

As Much Light as It Will Take: On Poetic Language and Revelation¹

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This essay argues that poetic language provides a means of understanding the nature of divine revelation by showing how poetry overcomes problems of human communication through metaphor and excessive language. Through a discussion on metaphor and a brief look at A. R. Ammons's poem "The City Limits," the author demonstrates the ways poetry pushes language to its breaking point using excessive speech to forward communication. The author then argues, using the language of call and response developed by Jean-Louis Chrétien, that revelation functions in an analogous manner—as an excess that emerges when a human response strains but ultimately fails to equal the call of God. Finally, the author connects this definition of revelation as excessive response to God's unending call with the task of the church in allowing a diversity of voices in theological expression and in creating imaginative theological projects.

At the heart of the scriptures is a foundational belief that God both reveals himself to humanity, and, in turn, that humans are capable on some level of receiving this revelation of God. Scripture assumes that the primary means of meaning making for humans, language, is a sufficient method of communicating the truths of God. Furthermore, both the Old and New Testament connect this power of language with the reality of God: Genesis 1 reveals a God who calls the various parts of the world to being, and John 1 connects the

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¹ The title of this essay comes from line 14 of A. R. Ammons's poem, "The City Limits" in A. R. Ammons, *The Selected Poems* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1986), 89. I realize that "The City Limits" may not be widely known. I encourage the reader to find the whole poem.

Logos, the word or logic of God, with God's very nature. The whole notion of scripture depends on the reliability of language to communicate God's ways to humanity.

Yet the reliability of language to communicate anything concerning God does not seem to follow from what Christians have historically said about God. One of the persistent claims of Christian theology is that God created the world *ex nihilo*—from nothing. The matter of the world then does not come from the being of God—for God does not have a body. The world is then distinct from God in its created nature, and because it exists in both time and space, while God does not. As a result, creation is wholly other than God. In order for the divine creative act to happen at all, God had to create the conditions of God's absence in the created world. If creation is to reveal anything of God at all, it is first of all God's absence from the created world that is revealed by distinction. What we have then in traditional theology is a transcendent God who is distinct from creation.² God is not simply the biggest thing in a string of created things, but wholly other from the created world.

It is therefore not immediately clear how the transcendent, infinite, bodiless God could communicate to humans through speech—a fully embodied form of communication. Even direct communication to human consciousness does not solve the problem, for our consciousness is itself a process of our embodiment (no escaping the body as way of knowing for humans) and our consciousness begins its knowing with the objects of the world. The poet Christian Wiman states this problem clearly in his collection of essays on faith, *My Bright Abyss: Meditations of a Modern Believer*, when he writes in an Augustinian vein, “Lord, I can approach you only by means of my consciousness, but consciousness can only approach you as an object, which you are not.”³ We are left then with a seeming impasse: how can we claim to say anything about a transcendent God, and how can we further claim that our saying is ever revealed?

The problem of revelation is then a problem of communication. The questions surrounding revelation are related to the limits and possibilities of all human communication. Our difficulty in talking

² See, for example, Augustine's *Confessions*, bk. 11, or Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* I. Q45.

³ Christian Wiman, *My Bright Abyss: Meditations of a Modern Believer* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2013), 30.

about God, or even talking with God, is simply one facet of our difficulty in communicating with one another at all. When communication implies only the simple exchange of information, then we might avoid the limits and breaking points of our language. However, as Rowan Williams shows throughout *The Edge of Words*, any time we try to communicate irreducibly complex systems, either of information or processes, we realize the great possibilities of speech and the utter limits of language and human communication—our systems depend on our ability to formulate them with language (assuming here that mathematics is a type of language).⁴ Moreover, if by communication we mean something closer to what Sandra Schneiders calls “self disclosure,” then we can begin to see how often our communication fails and falls short.⁵ The desire to be understood and the desire to understand someone beyond a mere factual exchange of data is a fundamental human desire, yet the failure to arrive at such knowing is an all too common human experience. For example, the central tension in the novel *Pride and Prejudice* is in part the failure of Mr. Darcy to communicate his true self to Elizabeth Bennet, his love interest. The self that he projects (a wealthy, proud man) is not the self that he wants to communicate to her and is not who he perceives himself to be. The resolution in the novel occurs not only through Darcy’s revelatory actions (saving Elizabeth’s sister Lydia from shame and ruin), but through speeches between Darcy and Elizabeth where real self-disclosure occurs.

