‘A SMALL ADJECTIVE ATTENDING LIGHT, THE ARCHANGELIC NOUN’.

JESSICA POWERS: A MODERN METAPHYSICAL POET

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In memory of my parents, Pamela and Vincent Lamb.

With love and thanks to my husband, Det, with whom all debts begin and end;

to our dear ten children who believe in us and support us unfailingly;

to my friend and supervisor, Felicity, who was a sure source of guidance and kindness,
to Brenda, my co-supervisor, who kept a cheerful and practical eye on proceedings throughout, and to David and Deirdre who oversaw the final stage with quiet diligence;

to my siblings and extended family who confidently predicted a happy outcome;

to my friend and first teacher, Moira;

to my friends and colleagues who lined the course to urge me on;

to Ruth, my fellow sufferer, and Lilli, her supervisor, who kept a neighbourly and kindly eye on me as well;

and to Dawie Malan whose prompt and expert assistance was unstintingly available to me.
DECLARATION

I declare that this thesis, entitled “A Small Adjective Attending Light, the Archangelic Noun”. Jessica Powers: A Modern Metaphysical Poet’ is my own work and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

Signed:

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SUMMARY

This thesis aims to establish Jessica Powers (1905 – 1988) as a metaphysical poet, to augment the composite definition of metaphysical poetry, and to add two emphases to Christian literary theory. A comprehensive library search on Powers reveals that no scholarly work has been written on her poetry since 2005. A meta-analysis of existing work on Powers demonstrates that the metaphysical aspect of her poetry has not yet been comprehensively examined. Though Powers wrote in a time commonly called ‘post-modern’, my contention is that it would be more accurate to describe her as a metaphysical poet in the traditional sense of that term, as used, for example, of George Herbert (1593 – 1633). I endorse the view that the central theme of all metaphysical poetry is the relation between body and soul (Tanenbaum 2002: 211). It will be seen that this relation is the central concern of Powers’ metaphysical poetry.

My close reading of Powers’ work as metaphysical is according to a Christian literary theory which agrees with Hass ‘that the study of the text and textual hermeneutics in the twenty-first century will continue because of a particular resurgence of religion’ (2007: 856). It is augmented by two emphases, a scientific (based on Gallagher’s 2009 study of the neurophysiology of attention), and a philosophical (based on Fromm’s 1976 analysis of the ‘being mode’, and on Buber’s 1947 analysis of attentiveness to the present moment). My study thereby contributes to Christian literary theory.

There are one hundred and eighty two poems in The Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers. This thesis refers, to greater or lesser extents, to one hundred and seventy six of the poems, and comprehensive examination of their metaphysical aspect is the primary focus of the thesis.

My examination of the poems demonstrates that Powers’ poetry can justly be described as metaphysical, which definition of her work serves to highlight an important and hitherto neglected aspect of her work, that she is a metaphysical poet of the finest calibre, and that renewed attention to her work is timely.
KEY TERMS:

Jessica Powers; Metaphysical poetry; a Christian theory of reading; a Christian criticism; a Theological Aesthetic; Discalced Carmelites.

KEY TERMS, THEORIES AND THEORISTS

Jessica Powers


Metaphysical Poetry

The label ‘Metaphysical’ is traditionally given to English poets of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who inclined towards intellectual complexity, metaphysical speculation, and concentration of language. This thesis does not examine the work of the sixteenth and seventeenth century poets known as ‘the Metaphysicals’, though it uses one iconic ‘Metaphysical’ poem as a key note in its introduction. The thesis is concerned with qualities in the ouevre of Jessica Powers which I contend may be called metaphysical as the term is used in this thesis. Metaphysical poetry is sometimes accused of being ‘difficult’. The boldness of the literary devices used – especially obliquity, irony, paradox and a unique brand of wit – is often reinforced by a dramatic directness of language and by rhythms derived from living speech. Metaphysical poets express deep thoughts in common language, and extraordinary thoughts in ordinary language. The strength of the religious poetry of metaphysical poets is that they bring to their praise, prayer and meditation so much experience that is not in itself religious, although the central theme is always the relation between body and soul.

Some famous poets known in the canon as ‘Metaphysical’ are Sir Walter Ralegh (1552?-1618); Robert Southwell (1561-1595); John Donne (1572-1631); Ben Jonson
A Christian Theory of Reading

A Christian Theory of Reading aims to have the qualities and points of view of an orthodox Christian criticism. The Christian Theory of Reading according to which I read Powers in this thesis is grounded in Hans Urs Von Balthasar’s account of a theological aesthetic, and agrees with Hass that if, as Eagleton maintains, the study of English literature in the nineteenth century arose out of the decline of religion, then the study of the text and textual hermeneutics in the twenty-first century may continue because of a particular resurgence of religion.

A Christian Criticism

A Christian criticism is grounded in orthodox Christian theology and holds that literature may be seen as a site of theology because literature, biblical and non-biblical, is a place where sacred and secular meet. Based on this hypothesis, a Christian reading will expect to find in the words of non-canonical and even non-Christian writings something of the moral and doctrinal instruction to be found in sacred scripture.

A Theological Aesthetic

A Christian theological aesthetic considers Christ to be the greatest beauty, in the Incarnation, the Crucifixion and the Eucharist, and maintains that religious metaphysical poetry, such as Powers’ poetry, symbolises in its form the beauty of the divine creation.

Discalced Carmelites

‘Discalced’ or ‘Barefoot’ Carmelites are a Catholic mendicant order with roots in the eremitic tradition of the ‘Desert Fathers’ and ‘Mothers’. The order was established in
1593, pursuant to the reform of the Carmelite order of the Ancient Observance by two Spanish saints, Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross. The Discalced Carmelites are men and women, in religious consecration and lay people, who dedicate themselves to a life of prayer. Carmelites trace their roots and their name to Mount Carmel in the Holy Land. There, in the 13th century, a band of European men gathered together to live a simple life of prayer. Carmelite nuns live in cloistered (enclosed) convents and follow a completely contemplative life.

**George Steiner**

Francis George Steiner (born 1929), is a European-born American literary critic, essayist, philosopher, novelist, translator, and educator. This study is indebted to his influence and inspiration.
INTRODUCTION

‘Metaphysic means the ultimate reality’ (Radice 2003: xv 1)

‘The central theme of all metaphysical poetry is the relation between body and soul’ (Tanenbaum 2002: 211)

This thesis is a reading of the metaphysical aspect of the poetry of Jessica Powers which has not been comprehensively examined hitherto.¹ My reading is informed by a Christian Theory of Reading which I consider to be an appropriate theory in the light of which to read an avowedly religious poet, but of course I acknowledge that other literary theories could be used to read Powers and would no doubt yield differing readings from mine. I use inclusive pronouns, as in ‘we’, ‘us’, and ‘our’, in my analysis of Powers’ work as I deem this usage to be compatible both with the content of the poems and with a Christian Theory of Reading. My usage as well as my theory of reading is informed by Steiner in this regard. He says ‘The questions “What are poetry, music, art?”, “How can they not be?”, “How do they act upon us and how do we interpret their action?” are, ultimately, theological questions’ (Steiner² 1989: 227). However my usage of inclusive language makes absolutely no suppositions about any opinions or beliefs of any reader of Powers or of my study, and equally, makes no statement about any personal beliefs of my own.

This comprehensive examination of the metaphysical aspect of Powers’ selected poetry appears to be the first scholarly writing on her since 2005.³ In the course of my reading of Powers I have developed an added nuance to the definition of the term ‘metaphysical’. I read Powers in this study in the light of a Christian theory of reading by means of close study of text and textual hermeneutics. In my opinion, religion and

¹ As demonstrated in Chapter One of this study.
² Francis George Steiner (born 1929), European-born American literary critic, essayist, philosopher, novelist, translator, and educator. This study is indebted to his influence and inspiration.
³ As revealed by an expert search conducted by Mr Dawie Malan of the UNISA library of the major theological (ATLA Catholic Periodical and Literature Index, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials) and literature, humanities and interdisciplinary databases (MLA, LLBA, Humanities & Social Sciences Index Retrospective, Humanities Source, Academic Onefile, Academic Search Premier and Masterfile Premier) as well as the Proquest Dissertations Database and WorldCat.
close reading are complementary. I agree with Hass that: ‘if the earlier Eagleton was right, that the study of English literature in the nineteenth century arose as the result of “the failure of religion”, then we might venture to say that the study of the text and textual hermeneutics in the twenty-first century will continue because of a particular resurgence of religion’ (Hass 2007: 856).

My Christian theory of reading acknowledges a debt to George Steiner’s exposition of real presence in his book Real Presences which has been a lode-star to my exploration of the metaphysical in Powers’ work. My literary theory is further characterised by two emphases, a scientific and a philosophical, which emphases constitute a contribution to Christian literary theory.

A quotation from Powers sets the scene for a consideration of the metaphysical aspect of her work:

leness, O soul, is this your journey!
Love is its end and love its plan and prod.
‘On Reading Saint Peter of Alcantara’.

These lines state the goal of her work: ‘Love is its end’; they give her opinion of a life lived for Christ: ‘How glorious, O soul, is this your journey!’; they acknowledge, as metaphysical poetry does, the intrinsic role of human intelligence in life: it has a ‘plan’; and they claim that mankind needs a divine antidote to the self-destructiveness that undermines human joy: the ‘prod’. All these components which Powers considers to be intrinsic to human life, its ‘end’, its ‘plan’, and its ‘prod’, find their metaphysical raison d’etre in Powers’ most used word, ‘love’, the ‘love [that] must out of Love begin’ (‘Letter of Departure’).

Metaphysical poetry, according to the use of the term ‘metaphysical’ in this study, is poetry which relates us most directly to that in being which is not ours. All good art and literature begin in immanence. But they do not stop there ... it is the enterprise and the privilege of the aesthetic to quicken into lit presence the continuum
between temporality and eternity, between matter and spirit, between man and ‘the other’. It is in this common and exact sense that poiesis opens on to, is underwritten by, the religious and the metaphysical. The questions ‘What are poetry, music, art?’, ‘How can they not be?’, ‘How do they act upon us and how do we interpret their action?’ are, ultimately, theological questions (Steiner 1989: 227).

This thesis examines and demonstrates my proposition that Jessica Powers (1905 – 1988), a poet who wrote between 1948 and 1988, can be described as a metaphysical poet, that is, a poet who ‘quicken[s] into lit presence the continuum between temporality and eternity, between matter and spirit, between man and “the other”’ (Steiner 1989: 227), rather than as a post-modern poet. Precisely ‘what constitutes post-modern literature is notoriously difficult to define, but it is habitually associated with stylistic characteristics such as self-reflexivity, parody, pastiche and meta-fiction, and with epistemological claims that reality is preceded by and dependent on language, and that we can only know the real through its textual traces’ (Poplawski 2008: 622). My contention is that though Powers wrote in a time covered in common usage by the term ‘post-modern’, she is in fact a metaphysical poet in the traditional sense of that term, as used, for example, of George Herbert (1593-1633). I deploy the term ‘metaphysical’ in this thesis as used by Tanenbaum who says that ‘the central theme of all metaphysical poetry is the relation between body and soul’ (2002: 211). It will be seen that this ‘relation’ is the ‘central theme’ of Powers’ metaphysical poetry. My thesis will offer a further nuance to the standard definition of metaphysical poetry based on my theory of the nature of metaphysical poetry developed in the course of my study.

Frank Kermode’s words in his book *Forms of Attention* are relevant to my reading of Powers in this study:

> Interpretation is only the possibility of error, … it is necessary to [remember that] the blindness of interpreters is a necessary condition of that thought. De Man gives *Blindness and Insight* a marvellous epigraph from Proust: ‘Cette perpetuelle erreur,

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4 Francis George Steiner (born 1929), European-born American literary critic, essayist, philosopher, novelist, translator, and educator. This study is indebted to his influence and inspiration.
qui est précisement la vie’. The blindness is vital and beneficent, for all interpretations are erroneous, but some, in relation to their ultimate purpose, are good nevertheless, saying what they had not meant or more than they meant, and defeating time. Perhaps a perfect interpretation would, as Valery said of pure reality, stop the heart. Good enough interpretation is what encourages or enables certain forms of attention (1975: 91).

This calibre of ‘attention’, based on ‘good enough interpretation’, is the aim of this study.

Jessica Powers (1905-1988) wrote over four hundred poems throughout her life. In the years immediately preceding her death in 1988 Siegfried and Morneau worked with Powers to put together a selected edition of her poems, which I use for this study. On July 9th 1988 Powers had a meeting with Siegfried and Morneau to complete and approve the final version of the manuscript. Morneau says, ‘that she was pleased, happy and peaceful about the manuscript, has made our work all the more gratifying. This is indeed her book; it is our privilege to have been the editors’ (Siegfried and Morneau 1999: xxi). There are one hundred and eighty two poems in The Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers. This thesis refers, to a greater or lesser extent, to one hundred and seventy six of the poems. In order to accommodate this comprehensive examination of the selected poems in their metaphysical aspect (which is the substance of this study) I discuss them and refer to them in seven of the nine chapters in the study.

In this thesis I follow the conventions used by Powers in the use of the capital letter to refer to God, and in pronouns referring to Him, and, on occasions, the use of the word ‘man’ to refer to mankind. Where the revised edition of her work uses the American spelling of English words I follow her usage in quoting her poetry.

The lines quoted in the title of this thesis,

‘a small adjective attending light,
the archangelic noun’
are taken from Powers’ poem, ‘Manuscript of Heaven’. This poem shows the wit and metaphorical dexterity characteristic of metaphysical poetry, which is the subject of this thesis. A brief examination of this poem serves as a preparation for the comprehensive analysis of the metaphysical aspect of Powers’ poetry which follows:

I know the manuscript the Uncreated writes in the garden of His good estate. His creatures are the words incorporated into love’s speech. O great immortal Poet, in Your volume bright if one may choose a portion, write me down as a small adjective attending light, the archangelic noun.

Powers opens her poem directly in a metaphor for God, ‘the Uncreated’, as a writer who writes His manuscript ‘in the garden of His good estate’. There, in Eden, Powers says, He writes us, His creatures, as words in His ‘love speech’. This direct opening is characteristic of metaphysical poetry. Powers’ love for God is carried by one simple note: ‘O’. This seemly restraint brings John Henry Newman ⁵ to mind: in Newman’s style, restraint is the form used to denote feeling and reverence. He ‘concealed [his] emotions, lest by advertising them [he] should seem to cheapen the objects of [his] love. There was nothing cold about this doctrine of reserve. The word betokens, it is true, discipline, austerity and restraint. Precious things must be guarded, even hidden from irreverent eyes’ (Coulson and Allchin 1970: 24). Thus it is the depth of feeling underlying the simplicity that gives the poetry its simultaneous delicacy and passion which are qualities often found in metaphysical poetry.

Powers honours God with what she considers to be praise of the highest order: ‘great immortal Poet’. There could be a little self-ironic smile at her own expense here, as she too is a poet. This subtle and fugitive use of humour is an element of metaphysical wit. Her unstated claim is to membership of the same exalted guild as God Himself. As though to downplay what may seem to be a claim to some degree of creative equality

⁵ 1805-1888, Saint, Cardinal, theologian and writer of inimitable prose.
with God, she ends her poem on a note of humility: she asks to be, in the ‘volume bright’, which is the Manuscript of Heaven in which God writes us,

a small adjective attending light,
the archangelic noun.

There is a final note of metaphysical daring, however, near the end of the poem: she presumes to ask God, the ‘great immortal Poet’, for a ‘portion’ of her choice in the ‘volume bright’. But, as becomes a creature of ‘the Uncreated’, she prefixes her request with a humble disclaimer: ‘if one may choose a portion’. Metaphysical echoes of seeming near-effrontery can be heard in this: Christ too made a request of God, in the Garden of Gethsemane, and rounded it off by relinquishing it: ‘Father, if You are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will but Yours be done’.6 However to imitate Christ thus is only seeming effrontery, as Powers believes that Christ is our brother and our pattern in all things,7 so to presume to Almighty God must be a presumption allowed in the beloved creature, as it is in the Son. The metaphysical wit and metaphorical dexterity evident in this poem will be seen in Powers’ poetry throughout this thesis. Her own words in this poem describe her work, in effect: in her metaphysical poetry she is ‘attending light’.

An analysis of a poem by George Herbert (1593-1633), one of the most famous of the poets traditionally known as ‘Metaphysical’, and of a poem by Powers establishes, as a form of metaphysical benchmark, the similarity between the metaphysical characteristics evident in both poems. George Herbert’s poem ‘Prayer’ (1633), is defined in the canon as metaphysical and serves in this thesis as the exemplar around which all of Powers’ work fits. Herbert’s poem is an expression of the essence of metaphysical poetry, and may be said to be an expression of the essence of Powers’ poetry, and a description of her poetry. The intrinsic affinities between Herbert’s metaphysical poem and Powers’ poetry will establish a basis for the demonstration of the metaphysical nature of Powers’ poetry.

6 Luke 22: 42. All quotations from The Holy Bible in this study are taken from the New International Version. 1973: Colorado Springs: International Bible Society.
7 1 Peter 2: 21: To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in His steps.
Prayer

Prayer the Churches banquet, Angels age,
God’s breath in man returning to his birth,
The soul in paraphrase, heart in pilgrimage,
The Christian plummet sounding heav’n and earth;
Engine against th’ Almighty, sinners towre,
Reversed thunder, Christ-side-piercing spear,
The six-daies-world transposing in an houre,
A kinde of tune, which all things heare and fear;

Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse,
Exalted manna, gladnesse of the best,
Heaven in ordinarie, man well drest,
The milkie way, the bird of Paradise,
Church-bels beyond the starres heard, the souls bloud,
The land of spices; something understood.

George Herbert.

The poem opens abruptly: ‘Prayer the Churches banquet’. Without preamble the reader is deep in a striking metaphor. Abrupt opening is a characteristic of metaphysical poetry. The connotations of the word ‘banquet’ are sumptuous: splendour; richness; variety; sustenance; wealth; opulence; life-enhancement. All these qualities are succinctly attributed to prayer in a metaphor, the intricacy of which is typical of metaphysical poetry.

‘Angels age’ is a ‘difficult’ phrase, in the sense of that word as used of metaphysical poetry to denote intellectual complexity. It suggests that prayer is the age of angels; that the time-zone inhabited by angels co-exists with the time-zone inhabited by man; and that when man prays he enters the angelic sphere. This phrase is elliptical, with a boundless possibility of meaning compressed into two words. This complexity is typical of metaphysical poetry.

The line ‘God’s breath in man returning to his birth’ combines feeling with intellect in a complex metaphor. This combination of feeling and intellect is characteristic of metaphysical poetry. According to Herbert’s belief, Prayer is ‘God’s breath’, which He
breathes into us as grace, and which we, in turn, breathe out as prayer, which returns to God, its place of birth. Serene religious conviction is asserted here too: Herbert’s pronoun ‘his’ in ‘God’s breath in man returning to his birth’ is a theological statement pertaining to human origin and destiny in one quiet word. Thus the life-giving blowing in of grace by God, and the involuntary breathing out of prayer by man, mimics the physical act of creaturely breathing. Breathing is an involuntary attribute of life: we either breathe in and out in this way or we die. Herbert is implying here that to pray is intrinsic to life, that a properly functioning man is a praying man. The man who does not pray is actually, if not apparently, as dead as the man who does not breathe. It is of interest to note here that the Old Testament (Hebrew) and the New Testament (Greek) use the same words for spirit, breath and wind, ‘Ruach’ (Hebrew), and ‘Pneuma’ (Greek), so that in these words we already have a connection between the metaphysical and the existential.

‘The soul in paraphrase’ is a witty conceit, the words ‘witty’ and ‘conceit’ being used in their relation to metaphysical poetry: ‘witty’ denoting audacity or cleverness; and ‘conceit’ denoting an unusual metaphor. The conceit is subtle ellipsis, and it will be shown to simultaneously expand and contract in an instance of metaphysical sophistication. The sense of the words mimics the expansion of the chest as air fills the lungs, and the contraction, or paraphrase, of the chest as air is breathed out of the lungs. The word ‘soul’ carries illimitable connotations, arising out of the inexhaustible nature of God’s breath breathed into man. This is the expansion in the conceit. The prayer, or breath we breathe out, carries connotations of the contraction and smallness of our breath, of paraphrase. Paraphrase is man’s minute response to God’s immeasurable act of initiation. And yet, paradoxically, a paraphrase, as well as compacting meaning, also expresses the essence of something. This line therefore proposes that prayer, which is the breath of God, is the very essence of man’s soul. This sinuous and understated use of paradox is characteristic of metaphysical poetry.

‘Heart in pilgrimage’ is another instance of metaphysical contraction. It is a witty metaphor replete with connotations. Man’s heart resides in his body, but in prayer it is on a pilgrimage to God. It is, thus, paradoxically, at once en route to God, and fixed in
man’s body. The metaphor in line four: prayer as ‘The Christian plummet sounding heav’n and earth’, is strong, as in thought-provoking, witty, and complex, as is characteristic of a metaphysical use of metaphor. A plummet usually plumbs depths. Here prayer, the ‘Christian plummet’, seems initially to reverse the direction: it ‘sounds’ heaven, and then earth. Like the breath, from God to man and back, prayer, which seems to rise from man to God, in reality comes to man from God as grace, and returns to Him as praise, and then returns to man again as His life-giving breath, and so on, in a God-initiated and God-sustained spiral of love.

Stanza two is a strong, witty (in the metaphysical sense of this word, as denoting audacity or cleverness) conceit, using medieval battle imagery. ‘Engine’ is an audacious paradox: ‘against (my emphasis) the Almighty’ – man may not attack God – yet in prayer, he may. God’s own breath becomes man’s ‘towre’ from which man can attack God with His own breath. ‘Reversed thunder’ makes the paradox explicit: naturally thunder arises in the heavens, but here it comes from man on earth, and yet it really comes from God in heaven as the initial breath.

‘Christ side-piercing spear’ is a line laden with wit and theological subtlety. It suggests lightning, coming as it does in conjunction with thunder, again in reversed order, as lightning from earth up to heaven. It is prayer which moves Christ, wounds Him, as the lance pierced Him on the Cross. Man pierced Him on the Cross as He suffered for mankind’s sins, and here He suffers again as mankind’s prayers, which are really the return of His own gracious breath, assault Him.

This stanza shows the logical development typical of metaphysical poetry: the subject, prayer, is held up like a facetted jewel and examined from every side, each time from a new angle, so that the light of its meaning flashes out. This poem is essentially a meditation on prayer. This is ‘composition by similitude’: an abstraction, in this case, prayer, is made powerful imaginatively by its being embodied in concrete metaphors such as ‘banquet’; ‘breath’; ‘paraphrase’; ‘pilgrimage’; ‘plummet’; ‘engine’; and ‘spear’. The attributes of prayer are meditated upon in a condensed, intellectually strong, extended series of metaphors. This is typical of metaphysical poetry, as it is poetry
which deals with metaphysical issues which, by their very nature, are abstractions which can only be apprehended and conveyed by means of metaphor.

‘The six-daiies’, that is, the entire Creation, are contracted into an hour of prayer. The Creation, the Fall, and the Redemption too are distilled into an hour of prayer. Contraction which carries complexity is characteristic of metaphysical poetry, and is one of the reasons for the charge of ‘difficulty’ that is sometimes levelled against it.

The metaphor, ‘A kinde of tune’, has connotations of homeliness and simplicity. The expression ‘a kinde of’ is a humble expression which is seemingly neither intellectual nor sophisticated. The word ‘tune’ is again seemingly simple. A tune is not a complicated piece of music. Any person, even a child, can hear, remember and reproduce a tune. This simplicity embodies an astonishing metaphor: the vastness of God’s dealings with man is distilled into the beguiling clarity and simplicity of a tune. It will be seen in the course of this thesis that, as Morneau comments in his audio cassette on Powers, ‘Jessica Powers: Landscapes of the Sacred’ (Morneau 1989), the word ‘astonishing’ is very often appropriate in regard to the audacious use of metaphor that is characteristic of Powers’ poetry, as it is of Herbert’s poem, and of metaphysical poetry.

It is also characteristic of metaphysical poetry that its ‘astonishing’ insights are conveyed by means of metaphor which often uses homely and simple images. This line carries theological complexity with effortless grace. The words are not ‘all things’ can ‘heare and fear’, but ‘all things’ ‘heare and fear’. The implication is that man does not have an option in regard to choosing whether or not to ‘heare and fear’ God. In accordance with man’s God-given nature, he ‘heares and fears’ God. His choice lies in whether or not to obey or to deny his own deepest nature, and that choice carries consequences that are not optional. The words make the claim that awareness of God is as intrinsic to the human condition as breathing: we ‘heare’ as automatically as we breathe, and, just as we die if we don’t breathe, so we die (though we may not know it) if we do not ‘fear’. ‘Fear’ in this context carries conventional religious connotations of
awe and reverence when used in relation to the Almighty. It serves as a quiet reminder of just who the subject of the poem is: Almighty God.

Stanza three contrasts the intellectually tough concision of the first two stanzas with an outpouring of loving rapture in words descriptive of the most human, homely and delightful states known to man: ‘Softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse’. The intimacy of the outpouring of the graceful words depicts a blessed state that highlights a deeply comforting attribute of what Herbert considers to be a proper relationship to God that both mitigates and complements the ‘fear’ of line four of stanza two.

Line two of stanza three demonstrates the concision so often found in metaphysical poetry: ‘Exalted’, a fitting word to describe any dealing with God, and then ‘manna’, so simple, a quiet and yet literally life-saving staple.\(^8\) This unassuming word is an ironic echo of ‘banquet’, simultaneously contrasting with and enhancing that word’s connotations of richness and nourishment. ‘Gladnesse’ is again an intimate word, a homely word, a comprehensive description in a single word of all that Herbert believes is most precious in human life.

‘Of the best’ is a complex concept with the layered meaning typical of metaphysical poetry: it denotes simultaneously of the best kind; of the best because it is of God; and of the best of men who ‘fear’.

‘Heaven in ordinarie’ is a metaphysical conceit. The words are a contracted metaphor which is witty, audacious, and intimate. According to Herbert prayer is Heaven, with all its connotations of power and splendour, but Heaven ‘in ordinarie’, that is, in the everyday clothes used by ordinary man. The paradox claims that the words of human language, which are ordinary and plain, nevertheless express the inexpressible and the ineffable, when they are used in prayer. And the Heavenly beauty of prayer renders

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\(^8\) Exodus 16: 14,15: When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, ‘What is it?’ for they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat’.
fallible, ordinary man ‘well drest’, that is, the ordinary clothes of human language are made elegant and beautiful, ‘well drest’, by the breath of God which is the essence of prayerful words. Herbert’s metaphor shows two things happening at once: the splendour of God is made bearable for man by being clothed in humble human words, and, at the same time, the splendour inhabiting prayerful human words makes the human words ‘well drest’, that is, Heavenly. According to Newman prayerful words, in fact, inhere in a new language taught us by Christ. Newman says prayer speaks a ‘new language Christ has brought us. [Christ] has interpreted all things for us in a new way; He has brought us a religion which sheds a new light on all that happens’ (2009: 82). This thesis maintains that Powers’ poetry speaks this ‘new language’, as Herbert’s does, and that she, like Herbert, sees in this ‘new light’.

The exquisite light that illuminates this poem, the beauty in which prayer inheres, is shed by ‘the milkie way’. This is a spiral galaxy of at least two hundred billion stars and an estimated fifty billion planets. These stars were given the adjective ‘milky’ by the Ancient Greeks who called the misty radiance in the sky the ‘Galaxies Kuklos’, the milky circle. The Romans changed the name to the ‘Via Lactea’, the ‘milky road’, and in English it became, as Herbert calls it, the ‘milkie way’. It was seen up until 1610 as a phenomenon of unearthly beauty mysteriously adorning the night sky. In 1610 Galileo Galilei discovered that it was not an exquisite mystery but rather a galaxy of stars. Not until the nineteenth century did astronomers begin to understand that it is merely one of many galaxies. So, for Herbert, with early seventeenth-century astronomical insight, it is a metaphor evoking at once the unfathomable mystery and the ineffable beauty of God, and of prayer, which is His breath.

‘The bird of Paradise’ refers to a bird which is a member of the genus Paradisaea which includes the type species, paradisaea apoda, the Greater Bird of Paradise. This species was described from specimens brought back to Europe by travellers and

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merchants. The specimens brought to Europe had had their feet amputated by native traders before they were sold to the European traders, because the feet were valued in their own right and were therefore sold separately. This custom was not known to the early explorers who bought the birds, and this led to the widely held belief that the birds were naturally footless, and that they thus never landed but were kept permanently afloat by their plumes. This is the origin of both the names ‘Bird of Paradise’, and ‘apoda’, without feet.10 This is a striking and apt metaphor for prayer: beautiful, precious, winged, permanently aloft, as Herbert would have believed such a bird to be. The bird was perceived to be a native of Paradise, as Herbert believes prayer is a native of Paradise, because it is God’s breath arising in, coming from, and returning to Paradise.

‘Church-bels beyond the starres heard’ is an eminently metaphysical metaphor. It is clever, compact, and complex, appealing simultaneously to the senses, to the mind, to the imagination, and to the emotions. It carries all the connotations of ‘church-bels’, some of which are homeliness, village life, ritual, holiness, tradition, religion, a sound made by man on earth. And then it soars heavenwards: the man-made sound is ‘heard beyond the starres’. The word ‘starres’ evokes mystery, wonder, and beauty, it stirs and sweeps the imagination up into the vastness of the heavens. The ‘starres’ are of course an echo of ‘the milkie way’, but now with all the added texture of the homely connotations of ‘church-bels’.

The words ‘the souls bloud’ hark back to breath, in that blood, like breath, is essential to life. The physicality of this metaphor, which conveys attributes of the spiritual relating to the soul by means of analogy with the bodily element of blood, is typical of a metaphysical use of metaphor. The words carry connotations of the Blood of the Lamb spilled for man; and also of the Eucharist. They make the theological point that, just as the body cannot live without blood, so the soul cannot live without prayer, or without

the Eucharist, which is the Body and Blood of Christ. The metaphor is compact and intellectual, yet it is intimate, as intrinsic as blood in a vein, and as blood in a soul.

‘The land of spices’ is an evocative phrase. Its connotations are sensuous, romantic, enchanting, adventurous, and costly. Multiple aspects of prayer are conveyed in four words.

And finally, ‘something understood’: this is a purely metaphysical phrase. It reaches from the sensuous richness of the ‘land of spices’ to something seemingly simple, yet actually complex. A communication so inexpressibly profound as to involve the breath of God, the stars, the blood of the soul, is yet able to be ‘understood’ by man. It is not esoteric or unfathomable, but is rather something graspable by man: to ‘understand’ is to fully apprehend. This is a perfect example of the intellectual, compact rigour of metaphysical poetry. In the phrase ‘something understood’ theological depth is expressed in a two-word phrase which is simultaneously translucent and inexhaustible. To ‘understand’ has multiple layers of meaning: to know or realise the meaning of something; to know or realise how or why something happens, how it works or why it is important; to know somebody’s character, how they feel and why they behave in the way they do; to think or believe that something is true because you have been told that it is; to agree to something with somebody without it needing to be said (The Concise Oxford Dictionary 1982: 1169). All these subtle layers of meaning describing the process of understanding are succinctly expressed by the apparently simple word ‘understood’.

This analysis has mentioned certain qualities of the poem: the abrupt opening; the striking use of metaphor; the so called ‘difficulty’; the use of witty conceit; of extended metaphor; of ellipsis; the acuity of the theology; the use of audacious paradox; the orderly development; the fact that the poem is a meditation; that it is at once homely, intellectual, and sensuous. It will be seen that these are all attributes typical of metaphysical poetry, specifically of this poem of Herbert’s, and also, of Powers’ poetry. This thesis will show that Powers’ poetry exhibits many of the characteristics of metaphysical poetry, as it is defined in this thesis, in a way that is essentially akin to
this metaphysical poem of Herbert’s. I hope to show that Powers’ poetry can be described by words from this metaphysical poem: that her poetry is indeed ‘a kinde of tune’, ‘expressions of ‘softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse’, poems from ‘the land of spices’, and, supremely, poems in which some of the ineffable things of God can be ‘understood’.

An analysis of Powers’ poem on prayer (1954), demonstrates her kinship with the metaphysical qualities of Herbert’s poem on prayer:

Prayer: A Progression

You come by night, harsh with the need of grace,
into the dubious presence of your Maker.
You combed a small and pre-elected acre
for some bright word of Him, or any trace.
Past the great judgement growths of thistle and thorn
and past the thicket of self you bore your yearning
till lo, you saw a pure white blossom burning
in glimmer, then light, then unimpeded more!

Now the flower God-is-Love gives ceaseless glow;
now all your thoughts feast on its mystery,
but when love mounts through knowledge and goes free,
then will the sated thinker arise and go
and brave the deserts of the soul to give
the flower he found to the contemplative.

Line one shows the compassionate though understated psychological insight that is characteristic of metaphysical poetry: it is in the depths of the night that human beings often feel existential anguish. It is then that even the most thoughtless and the most complacent may crave ‘grace’ with ‘harsh’ hunger. The bitter connotations of ‘harsh’ contrast with the sweetness and light of ‘grace’ to emphasise mankind’s forlorn neediness. Line two has a wry note of metaphysical wit in the word ‘dubious’. Powers says that we acknowledge, in our hour of desperate need, that we have a ‘Maker’, but the word ‘dubious’ casts its shadow back and forth over the line. We are dubious, at least in our daytime self-sufficiency, about His presence and about His status as our ‘Maker,’ and He in turn may well, we half fear, feel dubious about the sincerity of our small-hours gesture towards Him, and even about the putative value of such reluctant
prayers. Now that we have yielded, out of midnight terror, to slinking into His presence, under cover of dark, we yet presume to dictate to Him the exact terms and extent of His possession of us: in a ‘small and pre-elected acre’ we deign, because our need drives us to it, to search ‘for some bright word of Him, or any trace’. The word ‘bright’ shares the beauty and light of the word ‘grace’ of line one, and these words belong to the category of the theological in the poem. Without doctrinaire emphasis Powers quietly describes certain attributes of God. This presentation of some of the attributes of a transcendent presence places the poem in the realm of the metaphysical.

The poem is stern in its delineation of man’s puny pride and his foolish claim to self-sufficiency, but it is also tender in its delineation of the suffering we cause ourselves by our hubris. This psychological insight is a characteristic of metaphysical poetry. The metaphor, ‘judgement growths of thistle and thorn’, carries pity for the stinging, piercing pain we inflict on ourselves when we succumb to self-blame and self-loathing in the despairing moments in which we survey the ruin we have made of our lives, and the metaphor, ‘thicket of self’, acknowledges how difficult it is to fight our way beyond ourselves. This poem carries no trite or sentimental suggestion that conversion is easy. Nothing less than death to self is required and the very real pain and struggle this entails is conveyed by the connotations of the words ‘harsh’, ‘great growths’, ‘thistle’ ‘thorn’ and ‘thicket’ that combine to form a seemingly impenetrable barrier to self-transcendence.

The word ‘yearning’ is the metaphysical word that with lucid economy penetrates the ‘thicket of self’. This word is metaphysical because it describes the restless longing for God that Powers, like St Augustine, believes to be an intrinsic part of our human make-up. Her word ‘yearning’ comes out of the same metaphysical realm that St Augustine prays from in his famous prayer: ‘You have made us for yourself, O God, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You’ (1957: 1, 1). Powers maintains that It is our ‘yearning’ for Him that God cannot resist. God so loves us, even unto dying Himself on the Cross for us, that when we respond with even a feeble glimmer of answering yearning, He cannot but come to us. The complexity of the theology and the succinct perceptiveness
that underlie this use of the word are metaphysical qualities in the poem. Powers conveys a sense of the immeasurable generosity of God’s response to man in the metaphor of the light that glimmers, then glows and then shines without limit and without end, in ‘unimpeded more!’ Even the exclamation mark here carries metaphysical significance. It is an exclamation of wonder and gladness at the miraculous inexhaustibility of God’s light. Powers uses an extended metaphor taken from nature in this stanza that is not in itself unusual or startling: the ‘growths of thistle and thorn’, the ‘thicket of self’, and finally, the ‘pure white blossom’; but the theological issues addressed by the metaphor are metaphysical.

Stanza two carries the metaphor of the ‘white blossom’ into purely metaphysical territory. The flower now symbolises God’s nature, which is love. Its ‘burning’ of stanza one now gives ‘ceaseless glow’. This image brings a lit sanctuary lamp to mind. A sanctuary lamp glows ceaselessly in a church to witness to the presence of God Himself, present in a consecrated Host in the tabernacle. We are now moving from meditation on the love of God, from ‘all [our] thoughts feast[ing] on its mystery’ [my emphasis], to mystical contemplation: now ‘love mounts through knowledge and goes free’. The ‘dubious’ reluctance of the first stanza, the anxious combing of a ‘small and pre-elected acre’, the strangling growths and the imprisoning thicket, have been transmuted by ‘yearning’ prayer into freedom in the ‘unimpeded’ light, where thoughts must be left behind, where knowledge is of no avail, where unknown ‘deserts’ must be braved, and where finally, the one who prays thus, will reach a mystical union with God, will be given the flower ‘God-is-Love’.

Metaphysical wit underlies this poem in that the mystical experience of God in contemplative prayer, which Powers describes here in words and images, is an experience which lies beyond words and which cannot finally be described. And yet she does so. She presents that which is ‘conceivable but unpresentable’ (Detweiler and Doty 1990: 176). The poem goes beyond this world into an encounter with mystery in an instance of the metaphysical.
This analysis of these two poems has shown that both poems can be described as ‘metaphysical’, and has highlighted core attributes of metaphysical poetry. These qualities will be examined in greater detail throughout the thesis in relation to Powers’ work. It will become clear that Herbert’s 17th century, indisputably metaphysical poem, serves in this thesis as a touchstone for the examination of the metaphysical quality of Powers’ poetry, and that his lovely words can act in an overarching way as both an analysis and a description of Powers’ work.

This thesis is structured in the following way: Chapter One is a meta-analysis of scholarly work on Powers’ poetry. Chapter Two acknowledges the influence on all serious reading of some of the dominant literary theories of the Twentieth Century. Chapters Three and Four describe a Christian theory of reading, which is the theory of my choice in this reading of Powers’ poetry. Chapter Five describes the further two emphases, scientific and philosophical, that inform my theory of reading. Chapter Six makes seven observations about the nature of metaphysical poetry. Chapters Seven, Eight and Nine each consider eight aspects of the metaphysical in Powers’ work. The Conclusion closes my examination of the metaphysical in Powers’ poetry. Analysis of Powers’ poetry supports my discussion of her work in all the chapters, except Chapters One and Two of this study.
CHAPTER ONE: SCHOLARLY WORK PUBLISHED ON POWERS’ POETRY

‘the marvellous human journey and the movement of the soul home’ (Barnum 2000: 8)

A search (and a repeat search on 9/04/2013) of the major theological (ATLA Catholic Periodical and Literature Index, ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials) and literature, humanities and interdisciplinary databases (MLA, LLBA, Humanities & Social Sciences Index Retrospective, Humanities Source, Academic Onefile, Academic Search Premier and Masterfile Premier) as well as the Proquest Dissertations Database and WorldCat, reveals that scholarly work on the poetry of Jessica Powers (1905 – 1988) comprises four books, one audio cassette, and six scholarly articles published between 1949 and 2005. A meta-analysis of this writing on Powers demonstrates that the contemplative nature of her work has been highlighted but that her work as a metaphysical poet has not been comprehensively examined. Two theses on Powers’ work, submitted in 1960 and 1992 respectively, one in the subject of Theology, and the other in Literary Studies, also have as their subject the contemplative aspect of her work. Scrutiny of the topics of the papers presented at the Jessica Powers Symposium held at Marquette University on the 26th August, 1989, shows that Powers as a contemplative, nature poet is the burden of their theme. This thesis examines comprehensively the metaphysical aspect of Powers’ poetry and thus hopes to make a new and original contribution to scholarship on Powers’ work.

Four books about Powers, Dolores Leckey’s *Winter Music: A life of Jessica Powers*, 1992; Marcia Ann Kappes’s *Track of the Mystic*, 1994; Robert Morneau’s *A Retreat with Jessica Powers*, 1995; Regina Siegfried’s and Robert Morneau’s *The Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers*, 1999; and Robert Morneau’s *Poetry as Prayer: Jessica Powers*, 2000; discuss mainly the contemplative and nature-loving attributes of her poetry, and though they sometimes allude to the metaphysical in her work they do not analyse it closely.
Leckey, in her book, Winter Music: A life of Jessica Powers, 1992, sees Powers as an American nature poet, as well as a religious poet, who ‘used nature as metaphor to explore human interactions, human/divine relationships, and inner/outer landscapes’ (1992: 25). She says ‘Powers was able to express her understanding of God and her deep sense of the divine, an area where [she] may ultimately prove to be more at home, more profound, and more sure of herself than Emily Dickinson’ (1992: 25). Leckey thus highlights Powers as ‘an American nature poet as well as a religious poet’ (1992: 25). My study will agree with Leckey that Powers is a religious poet who uses nature as an exquisite as well as an inexhaustible source of metaphor but I will maintain that these are aspects, amongst others, of the metaphysical in her work.

Marcia Ann Kappes’ book, Track of the Mystic: The Spirituality of Jessica Powers, 1994, examines Powers’ early years in a farming community in rural Wisconsin (1905-1922); her Chicago period (1922-1925); her return to the family farm (1925-1936); her New York period (1937-1941); her early years in the Carmelite Community in Milwaukee, Wisconsin (1941-1958); and her later years in the Carmelite community of Pewaukee, Wisconsin (1958-1988).

Kappes maintains that the ‘spiritual sources which influenced Jessica Powers most heavily throughout her life were those which function as base documents in the development of Carmelite Spirituality in the Teresian or Discalced tradition: the Bible, the Rule of St Albert, the writings of St Teresa of Avila, the writings of St John of the Cross, and the writings of St Therese of Lisieux’ (1994: 4). Thus the emphasis of this book, and, indeed, of all the scholarly writing on Powers considered in this chapter, is on Powers’ contemplative, Carmelite spirituality.

