

*Encountering the Spiritual: Wordsworth, Shakespeare  
and George Herbert*

Alexander Leggatt

Bloor Street United Church

Craddock Lecture – Sunday, October 25, 2009

---

C.S. Lewis once declared that he didn't have language weak enough to describe his spiritual life. It's a surprising statement coming from one of the most eloquent Christian writers of the twentieth century; but it's characteristic of C.S. Lewis in its disconcerting honesty. The assent to certain articles of faith, moral action in the world – these are aspects of a Christian life with which we're familiar. This doesn't mean they're easy, but on a day to day basis we can somehow manage and carry on. But an actual experience of the presence of God, a first-hand knowledge of a life deeper and truer than the life we can see, of a life invisible to the naked eye, the microscope or the telescope, yet real and powerfully felt – for a few saints this may be a daily experience, but for the rest of us it's something we read about, glimpse occasionally if we're lucky, and feel we've never known adequately. It's the capacity William Blake writes of

To see a world in a grain of sand  
And a heaven in a wild flower,  
To hold infinity in the palm of your hand  
And eternity in an hour.

To some people of course this is a fantasy – to coin a phrase, the God delusion. But Blake is unrepentant: “‘What,’ it will be questioned, ‘When the sun rises, do you not see a round disc of fire somewhat like a guinea?’ ‘O no, no, I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host cry, ‘Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty.’” Blake was mad, of course. Or was he? One of King George II's advisors warned him that General Wolfe was mad. “Mad, is he?” replied the king. “Then I wish he would bite some of my other generals.” There are certain kinds of madness that we need.

I want to look this morning at the work of three English writers, William Wordsworth, William Shakespeare, and George Herbert, who in their different – very different – ways have tried to express what it is like to encounter the spiritual, tried to capture in words the kind of experience that’s almost impossible to capture in words. I’m going to take them not in chronological order but in an order that allows me to imagine a discussion between them, each one responding to the other. Wordsworth first. In *Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey – Tintern Abbey* for short – he describes a certain mood that the contemplation of nature gives him, a mood in which

with an eye made quiet by the power  
Of harmony, and the deep power of joy,  
We see into the life of things.

In that mood he feels

A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air,  
And the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
A motion and a spirit, that impels  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.

The language for the most part is deliberately abstract, since it describes a force so powerful and pervasive that it can’t be captured in particular words. And he doesn’t try to identify this force: it is “something”; “a presence.” The later, more orthodox Wordsworth might have called it God. But one thing we know about God is that all our attempts to imagine him (or her) are bound to fail, and so the familiar three-letter word is an inadequate sign for the inexpressible reality, and it may be that (at least in *Tintern Abbey*) we are better off without it.

It could be said that what he describes is not a power that is really there, but something created by his own imagination. In *Tintern Abbey* Wordsworth half-admits this, speaking of

the mighty world  
Of eye, and ear – both what they half create  
And what perceive.

Half create: our perception of the world, including the power that lies behind things visible, is in part our own creation. Only in part – but that is enough to give it an instability, because we ourselves are unstable. We change through time, and one of Wordsworth's key themes is how our perception of the spiritual alters as we ourselves age. *Tintern Abbey* describes not just a single moment of inspiration, but a whole series of developments through time as Wordsworth recalls first the "coarser pleasures" and "glad animal movements" of his boyhood, then a more passionate response to nature as a young man, "aching joys" and "dizzy raptures" in which thought had no part. He says of this period "I cannot paint / What then I was," and finally, "That time is past." It follows that the steady, thoughtful response he feels now, in which he sees into the life of things, is also a phase that will not last. He hopes "That in this moment there is life and food / For future years," and in saying that he implies that he will not have an experience like this again; the best he can do is live off the memory.

