

The Thirty-second
ERIC SYMES ABBOTT

Memorial Lecture

FAITH & IMAGINATION:

How the Arts speak to the reality of the Unseen

delivered by

Salley Vickers

Former psychoanalyst, literary critic and best-selling author
of *Miss Garnet's Angel* and *The Cleaner of Chartres*

at Westminster Abbey

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and

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on Friday 12 May 2017



The Very Revd Eric Symes Abbott
(1906 – 1983)

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Faith & Imagination: How the Arts speak to the reality of the Unseen
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Faith & Imagination:

How the Arts speak to the reality of the Unseen

May I begin by telling you a story about Eric Abbott whose memory we are here today to honour and celebrate? Before I threw caution to the winds and embarked on the perilous career of novelist, I worked for many years as a psychoanalyst/psychotherapist. In that time I had in my care a woman who has since died. I shall keep her anonymous but I do not think she would mind my recounting this story as it was one she often liked to tell herself. She was a very gifted school teacher but she was emotionally fragile, susceptible to that syndrome psychotherapists increasingly recognise: a savage and impossibly taxing perfectionism. During her periods of fragility, my client was beset by a fear that she was too lacking in faith in the value of life to be acceptable to God. During one of my annual breaks over the summer, she experienced just such a depression and with me away called upon the help of Eric Abbott. I am not sure how she had first come to his notice but she had often quoted his sermons to me in our sessions together and on some earlier occasion she had corresponded with him. On this occasion, with me out of the country, she wrote to him explaining that she was at a crisis point and felt that she could not go on feeling, as she did, incapable of faith in a wicked world. Never having spoken to my client, Eric telephoned her and spent half an hour counselling her, ensuring, I am convinced, her renewed hold on life. When I called to thank him he said, 'It's what I am here for. To be a spokesman for God for those who are in pain or distress.'

I met Eric several times after that and felt that few people could have been better chosen to speak in human terms on God's behalf. One of the subjects we discussed was the problem of encouraging faith in an increasingly secular society. Since Eric's death, I fear society has moved further, on the one hand, on a tide of secularism, on the one other, on a surge of faith that has taken an increasingly dangerous and disturbing path. One of the matters that I remember Eric being taken by was my suggestion that loss of faith was possibly linked to a decline in the appreciation of the arts. So, as one who nowadays tries to contribute to the arts and has a concern for the wellbeing of the arts in our society, it was this subject that I felt in honour of Eric I would like to talk about today.

'Faith' we are told in Letter to the Hebrews, is, in the KJV translation, 'the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen' (Heb. XI.1). The author of Hebrews then goes on to give a tremendous list of all the many occasions when the Old Testament

figures have let faith be their protection and guide. ‘What more shall I say?’ he continues, in his vociferous way, having apparently already run the gamut of all the Old Testament heroes, ‘of Gedeon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets: Who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens...’ (We can at least be thankful in these otherwise benighted times that there is not the same call on us to stop the mouths of lions ...) There is more to follow in this vigorous catalogue and this is not just because of the author’s seemingly inexhaustible energy but because what he is proposing is that almost anything which is not subject to tangible proof requires us to have faith since faith is the necessary prerequisite to belief in anything unseen.

We live in a world where there is a high – some would say almost exclusive – premium placed upon empirical evidence or scientific testing. And yet, as Tennyson says, ‘Nothing worth proving can be proven / Nor yet disproven’ (‘The Ancient Saga’) as very little which gives value and meaning to life can be tested or ‘seen’. Yet today we have research programmes to test the efficacy of prayer, and experiments conducted into whether those who die can survive death; and an area of the brain has been identified which can be demonstrably shown to be activated when we are in love. But none of those empirical tests get to the bottom of prayer, or the way that those who have died continue to haunt us, or the continuing mystery of the affections of the human heart. The best such experiments can do is to register that there is a physical co-relative, a counterpart, to what I like to call ‘intangible realities’.

The poet, William Blake, as so often, puts his uncanny finger on the limitations of a purely materialist description.

