

‘The holy space ablaze’: New understandings of spiritual reality through poetry and music

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The audience in St Vincent’s Church in Edinburgh sat enthralled as the clarinettist played the first note of the third movement of Messiaen’s *Quartet for the End of Time*. The setting was the Edinburgh Festival of the Sacred Arts (<http://www.edinburghsacredartsfestival.org/>), part of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, and we were all wearing masks, sitting somewhat apart. I imagine most of us were glad to be hearing live music again after a long period of silence. The uncertainty about whether or not the festival would take place at all under COVID restrictions had been unnerving for all involved.

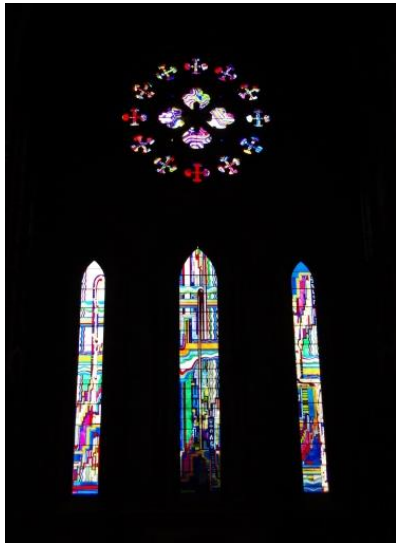
The three other musicians in the Quartet became part of the audience as the clarinettist, Calum Robertson, slowly, gradually, played the opening note of the movement, “The Abyss of the Birds”. The shift from silence to sound and then to loud, almost raucous noise was powerful and paced, as Calum brought the music to life with the control of his breath. This was a moment of intense creativity, demanding on the creator and on those who witnessed it in sound and vision. The stillness, the contrast, the setting and the moment were profound. This article will consider whether such moments in the context of the experience of art, whether musical, literary or visual, might be described as offering something new in terms of an understanding of spiritual reality.

The performance of Messiaen’s work in the Festival of the Sacred Arts was one of several events which were considered as part of a research project I am leading. The project is funded by the Templeton Religion

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Trust and its aim is to investigate the role of sacred art in mediating new understandings of the spiritual. A number of audience members were selected for interview after each of the designated performances, and twelve members of a symposium made up of academics and artists also attended the events, their responses to be discussed in monthly meetings over the following year. This performance of *Quartet for the End of Time* was fraught with expectation. If spiritual reality was to be encountered, we were ready for it, and keen to analyse and quantify it.

My background is in literature rather than music, and I have to admit I am more comfortable approaching the topic of art and the sacred through poetry rather than a musical performance. One of the project symposium members is Christine De Luca,¹ a poet writing in English and Shetland dialect, appointed Edinburgh's Makar from 2014 to 2017, and an active member of a Church of Scotland congregation in Edinburgh. While not someone who presents herself as a 'Christian poet', many of her poems reflect religious themes, and some are set in the context of experiencing art in churches. When De Luca made her symposium presentation on the themes of the project, she offered a poem she had written on the occasion of the dedication of a Millennium Window designed by Sir Eduardo Paolozzi. The stained-glass window was installed in the Resurrection Chapel of St Mary's Episcopal Cathedral in Edinburgh in 2002. Paolozzi was in attendance, although frail following a stroke, and there was a musical contribution specially composed by James MacMillan. De Luca's poem engages with a much earlier poem by George Herbert, which also reflects on stained glass in a church.



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¹ For more information, see Christine De Luca's website, <https://www.christinedeluca.co.uk/pages/index>.

Like a Flaring Thing²

*... speech alone
Doth vanish like a flaring thing
And in the eare, not conscience, ring.*

George Herbert, "The Windows"

Dumb-struck, the old man in the wheelchair sits in the Resurrection Chapel, scans his work in situ: the Ascension Window – three lancets and a rose.

Any minute now the crowds will gather where the glassmaker has brought his design to life: cut and painted, matched tones exactly; captured the numinous in emerald, cerulean, ultramarine; in terracotta, jade and azure, in flaming carmine. Lead comes clasp the vivid pieces so they ribbon and wave, stack in blocks, in steps and stripes; a city rising, an ocean; a dazzle, a hint of heaven; a prized mosaic, a map of a blissful unknown.

The rose window – that grand *oculus* – stencils the sun as it crosses the morning sky, rich and glorious. Light washes the cathedral, softens stone, tie-dyes all who enter. They are strafed by its splendour.

The dedication begins:
Tremunt videntes angeli: MacMillan has crafted a soundscape of the eternal; no need for utterance. The nave is shot with radiance, beyond points of colour or notes on a stave, beyond closed minds or deadened hearts.