For Wordsworth spiritual vision of this sort is the privilege of the young; our capacity for it fades as we get older. His Ode, *Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, describes early childhood not, as in *Tintern Abbey*, as a time of coarse animal pleasure (for all the continuities in his work, Wordsworth never quite does the same thing twice) but as a time when our sense of the divinity in nature is strongest, when

every common sight,  
To me did seem  
Apparelled in celestial light,  
The glory and the freshness of a dream.

But now: “Whither is fled the visionary gleam? / Where is it now, the glory and the dream?” As we grow up, the youth retains some of the vision, but “the man perceives it die away, / And fade into the light of common day.” By the end of the poem he finds consolation “In years that bring the philosophic mind.” There is gain as well as loss. But the lines we remember from the poem are the lines about loss. In *The Prelude*, his epic poem about the growth of his own imagination, Wordsworth puts it more simply: “I see by glimpses now; when age comes on / May scarcely see at all.” The stark honesty of that admission makes one realize that Wordsworth is not just the great poet of inspiration; he is the great poet of the loss of inspiration.

One danger in Wordsworth’s way of encountering the spiritual is that it is dependent on his own capacity, and that capacity fades in time. He is frank about that, and writes about it powerfully. That’s part of his greatness as a poet. We may also question whether the inspiration he values so much is a private matter, having no bearing on our life with other people in the world. In *Tintern Abbey* Wordsworth tackles this question, calling the feelings he gets from the peaceful scene,

such, perhaps,  
As have no slight or trivial influence  
On the best portion of a good man’s life,  
His little, nameless, unremembered acts  
Of kindness and of love.

That word “perhaps” is, I think, not just there to fill out a line but to register honestly the difficulty of making the connection between private vision and our behaviour in the world.

In the *Elegiac Stanzas* on the death of his brother John, Wordsworth writes of the effect of bereavement – “A deep distress hath humanised my Soul” and seems to turn away from solitary contemplation: “Farewell, farewell the heart that lives alone, / Housed in a dream, at distance from the Kind” – the kind being human kind. In *Tintern Abbey* we begin by visualizing him alone, contemplating the scene; then three quarters of the

way through the poem we suddenly realize that his sister Dorothy is standing beside him, and she becomes part of the experience. But there is a problem here. Dorothy has no voice of her own in the poem. Wordsworth sees in her passionate response to nature a reflection of his own, a few years earlier; and he predicts that in the future she will draw strength not just from her memory of the scene, as he hopes to do, but from her memory of his words about it:

with what healing thoughts  
Of tender joy wilt thou remember me,  
And these my exhortations!

That word “exhortations” bothers me. In one way Dorothy’s presence doubles the experience of the poem, making its vision something to be shared, as part of a relationship between two people. But there is no conversation; we hear only one voice, one side of this relationship. Dorothy is there to be loved, valued, blessed; but she is also there to be lectured.

This leads us to Shakespeare, away from the solitary voice of the individual poet to the multiple voices invented by the dramatist. And it may seem to lead us from the spiritual to the secular. In his television series *Civilization* Kenneth Clarke described Shakespeare as the first instance in Western culture of a major poet without a religion. Wordsworth began to write as an orthodox Christian later in his work, and his poetry is not always the better for it. But this was a gradual development that began quite early, and a religious sensibility pervades his work from the beginning. Shakespeare’s characters have whatever religious or irreligious beliefs the stories require: his personal faith, whatever it was, remains characteristically elusive. His characters invoke God, the Devil, heaven, hell, the gods. They swear by various saints, and by the Mass. But there is a characteristic moment at the end of *Othello* when Othello imagines that at the Last Judgement he will be condemned to Hell for murdering his wife Desdemona. Speaking to her as though she could hear him, he declares:

When we shall meet at compt [that is, at the Day of Judgement]  
That look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven,  
That fiends will snatch at it.

Something is missing here: Christ himself doing judgement, as he warned us in the gospels he would. Shakespeare gives us Judgement Day without the judge. Othello looks at Desdemona and condemns himself. If in Wordsworth we have a speaker in touch with a great spiritual power, while other people remain shadowy, in Shakespeare do we have a vision of people on their own in an empty universe?

