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EMBODIMENT AND INCARNATION: NOTES ON PREPARING AN ANTHOLOGY OF AUSTRALIAN RELIGIOUS VERSE

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Mr. Murray was born in Nabiac on the northern coast of New South Wales in 1938. He was raised on his parents' dairy farm at nearby Bunyah and, together with his wife, Valerie, and their five children, returned to his native region to live in 1986.

After attending local schools, Mr. Murray entered Sydney University in 1957 and, after discontinuing his studies for some years, gained his B.A. degree in 1969. He began writing at university, but it was not until 1971, after working in various survival jobs to support both his wife and family and his writing habit, that he became a full-time freelance author.

Mr. Murray's verse has appeared regularly in all worthwhile Australian literary magazines and increasingly in overseas journals. He published seven books of verse between 1965 and 1983, the latest being "The People's Otherworld" (Angus & Robertson, Sydney), and volumes of his selected verse have appeared in Australia and overseas. As well as poetry, Mr. Murray has written criticism, essays and book reviews, and has compiled and edited two important anthologies "The New Oxford Book of Australian Verse" (Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1986) and "Anthology of Australian Religious Poetry" (Collins Dove, Blackburn, 1986).

The recipient of many prizes and awards, including the C.J. Dennis Memorial Prize for Poetry (1976) and the Christopher Brennan Medal of the Fellowship of Australian Writers (1985), Mr. Murray is one of Australia's best poets and is regarded by many, including Peter Porter and Thomas Keneally, as a poet of international stature.

In 1984, I was approached by David Lovell of what was then Dove Communications in Melbourne to compile and edit an anthology of Australian religious poetry. "Do you want an anthology of Australian Catholic poetry?", I asked, seeking at once to clarify, and to delimit the job I was being asked to do. "No", was the reply, "not just Catholic". I then asked whether they'd like a book of Australian Christian poetry, thinking that that might at least have manageable limits, and knowing that no full-scale high-quality anthology of Christian verse written in this country was on the market at the time; I couldn't really recall one from the past either. Again, though, the reply was no. What was wanted was a wider survey, embracing religious poetry from all traditions and none. "Ah", I sighed: "you mean you want me to do the *hard one*?". I knew immediately, and had really known since the conversation began, that such a book was needed. Indeed, under the influence of R. S. Thomas' *Penguin Book of Religious Verse*, which had drawn upon the corpus of British poetry, I had even toyed at times with the idea of just such a book based on our own material. I may even have mentioned this idea to people, including Father Edmund Campion, the member of the Dove Board of Directors who, I gather, had instigated David's call to me. So I had quite possibly made the yoke that was being gently laid on my back, and I guess my questions were in part the wriggings of a man trying to get out of, or at least reduce, a heavy task he really knows he should undertake.

I must say the timing of the request was uniquely opportune. I had just embarked on my reading for another anthology, the *New Oxford Book of Australian Verse*, a huge job which would involve my examining the whole corpus of English language poetry written in Australia since European settlement, plus all accessible translations of Aboriginal song verse. Reading for another anthology at the same time would be a very small extra burden, and greatly preferable to doing the whole large survey twice at different times! It would be no trouble to photocopy likely poems for both anthologies at the same time and put them into two separate cardboard boxes for subsequent winnowing. In the end, my reading for the religious verse anthology went on for a few months after I had finished that for the Oxford book; some poems were sent to me by individuals, and I was able to track down more in publications outside the usual literary ambit. Readers of both anthologies may have noticed a degree of overlap between the two, however, and now they know how it came about. I really don't think the overlap means very much, beyond the mechanical circumstances

that brought it about; I would have been scanning the same corpus of published sources whether I did so twice or just once, and the spirit in which I did both jobs was, allowing for the different objects of the two collections, essentially the same. Poetry is my work, my field and I think my vocation, the prime channel through which I ever achieve (or am given) any apprehension of ultimate and Divine things. I'm fairly zealous in its defence and in its service, and I think it presents us with some highly important insights about the very nature of religion itself. Indeed I think that religions are themselves large poems, but I will come back to a discussion of that later in this paper.

Not all poetry is religious, of course. My first task, after settling the point that the book was to be essentially a survey, was to set up criteria by which poems would be admitted to the collection or excluded from it. I decided to keep these loose, in the sense that they would include a measure of instinct, of intuition and sympathy as well as a framework of intellectual clarity. I would not make strict intellectual definition central, because I don't think it ever finally is so, in the most important realms of life. I would, rather, make poetry itself central and decisive, because I believe, perhaps controversially, that this is a truer reflection of reality. No poem would be included if it lacked poetic quality. Some lowering of poetic wattage might be allowed in cases where nothing else was available to represent a theme or a tradition in our religious verse, but nothing wholly lacking a spark of poetry would be put in just for representation's sake. To do that would be to betray poetry itself and to belittle the thing represented. As I wrote in the Foreword, this was to be an anthology of poetry, not a source-book of religious sociology or a pious book of spiritual golden thoughts for all. In the same Foreword, I went on to write:

Most of the religious traditions existing in Australia are represented in this book, though there are bound to be a few gaps. No attempt has been made to ration representation in accordance with respective numbers of adherents. The religious configuration of the Australian literary world is apt, in all periods, to be different from that of the wider population, and talent is not shared out evenly among human groupings anyway. Also, and obviously, the religion of artists is quite often art itself; a poet's intense spiritual experience is apt to be bound up with writing poems. Art is anciently a part of religious activity, and is surely still at least continuous with it. I have only been a bit restrictive in respect of two broad poetic types: vague poetical pantheism of the automatic sort, and the more vapid kinds of devotional verse of whatever tradition. Anything more distinctive or specific is likely to have been represented, and the same goes for anything more strictly mystical or contemplative, in the proper sense of those words. I have regarded as coming within the ambit of this book any verse dealing with material commonly regarded as religious – this is partly why the book opens with bells, bishops

and church buildings, things that anyone might vaguely summon up when starting to think about the religious dimension – as well as any verse that seemed to me to evince some real engagement with the numinous. And this includes negative engagement, which is not to be confused with rejection.

Books of poetry which actually give primacy to the poetry in them are quite rare in our age, and I was compiling two of them that year. Most anthologies nowadays use a good deal, often a great deal, of managerial prose to marshal and discipline the poetry they are presenting, rather as if it were a primitive and rather dangerous force they were obliged to keep under control – and sometimes to harness for useful work, such as refining the souls of future office workers and grading their minds' quality in public exams. Poetry as a zoo animal, as an educative workhorse, as a fuel for political Molotov cocktails, as grist to an academic or therapeutic mill – these are some of the secret functions which the very design of most modern anthologies would have our ancient art serve, often while pretending to be its protectors, preserving it like a frail endangered species in a paper Wildlife Reserve. I had decided very firmly to do all I could to counter these received views. My two anthologies would carry as little managing prose as possible, so as to leave more room for poetry, but more importantly so as to give it its freedom and let it have its effect, without all the guide rails of commentary to which many readers will cling if they are provided. I would not even trammel my books with biographical data on the poets; other books contain those, and can be looked up. In the case of the religious verse anthology, I even eschewed poets' dates of birth and death (if things had gone that far with them) so as to exclude the relativising effects of an historical view. All the historical orientation I thought relevant went instead into the Foreword, and consisted pretty much in the observation that it was striking how much of the decent religious poetry of this country dated from the period since World War II; this is where the preponderance lay, and I left readers to mull over possible reasons why. I hesitate to give my opinion even now, though it is hard to resist the speculation that a decline in religious certainty has provoked an upsurge in searching and questioning – and a decline in an older sort of anti-religious hectoring, which required a firm opponent to batter against. Things have arguably gone too far for that now, and the near-total divorce of the State from any underlying religious ethic has produced not "freedom" but a terrifying void against which comfortable old Enlightenment audacities are meaningless. It is generations since being an agnostic involved any daring, and atheism tends to put one into coercive rather than generous company. More seriously, whether one believes in the

soul or not, neither of these positions feeds it; we feel its hunger as a matter of experience, and have nothing to feed it on but our own selves. At bottom, we cannot build a satisfying vision of life upon agnostic or atheist foundations, because we can't get our dreams to believe in them.

I could not, of course, attain utter purity in my rebellion against presuming to manage poetry. For one thing, the mass of material I had gathered had to be put into the book in some sort of order, for another thing there was the special case of Aboriginal verse. I was determined that the latter be presented as far as possible on the same terms as the rest, since it had been selected on the same terms of poetic impact, but in a few cases I relented and, in order to orient readers completely unfamiliar with Aboriginal culture, left in the notes supplied by those, usually anthropologists, who first translated particular song-texts. The fact that the Aboriginal poems were all really translations, from another culture if not from another language as well, gave them a claim to some privileges. In ordering the book as a whole, I resorted to loose, unlabelled groupings based on primary or apparent subject matter, always ruefully conscious that even to say what a poem is about is to limit its life and begin to constrict it in a web of prose. And of course the timeless Aboriginal song-texts with their utterly different relationship to subject matter tended to cut across the constellations of common concern traceable in the English-language poems.