The old artist can only nod. The sun plays on stone; the holy space ablaze.



² Published in *Paolozzi at Large in Edinburgh: Artworks and Creative Responses*, ed. Christine De Luca and Carlo Pirozzi (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2018), 112. Quoted in full with the permission of the author.

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The poem makes much of the ‘beyondness’ of the creation and the experience of music, word, colour and light. The artist is frail and his positioning in the Resurrection Chapel points to the eternal energy within his soul rather than the weakness of his body: he can ‘only nod’ while the sun brings his creation to life. Even the composer MacMillan, the crafter of ‘a soundscape of the eternal’, deals only with ‘notes on a stave’ which the ‘radiance’ infusing the nave goes far ‘beyond’. Those who enter the cathedral of light within the edifice of stone are ‘strafed’ by its ‘splendour’. The new window offers a ‘map of a blissful unknown’ but the moment of revelation is blinding, like the flames of the burning bush: for those who encounter it, like Moses, the place is ‘ablaze’, and maps are unreadable. The sacred art of music and stained glass draws the people, gives them a focus, but it is the light from above which goes ‘beyond closed minds or deadened hearts.’

In the poem which De Luca uses to preface her own, Herbert³ is contrasting the power of preaching alone with the effect of the artistic setting of the windows in God’s ‘temple’. These windows turn the preacher from ‘brittle crazy glass’ to a place where God’s ‘life ... shine[s] within’. The poem imagines a process of integration at the deepest level which takes place between the preacher, the story of the gospel and the windows in the sacred place, through the use of the word ‘anneal’. Heated together then cooled, there is a bonding and co-mingling of these elements which makes the ‘light and glory’ powerfully attractive. In the final verse, from which De Luca’s quotation comes, the components of this integration are presented: ‘Doctrine and life, colours and light’. The first of the two pairs are abstract, the second rooted in experience, and together they suggest that art, word and the presence of God in the context of worship affect all of theology, experience and the appreciation of beauty. In contrast, speech on its own affects only the physical (‘ear’) and makes no lasting impression. The ‘flaring thing’ to which speech is compared is associated with the ephemeral rather than the revelatory.

In De Luca’s poem, the ‘flare’ seems to be what makes the holy space ‘ablaze’ and is rooted in the combination of window, music and the light from beyond. This light is what brings the art of the window and music into the world of the moment, and words are unnecessary. In the space so

³ George Herbert, “The Windows” (1633), <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/50695/the-windows-56d22df68ff95>.

busy with fellow-creators (Paolozzi and MacMillan), it is the divine creator whose moment is celebrated, while the artist remains ‘dumb-struck’. However, the role of art to mediate the sacred is given a shifted perspective here in the elision of the preacher into the work of the poet herself. Herbert’s poem centres on the prayer of the preacher: ‘Lord, how can man preach thy eternal word?’ In De Luca’s, no words are spoken in the moment of illumination, but it is the poet-speaker who proclaims its significance, with a detachment of perspective: the ones who ‘enter’ and are ‘strafed’ by the ‘splendour’ are ‘they’ rather than ‘we’ or ‘I’. The reader is left to wonder how she knows about the effect of the experience on ‘closed minds and deadened hearts’, although there is a temptation to infer that the speaker’s mind and heart have been opened and brought to life. Most significantly, it is the poem’s bringing to life of the interplay between the light, the window and the music which introduces the divine presence through its introduction of religious images such as the rose window forming a stencilled cross in the sky. The words come after the experience, the preaching is the poem which is the distillation of the moment, and the reader experiences the sacred moment at a distance. The words which form the poem offer delayed but permanent access to the fleeting spiritual reality which the music, art and light combine to offer. The setting is not worship in church led by a preacher, but a private experience enabled by the poet.

We might approach the insight into spiritual reality offered by both Herbert and De Luca by considering a recent book by Paul Fiddes and others about the role of creativity in reaching an understanding of the doctrine of the communion of saints. In his chapter on “Three Literary Versions of Communion with the Dead: Thomas Hardy, James Joyce and T. S. Eliot”, Fiddes considers the differences and similarities between doctrine and literature. While ‘literature tends to openness and doctrine to closure’, both are rooted in metaphorical language and both may be understood as a ‘human response to a self-revelation of God’.⁴ In literature, there is a reaching out of the imagination towards a mysterious reality of particular concern to the author, which is not open to empirical

⁴ Paul S. Fiddes, “Three Literary Versions of Communion with the Dead: Thomas Hardy, James Joyce, and T. S. Eliot”, in Paul S. Fiddes, Brian Haymes and Richard L. Kidd, *Communion, Covenant, and Creativity: An Approach to the Communion of Saints through the Arts* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2020), 1–22, p. 17.

