

## Poetry, Theology and Emptiness: “The Angel Did Not Draw Attention to Himself”

Noel Rowe

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**Abstract:** *“The Glory of God: Humanity Fully Alive” (courtesy of St Irenaeus) provokes thought of another popular motif of the 1970s: “Life is either a daring adventure or nothing” (courtesy of Helen Keller). These two motifs, once used to inspire yesteryear’s seminarians, are used by the author as a catalyst for reflecting on the interplay between fullness and emptiness in theology, poetry and life. Themes of poverty, vulnerability, nothingness, suffering, kenosis (self-emptying) are traced with reference to political theologian Johan Baptist Metz, Australian “Catholic” poets James McAuley and Francis Webb, and Mary of Nazareth who inspires a series of “Magnificat” poems. At the level of theology and spirituality, there is complementarity between Christian “poverty of spirit” and Buddhist “emptiness” which the paper goes some way in exploring. It is also an exploration of one poet’s understanding of the spiritual discipline required for writing “religious” poetry.*

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**Key Words:** theopoetics; religious poetry; Johan Baptist Metz; James McAuley; Francis Webb; Magnificat; Blessed Virgin Mary

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**Y**ou will not believe me, I know, but some thirty years ago I was living at the Marist Fathers Seminary at Hunters Hill, also known as the Catholic Theological Union, and among the posters we patched on concrete walls was one that read, “The glory of God is Man fully alive.” There was also one that read, “Life is a daring adventure or nothing,” and I was rather fond of that one, at least as a concept. At the time I had not yet developed my large suspicion of that little word “or,” nor my suspicion that life might be a daring adventure of nothing. This morning I find myself speaking from a position somewhere between those two posters, the one that provides this conference with its title, “The Glory of God: Humanity Fully Alive,” and the one that, in my memory at least, is its necessary companion, “Life is a daring adventure or [of?] nothing.”

Life did seem full, even daring at the Catholic Theological Union, Hunters Hill. God, who did not seem too concerned with his own image, was ready to risk all or nothing. Religious orders were, like the Church itself, engaged in renewal, stripping back to their founding inspiration, what might almost be called their first poetic, and engaging with contemporary culture. We spoke often of accepting our humanity, living gospel community, and witnessing the love of Christ. We said if we did not learn to love ourselves we would not learn to love God, nor to serve his people. One of us, I seem to remember, called the love of Christ a dangerous memory. We had vision, pastoral skill, theological confidence, and generous energy; and we had, at least we thought so then, the authority and hope of Vatican II.

No doubt we could all look back now and say we were romantic. I am not, however, going to say such a thing: in remembering the past I too often become ironic and I want, at least today, to try to exercise what little simplicity I have. Irony, cynicism, pragmatism and even dogmatism can cover up the damage we have done to our desire for simplicity.

Back then we were students who felt human and believed that to be human was to give glory to God. In case you think we covered ourselves in soutanes made of sugar, certitude and sunshine, I should perhaps add: not everyone was impressed when the choirmaster sang Rod Stewart's "Sailing" in a liturgy; one of us was barred from the Philippines because he made too much noise about justice; another began to sing, "If you happen to see the most beautiful girl in the world, tell her I love her," then saw her and told her himself; yet another, very early one morning, smashed a seminary car on his way back from an overworked night in a gay steam bath. One of those went on to be vicar-provincial, one Lord Mayor, one happily married, and one dead of AIDS. But that is the risk you take when you start talking about being fully alive – the story of fullness will not necessarily be ruled by a doctrine of perfection.

