

Significance of God in Literature

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ABSTRACT

In our sophisticated 21st. century, when technology reigns supreme and science is practically worshiped as a god—capable of solving all earthly problems and assuaging the deep desires of humankind—it is refreshing to bask in the music and poetry of literature from every age and culture, where eternity invades time and the human heart is refreshed by a vision of the divine. Here we propose to ponder a few of those treasured glimpses of the eternal as preserved in selected passages from our classical repertoire.

Human achievements in the field of science have astounded us with the immensity of the universe and the myriads of heavenly bodies that continue to underscore the infinitesimal dimensions of our own home, planet Earth. But while the wonder of this celestial magnificence is often dimmed by the drabness of daily life, our innate sense of the transcendent impels us to account for the grandeur of God in a warped world. In an era as turbulent as ours, we seek to integrate our fragmented existence and to mend the rift between the wonders of science and the realm of the spirit. Given the ever-expanding scientific frontiers, a sense of doubt often shrouds our efforts to articulate our encounter with the divine. In our sophisticated 21st century where life is dominated by technology and science, it is refreshing for the human spirit to bask in those peek moments that come to us throughout literature—both secular and religious—when eternity invades time and the human mind is recreated by a sense of the divine. These moments are not likely to make the headlines in our popular press. Instead, we are more apt to be dazzled by the September 15, (2017) global announcements of the demise of NASA's Cassini spacecraft in a blaze of cosmic glory after an equally sensational twenty-year journey to the planet Saturn; or by the previously inconceivable discoveries in science such as those that blared across the national news in *USA Today* (June 4, 2017). In the latter instance the headlines screamed:

Gravitational Waves Found Again, 3B Light-Years Away. These strange undulations, the article explained, resulted from the collision of two black holes that merged, releasing energy that created the gravitational ripples that we are now 'seeing', but which actually happened three billion years ago. Scientists tell us that the mass of the newly formed black hole is approximately 49 times that of our sun. We do not know the precise location of this gigantic marvel, but the experts say it is roughly 3 billion light-years away in a distant galaxy. Furthermore, they explain that what we are seeing now actually happened 3 billion years ago. Even a society as jaded and blasé as ours is aroused from its lethargy by discoveries such as these. As science unearths new wonders of nature—whether in the vast expanses of outer space or in the mysterious and fertile depths of our oceans—such marvels are surely among the *dearest freshness deep down things*, that remind us in the words of the poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, that *the world is charged with the grandeur of God*. A new sense of jubilant exhilaration may spring from the joy of being a participant—a type of vicarious explorer, as it were, in the unfolding discovery of our universe. But we may also experience concomitantly an overwhelming trepidation, occasioned by the vastness of the universe that dwarfs our human stature. Bedazzled by such wonders, we tend to place our hopes and aspirations in these new *gods*, and demand that they satisfy our deepest longings and aspirations. Frequently, the euphoria of this celestial grandeur is dimmed by the drabness of life on our planetary home, and soon a sense of transcendence intrudes to disturb our earthly paradise and compels us to seek the integration of our fragmented human existence, so characteristic of our 21st. century living. This disquietude invites us to ponder ever more profoundly the philosophical questions that address the meaning and purpose of human life. Literature is replete with examples of that ennui of spirit that repeatedly summons humanity to re-learn the deeper purpose of human existence and to establish a more meaningful attitude and way of life. A few quotations can supply the evidence.

Prime example *par excellence* among those who explored all earthly sources of self-indulgence is Augustine, Bishop of Hippo in the 5th century of the present era. His *Confessions* give us a brilliant insight into a mind that diligently sought fulfillment in every possible human manner, through passion, pleasure, and prestige. His life seemed to embrace all that was desirable and possible in a human existence. At Milan—seat of the western imperial residence—he held an enviable position in rhetoric, he indulged his sexual passion, sleeping with his concubine for more than a decade, he explored the then popular teaching of Mani until his discussions with their expert, Faustus, showed how shallow and untenable their doctrines really were. Finally, having reached an impasse in his vain strivings for all earthly satisfactions, he capitulated, found God and discovered peace. He subsumed all his wasteful wanderings and all his heart's desires in that famous utterance which stands in the opening lines of his *Confessions*: *You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in thee.*" (I.1-2). His *Confessions*—the only extant example of a Latin autobiography from the 5th century of our era—is a wonderfully comforting and encouraging account of what it means to be human, frail, sinful, and still hopeful. Only by turning to God who was immanently present within him, did Augustine find the peace and solace he desperately sought in the outside world. The saint speaks of his intimate encounter with the Divine, perceived as Eternal Trust and Unchanging Beauty, and the goal of all his mundane pursuits. Henry Chadwick captures eloquently Augustines's disappointment at the transience of that divine encounter, when he writes: *At the heart of the experience ... lay the conviction that the finite creature has an insatiable longing for a fulfillment that can be found only in what lies beyond itself, and indeed beyond human capacity for definition or description.*¹ Herein lies open to view the mystery of the human person at his most basic level, without respect for wealth, wisdom or status in life. Book VIII tearfully records Augustine's struggle to seek the wisdom he was inspired to pursue after reading Cicero's *Hortensius*; the saint's attempt to ask for chastity and continence, but not yet (VIII.11); and his efforts to surrender to the Lord. There he details the final break from his self-imposed slavery to sexual passion and reiterates his pleas to God to help him now. At the sing-song voice of a child, an anguished Augustine picked up Paul's *Letter to the Romans* and read the first passage his eyes fell upon: *Not in rioting and drunkenness, not in chambering and impurities, not in contention and envy, but put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ and make no provisions for the flesh in its concupiscence* (Rom. 13.13). His life was then transformed forever. In the final biographical remarks of the *Confessions* we find the oft-quoted lines that any one of us might claim as our own: *Late have I loved you, Beauty ever ancient, ever new! Late have I loved you!*

