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Associate Professor of English  
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# Clothed in Language

*Pauline Matarasso*



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*To the Community of Mount Saint Bernard  
who opened to me  
the doors of their hearts;  
and remembering specially  
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who shared with me so freely the treasures of the Fathers.  
1973–2019*



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# **Clothed in Language**





## Sighing and Prophesighing

Sighing and prophesighing  
before the God who was in the beginning  
and is and ever may be,  
in whom we believe and doubt  
and think and feel and yearn and imagine,  
in whom we strive and fail,  
to whom we travel and from whom we run;  
the God who is the non-sense to the far north  
of paradox,  
who holds in balance now and never  
and for ever,  
who makes of self and other  
one.

The Word for whom we spread our nets of metaphor  
to capture our heart's hart leaping on the mountains,  
looking through the lattice  
of our eyes.

We nailed him to a Cross to be rid of him.  
And still we build brick walls and concrete bunkers,  
with manacles and statements and straitjackets to hold him,  
but he, on the third day, walks out, leading  
a little child by either hand.

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The Spirit who is joy, and love, and gift,  
nameless formless  
rocking the sea;  
breath of Eden  
water of Jordan  
newness of childhood  
clear as flame;  
gift of the two  
who binds all together  
girdle of love  
in Jesus' name.

## i. Alpha and Omega

Walk through Sion, walk all round it;  
count the number of its towers.  
Review all its ramparts,  
examine its castles,

that you may tell the next generation  
that such is our God.<sup>1</sup>

1. Ps 49 [48]:13-15.

## Paradox

I have learned that the place wherein Thou art found unveiled is girt round with the coincidence of contradictories, and this is the wall of Paradise wherein Thou dost abide.<sup>2</sup>

A God beyond our grasping, who laughs at time and space. The God of essence who translates himself into substance, so that we may taste and see that he is good. The God who explodes language and calls himself the Word. A God so great, so alien, so other, that he takes into his lap the uncomforted child that most of us remain lifelong, the weaned child that rests more peacefully on its mother's breast than the burrowing nursling, the infant unsteadily exploring the world, held back from danger by the leading strings of love. The bridal union is for grown-ups. Most of us never grow out of infancy, stunted alike by ourselves and one another.



We have lost the sense of paradox, which is why our theology has long been fractured. All theology, all life is paradox. Paradox is our window onto glory, our only language for it, a God-given language.



Since the late Middle Ages we see the Crucifixion as awful, rather than awful, but the Fathers saw it as the triumph of

2. Nicholas of Cusa, *The Vision of God*, trans. Emma Gurney Salter (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007), 44, chap. 9.

love, the triumph that trumped those of Caesar. The Resurrection was the evidence supplied for the weaker-minded, those who cannot see or understand.

Christ the king of love wears his crown on the Cross, an artefact woven by soldiers who, paradox to crown all paradoxes, in hailing him as king spoke the truth they were busily mocking and denying.



The Word of God is defined for us in the richness of metaphor and the starkness of negation, but in the latter often walks unrecognized. We meet him there in paradoxical form, and in places well beyond the precincts of theology. My wandering mind was arrested recently by a few words of Samuel Beckett:

The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new.<sup>3</sup>

This, I thought, is apophatic theology, and Beckett himself holds that door ajar by pointing us to Ecclesiastes: “There is nothing new under the sun.”<sup>4</sup> But he is a writer who pursues the negative to the point where it opens onto infinity, the non-place without closure, and, led by this urgency, he sought continually to pare down his work, “stripping reality to its naked bones.”<sup>5</sup>

3. Opening line of Beckett’s first novel, *Murphy* (New York: Routledge, 1934).

4. Eccl 1:9.

5. Martin J. Esslin, “Samuel Beckett,” *Encyclopedia Britannica* online. See also John Fletcher, *Beckett’s Debt to Dante* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1965); [www.eupublishing.com/doi/pdfplus/10.336/nfs.1965.005](http://www.eupublishing.com/doi/pdfplus/10.336/nfs.1965.005).

The author of Ecclesiastes, also notoriously negative, is given the lie in the penultimate chapter of the Book of Revelation, where God reveals himself as the great creator and perpetual renewer (“Behold, I make all things new”).<sup>6</sup> Beckett’s sentence points two ways, like all paradox, alternately true or false according to the context. It holds up a mirror image of truth and is, in its refinement, its true elegance, a reflection of the beauty of God.

