

Man, Mystery, Myth and Metaphor: Poetry and the Heavens

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A team of roadmen was working the lanes of Banc Sion Cwilt, a folk name for the small patch of high land where we live. One of them was described as 'simple'. He believed the earth to be flat. The men teased him. 'What's over the horizon then, Dai?' He replied, 'There's a ditch. In the ditch are workmen making stars out of old moons.' Was he simple? Or a poet, wiser than they knew, making myth from mystery?

We live in a dark place. There are no street lights. To the west is the sea, to the east, hill country hides the lights of villages, to south and north no light stains the sky. The trig point behind our house records the hill rising to a thousand feet.

At One Thousand Feet¹

Nobody comes but the postman
and the farmer with winter fodder.

A-road and motorway avoid me.
The national grid has left me out.

For power I catch wind.
In my garden clear water rises.

A wind spinning the blades
of the mill to blinding silver

lets in the rumour,
grief on the radio.

America telephones.
A postcard comes from Poland.

In the sling of its speed the comet
flowers to perihelion over the chimney.

I hold the sky to my ear to hear
pandemonium whispering.
We're connected to the national grid now, and the windmill has gone, but one day a man asked us if our small turbine was permitted by the electricity company. 'Aren't you stealing their wind?' he asked.

¹ 'At One Thousand Feet'. Collected Poems

I once knew a star-gazer and an archaeologist who separately discovered stars in the heavens and ancient bones in the earth, metaphors for our search for meaning in the earth and the sky.

‘Looking’²

Kate in full day in the heat of the sun
looks into the grave, sees in that unearthing
of a Roman settlement, under a stone
only the shadow of a skeleton.

Gwyn on his back in the dark, lying
on the lawn dry from months of drought,
finds in the sky through the telescope
the fuzzy dust of stars he has been searching.

Imprint of bones is a constellation
shining against silence, against darkness
and stars are the pearly vertebrae
of water-drops against the drought, pelvis,

skull, scapula five million light years old
wink in the glass, and stardust is all we hold
of the Roman lady’s negative
in the infinite dark of the grave.

We, being human, have always searched for an understanding that shines against silence, against darkness. I ask you to suspend all your self-doubt for an hour, and to join me in believing that, as the blackbird has evolved to sing, so the human mind has evolved to think in poetry; that all human beings are poets; that it is poetry that distinguishes the human animal from other living creatures; that poetry – as epic, as lyric, as narrative, as myth, in formal or free verse – is the truth, though not necessarily fact; and that it is through poetic devices that we have always explained the inexplicable to ourselves, ever since we have been human. The Poet Laureate, Carol Ann Duffy, defines poetry as the music of being human. I think of poetry as a rhythmic way of thinking. I think we are both saying that poetry is the rhythm of human thought, reason and imagination, and metaphor is, and always has been, our human way of explaining to ourselves the manifestations of the heavens and the mysteries of the universe. What we don’t understand – in art, science, technology, engineering, mathematics, religion, philosophy – we explain to ourselves in metaphor, in poetic narrative. The internet uses metaphor to describe itself. The ‘mouse’ moves under your right hand. We travel the ‘web’. Radio records a few minutes of ‘wild sound’ to fill the silence in a recorded programme. A

² ‘Looking’. Letting in the Rumour (or ‘Today’ in Collected Poems)

television cameraman complains of 'a hare in the gate.' Architects call tracks worn by human feet across landscaped areas around buildings, 'paths of desire'. The poet RS Thomas, speaking of his religious faith, spoke of putting his hand in the empty form of a hare, and finding it still warm. The offence allegedly committed by Sam Warburton in the Wales v. France match in the Rugby World Cup, tackling, lifting and dropping an opponent, is called a 'spear'. The player got a red card, the match was played with fourteen men, and lost by a point. The battle of the Gododdin all over again! The 6th century British/Celtic tribe of three hundred men trained for a year and were all killed in the Battle of Catraeth (Catterick). It is recorded in the earliest British poem by a named poet, Aneirin, and preserved in an early medieval manuscript known as The Book of Aneirin, in the language is we know as Welsh.

