Good News, Big News, News That Stays News

Rupert Loydell and H. L. Hix in Conversation about Loydell's *Dear Mary* and Hix's *The Gospel*

Rupert Loydell's *Dear Mary* (2017a), a sequence of poems that 're-invents moments of annunciation in today's world', and H. L. Hix's *The Gospel* (2020), an edition and translation of the gospel that incorporates noncanonical sources and refers to God and Jesus without gender designation, might at first appear to have only superficial connection, but in this conversation the authors uncover deeper connections of process, problematic, and purpose.

Rupert Loydell: Christianity is tangled up in all sorts of ways with Western society, just as other religions have informed and influenced other nations and peoples. The 20th Century saw several changes of attitude in the West towards Christianity: secularisation, the death of god movement, new age mysticism, multi-faith movements and the postmodern rejection of metanarratives and Truth in favour of individual truths. We had Harvey Cox suggesting the church returns to medieval festivals (*The Feast of Fools*, 1969); Don Cupitt wanting to adopt Anglican liturgy simply for humanist and communal ritual (*Radicals and the Future of the Church*, 1989) and later preferring sunlight as a theological model (*Solar Ethics*, 2005); and Mark C. Taylor re-inventing theology as 'postmodern a/theology', post-Wittgenstein word games, systems theory and economic model (e.g. *Erring*, 1984; *About Religion*, 1999; *The Moment of Complexity*, 2001; *After God*, 2007).

The suggestion that no one story had any more importance than any other changed society's attitude towards the Bible and Gospel story and also resulted in many people rejecting even the idea of Bible stories as stories, something I feel culture is all the poorer for. Having said that, there continue to be literary retellings of these stories: Karl Ove Knaussgaard's *A Time to Every Purpose Under Heaven* (2004) which I think is his best book by far; David Maine's *The Flood* (2004) and *Fallen* (2006), and Jim Crace's *Quarantine* (1998) for instance. In a similar way there are many contemporary stations of the cross paintings (e.g. Davey, 2000), as well as work that uses other stories from the Bible, tales of saints and martyrs, or engage with notions of the sacred (e.g. Fabian Miller, 1990; Beckett, 1992; Devonshire Jones, 1993; Doney, 2004), sometimes in a wider context (e.g. Weisberger, 1986; Francis, 1996). My own art practice has included an abstract Stations of the Cross and a series of Tower of Babel paintings (cf Loydell 2001, 2013), and my annunciation poems have drawn on a wide-ranging number of contemporary paintings, videos and installation works (Loydell, 2017a; Cave & Loydell 2017, 2020).

Your new book, however, is not a reinterpretation or a fictionalising of the story of Jesus is it? Can you tell me how and why you undertook the research and writing of this book?

H. L. Hix: There are many intriguing Jesus or Christ-figure fictions. I only learned of the Knaussgaard from your *Dear Mary*, and didn't know of the Maine books you mention until now, but over a beer at the pub I'm sure we could extend the list indefinitely: William Faulkner's *A Fable* (1978), Mongo Beti's *The Poor Christ of Bomba* (2005), Borislav Pekić's *The Time of Miracles* (1994), and on and on.

I'm interested in such fictionalizings, but you're right: that's not what *The Gospel* does. Crace and the others take the figure of Jesus derived from ancient narratives, and invent new narratives that feature a protagonist based on or associated with that figure. In *The Gospel*, I don't *invent* any of the narratives: I select from existing ancient narratives, arrange those selections, and translate the selections, but I don't add anything new 'out of my own head'. However satisfying or unsatisfying the compilation, however adept or inept the translation, nothing in *The Gospel* is 'made up' by me: it is *composed of* ancient narratives, not *based on* them.

The 'how' of my composing *The Gospel* is straightforward. I gathered all the gospels I could, then read them, selected material from them, arranged the selections into an order, and translated the newly arranged whole. The *why* is (of course?) more complicated, enough so that no doubt I myself don't fully understand. But here's one point of entry. In relation to other literature, we've figured out how problematic canon-fixing is: reading lists composed exclusively of works by white males from colonizing nations reify and reproduce patriarchy, colonialism, whiteness. The work of questioning the literary canon is not complete, but it's active: a university student in a typical intro lit survey course today would be assigned a very different set of readings than I was assigned long years ago in the survey courses I took. But nowhere is the canon more rigidly and unquestioningly fixed than in relation to the gospel. The canon is *so* fixed that many people don't know that it *can* be questioned. In popular culture, the terms 'the gospel', 'the Gospels', and 'the four Gospels' are interchangeable.

