Language and Symbolism: Austin Farrer Meets Gregory of Nazianzus

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a. Images

In this chapter, I wish to explore some suggestive points of contact between Gregory of Nazianzus and Austin Farrer's theology of inspiration as set out in his Bampton Lectures, published collectively as *The Glass of Vision* (section **a.**). In the final sections of my paper (**b. – c.**), I wish to bring Gregory and Farrer more closely into conversation on the issue of the boundaries between inspiration and poetry —between divine and human acts of literary making. This is not to attempt to use Gregory to correct Farrer in some simplistic way, as if he has answers to questions which Farrer leaves unanswered. It is rather to suggest that Gregory prompts some questions which Farrer does not directly address in *The Glass of Vision*, but to which his concept of inspiration—however 'inexact'—might fruitfully be applied. The issue I wish to explore is what Farrer's ideas in *The Glass of Vision* might have to say about other, post-apostolic acts Christian literary making? To narrow this down I will focus on the act of preaching: to what extent and in what ways is the preacher like (and unlike) an apostle and a poet?

In the third of the lectures which comprise *The Glass of Vision*, Farrer asks what should be looked for in Scripture, if one is to attend to God's voice.[1] He rejects the idea that one should read scripture thinking that revelation is 'given in the form of propositions'—an assumption which he

[1] Austin Farrer, *The Glass of Vision* (Ashgate Studies in Theology, Imagination and the Arts; London; New York: Routledge, 2016), 43. Henceforth referred to in the text as GV.

(very guardedly) attributes to pre-modern theologians (GV, 37-8, 43). He is also critical of the view which separates revelation—understood as the person of Jesus Christ and events of his life—from Scripture which is a witness to them (GV, 38-9). Such a separation of content from form tempts one to try to strip away the latter. But if one pursues such a strategy with scripture, Farrer warns, the substance of revelation 'has an uncanny trick of evaporating once its accidents of expression are all removed'(GV, 38). Farrer's own approach is to see revelation as the dynamic interaction between God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ and the God-given images by which it is understood and interpreted.[2] Christ used such images as the Kingdom of God, the Son of Man and so on, to interpret his own words and deeds. Such images were inherited from Jesus' own Scriptural tradition, but his own life and words gave them radically new meaning. Consequently, the interaction between event and images is mutual, such that, 'the great images interpreted the events of Christ's ministry, death and resurrection, and the events interpreted the images; the interplay of the two is revelation' (GV, 42).

This doctrine of revelation as the interplay between event and images, allows Farrer both affirm that 'the revelation of deity to manhood is absolutely fulfilled in Christ himself' (a self-revelation 'by word and deed') and that 'the actions of Christ's will, the expressions of Christ's mind' are only 'the precious seeds of revelation' (GV, 41). The interplay of event and image begins with the life of Jesus Christ; these seeds are then taken up and developed by the apostles who, participating in the mind of Christ through the working of the Holy Spirit, 'worked out both the

[2] This is related to Farrer's belief that there is no such thing as uninterpreted experience: Edward Henderson, 'Austin Farrer: The Sacramental Imagination', in *C.S. Lewis and Friends: Faith and the Power of Imagination* (ed. David Hein and Edward Henderson; London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2011) 35–51, here 37–38.

saving action and the revealing interpretation' (GV, 40-1, 43). This process of 'working out' took place both in the life of the apostolic church in general and in the composition of the apostolic books in particular (GV, 51). Farrer is careful to balance the two of these, lest he diminish the life of the early church and commit what he calls 'the old biblicist error' that sees the Bible as the 'primary instrument of the Pentecostal Spirit' (GV, 51). As we have just seen, revelation for him is broader than the inspiration of the New Testament; the interaction of image and event can be experienced by believers now as it was by the apostles in, for example, baptism and eucharist. The images thus continue to 'shape life as engagement with God'; believers 'can hope to know God's active presence', as they live by those images.[3] Nevertheless, Farrer's main interest in *The Glass of Vision* is Scripture. The focal point of his lectures seems to be an attempt to develop a coherent concept of scriptural inspiration, given the doctrine of revelation which has just been sketched out. It is this key focus that produces his core argument:

