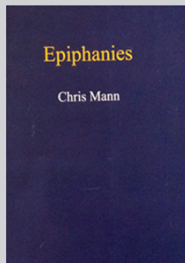


## The persistence of spirit



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The persistence of spirit

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One of the epigraphs to this graceful and lucid volume is from Albert Einstein, and it gives clear expression to Chris Mann's essential poetic bearing: 'The most important function of art and science is to awaken cosmic religious feeling'. *Epiphanies* is imbued with religious feeling, linked to the cosmos, and expressed through elements of both art and science. The content of the poems is often epiphanic, if we understand by 'epiphany' the manifestation of that which is greater than ourselves, yet gestured towards through the limited means we have at our disposal: words and images. Mann has a particular ability to body forth the spiritual through the right words and images. Themes in the volume include the healing, peace-inducing power of nature, an understanding and appreciation of the value of the darker aspects of existence, the holiness of the material world and interaction with the shades (significant people in our lives, internalised by us). Certain poems display the value of the emblematic potential of nature. Representative works include 'A Small Church in the Drakensberg' (p. 5), 'The Glimmer in the Moil' (p. 8), 'Doubt' (p. 10), 'The Spirituality of a Hug' (p. 15), 'A Visit to the People Within' (p. 20) and 'The Leopard and the Heart's Gazelles' (p. 37). Also prominent in the book is the use of biblical personages and events as focalisers, and these offer dramatic and 'manifest' expressions of the human encounter with spiritual potency. Examples are 'Jonah' (p. 43), 'Mary of Magdala's Dream' (p. 56), 'Doubting Thomas' (p. 58) and 'The Roman Centurion's Good Friday' (p. 61). Some of these poems are discussed in the following.

'A Small Church in the Drakensberg' is, in fairly typical Mannian fashion, a direct address to a second person (thereby involving the reader from the start); it is in the form of a prose poem, which is nevertheless subtly structured, thereby suggesting in slantwise fashion the patterns behind apparently random nature. The church itself is an organising structure of the spirit, set in 'the foothills of the Drakensberg', themselves patterned against the implicit mirroring presence on another scale of a vast mountain range and all that it evokes. Looking at the poem, one notices, for instance, rhyme words appearing every 11 to 13 beats. These rhyme intervals are usually demarcated by periods, as in the first stanza, which contains the delayed couplet, 'lane'/'grain':

If you're out driving through the foothills of the Drakensberg, don't miss  
the sign that points towards a quiet lane. It leads to what looks like a shed  
made out of planks of wood whose splinters, cracks and knots are weathered in the grain. (p. 5)

The attention to descriptive detail imbues the humbleness of the 'shed' with its own material significance, which anticipates a spiritual substantiality that is sounded throughout the poem: 'a dove flying up into a clearing's sun-streamed air', 'the deep and steadfast hum of bees', the 'bee-bread in a world renewed'. In the penultimate stanza, the interior of the church is undergoing renovation, and, again, the details of this are significant:

The porch door was ajar. I peered into a restful gloom and saw a sanded  
crucifix and altar rails, an altar like a workbench where a carpenter had left  
his tools, wrapped panes of glass, new sanding discs and nails. ('A Small Church in the Drakensberg', p. 5)

The wholesome value of these signs of renewal is made explicit in the final stanza, where carpentry, the setting, the labouring of the bees and the little church are concentrated in the presence of Christ:

The scent of sanded yellowwood hung in the hot still air. It stirred my soul-  
life from its dusk-wan wintering. The dim gold light, gathered inside that  
rough-planked forest shed, fed me like Christ stored in a honeycomb of spring.  
( 'A Small Church in the Drakensberg', p. 5)

We notice how the rhyme words offset each other, involving traditional images that still retain strength and freshness: 'dusk-wan wintering' of the soul, and Christ, 'in a honeycomb of spring'.