The Book of Aneirin³

Sorrow sharp as yesterday, a lament
passed down and learned by heart
until that moment
when the scribe began to write.

Fifteen centuries later,
words still hymn their worth,
young men, all but one slaughtered,
lost in the hills of the Old North.

Blood-ballad
of the battlefield
on quires of quiet pages, laid leaf
on leaf like strata of stone, Aneirin's grief.

This is not about religion. It's about poetry's power to fire an arrow of understanding straight to the heart. George Herbert ends his poem 'Prayer' with a perfect definition of poetry: it is 'something understood'.⁴ I was once teaching a workshop on metaphor to primary school children, though they thought we were just writing a group poem about a tree. I asked them what a tree was like. Like a hand, said one child. I asked for words connected with hands. What do hands do? I asked. They gave me words like wave, write, stroke. At last, I confessed I'd played a trick, and read their poem back to them, the word 'tree' replacing 'hand'. When I read aloud the line, 'The tree writes on the sky', up jumped the least able boy – the naughty one, the slow reader, the one who was threatened by his teacher, behave or you're out. He stood up, his two hands in the air, shouting, 'YES! I get it! Hand! Tree!' It was - 'something understood'.

We - human, poets all - look up at the night sky, and we map it for the shapes we see, the Square of Pegasus, the Plough, Orion. We name it for the gods who ride their chariots up

³ unpublished

⁴ 'Prayer' by George Herbert

there, who shake the heavens with lightning, who send an occasional comet to remind us of our subordinate place in the order of things, who cause floods, earthquakes, hurricanes to warn us we are killing the planet. We can't erase that ancient naming, or forget the mythology. Words and images are powerful. The sky is the page on which where the story of human life is written.

When I was a child my father would take me out on a clear night to look up at the sky. Often, quoting from Sean O'Casey's 'Juno and the Paycock', he'd say: 'What is the stars.'⁵ Once, at Ty Newydd, our Welsh Writers house in Gwynedd, back in the 1980's, I was tutoring a poetry course for 16 year olds from Reading. One clear night we doused the house lights and stepped out to watch the Perseids, the August meteor shower. We lay on our backs on the lawn. Between their chorus of cries at every shooting star, I pointed out the planets, the constellations, the Milky Way. The students were astonished. For them such heavenly bodies were the stuff of fantasy, the content of science fiction novels, comics and movies. Suddenly one of the boys uttered these immortal words:

'Wow! Do we 'ave these in Reading?'

I remembered my father's voice, the huge sky over my grandmother's farm in Pembrokeshire, my heart huge with wonder. The words, 'What is the stars?' The quotation didn't diminish the science or the mystery. My father was Engineer-in-Charge of Outside Broadcasts for the BBC in Wales, and he told me about radio's long waves, the speed of light, the age of stars, the Heaviside Layer.

Ah! the Heaviside Layer! He told me it was the lowest layer of the ionosphere, which moves closer to Earth at night, and that he bounced his BBC radio waves off it, but he failed to tell me it was so-called because it was discovered by a Professor Heaviside. I continue to this day to imagine it as a heavy, traditional Welsh blanket, known as a carthen, in the sky. In a sequence of poems called The Radio Engineer, I wrote about it thus:

The Heaviside Layer⁶

Staring into the starry sky, that time
in the darkest dark of war and countryside,
'What is the stars?'
my father asked,

then told me that up there,
somewhere between us and Orion,
hangs the ionosphere, lower, closer at night,
reflecting his long wave signals back to earth,

light bending in water.

⁵ Juno and the Paycock by Sean O'Casey

⁶ from 'Radio Engineer', Collected Poems

But things get tight and close,
words music, languages
all breathing together under that old carthen,

Cardiff, Athlone, Paris
all tongue-twisted up,
all crackle and interference,
your voice hearing shimmer

like trying to stare at stars.