At times it would seem so. *King Lear* takes place in a pre-Christian Britain, and Shakespeare takes what for him is unusual care to make the period consistent. Characters invoke the gods, small g, plural, and they invoke the gods they need to support their own plans and desires, their own sense of what the spiritual world is like. Edmund, starting to make his way in the world by any means that will work, declares, "Thou, Nature, art my goddess, to thy law / My services are bound." The law he means is survival of the fittest, and he's one of the fittest. This is nature red in tooth and claw. Gloucester, who has just been tortured and blinded, imagines the universe as a place of random cruelty: "As flies to wanton boys are we to th' gods, / They kill us for their sport." In the last scene, Lear and his daughter Cordelia, having lost a crucial battle, are offstage under sentence of death. Edmund tries to send a last minute reprieve, and Albany cries, "The gods defend her!" In the next moment Lear enters carrying her body. For once it would seem that the play itself, not just the characters, is making a point about the gods: they are helpless, or indifferent, or just not there. We seem to be in a spiritual universe as dead as the spiritual universe of Wordsworth is alive.

But just under the surface there are hints of another kind of vision. It is something the characters themselves cannot make articulate. Their conscious statements about the gods of their world may be only echoes of their own minds. But the play seems to know something they don't. Lear has banished his daughter Cordelia, the only one of his three daughters

who actually loves him. When she returns to save him from the suffering inflicted on him by her sisters Goneril and Regan, in her words, "O dear father, / It is thy business that I go about," it is hard not to catch an echo of *Luke* chapter two. Mary and Joseph have lost Jesus, and they find him in the temple conducting a theology seminar, or as he puts it "I must go about my father's business." Later, a nameless Gentleman says that Cordelia "redeems nature from the general curse / Which twain have brought her to." The two who have brought a curse on nature could be her sisters Goneril and Regan, and that is probably what the Gentleman means; but they sound more like Adam and Eve. But if Cordelia is a Christ-figure bringing salvation, it is a salvation that Lear at first cannot accept. He wakes in her tent, wearing fresh garments as the sign of a new life; he wakes to love and forgiveness. It is a kind of resurrection, and his first reaction is to protest:

You do me wrong to take me out o' th' grave:  
Thou art a soul in bliss, but I am bound  
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears  
Do scald like molten lead.

They are not on earth; she is in heaven, where she belongs; he is in hell, where he belongs, and between them there is a great gulf fixed. This may be one of Shakespeare's most acute religious insights: how hard it is to accept the new life when it is offered. It demands sacrifice – including the sacrifice of our own conviction that we don't deserve it. We'll see in a few minutes how George Herbert handles this problem. But gradually Lear returns to earth, and to reality. "Where am I? Fair daylight?" To move into the light of common day is for Wordsworth a disappointment; for Shakespeare it's progress. In that light Lear becomes aware of himself, though the awareness is at first groping and uncertain: "I will not swear these are my hands. Let's see; / I feel this pin prick." He is his own Doubting Thomas, who wants to see the wounds in the hands before he will believe this experience is real. Lear wants the evidence of pain to tell himself this is really him, and he is alive again.

The reunion of Lear and Cordelia is a human drama, but its language is touched with hints of the Resurrection, with both Lear and Cordelia in different ways playing the role of Jesus. But as the moments of inspiration in Wordsworth gradually fade, so the image of salvation in *King Lear* is cruelly snatched away. Cordelia is hanged. In Shakespeare's society this was the lowest form of execution, reserved for common criminals. Like crucifixion. Throughout the last moments of the play Lear cradles the dead Cordelia, looking for and sometimes imagining signs of life – breath, whispered words, anything to prove she is alive. But if Cordelia is a Christ figure, this is Good Friday without Easter. The human drama has been touched by the light of the divine; but the promise of that light is deceptive, and we are left with unbearable loss. Samuel Johnson was so shocked by the death of Cordelia that on subsequent readings he would always stop before the last scene; he couldn't face it. And I suspect that Shakespeare couldn't stand it either. He rewrote it twice, in two of his later plays, *The Winter's Tale* and *Pericles*. *The Winter's Tale* I will leave to one side; if you see it at Stratford next summer, you'll see what I mean. In any case there is a more powerful spiritual dimension in *Pericles*, to which I would now like to turn.