The atoms of Democritus,
And Newton’s particles of light,
Are sands upon the Red sea’s shores,
Where Israel’s tents do shine so bright.

Democritus was a pre-Socratic philosopher and in the 6th century BCE (I am not sure if Blake would have known this) ‘science’, which of course merely means ‘knowledge’, was a common subject of poetry and philosopher-scientists habitually wrote their thoughts in a poetic form. In fact even Newton, in the comparatively modern seventeenth century, believed in alchemy and astrology and had a fascination for the irrational. But what Blake’s epigrammatic lines indicate is that we now live in a world

which assumes a separation between the material and immaterial realms.

As well as the part of the brain which is activated when we are in love, there is a part popularly known among scientists as the 'God Circuit' which, if stimulated, gives rise to perceptions of the infinite or the ineffable even in those who are convinced atheists. This area of the hippocampus is of comparatively modern evolution: as with the grammar centre, it is a mere upstart system only having evolved within the last 100,000 years. But this centre, which is more active in certain people, epileptics as well as religious visionaries, and appears to be a corollary of certain religious experience, does not of itself account for, explain or define religious experience, or prove that it is simply a function of a particular set of nerve cells and neural pathways. All it shows is that religious experience has a physical resonance and dimension and, incidentally, this also may suggest that its appearance at a certain point in our human development had an evolutionary purpose. It is possible that receptivity to religious belief has a role in human survival. In a sense, though, religious experience is itself 'evidence of things not seen', since it is an identifiable measurer of what in its very essence is invisible. Some would prefer to say non-existent rather than invisible; but if these experiences are non-existent one can only say they have always been 'non-existent' in a deeply influential way.

The poet Francis Thompson left when he died an unpublished poem which many of you may know. It begins:

O world invisible, we view thee,
O world intangible, we touch thee,
O world unknowable, we know thee,
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee.

The poem employs paradox to define the phenomenon which the 'love' experiment on the brain reveals: the human capacity to be affected, at the sensory level, by what is seemingly invisible, intangible, unknowable and inapprehensible. Being a poet, Thompson goes on, through the use of language, to bring all that – the invisible, the ineffable, the unknowable – to birth in our imagination and consciousness.

Does the fish soar to find the ocean,
The Eagle plunge to find the air,
That we ask of the stars in motion
If they have rumour of thee there?

Not where the wheeling systems darken,
And our benumbed conceiving soars,
The drift of pinions, would we harken,
Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.

The Angels keep their ancient places;
- Turn but a stone and start a wing!
'Tis ye, tis your estrangèd faces,
That miss the many-splendoured thing.

But (when so sad thou canst no sadder)
Cry; - and upon thy so sore loss
Shall shine the traffic on Jacob's ladder
Pitched between Heaven and Charing Cross.

Yea, in the night, my soul, my daughter,
Cry; - clinging Heaven by the hems;
And lo, Christ walking on the water,
Not of Genesareth, but Thames!

The poem is about faith, in this case the capacity to perceive and thus to 'see' in the everyday what cannot be perceived by every day vision; to see the marvellous, the remarkable, within the ordinary and, importantly, to interiorise it.

But it could just as well be a poem about the imagination. The capacity to transpose the image of the vision of Jacob's ladder, from its original site in Ancient Israel in a story in the Old Testament, to a twentieth-century London railway station, or Christ walking towards his disciples across the Sea of Galilee to his progress across our cold Thames, is not merely a matter of faith or belief, it requires also an act of creation. Nobody, not even the devout and mystical Francis Thompson, believes that there were winged beings mounting and dismounting a ladder constructed somewhere in the sky above a Central London terminus. The Israelites may have believed this marvel actually occurred in their forefather Jacob's history, but then they lived in a culture where the visible and invisible were more of a philosophical continuum. What Francis Thompson does is to create, through the medium of poetic language, a place within us, within our imaginations, where the image of that heavenly ascent and descent has a reality of a different kind to that which we use to negotiate a railway journey via Charing Cross – but, an important but, is still, none the less, a coherent and describable reality. Anyone reading or hearing that poem will have some sort of image in their mind of angels,

ladders, railway stations, water, and mixed in with all of these another element, an emotional element which, to use the poet's own image, clings to the hem of the poem – a something to do with passion, which is also something to do with suffering, and also to do with suffering's impassioned answer. In other words, through the process of the poem Francis Thompson gives form and substance to 'things not seen'.