Kappes’ book, Track of the Mystic: The Spirituality of Jessica Powers, suggests that the genesis of Powers’ poetic gift lay in her engagement at ‘each shift in her historical circumstances’ with the great ‘underlying questions of significance in human existence’ (1994: 16). These of course are metaphysical questions. I agree with Kappes that these questions constitute the well-spring of Powers’ poetic gift, and this thesis hopes to complement Kappes’ insight by demonstrating comprehensively that Powers’ poetic
grappling with these ‘underlying questions of significance in human existence’ issues in
the metaphysical quality of her poetry. Kappes, like Leckey, stresses Powers’ ‘kinship
with the great American religious and nature poets who preceded her, especially Emily
Dickinson ... [as] both poets share profound observations with their readers through
their use of simple verse’ (1994: 24). This thesis will complement Kappes’ and Leckey’s
insights in a close examination of complexity presented as simplicity, often by means of
a metaphorical use of nature, which characteristics are metaphysical attributes of
Powers’ poetry.

Kappes points out that ‘night’, a metaphor used by St John of the Cross and Emily
Dickinson for walking into the inner darkness of faith, was used by Powers as early as
1926 to ‘describe the paradox of suffering and death in relationship to life and God’
poems repeatedly, plunging the original written words to ever deeper levels of
meaning’ (1994: 26). My study maintains that this poetic re-examination of certain
words and images in Powers’ work arises out of her ongoing and ever deepening
engagement with metaphysical issues such as meaning, death, suffering, love and
transience.

In Kappes’ opinion, poems like ‘Petenwell Rock’ and ‘Cabaret’, which I analyse in depth
in this study,11 ‘mark the beginning of a serious shift from the general themes and
romantic musings in Powers’ earliest poetry to the type of theologically reflective
stance that stamps the vast majority of her subsequent poems’ (1994: 36). My thesis
will show that Powers’ ever deepening meditation on what Kappes calls ‘the paradoxes
of life, suffering, death, and resurrection [which] raise[d] questions which capture[d]
her attention from the mid-1920s onward’ (1994: 36), issues in the metaphysical
attributes of her poetry.

In Kappes’ opinion

11 p.173; p.171.
the catalyst for change in [Powers’] life is twofold, wonder and beauty, and both [elements] are always calling her forward. Like classical figures in Carmelite spirituality before her, [Powers] struggles to abandon the fear of a wrathful God as her guiding principle in life and strains to follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit by risking all to undertake the search for a loving God (1994: 36).

My study will show that Powers’ metaphysical poetry is the evidence of her search and of her findings.

Morneau’s 1995 book, A Retreat with Jessica Powers, briefly describes Powers’ geographic journey and outlines the major influences on her life. An early influence in Powers’ life was a Dominican Sister, Lucille Massart, who encouraged her student to write. A second major influence was ‘the faith of her Scotch-Irish heritage. Religion was in the air she breathed as a child; God was a felt presence’ (1995: 15). A third influence was ‘nature, the haunting beauty of the rural landscape and the strong seasons of Wisconsin’ (1995: 15). Like Leckey and Kappes, Morneau stresses the influence of Powers’ love of nature on her work. This study will show that Powers infuses nature with metaphysical significance as she uses it as a vehicle for meditation and for adoration.

The book moves briefly on to the next geographic place in Powers’ life, which was New York, for the years from 1936 to 1941. In 1941 she entered the Carmel of the Mother of God on Wells Street in Milwaukee. She spent the rest of her life as a Carmelite nun, and died on August 18th, 1988. Morneau maintains that ‘her life was limited geographically, but few people have ventured so far into the interior of the soul as she. There she found God as “a thousand acres”, “the strangest of all lovers”, “the joy of the soul”. In the end she found a God of mercy and salvation’ (1995: 16). Like Kappes, Morneau stresses that the dominant note that sounds throughout Powers’ poetry is the ‘tremendous mystery of God’s love’ (1995: 17). This thesis will examine this ‘tremendous mystery’ in the metaphysical poetry that both evokes and adores the mystery.
The Selected Poetry of Jessica Powers, 1999, edited by Regina Siegfried and Robert F. Morneau, offers Powers’ own selection of one hundred and eighty two poems. The poems examined in the course of this thesis are taken from this book as Powers worked on it with Siegfried and Morneau before her death and it had her full approval.

The foreword to the book states that Powers’ ‘primary focus is on the particular grace, grace that is often submerged in suffering and great pain’ (Siegfried and Morneau 1999: xv). This, in the opinion of this thesis, is the domain of the metaphysical: the poems mediate the metaphysical divide that stretches between the human and the Divine, between suffering and grace. According to Siegfried and Morneau, Powers’ ‘is primarily an interior topography of a God of a “thousand acres”. Hers is a “trackless solitude” that each person must one day encounter. She startles us with the naked question: “Child, have none told you? God is in your soul!”’ (1999: xv).

They state that ‘the poems in this volume eventually draw us into the universal Love we call God’ (1999: xvi). In my opinion this effect of the poems arises out of the metaphysical challenge they pose to the attentive reader. The Editors note that Powers entered a Carmelite community in the tradition of St John of the Cross and St Teresa of Avila, and in their opinion she ‘is a contemporary poet in the ancient tradition of St John of the Cross’ (1999: xix). The intellectual influences on her they cite as being: ‘first of all, St. John of the Cross, [and also], [s]he read Hopkins and Herbert and Emily Dickinson’. Thus, though they see Powers as a contemplative, Carmelite poet ‘in the ancient tradition of St John of the Cross’ (1999: xix), they suggest that Powers’ literary and spiritual homeland lay in the metaphysical, as evidenced in her familiarity with these poets. It is this aspect of her work which this study will examine in detail.

Morneau’s book, Poetry as Prayer: Jessica Powers, 2000, is a devotional book which uses selected poems of Powers as subjects for prayerful meditations on God and His Creation and His love. Morneau writes that when he first read Powers he was ‘astounded by the clarity of the verse, its simplicity, its insight, [and] its rootedness in nature and grace’ (2000: 37). The ardent yet decorous intimacy of loving rapture typical of metaphysical religious poetry is often encountered in Powers’ poetry, and this thesis
will show that Morneau’s word ‘astounded’ is very often exactly the word that aptly describes the reaction of an attentive reader to her work.

Morneau’s 1989 audio-cassette on Powers’ work, *Jessica Powers: Landscapes of the Sacred*, speaks of her ‘Low Christology’, by which Morneau means that she portrays Jesus as humble, although of course always as God. I will maintain that her awareness and portrayal of theological complexity is a metaphysical quality in her work. He maintains that the Carmelite life afforded Powers the silence and solitude essential to spiritual life. He stresses that a poet must be a listener and a lover, that she must be present to reality, and that Powers was all of these things. This quality of presentness to things, highlighted by Morneau, is defined in this thesis as attentiveness, and I will show that rapt attention is an attribute of metaphysical poetry according to my definition of this genre. Morneau says that Powers wished to live simply in every successive moment of God’s will for her. In the opinion of this thesis, this is to practise the ‘sacrament of the present moment’ (De Caussade\(^\text{12}\) 1966: 18), which is to pay rapt attention to the present moment, and to abandon oneself to the Divine Will in every given moment. This is an attribute of the metaphysical in Powers’ work.

Morneau maintains that listening requires silence, solitude, and surrender. According to my thesis these can all be termed facets of attention and were afforded to Powers by her Carmelite lifestyle and by her mental discipline. Morneau claims that ‘Powers mediates God to us’, and that her poems are ‘constant epiphanies’. This thesis will support this claim that Powers’ poems are epiphanies in that they manifest Christ to the attentive reader, and thus mediate God to us, and furthermore, will claim that this manifestation and mediation are metaphysical qualities in her poetry. Morneau mentions that Powers shares with Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Hopkins a sense that ‘the “Earth’s crammed with God”, that “the world is charged with the grandeur of God”’. This quality of attentiveness to God in every moment and in everything is, in my definition, a metaphysical quality. I maintain that attentive reading of Powers can make the presence of God apparent because she shows something of the light from Mount

\(^{12}\) De Caussade 1675-1751.
Tabor, which is the radiance given off by the Lord, as was seen on Moses’s face when he came down from Mount Sinai after talking to the Lord, and which is the light that artists depict in haloes.

Morneau maintains that Powers is an existentialist. I agree that Powers may be called an existentialist in the sense of a Christian existentialism as formulated, for example, by Kierkegaard and Marcel, which holds that ‘human existence searches for God as the Light and Life towards which the twilight of our human existence ever reaches out. The whole meaning of that metaphysical compulsion that impels [one] to the quest of Being lies in [one’s] recognising and accepting the mystery that envelops one’s existence at every moment: one’s own mystery and the mystery of every other person’ (Simmonet 2011: 1). This existentialist quality in Powers’ work I maintain arises from the attentiveness to the sacramental in the present moment which is her spiritual and mental stance vis à vis life, and which issues in her metaphysical poetry. Morneau further maintains that rumination is experience at a remove, whereas experience itself is immediate. This thesis maintains that when rapt attention is paid to the present moment in a poem, the immediate quality of that experience is imaginatively recreated, first in the poem, and then in the attentive reader of the poem.

Morneau contends that, whereas external geography can be seen (for Powers, it was the country, the city, and the cloister) internal geography, that is, the inner voice, needs a tongue: this he maintains Powers has. I will show that Powers’ ‘tongue’ functions ‘at the extreme metaphorical tip of language’ (Gallagher 2009: 37), which is the site of metaphysical poetry.

Morneau remarks that Ralph Waldo Emerson said that the poet is like a lightning rod, receiving inspiration from on high but grounded in dark wet soil. Like Kappes and Leckey, Morneau maintains that Powers’ work straddles these two worlds. He reiterates the comment he made in his book Poetry As Prayer, that ‘astounded’ (2000: 37) is an appropriate word with which to describe the response of an attentive reader

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13 Exodus 34:29: When Moses came down from Mount Sinai with the two tablets of the covenant law in his hands, he was not aware that his face was radiant because he had spoken with the Lord.
of Powers’ work: in ‘Jessica Powers: Landscapes of the Sacred’ he says that Powers’ poetry calls on her reader to ‘be astonished’. This thesis will show that the response of astonishment which Powers’ poetry often elicits arises from metaphysical attributes of her poetry: the intimacy of her voice; the abruptness of her openings; the reverent directness of her address; and the audacity of her use of metaphor. It will be seen that all the qualities of Powers’ poetry highlighted by Morneau, Leckey and Kappes as constituting the mystical and contemplative aspects of her work are metaphysical qualities which my study will examine comprehensively. Thus my work hopes to complement theirs and to make a contribution to scholarship on Powers’ work.

Mary Luke Baldwin’s 1949 article, ‘Burns the Great Lantern’, speaks of Powers’ ‘spiritual vigor, her finesse of phrasing and rhythmic mastery’. The article includes her ‘in a bright company numbering such women poets as Christina Rossetti’, and asserts that her name is most frequently ‘literarily linked with Thomas Merton and Robert Lowell’ (1949: 361).

‘Jessica Powers: The Paradox of Light and Dark’, 1984, is an article written by Regina Siegfried in which Siegfried writes of Powers that though she is a poet who is ‘always aware of the dark side of human nature and of pain and purification as necessary companions on the journey, [she] nevertheless believes in light and chooses it’. Like Geigel, Boudreau, and Warner, Siegfried sees Powers ‘as a contemporary poet in the ancient tradition of St John of the Cross’ (1984: 34). Siegfried thus sites Powers in the numinous territory of the mystical and the metaphysical, which attributes of her work this study will consider closely.

Kieran Kavanaugh stresses Powers’ relation to the base documents of her Carmelite spirituality, as the title of his 1990 article avers: ‘Jessica Powers in the tradition of St John of the Cross: Carmelite and Poet’. Thus he too places her in the realm of the mystical, which quality of her work this thesis will scrutinise closely as metaphysical.

Morneau’s 1990 article, ‘The Spirituality of Jessica Powers’, attests that Powers’ poetry addresses ‘the inarticulate workings of grace, the inherent mystery of our personality
and the infinity of the Deity’ (1990: 150). This is to function as a Christian existentialist, as Morneau refers to her in his 1989 audio-cassette, ‘Jessica Powers: Landscapes of the Sacred’, in that she works towards God from the mystery in which human life inheres. I agree with Morneau, though I maintain that her poetry does, to varying degrees, articulate ‘grace’ and something of the ‘inherent mystery of our personality’ and even affords the attentive reader moments of metaphysical insight into ‘the infinity of the Deity’.

Mary Warner says of Powers in her 1998 article, ‘The Paradox of Contemplation: The Poetry of Jessica Powers’, that she ‘simultaneously blends the natural and metaphysical worlds’ (1998: 295). Warner uses the word ‘metaphysical’ to refer to that branch of philosophy which deals with the nature of existence, truth and knowledge. This is indeed the subject matter of metaphysics, and in my opinion Powers’ poetry is a radiant religious response to the great metaphysical questions which confront mankind. Like Siegfried, Morneau, Kappes, Kavanaugh and Geigel, Warner regards Powers as a contemplative poet, maintaining that the contemplative in Powers is evidenced on three levels, paralleling the major geographical locations and poetic periods of her life. These three levels Warner identifies as the ‘natural contemplative, dominating Powers’ Wisconsin years from 1916 to 1937, and presenting poetry primarily of the external world; the poetic contemplative, most evident from 1937 to 1941, when Powers was a true social-justice mystic; and the monastic contemplative, seen from 1941 to 1988, when Powers was a Carmelite nun’ (1998: 297).

In Warner’s opinion the characteristic trait of Powers’ poetry is that it is contemplative: ‘the contemplative binds all’ (1998: 297). In my opinion Powers’ poetry is indeed contemplative, but I maintain that the contemplation is an aspect of the metaphysical in my sense of the word. According to Warner, William James equates ‘mysticism and contemplation’ (1998: 298). I would agree with all the scholars cited that both mysticism and contemplation are evident in Powers’ poetry, and this study will maintain that these are aspects of its metaphysical nature.

14 (1842 – 1910) philosopher, physician and psychologist.
Warner, like Morneau, maintains that Powers demonstrates ‘the immediacy of interior and exterior landscapes chartered through contemplation and expressed in poetry’ (1998: 296). This quality of ‘immediacy’, which Morneau refers to as her ‘existentialism’, I maintain is the effect of the intensity of the attention she brings to bear on the subjects of her poems, and is an attribute of the metaphysical in her poetry.

Martin J. Barnum’s article, ‘Jessica Powers’ Poetry: A guide for Spiritual Growth’, 2000, points out that Powers grasps ‘so clearly the marvellous human journey and the movement of the soul home’ (2000: 8). He maintains that there are three fundamental themes in her work: ‘the spiritual journey; prayer seeking the mercy of God; and the joy of living life through all of its ups and downs’ (2000: 8). Like Siegfried, Morneau, Kappes and Warner, he locates Powers in both the physical and the spiritual world, and therefore in the metaphysical, though he does not articulate this aspect of her work in depth in this article.

In ‘Who speaks for Winter? Jessica Powers: Poet and Mystic’, 2002, Mary Warner speaks of Powers’ distinct contribution to mysticism: ‘her experiences with American landscape taught of expansiveness, fertile soil, relentless cold and wind, and spring times alive with greenness and ”glistening foliage”’ (2002: 234). In Warner’s opinion, Powers, ‘unlike many European mystics, specifically St John of the Cross and St Teresa of Avila, who often rejected the natural and secular worlds as barriers to achieving ultimate union with God, thus emphasizing salvation over creation’ (2002: 235), moved through and in nature to spiritual union. Warner, as do all the scholars cited in this study, explores how Powers, a poet who in Warner’s opinion, has not received the attention and study she deserves, continues the tradition of celebration of nature that many of America’s eighteenth and nineteenth century writers began. Powers, Warner asserts, brings to contemporary readers a sense of mysticism and an awareness of the place of contemplative religious life in religion and literature in America. ‘Powers’ rendering of the paradoxical imagery of inner and outer geography is precisely why she has a voice, a voice which needs to be heard by contemporary readers’ (2002: 235).
Warner’s word ‘paradoxical’ here refers to an attribute of Powers’ poetry which my study will examine closely as a metaphysical quality in her work.

Martin Barnum’s 2005 article, ‘Jessica Powers: A Bridge Into Ministry’, maintains that prayerful reading of Powers can enable church leaders to become ‘the bridge that leads others to Christ’ (2005: 80). He urges sincere Christians, especially those training for the ministry, to use Powers’ poetry as a springboard to prayer and meditation. Barnum does not develop the point here, but he is in fact referring to one of the main characteristics of metaphysical poetry, which is that it often serves as a starting point for prayer or meditation. This thesis will examine this cardinal quality of metaphysical poetry comprehensively.15

Scrutiny of the titles of the presentations made at the ‘Jessica Powers Symposium’ held at Marquette University on August 26th, 1989, shows that they were concerned with Powers’ spirituality and her love of nature, while the metaphysical quality of her work was not an explicit subject. The titles listed are: Dolores Leckey’s ‘Notes on a poet’s life’; Richard Boudreau’s ‘Meadow Moreover, the Wisconsin poems of Jessica Powers’; Robert Morneau’s ‘Spirituality of Jessica Powers’; and Regina Siegfried’s ‘“write me down as a small adjective attending light, the archangelic noun”’. While this thesis acknowledges fully the spiritual and nature aspects of Powers’ work, it considers them to be aspects of the metaphysical in her poetry.


15 p. 70 of this thesis offers examination of one of the main characteristics of metaphysical poetry, which is that it often serves as a starting point for prayer or meditation.
and writings the many and various strains of American landscape and Catholic tradition with biblical perspective and Carmelite spirituality, and offers an evaluation of her unique contribution to historical theology in the American context and Carmelite tradition. Both these studies are primarily concerned with Powers’ Carmelite spirituality and her contemplative mysticism.

This meta-analysis of work on Powers shows that the emphasis in writing about her tends to be concentrated on her Carmelite contemplative spirituality, and on her love of nature, and that her poetry has not been examined in depth in these works in its metaphysical aspect. This thesis therefore hopes to make a contribution to scholarship on Powers’ work by examining its metaphysical attributes as comprehensively as space allows.
CHAPTER TWO: SOME DOMINANT LITERARY THEORIES OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

‘the immense importance and pervading influence such theory has had, and still has’ (Hass 2007: 854)

This chapter is an acknowledgement of some of the dominant literary theories of the Twentieth Century which still colour critical thinking so vividly due to ‘the immense importance and pervading influence such theory has had, and still has’ (Hass 2007: 854).

Andrew W. Hass’s comment in the Oxford Handbook of Literature and Theology paves the way for a discussion of my theory of reading:

The idea of ‘pure theory’ has itself fallen prey to the same internal critique as that of pure religion. We can see this critique in a recent turn in Britain towards a kind of thinking called ‘after theory’ as evidenced in the book titles of notable British literary critics Terry Eagleton and Valentine Cunningham: After Theory (2004) and Reading After Theory (2002) respectively. Both these writers understand ‘theory’ here as the cultural theory that grew up particularly in the 1960s and 1970s, as put forward by many Western intellectuals either of the French (from Lacan to Derrida), German (Habermas), American (Jameson), or British (Raymond Williams) cast. It was such cultural theory that had direct influence on literary theory and criticism as it rode the wave of postmodernism through to the new millennium. Both writers suggest that this theory has had its heyday now, and that we are moving on to something else, something as yet undefined, but certainly ‘after’. Yet both also admit that that such theory has made its mark indelibly upon our culture, and that there is no turning back to a moment before such theory, as if it was all a serious mistake. On the contrary, both go out of their way to show the immense importance and pervading influence such theory has had, and still has (2007: 854).

My chosen theory of reading in this study is a Christian theory of reading, though I do not mean by this a ‘naïve hermeneutics void of critical element’ (2007: 856). My understanding of literary theory has, however, been informed by many theories. I will mention the chief of these before I outline in some detail the main emphases of the theory which underpins my use of the term ‘metaphysical’ for the purpose of reading Powers in this thesis. I feel it is courteous to make the position of my theory of reading explicit in relation to the dominant theories of the twentieth century because, as Hass
states, these major theories still colour critical thinking so vividly because of ‘the immense importance and pervading influence such theory has had, and still has’ (2007: 854). My theoretical stance is neither deconstructionist, Marxist, nor psychoanalytical. I acknowledge, however, that these dominant theories enjoin on-going rigour and vigilance on any theory of literature reading after them. I agree with Ferretter that, though these theories ‘teach theology nothing radically new’, they do insist with a healthy ‘new rigour’ on what theology already knew, that its ‘positive statements must be qualified with an acknowledgement of the incapacity of [any] position as such finally and certainly to represent God’ (Ferretter 2003: 19).

As I am working in a post-modernist period I acknowledge the critical challenge of deconstruction, though in this thesis I am reading modern poetry in a distinctly non-modern mode. Modernism can be described as Mallarme’s ‘repudiation of the covenant of reference’. His ‘insistence that non-reference constitutes the true genius and purity of language, entail[s] a central supposition of “real absence”’. The consequence is, ‘in a rigorous philosophic-semantic sense (where both the philosophic and the semantic are progressively emptied of meaning), an ontological nihilism’ (Steiner 1989: 96). For Mallarme words refer only to other words.

Thus for modernism the world of discourse may be similar or dissimilar to the world outside of discourse. We have no way of knowing anything about such a world. We have only words which refer only to other words. This world of discourse, then, is not, ‘as Neo-Platonism and Romanticism would have it, a luminous veil behind which we discern the lineaments of a higher, more beauteous and consoling order’. We cannot, by means of language, ‘transcend the real towards the more real’. Words have nothing to say to what seems to be the world around us, they cannot address any ‘other’, ‘language speaks [only] itself’ (Steiner 1989: 97).

Rimbaud travels further along the path to pure isolation: ‘for him not even the self can be known, for now the ego is no longer available to integration’ (1989: 115). For him ‘I is the other’. He ‘deconstructs the first person singular of all verbs; he subverts the
classical domesticity of the “I”. The provocation is deliberately, necessarily, anti-

The spectre of nothingness has always exercised philosophy and theology in the
Western tradition:

‘Why is there not nothing?’ is Leibniz’s question. But in recent philosophy, in
Heidegger’s *Nichtigkeit*, in Sartre’s *le Neant* the concept of absolute zero
becomes dominant. Of this midnight of absence, this consequent annihilation of
meaning, deconstruction is the spectral trace (Gearon 1999: 11).

I am at one with common sense in the stubborn stand it takes against meaninglessness
based on the large degree of reliability inherent in daily life and with what Steiner
describes as ‘the grammar of mundane intelligibility according to which we live’. But
‘the great imperative of death’, which represents here all the metaphysical questions
which confront human beings, provides a further incentive to us to ‘ask of ourselves
and of our culture whether a secular, in essence positivist, model of understanding and
of the experience of meaningful form (the aesthetic) is tenable in the light, or, if you
will, in the dark of the nihilistic alternative’. Steiner asks, and this thesis endorses his
question, ‘whether a hermeneutics and a reflex of valuation – the encounter with
meaning in the verbal sign, and the assessment of the quality of such meaning in
respect of form – can be made intelligible, can be made answerable to the existential
facts, if they do not imply, if they do not contain, a postulate of transcendence’.
Metaphysical poetry answers this great question in the affirmative: it contains, by its

Ward agrees with Steiner, as I do:

Any common noun can give access to a symbolic hoard of wealth in a dragon’s den.
Language and the imaginary both transcend individual authors and individual
readers, and they both point towards metaphysics and mythologies, whether
expressly articulated or denied or not. Both these inchoate metaphysics and
mythologies each bring the literary and the religious into close proximity. Logos and
mythos are inextricably intertwined; in translating metaphor can still transfigure
Catherine Pickstock, writing out of the 1998 movement known as ‘Radical Orthodoxy’, not only affirms this ‘postulate of presence’ but makes the radical claim that ‘language itself is an opus metaphysicum, and that its intrinsic nature and purpose is doxological’ (1998: xiii). According to Pickstock, then, ‘presence’ is not merely a ‘postulate’ but is the very essence of language. It must be admitted that many serious thinkers are of the sincere opinion that

these questions [questions about meaningfulness and presence] no longer admit of an adult, let alone a consoling, answer. They may be mere flourishes of nostalgia and pathos. What seems clear is that the challenge cannot be evaded. For the current masters of emptiness, the stakes are indeed those of a game. That is where we differ (Steiner 1989: 134).

This is where this thesis differs. I maintain, with Ferretter, that deconstruction does not render meaningless the use of theological language in literary theory or criticism ‘since it remains within the circle of precisely such language itself’. However, deconstruction reiterates a point which Christian theologians have always in principle, if not in practice, recognised: theology must remain continually critical of its own language. ‘Theological statements cannot be taken to be finally or certainly true, therefore, but rather as provisional articulations of the church’s faith in that which lies beyond the world to which language can refer’ (Ferretter 2003: 184).

In my opinion, Steiner articulates with elegant clarity the nub of the matter which lies at the heart of my reading of Powers’ poetry: ‘The issue is, quite simply, that of the meaning of meaning as it is re-insured by the postulate of the existence of God. “In the beginning was the Word”.16 Deconstruction maintains that there was no such beginning’ (1989: 120). My position in this thesis is that there was ‘such a beginning’, and, as neither hypothesis is demonstrably provable, I maintain that my theory is as tenable for the purpose of reading Powers’ poetry as that of deconstruction.

Deconstruction holds that ‘there is nothing outside of the text’ (Derrida 1976: 158), and that no body of discourse has any single theoretical meaning. As Derrida said of

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16 1John1: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
Barthes: ‘from where did the singular clarity of Barthes’ thinking come? It always emanated from a certain point that yet was not a point, remaining invisible in its own way, a point that I cannot locate’ (2001: 35). According to this thinking there can be neither gospel in any authentic sense nor, it follows, gospel-truth, because ‘beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed as text there has never been anything. In the text that which words name has always already escaped, has never existed, what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence’ (Derrida 1976: 159), and hence no text can have any single theoretical meaning.

However, it seems logical to me that, as deconstruction itself insists that there can be no decidable meaning because it maintains that ‘a text, a writing and a reading … is ordered around its own blind spot’ (Derrida 1976: 164), it becomes inarguably clear that its claim of meaninglessness cannot be more true or more self-evident than any claim of meaningfulness. Deconstruction’s claim to the validity of its position is vitiated by its own inherent irony: if there cannot be truth then there cannot be truth in its position. Deconstruction claims that ‘we must now be honest and perceptive enough to set the metaphoric insignificance, the arbitrariness of meaning, always open to deferral or to vacancy, against the fossilised authority of the Logos, of “the logocentric order”’ (Steiner 1989: 121).

Derrida maintains that ‘in my view – and this is a gesture of deconstructive thinking – we don’t even consider the existence of any threshold to be secure, if by “threshold” is meant either an invisible frontier line or the solidity of a foundational ground’ (Stoker 2007: 413). Deconstruction is entitled to its claim of vacancy, of radically unstable ‘foundational ground[s]’ (2007: 413) but, by a similar exchange of intellectual courtesy, it too must be ‘honest and perceptive enough’ to acknowledge a contrary claim to presence. My reading challenges the claim that the authority of the Logos is ‘fossilised’. After all, a claim made by the simple attachment of the adjective ‘fossilised’, while it may be rhetorically impressive or persuasive, does not constitute a necessary proof of the justness of the claim. My reading chooses to recognise the ‘authority of the Logos’ and reads Powers’ poems in its light.
Deconstruction challenges the assumption of meaningfulness, maintaining that signs do not transport presences. My view dissents from the contrary assumption of meaninglessness. In the view of this thesis signs do transport presence. In my opinion, the grounds for rebuttal of the position of deconstruction are ultimately as unanswerable as I concede the claim made by deconstruction to be:

The deconstructive discourse is itself rhetorical, referential and altogether generated and governed by normal modes of causality, of logic and of sequence. The deconstructive denial of ‘logocentrism’ is expounded in wholly logocentric terms. The central dogma, according to which all readings are misreadings and the sign has no underwritten intelligibility, has precisely the same paradoxical, self-denying status as the celebrated aporia whereby a Cretan declares all Cretans to be liars. Immured within natural language, deconstructive propositions are self-falsifying (Steiner 1989: 129).

In my opinion therefore, deconstruction cannot claim that the use of theological language in literary theory or criticism is meaningless since it itself uses language which transports meaning to transport a claim to meaninglessness. This claim to meaninglessness it claims to be a true or meaningful claim. It seems to me that this position could be considered to be self-negating. Deconstruction does, however, reiterate the undeniable point that theology must remain continually critical of its own language. All theories, I suggest, must remain continually self-critical.

Deconstruction reads from its central dogmatic stance of the meaninglessness of signs which have no ‘underwritten intelligibility’: ‘There is no decision or responsibility without the trial of aporia or undecidability’ (Derrida 1976: 128). Jeffrey and Maillet give a charming illustration of deconstruction in practice from Alice in Wonderland:

“There’s glory for you!”
“I don’t know what you mean by ‘glory’”, Alice said.
Humpty Dumpty smiled contemptuously. “Of course you don’t – till I tell you. I meant, there’s a nice knock-down argument for you!”
“But ‘glory’ doesn’t mean a ‘nice knock-down argument’” Alice objected.
This study, on the contrary, reads from a central dogmatic stance which, unlike Humpty Dumpty, acquiesces in the meaningfulness transported by signs.

Deconstruction recognises that

the very concept of meaningfulness, of a congruence, even problematic, between the signifier and the signified, is theological or onto-theological. The archetypal paradigm of all affirmations of sense and of significant plenitude – the fullness of meaning in the world – is a Logos-model (Steiner 1989: 119).

This, for Deconstruction, is a delusion. For my reading, it is the truth. The claim to meaningfulness is a theological claim, which Deconstruction finds to be delusional but which I find to be tenable. Both positions are ultimately unprovable and both can be legitimate theories of reading where they are practised with rigour and integrity. In what might be defined as irony, Derrida exquisitely articulates my theory of reading: ‘The intelligible face of the sign remains turned to the word and the face of God’ (Steiner 1989: 119). This thesis reads according to a ‘semantics, a poetics of correspondence, of decipherability and truth-values arrived at across time and consensus’, and maintains that a postulate of theological-metaphysical transcendence is intrinsic to such a reading. I agree with Steiner that ‘the origin and the axiom of meaning and of the god-concept is a shared one. The semantic sign, where it is held to be meaningful, and divinity have the same place and time of birth’ (1989: 119).

It is from this shared ‘place and time of birth’ of meaningfulness and divinity that I read Powers in this thesis. Steiner’s words here could be said to simultaneously describe and analyse the metaphysical quality of Powers’ writing in her poetry: she is entirely committed to the meaningfulness of the semantic signs she uses. Her writing makes a truth claim for what it writes. Thus, in my opinion, the divinity disclosed in her writing about God issues from the ‘theological-metaphysical transcendence’ (1989: 119) inherent in her use of meaningful semantic signs.

One of the serious questions which post-modernity poses to anyone writing or reading now is whether writing can refer to any reality or truth other than itself, or whether a
text is a sealed autonomous world within which the reader can dwell but which has no
direct reference to any world outside itself. For deconstructionists, this is what the text
is. In Derrida’s opinion ‘metaphor gives rise to a text that is always at a loss, always
stumped, but also as a result, always open to being repeated, to being read otherwise,
to being read instead of itself’ (Naas 2003: 46). The position taken by this thesis is that
Powers’ poems do refer to some reality or truth outside of themselves.

Marxism is another theory of significant stature which requires courteous
acknowledgement. Marxism, like Christianity, is a system of belief

which [is] total in [its] scope. Both Christians and Marxists claim to have the
essential truth about the whole of human life; they assert something about the
nature of all men, at any time and in any place. And these world views claim not
only assent but also action; if one really believes in either theory, one must
accept that it has implications for one’s way of life (Stevenson 1987: 7).

I concede that Marxism remains ‘an influential critique for politically committed
forms of literary and cultural criticism’ (Ferretter 2003: 185). Certainly, Marxism
reminds theology that though it has sometimes served to mitigate suffering and to
condemn injustice, it has also sometimes participated in the propagation of
persecution and injustice, and that it remains always vulnerable to corrupt
distortion, and can still function in either way. I suggest, however, that this grave
reminder is equally pertinent to Marxism. Furthermore, I stand with Ferretter on the
contention that Christian theology can be used in literary interpretation after the
critique of religion posed by Marxism (2003: 184) because I agree with Ferretter that
Marxism’s claims to have debunked religion are logically flawed:

As an argument for atheism, the Marxist critique of religion is based upon a
logical fallacy, inasmuch as the socio-economic determinants of religious beliefs
do not constitute evidence for the truth or falsity of these beliefs. Whilst
religious beliefs may be influenced by the social and economic conditions in
which they are held, it does not follow from this, as Marxism claims, that they
refer to no other reality than these conditions. The atheism of the Marxist world-
view is ultimately an unproven hypothesis (2003: 185).
Thus a Marxist world-view can be seen to be based upon an unproven hypothesis just as it considers Christianity to be.

My theory of reading acknowledges that it is true that, as Marxist literary theory claims, literary works are to an immeasurable extent determined by the material conditions of their production. That this is true, however, does not render it invalid for Christian literary criticism to read a given text in the light of Biblical social ethics as long as it remains vigilantly self-reflexive.

Marxist literary theory speaks of ‘the utopian desires expressed in literary works for the kind of fully perfected human society that does not exist at present, and [it claims] that this disjunction is misleading whether wilfully so or not’ (Ferretter 2003: 185). A Christian theory of reading acknowledges that a work may describe a state of life that does not correspond to the material world, but, as it maintains that writers and readers are both spiritual and material beings, it maintains that it is therefore valid for a writer to strive to describe in her work a life lived in loving relationship with both God and man, which is the life to which Christianity believes all humans are called.

In my opinion, therefore, it remains as ethically possible to use a Christian theory of literature after the critique of religion posed by Marxism, as it is to read from a Marxist point of view, though I agree with Ferretter that both readings must remain vigilantly self-reflective in the light of the historical fact that ideologies can ‘all too easily be used to degrade human life and have been used so tragically often’ (2003: 185). A comment by Thomas Merton referring to the Katyn massacre of 1940 is apposite here: ‘More men were killed, without reason, uselessly, without trial, in one night and in one city (Leningrad), than were killed in four hundred years of Inquisition in the whole of Latin America: and simply to make room for more victims of more terror than the world had ever seen in any previous century’ (1968: 104). I mention this not to accuse a Marxist state here, nor to seek to excuse the crimes of the Inquisition, but in support of Ferretter’s comment that all ideologies can ‘all too easily be used to degrade human life and have been used so tragically often’ (2003: 185).
The third theoretical giant to which civility is appropriate, though it is not the theory of my choice in reading Powers’ poetry, is psychoanalysis. I agree with Ferretter that Christian theology can be used in literary criticism after the critique of such theology posed by psychoanalysis for the following reason: ‘Freud’s theory that the Christian faith is a theological expression of guilt which derives from the collective memory of an ancient parricide is, as he himself recognises, a speculation that cannot be proved’ (2003: 185). Furthermore, ‘[Freud’s] claim that religious beliefs are wish-fulfilments does not constitute evidence for their truth or falsity. Whilst religious beliefs may be expressions of infantile attitudes, it does not follow [logically] from this that there is no reality to which they correspond’ (2003: 185). It remains legitimate, therefore, in my opinion, to use Christian theology in literary and cultural interpretation after psychoanalysis. Nevertheless, I agree with Ferretter that Freud’s claim that such beliefs can be a means of flight from reality and moral responsibility is true and must be conscientiously borne in mind:

Psychoanalysis reminds Christian theology that the faith upon which it reflects can function as an imaginary escape from the reality of human suffering, although it is in fact a call courageously to face and to improve this reality. It is only in the light of such self-reflection that Christian theology can be used in literary theory and criticism after psychoanalysis (2003: 185).

It is, however, appropriate to extend the reminder that a theory can ‘function as an imaginary escape from the reality of human suffering’ (2003: 185) to psychoanalysis also, as indeed, to all theories: limiting and destructive ideology lies in wait for all theories unless they are used with attentive and tireless self-reflection.

Furthermore, though Freud spent his life treating individual neurotic patients, he never thought that psychoanalytic treatment is the answer to every human problem:

When grappling speculatively with the problems of civilization and society he was realistic enough to realize their extreme complexity and to abstain from offering any panacea. But he did hold that psychoanalysis had much wider applications than just the treatment of neurotics. He said our civilization imposes an almost intolerable pressure on us and it calls for a corrective ... he cautiously proposes an analogy between cultures and individuals, so that cultures too might
be ‘neurotic’. But he recognized the precariousness of the analogy, and refused to rise up before his fellow-men as a prophet (Stevenson 1987: 81).

In the opinion of Cleo Mcnelly Kearns,¹⁷

the two major and growing challenges to religious faith in the modern period [were] the social theory of Karl Marx and the psychologies of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. The Marxist view of religion as the ‘opium of the people’ and the Freudian view of it as a form of mystification and unconscious projection gained instant attention and growing currency among the intelligentsia throughout the period, and so as time went on did Jung’s association of the sense of divinity with a transpersonal collective unconscious. These opinions influenced ... many artists and writers. Indeed it might be argued that the most important theological or rather atheological statements of the modern period were Marx’s *Critique of the German Ideology* (1846), Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), and Jung’s *Answer to Job* (1952) (2007: 171).

However, it is important to note that though each of these philosophies criticises religion, and each is scornful of theological mystification, each also arises from ‘within a Jewish and Christian discourse and can hardly be conceived without the valorisation of social justice and personal self-examination found in these faith traditions’ (Kearns 2007: 171).

This chapter has acknowledged ‘the immense importance and pervading influence [some of the great theories that were dominant in the twentieth century] ha[ve] had, and still ha[ve]’ (Hass 2007: 854), and makes explicit the indebtedness my reading of Powers’ poetry has to these great theories which have enjoined rigour on all theories reading after them.

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¹⁷ Non-Resident Fellow at the Centre of Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey.
CHAPTER THREE: A CHRISTIAN THEORY OF READING

A call to pattern and fulfilment in the new ‘Sign at Sexagesima’

This chapter begins a description of a Christian theory of reading by making eight comments about the nature of such a theory, and it offers some analysis of Powers’ poetry in illustration of its comments.

I read Powers in this study in the light of a Christian theory of reading by means of close study of text and textual hermeneutics. There is no generic Christian theory of reading which is why I go on to define what I mean by the term in this thesis. The question of my personal beliefs and of any reader’s personal beliefs is of course irrelevant to this study but I would suggest that some knowledge of the tenets of Christianity would render Powers’ work more accessible.

The first tenet of my Christian theory of reading, as opposed to the theories discussed in the previous chapter, is that it aims to have the qualities and points of view of an orthodox Christian criticism, and is grounded in Hans Urs Von Balthasar’s\(^{18}\) account of a theological aesthetic. According to such a theological aesthetic, Christ is the greatest beauty, in the Incarnation, the Crucifixion and the Eucharist, so that ‘one who has been snatched up by the beauty of Christ [such as I contend Powers is when she writes about Christ in her poetry] is inflamed by [this] most sublime of beauties’ (1984: 33). Powers’ poem, ‘The Sign of the Cross’ issues from her being ‘snatched up by the beauty of Christ’:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The lovers of Christ lift out their hands to} \\
\text{the great gift of suffering.} \\
\text{For how could they seek to be warmed and clothed} \\
\text{and delicately fed,} \\
\text{to wallow in praise and to drink deep draughts} \\
\text{of undeserved affection,} \\
\text{have castle for home and a silken couch for bed,}
\end{align*}
\]

\(^ {18}\) 1905-1988, Cardinal, considered to be one of the most important theologians of the 20\(^{th}\) Century.
when He the worthy went forth, wounded and hated, and grudged of even a place to lay His head?

This is the badge of the friends of the Man of Sorrows: the mark of the Cross, faint replica of His, become ubiquitous now; it spreads like a wild blossom on the mountains of time and in each of the crevices. Oh, seek that land where it grows in a rich abundance with its thorny stem and its scent like bitter wine, for wherever Christ walks He casts its seed and He scatters its purple petals. It is the flower of His marked elect, and the fruit it bears is divine.

Choose it, my heart. It is a beautiful sign.

Her loving ardour, arising from her theological aesthetic, is expressed simply in the one word ‘Oh’ in the line ‘Oh, seek that land where it grows in a rich abundance’. This is an example of the restraint which Newman says is proper to deep religious feeling, and this line expresses the essence of a Christian theological aesthetic:

Choose it, my heart. It is a beautiful sign.

This poem has all the hallmarks of the metaphysical poem. Its subject is the metaphysical paradox of the ‘gift of suffering’:

The lovers of Christ lift out their hands to the great gift of suffering.

The poem is a meditation, which is a characteristic of metaphysical poetry, conducted in a series of metaphors both abstract, as in suffering as a ‘gift’; and concrete, as in people who forget that ‘He the worthy went forth, wounded and hated’, eat, drink, wear warm clothes, ‘wallow’ and ‘drink deep draughts’.

The sign of the Cross, in a simile which again displays both the concrete and the abstract attributes of a metaphysical use of language

spreads like a wild blossom,
on the mountains of time and in each of the crevices.

This image of a humble ‘wild blossom’ covering the mountains and crevices of time extends in the next line into a metaphor that encompasses the beauty, mystery, suffering and divinity that are some of the attributes of Christ: where Christ walks is ‘a land’ where suffering, as signified by the Cross,

grows in a rich abundance

because

He casts its seed
and He scatters its purple petals.

The theological complexity conveyed by these lines is typical of metaphysical poetry: Christ Who is the Saviour is also the One Who ‘casts’ the seeds of suffering, Who ‘scatters’ the petals of the blooms of suffering. However the petals are purple, and metaphysical paradox inheres in these words ‘purple petals’: purple is both the colour of majesty, and the colour of the robe the soldiers put around Jesus in bitter mockery before the Crucifixion. Thus the Kingship of Christ and His agony on the Cross lie inextricably side by side, just as blessing and suffering lie side by side in the life of the believer. The purple flower is the blessed sign of ‘the elect’, which yet blooms in suffering. The resolution of the paradox lies in the fruit of suffering which is ‘divine’, borne as it is out of the Cross which is ‘a beautiful sign’. Powers’ psychological insight and her quietly understated compassion lie in the line that describes the ‘wild blossom’ that is the Cross:

its thorny stem and its scent like bitter wine.

