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A VISION OF WATER

James Harpur

This essay will make the connection between water and the power of imagination, and argue that by losing touch with the ancient tradition that water is holy, we treat streams, rivers and wells as merely utilitarian objects, to be exploited and not revered. This desacralisation of water is an attitude found with other aspects of nature and, I shall argue, is analogous to a loss of a sense of mythic imagination in poetry and other arts. The diminution of the mythopoeic worldview and rise of science in the eighteenth century resulted in people seeing and treating water, and nature, in a brutally pragmatic way. Also, with streams and rivers being used as conveyors of chemicals and other waste, instead of 'fonts' of inspiration, poetry has lost one of its core metaphors for creativity and the imagination. I will emphasise the role that William Blake's idea of 'Double Vision' — perceiving the sacred reality behind the surface object — is central to changing our view of rivers (and nature). And I will illustrate this through examples of poems, including GM Hopkins's 'Inversnaid', Henry Vaughan's 'The Waterfall', and Emily Dickinson's 'What mystery pervades a well!'.

Keywords: water; pollution; poetry; imagination

Acknowledgement: Following the peer review process, I received some encouraging and critically insightful comments from two anonymous reviewers. Rather than altering the structure of the essay to take due heed of their excellent suggestions, I asked the editor, Jen Webb, to insert as footnotes the comments she felt were the most relevant, and which will serve, I hope, to give a better balance to the thrust of my essay. I would like to thank the two reviewers for their engagement with the piece and their invaluable input.

A Vision of Water

In 1992 a British judge, summing up a court case in Southwest England, likened the victim of the crime to 'the face of a beautiful woman scarred by disease'. The victim was in fact a river named the

Creedy, in Devon, and her scar was caused by disfiguring foam generated by a sewage works, which had prompted litigation by a local landowner (in Gifford 2008). The judge might have used a different image to describe the Creedy, such as a rabid dog, foaming at the mouth.^[i] But in choosing the ‘face of a beautiful woman’ he was perhaps doing more than following the instincts of his class, generation and gender: he was implicitly acknowledging the deep connection between nature and the feminine principle,^[ii] a linkage that goes way back into ancient times to the Earth Goddess, or, in Greek culture, Gaia who, as Hesiod tells us in his *Theogony* (1987 [c.700 BCE]: lines 126–30), brought forth the sky, hills and the sea.

The imagery we use makes a difference to how we perceive reality, and vice versa. It’s much easier to dump chemicals in a river if we believe that water is not the face of a beautiful woman but rather, as the Oxford Dictionary defines it, a transparent, colourless, tasteless and odourless liquid. If we believed a river really were, in some sense, the face of a beautiful woman, would we not give it more attention and care? To regard or personify a river as a woman or any another living creature may seem whimsical or nonsensical in our hard-nosed rationalistic culture. But if, conversely, we see the material world solely as inert matter or in terms of chemical formulae, we have greater license to treat nature as a corpse rather than a living body. With a corpse, you can do almost anything you want to it with impunity: strip it, chop bits off it, dissect it for experimentation or re-use some of its parts.

The problem with the pollution of our rivers, and indeed with every other form of environmental pollution, is rooted, I believe, in a materialistic, rationalistic and monochromatic tunnel vision that sees nature as a commodity to be exploited rather than the crowning glory of creation, whether authored by God or the gods or, indeed, by a natural intelligence via an evolutionary process. This reductionist worldview combined with human concupiscence — that restless desire to fill the soul-shaped absence in our being with ever more ‘stuff’ — is a toxic and destructive force. For the poet William Blake the rot began with what he called the blinkered ‘Single Vision’ (Blake 1908 [1802]) of Sir Isaac Newton, the father of modern science. But everyone, poets and artists included, can be found among the ranks of the reductionists. After all, we live in the wake of the so-called European Enlightenment and the ripples of its rationalistic principles, emphasising the distinction between the internal world of human perception and the infinitely measurable external world.

Yet despite the pressures in modern times to view matter and nature simply as inert and therefore exploitable, there have always been those who have maintained a vision of a holistic, living and numinous natural world. To take just one example: in 1881 the British Jesuit poet Gerard Manley Hopkins was wandering in the highlands of Scotland by Loch Lomond when he was so struck by a stream roaring onwards and dropping into the lake that he was moved to commemorate the moment in his poem ‘Inversnaid’ (Hopkins 2011 [1881]: 69). It begins:

This darksome burn, horseback brown,
His rollrock highroad roaring down,
In coop and in comb the fleece of his foam
Flutes and low to the lake falls home.

