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**“NOTHING BUT A SPACE THAT SOMEONE HAS TO FILL”:
ON SUSPENSION OF BELIEF
IN CONTEMPORARY BRITISH WOMEN’S POETRY**

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Abstract: *An essential feature of contemporary British poetry is the dramatic conflict between the multiple facets of self-divided identity. Among others, obsession with inner alterity and outer identity translates into minute investigation of the relationship with Divinity, displayed in a wide range of attitudes, from unconditioned obedience and fidelity to chronic disappointment and bold disbelief. Following the tradition of Stevie Smith’s distrust in the supreme authority, poets like Elizabeth Bartlett, Veronica Forrest-Thomson and Sophie Hannah contemplate the purpose of praying and the utility of metaphysical relationships in acid commentaries. Taking the liberty of embracing agnosticism, they reject the illusion of living on a promise, dispelling the grounds of expectation for future achievements in another realm than the Earth. Their outbursts of profaneness, closely bordering on blasphemy, are counterbalanced by Helen Ivory, Kathleen Raine, Imtiaz Dharker and Myra Schneider in meditations introducing God’s uncomfortable response to the decay of religion in the modern world of reversed values. Although faith is impossible for the present-day secular man in an environment stripped of spiritual meaning, there is still a deeply human desire to believe in something beyond any possible comprehension since human imagination needs support from inexplicable external resorts.*

Contemporary English women poetry displays a marked concern with self-discovery and self-communication in narratives that produce almost endless significations of individual personality. The minute explorations of private lyrical cosmologies develop particular ideologies that celebrate liberation from constraints. In the challenge to test the limits of the self, religion and spirituality are devices often called up to construct and substantiate the personal systems of self-conduct along clearly definite coordinates.

The minute investigation of the relationship with Divinity is displayed in a wide range of attitudes, from unconditioned obedience and fidelity, to chronic disappointment and bold disbelief. There are many women poets who search into the unknown inside by worship and meditation, in high hopes of salvation. And there are even more poets who seem guided by what the French feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous called, in one of her (numerous) valiant writings, “The courage to disbelieve, and then the courage to begin to marvelously want to live before, before all exploration, before all reason, before god,

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before all hope. Or after” (Cixous 91). To these poets, the ultimate place where one can achieve peace, spiritual consolidation and stability is the interior other which perpetually constructs, deconstructs, and reconstructs personality, without converting its true essence or altering its relationship with the material universe and its mysteries.

Stevie Smith was among the first women poets of the 20th century to express chronic disappointment in the relationship with the supreme authority. In “Egocentric”, she makes it clear that there is no guardian angel and no hope for salvation and resurrection; there is neither forgiveness nor understanding in her harsh lines of disbelief. Taking the liberty of non-believing, she rejects the illusion of living on a promise, attacking any pre-established order and dispelling the grounds of expectation for future achievements in another realm than the Earth. The habitat of God and His angels seems to have no appeal to her:

What care I if good God be
If he be not good to me,
If he will not hear my cry
Nor heed my melancholy sigh? (Smith 1-4)

Stevie’s brave choice lies in the constant irony of mighty indifference and absolute silence from above. For her, there is nobody to secure the order of the world: each is responsible for his/her own fate and living. Her repetitive existential question reflects her overt lack of interest in and attention for the divine creation, be it terrestrial (the lamb, the lion, the clam) or celestial (the sun, the moon and the stars). Mosquitoes and biting midges, as well as large African antelopes, are watched with the same lack of interest: “What care I if skies are blue,/If God created Gnat and Gnu . . .” (Smith 15-6).

It is, however, absurd to expect God to have created the universe only to satisfy any one individual’s desires; the simple thought is greeted with ridicule: “What care I if good God be/If he be not good to me?” (Smith 17-18). God’s goodness is acknowledged in recovery from illness, escape from harm or victory in a battle, not in deliverance from personal failure, pain or sadness. Nevertheless, God may well be a human construct; therefore, a comfortable response is not possible, as simple dialogue is not satisfactory for the self, as long as it cannot find gratification in similar otherness.