Of course, the difficulties in communication appear in the tragic realm and not only in romantic comedies; Lear’s misunderstanding of his daughter Cordelia’s response to his ridiculous request in *King Lear* sets in motion the tragedy that ensues. One of the ways Hamlet attempts to bring about his revenge is through intentional miscommunication. Communication, real self-disclosure, is not simply a problem of theology, but a more general human dilemma. If revelation is the communication of God to humanity, and if communication between humans is itself fraught with failure, then the problem of revelation hinges on the more basic problem of human communication. For while God may communicate perfectly, our ability to receive divine communication, or any communication for that matter, is imperfect

⁴ Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

⁵ Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting The New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991), 34.

and fraught with failure. Therefore, any talk of revelation must then look at how human communication navigates self-disclosure.

One of the paradoxical means of navigating the problem of human communication is the pushing and stretching of communication to its breaking point. This process of expanding and stretching communication occurs most clearly in poetic language, here used broadly to include not only poems but other forms of communication and art that use imaginative and fictive language that is not fundamentally descriptive. The definition of poetic language that I am using comes from Paul Ricoeur's essay "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation." He argues that poetic language "suspends the descriptive function" intentionally.⁶ Poetic language then communicates deliberately in a nondescriptive manner, so that by making language strange, a deeper form of communication might result. Rowan Williams argues in *The Edge of Words* that "what the poet seeks to do is something quite close to provoking a crisis in the language she is using or the linguistic situation she is setting out, so that a new perception is pushed into being." It is by "provoking a crisis" in the language and by "generating puzzlement," Williams argues, that the poet is then able to "generate some kind of discovery."⁷ If we look at some of the ways poetry provokes a crisis in language to generate discovery and self-disclosure, then perhaps the communicative capacity of poetic language will become clear. I argue that poetic language provides a window into understanding how language can become revelation. This essay then is an attempt to provide a groundwork for revelation through language. It is a *prolegomenon* to the doctrine of divine revelation and not principally an analysis of the content of revelation, hoping to answer the question, "Whether such a thing as revelation through language be at all possible?"⁸ However, after I have shown how poetry provides a way of understanding revelation more generally with some help from Jean-Louis Chrétien and his language

⁶ Paul Ricoeur, "Toward a Hermeneutic of the Idea of Revelation," *Harvard Theological Review* 70, nos. 1–2 (January–April, 1977): 1–37.

⁷ Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 58.

⁸ In the preface to his *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Kant argues that his "object is to persuade all those who think metaphysics worth studying that it is absolutely necessary to pause a moment and . . . to propose first the preliminary question, "Whether such a thing as metaphysics be at all possible?" Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, trans. Paul Carus, rev. James W. Ellington (Indianapolis, Ind.: Hackett Publishing, 2001), 1.

of the call, I look at how the particular revelation of God in Jesus Christ does not contradict the more basic poetic vision of revelation that I outline. Instead, I argue that *what* the revelation of Jesus Christ reveals follows from *how* God is revealed more generally in language.

One of the ways that poetic language pushes speech beyond its normal habits is through the process of metaphors. At its most basic level a metaphor is composed of two parts of speech: the *tenor*, the referential word that is typically stated in a metaphorical construction and is often the more abstract term, and the *vehicle*, the concrete specific to which the tenor is compared. In a metaphorical construction, the meaning of the tenor is transformed as it passes through the connotations of the vehicle.⁹ For example, in Robert Frost's poem *The Silken Tent*, the opening line sets up the metaphor that will be explored throughout the poem: "She is as in a field a silken tent." The tenor, "she," a woman, is likened to the vehicle, "a silken tent." The rest of the sonnet explores the conceit of the opening line, showing all the ways that the "she" of the first line can be brought into relationship and transformed by being brought near to the silken tent.¹⁰ Therefore, one of the ways metaphor enables communication is by highlighting the interrelatedness of creation. Human females can be brought into a particular relationship with silken tents (whether we think the relationship is a fitting one is another question) with the result that both the particular parts of speech, the tenor and the vehicle, are transformed by their relationship. Metaphorical language highlights that we learn about the subject only through encountering it through another—the presence of other things becomes the vehicle for exploration for diverse subjects. The result is that communication is clarified as further relationships are made and further connections brought together.