For Hopkins the stream was more than the swift passage of a colourless, transparent, tasteless, odourless liquid. He describes it like a creature; its colour is that of a horse’s back, its foam

resembles a sheep's fleece; and the sound it makes is that of a flute, with breathy fluctuating notes. The burn topples into the lake, which Hopkins describes as 'home', suggesting not just a connection between burn and lake, but the underlying sense of a metaphysical journey of the soul, reaching wholeness. It's no wonder that Hopkins, a spiritual pilgrim, felt a strong psychic tug when he witnessed this stream with its raw energy finding catharsis in a lake; and no wonder that he ends this poem with a plea for civilisation to resist the destruction of natural habitats:

What would the world be, once bereft
Of wet and of wildness? Let them be left,
O let them be left, wildness and wet;
Long live the weeds and the wilderness yet.

I wonder what Hopkins would say to the news that the 'fleece of the foam' on the River Creedy was created by sewage? Or what would the Metaphysical poet Henry Vaughan, say — Vaughan who in his poem 'The Water-fall' also wrote about a stream plummeting over a cliff, not with the raw animal energy of the 'Inversnaid' stream, but with a sense of serenity, purity and otherness: 'With what deep murmurs through time's silent stealth / Doth thy transparent, cool, and watery wealth / Here flowing fall ...' (Vaughan 1871: 205).

The point about Vaughan's and Hopkins' poems is that they portray water in a spiritual way; the poets themselves were spiritual creatures and found in nature a divine creator, imbuing trees, hills, valleys, rocks, streams, rivers, and the like with a luminosity born of a divine substance, a divine light. If you were to say to either poet that someone had deliberately dumped a shopping trolley, a rubber tyre and three bags of foul waste into their streams they would probably view this not merely as a loutish act or a contravention of a bylaw but as an absolute *sacrilege*, a sin against the Holy Ghost. And this, I suggest, is how we should all feel.

If everyone shared these two poets' outlook on life — that nature is infinitely beautiful, infinitely complex, divinely created and intrinsically whole — there would be no pollution; our rainforests would stand proud, green and intact; and our rivers would flow without impediment and caressed by only natural foam. But too few people share this outlook. We know this not just from personal witness and anecdote but statistically. In Ireland for example, where I live, *The Irish Examiner* reported in November 2018 that water quality in the country's rivers was 'going in the wrong direction' (Ring 2018). This was not an undercover investigation but a report based on the latest findings of the country's Environmental Protection Agency, who warned that since 2015 the water quality of 197 rivers had improved. That was the good news. The bad news was that 269 rivers had deteriorated. The report warned: 'The declines seen in our rivers' indicators are an early warning signal that trends in water quality may be at a turning point and heading in the wrong direction' (EPA 2019: 7). The bureaucratic language with its hedging and hesitations can hardly disguise the plain truth: things are getting worse.

You might think that by now, by 2020, with the increasing proliferation of news coverage and debate about the environment, and with schools becoming more tuned into ecology, the very idea of letting nitrogen, phosphorus, slurry, chemical fertilisers and sewage enter lakes and rivers would be regarded as a problem of the past. Not so. And the reason lies, I believe, in the fact that the spiritual

or imaginative vision of Hopkins, Vaughan and others is not sufficiently pervasive or deeprooted.^[iii] Pollution will never go away until we change our vision; until, in fact, we allow the infinite power of the imagination to work a revolution in our *inner* lives so that we can act by its guidance in our *outer* lives; the imagination that allows us to see that nature is not a collection of separate entities placed at random in a landscape, but a harmonious and interrelated whole, with each tree, each flower, each hill, each stream having its own integrity but each related to the whole.

William Blake described this type of necessary imagination as Double Vision, the ability to see two things at once in an object. Blake gives an example of Double Vision in a poem in which he describes a thistle in terms of a grey-haired old man. It's as if Blake saw through the outward surface of the thistle's whiskery spikes, its drooping head and thin body, and his imagination re-shaped it into an old man. What he actually wrote is this:

... double the vision my Eyes do see
 And a double vision is always with me
 With my inward Eye 'tis an old Man grey
 With my outward a Thistle across my way

For Blake, Double Vision was what not just poets, but everybody, should have. He feared and raged against the Single Vision that regarded things purely as material objects, devoid of soul. Double Vision was what Hopkins possessed when he saw the Inversnaid stream — it allowed him to see it both as a flow of water and as a living creature, as brown as a horse, with the foam-fleece of a sheep. And Double Vision is also what Vaughan possessed when he gazed upon his own stream, and, in his poem 'The Water-fall', addressed it not as a flow of neutral liquid atoms, but as a beloved friend:

Dear stream! dear bank, where often I
 Have sat and pleased my pensive eye,
 Why, since each drop of thy quick store
 Runs thither whence it flowed before,
 Should poor souls fear a shade or night,
 Who came, sure, from a sea of light?