'The Glimmer in the Moil' is an inspired analysis of the conceptual and psychic limitations besetting human life; it offers, through metaphor, a means of articulating the consequences of the limitations:

It can't be what you think it is, spirituality. If it were, the soft white  
glimmering which blooms at night in the dim-lit waves heaving through  
the kelp below Cape Point, would comprehend the ocean's dark immensity. (p. 8)

The richness of materiality again underlies spiritual appreciation – that word 'blooms' seems so appropriate in the context of luminescence and growth attached to the image of the 'glimmering' presence beneath the kelp; it captures perfectly the sense of a tiny living element participating in an 'immensity' that is 'dark' to its limited understanding. The ineffable quality of spirituality, that sense of what is just beyond apprehension, pondered in recent years by philosophers such as Derrida and Levinas, is presented by Mann in terms of mundane experience and spiritual vision, the extreme loci of expression found in this volume:

It gathers, it seethes in the always just before, the just before you waken,  
blissfully at peace, before you hear yourself say on the phone,  
*Sorry!* or, all  
of a sudden, while turning on a tap in the shower, you see Christ walking on  
the shore of a lake. ('The Glimmer in the Moil', p. 8)

The connected images in the final stanza provide, through a supple blend of scientific and spiritual terminology, an extended metaphor of the power of prayer:

Cynics blacken, fanatics red-tide its bloom. If thought's like plankton, and  
caritas oxygen, then prayer's the wave-pulse that gets them glowing.  
Without them, you'd never write a line, for all the kelp and sea-seethe in the  
psyche, the gloom. ('The Glimmer in the Moil', p. 8)

Here the second person address is to the self, not the reader, and it suggests that objective distancing necessary for a dispassionate appraisal. For if the poem affirms the value of spiritual practice, it also warns against complacency. Spiritual understanding and aesthetic sensibility find common ground (and the extended metaphor to a degree imparts this). Mann's religious expressions throughout this volume are thus linked to his ability to 'make it new' as a poet, causing language and image to resonate in a way that brings to my mind the poetry of George Herbert.

A familiar theme is that of the 'shades' who can inform our course through life. In 'A Visit to the People Within', the theme is revisited to quite startling effect, as all the jive of rap and street poetry is combined in it with serious subject matter. The rhyming couplets and forceful dimeters snap within the body of what is presented to the eye as a prose poem (again), helping to make immediate the issues with which it deals:

Can't you see the prophets, flashing their eyes, angered by the carbon  
choking the skies? Can't you see Mandela breaking the stone,  
hammering at the  
bias built in the bone? Feel the rush of anger spurt through the calm, see along  
a passage one who did you harm. Take him by the elbow, show him the  
door, tell him, *I forgive you, haunt me no more.* (p. 20)

This has a similar general effect to the ballad form used by Shelley in *The Mask of Anarchy* (Shelley 1968:338). The poem is, in a way, didactic, something poetry is not supposed to be. The redemptive mission involving the shades, however, ties in with the theme of healing and offers an indigenous expression of psychic reciprocity closely linked to prayer. From this point of view, the book's thematics justify the need to instruct; certainly the effect is not doctrinaire. In our reciprocatory interaction with the shades, we need to:

... listen to their heartaches, feel their  
embrace. Talk out what's upset them, ask for release, drift on into silence,  
float into peace. Drift on into silence before the vision fades, float on into  
peace in the arms of the shades. ('A Visit to the People Within', p. 20)

In bringing the shades peace, we gain peace; the process is, in an internalised way that acknowledges the potency of the mind and what lies beyond the rational intellect (as does prayer), an affirmation of polyvalent existence, found as much within us as without us.

My example of an emblematic poem from the volume (presented as such in explicit terms reminiscent of the emblematic parallelism of Hebrew poetry, as found in Prov) is 'The Leopard and the Heart's Gazelles':

Roam the plains or scrubland,  
keep lithe and muscled as we may,  
no heart's desire can hope  
to hold its doubts at bay.

Belief's the heart's gazelles  
kept trotting in the breeze,  
while doubt's the young leopard  
which prowls the fever-trees. (p. 37)

The poem is epigrammatic in quality, relying on the simplicity of its appropriate images for its power. The distinction between herbivore and carnivore highlights an internal division in us, which must always accompany spirituality. The 'breeze' is the element of the one, the sinister sounding 'fever-trees' the element of the other, yet both types of creature are 'lithe and muscled', that is, both tendencies are strong within the human breast. This particular poem, unlike the poem 'Doubt', offers no explicit consolation through faith, and part of its sombre power lies in this fact.