One reason for composing *The Gospel* was to perform a recognition that identifying the gospel with Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John is an institutional constraint, not an inherent characteristic of the texts themselves. If in my university all intro to poetry courses had a standardized syllabus, always and only Milton, Keats, Robert Browning, and T. S. Eliot, in that order, I would recognize this as the institution telling me what and how to read; I wouldn't believe that the poems of those four define and exhaust poetry. Yet it is a very widely held, and very seldom questioned, view that Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John define and exhaust the gospel.

RL: Part of your approach was to use an everyday translation of language rather than any specialist or religious words that have become associated with the original vocabulary. So 'lord' becomes 'boss', 'angel' becomes 'emissary'. I found the former difficult, not in a theological way, but because it is so mundane and almost slang-like. Doesn't the humanisation of god in this way produce other problems? – I mean instead of an unknowable deity we now have the image of a money-grabbing businessman, someone who we resent being in charge.

HH: My decision to use 'boss' rather than 'lord' to translate the Greek word *kurios* is, so far, neck-and-neck with the ungendered pronouns for generating the most negative responses from readers. I certainly agree that it's not a perfect solution, but it does at least *address* a problem that other translations sweep under the rug. One way to identify the problem would be to point to this dissonance. To my knowledge, *every* English translation of the canonical gospels substitutes 'lord' for 'kurios' when the reference is to Jesus or God. Yet, if there were no tradition, if the canonical gospels had been discovered in a desert cave yesterday afternoon and were being translated into English for the very first time today, *no* translator would choose 'lord' to translate 'kurios'. That signals at least this: the use of 'lord' for 'kurios' reflects a very secure social/institutional custom but *not* a strong correlation of meaning between the words.

So you've put your finger right on the problem: 'kurios' in the originals is much more 'mundane and slang-like' than 'lord' in our translations. If I were an agricultural labourer, I wouldn't refer to the landowner as my 'lord', but 'kurios' is the term used to designate the landowner in the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. 'Lord' for 'kurios' when it is applied to Jesus picks out the same referent as the original, but its implications are completely contrary to those of the original.

RL: You have also de-gendered God and Jesus, or at least changed their pronouns. I accept that the depiction of a bearded, white old man in Heaven has been problematic for many centuries, but I found the degendering of Jesus a more difficult concept. Isn't Jesus' humanity something that has allowed Christianity a contemporary voice, as readers can interpret or accept him as a teacher, radical, or philosopher if they choose not to. Is Jesus being male such a problem? You haven't degendered any other human characters in your *Gospel*. Have you neutered Jesus?

HH: The approach to gender in *The Gospel* does differ from the other ways in which this gospel resists contemporary norms. In translation choices such as 'boss' instead of 'lord' for 'kurios' and 'sky' always for 'ouranos' instead of sometimes 'sky' and sometimes 'heaven', my claim (right or wrong) is to be repairing an entrenched error about the text. (Here I'm using Mieke Bal's [2017] text/story/fabula distinction.) My claim in those cases is that the customary translation into English gets something wrong about what the original Greek text says and means. Even the decision to make a redaction is first and foremost about the text: which texts (canonical only, or also noncanonical?) get to take part in telling the story, and how do they take part?

The gender approach in *The Gospel*, though, has more to do with the fabula. Most of the uniquenesses of *The Gospel* are claims that other English editions get it wrong about the Greek texts: what the Greek texts say and how they were composed and which are worthy of regard. (I'm using 'Greek' here synecdochally, because the four canonical Gospels are in Greek, but *The Gospel* draws also on Coptic and Latin and even in one case Syriac originals.) By contrast, the degendering in *The Gospel* says other English editions *and* the original Greek texts get the fabula wrong.