To take up the Cross and to follow ‘the Man of Sorrows’\(^\text{19}\) is no easy option. ‘Christian life is not easy – as Ernest Hemingway might say, such a course of life is not all “downhill skiing in powder snow’’ (Jeffrey and Maillet 2011: 312). Suffering, ‘thorny’ and ‘bitter’, is what He has to offer to ‘His marked elect’, but the fruit of the suffering is

\(^{19}\) Isaiah 53: 3: He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.
‘divine’. Powers, writing out of the tradition of the Church, echoes the words of an anonymous Franciscan poet of the early fourteenth century in the value and beauty she ascribes to the cross:

Gold and all the joy of words
is worthless, but for the Cross of Christ
(Jeffrey and Maillet 2011: 152).

The poet, in this case Powers, seeks ‘to communicate a representation of imagined form’. Her poem is what Steiner calls a ‘living signification of the aesthetic’. We, the readers, ‘are the “other ones” whom the living significations of the aesthetic seek out. It is on our capacities for welcome or refusal, for response or imperception, that their own necessities of echo and of presence largely depend’ (Steiner 1989: 147). Von Balthasar too stresses the reciprocal nature of the relationship between a work of art, such as, in the case of this thesis, a Powers poem, and the reader. The idea is that the reader’s spirit interacts mysteriously with the poem she reads attentively, and that a lack of real attention or empathy in the reader can in some way affront the poem and inhibit its influence: ‘Works of art can die as a result of being looked at by too many dull eyes’ (Von Balthasar 1984: 23).

Morneau maintains that ‘religion is a metaphysical thirst’ (1995: 12). This sentence could be said to underlie a theological aesthetic and my theory of reading in this thesis. Powers’ thirst is all-consumingly for religion, and I will show that this thirst issues in metaphysical poetry. Her poem ‘Christ is My Utmost Need’ comes out of this need:

Late, late the mind confessed:
wisdom has not sufficed.
I cannot take one step into the light
without the Christ. Late, late the heart affirmed:
wild do my heart-beats run
when in the blood-stream sings one wish away
from the Incarnate Son.
Christ is my utmost need.
I lift each breath, each beat for Him to bless,
knowing our language cannot overspeak our frightening helplessness.
Here where proud morning walks
and we hang wreaths on power and self-command,
I cling with all my strength unto a nail-investigated hand.

Christ is my only trust.
I am my fear since, down the lanes of ill,
my steps surprised a dark Iscariot
plotting in my own will.

Past nature called, I cry
who clutch at fingers and at tunic folds,
‘Lay not on me, O Christ, this fastening.
Yours be the hand that holds’.

These lines place the ‘metaphysical thirst’ for Christ out of which they arise in the very centre of the poet’s being: in ‘each breath’, and in ‘the blood stream’. The poet’s mind confesses and her heart affirms that Christ is her utmost need. She cannot take one step into the light without the Christ.

The complexity, the so-called ‘difficulty’, typical of metaphysical poetry lies in the theological paradox that seems to say, unsay, and then resay itself in this poem. The poem asserts unequivocally mankind’s absolute and ‘frightening helplessness’ outside of Christ: we ‘cannot take one step into the light’ in our own strength, and yet Powers says

I cling with all my strength unto a
nail-investigated hand.

So, though we are powerless, yet we must cling. There is agency in this clinging, but it is the agency of the acknowledgement of an entire lack of agency. The ‘nail-investigated hand’ is stretched out for us, but our responsive grasp is necessary to the salvific grasp. However the metaphysical resolution to the poem is a reiteration of our essential powerlessness: we clutch, but we cannot hold fast. When all is said and done, Christ’s must ‘be the hand that holds’. As is typical of metaphysical poetry, Powers embodies her meditation in physical, concrete metaphors: she takes a step; her heart beats; she breathes; she clings; she cries; she clutches ‘at fingers and at tunic folds’. Her quiet irony deconstructs politics and pop-psychology: ‘we hang wreaths on power and self-
command’ in wilful self-deception, while nearby the ‘nail-investigated hand’ waits in powerlessness that, unlike mankind’s, is the self-imposed powerlessness of the lover who longs but will not coerce.

According to my thinking, then, which is grounded here in Hans Urs Von Balthasar’s account of a theological aesthetic, Christ, ‘the Gospel’s Humiliated Fool’ (1984: 26) is the greatest beauty, in the Incarnation, the Crucifixion and the Eucharist, and ‘one who has been snatched up by the beauty of Christ [as Powers is when she writes about Christ] is inflamed by [this] most sublime of beauties’ (1984: 33). Again and again the deceptive simplicity of Powers’ presentation of theological concepts masks metaphysical insight, and careful reading of her work shows how she examines these concepts from many angles, turning them every way, as it were, so that many facets of a metaphysical truth are exposed.

A second characteristic of an overtly Christian criticism is that it will naturally be grounded in Christian theology. ‘That is, it [will] attempt not the inferring of Christian belief or theme in writers who may or may not be Christian [Powers was an orthodox Christian], but rather the exploring of the creative laws, under which writers operate, as they might be understood both by a critic and a Christian theologian’ (Jasper 1984: 11). It is my contention that the creative laws under which Powers operates when she writes about God are framed by a ‘theological perspective of participation which allows of no territory independent of God’ (Milbank, Pickstock and Ward 1999: 3).

A Christian literary theory can be defined as a critical discourse ‘whose interpretations and judgements derive from [Christian theology] or from principles consistent with it’ (Ferretter 2003: 183). Such a theory holds that

religion and literature are both cultural products and therefore subject to cultural analysis. The cultural here is not the subsequent expression of sets of social circumstances. Both the cultural and the social are rooted in a more fundamental operation: that of the imaginary. The imaginary is that magma of images which consciousness can treat only partially. We can view the imaginary in two distinct but maybe increasingly related ways: the first after psychoanalysis and particularly the work of Jacques Lacan and Cornelius Castoriadis; the second after
the explorations into affect and consciousness undertaken by modern neurophysiology, [as this thesis will do in Chapter Five]. For Lacan, the imaginary is that realm out of which the symbolic is generated, it is prior to articulation ... it is dynamic and productive (Ward 2009: 23).

A Christian theory of reading holds that narratives are the primordial ways in which we make sense of the world in which we live. They are the basis for an analogy between the creative author and the Creator God:

Creative writers do not create *ex nihilo*, they work with the materials of the worlds that have already been given. Story-telling and priest-craft have long historical association; no creative writer, even the most modern and non-religious, is unaware of those past figures of shaman poet, the temple scribe, the magus and the prophet. All writers don something of the mantles of these forebears, understanding to a greater or lesser extent the power of language to conjure ... Literature is always and inevitably caught up with notions of thaumaturgy, revelatory disclosure, providence and eschatology – however much these notions are secularised into ‘aesthetic epiphanies’ ... realism, surrealism, naturalism, minimalism, primitivism, the epic, the comic, the gothic, the tragic and the pastoral are all rhetorical and aesthetic attempts to tell it as it is: even if the ‘truth’ revealed is the brutish meaninglessness of it all. They are all styles aspiring to what Roland Barthes called ‘the essentialist ambitions of poetry’. They are all wagers on value, and value is a wager on the transcendent and universal (Ward 2009: 27).

A Christian reading of a work reads from the perspective of Christian faith, and is based on an acknowledged structure of presumptions based on the acceptance of Christian doctrine and tradition. In my opinion, it is self-evident that all interpretation is based on structures of ‘pre-understandings’ (Ferretter 2003: 183). Therefore to interpret from the basis of Christian pre-supposition is not an eccentric or invalid practice, but is the natural and inevitable outcome of reading from a Christian theoretical basis, the basis chosen for interpretation in this thesis. This position does acknowledge that unexamined traditions can mutate into limiting ideologies and that therefore traditions must be subjected to rigorous scrutiny in a sincere determination to remain fair and open minded.

Ferretter maintains that Christian theology can legitimately be used to understand and interpret literary works because, in the opinion of this theory of reading, the human
person is a unity of body and spirit, and the literary works humans produce are therefore determined by both these aspects of their being. As ‘spiritual creatures, men and women are faced with the question of meaning in their existence, and their literary and cultural productions can constitute explorations of precisely that question’ (2003: 186).

This question of meaning, the great question which confronts men and women, is the metaphysical question at the heart of Powers’ poetry. Powers’ poem ‘Sign at Sexagesima’\(^\text{20}\) is one of her responses to this question. This poem has as its subject Powers’ baptism, but it is also a meditation on salvation, and Powers’ answer to the metaphysical question of meaning:

I entered the kingdom in Noah’s week
at the sign of the rainbow,
out of black waters into the waters of life.
I know my place; I can find my place in the ancient Scripture
as all can: prefigurement, a call
to pattern and fulfilment in the new.
With love I bow, with reverence bow before
my sacramental beginnings.

My darkness was always rain and turbulent waters,
a troubled world held in a crowded place.
My light was always rest on a mountaintop
in a new christened innocence of morning
with all the world washed clean.
The earth blushing with youth, dressed herself
in flowers and leaves,
and over all the sign of the sacred rainbow,
covenant like a poem one could read
over and over again and relish meaning,
itself arched doorway and a sudden entrance
to unexpected wisdom and delight.

With simplicity and the unemphatic tones of quiet personal conversation she makes astonishing claims for herself and for all of humanity:

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\(^{20}\) Eighth Sunday before Easter.
I know my place; I can find my page in the ancient Scripture as all can.

She uses metaphor with a dramatic concision that is metaphysical. God’s great promise of faithfulness to man for all time she alludes to with spare economy as though she were giving street directions: ‘at the sign of the rainbow.’ This is metaphysical wit. She is in fact giving street directions of a kind, though absolutely without preaching or hectoring: in her opinion the way to the Kingdom is via the route of baptism into Christ Who is the Way21 and the fulfilment of God’s promise of faithfulness. ‘Black waters’ are her metaphor for life before baptism, containing in two stark words all the misery of unredeemed human life, and in radiant contrast she places ‘the waters of life’. The connotations of the words in this line range themselves in a theology that is lucid and complete: ‘black waters’ with their nuances of disease, poison, confusion, terror and drowning transform into the healthful translucence of life-giving, thirst-quenching ‘waters of life’. Her metaphor for a life which has responded in the affirmative to Christ’s offer of redemption is a definitive instance of simultaneous understatement and eloquence: such a life, in her view, has accepted

a call to pattern and fulfilment in the new.

The words ‘a call to pattern’ convey by omission all the distressing, bewildering, destructive, blundering that are the fruits of the disorder and the disharmony that are the antithesis of the lovely order that lies in the quiet word ‘pattern’. Powers, in her use of the word ‘pattern’, shows her spiritual and philosophical affinity to the Renaissance frame of mind out of which the poet Thomas Campion comments in his Observations in the Art of English Poesy, (1602), that ‘the world is made by symmetry and proportion, and is in that respect compared to music, and music to poetry’ (Poplawski 2008: 156).

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21 John 14:6: I am the way, the truth and the life.
Theological complexity inheres in this word too: a pattern is a carefully thought out, conscious sequence of actions, there is nothing random, non-essential or purposeless in it. The connotations of the word ‘pattern’, Powers claims, describe some of the attributes of the loving attention God brings to bear on a life lived according to His sign, His pledge of faithfulness. Her religious ardour is quietly stated:

With love I bow, with reverence bow.

The word ‘bow’ succinctly conveys depths of theology: to bow is the only appropriate response of the creature to the Creator, but the word ‘love’ opens the vista of relationship with the Creator that becomes possible to the mere creature reborn into ‘fulfilment in the new’. According to Powers, loving reverence is the entirely appropriate response to this amazing offer of relationship.

Stanza two has evocative metaphors for faithless human life:

My darkness was always rain and turbulent waters, a troubled world held in a crowded place.

The ‘turbulent waters’ extend the metaphor of the ‘black waters’ of stanza one, and the line ‘a troubled world held in a crowded place’ says in bleak reinforcement what the word ‘pattern’ said by omission in stanza one. This is a metaphysical metaphor for human misery that conveys much of the desolation and degradation of life in the modern megalopolis. Powers goes on to use metaphors in stanza two that are not in themselves unusual but that overlay gathering connotations of beauty, peace, freshness, healthfulness and fruitfulness that contrast with the darkness, turbulence, troubledness and crowdedness of the opening lines of stanza two:

My light was always rest on a mountaintop in a new christened innocence of morning with all the world washed clean.
A simile and a metaphor extend the theology of the meditation in the last lines and bring it to its metaphysical resolution: she says the covenant of faithfulness that has as its sign the rainbow is

like a poem one could read
over and over again and relish meaning.

The loving allowance which Powers believes God makes for His children lies in this simile: He knows that we are forgetful and easily dismayed, and therefore He gives us a beautiful sign to remind and comfort us. Thus Powers conveys God’s understanding and compassion, His fatherly attributes. All the connotations of

a poem one could read
over and over again and relish meaning

reinforce this sense of gentle security and familiar dearness that she believes God wants us to feel. This is an example of the small ‘particular moments’ of fond memory, the ‘humble, un-dress, private things’ (Lewis 2002: 128) that poetry can make ‘imaginatively present’ to us again in a way that is healing. Beloved poems are usually in often-read, favourite books, which are ‘relished’ in quiet hours in safe spaces. Powers claims that these are the qualities of the pledge given by Almighty God to His creatures. This is the astonishing metaphysical aspect of the poem: Powers conjures up a homely, comfortable, friendly scene and then she reminds us that we are talking about, are in the presence of, God: the mountaintop, the lovely morning, the blushing earth dressed in flowers and leaves, the dear often-read poem constitute in fact an

arched doorway and a sudden entrance
to unexpected wisdom and delight.

According to the theology out of which Powers writes it is out of God’s awareness of our frailty and His compassion for our weakness that He dims His radiance and comes to us in glimpses that we can bear. In Steiner’s opinion ‘the private reader can become an executant of felt meaning when he learns a poem by heart. To learn by heart is to afford the text an indwelling clarity and life-force. What we know by heart becomes an agency in our consciousness, a “pace-maker” in the growth and vital complication of
our identity’ (1989: 9). Thus a poem one reads ‘over and over again’ changes us, and Powers’ analogy is that, by often reading God in His signs, we are changed. Powers echoes Newman’s view here that because we could not yet bear to see the full splendour of God we are allowed instead beautiful glimpses of His angels: ‘every breath of air and ray of light and heat, every beautiful prospect is, as it were, the skirts of their garments, the waving of the robes of those whose faces see God’ (1976: 18).

I agree with Ferretter that ‘the distance that now lies between the Christian impulses and contemporary writers is too great for Christians to make confident assertions that their faith is still the implicit if not explicit dynamic behind modern writing’ (2003: 33). I will show, however, that this faith is the explicit dynamic informing Powers’ work, and indeed that this Christian impulse is intrinsic to the metaphysical nature of her poetry. She is unequivocal in her statement of her faith in her poem ‘For a Lover of Nature’:

Your valley trails its beauty through your poems,  
the kindly woods, the wide majestic river.  
Earth is your god – or goddess, you declare,  
mindful of what good time must one day give her  
of all you have. Water and rocks and trees  
hold primal words born out of Genesis.  
But Love is older than these.

You lay your hand upon the permanence  
of green-embroidered land and miss the truth  
that you are trusting your immortal spirit  
to earth’s sad inexperience and youth.  
Centuries made this soil; this rock was lifted  
out of the aeons; time could never trace  
a path to water’s birth or air’s inception,  
and so, you say, these be your godly grace.  
Earth was swept into being with the light –  
dear earth, you argue, who will soon be winning  
your flesh  
and bones  
by a most ancient right.

But Love had no beginning.

Her celebration of the beauty of nature and her recognition of the inevitability of death are lyrical but her affirmation of her faith in the primal agency of Love, to whom she
ascribes Godhead by virtue of her capital letter, is paramount, and is quietly affirmed in the closing line: ‘But Love had no beginning’.

Analysis of these poems demonstrates that the creative laws under which Powers operates when she writes about God are framed by a ‘theological perspective of participation which allows of no territory independent of God’ (Milbank, Pickstock and Ward 1999: 3).

A third quality of a Christian theory of reading is that it makes the claim that

one light illuminates all fields, and that literature may be considered to be a halo around the light, fading off into shadow – as if round the canonical books of sacred scripture are grouped innumerable other books of secular wisdom of which, with appropriate qualifications, it may be said in the words of St Paul22: ‘All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly finished unto all good works’ (Boyle 2004: 5).

Therefore Boyle’s working hypothesis, and mine, is that ‘literature is the site of theology because literature, biblical and non-biblical, is a place where sacred and secular meet’ (2004: 6).

Based on this hypothesis then, a Christian reading ‘can expect to find in the words of non-canonical and even non-Christian writings something, though not of course everything, of the moral and doctrinal instruction to be found in sacred scripture’ (Boyle 2004: 7), because, according to this approach to reading, ‘the words of Christian sacred texts are in permanent intercourse with the words of texts that are not sacred’ (2004: 8).

According to this theory literature can ‘show us in words the truth about life’. This theory claims that, though the words literature uses are not primarily for instruction, and though the defining characteristic of secular literature is its non-instrumental use of words to give enjoyment, nevertheless the words literature uses can ‘tell us truths

22 2 Timothy 3: 16-17.
about things, about individual beings, natural, personal or cultural; they can tell us the truth about Being in general, [that is, they can address the metaphysical, as Powers’ work does]; and they [can] amount, or are capable of amounting, to a revelation’ (Boyle 2004: 128). Powers’ poem ‘Star, First Magnitude’ is a lancing analysis of pride. It ‘tells us truths’ about the destructive effects of unbridled ego and it ‘amounts’, in fact, ‘to a revelation’:

The five points of his star are I, me, mine, to me and for me, and he shines with these. The quick mind gasps to see how soon his light cancels Orion and the Pleiades. When he begins effectively to shine even the Christmas star is put to flight.

He sees his splendor blazing through all darkness, and there is none within his circle, none to tell him what his helpless earth will come to now that he routs the sun. The trees and flowers of grace go down in frost. Thus is good love by too much twinkling lost.

Powers uses ironic understatement and even some rather grim humour in the first stanza to describe the effects of a diseased ego. Her ‘quick mind’ gasps at the brightness of the light of the subject of the poem’s all-consuming self-importance. But the effects of his shining are no joke: whole constellations are ‘cancel[led]’ and it comes as no surprise that ‘even the Christmas star is put to flight’. The stars in this stanza serve as signs for the beauty and mystery of the universe and for the miracle of the Nativity. Powers does not delineate the consequences of the demise of beauty, mystery and miracle in this stanza. Instead she leaves her deceptively simple lines to reverberate in deepening alarm at the appalling effects of terminal complacency and arrogance. Her poem is a ‘continuance’, in fact, of sacred scripture in that it is a vivid delineation of the converse of St Paul’s words: ‘I no longer live, but Christ lives in me’23. Powers demonstrates what she believes to be the scriptural truth that the soul has room only for Christ or for the human ego.

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The second stanza is sombre and yet compassionate in its stark diagnosis of the consequences of the subject of the poem’s ‘blazing’: he is so blinded by his own glare that he fails to register that around him is ‘all darkness’. Powers’ pity is stirred by the silencing effect of his rampant ego: she reiterates the word ‘none’ to underline his deadly peril now that he is beyond understanding that once he ‘routs the sun’ his ‘helpless earth’ will die. Her metaphor in the last two lines extends that of the earth dying from lack of sunlight, but now it has metaphysical depth: the ‘trees and flowers’ that ‘go down’ in the deathly, sunless cold are the fruits ‘of grace’. The words ‘trees and flowers of grace’ gather up everything that is precious, lovely and bountiful in human life and, in bitter sorrow, Powers watches them ‘go down in frost’. Her closing line makes the sad theological claim that egotistical human love, unless it allows itself to be rescued from itself by Divine love, is ‘lost’. It is the contention of this thesis that Powers’ metaphysical poetry can be justly described by the term revelatory, and, in my opinion, this poem ‘amounts’, in fact, to ‘a revelation’ (Boyle 2004: 128).

The poem ‘Everything Rushes, Rushes’ demonstrates that Powers’ poetry, which might be called ‘secular scripture’, can be called a ‘site of theology’ and can be considered to be ‘continuous with sacred [scripture]’ (2004: 6):

The brisk blue morning whisked in with a thought:
everything in Creation rushes, rushes
toward God – tall trees, small bushes,
quick birds and fish, the beetles round as nought,
eels in the water, deer on forest floor,
what sits in trees, what burrows underground,
what wriggles to declare life must abound,
and we, the spearhead that run on before,

and lesser things to which life cannot come:
our work, our words that move toward the Unmoved,
whatever can be touched, used, handled, loved –
all, all are rushing on ad terminum.

So I, with eager voice and news-flushed face,
cry to those caught in comas, stupors, sleeping:
come, everything is running
flying,
leaping,  
hurtling through time!  
And we are in this race.

The poem exuberantly celebrates God’s energising presence in every atom of His Creation, and urges those unaware of the rush of Creation to glorious fulfilment in God to come, to join the race. This of course echoes St Paul’s words that we are to run without flagging in the race to God,²⁴ and Powers reiterates the excitement of the ‘good news’²⁵ of salvation by referring to her own ‘eager voice and her news-flushed face’. Her poem explicitly claims to be a ‘site of theology’ in the line ‘our work, our words that move toward the Unmoved’: her ‘work’ is her writing, her ‘words’ are her poems and their metaphysical intention and their religious effect are movement ‘toward the Unmoved’.

A Christian theory of reading makes the claim that ‘one light illuminates all fields, and that literature may be considered to be a halo around the light, fading off into shadow – as if round the canonical books of sacred scripture are grouped innumerable other books of secular wisdom’ (Boyle 2004: 5). These poems show the metaphysical radiance of this ‘one light’ which ‘illuminates all fields’.

In the fourth place, the theory according to which this thesis reads Powers’ work holds that presence is an intrinsic attribute of language: ‘Face to face with the presence of offered meaning which we call a text we seek to hear its language’ (Steiner 1989: 156). ‘There is language because there is the other. Descartes, in his third Meditation, calls upon the imperative likelihood of God in order to escape from the finality of aloneness’ (Ferretter 2003: 137). Where poetry engages with rapt attention the issues of our human condition it is metaphysical and it seeks to ‘elucidate the incommunicado of our meetings with [the great metaphysical issues, such as], death’. Of course no poem, however inspired, ‘can make us at home with death, let alone “weep it from its purpose’” (2003: 137), but the existential fact that great works of literature do outlast

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²⁴ 1 Corinthians 9:24: Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.
²⁵ Luke 2: 10: But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people’.
the human lives of their makers offers some consoling intimations of immortality and of the continuance of presence. In Ferretter’s opinion ‘it is the lucid intensity of its meeting with death that generates in aesthetic forms that statement of vitality, of life-presence, which distinguishes serious thought and feeling from the trivial and the opportunistic’. In my opinion, this clear-eyed gaze at the great issues of life and its corollary, death, is what makes this kind of poetry metaphysical, as these are of course metaphysical questions. This kind of poetry may give ‘endurable form to that coercion [death] still, as neither politics nor the sciences can’. Powers’ poem ‘The Ledge of Light’ makes such ‘a statement of vitality, of life-presence, which distinguishes serious thought and feeling from the trivial and the opportunistic’ (2003: 138):

I have climbed up out of a narrow darkness on to a ledge of light. I am of God; I was not made for night.

Here there is room to lift my arms and sing. Oh, God is vast! With Him all space can come to hole or corner or cubiculum. Though once I prayed, ‘O closed Hand holding me …’ I know Love, not a vise. I see aright, set free in the morning on this ledge of light.

Yet not all truth I see. Since I am not yet one of God’s partakers, I visualize Him now: a thousand acres.

God is a thousand acres to me now of high sweet-smelling April and the flow of windy light across a wide plateau.

Ah, but when love grows unitive I know joy will upsoar, my heart sing, far more free, having come home to God’s infinity.

The poem acknowledges that though the poet has, by means of prayer,
see[s] aright,
set free in morning on this ledge of light,

yet because she has not died, she does not yet see ‘all truth’, she is not ‘yet one of
God’s partakers’. In her prayer she can ‘visualize Him’,

    a thousand acres to me now
          of high sweet-smelling April and the flow
          of windy light across a wide plateau.

Yet out of these intimations of bliss and fresh beauty that she experiences in her
mystical prayer she can attest to God’s presence with a confidence that may inspire her
attentive reader also:

    Ah, but when love grows unitive I know
          joy will upsoar, my heart sing, far more free,
          having come home to God’s infinity.

In her poem ‘Heaven’ Powers asserts that in death the soul does not ‘plunge headlong
into glory’ without preparation because it has heard ‘a rumor of a light before’. I
maintain that Powers’ metaphysical poems function as such rumours ‘of a light’. She
goes on in the poem ‘Heaven’ to say that God

    has reservoirs of morning
          whose unguessed joy we distantly extol.

This ‘unguessed joy’ she ‘distantly extol[s]’ in her poetry, and thereby possibly affords
her readers consoling intimations of presence and of immortality.

The basic premise, then, of the theory in the light of which I read Powers’ poetry in this
thesis is that

    Western theology and the metaphysics, epistemology and aesthetics which have
been its major footnotes, are ‘logocentric’. This is to say that they axiomatise as
fundamental and pre- eminent the concept of a ‘presence’. It can be that of God
(ultimately, it must be); of Platonic ‘Ideas’; of Aristotelian and Thomist essence. It
can be that of Cartesian self-consciousness; of Kant’s transcendent logic or of
Heidegger’s ‘Being’. It is to these pivots that the spokes of meaning finally lead.
They insure its plenitude. That presence, theological, ontological or metaphysical, makes credible the assertion that there ‘is something in what we say’ (Steiner 1989: 121).

Of course I acknowledge that this stance, based on a presumption of meaningfulness, is ultimately no more provable than one based on a presumption of meaninglessness, but it is therefore at least as legitimate. My theory of reading and writing is logocentric. It is my contention that Powers’ writing in the poems under consideration in this study discloses presence and is therefore meaningful. ‘We must come to recognize, and the stress is on re-cognition, a meaningfulness which is that of a freedom of giving and of reception’ (1989: 49). In Powers’ poetry we are brought face to face with meaningfulness. In her poem ‘The Place of Splendor’ she says unequivocally:

Child, has none told you? God is in your soul.

In the ‘The Mystic Face’ Powers both implicitly and explicitly describes a religious experience as an experience of ‘reality’. The writing, by virtue of its subject, makes a claim to the meaningfulness of what it writes:

I never try to probe the sky’s blue span;
I never look too deep into the sea
but the dim face of a tragedian
looks at me.

Neither the night nor day can find a place
where I have not been shaken with surprise
at the white beauty of a holy face
and two great lonely eyes.

This poem places Powers’ poetry squarely in the metaphysical domain of the theological and the mystical, and acknowledges an intrinsic relation to the mysterious reality of presence. Wherever she looks, whether up into the sky or down into the sea, she sees the Omnipresent Face, and not only does she see It, but It sees her: ‘looks at me’. This mutual ‘looking at’ signifies relationship. According to Steiner, the ‘authentic experience of understanding, when we are spoken to by another human being or by a poem, is one of responding responsibility. We are answerable to the text, in a very
specific sense, at once moral, spiritual and psychological’ (1989: 8). We see this relationship, this ‘responding responsibility’, imaged in this poem in which the poet looks at God in the world and God looks right back. Powers’ poem is a theistic riposte to Nietzsche’s 1886 aphorism that ‘when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you’ (Nietzsche 2003: 146).

The poem ‘I Hold My Heart as a Gourd’ too delineates this relationship in a metaphor the physicality of which conveys intimacy and presence:

I hold my heart as a gourd filled with love, 
ready to pour upon humanity,  
not that I see each one as my own neighbor  
though veiled with strangeness or with enmity,  
and not that it is my own self I see,  
my sins and virtues and my secret mind  
multiplied almost to infinity.  
Though this to love a proper cause might be,  
not in these words is my true love defined.

I hold my heart as a gourd ready to pour  
upon all those who live.  
Not that I see each one as come from God  
and to my soul His representative,  
but that God inhabits what He loves  
and what His love sustains, and hence I see  
in each soul that may brush against my soul  
God Who looks out at me.

This assumption of presence, evoked here with the physicality characteristic of metaphysical poetry, in the words ‘inhabits’, ‘brush against’, and ‘looks’, sets up immediate resonances with an orthodox theology of omnipresence, to be found, for example, in De Caussade’s 1741 treatise on The Sacrament of the Present Moment: ‘There are no moments which are not filled with [God’s] infinite holiness so that there are none we should not honour’ (De Caussade 1966: 103); and mystery, as in: ‘genuine intellectual clarity is obtainable only when that which is to be “known” is allowed to remain open and mysterious: an attitude synonymous with a kind of reverence’ (Pickstock 1998: 20). According to my theory of reading, Powers’ writing evokes these
metaphysical resonances because it inhabits the presence-filled space which all logocentric writing inhabits.

My reading of Powers in this thesis claims that because she is an artist who writes out of a presence-filled space she ‘manage[s] to create a world of hope’ (Antonaccio and Schweiker 1996: 208). In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, ‘It is a dark century ... to look into this darkness and see there the victory of Christ is to see the essence of hope (Jeffrey and Maillet 2011: 269). Ricoeur says, in the book edited by Twiss and Conser, of ‘the specifically religious way of speaking about [a response to] evil, I would not hesitate for a moment to answer: the language is that of hope’ (1992: 233). This hopefulness is an attribute of logocentric writing, in which freedom, according to Ricoeur, ‘entrusted to the “God who comes”, is open to the radically new; it is the creative imagination of the possible’ (1992: 234). This is evident in Powers’ poem ‘The Homecoming’:

The spirit, newly freed from earth,
is all amazed at the surprise
of her belonging: suddenly
as native to eternity
to see herself, to realize
the heritage that lets her be
at home where all this glory lies.
By naught foretold could she have guessed
such welcome home: the robe, the ring,
music and endless banqueting,
these people hers; this place of rest
known, as of long remembering
herself a child of God and pressed
with warm endearments to His breast.

This metaphysical poem, which is a meditation on the parable of the prodigal son,26 has as its subject a quiet hopefulness. It offers an affirmative response to the metaphysical question of whether there is life after death, and makes an unequivocal claim to the reality of life after death. In the poem the spirit is not only still alive after death, but is ‘newly freed from earth’. The word ‘freed’ implies that before death the person is in

some sense a captive, but that death, far from being a calamity, in reality frees the
person. The newly freed spirit is not ‘freed’ into any limitless unknown, but,
paradoxically, into ‘belonging’. This ‘belonging’ is obviously radically different in nature
from the boundedness that is life on earth before release into death. Furthermore, the
spirit does not merely enter into just any belonging, but into ‘her (my emphasis)
belonging’. Her being ‘native’ here is her ‘heritage’. Family members, or people with
legitimate claims, inherit, have a heritage; therefore this line makes the supremely
hopeful claim that death is indeed a ‘homecoming’ into a legitimate inheritance of
‘glory’. ‘Literature, like religion, operates in accordance with the existential horizons of
anticipation and expectation, fear and hope’ (Ward 2009: 23), as this poem can be seen
to do.

These poems demonstrate that presence is an intrinsic attribute of Powers’
metaphysical use of language: Steiner’s words that ‘Face to face with the presence of
offered meaning we seek to hear its language’ (1989: 156) can be seen to apply to
Powers’ writing.

A fifth attribute of a religious reading is that it always acknowledges the possibility for
change that lies in a genuine response to literature. Steiner refers to the archaic torso
in Rilke’s famous poem ‘Archaic Torso of Apollo’, translated from the German by A. S.
Kline, which says to us: ‘change your life’ (1989: 142):

We cannot know his legendary head
with eyes like ripening fruit. And yet his torso
is still suffused with brilliance from inside,
like a lamp, in which his gaze, now turned to low,
gleams in all its power. Otherwise
the curved breasts could not dazzle you so, nor could
a smile run through the placid hips and thighs
to that dark centre where procreation flared.
Otherwise this stone would seem defaced
beneath the translucent cascade of the shoulders
and would not glisten like a wild beast’s fur,
would not, from all the borders of itself,
burst like a star: for here there is no place
that does not see you. You must change your life.
A Christian theory of reading holds that ‘any poem, novel, play, painting, [or] musical composition worth meeting’ (1989: 142) makes the same demand. In the dialogue that takes place between the text and the attentive reader the world of the text may be even radically unlike the world of the reader. Nevertheless, the attentive reading of the text is a ‘real’ experience in the reader’s ‘real’ life, and it may change the way in which he perceives some of the other realities of his life. This is of course the basis of all claims to any ethical value of literature. A thoughtful reader examines the beliefs and values inherent in a text and she may be changed by them as she lives with them. Indeed, Steiner maintains, and I agree with him, that authentic literature requires change of the authentic reader.

That Powers’ poetry both makes and responds to this demand to change one’s life can be seen, for example, in the following poems:

‘The Mercy of God’:

I rose up from the acres of self that I tended with passion
and defended with flurries of pride;
I walked out of myself and went into the woods of God’s mercy
and here I abide;

‘This Trackless Solitude’:

Love leads and she surrenders to
His will, His waylessness of grace.
She speaks no word save His, nor moves
until He marks the place.
Hence all her paths are mystery,
presaging a divine unknown.
Her only light is in the creed
that she is not alone;

‘This is a Beautiful Time’:

Oh, hear Him tonight crying all over the world
a last desperate summons of love to a dying race.
Oh, hear Him within you speaking this infinite love;

‘The Pool of God’:

When I so much as turn my thoughts toward her
my spirit is enisled in her repose.
And when I gaze into her selfless depths
an anguish in me grows
to hold such blueness and to hold such fire.
I pray to hollow out my earth and be
filled with these waters of transparency;

‘Michael’:
O heart believe;

and ‘Place of Ruin’:
O come and take my hand, you whom I love,
and let us find that place.

These examples show Powers both making and responding to the demand to change one’s life.

Steiner’s elegant analysis of the change that takes place in a reader when a good poem is well read applies, in my opinion, to Powers’ poetry:

The encounter with the aesthetic is, together with certain modes of religious and metaphysical experience, the most ‘ingressive’, transformative summons available to human experience. Again, the shorthand image is that of an Annunciation, of ‘a terrible beauty’ or gravity breaking into the small house of our cautionary being. If we have heard rightly the wing-beat and provocation of that visit, the house is no longer habitable in quite the same way as it was before. A mastering intrusion has shifted the light (1989: 143).

Powers’ poem, ‘The Song of Distance’ may, if ‘heard rightly’, ‘shift the light’ for the reader in this way:

Little One, come. I will teach you the song of distance
whereby to flee this peacelessness and din.
Turn from the earth as stranger and begin:
my soul is out on paths that have no ending
and no return. Where the noon kneels to pray
love guides my steps, ascending and descending.
Out through the sleeping solitudes I stray
O far
O far away.
Morning and evening do not mark this day.
O little One, believe that earth is alien.
Let its concerns all unremembered lie.
Say to the storm or sweetness passing by:
my soul is out on paths that have no ending
and no return. A light blurs out my way.
I am with God and toward my godhood tending.
I near the foothills of eternal day
O far
O far away.
God speaks to me. Earth has no more to say.

The opening lines of the poem extend a beguiling and consoling offer: to ‘flee’ the ‘peacelessness and din’ must surely be one of mankind’s most imperative longings and here Powers quietly but with absolute confidence offers to teach her reader how to do this. The third line however expels any hope that a panacea is on offer: ‘Turn from the earth as stranger and begin’. These are strenuous verbs, to ‘turn’ and to ‘begin’. According to the religious paradigm in which Powers works, this is the metaphysical paradox that mankind has agency in effecting his salvation which is yet entirely achieved by Christ by His death on the Cross. However Powers avers that we have only to begin. Once we are ‘out on paths that have no ending’ we will be guided by love. Powers is always realistic about suffering and the vicissitudes of life: sometimes we will ‘ascend’, but sometimes we will ‘descend’. But the ‘Annunciation’ breaking out of Powers’ poem ‘into the small house of our cautionary being’ is that we need have no concern. She says we can afford to let the earth and all its concerns ‘unremembered lie’ because we are ‘with God’ and ‘toward [our] godhood tending’.

The line ‘A light blurs out my way’ is quintessentially metaphysical: the metaphor is concrete, a light and a way, but the meaning is metaphysical paradox presented with utmost simplicity. A self-sufficient person sees the way if he has a light; but for the person who has become radically un-selfsufficient, in that he lives now not in himself but in Christ Who lives in him27, the way is ‘blurred’ by the light because he no longer sees the way but only the light, which is so bright that he can see nothing but it. Yet it is

27 Galatians 2: 20,
enough to see only the light because this Light\textsuperscript{28} which ‘blurs’ the way is itself the Way.\textsuperscript{29} This is an instance of supremely understated metaphysical wit.

Powers’ concrete metaphors for the troubles and the joys of life are succinctly evocative: ‘storm’ and ‘sweetness’. The metaphysical point of this line, indeed of the poem, the ‘mastering intrusion’ which should shift ‘the light’ for us, is that, whether they be ‘storms’ or ‘sweetness’, the moments of our lives as they unfold are ‘passing by’, and we are nearing ‘the foothills of eternal day’.

Ezra Pound talks of ‘that sense of sudden growth, which we experience in the presence of the greatest works of art’ (Pound 1974: 4) which comes out of the demand made by such art that ‘you must change your life’ (Steiner 1989: 142). Pound says ‘literature … invite[s] humanity to continue living’ (1974: 20). This imperative to change, to ‘continue living’ issued by beauty in metaphysical poetry can evoke fear masked as embarrassment, as Merton comments: ‘A woodpecker with a cry as sharp as a dagger terrifies the lesser birds, while he is himself benevolent and harmless. The beautiful kingfisher in dazzling flight rattles like a bird of ill omen. So we fear beauty!’ (1968: 23).

Instances of urgent appeal to herself and to her readers to see the light and to change abound in Powers:

\begin{quote}
o heart, believe
‘Michael’;

Come home, roamer of earth, to this room and find
a timeless Heart under your own heart, beating
‘The Kingdom of God’;

Oh, hear Him tonight crying all over the world
a last desperate summons of love to a dying race;
Oh, hear Him within you speaking this infinite love
‘This Is a Beautiful Time’;
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{28}John 8: 12.
\textsuperscript{29}John 14: 6.
Oh, give Him then that title which will place
His unpredictable breath upon your face
‘The Spirit’s Name’;

O come and take my hand, you whom I love
and let us find that place
‘Place of Ruin’;

Little One, come, I will teach you the song of distance
whereby to flee this peacelessness and din,
O Little One, believe that earth is alien,
let its concerns all unremembered lie
‘The Song of Distance’;

Not all is lost! Oh, turn and see!
Borne after you by the divine forgiveness
is the rich booty of humility
‘Israel Again’;

Drive yourself forth, O love so newly born,
set out, O soul, in darkness and alone
‘On Reading Saint Peter of Alcantara’;

Oh, seek that land where it grows in a rich abundance
with its thorny stem and its scent like bitter wine
‘The Sign of the Cross’;

and

Yet past all loss, heaven leans down to argue:
ah, in love’s denser wood and far more fair
sings the more hidden soul its purer music.
Enter, it says, oh, go and listen there
‘The Hermit Thrush’.

This reading of these poems of Powers acknowledges the possibility for change that lies
in a genuine response to them. Like the archaic torso in Rilke’s famous poem ‘Archaic
Torso of Apollo’, they say to us: ‘change your life’ (Steiner 1989: 142).
A two-pronged sixth observation about a Christian theory of reading is that, as Steiner maintains, ‘any mature representation of imagined form, any mature endeavour to communicate such representation to another human being, is a moral act – indeed, a religious act’ (1989: 147), and that ‘seeing and understanding ourselves as characters in a story or a history [or poem] enables us to have character in our daily lives’ (Detweiler and Doty 1990: 101).

A metaphysical poem, such as Powers’ poem ‘If You Have Nothing’, is, in my opinion, such a ‘moral’ and ‘religious’ act which endeavours to communicate a ‘mature representation of imagined form’ to another human being, the reader. Powers wishes to communicate an understanding of the virtue of humility. According to the great Christian apologist Chesterton,

in spirituality the virtue of humility matters the most; yet in the manner of explanation it requires the least. Suffice it to say, Love has a number of spiritual honorifics. It is the great commandment, the third theological virtue. But on the hoof Love mummers as Humility. Thought to be, and indeed taught to be, a somewhat passive virtue, it is really, paradoxically, quite an aggressive virtue. Indeed it is a collective noun for all the virtues and commandments (2006: 34).

Powers’ poem is a ‘moral’ and ‘religious’ act which communicates in poetry what Chesterton communicates in prose:

The gesture of a gift is adequate.  
If you have nothing: laurel leaf or bay,  
no flower, no seed, no apple gathered late,  
do not in desperation lay  
the beauty of your tears upon the clay.  
No gift is proper to a deity;  
No fruit is worth for such power to bless.  
If you have nothing, gather back your sigh,  
and with your hands held high, your heart held high,  
lift up your emptiness.

This poem is metaphysical in that it deals with the matters of human destiny and moral agency. It analyses human nature and divine nature and lays bare what Powers considers to be the only appropriate way for human life to become not only bearable but blessed. Human destiny, according to the theology out of which this poem is
written, is to arrive, after all the fruitless jostling and striving of life, at the point where we ‘lift up [our] emptiness’. The only genuine agency possible to us is to hold our hands and our hearts ‘high’ in the humility that understands at last that ‘No gift is proper to a deity’. A prospect of utter peace lies before us in the line ‘no fruit is worth for such power to bless’. The self-doubt that torments ambitious man is here laid to rest in a metaphysical paradox. We need strive for no fruit except the fruit of humility that realises that all striving is fruitless. ‘Emptiness’ is the ‘fruit’ which is ‘worth for such power to bless’. The hope offered by the poem lies in the blessing that radical ‘emptiness’ will elicit.

The literary critic Brown maintains, with Ricoeur, that a work of literature ‘can create a new moral intentionality for us’ (1992: 29). This morality is of a religious rather than an ethical nature. As Ricoeur says: ‘religion is distinguished from ethics in the fact that it requires that we think of freedom under the sign of hope. In the language of the gospel ... to consider freedom in the light of hope is to re-situate my existence in the movement which might be called, with Jurgen Moltmann, the “future of the Resurrection of Christ”’ (Twiss and Conser 1992: 234). Powers has this effect because, I maintain, of the meditative ingredient of metaphysical poetry: the poems are theological meditations and as such, if attentively read, they can ‘create a new moral intentionality for us’. They can convey warnings and urgent appeals to timely awakening, as in the poem ‘The Late of Leaf’:

Tempted am I to tell the locust
what every pale green willow knows –
that spring is here. Her mind is focused
on sleeping and remembered snows.

She is like those who, though the ringing
of alleluia be heard,
still miss the resurrection, clinging
still to the bleak disproven word.