Furthermore, metaphorical language forces us to engage in speech in a different register—one that exists beyond the tenor and the vehicle. Sandra Schneiders argues that one of the reasons metaphors are so potent is that at the literal level metaphors are "absurd" and "meaning-less."¹¹ "She" is fundamentally *not* a "silken tent," nor

⁹ Jack Myers and Don C. Wukasch, *Dictionary of Poetic Terms* (Denton, Tex.: University of North Texas Press, 2003), 211.

¹⁰ Robert Frost, *The Poetry of Robert Frost: The Collected Poems* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1975), 331.

¹¹ Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 31.

can she ever be. However, Schneiders continues that “by the very fact that it [the metaphor] obviously intends meaning (because its propositional structure is intact) but is literally absurd, it forces the mind into action to find meaning at another level.”¹² Metaphors push language into near absurdities to generate new insight that exists beyond simply the “propositional structure” of the sentence. Metaphorical language reveals that there is an excess inherent in the world and especially in our language. Things brought into relationship with one another can create new things that exceed their individual parts. In addition, metaphors invite further metaphors and further speech. They delight and illuminate what Rowan Williams calls the “hinterland” of our speaking, that place where our language indicates a beyond, a presence that is unable to be captured fully.¹³ Furthermore, successful metaphors highlight the difficulty of all communication by making strange relationships that force the mind to perceive anew. It is as though the difficult process of resolving the relationship between the tenor and the vehicle, a process that invites active participation on the part of the hearer or reader of the metaphor, creates new ways of bringing communication forward and engaging in deeper levels of speech. By refusing the mind the comfort of resting in easy descriptions and facile representations, metaphors allow the complexity of persons (and we might add of things, too) to become apparent, not as problems to be solved but as mysteries to be engaged with, as presences with which we converse, and that can become intelligible through relationships but are ultimately irreducible to any comparison.

Of course, metaphors do not always further communication by challenging accepted ways of speech. Schneiders rightly shows cases of metaphors that have become “banalized” and those that have lost all of their force. She argues that metaphors must live “in the struggle between the ‘is’ of predication and the ‘is not’ that the recognition of literal absurdity insinuates immediately into our perception.”¹⁴ If the tension between the “is” and the “is not” is lost through overuse or overly literal readings, then the revelatory force of the metaphor weakens. Therefore, metaphors are living only when the shock of the relationships proposed between the vehicle and the tenor is maintained. The paradox of metaphoric language is that it is precisely the

¹² Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 31

¹³ Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 167.

¹⁴ Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text*, 29–31.

shocking relationships and strange communities of relations found in metaphors which provoke fresh insights and compel human communication forward.

However, this does not mean that every surprising or shocking metaphor depicts reality, or provides a sufficient mode of communication for a community. Metaphorical language is always liable to judgment by the community of metaphor makers, whether in a religious community or any other community of speakers. In her depiction of metaphors and theological realism, Janet Soskice argues that the metaphors used for God in the Old Testament were preferred over the years precisely because they described similar experiences across the community of faith. She argues that “over time, there comes into being a rich assortment of models whose sources may be unknown but which have been gradually selected out by the faithful as being especially adequate to their experience.” Thus, the adequacy of the metaphors used for God are judged by the community of faith over time and “are confirmed by generations of belief.”¹⁵ The selection of fitting metaphors for God through tradition does not, however, imply that the community of faith only chooses safe or banal metaphors.