Needless to say I was not so daring. I wrote poems – dreary, turgid things that have since been burned. And I read poems. I read T.S. Eliot:

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,  
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.<sup>1</sup>

I read James McAuley:

Incarnate Word, in whom all nature lives,  
Cast flame upon the earth: raise up contemplatives  
Among us, men who walk within the fire  
Of ceaseless prayer, impetuous desire.  
Set pools of silence in this thirsty land...<sup>2</sup>

James McAuley, an Australian Catholic poet was then, though I did not know it, dying of cancer. It is not surprising that his writing appealed: his commitment to the authority and reliability of reason, the vision of ceremony, and the grammar of the real, reinforced the education I had received. Just as the metaphysical intuitions that inform McAuley's poetry are Thomistic, I was taught such doctrines as the realism of knowledge, grace perfecting nature, elevating but not abrogating it, and natural law. Reading McAuley was like reading this familiar theology, but with the advantage that his work appealed to feeling. I was not then aware that in the Australian poetry scene of the 60s and 70s, McAuley was under attack for his metaphysical and religious notion of poetry, as well as for his conservative politics. Nor did I know that McAuley had become more and more alienated in the very Church that gave me hope. Although he had, as part of the liturgical renewal, written some marvellous hymns, he became unhappy with the new liturgy: he hated guitars in church; he would, no doubt, have been horrified to know we had sung "Sailing." More profoundly, the liturgical renewal confirmed for him a more general judgment that the Church has lost its traditional picture-language, its symbolism:

Work on religious themes is now an exceptional and usually unsuccessful application of an art which is predominantly secular in its origins (though I would not want to deny an implicit religious feeling in some of it). But the poet and the visual artist find that, even if they want to, they cannot cope with religious subjects as the old masters

<sup>1</sup> T.S. Eliot, "East Coker," Four Quartets, *The Complete Poems and Plays* (London: Faber & Faber, 1969), 180.

<sup>2</sup> James McAuley, "A Letter to John Dryden," *Collected Poems* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1994), 115.

naturally did, and that no amount of individual willing or effort can change this cultural situation for them.<sup>3</sup>

Whether or not such a judgment is historically accurate, it is narratively consistent. McAuley's writing is informed by a sense of original loss and consequent belatedness. For example, "A Letter to John Dryden," which contains that lovely passage about the pools of silence in a thirsty land, and which still offends many because of its attacks on secularism, individualism and relativism, is a letter written to one who is dead by one who imagines himself dead and well removed from a time to which he does not belong. It is a late address from a poet who writes belief as if it were something held back from loss.

Even as I was admiring the lucid mind and astringent heart of McAuley's poetry, I was reading a book that would lead me in another direction. This was *Poverty of Spirit* by Johannes Metz,<sup>4</sup> a profound meditation on how Christ emptied himself and taught his followers to do likewise. Metz's theology had an unusual and compelling simplicity: "Only through poverty of spirit do men draw near to God; only through it does God draw near to man."<sup>5</sup> He gave the feeling that he had experienced, had felt, that fulfilling loss, that humanity he was writing about, especially when he connected poor-heartedness with love, recognising how "Every stirring of genuine love makes us poor...The true lover must be unprotected..."<sup>6</sup> This poverty of spirit had, nevertheless, its own power; Metz was capable of offering stern signs of contradiction. Arguing that Satan feared precisely the powerlessness of God and therefore tried to tempt him back to "strength, security and spiritual abundance,"<sup>7</sup> he declared:

Poverty of spirit is always betrayed most by those who are closest to it. It is the disciples of Christ in the Church who criticize and subvert it most savagely.<sup>8</sup>

At the time it never occurred to me to ask if the book's simplicity might be an illusion created by an unencumbered lyrical style. Reading it again, I think not; I think Metz's book takes its message into its body as it were, in words that know their own indigence. As it constructs its image of an empty Christ, *Poverty of Spirit* incorporates the emptiness that constitutes writing. It knows what Kevin Hart means when he remarks:

There's a sense in which poetry answers to the absence of the Word, the unique master word that underwrites all other words. Not even the word 'God' can do that, for as soon as you pronounce the divine name it divides like spilt mercury. As soon as it enters the world, the Word is lost. Writing poems is a search for that Word.<sup>9</sup>

In 1984 I wrote a sequence called "Magnificat,"<sup>10</sup> which is in many ways a meditation on the poor-heartedness that made Mary sing:

My soul glorifies the Lord,  
my spirit rejoices in God my saviour,  
for he has looked upon his servant  
in her nothingness... (Luke 1: 46-48)

<sup>3</sup> James McAuley, "A Small Testament," in Leonie Kramer (ed.), *James McAuley: Poetry, Essays and Personal Commentary* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1988), 136.