Critical reaction to the anthology when it came out was mostly generous and favourable. Some said, rightly, that I had over-represented myself: I simply hadn't noticed that, as I put the book together. Some people regretted the absence of favourite poems, and I am sorry myself about some of my omissions. I should perhaps have had just a little more of Father Hartigan ("John O'Brien") on an older style of Catholic family devotions, because he gives us perhaps our best window on those, and really conveys their sweetness in ways that are only occasionally cloying to modern tastes. I fight hard against being a prisoner of the sensibility of my own time, or of any time, but that is one case where I failed in my fight. I should have been more diligent, too, in my search for Australian hymns. Those are difficult poetic territory because only some of them work on the page, without their proper dimension of music. They belong to the realm of song, which most kinds of poetry have been drawing away from for centuries in order to be a pure and not a composite art form. The music of most of the poetry written in the last few centuries is verbal and

gestural, bound up in the sounds of words and the ordering of breath which the structures of written verse are designed to bring about; it is also frequently present in the logic of a poem. All of this would usually be merely impeded by an overt musical accompaniment - and to call the musical side of song an accompaniment is to denigrate its importance, in the majority of cases. Song really is pretty much a separate art, and I am less than confident when I get into it. Some critics, in fact quite a few, spoke of the preponderance of Catholic material in the book, which may be so, but I claim in reply that this reflects the situation I was examining; I'm pretty sure I didn't over-represent Catholic material in relation to what exists in print in our literature. In fact, I was on my guard against this danger, and this possibility of bias in myself. It was amusing that some who complained of my neglecting identifiably Protestant material weren't any longer practising members of their original denominations: loyalty outlives commitment, it seems, or may be meant to serve as a residue from which commitment may regrow. A few were forgivably disoriented by the lack of signposting in the book, and quite a few were puzzled at some of the inclusions, wondering how this or that poem could be regarded as "religious" at all. No one, so far as I can recall, went into detail as to which poems troubled them in this way, and though I have told a few inquirers privately why I put in particular poems, it would violate the spirit of the book if I were to go into public defences of particular inclusions, particularly if I were merely guessing which poems to defend. I merely claim, therefore, that I had my reasons in each case, and I leave it to individual meditation to wrestle with apparently puzzling cases.

Of all the reviews, I think the one which understood best of all what I had been trying to do was that published in the Anglican (or anyway Anglican-based) *Eremos Newsletter* (No. 18, February 1987) by my fellow poet John Foulcher. Under the title "Poetry as Divining Rod" John wrote that his very uncertainty as to why much of what he read in the book was strictly speaking "religious" came to seem the key to understanding it. He goes on to say:

On one level, this lack of apparent structure looks decidedly perverse – when I read an anthology, I like to dabble a bit, read a few favourite poems and the like, rather than reading the entire thing right through. I suspect most people approach poetry in the same way. Yet Murray forces us to actually read the book as a whole in much the same way as we would read a novel – a long picaresque outing written from the viewpoint of many disparate characters. Ultimately, this dumping of the reader into a virtual sea of poetry turns out to be one of the book's major strengths. You don't drown in it, as you thought you would, but you're buoyed by the constant interplay between the earthy and

the mystical, between despair and hope, cynicism and faith. And when it's all over, you find you're still breathing, but you're immersed in that basic question Murray begs throughout: just what is "religion"? ... It comes as no surprise then, to find work by many of Australia's greatest writers here, many who would not call themselves religious, and who certainly would not call themselves Christian. But the book implies that the poet and the theologian can cover the same ground, they just approach it from different angles. I like this approach, as it forces truth to be separated from dogma and self-interest, it returns God to the wordless, and then tries to find words for Him.

A Catholic might have added here that forcing truth to be separate from dogma for a moment is done in order to allow it to recover its freshness, its poetry. I assent to the dogmas of the Church, but I was compiling an anthology of work by authors who might or might not assent to them for readers who similarly might or might not, and I had to be fair to all equally. Dogmas, too, quickly and inescapably approach the condition of prose, though they are ultimately grounded in a sublime poetry. The Popes are the administrators, we should remember, of a great ever-living poem – and perhaps no poem in the anthology shows a more sympathetic awareness of that, or describes it better, than the superficially risqué "Pope Alexander VI", by my old colleague Geoffrey Lehmann, who often presents himself as a fierce anti-Catholic. Again, my making the poetic dimension and experience paramount in the book's design arose partly from a realisation that in an age of seemingly hopeless religious fragmentation, poetry itself is one of the few channels of spiritual life all may still have in common. Indeed it may be the only one. And given Literature Board fellowships, few and brief as they are, it may indeed be our only established church. Each person may be caught up in the large "poem" of his or her beliefs, or involved with fragments of several such, but poetry itself remains as an available universal value. I was sorry that one poet whose work would have yielded many worthwhile inclusions in the anthology misunderstood this, and refused to be represented because he did not want to be seen as a religious poet. It was no part of my intention to present anyone as that, or to pigeonhole them in any way. As John Foulcher goes on to say, after commenting on some adverse reactions to his own work by a Sydney Christian arts group:

I think such people wouldn't like Murray's anthology: in the long run they're probably not interested in poetry. Nor, perhaps, are they interested in religion. They seem to be interested in order, in neatness, and that's precisely what Murray refuses to provide. In the book's final poems – the most metaphysical of all, concerned with the "Spirit" or "Presence" of God in the world – we are left with a sense of yearning, of longing. And if anything unites the poems in the anthology, it is precisely that sense. On that level, poets are basically a religious lot, and religious people have a lot of poetry inside them.