Nowadays, the sort of mind that addresses nature as a living thing, that talks to flowers or hugs trees, runs counter to the prevailing science-dominated culture in which reality is gauged by measurement.^[iv] As a result, nature has been de-souled; or, less theologically, it has ceased to be a friend. When measurement becomes the test of value, the heart shrivels. How do you measure beauty, love, truth, nature?

Yet it is salutary to remember that the Single Vision of the scientists, to use Blake's phrase again, is only a relatively recent phenomenon, and mainly confined to the West. In ancient times our trees, mountains, rivers and seas were teeming with deities or demi-deities for whom these places were their homes. And what do you do with a home? You protect it and care for it. Water was not merely a utility, treated in a sewage plant and sluiced with chlorine, but a gift from the gods or God. In Psalm 114, God is described as the one who 'turned the rock into a pool of water, / The flint into a fountain

of water'. In the Shinto religion, wells, streams and waterfalls are believed to be protected by deities, or *kami*, known as Sui-jin. In ancient Greece, springs, rivers, and brooks were inhabited by nymphs known as Naiads, the daughters of Zeus. Some of them presided over springs that gave inspiration to those who drank their waters, for example the Castalian spring at Delphi and the Pierian spring in Macedonia. On Mount Helicon in central Greece, there were two springs whose waters gave inspiration. One of them was called the **Hippocrene**, which literally means 'horse spring' — because it was said that the winged horse **Pegasus** struck his hoof on a rock on Helicon with such impact that a spring of water burst out of it.

The nymphs of ancient Greece not only protected lakes, rivers and springs but were also associated with healing (Larson 2011: 5). The second-century Greek traveller Pausanias reported the tradition of the nymphs, known as the Anigrids, at Samikon near the western coast of the Peloponnese. He said that there was a cave near the local river where those suffering from unsightly skin disorders would go for healing. The afflicted would pray to the nymphs and promise a sacrifice then wipe the affected parts of their bodies. They would then swim in the river and leave their 'old uncleanness in its water, coming up sound and of one colour' (Pausanias 1918: 5.5.11). Yet we now have rivers where you can go for a swim and pick up uncleanness *from* the water. For example, the annual River Liffey swim in Dublin is known among other things for giving swimmers a stomach upset known locally as 'sluice belly': in the reverse of Pausanias's description, some Liffey swimmers come up unsound and of more than one colour.[v]

Despite the utilisation and exploitation of rivers and other sources of water, their connection with a presiding spirit or a divine source and as places of healing can still be found; and it is important to remember and commemorate this. In the past, the Liffey would doubtless have been considered the home of a pre-Celtic female deity, and the remnant of this belief can be seen in the bronze statue of Anna Livia, the spirit of the river, in Dublin's Croppy Memorial park. More tellingly, pilgrimages to sources of water believed to have curative powers, such as at Samikon, have continued to the present. After all, it's why millions of people seek out the waters of Lourdes every year, quite apart from those who still frequent the countless holy wells of Britain and Ireland. At Holywell in North Wales, for example, pilgrims come to experience healing waters sacred to St Winifred; at Bath in the west of England visitors can sample spa water that was associated with the Celtic goddess Sulis; and in Co. Carlow in central Ireland, the holy wells at Cranavane are believed to heal bodily pain, especially in the eyes.