Constantly questioning authority and refusing to accept Christian comfort, Smith seems determined to live every day as it comes and critically record all its absurdities. In her poem “The Reason”, she admits that she finds it impossible to discover a complementary other that would accomplish her personality. There is no Supreme Being who controls everything from above. Having experienced no epiphany, she doesn’t trust personal relationships with any superior being living in the universe. For her, there is only a huge loneliness inside and outside individual life:

My life is vile
I hate it so
I’ll wait awhile
And then I’ll go. (Smith 1-4)

Smith provides an alternative to the potentially harmful split of the self: waiting, passive abstinence from action, reaching the top of indifference. But even then, apathy is perceived as a form of tension, strife and struggle: to embrace lethargy does not characterise the human way of living: it refuses it instinctively, just as it refuses ignorance, and thus the best way to cope with pain and misery is to depart. Transgressing its limits, the self enters another world, beyond time and space; it breaks free from the tensions and pressures of the external world and moves beyond it, trying to create the perfect form ever created by imagination. The dimension of Smith's heterodoxical schiamacy transcends any personal account as she obsessively doubts faith, unable to decide "If God is good, impotent or unkind" (Smith 10).

Following the tradition of Stevie Smith's distrust of the Supreme Power, Elizabeth Bartlett goes even further, replacing cynicism with aggressiveness. In "Arguing with God", she proclaims freedom of rebellion and insolence of self-assertion. Her anarchic activism is at work from the introductory line articulating a negative plan for the near future:

I'm not going to lie
down like a dog and die.
I'm going to gird my loins
in a Biblical way
and have them say
I went out fighting. (Bartlett 1-6)

The sextet is centred round sheer activism, repudiating passivity and unreasonable obedience to authority. The girdling of the loins "in a Biblical way" (Bartlett 4) is not only a protest against discrimination but also a celebration of femininity whose merits are undervalued. Human experience has no connection with outside authority: it all comes from the inside, for Bartlett seems to profess a turning of the eye towards the inner self in order to discover and understand the primordial force. Plunging into one's own spiritual and emotional depths, the self meets its shadow, its imperfect projection that reveals concealed strength and energy striving to achieve the outer balance.

The angry voice proposes an alternative to fatal resignation: it is rather a strategy to expose the divine bias that condemns humankind to compliance and submission. A strategy directed at the negotiation of the private space through both the non-verbal character of writing and vocal undertaking:

I'm going to write letters
to my elders and betters.
I'm going to protest loudly
to all who can hear... (Bartlett 7-10)

The self-confident tirade against prejudices and false precepts is powerfully sonorous, and words themselves reverberate from the paper, as if the inflamed champion of divine rights would stand tall on a stage, addressing an audience, "all who can hear"

(Bartlett 10) – a reminder that belief should not be meek acceptance of an implacable fate, a conclusive “Amen”, but rather a personal response to a highly enlightening experience, a glorifying “Hallelujah”: “I’m going to tell them/that it’s not an Amen,/but a Hallelujah instead” (Bartlett 13-15).

Bartlett restores the formal balance of the poem, continuing her diatribe in negative terms, rejecting the psychical and emotional pressure imposed by forms of coercion evocative of medieval absolutism and contemporary domination: “Don’t make me swear/on the book or wear/a shroud for igniting” (Bartlett 16-18). She thus justifies her violent defiance, close to madness, as an extreme reaction to the constantly ubiquitous, sometimes aggressive, Absence:

I’m going to meet Him
arguing madly

and behaving badly,
scratching and biting. (Bartlett 21-4)

Veronica Forrest-Thompson adopts the strategy of eccentricity to oppose divinity. Her poem, “Language Lesson for a Schizophrenic Age”, seems an apparently meaningless babbling, nurtured by the Foucauldian philosophical assumption according to which “though God still employs signs to speak to us through nature, he is making use of our knowledge, and of the relations that are set up between our impressions, in order to establish in our minds a relation of signification” (Foucault 66). Playing with contradictions, the poet points to the paradox of reality and illusion, and the crisis of representation generated by the ambivalent nature of human perception:

The pen is on the table.
The pen is not on the table.
The writing is on the wall.
The writing is not on the wall. (Forrest-Thomson 1-4)

Aware that nothing emancipates the spirit more than permanent contradiction, Thomson embarks upon the adventure of restlessly contradicting everything, as a solitary wanderer who takes the chance to speak her mind up on unknown roads. The symmetry of alternating affirmations and negations is broken by a sequence of absurd images whose surrealism projects a disturbed, chaotic world governed by hallucinatory illusions, echoing the protagonist’s confusion:

The room is in the sky.
The car is in the sea.
The man is in the moon.
The man is on the woman.
The man is on the man.
The woman is on the man.
The woman is on the woman. (Forrest-Thomson 13-9)

Although she is aware of her useless search for relief, she cannot stop herself from bemoaning the decay of religion in the modern world of reversed values. In an environment stripped of spiritual meaning, faith is impossible for present-day secular humankind. This deranged pandemonium is eventually negated ruthlessly – “not not not not not” (Forrest-Thomson 20) –, acknowledging the infinite disconnection between Divinity and humanity, for “God is in his heaven” (Forrest-Thomson 21). The poet’s skepticism seems to emerge from disillusionment with the religious experience: epiphany is no longer the prerogative of modern humankind; in a world deprived of any spiritual meaning, faith dissolves into nothingness.

Sophie Hannah displays the ultimate nihilism of celebrating disbelief in “GODISNOWHERE (Now Read Again)”. The poem is cleverly based on word play, as a triple reading of the sign outside a Bradford church, divided into different words whose phonetic juxtaposition reveals the same abrogation of faith, as the poet nurtures the deep feeling that the mystery lying at the core of things must be more than a person. Her lines suggest that God may be a limit beyond which there is nothing but void; it is the very moment when she comes to suspect divine authority in the interpretation of a woman called Diane contemplating a holiday in a tropical resort: “Go, Di. Snow here./(as read by a woman called Diane who is contemplating/booking a holiday somewhere hot)” (Hannah 1-3), a father attempting to persuade his teenage daughter to give up on hallucinogens intoxication:

Go dis now her E.

(as read by a concerned father who is hoping to persuade his teenage daughter to stop taking drugs by appealing to her in a more contemporary dialect) (Hannah 4-7)

and an undecided philosopher who needs to deepen the question of God’s existence:

God is now? Here? Now? Read again.

(as read by a philosopher who, on finding himself unable to settle the question of whether the concept of an almighty is a temporal or a spatial one, decides he needs to do more research). (Hannah 8-11)

However, in the end the sign itself decisively proclaims that “God is nowhere. Now read again” (Hannah 12) as, in Hannah’s humorous apprehension, it is no use looking for epiphanies, mystical experiences or the Supreme Being, either in heaven or on earth: relief and redemption can only be found in human imagination – or, as the poet advises, in “a good book” (Hannah 14). The collection of wisdom-gathering pages is the intellectual effort to gain support from something stable, a constant value outside the being, something that is more profound and able to capture the spiritual rhythm of the infinite. Since human beings are alone with their questions and dilemmas, it is the only way to reconcile with God, to restore the connection with the ultimate power. Human beings alone can reach knowledge in their dramatic quest for the meaning of life, beyond good and evil, beauty and ugliness, truth and lie, struggling to replace human disorder with divine order and to find the truth about life and nature, destiny and universe.

These outbursts of profaneness, closely bordering on blasphemy, demand an appropriate response. Although loss of faith is personally experienced, there is, nevertheless, a deeply human need to believe in something beyond any possible comprehension since human imagination needs support from some inexplicable external resorts. And thus, in their attempt to grasp the essence of Divinity, women poets feel the need to invent philosophical substitutes. Imtiaz Dharker imagines a defensive-explanatory reply from God in her poem “Postcards from God I” – an earthly God who had tried to achieve communion and communication with His own creation, but ended up in disappointment and distrust: “Yes, I do feel like a visitor,/a tourist in this world/that I once made” (Dharker 1-3).