Shakespeare was very interested in this 'realising', or making real, faculty of the imagination. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* he has Duke Theseus compare the 'lunatic, the lover and the poet' who, he tells us, are 'of imagination all compact.'

And as imagination bodies forth
The form of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name. (*AMND* V.i.8-23)

In this speech, it is the creative power of the imagination rather than faith which is being emphasised – but Shakespeare's phrase, 'the form of things unknown' has a clear echo of the Letter to the Hebrews' 'evidence of things not seen' and incidentally, 'evidence' is a word which derives from 'videre', the Latin verb 'to see' – which is why I suspect the translators of the King James Bible used 'evidence', rather than the modern 'conviction', because it makes a kind of conceit, a meaningful word play, on things 'seen' and 'not seen'.

Bear in mind that when Shakespeare has Theseus use the word 'nothing' whatever opinion he may have given Duke Theseus the author of *Duke Theseus* intends no disparagement. Few words were as potent and significant to Shakespeare as 'nothing'. 'Nothing will come of nothing' King Lear warns his daughter, Cordelia, but the whole body of that awesome play is born out of those awfully ironic lines. Everything, but everything, comes from that 'nothing' in 'King Lear', rather as everything comes out of the void in the story of creation in Genesis, and 'genesis' in Greek, of course means 'birth'. So the very first book of the Bible means 'Birth', just as the second book, 'Exodus' means 'Exit', which, once you know it, makes the opening of the Old Testament suddenly sound suddenly startlingly modern.

Let us put it like this: faith is the hope of the truth of the unseen and imagination is the faculty which gives form to or brings to birth the unseen, so that its reality becomes manifest and, in a special sense, 'visible' to us.

The Francis Thompson poem talks of angels, and angels are a good example of the way

a meeting of faith and imagination gives rise to this special kind of super-substantial reality. And they also happen to be a subject which has quickened my own imagination. Because I am known for having written a book about an angel, and because similar other-worldly beings drift in and out of all my books, people sometimes ask if I believe in angels and spirits and ghosts and so forth. The question is interesting because behind it is an implicit either/or: is what I write about something I believe in as an actuality, or am I merely having a bit of a fanciful play? As if there are only these alternatives.

In my novel *Miss Garnet's Angel* I retell – recreate - a very old story alongside the contemporary story of my heroine, Julia Garnet. The story is that of Tobit, one of the Nephthali tribe, which along with nine other of the twelve tribes of Israel was carried off in 722 BCE, in one of the first recorded holocausts, by the conquering Assyrians to disappear for all time. Old Tobit exiled in Nineveh, according to the story which has been passed down to us via the Hebrew scriptures, continued to exercise his Jewish piety by burying the dead, an activity outlawed in the story by his Assyrian captors (although in reality the Assyrians, like the Jews, did bury their dead and it seems unlikely this was ever an actual historical embargo on the Jewish immigrant population). However, as the story goes, as an indirect result of his subversive burial activities, Tobit is rendered blind and incapacitated, and as a consequence sends his only son, Tobias, on a journey, to the far off land of Media to collect a family debt.

The concept of debt is itself interesting when we consider that the Greek in the Lord's Prayer actually asks not that our 'trespasses' be forgiven (as in the Book of Common Prayer) but that according to Matthew VI.12 our 'debts' be cancelled, while Luke XI.4 has 'sins' in the sense of 'falling short'. In the original Greek – which of course was a translation of the Aramaic, although Jesus may have taught the original in either Hebrew or direct in Greek – it reads:

καὶ ἄφεσις ἡμῖν τὰ ὀφειλήματα ἡμῶν, (Matt. VI.12); or, τὰς ἀμαρτίας ἡμῶν, (Lk. XI.4)
and cancel/forgive/release for us the debts (Matt) or sins/fallings short (Luke) of us.