> In the apostolic mind… the God-given images lived, not statically, but with an inexpressible creative force. The several distinct images grew together into fresh unities, opened out into new detail, attracted to themselves and assimilated further image-material: all this within the life of a generation. This is the way inspiration worked. The stuff of inspiration is living images. (GV, 43)

The biblical authors, then, experienced revelation (amongst other things) as the inspiration of the texts they composed. Because 'the stuff of inspiration is living images', the locus of inspiration is

[3] Henderson, 'Austin Farrer', 35–36.

the human imagination.[4] But this is human imagination working beyond its natural limits. Divine inspiration is a supernatural form of knowledge which Farrer carefully distinguishes from the knowledge of God arising from natural theology (GV, Lecture V). As a supernatural act, this knowledge expresses both divine and human agency. Neither competes with the other; rather, inspiration opens up human imagination to the infinite, so that it is both continuous with, but transcends itself (GV, Lecture II, especially 34-5).

This theological epistemology resonates strongly with that of Gregory of Nazianzus, especially as expressed in his so-called 'Theological Orations' (*Orations* 27-31 in the traditional numbering). In these, Gregory is arguing in particular against his opponent Eunomius, whom he accuses of believing that the statement 'the Father is ingenerate' is a true proposition that defines the divine nature. In response, Gregory argues that humans are limited in their knowledge of God not only by sin but also—and more fundamentally—by their creaturely nature. He points out that human mental activity is fundamentally embodied, whilst God is not; no proposition, no language is thus able to encapsulate the truth about the divine.[5] More than this: no human can even comprehend the divine nature.[6]

Gregory's condemnations of his opponents 'complete obsession with setting and solving conundrums' resonates closely with Farrer's rejection of Aristotelian syllogisms as the stuff of

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[4] Austin Farrer, 'Inspiration: Poetical and Divine', in *Interpretation and Belief* (ed. Charles Carl Conti; London: S.P.C.K, 1976), here 41.

[5] Frederick W Norris, 'Introduction', in *Faith Gives Fullness to Reasoning: The Five Theological Orations of Gregory Nazianzen* (ed. Frederick W Norris; Leiden; New York: E.J. Brill, 1991), here 33; Christopher A Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus on the Trinity and the Knowledge of God: In Your Light We Shall See Light* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 96–100.

[6] Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 94–95, 100.

theology: 'The believer in God must suppose that the mystery of God's existence is no mere puzzle, but a genuine mystery'.[7] Neither author is interested primarily with their opponents' actual philosophical sources; rather, they are concerned that once one claims that humans can have propositional knowledge of the divine nature, God's nature becomes a problem to be solved, not something to be worshipped. And, as with Farrer, Gregory's rejection of propositional knowledge of God leads him not to sheer apophaticism, but to the dual affirmation that humans can know God by faith/grace and that humans know what they know of God through faithful contemplation of images.[8] Just as Gregory rejects Plato's idea that language is a weak attempt to articulate a philosopher's non-verbalised (unimaged) knowledge of the divine nature, so Farrer rejects the idea that one could by-pass theological images in order to access an imageless truth (GV, 93).

Gregory's frequently-used archetype of the knowledge of God is that of Moses ascending Mount Sinai.[9] Moses' experience shows us, Gregory writes, that God is 'outlined' or 'sketched out' by the human mind, 'but only very dimly and in a limited way—not by things that represent him completely, but by the things that are peripheral to him, as one representation (φαντασία) is derived from another to form a kind of singular image (ἴνδαλμα) of the truth'.[10] Thus, as Christopher Beeley remarks, God is truly known, albeit not completely known, by the limited human mind ' through created images and ideas'.[11] Consequently, Gregory's famous definition of

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[7] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 27.2, cited by Frederick W Norris, 'Gregory Contemplating the Beautiful: Knowing Human Misery and Divine Mystery through and Being Persuaded by Images', in *Gregory of Nazianzus: Images and Reflections* (ed. Jostein Børtnes and Tomas Hägg; Copenhagen, Denmark: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2004) 19–36, here 20. Norris, 'Introduction', 20 and 21; Farrer, *The Glass of Vision*, 72.

