

## **ON WRITERS**



## ANGUISH AND CHRISTIAN POETRY

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In his essay 'True and False Anguish', Paul Ricoeur describes five levels of anguish: fear of death; fear of psychic disintegration; fear that history is meaningless; the anguish of guilt; and fear that God is not good.

We must confront each anguish in order to transcend it. However, each transcending leads directly to the next anguish. We can resolve our fear of death by discovering that reasons for living are more important than life itself, and can 'become reasons for dying', but this search for meaning leads to inner conflict. Resolving this psychic anguish through 'communal and personal' work, we become involved in the anguish of history. Accepting that history is a result of our own choices leads to the anguish of guilt, which can be resolved through repentance. Finally, we realise that humanity is not responsible for all evil, and the problem of innocent suffering forces us to ask if the world is ruled by chaos or a malign God. There is no final answer, only a 'timid' hope that is close to despair and anguish. However, as in the case of Job, meditation on suffering can lead to an encounter with the living God.<sup>1</sup>

Christianity confronts these five anguishes in the Incarnation and Crucifixion. Christ dies willingly, and restores psychic health, or the image of God; his life and death give meaning to history, and release humanity from guilt. In his dying sense of abandonment, and in his Resurrection, he resolves the fear of God's wickedness or absence.

In wrestling with these anguishes, the Christian poet opens himself (so far it is usually *himself*) to an encounter with God, either through an unanswerable inbreaking of the divine, as in *Job*. or by a direct prayer to God as in the medieval lyrics:

Jesu, write in my hert depe  
 How that thou began to wepe...  
 Write the strokes with hammeres stout,  
 With the blood renninge about...  
 And with that blode write thou so ofte  
 Mine hard hert, til it be softe.<sup>2</sup>

Since these poems offer the simple believer an aid to meditation, they do not question God's goodness. The speaker is not the individual poet, but

Everyman, and the events occur in universal rather than particular time: these poets tell the Christian story, but not the story of their own time.

In order to assert that *history* has meaning, the poet must enter the story himself, to demonstrate that the Christian drama is taking place 'now' and is valid for himself and his time. The central question for the Christian poet is 'How may I, Dante Alighieri, or William Langland, be saved in my world?'

This paper outlines briefly the way four great English poets – Langland, Donne, Milton, and Eliot – confront or fail to confront these anguishes. As individual artists and thinkers, they could not simply retell the story of Redemption; they had to grapple with it as they grappled with the demands of their art, setting it in the context of their own time and concerns.

## MILTON

Many readers have found Milton's God repellent, and see Satan as the hero of *Paradise Lost*. Even admirers, such as C.S. Lewis, have doubted its success as a *religious* poem.<sup>3</sup> To my mind, this is because Milton does not enter the world of his poem in order to confront the five anguishes in his own life.

Death appears in *Paradise Lost* as an outsize allegorical character, or an abstract concept, not as a concrete reality, not as Milton's own death. Christ's death is not represented in the action of the poem, but occurs in our remote past and the poem's remote future; Michael explains it to Adam, as a theological rather than a human event:

thy punishment  
He shall endure by coming in the flesh...  
Proclaiming life to all who shall believe...  
For this he shall live hated, be ...  
...to death condemned...

XII.404-21

Nor does Milton explore his own psychic health in *Paradise Lost*. He takes no part in the action of the poem, but appears only as the poet. The crisis of his life was, as Northrop Frye observes, the choice of his epic subject.<sup>4</sup> The critical question in his invocations is not 'How may I, John Milton, be saved?' but 'How may I write a great epic poem in English?'

His story is set in universal time, not in the 'now' of seventeenth century England, so he cannot show that the Redemption gives meaning to the history of his own time. Because narrative is always linear, retelling the

existing story, as Milton does, makes it subject to time. Much of *Paradise Lost* concerns past or future events, related in conversation; there is no 'present' action except Satan's journey and man's sin. This is limiting from a Christian point of view, because, as Ricoeur points out, 'sin is not the center of the Christian Credo... We do not *believe* in sin, but in salvation.'<sup>5</sup> But in Milton, salvation is remote and sin is present. This sin is universal, not particular: however moving his account of Adam's sin, Milton does not enter the story, and thus cannot confront his own sin, nor express repentance.