The evangelists continue:

ὥς καὶ ἡμεῖς ἀφήκαμεν τοῖς ὀφειλέταις ἡμῶν (Matt. VI.12)

as also we have cancelled the debtors of us

or καὶ γὰρ αὐτοὶ ἀφίομεν παντὶ ὀφείλοντι ἡμῖν (Luke XI.4)

for we also cancel everyone/thing owing to us

I believe that these phrases – though I am mindful I am on dodgy ground here as I am not a Koiné Greek scholar – can also be rendered 'cancel our debts in so far as we have cancelled the debts owing to us'. When Jesus speaks of 'debts' he clearly isn't talking

the language of a Barclays Bank manager or a mortgage broker. Jesus is talking in the language of a culture where the actual still stood in for the metaphorical, so what he is describing are those myriad incalculable things we tend to feel we are owed, forgetting, very often, all the equally many things (or more) which we ourselves owe. What the great prayer really says, I want to suggest, is that once we overlook what we are owed, what we owe is also lifted from us, not as a quid pro quo but through or, by virtue of, our own impulse of and capacity for forgiveness. In the creative act of cancelling a debt owed we have our own debts cancelled (I could wish the German finance minister would bear this in mind in his strictures over the poor Greek people.)

In a still earlier period of history, the eighth century BCE, when the story of Tobit was evolving and probably first being recounted orally, the actual lived on an even firmer footing alongside the metaphorical, indeed the two were usually one. There was no need for 'metaphor' to 'transfer' anything to a 'higher' or more abstract level because that wasn't how the second or third or eighth century BCE mind worked. Before Tobias sets off for Media, his father, fussing about his son's safety as conscientious fathers will, urges him to hire a serving-man from the market place to accompany him on the hard and dangerous journey that he's about to undertake. It's more than a step and a hop to Media from Nineveh so you can imagine the sort of fellow Tobit has in mind: physically strong, capable, courageous, level-headed, steadfast, loyal, in fact exactly the qualities that Tobias needs to accomplish his mission successfully, the qualities which will make him into a mature man. And Tobias finds just the right person, going by the name of Azarias, and he, or his people, is even known to Tobias's father from the old days back at the temple in Jerusalem when things were done as they should be; except that he is not Azarias at all, we are told, in our privileged position as audience, but the Archangel Raphael, one of the seven great archangels who 'go in and out before the face of the Holy one'.

Or is he? Is this so-called archangel in disguise perhaps just the bundle of qualities which young Tobias needs and will acquire as he makes his testing journey into maturity? Is the story not saying, in an imaginative fashion, that the passage to manhood is a perilous one, and that to make it successfully some more-than-ordinary help may be needed, and if we look for it, is on hand?

The idea that this, at one level, is an initiation story is borne out by the fact that once embarked on the journey the issue of the family debt is quickly side-tracked. Away from the father, Azarias introduces a whole new factor into their quest – a potential marriage between Tobias and a young kinswoman, called Sara, who, rather like the debt, has apparently been forgotten until now but is conjured into sudden significance by the

angel. Or you could say, that once the young man gets away from the rather stifling home atmosphere, and begins to assert his masculine authority and independence, his mind turns naturally away from financial matters to sex and marriage and the other family obligation falls naturally to the back of his mind.

The girl, Sara, turns out to be cursed. A savage demon, Asmodeus, is lodged inside her body and has murdered seven men who have tried, and failed, to penetrate her virginity; but with the help of Azarias, alias Raphael, Tobias is able to find the necessary spirit to banish the demon and penetrate and finally marry the girl, and even collect the family debt, and finally, cure his father's blindness. Only after all this does Raphael reveal himself as an angel.

In my twentieth century version of this story I recast the demon as a form of sexual neurosis and the story of Toby and Sarah, the twentieth century cousins, as the overcoming of evil and guilt by the power of love. I dress the drama in contemporary clothes: sex, guilt, child abuse, mismanaged psychotherapy, but these are just other ways of defining what is differently described in the old story.