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research. Fiddes argues that a ‘Christian thinker will regard this Other as the mystery of God, and think that our very capacity for self-transcendence is being prompted by the self-opening of the mystery to us’.⁵ On this view, the imaginative exploration through symbol and story of the mystery at the heart of literature may be regarded theologically as a response to the revelation of God in the world. While there is no presumption that any given writer is actively attempting to create or present doctrinal truths, nevertheless a theological reading of his or her work might legitimately explore Christian concepts, images and metaphors through or alongside the writer’s own use of story and symbol. That exploration may lead not only to the illustrating of doctrinal understanding, but to its creation or recreation.

For Fiddes, the poems of Thomas Hardy which speak of an ‘absent presence’ offer the theologian new ways to conceive of the relationship between the living and the dead through the participation of both in the covenant community of the church. In the late poem “Afterwards”,⁶ Hardy anticipates his absence from the natural world, while maintaining a sense of his presence within it:

And will any say when my bell of quittance is heard in the gloom,
And a crossing breeze cuts a pause in his outrollings,
Till they rise again, as they were a new bell’s boom,
‘He hears it not now, but used to notice such things’?

The world is transfigured at the same moment as the destructive power of death is being asserted and, for Fiddes, this transfiguration for the villagers is possible because of Hardy’s imagined ongoing presence in the scene. Because he was a person who ‘noticed’ the transformative beauty of nature, Hardy’s presence is alive in those who find the world changed: ‘the poet’s eye, though absent from the scene, has become in some way part of their own vision.’⁷

Fiddes develops these insights offered by Hardy’s poetry alongside his doctrinal understanding of the ongoing presence of the living and the dead

⁵ Fiddes, 17.

⁶ Thomas Hardy, “Afterwards”, in *The Complete Poems. The New Wessex Edition*, ed. James Gibson (London: Macmillan, 1967), 553.

⁷ Fiddes, 7.

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within the covenantal promises of God. The personalities and identities of those who have died are held in the presence of God, awaiting their recreation and transformation in the resurrection. The possibility that these personalities, who are understood to be praying for the world, might be recognised by the living at certain times, and particularly in places of significance, is given expression by Hardy's poetry. For Fiddes, 'The theologian learns from Hardy that absent presence needs to be embodied in physical place, and will be enabled to think in new ways about the Christian tradition of pilgrimage and sacred space.'⁸

It is the 'truth of the emotions'⁹ which Hardy is expressing in his poetry which offers Fiddes a new way to interpret his theology of life after death. The same truth of emotion we found in De Luca's poem might offer us new theological insights into the engagement of art with revelation, centred as it is on the shift from present preacher to absent poet as interpreter.

Malcolm Guite offers further hermeneutical perspectives on the significance of the poet in this regard in his recent book, *Lifting the Veil: Imagination and the Kingdom of God*.¹⁰ Here the guiding literary voice comes from Shakespeare's description of the work of the poetic imagination in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Act V, Scene 1.¹¹ As Guite explains, Shakespeare offers a starting point for poetic endeavour in an active engagement with and observation of the things of both heaven and earth:

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven,

For Guite, Shakespeare is presenting the artist as one who 'strives to manifest within the earthly material those transfiguring glimpses of form and quality which can at any moment shimmer through the stuff of this world: the blaze of unconsuming flame that makes a burning bush'.¹² Both

⁸ Fiddes, 19.

⁹ Fiddes, 19.

¹⁰ Malcolm Guite, *Lifting the Veil: Imagination and the Kingdom of God* (Baltimore, MD: Square Halo Books, 2021).

¹¹ William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. Grace Ioppolo. Norton Critical Edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 2018), 52.

¹² Guite, 20.

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Herbert and De Luca would seem to situate themselves closely within that tradition in their ‘flaring things’ poems. Shakespeare continues with a description of the work of the poetic imagination once this field of inspiration has been established:

And as imagination bodies forth
The form of things unknown, the poet’s pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