If the becoming-human of the transcendent is part of the gospel fabula, then as a narrative the gospel is an especially intense way to pose the question of who gets to represent *us*. Feminists, activists for racial justice, and others point out existing inequities in distribution of that entitlement. (As in Nirmal Puwar's [2004] vivid, incisive concept of 'space invaders'.) Politically, in England you have a better record than we do here in the U.S.: you've had Queens, you've had a female Prime Minister. Here in the U.S., Biden will be the 46th U.S. President, and every one of them has been a male. In the U.S. the answer to who gets to represent us is clearly 'a man'. There's some kind of analogous problem within Christian religion, and it's hard to overcome, as manifest in our bibliography: more males than females doing the editing, translating, and interpreting of sacred texts.

If the gospel is about *God* becoming us, then who gets to represent us has real moment. My degendering Jesus is a way of posing a question. Of course there's particularity involved: if God became human, then it was in a body. But narratives assign relative importance to particularities. We take for granted that some particularities are, and others are not, important to the fabula. Maybe Jesus was 5'4" and had Morton's toe and olive skin and curly hair and

one leg a little longer than the other and a mole near the left nipple, but the canonical Gospels don't *say* any of that. Leaving it out is a value judgment: height is a relatively unimportant feature of God's becoming human. My degendering of God and Jesus is a way of asking: What if gender, too, is relatively unimportant to the fabula?

It's true that the historical Jesus was some particular height, but no one insists that I picture that height correctly. In fact, many would say it's a *good* thing to have some leeway: if I who am short want to picture Jesus as short, and you who are tall want to picture Jesus as tall, that's just fine. That leeway regarding something relatively unimportant might *help* us both get to other relatively more important things about the fabula. My degendering strategies ask whether gender, in this narrative, might be in this way like height, something readers may be allowed to imagine however they wish, rather than something readers should all be compelled to imagine in the same way.

RL: Don't your new neutral pronouns make the text even more difficult to read? I would have thought readability and accessibility were important to you? How would you answer accusations of being too PC for you own, or your book's, good?

HH: On the one hand, I want to make the same disclaimer about the pronouns as about all the other decisions: it's not perfect. By way of apology or rationale, though, I would appeal to Charles Bernstein's (1992) absorptive/antiabsorptive distinction, and say that the invented pronouns (etc.) *are* primarily antiabsorptive, so they *do* make the text more difficult to read, but for better or worse that's intentional, not altogether unlike the quotation marks in Alice Notley's *The Descent of Alette* (1992). I *do* want *The Gospel* to be readable and accessible, yes, but the new neutral pronouns do more to support an aim that's in tension with readability and accessibility, the aim of *de*familiarizing.

RL: By making angels become emissaries, you not only take away the magic and otherworldliness we associate angels with but also make it more difficult to read the story. A messenger arrives from the boss (I paraphrase) and making a prophecy or prediction makes even less sense to me than a heavenly being doing so. In a similar way emissaries singing to the shepherds in the hills after Jesus' birth, or midwives inspecting Mary for signs of virginity, make the story more unbelievable than angelic encounters. We can at least choose to reject the latter, or accept them in mythical terms. Doesn't your down-to-earth retelling simply make the whole thing laughable and even more improbable? I mean, my annunciation poems (Loydell, 2017; Cave & Loydell 2017, 2020) rely on translating impossible angelic encounters into other, sometimes even more impossible or unlikely, scenarios; they are imaginative flights, inspired by the consideration that the annunciation is basically an alien (as in *other*, not as beings from another planet) intrusion into human life. That's an amazing idea, which I don't have to believe in literally to work with; an emissary from the boss just doesn't do it for me.

HH: The problem I'm trying to confront by using 'emissary' rather than 'angel' for the Greek 'angelos' is related to the problem with 'lord' for 'kurios'. The Greek 'angelos' was a very common word, the primary, basic meaning of which was entirely human. 'Angelos' referred normally to a human: a special *context* might suggest that the entity referred to was another type of being, but the context, not the word itself, suggested that. English 'angel' is just the opposite: it refers normally to a non-human being, and only a special context can 'redirect' it to refer to a human.