Who shall say which is 'better', or more true or real? And who, or what, is Raphael, really? In my novel, he is the only character who appears in both stories but he appears, too, in other guises, not only as Azarias, the hired hand in the Tobit story, but also in the forms of various characters who act in helpful ways in the contemporary story of Julia Garnet – because what I am trying to show, taking my cue from the old wise story, is that angels are not so much other beings, but states of otherness, or, states of being other, however you like to put it. They are whatever helps us to rise above what we are, or have been, which in most people's lives is usually accomplished through the agency of other people. So, it is not a question of whether or not I believe in angels but that angels provide a time-honoured form for dramatizing what today we have only rather nebulous and abstract concepts for. You might say I am playing with these old ideas, but the play is a serious one. As Shakespeare knew, and Hamlet tragically forgets, the play's the thing – the play is real.

Let me now turn to an example of faith given by the author of Letter to the Hebrews in which so-called angels also feature. They appear in the form of the three anonymous guests who pitch up unannounced at the dwelling of Abraham and Sarah. 'Through faith also Sarah herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age' the author of Hebrews tells us. You may have seen these angelic visitors depicted on Byzantine paintings, sitting rather stiffly, their wings not altogether accommodated by the seating arrangements, along one side of a table while Abraham

and Sarah humbly wait on them. These are the first of a number of divine visitations which lead finally to the naming of Jacob and the establishing of the kingdom of Israel.

It is interesting that there are three of these strangers because while they are three they are also one. In the Biblical context it is hard not to think of the Christian Trinity but I suspect the Christian Trinity takes that form because, as the ancients knew, the number three is a numinous one being both creative and inclusive. In another ancient culture the Pythia, the priestess at Delphi who uttered the prophetic sayings of the god Apollo, delivers the divine oracular pronouncements from her tripod. Three forms part of most modern psychological theories: id, ego, super-ego – shadow, ego, self, but also three is a fundamental number for life: man, woman, child. No matter how genetic science evolves, or human beings choose their gender, for life to continue there will always be needed a sperm, which is male, to enter an ovum, which is female, to produce a new human life.

The author of the Book of Genesis tells us that these three strange beings are aspects of the Lord and it seems also pretty clear that the very late conception of the child Isaac, who will be born to Abraham and Sarah, is an oblique consequence, or corollary, of their act of unpremeditated hospitality. Sarah is, or has been, barren. In economic terms this is a problem for the wife of a future patriarch but let's forget the outer situation for a moment and concentrate on the inner.

The Jewish God, Yahweh, is often depicted as being either up on his high horse or being a bit of a wet-blanket, but here we have a charming example of the way he rewards the elderly Sarah by making her laugh: 'Sarah laughed within herself saying, After I am waxed old, shall I have pleasure in my Lord, being old also?' (Gen.18 v.12)

The ambiguity of 'Lord' in the KJV translation (seeming to imply that it might be either her husband or her God she is referring to) is suggestive. In entertaining the strangers Sarah gives access to something larger, and her husband whose ministrations have so far left her barren, is now imbued with the numinous procreative abilities of her God. It is lovely moment of spontaneity – a kind of jubilant precursor, and antithesis, of the Last Supper, and in many ways as significant in its outcome.

'Entertain' means to accept and take in willingly, hold or keep among. The three vital presences, angels, or aspects of the Lord, are accepted graciously, nurtured, given bread and wine, the basic foodstuffs of life which will become the symbols of communion with the divine. Furthermore, these visitors are given these goods in ignorance of who or what they are, under the law, not of exchange, but the other law, which is also as old

as civilisation, the law of hospitality – which gives without thought for the cost or for any return.