Poetic language reveals that our communication is really a “catching up” (to use a phrase from Rowan Williams) with something that we cannot master or manage completely.¹⁶ Things, concepts, and especially persons are excess laden and irreducible. The language of poetry delights in the irreducibility of the world and its excesses. A. R. Ammons’s poem “The City Limits,” for example, specifically highlights the excess inherent in the world. The opening stanza of the poem begins with an invitation to the reader to “consider” the “radiance” that flows out from the created world:

When you consider the radiance, that it does not withhold
itself but pours its abundance without selection into every
nook and cranny not overhung or hidden . . .¹⁷

The following five tercets of the poem are all acts of consideration of the “radiance” within “every nook and cranny.” This abundant and excessive radiance is not, however, simply discovered in the sublime

¹⁵ Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language*, 153.

¹⁶ Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 93.

¹⁷ Ammons, *The Selected Poems*, 89.

and obviously beautiful. What is so striking about the poem is the way the speaker invites the reader to consider even the ugly and grotesque as conveyors of radiance. The speaker goes so far as to claim that even

when you consider . . . the glow-blue
bodies and gold-skeined wings of flies swarming the dumped
guts of a natural slaughter or the coil of shit,

even then you discover radiance and excessive abundance.¹⁸ There is then an excess in even the ugly and the disturbing. Such excess exists independently of language, but is only brought to light through the movement of the language of the poem. The radiance of the created world is found through intentional acts of consideration—here presented as poetic exploration. The result of this movement of poetic consideration is not mastery over the created world through instrumentalized knowledge. Rather, the poem ends with the admission that the movement of consideration “calmly turns to praise.” The praise of the last line further indicates the unfinished nature of communication in the face of the illuminating world. To end with praise is to end with a point of departure, a place to begin again, perhaps within “The City Limits,” or out onto further horizons.

If we also look to the more conventional line from Wordsworth’s sonnet “It Is a Beauteous Evening, Calm and Free,” where the poet compares the quietness of the settling evening light with a “Nun // breathless with adoration” we also see the excess inherent in the world. On the face of it, an evening and a nun are completely different kinds of things and have very little relationship with each other. However, by bringing the two into a relationship in a metaphor, we are given a window into the nature of nuns and evenings that would not have existed prior to the metaphorical construction. The mind moves from the initial shock of the metaphor to a realization that there is in fact something evening-like about the nun, and nun-like about a quiet and beauteous evening. We realize that there are aspects of beautiful evenings that exceed simple direct language. It is only as the evening is brought into relationship with the nun that we encounter the fullness of the evening. We realize that there are more to nuns and evenings than we had previously thought. Through entering the linguistic world that poetry creates, we encounter presences

¹⁸ See stanzas 3 and 4, lines 8–11.

that exceed simple definition. We see the “radiance” that might have been obscured because of habituated blindness.

We have not yet arrived at what revelation is, but perhaps at one of the places in which revelation occurs: heightened habits of language in poetic discourse. However, it is by asking *when* revelation occurs, here articulated as the moments of excess in difficult and stretched modes of communication and speech, that we begin to see *what* revelation is. In our previous discussion of metaphor, we noted that the process of a metaphor (and of course it must be a living metaphor!) creates an excess between the tenor (the referential word) and the vehicle (the more concrete second term of the metaphor). What emerge in metaphorical language are new concepts that are not reducible to either the tenor or the vehicle of the metaphor—the resulting combination of both parts of speech far exceeds their particular meanings. Analogously, revelation is akin to that excessive and new thing created in the pressurized language of a metaphor. Revelation happens at the points of excess in the created world, in those moments when communication strains itself to its utmost, and revelation is that very excess that emerges when the human response realizes it cannot adequately master or equal the call of God that resounds through creation.

The language of Jean-Louis Chrétien is particularly helpful in articulating the nature of call and excess that is revelation. Chrétien argues in *The Call and Response* that the call “that comes from beyond being constitutes every being as what responds to it *but never corresponds to it*.”¹⁹ The call that precedes all of our responses, and is the very formal cause of our responding, exceeds every attempt at response, not because of human frailty, but because “there is no possible correspondence between the finite and the infinite.”²⁰ It would seem that we are back in the fundamental problem of revelation: how do we realize that a call resounds at all if it so far exceeds us? Chrétien maintains that we realize the call through our nonidentical response. He states, “We hear that which calls us from time immemorial to speak only in the utterance that we speak.”²¹ We thus realize the call in our own attempts to answer back, our own nonidentical

¹⁹ The italics are mine. Jean-Louis Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, trans. Anne A. Davenport (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 16.