Again, I think you point directly at the problem: what sort of improbability it is, where the improbability lies. ‘Angel’ locates the improbability in the *being* who delivers the message, unlike ‘angelos’: in the original language, the improbability is in the message being delivered, not in the messenger doing the delivering. In this way, it’s a little like Gregor Samsa’s transformation into an insect: the improbability doesn’t lie in the insect-ness but in the transformation. (Kafka, 2016) Part of the force of the story is that Gregor is *not* transformed into a hippogryph but into the most ordinary and familiar type of animal, a completely mundane being. What’s remarkable is not the thing he’s transformed into, but the fact that he’s transformed into it. Similarly, with ‘angelos’ it actually de-fuses the message if the deliverer of the message is too special: if a white-robed humanoid creature with a dazzling halo and big white feathered wings sprouting from its back shows up in my bedroom, I’m braced for the message that I’m going to have God’s baby, in a way that I’m not braced if a ‘regular person’ of the same species as myself shows up with the same message. The more mundane the messenger, the more pressure there is on the message.

But your Mary poems pursue this same question, about what sort of messenger can deliver a message straight from God to an individual human being. I’m interested in all the ‘angels’ that your poems (in *Dear Mary* and in poems you’ve written since) empower to deliver the message: there’s an ‘Online Dating Annunciation’, and ‘Alien Annunciation’, a ‘Surveillance System Annunciation’, a ‘Ouija Board Annunciation’, a ‘Ransom Note Annunciation’, and so on. What does this plethora of messengers imply? What does it do to the message?

RL: I hope it questions the message and offers variations, possibilities and impossibilities. For some reason the annunciation story became a kind of framing device I was able to use to transform all sorts of paintings, performance art, video art and news items into annunciations, if one projects the story forward and back in time from the actual moment the angel arrives, and is prepared to humanise and demystify the angelic encounter.

I don’t believe in angels, so I wanted to humanise that moment of encounter. How could I make the angel’s visit part of the 21st Century world I live in? How do people meet other people? Where do they do so? The scene in David Lynch’s *Twin Peaks: Fire Walk With Me* film (1992) where the character played by David Bowie is caught on surveillance camera yet is not physically there made me think about surveillance cameras, the poetry ouija board built and used by my work colleague Luke Thompson made me think of it as a supposed means of linking to the spirit world, the alien annunciation mixes up UFO conspiracy theories with a very real realisation that the Bible story of the annunciation is about one world visiting another, *intruding* into the human realm. It is, of course, one of several stories where this occurs throughout the Bible.

I don’t know why but I became fascinated by this moment of intervention and intrusion, the human and another world meeting. How might this moment of the story be interpreted and thought about? It obviously became part of an already existing ekphrastic writing practice which was writing from, about and back to the visual arts, but also a theme in itself. So in *Dear Mary* my annunciation poems are part of a book full of Italy, responses to many types of visual art and discussions about colour; after conversations with Sarah Cave and further reading, my poems in *Impossible Songs* and *A Confusion of Marys* become focussed in more on the annunciation.

HH: Your relating practice and theme reminds me that, in his introduction to your *Dear Mary*, Jim Harris relates the modality of the poems to their thematic focus, describing the

poems that are *about* annunciation as being *like* an annunciation. Is there any sense in which you yourself would describe your poems as annunciations, or as annunciatory?

RL: I guess in the way they present the annunciation anew there is a sense of announcing the annunciation? And however questioning, doubtful, humorous or cynical my poems can be they are of course, about the angel visiting Mary – the content, action and focus of the text remains that story, Gabriel visiting Mary to tell her she is pregnant with Jesus. Perhaps they can be regarded as an encounter with an idea or concept, so that – pushing the idea – the poem is like the angel, interrupting the reader (Mary) with surprising ideas?

HH: Surprising ideas, and some surprising angels! I'm intrigued by the way things in the world (ouija boards, surveillance systems) function as messengers, but also by the way in your Mary poems other texts function as messengers *and* as message, at once. Popular songs, philosophical and art historical texts, *become* these poems. Why is it important to have Patty Griffin and Ludwig Wittgenstein speaking in these poems?

RL: Well Patty Griffin is in the mix of quoted song lyrics that makes up the poem 'Dear Mary' (2017a: 772-73). Once my annunciation project was underway I started using the writing processes I often use to make my poems, which includes collage and juxtaposition. I enjoy finding a poem in other peoples' words, in finding new ideas and ways of discussing my theme there. The songs I found and sampled lyrics from aren't, of course, about the same Mary, it's a common name, but these songs of love, mourning, offered me new ways of looking at Mary the mother of Jesus. In some ways that poem is a kind of microcosm of all the annunciations poems I have written, that is I have appropriated these songs through the lens of the annunciation story.