Has wonder been eradicated? Do we think we have solved the last mystery, found the final piece of the jigsaw, the god-particle? Are wonder, and worship, no more? Could it be that, in the blind heavens of Reading, and every neon-lit city, town, village in the whole world, the night sky is available only on television?

My key words are wonder, worship, and story. I'm not talking about religion, certainly not theology, absolutely not dogma. Wonder is what our ancestors felt, worship arose from it, and story was how they explained the inexplicable to themselves. It is no surprise to know that our ancestors worshipped the heavens and the earth, and that we are inclined not to worship anything. Yet we do feel wonder, don't we? Wonder is a questing, questioning word. Its manifestation is a kind of worship, an urge to follow the thrill of wonder by wanting to save the planet. RS Thomas, our, great, late Welsh poet, a priest himself, wrote in his poem 'The Moor',

'It was like a church to me.'⁷

In her memoir, 'A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek'⁸, Annie Dillard, poet and poetic writer of prose, describes seeing a mockingbird drop like a stone from the top of a four-storey building, to open its wings a breath before reaching the ground. Another time she saw green waves roll ashore off Florida, translucent and back-lit by the sun, each one carrying the twisting bodies of sharks. 'The least we can do,' she writes, 'is try to be there.' All the poet in us can do is 'be there', letting wonder, even worship, electrify us.

Our earliest ancestors knew wonder. We have evidence that they were as watchful of the sky above them as they were of the earth they walked on. Observation of the moon and stars, of sunrise and sunset, the change of seasons, the weather, were all they knew of science, and of worship. Those who live and work in the real countryside are still aware of these things. Years ago, when our house in Ceredigion was still a ruin, without running water or electricity, just a two-roomed *bwthyn* to camp in during the summer, we stepped out on a dark night to brush our teeth and spit into the grass. Low in the north we saw strange shafts of green light moving in the sky. No town lay in that direction. We thought

⁷ 'The Moor', RS Thomas

⁸ A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek, Annie Dillard

of a travelling fair, maybe. Then, on the late night weather forecast we learned that the Aurora Borealis had been seen in many parts of Britain. How many times do we miss such phenomena, as we might have missed that one. In Brut y Tywysogion, or The Chronicle of the Princes, it is recorded that between 685 and 691, 'the earth quaked in Brittany', 'there was a rain of blood in the island of Britain and Ireland.' 'The butter and the milk turned to blood.' 'And the moon was blood.' Those events were clearly understood as warnings.

These nights, as we move towards winter, we look out for Jupiter, stepping along the planet-road, flanked by his moons, four of them clearly discernible through our telescope in the dark skies over Banc Sion Cwilt in Ceredigion. Sion Cwilt was a smuggler working the coast close to where we live. He wore a coloured quilt for a coat, hence his name. The place he haunted is named for him, as we name the planets in the dark sky above us. To name them is to possess them. To name them humanly, poetically, is to make them part of our world and our story. As Shakespeare says;

The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

A Midsummer Night's Dream⁹

Poetry is the mind's and the imagination's struggle to move from 'things unknown' to 'something understood'. In the moonlit wood, the fox sees not the moon in the night sky, but its light on the woodland floor, trees, shadows of trees, movement of enemy or prey. Badger, hedgehog and owl use its light, but do not consider it. I don't suppose they spend time looking at the moon. The moth, however, must yearn for it, as it yearns hopelessly for the light bulbs inside our rooms at night. Most nocturnal creatures keep watch on their earthly surroundings. It is we human beings who turn our eyes to the heavens, urging our companions to do the same. 'Look! Look at the moon!' My border collie sleeps in the sun. She understands shade, and sunlight. If she gets too hot she will move into the shade. She knows these things from experience. The sun shines through the glass gable of the room where I am trying to write, using a laptop, and I am too dazzled to work. At noon, this time of year, the low sun fills the room with sunlight. I also know that soon the Earth will roll over, leaving the room and my table in shadow. My Iron Age ancestors knew what the sun could do, but not what it was. They could calculate. Keeping careful watch, they could measure and predict the length of the day, the angle of the sun, the waning and waxing of the moon, seasonal changes. This was the mathematics of observation. A long time ago, my six year old son made a sundial in the garden from stones, a circle of paper, a broken bean stick.