There is an element of gentle metaphysical wit in the words ‘tempted am I to tell the locust’. Powers has in fact succumbed to the temptation to tell, and the poem is the telling. She wishes to alert us to Spring, symbolising ‘the [R]esurrection’, which, as
Ricoeur maintains, is the site of Christian hope (Twiss and Conser 1992: 234), in case we are still in thrall to the ‘bleak disproven word’ of the Crucifixion, which, without the triumphant completion of the Resurrection, is the ultimate word of defeat.

According to Detweiler and Doty in *The Daemonic Imagination*, ‘writers help us to see ourselves and our world in different ways; more specifically, they help us to see ourselves, others, and our situations in terms of a world that we might inhabit’. By reading attentively we may be enabled ‘to see others and ourselves as “characters” in a tale [or a poem] that makes sense of our lives, our past, our present, and our possible future. And to extend the metaphor, seeing and understanding ourselves as characters in a story or a history [or poem] enables us to have character in our daily lives’ (1990: 101). Powers repeatedly urges herself and her reader to ‘have character’ as can be seen the following lines:

Choose it, my heart. It is a beautiful sign.  
‘The Sign of the Cross’;

I coax you onward:  
‘Pure Desert’;

So I, with eager voice and news-flushed face,  
cry to those caught in comas  
‘Everything Rushes, Rushes’;

Enter, it says, oh, go and listen there.  
‘The Hermit Thrush’.

These poems demonstrate that ‘any mature representation of imagined form, any mature endeavour to communicate such representation to another human being, is a moral act – indeed, a religious act’ (Steiner 1989: 147).

A seventh observation is that a religious discourse ‘names God’ (Brown 1992: 102), and a religious reading would be one intended to ‘aid the community’s participation in the construction of myths and rituals against chaos’ (Detweiler and Doty 1990: 36). Brown
maintains, with Ricoeur, that literature is ‘one of the ways in which we name and pass on the name of the God who has been named to us’ (1992: 102). One function, therefore, of critical reading, according to the theory of my choice, is to see whether or not a text either implicitly or explicitly ‘names God’. This thesis will show that Powers’ work certainly names God, often with seeming audacity and with the metaphysical conceit of unlikely or startling metaphor, but always with loving reverence. Her poem ‘A Meadow Moreover’ is one such an unlikely but winning ‘naming’ of God:

A sound like that of a meadowlark
poured heaven through the city park,
and though it died false, my memory
had crept through the notes and fluttered free.
It was off and away where a meadow stands
out in the clean undeeded lands,
past time, past even a need of name,
a place where only the children came.
The bobolinks sang where a tall grass sway
made a green salaam, and the wild flowers ran gay
through a moving quilt; wild strawberries bled
till the thought like the taste was comforted.
And the moss was soft – of a finer class
than the soft of the friendly ticklegrass.
That free is a child’s word none deny –
this, heaven and earth both testify,
that God is a meadow in some high way,
a meadow moreover revealed in ours
where only the children find the flowers.

The poem first establishes the beauty of a meadow in ‘clean undeeded lands’, where ‘only the children came’, where ‘bobolinks sang’ and ‘tall grass swayed’, where ‘flowers ran gay’ and ‘wild strawberries’ comforted the taste, and where ‘the moss was soft’. The reader is lulled and enchanted by the beauty of nature thus described, and is the more startled by the metaphysical metaphor which seamlessly moves from botany to theology:

heaven and earth both testify,
that God is a meadow in some high way,
a meadow moreover revealed in ours.
The resolution of this metaphysical meditation on God as a meadow is succinctly, but
with a quiet understatement that nonetheless echoes scripture, expressed in the
closing line:

where only the children find the flowers.

Powers’ poem ‘The Wind of Pentecost’ names God in attributes different from those
described in the poem ‘A Meadow Moreover’: here His sound is ‘an inner crying’ that
strains the soul more ‘vehemently’ than ‘wind on a ruined plain’ that ‘sets a debris of
echoes flying’, and His Love is ‘the gale of God’ that will ‘possess’ one ‘as a hurricane’.
In this poem He is the wind to which ‘death and loss and devastation’ present ‘no
obstacle’, and to court Him will be to become a ‘wasteland, lone and lost’, but, Powers
says, in a restatement of the paradox of His munificence, which bestows all even as it
demands all, if one becomes thus a ‘divested earth’ for His sake, then one will ‘hold’
none less than the Spirit Himself, ‘the Wind of Pentecost’.

‘The Spirit’s Name’ is another poem which names God:

Dove is the name of Him and so is Flame,
and Love can push aside all eager symbols
to be His peerless and His proper name.
And Wind and Water, even Cloud will do,
if it is heart that has the interview.

But when at last you are alone with Him
deep in the soul and past the senses choir,
Oh, give Him then that title which will place
His unpredictable breath upon your face:
O Dove, O Flame, O Water, Wind, and Cloud!
(And here the creature wings go veering higher)
O love that lifts us wholly into God!

_O Deifier._

The first stanza recites some of the formal praise names of the Holy Spirit. The tone is
quietly convinced and the manner respectful and contained as befits the naming of the

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30 Matthew 18:3: And he said: ‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you
will never enter the kingdom of heaven’.
Almighty with the names of the most powerful elements known to man, Flame, Wind and Water, and with the attributes of the Dove of Peace, and the Love that is proper in all its connotations only to Him. It is in the second stanza that ardour infuses the given names with worship. The simple addition of the vocative particle ‘O’ to the titles already enunciated raises them from enumeration to litany, as they gather to the metaphysical epiphany of the poem: ‘O Deifier’. According to the critic Clark, ‘in metaphysical poetry, the musing takes on the quality of address, and the grammatical modes are more often than in most other styles the less ordinary: interrogative, imperative and vocative’ (1982: 213). This characteristic is very often evident in Powers. These two words ‘O Deifier’ carry the theological and metaphysical thrust of the poem: the breath of the Holy Spirit on our face in response to our loving worship not only ‘lifts us wholly into God’, but deifies us. This is an astonishing metaphysical statement, making claims as to our ultimate purpose. There is also metaphysical complexity in the lines

Oh, give Him then that title which will place
His unpredictable breath upon your face.

Scripture says that the Holy Spirit blows where He likes,31 and Powers refers to this quality of His in the word ‘unpredictable’, and yet she makes the unequivocal claim that we have the power to direct the Spirit to ‘place His unpredictable breath upon [our] face’. There is metaphysical wit in this claim that simultaneously says and unsays itself. The believer can make the Spirit respond to her; but she can only do this by acknowledging that He is Almighty God and she is absolutely His to deify, powerless of herself to aspire to divinity, and entirely dependent upon His grace for life. Thus her worshipful admission of utter powerlessness makes her powerful even over the Spirit. This makes an implicit comment on the nature of God’s love for mankind: He who is omnipotent is yet unable to withhold Himself from a creature who lovingly acknowledges His Godhead and asks to be lifted ‘wholly into’ Him. While Powers of course admits that all the deifying comes, and can only come, from God Himself, she paradoxically makes some claim to our also being agents in our sub-summation into

31 John 3: 8: The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.
Him: ‘the creature wings go veering higher’. It is our worshipful near-approach to Him, she believes, which draws down His breath onto our faces. We are in a metaphysical area here: this is to address questions concerning human nature, purpose and destiny.

A religious discourse not only ‘names God’, but it also intends to ‘aid the community’s participation in the construction of myths and rituals against chaos’ (Detweiler and Doty 1990: 36). A religious reading in this sense ‘emphasises the festival dimensions of a text’, which in turn constitutes a response to its ‘surplus of meaning’, that is, to the reader’s sense that the text means more than his interpretation can bring out. A religious reading, therefore, will ‘uncover the elements of excess’ in the texts it reads, and will see them ‘in their double role, both as witnesses to the great ineffability of existence on the one hand, and as a reminder that the practice of religion, for all its sublime moments, always remains close to humanity’s most primitive impulses on the other’ (Brown 1992: 176). Another description of this surplus of meaning in a text is Bakhtin’s concept of the carnival, the holiday that for a limited period inverts the normal order and turns it into transgressive play, which, Detweiler argues, represents ‘both an attempt to control excess and a means of increasing it’ (Detweiler and Doty 1990: 36).

This concept of carnival can be seen in Powers’ poem ‘But Not With Wine’. Her subject is the metaphysical profound, coming out of, but inverting with metaphysical wit, a quotation from Isaiah, ‘You are drunk, but not with wine’.

Isaiah refers to the cup of the Lord’s wrath, but Powers visualises a cup brimming with the Lord’s love. Her tone is intimate, even playful, though always reverent. She uses metaphysical wit to analyse one of the attributes of God, which is the infinite generosity of His love:

O God of too much giving, whence is this inebriation that possesses me,
that the staid road now wanders all amiss
and that the wind walks much too giddily,
clutching a bush for balance, or a tree?
How then can dignity and pride endure
with such inordinate mirth upon the land,

32 Isaiah 51:21.
when steps and speech are somewhat insecure
and the light heart is wholly out of hand?

If there be indecorum in my songs,
fasten the blame where rightly it belongs;
on Him who offered me too many cups
of His most potent goodness – not on me,
a peasant who, because a King was host,
drank out of courtesy.

Her transference of the symptoms of inebriation onto the road and the wind is playful,
and her joy brims over in the question she asks out of her delineation of tipsiness:

How then can dignity and pride endure
with such inordinate mirth upon the land,
when steps and speech are somewhat insecure
and the light heart is wholly out of hand?

This is a charming description of delightful joy, with humorous understatement and
mock primness in the words

steps and speech are somewhat insecure
and the light heart is wholly out of hand.

Her second stanza moves into the seriously theological, and now her metaphor carries
connotations of majesty and courtesy and reveals the reverence that underlies the
playfulness of the first stanza, although the playfulness persists even into the more
serious second stanza. Powers says, ‘If there be indecorum in my songs’, using a more
sober word than the ‘inebriation’ of line two of stanza one, but still a merry word,
‘fasten the blame where rightly it belongs’. This is still an audacious tone for a creature
to use to the Creator, and she goes on in a daring attribution of blame:

on Him who offered me too many cups
of His most potent goodness – not on me,
a peasant who, because a King was host,
drank out of courtesy.

There is a witty metaphysical inversion in these lines which serves to make a
theological point: the courtesy comes not only from the hospitable King but also, and
astonishingly, from the peasant. This is a peasant/King relationship in which the peasant shows tender consideration for the King. The bountifulness is from the King, as is proper, but the peasant, though overwhelmed, accepts the King’s loving largesse so that the kindly King is not rebuffed. Powers’ metaphysical claim here is that the nature of our relationship with God can be such that we are not merely recipients of glory, but that we too can offer tender consideration in return, that we are the keepers of God’s feelings which can be hurt by our rebuff. The joyous lightness of heart which this poem conveys is, Powers believes, one of the effects of this intimate relationship with God. Other poems will deal with the suffering that a near approach to the Cross entails but this poem is suffused with merry joy.

Analysis of these poems has demonstrated that a religious discourse, such as Powers’ poetry, ‘names God’ (Brown 1992: 102), and that a religious reading involves the reader ‘in the construction of myths and rituals against chaos’ (Detweiler and Doty 1990: 36) and in a celebration of relationship with God.

A last observation concerning a Christian theory of reading in this chapter is that Detweiler mentions three kinds of text that he believes are particularly susceptible to religious readings: texts of pain, of love, and of worship. I will examine ‘texts of pain, of love, and of worship’ by Powers to show how she ‘witnesses to the great ineffability of existence’ (1990: 176), which is a metaphysical quality in her poetry.

The poem ‘There is a Homelessness’ is a metaphysical poem that deals with mystical pain, with what is in fact metaphysical pain. This is the pain of striving in ‘finite words’ to pray to ‘an Infinity’, the pain of straining to see in the ‘night’ of our ‘humanity’ someone Whom, if we could see, we could not comprehend, but in any case, Whom we cannot see:

There is a homelessness, never to be clearly defined.  
It is more than having no place of one’s own, no bed or chair.  
It is more than walking in a waste of wind,  
or gleaning the crumbs where someone else has dined,  
or taking a coin for food or clothes to wear.  
The loan of things and the denial of things are possible
to bear.

It is more, even, than homelessness of heart,
of being always a stranger at love’s side,
of creeping up to a door only to start
at a shrill voice and to plunge back to the wide
dark of one’s obscurity and hide.
It is the homelessness of the soul in the body sown;
it is the loneliness of mystery;
of seeing oneself a leaf, inexplicable and unknown,
cast from an unimaginable tree;
of knowing one’s life to be a brief wind blown
down a fissure of time in the rock of eternity.
The artist weeps to wrench this grief from stone;
he pushes his hands through the tangled vines of music,
but he cannot set it free.

It is the pain of the mystic suddenly thrown
back from the noon of God to the night of his own
humanity.
It is his grief; it is the grief of all those praying
in finite words to an Infinity
Whom, if they saw, they could not comprehend;
Whom they cannot see.

The opening line of this poem offers a quietly resigned expression of metaphysical humility:

There is a homelessness, never to be clearly defined.

The great metaphysical question of the whereabouts of the true home of the mortal human, whether only earthly or heavenly also, and the duration of our stay in any home, whether finite or infinite also, is acknowledged in the words: ‘there is a homelessness’; but the unknowability of the parameters of either the question or its answer is simultaneously acknowledged: ‘never to be clearly defined’. This metaphysical uncertainty is acutely painful, is even more painful than homelessness of body and of heart. Stanza one deals with homelessness of body:

It is more than having no place of one’s own, no bed or chair.
It is more than walking in a waste of wind,
or gleaning the crumbs where someone else has dined,
or taking a coin for food or clothes to wear.

Powers renders the physical distress of homelessness with stark simplicity: ‘no place of one’s own, no bed or chair’. The safety, the restfulness and the dignity, which are the essential ingredients of decent human living, are brought dramatically into focus by the homely words, ‘place of one’s own’, ‘bed’ and ‘chair’. But the metaphysical pain of our unhousedness far surpasses even this utter bleakness of the total lack of creature security and comfort. Extreme desolation lies in having to walk ‘in a waste of wind’, and extreme pain in the humiliation of having to beg, and in being the recipient of careless or even disdainful charity, but all this is ‘possible to bear’. The pain with which this poem is dealing is ‘more than’ this. This climactic building of pain upon pain is often typical of the dramatic structuring of metaphysical poetry.

Stanza two deals with emotional homelessness: ‘homeless of heart’. To be ‘homeless of heart’ is to be ‘always a stranger at love’s side’, it is to ‘hide’ in the ‘wide dark of one’s own obscurity’. All the sweetness and intimacy of ‘love’ are briefly conjured up in this stanza only to be chilled by the relentless words ‘always a stranger’. The bleakness of not being in relation to any loving other, but of having rather to crouch, entirely unknown and unmissed, in the ‘wide dark of one’s own obscurity’ is pain indeed, but the pain that is the subject of this poem is beyond even this.

Stanza three deals with the subject of this poem: the metaphysical pain that comes from

the homelessness of the soul in the body sown;
... the loneliness of mystery.

This pain Powers describes as the pain

of seeing oneself a leaf, inexplicable and unknown,
cast from an unimaginable tree.
This is a homelessness that sees the person as beyond even the homelessness of having no home and no one to love. This homelessness arises from the metaphysical fact that we are beyond being at home and being known and loved. We are ‘inexplicable and unknown’, our origin is ‘unimaginable’ by us. The desolation of the wind in the windy street walked by the homeless beggar of stanza one assumes metaphysical proportions in this verse: here our very life itself is

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{a brief wind blown} \\
\text{down a fissure of time in the rock of eternity.}
\end{align*}
\]

This metaphor is metaphysical in the reaches of the unfathomable mystery that it evokes. Powers places our homelessness beyond even the consolations of art and music: the greatest artist cannot ‘wrench’ out this grief or ‘set it free’.

The final stanza of the poem, which resolves this meditation on the painful homelessness of the human spirit in the human body, sees this pain defined with metaphysical complexity and paradox: the pain which lies beyond all pain is the pain

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{of the mystic suddenly thrown} \\
\text{back from the noon of God to the night of his own humanity.}
\end{align*}
\]

The brightness of God and the rapture of passionate prayer lie in the words ‘noon’ and ‘mystic’, but the consolation suggested by these luminous words is illusory: the one praying is ‘suddenly thrown back’ from the ardently longed for ‘noon’ into the ‘night of his own humanity’. The words ‘suddenly thrown back’ carry a note of anguish at the seemingly arbitrary and even violent and cruel action of the God of the ‘noon’, who thus spurns the advances of the devout mystic. Ultimately we are thrown back from prayer and metaphysical speculation into grief. Grief is our home in the homelessness that is human life, because of the metaphysical paradox that lies at the heart of our creaturehood: we pray ‘in finite words to an Infinity’, and the ‘Infinity’ to Whom we pray we cannot see – after all, no human can look into the ‘noon’ sun – and, even if we could see it, we could not ‘comprehend’ it.
The metaphysical quality of the poem lies in its use of complex metaphor, in the nature of the subject matter of its meditation, and in the witty paradox that illumines the poem’s heart: the poem states that artists, as in sculptors and musicians, cannot assuage this grief or begin to comprehend its mystery. Yet the poem, itself an artefact and the work of an artist, in the very act of denying art’s capacity to comprehend God, succeeds nonetheless in meditating upon the mystery, and offers some insights into the nature of the grief that assails mortal man. It even, in ironic seeming-contradiction of its own premise, offers some consolation for mankind’s inexpressible metaphysical grief.

The consolation that is intrinsic to the poem is based on an implied but undoubted faith that ultimately answers the great metaphysical question and assuages the great grief. Stanza two has the word ‘sown’: this word makes the metaphysical claim that we are not accidental creatures, we are the intentional work of a sower. To sow is to perform a conscious, deliberate act. We are not the random outcome of some unconscious action or reaction. There is metaphysical consolation in this claim. The word ‘mystery’ too carries hope: its essence is unknowable and unseeable by mortal man, but the word, just as it carries an admission of its own impenetrability, also conveys a belief in the existence of the reality which is the substance of its mystery.

The poem acknowledges that we are inexplicable and unknowable leaves of an unimaginable tree, but never doubts that the tree exists, and even as it makes obeisance to the inexplicable, unknowable and unimaginable nature of the tree, it is itself a small spark of the noon sun: it offers some explanation for our grief, it allows a small glimpse of knowledge into the unknowable, and it is itself an imagined vision of the nature of the mystery. It is that which it says cannot be. This is metaphysical wit or paradox, and it is intrinsic to the nature of the metaphysical questions which this kind of poetry seeks to address. These mysterious issues can only be approached obliquely by the intellect, though also with often ravishing sensuality and tangible physicality, by means of metaphor. The ‘tough’ or intellectual complexity of this poem, which yet is as simple and as concrete as a bed and a chair, lies in the negative theology succinctly expressed in the last few lines, which seek to say the unsayable:
it is the grief of all those praying
in finite words to an Infinity
Whom, if they saw, they could not comprehend;
Whom they cannot see.

The poem simultaneously acknowledges that God cannot be comprehended and cannot be seen, and yet, by this very acknowledgement, implicitly claims that He is there. This poem shows ‘the very fluctuations between sorrow and joy, doubt and assurance’ which ‘are the most valuable evidence of [the] psychological realism’ (Summers 1974: 172) that is characteristic of metaphysical poetry.

C. S. Lewis maintains that

If we cannot ‘practise the presence of God’, it is something to be able to practise the absence of God, to become increasingly aware of our unawareness till we feel like a man who should stand beside a great cataract and hear no noise, or like a man in a story who looks in a mirror and finds no face there, or a man in a dream who stretches out his hand to visible objects and gets no sensation of touch (2002: 128).

Lewis is writing here out of the same painful awareness of ‘homelessness’ that is the subject of Powers’ poem, and her poem might be said to be practising ‘the absence of God’, though, like Lewis, always with the paradoxical underlying awareness, as described by Archbishop Anthony Bloom in his book School For Prayer, that ‘obviously I am not speaking of a real absence – God is never really absent – but of the sense of absence which we have’ (1970: 1).

Detweiler maintains that, along with texts of pain, such as the poem just read, texts of love are also particularly amenable to a religious reading (1989: 176). Powers’ poem ‘My Heart Ran Forth’ is such a poem. It opens on a beguilingly joyous and childlike note in keeping with the scriptural reference in its first stanza:

My little children,
love one another.

The first line frolics in a childlike simplicity that is deceptively transparent. This is a frequent characteristic of metaphysical poetry: it is simultaneously limpid and complex.
This faith is new, fruit of ‘an awakening spring’. The ‘new commandment’\(^{33}\) seems bright and easy to obey, and the world will swiftly be beguiled into being a lovely garden by the ‘feast and a frolic’ of love. But the sober demand of the true nature of love that underlies its apparent simplicity calls a solemn halt to the initial facile rapture: ‘But wisdom halted it’. And wisdom goes on to pose the inescapable and uncomfortable question:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{did you sow this seed} \\
\text{around your house, or in the neighbor’s garden} \\
\text{or any nearby acreage of need?}
\end{align*}
\]

Powers’ tone is wry here, self-ironic and unequivocal:

No? Then it will not grow in outer places.

The words here are apparently simple, the metaphor a common one, but the psychological insight and the theological probity into the nature of love are complex: the command to us, Powers believes, is to take up our Cross daily and to follow the Suffering Servant. We are not called to easy enthusiasm, to superficial idealism, to any affectionate outward show of sweet piety, but rather to loving not only ‘the loveless, but the unlovable, the difficult, the perplexing, the disappointing unto the end’ (Carmichael 1981: 99). The quotidian, the quiet commonplace, is the ‘proper soil’, the ‘native land’ of love. This is the resolution to the metaphysical meditation that lies at the heart of this apparently simple poem:

\[
\text{my heart brought home its charity.}
\]

The final lines of the poem emphasise the seeming and yet intrinsic simplicity of the meditation on love even as they simultaneously undermine and reassert it: the heart that ‘deftly fled’ from homely duties in the first flush of religious enthusiasm to perform spiritual wonders abroad has to return home with its tail between its legs to take up its routine, no doubt often irritating, chores. Powers’ point is that it is no easy

\(^{33}\) John 13: 34: A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.
thing to love. And yet at the same time, Scripture says that the yoke of the Cross ‘is easy and [its] burden is light’. With a witty paradox that links the sublime and the common-place, love and a common weed, the poem comforts the chastened would-be saint: the ardour that rushed out to serve the Lord abroad will also be fulfilled by staying at home, as

love is a simple plant like a Creeping Charlie;
once it takes root its talent is to spread.

This simultaneous saying and unsaying is an attribute of metaphysical wit and complexity.

The third kind of text that Ricoeur believes to be particularly susceptible to religious reading is texts dealing with worship, such as Powers’ poem ‘Advent’, which is entirely metaphysical:

I live my Advent in the womb of Mary.
And on one night when a great star swings free
from its high mooring and walks down the sky
to be the dot above the Christus i,
I shall be born of her by blessed grace.
I wait in Mary-darkness, faith’s walled place,
with hope’s expectance of nativity.

I knew for long she carried me and fed me,
guarded and loved me, though I could not see.
But only now, with inward jubilee,
I come upon earth’s most amazing knowledge:
someone is hidden in this dark with me.

The poem opens with the direct intimacy of quiet conversation, as is often the case in metaphysical poetry. It immediately makes a staggering theological claim that is belied by its undramatic tone:

I live my Advent in the womb of Mary.

Matthew 11: 30.
According to the theology inhabited by Powers’ poetry, Mary is the Ever-Virgin who bore only One Child. Yet Powers is claiming to be her child also. She pursues her metaphysical daring in the next line:

And on one night when a great star swings free
from its high mooring and walks down the sky
to be the dot above the Christus i.

This is an example of the lustrous way in which metaphysical poets sometimes use metaphor with sensuous immediacy: the splendour and the majestic beauty of the star that led the Magi to the birthplace of the King lie in this metaphor of the ‘great star’ swinging free and walking ‘down the sky’. At the same time, the metaphor carries the complexity typical of metaphysical poetry: though so beautiful and so mysterious, representing all the splendour and wonder of the natural world, the proper function of the ‘great star’ is to be merely ‘the dot above the Christus i’. Reams of prose theology would be required to comment on the omnipotence of a King so majestic that He has a ‘great star’ as ‘a dot’ above the i of one of His titles, but all this is conveyed by Powers in one metaphysical metaphor.

Powers’ seeming theological effrontery continues in her next line: she claims that when the ‘great star’ has shown the way to the holy place, ‘I shall be born of her by blessed grace’. She makes no mention of the God born of Mary under that star, she mentions only her own birth. The orthodox theology that underlies her audacious-seeming paradox lies in the words ‘by blessed grace’. According to Powers’ beliefs these three words inform the miracle of the motherhood of the Virgin Mary, and define her relationship to us. Powers claims both childhood and sisterhood (or brotherhood) for herself and for us: by the ‘blessed grace’ of God, Mary conceived and bore Christ, and by Him we are saved into sisterhood (or brotherhood) with Himself. It follows logically then, that, by His grace, His mother is also our mother.

In the second stanza Powers describes the metaphysical inkling of tender care which we sometimes, by dim intuition, sense lies beneath the confusion of our lives:

I knew for long she carried me and fed me,
guarded and loved me, though I could not see.

With seeming simplicity Powers approaches a sacred mystery here: it was Christ who was ‘carried’, ‘fed’, ‘guarded and loved’ by Mary two thousand years ago, but by the miracle of our salvation, we are so entirely gathered into Him that we are with Him even in Mary’s womb, as, in God’s eternal present, He waits to be born. Powers’ metaphor for our lives is evocative and comforting in the extreme: we wait with Christ in ‘Mary-darkness, faith’s walled place’. This is a metaphysical use of metaphor which is at once complex and sensuous. The suffering which is an inescapable component of life is conveyed unflinchingly by the words ‘darkness’ and ‘walled’. The negative connotations of both these words are sensuously present in the poem but their radiant antidotes lie right beside them to unsay their gravity even as they state it: the ‘darkness’ is ‘Mary-darkness’, and the ‘walled place’ is ‘faith’s walled place’.

The attitude of reverent restraint that Newman considers to be proper to speech about God can be seen in Powers’ masterly understatement in her line ‘But only now, with inward jubilee’. ‘Jubilee’ carries connotations of extreme joy and celebration, but it also gestures to the calibre of the joy it denotes: it is solemn joy, which shows a fitting sense of the splendour of its occasion. Here it is occasioned by

earth’s most amazing knowledge:

someone is hidden in this dark with me.

Again Powers uses understatement to convey emotion: the full weight of her reverent wonderment and worshipful awe is carried by her use of italics, and all the majestic and innumerable titles of God Himself she subsumes into one entirely unassuming word ‘someone’.

This very near approach to the ineffable in language that is simultaneously restrained and evocative is characteristic of metaphysical poetry. This poem requires something of the ‘demanding energetic mental gymnastics’ of the reader (Poplawski 2008: 203), that is a frequent characteristic of metaphysical poetry.
Powers’ poetry prompts ‘ways of knowing that are not quantifiable and witness[es] to that which escapes analysis: to the unimaginable beyond our imaginations, to the unspoken where words cannot reach, to that which can be glimpsed only “through a glass darkly”, to the reality beyond the mosaic of all our human attempts at reflection, which one day we hope to “know fully”, to see “face to face”’.\(^{35}\) (Carey 2012: 354). In other words, it is metaphysical.

Texts such as these poems are particularly susceptible to religious readings and they represent their reading communities’ mode of alluding to the ‘conceivable which cannot be presented’ (Detweiler 1989: 176). My contention is that Powers is alluding to the ‘conceivable which cannot be presented’ but, that, paradoxically, in a real sense she does present it. This is metaphysical paradox.

This chapter has begun a description of a Christian theory of reading by making eight points about such a theory, supported by analysis of Powers’ poetry.

\(^{35}\) 1 Corinthians 13: 12.
CHAPTER FOUR: FURTHER ASPECTS OF A CHRISTIAN THEORY OF READING

‘the communion of mystic with material in language drawn from both worlds’  
(Banzer 1998: 419)

This chapter develops and concludes my description of a Christian theory of reading by means of making eight more points about the nature of such a theory, as illustrated by further analysis of the metaphysical characteristics of Powers’ work.

The first of the aspects of a Christian theory of reading examined in this chapter is that such a theory maintains that meaning is ‘both immanent and transcendent at the same time’ (Fiddes 2000: 1). Powers’ poem ‘The Cloud of Carmel’ is an example of the transcendent quality which lies at the heart of her metaphysical poetry:

‘The Lord promised that He would dwell in a cloud’.
(2 Chronicles 6: 1)

Symbol of star or lily of the snows,  
rainbow or root or vine or fruit-filled tree:  
these image the immaculate to me  
less than a little cloud, a little light cloud rising  
from Orient waters cleft by prophecy.  
And as the Virgin in a most surprising  
maternity bore God and our doomed race,  
I who bear God in the mysteries of grace  
beseech her: Cloud, encompass God and me.

Nothing defiled can touch the cloud of Mary.  
God as a child willed to be safe in her,  
and the Divine Indweller sets His throne  
deep in a cloud in me, His sanctuary.  
I pray, O wrap me, Cloud, ... light Cloud of Carmel  
within whose purity my vows were sown  
to lift their secrecies to God alone.  
Say to my soul, the timorous and small  
house of a presence that it cannot see  
and frightened acre of a Deity,  
say in the fullness of your clemency:  
I have enclosed you all.  
You are in whiteness of a lighted lamb wool;  
you are in softness of a summer wind lull.
O hut of God, deepen your faith anew.
Enfolded in this motherhood of mine,
all that is beautiful and all divine
is safe in you.

There is an element of metaphysical wit in the calm phrase, ‘a most surprising maternity’, by means of which Powers states the astonishing nature of the Virgin birth by understating it. This poem ‘pushes language to its limits’ in striking metaphysical conceits: Powers, with reverent audacity, compares herself to the Virgin, in that,

as the Virgin in a most surprising
maternity bore God and our doomed race,

so she (and by extension, we, if we so choose), also

bear God, in the mysteries of grace.

Powers’ logic in this extended metaphor is witty in the metaphysical sense of wit as unusual and intellectual: Mary, by God’s grace, is forever pure by virtue of her immaculate conception36 because

God as a child willed to be safe in her.

Scripture tells us that God lives within us, and Powers reiterates this in her line

He sets His throne in me, His sanctuary.

Therefore, as He is safe in Mary’s purity, because she is utterly pure entirely by His grace, we too are ‘enclosed’ and safe in her, by His grace, because He is enclosed within us. We, together with God, then, the poem maintains, are deep in the cloud of perfect purity that is the Virgin. This poem not only pushes language ‘to its limits’ in this syllogism, but it also ‘delights by unexpected felicities of phrase’: Powers calls her soul ‘the timorous and small house of a Presence it cannot see’; the ‘frightened acre of

36 The Roman Catholic doctrine which holds that Mary, by God’s grace, was sinless from the moment of her conception because she was to be the Mother of Christ.
a Deity’; and the ‘hut of God’. And it instructs ‘by sweetly ordering its objects’ (McDermott 2009: 46), as can be seen, for example, in its closing lines where it urges us to deepen [our] faith anew because

all that is beautiful and all divine
is safe in [us]

because He is in us and we, with Him, are ‘enclosed’ in her.

Fiddes says that because meaning is ‘immanent and transcendent at the same time it can be transformative and healing as well as entertaining’ (2000: 1). This is illustrated in Powers’ tenderly consoling poem ‘For a Silent Poet’:

Weep not that visit of a brief duration.
You are a guest yourself and you must know
that in you lie the instincts of migration,
and where the bird went, one day you will go.

And her poem ‘The Place of Splendor’ is also deeply comforting:

That light-swept shore
will shame the data of grief upon your scroll.
Child, have none told you? God is in your soul;

as are her lines from ‘Los Angeles Earthquake’:

If I could find him, wakeful still with pain,
harrried by dreams, discomfited by fear,
I think I could reassure him now:
new earth, new heaven. See the end is sweet.

Analysis of these poems has shown that in Powers’ metaphysical poetry, meaning is both ‘immanent and transcendent at the same time’.

Another aspect of a Christian theory of reading is that it is based on theology’s recognition of the importance of writing as a means to contemplate God. In the Ignation Exercises, for instance, written by St Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556) the
participant is urged to enter imaginatively into the gospel story of Jesus in order to
grow in love for God and in discernment of His will. We see Powers doing this in her
poem ‘The Visitation Journey’:

The second bead: scene of the lovely journey
of Lady Mary, on whom artists confer
a blue silk gown, a day pouring out Springtime,
and birds singing and flowers bowing to her.

Rather, I see a girl upon a donkey
and her too held by what was said to mind
how the sky was or if the grass was growing.
I doubt the flowers; I doubt the road was kind.

‘Love hurried forth to serve’ I read, approving.
But also see, with thoughts blown past her youth,
a girl riding upon a jolting donkey
and riding further and further into the truth.

In this metaphysical poem about Mary riding on a donkey to visit her cousin, Elizabeth,
the reader of the poem is led in effect to meditate on a spiritual truth. The poem uses
the saying of the rosary as a setting for its meditation: ‘The second bead’. The first will
have been meditation on the annunciation to the young girl of her astonishing option
to become the mother of Christ. Now she is pregnant and travelling to visit her elderly
cousin, who is also astonishingly, but not as astonishingly, pregnant. Powers presents
pious tradition in her first stanza:

Scene of the lovely journey
of Lady Mary

only to gently undermine it: the words ‘a jolting donkey’ dismantle the sentimentality
of ‘lovely journey’, and the line ‘I see a girl upon a donkey’ does the same to the
conventional reverence of the title ‘Lady Mary’, though the overall tenor of the poem is
the very opposite of irreverent. The first stanza paints the picture with the pretty
piousness of the so called ‘holy cards’\(^{37}\) of a traditional Roman Catholic childhood:

\(^{37}\) Small devotional pictures, often sentimental, intended to be used as aids to prayer.
a blue silk gown, a day pouring out Springtime,  
and birds singing and flowers bowing to her.

The metaphysical effect of the poem is to deconstruct such facile religiosity to order to  
lay bare the immeasurable courage and miracle that inform the scene. Instead of the  
charming pastel, Powers presents ‘a girl upon a donkey’. The depths of the  
psychological impact of the recent events of her life, the visit from an angel, the  
proposition put before her to become the mother of the Saviour, pregnancy by the  
Holy Spirit though yet a virgin, and the no doubt immensely demanding emotional  
effect of all this on her relationship with her fiancé, Joseph, her family and her  
neighbours, Powers conveys with quiet compassion:

    her too held by what was said to mind  
    how the sky was or if the grass was growing.

Powers’ tone sharpens wryly as she comments on trite religiosity:

    I doubt the flowers; I doubt the road was kind.

There is also metaphorical understatement in the words ‘I doubt the road was kind’:  
the road that Mary embarked upon when she assented to the divine proposition would  
prove to be, in the words of the prophet Simeon, ‘a sword’ to ‘pierce’ her soul

Powers lines,

    with thoughts blown past her youth,  
    a girl riding upon a jolting donkey,

evoke compassion for the extreme youth and vulnerability of the girl so astoundingly  
called. The last line of the poem carries the full metaphysical weight of the meditation:  
Mary is

    riding further and further into the truth.

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38 Luke 2:35: And a sword will pierce your own soul too.
This truth, at present in the poem an embryo in a young girl’s womb, is salvation history in its entirety: the Birth of Christ, the Cross of Christ, the Resurrection of Christ, and ultimately the Second Coming of Christ. It is the subject matter of Powers’ metaphysical poetry.

Powers’ poem ‘Shining Quarry’ marks an intrusion of mystery into human language. It is in fact a ‘mastering intrusion’ which ‘shifts the light’ by which we see (Steiner 1989: 143) and it might be said to demonstrate incontrovertibly the efficacy of writing as a means to contemplate God:

Since the luminous great wings of wonder stirred
over me in the twilight I have known
the Holy Spirit is the Poet’s Bird.

Since in a wilderness I wandered near
a shining stag, this wisdom is my own:
the Holy Spirit is the Hunter’s Deer.

And in the dark in all enchanted lands
I know the Spirit is that Burning Bush
toward which the artist gropes with outstretched hands.

Upon the waters once and then again
I saw the Spirit in a silver rush
rise like the Quarry of the Fisherman.
Yet this I know: no arrows of desire
can wound Him, nor a bright intrepid spear;
He is not seen by any torch of fire,

nor can they find Him who go wandering far;
His habitat is wonderfully near
in each soul’s thicket ‘neath its deepest star.
Let those who seek come home through the vain years
to where the Spirit waits a shining captive.
This is the hunt most worth of all tears.
Bearing their nets celestial, let them come
and take their Quarry on the fields of rapture
that lie beyond the last gold pendulum.

This poem describes a mystical experience of the divine poetry, the stirring of the ‘luminous great wings of wonder’ in ‘the twilight’, which can only be apprehended by
means of metaphor, the poet’s armour for venturing into the territory of the numinous. In ‘the twilight’, God is the Poet, The Holy Spirit is His Bird. The metaphor shifts in the second stanza: now, ‘in the wilderness’, God is the Hunter, and the Holy Spirit is His Deer, His ‘shining stag’. Then, in the third stanza, ‘in the dark in all enchanted lands’, the Spirit is

that Burning Bush39
toward which the artist gropes with outstretched hands.

There is a quiet touch of wry metaphysical wit here: Powers is herself an artist who ‘gropes with outstretched hands’ toward ‘that Burning Bush’. This could in fact be said to be a description of her life’s work.

In the fourth stanza the Spirit can be seen by the light of metaphor as a shining silver Fish ‘upon the waters once and then again.’ In these lines the poet seeks to apprehend the metaphysical by means of metaphor, she ‘gropes with outstretched hands toward the Burning Bush’. Her use of metaphor makes a fissure between time and eternity and allows a ‘mastering intrusion’ to take place.

The theology of the poem gathers in the fourth stanza:

Yet this I know: no arrows of desire
    can wound Him, nor a bright intrepid spear;
He is not seen by any torch of fire,
nor can they find Him who go wandering far.

With metaphysical wit Powers deconstructs her own metaphors: though He is a Bird, a Deer, a Fish, always a Quarry, yet He cannot be wounded by an arrow, nor by a spear, nor can He be seen by the light of any torch, nor be found by ‘wandering far’. Now all the poet’s human assumptions are inverted in a metaphorical reordering of insight. The intimations of divinity that the poet has experienced she assumes have come from far and away: from the dim ‘twilight’, from ‘the wilderness’, from ‘the dark in all

39 Exodus 3: 2, 4: There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. When the Lord saw he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush.
enchanted lands’, from ‘upon the waters’. In fact, however, ‘His habitat is wonderfully near’. This is metaphysical concision and masterly understatement, theology presented as quiet simplicity: ‘habitat’ and ‘near’ are homely words, by their very nature close to us, familiar and apprehensible.

The word ‘wonderful’ here serves two purposes: firstly, it proclaims the astonishing miracle of just Who has a ‘habitat’ ‘near’ to us: it is none less than the Holy Spirit Himself. His luminescent attributes, which the earlier stanzas have conveyed with gathering lustre in the words ‘luminous’, ‘great’, ‘wonder’, ‘shining’, ‘enchanted’, ‘Burning Bush’ and ‘silver’, are all alluded to here in the word ‘wonderfully’, if it is read attentively. The content of the word, that is, the attributes of the Holy Spirit, is full of wonder, and it may occasion wonder in one who reads it attentively. And secondly, the word ‘wonderful’ comments on the miracle that the poet is about to state: that this lambent Spirit is a ‘shining captive’ right within ‘each soul’. There is a metaphysical paradox here: the Spirit Who can be neither wounded, nor seen, nor found, in fact ‘waits’, ‘captive’, to be ‘taken’, in the soul of a lover of God. Such a lover does not ‘take’ Him by virtue of any skill, or insight, of her own. Instead He surrenders voluntarily to the ‘celestial’ nets woven of love and tears. The only appropriate response to the astonishing religious truth Powers alludes to in metaphor here is wonder. Powers’ writing in this poem may justly be said to contemplate God.

The psychological insight that is characteristic of metaphysical poetry underlies the last three stanzas, as well as metaphysical complexity, even wit: the Spirit is in each soul, but ‘in each soul’s thicket ‘neath its deepest star’. Holiness is not easy or cheap: it is difficult and exhausting and probably wounding to struggle through a thicket, and the connotations of ‘deepest star’ too carry a sense of depths of darkness to be traversed in quest of the ‘deepest star’. There is a Cross to be taken up and carried here. All the sad desolation and weary frustration that comprise so much of human life lie in Powers’ laconic description: ‘the vain years’. But the hope that is the heart of the Christian faith lies in the word ‘home’. This word ideally carries all the dearest

40 Luke 9:23: Then he said to them all: ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me’.
connotations of safety and love known to man, and is the absolute antidote to the misery of ‘the vain years’. The poem gathers to its metaphysical resolution, which is that the Spirit is the One who awaits us within ourselves. Furthermore, He is held captive there by His love for us. We have only to ‘seek’ Him to be able ‘take’ Him. It is true that this ‘hunt’ will occasion ‘tears’, the mystery of suffering in human life is never elided by Powers. But the last stanza attests to the transcendent joy and beauty that will attend the final outcome of this hunt, when time as we know it is over, ‘beyond the last gold pendulum’, in a radiant metaphor that presents the ‘conceivable which cannot be presented’ (Detweiler and Doty 1990: 176): we will take our quarry, should we so choose,

on the fields of rapture
that lie beyond the last gold pendulum.

These poems demonstrate resplendently the importance of writing as a means to contemplate God.

Thirdly, a Christian theory of reading maintains that ‘the indiscretion of serious art and literature and music is total. It queries the last privacies of our existence’ (Steiner 1989: 142). This interrogation of ‘the last privacies of our existence’, as in poems which deal with metaphysical issues such as love, faith, suffering and death, makes Powers’ poetry metaphysical. The metaphysical claim to truth, which Powers makes throughout her poetry, ‘can occasion scorn and rejection’, as Steiner points out. The ‘embarrassment we feel in bearing witness to the poetic, to the entrance into our lives of the mystery of otherness in art and in music, is of a metaphysical-religious kind’ (1989: 178). Powers’ poetry occupies this ‘metaphysical-religious’ site, a point of entrance into our lives of mystery. Steiner maintains that we

...
Powers reveals the beauty of this ‘mystery’ in her poem ‘This is a Beautiful Time’, in an ardent bid to woo us into a genuine response to the ‘entrance into our lives of mystery’:

This is a beautiful time, this last age, the age of the Holy Spirit. This is the long-awaited day of His reign in our souls through grace. He is crying to every soul that is walled: Open to Me, My spouse, My sister. And once inside, He is calling again: Come to Me here in this secret place. Oh, hear Him tonight crying all over the world a last desperate summons of love to a dying race.

