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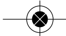

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INTERVIEW

DINAH LIVINGSTONE

Tell us a little bit about your background. Specifically, family, education and, above all, what led you to write poetry?

I grew up in the country and went to a girls' boarding school. After A-levels I came to London and, to my parents' horror, became a Catholic. I worked as a receptionist at the Catholic publishers Sheed and Ward. Frank Sheed and Cecily Hastings taught us theology in a hut behind Westminster Cathedral and trained us to speak in Hyde Park for the Catholic Evidence Guild. I remember on one occasion a man came up, shook the platform and demanded angrily: 'Why aren't there any black statues in heaven?' 'Well…'

I left London for various studies, partly abroad, got married, then returned to London in 1966, on my own with two children. I could now translate from French, German and Spanish (later adding Italian) and got work as a freelance translator. I learnt a lot from two of the German books I translated in the sixties: *Nature and Grace* by Karl Rahner (the pre-eminent theologian of the day with whom I had studied briefly in Innsbruck) and Dorothee Sölle's *The Truth is Concrete*. But now I had got back to London, what I wanted to do above all was become a poet

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I recall seeing you in the Sixties at various reading venues, most especially at The Lamb & Flag pub in Covent Garden. The then chairman of The Poetry Society, Norman Hidden, used to organize monthly readings in the Dryden Room above the bar, and most of the well-known poets of the day appeared there. You presented yourself as very much the performance poet in way-out attire or 'gear', as the term was in that hippy era. Did you see yourself as a performance poet then, rather than one aiming to create effects on the page?

I used to read my poems regularly at the Lamb and Flag and other places. Madge Herron and I read our poems in the Roundhouse at the 1967

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Dialectics of Liberation Conference. At that time when I had written a poem I would automatically know it by heart, so I recited it without a text. But I never saw myself as a 'performance poet'. I loved Keats's unfinished 'Fall of Hyperion' about poetry as a struggle to see more. With each poem I wanted to see a little bit more and say what I see, so that when I see what I say, I see more clearly. I wanted to learn to write well and make each poem as deep and concentrated as I could. At the same time I agreed with Hopkins that 'poetry, the darling child of speech, of lips and spoken utterance: it must be spoken; till it is spoken it is not performed, it does not perform, it is not itself.' I thought of the spoken word as primary, but because poetry is very concentrated we need also to see it written down, to go back to it and take in more each time.

Incidentally, I don't recall my 'attire' as being that way out. I had two Mary Quant dresses and recently I met a poet at Torriano, who also used to frequent the *Lamb and Flag*. She reminded me that we both used to wear Anello and Davide bar shoes – almost *jeune fille bien élevée* rather than 'gear'!

As for poetry on the page, Norman Hidden published my poems in his magazine *Workshop* and they were also published in other little magazines of the time. In 1967 I started my press Katabasis (katabasis.co.uk), publishing my poems in pamphlets, as well as other poets. In 1987 Rivelin Grapheme published my first book of poems, *Saving Grace*. From 1989 to 2006 I managed to get funding for Katabasis to publish books – by poets including Anne Beresford, Christopher Hampton and Kathleen McPhilemy, poetry translations and my own poetry. In 1999 Rockingham published my *Time on Earth: Selected and New Poems*, but mostly I've preferred to publish with my press Katabasis and have control over my work. This has not done me any good as a 'professional' poet, but I don't mind about that.

Politically, you have always been fairly radical. Was your radicalism developed through the influence of the 'revolutionary' 'Sixties? Or like, say, Michael Horovitz's, was it developed by reading the likes of Milton's Areopagitica *or William Blake's political-religious-visionary influence?*

In London from 1966 I was with the Catholic Left which produced the

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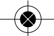
magazine *Slant,* edited by Terry Eagleton. We met weekly as the Friday Group in the Aquinas Centre attached to the Dominican Priory in Kentish Town, and our annual December Group met at Spode House in Staffordshire. We thought the gospel was about bringing a reign of kindness on Earth. Jesus had called it 'the reign of God', we talked about 'love and peace, man!'