The imaginary God’s meditation is an opportunity to bemoan the decay of religion in a universe driven by a pervasive sense of personal and global apocalypse:

I walk around through battered streets,
distinctly lost,
looking for landmarks
from another, promised past. (Dharker 9-12)

The feeling of inadaptability is gradually deepened by the appeal to negative terms that resonate with Hassan’s “vast will to unmaking” (Hassan 92), expressed as a general sense of collective and personal apocalypse leading to physical and mental disaggregation:

Here, in this strange place,
in a disjointed time,
I am nothing but a space
that someone has to fill. (Dharker 13-16)

Kathleen Raine softens God’s tone in her poem “A Blessing”. It is the voice of a somewhat benevolent though utterly uncommitted God, who agrees with His ambivalent appearance created by humankind throughout centuries:

Some think me wise
Generous and kind –
May that image bless
Your need, your distress.

Others see a destroyer –
May that dread aspect
You hate and fear
Warn from the abyss. (Raine 1-8)

Compassionate Christ or vengeful Jehovah, either image is acceptable, as long as it helps the ritual practitioner acquire self-measure, and secure instant betterment. This acknowledged duality, however, and the only certainty – that of an invisible God – point that everything is imagination, an arbitrary understanding of reality. True cognition is prohibited to human mind and, in the end, even in God’s own voice, the real meaning of the sacred is given by a series of highly personal projection of feelings and emotions:

I am a mask of God
Among his myriadfold
Who turns you to my face
Who am no-ne, no-where. (Raine 9-12)

The interplay between the first and second persons (“I am a mask . . . who turns you to my face”) acknowledges the externalisation of sameness and the simultaneous internalisation of otherness through the agency of imagination. For, although faith is impossible for the present-day secular man in an environment stripped of spiritual meaning, there is still a deeply human desire to believe in something beyond any possible comprehension, since human imagination needs support from inexplicable external resorts that connect the self with a site of individual enlightenment. Thus, religious imagination becomes the locus of communion, the source of individual strength that transcends estrangement, and reconciles inner and outer worlds into coherent identity.

The restorative interplay of likeness and difference is further explored by Imtiaz Dharker in her “Question 2”, where God – the omnipotent creator, this time – addresses His creation:

Did I create you
in my image

or did you create me
in yours? (Dharker 1-4)

The symmetrical interrogative couplets seem to blur the thin line between the self and the Divinity: following the principle of difference, the individual becomes aware of its own boundaries, turning to spirituality in quest for perfection. The simultaneous discovery of identity in the sacred, supreme otherness, and of alterity in the inner other, the spiritual self, generates the necessity to elevate personal values, a process inconceivable without the freedom of being self and other as an integrated whole. Thus, identity emerges as a different mosaic of impressions, incorporated and further conveyed through forms of discourse that reflect an aspiration to absolute perfection and genuine harmony.

Residing on the intense visions generated by the limitless boundaries of imagination, Helen Ivory’s poem “What Am I?” provides an imaginary exploration of the mysteriously absent omnipresence in subversive lines. The first line is a definite statement of identity, dissipated into impermanence by the adverb strictly related to immediacy: “I am God today” (Ivory 1). Once hinting at the loss of true significance, it all seems a game performed simply out of a long-exercised habit:

Today I can swim under water,
murky water.

Swim with no need for air.
I can see (because I am God today),
I can see through all the underwater slime.

And because I am God today,
I can create anything –
so I create a man. (Ivory 2-9)

The poet employs a technique similar to the one used by Shakespeare in Mark Anthony's famous speech in *Julius Caesar*: the reiteration of the supreme power subverts its authority, emphasising self-imposing imperiousness – for, even though there is an illusion of similarity and even sameness between the Creator and His creation, the (im)balance is quickly restored through a humorous twist: “Here he is, swimming next to me./The man will drown because he needs air./The man drowns” (Ivory 10-12).