²⁰ Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, 17.

²¹ Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, 25.

repetitions, and our response becomes revelatory when it carries within it the signs of its own limitedness, its own failure. To put it another way, our response as the locus of revelation can only be revelation when it reveals an excess that is not reducible to the response, and thus when it highlights its own straining and failure to repeat that which called it into being. Hence, Chrétien maintains in his chapter “The Other Voice,” the voice of response—here shown to be the voice of John the Baptist crying out—is only perfect “by failing” and “is truly itself and accomplished as a voice only by being both defeated and exceeded.”²² The appropriate response is then what highlights its own limits and strains at exceeding those very limits.

Revelation is then only revelation for us as we are responding, but it is not reducible to our response. It is not simply the call going out, for surely the call always goes out, yet revelation is not always perceived. It is the excess in our response to the call that revelation occurs and shows its fundamental nature. The call is the beyond that speaks at the edge or end of our speaking—here, at the point where our communication seems pushed to the point of breaking. If we think simply of the world at hand, we realize all the ways that we do not see or hear the world’s call, though it may be calling out, and though the call of the world may be partial revelation; hence it is not revelatory for us. Jacques Maritain claims that “being is intelligible in itself [and perhaps we could use the word *revelatory*] but not always for us.”²³ The intelligible nature of the world, the world that is “charged with the grandeur of God,” as Gerard Manly Hopkins declares, a world that “day unto day uttereth speech” according to Psalm 19, or the world illuminated by “radiance” in A. R. Ammons’s poem, is also a world that we perceive mutely and in blindness. The world (and what is our speaking but a process of the world) calls forth and yet it is not on its own meaningful for us, for the call is often unheard. Revelation is then a stronger pill, a fiercer medicine. Notice that while both Hopkins and the psalm claim the created world as the locus of “charged grandeur” or speech about God, the speaking character of creation is only so for us as we engage in the strange language of the poems and then turn back to the created world. The charged world and the speaking world become so for us through our encounter with

²² Chrétien, *The Call and the Response*, 65.

²³ Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (New York: Meridian Books, 1966), 123.

language—with charged language at that. We realize that the world is speaking all the time, and it is calling out as we respond and we call out with creation only when we respond. We hear the call of creation back to God only as we join our voice in response; and our response is always as speaking creatures within the created world and as creatures capable of responding. Furthermore, language that claims to match or equal the call, or language that hides its own conditional nature, is not revelation, for it occludes a fundamental truth that all our speaking is conditional in the face of the strength of the call. Rather, we must engage in the process of considering articulated by Ammons in “The City Limits”—a process that does not end with a final mastery, with full disclosure, but with praise.

It is therefore by engaging in speech that is excessive, speech that engages in odd habits of metaphor, rhyme, parallelism, alliteration, and all the other tools and tricks of poetry, that we realize the excess at the heart of language and therefore the excess in the created world. The call that goes out is only revelation for us as we respond, and poetic response enables us to realize the excess inherent in the call. Poetic speech thus shows us the nature of all revelation as excess. As Williams argues, “The environment we encounter and inhabit is more than it seems; sometimes it takes extreme and excessive speech to prompt this acknowledgment, and the deliberate ‘making extreme’ of our language is a tool of discovery.”²⁴ It may be that only when our language is made “extreme” that it can become the appropriate vehicle for revelation about God, for the God we claim is revealed is infinite and not subject to our mastery. Appropriate language about God should then reflect the transcendent character of God, and paradoxically, poetic language that delights in metaphor might be the most fitting method of truly revealing God’s transcendence. It is thus as we refer our excess-laden response back to God’s original call that the self-disclosure of God is made manifest. Divine self-disclosure enters the language of our response, pushes it beyond what it can seem to bear, and becomes for us the revelation of God.