As Guite notes, the use of the noun ‘body’ as a verb here, to describe the action of the imagination on that which was previously unknown, is striking. It associates the result with a living being, particular and growing, independent of its creator. And that creation is the giving of a home and an identity (‘a local habitation and a name’) to that which those who are not artists would consider less than inconsequential (‘airy nothing’). Later in this speech Shakespeare connects ‘comprehension’ with ‘reason’ and ‘apprehension’ with ‘imagination’: for Guite, the connection created by the artist is one which *comprehends* the visible earth while *apprehending* the invisible heaven. Drawing theological comparisons between Shakespeare’s reflections on the artistic imagination and the incarnation, Guite sees the passage as engaging with the message of John’s Gospel chapter 1. Here, the unknowable personhood and love of God is ‘bodied forth’ in the being of Jesus, using similar language of indwelling, habitation and naming. More than this, ‘God’s great art of imaginative bodying in Christ indwells and gives meaning to all our own artistic bodying’:¹³ for Guite, Christ is the living connection between heaven and earth on which all art depends and in which it participates. It is the incarnation, the chosen way of God to communicate God’s love, which makes artistic endeavour possible while at the same time art reflects on the nature of the incarnation itself. Fiddes had made a similar claim when he asserted that ‘our very capacity for self-transcendence is being prompted by the self-opening of the mystery to us’.¹⁴ In the remaining chapters of his book, Guite develops the argument that artists may reveal deeper meanings within the created world at the same time as they may offer

¹³ Guite, 22.

¹⁴ Fiddes, 17.

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deeper understandings of Christ's mission and significance, particularly his incarnation, passion and resurrection.

And so we return to Christine De Luca's poem and its refraction of Herbert's insights alongside the artist-filled moment in the cathedral. We had noted the way De Luca's poem stressed the 'beyondness' of the divine light, and also the way the poet here takes on the role of the preacher in the Herbert poem. When the insights from Fiddes and Guite are brought to bear on the notion of the artistic imagination as enabled by and participating in the revelation of God in Christ, we might be more open to the expectation that the poem will offer new theological understandings also. Here the setting is important: the reader is situated in the Resurrection Chapel, looking upwards at Paolozzi's 'Ascension Window' commissioned for the millennium. We are placed in the position of the disciples after the ascension of Jesus, looking towards heaven into which the risen Christ has disappeared. In the apparently empty silence before the crowds enter, a moment of intense anticipation, the work of the 'glassmaker' who has brought the artist's vision to 'life' is described. The accumulation of colours ('emerald, cerulean, ultramarine') in their precise differentiations and the juxtaposition of unrelated images ('a city rising, an ocean; a dazzle, a hint of heaven') suggests the image of the heavenly Jerusalem given to the seer of Revelation 21:

Having the glory of God: and her light was like unto a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal; [...] And the foundations of the wall of the city were garnished with all manner of precious stones. The first foundation was jasper; the second, sapphire; the third, a chalcedony; the fourth, an emerald; the fifth, sardonyx; the sixth, sardius; the seventh, chrysolite; the eighth, beryl; the ninth, a topaz; the tenth, a chrysoprasus; the eleventh, a jacinth; the twelfth, an amethyst. (vv. 11, 19–20 KJV)

The list is precise but mediated and interpreted through the words of John the seer. John has been told by the angel who takes him to the place of the vision that what he is seeing is actually, symbolically, 'the bride, the Lamb's wife', rather than (or at least as well as) the city of jewels before him (v. 9). The reader is firmly in the realm of symbol and image, depending on the craft of the writer to bring to 'life' his experience of a divine truth, deeply mediated though it is.

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Christine De Luca's poem foregrounds multiple levels of such creatorly mediation which includes Herbert and the preacher, Paolozzi, the glassmaker, the composer MacMillan (and MacMillan's dependence on the words of a fifth-century hymn). In doing so, the poem offers rich resources to fill the apparent lacuna left by the ascension. The poet-speaker includes herself in this prophetic, creative role of bringing inspiration into people's reality, but her deliberate distance from participation in the moment gives her a meaningfully different perspective. From her undisclosed vantage point, perhaps more in the imagination than in the memory, the speaker offers the closing insight that 'The sun plays/ on stone'. In the midst of the creative activity of human artists and musicians flooding the space, it is the poet who 'sees' it is the sun/Son who is 'playing' on the place and by implication the 'deadened hearts' of stone, in an allusion to Ezekiel 36:26. The insight within the ambiguity of 'sun/Son' is particularly strong when the poem is heard, rather than read. The story of the ascension within which the poem is set begins in the moment of absence and loss, with the vision of the New Jerusalem in all its splendour before those present in the form of the window far above them. But it is the story of Pentecost within which the poem closes and to which it points, in the recognition of the playful presence of the Son still active in the world, through the Pentecostal flames of the Spirit, 'ablaze' in the place. It is by absenting herself from the scene that the speaker incarnates the presence of Christ, not just in the moment of the dedication of the window, but in each reading of the poem.