Indeed, it was and is common for wells to have specific curative functions. Some of these were recorded by an early nineteenth-century Irish churchman named Reverend Charles O'Connor, who was informed by a local man in Co. Roscommon that some wells helped people to preserve their cattle from infection and appease potentially malevolent fairies, while others cured specific ailments, such as eye problems, back-aches, and toothaches. O'Connor himself was a Protestant who embodied the Reformers' impatience with age-old church rituals and rural beliefs. In his account, he refers to wells' rituals as 'heathenish abominations'. And after a sustained rant against what he viewed as superstitions, he says: 'In putting these questions, I again repeat I am alone actuated by a desire to promote the happiness and the well-being of my countrymen. I conceive I have only spoken *as a rational being* should speak' (in Dixon Hardy 1840: 110; emphasis added). We might ask

ourselves the hypothetical question: who is more likely to tolerate or instigate the pollution of a well or river: O'Connor or his 'superstitious' Roscommon informant? [vi]

O'Connor spoke as 'a rational being', and under the influence of his rational tribe many holy wells fell into disrepute and disrepair in Ireland and Britain after the Reformation; or they metamorphosed into desecralised 'wishing wells', where sacrifices to the nymphs were replaced by offerings of coins. But the sacred status of wells cannot be eradicated so easily from the psyche. After all, in the Christian tradition fountains and wells have always had a resonance of the biblical story of Jesus and the Samaritan woman meeting at a well near the town of Sychar in Samaria (John 4: 1—30). During their conversation Jesus tells the woman that everyone who drinks the well water will be thirsty again, but that the water he himself offers will ensure that those who drink it will never thirst again, for it will become in them 'a spring of water welling up to eternal life'. Here the idea of water as a gift of God, as in Psalm 114, and as conferring inspiration, as in the Greek oracular streams, is taken further and becomes an image of the holy spirit, conferring immortality on those who imbibe truth.

Even at secular wishing wells the echo of Jesus's words still lingers and draws the coins of the faithful. On the lake island of Gougane Barra, sacred to St Finbarr, in the wilds of West Cork, there is a holy well that has become a wishing well; or *had* become, because if you go there now you will see an official notice requesting visitors *not* to toss coins into its waters. Twenty yards farther on, at the edge of the shore, you can see in the shallow water the glitter of coins that were intended for the well but cast into the lake as the next best thing. The faithful will not be deterred by pernicky bureaucrats; and whatever offerings the nymphs of the well may lose, the nymphs of the lake will gain.

You can forbid people giving their offerings to a well, but you can never put a lid on a well's psychic significance, nor the instinct to make a connection with a reality lying beyond that of the ego. The poet Emily Dickinson beautifully captures this idea of a well as a portal to another reality in her poem, 'What mystery pervades a well!' (#1400). In the poem she uses Double Vision to describe both the surface appearance of the well — resembling a 'lid of glass' of something containable, like a jar — yet at the same time seeing it as the face of an abyss. Nature, as Double Vision reveals, is always two-fold: a surface amenable to the senses and a metaphysical reality beyond comprehension. Dickinson describes nature as a 'stranger' and says: 'To pity those that know her not / Is helped by the regret / That those who know her, know her less / The nearer her they get'. We can ignore nature, or we can engage with nature, and in doing so come to realise that our knowledge of her will reveal our ignorance of her infinite mystery. But in doing so we may reach a state of humility and even awe before creation, rather than treating it as a thing to be conquered or a problem to be solved.

If we cannot ultimately know the mystery of a well or stream or spring, we can still form a right relationship with one, a connection based on reverence or at least respect. The Roman poet Horace, for instance, wrote an ode about a sacred spring called Bandusia, which probably lay either near his birthplace in the south of Italy or near his farm in the north of the country; and, of course, he addressed the spring, *fons*, as a living thing, a friend. He tells the spring 'tomorrow you'll receive a young goat', a sacrifice designed, one supposes, to ensure the bountiful flow of water in a hot climate, an oasis for people and thirsty cattle alike. Horace ends the poem in a lighter vein, pointing

out the mutual relationship between himself and the spring. While a spring can make a poet famous by conferring the waters of inspiration, the poet can make the spring famous by writing a poem about it.

O Bandusian spring, shinier than glass,
 worthy of sweet wine and flowers —
 tomorrow you'll receive a young goat,
 its horns just bulging from its brow

and primed for lustiness and fighting,
 in vain: this scion of a frisky ram
 will dye your freezing flow of water
 with a hot red bloody stream.

The torrid season of the Dog Star
 does not affect the kindly way
 you cool the wandering herds
 and bulls exhausted from the plough.

I will bring *you* fame — yes, *you* —
 by singing of the oak tree on the cave
 from which your chattering waters
 cascade ...[\[vii\]](#)

I suppose you could argue that consigning a goat's blood to a stream constitutes pollution of a sort; but in ancient times an animal sacrifice was a mark of the highest respect, the sort of tribute you would afford a god. In doing so, you recognised that a spring, like the Bandusian one, had sacred status, and must be honoured, not desecrated.