<sup>4</sup> Johannes B. Metz, *Poverty of Spirit*, trans. John Drury (New York: Paulist Press, 1968).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*, 26.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*, 45.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 15.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 20.

<sup>9</sup> John Kinsella, "Interview with Kevin Hart," SALT 10.1997.260. The interview was conducted in Melbourne on 22 October 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Those of my poems to which I refer are to be found in *Next to Nothing* (Sydney: Vagabond Press, 2004).

The poem had its beginnings in a desire to crack the blue-veiled imagery that had solidified around Mary of Nazareth. I found a way to do that when I imagined that when she agreed to be the mother of her saviour, she had no memory of his first smile, his first words, his first steps, but when she knew he was about to be crucified she did have such memories. Knowing him differently, loving him differently, and embodying that difference, she had somehow to ratify a Fiat made before her body knew him. I wrote the poem "Crucifixion" in which Mary says:

Last night, when the bread went  
from my hand to his, it was bruised,  
and still he carried the scent  
of the broken jar, the sinner's nard.  
When, to take his wine, he bent  
his shoulders forward, I was afraid  
to ask, did he wish, now, I had refused?

I used rhyme and punctuation to give the voice a halting, hurt rhythm that was meant to enact the pain she felt as the sword prophesied by Simeon found its mark.

Working back, then, to the Annunciation, I began to think of the angel as someone who entered deeply into an ordinary moment, someone who might almost go unnoticed, messenger of a God as tactful as he was graceful. "The angel did not draw attention to himself." *Claritas*, like *caritas*, loses its integrity if it looks to itself. Truly beautiful angels do not think of themselves as beautiful. Perhaps I was hoping the angel would remind me that those who want to be fully alive and glorify God need to practise self-forgetfulness, otherwise they are likely to mistake the angel for a guarantee of their own holiness, to grab hold of him and prevent him passing, like beauty, through their veins. So:

The angel did not draw attention to himself.  
He came in. So quietly I could hear  
my blood beating on the shore of absolute  
beauty. There was fear, yes, but also  
faith among familiar things:  
light, just letting go the wooden chair,  
the breeze, at the doorway, waiting to come in  
where, at the table, I prepared a meal,  
my knife cutting through the hard skin  
of vegetable, hitting wood, and the noise  
outside of children playing with their dog,  
throwing him a bone. Then all these sounds  
dropped out of hearing. The breeze  
drew back, let silence come in first,  
and my heart, my heart, was wanting him,  
reaching out, and taking hold of smooth-muscled fire.  
And it was done. I heard the children laugh  
and saw the dog catch the scarred bone.

I used a slightly eroticised image not to suggest their encounter was sexual, but to re-imagine spirituality as passionate and creative, a poetic of desire. And to keep desire as desire, I left the annunciation out. The moment of transcendence is not made fully present in words. And I debriefed with the image of the children and the dog because I wanted to suggest that moments such as this have to be abandoned; we cannot hold on to glory or it turns from encounter to idea.

The final poem in the sequence is called "Resurrection" and is dedicated to James Esler, the Marist theologian who was one of my teachers. In it Mary is talking back to Simeon, remembering how he had predicted pain, but wanting to add that there had also

been fun. This piece was inspired partly by a notion that comedy and mercy have in common a principle of unexpected reversal that is very like Mary's vision of the mighty cast down and the lowly raised up. I had at the time been reading some of Shakespeare's comedies and John Paul II's encyclical "On the Mercy of God." I remember being very struck by his comment that:

The true and proper meaning of mercy does not consist only in looking, however penetratingly and compassionately, at moral, physical or material evil: Mercy is manifested in its true and proper aspect when it restores to value, promotes and draws good from all the forms of evil existing in the world and in man.<sup>11</sup>

Whether or not I understood this correctly, it helped me hear what I needed for the poem, something like a chuckle in Mary's voice as she said:

Yes, Simeon, there was sorrow, but much fun  
 too, when he set about making contradiction.  
 I should have known: for when the glorias first were sung,  
 it was to celebrate my son, born among the dung.  
 Ever since, I've been hearing heaven's laughter.  
 Cana's newly-weds, absorbed in what was coming after,  
 did not even notice how the water changed its mind.  
 The Pharisees got a holy shock as a man born blind  
 told them if they didn't get a hold on their desires,  
 so taken up with Christ, they'd land themselves among his followers.  
 Sacred irreverence. It is a gift to those found free  
 in the spirit. Even Zaccheus found it in himself, up a tree,  
 and Lazarus, sauntering around in his shroud.  
 There was a time too when, expecting stones, a crowd  
 got instead some bread and fish. I heard a thief steal  
 his way back to paradise. The structure of the real  
 is mercy. Having seen so many reversals,  
 I should have known he would test his muscles  
 on the stone, and walk away from the dazed  
 grave, leaving its mouth open and amazed.

The final image, combining the empty grave and the Greek mask of comedy, is at once empty and full: the grave has lost its self-importance as the resurrection catches it in a moment of unprotected surprise.

The sequence as a whole attempts what it calls "sacred irreverence" - on the assumption that this is a form of reverence, on the assumption that breaking theology into poetry was a way of enlivening both, on the assumption that if they were to share bread and conversation they would need to be equal partners in the process. What I perhaps did not appreciate at the time was that I had released a narrative of nothingness that would make its own way through my work and my life. By this stage I was reading another Australian poet, Francis Webb. Whereas McAuley uses the language of suffering, Webb goes further: he enters and endures the suffering of language. And the theology that appears, broken, in his poetry is that of the suffering servant: his protagonists are very often marginalised and rejected and therefore redemptive, at least for those who can come out from behind their walled minds. So it is the ragged tongue of the leper that teaches Francis of Assisi eloquence; it is the mongoloid "Harry" making his futile attempt to write a letter who becomes the "Word unwritten"; it is the rejected and dying "Homosexual" who becomes agent of a final judgment for those incapable of compassionate love. But none of this is made easy: presence is always turning into absence (Webb's poetry is remarkable

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<sup>11</sup> John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia* (30 November 1980), no. 63.

for its empty centres), the desire for fullness is always evoking an “outline” or “shadow.” While Webb uses theological language, he does not privilege it; he casts it down so that it has to make its way alongside everyday words and come to terms with gaping silences. It is difficult to quote a moment from Webb’s quite complex works, but here is the ending of “Harry,” from a sequence called “Ward Two,” in which inmates of a psychiatric hospital are presented as signs of Christ. In this case, we are asked to regard someone suffering severe Downs Syndrome:

Because the wise world has for ever and ever rejected  
Him and because your children would scream at the sight  
Of his mongol mouth stained with food, he has resurrected  
The spontaneous thought retarded and infantile Light.  
Transfigured with him we stand  
Among walls of the no-man’s-land  
While he licks the soiled envelope with lover’s caress  
Directing it to the House of no known address.<sup>12</sup>

To privilege the discourse of resurrection, light and transfiguration is to misread the poem by extracting its theology from the community it shares with the “mongol mouth stained with food” and the bleak reverberations in “no known address” (which might as easily describe the poem as Harry’s letter). Webb does not say “Although,” but “Because.” This releases the redemptive logic of the suffering servant: it is precisely because the mongoloid disturbs that he gives us the chance to be transfigured: because he gives us back our poverty of spirit, because he includes us in his unwriting and directs us again to “the House of no known address.”