As for Wittgenstein, well surely anyone who is interested in how language works has to engage with his work? And anyone who seriously wants to think about colour will read his *Remarks on Colour* (1978). The poems about perception, greys (and grays), naming colours are very much dependent upon two David Batchelor books (2000, 2014) and the Wittgenstein. I am interested in how we talk about what we see, how we make the world through language – which appears to be how we think and understand.

HH: One of the poems I return to over and over in *Dear Mary* is 'Strange Photos' (2017a: 92-97). I think this conversation is helping me see *why* I am so drawn to that poem. The exploration of 'it', the making-determinate of the indeterminate, resonates for me with the making-human of the divine in the gospel, so in the context of *Dear Mary* I read 'Strange Photos' (in a way I wouldn't if I encountered it only by itself) as an annunciation of sorts. I don't know if that aligns in any way with how you see that poem, or if it just seems to you like a loopy way of reading the poem.

RL: 'Strange Photos' was not written as an annunciation poem, but as what I call a Google poem, again a constructed text, in this case using online searches. The first part to be written was in response to the David Grubb quote which begins 'What It Is'. David and I have had a conversation in poems for at least a couple of decades now (as well as conversations in person and on the phone), and I have often written back to or been inspired by specific poems of his, sometimes because they annoy or challenge me, at other times because they ask fascinating questions or offer unusual images and ideas. David's phrase 'what it is' was an odd one, so I Googled it and collected the online answers (I have my own rule about only using what comes up onscreen in the search results, not clicking through), selecting from the first 10 or

20 pages.

I then started playing with ideas around ‘it’ and eventually came up with four poems which I decided were actually four parts of a long poem. When I was selecting poems for the *Dear Mary* book the ‘it’ in these poems seemed to partly be spiritual or *other*, something unknowable, particularly when the poem addresses – often obliquely – ideas such as heaven, death, framed experience, absence, the unknown, perhaps the nature of life itself. That looks very pretentious in cold print, and I don’t want it to appear so, the poem is meant to be fun with a serious questioning tone underneath. I want to make the reader question and think.

I’ve used these quotes before (Loydell, 2017b), but they are touchstones for my poetry. I love Charles Bernstein’s idea that ‘Poetry is turbulent thought’ which ‘leaves things unsettled, unresolved – leaves you knowing less than you did when you started’ (Bernstein, 1999: 42-43). And although collage is only one of the ways I construct my poems I agree with David Shields when he states that ‘collage teaches the reader to understand that the movements of the writer’s mind are intricately entangled with the work’s meaning. Forget “intricately entangled with the work’s meaning”: are the work’s meaning.’ (Shields, 2013: 161) Tony Hoagland suggests that

Collage is really the practice of a theory of knowledge. [...] it takes disorder, coincidence and chance materials as part of its methods and inspiration. [...] it embraces ambiguity, improvisation, speed, and multiplicity of meaning. It is expressive, but not primarily self-expressive. It places priority neither on closure, nor on conventional notions of completeness. (Hoagland 2006)

I’m interested in the texture and language of a poem as much as any content, narrative or idea it contains. That is *how* something is said is as important as *what* is said. Poems should open up connections and thought processes, not offer simple or concise, let alone complete, answers.

HH: Yes, *how* something is said can matter as much as *what* is said. Or, as Diane Glancy (2020) puts it in her book on another case of God talking to humans (the book of Job), ‘More than content is the manner in which it is held.’ So *that*’s why so many things can be messengers? And why so many messages can be annunciations? Because it is a way of training the attention, of listening for messengers and messages, to (as you put it in your ‘Process, remix …’ essay [2017b]) step away ‘from the idea of a poet somehow sharing an original experience’ and ‘resist the implied egotism of the declamatory “I” in poetry’?

RL: That’s an interesting take on the idea of messengers and the conveyance or delivery of messages. But doesn’t your re-telling take away the poetic nature of the Gospel texts? Since I was a teenager I have always used the Authorised version of the Bible, because I want the language to be different, unusual and musical. *The Living Bible* and *Good News* versions, so popular in the 1970s when I attended church and church youth group, simply made everything mundane and ordinary. It’s a little like summarising a novel’s plot rather than reading it for the language, voice(s) and storytelling. How does your *Gospel* avoid this problem?

