

The Poetry of Motherhood

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William Butler Yeats, who knew a great deal about poetry, though perhaps very little of theology, once remarked that “The rhetorician would deceive his neighbors, the sentimentalist himself; while art is but a vision of reality.”

Poetry, as a form of art, does offer a “vision of reality” and one that lies between these two common forms of deception. When it is poetry in the best sense, it offers us glimpses into reality that we can ill afford to do without. Science, opinion polls, psychological theories, and the like, are but

shadows in comparison with the light by which poetry can illuminate certain realities.

G. K. Chesterton, who was more comfortable than Yeats with the intersection of poetry and theology, maintained that “great poets use the telescope as well as the microscope.” This paradoxical feature may make great poets obscure for opposite reasons, he said: “because they are talking about something too large for anyone to understand, and now again because they are talking about something too small for anyone to see.”

Such is the poetry of motherhood, for the mother sees something real in her child



that others either do not see or cannot see nearly as well, and because she senses the far-ranging implications of the effects of her mothering. She applies both the microscope and the telescope to her child. It is altogether fitting, then, that John Henry Cardinal Newman would call the Church herself, Ecclesia, “the most sacred and august of poets.” The Church, like the mother, has a vision that is both sacramental as well as poetic. Each understands the eternal implications of the passing moment as well as the infinite potential that lies within an unpretentious parcel of flesh.

Hans Urs von Balthasar, one of the most insightful and prolific Catholic theologians of our time, opens Volume III of his *Explorations in Theology* with this beautiful and thought provoking sentence: “The little child awakens to self-consciousness through being addressed by the love of his mother.”

It is precisely because of this moment of utterly unselfish love that the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge referred to motherhood as “the holiest of all things.” In this image of the “I” of the child awakening in response to his mother’s loving smile, theology and poetry coincide. Van Balthasar elaborates on this coincidence when he says that: “the child does not ‘consider’ whether it will reply with love or nonlove to its mother’s inviting smile, for just as the sun entices forth green growth, so does love awaken love; it is in this movement toward the ‘Thou’ that the ‘I’ becomes aware of itself. By giving itself, it experiences I give myself. By crossing over from itself into what is other than itself, into the open world that offers it space, it experiences its freedom, its knowledge, its being as spirit.”

God left to motherhood the task of being an indispensable aid in the final crossing from what appears to be mere life to that

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being’s vital awareness that he is far more than that – a subject, a conscious “I” who is destined to love and live in a wide and challenging world. No true mother, intimately involved as she is in completing the creative order, can be an atheist.

The generosity of the mother’s love has its corollary in the relative undevelopment of the child she loves. Added to her generosity, therefore, is an extraordinary sensitivity to human potential. John Paul II, himself both a theologian and a poet, once wrote:

*Mother of the Incarnate Word!
You are the human heart’s immaculate
sensitivity
To all that is of God . . .*

Mary is the model of all motherhood. We find this special “sensitivity” praised in Gerard Manley Hopkins’ poem, *The May Magnificat*:

*All things rising, all things sizing
Mary sees, sympathizing
With that world of good
Nature’s motherhood.*

This uncanny sensitivity a mother has for her infant has been noted by the distinguished philosopher and Nobel Laureate, Henri Bergson. In his book, *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, he turns the reader's attention to the special sensibility the mother has for her child, something that he believes is "supra-intellectual in that it becomes divination:" "How many things rise up in the vision of a mother as she gazes in wonder upon her little one? Illusion perhaps! This is not certain. Let us rather say that reality is big with possibilities, and that the mother sees in the child not only what he will become, but also what he would become, if he were not obliged, at every step in his life, to choose and therefore to exclude."

The mother divines in her child things that non-mothers apparently cannot. She is



both a seer and a prophet. This special quality is as indispensable to the human race as is her ability to give birth. We know from various psychological reports of the debilitating effects the absence of a mother's love has on infants.