In his poem, "A Work for Poets",¹⁵ the Orcadian poet George Mackay Brown in the sparsest language possible distils the poetic task to the making of marks such that

[...] not far from the stone
A well
Might open for wayfarers

Here we find a similar contrast between 'stone' and Pentecostal images, water in this case, as we find in De Luca's poem. Mackay Brown's poem then closes with words which are engraved on his tombstone:

¹⁵ George Mackay Brown, "A Work for Poets", in *The Collected Poems of George Mackay Brown*, ed. Archie Bevan and Brian Murray (London: John Murray, 2005), 378.

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Here is a work for poets—
Carve the runes
Then be content with silence.

Both poems suggest that the poetic imagination, particularly in the realm of the theological, is in contact with deeper realities beyond time, and also that it depends ultimately on outside forces to fill or complete the silence in which they place and then leave their work. There is an implicit acknowledgement by both that, in Guite's words we quoted earlier, 'God's great art of imaginative bodying in Christ indwells and gives meaning to all our own artistic bodying'.¹⁶ The insight seems to accord with the poetic examples offered here.

We began with an example from the world of music, the experience of the third movement of Messiaen's *Quartet for the End of Time*, which moved from silence to sound in a particularly striking way. This movement, "The Abyss of the Birds", draws on the image of the bottomless pit in Revelation chapter 9, the spatial antithesis of the New Jerusalem of chapter 21. Messiaen, in his notes to the composition, suggests the abyss represents time and all its sorrows and struggles. The counterpart to this is the birdsong transcribed by the clarinetist's solo, also bottomless and never-ending, but representing a positive desire for joy and light which is never completed. Musicologists have noted that the score for this movement is unmetred, with no time signature, no standard unit of time or regular repetitions as foci to orientate the listener, and no regular recurring downbeats. However, David B. Greene finds a theological significance in the lack of these regular downbeats. He relates the presence of regular downbeats to time-markers in the human experience such as alarm clocks and train schedules. For him, such 'time that is marked by events that are indifferent or un-friendly to human aspirations is time that is full of sadness and fatigue'.¹⁷ In contrast, in this movement, 'the temporal process [Messiaen] has created corresponds to life that is shaped from within, that is, without reference to markers that are humanly

¹⁶ Guite, 22.

¹⁷ David B. Greene, *The Spirituality of Mozart's Mass in C Minor, Bach's Mass in B Minor, and Messiaen's Quartet for the End of Time: When Hearing Sacred Music is Relating to God* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011), 81.

extraneous and therefore experienced as arbitrary'.¹⁸ This abyss of desiring is associated with joy and life rather than the more negative aspects of human desiring. Although there is no closure in these alternative temporalities, and 'even at the end the closing is unstable, open to some undefined future', this is not troublesome or difficult for the hearer to bear. With no external quantification of desire or duration, there is a simplicity and directness about the desire for what is positive: 'the desire for light and joy is itself light and joy'.¹⁹ There is a coherence between fulfilment and non-fulfilment of this desire which Greene goes on to relate to the notion of 'open completeness' throughout the work.²⁰ Acceptance of such open completeness through the experience of the music brings acceptance of the present and an openness to the future, including the possibility of new relationships with others and with God without the demands of resolution.

Those of us who sat in St Vincent's Church and experienced Calum Robertson's playing of "The Abyss of the Birds", the breathing of sound into the silence and the disorientating yet compelling interplay of melody and atonality, may not have come to the same fully-formed conclusion as a scholar who has studied the score in such detail. However, in the unresolved openness of the piece, particularly in the setting of the church where it was being performed, many may have glimpsed what Jeremy Begbie has offered as the contribution of music to theological understanding:

There is a fullness or plenitude in the world, human and non-human, that always outperforms our speech. Put in Christian terms, music can serve to remind us not only that the world God makes always exceeds our grasp of it in language, but also that this excess is sourced in, and sustained by a God who similarly outstrips all we can say.²¹

¹⁸ Greene, 81.

¹⁹ Greene, 81.

²⁰ Greene, 111.

²¹ Jeremy Begbie, "The Word Refreshed: Music and God-Talk", in *Theology, Music and Modernity: Struggles for Freedom*, ed. Jeremy Begbie, Daniel K. L. Chua and Markus Rathey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 358–74, p. 369.

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I have argued here that the poetic imagination as ‘bodied forth’ in poems such as Christine De Luca’s “Like a Flaring Thing”, in conversation with the theological thinking of Paul Fiddes and Malcolm Guite, may offer similar insights. Both poetry and music, particularly in the context of a sacred space, may indeed be a source of new understandings of the divine.