In the Immortality Ode Wordsworth uses the sea as an image of the immortal world from which we came, and to which we will return. He writes, of our ability to recall that world:

Hence in a season of calm weather,  
    Though inland far we be,  
Our souls have sight of that immortal sea  
    Which brought us hither,  
Can in a moment travel thither,  
And see the Children sport upon the shore,  
And hear the mighty waters rolling evermore.

In *Pericles* the whole action seems to take place with the roar of the ocean in the background. Pericles travels from city to city by ship; he suffers

shipwreck, and his wife Thaisa dies in a storm at sea, while giving birth to a daughter Pericles calls Marina. Marina sums up her own life:

Ay me! Poor maid,  
Born in a tempest when my mother died,  
This world to me is as a lasting storm,  
Whirring me from my friends.

As in Wordsworth, the sea is something immortal, beyond humanity; this time it seems as cruel to humanity as Gloucester's fly-killing gods. But it is ultimately benevolent. Thaisa is cast up by the sea, and restored to life. And Pericles, who thinks Marina is dead, is reunited with her on a barge on a calm sea, during a festival celebrating Neptune. It is a replay of the Lear-Cordelia reunion, but this time the happiness it offers is not snatched away, and the only thing to fear is that it is overwhelming, like the sea. Lear tested reality by pricking himself with a pin. Pericles asks one of his attendants:

Give me a gash, put me to present pain,  
Lest this great sea of joys rushing upon me  
O'erbear the shores of my mortality  
And drown me with their sweetness.

It is the death of his old life of grief, and for a moment, like Lear, he is afraid of it. There are more specific Christian associations when Pericles calls Marina "Thou that beget'st him that did thee beget": he may be echoing the paradox of the Virgin Mary, who in traditional belief is both the daughter of God and the mother of God. And it may be relevant that the other miracle associated with Marina is that she has preserved her virginity while living in a brothel.

At the end of the reunion, another miracle takes place: Pericles hears the music of the spheres. The music puts him into an enchanted sleep, in which he sees the goddess Diana, who directs him to her temple at Ephesus, where in the last scene he is reunited with his lost wife Thaisa. Shakespeare is drawing on the belief that as the heavenly bodies rotated each one gave forth a note of music; it is the equivalent for an earlier society of Wordsworth's belief in a mighty power that pervades the

universe. In *The Prelude* Wordsworth writes, "Dust as we are, the immortal spirit grows / Like harmony in music." Dust as we are, according to Shakespeare this means we cannot hear the music. Lorenzo in *The Merchant of Venice*:

Such harmony is in immoral souls,  
But whilst this muddy vesture of decay  
Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

Pericles hears it. Once again Shakespeare has touched a human drama, a father-daughter reunion, with hints of something beyond the human.

That having been said, we turn to Shakespeare primarily for the human drama; comparatively speaking, the spiritual dimension of his work is thin. And we turn to Wordsworth for the moments of vision; comparatively speaking, it is the human drama that is thin. In Wordsworth there is an encounter with the spiritual that is private and subject to decay through time; in Shakespeare the encounter with the spiritual gives an extra dimension to actions that are primarily human, to do with the relations between people. It is in the work of the seventeenth-century English parish priest George Herbert – a poet whose poetry has been set to music, some of which we're using this morning – that we find what we might call in all seriousness close encounters of the third kind. *Love III* reports a dialogue, a scene not between two people, but between the speaker, who is human, and Love (capital L), who acts as a human might but who is more than human:

Love bade me welcome; but my soul drew back,  
Guilty of dust and sin,  
But quick-eyed love, observing me grow slack  
From my first entrance in,  
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,  
If I lacked anything.