As with the Tobit story, it isn't necessary to see these mysterious guests as winged beings from another realm, even though in this form they make gravely beautiful subjects for paintings. In both the Hebrew and the ancient Greek Bible, the so-called Septuagint, which is our oldest extant translation of the Old Testament scriptures, they are not described as '*angelos*', which anyway merely means messenger, but as '*anashim*' or '*andres*', which, as you may know, means 'men'. They are men, we understand, but at the same time they are aspects or reflections, call it what you will, of divinity not so much because of what they are in themselves but because of what they constellate in Abraham and Sarah, a generosity of spirit which is prepared to share whatever is available even under conditions of dearth. The inner dearth of the couple, their inability to conceive a child, is, through this uncalculated action, made fertile – and it is through this act of unpremeditated generosity that the strangers, the 'men', become not men but 'angels'. The miracle works both ways. For, assuredly, it is a miracle, but a miracle, as most miracles turn out to be, with wholly comprehensible psychological underpinnings. Both stories, the story of Abraham and Sarah and the Tobit story, take a common human difficulty, in the one case infertility, in the other frigidity, and give it not only a wider poetic appeal but also offer a dramatic account of how the difficulty may be surmounted – through trust, courage, self-forgetfulness, qualities – virtues, I would rather say – which while entirely human are not easily commanded without the aid of some other, 'higher', state of consciousness, and which, in turn, prove generative.

You get exactly the same kind of dramatisation of what we might today perceive as entirely internal and invisible processes in other great stories of the ancient world. In Homer, for example, the goddess Athene doesn't appear to Telemachus, Odysseus's son, as a goddess, she appears first as a family friend.

'Athene flashed down from the heights of Olympus, and on reaching Ithaca she took her stand on the threshold of the court in front of Odysseus's house; and to look like a visitor she assumed the appearance of a family friend, the Taphian chieftain, Mentès.' (*Odyssey* Book 1)

But her presence in Ithaca is not simply a clever piece of story-telling art. She is there for an important psychological purpose: to reassure and encourage Telemachus that his father is alive and needs him.

‘The reason for my presence here,’ says Athene, ‘is this. I actually heard that he was home – I mean your father. The gods must be hindering his return, because the good Odysseus is not dead. He must be on some distant island out at sea. I am no seer or soothsayer, but I will venture a prophecy to you which the immortal gods put into my mind. Your father will not be exiled for much longer from the land he loves so well. He will think of a way to return – he is endlessly resourceful.’

This comes at the very beginning of *The Odyssey* and it is this visit from Athene, in the likeness of an old friend of his father’s, which galvanises Telemachus to make enquiries after his father and to begin to deal effectively with the suitors who are plaguing him and his mother in Odysseus’s absence. But what is going on here? Or, how might we describe this scene today? I think we might say something like this: that a family friend came to pay a visit and through reminiscence and affectionate recall of Telemachus’s father activates something of the same paternal resourcefulness in his son. The human effect is the same but the means used to describe it is very different – and some of us frankly prefer Homer’s description because Homer’s account adds, if implicitly, this other dimension. The goddess is the vessel of valour and at the same time her numinosity is generated by the valour of the young man. The human being – some would say soul or psyche – in Homer’s version becomes the crucible for both the reception and recreation of the divine.

Gods and goddesses, angels and spirits, ghosts and demons are imaginative representations of the unseen realities which affect, and have always affected, human decisions at the deepest levels. A great tradition of art gives them the forms of independent external presences but this is only a way of assuring us of their objective if hidden reality, and, by extension the objective reality of the invisible world. But notice how I say ‘only’. The hint of apology defines the modern problem. For to conceive these forms, and also to recognise them for what they are, requires both imagination and faith. If we pooh-pooh Homer’s gods and goddesses, as old-fashioned phantasms of a less sophisticated more infantile era, we miss the depth and power of that culture’s understanding of human consciousness which is no less modern and psychological for being described in these seemingly unpsychological terms. (As if ‘psyche’ which is the Greek for soul, were a modern discovery anyway!).