HH: We’re more or less the same age, and it sounds like there are points of similarity in our religious backgrounds. Same story here: someone (my parents? my maternal grandparents?) gave me a copy of *The Living Bible* as a Christmas gift, the edition with an olive-green ‘hardback’ cover that had a weird pillowy texture to it. My older sister had a thick paperback

called *The Way*, that I think was the same translation/paraphrase. I share your sensibility in regard to such versions. There's an elevator-music quality to them, an attempt to make the narrative all comfort and no challenge, but I take it that gospel narratives pose a *lot* of challenge, and I myself want literature to offer me both comfort *and* challenge, not only one of the two, so the *Living-Bible*-type ordinary-language paraphrase doesn't interest me.

I hope, then, that *The Gospel* does *not* have much in common with such versions of the Bible. I find it misleading to use always and only 'pub language', but I find it equally misleading to use always and only 'church language'. Many translation decisions in the Authorized version were made because at the time they were 'true to' the original being translated, but now they're only true to the time of translation. My claim is that translating 'kurios' as 'lord' is as goofily anachronistic as it would be to translate 'makarios' as 'groovy'.

RL: Well, I'm not suggesting you don't care about the language used – you clearly do, as evidenced by this discussion – but your written work is often underpinned by a philosophical concept, yes, rather than a poetic one?

HH: The short answer would be *yes*, though I might swap metaphors. For me, philosophy and poetry are richly interconnected. I see them as less distinct and opposed than the prevalent view would have it. That view shows up, for example, as disciplinary categories in academia: many universities have a department of 'Philosophy and Religion', but I don't know of any university in the world with a department of 'Philosophy and Poetry'. For me, though, they are more merged than distinct, more reciprocal than opposed. So I don't see one as underpinning the other, quite. It's not that one is foundation, the other edifice, but more like planets whose gravitational fields influence one another. How something is said and what is said don't pull apart neatly, and for me neither do poetry and philosophy. Am I right to guess that you would say something similar about the relation for you between poetry and visual art?

RL: The term creativity can be applied to many things, including poetry, fine art, film, music and theatre as well as pure maths, theology and philosophy. I took an undergraduate degree in Creative Arts, which focussed attention on the way the arts could be integrated (or not) and helped us develop a vocabulary and understanding that could deal with many art forms. So although I may not have a technical dance or formal musical vocabulary (let alone skill in composition, playing or choreography), I am not shy of watching or listening and then responding in words. I am also of the persuasion that we think in language, so have moved away from thinking that art can somehow deal with stuff language can't. Several years later, my MA in creative writing really challenged me about the possibilities of poetry, the fluidity of language and introduced me to a lot of conceptual and processual writing, as well as associated theory, that changed the way I write.

Having said all that, I do mostly regard my painting and writing practices as distinct from each other, just as my academic and journalistic writing is separate from poetry. But of course it all relies on using this wonderful stuff called language, which I realise offers the writer so many possibilities, the more one works with it... There is always more to know, to understand, to contemplate and wonder at, to process and question.

With that idea of 'so much more to know', the material you have gathered in *The Gospel* tells a much wider story than we are used to. So, for instance, we get some family history, much more about Mary, and some stories about Jesus growing up, from the period between the

Nativity and when he starts preaching. What does this show? Although you say you do not make any of this story up, you have of course, selected and edited from your sources. How did you decide what went in and what was not included?

HH: There were really two types of decision involved, but maybe only one decision principle. One type of decision involved selecting a single version from several available versions. For example, Matthew, Mark, and Luke all three tell the story of Jesus curing a boy of his epilepsy. I included Mark's account, because in it the boy's father is a real character, too, not only the boy himself. The other type of decision, the one you're highlighting here, was whether or not to include material that is in only one source. As an example of that type, I included the story of child Jesus making sparrows out of mud on the Sabbath, which (to my knowledge) only appears in the Infancy Gospel of Thomas (Ehrman and Pleše, 2011). In both types of decision, I would say I'm ultimately relying on an intuitive sense of how compelling the story is *as a story*. (By contrast, for example, with a sense of how plausible the story is as a record of a factual/historical event.) Probably I've erred on the side of including too much, but since one thing I'm trying to push back against is canonization – the rule that only a few stories count – I *wanted* to err on the side of inclusion rather than exclusion.

