



The Joy of Poetry for an Anglican

by the Revd Rachel Mann

Rachel is an Anglican parish priest, theologian and writer. She is poet-in-residence at Manchester Cathedral and is the author of four books, including the bestselling memoir of growing up transgender, *Dazzling Darkness*. Her latest book, *Fierce Imaginings*, examines the place of the Great War and Remembrance in post-Brexit Britain. Her poetry and criticism have appeared in a wide variety of academic and poetry journals as well as newsprint.

“There’s blood between us, love, my love.”

Christina Rossetti, “The Convent Threshold”

It may come as a shock to some readers, but I am not especially inspired by Christian poetry. In my mind, I associate – perhaps unfairly – the phrase with sickly, sentimental verse. Poetry is either good or bad, fine or inadequate. The qualifier “Christian” really adds little. And yet I am inclined to make an exception for the idea of Anglican poetry. I have been drawn to it again and again because of its wide and wonderful contribution to the English language itself.

For a tradition founded in political machination (indeed, a king’s desire for a new bride), Anglicanism’s richest and most distinctive joys might ultimately be found in words. Thankfully, not so much in its rhetoric, but in its original contribution to God’s praise, the Book of Common Prayer (BCP), especially its 1662 variant. For, as the Church of England sought to heal divisions generated by its troubled birth, as well as the effects of a civil war a century later, and the theological divisions among Catholic and Protestant elements, the 1662 Prayer Book offered the Church and nation what they badly needed – a way to unite without the need to look too deeply into the souls and consciences of the people. It remains a founding gift of the Church.

However, another way of organising words – poetry – offers a key way of bringing out the distinctive joys of the Anglican inheritance. For, if it would be an act of folly to claim that Anglicanism is a uniquely poetic tradition, its poetry – which springs so often from a bold delight in the rhythms of the English found in the King James Bible, as well as the BCP – remains a joy.

Quantity is never a measure of quality, especially in an art form where fourteen lines can say much more than a thousand words of prose. Yet, for those who like things quantifiable, here’s just a sample of the poets who might be claimed for Anglicanism: Donne, Herbert, Vaughan, Traherne, Eliot, Christina Rossetti, Auden, R. S. Thomas (in its Welsh variant), Geoffrey Hill and Rowan Williams to name a few. Oh, and Wordsworth and Betjeman. At the edges, one finds the likes of Wilfred Owen.

For some, reading that list might be troubling. They will want to distinguish between poets who – like Herbert – might be said to “make” pictures of Anglicanism’s possibilities in their work and those – perhaps

like Auden – for whom being Anglican offered a kind of thematic background. I’m happy for people to be troubled. Arguably, one of the joys of Anglicanism lies in its porous boundaries and wideness. To be Anglican is to be free of the need for doctrinaire safety or dogmatism; it is to find oneself somehow shaped by and attached to the wide Anglican way of going on, in worship, thought and prayer.

Poetry is a kind of alchemy. It makes wonder in the commonplace of language, using language (usually tired and worn) to achieve miracle. The Anglican “tradition” of poetry – if there be such a defined thing – is a miracle of invention. In the early seventeenth century, what was the Church of England’s theology and polity to be? What, indeed, was “England”, and “English” as a language? The most educated English poets could write in Latin or French or Italian. The alchemic joy of an emergent Anglican poetry lay in its making of a language vibrant not only with rhetorical force, but with music.

Donne’s *Divine Meditations* – not marked by obvious joy, but by the thoughts of a poet working out his faith in the face of God’s terrifying love – show poetry in movement with new possibilities in English. Most are Petrarchan in form, yet some show signs of Shakespeare’s influence on the sonnet. If the Petrarchan sonnet is noted for its capacity for argument, the incorporation of Shakespearean elements perhaps signals a new trust in the possibilities of love. Donne writes, “Oh my black soul! now thou art summoned/By sickness, death’s herald, and champion.” The sonnet opens with startling honesty and is met by a volta of apparently easy conventionality: “Yet, grace, if thou repent, thou canst not lack”. Donne’s genius is to develop this in quite visceral, yet beautiful ways:

Oh make thyself with holy mourning black,
And red with blushing, as thou art with sin;
Or wash thee in Christ’s blood, which hath this might
That being red, it dyes red souls to white.

There is delight, sensuality and joy in this tension and it indicates a path into metaphysical joy and wonder pursued by Traherne and Vaughan and, most especially, George Herbert.