Inefficient in His initial travail, Ivory's imaginary God displays a natural inclination to self-improvement, evident in His own magnanimity and, hopefully, His future creation, as the persona seems willing to reconcile the laws of nature with the ones of the spirit into not simple improvement but profound metamorphosis, for its imperfect making receives the Divine Spirit and becomes something else, a superior being:

Because I am God today, I will let this happen.
Tomorrow, if I am still God,
I will make another man.

This time I will make him in my own image. (Ivory 13-16)

With Myra Schneider, the only solution to relate with the otherness beyond borders and to establish exceptional connections seems to be the retreat into sovereign solitude, as advocated in her poem, “Old Churches”. Although her lines reveal a nonconformist spirit, recalcitrant to the familiar order of the immediate community, the tangible surroundings retain a certain promise of redemption and self-composure:

Although I do not believe in God
Except as a green thread
Sewing us together,
Although I reject religion for its nailing down,
Its biting into,
I find among arches trumpeting upwards,
Among pillars spaced out like triumphant tree trunks (Schneider 16-22)
...
A still centre
Which touches my centre. (Schneider 27-28)

The solid stability of the arches and pillars seems to allude to the power of the spirit, gathering together the universal principles of knowledge and existence into a world based on modesty and simplicity, governed by unpretentious laws of respect for the self and the others. Mystical experience can only be achieved in silence and the solitary contemplation of the holy place that reverberates deeply within the soul.

The immediate allocation of the public place to private possession by means of the spirit and feelings allows the individual to absorb its collective spiritual memory. At the same time, turning towards the inner self, and discovering and understanding the primordial forces of the unconscious, help the ego configure an authentic narrative of renewal, continuity and strength:

Here present is pinned to past
And the soundless song
In this unstable world
Is of survival. (Schneider 29-32)

It is not simple self-improvement but profound metamorphosis, as the self assumes the condition of transgressing its own limits and regains its true essence, freed from weakness and confusion – and thus, it becomes able to solve the dilemma of living under the rules of time and, at the same time, beyond it.

As seen from these very few examples, contemporary British women poets employ a wide range of imaginative strategies that challenge stereotypes and subvert hierarchies in their approach to religion and their relationship with the Supreme Being. They do not hasten to accept their destiny but refuse to be enchained in conformity or wait passively for the liberation brought by extinction. They know that the great questions of the world must have alternative answers to the ones already known. Therefore, they refuse to surrender to blind faith: in their zetetic break with tradition, they try to offer alternatives, venturing to transcend the common by scanning the horizon and exploring the unknown.

Their diversity of irreligious manifestations – from crude agnosticism to philosophical impertinence or from intellectual doctrines to highly individual attitudes – is a creative endeavour to make sense of both cosmic and moral matters, and acquire superhuman clear-sightedness. In their verse, contemporary British women poets do not offer answers or essential revelations to the great mysteries of the world but the words in their poems provide a broad-minded balance between certainty and doubt. To them, faith as such means nothing: the kind of Divinity they propose is the one that can truly provide a reasonable explanation to the constants of human nature, the universal beliefs and patterns of behaviour that pertain to human existence. Their creative liberalism rearticulates the poetic rhetoric of dissent in acid commentaries and a bitterly-cynical tone aimed to recapture the sense of identity in a ritual of survival, without eluding the sense of betrayed expectation and deceived faith. Consequently, their poems arise as quests that can only partially reveal the metaphysical mystery, providing it with doubtful authority.

All these poems encompass, however, a hint that the unseen and yet the omnipotent absence is desirable insofar as it allows the individual to preserve the condition of being autonomous and free-thinking. Limiting the perspective and narrowing the individual spiritual horizon would bring about certainty, therefore fall and decay, and would leave no space for approximation, for imagination. Therefore, defying conformity and conventionality, poets often turn the written word into a powerful tool that exposes a complicated and complex web of meanings and interpretations, and generates strategies of absolute personal freedom allowing human psyche and soul become the ultimate place of worship and vision.

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