(from The Sundial)¹⁰

⁹ A Midsummer Night's Dream. Shakespeare

‘In the still
Centre he pushed the broken bean
Stick, gathering twelve fragments
Of stone. placed them at measured
Distances. Then he crouched, slightly
Trembling with fever, calculating
The mathematics of sunshine.’

He was calculating time from sunlight, as people did five thousand year ago, when they built the passage-grave at Newgrange in the Boyne Valley in Ireland. At dawn after the longest night of the year, a cunning slit left above the portal by those ancient builders lets in a spear of light which reaches deep into the passage to touch the great stone. Their building was constructed to a precise calculation. After the darkness, the cold, the sterility of winter, the ray of sunlight touching the stone at sunrise on the shortest day of the year symbolises a waking, a quickening, an insemination of the earth itself, urged into ripeness after winter sleep. All along the Atlantic coast the remains of these powerful buildings are evidence of human reason and calculation at work, hand in hand with worship in the culture of our ancestors. Plant pollens have been found in some of the oldest burial sites on earth, telling us that, faced with the mystery of death and grief, they were human, and as reverential as we are. We ‘glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven’. Then something else happens.

‘as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.’¹¹

Poetry is our narrative, and at the heart of the telling is repetition, memorable sound. Story has always been crucial to our understanding of ‘life, the universe and everything,’ of heaven and earth. How else to explain the sun, the moon, the extreme weathers of storm, thunder, flood, hurricane, earthquake, darkness and light. The gods were angry, or pleased. The moon was blood. Early humans explained the great, omnificent gold sun by calling it a god. We know it is a star, but that does not erase from our minds, our literature, our music, our culture the memory and naming of the gods. On the contrary, it leaves an extra shadow of meaning, and to this day stories are the means by which we fathom the unfathomable. Early poetry, like poetry today, uses rhythm, repetition and metaphor to help us memorise, to explain things simply to ourselves and to each other. ‘Grandma’s gone to heaven’, we tell a child. That is not a lie. It is a metaphor, because the truth is we don’t know where she’s gone. How can the dead live in us still, as they do, if they are nothing but bones in the ground, or ashes blown away on the wind? Only metaphor comes to our rescue at such a moment.

¹⁰ ‘The Sundial’. Collected Poems

¹¹ A Midsummer Night’s Dream

It is easy to imagine the narrative epic, sung, maybe, to the harp, passed from speaker to listeners round a fire under the stars. Maybe it was chanted as a song repeated to each other and to the gods. 'Song' and 'poem' both lie in the Welsh words *cân* and *cerdd*. In English too, a particular kind of poem, the *lyric*, suggests the words of a song, and the epic suggests story. The stories we tell ourselves allow us to escape the trap of literalism, and, that most unattractive human characteristic, certainty. The 'I am right' of the doctrinal zealot. The verse narrative tells the human story with imagination, not dogma.

The oldest stories we know, and the earliest art, show that human beings used the moon and the sun for their calculations. To 'worship' is human. It recognises Earth's mysterious relationship with sun and moon, stars and planets, seasons and the weather, and of our subordinate place in it. No wonder they felt the need to appease the gods. We know, and they knew, that if we hurt the planet, we die. How could we not gaze at the heavens? The first humans observed the shadow edging across the moon, a little more each night, the sun rising every day, the shortening and lengthening days, and they lived by their light. I once watched a complete eclipse of the moon. I saw it slowly lose first its edge then its brilliance. In complete eclipse it was just a stone. No longer a goddess, but a sad stone, it looked close enough and ordinary enough to pluck from the sky, all the more moving for being just a pebble. Then it struck me - that was our shadow, Earth's shadow had put out its light. This metaphor for our carelessness reminded me of three old men I saw sitting on a bench in the sun. A white moth was fluttering close to them. One of the old men reached out and, without even a pause in his talk, he crushed it in his fist.