If Mary’s nothingness and Webb’s negativity allowed me to express my story of nothingness, my encounter with Buddhism drew me further down that path. A year after writing “Magnificat,” I was visiting Stephen Fahey, a friend from seminary days who had become a Buddhist. He showed me some paintings he had done as a form of meditative practice, in particular one that he said was a healing mantra. When I remarked that it seemed like a pattern of slender outlines, he said: “Beauty can be appreciated only by the empty heart.” To keep these words, I put them into a sonnet called “On This Winter Morning”:

On this winter morning, your bare  
shoulders shawled by wind, you walk  
among your backyard plants and talk  
about the healing mantra you have drawn as prayer.  
I think about your Buddhist way of art,  
its tiny, kindling lines, then remember what you said  
years ago: “Beauty can be appreciated  
only by the empty heart.”  
Now, on the back step, where the sun is settling  
down like monks to meditation,  
we see your first orchids flowering.  
Sunshine and saffron in the shape of tongues. Yet we recognise,  
where each orchid has its crimson break, an old relation,  
almost friend, keeping hold: desire’s wound and way for being wise.

That may well have been the moment I became involved in a conversation between the Christian poor heart and the Buddhist empty heart. Certainly that conversation was well under way in 1989 when I visited Bangkok for the first time and was taken to see the Emerald Buddha at Wat Phra Keo. As someone who has always been tempted to think of

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<sup>12</sup> Francis Webb, “Harry,” *Collected Poems* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1969), 225.

spirituality as a matter of size, I was expecting something grand – especially since I was told to remove my shoes, to make sure my feet never pointed towards the sacred image, and to abandon all attempts to take a photograph. When I then entered the temple, I hardly noticed the image itself – it seemed too ordinary to be glorious. What I did notice was that it was surrounded by what I imagined as angels, figures that held their hands flat up against the air, in a gesture I was told meant “No Fear,” a gesture that guaranteed they could hold on to nothing, conceal nothing. Then I realised that my eye had, as it were, to walk up these figures in order to concentrate on the Emerald Buddha. I could not put that gesture out of my mind; those angel figures had again reminded me that glorifying God is an act of poverty. The poem in which I tried to say something of this is called “Bangkok III”:

No photographs allowed. No shoes.  
 You kneel and keep your feet  
 facing from the elevated shrine. You watch  
 the angel-figures, how their gold  
 becomes a dream, a flaming balm,  
 how their open hands,  
 facing up against the air, having nothing left  
 to lose, are poor and therefore unafraid,  
 so climb the hands  
 stairs within a barely-breathing waterfall  
 to see the Buddha’s emerald face.  
 It is the way: each pair of hands  
 allows another step, another emptiness,  
 with neither shoes nor camera,  
 beckons you  
 more closely  
 the cool and greening mind.

Buddhism and Catholicism, at least in my story, are not enemies: they sit side by side in the “house of no known address,” talking about what they cannot say. I suspect they tell each other stories, but that may be because I think the process of believing is very like the process of participating in stories. I do not think they are overly concerned with disputed truths and territories. They grow in truth by sharing what they have: stories are, in that sense, reminders that the glory of God is her generosity, which is also her nothingness.

You will have noticed that I am using the terms ‘nothingness’ and ‘emptiness’ without saying exactly what I mean by them. That is partly because I want to convey a poetic rather than a philosophy, and would rather not land myself in discussion about whether I am talking nihilism, atheism or atheology. I want to abide in the realm of metaphor, using the terms to generate suggestions, associations, ambiguities, contradictions. I am aware that in using the terms I have been moving between possibilities: sometimes the terms signify spiritual poverty, sometimes the unknown, sometimes death, and sometimes disappointment and depression. I am deliberately not choosing between them, deliberating not preferring one to the other, since they quite often come into the same house and at the same time, and if I am to have any chance of being fully alive I have to have regard for each and all of them. Since writing how “each pair of hands/ allows another step, another emptiness,” I have begun to notice how often my poetry comes back to nothingness. Another poem touched by Buddhist emptiness is “Kata Beach,” which I found on my second trip to Thailand in 1990. Looking at how the land lies lightly against the sea, it too remembers that beauty needs to be held in empty hands:

Could it be  
 the hills have learned patience  
 enough to lie lightly on the sea,  
 not to cling, instead to make their touch  
 complete with emptiness, as a dancer's hand  
 will train the air to wait, will borrow beauty just  
 for a while, then, wiser than the thieves who tried  
 to steal the moonlight, throw it back.