The problem John encountered with those straitly devout people seems to have been that they disapproved of his using poetry as a key to the subconscious, bringing into the open our greatest fears and doubts as well as our great joys. Anxiety and despair come through that door to the light of day, and poetry is not always the obediently reassuring, inspirational thing some want it to be. To expect it to be so is to ask it to be subservient to laws not its own, and this is a very effective way of killing it off, because for its very life it has to dare the great depths. So does religion, in exactly the same way, if it is not to be merely a neurotic refuge from life. No one exactly said so, but it may have been a shock to some readers to see the likeness of their own religious commitment in strange mirrors, in poems dealing with such religion-substitutes as drugs, doctrinaire politics or the obsessive nationalist heart-searching we go on with in Australia, the sort of domestic Shinto with which we revere every fragment of national distinctiveness, sometimes in rites made of searing ridicule. All these aspects of our religious consciousness are reflected in the book, as are the authentic spiritual insights of atheists and the stinging criticisms of anti-religious polemic. Most importantly, authentic spiritual experience is present everywhere, from moments of illumination to whole passages of positive and negative mystical encounter. An example of the latter would be Lex Banning's "Apocalypse in Springtime", with its profound evocation of a sense of nothingness that deepens and deepens but oddly does not seem to include the observer who experiences it. A positive parallel to it would be Kenneth Mackenzie's "Two Trinities", in which a man realises his distance from all his earthly attachments and finds himself ready to accept his soul's invitation to accompany it on its journey. Other examples of this same theme can be found in the anthology, along with many other sets of experience which can be discussed only in terms provided by religion. As a sort of lowest common denominator, there's even a small clump of ghostly poems, involving the universal human experience of the delicious shudder, or *grue* as my old master Rudolf Otto called it, borrowing a word from the Scots. Here, though, I must stop itemising the book's contents, or I will start to sound like a publisher's representative out to push it.

The point I am making, of course, is that the book is filled with experiences, and concerned with experience, because it is founded upon a single experience with which all those reported in its pages are congruent. This is the poetic experience, the thing poets and their readers share, and the thing we all seek from poetry. This, as I have said elsewhere, is an experience as primary and

distinctive as sex or the enjoyment of food. It is the verbally-based version of the aesthetic experience, that which transfixes us in the presence of a great painting or sculpture, or enraptures us in music. It seems, at bottom, to be an experience of wholeness. If a poem is real, it is inexhaustible; it cannot be summarised or transposed into other words. Something intrinsic in it inhibits us from doing so, and makes us feel silly and frustrated if we try. It is marked by a strange simultaneity of stillness and racing excitement. Our mind wants to hurry on and have more and more of it, but at the same time it is held by an awe which yearns to prolong the moment and experience it as timeless. We only half-notice, consciously, that our breathing has tightened and altered, submitting to commands from beyond ourselves. It shifts in and out of this sympathetic obedience as the experience oscillates within us, coming and going in its successive small peaks of intensity. We may say that the poem is dancing us to its rhythm, even as we sit apparently still reading it. It is, discreetly, borrowing our body to embody itself. We speak of being struck by an image or a phrase – "I came to that place in the poem", as a friend said to me once, "and clunk! my mind turned inside out, quite painlessly. Huh? I said, and read that bit again, and it happened again, precisely there, and I couldn't explain it to myself". Where this sort of thing begins to happen in series, we are as it were watching someone on a tightrope, and so caught up in the skill, the danger, the whole shimmering alternation of grace and teetering in the performance that we are really on the tightrope ourselves, in sympathy, exhilarated, dreading that their fall would be ours. It can seem, fuzzily and in ways we would be hard put to explain, that a great deal is involved in the success of such a walk, and that a fall would be momentous. These mechanisms operate even with poetry of lesser intensity, though we can become disgusted if we sense that the tightrope is too close to the ground, or that the walker is not walking for mankind, for us.

The poetic experience is not, of course, confined to verse: it can arise from properly tuned prose, too, and can affect us whether we receive it through listening or reading. Where it is at all intense, we find it enthralling but quickly exhausting. We want more of it, or we want it again, but we also need frequent rests from it. And if we resist this need for rests, the experience itself will fluctuate. We can have it repeatedly, and each time timelessly, but we can't have it steadily. We are as it were not yet permitted to live there. And yet it is itself a quietly perpetual thing, this ordinary ecstasy: it is kept for us in a finite vessel, the poem, which we can return to whenever we

want to have the experience again. Each time we return, the poem is the same, and yet fresh intimations of significance are likely to rise from it. It is, as St Thomas said, *radiant*. And we can grow in relation to it, perhaps over our whole lifetime, if it is a favourite poem. It is complete, finite, yet inexhaustible. Analysis cannot touch this reality, because it is a different order of discourse lacking the mysterious integration of what it examines. Nothing equally complete or economical is available to describe it. Each interpretation we put upon the poem will wear out in time, and come to seem inadequate, but the standing event of the poem will remain, exhausting our attempts to contain or defuse it. The only way in which commentary can defuse a poem is by inhibiting our surrender to it; we are taught strategies of intellectualising about it, of comparing and classifying it, all the myriad ways of forestalling our looking attentively at it in itself. This can sometimes seem the nervous purpose of literary education itself, to protect society from poetry. This impulse is not wholly unwise, as we shall see, though it is crucially wrong at its heart, because it protects us against the wrong sort of poetry.