The 5th century BCE playwright, Sophocles, illustrates a rather similar, deeply human dilemma, with overtones resembling the salutary lesson Augustine learned in the 5th century of the present era. The first *Choral Ode* in *Antigone* celebrates the wonder that is the individual human person, which surpasses all other marvels in the world. The term the author cunningly uses is *deinos*, with its all its shades of ambivalence, from "wonderful" to "terror inspiring", and embracing all the intervening shades, to describe human beings. Sophocles notes that as humans, we have conquered the stormy sea, have wearied the inexhaustible earth, have captured both birds and fish and tamed wild animals; we have even mastered our language, thought and temper, and learned to live in social settings, under cover from cold and rain. But then we encounter an impasse. A literal reading of the following lines would yield the following sense: *Regarding the future, he comes to nothing without resources; only in fleeing death has he not devised a means* (360-61). A more elegant reading might render it thus: *We have resources for all that may come our way; it is only against Death that we are defenseless.* This passage presents a summation of all our human efforts to be masters of our own lives, destiny and happiness. From a natural point of view, we have planned for all eventualities: money in the bank, a satisfying job, a congenial family, and a comfortable home. From this standpoint, we have covered all our bases and done everything well. However, the gnawing inner call to provide for the spiritual side of human

¹ Henry Chadwick, *Augustine: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: University Press, 2001, 23.

life has been overlooked and will not be silenced. As the author of Qoheleth states in Ecclesiastes 3:11, *God has made everything beautiful in its time; He has also put eternity into the heart of humankind so that we cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end (Eccles. 3.11).*

There is another interesting remark in the opening lines of the same Sophoclean tragedy when the sisters are discussing the law of the land that forbids the burial of their brother Polyneices. There Antigone issues the telling comment: *I have to please the dead far longer than I need to please the living; with them, I shall have to dwell forever (74-76).* These provocative lines clearly demonstrate the ancient sense of eternity and the enduring *post mortem* life of the human spirit. They further illustrate the belief that our actions in this life can affect our situation in the afterlife. Antigone's conviction of the appropriateness of her action in the eyes of the gods is also found in Peter's reply to the Sanhedrin in the *Acts of the Apostles* when he and John, recently released from prison were instructed by the religious leaders not to speak again about the Way. Peter's reply was brief and to the point: *It is necessary for us to obey God rather than humans (Acts. 5:29).* Earlier, in a rather similar incident, after the healing of the cripple, Peter is interrogated by the authorities as to the source of his power, and he replied in a similar vein: *Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you be the judges. We cannot refrain from speaking about what we have seen and heard (Acts 4:19-20).* Both instances point to the immanence of God in the human spirit, urging appropriate action, regardless of religious persuasion or political restraint.

Our next example comes from one of our earliest literary witnesses to human love, longing and the search for immortality. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, records another futile undertaking, approximately 2,000 years prior to the time of Homer. In this Epic, Gilgamesh, totally distraught by the death of his friend, sets out on a precarious journey to satisfy this human longing for immortality, only to learn from the wise old Utnapishtim that *"from the days of old there is no permanence. The sleeping and the dead, how alike they are: they are like a painted death".*² Frustrated in his desperate search, Gilgamesh departed, disappointed and crestfallen returned home, having lost even the one gift he had received from the wife of the aged survivor of the flood, namely a lucky charm that promised eternal youth.