It would be fair to say that many springs, streams and rivers in the West are seen less as sacred waterways or Horatian friends deserving protection, if not worship, than as natural gutters or convenient run-offs. To take just one example in Ireland: the Avoca River in Co. Wicklow, which an EPA report of 2017 labelled as one of the worst-polluted rivers in the country. Back in the mists of time this river was given the name 'Avoca', from the Irish meaning 'the great river'; now it is not so much 'great' as notorious, a great sewer, in fact, with its waters blended with cadmium, lead, chromium and zinc, the effluents of the local mining industry (see *Irish Times* 2017). Supposing a latter-day Horace, someone such as Seamus Heaney, had written an ode in celebration of the Avoca and the kindly way it used to give cool water to wandering herds? Would that, perhaps, have given the Avoca an aura of protection, a means of saving it from the worst excesses of modern industrial processes?

Only imagination, Blake's Double Vision, can show us the way to see deep down into nature and thereby empathise with it — to a degree that will give us the determination and energy to protect, revere and celebrate it.[\[viii\]](#) How many of us can say we have a proper, felt, relationship with a local lake, stream or spring, like Horace did, or indeed with any natural feature beyond a generalised

pleasure of seeing a hill in the distance or a tree in the garden? The Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō once said that if you want to learn about a pine tree or a bamboo you have to experience them directly and leave your ego behind, otherwise you will simply impose your self-centred self on the object and any relationship will be impossible (Bashō 1966 [1694]: 33). And that with which we have no relationship becomes easier to exploit or degrade. Our actions are guided by the way we see the world; and if we can see a river as the face of a beautiful woman, or a stream as Hopkins' wild creature or Vaughan's dear friend, or a well as Dickinson's portal to infinite mystery, we cannot but marvel and in marvelling feel moved to protect and nurture our waterways. But if we cannot recapture our vision and see the world with the eyes of imagination, our rivers, which could be like the rivers of paradise, will become like the Avoca in Wicklow; will become like the rivers of the classical underworld: the River of Woe, Acheron; the River of Lamentation, Cocytus; the River of Burning, Phlegethon; and the River of Shuddering, Styx.

In the course of this essay I have mentioned Blake, Hopkins, Vaughan, Dickinson and Horace as individuals who regarded nature with the eyes of imagination. I'm going to end with another poet. In the city of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, there is an old defunct drinking fountain, constructed in the early 1900s, which bears the unattributed inscription in verse: 'Drink, Pilgrim, here; Here rest! and if thy heart / Be innocent, here too shalt thou refresh / Thy spirit.' It's a beautifully worded invitation to a pilgrim, someone both a traveller and spiritual seeker, to take refreshment; and whether or not the refreshment will remain merely on the physical level will depend on the heart of the individual: innocence is rewarded by true refreshment. I like to think that thousands of Bethlehem citizens have over the years drunk from this fountain and mulled over these words, which were in fact written by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in a poem called 'Inscription for a Fountain on a Heath', first published in 1801. It's a nice thought that a spray of Coleridge's verbal fountain crossed the Atlantic and found itself in Bethlehem just over a hundred years later.

In the poem, the poet — let us assume it is Coleridge — is walking across an unidentified heath and comes across a sycamore tree. Beside the tree is a natural spring or fountain bubbling up from sandy soil with a stone jutting over it, shielding it from falling leaves. The poem is low key, gentle, but captures the whispering charm conferred by the spring on its surroundings, transforming what might have been a bleak heath into an oasis of the spirit. Whoever created the fountain in Bethlehem must have been struck by Coleridge's verbal vista of the imagination and transferred it into a public space for future generations to ponder over. And perhaps one day the Bethlehem fountain will be revived by those with Coleridge's Double Vision of water as something that both quenches the thirst and refreshes the spirit.