Human beings have two main modes of consciousness, one that is characteristic of waking life, one we call dreaming. The former is said by psychologists and physiologists to be the province of the "new" part of the brain, the recently evolved forebrain, the latter relates to the older, limbic levels of the brain, sometimes called the reptilian brain. We now know from sleep studies that we need to experience both, and that we grow distressed and finally psychotic if we are prevented from dreaming. Our dreams then invade the daylight realm of our life, and that is psychosis. In normal life, we experience a substratum of dream mentation running along just below our waking consciousness and seeping through it here and there. This is reverie, or daydreaming, and if it is too markedly out of kilter with our daylight thinking, we find ourselves agitated and under stress. As we have known since Freud and the other early psychoanalysts, neither of our two lives is wholly subordinate to the other – or if it is, we are likely to be more or less severely ill. Harmony between our two modes of life promotes health, and it is my belief that aesthetic experience is the supreme case of harmony between them. To be real, a poem has to be at once truly thought and truly dreamed, and the fusion between the two represents incipient wholeness of thinking and of life. A poem, or any work of art, enacts this wholeness and draws us into it, so as to promote and refresh our own. We find the atmosphere of this fusion intensely attractive, and may even become

addicted to it; this is the Good Addiction, which the other kinds merely point to and parody, and we can judge them by Jesus' test of examining their fruits.

What attracts us to art and poetry is probably, first of all, the signals it sends out that here the secret world is present; to put that another way, we are drawn by the bloom of dreamlife that the work bears. If the work is too drily intellectual and forebrainish, we apprehend it as arid and not really worth the trouble, or else shallow. If it is too indulgently dreamy, we may gulp it greedily in search of sustenance, but finally find it arbitrary and unsatisfying, and if it is contrived to look dreamier than it really is, we will react to that too, more or less quickly depending on the strength of our need for dream-sustenance; in the long run, our unconscious will persuade us of the fraud, and reject it before we are aware the rejection has happened. This is frequently the fate of all but the best surrealist art, which apes dream mentation in order to invoke it. The danger though, always, is that our need of the good, true harmony which the best art evokes and nourishes may be so great that we will fool ourselves as to the quality of what seems to be supplying it, or a sufficient measure of it. And since the fusion of dream life and waking consciousness, of dream and reason if you prefer, lies at the very wellsprings of human endeavour, extending far beyond anything we can recognise as art, it behoves us to be fussy about the nature and sources of the inner equilibrium between the two which we attain. The artist Francisco Goya wisely observed that the sleep of reason produces monsters, and we have had redoubled evidence for that in this century. The monsters are generated in part because the sovereignty of daylight reason we have extolled over the past few centuries is an illusion, based on the delusion that we can ever fully wake up, and the further delusion that perpetual rational wakefulness would even be bearable. Our very evolution, I submit, doesn't tend that way, but towards a wholeness of which art is the model.

I have been convinced for several years that the fusion of our two modes of life is a prime datum of human life and action. Everything we make, beyond the immediately utilitarian and the trivial, and perhaps much of that, too, comes of combinations of vision and reasoning. The thing has to make daylight sense, and have some sort of rationale, but it must also feel right, have the right sort of vibes as we say, and be acceptable to the contemplation of reverie. As we all know, work done without any vision, any sense of consonance with our deeper life, approaches the

condition of drudgery, just as bad products or bad buildings lack a certain enlivening charm. Bad products, like bad poems, lean too far one way or the other: they look too calculated and possibly inhuman, or too banal, or else they look bizarre, flimsy and idiosyncratic to no purpose. A bad marriage may be too cool and emotionally arid, or too painstakingly thought-through and fair-minded, or too designing; on the other hand, it may be too intensely romantic, a sort of *folie à deux* which can't handle the asperities and practicalities of the outside world, or it may be bedevilled by the personal kinks and nightmares the partners bring to it. I am necessarily describing these imbalances in the biased language of daylight consciousness, because we are speaking here in verbal language, not the dreamworld's language of feelings, atmospheres and symbols. It is a moot point whether the dream has any verbal language of its own: how many actual words or phrases do we remember from our dreams? A few, perhaps, and we may have a sense that speech was present in some of our nightly visits to the personal otherworld. In waking life, pretty clearly, dream mentation may change words, or bend them, or inspire them to be uttered, but it doesn't reason or explain in words. Indeed, while we may say that dream is the explanation for a lot of things, it itself never explains! It evokes, and moves, and conveys, and suggests, and it can do more of that with, say, one poignant memory from childhood (which of course it may also edit) than it could achieve with many closely-reasoned paragraphs. It follows from all we've been saying that the systems, ideologies, religions and other loyalties by which we live our lives are also fusions of the sort I've been describing. Freud's poem, Marx' poem, the poem of the Enlightenment, Buddha's poem, Jesus' poem. Just as surely as the smaller poem-constructs of our private lives, the personal quasi-poems which may constitute our image or role – the tough Australian bushie, the no-nonsense business executive – these larger poems make sense both to reason and to the unconscious world of our fears, needs and aspirations. Or each does so for a great many people. I may find, say, the poem of Science too cerebral and too poorly integrated on its dream side (though it does have its own mythologies and legends, such as the theme of Galileo's persecution), but for some it serves as the poem of their lives, and they may find Catholicism, as they understand it, to be aberrant to reason in some way, or distorted in what Germans might call its dreamwork, lacking warrant from the unconscious for some of its claims. A lot of such judgements, of course, are based on perceptions of atmosphere and "feel", whether or not these are rationalised afterwards. And it is surely true that a religion, with an explicit space for and vocabulary for the