[8] Norris, 'Contemplating the Beautiful', 27.

[9] Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 90–113.

[10] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 38.7, cited in Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 102–3.

[11] Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 103.

the greatest theologian is 'not the one who has discovered the entirety [of God's being]… but the one who has imagined (φαντασθῇ) more of it than someone else, and has gathered in him- or herself more of an appearance, or a faint trace, of the truth (τὸ τῆς ἀληθείας ἴνδαλμα, ἢ ἀποσκίασμα)'.[12] The role of the theologian, according to Gregory, is not to create these images, but to gather them, to sift them and use them wisely.[13]

Where do the images come from, according to Gregory? Farrer himself recognises that that the metaphysician and the natural theologian use analogies or metaphors; they are not just found in inspired scripture. In particular, the philosopher might use analogy to try to express that which is absolutely singular—like the human soul or God. But the images of revelation are authoritatively communicated and supernatural, while the analogies used by natural theology and metaphysics are products of the natural imagination (GV, Lecture V, especially 81-2).[14] Gregory of Nazianzus does not make such precise distinctions. Nevertheless, recent scholars (arguing against some earlier scepticism) have argued that Gregory asserts the Scriptural origin of orthodox images of the divine.[15] His theology is grounded on belief in supernatural knowledge—illumination.[16] However, as Frances Young argues the Bible was not just the epistemological, but also the literary foundation of Christian theology. Figural representation is thus absolutely central to early Christian discourse: one of Young's key examples is Gregory's complex web of quotation, allusion and imitation (*mimesis*) of

[12] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 30.17., cited in Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 97.

[13] Norris, 'Contemplating the Beautiful', 27–28.

[14] Austin Farrer, 'Poetic Truth', in *Reflective Faith: Essays in Philosophical Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974) 24–38, here 34–36.

[15] Gregory of Nazianzus, Or. 31.31-33; see Norris, 'Introduction', 41–42; Norris, 'Contemplating the Beautiful', 30.

[16] Beeley, *Gregory of Nazianzus*, 90–103, 112.

biblical themes, stories and images.[17] As Young writes: 'the language of the Bible is parable, sign and symbol, and Christian religious language remained metaphorical, even though it was the language of representation… it is the figurality of Christian discourse which gives it power'.[18]

The point of remarking on these resonances is not to argue that Farrer was influenced by Gregory of Nazianzus, nor that Farrer was attempting to revert to a patristic conception of inspiration. Rather, my argument is that the resonances I have so far established suggest that there are enough commonalities to justify bringing the two into conversation. In what follows I will now suggest some ways in which Gregory's and Farrer's notion of images might illuminate and critique each other.

b. Poets, prophets, apostles and preachers

Austin Farrer makes a very careful distinction between natural and revealed knowledge—or the 'noble inspiration' of a secular poet and the divine inspiration of the apostle. The apostle responds to a supernatural event—the incarnation—which he interprets through divinely-given images: 'the apostles know that they are transforming images by referring them to Christ, or rather, that Christ has transformed them, by clothing himself in them and dying in the armour' (GV, 108). This is what makes it revelation. However, Farrer also notes that the 'noble inspiration' of a poet works just at the apex of the human faculty of imagination. It might be <u>experienced</u> as something beyond herself, even though it is not. By contrast, the inspiration which brings supernatural

[17] Frances Margaret Young, *Biblical Exegesis and the Formation of Christian Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), chap. 5.

[18] Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 258. developing the work of Averil Cameron.

knowledge of God represents not the denial of the natural, but the 'opening of the finite to the infinite' (GV, 35). It functions in continuity with that apex, but just beyond it and, crucially, 'the boundary between the two need be neither objectively nor subjectively felt' (GV, 93).