The poem goes on to describe meeting a Buddhist monk who said something like: "We need to make the heart into an empty room, so that we can come and go freely." At the same time I wrote "Bangkok Never Really Sleeps," which tells the story of someone who learns that just as greed can wear the face of love, so love can wear the face of greed. The poem ends with a negation of time, love and hate, a negation that is an affirmation of impermanence:

He spoke of love, water buffaloes and going home,  
 and if you know now  
 it was a lie, do not hate him, there isn't time.  
 Today, when you visit Wat Phra Keo  
 to see a Buddha carved green as deep water,  
 you'll hear the wind release the temple bells:  
 Ani'chung. Impermanent. There isn't hate,  
 isn't love. Ani'chung. There isn't time.  
 Ani'chung, ani'chung, ani'chung.

Nothingness appears as death's companion in "Winter More Than Anyone Knows." The poem opens in a downstairs seminar room, where literary critics are rhapsodising about kenosis and how "the word comes into being as / the writer dies." Then, as if to show how easily words about emptiness can turn to treacherous talk, it shifts upstairs to a common room where an actual man is undergoing an actual death. Death, says Johannes Metz, is "the lodestone for all the various forms of poverty of spirit [...] It is here that the truth of our being is judged irrevocably."<sup>13</sup> Metz is confident that by abandoning ourselves to death we abandon ourselves to God: "Poverty of spirit becomes the doorway to an encounter with God and to immersion in transcendence."<sup>14</sup> If I am to be honest, I cannot say my poem sounds so confident; it becomes uncertain when it finds that the language of death is as indecipherable as the language of critical jargon. Another poem that attempts to look into the face of death, is a poem based on my sister's encounter with Hodgkin's Disease. Called "Next to Nothing," it plays its title out in different ways: by denying itself the consolation of words such as providence, by likening its cracked tongue to the cancered body cut down the middle, by admitting that death has intimate knowledge of us, by confessing its own inclination to disappointment, by comparing its own processes of writing to a mother making meals from "next to nothing." That mother is also concerned that she cannot say her prayers:

she says she can no longer pray  
 wonders if she should  
 worry about this  
 I'd like to say it isn't words  
 that constitute prayer but can't  
 when it comes to god  
 these days my tongue

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<sup>13</sup> Metz, *Poverty of Spirit*, 46.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid*, 46-47.

cracks open

Another poem, "Self-Portrait," depicts a writer trying to tell himself that the loss of theological language need not mean the loss of God, trying to bluff his way into a quasi-theology in which God becomes the great perhaps. Almost without noticing what he is doing, he looks at a dead tree and sees "just a trunk and two stretched dry limbs/ cracking as if absence had got its fingers in and was prising them apart/ to see if there was anything left of mystery..." Has he simply got himself caught in memory or has he renewed the image of the cross by re- entering its humility?

The final poem to which I will refer is "Bluthorpe finds it hard to introduce himself." Bluthorpe is a character I invented as a way of establishing ironic perspective on some political issues I was trying to write about, issues such as the present war in Iraq and its poetics of terror, as well as the state of Sydney's trains. In this poem Bluthorpe is at a party and, once more, finding it difficult to talk to people. One of the subjects he cannot talk about is religion – partly because it involves him in a kind of mourning, and partly because he is, when it comes to god, wary of words. Another subject he does not talk about, although it occupies his mind, is nothingness. One of his students has told him his staff photograph makes it look as if his face is disappearing. He realises this is a warning: the narrative of nothingness can debilitate. He remembers that Shakespeare's King Lear had to suffer rather bleak consequences for being careless with the word "nothing." Lear, you will remember, asks his three daughters what they can say of love, intending to reward their speeches with parts of his kingdom. Goneril and Regan give great speeches and get great portions. Cordelia, the youngest and dearest, refuses the game. When Lear asks, "What can you say to draw a third more opulent than your sisters?," she replies, "Nothing." Lear declares that "Nothing will come of nothing" and has the rest of the play to learn the logic of that nothing: Cordelia is banished, Goneril and Regan drive him out into a storm where he loses his mind, Cordelia returns to save him but her army is defeated and she is hanged. In the final scene the stage directions read: "Enter LEAR, with CORDELIA dead in his arms...":