There is a great moment towards the end of Shakespeare’s ‘The Winter’s Tale’ when Hermione, the wronged queen of Leontes, who, through the destructive consequences of his overweening jealousy, has been believed dead for sixteen years to all intents and purposes returns to life. She has been both dead and not dead, in a way that perhaps

only Shakespeare's genius could pull off – dead to the king her husband, and to her daughter, Perdita, but also alive, both to them and to us, as an image of vital life and unsentimental goodness which cannot be defiled. A story (another one!) has been put about that a statue of her has been fashioned by a consummate artist so like the real woman that it may be mistaken for Hermione herself. And the conceit is that of course it is no statue at all and is in reality the woman who has both lived and not lived in this lapse of time. At the moment of revelation, Paulina, the architect of this creative deception (as the Greeks knew, deception and illusion are the stuff of art, which is why, with the exception of Plato, they tended to tolerate liars) says to the assembled company, 'It is required you do awake your faith.' Only then does the living woman step, as it were, out of the stone. It's a truly amazing moment because Shakespeare really makes us feel that there has been not just a resurrection, and Hermione has been restored, but that art itself has crossed some mysterious threshold and come to life in our presence, become life itself, but a life now made incalculably more precious by being imbued with a proper awe which the apparent loss of it has guaranteed. And it is art, both the art of the sculptor, who doesn't exist, and Shakespeare's own art, which has created both the non-existent artist and his work of art – the 'statue' which exists in this mysterious place of otherness and which both is and is not a work of art – which has preserved this life within the large, elastic, numinous sanctuary of the play. Remember, too, that this is being played by an actress, or, in Shakespeare's day, an actor playing at being a woman, who is playing at being a queen, who, in turn, is playing at being a statue made out of stone. Think of all the complicated business which underlies this scene – and then hear that singular compelling moment when Paulina declaims, 'It is required you do awake your faith'. At that moment, all those other complicated elements drop away and become beside the point and we are left with another 'miracle', the miracle that those few simple sounding words can bring a dead woman back to life, not just for her husband and daughter, and the court of Bohemia, but also for all of us, for all time – or as long, anyway, as Shakespeare is read and heard and enters our being. And yet, as Leontes says, in words of heart-breaking simplicity, 'If this is art then 'tis an art lawful as eating.'

What is this 'art lawful as eating' which, like the food we digest, becomes, if we absorb it, inextricably part of us?

In the days when I taught literature I sometimes liked to play a game and ask students whether or not they considered Hamlet, the prince not the play, real. Obviously, there is a sense in which he is not. He doesn't pay taxes or parking fines, but then neither do many real people who are living. You might protest that nor, for example, does John Stuart Mill, who is not living but who once lived and has died and been given a

memorial service, but then I would say so has Hamlet, rather a splendid one, with pall-bearers and sounding trumpets. And yet, clearly, Hamlet has not died in the way John Stuart Mill has, and you and I surely will; neither is he alive in the way that you or I are, or John Stuart Mill once was. But I think you may agree with me that there is a sense in which Hamlet's reality is as assured, possibly more so, than John Stuart Mill's, or yours or mine. What I'm driving at, through the case of Hamlet, or Hermione, or Odysseus is that reality is not defined by the act of having been a subject of everyday sentient life. No-one can tell us exactly what Hamlet looks like as no-one has ever seen him, and yet we all know something of what he is like, what his essence is.

Hamlet, in fact, is not only real he is immortal. Although he does famously 'die', in a crucial and important sense he can never die; and yet his creator was a mortal man. I think where imagination and faith meet is not only in the conception, the perception and the bodying forth of things unseen, but in the power of those forms created, through the medium of imagination, to surpass death. 'The imagination', to quote from my another of my novels, *Mr Golightly's Holiday*, 'is a creator of worlds ... from (it) has issued, gods and kingdoms, people and purposes, stables and citadels, deserts and mountain tops, the defeat of principalities, the frail victory of hope.' In that book I try to suggest how the imagination is the creator, or, rather, the creator's chief executive, and how the creative principle is perpetually at work in and through – for as well as being a reflective it is also an active force – the imagination, that creation is not something which happened 'once upon a time' but is always happening, all the time, forever bringing new life to birth out of seeming nothingness, making what was unconscious conscious. Just as it was in the beginning.