Farrer's whole argument in *The Glass of Vision* circles around his suggestion that the apostolic imagination is in some ways similar and in other ways dissimilar to poetic imagination. But this is not the only analogy present in that work, for his argument proceeds through a succession of analogies in order to come closer to finding what apostolic inspiration is most like. Rhetorically, this method is very persuasive, but it also means that some of the boundary-lines between likeness and unlikeness are somewhat unclear. As Farrer himself admits, 'there is no question here of proper and exact statement, of a theory of poetry or of prophetical inspiration. All we can do is to distinguish certain real differences, and evoke the inscrutableness, even in our own minds of the making word' (GV, 106). Gregory of Nazianzus raises this question of boundaries rather insistently, firstly in relation to the issue of inspiration (which I will treat in this section) and secondly, in relation to his own literary creativity (section **c.**).

As we have discussed above, Gregory believes that knowledge of God is grounded in divine inspiration or illumination. However, when one asks to whom such illumination is given, Gregory appears to assume that it is relatively uniform phenomenon, stretching across prophets, the apostolic authors of the New Testament and theologians like himself. The content of that revelation might have developed according to God's careful plan to reveal gradually; but the kind of thing which revelation is, seems not to change. So, for example, in the first of the sequence of theological poems known as the *Poemata arcana* Gregory carefully sets himself in a tradition following from the great authors of the Old Testament:

> I shall set this word upon the page as a prologue, a word which before now godly men have uttered to bring fear to a harsh-minded people, those two witnesses of

> divine sayings, Moses and Isaiah… Spirit of God, in your truthfulness, come rouse my mind and stir my tongue to be a loud-sounding trumpet, that all who are fused with the fullness of godhead may heartily rejoice.[19]

This persona of the author fully inspired by the Spirit, in line with the prophets, is also found in his prose. Thus, in one of his Easter sermons Gregory announces that he will take his stand next to the prophet Habakkuk; in another, his model is David.[20]

Gregory also expresses the concept of divine inspiration by invoking by the Holy Spirit as a classical poet might invoke his Muse. Thus the opening to Gregory's great theological poems which we cited above in fact sets his composition in a <u>double</u> tradition: on the one hand he is like Moses and Isaiah; on the other, Gregory invokes the Spirit directly as a poet might invoke the Muse: 'O Spirit of God, may you then waken my mind and tongue as a loud-shouting clarion of truth, so that all may rejoice, who are united in spirit to the entire Godhead'.[21] At times Gregory's poetry alludes to the *Phaedrus*, that work in which Plato argued for a place for 'a truly rhetorical and persuasive craft' grounded, amongst other things, on divine inspiration.[22] Intriguingly then, for Gregory the inspiration granted to Moses, Paul or Gregory himself, seems to lie in some kind of continuity with that accorded to Plato's philosopher (as set out in the *Phaedrus*) and even with a classical poet.

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[19] Poem 1.16-24, in Gregory of Nazianzus, *Carmina [Poemata Arcana]* (ed. Claudio Moreschini; trans. D. A. Sykes; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

[20] Or. 45.1; 2.1.

[21] *Poems*, 1.1.1:23.

[22] See especially *Phaedrus* 269a–e and 271d–272b; quote 269d (trans. Fowler) and Gregory's allusions in, e.g. *Poem* 1.2.14 (tr. Gilbert, Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Man : The Theological Poetry of Saint Gregory of Nazianzus* (trans. Peter Gilbert; Popular patristics; St. Vladimir's Theological Seminary Press, 2001). On fourth-century Christian responses to Plato's programmatic statement, see Morwenna Ludlow, *Art, Craft, and Theology in Fourth-Century Christian Authors* (Oxford Early Christian Studies; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), chap. 11.

So, Gregory has an expansive concept of supernatural revelation. The crucial point, however, is that he claims that it includes himself as poet and preacher:

> I subjected myself to the Lord, and prayed unto Him (Ps. 36 [37].7). Let the most blessed David begin my speech, or rather let Him Who spoke in David, and even now yet speaks through him. For indeed the very best way of beginning every speech and action, is to begin from God, and to end in God.[23]

So long as Gregory subjects himself to God, God's speech through him is essentially the same as it was through David. On the one hand, this seems remarkably—even outrageously—bold. Unlike Farrer, who carefully tries to delineate the difference between the workings of God in the prophets and the apostles, Gregory claims continuity not only between them but between them both and himself.