Yet there is more. Donne’s “Batter My Heart, Three-Personed God” is justly famous. It gestures to a profound analogue to joy – terror. It is striking because it is uncomfortable, indicating the violence that lurks close to the mystery of the Trinity; its familiarity with human conflict and the fragility

of goodness. This is no image of a pale Galilean¹ or a domestic god. This is poetry as *eros*. Donne requires of God, “Take me to you, imprison me... /... ravish me.” This is language at breaking point. When it reaches there it either collapses or, as in Donne’s case, remakes itself anew.

There’s a reason Herbert is held in such high esteem in Anglicanism and beyond: he achieves poetry which is almost impossibly clever, yet simple. His poems are like a concentrated version of the Church of England’s settlement: paradoxical and yet liveable. Lines like “Love bade me welcome. Yet my soul drew back/Guilty of dust and sin” are justly famous. There are, of course, echoes of biblical rhythms (most notably the Song of Songs), but the technical achievement in the poem is startling, deploying iambic pentameter along with short lines. This is sensuous joy allied to linguistic mastery. The boldness of Herbert is indicated in the intimacy of address: “And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?/My dear, then I will serve.” He is biblical, he is modern and he remains fresh.

Several postmodern critics, including Antony Easthope and Julia Kristeva, have suggested that iambic pentameter is not to be taken as a neutral form, but as ideological. Easthope notes that it is especially suited for the voice of privilege, becoming the poetic metre of the Tudor courts, relegating older accentual forms to a secondary, “folk” status.² In English, pentameter became the dominant form for at least four centuries.

Insofar as there is truth in this (and I think there is) perhaps one of the question marks over the Anglican poetic tradition is the extent to which it is tied up in authority and privilege. Clearly, of all the Christian traditions in Britain, the Church of England is tied up with establishment and privilege. Yet, ironically, perhaps because Anglicanism has tended to be “discreet” on matters of doctrine or, in the very least, has encouraged a certain wideness in its interpretation, its poets have rarely felt called to be doctrinaire. There is little safety in Anglican poetry’s imagination.

If the language of Anglicanism has been over-identified with privilege and position, there are grounds for asking, “Where are all the women poets?” This is, of course, a serial issue in all poetry. Until the “triumph” of the novel in the nineteenth century, poetry was the ultimate masculine art form. It was the province of Wordsworthian “artists” wanting to touch the Sublime or – later – Tennyson trying to reconstruct poetry’s Round Table in epics like “Idylls of the King”. In comparison, Cecil Frances Alexander

1 “Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean; the world has grown grey from thy breath”. From Algernon Charles Swinburne, “Hymn to Proserpine”.

2 “Antony Easthope, *Poetry as Discourse* (London: Routledge, 1983).

(of “All Things Bright and Beautiful” fame) might offer adequate verse, but she offers questionable poetry.

Christina Rossetti is more than an exception. She is a reminder that the canon of poetry, Anglican or otherwise, can be reconstructed and remade. Her reputation has gone through various iterations in the past one hundred and fifty years. At the turn of the twentieth century, Rossetti was seen as a writer whose poetry revealed the invisible world of her faith. However, by the 1990s, she was read as a highly intelligent woman whose poetry negotiates victimisation, whilst being subversively feminist.

What is clear now is that her poetry – dazzlingly balanced between the influence of John Keble’s theology of reserve and a delight in language – sits at the Victorian top table. Her devotional poetry – often dismissed by feminist and formalist critics alike as simpering and lacking the bravery of early work like “Goblin Market” – is increasingly appreciated for its suppleness and sensitivity. If much poetry can feel like dust in the mouth, Rossetti’s poetry – grounded in her Anglo-Catholicism – sings. The riches of the fruit in “Goblin Market” (“Apples and quinces,/Lemons and oranges,/Plump unpeck’d cherries,/Melons and raspberries,/Bloom-down-cheek’d peaches”) explode in the mouth, while the wider poem reworks the meaning of the Eucharist as grounded in love between sisters. The poem is revolutionary.

Yet this liveliness, mutuality and communion is also a feature of her directly religious poetry. Rossetti’s second “St Peter” sonnet echoes Peter’s denial. Rossetti requests the Divine to look her “eye to eye”:

Lord, I have heard the crowing of the cock
And have not wept: ah, Lord, Thou knowest it.
Yet still I hear Thee knocking, still I hear:
“Open to Me, look on Me eye to eye,
That I may wring thy heart and make it whole;
And teach thee love because I hold thee dear,
And sup with thee in gladness soul with soul,
And sup with thee in glory by and by.”
(ll. 7-14)