Acres are we to be gathered for God: He would pour out His measureless morning upon divinised lands, bought by blood, to their Purchaser given. Oh, hear Him within you speaking this infinite love, moving like some divine and audible leaven lifting the sky of the soul with expansion of light, shaping new heights and new depths, and, at your stir of assent, spreading the mountains with flame, filling the hollows with heaven.

Powers’ longing to elicit a ‘stir of assent’ from her reader, to move her reader into acquiescing to ‘the indiscretion’ of this instance of ‘serious art’ as it ‘queries the last privacies of our existence’ (1989: 142) in the ‘secret place’ that is the soul, wells up in the last lines of the first stanza:

Oh, hear Him tonight crying all over the world a last desperate summons of love to a dying race.

She goes on in striking metaphysical metaphor:

Acres are we to be gathered for God: He would pour out His measureless morning upon divinised lands.

Powers believes that God has sown us with divinity, watered us with perpetual morning with all its beauty and flawless freshness, and now longs to reap what He has
sown. Her astonishing metaphysical claim is that God longs for us. Again in stanza two
her plea sounds:

    Oh, hear Him within you speaking this infinite love

and again a metaphysical use of imagery carries the theology:

    moving like some divine and audible leaven
    lifting the sky of the soul with expansion of light.

As leaven causes the homely matter of flour to rise, so, Powers believes, the loving
voice of God causes our souls housed in homely bodies to lift with ‘expansions of light’.
These ‘expansions of light’ are the light of the ‘perpetual morning’ poured out on us.
The last two lines of the poem offer a dramatic theological insight in imagery that is
metaphysical in its vision and vivid audacity:

    and, at your stir of assent,
    spreading the mountains with flame, filling the hollows with heaven.

Volumes of theology about the radical generosity of the love of God for mankind lie in
the quiet contrast set up between the ‘stir of assent’, in all the puny smallness of ‘stir’,
required of mankind, and the response of Divine love which spreads mountains with
flame and fills valleys with heaven. Certainly this is poetry which deals in metaphysical
matters of love and eternity, and in which the ‘sonority’ of ‘ordered harmony stirs up
the hearing heart within itself [and] bewitches it’ (Von Balthasar 1984: 395) so that in
our inmost beings we may be called into response.

Powers’ poem ‘Without Beauty’ also interrogates one of ‘the last privacies of our
existence’. It is a delineation of the humiliation which she sees as a prerequisite for
openness to salvation: her spirit ‘travels unmolested’ through the perils of temptation
once she sees

    herself divested
    of every comeliness on earth.
Her ageing body, which the contemporary West finds so shameful, she depicts with clear-eyed unsentimentality:

The body may grow poor and charmless, and age inscribe its added jest.

Her essential ignorance too, despite any semblance of learning, she acknowledges with wry self-irony:

the mind may stand, a not too harmless buffoon in its own blunders dressed.

Her selfishness she demolishes with ruthlessness:

The troublous heart that hurried after each silly windfall of no gain may starve and die.

Easy emotion that clouds the heart and mind with facile sentimentality she disarms with clear-eyed insight:

Lament and laughter now ply their crafty trades in vain.

She goes on in lines that have the difficulty characteristic of metaphysical poetry:

Unloveliness becomes her treasure whom God’s attraction pleases well. She is His contrast and His pleasure Whose beauty captured her from hell.

This is no masochistic glorification of physical, intellectual and emotional ‘unloveliness’ for its own sake. Neither is it the egotistical charade of humility which ‘makes a little feast of pleasure out of a woe she calls humility’ (‘Old Woman’). It is rather Powers’ keen understanding that anything that we allow to mask God’s beauty from us keeps Him from ‘capturing’ us, so that if His ‘attraction’ does not ‘please [us] well’ then the alternative for us, by our own choice, is hell, because, Powers believes, life without God
is hell. The simple claim made by the poem is that the alternative to God is hell. If He is all beauty, then where He is not is utterly without beauty. The opening lines of the fifth stanza offer a resplendent description of a life of faith in a definition of the blessed poverty of spirit referred to by Jesus in the ‘Sermon on the Mount’:41

And though she walks in rags and tatters, her face is to a sunset turned.

The final stanza delineates a spirit entirely open to God in a mystical experience of ecstatic union with God:

For God within her stoops to sharing
the splendor that is His alone
which still were hid had she come bearing
one spurious beauty of her own.

Powers makes clear that God does not dislike human vanity because He is rigidly intolerant or pettily judgemental but because it keeps people from Him. She believes that any ‘spurious’ beauty we lay complacent claim to clutters up our spirits and renders us unable to see His beauty, which may, if we acquiesce, ‘capture’ us ‘from hell’.

The poem ‘Obscurity’ could be said to complement this poem: it describes by means of paradoxical inversions one who has been ‘divested’ of every ‘spurious beauty’ and who is thus ‘released’ into the blessed ‘anonymity’ of the ‘multitude’ who ‘serve unseen’:

Obscurity becomes the final peace.
The hidden then are the elect, the free.
They leave our garish noon and find release
in evening’s gift of anonymity.
Lost, not in loneness but in multitude,
they serve unseen without the noise of name.
Should you disdain them, ponder for your good:
it was in this way that the angels came.

41 Matthew 5: 3: Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
This poem also interrogates one of ‘the last privacies of our existence’: our pride. The recognition which pride and self-esteem demand so urgently is here radically deconstructed by means of the quiet assertion of its absolute opposite: the ‘hidden’ are ‘the elect’; those not in the spotlight of the ‘garish noon’ but in the ‘gift’ of the shadows are the ‘free’; they appear ‘lost’ but appearances are deceptive – this lostness is in fact membership of the ‘multitude’ who ‘serve unseen’ in peace, without ‘the noise’ of the clamorous ego. Powers’ litany of the beauties of quiet humility sharpens a little with rather stern irony in the closing two lines: in case we feel superior to such meek servants she exhorts us to remember the angels who came in obscurity to Abraham. The humble thus have the last resplendent word in this small but telling poem. They may not be in the company of the famous and the powerful but they are in the company of the angels.

Steiner believes that the neglect of the Humanities in contemporary culture and society ‘implicates that of the humane’ so that

we flinch from the immediate pressures of mystery in poetic, in aesthetic acts of creation as we do from the realisation of our diminished humanity, from the often harsh, imperious radiance of sheer presence. Beauty can, indeed, be ‘terribly born’, as Yeats says. The news brought by annunciations not only stays new; it can be unendurable in its ambiguity. So we slide past the singing rocks, their song stifled, or made artifice, by secular gloss and critique (1989: 49).

In Powers’ poetry we may inhabit ‘the domain of the singing rocks’. This is a reference to the so called Singing Rocks of Silence in Meteora, Greece. The ancient bells from the monasteries of Meteora echo wistfully amongst the rocks, calling the faithful to prayer. Powers’ poems exercise a similar function, as seen, for example, in the poem ‘Night Prayer: to the Prophet Elijah’, which calls the reader out

over the sill of time

into what Powers calls in her poem ‘Come is the Love Song’

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42 Genesis 18: 4-8.
the flood of some amazing
personal Pentecost.

These poems have shown that ‘the indiscretion of serious art and literature and music is total. It queries the last privacies of our existence’ (Steiner 1989: 142).

A fourth attribute of a Christian theory of reading that is evident in Powers’ work is that she is ‘an expander of consciousness’. David Jasper points out in the book, *Images of Belief in Literature*, that any ‘attempt to discover the unknown, or reveal the transcendent, unless it is accompanied and subserved by [a] passion for form, can end in cliché, since, as Coleridge remarks, we stop in the sense of life just where we are not forced to go on. It is then that we need the expanders of consciousness – sorrow, sickness, poetry and religion’ (1984: 20). This is the metaphysical area in which Powers works. The poem ‘The Heart Can Set Its Boundaries’ is deceptively simple but metaphysical complexity underlies the casual tone and challenges complacency:

The heart can set its boundaries
on mortal acres without fear.
Descent of skies, cascade of seas
are not to be expected here.

The heart can take a human love
to feed and shelter, if it will,
not think to see its cities move
in avalanches down a hill.

Only when God is passing by,
and is invited in to stay
is there a split of earth and sky.
Boundaries leap and rush away,

and wound and chaos come to be
where once a world lay, still and small.
But how else could Infinity
enter what is dimensional?

The domesticated metaphor of neatly bordered farm land denoting the emotional scope of a life unshaken by faith is shattered by the explosive metaphors of boundless power and energy used to denote the effects of the Spirit: ‘descent of skies, cascades
of seas ... avalanches down a hill’. The entirely life-changing result of an invitation to
God ‘to stay’ is cataclysmic:

    a split of earth and sky.
    Boundaries leap and rush away.

Metaphysical wit and near or seeming effrontery lie in the casual, conversational tone
that ushers in this upheaval:

    Only when God is passing by,
    and is invited in to stay.

Theological paradox follows quietly in the masterly understatement of the lines that
describe the effects of a commitment to faith:

    wound and chaos come to be
    where once a world lay, still and small.

This invitation is to a God who has nowhere to lay His head, and who expects His
companions to carry a Cross, which is the ultimate expander of consciousness, thus
‘wound and chaos come to be’. The resplendent paradox that inhabits Powers’ clear-
eyed acknowledgement of the ‘wound and chaos’ that taking up the Cross entails is the
fact that this same Cross is paradoxically ‘the most beautiful form in creation’ (Von
Balthasar 1984: 26). Powers closes her short meditation on the uncomfortable fruits of
faith by posing a quiet and logical metaphysical question:

    But how else could Infinity
    enter what is dimensional?

Certainly, in my opinion, this poem could be said to expand consciousness. According
to Detweiler, who uses a phrase of Lyotard’s, such writing alludes to the ‘conceivable
which cannot be presented’ (Detweiler and Doty 1990: 176). It ‘makes the footfall of
meaning enigmatically lustrous’ (Steiner 1989: 161).
In the following stanzas from her poem ‘The Master Beggar’ Powers expands consciousness into an almost unbearable confrontation with the reality of Christ:

Worse than the poorest mendicant alive,
the pencil man, the blind man with his breath
of music shaming all who do not give,
are You to me, Jesus of Nazareth.

Must You take up Your post on every block
of every street? Do I have no release?
Is there no room on earth that I can lock
to Your sad face, Your pitiful whisper ‘Please’?

I seek the counters of time’s gleaming store
but make no purchases, for You are there.
How can I waste one coin while You implore
with tear-soiled cheeks and dark blood-matted hair?

Jesus, my beggar, what would You have of me?
Father and mother? The lover I longed to know?
The child I would have cherished tenderly?
Even the blood that through my heart’s valves flow?

This may be referred to as a consciousness-expanding instance of what Morneau calls Powers’ ‘low Christology’ (Audio-Cassette: 1989) in which she describes Jesus of Nazareth as a tormenting Beggar Who ‘shames’ all who do not give themselves to Him by means of the persistence of His love. He takes up His post on every block
of every street
so that we ‘have no release’. Her groan of exasperation speaks for every man:

Is there no room on earth that I can lock
to Your sad face, Your pitiful whisper ‘Please’?

She portrays Christ in this poem as a despoiler of hedonistic self-indulgence:

I seek the counters of time’s gleaming store
but make no purchases, for You are there.
She conveys the seductive luxury of consumerism in her adjective ‘gleaming’ and her noun ‘store’. These words come out of what Fromm\(^43\) calls the ‘mode of having’, to be more fully discussed in Chapter Five. But the pleasure of acquisition she shows as spoilt by her description of Christ as coming to us out of the ‘mode of being’ (2002: 20), which is the mode of the verb: He implores, He weeps, He bleeds. This is not comfortable for us, because of our consciences, and thus the poem, in inducing shame, remorse and an inescapable awareness of the ubiquitousness of poverty, expands consciousness.

The poem ‘Robin at Dusk’ evokes the wistful twinge of longing for eternity which beauty and twilight can arouse in us, thus expanding our consciousness of the metaphysical, even if only momentarily:

I can go starved the whole day long,  
draining a stone, eating a husk,  
and never hunger till a song  
breaks from a robin’s throat at dusk.

I am reminded only then  
how far from day and human speech,  
how far from the loud world of men  
lies the bright dream I strain to reach.

Oh, that a song of mine could burn  
the air with beauty so intense,  
sung with a robin’s unconcern  
for any mortal audience!  
Perhaps I shall learn presently  
his secret when the shadows stir,  
and I shall make one song and be  
aware of but one Listener.

Powers offers a metaphysical resolution to her metaphysical meditation about the mysteriously unsettling effect of beauty: only ‘one song’, sung for ‘but one Listener’, can assuage that longing.

\(^{43}\)Erich Fromm, 1900-1980. Sociologist and psychoanalyst. An opponent of Adolf Hitler, Fromm emigrated from Germany to the United States in 1934, and from there to Switzerland.
Jasper quotes a line from a letter Blake wrote in 1800 to William Hayley: ‘Even in this world by it I am the companion of angels’ (2004: 144). This line could, in my opinion, be said to sum up Powers’ oeuvre. Powers is acutely aware of the spiritual, in this case of angels, and a close reader of her work is unlikely to remain oblivious of their awesome radiance even ‘in this world’:

I walk in a cloud of angels.  
I move, encircled by light,  
blinded by glowing faces,  
lost and bewildered in the motion of wings,  
stricken by music too sublime to bear.  
Splendor is everywhere.  
‘In a Cloud of Angels’;

angels chief in grace  
who stir when Splendor breathes His name  
and wake and slumber in His flame  
alone use wings to hide their face.  
‘Like the Bright Seraphim’;

Never go anywhere without the angels  
who watch God’s face and listen to be sought.  
The angels of the Lord encamp around you  
in any place you pitch your tents for prayer.  
Know that your soul takes radiance from the angels.  
‘Ministering Spirits’;

and

O heart believe. The great winged prince of heaven  
watches the Queen’s child with a warrior’s eye  
and lifts his flaming spear and comes like lightning  
at the first cry.  
‘Michael’.

Blake’s words ‘by it’ in his comment ‘Even in this world by it I am the companion of angels’ are important. He does not say that it is in spite of ‘this world’ that we are ‘the companion[s] of angels, he says that ‘by it’ (my emphasis) we are the companions of angels. This is why metaphysical poetry is rooted in the ordinary and the everyday, as
this is the only place where human beings can perceive and encounter God. As Powers says in her poem ‘The Flower of Love’, we can

[re]create, in even this trivial hour,  
the Eden story.  
Blessed are they who stand upon their vow  
and are insistent  
that love in this bleak here, this barren now  
become existent.

In his book *The Sacred Desert*, Jasper says that Eternity becomes present in moments of real time (2004: 114). This can be seen in these words:

love in this bleak here, this barren now  
become[s] existent.  
‘The Flower of Love’

A passage from Newman is relevant to this examination of Powers’ metaphysical perception of the world:

I viewed them [angels] as carrying on the Economy of the Visible World. I considered them as the real causes of motion, light, and life, and of those elementary principles of the physical universe, which, when offered in their developments to our senses, suggest to us the motion of cause and effect, and of what are called the laws of nature. Every breath of air and ray of light and heat, every beautiful prospect is, as it were, the skirts of their garments, the waving of the robes of those whose faces see God (1976: 18).

Powers’ poetry, in its recognition of both the ‘love’ and the ‘bleak here’, the ‘barren now’, can be seen to be rooted in the faith which, O Gorman notes, Pope Benedict XVI recently reaffirmed as ‘the religion of the great et et, or both/and, the religion of synthesis. [Powers’] work is both physical and metaphysical, both temporal and transcendent’ (O’Gorman 2012: 347). In it ‘eternity becomes present in moments of real time’ (Jasper 2004: 114).

These poems have demonstrated that Powers’ work is ‘an expander of consciousness’, in that it is poetry which ‘discover[s] the unknown, [and] reveal[s] the transcendent’,
and which does not allow us to ‘stop in the sense of life just where we are not forced to go on’ (Jasper 1984: 20).

A further characteristic of a Christian theory of reading is the assumption that though the ‘pertinent categories of inference and felt intelligibility are theological and metaphysical’ they ‘inhere in language’ (Steiner 1989: 50). The categories of meaning with which this thesis is concerned are metaphysical, and the access to them, for the purposes of this thesis, is in the language. We are in this theological/metaphysical area in a Powers poem, for example in the poem ‘In Too Much Light’:

The Magi had only one star to follow,  
a single sanctuary lamp hung low,  
gold ornament in the astonished air.  
I am confounded in this latter day;  
I find stars everywhere.

Rumor locates the presence of a night  
out past the loss of perishable sun  
where, round midnight, I shall come to see  
that all the stars are one.

I long for this night of the onement of the stars  
when days of scattered shining are my lot  
and my confusion. Yet faith even here  
burns her throat dry, cries: on this very spot  
of mornings, see, there is not any place  
when the sought Word is not.  
Under and over, in and out, this morn  
flawlessly, purely, wakes the newly born.  
Behold, all places which have light in them  
truly are Bethlehem.

Immediately as this poem opens we are in the presence of the theological and the metaphysical. A sanctuary lamp signals the presence of the sacred. Thus the metaphor of the sanctuary lamp for the star that leads the Magi implicitly makes the claim to the Godhead of the Baby towards Whom the star leads them. The line which describes the star is delightfully metaphysical:

   gold ornament in the astonished air.
The connotations of ‘gold’ here are theological and they accrue to the attributes of Kingly Godhead in their implications of beauty and value, and the metaphor of ‘the astonished air’ carries with metaphysical wit the amazed intellectual acknowledgement of the astounding fact that God has been born in a manger – Creation, the air itself, stands ‘astonished’. The next two lines of the first stanza are a wry analysis of the confusion of aspirations spawned by modern living:

I am confounded in this latter day;  
I find stars everywhere.

The second stanza bears the hallmark of ‘difficulty’ that is often considered to be a characteristic of metaphysical poetry:

Rumor locates the presence of a night  
out past the loss of perishable sun  
where, round midnight, I shall come to see  
that all the stars are one.

The theology in this stanza is complex and it is also slyly witty: ‘Rumor’ has it – this suggests, in an ironic nod to commonly-held contemporary opinion, that this may or may not be true – but the words ‘I shall come to see’ in the third line make an unequivocal claim to unshaken faith. The ‘perishable sun’ denotes the end of the world as we know it, the end of the days of life on earth. ‘[R]ound midnight’ is the end of every day, but here, when the sun itself is lost, it is the end of all days. The last line of this stanza is pure metaphysics: beyond the lost ‘perishable sun’ can only be ‘a night’. Sunless ‘night’ denotes absolute darkness, in which one naturally cannot see. But not this sunless night. This ‘night’ is in fact the antithesis of darkness, a darkness in which we ‘shall come to see’, and what we shall come to see, instead of absolute darkness, is one absolute light: ‘all the stars are one’.

The language here gestures towards the theology carried by the next long stanza: the first stanza showed the poet ‘confounded’ by myriad seeming stars, in contrast to the simplicity of the ‘one only star’ the Magi had to follow, but the statement of faith made in stanza two, ‘I shall come to see’, has calmed the poet, and what follows in stanza
three is an affirmation of Christ as the unassailable Light of the world. Religious ardour is succinctly conveyed in the opening words: ‘I long’. The words ‘this night of the onement of the stars’ are metaphysical in their simultaneous metaphorical and theological effect. The intellectual theological meaning is complex: it is death, it is the end of a life, it is the end of life as we know it on earth, it is a night that is paradoxically utterly light filled; and, at the same time, the metaphorical splendour of the amalgamation of all the starlight of the universe into a radiant ‘onement’ is, as line three of stanza one puts it with wry understatement, astonishing. The next lines of this stanza are a striking description and analysis of human life: ‘days of scattered shining are my lot and my confusion’. But, as the meditation moves towards its resolution in the last line of the poem, the ‘scattered shining’ is no longer ‘confounding’ but, seen with the eyes of faith, deeply consoling:

see, there is not any place
when the sought Word is not.

The consolation lies in the words ‘not any place’, and orthodox doctrine in the word ‘sought’: scripture says ‘seek and you will find’. Free loving response to the invitation to salvation is necessary to the perception that ‘all the stars are one’. The poem closes on an ecstatic affirmation of the omnipresence of God: ‘Under and over, in and out’; with a description of the attributes of God: ‘flawless’ and ‘pure’; and with an analysis of the action of God: ‘wakes’; and the last line resolves the meditation by locating God securely in this world:

all places which have light in them
truly are Bethlehem.

The placing of the word ‘truly’ at the beginning of the last line makes an absolute statement of faith: Christ is born in every place where the light of His love shines, so that every love-filled place ‘truly’ is Bethlehem.

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44 John 8: 12: I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.
45 Matthew 7: 7.
This poem is what Steiner calls an ‘encounter with immediacy and transcendence in the aesthetic’ and any reading of it is, of necessity, logocentric. These qualities, its ‘immediacy and transcendence’, and its ‘logocentricity’, inhere in its language. The ‘pertinent categories of inference and felt intelligibility’ in this poem are ‘theological and metaphysical’ and they ‘inhere in language’ (1989: 50).

The theologian Rahner is explicit about an issue that I think throws light on the nature of Powers’ logocentric, metaphysical language:

the free fundamental act of existence [the allegiance to the all-embracing and unconditional hope engendered by the Resurrection] which can only be described haltingly – [but, in my view, by Powers, sometimes sublimely] – moves towards what we call God. I know that this word [God] is obscure, by definition the most obscure word there can be, the word that it is genuinely impossible to include among the other words of human language as one more word (1984: 6).

Rahner’s term ‘word’ raises a question about language that is recurrent in theology: Newman wrote that Christ brings us ‘a new language which sheds a new light on all that happens. Try to learn this language’ (Dessain 1962: 82); Weil demands that our language ‘be permeated in a new way by the completely universal love expected of us by Christ’ (1951: 47); and Pickstock construes language ‘as that which both signifies and provokes a beneficent mystery which is not wholly other from the sign, although it cannot be exhausted by the sign. Instead, the theological sign [for the purpose of this thesis, Powers’ writing about Christ], includes and repeats the mystery it receives, and as such, it reveals the nature of that divine mystery’ (1998: 267). This is an apt description of Powers’ poetry. This expresses the essence of the theory of reading in the light of which I read Powers as a metaphysical poet.

In the opinion of this study, then, when Powers writes about God in a poem, she is, as Pickstock contends about theological writing, receiving the ‘divine mystery’, and her writing is authentic from a metaphysical point of view because she is revealing in the writing ‘the nature of that divine mystery’; it is authentic because, as claimed by ‘Radical Orthodoxy’, there is no territory independent of God, and, as Plato thought and Pickstock maintains, the character of language is essentially doxological in that
‘language exists primarily for, and in the end only has meaning as, the praise of the divine’ (1998: xiii); it is authentic because, as Weil contends, ‘one can never wrestle enough with God if one does so out of pure regard for the truth. Christ likes us to prefer truth to Him because, before being Christ, He is truth. If one turns aside from Him to go towards the truth, one will not go far before falling into His arms’ (1951: 26). Thus Powers does not shrink from confronting the agonising mystery of suffering. Any rigorously determined effort to come to terms with this reason-bewildering paradox will return one sooner or later, in Weil’s beautiful and consoling phrase, ‘into His [Christ’s] arms’; and it is authentic because ‘the poetry of [her] inner soul, [her] mental attitude and bearing, the force and keenness of [her] logic and the beauty of [her] moral countenance are imaged in [her] language’ (Dessain 1962: 279).

Weil wrote in regard to a longing for truth, that ‘the conviction came to me that when one hungers for bread one does not receive stones’46 (1951: 54). Certainly Powers hungered for the bread of truth as she makes clear in her poem ‘Christ Is My Utmost Need’:

Christ is my utmost need.
I lift each breath, each beat for Him to bless,
knowing our language cannot overspeak
our frightening helplessness.

Certainly, union with God was Powers’ abiding concern as can be seen in her poems:

‘The Far Island’:

Heaven to me a mystic Erin is,
God’s sea-encircled dwelling, wholly lit
by its own inner and eternal day,
and all my birds of longing nest in it;

And ‘Millet’s “Feeding Her Birds”’:

my will
to take my given portion and be still;
or if there must be words, to speak none other

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46 Matthew 7: 9 Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone?
A Christian poet will of course have a basic, if not always serene, conviction that the sacred, hidden meaning of the world has been finally revealed in Christ. But poetry is not doctrine and the poet will use metaphorical language to approach mystery in evocative and allusive ways. This is what metaphysical poetry does, as Powers can be seen doing in, for example, her poem ‘The Evening Chimes’:

Music ingathers all, yet takes one only into its secret when the chimes begin. When that great rain of sound comes down, the lonely of spirit is elect and enters in. Our evening shines with bells; alone, apart, we listen, awed, to the antiphonal pealing of our hearts. Music by right is for the solitaries whom a long silence trains to the profound. The bells are ours; we come at the first airy rumor to drench our deserts with their sound. Yet anyone who listens may become hermit or anchorite under that shower when the great chimes-tree shakes its leaves of light.

It can justly be said of this poem in the scholar Yu’s words that ‘the miraculousness of the poetry lies in its transparent luminosity, which cannot be pieced together; it is like sound in the air, color in appearances, the moon in water, or, an image in the mirror; it has unlimited meaning. This poetry leaves no traces of its artistry or concern with technique’ (1978: 297). In this poem ‘intuitive apprehension of the essence of phenomena, fusion of emotion and scene constitute the resulting qualities of a poetry that is highly elusive, evocative, and seemingly effortless. It transcends the limits of mimetic description, purely personal emotion, and ultimately language itself’ (1978: 298).

This poem is certainly ‘highly elusive’ and ‘evocative’: the words ‘When that great rain of sound comes down’, and ‘Our evening shines with bells’, in my opinion, are instances of what Steiner calls ‘mastering intrusions’ which have the possibility to ‘alter’ in some real sense the way in which the attentive reader will henceforth listen.
The metaphor of the ‘deserts’, which are the spirits of the nuns, the dedicated lovers of God, ‘drenched’ with the sound of the bells, defies the reduction that is analysis.

Nonetheless, even though the poem ‘transcends the limits of mimetic description’, it yet has an intellectual paradox at its heart, as is typical of metaphysical poetry: the poem makes an assertion of ‘election’ which seems to exclude all but the entirely devoted lovers of God from this outpouring of grace made audible. Lines three and four speak of ‘the lonely of spirit’ as the ‘elect’, and the poem refines this description in an explicit reference to enclosed nuns (such as Carmelites) in the opening line of the second stanza:

Music by right is for the solitaries
whom a long silence trains to the profound.

Powers’ assertion of entitlement that could seem to be spiritual elitism is unequivocal in the words: ‘The bells are ours’. Yet the poem both reiterates and retracts its assertion of privileged status in what is a form of metaphysical wit in its closing lines: Powers has stated that the music of the bells belongs to the solitaries ‘by right’. She goes on to reaffirm that claim but broadens it as she rephrases it to include all single-minded lovers of God:

Yet anyone who listens may become
hermit or anchorite under that shower.

The metaphysical paradox lies quietly in the word ‘listens’: ‘hermits’ and ‘anchorites’ are dedicated to God. They therefore listen in a way not possible to listeners who are undedicated, distracted, with unquiet spirits not trained by ‘long silence’ to ‘the profound’. Thus Powers is not being spiritually exclusive. Anyone may indeed ‘listen’ to the music of the bells, but only those whose spirits have been attuned by long loving will hear it. They will in fact, by dint of personal dedication, if not by formal adherence to a religious order, be ‘solitaries’. In my opinion, the incandescent closing line of this poem, ‘when the great chimes-tree shakes its leaves of light’, can justly be described by
Steiner’s words, that the ‘aesthetic is the making formal of epiphany. There is a “shining through”’ (1989: 226).

This point about the language of metaphysical poetry has as a basic assumption that ‘although all human words can only point by way of analogy to the unique being of God, some images are felt to have an intrinsic relationship to the reality they express and so participate in the power of the divine to which they point’ (Fiddes 1991: 24). This I maintain is a metaphysical characteristic of language as used by Powers when she writes about God. Her words ‘act as media of the Spiritual Presence, not because of their own nature, but because they are used by the divine Spirit for a place of revelation’ (1991: 24).

This lambent quality which is evident in language ‘used by the divine Spirit for a place of revelation’ can be seen in the poem ‘The Cloister’:

Nobody lives in this shining house but God, though shadowy figures tremble to and fro. Over these cool grey stones that suffering made only the pierced feet of the Master go. A fire went through this place and gutted it; over the ruins a fog of silence spread. Nobody comes here but the pale young Christ Who loves a shelter uninhabited.

Powers’ metaphor for the soul is the deserted ruin of an ancient cloister which is only apparently deserted: it is in fact inhabited by

the pale young Christ Who loves a shelter uninhabited.

The metaphysical point of the poem is that in order to house the Christ the shelter must be uninhabited by any other preoccupation. This is the radical requirement of the
Gospel,\textsuperscript{47} and this scouring of everything that is not God is achieved by God the Holy Spirit, if He is invited in to stay: ‘A fire went through this place and gutted it’. But Powers opens her poem with a statement of the radiant outcome of such a whole-hearted commitment:

Nobody lives in this shining house but God.

If God is the sole inhabitant of a shelter it becomes ‘a shining house’, and by the light of this Light the metaphysical paradox is resolved: we are all members of the Body of Christ,\textsuperscript{48}, therefore, if He is the sole occupant of our soul, of the ‘shining house’, then all whom we love are there with us too, in that they are all members of His Body.

According to Fiddes ‘the [poem] can be understood as a kind of “grammar” which enables the reader to speak a language in which he would otherwise be dumb’ and which can have the ‘power to shape the imagination of the hearer’ (1991: 25). This is what Powers does in the poem ‘The Mystical Sparrow of St. John of the Cross’:

‘Lost in the fathomless abyss of God’  
\textit{-The Spiritual Canticle}

Distantly pure and high, a mountain sparrow  
is solitary in transfigured sky.  
A ball of bird melodious with God  
is lightsome in its love.  
Not to dear mate or comrade do I cry  
but to my own remote identity  
who knows my spirit as divinely summoned  
to gain that perch where no horizons lie.

Here is the King’s secret scattered when I focus  
unworthy song on one small eremite  
lost in infinities of airy desert  
where love is breathed out of the breast of light.  
For call, for meeting-place, good end and rest  
each has a symbol; each invokes a sign.

\textsuperscript{47} Matthew 10: 37: Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.  
\textsuperscript{48} Romans 12: 5: So in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.
I take a bird in vastness and on height
to mark my love. It sings its jubilation
alone upon the housetop of creation
where earth’s last finger touches the divine.

In my opinion this poem ‘can be understood as a kind of “grammar” which enables the reader to speak a language in which he would otherwise be dumb’. Powers’ chosen ‘sign’ or ‘symbol’ for love in this poem conveys to the close reader several of the attributes of God. Her words serve as a ‘grammar’ by means of which to speak about God. The bird is ‘solitary’. In the last resort the spirit must encounter God alone. A sparrow is not considered to be a beautiful bird, when rated by colour, size or gloss, yet love of God transforms it into melody embodied. It is ‘lightsome’ by virtue of love. Powers is using a mystical grammar here to describe the effects of the love for and of God. The bird with no beauty of its own is transfigured by divine love into melody and light, that is, it is made beautiful. The spiritual grammar in which this poem inheres completely defines human identity and destiny in one little feathered metaphor: ‘my spirit as divinely summoned to gain that perch where no horizons lie’.

A line from the poem could be used to describe both this poem and Powers’ poetry: ‘Here is the King’s secret scattered’. Later in this line Powers uses the word ‘focus’. This is the key to the ‘grammar’ of this poem: Powers is attending fully to, she is focusing on, the love of God in her chosen ‘symbol’, she is ‘invoking’ God in her ‘sign’ of the sparrow and the response she intuits is ‘love’, ‘breathed out of the breast of light’.

Though Powers, as an orthodox Christian, works from Christian doctrine, she also, as a poet, ‘works from human life and language in the raw state where ... expansive echoes are as yet unlimited by concept’ (Fiddes 1991: 25). This is the area in which metaphysical poetry works, at the ‘extreme metaphorical tip of language’ (Gallagher 2009: 37) and theology. In metaphysical poetry ‘the words mean things, and it is the things that matter’ (Clark 1982: 77). This is of course to read from a theory of reading which holds that meaningfulness inheres in words, as this thesis does.
Powers’ poem ‘Repairer of Fences’ ‘works from human life and language’ (Fiddes 1991: 25) to approach the numinous:

I am alone in the dark, and I am thinking
what darkness would be mine if I could see
the ruin I wrought in every place I wandered
and if I could not be
aware of One who follows after me.
Whom do I love, O God, when I love Thee?
The great Undoer who has torn apart
the walls I built against a human heart,
the Mender who has sewn together the hedges
through which I broke when I went seeking ill,
the Love who follows and forgives me still.
Fumbler and fool that I am, with things around me
of fragile make like souls, how I am blessed
to hear behind me footsteps of a Saviour!
I sing to the east; I sing to the west:
God is my repairer of fences, turning my paths into rest.

The opening statement has the directness and the ordinary language of common speech that is typical of metaphysical poetry. The word ‘dark’ in the first line suggests the normal darkness that is a familiar part of life on earth, but the ‘darkness’ of the second line is a metaphysical darkness that approaches the borders of despair. With eloquent understatement Powers gestures towards the abyss in the words ‘darkness’, ‘ruin’ and ‘wrought’. Her word ‘every’ disallows even a shred of complacency. She admits to doing damage in ‘every’ relationship she has. There is metaphysical paradox in line five, a witty inversion which conveys theological complexity: Jesus Himself, and popular hymnody ever since, exhort us to follow Jesus. Powers reverses this in a startling metaphor that has Jesus following her. The effect of this is to unsettle familiarity and to quicken awareness of the astonishing content of her claim.

Her line six asks one of the most unanswerable metaphysical question known to man with spare simplicity and intimate directness: ‘Whom do I love, O God, when I love Thee’? This question in all its permutations has troubled mankind since the beginning, and the manifold answers to it constitute the weighty discipline of Theology. Even

Matthew 4: 18-22.
when we feel we have an inkling of an answer we struggle to remember it: ‘The trouble with God moments is that we forget them so easily. We go right back to playing hide-and-seek with God. Sometimes God hides and we find Her. Sometimes we hide and He finds us. But the eternal question: “Where in the world is God?” echoes in the marrow of our bones’ (Langford and Rouner 2003: 97).

In the poems of the great metaphysical poet, Donne, ‘there is the same quality of mental emotion as in the poems of human love. Donne adores God reasonably, knowing why he adores Him. His “Holy Sonnets” are a kind of argument with God; they tell over, and discuss, and resolve, such perplexities of faith and reason as would really occur to a speculative brain like his’ (Clark 1982: 80). In Powers’ question here, ‘Whom do I love, O God, when I love thee’?, and in this poem, she is ‘tell[ing] over, and discuss[ing], and resol[ving], such perplexities of faith and reason as would really occur to a speculative brain like [hers]’ (1982: 80). This combination of speculation and conviction is characteristic of metaphysical poetry.

With metaphysical daring couched in concrete images drawn from ordinary life Powers answers the unanswerable question: When we love God we love ‘the great Undoer’; ‘the Mender’; ‘the Repairer of fences’. These homely activities she claims constitute ‘Love’, and are the functions of ‘a Saviour’. All these actions of the ‘One’ involve self-sacrifice: He follows patiently, He tears down prison walls, He sews together broken hedges, He forgives repeatedly, He repairs damaged fences, He turns wayward steps ‘into rest’. In short, He takes up His Cross and follows us! Powers’ dramatic reversal of the words with which we are too familiar startles the attentive reader into a new awareness of how ‘blessed [we are] to hear behind [us] footsteps of a Saviour’. An appropriate response to this fresh understanding of Who we love when we love God may be to join Powers in her adoration: ‘I sing to the east; I sing to the west’. What takes place when a poem such as this is read with attention is ‘both domestic and sacramental’ (Steiner 1989: 149). Thus her poem has possibly brought about in the attentive reader the ‘change’ which metaphysical poetry by its very nature seeks to effect.
These poems have illustrated the point that though the ‘pertinent categories of inference and felt intelligibility are theological and metaphysical’ they ‘inhere in language’ (Steiner 1989: 50).

Another characteristic of a Christian theory of reading is described by Newman when he says that ‘when the mind is occupied by some vast and awful subject of contemplation, it is prompted to give utterance to its feelings in a figurative style, and when, dazzled at length with the great sight, it turns away for relief, it still catches in every new object which it encounters, glimpses of its former vision, and colours its whole range of thought with this one abiding association’ (Coulson and Allchin 1970: 82). For Powers, God is the abiding association, as can be seen in her poem ‘Covenant’:

I made a covenant with my hands not to be reaching for love and praise which once were all my light. These are for Christ by the most utter right.
I made a covenant with my tongue not to be speaking of aught that draws me from the Word apart, much less to interpret Him in my heart.
I made a covenant with my eyes not to be watching to see what beauty might come down to me. Christ is my beauty; Him alone I see.
I made a covenant with my heart never and nowhere to be admitting any lover but Him.

MacDonald says of the seventeenth-century poet Vaughan that ‘He can see one thing everywhere, and all things the same – yet each with a thousand sides that radiate crossing lights, even as the airy particles around us. For him everything is the expression of, and points back to, some fact in the Divine Thought. Along the line of every ray he looks towards its radiating centre – the heart of the Maker’ (MacDonald 1974: 71). I maintain this is equally true of Powers and the metaphysical quality of her poetry. As can be seen in this poem, Christ is her ‘one abiding association’ (Coulson and Allchin 1970: 82), and all her poetry yearns towards Him: ‘Christ is my beauty; Him alone I see’.
Ira Clark points out that ‘true metaphysical poetry [is] where philosophical beliefs colour the poet’s private feelings, and vice versa: You only have metaphysical poetry when you have a philosophy exerting its influence, not [necessarily] directly through belief [though in Power’s case directly through belief], but [also] indirectly through feeling and behaviour, upon the minute particulars of a poet’s daily life, his quotidian mind’. She says that functioning as a metaphysical is ‘not the simple use of philosophical and abstract terms, but rather a more sophisticated way of seeing the smallest physical or emotional detail as containing metaphysical significance’ (1982: 170).

This metaphysical ‘way of seeing’ is characteristic of Powers: she sees a ‘Bird at Daybreak’ as a sign for John the Baptist, and the dawn bird’s call that ‘now in the east approach the feet of day’ as an analogy for St John’s call to make straight the way of the Lord; she sees a ‘Bird at Evening’ as ‘a very Magdalen of bird’ whose lament at the day’s ending is a metaphor for Mary Magdalen’s lament over the body of the crucified Christ; she sees ‘Nighthawks Flying’ as spiritual intimations, ‘a word’ she ‘chanced to miss’; she sees a tram terminal as a metaphor for ‘the terminal that stands at the world’s end’; she sees a faithless and loveless life as ‘cliffs of pain’, ‘swamps and desert’, ‘thicket and terrain’, and ‘down’ ‘cliffs of pain’ she glimpses the dominant Presence of her life and of her poetry: ‘oh, Someone [Who] came and found me’.

In the words of Hans Urs Von Balthasar, when one writes about the [metaphysical] ‘the words gravitate first of all towards the mystery of form. Formosus (beautiful) comes from forma (shape), and speciosus (comely) from species (likeness). This is to raise the question of the great radianc.e from within which transforms species into speciosus, form into comeliness: the question of splendour. We are confronted simultaneously with both the [form or shape, of, in this case Powers’ writing about Christ] and that which shines forth from the [form], the comeliness, making it into a worthy, a love-worthy thing’ (1984: 395). Thus, in my opinion, when Powers writes about her abiding association, which is God, her work is metaphysical and the effect of it is to ‘stir up the hearing heart within itself [and to] bewitch it’ (1984: 395).
An interesting insight arises for my thesis here: literary theory commonly holds that the imagination moves from the immediate outwards towards mystery. However, for a Christian reading and for this thesis, the movement is from mystery, that is from God, to the world which is apprehended through the senses. As the theologian Karl Barth expresses it, ‘revelation seizes the language’ (Fiddes 1991: 12). This seizing of the language by revelation results, in my opinion, in metaphysical poetry: poetry because the language seeks to express the revelation in metaphor, and metaphysical because the metaphysical is the home-language of revelation. This quality of revelation can be seen, for example, in Powers’ poem ‘And Wilderness Rejoices’:

Land that was desolate, impassable, 
is forest now where secrets find their voices.  
The desert is inhabited and blooms.  
One with the meadow, wilderness rejoices.

Lebanon’s glory is its green possession  
and Carmel’s beauty. Visited by love,  
wastelands are pastures for the Lamb at midday,  
and living solitudes to hold the Dove.

Never again will patriarch prefigure  
or lean precursor walk or prophet call.  
Here is fulfilment. One has come and given  
the Spirit Who is flame and festival.

Sower and Sown are here. The bright groves flourish  
and burn toward islands in the utmost sea.  
Time has become a wilderness of presence  
which too is essence of its jubilee.

Earth keeps its seasons and its liturgy,  
as should the soul. Oh, Come, Green summer, blur  
these wastes and let my soul in song declare  
Who came by flesh and Who by fire to her.

This poem is written out of the area inhabited by revelation. It perforce uses metaphor and symbol to imagine what is infinitely beyond human imagination and to say that which lies beyond human speech. Theology, in its response to revelation, uses symbol and story to attempt to convey transcendent concepts. Poetry uses metaphor to talk about God in a way which ‘eludes reduction’ (Fiddes 1991: 15).
The metaphor of desert blooming and greening runs throughout the poem carrying the message that ‘One has come’ and that sorrow has forever been turned to joy.‘Love in this bleak here, this barren now, has become existent’ (‘The Flower of Love’). The Lamb and the Dove have turned ‘wastelands’ into ‘pastures’ and ‘meadow’, and ‘rejoicing’, ‘festival’ and ‘jubilee’ take the place of prophetic voices warning of doom and calling for sackcloth and ashes. Powers’ line ‘Time has become a wilderness of presence’ is typical of metaphysical imagery. The theological concept expressed is ‘difficult’, as is often the case in metaphysical poetry, in that it both says and unsays itself: time is a wilderness, but it is a ‘wilderness of presence’. Now, though it remains a wilderness, it is no longer a wilderness inhabited by a solitary voice calling for the way to be made straight for the Lord. Now the Way Himself occupies the wilderness so that where desolation once lay is now all presence, and where the mournful voice once rang out is pure ‘jubilee’. Powers’ use of the word ‘wilderness’ in her line ‘Time has become a wilderness of presence’ acknowledges that time, which is an earthly concept, remains a wilderness for human beings, as we cannot see the future, or control time and the change and suffering it inevitably brings. This psychological realism is also often a characteristic of metaphysical poetry.