Bluthorpe finds it hard to introduce himself  
 Sometimes Bluthorpe dreams  
 of lines he'd like to use at parties such as this,  
 for example, Descartes died of a collapsed cogito  
 or Beware the past bearing gifts,  
 but basically he finds it hard to introduce himself.  
 Perhaps he's still a farmer's boy, from the edge of town,  
 who's never sure what to say. He hasn't travelled much:  
 his money and his courage died  
 before he got to Venice. He cannot say  
 how best to cook an oyster or a mussel, even though  
 his friend the monk is fond of Provençale. He chooses wine  
 by what's on special and there are nights he finds  
 in Poet's Corner all the comfort of a good  
 metaphor. As to politics, he'd better not, he can't believe  
 a good economy means never having to say  
 you're sorry. He dare not talk religion, there's an ache,  
 a silence waiting there that won't keep faith  
 with the sacrament of sausage rolls. That leaves  
 only the weather, literature and sex – but can he take it,  
 can he really spend another night  
 tossed about in humid theories of erotic prose?  
 He's almost relieved when Lyn Vellins says  
 his staff photograph is out of focus, "It's a nice

shot but it looks as if your face is disappearing.”  
 He’s read, of course he has, about performance  
 notions of the self. But the greatest role he ever had  
 was Lear, nothing will come of nothing, speak again,  
 and then a chance that does redeem all sorrows that ever  
 I have felt. That was the night he got carried away  
 by his own acting and was about to walk over the edge of the lit stage,  
 Cordelia still hanging through his arms.

I should add that the quotations from King Lear do more than confirm Bluthorpe’s fading sense of identity. They also balance nothingness against redemption. While the actor about to walk over the edge of the lit stage represents someone about to pass into the dark, he is carrying Cordelia, who may embody evidence that he has loved and is therefore worthy of redemption. There is, however, an ambiguity in “through his arms”: while it obviously means “in his arms,” it can also mean “by his arms,” thus reminding him that his “nothing” has caused her death.

I think I am in a slightly darker place than that occupied by James McAuley when he spoke of the loss of traditional picture-language. I think I am closer to that place intuited by Yves Bonnefoy when he suggested that for poets who “come after the gods” and “can no longer have recourse to a heaven to guarantee [their] poetic transmutation,” words “appear on the confines of the negativity of language, like angels telling of a still unknown god.”<sup>15</sup> I am for the moment writing a poetry that has emptied the theology I learned at the Catholic Theological Union, Hunters Hill. The god who appears in it is an empty god. This could, of course, merely mean that I have made a god of emptiness. I hope not. I hope I have done nothing more than give God back to mystery.

But the thing is: I cannot really say. All I can say is that this paper came to me in the night. I had to get out of bed and, with darkness looking on, I had to write, though I had no idea what I was going to say. When I am writing I am as close as I get to being fully alive, but I am only writing well if I am not thinking about myself. When I am writing I am as close as I get to glorifying God, but only to the degree that I forget God. So I was not thinking God, not thinking glory, not thinking fully alive, I was trying to let my hand receive the rhythm. I knew that if I got caught in the rhythm it would happen: the darkness would draw back, the angel would come in, and so quietly I would hear my blood beating on the shore of absolute beauty.

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**Author:** Dr Noel Rowe is Senior Lecturer, Department of English, University of Sydney. He was invited to present this paper at the Conference of the Australia and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools (ANZATS), Queen’s College, University of Melbourne, 9th July 2004. The Conference theme was ‘The Glory of God: Humanity Fully Alive’.

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<sup>15</sup> Yves Bonnefoy, “The Act and the Place of Poetry,” trans. Jean Stewart and John T. Naughton, in John T. Naughton (ed.), *The Act and the Place of Poetry* (Chicago, London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), 102, 114.