The title of Coleridge's poem makes us imagine that the setting is somewhere a bit scrubby and relatively barren. Yet there, the poet says, stands a sycamore that is a home for bees and is a tree that the Hebrew patriarchs would have known and loved. The adjacent spring embodies both motion and stillness. Its little jet of water is breaking from the sandy soil but is not powerful enough to disturb the glassy surface of the pool. Tree and spring combine to form an oasis, a miniature Eden, affording a traveller shade, coolness and ease. Coleridge has seen deep down into this spring, and has felt its efficacy, and in doing so he has shown that all of us can have the same vision. It needs no specialist talent. All we have to do is let the imagination enter our lives through stillness, observation and

meditation. With imagination we change ourselves, and if enough of us can do that, there will be no need to change the world; it will already have been changed.[ix]

Inscription for a Fountain on a Heath

This Sycamore, oft musical with bees,—
 Such tents the Patriarchs loved! O long unharmed
 May all its agéd boughs o'er-canopy
 The small round basin, which this jutting stone
 Keeps pure from falling leaves! Long may the Spring,
 Quietly as a sleeping infant's breath,
 Send up cold waters to the traveller
 With soft and even pulse! Nor ever cease
 Yon tiny cone of sand its soundless dance,
 Which at the bottom, like a Fairy's Page,
 As merry and no taller, dances still,
 Nor wrinkles the smooth surface of the Fount.
 Here Twilight is and Coolness: here is moss,
 A soft seat, and a deep and ample shade.
 Thou may'st toil far and find no second tree.
 Drink, Pilgrim, here; Here rest! and if thy heart
 Be innocent, here too shalt thou refresh
 Thy spirit, listening to some gentle sound,
 Or passing gale or hum of murmuring bees!

[i] Reviewer: “The use of a judge’s remark on a river being like the face of a beautiful woman is powerful, but risks being read as an oddity, or an off-the-cuff remark. Perhaps the example of NZ’s Whanganui River being recognised in 2017 legislation as having the rights of a person [or the Atrato in Colombia; or the Ganges and others in India] would show something more powerful that is possible for our consciousness of our place in the world.”

[ii] Reviewer: “I am not fully convinced by the notion that it is both sufficient and necessary to align nature and the feminine principle: though if that were the case, perhaps it is not surprising that nature is so easily abused by culture. Consider the gender politics that have long shaped this alignment of the feminine and nature.”

[iii] Reviewer: “This seems to alert readers to an alternative, mythopoetic encounter with the world exemplified in certain poetry (or perhaps in nearly all poetry?), suggesting that we might learn to see the world anew if only we read more of this kind of poetry ... Here the essay focuses on a forgotten way of encountering the world, which these poets remind us is still possible and viable.”

[iv] Reviewer: “The environmental scientists I know do indeed see nature as a living thing; are known

to talk to flowers, hug trees. I suggest that the problem is not a science-dominated culture, but a money-dominated culture, which reduces everything to commodity and effectively accomplishes the disenchantment of the world.”

[v] Reviewer: “The reflections upon the poetry quoted, from Blake, Hopkins, Dickinson and Coleridge are well chosen to make the point about a double vision, and attentively explicated. The inner/outer life that the essay seems to be seeking to balance is a strong point, and Blake’s Double Vision is an effective framework for this approach.”

[vi] Reviewer: “It might have been the case that water had a mythopoetic and sacralised presence in human society before the eighteenth century, but reports and descriptions we have of the filth running through the streets of medieval villages, for instance, into village streams, and the evidence of plagues and water-borne illnesses suggests that water has for a long time played a degraded and functional role in human lives, particularly urban lives. None of this need negate the argument of the paper ...”

[vii] Horace, *Odes* 3.13. My translation.

[viii] Reviewer: “It is science that has alerted us, and has been alerting us for fifty years, that the planet is on an unsustainable trajectory. Science has an important role to play in telling truth to the world, along with poets and mystics who might tell the same truth but through entirely different channels.”

[ix] Reviewer: “The topic of this essay is so very important, and the writing brings in a lovely gentleness that is not often found in contemporary philosophical texts.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Harpur

James Harpur has had six poetry collections published by Carcanet and Anvil Press and is a member of Aosdána, the Irish academy of arts. He has won a number of awards for his poetry, including a Patrick and Katherine Kavanagh Fellowship, the British National Poetry Competition, and the Vincent Buckley Poetry Prize, which enabled him to travel to Australia and spend time in Melbourne and Sydney. His books include *The White Silhouette* (2018) an *Irish Times* Book of the Year; *Angels and Harvesters* (2012) a PBS Recommendation and shortlisted for the 2013 *Irish Times* Award; and *The Dark Age* (2007), winner of the Michael Hartnett Poetry Prize. James regularly broadcasts his work on radio and gives readings and talks about poetry, inspiration and the imagination in schools and universities and at literary festivals. www.jamesharpur.com

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