non-rational side of things, will be better equipped to understand and work with poetic fusions than can any tradition which explicitly or implicitly relegates the dream side, and so doesn't comprehend its own origins and nature. Here, perhaps, I should mention two terms I have started using, and which may be useful. I call properly integrated poetic discourse Wholespeak, while discourses based on the supposed primacy or indeed exclusive sovereignty of daylight reason I call Narrowspeak. The former embraces all good poetry, including that of religion, the latter embraces most of the administrative discourse by which the world is ruled from day to day, as well as most of criticism. The two are obviously not commensurate, and it was also for this reason that I tried to reduce the proportion of narrowspeak in my book of religious verse to a minimum. We have come, over the last few centuries, to think that we live in a prose universe, with prose as the norm of all discourse. This is a cause, or a consequence, of the decline in belief in creation (*poesis*). In fact, narrowspeak prose doesn't answer to our own inner nature, and cannot describe the cosmos adequately.

Narrowspeak made to look like poetry but not truly dreamed (we are all guilty of this at times) is enormously common in modern times, and constitutes a majority of the verse published in literary journals everywhere, but in the absence of true or sufficient consonance with the dimension of dream it can only appeal on the basis of whatever intellectual interest it manages to generate. The aesthetic of interest is characteristic of a spiritually starved period, and among its features is an insistent appeal to excitement, to innovation, to relevance or to some group alignment or other. Real poetry has its own authority and needs make no such appeals. Works obedient to the aesthetic of interest I term *poesies*, and of course strains of poesy, in this sense, are often found even in real poems. There, though, the true fusion justifies and redeems them. A further and final point to make about narrowspeak is that while it lacks the true simultaneity of fusion in its own right, it is always in the service of some large "poem" or other (Marxism, Rationalism, Science, Christianity, Islam) at one or more removes; it is a secondary and derived thing, a servant. Which is not necessarily to denigrate it. It has its essential and complex place in the world, just so long as we don't consider it primary. Part of its function is to protect us against the strain and fallout of wholespeak, and to help integrate this into the web of ordinary life. Narrowspeak can't be all bad, or I wouldn't be writing this essay in it, or mostly in it!

As we saw earlier, there is a third partner in the integration which is art, and that is the body. If we allow this to have the two obvious meanings which join in the term embodiment, it refers at once to the materials in which a work is realised, and to its somatic effect upon the beholder. This latter effect, felt in the ghostly sympathy of breath and pulse and muscle, is particularly central to poetry, but not limited to that sphere. In the face of strong examples of other art forms, we speak of being brought up short, of having our breath taken away, of being made to shiver, of being knocked sideways, being rocked on our heels. Experience of my own reactions tells me that these are more than merely metaphors. Music will often cause us to tap our foot or beat time with our hands, and we have all felt the tense slight participation of our muscles in the action of a gripping film or play. Religion, by more than analogy, has both ritual and spontaneous movements built into many of its observances: one thinks of the set bowings and upraisings of the Mass, or the rocking (called *davinen*) of Orthodox Jews at prayer, or of Miriam dancing before the Ark of the Covenant. And there is the full surrender of dropping to one's knees before God or before a great painting: if you think that is confined to more emotional cultures than our own, I cite the case of staid Calvinist and post-Calvinist Dutch people falling to their knees a few years ago when Rembrandt's "The Night Watch" was carried past them for re-hanging in the Rijksmuseum. Beauty and the identity-poem of patriotism had combined to overwhelm them. At a far extreme, beyond the familiar lump in our throat when we are deeply moved, there is the exaltation, common to hysteria and ultimate joy, of laughing and crying at once. That is a very special momentary kingdom in which only truth is possible, and we reach it, only at the end of our tether. Within the processes of creating art, in turn, there is a world, better understood and described in some arts than others, of gesture and bodily participation. In some of the arts, for example ballet, this may constitute most of the means by which fusion is attained. In poetry, it is at least a quarter and probably a third of the story, especially if we add to the orchestration of breath and cadence the whole lore, far better understood on the unconscious than the conscious level, of affective sound and what we call mimesis, which is the transposition of natural sensations into words: a jack-plane lisps over a plank, a nun walks on her prayer, from underwater the troubled floor of the world becomes a remote and beautiful sun-bewildered ceiling. All these things produce tiny pauses in the mind, stop time, and echo right down into bodily aspect of our life. In their own sphere away from rhythm, they are a

borderland music of arrests and releases, and not one which can easily be scored, or played purely by calculation.