This centrality of sin means that the problem of innocent suffering does not arise. In seeking 'to justify the ways of God to men', and allowing God to argue his case, Milton fails to face God directly, questioning his goodness and thus making way for the inbreaking of God: his God is a self-satisfied theologian, not a personal God who can connect with the poet. Milton could represent sin because he knew what sin was and believed in it. His representation of God fails because he did not believe in it sufficiently. He had, as Angus Wilson says, believed most heresies, but he wrote *Paradise Lost* as if from the point of view of orthodoxy.<sup>6</sup> You cannot write a successful religious poem 'as if from a point of view', but only from a difficult and deeply honest confrontation with the truth as you see it.

#### ELIOT

When asked to explain 'Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree', Eliot replied, 'It means, "Lady, three white leopards sat under a juniper-tree."' It is inconceivable that Milton, Donne or Langland would have given such an answer or chosen such an image, dissociated from any clear reference point. All three use extended metaphors to make connections between things, but Eliot followed the Imagist tradition of juxtaposing fragmentary, disconnected images: 'These fragments I have shored against my ruins,' as he says in *The Waste Land*. Form and narrative break down: his poetry lacks both the formal unity of the lyric and the cohesive story of the narrative poem. Though he feels the five anguishes acutely, his fragmentary approach prevents him from resolving them.

Despite Eliot's sometimes morbid concern with death, he keeps it at a distance: the Magus says, 'I should be glad of another death'; in 'East Coker' Eliot speaks of 'Eating and drinking. Dung and death', but 'death' remains a single abstract noun, not a process expressed in the verb 'to die'. Eliot distances the Crucifixion (and the Nativity) by placing it in the past or



Here the impossible union  
Of spheres of existence is actual...

DONNE

Donne engages more closely with God than either Eliot or Milton. This may be because a lyric allows a more intense connection than can be maintained over a longer poem, but I think it is more than that: unlike Eliot, Donne tells a coherent story in his poems; unlike Milton, he tells the story of his own search for God.

Donne confronts the first four anguishes head on. Death is a frequent theme, and the death he fears is clearly his own:

Thou has made me, And shall thy worke decay...  
I runne to death, and death meets me as fast,  
And all my pleasures are like yesterday...      Sonnet I

Donne also engages with the mortality of Christ, knowing, as Eliot and Milton do not, that Christ's humanity is essential:

The Sonne of glory came downe, and was slaine...  
'Twas much, that man was made like God before,  
But, that God should be made like man, much more.      Sonnet XV

Donne uses paradox to confront Christ's suffering, which gains greater force from his divinity:

Could I behold those hands which span the Poles,  
And turne all spheares at once, pierc'd with those holes?  
...or that flesh which was worne  
By God, for his apparell, rag'd and torne?      'Goodfriday, 1613.'

Christ's death enabled Donne to accept his own:

Looke Lord, and finde both *Adams* met in me;  
As the first *Adams* sweat surrounds my face,  
May the last *Adams* blood my soule embrace.      'Hymne to God, my God'

Donne was acutely conscious of the history of his own time, its discoveries, which are a major source of imagery in his poems, and its religious struggles. For the first time, a Christian might doubt that he had

been born into the true religion,<sup>9</sup> and Donne's fear of psychic disintegration is mainly centred around religious doubt:

...doubt wisely; in strange way  
To stand inquiring right is not to stray;  
To sleepe, or runne wrong, is. On a huge hill,  
Cragged, and steep, Truth stands, and hee that will  
Reach her, about must, and about must goe...  
Yet strive so, that before age, deaths twilight,  
Thy Soule rest...

Satyre III, 77-84

Donne's sense of Christian history is also strong, but unlike Milton he does not attempt to retell the story, but meditates on its meaning for his own life: 'Thou look'st towards mee, / O Saviour, as thou hang'st upon the tree...' ('Goodfriday, 1613')

Donne has a strong sense of his own sin, of his 'profane mistresses' (Sonnet XIII) and his 'Idolatry' (Sonnet III); his sonnets are full of repentance:

Spit in my face you Jewes, and pierce my side,  
Buffet, and scoffe, scourge, and crucifie mee,  
For I have sinn'd, and sinn'd, and onely hee,  
Who could do no iniquitie hath dyed...

Sonnet XI

The problem of God's responsibility for innocent suffering does not arise, because God is the one suffering to save Donne, who is not innocent.

Donne's relationship with God is not so much one of questioning, but of imploring. The full breaking of God into his own life is always just out of reach, always in the future, something that he yearns to feel more fully:

O thinke mee worth thine anger, punish mee,  
Burne off my rusts, and my deformity,  
Restore thine Image, so much, by thy grace,  
That thou may'st know mee, and I'll turne my face.

