



# Illuminated Manuscripts

by Hilary Brand

**Hilary Brand is a freelance writer, whose books include *The Sceptic's Guide to Reading the Bible* and *Art and Soul* (co-written with Adrienne Chaplin), plus four novels for children. Until recently she was Chair of the Arts Centre Group, a national organisation for Christians working professionally in arts and media.**

*Are theological themes re-emerging in literature? Hilary Brand examines the contemporary scene and asks Poet Laureate Andrew Motion for his thoughts on the subject.*

I knew it was a silly question as soon as I'd asked it. "Why do you believe so strongly in poetry? Is it just love of words, or is there more to it?"

But the Poet Laureate is a gentle man with a passion to spread his love of poetry to others, and he answers with careful consideration: "I think one thing leads to the other. Of course, it is at first contact to do with the words themselves, but all literature worth its salt is forever compelling us to ask questions about ourselves. It endlessly invites us to define and redefine our humanity. For non-believers that's enough in itself, but for a lot of people that would fulfil a religious function."

"So do you see theological themes re-emerging?"

To this, Motion offers a decisive "no". But while he sees the current poetry scene as

characterised primarily by its diversity, and thin on religious writers apart from the great, gaunt RS Thomas, he is in no doubt that poetry almost inevitably leans towards the spiritual.

"Although there may be fewer people writing Christian poems, I can't see any evidence whatsoever that people are writing fewer poems which are interested in spirit life... I think that any decently ambitious poet is bound to brood on these things. They might come to the conclusion that there's nobody there, but it doesn't make the enquiry valueless."

He cites Seamus Heaney as a great example of this brooding, and refers to his Laureate predecessor Ted Hughes as someone who "dived beneath the appearance of things, looking for fundamental symbolic values"<sup>1</sup>

Clearly, Motion too believes in searching below the surface. In his poem *A Wall in Naples*, he uses the inscrutable marks on an age-worn wall as a metaphor for his own yearning for meaning: "I cannot imagine a hunger greater than this, for marks, for messages sent by

hand, for signs of life”<sup>2</sup>.

But for him these signs are not found in religion. “I’m not an orthodox believer. But I do care deeply about what I prefer to think of as ‘a sense of the numinous’.”

Perhaps definitions matter less than he, or we, might think. Thomas Hardy, a poet of a previous generation, certainly thought so. “Poetry and religion touch each other, or rather modulate into each other, are indeed often but different names for the same thing.”<sup>3</sup>

Strangely, this connection is not so apparent when it comes to the other great literary form of our age, the novel. Novelist and feminist theologian Sara Maitland, in a recent lecture, pondered why this was: “Seventy three per cent of people (in Britain) when surveyed claim to believe in some sort of God. That is markedly higher than the percentage who commit adultery, get divorced, question their sexual orientation or seek psychiatric support or psychological counselling. Yet that is not the impression one might get from reading contemporary novels. Religious experience (as opposed to the social experiences of people who happen to be religious) is markedly absent from the modern novel.”<sup>4</sup>

Maitland, along with many others, puts this down to the fact that the novel as an art form sprung into existence at almost exactly the same time as the Enlightenment – when conventional religion was beginning to be doubted and rationality was all. “The novel up to and beyond Jane Austen offers no spirituality at all, but simply morality,” comments priest and novelist David McLaurin<sup>5</sup> – a view that seems to have prevailed into the present century: “Novel reading,” says author Jill Paton Walsh, is “moral philosophy with the theology left out.”<sup>6</sup>

Whether this is an inherent characteristic of the novel or simply the way things happen to be, is open to debate. Certainly, here and there are signs that writers are beginning to “subvert the genre” to explore theology in their own particular ways.

Of course, some genres have always been more open to

subversion than others. Fantasy and sci-fi with their mythical elements of *journey*, *quest* and *allegory* have long had a particular potential for expressing spiritual themes, as CS Lewis and Tolkien testify (though no contemporary tale-spinner has quite matched their genius).

Surprisingly, contemporary crime fiction – moving into darker and deeper realms than Christie ever dreamed of – has. Writers such as PD James and Minette Walters ask not just *who-dun-it?* but *why?* and the question has taken them beyond psychology to the nature of evil itself.

Then again a completely new genre of fiction has appeared in recent years, that of, for want of a better word, the *ecclesiastical* novel. Susan Howatch pioneered it and Catherine Fox and now Michael Arditti have followed close behind. These are not mere Trollopian (Anthony *and* Joanna) “social experiences of people who happen to be religious”, but novels that use the church as a background for an exploration of the theological – and, it has to be said, the sexual, earning them in some quarters the “vicars and knickers” tag (although in Arditti’s case “vicars and Y-fronts” is perhaps more accurate).