*Eclipse of the Moon*¹²

Whose shadow's that?

Who walked in the evening
at his own ghost's back?

Who trod in the circle,
left a footprint on the frozen pond?

Who looked in the mirror
and clouded the glass?

Who snatched the white moth
in his closed fist?

Who drowned
reaching for the coin?

Circa 600 B.C. an anonymous Chinese poet says, on seeing the new moon rise over the

¹² 'Eclipse of the Moon'. Collected Poems

hill, 'my heart lays down its load'. A thousand years later, in Arthur Waley's translation of Yang-Ti, we read, of the same moon,

'Suddenly a wave carries the moon away
And the tidal water comes with its freight of stars.

Milton describes Lucifer after his fall from grace, he, who had been brightest of all the angels,

'as when the sun, new-risen,
Looks through the horizontal misty air
Shorn of his beams'

We talk of the man in the moon. In parts of Africa they speak of the hare in the moon. To no one is it just a stone. The moon, the same moon by which we measured months and years, inspired, ruled, is female in our culture, male in others, was goddess or god, written about by poets from ancient times to today in every culture, which shone down on Juliet and her Romeo. A sculpture of a limestone hare brought to my mind the thought of that moon shining on ancient, shallow seas as this very chunk of limestone was forming in what is now Derbyshire, before a single human foot had trod the earth.

*The Stone Hare*¹³

Think of it waiting three hundred million years,
not a hare hiding in the last stand of wheat,
but a premonition of stone, a moonlit reef
where corals reach for the light through clear
waters of warm Palaeozoic seas.
In its limbs lies the story of the earth,
the living ocean, then the slow birth
of limestone from the long trajectories
of starfish, feather stars, crinoids and crushed shells
that fill with calcite, harden, wait for the quarryman,
the timed explosion and the sculptor's hand.
Then the hare, its eye a planet, springs from the chisel
to stand in the grass, moonlight's muscle and bone,
the stems of sea lilies slowly turned to stone.

I try to imagine the physical earth in formation, the moon before we mythologised it, before we were here to dream the gods into place, or a hare into stone.

George Herbert's sonnet, about prayer, considers the heavenly discourse of the spirit and the mind, and arises from the human to deity dialogue that began when we named the gods, or in Herbert's case, the God. But Herbert was a poet, and his definition of prayer equally well defines what poetry is, and it is that meaning I choose to stress.

¹³ 'The Stone Hare'. Making the Beds for the Dead

Herbert's sonnet brings my take on our theme - heavenly discourses - to a conclusion where, I hope, wonder, worship and story meet, eluding the trap set by the literalists and their demand for absolutes. Instead, we follow poetry's way, imagination's way. I think the poem has wonder, worship and story in it. It leaves the story open to interpretation, thrilling, the heavens bright with stars, planets, and legends to live by. The mystery is 'understood', as he says, but only for a moment, before it shimmers into uncertainty again and leaves us disturbed, as the best poetry does:

'Prayer, the Church's banquet, Angels' age,
God's breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,'
The Christian plummet sounding heav'n and earth;
Engine against th' Almighty, sinner's tower,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-days'-world transposing in an hour,
A kind of tune, which all things hear and fear;
Softness, and peace, and joy, and love, and bliss,
Exalted manna, gladness of the best,
Heaven in ordinary, man well dressed,
The milky way, the bird of Paradise,
Church bells beyond the stars heard, the soul's blood,
The land of spices, something understood.

Biography

Gillian Clarke was born and brought up in Cardiff, and now lives in Ceredigion. She is a poet, playwright, editor, translator (from Welsh), and President of Ty Newydd, the writers' centre in North Wales which she co-founded in 1990. Her poetry is studied by GCSE and A Level students throughout Britain. She has been National Poet for Wales since 2008. In 2010 she was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry, the second Welsh poet to receive the honour. In 2011 she was made a member of the Gorsedd of Bards.