Such is the embodiment and bodily echo of art, but what of those poetic moments which do not issue in art? They seek embodiment too. Ferdinand Porsche's poems came out as cars, Henri Dunant's emerged as the Red Cross, those of Fred Burley took the form of ladies' foundation garments. Hitler's poem took concrete, steel and possibly forty million human lives to find expression. Karl Marx' poem, as variously augmented and re-expressed, shared with Hitler's a liking for such lines as leather top coats, merciless secret police and eager communal mind-control, but has also issued in stanzas of improved rights for working men and women, in good folklore studies and in health care, along with such stanzas as the Gulags and the starvation of the Ukraine, though the latter may have been a composite stanza, with lines borrowed from the older poem of Mother Russia. What is very clear is that poem-fusions which do not find embodiment in art, and rejoice our bodies through that, may find more terrible embodiments and take our bodies from us altogether into the bargain. A poem-fusion seeking its embodiment outside art may well be the most dangerous thing on earth, and we need all the thickets of existing art and of other, realised poem-fusions to hide among when one of these comes looking for its human materials. In a verse novel I wrote some years ago, I contrasted my religion with some other allegiances by saying, "The true God gives his flesh. Idols demand yours off you". A poem which stays within the realm of literature completes the trinity of forebrain consciousness, dream wisdom and bodily sympathy – of reason, dream and the dance, really – without needing to embody itself in actual suffering or action, and without the need to demand blood sacrifice from us. It is thus, like Christ's Crucifixion, both effectual and vicarious. And yet criticism seems keener to police such poems than to grapple with the non-literary ones that come seeking embodiment, and warn us about them. Even this might well be futile, though: only a poem can fight a poem. A completed poem, of the literary kind, needs no commentary beyond perhaps the elucidation of unfamiliar words or references. To a fully realised poem, the appropriate response is meditation conducted on the level to which it raises us, and this may or may not be written down.

Aesthetics has three legs, as we have seen: religion has a fourth one, the Divine. To fusion we must now add the dimension which theology calls infusion. God can reach us through any of the modes of our life, through our dream consciousness, through our waking intellect, though that is much more capable of resisting Him, and through the vegetative life of our body, in which He may be most constantly present. He seems to reach us most easily in our wholeness, or at the opposite extreme in our disintegration: where we are most resistant to Him is in the middle range of premature and temporary self-integration. An example of the Divine reaching us when we had not sought it is given in Judith Wright's poem "Grace", which I placed near the very end of the anthology:

Living is dailiness, a simple bread
that's worth the eating. But I have known a wine,
a drunkenness that can't be spoken or sung
without betraying it. Far past Yours or Mine,
even past Ours, it has nothing at all to say;
it slants a sudden laser through common day.

It seems to have nothing to do with things at all,
requires another element or dimension.
Not contemplation brings it; it merely happens,
past expectation and beyond intention,
takes over the depth of flesh, the inward eye,
is there, then vanishes. Does not live or die.

It is certainly true that contemplation doesn't bring this sort of authentic infusion, though it often invites it and may find the invitation answered. No form of prayer commands God, and it is possible that our seeking Him, as distinct from His seeking us, has its natural terminus in the Crucifixion, which showed us what we would do to God if we could get our hands on Him. We need not be shocked at this. He told us He would die so that sins might be forgiven, and it was surely necessary for us to discharge our fury at much of the world's workings on Him who had made it, and seemingly made it the ambiguous place it is. The existence of consequences, and of our freedom, necessarily involve great anguish which the space of our lives does not provide room enough to redeem, and our bewildered anger at this has to go somewhere before we can attain the sort of purified wholeness which can give and receive pardon. The Crucifixion is also the end of any self-righteous notion we may have of ourselves as innocent victims of a bad cosmic set-up, which helps to explain our eagerness to shift the blame for it on to the Jews, the Roman Army,

Pilate, anyone who was there at that point in history. But I digress, a little, into matters I only apprehend and which no one fully understands, since they are inexhaustible. I would certainly never trust anything I could fully understand.

