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 verse. 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.”

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?”

continued on page 2
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 give up 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; unforseen 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 Mokos

In addition to those quoted, we would like to thank the following students for their thoughtful suggestions: Daryl Williams, John Basilius, Sarah Anderson, Chris Jones, and all those who made submissions.

Kathryn Kerby-Fulton is Visiting Professor of Religion and Literature

2 Winn, 298.
Alison Werner ’96 was ordained at Christ the King Lutheran Church in Houston, Texas on November 5. Alison was also installed as Associate Pastor of the church and Director of the Melanchthon 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.

UTS

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 Durufle 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 203-492-9751 or gale.pollen@yale.edu.
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*

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.

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

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.

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

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