It was an optimistic time and in London we were always discussing, dancing and had a lot of laughs. We danced to the Beatles and noted how the film *The Yellow Submarine* had the same theology as the Church Father Origen, who thought that finally the Devil would be saved. At the end of the film the Blue Meanies join the dance. We were rather earnest and disapproved of drugs because they made people fuzzy and boring. But we often took no notice of some of the Church's sillier regulations. There were gay Catholics with partners, and women who wanted to go on the newly available pill were not deterred by 'priests in black gowns… binding with briars'.

Yes, of course I was inspired by William Blake's vision of London transformed into the kind and beautiful city which we 'mutual shall build ….both heart in heart and hand in hand'. And also by his furious awareness that 'the truth is concrete', as in his *Song of Experience* 'Holy Thursday': 'and so many children poor' – which, alas, is still true today.

For me you are one of the most 'religious' poets (note the inverted commas) whom I have known since Kathleen Raine, who was both poet and pre-eminent Blake scholar of her generation. How do you respond to that?

During *les évènements* in May 1968, poet Olivier Bernard went to Paris to gather and translate the graffiti, one of which was '*L'Imagination au Pouvoir*!: Power to the Imagination!' By the 1970s, following Blake, I realised that God(s) and the whole supernatural realm were created by the human Poetic Genius or imagination, and that they have been and remain vital in human history and consciousness. My poems are focused on this world, and obviously things that happened in my own life fed into them. For example, when I married again and had another daughter, that baby figured prominently in my pamphlet *Ultrasound* (Katabasis 1974). She is now Dr Livingstone. When I use religious language, images or poetic



visions, it is to talk about this life on Earth.

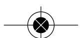
Since 2004 I have edited the magazine *Sofia*, which explores religion as a human creation. It is stocked on the open shelves of the London Poetry Library – as one of the few 'religious' magazines that has decent poetry in it.

It seemed to me your most recent volume of poetry The Vision Splendid *(Katabasis, 2014) is the most mature and masterly collection you have published. The English nature poetry strain infused, perhaps, with influence of your translation work over the years from Spanish and South American poetry, plus your deeply religious humanism, has brought you to a poetry of mature visionary status: which is why I invoked the comparison with Kathleen Raine. However, your poetry of a London that 'shines as a city of social joys' expresses an urban world far in excess of Kathleen Raine's: though, like you, she lived the greater part of her life in the Metropolis. How do feel about this as a description of your most recent poetry?*

Thank you. I was chuffed when a reviewer said of *The Vision Splendid*: 'Her eye is exact and her ear faultless... Livingstone's language is so conversational that one might just not notice her formal skill.' This is what I have always wanted to produce: rich, technically accomplished poetry that appears spontaneous.

I love London, its huge variety of people and places, its metropolitan buzz and its greenness. An early review of my poems said '…the feel of London much to the fore'. William Blake was a visionary poet who dreamt of London transformed into the shining New Jerusalem in *Revelation*, the beautiful city where tears are wiped away. But, as a Londoner, he was firmly rooted in the London of his day and also wrote poems about its darker side, its 'chartered streets', chimney sweepers and 'babes reduced to misery'.

The theology of his *Jerusalem* is actually very Thomist. As Thomas Aquinas said and Karl Rahner insisted too: 'Grace does not destroy nature but perfects it.' Blake's Jerusalem is not up in the sky but our own London shining, transformed here on Earth. That's why he begins the lyric at the heart of his long poem *Jerusalem* with a list of familiar London names: 'The fields from Islington to Marybone,/ To Primrose Hill and Saint John's Wood,/ Were builded over with pillars of gold/And there