Such a definition of revelation as I have articulated here not only provides a hermeneutic for understanding how scripture can be revelation, but also shows how the incarnation of Christ is consistent with the mode of God’s revelation, while simultaneously being something new, a breaking in of divine self-disclosure into the world. For while

²⁴ Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 139–140.

it seems that our usual human response to God's call can never match the sheer excess of that call, Christ becomes the one place where a response does finally match the gratuity and excess of the call. In the incarnation of Christ, God becomes the response to God's eternal call. The call of God that exceeds our responding becomes the incarnate Word. The God who called out to creation, bringing it into being, "became flesh and lived among us" (John 1:14). The creative call of God to which we respond, even in our most excessive utterances, with trepidation and acknowledged failure became our responding call. Christ is thus the only one who can "speak just as the Father" for he alone is the fullness of the call of God (John 12:50). Furthermore, death itself, the ultimate end to any response's claim at meeting the call, is overcome by Christ through his resurrection life. Christ's life is the perfect response to a perfect call; hence he does not die and continues to live not only at the "right hand of the Father" but also in his body here on earth. The resurrection life of Christ reveals that he is truly the eternal call of God mapped out onto human history.

Yet even in Christ's perfect response to the call of God, there remains the excess of revelation—the excess at the edge of the response. John's claim that if every one of Jesus' deeds were written, "the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25) is, on the one hand, literally absurd. Jesus lived for a short period of time and his years of active ministry were few, and yet because he was the embodiment of the call of God that exceeds our response, the excess from that call cannot be contained in all the books and stories of the world. Jesus' response to the call of the Father may be perfect, but we experience this call as excessive and beyond our mastery. To speak of Jesus is thus to never cease speaking, for he eternally exceeds our speech, and the call that goes out from him exceeds all our utterances. Furthermore, Jesus continues his call, his revelatory life in the world, after his ascension by creating a community, a multitude of speakers. The author of Ephesians thus speaks of the church as the place where "the wisdom of God in its rich variety" might be revealed to the world (Eph. 3:10). The greatness of the call of God found in Christ and revealed in his body on earth can thus only be revealed through manifold variety in a community of believers.

It is then no wonder that many (though not all) of the christological formulations of Jesus are metaphorical, and do the similar work of metaphor by bringing disparate persons into relationship. The Definition of Chalcedon's insistence on the two distinct natures of Christ that are yet found in one person brings into relationship things that

are on the one hand completely unrelated—the creaturely and the divine. By holding to the overwhelming difference of the two natures “without confusion, without change, without division, without separation,” the scandal and power of the incarnation becomes apparent. The force of incarnational theology and the excess of both divine participation and human response are maintained only when the tension between the two natures is not blurred. In an essay comparing the work of the poet with that of the theologian, Anthony D. Baker argues that behind the christological formulations developed in the early church lay the fundamental “mythopoetic story” of the kenosis hymn of Philippians 2, a drama of Christ’s descent from the Father to death by crucifixion and exaltation by the Father to God’s right hand. Thus, he argues, “something poetic remains . . . in the depths of classical Christological formulas.”²⁵ It is precisely because of the excess of this call of God embodied in the person of Christ that even the most analytical of doctrines has at its heart the poetic, for it is the poetic that most revels in excess.

I do not want to imply that Jesus is the excess that occurs when the human and the divine are combined, as in a type of monophysitism, but rather to state that to speak of the nature of Christ is to speak of someone who exceeds normal discourse and therefore requires bringing into relationships a multitude of differing ideas, words, and images. This bringing of disparate things into relationship to push language to a new insight is the very stuff of metaphor, and the new insight that the relationship of the human and divine in Jesus gives rise to is not that Jesus is some new divine creature that results from a combination of the human and the divine, but rather, as Frances Young states, that “God could be envisaged as transcending human nature, but even so human nature could mirror God, even receive God’s impress, while God could accommodate the divine self to human form, and express the divine communication in human language.”²⁶ Christological formulations then become a place for creative theology that expands and pushes language to reach new insight through metaphor and a host of images and stories about Christ. Human language can speak meaningfully of God because of divine accommodation, exemplified in the

²⁵ Anthony D. Baker, “Our Grass Stained Wings: An Essay on Poetry and Theology,” *Anglican Theological Review* 94, no. 3 (Summer, 2012): 507. In his essay, Baker looks primarily at the Nicene Creed, but I believe you can extend his argument to include the Chalcedonian Definition.