Today, we continue the search, as frenetically as in the past, both for immortality and for the fountain of youth, being as unwilling as our Mesopotamian and Greek ancestors to accept death as the lot of humanity. We still explore the transcendence to which all people inherently aspire. Modern authors frequently point to those moments in which we discover "something else"—that something that lifts us out of our dull, lethargic present and points us to a glimmer of the eternal. These momentary insights help us detect a greater meaning in life.³ Thus, John Steinbeck speaks of these moments of revelation as "breaking through". It is a theme that weaves through many of his writings, especially in *his Log from the Sea of Cortez*, but also in his earlier work *To a God Unknown*. There his character John Wayne says: *We have something here, all of us. In some ways we've come closer to earth for a moment... something will come of this ... It's a kind of powerful prayer.* Later, in explaining such an awe-inspiring experience to Elizabeth, John says: *I think there were things hidden today.... The dance was timeless, do you know --- a thing eternal, breaking through to vision for a day.* Thornton Wilder expresses a somewhat similar idea in *Our Town*, Act III). There the Stage Manager addresses the audience seated behind him who represent the dead. It's the funeral of Emily, a young mother who died in childbirth, and who will come to take her place among the dead. He informs his audience: *Now I'm going to tell you some things you know already. You know 'm as well as I do, but you don't take 'm out and look at 'm very often. I don't care what they say with their mouths --- everyone knows that something is eternal. And it ain't houses, and it ain't names, and it ain't earth, and it ain't even stars... everybody knows in*

² N. K. Sandars, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, London: UK: Penguin Books, 1972, 107.

³ Google. "God in Literature". plus remaining references in this paragraph. Dec. 2015. as of June 18, 2017.

*their bones that something is eternal and **that** something has to do with human beings. All the greatest people ever lived have been telling us that for five thousand years, and yet you'd be surprised how many people are always losing hold of it. There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being....*

This is the same “eternal something” “breaking through” discovery moment that appears in the closing stanza of Edna St. Vincent Millay’s masterpiece, *Renascence*—a truly memorable *moment in American Poetry*:

The world stands out on either side
No wider than the heart is wide;
Above the world is stretched the sky__
No higher than the soul is high
The heart can push the sea and land
Farther away on either hand;
The soul can split the sky in two
And let the face of God shine through.
But East and West will pinch the heart
That cannot keep them pushed apart;
And he whose soul is flat---the sky
Will cave in on him by and by.⁴

It would be remiss to exclude Longfellow’s Psalm of life in this context. Only a transforming glimpse of the eternal can call us to see and live life as here describes:

Life is real, life is earnest,
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust returnest
Was not spoken of the soul.⁵

⁴ Google. *Renascence-Poem by Edna St. Vincent Millay*. Edna St. Vincent Millay. Rockland, Maine, US. as of June 19, 2017.

⁵ Google. *A Psalm of Life*, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. as of June 19, 2017.

Howard Thurmond has gives these same “break through” moments a fresh sense of musical beauty. In his work, *Deep Is the Hunger*, he writes:

There must always be remaining in everyone’s life a place for the singing of angels—some place for that which in itself is breathlessly beautiful and by an inherent prerogative, throwing all the rest of life into a new and creative relatedness ____ something that gathers up in itself all the freshets (tiny trickles of spring water), of experience from drab and commonplace areas of living and glows in one bright light of penetrating beauty and meaning ____ then passes. The commonplace is shot through with new glory____ old burdens become lighter, deep and ancient wounds lose much of their old, old hurting. A crown is placed over our heads that for the rest of our lives we are trying to grow tall enough to wear. Despite all the crassness of life, despite all the hardness of life, despite all the harsh discords of life, life is saved by the singing of angels.⁶

All of these, poets and writers alike, struggle with words to express the inexpressible, and seek to articulate what perhaps is best subsumed in St. Paul’s *Letter to the Romans* (8:9 J.B. Phillips, trans.):

The whole creation is on tiptoe to see the wonderful sight of the children of God coming into their own. The world of creation cannot see reality... yet it has been given hope We were saved by hope, but in our moments of impatience let us remember that hope always means waiting for something we have not yet got.

Paul continues this same theme a little further on in this same Letter (*Ro. 8:22-26. The Message*):

All around us we observe pregnant creation. The difficult times of pain throughout the world are simply birth pangs. But it’s not only around us; it’s within us. The spirit of God is arousing us within. We’re also feeling birth pangs. These sterile and barren bodies of ours are yearning for full deliverance. That is why waiting does not diminish us any more than waiting diminishes a pregnant mother. We are enlarged in our waiting. We of course, don’t see what is enlarging us. But the longer we wait, the larger we become, and the more joyful our expectancy.⁷

These moments of insight, these “breaking through” experiences, help to assure us that there is a reality much greater, broader, higher and more visionary than our limited, mortal existence suggests, infinitely more than the marvels and wonders with which 21st century science and technology can dazzle the human mind. These insights give us hope that the prophetic words of Teilhard de Chardin may finally be realized in our time. *The day will come when, after harnessing space, winds, tides, gravitation, we shall harvest for God the energies of love. And on that day, for the second time in the history of the world, humanity will have discovered ‘fire’.*⁸

⁶ Google. *Deep Is the Hunger*, Howard Thurmond, pb, 1973. As of June 20, 2017.

⁷ Google. *The J. B. Phillips New Testament*. 1997. as of June 20, 2017.

⁸ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Toward the Future*, London: Collins, 1975, 86-87.