new mailing address, P.O. Box 189, New York, NY 10101; phone, 732-558-5138.
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Robert Burns King '61 continues as Organist-Choirmaster at First Presbyterian Church in Burlington, North Carolina and as organ teacher at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Following his years at Union, Robert studied with Langlais and Duruflé for one year, and for a summer with Michael Schneider in Cologne. He frequently plays recitals, and last summer played three in Italy. Robert designed an Andover Organ which is housed in the new \$28 million music building on the UNC campus. A CD of Robert's first recital on this organ may be obtained by contacting him at 508 West Davis Street, Burlington, NC 27215.

Richard N. Palmquist '61 can now be reached at his new address, 190 Timber Mill Street, The Woodlands, TX 77380.

The YDS Gospel Choir and Saint Andrew's Community Gospel Choir recently released a recording of their January 2000 Marquand Chapel concert. The recording, entitled *The Gospel in Song*, features solo and duet performances by members of the choirs and members of New Haven's Gospel community. For information, contact Gale Pollen at 203-432-9751 or gale.pollen@yale.edu.

Placement Listings

Music Director

FAITH CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, 2030 Main St, Hartford, CT 06120. 860-547-0820; fax 860 293-1541. Music director/organist for historic black church. Candidate must be familiar with black church hymnody and sacred anthems. Chancel choir and men's choir, pipe organ and Hammond organ. For information, contact Dr. Barbara Headley, Pastor.

FRIENDSHIP BAPTIST CHURCH, 3301 Beatties Ford Rd, Charlotte, NC 28216. Predominantly African-American congregation seeking full time organist/assistant director of music. Knowledge of organ literature and ability to play gospel by ear is strongly desired. Three Sunday morning services. Work with the Director of Music in planning worship and seasonal events. 52-rank Knowlton pipe organ, Hammond organ. For more information, contact Tony McNeill, Director of Music, at the church.

THE GAY MEN'S CHORUS OF LOS ANGELES, 8235 Santa Monica Blvd, Suite 210, W Hollywood, CA 90046. 530-325-6188. Artistic Director for a 150-member auditioned chorus. Successful candidate will have an advanced degree in choral conducting or vocal technique and be a capable teacher experienced in leading a volunteer ensemble. Consideration will begin on January 15, 2001 and continue until a suitable candidate is selected.

Academic

HARTT SCHOOL, UNIVERSITY OF HARTFORD, West Hartford, CT 06117. Tenure-track position beginning August 2001. Assistant/associate professor of choral music education. Teach undergraduate and graduate choral music education courses, supervise student teachers, promote choral music education through clinics and workshops. Advise students, participate in campus committees. Position may also include assignments from the following: serve as principal conductor of the Connecticut Children's Chorus, teach undergraduate and graduate conducting, conduct one of the university choirs, teach graduate level choral literature courses. Required qualifications: Completed or nearly completed doctorate. Successful teaching of public high school choral ensembles. Other desirable qualifications: Expertise in conducting university/college choral ensembles. Record of research

and/or creative activity. Direct application questions to the office of John M. Feierabend, Ph.D., Chair, Music Education Search Committee. Review of applications will begin on December 15, 2000.

MALONE COLLEGE, 515 25th St NW, Canton, OH 44709. Tenure-track position, assistant professor, beginning January of 2001 or August 2001 in choral music. Position includes directing the college chorale, chamber singers, teaching studio voice, teaching related classes based on candidate's expertise, and other duties as assigned by the department. Doctoral degree preferred (required for tenure-track); ABD considered, college and/or public school teaching experience desired, successful record in both vocal performance and choral performance. Direct application inquiries to the office of Robert C. Suggs, Provost. Malone College is a Christian college affiliated with the Evangelical Friends Church-Eastern Region.