Powers’ final stanza fully recognises that though ‘Sower and Sown are here’, though the Trinity, the Father Who sows, the Son Who is sown and the Spirit ‘Who is flame’, entirely occupies the wilderness which is time, nevertheless the ‘seasons’ of human life move on with their freight of joy and sorrow. These ‘fluctuations between sorrow and joy, doubt and assurance, are the most valuable evidence of psychological realism’ (Summers 1954: 178) in metaphysical poetry. Nevertheless, Powers’ poem closes on an affirmation of faith as she calls on ‘green summer’, her metaphor in this poem for the presence of God, to enable her soul to ‘declare’ in song ‘Who came by flesh [Christ] and Who by fire [The Holy Spirit] to her’. There is an element of metaphysical wit in these statements.

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50 Revelation 21: 4: He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.
51 Matthew 11: 21: Woe to you, Korazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the miracles that were performed in you had been performed in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.
52 John 1: 23: John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, ‘I am the voice of one calling in the desert, ‘Make straight the way for the Lord’.
53 John 14: 6: Jesus answered, I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the father except through me.
closing lines, in the sense of elegant complexity: the poem closes in a prayer to be able
to make the song, but the poem is itself the answer to the prayer it makes, it is itself a
‘song’ that ‘declares Who [comes] by flesh and Who by fire’ to one who calls.

Clark points out that the ‘force of the musing [in metaphysical poetry] is often
augmented by symbols’ so that the poetry is sometimes called ‘emblematic’ (1982:
205). This can be said of Powers’ poetry, as can be seen, for example, in her poem ‘The
Legend of the Sparrow’: The metaphor of a sparrow, who symbolises the loving soul,
‘who dreamed to fly into the sun’ runs throughout the poem, which is in effect a
meditation on holiness, which resolves itself when at last the sparrow, is ‘lifted up into
His tender blaze’. The lesson imparted by the meditation is that

a bird that wings itself with resolute love
can travel anywhere.

The complexity typical of metaphysical religious poetry inhabits the metaphor. The
little bird struggles resolutely, but only once she fully acknowledges her essential
powerlessness, as in, ‘I faint; I fall whatever way I go’, is she open to ‘all [the] winds
that blow upward from the mountain peak’ which lift her up into the sun. The poem
quietly makes mutually contradictory statements as it conveys metaphysical paradox:
the sparrow cannot attain sainthood, that is unity with the sun, in her own strength,
yet the poem closes with the enigmatic assertion that

only the sun knew, and the moving air
the miracle thereof:
a bird that wings itself with resolute love
can travel anywhere.

This is an astonishing assertion: the miracle, says Powers, does not lie in the undeniable
fact that the winds lifted her up, and that without them she absolutely could not have
reached the sun, but rather in the fact that her ‘resolute love’ enabled her to seek
‘earth’s last height’ and that the grace that completed the journey for her required of
her this utmost effort before it ‘lifted’ her up. Powers’ poems ‘correspond to the
Christian mysteries, but [are] not afraid to be playful and experimental’ (Morneau 1991: 16) as this poem about a loving little sparrow shows.

These poem have illustrated Steiner’s point that though the ‘pertinent categories of inference and felt intelligibility are theological and metaphysical’ they ‘inhere in language’ (1989: 50).

A Christian theory of reading notes that ‘after the Reformation another avenue by means of which to allude to the inconceivable opened to the poet: the poet could offer individual insights into the mystery at the heart of the Christian truth. Here, imagination creates a private world which claims nevertheless to be a view of reality, a particular perspective which opens up the whole meaning of the world outside’ (Fiddes 1991: 16). In 1520 Protestants moved to make widely available an English version of the Bible, shaped by the principles of the Reformation, and to encourage the literacy that would give ordinary people access to what they called the plain, unvarnished truth, which previously they had heard read only in Latin in the liturgy and prayers of the Church. In Greenblatt’s opinion, ‘this was the crucial moment in the development of the English language, the moment in which the deepest things, the things upon which the fate of the soul depended, were put into ordinary, familiar, everyday words’ (2004: 91).

Powers can be seen doing this in her poem about the sparrow. Her imagination ‘creates a private world which claims nevertheless to be a view of reality’ (Fiddes 1991: 16). This, in my opinion, is a metaphysical quality in the poem, as the issues being approached by the poet in ‘ordinary, familiar, everyday words’ are spiritual issues relating to the nature and attributes of the divine mystery, and are ‘the deepest things, the things upon which the fate of the soul depends’ (Greenblatt 2004: 91).

This quality of existential vividness, of a ‘private world’ approached in ‘ordinary, familiar, everyday words’ can be seen in the poem ‘Siesta in Color’. Powers sets her scene in her first stanza with dramatic immediacy:
Near a glazed window drinking south and west
in thirst of sunlight in the early spring
I with sudden luck of illness take
magic siesta. I commune with color,
hobnob with rainbows on the coasts of slumber,
revisit prisms of long disregard.

The second stanza is pure Christian existentialism, which holds that ‘human existence searches for God as the Light and Life towards which the twilight of our human existence ever reaches out. The whole meaning of that metaphysical compulsion that impels [one] to the quest of Being lies in [one’s] recognising and accepting the mystery that envelops one’s existence at every moment’ (Simmonet 2011: 1), which will be transmuted in the third stanza into metaphysical meditation:

Soft pinks, impetuous yellows splash the wall
and line my eyelids as I drift towards sleep;
Blue, green and aqua prance in patterns; purple
and lavender to squares and circles run.
I think if I could track this charm to source
or else to terminal I might discover
opening or dropoff or amazing shore
to color’s primal meaning.

Again and again in her poetry Powers catches glimpses down fissures between time and eternity and close reading of her poetry may enable the reader also to have these evanescent metaphysical glimpses. Here, for a second, in the splashes of colour, she is aware of the ‘amazing shore’ whence colour comes, and the reader glimpses it too. Her awareness of the beauty of this moment deepens as she intuits more of God’s presence in it:

Is not pure fact a fullness? I remember
how rainbows had addressed me as a child,
how light and color made their language heard
though I was not yet judge or analyst,
something secure was given, kept; I held,
as with my grandmother’s warm bursts of Gaelic,
sweet words that had no meaning but were there.
The poem moves into metaphysical complexity in this stanza though it remains embedded in the moment. She grasps the theological mystery that in the moment ‘something secure was given’. This is metaphysical paradox: eternity is fully present in the moment. Furthermore, not only is ‘something secure’, ‘given’ in the moment, but it is ‘kept’. With quiet understatement the poem closes with an affirmation of faith. Her response to the ‘something secure’, ‘given’ in the moment is: ‘I held’. She does not understand the miracle she apprehends. As with her grandmother’s ‘warm bursts of Gaelic’, she cannot grasp the meaning of the moment, but the sacramental ‘fullness’ she knows, without a trace of doubt, is ‘there’.

An analysis of Powers’ poem ‘Leafage of Snow’ shows that it is renders ‘the paradoxical imagery of inner and outer geography’ in an act of rigorous attention which mirrors ‘the piety of [Powers’] soul’ (Steiner 1989: 156). This poem ‘allude[s] to the inconceivable’, it ‘offer[s] individual insights into the mystery at the heart of the Christian truth. Here, imagination creates a private world which claims nevertheless to be a view of reality, a particular perspective which opens up the whole meaning of the world outside’ (Fiddes 1991: 16):

How would the green lush growth encounter frost?  
With odor and decay.  
There rejoice that leaf and blade are lost  
before death’s hands are on the season crossed.  
Nature is much more easily embossed  
with all but the simplicities away.

And we, as well, invite the matchless fair  
when we are stripped and shriven.  
When all that grows of earth lies gaunt and bare  
then is the hour auspicious to prepare  
for the white foliage of upper air,  
the snow that falls from heaven.

This poem is an intent look at nature and a metaphysical meditation on death. The tone is direct, almost conversational in the manner typical of metaphysical poetry. It opens with an abrupt question,

How would the green lush growth encounter frost?
and answers its own question bluntly:

   With odor and decay.

All the putrefaction of lushness gone rotten lies in this economical phrase. The stark image of the corpse of the season, lying in spare dignity with the crossed hands of the final propriety, belies sorrowful appearances. This is a death that is cause for rejoicing, a death decorated by a beauty which is composed only of simplicities. This moment of intense looking at a winter scene has the potential to change intrinsically the way a reader of this poem may look at a stark winter scene hereafter.

The second stanza looks with an equal intensity at spiritual luxuriousness that is pruned by life until only what ‘lies gaunt and bare’ remains. Suffering has stripped away every superfluity, and the humble remains have been absolved, ‘shriven’, of the excesses that accrued from the days of ‘green lush growth’. So far the poem offers a conventional metaphor: the ripening, the ageing and the dying that occur in nature are paralleled by those which occur in man. But suddenly the metaphysical quality of the poem that lies in its wit and its striking intellectual inversion is apparent: it is precisely then, when we are ‘stripped and shriven’, ‘gaunt and bare’, that we ‘invite the matchless fair’. As nature is ‘embossed’ with beauty by the snow, so we are transformed into the beauty of beauties, the ‘matchless fair’, by death, ‘the snow that falls from heaven’. The theology of the poem is carried with elegant economy by the word ‘shriven’. To be shriven is to have confessed one’s sins and to have been absolved of the guilt which should naturally accrue to them. Relationship is intrinsic to this word: confession and absolution arise from contrition and mercy. Without sincere contrition there can be no absolution and without absolution there can be no restoration of the loving relationship between Creator and creature which constitutes the ‘matchless fair’. This poem is another example of a trait that is characteristic of metaphysical poetry: ‘the deepest things, the things upon which the fate of the soul depend[s], [are] put into ordinary, familiar, everyday words’ (Greenblatt 2004: 91).
And lastly, a Christian theory of reading sees metaphysical poetry as inhabited by instances of what Steiner calls ‘cortesia’. By this word he means that ‘our meetings with the other, with the beloved, with the adversary, with the familiar and the stranger’ have been quickened ‘into articulate life’. Cortesia ‘qualifies the last ambush or the final tryst which is the possible venue – the coming, the coming to a place – of God’ (1989: 147). Powers’ writing constitutes such a ‘possible venue’, a ‘place’ where God may be encountered.

In Steiner’s opinion the ‘informing agency’ of ‘cortesia’, of careful reading of work such as Powers’ poetry is that of ‘tact, of the way in which we allow ourselves to touch or not to touch, to be touched or not to be touched by the presence of the other (the parable of doubting Thomas crystallizes the manifold mysteries of tact). The issue is that of civility towards the inward savour of things’ (1989: 148). Jasper maintains that very close reading is itself ‘an act of liturgical living’ (2009: 171). In Steiner’s opinion, and in the opinion of this thesis, the ‘act of reading is a metaphysical and, in the last analysis, a theological one. The ascription of beauty to truth and to meaning is a piece of theology. Everything we recognize as being of compelling stature in literature, art, and music is of a religious inspiration or reference’ (1989: 215). According to the Christian theory of reading which informs this study, this is because ‘any coherent understanding of what language is and how language performs, is, in the final analysis, underwritten by the assumption of God’s presence’ because ‘the wager on the meaning of meaning, on the potential insight and response when one human voice addresses another, when we come face to face with the text, is a wager on transcendence’ (1989: 3).

This ‘assumption of God’s presence’ is intrinsic to Steiner’s hermeneutics. God is ultimately ‘the other’ whom we encounter in an instance of ‘cortesia’ (Steiner 1989: 147). De Certeau points out that the word ‘hermeneutics’ is ‘inhabited by the god Hermes, patron of reading and, by virtue of his role as messenger between the gods and the living, between the living and the dead, patron also of the resistance of meaning to mortality’ (1992: 155).
Again and again Powers exhibits a striking intimacy with God that arises from her ‘tact’, from the way in which she allows herself ‘to touch, to be touched by the presence of the other’ (Steiner 1989: 148). She approaches and even inhabits ‘the last ambush or the final tryst which is the possible venue – the coming, the coming to a place – of God’ (1989: 147), as can be seen, for example, in these lines from her poem ‘The Kingdom of God’:

There is a Tenant here.
Come home, roamer of the earth, to this room and find
a timeless Heart under your own heart beating,
a Bird of beauty singing under your mind.

There is more than ‘a conjecture’ that ‘God is’ in these lines. There is confident faith that is embodied in a warmly physical metaphor: ‘a timeless Heart beating under your own heart’. This expression is commonly used to describe a baby in the womb who lies beneath her mother’s heart in the most intimate proximity possible to a human being. Here Powers inverts this metaphor with reverent metaphysical daring: though God is our Mother, in keeping with this metaphor, He is at the same time dependent upon our hospitality to Him, He is our ‘Tenant’, and His occupancy of ‘this room’, which is our being, is contingent upon our willingness to house Him. The astonishing reciprocity intrinsic to the relationship between God and a believer is evoked with an understated economy in this metaphor, the simplicity of which nonetheless conveys the enormous theological claim that lies at the heart of Christianity.

In Jasper’s opinion, ‘in the poem, the human and the non-human world meet at the point of visionary consciousness, and by the imaginative act of the poet, the finite is opened momentarily onto the infinite’ (1985: 40). The poet is here paying rapt attention to the moment in which ‘the finite is opened momentarily onto the infinite’ (1985: 40). Ferretter shows how the poet ‘stretch[es language] to the point where the images of human life break through into a perception of a greater love and a greater forgiveness, that speaks more profoundly to the imagination than doctrinal abstractions could’ (2003: 154). Powers can be seen ‘speak[ing] more profoundly to the imagination than doctrinal abstractions could’ in her poem ‘This Paltry Love’:
I love you, God, with a penny match of love
that I strike when the big and bullying dark of need
chases my startled sunset over the hills
and in the walls of my house small terrors move.
It is the sight of this paltry love that fills
my deepest pits with seething purgatory,
that thus I love you, God – God – who would sow
my heights and depths with recklessness of glory,
who hold back light-oceans straining to spill on me, on me,
stifling here in the dungeon of my ill.
This puny spark I scorn, I who had dreamed
of fire that would race to land’s end, shouting your worth,
of sun that would fall to earth with a mortal wound
and rise and run, streaming with light like blood,
splattering the sky,
soaking the ocean itself, and all the earth.

The poem opens with the intimate abruptness typical of metaphysical poetry, ‘I love you, God,’ and moves into a metaphor which pits a match flame against a ‘big and bullying dark’ that routs a sunset and engulfs the house in which ‘terrors move’. Powers uses only three words to describe our creaturely smallness in the face of God: ‘penny’, ‘small’ and ‘paltry’, but her economy nonetheless dramatically conveys the astonishing enormities of scale inherent in our relationship with a God of infinite glory, who has ‘recklessness of glory’ to sow, ‘light-oceans’ to spill, and ‘light like blood’ to soak ‘the ocean itself, and all the earth’. In my opinion these three metaphors ‘speak more profoundly to the imagination than doctrinal abstractions could’ and may afford the attentive reader ‘a perception of a greater love and a greater forgiveness’ (Ferretter 2003: 154) than scholarly theological exegesis usually does. The astounding theological truth, that this infinite bounty of God, which ‘strains’ to ‘spill’ on us, is ‘held back’ by our own stubborn choice, Powers conveys by means of one terse metaphor: ‘stifling here in the dungeon of my ill’. This metaphysical metaphor conveys starkly the theological tenet that it ‘can never be said too often that God is always present, always bestowing Himself in the measure that He can be received. On His side it is total gift, it is on our side that the check lies’ (Burrows 1989: 11).

Powers also alludes with vivid economy to the doctrine of purgatory in this poem, a subject which exercises many a theologian and fuels many a controversy:
It is the sight of this paltry love that fills my deepest pits with seething purgatory.

In Powers’ opinion in this poem, purgatory is the very real suffering which arises from our deepening understanding and remorse that we offer such a ‘paltry’ response to the amazing love so abundantly offered to us. She moves from describing the ‘dungeon of our ill’ to a resplendent metaphor which conveys the glory which would result from a choice we might make to ‘scorn’ our ‘puny spark’ of grudging love in favour of a love for God which fulfils the first and greatest commandment, which is to ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind’.\(^\text{54}\) The radiant outcome of a fulfilment of this commandment would be ‘a sun’ that would rise and run, streaming with light like blood, splattering the sky, soaking the ocean itself and all the earth.

There are two instances of Powers’ metaphysical wit in this poem in her lines:

That thus I love you, God – *God* – ;

and

Who hold back light-oceans straining to spill on me, on *me*.

Her use of italics in both instances conveys with dramatic economy her reverent amazement that she is in fact in speaking intimately to God.

According to Boyle, attentive reading of works such as this poem is ‘the task of a Christian hermeneutics’: ‘Finding the word of reconciliation, finding the word which tells how human works begun in the shadow of an unfulfillable obligation can by God’s free gift be completed as vessels of life, and life more abundantly, that is the task of a [Christian] hermeneutics’ (2004: 109). In my opinion a poem such as this may well be

\(^{54}\) Matthew 22: 37.

This chapter concludes my description of a Christian theory of reading by means of a further eight points about the nature of such a theory, as supported by an on-going examination of Powers’ poetry. I come now in Chapter Five to a description of the further two emphases, a neurophysiological and a philosophical, which underpin the Christian theory of reading according to which I read Powers’ poetry as metaphysical. These emphases contribute an additional element to the definition of a Christian theory of reading and to the definition of what constitutes a metaphysical poem, and will be supported by further analysis of Powers’ poetry.
CHAPTER FIVE: TWO EMPHASES: A SCIENTIFIC AND A PHILOSOPHICAL

the ‘metaphorical tip of the very top of that complicated organ’ the conceptual brain (Gallagher 2009: 37)

This chapter describes the further two emphases that inform my theory of reading: a contemporary, scientific focus based on a study published in 2009 by Winifred Gallagher, called RAPT Attention and the Focused Life, and a philosophical focus based on Erich Fromm’s book, To Have or to Be, 2002, and Martin Buber’s book, Between Man and Man, 1971. This chapter also continues analysis of Powers’ work in substantiation of my reading of her work as metaphysical.

Winifred Gallagher’s book, RAPT Attention and the Focused Life, outlines contemporary scientific research on the nature of attention. RAPT is a study of consciousness. Gallagher says that the University of North Carolina has demonstrated by means of a study based on objective laboratory tests that measure vision, ‘that paying attention to positive emotions literally expands [one’s] world, while focusing on negative feelings shrinks it’ (Gallagher 2009: 35). The words that interest me here are ‘paying attention’ and ‘literally expands [one’s] world’. These words, I contend, describe the writing and the reading, of a metaphysical poem. Firstly, the poet, in this case, Powers, pays close attention, and writes the poem out of the expansion of her world caused by her paying rapt attention; then the reader focuses intently on the poem and experiences a similar expansion. This imperative to expansion issued by authentic art is what Steiner describes in regard to Rilke’s poem ‘The Archaic Torso’, which issues the challenge to change one’s life (1989: 142). ‘Just as bad feelings constrict [one’s] attention so [one] can focus on dealing with danger or loss, good feelings widen it, so [one] can expand into new territory. This broader, more generous cognitive context helps [one] to think more flexibly and creatively’ (Gallagher 2009: 37).

According to cognitive science the brain has three major parts: “the reactive” component, which handles the brain’s visceral, automatic functions, [and which] concentrates on biologically determined responses; the “behavioural”, or routine, component [which] attends to well-learned skills, such as riding a bicycle; and the “reflective” element or consciousness, [which] handles the “higher” functions at the metaphorical tip of the very top of that complicated organ, the human brain’. The ‘two “lower” modes of brain functioning [that is, the ‘reactive’ and the ‘behavioural’], handle most of what [one does], and mostly without requiring conscious attention. Consciousness, the “reflective” element of [the] conceptual brain, which handles the “higher” functions also has a “qualitative, sensory” capacity’ (Gallagher 2009: 37).

This, in my opinion, is the area in which metaphysical poetry functions, the ‘metaphorical tip of the very top of that complicated organ’, the conceptual brain, which has a ‘qualitative sensory capacity’. This is the area of the brain in which poetry arises and from which poetry is responded to. According to Gallagher the ‘immediate reward for the effort [of attention] is not just a more comfortable, satisfying affective state, but also a bigger, better worldview’. Gallagher maintains that ‘attention’, from Latin for ‘reach toward’, is the most basic ingredient in any relationship, and also, I contend, in writing and in reading poetry. In Death of a Salesman, Arthur Miller describes the final courtesy that even the failed, deluded, doomed Willy Loman deserves, because “he’s a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid”’ (2009: 81). This is what Powers does: she pays rapt attention to aspects of life, usually to the metaphysical questions of life that pertain to the relation between the spirit and the senses, her attention issues in her poems, and when the reader pays rapt attention to the poems the reader’s ‘consciousness [also] expands’ (2009: 84).

Recently, a rare convergence of insights from both neuroscience and psychology have suggested a paradigm shift in how to think about this cranial lazer which is attention, and its role in behaviour: thoughts, feelings and actions. Like fingers pointing to the moon, other diverse disciplines from anthropology to education,
behavioural economics to family counselling, similarly suggest that the skilful management of attention is the *sine qua non* of the good life and the key to improving virtually every aspect of experience (Gallagher 2009: 2).

My contention is that the ‘skilful management of attention’ is what a metaphysical poem is. It issues from this skilful management of attention in the poet, and results in an increase in skilfully managed attention in the reader of the poem. Gallagher maintains that ‘if [one] could just stay focused on the right things, [one’s] life would stop feeling like a reaction to what happens to [one] and become something that [one] creates: a work of art’ (2009: 2). My contention is that the poem is a work of attention issuing in art, and the reading of it is a work of attention resulting in art.

The scientific nature of attention is ‘now a major subject in both neuroscientific and behavioural research, and studies are increasingly revealing its importance to functions from the simplest learning to *Homo Sapiens*’ distinctive search for meaning’ (Gallagher 2009: 7), which is a metaphysical quest. At the National Institute of Health, researchers recorded electrical signals from the brains of primates as they performed focusing tasks. Over the past twenty years, this process has been accelerated by increasingly sophisticated tools, such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), and magnetoencephalography (MEG), that allow scientists to see parts of the brain activate and appear to light up and turn different colours when people think, feel and act:

Research now suggests that, like consciousness or mind, attention is a term for a complex neurological and behavioural business that seems like more than the sum of its parts. There’s no tidy ‘attention centre’ in the brain. Instead, an ensemble of alerting, orienting, and executive networks collaborate to attune [one] to what’s going on in [one’s] inner or outer world in a coherent way that points [one] toward an appropriate response (Gallagher 2009: 8).

In a poet, in this case, Powers, this ‘appropriate response’ issues in a poem. ‘The brain’s parietal and frontal cortexes are especially important to this process, but the sensory systems and many other structures are involved; indeed, every neuron, or nerve cell, shows some sort of attentional modulation’ (my emphasis) (2009: 8). Neuroscience’s ‘truly groundbreaking’ (2009: 9) insight into attention is the discovery that its basic mechanism is a process of selection. This two-part neurological sorting operation
allows one to focus by enhancing the most compelling, or ‘salient’, physical object or ‘high-value mental subject in one’s ken’ and suppressing the rest. ‘As the expression paying attention suggests, when [one] focus[es], [one is] spending limited cognitive currency that should be wisely invested, because the stakes are high’ (2009: 9). At any given moment, one’s world contains too much information for one’s brain to ‘represent’, or depict clearly:

Contemporary neuroscience has drawn attention to the myriad sensory impressions of our environment that impinge upon the body and are transmitted to the brain through the intricate neural networks of the nervous system. We can only deal with this multiplicity of sense data ‘through a vast delimitation exercise … So we have a dense penumbra of consciousness, thick with half-digested impressions and intuitions of nonconscious neural patterns, like the teeming motes of dust circulating in a shaft of sunlight (Ward 2009: 22).

Therefore one’s attentional system selects a certain chunk of what is there and ‘this thin slice of life’ becomes part of one’s reality, while the rest is consigned to the shadows or oblivion. By helping one to focus on some things and filter out others, attention distils ‘the universe into [one’s] universe’. This ability to focus not only allows one to organise one’s world, but it also enables one ‘to have the kind of Dionysian experience beautifully described by the old-fashioned term “rapt” – completely absorbed, engrossed, fascinated, perhaps even “carried away” – that underlies life’s deepest pleasures, from the scholar’s study to the carpenter’s craft to the lover’s obsession’ (Gallagher 2009: 13).

This, I contend, is the area in which metaphysical poetry functions. Powers does this: she distils the universe into her universe, which is the poem, and we in turn distil her universe into our universe by reading the poem with rapt attention and we are changed, which, Steiner maintains, is the outcome of rapt engagement with all serious art (1989: 142). ‘Paying rapt attention, increases [one’s] capacity for concentration, expands [one’s] inner boundaries, and lifts [one’s] spirits’ (Gallagher 2009: 13). This is the effect of a metaphysical poem, which might be described as a supremely concentrated form of experience ordered into words, as, in fact, rapt attention issuing in words, and eliciting rapt attention in response. Attention research demonstrates
that ‘focusing on upbeat emotions such as hope and kindness [in other words, on love, human and Divine, which is the habitat of the metaphysical] literally, not just figuratively, [my emphasis] expands [one’s] world, just as dwelling on negative feelings shrinks it’ (2009: 13). The especially important word here is Gallagher’s word ‘literally’: she uses it as opposed to figuratively. This is physiology, psychology, neuroscience, not abstract theory. I contend that this expanding effect on the reader, in her mind, heart and spirit, is literally what happens when a poem which has issued from rapt attention to metaphysical questions is attended to with rapt attention. The reader is enabled to attend to the ‘sacrament of the present moment’ (De Caussade 1966: 18) with heightened awareness.

It is thus my contention that rapt attention is intrinsic to the writing and reading of a metaphysical poem. Newman says that: ‘every breath of air and ray of light and heat, every beautiful prospect’ are glimpses of ‘the skirts of their garments, the waving of the robes of those whose faces see God’ (1976: 18). Powers’ poems, I maintain, afford the attentive reader such glimpses. Her poem ‘In a Cloud of Angels’ delineates human life in terms of a splendour to which most people are mostly blind and deaf, not entirely by any fault of theirs, but because their senses are not attuned to a radiance they could hardly bear:

I walk in a cloud of angels.
God has a throne in the secret of my soul.
I move, encircled by light, blinded by glowing faces,
lost and bewildered in the motion of wings,
stricken by music too sublime to bear.

There is mercy in this blindness to the ‘glowing faces’, and this strickenness by the ‘music too sublime to bear’ because, like Elijah on Mount Sinai, 59 we need to cover our faces in God’s presence, but none the less we suffer from some inklings of the ‘splendor’ that ‘is everywhere’. This is the intuition of glory that makes us restless in our ‘lost and bewildered’ state so that we strain to catch faint echoes of the ‘music too

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59 1 Kings 19: 13: When Elijah heard it, he pulled his cloak over his face and went out and stood at the mouth of the cave.
sublime to bear’. However Powers finds consolation for this state of blindness, lostness, bewilderment and strickenness in a quiet statement of serene faith:

God has a throne in the secret of my soul.

She attests to the reality that lies beyond her human senses:

Splendor is everywhere.

According to Powers only one response is proper and adequate to this presence of God:

wave upon wave of endless adoration.

This quality of pure adoration we are too frail to aspire to, but the poem lays confident claim to the metaphysical consolation that there are those who worship on our behalf:

I walk in a cloud of angels that worship Him.

The audacity, which could be called a kind of reverent metaphysical wit, lies in the completion of the line, ‘God has a throne in the secret of my soul’, in the subsequent lines:

God is always enthroned on the cherubim, circled by seraphim.

If God’s throne is in my soul, and the cherubim and the seraphim attend Him there in endless worship, then all this worship and splendour is taking place in my soul. In a miraculous and mysterious, but entirely real way, then, I carry God and heaven within me. The compelling logic in this poem may engineer a ‘mastering intrusion’ (Steiner 1989: 143) in the attentive reader which may alter the light by which such a reader reads in future. It is my contention that rapt attention is intrinsic to catching glimpses of ‘the waving of the robes of those whose faces see God’ (Newman 1976: 18) in the writing and the reading of a metaphysical poem.
Erich Fromm’s book, *To Have or To Be*, is another essential strand of my theoretical base. According to Fromm, the distinction between ‘having’ and ‘being’ represents ‘the most crucial problem of existence’ (2002: 25). The difference between ‘having’ and ‘being’ is the difference between a society and an individual centred around things and one centred around persons:

The having orientation is characteristic of Western Industrial society, in which greed for money, fame, and power has become the dominant theme of life. Less alienated societies, such as medieval society, were not affected by the ideas of modern ‘progress’. Modern Man cannot understand the spirit of a society that is not centred in property and greed (2002: 29).

It is my contention that metaphysical poetry evinces a quality of attention that is from the ‘being’ mode. This is one of its chief characteristics. Fromm makes the extremely significant point that an idiomatic change occurred in language over a period of centuries due to the dominance of the ‘having’ mode that grew out of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution. I will show that Powers is not affected by this change because she is spiritually rooted in the medieval ‘being’ mode, in spite of her being a twentieth-century poet. She inhabits the ‘being’ mode spiritually because her Carmelite spirituality is informed by the same religious and devotional practices, such as the liturgy of the Church, the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola and the writings of St Thomas à Kempis, which informed the spirituality of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth-century metaphysical poets. It is as if she leapfrogs the acquisitive and consumerist spirit that has been on the ascent since the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on individuality, and the Industrial Revolution, and remains spiritually a child of the medieval church.

According to Fromm

a certain change in the emphasis on having and being is apparent in the growing use of nouns and the decreasing use of verbs in Western languages in the past few centuries. A noun is the proper denotation for a thing. I can say I have things. The proper denotation for an activity, a process, is a verb. Yet, ever more frequently an

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60 Articulated between 1522 and 1524.
activity is expressed in terms of having; that is, a noun is used instead of a verb. But to express an activity by to have in connection with a noun is an erroneous use of language, because processes and activities cannot be possessed; they can only be experienced (2002: 127).

The mode of ‘being’ exists only in the here and now (hic et nunc). The mode of ‘having’ exists only in time: past, and future.

In the ‘having’ mode we are bound to what we have amassed in the past: money, land, fame, social status, knowledge, children, memories. We think about the past, and we feel by remembering feelings (or what appear to be feelings) of the past. (This is the essence of sentimentality.) We are the past; we can say: ‘I am what I was’ (Fromm 2002: 127).

The future is the anticipation of what will become the past. It is experienced in the mode of ‘having’, as is the past, and is expressed when one says: ‘This person has a future’, indicating that the individual will have many things even though he or she does not now have them.

In the opinion of the psychoanalyst Kabat-Zinn, we must cultivate a ‘non-striving, non-reactive, non-judgemental orientation toward our experience of any moment’, without our tendency, which arises in the ‘having mode’, to ‘attach personal pronouns to the feeling states’ (1997: 126).

Pascal maintains that we have great difficulty living in the present moment:

We never keep to the present. We recall the past; we anticipate the future as if we found it too slow in coming and were trying to hurry it up, or we recall the past as if to stay its too rapid flight. We are so unwise that we wander about in times that do not belong to us, and do not think of the only one that does; so vain that we dream of times that are not, and blindly flee the only one that is (1966: 43).

This time, ‘the only one that is’, is the present, is ‘the point where past and future join, a frontier station in time’ (Fromm 2002: 128). The present is where attention happens.

Being is not necessarily outside of time, but time is not the dimension that governs being. The painter has to wrestle with colour, canvas, and brushes, the sculptor
with stone and chisel, [and the poet with words]. Yet the creative act, their ‘vision’ of what they are going to create, transcends time. It occurs in a flash, or in many flashes, but time is not experienced in the vision. The same holds true for the thinkers [and poets]. Writing down their ideas occurs in time, but conceiving them is a creative event outside of time. It is the same for every manifestation of being. The experience of loving, of joy, of grasping truth does not occur in time, but in the here and now. The here and now is eternity, i.e. timelessness. Eternity is not, as popularly misunderstood, indefinitely prolonged time (2002: 129).

In Powers’ poem, ‘Nighthawks Flying’, rapt attention to a present moment issues in a metaphysical poem because the quality of the attention Powers pays to the scene leads her from acute observation into metaphysical awareness:

At dusk the nighthawks dip and fly between the purple bluffs and me; black wings against a tinted sky – they make a strange uncertainty of sane things that the daylight said, as if a word I chanced to miss; a prelude I had never read were needed to interpret this.

Powers’ attention is very close, as attested to by her painterly detail: ‘purple’, ‘black’ and ‘tinted’. She responds to the moment with not only her senses, but also with her emotions, her mind and her spirit. With her alert senses she sees the birds’ beauty and that of the bluffs and of the evening sky. Her emotions are stirred by the wistfulness that beauty at evening closely attended to can arouse: ‘a strange uncertainty’ touches her. Her mind is engaged as she thinks about what she is feeling, ‘as if a word I chanced to miss’. And her emotionally charged thought deepens into a spiritual insight: something more than mere eyes are needed ‘to interpret’ this moment. Powers has, in this short metaphysical poem, in fact, meticulously analysed a moment of psychological and spiritual insight.

According to Fromm, it is the same for every manifestation of being: ‘The experience of loving, of joy, of grasping truth does not occur in time, but in the here and now. The here and now is eternity, i.e. timelessness’ (2002: 128). Eternity is the Kingdom of God. It is in the present moment in its fullness: ‘Surely the Lord is in this place and I was not
aware of it. De Caussade calls the present moment a sacrament because God
inhabits it in His fullness: ‘O bread of angels, celestial manna, precious Evangel,
sacrament of the present moment’ (1966: 18) Each present moment ‘brings Him to
you. He is by your side, over you, around and in you. Here is His dwelling’ (1966: 34).
This is the area in which a metaphysical poem arises and is attentively read – out of
attention to the sacrament of a present moment into attention to the sacrament of a
present moment.

Fromm maintains that the dominant use of the verb, as opposed to a dominant use of
the noun, indicates the ‘being’ mode in the present moment. Powers’ poetry makes
abundantly clear that her spiritual home is in the ‘being’ mode as can be seen by the
preponderance of verbs in her work: her poem ‘And In Her Morning’ is a supremely
metaphysical poem which is all wit, perspicacity, rapturous worship and verb:

The Virgin Mary cannot enter into
my soul for an indwelling. God alone
has sealed this land as secretly His own;
but being mother and implored, she comes
to stand along my eastern sky and be
a drift of sunrise over God and me.

God is light and genitor of light.
Yet for our weakness and our punishment
He hides Himself in midnights that prevent
all save the least awarenesses of Him.
We strain with dimmed eyes inward and perceive
no stir of what we clamoured to believe.
Yet I say: God (if one may jest with God),
your hiding has not reckoned with Our Lady
who holds my east horizon and whose glow
lights up my inner landscape, high and low.
All my soul’s acres shine and shine with her!
You are discovered, God; awake, rise
out of the dark of Your Divine surprise!
Your own reflection has revealed Your place,
for she is utter light by Your own grace.
And in her light I find You hid within me,
and in her morning I can see Your face.

61 Genesis 28: 16.
This metaphysical poem is based on the incandescent lines from the Book of Wisdom\textsuperscript{62}

She is a breath of the power of God,
pure emanation of the glory of the Almighty;
hence nothing impure can find a way into her.
She is a reflection of the Eternal Light
untarnished mirror of God’s active power,
image of His goodness.

The poem opens with a startling statement, as is so often the case in metaphysical poetry:

The Virgin Mary cannot enter into
my soul for an indwelling.

The entire audacious conceit which extends throughout the poem is based on verbs: Mary ‘cannot enter’; God ‘has sealed’; the creature ‘implores’; Mary ‘comes to stand’; she ‘is a drift of sunrise’; God ‘is’; God ‘hides’; midnights ‘prevent’; we ‘strain’; we ‘perceive’; we ‘clamour’; the poet ‘says’; she ‘jests’; God ‘does not reckon’; Our Lady ‘holds’; her glow ‘lights up’; the soul’s acres ‘shine and shine’; God ‘is discovered’; He ‘is commanded to awake, to rise’, He ‘is revealed’; Mary ‘is light by His grace’; the poet ‘finds’; the poet ‘sees’.

The metaphysical wit of this poem is carried by the verbs: God occupies the soul, Mary stands along the horizon. Out of mercy and out of justice He hides Himself, but His hiding place is given away by His shining Mother. Yet she only shines by virtue of His grace within her. So in spite of Himself, His presence is disclosed by virtue of His own attribute of light. The movement in the poem is circular: by God’s grace Mary is ‘utter light’. This light is simultaneously from Him and reveals Him. The poet finds Him hidden and yet simultaneously sees His face. The poem jests with God but the theology is orthodox: Mary’s glow lights up the soul’s inner landscape and makes the soul’s acres

\textsuperscript{62} One of the Sapiential Books of the Septuagint Old Testament which includes also \textit{Job}, \textit{Psalms}, \textit{Proverbs}, \textit{Ecclesiastes}, \textit{Song of Solomon} and \textit{Sirach}.
shine and shine with her, but God is the light whereby she shines, and He is the only
genitor of light. Mary reveals Him, but only because, by His grace, she reflects Him. He
is the source of the light which lights up Mary and in the illumination of Mary the poet
sees the Light itself, the face of God.

The poem ‘Ministering Spirits’ embodies angels in metaphors composed of verbs: the
angels watch God’s face, they listen for our seeking, they take joy in serving. The poem
uses a metaphor for thought composed of a strenuous verb:

    Never go blundering through the jungle, thought,

and extends the metaphor to convey the activity of the angels:

    without a clear-eyed one to part the branches,
    shout snake or swamp-hole, cry a rock beware.

No place on earth is empty of the radiant throng: as they are in the jungle, so they are
in the desert; they encamp around us ‘in any place [we] pitch [our] tents for prayer’.
The soul ‘takes radiance from the angels’ and ‘glories’ in them as she is of their kind.

Jasper points out that it is ‘in the desert, and in the depths of despair, [that] God
provides and brings life’ (2004: 151). It is this spiritual truth, that by performing actions
God ‘provides’ and ‘brings life’, that Powers is alluding to in this poem. She also alludes
to the regeneration effected by love in her poem ‘And Wilderness Rejoices’:

    Land that was desolate, impassable,
    is forest now where secrets find their voices.
    The desert is inhabited and blooms.
    One with the meadow, wilderness rejoices.

The poem ‘About Bruno’ too describes the action of God: God is

    most ready to discover
    the moment that a heart fills to the brim;
God ‘burst[s]’ into our time of need; God ‘sits down beside’ us; God is ‘eager with delight’; God gives to His lover the joy of endless dialogue with Him.

Powers’ poem ‘The First Pentecost’ further demonstrates that she writes out of the ‘being’ mode of the verb rather than out of the ‘having’ mode of the noun (Fromm 2002: 129):

All the Apostles looked at one another; words curled in fire through the returning gloom. Something had changed and colored all the room. The beauty of the Galilean mother took the breath from them for a little space. Even a cup, a chair or a brown dress could draw their tears with the great loveliness that wrote tremendous secrets every place. That was the day when Fire came down from heaven, inaugurating the first spring of love. Blood melted in the frozen veins, and even the least bird sang in the mind’s inmost grove. The seed sprang into flower, and over all still do the multitudinous blossoms fall.

The entire meaning of the poem is expressed in verbs: the Apostles ‘looked’; words ‘curled’; something ‘changed’ and ‘colored’; the beauty ‘took’ the breath; ordinary things ‘could draw their tears’ and the loveliness ‘wrote tremendous secrets’; the Fire ‘came down’; ‘inaugurating’; blood ‘melted’; the least bird ‘sang’; the seed ‘sprang’ into flower; and the poem closes in the sacramental space of the present moment:

still do the multitudinous blossoms fall.

The first line has the dramatic immediacy typical of metaphysical poetry. It could be a direction in a play, or a commonplace comment in a story. Then, following immediately on the ordinary, comes the sacred: ‘words curled in fire through the returning gloom’. This line has the so called ‘difficulty’ of metaphysical poetry, as well as its sensuousness and theological insightfulness. No doubt the apostles had been speaking as anxious
people in a close group might be expected to do. Then the tongues of flame came down. The drama of the poem (drama being a characteristic of metaphysical poetry) lands the reader in the astonished seconds immediately after the miracle: the previously spoken words still hang in the air which is charged with the Holy flames so that the words seem suspended in the mysterious fire. But the ‘gloom’ is ‘returning’. This is the psychological insight and theological depth typical of metaphysical poetry: the gloom is real. Holy mystery and spiritual radiance contend with the forces of evil. A moment of glory does not erase the Cross in this life. The gloom encroaches, the Cross must be shouldered again, hard on the heels of miracle. However the claim for the truth of the religious experience is simply but unequivocally made: things are ‘changed’ and ‘all’ is coloured. The effects of the holy are real and their chief attribute is beauty:

The beauty of the Galilean mother took the breath from them for a little space.

It is in the light of the flames that the beauty of the mother becomes apparent. The line implies that to see clearly man needs to see by the light of the Spirit. The Holy glow reveals innate reality. By implication, then, Powers suggests that when man does not see in the light of the Spirit, he does not see really or truly. Again Powers juxtaposes the human ordinary to subtly highlight the sacred: the beauty ‘took the breath from them’ – a very commonplace description of awe, followed by wry psychology – ‘for a little space’. Man is only fleetingly overawed, even by the heavenly. The lines which follow are a striking example of my theory of the nature of metaphysical poetry drawn from neuroscience:

Even a cup, a chair or a brown dress could draw their tears with the great loveliness

– this is the effect of paying attention. When we really look, we really see, and the beauty inherent in God’s Creation may become apparent to us. The last line of stanza one plunges again to theological depths: in the light of the Spirit, ‘great loveliness’ is to be seen ‘every place’. There is no place without the ‘tremendous secrets’ of loveliness. But the loveliness needs to be discerned by the light of the Spirit, and this discernment
is contingent upon rapt attention to the sacrament of the present moment. This I
maintain is the quality of Powers’ attention when she writes the poem. The reader in
turn attends when she reads the poem. The metaphysical ‘loveliness’ inherent in all
Creation, even ‘a cup, a chair or a brown dress’, is laid bare ‘for a little space’. The
miraculous event described in this poem inheres in the verbs which re-enact it, and by
the end of the poem the action of the poem is fully and eternally in the present
moment:

still do the multitudinous blossoms fall.