If we are suspicious of our dreaming side as a channel of the Divine, guessing that it can be a realm of demons and delusions as well, and know that our intellective side is fatally well equipped to resist Him, and if, finally, we find it hard to do more than dimly sense His presence in our bodily frame (we sadly know that its homeostasis, its health, are temporary things) we are left with the plane of integrations between all three, that is, the plane of inspiration and prophecy as well as of beauty, as the most trustworthy area for interactions with Him. How many of the poems in my anthology do or do not contain instances of inspiration, in the true narrow sense of the word, it would be presumptuous of anyone to say. Most such interactions, though, are apt to be as brief in their intensity as our experiences of art: timeless while they last, but brief in time, and harder to recover than passages of art because they leave no exterior deposit. If there is anywhere in us a sort of embassy of such wholeness, it may be what we call our conscience – which some, at times to avoid the Christian theology of it, prefer to call their integrity. In my experience, conscience shares with art an ability to be instantaneously and convincingly there and a total resistance to untruth (you can't lie in art, any more than in prayers) and it has an eloquence both in and beyond words, and a stern logic that operates without any need of them, seemingly at the level of design – we speak of artistic conscience, and mean a firmer inner monitor which threatens to dissipate the essential effect of a work if we try to flout or evade it, say by leaving something in we know shouldn't be there, or by getting an image near enough to right, instead of right-plus. In some ways, I would go close to saying that the conscience resembles a permanent poem of ourselves that we carry within ourselves, though not one which claims our attention unless we try to circumvent it or some external influence challenges it. It is in no way subservient to interest, in either of the ordinary meanings of that word. It differs most signally from art, of course, in not bearing any aura of the rare and special, and in having no power or need to communicate itself to others. You can claim things on its behalf, but you can only display its effects through what you make or do: you can't directly show your conscience to another. In Christian terms, this

hiddenness, this deep intimacy of presence, signals a resemblance between conscience and God the Father, rather than God the Son.

In that unique Divine embodiment for which we reserve the term Incarnation, Jesus lives from the first in a wholeness no mortal artist can sustain: He lives on the level of poetry, and thus shows us the way to that quality of life, which He calls the Kingdom. This Kingdom is Jesus' own poem, and He embodies it fully, while revealing it as an aspect of God's poem. He never speaks in abstractions; there seems to be no narrowness in Him. He speaks to the elements with the authority of a director, and of the wild lilies out in the paddocks with the just appreciation of one who respects them and their making, and knows their real worth: we may say that He puts Solomon's man-made glories, and ours, in their place with the calmly ruthless judgement of an artist comparing two pieces of work. His words constantly go beyond the expected, and dazzle us with their quality of paradox, and of discovery: every "line" is better than you expected, and deeper, and truer. His cures most often have no paraphernalia, and seem to come as directions spoken with authority, as by an author to a character. Sometimes they seem to cost Him strain and grief, but for reasons we can't fathom, rather as if they involved the body of the text which we can't see because we're in it. Human wholeness is always good, in His sight, but not so the premature integration which thinks of itself as human wisdom and lacks interaction with the Divine. "You think as man thinks", He says, "not as God thinks", or again, "Blessed are you, Simon Peter, for flesh and blood have not revealed it to you, but my Father who is in Heaven". And He also speaks with calmly terrible knowledge of the future, which being within time is also partly subject to human freedom and human device: clearly, the great work is also in part committed into the hands of its characters. When He speaks of laws, it is never in the one-dimensional terms of legal narrowness: He transposes them into their full poetic value. Just as a work of art must never merely obey its own rules, but always excel them within its obedience, He gives the Law its more tremendous dimensions, showing it in the way it exists in the Kingdom, or, to put that another way, He consistently shows us the Law as it is when raised to the power of love and grace. And He refers his message always to the vision of children, to that integral and naturally poetic vision we all have before reason, the dream and the dance drift apart in us and flatten our perceptions. Like any great poem, that of Jesus is inexhaustible, and not all the books in the world could contain a

sufficient meditation on it. Meditation would not be enough, anyway: this is meant to be not merely a poem we can appreciate and gain spiritual strength from, but one we can join. By sharing in our tragedy to the full, embodying it all the way to its tragic end and then reassuming His own embodiment beyond it, He confirms better hopes, even for our bodies, than we had dared to hold on the basis of our health and our dreams alone. And He leaves his own incarnation behind, in a way that at once goes beyond metaphor and, surprise of surprises, confirms that even our most primitive, dream-impelled rituals of taking on the power of a god or an awesome animal by eating it were in their way good, because they were on the right track. Or else, if we insist on human autonomy in the matter, they were a poem we arrived at repeatedly in different cultures worldwide, and He took the poem, sanctified it, and made it both harmless and salutary for all time to come. The impulse need never again be savage, for it is redeemed and transposed into a life-giving thing like the calm eating of ordinary food. Indeed the very fact of eating is redeemed, since we are at last feeding upon what can afford to be eaten, and not on what can't. The way to our true potential, we are shown, lies not through the rationalisations of the forebrain, which imagines itself bodiless or exploits its embodiment, but through integration of all the dimensions of our life, each of which is good and holy, with the Divine.