On the other hand, Gregory's boldness prompts one to ask: what is happening in Christian preaching? If a sermon is to be more than an academic theological commentary on a text, or more than moralising, if a preacher composes her words prayerfully and sincerely tries to subject herself to God—is there no sense in which the preacher participates in divine inspiration? Or, to pose the question more modestly: in what sense is the preacher like and unlike the prophets and the apostles? For an answer, we will turn again to Farrer's distinctions.

In order to persuade his audience to read the New Testament more poetically, Farrer needs to ascertain to what extent and in what sense they are poetic. He applies himself to this task in his

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[23] Or. 2.1.

last two lectures in which seems to identify three closely-related senses of the poetic.[24] The first sense is what we might call the basic poetic impulse which causes someone, as Farrer puts it, to 'move an incantation of images under a control' (GV, 104-5). The second sense of the poetic applies to the quality of this poetic impulse, specifically as to whether it is free. The third sense of the poetic applies not to the creative emergence of images in the original response to the control, but rather to the production of secondary images under pressure from the primary set.

In Lecture VII, Farrer deals with the first two senses. Although he strenuously resists the idea that there is a two-stage process involved, or that form can be separated from content in the process, nevertheless, his argument seems to focus on what one might call two sides of the poetic process which he examines in order to delineate the difference between the prophet and the poet. According to Farrer, both prophet and poet are responding to something which they experience as an imperative or 'controlling pressure'—an '*ought*' (GV, 102-3). For the poet, this 'ought' is 'the texture of human existence, or the predicament of man'; it is therefore thoroughly natural. For the prophet, the 'ought' is 'the particular self-fulfilling will of God' (GV, 103-4). The other side of the process is the human response and herein lie the first two senses of the poetic. First, the response of both poet and prophet is 'poetic' in that their mode of response to the 'ought' is imaginative: there is no initial response to the 'ought' which is then 'translated' into images, no content which is then given new imaginative-form.

However, the poet and prophet differ in their imaginative acts. The poet responds subjectively to her experience of the human predicament. She may feel that she could respond in

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[24] Here, I am delineating them in a way which Farrer does not and in the process may be forcing distinctions which are not clearly there in Farrer's text. The concept of the two sides of a unified poetic process is also my interpretation.

no other way, for the images which she uses 'impose themselves with authority'; nevertheless, she alone is the author—the maker—of her response (GV, 95, 98-9, 103). By contrast, the prophet is truly constrained by God's will: 'his control tells him exactly what to say, for he is not responding to the quality of human life, he is responding to the demands of eternal will on Israel as they make themselves heard in the determinate situation where he stands' (GV, 104). Consequently, Farrer expresses the contrast between poet and prophet in terms of freedom and subjection, respectively—a contrast which holds despite that the poetic and prophetic acts might <u>feel</u> equally bound.

> For poetry arises in the imagination; and not under the direct control of fact, so that it should be the literal transcript of it. Yet it is not a silly or vain day-dreaming either; it is controlled by realities, but the control is looser or more elastic than in the case of literal description. The poet's inventions respond somehow to the deep nature of human existence, and give it an expression all the more powerful because inventive and free.[25]

In this second sense of the poetic*,* then, the poet is truly a poet—a maker (*poietes*) of her response—and the prophet is not.

In Lecture VIII Farrer applies these senses of the poetic to the apostles. Again, Farrer denies that humans first have an experience which is then translated into images: for both prophets and apostles, the creation of the images <u>is</u> their response. But there is a difference in the kind of images in play. On the one hand, the prophet's message is not 'a revelation of fundamental images'. Farrer

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[25] Farrer, 'Inspiration', 42.

seems to suggest that they have received those master images from their tradition, for the images 'stand behind' their oracles and have a fundamental power which means that they 'thunder and lighten' in the prophets' words (GV, 108). In the apostles, on the other hand, there is a new revelation: 'the great images of faith are being freshly minted and reborn through Christ's incarnation' (GV, 108). Farrer concedes that it might be the case that the master images change their nature 'very gradually' in the prophets' oracles, but this is a supernatural process—'the process of the incarnation preparing its own way' (GV, 109).