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Jerusalem's pillars stood./ …Pancras and Kentish Town repose…' That's why he speaks of the shining 'ponds where boys to bathe delight', actual ponds on Hampstead Heath, one of which is now the Ladies' Pond where I swim today. For me, as for E. P. Thompson in his *Witness against the Beast*, Blake's greatness is that he is both a visionary and a *this-worldly* poet. Incidentally, 'grace does not destroy nature but perfects it' is also true of poetry as 'ordinary language heightened', the point Wordsworth is making when he argues against 'poetic diction' in his *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads.*

And now, this year, you challenge us with an equally remarkable book entitled The Making of Humanity (*Katabasis, 2017), the first chapter of which firmly associates 'poetry and theology as sister arts'. Well, the American poet Wallace Stevens argued 'The Major poetic idea in the world is, and has always been, God'. This, like you in* The Making of Humanity, *firmly allies poetry and religion. But you develop the notion that successful poems have, like concrete objects, a splendour, a 'shining of shape'; whereas God and Divinity are nebulous abstractions invented by humans. Is this a correct interpretation?*

In the book I say that in a successful poem 'shining of shape' (a medieval definition of beauty) becomes shining of meaning. I go on to say that the Proto-Indo European word for 'god' is *Dyeus*, related to the root *div* meaning 'shining'. *Dyeus/div* descends into words meaning 'god' or 'divine' in Greek Zeus, Latin Jupiter (Shining Father), Latin *Deus* and modern Latin languages: *Dio, Dios, Dieu*, the Germanic god *Tiu* (as in our English Tuesday) and our word 'divine'. God is a Shining One. I suggest that theology is a sister art to poetry and concerned with the apprehension of a Shining. This Shining, which has been called transcendent but I believe belongs to our natural, earthly life, is part of the remit of poetry.

I think The Making of Humanity *is an amazing and wonderful book. It has stimulated for me a number of questions. For the sake of argument I mention two which could be said to be somewhat negative. The first is the thought that the more one seeks to explain the importance of poetry to people, the less they believe you. Do you agree or not?*

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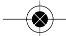
In the book's Introduction I say:

> This book is a defence of poetry because some people are wary of it and regard it as an attempt to bamboozle us. I include stories of the supernatural as poetic visions and here we find two mirror-image types of literalist, even though both lots would probably be horrified to be lumped together: some secular humanists, who aim to be 'purely rational' according to what 'Science says', and Christian fundamentalists. Fundamentalist Christians think the biblical stories and visions must be literally true because God says so, whereas some secular humanists strenuously reject them, on the grounds that, since they are not literally true, they are a kind of trick. Both groups think in terms of literal or nothing. Both groups are prosaic – with no time or place for poetic faith; they think if something isn't literally true, then it is false.

I think you are right. I have certainly never succeeded in explaining the importance of poetry to a secular humanist or Christian fundamentalist of the kind described in that paragraph. However, maybe there are other people who are less sure of themselves, who suffer the 'blank misgivings of a creature/moving about in worlds not realised'. I hoped that my book might clarify a few things for them. And of course, there are plenty of people who do believe in poetry. I also dared to hope that they might read my book and say: 'Yes! That's a good way of putting it.'

The Making of Humanity, *with its subtitle of 'Poetic Vision and Kindness' stirred in me much thought, as I suggest. The book is a quiet but remorseless argument for humanism by equating 'the shining of poetry' with theology and the shining or illumination of Deity. Its weakness lies, I think, in the dismissal of God as a humanly invented abstraction: without at all acknowledging the logic that all abstractions could be equally dismissed as mere human inventions. But it is surely preposterous to argue that any abstractions – which are the vital epistemological links between all concrete ideas, subjective or objective – are not innately 'given': for without them, namely abstractions, coherent thinking about anything would be impossible. Comment, please.*

Of course we need and use abstract nouns and ideas to think and converse, but personification of them is a poetic trope. For example, Mercy, Truth, Justice (Righteousness) and Peace are vital abstract nouns.