One welcome aspect of the diversity of contemporary writing is the rich marriage between Western rationality and the thought streams of other cultures. Ben Okri, for example, has brought a particularly African perspective to spirituality; while for Salman Rushdie it has meant going back to his Islamic roots. (Rushdie’s experience offers a valuable object lesson – if you want to explore theology in fiction, doing it from a Christian rather than a Muslim viewpoint may be a safer option!)

So then – are theological themes re-emerging in contemporary literature? Perhaps it is more accurate to say that they have never gone away. For Andrew Motion, literature – and poetry in particular – always has and always will address these great issues.

“What does it mean to be a human being? What does it mean to look beyond ourselves



and try and find our role in the larger picture of things? What does it mean to contemplate death? What does it mean to raise issues of faith, whether or not you come down feeling convinced?" Poetry is a primitive and timeless response, Motion believes, to "viscerally human questions".

And in some quarters at least, the postmodern world is provoking writers to enquire with ever greater urgency:

"Ask questions, no, screech questions out loud – while kneeling in front of the electric doors at Safeway, demanding other citizens ask questions along with you – while chewing up old textbooks and spitting out the words onto downtown sidewalks – outside the Planet Hollywood, outside the stock exchange and outside the Gap... that's what you have to do, each time baying louder than before..."<sup>7</sup>

Prophetic words from Douglas Coupland, creator of *Generation X*, in his novel *Girlfriend in a Coma*. But are they words the Church, more comfortable with answers and certainties, can take on board?

Alan Bennett, in a recent TV programme on Westminster Abbey, commented on the fact that a fresco of St Thomas had been uncovered on a wall in Poets Corner. It was fitting, he said, because writers always deal in doubts. Encouraging too, that the Church has room for both writers and doubters in its midst.

There is no doubt that the Church needs its creative writers. And if there is scant evidence for a grand awakening of theology in literature, there is, thankfully, a great deal of proof that theologians are at last waking up to the value of poems and stories.

Andrew Motion, who has recently been commissioned to write poems on the *Seven Words from the Cross*, as well as for the Salvation Army, is heartened at how quick the Church has been to ask him to do things. He suggests that an injection of poetry into the religious establishment could do it nothing but good. "Every time *Thought for the Day* comes on, I find myself turning the tap on more loudly, so I don't have to listen to this banality that's

coming out. I mean, what a waste. If you guys can't use it, give it to poets!"

Poetry, he believes, is often a better medium to express the transcendent, because: "it moves at a different speed. What poetry does is slow things down – make us brood and reflect and reread and ponder, in a way that journalism, and even sermons, don't. We go back to poems and carry them round with us, so that they crystallise around the important things in our lives."

A similar characteristic has been claimed for fiction. "One of the remarkable qualities of the story," said the late Henri Nouwen, "is that it creates space. We can dwell in a story, walk around, find our own place. The story confronts but it does not oppress: the story inspires but it does not manipulate."<sup>8</sup>

In a world where the meta-narratives, the Grand Stories of life, are distrusted and discounted, people still need stories and symbols to help them understand who they are. "The Church and poetry are natural partners in all kinds of ways," says Andrew Motion. It is a partnership one hopes can only grow and develop. ■

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Motion's Introduction to *Verses of the Poet Laureate*, collected by Hilary Laurie, Orion 1999. All other quotes from Andrew Motion from an interview by Hilary Brand, exclusively for *TransMission*, 5 September 2000

<sup>2</sup> Part of the *Encounters* exhibition at the National Gallery

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Hardy, Introduction to *Late Lyrics and Earlier 1922*, quoted by Stephen Platten in *Ink and Spirit*, Canterbury Press, 2000

<sup>4</sup> Sara Maitland *Religious Experience and the Novel, a problem of genre and culture* in ed: Davies & Flood *The Novel, Spirituality and Modern Culture*, University of Wales Press 2000

<sup>5</sup> David McLaurin *The Dark Night of the Novel in an Age of Weak Faith* ed: Davies & Flood Op Cit.

<sup>6</sup> Jill Paton Walsh *The blizzard of circumstance: writing and moral discovery* in ed: Davies & Flood Op Cit.

<sup>7</sup> Douglas Coupland *Girlfriend in a Coma*, HarperCollins 1998

<sup>8</sup> Henri Nouwen *The Living Reminder*, HarperCollins 1996