MIAMI UNIVERSITY, Department of Music, Oxford, OH 45056. Choral conductor, tenure-track position, at the rank of assistant or associate professor, beginning August 15, 2001. Conduct the college chorale, a mixed choir, and the men's glee club. Conduct a major choral/orchestral work as part of a three-conductor rotation. Assist with departmental recruitment; additional duties as appropriate to appointee's qualifications. Doctorate must be completed by August 15, 2001. Demonstrated success as a choral conductor and commitment to excellence in teaching and musical artistry. Review of applications begins December 8, 2000. For application inquiry contact the office of Gary Speck, Chair, Choral Search Committee.

PENN STATE UNIVERSITY, School of Music, 233 Music Building, Box C, University Park, PA 16802-1901. Director of choral activities at assistant or associate professor level, tenure-track. Duties: conduct the school's premier choral ensemble, provide leadership and vision for large choral program (six major ensembles conducted by five faculty members), teach graduate choral conducting and choral literature, recruit graduate students in choral conducting, assume additional duties as appropriate to appointee's qualifications. Advanced degree or equivalent professional experience required, proven success with high level colle

giate choral ensembles. Experience in public school choral music desirable. Position begins Fall, 2001. Application inquiries should be sent to the office of Richard D. Green, Director.

TEXAS LUTHERAN UNIVERSITY, 1000 W Court St, Seguin, TX 78155. Full-time tenure-track position in choral activities to begin August, 2001. Director of choral activities to be responsible for the concert choir, coordination of vespers, and to work closely with the university to schedule concert choir tours and outreach performances. The successful candidate will supervise all choral activities, including recruitment and retention of members. The concert choir is a vehicle for presenting the university's mission and message to diverse audiences. Teaching duties will consist of choral conducting, arranging instrumentation, and instructing upper level theory courses and other areas of choral music education. Master's degree required; doctorate preferred. Strong commitment to excellence in teaching and advising undergraduates, ability to work with representatives of other disciplines, commitment to continued professional development. Preference will be given to candidates with teaching experience. Rank will be determined by qualifications. Application deadline: Until filled. Please direct application inquiry to office of Robert Hiner, Dean of the College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences.

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA, 250 River Rd, Athens, GA 30602. Full-time, tenure-track, assistant professor of choral conducting. Conduct choral ensembles, teach choral conducting and choral literature at undergraduate and graduate levels, recruit students, assist with overall operation and further development of a comprehensive choral program. Qualifications: Earned doctorate or documented equivalent, interest and experience in directing a variety of ensembles, extensive knowledge of choral literature and performance practice. Position begins August, 2001. Applications received by January 8, 2001 will be assured full consideration. Send a letter of application, c.v., current audio and video recordings and 3 letters of reference specific to this position to Edward Sandor, Associate Director, Choral Conducting Search Committee, School of Music.

Poets Speak of Christmas and the Incarnate Word

For the coming season we offer these passages:

John Donne, "Upon the Annunciation and Passion falling upon one day"
This Church, by letting these days join, hath shown
Death and conception in mankind as one.

George Herbert: "Christmas"
The shepherds sing; and shall I silent be?
My God, no hymn for thee?
My soul's a shepherd too; a flock it feeds
Of thoughts, and words, and deeds.

T. S. Eliot, "The Wasteland"
Shantih, shantih, shantih*

*meaning "peace which passeth understanding,"
from the "Upanishads", commentaries on the
Hindu scriptures

G. M. Hopkins, "The Blessed Virgin Compared to the Air We Breathe"
Gave God's infinity
Dwindled to infancy

T. S. Eliot, "The Journey of the Magi"
There was a Birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt. I had seen birth and death,
But had thought they were different; this Birth was
Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death.
We returned to our places, these Kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
With an alien people clutching their gods.
I should be glad of another death.

William Blake, "The Lamb"
He is meek and he is mild,
He became a little child. . . .
Little lamb God bless thee.
Little lamb God bless thee.

*Christmas poetry was chosen for inclusion by the following students of
Kathryn Kerby-Fulton: Danielle Aberle, John Basiulis, Cooper Harriss,
Chris Jones, Kimberly Miller, Joey Mokos*