6. Rev 21:5.

## Truth

Truth so often—always?—faces two ways, Janus-like. This paradoxical element is its stamp of authenticity. We should look for it.



Truth: utter simplicity generating inexhaustible variety.



Truth is always subversive, which is why all establishment resists it. We will be judged on the persistence and passion with which we have questioned established wisdom, particularly the versions closest to our hearts and pockets.



“It is not Christ who is too good to be true; it is we who are not good enough to be true.”<sup>7</sup>

“Our call is to a more naked faith and a more hopeless hope.”<sup>8</sup> More Alice-in-Wonderland truths. We should all walk around on our heads; then we might see straight.

7. See Denys Turner, *Thomas Aquinas: A Portrait* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 222.

8. Michael Casey, “Bernard’s Biblical Mysticism,” *Studies in Spirituality* 4 (1994): 21, quoted in Maggie Ross, *Silence, A User’s Guide, I* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 171.



In regard to the complex structures of the so-called real, including myself, I understand less and less. Alone shines clear the Incomprehensible; clear because utterly simple. I have looked on it as a brightness at the end of a telescope-like tunnel, the NO THING beyond things that is the object and fulfillment of all desire.



Nowadays I believe only in the impossible.



The truth is such a noble thing that if God were able to turn away from truth, I would cling to truth and let God go; for God is truth, and all that is in time . . . is not truth.<sup>9</sup>

9. Meister Eckhart, Sermon 11, *The Complete Mystical Works of Meister Eckhart*, ed. and trans. Maurice O'C. Walshe, rev. Bernard McGinn (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), 95.

## Time and Eternity

We need to redefine our vocabulary: never-ending is not the same as eternal.



The present moment offers a squint onto eternity, but we prefer the rooms we have built to house past and future, windowless but frescoed.

Eternity is not length of time, it is time telescoped out of existence. It is the vanishing point of time. While we are still in time, our meaning is in the waiting.

In the mathematics of eternity ( $- = +$ ). When all has been given away the sum will be complete.



It is possible that the Last Judgment has already taken place.<sup>10</sup>



The cross is the form, the pattern, and the meaning. Time is stretched out on the cross-piece where Christ's extended arms reach from Paradise lost to Paradise regained. At the center, at the intersection of time and eternity, is the riven heart of Jesus; and each and all of us, wherever we are placed on history's cross-bar, find ourselves also at that mystical intersection where

10. "It is already done" (Rev 21:6).

eternity is open to us in the present moment and we see the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.



Timeless, you operate in ways that make nonsense of our mental calendars and calculations. You are the apparently random, the inexplicable we call coincidence. You take some moment over which we think we have control, and like a conjuror you stick it up your sleeve and with sleight of hand pull out silk scarves of all the colors of the rainbow.

## Trinity

I know now why the Father begot the Son: Love constrained him; Love begets love, it is Love's own law.

Indeed, if God is love, it follows that he is Three in One. For Love needs a Beloved, is incomplete without. The Spirit proceeds from the Two, for if two is fullness of a sort (an incomplete completion), three is balance, where stillness and movement become one. This One alone is adorable.



Paradox is at the heart of the Trinity, our God who is Three-in-One. We tend to prefer the word *mystery*, as being more encompassing, stretching farther, going deeper. There is pleasure in getting lost. Yet it can't easily escape the mutter of "cop-out, cop-out" rising from the pews. The harder-edged paradox is more exciting, a vertiginous word, and surely it is dizzying to ask his Mercy to plead in Person for us, to and against his Justice—God versus God?

## Love of Nothing

This love has nothing in its sights  
and aims so true  
that out of everything there is  
nothing will do.

And should love call by any name  
(save only one)  
the lover lost the lover found  
nothing will come.

And yet one name to nothing is  
the certain door  
where love may enter knowing that  
nothing is sure.

## Knowledge and Meaning

Meaning is knowledge made active.

On Calvary knowledge was lodged only with the Father. Prophetic knowledge was given to the Son during his public life, as well as that which came from a relationship with the Father unclouded by sin. That knowledge was withdrawn during the Passion and hidden in the Father.