Even more strongly than with the prophets, then, one sees that in one sense the apostles are not poets in the second sense: God, not the apostles, is the 'maker' (*poietes*) of their images, for 'in the apostles we see the images already refashioned by the fingers of the divine potter' (GV, 109). However, both the prophet and the apostle are poetic in the first sense that their activity as inspired people is to weave a web of images under a divine source of pressure, just as the poet weaves her images in response to the stuff of human existence.

Farrer then introduces a further sense in which both apostles and prophets can be understood as 'poetic': not only do they use/produce certain master images—the key symbols of salvation—but they also produce 'subordinate images by which the master-images are set forth or brought to bear' (GV, 108). Hence there is a second-order pressure to which the biblical authors are responding: not only the divine 'ought', but also the master-images resulting from that divine imperative.

Given these three senses of poetic, then, one might well ask to what extent and in what ways is the preacher like a poet? First, the preacher might well feel (at least on some occasions) that she is responding to some imperative and that her response consists not in an attempt to analyse and describe God in propositions, but rather in images arising in her imagination. To the

extent that she is weaving images under a control, she is poetic and in this she is like the poet, the prophet and the apostle.

Second, it may be that she is responding, poet-like, to the warp and weft of human existence in her preaching—albeit responding to the stuff of existence in the light of her beliefs about Jesus Christ. Sometimes, then, her images might arise as her 'made' response, and not under some supernatural pressure. Then she will be more like a poet in being a maker of her images, even though she may feel as though she could articulate her response in no other way. But equally, sometimes it may be that she is responding to a divine 'ought', that she is subjecting herself to that kind of pressure which Gregory of Nazianzus so boldly describes as the Holy Spirit or God opening his mouth. But in this subjection is the preacher more like Farrer's apostle or prophet? On the one hand, one might want to preserve the decisively-different character of the apostles' revelation: surely it would not be right to say God is refashioning images anew in today's preaching as God did in that first generation of witnesses to the incarnation? On the other hand, to assert that preachers today are like prophets might deny the sense in which all believers are part of the church to which the apostles belonged. Is there not a sense in which preaching, like the activity of the apostles, is partly an expository, partly a poetic act? (GV, 103). Is there not a sense in which, as later preachers wrestle with the biblical text, these images '[grow] together into fresh unities, [open] out into new detail, [attract] to themselves and [assimilate] further image-material'? (adapting GV, 43). Although preaching may be theologically-informed, the core of preaching is to let the images live and bear fruit, not primarily to analyse, critique, test and determine their sense (as Farrer describes the role of theology) (GV, 44). The preacher would seem to need to be that bible-reader who, Farrer writes, 'will immerse himself in the single image on the page before him, and find life-giving power in it, taken as it stands'. Could it not be through preaching, as through the sacraments, that 'the shape of

the mystery of our redemption… possesses and moulds [our minds]' as it possessed and moulded the minds of the apostles? (GV, 50, 53).

So, the preacher might well be poetic in the sense that in using images to express the ineffable she is responding imaginatively to some kind of control. With God's grace, she might also be allowing herself to be possessed and moulded by those images—in which case she is unlike a poet who is truly the maker of her own images. However, if the images continue to possess and mould the preacher's mind, then she is certainly working with secondary images under pressure from those master images. In it is this third sense that the preacher is probably most aware of being like a poet.

c. Working with one's materials

Farrer develops this third sense of the poetic in *The Glass of Vision* (applied to Mark) and in the essay 'Inspiration: poetical and divine' (applied to Revelation).[26] In latter especially Farrer compares the pressure of the master-images on the apostle to the pressure of other controls on the poet. The poet's creativity is controlled by 'the bondage of the formal conditions they accept; the metre, for example, and the rhyme'. A poet does not have an emotional response to grief and then translate that into sonnet form; rather, authentic response responses arises as he *works with* the sonnet form. The complex interplay of the various elements which the poet allows to impose

[26] See also Austin Farrer, *A Rebirth of Images: The Making of St John's Apocalypse* (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1949); *A Study in St Mark* (London, Westminster: Dacre Press, 1951).

themselves on him 'challenge a writer's invention' but also 'help him discover what he wants to say'.[27]