They are personified in Psalm 68 (a poem): 'Mercy and Truth have met together, /Righteousness and Peace have kissed each other.' They now stand personified as statues of women on either side of the Great West Door of Westminster Abbey. In the medieval poem *Piers Plowman* they appear as quarrelsome sisters arguing about the events of Good Friday, the Crucifixion and Harrowing of Hell. When Peace explains to Righteousness 'Jesus jousted well, joy beginneth [to] dawn…' Righteousness retorts: 'Why ravest thou? Or art thou right drunk?' In the end, when Jesus rises from the dead, they kiss and make up, as in the psalm.

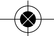
In the book I wrote:

> Theology deals with visions of shining transcendent person(s) or a whole supernatural realm. That is not to say that these Shining Ones are pure fantasy floating about detached from any of the reality of our lives on Earth. They are usually personifications of real forces in the cosmos or actually or potentially in ourselves. If we call God 'the ground of being', this is a personification of the energy that makes anything exist at all… If we call God Love, that is a personification of the love we are capable of ourselves.

Today some theologians speak of God as a 'leading idea' or 'emergent property'. In the Exodus story when God in the burning bush reveals his name to Moses as Yahweh, that is a form of the Hebrew very 'to be', which could mean I AM or I WILL BE. In his *Oracle upon Managua* the Nicaraguan poet and Catholic priest Ernesto Cardenal sees God emerging as 'love-among-humans':

    And Yahweh said: I am not.
I will be. I am the one who will be, he said.
    I am Yahweh a God who waits in the future
(who cannot be unless the conditions are right)
            God who is not but who WILL BE
for he is love-among-humans
    and he is not, he WILL BE.

Switching back now to poetry, which has always been this magazine's primary focus, for many years you ran a well-known poetry workshop in Camden Town: how did this come about?



In 1978 I was invited to run what was formally an adult education evening class on poetry at the Camden Adult Education Institute (ILEA until 1990). After reorganisation, from 1991 the class continued until 1998 at the Working Men's College in Camden Town. Known as the Camden Voices Poetry Group, we produced a pamphlet every year and an anthology of members' poems, *Camden Voices* 1978-90 (Katabasis, 1990). *My Poetry Handbook for Readers and Writers* (Macmillan, 1993) is dedicated to Camden Voices.

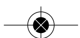
The Group attracted an extraordinary range of talent and many of its members went on to publish poetry collections and win awards. Among these were *Acumen*'s advisory editor Danielle Hope, Cicely Herbert (one of the trio who founded and ran Poems on the Underground), Kathleen McPhilemy, Mimi Khalvati (founder of the Poetry School), Jane Duran, Martina Evans, Dilys Wood (founder of Second Light Network and *Artemis* magazine), Peter Campbell (founder of Survivors' Poetry), Brian Docherty, Barbara Cumbers, Peter Phillips and many others.

We always spent the first hour of every session reading poems by a well-known poet from past or present. Though I introduced technical input on rhythm, sound, shape etc., I never set any 'Workshop' exercises and the second hour was devoted to poems members presented to the Group, which they had written in their own time because they wanted to. This encouraged each – very different – poet to develop her or his own voice. Even after all these years, I still get a little thrill when someone from Camden Voices publishes good poetry, wins an award or puts on a good show.

In the development of your own poetry who and what have been the major influences?

I've mentioned some of these in my answers to your questions so far. Friends. London. Politics. Theology, especially radical and liberation theology. But above all poets, so many English poets, Shakespeare, Milton, Herbert, Blake, early Wordsworth and Coleridge, Keats, Hopkins, Owen, Cornford, Stevie Smith, to name just a few. In 1981-4 I did an English degree at London University Bedford College and enjoyed studying more English poets and phonetics.

Then I've learnt from poets I've translated, including Nicaraguan



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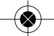


Ernesto Cardenal and Daisy Zamora (her *Life for Each,* Katabasis, 1994), and Chilean poets exiled in London after the Pinochet coup, especially María Eugenia Bravo Caldera (her *Prayer in the National Stadium*, Katabasis, 1992). Other Latin American and European poets I've been able to read in their own languages: Neruda, Lorca, Rilke, Montale, Verlaine, who for a while had lived round the corner from me in Camden Town. And many others, to this day. Such a great cloud of witnesses to the human Poetic Genius. It would be the greatest honour to be admitted into their company.