Meaning was embodied in the Son and given life through obedience, suffering, and love. Obedience is passive will, love is active will, and both were expressed in bodily suffering on the Cross: that was how the meaning was written out for us.<sup>11</sup>

Obedience was expressed in silence, love in the seven last words.

Knowledge was restored when Christ returned to the Father, and was given to us, in human measure and proportionate to our humility and longing, after the coming of the Spirit at Pentecost.

11. Obedience here is understood as the willed endurance that accepts and welcomes the underside of doing—the being done to, the Passion longed for in the Upper Room, dreaded in Gethsemane, undergone in the Praetorium and on Calvary.

# Reading Between the Lines





## Reading Between the Lines

We have more languages at our disposal than we are always aware of, certainly more than we use consciously and often. Those spoken by our neighbors, near and far, which, if we knew them, would broaden our minds and expand our hearts. Technical languages like mathematics that we leave to experts and the machines at supermarket check-outs, forgetting that fluency in mathematics and cutting-edge physics opens a door to outer space. Closer to home and friendlier is the language of the natural world, the extraordinary ordinary. It is learned by looking with close attention, often. It is the *lectio divina* of divine glory, and the book is free. There is also a language we have half forgotten, the language of the oral tradition that passed unwritten down uncounted generations, the treasure chest of human knowledge packed with the stories that explained us to ourselves. Printing, followed by the growth of literacy, saw by the middle of the nineteenth century the final phasing out of this oral tradition in England. Nonetheless, much of the material, the stories and the language they are told in, remains to us either as literature—texts more often studied than read—or as tales for children, read aloud as such tales should be, and thus still shared and heard.

The Scriptures too, both Hebrew and Christian, were part of that oral tradition and in more than one sense still are, being proclaimed and listened to collectively. All share themes drawn from a common pool of giants and dragons, boy heroes, magic cauldrons, and a conviction that, at a moment of crisis, any

rule, including what we would now call the laws of nature, is subvertible (by whom or what, in fairy tales, is not always obvious). More important, they share a belief in good and evil and their mutual opposition, in rewards and punishment, and in the ultimate triumph of the good. Myths and legends introduce the tragic, fairy tales the ghoulish; humanity likes a bit of tragedy, particularly when there is another page to turn: Roland dies at Roncevaux, but Charlemagne will come to avenge him. Children are both less and more sensitive: they enjoy being threatened with indescribable horrors their parents would never cope with (being cooked and eaten by witches), but they also need to be saved in the nick of time, preferably by their own guile. My seven-year-old son, being read a version of *La Chanson de Roland*, dissolved into tears: “J’aime pas les histoires où tous les Français mourent,” he sobbed a trifle ungrammatically. He would never have cried over Hansel and Gretel, though he might have been seriously frightened.

We don’t believe in legends now; we certainly don’t believe in fairy tales, and to save our children from nightmares we assure them that they aren’t true—but children know better. We, their parents, have science to guide us, and it has closed our minds to the possibility of other possibilities. Scripture of course is all about possibilities other than the scientific and rational, and the ways in which we approach these and solve the difficulties that they now present are various. Christians position themselves on a spectrum of belief that stretches from a deadening literalism to a point where any historical content that lacks an archeological substratum is vaporized as metaphor. Medieval historians faced with saints’ lives are often experts at dissection: having stripped out the useful parts that help them prove how our forebears *really lived*, they toss the rest in the bin labelled “superstition.”

We still read fairy tales, usually for their Freudian insights. Some read myths and legends, and of all these genres we are more accepting than we are of religious texts. When we apply

the words *myths* or *fairy tales* to the latter it is to dismiss them as rubbish, or worse. Might it be that we just need to re-learn how best to read them all from looking at the elements they have in common? Some others, it seems, may be starting to think so. Philip Pullman, author of *His Dark Materials*, in a review of an exhibition of magic put on in August 2018 by the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, casts an interested and informed eye over the wide perspective of what he calls, without wishing “to disparage or belittle it,” the imaginary world: the world of magic, of religion, of poetry, indeed of “everything that touches human life,” which he describes as “surrounded by a penumbra of associations, memories, echoes, and correspondences that extend far into the unknown. In this way of seeing things, the world is full of tenuous filaments of meaning, and the very worst way of trying to see these shadowy existences is to shine a light on them.”<sup>1</sup> He is speaking here of the light of scientific reason, but there are other and kinder lights that can be trained on these areas of human experience.