(In the seventeenth century this was a shopkeeper's question: what do you lack?)

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:  
Love said, You shall be he.  
I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,  
I cannot look on thee.  
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,  
Who made the eyes but I?

There's a pun that you can hear, but not see on the page in our age of standard spelling. The repeated "I" is the speaker's self-obsessed insistence on his own unworthiness. In "who made the eyes but I," "eyes" is spelled as the organs of vision; but what we hear is that Love, who has his own "I" to insist on, made the very self the "I" that is now resisting him, made the words the speaker uses to express that resistance. (Who made the I's but I?)

Truth, Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame  
Go where it doth deserve.  
(You do me wrong to take me out o'th'grave.)  
And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?  
(I've taken your sin on myself.)  
My dear, then I will serve.  
You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat.  
So I did sit and eat.

It is the relation between a doubting, self-deprecating human soul and a gently insistent God, worked out in human terms, not just as a dialogue (the dialogue we get all over Shakespeare and miss in *Tintern Abbey*) but as a dramatic scene, with bodily movements as Love advances and the speaker retreats, eye-movements as Love observes the speaker and the speaker turns his eyes away, and finally the physical control Love exerts over the speaker, taking him by the hand and getting him to sit down. When he sits he's committed, and the restless movement stops. The poem ends with the simple human action of eating – invoking the service of Holy Communion. Shakespeare took human actions and showed them

touched with the divine. Herbert reverses that, expressing a divine action in terms that are almost fully human.

*Love III* is a dialogue. *The Collar* is a monologue that suddenly becomes a dialogue at the end. It is as though the speaker of *Love III*, tired of sitting and eating, wants to get away, wants to be free, wants to live life on his own terms, wants to experience the pleasures he thinks his faith has denied him:

I struck the board, and cried, No more.  
I will abroad.  
What? Shall I ever sigh and pine?  
My lines and life are free, free as the road,  
Loose as the wind, as large as store.

He continues in this vein for several more lines, and we can see one reason why the poem is called *The Collar*; it's a pun on "choler," anger. Like Max in his wolf suit, he's throwing a tantrum. He goes on, threatening to seize

the pleasures that have been denied him, rejecting a faith that as he sees it tells him what he can't do and tries to frighten him into submission:

There is fruit,  
And thou hast hands.  
Recover all thy sigh-blown age  
On double pleasures, leave thy cold dispute  
Of what is fit, and not. Forsake thy cage,  
Thy rope of sands,  
Which petty thoughts have made, and made to thee  
Good cable, to enforce and draw,  
And be thy law,  
While thou dost wink and wouldst not see.  
Away; take heed;  
I will abroad,  
Call in thy death's head there: tie up thy fears [call off your dog]  
He that forbears  
To suit and serve his need,

Deserves his load.  
But as I raved, and grew more fierce and wild  
At every word,  
Methoughts I heard one calling, *Child*,  
And I replied, *My Lord*.

We can see it coming. The speaker keeps saying, *I'm leaving now, I'm leaving now*, and not going anywhere. And when it comes it's another parent-child reunion; only this time the parent is God. And the speaker goes from being a child in a tantrum to a child who submits to the parent, in language as plain and simple as the language of his tantrum has been frantic and twisted. The speaker has been too concerned with himself, as Wordsworth realizes he has been too concerned with himself and renounces "the heart that lives alone, housed in a dream." And in other poems, poems I haven't looked at this morning, Wordsworth engages in dialogues, listens to other voices: *We are \Seven, Resolution and Independence*. And of course dialogue between one person and another is Shakespeare's natural medium. But in Herbert the other speaker is God; God imagined not as something ineffable and beyond language, but God imagined in human terms, speaking to us, the God who for our sakes became human, the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us.