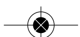
You will have noticed I have mostly avoided mention of your political activism. That is because you took part in a debate (published in Acumen *72, Jan 2012) with Sebastian Barker (himself another visionary/ religious poet by the way): a debate on poetry and politics. But, briefly, would you say that your support for the Nicaraguan Sandinistas and other radical causes has been beneficial for your poetry?*

The title of the debate was *Poetry and Politics Don't Mix*. I spoke against the motion and it was defeated by a large majority.

In the 1979 Revolution the Sandinistas overthrew the dictator Somoza and came to power (ratified in a substantial election victory in 1984). Ernesto Cardenal became Minister of Culture and immediately set up poetry workshops all over Nicaragua, seeing them as a vital part of the 'sane and kindly humanism' to which they aspired. Graffiti appeared on walls proclaiming: 'The Triumph of the Revolution is the Triumph of Poetry.'

There was a strong input into Sandinista thinking of liberation theology, focused on this world: Christ is to be found today in the 'crucified people', and their struggle for a better life is Christ rising again. I translated John Sobrino's *The Crucified Peoples* (CIIR, 1989), more works by him and other liberation theologians. In 1989 the US-trained Atlacatl battalion of the Salvadoran Army murdered six of Sobrino's fellow Jesuits at the University of San Salvador, together with their housekeeper and her daughter, for their theology and commitment to the poor. I translated his *Companions of Jesus: The Murder and Martyrdom of the Salvadoran Jesuits* (CIIR, 1990).

In 1986 singer-songwriter Carlos Mejía Godoy and his group Los de Palacagüina came to London and sang the revolutionary Nicaraguan Peasant Mass (*Misa campesina*) in St Aloysius Church, Somers Town. I



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translated it and Carlos wanted parts of it repeated in English. An *ad hoc* choir, mainly students from the local comp, had just a few days to learn to do this. A bilingual text of the Mass, together with a live recording, was published by CIIR in 1986 and a third edition by the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign in 2007.

Ernesto Cardenal came to London and invited me to read at their annual Poetry Marathon in Ciudad Darío, Nicaragua. I went with a commission from Journeyman Press to ask him for some of his poems for me to translate; these were published as *Nicaraguan New Time* (Journeyman, 1988). I also translated *The Nicaraguan Epic*, Carlos's song cycle about the Revolution and poems by Julio Valle-Castillo (Katabasis, 1989). In 1989 Ernesto, Julio Valle-Castillo, and Carlos with his Palacagüina group all performed in the Purcell Room on London's South Bank. Ernesto had faxed his long poem *The Music of the Spheres* (by satellite, which pleased him). At the event I read my translations of the two poets. *The Music of the Spheres* was published in bilingual text by Katabasis in 1990. Ernesto also gave me a large pile of typescript poems he had collected, both by well-established Nicaraguan poets and from the workshops. I translated and edited a bilingual book of these, as *Poets of the Nicaraguan Revolution* (Katabasis, 1993). More recently, in 2011, I was invited to read in Nicaragua at the Granada International Poetry Festival. When I read my poem 'The Human Breast' (the title, of course, from Blake: 'all deities reside in the human breast'), Ernesto came up to me afterwards and said how much he liked the poem.

I would say that this Nicaraguan connection has been very fruitful for me and my poetry. And, of course, I am interested in politics at home as well as abroad, worry, and engage in political activities – campaigns, marches and so on. This also comes into my poetry.

Is there any other question you would have liked me to have asked?

That's enough to be going on with. If anyone wants to know more about my work there is info on my website katabasis.co.uk/dinah.html

William Oxley / Dinah Livingstone
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