### Question and Answer

Asking questions is, surely, one of the few essentials that define being human. The young of animals learn by observing and copying, and by being disciplined and kept in their places by elders and siblings. Children do likewise, but they also initiate: Why? why? why? they ask, as soon as language has provided the magic word. The traditional tales, told, enacted, and sung, which for centuries formed their diet, nourished the tendency. The significance of questions asked and unasked, promising and perilous, is a strong current in the ancient wisdom that flows like an underground river through the landscape of our culture. Question and answer are or once were the scholastic’s dialectic, the pianist’s two hands, chamber

1. *The Guardian*, Saturday, September 2, 2018.

music's conversation, and a recurring pattern in children's games, nursery rhymes, and songs.

On yonder hill there stands a creature,  
 Who she is I do not know.  
 I'll go court her for her beauty;  
 She must answer Yes or No.

The themes that led an oral existence for centuries before being lifted into literature or demoted to fairy stories often set up scriptural resonances (and of course vice versa). They demand to be read in a not dissimilar way, in that all have deeper meanings behind or beneath the literal. While a child will not spell them out, these meanings may be absorbed sub-consciously and become a part of the ground on which that child walks.

In stories, unlike in life, children do not ask the questions, they get asked for answers: impossible, unguessable answers to trick questions—how can anyone guess a name like Rumpelstiltskin?<sup>2</sup> Sometimes the story turns on a threat of failure, which may spell death; sometimes on the promise of a kingdom as reward—the happy-ever-after of the hallmark ending. These tests invariably fall to the lot of the least likely candidate, the smallest, youngest, and most vulnerable, who just as invariably triumphs, thereby proving that belief in the triumph of good over evil is written not only in the Scriptures but in the world's genes. It is the truth that continues to deny all the available evidence. Such a story in its many variants says to every child, keep going, never give up, you don't have to be big, strong, rich, or top of the class for something good to come—perchance—your way. Every

2. Of course in life they get asked for answers later, interminably, at school and beyond, and often for the wrong answers, those that close down further necessary questions.

happy-ever-after tale is making the same point as Yahweh in Exodus when he brings his undeserving people out of Egypt. He did it because they were wretched, not because they deserved it. Even his “saints,” Jacob, David, Solomon the Wise, weren’t more deserving than Jack of the Beanstalk—Moses was the one exception. Fairy tales are in fact more upbeat than Scripture, which contains a lot of history, and history is pretty bleak: God is always having to send his prophets to put new heart into his people. Yet arching over all is the saving rainbow of the Flood, the drama of the Passover story, and the forty-year trek to the Promised Land. Moses may die on the heights overlooking it, but another Savior will come one day and lead his people across the Jordan. The Old Testament is the story of hope against hope.

The New Testament brings one fulfillment: the promised Savior is given and triumphs over death, the ultimate evil. Yet this does not take place in the literal, rock-hard sense apparently offered in the fairy tale, where the conferral of kingship on the hero happens here and now—good things in this tradition are *not* for tomorrow. In the course of the New Testament the land of milk and honey by contrast gets shifted definitively beyond the horizon; yet the promise holds good, and the triumph, assuming a cosmic dimension, becomes greater, even when expressed in literal terms for want of better (“The shout of them that triumph, / The song of them that feast”).<sup>3</sup>

Nonetheless a great deal of moral ambiguity is tolerated in the Old Testament as in folk tales, even in the doings of the “goodies,” the heroes. There is discomfort in reading about Jacob’s cheating his twin brother Esau out of his blessing and lying brazenly to his blind father while his mother eggs him on, and worse discomfort when we realize that his very own God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, will not hold it against

3. Bernard of Cluny, “Jerusalem the Golden,” trans. J. M. Neale.

him. The just God, who insists on the highest standards of integrity in all his people's dealings, appears to turn a blind eye to treachery in his favorite. Yet these stories of the Patriarchs in the book of Genesis, which display an ambiguity in regard to moral issues that is characteristic of primitive tale-telling, tell on another level a different truth to those with ears to hear. They speak of the infinite patience of God with those whom he has chosen to work out his purposes and bring his stories to their redemptive ending. Jacob, after grasping his father's blessing, finds it gets him nowhere without that of the God with whom he has at last to wrestle. He comes out of this contest blessed, but badly lamed, and only then is he given a new name and allowed to return to the Promised Land. These tales are a record of the first tentative steps on a long spiritual journey. The Fathers stepped round the discomfort generated by a proportion of Old Testament stories by reading them metaphorically and have left us a treasure house of scriptural interpretation. Theirs too is a reading between the lines, just as the medieval glosses literally were, lines within lines upon the page, like part-singing, with each voice maintaining its own tune.