This sense of a craftsperson's materials being a point of both challenge and creativity is a strong theme in modern writing on craft. The importance of the craftsperson developing an intense knowledge of her materials is stressed, alongside the idea that such knowledge is difficult, if not impossible, to encapsulate in propositional language. Many craftspeople articulate the experience of learning that it is precisely in working with the resistance of their materials that one experiences the greatest moments of creativity. In short, as Richard Sennett has argued in detail in his book, *The Craftsman*, points of resistance might seem like problems, but they move craftsmanship forward.[28] As Dorothy L. Sayers has noted, this is as much the experience of the wordsmith as with other kinds of maker.[29]

Gregory of Nazianzus knew this experience of resistance. Anyone who has read his poetry will be familiar with agonising over his verbal failings, especially his prolixity which in Gregory's mind is an obstacle to, rather than a vehicle for divine words. Punning in Greek, he asserts that poetry forces him to set his words to a metre—that is, to set a measure or a limit to his words.[30] Rather than merely being ironic self-deprecation, this expresses precisely the experience of creative resistance we have noted above. It is precisely in working creatively with the constraints of metre

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[27] All quotations from Farrer, 'Inspiration', 51.

[28] Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), chap. 8. See also Peter Korn, *Why We Make Things and Why It Matters.* (London: Vintage, 2017), 50.

[29] Dorothy L. Sayers, *The Mind of the Maker* (2nd ed.; London; New York: Mowbray, 1994), chap. XI.

[30] 'On silence at the time of fasting', lines 10-12; 'On writing in metre' (Poem 2.1.39), line 35, both in Gregory of Nazianzus, *Autobiographical Poems* (trans. Carolinne White; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

that he is able to express his most profound theological thoughts. In Farrer's words, Gregory's poetic forms 'challenge [his] invention' but also 'help him discover what he wants to say'.[31]

But Gregory, as we have seen, is a poet who also claims that he is working under inspiration. In Farrer's terms, he is weaving images in an activity which arises from his imagination being 'possessed and moulded' by 'living images' (GV, 53). In a second order, he is weaving images under the control of those master images. But, for Gregory, that second order of poetic weaving is not just analogous to the poetic activity of composing under 'the bondage of the formal conditions they accept; the metre, for example, and the rhyme'—it is part and parcel of it. The two kinds of bondage are inseparable.

In *The Glass of Vision* Farrer comes close to making the interconnection between the two this tight. As a gifted and rhetorical speaker and writer himself he perhaps recognises the controls inherent in the act of composition. He also recognises that it is false to separate a moment of response to a control from a second moment in which it takes poetic form. But in his attempt to clarify that the apostolic writers were like poets (in our first and third senses), he perhaps is unwilling to admit that a writer might also be a poet—not in the second sense of being the free maker of her response, but in the third sense of being creatively constrained not just by the major images of salvation but also by her literary form.[32] Farrer perhaps comes closer to articulating this point in his later essay on inspiration. Nevertheless, in general his main purpose is to illuminate the

[31] All quotations from Farrer, 'Inspiration', 51.

[32] Although I have used the example of poetry in regard to Gregory, I assume that prose too has its creatively constraining forms—many of which are very evident in the sermon.

biblical text, and his eye is more on the analogy between the apostle and the poet (which demands to be applied with caution) and less on that between the poet and present-day theological makers.

The lectures which comprise *The Glass of Vision* were given in a context where Christianity and its intellectual modes were being both attacked and vigorously defended. Mid-twentieth century Oxford was an epitome of both movements and one of the places they collided. Farrer concentrates on the question of what one should look for in Scripture and how one should read it, if one is to attend to God's voice. This is his own very focussed form of apologetics. He seems less interested, in *The Glass of Vision*, at least, in arguing for the coherence of Christian discourse in general in the way that Gregory of Nazianzus was. Nevertheless, by bringing these two theologians into conversation, I have tried to show not only how they share sensitivity to the various aspects of poetic activity, but how Farrer might have much to offer a more far-reaching vision of Christian wordsmithery. Gregory's boldness about his own approach prompts theologians and preachers to ask some searching questions both of Farrer and of themselves.

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