One of my favourite poems in the volume is 'The Roman Centurion's Good Friday', a powerful dramatic account of

Christ's arrest, trials and Passion from the point of view of an intelligent, and not unsympathetic, Roman. The poem is remarkable for its recreation of place and atmosphere. Within its brief compass, it evokes a swathe of history as lived experience, making 'manifest' the figure of Christ, too often rendered abstract by repetition of dogma and the rituals of belief. Presenting Christ from the viewpoint of an independent observer thoroughly alert to his surroundings and his historical moment, Mann thus replaces the jaded projections informed by childhood reading and instruction. Line lengths are irregular, although a hexameter pattern tends to prevail; after the first two nine-line stanzas, it is made up of octaves that overflow into an abbreviated ninth line, a form giving it both structure and freedom which might serve semantic purposes, as in the conclusion to the poem, where the word 'love' overflows the constraints inherent in metre: the Centurion, burdened years after the crucifixion by guilt, tells of the 'slow suffocation' on 'the scaffold of Rome':

... of a priest from the hills and lakes of beyond, who  
spoke to people of the world within them and channelled the  
waters of love,  
love, love. (p. 61)

This element of lyrical repetition occurs at various points where Christ is mentioned and suggests that the Roman's mind (usually factually pragmatic) is stirred by his appearance. For instance, the first two stanzas contain these closely related lines and cadences: 'Jerusalem,/Jerusalem on a Friday in spring-time is where I first saw him, heard him,/evaded him, an artisan in the robe and sandals of his people' (stanza one); 'Jerusalem,/Jerusalem on a Friday in spring-time is where I first saw him, heard him,/spurned him, a friend to children and the untouchable woman' (stanza two). These lines convey the Roman's past attitude (now regretted) and certain pertinent details regarding Christ, in a chant whose lyricism bears the emotional charge reflective of memorial reconstruction undergoing present re-evaluation. These passages occur after detailed evocations of the setting, such as:

... Jerusalem in the dim light of a dawn, the priests carrying  
firewood to the inner temple, the hawkers setting out their  
trestles and  
boards, the athletes beginning their run up the Mount of Olives,  
a caravan from the south unpacking its panniers. ('The Roman  
Centurion's Good Friday', p. 61)

This is the account of an observant Roman, who appreciates his surroundings and records them with a keen objective eye, making the contrast with the lyricism all the more salient. Not that the juxtaposition feels as if it serves a technical purpose, merely. A world is summoned up, as is a consciousness within that world, reacting to its own memories.

The Centurion's historical vision incorporates an idealised impression of the Pax Romana of Augustus, but is certainly alert to present corruption and the collapse of the ideal. Temporal change takes on millenarian overtones, reminiscent

of Yeats's 'Two Songs from a Play', where the presence of 'that fierce virgin and her Star' heralds the end of pagan civilisation (Yeats 1957:437). The notion of the historical cyclicity that is envisioned by Yeats is perhaps evident in the Roman's wondering in the final stanza of the poem about his possible involvement in a 'seasonal betrayal'. Apocalyptic change is certainly evident in his being 'woken in the dark' on the Friday of Christ's death

... from a nightmare chaos of goat-legged couplings, old citadels in  
flames, Apollo's smashed statue in the sewers of Rome... ('The  
Roman Centurion's Good Friday', p. 63)

After this he is 'ushered' to 'a chamber inside the barracks to listen to the whispers of my friends in hoods'; then he 'roused the legion, debriefed the governor and summoned the clerks of/the court to a trial'.

We are familiar with the events which follow, of course, but this newly dramatised version, set squarely in historical time, creates an almost unbearable proximity to the fact of man's age-old inhumanity to man:

The trial was a fire-storm of furied confusions with the outlaw  
at the centre  
the only one still, the governor outflanked by the leaders' guile,  
the soldiers  
in the guard-house losing control, and beating him longer than  
had been  
planned, a nightmare in daylight of blood-streaked skin, the  
crown lopsided  
on his head like a clown's, the laughter of adults and children in  
the alley  
when he stumbled with his cross to the ground... ('The Roman  
Centurion's Good Friday', p. 64)

The objective reportage of the Roman takes on a different colouring here, as he moves towards his acknowledgement in the final stanza of his 'days of shame'. That the final three words should be 'love,/love, love' suggests that the poem, his exercise of 'bringing to account' his experiences towards the end of his life, has not been futile, and that his consciousness has been altered.

This slim volume then, as we have come to expect with the work of Chris Mann, contains much food for the mind and for the spirit, whatever one's belief system or views on the cosmos. That Mann roots himself in the images and figures of Christianity in a free-thinking, undogmatic way gives his verse a powerful honesty and strength; his voice is that of a person all too aware of the 'moil' of existence, but who has repeated access to perceptions of the transcendent manifest in the immanent.

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