²⁶ Frances Young, *God’s Presence: A Contemporary Recapitulation of Early Christianity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 389.

person of Christ; because of the excess of that divine communication, revelatory speech about God will take striking forms, as demonstrated by the Chalcedonian definition.

What then my definition of revelation encourages are theologies that are exploratory, and delight in paradox, irony, and poetic methods and language. If revelation is the human response to an excessive call, then any proper response must reflect the exceeding nature of the call. If we turn to look at the scriptures, we realize that these are the very methods employed in the biblical narrative. Even when the text claims a clear and direct mode of revelation, as in the prophets, poetic language remains one of the dominant forms of discourse; think of all the strange metaphors, allusions, and visionary glimpses that pervade prophetic literature. The sheer variety of speakers and forms of poetic discourse further indicate the sheer excess of the call on the people of God. Seemingly contradictory responses to the call are placed next to each other, forcing the mind to engage in a process of synthesization akin to that of metaphoric constructions. The mind is forced to differing registers of reading and creative interpretation—which is itself a further response to that same call.

Biblical language about God often uses startling metaphors that shock and create new possibilities of meaning. Williams notes that the safe metaphors for God as shepherd or king exist in our scriptures alongside parabolic metaphors in which God is, for example, “a magistrate who ought to be struck off the bench.”²⁷ Dionysius the Areopagite claims that these shocking metaphors for God are spiritually beneficial and keep us from a type of idolatry. He argues that if we compared God to “nobler images,” we might be tempted to think that God is just like those “nobler images,” when God is fundamentally different from anything in the created world. The scriptures use “inharmonious dissimilitudes” to arouse “the upward turning-part of the soul” to further contemplation. He further claims that even the “ugliness of the images” is fitting, because “no single existing thing is entirely deprived of participation in the Beautiful.”²⁸ Or, to use the language of Ammons, each created thing “is accepted into as much light as it will take,” and therefore the whole created world can become part of human discourse about God—all of creation is capable

²⁷ Williams, *The Edge of Words*, 149.

²⁸ Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Celestial Hierarchy*, 154. <http://www.esoteric.msu.edu/VolumeII/CelestialHierarchy.html>.

of framing our revelatory response to God's call, though this does not mean that every single metaphor or image will be useful or true.

The task of the church is then to continue this never-ending response to the call of God. The sheer diversity of Christian voices and witnesses attests to the surplus of God's engagement with the world. In our own Anglican Communion, there are over thirty-nine provinces, representing a diversity of responses to the call of God. Places of contact between these diverse voices must be encouraged to allow for new and unending responses. The danger of becoming a singular voice through theological or ecclesial isolation is that we might think that our own response encapsulates the call of God. A multitude of speakers points to the sheer excess of the call of God. I do not mean to imply that a simple multiplicity of voices equals the truth. The community of faith in the church with the scriptures is tasked with discerning which language about God is fitting and which is not. As I noted earlier, not all metaphors of God are adequate or true. However, what my articulation of revelation encourages are new and innovative artistic engagements with theology and scripture and a plurality of reading methods. The church thus needs poets with a mind for theology and theologians with an ear for poetry. Perhaps what is really needed alongside theology proper, is more art, more poetry, more language explorations. How can we take what we have received and nonidentically repeat it so that it once again shines forth and disrupts settled opinions and becomes for us revelatory? Many of our settled dogmas are actually shocking claims and beautiful metaphorical leaps that have become functionally dead metaphors. I am not claiming that we should therefore scrap our received inheritance, but that we must find new words and images to bring the true shock of our language about God to the fore. Baker is worth quoting in full on this point: "To say that the theologian ought to become like the poet is not to suggest that she must surrender her quest for logic and precision; still, the poetic theologian will allow the edges of her claims to transcend her own syllogisms."²⁹ Our language about God should never end in settled mastery or finalized speech, but, as we continue to speak about God and write about God, our linguistic posture should always allow for mystery, and ultimately all our speech should turn to "praise."³⁰

²⁹ Baker, "Our Grass Stained Wings," 516.

³⁰ See the final line of Ammons's "The City Limits," 18.