1. In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.
2. And the earth was without form, and void.

Or, in another, later, version of the story of creation

1. In the beginning was the word. And the word was with God. And the word was God.

If you look at the original Greek:

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος

the word 'Word', *logos*, for 'account' could, I want to suggest, also be read as:

In the beginning was the story. And the story was with or for God. And the story was God.

A reading which, to a novelist, makes sense.

I suggested that when people asked if I believed in angels they were asking an either/or question: does she think angels are real – or not? And I have asked my own question is Hamlet real – or not? Behind both questions is a deeper one. What do we mean, by ‘real’; and, as a corollary, what do we mean by story? (By ‘story’ you can assume I include myth, poem, play, anything which apparently arises out of a mortal imagination but has an independent existence.) Paul and the disciples were asking people to believe a story, a hugely powerful one, that a man had died and come to life again simply because he loved enough. In fact, He, and the way he lived, came to define, at least for the Western world, what ‘real’ love means. It’s a terrific story and although it is unique it also shares much with other stories that have informed and nourished human society since the beginnings of civilised time. Real stories are not ours to make up. They are there to find, much as scientists, in another realm, find new particles or planets, if we are attentive enough and, if we are lucky, have their reality made real to us.

When I taught a course on myth I used to start by asking my students what a ‘myth’ was. The class would come up with various definitions and then I, rather smugly, would declare ‘a myth is something which gives us the facts’. Any real story is something that gives us the facts but for it to be ‘real’ it must be more than a mere description of factual events because that is merely an account of reality and not a recreation of the thing itself. But then I am begging the question again what is ‘real’?

Fairy stories, myths, legends, the plays of Shakespeare, the novels of Jane Austen, or George Eliot survive because they are stories which not only engage us with their truths but allow something real to happen inside us and maybe this is the key to their value. I’ve said elsewhere that the defining quality of great art is not that we understand it but that it understands us. But thinking about this talk, I felt I wanted to go further and suggest that a great work of the imagination expresses itself by working, and reworking, a creation within us, so that we are taken up by it and, through it, we too become a contributing part of a creating process and so evolve. A work of art makes us, for a while, become Hamlet, or Telemachus, or Hermione, or whoever it may be with whom the artist has aligned our sensibilities, so that with this ‘other’ we weep and tremble and curse and suffer and rejoice. And as we are captured by that ‘other’ reality our own reality is enlarged in the mystery of the ‘otherness’ of others. We might also, if we reflect on the experience, recognise that we have been deeply and powerfully and often irreversibly affected by something which at one level is no thing – a thing, or things, ‘not seen’.

It takes enormous faith in ‘things not seen’ to coax into life a story and be, in turn,

enlivened. I think in this way the creations of real art, Odysseus, Hamlet, Hermione, are true manifestations and evidence of ‘things not seen’, because they are also reflections of the biggest thing not seen, the process of unfolding which is creation – small stories which illuminate and dramatise that much larger story within which we all move and live and have our being.

But I believe, too, that faith works both ways. It takes faith to make the unseen seen but it also requires faith to see and believe in that unseen-made-seen. I am fond of the probably apocryphal story of the man who, watching ‘Othello’ for the first time, was unable to contain himself and shouted, ‘Can’t you see he’s fooling you, you stupid beggar?’ (I am bowdlerising his language in deference to my audience.) I am with that man, whose imagination was awakened enough to see that the darkness of Iago is real, deadly real, even though Iago cannot be detained in any psychiatric prison. Iago doesn’t disappear when the actor who plays him takes off his costume and goes home for a quiet pint. Iago exists, and he continues to exert his deadly influence and Shakespeare is there to ensure that we see him, and that his presence occupies and troubles our moral imagination, if we only have eyes and ears.

The eyes and ears are internal ones but as with our material bodies they need proper nourishment. This why it is vital that our children are helped to read, to go to plays, to listen to music and enjoy paintings. Because art is food for the spirit – and the consumption of art should be not only be ‘lawful as eating’ but understood as vital to our healthy sustenance as a society. The arts are the vessels that promote and keep alive faith in a deeper intangible reality, one that promotes a creative life that our age of galloping materialism is in grave and present danger of starving.

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