



Editorial

This, the Spring 2017 issue of *Theology in Scotland*, contains five papers on the topic of theology and poetry.

In “Nature’s million-fuelèd bonfire: Thoughts on honest poetic contemplation”, Christopher Southgate contemplates the natural world in relation to creaturely suffering in evolution and the manifestations of Divine glory – *Gloria mundi, gloria crucis, gloria in excelsis*. Christian attentiveness has often concentrated on the beauty of the earth, ignoring the competition and struggle which are factors integral to evolution. Struggle in nature, however, may lead to God’s ends for his creatures. This speaks of a suffering world necessitating honest contemplation, as Holmes Rolston argues. For his part, however, Southgate turns to Gerard Manley Hopkins whose perceptive gaze sees both the beauty and the strangeness of what is created. Southgate touches on Louis MacNeice, Norman MacCaig, and turns to R. S. Thomas, who states that ‘contemplation of the natural world needs to seek honestly for signs of the divine reality’ at work in that world. As a Darwinian contemplative, Southgate’s intention is to contribute towards a contemplation which is open to the ‘thisness’ of the object. As a poet seeking to indwell known and particular landscapes – Dartmoor, the Cuillins, Rosslyn Glen – Southgate’s own poems are suffused with a profound sense of place, a feeling for *locale*.

The winning essay for the Fraser Prize 2016 follows, “Where have all the poets gone?” by Bruce Pass. The assessment and comments of the Reading Panel form a preface to the essay.

In “Emily Dickinson: A poet at the limits”, Jaime Wright draws attention to the recent shift in Dickinsonian scholarship towards an examination of the scientific elements of her poetry and the interface between science and theology in her work. In noting this, however, Wright argues that ‘the pertinent intersection is epistemology’. The relation of science and theology is then explored utilising one of Dickinson’s favoured metaphors: that of *circumference*. By use of this metaphor, Dickinson expresses an understanding of the limits of scientific and theological knowledge. Wright then explores further the

paradigm of epistemic limits or circumference in Dickinson's poetry by means of its varying spatial points: *within* a circumference, *at* a circumference, and *beyond* a circumference. The essay concludes with an affirmation of the continuing persistence of Dickinson's faith in her life and in her work.

In "What is the significance of poetry for theology today?", Joan Jones examines four significant terms: 'theology', 'poetry', 'significance' and 'today'. Jones begins by exploring what is meant by the terms 'theology' and 'poetry'. 'Theology', she argues, contains and presents the past within itself, as well as pointing to the future. Theology is defined as the disciplined attempts of human beings to understand God. That is, the effort to understand how the world is affected by God's presence and activity, what kind of God he is, and what his purpose is. This exploration is placed in the context of Christian living and discipleship. Jones turns to how a knowledge of God might be expressed. Might this be poetically? This could be of help in theology's disciplined search for perfect expression. The fact is, however, that theology and poetry have always worked together, be it in Scripture, liturgy or psalms and hymns. And in turn, poetry often expresses theological truths. Is poetry, then, more significant than theology in the early twenty-first century? Jones answers this question by observing that, currently, personal self-definition is much more likely to take place through subjective means than through social objectivity, as was once the case. Jones concludes by pointing to the great outpouring of new liturgy evidenced in praise songs and poetry, which demonstrate the both the potential of faith's reality and relevance and its significance for twenty-first-century theology.

In his paper, "In other words: Towards a poetic theology of the spoken Word of God", Jacob Rollison considers poetry in its various relations. Poetry raises questions regarding the relation of the world to a 'beyond', and the relation of representation to presence. The question poetry poses to theology is: if Jesus Christ is the Word, is this to be understood prosaically or poetically? as representation or presence? For Jacques Ellul, poetry manifests the inseparability of form and content in communication. Ellul sets this out in the two volumes: *Reason for Being*, and *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation*. However in *The Humiliation of the Word* Ellul resists Kierkegaard's

ironic stance and views the word as inseparable from the life of the one who speaks it. This points, in turn, to an inseparability of form and content in theology and the presence of God in his revelation. In contrast to the structuralist view, the world is not *a text*. For Ellul, the central medium is God's *speech*, temporal and non-spatial in its essence. Ellul's poetics of speech is in turn based on the poetics of the Word of God. The form, then, of the Apocalypse in Revelation 'allows the comprehension of its content': theology is a poetic listening and responding to the Word, *architecture in movement*. The concerns of theology as poetry are not simply with poetic *ideas* but with the richer world of poetic existence.

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Editor