'Goodfriday, 1613'

## LANGLAND

Of the four poets, William Langland confronts the five anguishes most fully. Apart from *Paradise Lost*, his poem *Piers Plowman* is the only contender for the title of the greatest single religious poem in English. It represents a lifetime's quest for God, centred on the question which the hero, Will (both Langland and the human will), asks Holy Church at the outset: 'telle me... How y may saue my soule?' (i.79-80) Langland does not

retell the Christian story, but relates Will's search for salvation in fourteenth century England. This allows the eternal story of Redemption to be a constant reference point outside that time, and to break into the poem at critical moments.

Langland sets Will's journey between the Tower of Truth and the Dungeon of Death. Death, as the negative pole of Will's search, is ever-present in the story, and Langland confronts his own mortality in a comic passage near the end of the poem, where Old Age makes Will bald, deaf, toothless, crippled, and impotent.

Langland's awe at the divinity of Christ is mixed with pity for the humanity which allows Christ to feel 'our sorrow' (vii.127-31) in his death:

'Consummatum est' quoth Crist, and commenced for to swoon.  
Piteously and pale, as a prisoner that dyeth,  
The lord of life and of light then laid his eyes together.

xx.58-60

A large part of *Piers Plowman* is the search for psychic wholeness, as Will struggles to discover the nature of doing well under instruction from Thought, Wit, Reason, Imaginative, and Conscience – mental faculties which are integrated in his last internal guide, *Liberum Arbitrium*, or Free Will. For Langland, psychic and social health lies in the productive work necessary for the common good. In the person of Piers Plowman, the honest labourer, the history of fourteenth century England with its acute famine and labour shortages is redeemed by union with Christian history: when Christ becomes incarnate, he jousts against the devil wearing Piers' armour of human nature.

Work, begging, and poverty are the centre of Langland's own confession of sin: Will is accosted by Reason and Conscience,

In a hot harvest when I had my health  
And limbs to labour with and loved to fare well  
And no deed to do but to drink and to sleep.

v.7-9

When Reason and Conscience reproach him, Will gives a passionate speech of repentance and trust in God's mercy (v.92-100).

Langland is also acutely aware of the suffering of the 'poor folk' who scrape together enough meal to make porridge for their crying children (ix.71-83). While Langland blames man rather than God for the suffering of these innocents, he never takes God for granted, and his poem is full of agonised questioning about whether he and others can be saved.

At crucial points, God bursts into the poem unexpectedly. Truth does not wait for the pilgrims to reach him, but sends them a Pardon before they have begun their journey. Christ, in the person of the Good Samaritan, gallops to Jerusalem to joust with the fiend and save mankind. In the Harrowing of Hell (xx.370-449), Langland achieves a powerful and moving encounter with Christ, a feat which Milton botched in *Paradise Regained*, and which Dante did not attempt. This passage is an unanswerable inbreaking of the divine, demolishing the Devil's arguments for damnation, and silencing Will's questioning. He calls his wife and daughter to kiss the Cross which 'bore God's blessed body for our bettering' (xx.476)

#### CODA

The central question for the Christian poet is, 'How can I meet God so that my whole life is centred on him?' If the answer to this question is, as it is for Hopkins and Herbert, 'in my heart', then that is too easy. We can all meet God in our hearts, but this is pale beside the shocking Christian claim that God becomes like us in the body of one man, subject to physical pain and the historical time in which he lived. For a Christian poet, answering the central question involves confronting both the physical reality of the Incarnation, and making this story relevant for his own time. We cannot redeem history unless we encounter God in it. Langland and Donne do this better than Milton and Eliot. I think it is no accident that Milton and Eliot were born into the Protestant tradition which centres worship on the Word of God, while Langland and Donne were born into the Catholic tradition, which centres on the Eucharist, believing that Christ, the word made flesh, is present in the Sacrament.

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#### REFERENCES

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- <sup>2</sup> Davies, R. T., *Medieval English Lyrics* (London: Faber, 1963), Number 45.
- <sup>3</sup> *A Preface to Paradise Lost* (London: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 132.
- <sup>4</sup> Frye, Northrop, *Five Essays on Milton's Epics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966).
- <sup>5</sup> Ricoeur, 'Christianity and History', p. 93.
- <sup>6</sup> *The Life of John Milton* (OUP, 1983).
- <sup>7</sup> *The Waste Land* V, 'A Song for Simeon'.
- <sup>8</sup> *The Composition of Four Quartets* (London, 1978), p. 29.
- <sup>9</sup> Hunter, *Metaphysical Poets*, p. 14.