RL: How do you think your book will be received, or how has it been received? The USA still seems to be a country underpinned by religion in a way the UK is not. In my experience the UK is now a nation that does not always know why we celebrate Easter or Christmas, and my students are unfamiliar with Adam and Eve, Noah's Ark, Jacob's Ladder or other Bible stories that were staples of my childhood. Newspaper reports suggest that this may be similar to USA citizens, yet they still attend church, and religious ideas are tangled up with concepts of freedom and law in a way they are not in the UK (despite the theoretical American separation of religion and state).

HH: We're having this conversation just before the official publication date of the book, so I'm only guessing how it will be received. (And part of me wants to chuckle and say it will be received like all my previous books: with silence!) With another chuckle, we could invoke the cartoon version of history in which *of course* the U.S. has a tortured relationship with religion: you Brits sent all your jailbirds to Australia and all your religious kooks to America! More seriously, though, I do anticipate *more* response to this book than to my previous books, and much *stronger* responses.

Much has been said, and there is much to be said, about why and how the U.S. is, as you so aptly put it, 'underpinned by religion', and I'm no expert on the matter. But I do have a sense that at least one aspect of that underpinning is likely to bear on the response to *The Gospel*. In the U.S., religious beliefs most often function less as constituents of an understanding of how the world works than as declarations of affiliation and tests of loyalty. It's not about factual or metaphysical *truth*, it's about securing membership in an in-group and opposing oneself to an out-group. Hence the Trump photo-op holding a Bible and posing in front of a church. We didn't learn anything about whether Trump believes there is a God who is active in human history, we learned a demographic that Trump thinks he can get to say 'He's one of *us*.'

That's one reason for my anticipation about response. Viewed in those terms, as a question of group loyalty, *The Gospel* is an opposite of the Trump photo-op, a statement that your Bible is not my Bible, that I'm one of *them*, not one of *us*.

RL: Yes, I can see that is the kind of statement or performance one doesn't want to be part of,

directly or indirectly, it's a question of different responses to the same material or idea, of who represents who in these issues.

HH: It can be hard to 'pull apart' representation and represented, and *trying* to separate them might sometimes be misleading. I'd want to describe your work as foregrounding *representations* of Mary: paintings, stories, and so on. How would you talk about your work's concern with representations of Mary, and with the Mary represented?

RL: I think you are correct in your statement that I am interested in using *representations* of Mary as much as the Bible story. My interest came about because of my reading and research about Renaissance painting, because I wanted to understand how Fra Angelico's annunciation paintings worked. Particularly the one in San Giovanni Valdarno, which is very near where we sometimes stay in Tuscany, but also the one in San Marco, Florence and another in Cortona. (The fourth in the Prado, Madrid, which I have visited, seems over-restored and gaudy to me.)

The paintings are simply beautiful, formally and in terms of colour, and reading texts such as John Drury's *Painting the Word* (1999) revealed a wealth of symbolism and implied storytelling in these and other paintings hitherto unknown to me. I also became fascinated by the abstract parts of the painting(s) and the words spilling out of the angel's mouth. My Mary is a confused human being whose everyday life is interrupted by an encounter with the unknown – some kind of 'angel' or 'other' – and a resulting pregnancy.

Having said that, I guess the elephant in the room, the question we've been avoiding, is why both of us return to the Bible, or stories from it at least. I know we started by questioning ideas of canonicity and the fact that Christianity did shape the Western World, but away from these intellectual arguments, why *The Gospel*?

HH: One need not 'believe in' the gospel, in the way 'believe in' is normally used, to be deeply engaged by it. I myself don't 'believe in' it, though as we mentioned earlier I was raised in a 'believing' household. But I think there's a *reason* why 'belief' is so often viewed as important in relation to the gospel. There is something archetypal about a narrative in which God becomes human. It positions in a story, or presents as a story, what I take as a basic and ultimate human problematic, to adequate the immanent to the transcendent. The question is all around us all the time. Socrates in the *Crito* (1997) has been ill-treated by the laws, but asks for guidance from the Laws. Antigone defies the duty imposed on her, in order to fulfill her Duty. How could a narrative not be compelling, in which the immanent is depicted as not merely *subject to*, but even *embodying*, the transcendent?

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