A British poet by the name of Anne Ridler (1912-2001), who at one time served as a secretary for T. S. Eliot, authored 11 volumes of poetry over a 50-year span. Herself mother to two sons and as many daughters, she has penned a number of poems that reveal her own acute sensitivity to the mother-child relationship. In *Choosing a Name*, she beautifully expresses the motherly paradox we find when generous love embraces gossamer child:

*Strong vessel of peace, and plenty
promised,
Into whose unsounded depths I pour
This alien power;
Frail vessel, launched with a shawl for
sail,
Whose guiding spirit keeps his needle-
quivering
Poise between trust and terror,
And stares amazed to find himself alive;
This is the means by which you say
I am,
Not to be lost till all is lost,*

Here, mother's love parallels God's creative love where He lifts us out of nothingness. God reaches out to us in our nothingness. The mother's reach extends to her child's apparent near-nothingness. Hence, the holiness and extraordinary generosity and prescience of motherhood.

Elsewhere, Ridler reflects that motherly vision in which she sees the eternal implications of the fleeting moment:



*Life beating with secret purpose;
What I see face to face,
Is recognition,
Spark of the eternal light.*

In a poem entitled, “A Mother to Her Waking Infant,” Joanna Baillie (1762-1851) returns to the theme that von Balthasar identified above, involving the loving mother addressing her child who is slowly awakening to consciousness of himself:

*Now in thy dazzling half-oped eye,
Thy curled nose and lip awry,
Thy up-hoist arms and noddling head,
And little chin with chrystal spread,
Poor helpless thing! What do I see,
That I should sing of thee?*

*From thy poor tongue no accents come,
Which can but rub thy toothless gum;
Small understanding boasts thy face,
Thy shapeless limbs nor step nor grace;
A few short words thy feats may tell,
And yet I love thee well*

Here, Ballie is not expressing a sentimental view of motherhood, but a sacred wonder that is inseparably linked to a poetic and realistic vision of the child she loved. Lord Byron saw enough realism in Baillie’s poetry to put her on a par with Sir Walter Scott and Thomas More.

Lastly, we turn to the personality and poetry of Anna Laetitia Barbauld (1743-1825). A child prodigy, she could read before she reached the age of 3 and was soon thereafter fluent in French and Italian. She subsequently became proficient in Latin and Greek. Her first book of poetry, published when she was 30, earned wide acclaim. She won the praise of both Coleridge and Wordsworth.

In one poem, with the elongated title, “To a Little Invisible Being Who Is Expected Soon to Become Visible,” she addresses the child in the womb:

*Come, reap thy rich inheritance of love!
Bask in the fondness of a Mother’s eye!
Nor wit nor eloquence her heart shall move
Like the first accents of thy feeble cry.*

*Haste, little captive, burst thy prison doors!
Launch on the living world, and spring to light!
Nature for thee displays her various stores,
Opens her thousand inlets of delight.*

Yeats warned, as we noted at the outset, of the deceptions associated with sentimentalism and rhetoric. It would be sentimental to depict motherhood as all sweetness and light, devoid of burdens, dilemmas, worries and woes. Surely, nothing could be more unsentimental than the frequency of diaper changes. Let us not deny that a mother's work can be, at times, drudgery. But Chesterton cautions us about the double meaning of that word: "If drudgery only means dreadfully hard work, I admit the woman dredges in the home." But a mother's work is not drudgery, he added, "because it is trifling, colorless and of small import to the soul."

The fact that a mother's work is difficult does not prevent her vision of the child from being poetic, and even theological. Nor does it deny that her office is monumental. The eternal implications of the diamond in her wedding ring still glimmer during diaper changes. The trials that Christ bore did

not mar his mystical capacities. Unsensationalism and mysticism are not only compatible, they are actually complementary.

Yeats also warned us about deceptive rhetoric. Unpoetic, unmotherly (even anti-motherly) rhetoricians have persuaded countless people that motherhood is merely a "choice." Yet, to vaporize motherhood into a whim represents the greatest of all deceptions. As philosopher Peter Kreeft has put it, "Motherhood with a capital M [is] a metaphysical force of which human mothers are but mere carriers. Her vocation speaks with authority – an absolute, an imperative, a divine revelation".

Motherhood helps to keep poetry alive, incarnating it into something undeniably real and decisively fruitful. At the same time, poetry—the validation of important realities that happen to be unmeasurable—helps to keep the true nature of motherhood alive.

Poetry, as we have stated, is situated between two deceptions. The tragic deception in the current era is the reduction of motherhood to a choice. This reduction is concurrent with the popular trend in literary criticism to deconstruct poetry into meaninglessness. At this juncture of human history, Mary, the model of motherhood, becomes all the more indispensable.

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