In the poem ‘The Mystic Face’ we see that the essence of creation is a verb: from the
heights of the sky and the depths of the sea, out of every instant of night and day, the
face of God ‘looks out at me’. In the poem ‘To live with the Spirit’ we see that to live
with the Spirit of God is ‘to be a listener’; it is ‘to keep the vigil’; it is ‘to lean’; ‘to catch’;
‘to walk’; ‘to turn’; ‘to lament’; ‘to echo’; ‘to rejoice’; ‘to cast down’; ‘to become’; ‘to
strain toward’; ‘to surge’; ‘to hold’: all of these verbs are facets of living with the Spirit.
In ‘The Gift of Love’ we see that the thoughts of the beloved are precious stones that
are ‘cut’ and ‘polish[ed]’, that are ‘held to the light’, that are ‘dropped’ down into the
heart, into the lifted hands of the God, Who ‘waits’ within the heart. Again the beauty
of love and the mystery of the presence of God are expressed in metaphors that take
their force from verbs. The poem, ‘The Homecoming’, too is informed by the energy of
verbs: the spirit ‘is freed’, ‘is amazed’, ‘sees’ herself, ‘realizes’, ‘is at home’, ‘is
welcomed’, ‘knows’, ‘remembers’, and, in a final metaphor for heaven that is purely
metaphysical in its simultaneous splendour and homeliness, is

‘pressed’

with warm endearments to His breast.

In the ‘Manuscript of Heaven’ we see the entire salvation history in terms of verbs:
God’s being, which predates time, lies in the words ‘the Uncreated’; the poet ‘knows’;
the Creator ‘writes’; the created ‘are words incorporated into’ love’s speech; the
creature ‘chooses’; and the petition is ‘to be’ an adjective which ‘attends’ light.
In the poem ‘Michael’ the beauty and strength of the archangel inhere in the verbs that describe his angelic action: ‘He stands beside the tall throne of his Queen’; he ‘made peace in heaven’; and he ‘keeps the earth serene’. We need not fear when foes or demons ‘assail’ us because the 

great winged prince of heaven
watches the Queen’s child with a warrior’s eye
and lifts his flaming spear and comes like lightning at the first cry.

The verbs in the poem ‘At Evening with a Child’ carry the theology of the poem and make Powers’ orientation to being, in antithesis to having, explicit. The poem opens with the intimate conversational tone typical of metaphysical poetry, and, as is also characteristic, it uses simple concrete things of daily life to set the scene for what will be a metaphysical meditation on the meaning of human life:

We walk along a road
at the day’s end, a little child and I,
and she points out a bird, a tree, a toad,
a stretch of colored sky.

She knows no single word
but ‘ah’ (with which all poems must commence,
at least in the heart’s heart), and I am stirred
by her glad eloquence.

Her feet are yet unsure
of their new task; her language limited,
but her eyes see the earth in joy secure.
And it is time I said:

Let the proud walls come down!
Let the cold monarchy be taken over!
I give my keys to rust, and I disown
castles of stone for ambushed roads in clover.

All the vast kingdoms that I could attain
are less to me than that the dusk is mild
and that I walk along a country lane
at evening with a child.
The poet and the child walk together, and the child points. They are attentive to each other and to the world around them. What appears to be an utterly commonplace scene is in fact an analysis of human life as it is intended by God to be: they are in loving communion with each other, and they are aware of the wonders that surround them. There is no artificial hierarchy in the things they notice: the toad has his place along with the bird, the tree and the evening sky. The child’s response, which encapsulates the theology of the poem, is to say ‘Ah’. We are immediately immersed in Christ’s laconic observation that no one who does not see with eyes such as this child’s eyes, and who does not respond with wonder like that in her voice, can see heaven. Powers calls the child’s exclamation ‘glad eloquence’. Here the poem deconstructs itself with quiet metaphysical wit: she knows ‘no single word’, yet she is ‘eloquent’. Words are not the essential ingredient of attentive worship, but wonder is. The wit lies in Powers’ use of words in a poem to say that words are not necessary. The action that in Powers’ opinion renders the child fit to enter heaven is that ‘her eyes see the earth in joy secure’. It is the lack of this childlike quality of seeing that unfits one for heaven.

Powers believes that the exercise of attending with wonder renders us open to salvation, and it is her diagnosis of the blindness and insensitivity that inoculate us against wonder that is unequivocal: it is the having mode, the ‘proud walls’ that enclose possessions, the ‘cold monarchy’ that connotes power, the ‘keys’ to treasure chests, the ‘castles of stone’ that are held and owned, which constitute the having mode, which renders us exiles from heaven. Powers uses a commonplace metaphor for life: a road. The metaphysical quality of the image is that the road is ‘ambushed’ by clover. Clover is a common little plant, but it is green, hardy and nutritious. It is also humble: no matter whether it has been ignored or gardened out, if it is given the chance, it will gladly spread its bright lushness even where it was formerly scorned. This is a heavenly quality, compounded of humility and generosity. Powers is quietly witty here: she uses a common image to make the point that it is exactly the blessedly common to which we have become fatally blind. The last lines of the poem are a lyrical delineation of the being mode, all that is worth living for, in Powers’ opinion:

Matthew 18: 3: I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.
All the vast kingdoms that I could attain [a word from the having mode] 
are less to me than that the dusk is mild 
and that I walk along a country lane 
at evening with a child.

This quality of achieved, childlike trust Powers evokes with vivid simplicity in her poem 
‘Awake at Night’: she describes a tiny bird in gathering darkness who

snatches his final feasting in last light, 
then off to where the black arms of the forest 
open to welcome in his leaping love. 
A small one in the predatory night 
tumbles to trustful slumber on a bough

whereas, she, ‘sheltered and secure’, lies ‘wakeful’, fear making her pillow ‘lumpy’. She 
does not elide the realities of vulnerability, of danger and of fear: the bird is small, the 
night is predatory, and the bough is insecure, yet the bird’s slumber is ‘trustful’, unlike 
the untrusting poet’s, whose bedclothes lie heavily and whose pillow assumes the 
‘lumpy’ contours of fear. This is the fear generated by her putative self-sufficiency 
which leaves her prey to ‘the dark shapes crouched / lurking beneath the bridges of 
[her] mind’ (‘Old Bridge’).

Powers’ poem ‘The Valley of My Childhood’ charts a return to a sadder adult version of 
this childlike innocence from a bleak interim of ‘searing’ experience:

This was my valley till a garish sun 
exposed it, and a more obtrusive thing 
laid searing hands on all its blossoming. 
I grew up to reverse the Midas legend: 
gold at my touch became, in ruthless day, 
something inferior to yellow clay. 
Only of late have I gone back to my valley 
and by a higher path that parallels 
the cancelled lanes of old simplicities. 
I have found cool equivalents of these 
in far green places of a deeper rest.
Powers’ simple verbs chart a human experience of faith lost and blessedly regained with eloquent understatement: ‘I grew up’; ‘I [have] gone back’; ‘I have found cool equivalents of these [the old simplicities] in far green places of a deeper rest’.

The poem ‘God Is Today’ makes the metaphysical point that God’s will for each individual lies in the present moment and inheres in verbs:

God is today.
He is not yesterday.
He is not tomorrow.

The full stops with which Powers ends these lines turn them from comments into doctrinal statements. For her they are statements that admit of no demur. In the second stanza she extends her metaphysical metaphor of God as ‘today’. He is each part of ‘today’: He is the dawn, the morning, the noon, and the sunset. But then she confounds her own metaphor with metaphysical wit and complexity: one would expect night to follow on from dawn, morning, noon, and sunset, but instead, ‘He withdraws into mysteries of light’. She confounds our expectation of night, and overlays darkness with unexpected light. Here the action of the poem parallels the working of God in the life of the believer: when all is said and done according to the radiant certainties of faith in His dawn, morning, noon and sunset, then the outcome will be not night, but light. She acknowledges that faith is the necessary light by which to see the mysterious light which comes at the end of the day and which can look like night. She is possibly alluding here to the mystery of suffering, but her implication that what appears to be dark is in fact ‘mysteries of light’ turns in the final stanza into an unequivocally confident dogmatic statement, which is given subtle emphasis by the simple but highly effective poetic device of placing the ‘is’ differently in the last line:

God is today.
He is not yesterday.
He is not tomorrow.
He never is night.

Powers’ poem ‘No One Can Stay’ demonstrates a metaphysical use of metaphor at its subtlest, most insightful when it seems most simple. It is a delineation of the often
painful but inescapable fact that we live only in the present moment which we must inhabit in the being mode as each present moment cannot be held or kept but is succeeded inexorably by another present moment until time as we know it ceases to be:

Though you be lined with down,
or though you be enamelled with new light,
O tender moment that I now disown,
still will I pass you in the swirling night.

The words ‘lined with down’ and ‘enamelled with new light’ carry every conceivable permutation of beauty and delight that could ever inhere in any ‘tender’ moment. The sorrow at their passing is rendered more acute by their value and loveliness. But Powers ‘disown[s]’ them. The reason for her seeming disregard she makes clear in stanza two:

Your invitation is with fraud extended,
and you will say, once I have come to rest:
the frost has come; the season of gain has ended ...

The spurious sense of permanence with which we invest the moment is self-deception, and its effects are deleterious. Powers’ word ‘fraud’ is a strong word, with connotations of lying, malicious trickery and wilful misleading. She has a powerful sense of the destructive element in the illusion of permanence which tricks us into complacency and inattention. We need not take due care of every moment, if ‘just now’ will do as well as ‘now’, or, maybe, ‘any other time’. She is firm in her repudiation of the temptation to indulge even a lovely moment if it pretends to be making a visit of any duration:

rich as you are, you cannot be my guest.

Her word ‘rich’ has attractive connotations and her word ‘guest’ carries with it the obligations of courtesy and the even sacred duties of hospitality. Thus she makes clear how seductive and seemingly harmless is the temptation to tarry in a false, as in a
fraudulent, sense of complacency. Our urge to indulge it can be fatally strong. Her last stanza is uncompromising and yet consoling:

No one can stay
in any golden moment, and no more
will I let any trick of light betray
me to a house that is nothing but a door.

This is metaphysical use of metaphor, at its most complex when it seems most transparent. Again there is the seduction in the word ‘golden’ that is unveiled in its sinister reality in the dark words ‘trick’ and ‘betray’. The deadly danger inherent in the temptation to clutch at the ‘golden’ present in a ‘having’ spirit as if it could be kept is made clear in the metaphor in the last line: ‘a house that is nothing but a door’. Her theological point is clear: our moments and our senses, if they are properly attended to in their reality, are there to serve as conduits of grace to us, they are to convey the ‘warmth and light’ (Dessain 1962: 224) of Christ to us. They are a ‘door’ into splendour. But if they are mistaken for a ‘house’, if they are stayed in, rather than passed through, then they become a fraudulent ‘trick of light’ that betrays us into ‘the swirling night’. We dwell then in unreality instead of moving ever deeper into the light.

Merton, to whom Powers is sometimes likened (Baldwin 1949: 361), writes out of the same metaphysical area in his lines: ‘A sweet summer afternoon. Cool breezes and a clear sky. This day will not come again. The young bulls lie under a tree in a corner of their field. Quiet afternoon. Blue hills. Day lilies nod in the wind. This day will not come again’ (1968: 37). Here his evocative prose highlights both the beauty and the transience of a precious present moment which cannot be kept in the having mode but which must be fully attended to in the being mode.

According to Fromm the past, like the present, can be experienced in either the having mode or the being mode. Remembering the past, thinking, ruminating about it is, in a sense, endeavouring to ‘have’ it. In this sense of ‘having’ the past, the past is dead. But there is a different calibre of remembering which can bring the past to life. ‘One can experience a situation of the past with the same freshness as if it occurred in the here
and now; that is, one can re-create the past, bring it to life, resurrect the dead, symbolically speaking’ (2002: 128). This is what a metaphysical poem can do, as Powers does in her poem ‘Wigwams’:

When the dead white mists
creep up in evening rain,
out of the half-blurred swamp
the ghostly cities rise:
wigwams like gulls’ wings spread,
hundreds across a plain;
and I look out on them
through my grandmother’s eyes.

In my opinion, this poem, in a very real sense, serves to ‘resurrect the dead’. Powers sees this scene from the past so vividly, both in her striking simile,

wigwams like gulls’ wings spread,
hundreds across a plain,

and in the power of her unstated emotion, conveyed in the lines

When the dead white mists
creep up in evening rain,
out of the half-blurred swamp
the ghostly cities rise

that the tragically lost cities, and the grandmother who looked at them, live again, or are revealed as living yet, though unseen by young eyes in bright light. The metaphysical irony lies in the fact that Powers’ are young eyes seeing in the light of the present day, but with such authenticity of vision and emotion, that her poem becomes a witness to the fact of the Resurrection.

‘The Old Bee House’ is also a metaphysical poem about genuine memory which serves to recreate the past in a deeply consoling way, so that it again becomes a nourishing, if transient, present moment. Powers uses the present tense throughout this poem about the past because her heart-felt emotion redeems her memory so that it becomes momentarily accessible to her again in a way that is healing:
There by the plum trees is the bee house;
it's roof sags and the clapboards rattle;
inside the door are the hat with netting
and bellows to bring the young swarm home,
and just beyond are the large extractor
and the squares for the honeycomb.

She constructs a vivid sense of a present moment by means of her careful, painterly enumeration of physical detail. The value of authentic memory she asserts in stanza three:

This is my house when the heart is injured,
the wild sweet smell
of buckwheat honey or clover honey
can make it well.

This is the metaphysical point of the poem. Powers is here, in effect, describing the indescribable, she is delineating, according to her beliefs, one of the attributes of salvation and one of the qualities of God’s love for us: because of the infinite tenderness of God’s love for us, every moment of our lives is precious to Him. Everything about us, every breath we draw throughout our lives, every hair of our heads, is treasured by Him, and it all inheres in our salvation. Therefore in Him what ‘can make … well’ remains eternally part of our redemption and eternally accessible to us.

Metaphysical poetry shows a ‘desire to make poems out of particular moments, made imaginatively present rather than remembered’ (Gardner 1967: 23). C. S. Lewis describes the small ‘particular moments’ of fond memory that poetry can make ‘imaginatively present’ to us again in a way that is healing: ‘Affection almost slinks or seeps through our lives. It lives with humble, un-dress, private things; soft slippers, old clothes, old jokes, the thump of a sleepy dog’s tail on the kitchen floor, the sound of a sewing machine’ (Lewis 2002: 128). This characteristic of metaphysical poetry can be seen, for example, in Powers’ poem ‘Escape’:

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64 Luke 12: 7: Indeed, the very hairs of your head are all numbered.
I have escaped from fear and loneliness
when this great city’s dusk descends on me.
It is a childhood’s game of make-believe,
filched from the years in my necessity.

I think: if I should open this dark door,
I could step into roadways lined with clover,
take the wind’s merchandise of down and scent,
and have the whole starred sky of home for cover.
I think: if I would lift this window now
and pause to listen, leaning on this sill,
I might hear, for my heart’s full consolation
the whip-poor-wills on some Wisconsin hill.

This poem writes out of ‘particular moments, made imaginatively present rather than remembered’ (Gardner 1967: 23). Metaphysical poetry shows a ‘strong sense of the actual and often [uses] very ordinary situations about which deep thoughts [are] expressed in common language’ (1967: 24). The ‘moments’ remembered from Powers’ Wisconsin childhood are made sensuously and emotively ‘present’ in this poem. The metaphor of her stepping through a ‘dark door’, out of the ‘great city’s’ fearful and lonely ‘dusk’, into ‘roadways lined with clover’, is dramatic and evocative. The contrast between the dark, teeming city and the country roads meandering through the green clover with its white, pink-tinged flowers is painterly, and the metaphor of the merchant wind carrying ‘scent’ and the ‘down’ of wispy seeds, is tactile in its sensuous evocativeness. It is also complex in its unstated exhortation to attentiveness to the present moment: the scents and the seeds carried by the wind can only be apprehended by alert, receptive senses. The metaphor of ‘the whole starred sky of home’ conveys the beauty of the bright stars that can only be seen in solitude, and where attention to beauty is not distracted by the ceaseless busyness of life. The word ‘home’ conveys deep longing for all the attributes of comfort and safety that that word ideally carries.

The third stanza extends the dramatic metaphor of stanza two: here Powers opens a window and attends so intently to her memory of the sound of the Wisconsin whip-poor-wills that the past moment is made vividly present to her, and to us. Complex
theology lies in this line: the past moment, raptly attended to, is in a sense restored to her, is in a sense resurrected, and is able to afford her wistful heart ‘full consolation’.

According to Fromm, one can also experience the future as if it were the here and now:

this occurs when a future state is so fully anticipated in one’s own experience that it is only the future ‘objectively’, i.e. in external fact, but not in the subjective experience. This is the nature of genuine utopian thinking (in contrast to utopian daydreaming); it is the basis of genuine faith, which does not need the external realisation ‘in the future’ in order to make the experience of it real (2002: 128).

This is the area in which metaphysical poetry often operates. Powers’ poem, ‘For a Silent Poet’, is written out of a ‘genuine faith’ which makes ‘the experience of [the future] real’ (2002: 128) in the present moment. Her poem seeks to comfort a poet who wrote beautiful poems, but who has now fallen silent:

Song was a wild bird and it came unbidden. 
It settled down across the darkened air 
to a gray branch in a dull orchard hidden. 
One morning it was there. 
Feathers of lustre and a polished beak, 
you cried in your delight, what is this bird that in one space of music seems to speak the note and the note’s word?

The painterly attention to detail typical of Powers’ metaphysical poetry, because it attends closely to the present moment, is immediately and evocatively present in the poem: the wild bird ‘settled down across the darkened air’. The slanting glide of the descending bird as it dips down to alight on a branch is vividly and economically conveyed by Powers’ words ‘across’ and ‘darkened air’. The misty pallor of very early morning, when the darkness is already diluted but the golden light of dawn has not yet spilled over the horizon, she conveys in her words ‘gray’ and ‘dull’. Already in this first stanza the poem is moving from poetic description into metaphysical meditation: all is grey and dull before the morning advent of the wild bird. The bird, a creature that comes with the beauty of the morning, seems to intimate in its very contrast to the grey dullness of the orchard before it comes, that it trails glory of some kind.
Stanza two describes an intrusion into the ordinary of a metaphysical insight which alludes to the ‘something more’ that seems to lie behind our perception of the immediate in a moment raptly attended to:

what is this bird
that in one space of music seems to speak
the note and the note’s word?

This is pure metaphysics: in one lucid line Powers enunciates the sense of the ‘moment God’, God who is ‘always the God of a moment’ (Buber 1971: 32), who inhabits each moment giving it meaning: the sweet ‘note’ of the bird’s song she hears with her physical faculty of hearing. But the ‘word’ that inhabits the ‘note’ she hears with a spiritual sense, and Powers’ use of the word ‘word’ carries the meaning here into the realm of the sacramental. Christ is the ‘Word’, and the poem makes the claim that the meaning that inheres in the experience, the ‘word’ that inhabits the ‘note’, is meaning that arises from a spiritual order of reality which is beyond, and yet which inheres, in the physical. Stanza four ascribes the beauty of the bird, and the meaning of its song, the ‘word’ of its song, to its true origin and nature: it is ‘from meadows seasonless and boundless’ and it cannot be grasped and held in any moment:

one night you saw it lift on soundless
white wings and float away.

Like the present moment in its sacramental aspect, it cannot be made to stay, and it is inhabited by God.

The calibre of faith that Fromm maintains can bring the future into the present in a real sense (2002: 128), Powers exhibits in the last stanza of the poem:

Weep not that visit of a
brief duration.
You are a guest yourself and you must know
that in you lie the instincts of migration,
and where the bird went, one day you will go.

65 John 1: 1: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
The ‘instincts of migration’ arise in the realm of the metaphysical and Powers offers a resplendent answer to the great metaphysical question of whither and why: ‘where the bird went’, that is, to the ‘meadows seasonless and boundless’, ‘one day you will go’. The consolation of achieved faith brings this statement of faith from the realm of prophecy into a present moment of consolation. Thus, out of rapt attention to the sacramental in a present moment, Powers conveys her reader into the kingdom of Heaven which is in each present moment.

According to Buber, in his book *Between Man & Man*, when we really understand a poem, all we know of the poet is what we learn of him in the poem – no biographical wisdom is of value for the pure understanding of what is to be understood: the I which approaches us is the subject of this single poem. But when we read other poems by the poet in the same true way their ‘subjects combine in all their multiplicity, completing and confirming one another, to form the one polyphony of the person’s existence’ (1971: 33). I agree with Buber on this issue, and the further relevance for my reading of Powers lies in what he goes on to say: ‘In such a way, out of the givers of the signs, the speakers of the words of lived life, out of the moment[s] …, there arises for us with a single identity the Lord of the voice, the One’ (1971: 33). In my opinion the ‘identity’ of ‘the Lord of the voice, the One’, arises for the attentive reader out of Powers’ poetry, and thus it is metaphysical. Throughout her work Powers alludes to His identity: He is

the worthiest King in a kingdom that shall never end
‘The Mercy of God’,

and her poetry could be described as a litany of her loving names for Him, some of which convey her awareness of His awe-inspiring qualities:

a little sagebrush
‘The Vision’;

the Lover
‘The Mountains of the Lord’;
The great Undoer
the Mender
the Love
a Savior
my Repairer of fences
‘Repairer of Fences’;

the strangest of all lovers
‘God is a Strange Lover’;

O God of too much giving
‘But not With Wine’;

not garden anymore
desert now
a vast unknown Sahara
‘Not Garden Any More’;

ominous presence
‘Let There Be Light’;

a Tenant here
a Timeless heart
a bird of beauty
‘The Kingdom of God’;

Vast
a thousand acres
‘The Ledge of Light’;

my beggar
‘The Master Beggar’;

pale young Christ
‘The Cloister’;

Zephyr and gentle breeze
O Love, vast and unabated
Wind of Pentecost
‘The Wind of Pentecost’;
Purchaser
‘This is a Beautiful time’;

the Paraclete
infinite patience
a silence
‘O Spirita Sancta’;

the Poet’s Bird
the Hunter’s Deer
that Burning Bush
the Quarry of the Fisherman
‘Shining Quarry’;

Beauty
‘Celestial Bird’;

wind and water
fire and a bird
Substance and sod
earth and matter
‘Lo Spirito Santo’;

tender
Love Who seeks to mother
‘Ruah-Elohim’;

the Ultimate Silence
the Winged Flame of heaven
‘Decoys’;

the Shepherd
‘Come, South Wind’;

my Truelove
‘In This Green Wood’;
the Keeper
‘Cabaret’;
Love, the divine
Love, the antiphonal
‘Letter of Departure’;

O Wisdom
Adonai
Root of Jesse
O Key
O Orient
King and Cornerstone
O our Emmanuel
‘Come Is the Love Song’;

the Uncreated
O great immortal Poet
‘Manuscript of Heaven’;

the Divine Indweller
‘The Cloud of Carmel’;

the King’s young Son
‘Young Maidens Running’;

the Master
a Radiance
the fountained Christ
‘The Blood’s Mystic’;

The Son of Mary
Him Who is slumbering with His Heart awake
the Soul’s eternal Lover
‘The Book of Ruth’;

light and genitor of light
‘And in Her Morning’;

Splendor
‘Like the Bright Seraphim’;
ancient primal mother
‘The Masses’;

my Hive
‘Draw Me: We Will Run’;

the final One
‘The Soul Is a Terrible Thing’;

Someone
‘Wanderer’;

O my Mother God, my God and Mother
‘Millet’s “Feeding Her Birds”’;

my beauty
‘Covenant’;

my utmost need
my only trust
‘Christ is My Utmost Need’;

a meadow in some high way
‘A Meadow Moreover’;

Good
‘The Cedar Tree’;

Listener
‘Robin at Dusk’;

flame and festival
‘And wilderness rejoices’;

O Water, Wave and Tide in One
‘Doxology’.
This survey of some of the names with which Powers names God in her poetry reveals that the poems ‘combine in all their multiplicity’ to ‘complete and confirm one another’ in such a way that ‘there arises for [the reader] the Lord of the voice, the One’ (Buber 1971: 33). Powers longed to

make one song and be
aware of but one Listener
‘Robin at Dusk’,

and in my opinion she does this, so that, because her poems are inhabited by ‘the Lord of the voice’, they may be called metaphysical.

The poem ‘The Cloud of Carmel’ also uses a litany of names to convey essence but it deconstructs its enumeration of some of the lovely titles of Mary in an instance of metaphysical wit, to replace them with a single title more essential still:

Symbol of star or lily of the snows
rainbow or root or vine or fruit-filled tree:
these image the immaculate to me
less than a little cloud, a little light cloud rising
from Orient waters cleft by prophecy.

Complex orthodox theology inhabits the lyrical metaphor chosen by the poet above the other lovely names as the essential descriptor: Moses led the chosen people out of Egypt through the ‘cleft’ Orient waters towards the Messiah Who would be born of Mary. In this poem she is a little cloud which arises from these waters of salvific miracle. The theological point is that, like all clouds, without the waters she would not be. But so absolute is her love for God that by His grace and with her consent the waters are not only her essence but she is entirely composed only of them. She consists of nothing but God in perfect accordance with the first great commandment to love God absolutely, but this she can only do because He first loved her. As Powers believes is true for all mankind, perfect communion with God requires both His grace and the human ‘heart’s decision to keep the first commandment always first’, (‘Letter of departure’), which decision Mary, by God’s grace, embodies.
My theory supports Buber’s theory here, in that I maintain that, by means of paying rapt attention at the metaphorical tip of language, Powers inhabits the present moment of the being mode, and her moment of attention issues in a metaphysical poem. In Buber’s terms, Powers’ rapt attention to God in a moment elicits from the attentive reader, in turn, an authentic experience of God. In my opinion this can be seen happening in her poem ‘Out of the Storm’. Powers sets her moment of intense attention in her opening line:

The lemon air hung paralysed
and not a leaf stirred in the lanes,
when sky, like spirit, was surprised
by sudden lightning veins.

The dramatic metaphor of ‘the lemon air’ carries painterly tones and an incipient threat of imminent storm violence. Close attention has been paid to ‘sudden’ ripples of lightning in nature: here they run like ‘veins’ that surprise the sky and the spirit. Powers goes on in concrete metaphor to evoke the threat-laden atmosphere of a pre-storm sky:

where the black dome of day inclined,
a slow black terror spread.

The poem moves into the metaphysical as Powers recreates ‘an authentic experience of the moment God’, first in herself in her vivid meditation on a spiritual experience, and then in the attentive reader, from whom she ‘draws forth also an authentic experience of the moment God’ (Buber 1971: 33). Powers’ spirit leaps up at the wild beauty of the storm-wind like an exultant bird that flings itself rapturously into the gale. The exultant bird seems to have soared from out of her own breast, and in her moment of ecstatic spiritual joy she feels an awareness of another bird, the Holy Spirit, that nestles yet in her ‘dark’:

I had not thought such joy could be
hidden in me and take to air.
My dark now sings with mystery.
What other bird is there?
The attentive reader’s heart may also stir at the rapturous mystery of Powers’ question to herself and to her reader: ‘What other bird is there?’

According to Buber,

the idea of responsibility is to be brought back from the province of specialised ethics, of an ‘ought’ that swings free in the air, into that of lived life. Genuine responsibility exists only where there is real responding to what happens to one, to what is to be seen and heard and felt. Each concrete hour allotted to the person, with its content drawn from the world and from destiny, is speech for the man who is attentive. Attentive, for no more than that is needed in order to make a beginning with the reading of the signs that are given to you (1971: 33).

This is the same quality of attention that is subjected to scientific scrutiny in Gallagher’s book ‘Rapt’. In my opinion this is the calibre of attention that Powers brings to bear on the subjects of her poems. She hears ‘the speech’, with its content ‘drawn from the world and from destiny’, and she reads the signs that are ‘given’ to her. Out of this rapt attention she writes a poem which, if read with ‘genuine responsibility’, imparts something of ‘the speech’ drawn from our common human destiny to the reader, and which can alert the reader too to the ‘signs’ given to her. Buber has stern words for what Fromm calls life as lived in the having mode:

For that very reason the whole apparatus of our civilization is necessary to preserve men from this attentiveness and its consequences. For the attentive man would no longer, as his custom is, ‘master’ the situation the very moment after it stepped up to him: it would be laid upon him to go up and into it. Moreover, nothing that he believed he possessed as always available would help him, no knowledge and no technique, no system and no programme, for now he would have to do with what cannot be classified, with concretion itself. This speech has no alphabet, each of its sounds is a new creation and only to be grasped as such (1971: 34).

Of this speech, which Buber calls ‘a new creation’, Newman has this to say: ‘It is not an easy thing to learn that new language which Christ has brought us. He has interpreted all things for us in a new way: He has brought us a religion which sheds a new light on all that happens. Try to learn this language’ (Dessain 1962: 82).
The radical thing about Buber’s new ‘speech’, and Newman’s ‘language’, is that its words are real in a way not shared by insincere speech, by words that arise out of shifting certainties and dissolving principles. Newman holds that inattentive use of language can have grave consequences: ‘to make professions is to play with edged tools, unless we attend to what we are saying. Words have a meaning, whether we mean that meaning or not; and they are imputed to us in their real meaning, when our not meaning it is our own fault’ (Dessain 1962: 73). The ethical value traditionally placed on sincerity is widely acknowledged. But what Newman stresses here are the aesthetic and the metaphysical attributes of sincerity: there is a beautiful congruence between words and their proper meaning, what Powers calls a ‘pattern’. And there is a solemn grandeur underlying words coming out of their exalted metaphysical destiny: ‘For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned’.66

Powers too writes about this new language: her poem ‘The will of God’ is about the song she believes the soul must learn to sing in order to enter heaven:

Time has one song alone. If you are heedful and concentrate on the sound with all your soul, you may hear the song of the beautiful will of God, soft notes or deep sonorous tones that roll like thunder over time. Not many have the hearing for this music, and fewer still have sought it as sublime.

Listen, and tell your grief: But God is singing! God sings through all creation with His will. Save the negation of sin, all is His music, even the notes that set their roots in ill to flower in pity, pardon or sweet humbling. Evil finds harshness of the rack and rod in tunes where good finds tenderness and glory. The saints who loved have died of this pure music, and no one enters heaven till he learns deep in his soul at least, to sing with God.

66 Matthew 12: 37.
She is unequivocal in her theological stance here: ‘Time has one song alone’. This song is not one of several from which one may pick and choose at will. It is the only song which underlies reality, in Powers’ opinion, and our free will lies in whether to choose it or not. The choice is ours, but the consequence of neglecting to ‘concentrate’ on it with ‘all our soul’ means exile from heaven until we learn ‘to sing with God’. This is Newman’s new language. What interests me for the purpose of this thesis is that in order to ‘hear’ the song ‘of the beautiful will of God’, one needs to be ‘heedful’, utterly concentrated: that is, to pay rapt attention. Contemporary neuroscience complements theology in its insistence that this quality of attention is necessary to living in a truly human way with all one’s faculties alert to the astonishing fact of life.

Powers is clear-eyed about the mystery of suffering: hers is no sentimental gaze of easy wonder at lovely things. The ‘song of the beautiful will of God’ may at times indeed sound ‘softly’, when life is pleasant, but it may also have ‘deep sonorous tones that roll like thunder over time’, when pain and loss are inescapable. The metaphysical paradox which Powers here analyses is that it is always, nonetheless, ‘beautiful’. This is the metaphysical mystery of suffering. Powers shows wry psychological insight when she comments that

Not many have the hearing for this music, and fewer still have sought it as sublime.

We may be reluctantly aware of ‘this music’, but we would much rather it played a different tune! The modal verb ‘may’ in stanza one, in the line, ‘you may hear the song of the beautiful will of God’, is of metaphysical significance: my reading of it is not as in carrying uncertainty, as in maybe or maybe not, but as in conveying permission: we have divine permission to hear the one thing needful for our entry to heaven, but the condition that arises from God’s wistful longing for our free response is that we must want to hear the song, and not half-heartedly or fitfully, but ‘with all our soul’.

Stanza two reiterates the resplendent affirmation of faith that Powers’ poem makes: ‘Listen, and tell your grief: But God is singing!’ She faces the fact of grief squarely, but her response is emphatic, the force carried by the exclamation mark which insists that
over and under ‘all creation’ God ‘sings’ with ‘His will’. Powers calls sin a ‘negation’. This word carries the refusal to be heedful, to concentrate on ‘the beautiful will of God’, and the dreadful fruits of this refusal, she says, are the ‘harshness of the rack and rod’. The metaphysical paradox that lies in this line is the sad irony that the rack and the rod are self-imposed, their harsh bitterness arising from the personal decision to remain deaf to the divine song. The undeniable and mysterious fact of human life, that suffering comes also to the lovers of God, that sometimes His notes ‘set their roots in ill’, Powers offsets by her claim that this kind of suffering, suffering that does not arise out of ‘the negation’ of wilful ‘sin’, ‘flower[s]’ miraculously into the lovely blooms of ‘pity, pardon or sweet humbling’, ‘tenderness’, and even ‘glory’. She is writing here out of the same metaphysical space that Blake’s clod speaks out of when, by means of selfless tenderness, he ‘builds a Heaven in Hell’s despair’:

Love seeketh not itself to please,  
nor for itself hath any care,  
but for another gives its ease,  
and builds a Heaven in Hell’s despair.

‘The Clod and the Pebble’.

Her final short stanza acknowledges that the high ecstasy of mystical union with God, such as that experienced by the ‘saints’, the great mystics of the church, such as St John of The Cross, St Teresa of Avila and St Cecelia, is a rarefied realm of spiritual experience during which absolute death to self occurs out of total immersion in ‘this pure music’, but she is not content to leave holiness to the great saints. Her closing line makes an unequivocal theological statement:

no one enters heaven till he learns,  
deep in his soul at least, to sing with God.

She knows that the great sanctity of the saints lies beyond the fitful heedfulness of most people, but nonetheless, she insists, unless we take up the responsibility to learn the song at some sincere level of our beings, we cannot enter heaven.
This chapter has shown how my Christian theory about the nature of metaphysical poetry, according to which Powers is a metaphysical poet, informed by the critics I have cited up to this point, has taken a contemporary, scientific focus from a study published in 2009 by Winifred Gallagher called *RAPT Attention and the Focused Life*, and a philosophical focus from Erich Fromm’s book *To Have or to Be*, 2002, and Martin Buber’s book *Between Man and Man*, 1971. Analysis of metaphysical qualities in Powers’ poetry has supported my description of my theory of reading.
Here is the king’s secret scattered
‘The mystical sparrow of St John of the Cross’

Gardner maintains that, though it is not possible to define a metaphysical poem definitively, it is both possible and useful to ‘describe some of the characteristics of metaphysical poetry’ (1967: 27). This chapter makes seven general observations about metaphysical poetry in order to highlight qualities which will be shown to be evident in Powers’ poetry, and offers further analysis of instances of the metaphysical in Powers’ work. In the light of the Christian theory described thus far, informed by my further two emphases, the scientific and the philosophical, as described in Chapter Five, according to which I read Powers’ poetry, the focus of this study will now narrow to concentrate exclusively on the metaphysical nature of her work. Examination of the metaphysical aspects of Powers’ poetry intensifies in focus in Chapters Six, Seven, Eight and Nine.

A first general observation about metaphysical poetry is that it raises, even when it does not explicitly address, the great metaphysical question of the relation of the spirit and the senses. This is a description, in fact, of Powers’ entire oeuvre. According to Gardner, the strength of the ‘religious poetry of the metaphysical poets is that they bring to their praise and prayer and meditation so much experience that is not in itself religious. The poems create for us particular situations out of which prayer or meditation arises’ (1967: 27), thus they raise metaphysical issues even when they address the ordinary and the commonplace. This can be seen, for example, in Powers’ poem ‘The First Pentecost’: the particular situation out of which the meditation arises is the upper room in which the apostles are huddled fearfully together after the Crucifixion; in the poem ‘The Gift of Love’, the situation out of which the poem arises is that the poet is sitting thinking about her beloved; in the poem ‘The Homecoming’, there has been a death; in the poem ‘The Visitation Journey’, the young Mary is travelling by donkey to visit her cousin Elizabeth; the poem ‘The Evening Chimes’ arises
out of a nun listening to chapel bells at evening; ‘Siesta in Color’ is about a person lying sick in bed, looking out of a window. Powers infuses these particular situations with metaphysical significance by means of her vivid imagination so that they evoke the great metaphysical questions about the origin and destiny of man.

The poem ‘Cabaret’ conveys the metaphysical loneliness and sorrow that arise out of the transience that is an inescapable component of human life, though it initially celebrates the senses in an evocation of sensual pleasure, warmth and vigour:

I shall spend a penny of love,
and a penny of grief,
and a penny for song,
wine that is red, wines that are purple and white;
I shall find a place in the dazzling room of life,
and sit on a chair and sip my wine all night.

Dancers will come like red and gold leaves blown
over a crystal floor, and I shall see
many a reveller wander out alone
through a black door beyond all revelry.

There will be music come on little feet
into my soul, and laughter to be spread
over young wounds, and kisses honey-sweet,
and shining words to keep me comforted.

And I shall wait till the Keeper comes to say
that my hour is done, and he drowns each glaring light
in endless black ... and the dancers go away ...
and I stumble out alone into the night.

Rich colour and pleasure infuse the opening stanzas of this poem with intoxicating sensuousness: there are ‘wine that is red, wines that are purple and white’, dancers that drift ‘like red and gold leaves blown over a crystal floor’, music and laughter, ‘kisses honey-sweet’ and ‘shining words to keep me comforted’. But loneliness and darkness run stealthily like a black river beneath the jollity, and succeed to it. Even amid the ‘revelry’, the poet sees

many a reveller wander out alone
through a black door beyond all revelry,

and ultimately she knows ‘the Keeper’ will come to ‘say that [her] hour is done’, He will
drown ‘each glaring light in endless black’, the dancers ‘will go away’, and she will
‘stumble out alone into the night’. The intermittent awareness of life’s brevity that so
troubles humans she alludes to in her word ‘hour’, and the words ‘drown’ and ‘endless
black’ evoke with horror the sinister current of grief that runs beneath even the most
sumptuous human pleasure to be found in the ‘dazzling room of life’. This poem raises
the great metaphysical question of the relation of the spirit and the senses in its
evocation of this dark vein of sorrow and sense of transience that infuse human merry-
making.

A second general observation about metaphysical poetry is that it shows ‘a strong
sense of the realities of daily life, the common concerns of men and women’ (Gardner
1967: 27). This too is true of Powers. She deals with the metaphysical themes common
to human life, such as suffering, love, faith, doubt, loneliness, loss, and joy, but they are
intently scrutinised through the lens of her Wisconsin background and her deep faith,
so that her metaphysical style heightens and liberates personality. It is ‘an intensely
individual treatment of common themes’ (1967: 28).

Aldous Huxley wrote of the seventeenth-century English ‘Metaphysicals’, that the
‘climate of the mind is positively English in its variableness and instability. Frost,
sunshine, hopeless drought and refreshing rains succeed one another with bewildering
rapidity. Herbert is the poet of this inner weather’ (1978: 233). Powers too is a poet of
‘inner weather’, though her ‘inner weather’ is that of rural Wisconsin, the beauty and
the bitter cold of which are often the prisms through which her individuality and her
metaphysical insight are presented:

    Mindful of you by love,
    ‘Souvenir, Wisconsin River’,

and
Your valley trails its beauty through your poems,
the kindly woods, the wide majestic river,
‘For a Lover of Nature’;

and her poetic habitat is often winter:

life is a night of snow,
‘Night of Storm’,

and

I am a February child. I love these things –
this broken shell of a house and the terrible song it sings,
and winter shrieking wildly at this door.
‘The House of the Silver Spirit’.

Her poem ‘Petenwell Rock’ shows an ‘intensely individual treatment’ of the common theme of the unbearable indifference of Nature to human suffering, in which her individuality and her metaphysical insight are evident. In this poem there are a ‘bright portion of revel’, lights ‘mellowed to warm young gold’, dancers ‘swaying like songs’ and music and laughter. But loneliness and darkness run beneath the increasingly frenzied jollity, and succeed to it. The sense of loss and anxiety intensifies throughout the poem: the road to the ‘portion of revel’ is a ‘long black road’, the music at the dance bellows ‘its anger against grief’, and the hectic ‘laughter flying’ falls on the poet’s ears like ‘sounded waterfall’. In dramatic contrast to the rather frantic merriment at the party

overhead the whip-poor-wills were crying,
crowding all loneliness into one cry.

Powers’ sorrow at transience wells up in the line

O grief that only loneliness should last!

and she moves on into a haunting evocation of emptiness and loss:
Madness will die, and youth will hurry after.
Into some shadowed past
dancers will bow like dust; laughter will crumble,
while still beneath the silver of the moon
for loveliness and joy that died too soon
these plaintive birds will cry.

This poem ends on a bleak note. Early in the poem Nature seems a benign presence in the human scene: the Petenwell Rock maintains ‘a wise old silence’ amid the revels, ‘lifting its strength into a starlit sky’, and the human longing for Nature to endorse human life in some way can be heard in her attribution of sorrow ‘for loveliness and joy that died too soon’ to the crying of the ‘plaintive birds’.

But by the final line of the last stanza, when the ghosts of departed dancers ‘bow like dust’, when laughter has crumbled, when the ‘plaintive birds’ still cry, then ‘this tall rock’ watches

    with calm indifference,
    holding itself aloof against the sky.

The words ‘calm indifference’ and ‘aloof’ turn a cold shoulder to human anguish at the blank otherness of Nature, which seems to people in times of sorrow to look on human misery entirely unmoved. This poem is an ‘intensely individual treatment’ of the common theme of the unbearable indifference of Nature to human suffering in which Powers’ individuality and her metaphysical insight are evident.