The moral elasticity of these tales distinguishes them also from the legendary matter that comes to us already graced with a literary pedigree and firm cultural parameters. The heroes of epics and Arthurian romances are not jumped-up shepherd boys but nobles steeped in honor. Roland at Roncevaux, heavily outnumbered, puts a rearguard at risk because to call for help would demean him. Too late he blows his horn, bursting his temple with the effort; he dies, but so do all his companions. Yet even the wrong choice is presented wrapped in the tragic grandeur that mantles the doings of the Greeks.

But the Hebrew Scriptures are far from uniform, and as we turn the pages the picture changes: the oral component slips beneath the surface, Yahweh moves center stage and takes over. What he expects from his people becomes much

more clearly defined, and while their behavior does not necessarily improve (see David's elimination of the inconvenient Uriah<sup>4</sup>), those who transgress are left in no doubt about the consequences. Somewhat surprisingly, moral complexity, if not ambiguity, returns with the Son of God in the gospel parables. Here too is material drawn from the everyday and mediated to the man in the street, and as with fairy tales, the learned today are still working out the meaning of these stories. So are the rest of us, those who have not given up. Why was the dishonest steward / middle manager commended by his master?<sup>5</sup> Why, oh, why are those who have nothing to be deprived even of what they have?<sup>6</sup> I have listened to explanations and forgotten as many as I have heard; perhaps it is better to be wise than to be learned, perhaps the point of the parables lies not in catching the hare, but in continuing the pursuit.

We find a perfect folk tale in the unlikely context of the first Book of Kings: "The Lord appeared to Solomon in a dream and said, 'Ask what you would like me to give you.'"<sup>7</sup> In folklore the unconditional offer is the prerogative of those who, as here, have everything to give, and is frequently qualified with "half my kingdom," which is the same as saying "anything you want" or "wealth beyond your dreams." Alternatively it can be the quid pro quo of some demiurge, engaged in a trade-off with one who has acquired by chance or guile an unlooked-for advantage. There is usually a catch, and the beneficiary who is in line to win everything may end up with nothing. In all such stories excessive greed gets its due requital. Solomon, in asking for wisdom, shows himself wise before the event: courteous and self-deprecating, he asks for a gift that is sure to meet with the approval of the giver. Indeed, when Christ

4. 2 Sam 11.

5. Luke 16:1-13.

6. Matt 13:12; 25:29; Mark 4:25; Luke 19:26.

7. 1 Kgs 3:5-12.

said that to those that have, more would be given, he might have had Solomon in mind.<sup>8</sup>

So-called fairy tales were never the preserve of children, but of the eternal child that lives in all of us and that we suppress at our peril. Unless you become like little children, there is not much hope for you, said Jesus, without specifying clearly which childhood traits he had in mind. Homilists have focused on trustful dependence, a state that tends towards the obedience we like to see in children and used to whip into them, finding that it rarely came of nature. Jesus knew that children are also risk takers, resourceful, truth seers and truth sayers, the only ones to shout that the emperor has no clothes. Much of what we hear or read today, on page or screen or in the press, is less true than we think; our problem with Scripture is that most of it is truer than we can imagine. Perhaps we need to become as little children by returning to Looking-Glass Land.

### **The Power of the Name**

The answer to the trick question in the well-known tale of Rumpelstiltskin, said to go back some four thousand years, is the name of the “manikin” who sets the challenge. A name holds the secret of identity, and to know the name of someone was long thought to confer power. Calling by name implies an assumption that the person will come, like the child Samuel, summoned by the Lord out of sleep by the repetition of his name, “Samuel, Samuel.”

The power inherent in a person’s name affected nomenclature and modes of address at different times and in different societies. In the knightly class the baptismal name was rarely used among social equals, title, status, or the general “Good Sir” being deemed more appropriate, even between close

8. Matt 13:11-12.