

Malcolm Guite's
Faith, Hope and Poetry:
Theology and the Poetic Imagination

A Review

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Christian theology has experienced an exciting surge of interest regarding the imagination over the past decade, and Malcolm Guite's study *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination* similarly highlights the potential of the imagination to help enrich theological vision. He specifically focuses on poetry as a medium that foregrounds the immanence of embodied experience while at the same time offering tastes or glimpses of the transcendent. Indeed, Guite's goal is to show how theology can benefit from closer attention to the complexities of language: figurative speech does not detract from encounters with the divine. Rather, the book argues that such speech can "demonstrate the essential power of imagination to bridge the gap between immanence and transcendence, to mediate meaning between unembodied 'apprehension' and embodied 'comprehension'" (243). In attempting to show ways that this gap can be bridged, Guite draws on numerous examples across eight chapters to illustrate how the poetic imagination can nurture a revitalized vision of everyday life.

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Guite begins and ends with Irish poet Seamus Heaney, though *Faith, Hope and Poetry: Theology and the Poetic Imagination* primarily deals with English poetry from a range of genres. He travels from the early “The Dream of the Rood” to various contemporary poems by Heaney, with chapters on *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Tempest*, Sir John Davies, John Donne, George Herbert, Henry Vaughn, Milton, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Thomas Hardy, Philip Larkin, and Geoffrey Hill. While Guite comments in a footnote that by “English” poetry he means poetry written in English, he primarily examines poetry from England. Of course, he must deal with the very tangible need to focus the scope of the project, but his choice of poets notably excludes women or postcolonial poetry. Poets such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning or Christina Rossetti could conceivably have fit within his undertaking; both of these women write highly crafted poetry, encouraging their readers to participate in the profound renewal of vision for which Guite advocates.

In the introduction, Guite addresses critiques of the imagination from various quarters, though these are recurring issues that he brings up in more depth in his studies of each poet and individual text. In a welcome move to avoid reductive thinking, Guite seeks not to polarize scientific, theological, and imaginative forms of knowledge; instead, he argues that the imagination functions as a crucial element of scientific and theological endeavour. In doing so, he moves beyond an oppositional reading of science as exhibiting an impoverished reliance on reason alone, though he notes a number of thinkers from the Enlightenment as well as in theology itself who are skeptical about language’s rich capacity for expressing symbol and metaphor. He is a bit tougher on post-modern thinking – singling out Derrida’s deconstruction – suggesting that it denies any ‘outside’ to language and thus refuses the possibility of the transcendent. Guite therefore rejects such thinking, asserting that the transcendent occupies a unique relationship with language in the form of poetry. He argues that “if poetry as a manifestation of particular em-

bodiment speaks of the immanence of God, then poetry as a means of cleansing and transfiguring vision speaks of God's transcendence" (242). The connection here is a crucial one as it points to a lively interplay between experiences of God in the everyday and daily life's immersion in the divine; this interplay is particularly encouraged by the imaginative capacity of poetry to alter how readers conceive of and approach their lived realities.

Guite sees poetry as a "truth-bearing faculty" that renews vision and embodies the glimpses of the transcendence of God through language, symbol, and the incarnation of meaning. Language cannot be divested of symbol or metaphor as Enlightenment thinkers hoped, but this fact, Guite argues, is its strength: symbol and metaphor are crucial to understanding how imaginative expression – especially poetry in this particular context – urges us to see things from a fresh perspective and "help[] us apprehend something of the mystery embodied in that phrase 'the Word was made flesh'" (2). This embodiment speaks to the *Imago Dei* as an integral part of the imagination, and Guite conveys strong belief in how this aspect of the imagination can be transformative: "If part of the *Imago Dei* is itself our creative imagination then we should expect the action of the Word, indwelling and redeeming fallen humanity, to begin in, and work outward through, the human imagination" (14).

At the same time, while Guite strongly believes in the power of the poetic imagination to offer glimpses of the divine amidst the immanent, he is also aware of the "fallen" nature of human faculties. He views this fallenness mostly in terms of "the disordering or imbalance of relations *between* our capacities of reason and imagination" (11), but also comments that the imagination can "lapse into idolatry and unhelpful fantasy" (13). I would be interested in Guite's perspective on the traumatized imagination as well as imagination disordered by violence and suffering; neither of these manifestations of the imagination fit into the categories of idolatry or unhelpful fantasy, but are

instead examples of how the imagination struggles to see anew in the midst of pain and vulnerability. He starts to approach this issue in his discussion of poets, like Heaney and Thomas Hardy, who reflect on societal violence and collective feelings of desolation in individual poems. As I mentioned, however, Guite could treat more directly how poetry can consider the imagination's pain and vulnerability and how his emphasis on transcendence can work into such a consideration.

Guite's readings of his selected poems are where his passion for poetry, commitment to renewed vision of the Divine in everyday life, and insight into the imagination compellingly emerge. He meticulously attends to the craft and practise of poetry while also possessing a vivid and lush way of exploring its implications, as demonstrated in the way he describes Seamus Heaney's "The Rain Stick": "Such rich imagery demands a slow and succulent reading, a *tasting* of the words as they flow...[a] celebration of the very words and sounds as good in themselves" (17). This more engaged way of reading, as Guite calls it, works in concert with attention to close reading techniques such as tasting, echo and counterpoint, images and allusions, ambiguity and ambivalence, and perspective and paradox. Through employment of these techniques, Guite delves into each poet's work, carefully teasing out the manifold ways they encourage readers to participate in transfigured vision and open themselves to the divine through the imagination. In the chapter on Sir John Davies, an Elizabethan poet he considers vastly underrated, the discussion unites Guite's central preoccupations with how poetry invigorates the body, speaks to the spiritual, and avoids the reductionism all too common to contemporary science: "The whole poem ends with an acclamation appealing to us not to despise, marginalise or ignore the hidden spiritual dimensions of our life, this light that pervades the atmosphere of our bodies. It as though Davies could foresee the coming disaster of reductionism" (99). The discus-

sion of Geoffrey Hill similarly highlights the book's consistent attention to the theological implications of each poet's work:

the confrontation between Christ and the poet becomes ever more vivid and intimate...the poet, having tried to explain martyrdom as a kind of 'self-wounding', suddenly sees through and behind it all, to Cavalry, and realises that what happens there is something that no amount of intervening history can eradicate or explain away, that in the paradoxes of God's death there, something is offered that cannot be ignored, even if it remains 'unfound' (197).

Guite's argument for the value of the poetic imagination asks the reader to reconsider their relationship to poetry, suggesting that such reconsideration can stimulate a transformation of theological vision. Through symbol and metaphor, poetry can break open habituated patterns of reading and faith, encourage constructive questioning, and point to new ways to conceive the divine in embodied life.