A third general observation about metaphysical poetry is that the act of reading it is necessarily a metaphysical, and, in the last analysis, a theological one: ‘The ascription of beauty to truth and to meaning is ... a piece of theology’ (Steiner 1989: 216). As Ward says, ‘logos and mythos are inextricably intertwined; in translating, metaphor can still transfigure’ (Ward 2009: 25). I agree with Steiner and Ward, and it is in this light that I read Powers’ poetry in this thesis.
Powers’ poem ‘There Shall Come Forth a Shoot’ is a metaphysical meditation on Isaiah’s prophecy: ‘A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit’. This meditation is in effect a transfiguration of metaphor into theology:

I am waiting for a green shoot
to come out of my stump some morning
in this unseasonable springtime –
December’s leaf and blossom, winter’s bird.
Joy waits with me and I can feel its seepage
into my day and night.
My bones sing and I hear an unknown music
from that one place where, by old reverence stirred,
the vowels drain from a word.
I think of the marvellous flower that is to come
and how the light will hover over it.
Now and again though is the message blurred
by brief uncertainties:
I fear that by my rude excess of watching
the green may be deterred
or that I have miscalculated seasons
or given far too personal a meaning
to glorious promises Isaiah heard.

Yet who am I to minimize the worth
of what a stump is likely to bring forth?

Her tone is intimate and conversational and without preamble we are in a metaphysical meditation that is given a friendly ordinariness by the words ‘some morning’. She is in a time of sorrow, ‘December’, and ‘winter’, but she invokes the radiant paradox that inhabits the heart of metaphysical poetry: ‘leaf and blossom’ though in ‘December’, and ‘bird’ in spite of ‘winter’. Joy ‘waits’ with her, and she ‘can feel its seepage’. Her bones ‘sing’, she hears ‘an unknown music’ from the unsayable name of YHWH, which, because of ‘old reverence’ she doesn’t say, but towards which she makes obeisance:

that one place where, by old reverence stirred,
the vowels drain from a word.

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67 Isaiah 11: 1.
She thinks of the coming of Christ, the second coming implicit in the first, and her metaphor extends that of Isaiah: the shoot he foretold she sees as ‘the marvellous flower’, and the Holy Spirit she sees hovering over it. The manifold doubts and despondencies that dog human faith she alludes to with masterly understatement that nevertheless conveys vividly the bewilderment they cause:

Now and again though is the message blurred by brief uncertainties.

‘Blurred’ conveys the frightening loss of clear sight, and the stumbling and losing of the way that loss of sight can entail, and ‘uncertainties’ lies lightly over the terrifying depths that lurk when glad certitude falters. Her final two lines are a witty metaphysical inversion and deconstruction of cynicism. One might taunt a naïve believer with the words Powers herself supplies: maybe wishful thinking gives

far too personal a meaning
to glorious promises Isaiah heard,

and who are we to claim their glorious fulfilment in our lives? Instead she ends with an exactly opposite delineation of the effrontery that would lie in our not believing so merciful a prophecy:

who am I to minimize the worth
of what a stump is likely to bring forth?

Steiner’s word ‘beauty’ in his comment that ‘the ascription of beauty to truth and to meaning is ... a piece of theology’ (1989: 216), and Ward’s word ‘transfigure’ in his comment that ‘logos and mythos are inextricably intertwined; in translating, metaphor can still transfigure’ (2009: 25), are applicable to Powers’ metaphysical use of metaphor in her poem about Mary, ‘The Pool of God’:

She was a pure, transparent pool reflecting
God, only God.
She held His burnished day; she held His night
of planet-glow or shade inscrutable.
God was her sky and she who mirrored Him became His firmament.
The beauty of the metaphor, that has the transparent pool ‘burnished’ with the sun’s reflection, sparkling iridescent silver with the stars’ and the moon’s reflections, and deepest black with the ‘shade inscrutable’ of moonless night, translates metaphor into theology and conveys both rigorous orthodoxy and something of the mystical radiance of spiritual truth.

Her closing lines round off her metaphysical conceit with the restrained ardour, intellectual complexity and poetic loveliness characteristic of much of her metaphysical poetry:

Oh, to become a pure pool like the Virgin,  
water that lost the semblance of water  
and was a sky like God.

The poem ‘Decoys’ also uses a striking metaphor to illumine a metaphysical issue, the nature of the love of God:

Make decoys he told me,  
set them on the blue;  
then observe the wild ducks  
lying down to you.

Wild ducks do not charm me  
save for beauty’s sake.  
But decoys of Spirit –  
these I strain to make.

The decoy of silence,  
hope’s unuttered sigh,  
that the Ultimate Silence  
drift down from the sky.

The chaste dovelike virtue,  
whiteness to allure  
One Who is a Spirit,  
ininitely pure.

Love’s decoy, the fire bird  
that, when God shall see  
the Winged Flame of heaven  
may come down to me.
Let him have his wild ducks,
green and blue and brown.
My decoys are fashioned
to bring heaven down.

Just as hunters use decoys to lure wild ducks, so Powers proposes to use the decoy of hopeful silence to lure ‘the Ultimate Silence’; the decoy of dovelike virtue to lure ‘One who is a Spirit, infinitely pure’. Then, with metaphysical daring, she proposes to use the Spirit Himself, when she has lured Him by means of ‘dovelike virtue’, as the ultimate decoy, Love’s decoy, to lure the triune God ‘down to me’. Thus she defines an attribute of God’s astonishing love for us with metaphysical audacity: He so loves us that we are able to entice Him with lures of our love to ‘come down’ to us. Though we are powerless and He is omnipotent, yet we can fashion decoys ‘to bring heaven down’.

McDermott says in relation to poetic inception:

The germ at the origin of poetry ‘tends from the very start to humble revelation, virtually contained in a small lucid cloud of inescapable intuition both of the Self of the poet and of some particular flash of reality in the God-made universe; a particular flash of reality bursting forth in its unforgettable individuality, but infinite in its meanings and echoing capacity (2009: 55).

Certainly Powers’ poem ‘Letter of Departure’ might be said to convey ‘a particular flash of reality bursting forth in its unforgettable individuality’, in evocative imagery that is ‘infinite in its meanings and echoing capacity’ so that ‘in translating [from metaphor into theology], metaphor transfigure[s]’ (Ward 2009: 25):

‘There is nothing in the valley, or home, or street worth turning back for – nothing!’ you write. O bitter words and true
to seed the heart and grow to this green answer:
let it be nothing to us that we knew
streets where the leaves gave sparsely of the sun
or white small rested houses and the air
strung with the sounds of living everywhere.
The mystery of God lies before and beyond us,
so bright the sight is dark, and if we halt
to look back once upon the burning city,
we shall be paralyzed by rage or pity,
either of which can turn the blood to salt.

We knew too much of the knowable dark world,
its secret and its sin,
too little of God. And now we rise to see
that even our pledges to humanity
were false, since love must out of Love begin.
Here where we walk the fire-strafed road and thirst
for the great face of Love, the blinding vision,
our wills grow steadfast in the heart’s decision
to keep the first commandment always first.
We vow that nothing now shall give us cause
to stop and flounder in our tears again,
that nothing – fire or dark or persecution –
or the last human knowledge of all pain –
shall turn us from our goal.

With but the bare necessities of soul –
no cloak or purse or scrip – let us go forth
and up the rocky passes of the earth,
crying, ‘Lord, Lord,’ and certain presently
(when in the last recesses of the will
and in the meshes of the intellect
the quivering last sounds of earth are still)
to hear an answer that becomes a call.
Love, the divine, Love, the antiphonal,
speaks only to love,
for only love could learn that liturgy,
since only love is erudite to master
the molten language of eternity.

The second and third lines of this poem constitute a metaphysical metaphor which
demonstrates all the characteristics of metaphysical poetry:

O bitter words and true
to seed the heart and grow to this green answer.

The ‘bitter words’ that ‘seed the heart’ convey the human misery to which the poem
alludes throughout: the ‘burning city’ to which the only appropriate human response is
‘rage or pity’; the

knowable dark world,
its secret and its sin;
the ‘fire-strafed road’;

the

fire or dark or persecution;

and

the last human knowledge of all pain.

In a concise metaphysical paradox this anguish grows to a ‘green answer’. This defies human logic and natural law. Bitter seeds cannot bear healthful fruits. But by means of the great theological paradox of the Cross, according to Powers’ belief, the natural law is gloriously inverted and the verdant outcome supplants the ‘rocky passes of the earth’ for all eternity. This theological and intellectual complexity conveyed vividly and with economy is a trait of metaphysical poetry, which often imagines a concrete scene in order to give dramatic intensity to its meditation. This Powers does in the lines:

    streets where the leaves gave sparsely of the sun
    or white small rested houses and the air
    strung with the sounds of living everywhere.

Her ‘difficult’ theological point here is that even the lovely and beloved aspects of human life must be relinquished in the face of the totally uncompromising first commandment: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind’. As already mentioned, one of the ‘strength[s] of the religious poetry of the metaphysical poets is that they bring to their praise and prayer and meditation so much experience that is not in itself religious (Gardner 1967: 26). In this poem Powers evokes the sweetness of everyday human life at its best: quiet, deeply shaded streets; simple family life in ‘white small’ houses; ‘rested houses’, which conceit infuses the houses themselves with the ease and peacefulness of fully realised family life. The words

\[68\] Matthew 22: 37.
invest the common activities of daily life with sacred significance carried by the word ‘strung’, which evokes the beads strung on a rosary, reverently fingered in moments of quiet devotion. The metaphysical challenge posed by the poem is intensifi ed by the charm of these scenes: this sweetness, like the anguish, is ‘not worth turning back for’. This paradox comes out of Christ’s paradoxical words that whoever seeks to save his life will lose it; and that anyone who wants to live can only do so by dying. In this poem Powers ‘conjures’ ‘numinous’ experience in metaphors which ‘court revelation’, so that that which is ‘essentially “unsayable” is articulated’ (Lundin 2009: 51).

Powers’ poem, ‘Millet’s “Feeding Her Birds”’, is an analysis of holiness. It is an ‘ascription of beauty to truth and to meaning [that] is ... a piece of theology’ (Steiner 1989: 216). The poem has metaphysical simplicity: its seeming simplicity overlays complex theology and it both reiterates Christ’s observation that it is necessary to become childlike in order to enter the kingdom of Heaven, and describes the lineaments of faith. The image around which Powers constructs her meditation is that of a mother feeding her children. She states the subject of her meditation in her opening lines: this image of trust and loving nurture is ‘all I ask for in biography’. This is perfectly achieved simplicity: all of life, her ‘biography’, is pared down to the trustful dependency of the beloved child:

These children and the mother and a bowl –
here is the scene which circumscribes my soul.

This is, in fact, an exhaustive analysis of our relation to God as Powers sees it: He is our Mother, we are His children, and all that comes to us, that which is in the ‘bowl’, comes from Him. His attributes of loving, nurturing, guiding, protecting, and comforting lie in His motherhood, and our only proper response to Him lies in the trustfulness, obedience and contentedness of the well-cared for child. The metaphysical paradox of God’s being a victim of His own nature lies in Powers’ line ‘Fledglings of peace whose

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Matthew 16: 25: For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it.
need is their defence’. He is, by His own admission, ‘the Good Shepherd’, so once we acknowledge our vulnerability and absolute dependence, we are entirely assured of His utmost care. Therefore we can rest in pure trust and achieved safety. The lines

her hands behind her and her lifted face
waiting its mouthful

are Powers’ complete analysis of the mysteries of free will and salvation: we are powerless of ourselves to effect our salvation, our useless hands are best clasped in meek admission of our weakness; we cannot feed ourselves but can only lift our mouths to await our portion. Thus our entire dependence on God is delineated. But metaphysical paradox lies in the corollary that God’s salvation needs our free response to become efficacious for us. His is the hand that feeds, but in order to be able to feed us He needs us to still our busy hands, to lift our faces and to await our mouthful.

Time and again Powers has lines which delineate the misery of much of human life with vivid economy. Here her lines

Let my day erase
its weary woe for what she knows of trust

set up a telling contrast between the anxious sorrow of so many days and the serene confidence of achieved faith. This spirit of childlike trustfulness she describes as ‘the purest homage of our dust’. This seemingly simple line is in fact a metaphysical analysis of the clear-eyed humility which comes out of a deep understanding of our origin, nature and destiny. Powers sums up the whole of Christian theology in her lines

Her peasant childhood motivates my will
to take my given portion and be still.

Running right through this description of loving acceptance and faith are the verbs delineating the human agency that Powers considers to be intrinsic to a proper relationship with God: ‘motivates’, will, (here a noun, but the verb ‘to will’ inheres

70 John 10: 11: I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.
Powers affirms the essential importance of words in a logos order: we must ‘speak’, but only the words ‘O my Mother God, my God and Mother’. These are the only words necessary because, in Powers’ opinion, they say it all. There is some metaphysical irony here, because, as a poet, Powers uses many words, yet all her words ultimately convey only these words.

Powers’ poetry in these instances demonstrates that, as Steiner and Ward maintain, ‘the act of reading is a metaphysical, and, in the last analysis, a theological one, because ‘the ascription of beauty to truth and to meaning is ... a piece of theology’ (1989: 216) arising from the fact that ‘logos and mythos are inextricably intertwined; [so that] in translating, metaphor can still transfigure’ (2009: 25).

A fourth general observation about metaphysical poetry is that some critics have argued that there is ‘no such thing as a school of Metaphysical poets’, and that the writers traditionally grouped under this name in the canon, such writers as John Donne, George Herbert, Thomas Carew, Richard Crashaw, Andrew Marvell and Henry Vaughan are more different than they are alike. Nevertheless, as Gardner points out, ‘if we treat “Metaphysical” as a convenient label rather than a strict category, the term can be useful. The major trend in criticism has, in fact, been away from capsule definitions and towards descriptions that elucidate rather than restrict’ (Gardner 1967: 27). It is by means of ‘descriptions that elucidate rather than restrict’ that this thesis examines Powers’ poetry.

A fifth general observation is that, as is well known, Samuel Johnson did not intend the term ‘metaphysical poets’ to be a compliment when he coined it. He was adapting a witty aside of Dryden’s who, writing in 1693, said of Donne: ‘He affects the metaphysics and perplexes the minds of the fair sex with nice speculations of philosophy’(Gardner 1967: 15). According to Gardner, what we call metaphysical poetry was referred to by contemporaries as ‘strong lines’ (1967: 15). This was also not intended to be complimentary. By ‘strong lines’ is meant ‘more matter and less words’. This was considered to be difficult poetry: it ‘is hard ... the second reading will please more than the first, and the third more than the second’. Though some disapproved of
so called ‘difficult’ poetry, there was none the less an idea held by some contemporaries that ‘difficulty’ was ‘a merit’. What came to be called by its denigrators ‘the “strong-lined” style had its origins in [a growing] desire at the close of Elizabeth’s reign for concise expression, achieved by an elliptical syntax. Along with this went admiration for difficulty in the thought’ (1967: 16).

Metaphysical poetry often uses the ordinary in metaphor to approach the numinous, so that simplicity overlays complexity in a characteristic that sometimes earns the pejorative epithet of ‘difficulty’. This can be seen in Powers’ deceptively simple poem ‘This May Explain’ which makes unequivocal claim for the absolute importance of the ordinary as the conduit for the metaphysical, in this case, for salvation:

The door to God, the door to any grace  
is very little, very ordinary.  
Those must remember who would gain the place  
this rule that does not vary:  
all truth, all love are by humiliation  
guarded, as One has testified before.  
This may explain why the serf finds salvation,  
and kings and scholars pass the little door.

Powers does not say that this is so for most people, or for all except the very exceptionally gifted or holy. She allows no qualification whatsoever:

Those must remember who would gain the place  
this rule does not vary.

‘[T]he place’, named here with understatement typical of metaphysical poetry, is ‘salvation’. The ‘rule’ that ‘does not vary’ is that:

all truth, all love are by humiliation  
guarded.

The words ‘all truth’ and ‘all love’ contain every scrap of knowledge and wisdom and every nuance of healthy emotion possible to man. Outside of ‘all truth’ and ‘all love’ can only be a howling wilderness composed of nothing but the antitheses of truth and
love. Powers’ word ‘humiliation’ here is complex: she does not use the word ‘humility’, which has positive connotations. Rather she uses the negative word ‘humiliation’. I take this to mean that this quality is not a conscious exercise of virtue, as in the practising of the virtue of humility, but is rather a description of the painful effects of the uncaring and denigrating way in which people often treat each other, and indeed even themselves, and of the way in which the powerless and the uneducated are often treated.

These ‘humiliated’ people are the wounded ones unable to defend themselves, as the powerful and the learned, the ‘kings’ and the ‘scholars’ of the poem, are. The word ‘humiliated’ as used in this poem is in fact a description of those described by Christ in His sermon on the mount. It sums up every attribute of those who suffer and who are thus paradoxically ‘blessed’ as delineated in the beatitudes: ‘the poor in spirit’; ‘those who mourn’; ‘the meek’; ‘those who hunger and thirst for righteousness’; ‘the merciful’; ‘the pure in heart’; ‘the peacemakers’; and ‘the persecuted’. Powers uses the old-fashioned word ‘serfs’ for those she says are equipped to ‘find salvation’. A ‘serf’ is someone who has to work on land he does not own, who has to obey someone with power over him. He is by definition not royal or learned. He is by virtue of his status powerless, vulnerable and disadvantaged. His vulnerable status renders him receptive to blessing. He has no armour of power or learning with which to barricade himself against his own neediness, and no sense of superiority which may tempt him to deny to himself his need for a saviour. It is the very weakness and poverty of the serf which paradoxically equip him to find ‘the little door’.

Powers can be said here to be referring to the preferential option for the poor (Gutierrez 2001: 17) which liberation theology points out is to be found in the teaching of Jesus, but she is not suggesting that powerlessness and ignorance are intrinsically valuable attributes. Rather she is scrutinising with lancing psychological insight the potentially dehumanising effects of wealth, power and prideful learning. She passes no judgement on these qualities or on the possessors of them; she merely shows that they

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71 Matthew 5: 3 – 10.
can render a person immune to the workings of grace, as described by Newman in his passage on wealth and privilege:

A smooth and easy life, an uninterrupted enjoyment of the goods of Providence, full meals, soft raiment, well-furnished homes, the pleasures of sense, the feeling of security, the consciousness of wealth – these, and the like, if we are not careful, choke up all the avenues of the soul, through which the light and breath of heaven might come to us (2009: 42).

All the qualities described by Christ in His Sermon on the Mount as prerequisites for becoming blessed are qualities associated with powerlessness and poverty. The point of the poem is that the insecurity and awareness of need consequent upon suffering and lowly status can enable the person to see ‘the little door’, whereas the complacency and self-sufficiency that can be engendered by power, wealth and education can paradoxically unfit the person thus privileged for blessedness by blinding him to his need for salvation. This ‘little’ poem, like ‘the little door’ it describes, exhibits the metaphysical complexity which might be called ‘difficulty’, that is shown to inhabit the ordinary when a metaphysical poet reaches for God in His Creation.

The poem ‘Water and Light’ also uses the ordinary in metaphor to approach the numinous, and simplicity to convey complexity. It presents ‘the conceivable which cannot be presented’ (Detweiler and Doty 1990: 176) in metaphor anchored in the concrete and the physical. Its content is purely metaphysical. It is in fact an analysis of a mystical experience:

I am reading my holy mother, Madre Teresa.
Dazzled with her clear sight,
I am holding fast to the bannisters of time,
climbing her stairs of light.
Enter this fluid day and climb with me
through what her pages tell:
the soul in the state of grace is like limpid water
out of a crystal well.
I see the light upon my sisters’ faces
lifted to God the world over. On these stairs
glory and grace are cloudbursts over me,
out of her soul and theirs.
Have you ever seen water that got tangled
with light and came alive and was divine?
I drown in these torrents out of her soul and theirs,
and (God forgive me) mine.

The poem opens, as is typical of metaphysical poetry, and as Powers always opens, with direct simplicity: ‘I am reading my holy mother, Madre Teresa’. Paradox follows straight on the transparent opening: ‘Dazzled with her clear sight’. The words seem to say and then unsay themselves: Madre Teresa’s sight is so clear it makes it impossible to see clearly: it is dazzling. This is a metaphysical seeing that has moved beyond the categories of sight and clarity as we know them. Powers follows this intimation that we are in a mystical area by extending her conceit in a metaphor that is ‘difficult’ and yet based squarely on the mundane physical as we know it: because she is dazzled by too much light, she holds ‘fast to the bannisters’. This we would normally and instinctively do. But these are ‘the bannisters of time’, and she is climbing ‘stairs of light’. Immediately we are transported into a mystical area and we are suffused in a heavenly light. The scriptural echo of the stairs to heaven being trod by busy angels lies luminously under this image.  

Powers appeals directly to us in a conceit that inheres in verbs:

Enter this fluid day and climb with me through what her pages tell.

Response is required of us, we must enter and climb, but a theological paradox is elicited by our response: the soul which thus enters ‘the state of grace’ becomes passive and lies

like limpid water
out of a crystal well.

Completely transparent acceptance is the only response possible to the soul in a mystical union with God, but, because He is a lover, He who needs nothing, needs our impulse of response: the nuns ‘lift’ their faces to God. Powers’ image of the faces of

72 Genesis 28: 12: He had a dream in which he saw a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.
Carmelite nuns, bathed in mystical light, ‘lifted to God, world over’ is beatific. She immediately anchors her translucent metaphysical vision in a direct question to the reader of her poem:

Have you seen water ever that got tangled with light and came alive and was divine?

so that we can relate to the mystical ecstasy she is describing. She ends her poem with a conceit that is both rapturous and witty, in the sense of the word as used of metaphysical poetry:

I drown in these torrents out of her soul and theirs, and (God forgive me) mine.

In this conceit she gives concrete, visual ballast to an astonishing vision: we see mystical ecstasy flooding out of holy souls through all of space and time to drown the lover of God. The quiet wit lies in her inclusion of herself, which is seeming audacity, but which is really an analysis of true humility: the radiant torrent that flows from her soul does not have its source in herself, but is from the ‘cloudbursts’ of ‘glory and grace’ that flood over her because, like Madre Teresa and her sisters, the ‘world over’, her face is ‘lifted to God’. Thus the metaphysical substance of this poem inheres in its inhabiting of the being mode in the present moment, as seen in the verbs: she ‘reads’, she ‘climbs’, she ‘sees’ the light, she ‘lifts’ her face, and finally, she ‘drowns’ in cloudbursts of glory and grace.

These poems demonstrate the complexity that sometimes earns metaphysical poetry the disapproving, or admiring, epithet of ‘difficulty’. Certainly ‘the second reading will please more than the first, and the third more than the second’. The poems show the ‘concise expression, achieved by an elliptical syntax [and] the difficulty in the thought’ (Gardner 1967: 16) that are characteristic of metaphysical poetry.

A sixth general observation is a point that Harold Skulsky makes in his book, Language Recreated, that though people call ‘the six most conspicuous poets of the seventeenth
century tradition “metaphysicals”’, he thinks a better case could be made for calling them ““metaphoricals”” (1992: 1). I think that Powers could certainly be called a ‘metaphorical’ because of the metaphysical nature of her poetry: the concepts she is dealing with pertain to the realm of the theological and the metaphysical, and so they must necessarily be approached by means of sign and metaphor. The kinds of subjects she deals with in her poems are, for example: God’s ‘infinite mercy’, in ‘The Mercy of God’; the world ‘kissing its own darkness’, in ‘The Vision’; the ‘sacred wood where waits the Spirit’, in ‘The Trackless Solitude’; the ‘Lamb at midday’, in ‘And Wilderness Rejoices’; a ‘City gleaming on a hill’, ‘a fire no storm could ever still’, ‘a Harp’ that ‘plucks its own serenade’, ‘the Living Water from cool streams’, ‘the Wind that blows far down earth’s shade’, ‘Tables spread with Bread the angels coveted afar’, ‘the shadow of a Dove / who made a marriage with a Morningstar’, and a ‘Bridegroom’s voice’, in ‘The Mountains of the Lord’; heaven, ‘the city I love where the streets are washed with light / and the windows burn’, in ‘Morning of Fog’; a place ‘where love is breathed out of the breast of light’, and where ‘earth’s last finger touches the divine’, in ‘The Mystical Sparrow of St. John of the Cross’. As these examples of the subjects of her poems illustrate, Powers is presenting ‘the conceivable which cannot be presented’ (Detweiler and Doty 1990: 176) and she is therefore working at ‘the extreme metaphorical tip of language’ (Gallagher 2009: 37) in the numinous area of the metaphysical.

In my opinion, Paul Fiddes’ comment that ‘metaphors are the very essence of poetry with its compression of meaning’ is strikingly true of metaphysical poetry. ‘Stories offer the promise of new creation, both with the consolations of form and the challenge of novelty, and the poetic image has a similar impact: by comparing one thing with another, it shows both an underlying unity between things in the world, and also puts them together in new ways’ (1991: 6). This is exactly what metaphysical poetry excels at. The poet asks, in effect, ‘Have you noticed that this is like that?’, and this both brings something new out of a verbal sign and unifies it with others. The coming together in this way of two verbal signs in an image can enrich the meanings of both signs and give greater depth and vividness to the resulting image. An example of this happens in the poem ‘The Terminal’:
It was Fifth Avenue, and it was April.
Who could have dreamed such wind and flying snow?
The terminal gleamed gold far in the distance.
And then I thought: where truly do we go?

Attention to a present moment, in this case to the distant bus or tram terminal
glimpsed through the ‘flying snow’, here gives rise to metaphysical musing: ‘I thought:
where truly do we go?’ The poem goes on to meditate upon life and living in
metaphor:

we wander out of time
down the bright canyons of white whirling air,
too cold and tired for beauty, and too sad
to utter secrets that are warm to share

until it reaches its metaphysical conclusion in the ‘terminal that stands at the world’s
end’. A ‘terminal’ signifies a journey’s end, a longed for destination, often home, a
conclusion, a resolution, a haven, all the many positive connotations of the end of a
freezing, wearisome journey. This is Powers’ theological answer to the metaphysical
question posed by the poem. Thus between the objects compared, the tram terminal
and Heaven, room has been made ‘for vibrations of undertones and overtones;
something happens which cannot be paraphrased in prose’ (Fiddes 1991: 7).
Sometimes, though very often in metaphysical poetry, poets use image in unexpected
and even disturbing ways. Unexpected metaphor ‘seems to dissolve the world as we
know it, to disintegrate the familiar in preparation for a new order’ (1991: 7). This is
what Powers does, for example in her poem ‘Prayer’:

But some day, hidden by His will,
if this meek child is waiting still,
God will take out His mercy-key
and open up felicity.

Serene faith lies in the quietly stated theological certainty of ‘some day’; unquestioning
humility lies in the fully accepted ‘His will’; and then comes the incongruously ordinary
image of God taking a key from His pocket. This is the fully human God Who is both
man and God and Who lived among us, and Who lives now within us. His key, though,
is no ordinary key: vast depths of theology lie in the phrase ‘mercy-key’. We cannot earn this unlocking, nor do we deserve it. It is the astonishingly generous impulse of pure mercy that prompts God to ‘open up felicity’ for His ‘meek’ children. The three words, ‘mercy’, ‘meek’ and ‘felicity’, sum up salvation history in its entirety with elegant economy: because of God’s mercy we are saved; the only proper response to this mercy is the meekness of the trusting child; and the outcome of this relationship between the initiating mercy and the responsive meekness is felicity, which is beautifully defined as great happiness.

Metaphysical poets often use radical imagery, choosing a vehicle for the metaphor which may have overt associations with the object to which it is linked but which is yoked now in a very striking way, for example, again from the poem ‘Prayer’:

where saltiest tears are given right
to seas where sapphire marries light.

Tears and the sea are a simple enough metaphor, but the sea as sapphire married to light, and the tears as therefore transformed by their ‘right’ to mingle in this shining beauty turns the metaphor into a metaphysical one that is striking and radical, and that addresses a metaphysical issue, which is the purpose and the outcome of the mystery of suffering.

Metaphysical use of imagery ‘will contain, to some degree, both ingredients of a new world: the dislocating and the unifying, the novel and the [familiar]’. Imagination, as Coleridge perceived, is a vitality which ‘dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create’. Metaphysical metaphor and symbol, in Fiddes’ opinion, with which I agree, ‘transcend themselves towards mystery’ (1991: 9), as can be seen in Powers’ poem, ‘Track of the Mystic’:

There was a man went forth into the night
with a proud step. I saw his garments blowing;
I saw him reach the great cloud of unknowing.
He went in search of love, whose sign is light.
From the dark night of sense I saw him turn
into the deeper dark nights of the soul
where no least star marks a divine patrol.

Great was his torment who could not discern
this night was God’s light generously given,
blinding the tainted spirit utterly
till from himself at last he struggled free.
I saw him on the higher road to heaven:
his veins ran gold; light was his food and breath.
Flaming he melted through the wall of death!

Here metaphor and symbol are dramatically anchored with elegant economy in a physical detail which at once renders a metaphysical meditation on spirituality strikingly concrete: ‘I saw his garments blowing’. This man is not an abstraction used as a symbol, he is a real human being, with a body which is clothed, and his clothes billow out when wind blows on him. This almost cinematic detail brings the poem into physical immediacy with the reader, who could be the subject of the poem if he so chooses. This stanza manipulates the concepts of night, darkness and light with metaphysical dexterity. There is a use of ‘night’ in the opening line which is both literal and metaphorical; there is a ‘dark night of sense’ in the fourth line which is used as shorthand for the kind of sensuality which troubles the clear spirit and darkens the soul; there are the ‘deeper dark nights of the soul’ in line six which the soul endures when it is locked in the death throes of the self en route to blissful union with God; and there is ‘night’ in line nine which is in reality ‘God’s light generously given’. This ‘vivid, almost cinematic’ use of imagery is typical of metaphysical poetry (Poplawski 2008: 204).

The word ‘light’ also mutates with metaphysical fluidity throughout the poem: in line four it is the sign of love; in line nine it seems to be a night though really it is ‘light generously given’; in line thirteen it is ‘food and breath’. Certainly the old criticism of metaphysical poetry that it is difficult or perplexing could be levelled at this poem but in effect it is far from obscure. It is in essence a meditation on spirituality that is complex and at the same time translucently beautiful: the man who has endured the various darknesses can be seen on the ‘road to heaven’ – an echo of the physical realism of the man with the billowing clothes – but now ‘his veins’ run ‘gold’, he eats
and breathes God’s light, and he is all flaming spirit as he melts ‘through the wall of
death’, although he remains fully physical, as he has veins, and he still eats and
breathes. As is typical of metaphysical poets, Powers reads salvation as comprising
both the body and the soul for all eternity. This poem ‘is characterised by compression
of meaning. It hides meaning in order to find it again with increase’ (Fiddes 1991: 10). It
is in fact, according to Powers’ beliefs, an analysis of human life ‘as God intended it to
be’ and as it may become if it avails itself of the salvation offered to it (Pickstock 1998:
267). As human beings we need to breathe and to eat in order to live. This poem makes
the metaphysical claim that in order to really live we need to breathe and eat the light
of God.

I contend that Powers writes in the area of the implicit end of the scale of metaphor:

The possibility for multiple levels of meaning, and for an orientation towards
Mystery, increases as we move along a spectrum from the explicit metaphor (or
simile) to the implicit one. At the extreme explicit end of the scale is allegory. At
the extreme implicit end of the scale of imagery is symbol, a kind of compressed
metaphor (Fiddes 1991: 10),

and that she also uses symbol as ‘a kind of compressed metaphor’ in order to say the
unsayable. This is how ‘light’, ‘darkness’ and ‘night’ function in this poem.

L’Engle writes of the poet’s ability to ‘take something that we know already and turn it
into something new’ (1980: 175). Powers can be seen taking something known and
turning it into something new with dramatic immediacy in, for example, her poem
‘Return of the Victor’. The poem is an incisive analysis of an instance of integrity.
Powers embodies an abstract virtue in concrete metaphor that is dramatic in effect:

No song can make a wreath for this dark brother
who spent his strength upon an unseen thrust,
who spread his beauty for the tide to smother
rather than put to sea with the unjust.

There was no war, no wound in sight of goal,
no bomb or shell, no falling plane ablaze,
save in the inmost places of the soul
where the grim siege can be prolonged for days
without a mortal witness. Earth makes little
of battles fought for strange democracies
when her towers fall and all her bones are brittle.
She wars enough within her boundaries.
So homeward turns this victor, his war ended.
Down a dull road with weary steps and slow
he struggles on, unsung and unattended.
And it is fitting that this should be so.

The opening of the poem is an example of restrained metaphysical wit or irony which extends throughout the poem so that the meaning of the poem is in fact opposite to the statement it makes. The words unsay themselves as they say themselves: Powers celebrates here a private moment of integrity, an ‘unseen thrust’ which earns no victor’s ‘wreath’ and has no ‘mortal witness’. Yet her poem serves as a wreath even as it proclaims the absence of a wreath, and if there is no mortal witness, the poem implies that there is an Immortal one. Throughout the poem Powers says by not saying, because, paradoxically, implication is more dramatic than proclamation. She says ‘Earth makes little / of battles fought for strange democracies’ but the point of the poem is, in fact, that if Earth makes little, Heaven makes much. Thus, though the ‘dark brother’ has apparently ‘spent his strength’ and ‘spread his beauty’ unseen, he turns ‘homeward’, here shorthand for ‘heavenward’, a ‘victor’. In this poem Powers has taken ‘something known’, an abstract, rather old-fashioned and under-valued virtue, and turned ‘it into something new with dramatic immediacy’ and metaphysical effect.

These poems of Powers’ demonstrate the validity of Harold Skulsky’s observation that though writers of this kind of poetry are traditionally called “metaphysicals”, they could equally well be called “metaphoricals” (1992: 1), because it is by means of metaphor that they apprehend and convey the metaphysical.

A seventh general observation is that, as Helen Wilcox maintains, reading religious metaphysical poetry ‘will inevitably involve an encounter with some of the central concerns of theology: the nature of God, the power of grace, the experience of sin and despair, and the language of spirituality’ (Wilcox 2007: 406). She maintains that the
materials of [metaphysical] verse are ‘extremes of exultation and despair, passion and disillusionment, love, death, the grave, and corruption’, which [elements] combine in witty language to form a passionate theology of experience (2007: 407). The words ‘a passionate theology of experience’ are descriptive of the metaphysical in Powers’ work which takes for its subjects the dominant themes of human life, such as love, death and meaning: she ‘tell[s] all that / [her] heart could utter’ of love in her poem ‘In This Green Wood’; she consoles herself and her reader in her conclusion to her meditation on death: ‘I can surmise that it will be / light (and not darkness) that will meet the eye’, in her poem ‘The Great Mystery’; and her confrontation of the issue of the meaning of life she conveys with tenderness, compassion and faith in her exhortation to those ‘wakeful still with pain, / harried by dreams, discomfited by fear’ to be reassured ‘now / new earth, new heaven. See, the end is sweet. / My brother, sleep. You’ll need your whole great strength / for later rising in some glorious dawn’, in her poem ‘Los Angeles Earthquake’.

Wilcox says that Herbert’s poetic art is by nature ‘prayerful’ and that ‘to write [and read] this devotional poetry is to analyse the state of the soul, discover the nature of redemption, and come into contact with the divine – that is, to engage in the business and the consequences of theology’ (2007: 407). I maintain that attentive reading of Powers’ work too entails ‘contact with the divine’ because her work is metaphysical in that it engages in ‘the business and consequence of theology’, which is, immortality:

You slay me, death, but then I rise to live
and you yourself are slain
‘The Monk at Quadragesima’.73

According to Low a definitive characteristic of metaphysical poetry’s use of metaphor is the ‘directness’, and ‘naturalness or familiarity of tone or voice’ with which metaphysical poets address God. Although they ‘consistently view God as a great King, utterly incommensurable with His creatures, paradoxically [they] also write as if God were [their] familiar friend, sitting somewhere near the poet’s elbow’ (1978: 222). Metaphysical religious poetry is in effect what Wilcox calls ‘an encounter’ with ‘the

73 First Sunday during Lent.
nature of God’ (Wilcox 2007: 406). This intimacy can be seen in Powers’ poetry, for example, in the poem: ‘Christ is My Utmost Need’:

   Late, late the mind confessed:
   wisdom has not sufficed.
   I cannot take one step into the light
   without the Christ.

   Late, late the heart affirmed:
   wild do my heart-beats run
   when in the blood-stream sings one wish away
   from the Incarnate Son.

   Christ is my utmost need.
   I lift each breath, each beat for Him to bless,
   knowing our language cannot overspeak
   our frightening helplessness.

   Here where proud morning walks
   and we hang wreaths on power and self-command,
   I cling with all my strength unto a nail-
   investigated hand.

   Christ is my only trust.
   I am my fear since, down the lanes of ill,
   my steps surprised a dark Iscariot
   plotting in my own will.

   Past nature called, I cry
   who clutch at fingers and at tunic folds,
   ‘Lay not on me, O Christ, this fastening.
   Yours be the hand that holds’.

The intellectual rigour characteristic of metaphysical poetry underlies the religious fervour. The mind confesses, and then the heart affirms. This is the point of the poem, succinctly stated in the opening stanzas of the poem and then developed throughout the poem to the resolution of the meditation in the last line of the poem:

   Yours be the hand that holds.

The quiet statement of faith, which the mind here confesses and the heart affirms, is that ‘Christ is my utmost need’. This line has the simple yet tough quality typical of
metaphysical poetry. It makes a huge theological claim in five simple words, without overt intellectual complexity or apparent fervour. It is a fine example of what Newman calls ‘the doctrine of reserve’ (Coulson & Allchin 1970: 24): deep spiritual truths do not need to be clothed in sophistication and fervid emotion; rather they are best expressed in quietness and simplicity. The third stanza goes on to state that ‘our language’ cannot fully measure the degree of our absolute dependence on Christ. But, with the wit also typical of metaphysical religious poetry, the poem does in fact, in our language, express what it claims cannot be expressed. The intellectual rigour of theological insight lies in stanza five:

Christ is my only trust.
I am my fear since, down the lanes of ill,
my steps surprised a dark Iscariot
plotting in my own will.

The doctrines of Free Will and of the Fall lie in these deceptively simple lines, according to which we have nothing to fear but ourselves. No one lies in wait to betray us but ourselves. The connotations of the word ‘lanes’ are unsophisticated. A lane is a humble path, usually not impressive or dramatic in any way. Yet it is down those commonplace ways, in the ordinary and the everyday, that, Powers believes, our inattentiveness and complacency can lead us to our own ‘dark Iscariot’. Newman describes this process:

Our bodily senses tell us of the approach of good or evil on earth. We have warnings and we feel we must not neglect them. Now, sinners have no spiritual senses; they can presage nothing; they do not know what is going to happen the next moment to them. So they go fearlessly further and further among precipices, till on a sudden they fall, or are smitten and perish. They attempt to discriminate for themselves between little and great breaches of the law of conscience, and allow themselves in what they consider the former; thus falling down precipices when they meant to descend an easy step, recoverable at the next moment (1849: 80).

The intellectual resolution of the poem is in the last two lines:

Lay not on me, O Christ, this fastening.
Yours be the hand that holds.
The mystery of free will is expressed here with lucid economy: we are powerless to save ourselves, yet the choice, whether to ‘cling with all [our] strength unto a nail-investigated hand’, or not to, remains ours. We have not the strength to choose, we are undermined by our innate treachery, so the solution to the dilemma offered by the poem is to confess our ‘utmost need’, to revoke voluntarily our God-given freedom, and to implore Christ to extend ‘the hand that holds’. This is poetry which, in Low’s inimitable phrase, ‘both thinks and feels, and does so deeply’ (1978: 222). Truman Capote says of Dolly in his novella *The Grass Harp* that ‘she looked around her, and felt what she saw’ (Capote 1981: 14). Powers too looks around her with rapt attention and, like Dolly, she ‘both thinks and feels, and does so deeply’.

The nature and depth of the experience of suffering is important in metaphysical poetry because suffering is an unavoidable element of the human condition. It is one of the essential ‘materials of [metaphysical] verse’ because it is one of the inescapable elements which, together with ‘exultation and despair, passion and disillusionment, love, death, the grave, and corruption’, constitute the ‘passionate theology of experience’ (Wilcox 2007: 407) which is the subject matter of metaphysical poetry. Summers points out that suffering, both spiritual and physical, is a ‘continuous challenge to the meaning of [a Christian poet’s] existence and art’ (1974: 179). Powers’ acute awareness of the paradox of suffering is evident in her poem ‘God is a Strange Lover’:

God is the strangest of all lovers; His ways are past explaining.
He sets his heart on a soul; He says to himself, ‘Here will I rest my love’.
But He does not woo her with flowers or jewels or words that are set to music,
o no names endearing, no kindled praise His heart’s direction prove.
His jealousy is an infinite thing. He stalks the soul with sorrows;
He tramples the bloom; He blots the sun that could make her vision dim.
He robs and breaks and destroys – there is nothing at last but her own shame, her own affliction,
and then He comes and there is nothing in the vast world but Him and her love of Him.

Not till the great rebellions die and her will is safe in His hands forever does He open the door of light and His tendernesses fall,
and then for what is seen in the soul’s virgin places,
for what is heard in the heart, there is no speech at all.
God is a strange lover; the story of His love is most surprising. There is no proud queen in her cloth of gold; over and over again there is only, deep in the soul, a poor dishevelled woman weeping ... for us who have need of a picture and words: the Magdalen.

Powers does not shy away from the mystery of suffering. Instead she writes it in strong words that carry shocking connotations of cruelty and violence: ‘jealousy’; ‘stalks’; ‘tramples’; ‘blots’; ‘robs’; ‘breaks’ and ‘destroys’. She looks full in the face ‘the heart-piercing, reason-bewildering fact’ (Newman 1976: 163) that it is the loving God to whom these pitiless words apply. She makes no attempt to rationalise this agonizing paradox. Instead she quietly lays beside the horrible words the ineffable bliss that waits beyond them, once the soul’s ‘great rebellions’ have died, and she is ‘safe in His hands forever’: then

\[ \text{does He open the door of light and His tendernesses fall.} \]

Her metaphor, then ‘does He open the door of light’, is an instance of the metaphysical poet’s ability to describe the indescribable with such translucent simplicity that an ineffable spiritual truth lies revealed in a concrete metaphor.

Her next lines are an instance of metaphysical wit so quiet as to be almost imperceptible:

\[ \text{and then for what is seen in the soul’s virgin places,} \]
\[ \text{for what is heard in the heart, there is no speech at all.} \]

She affirms that the mystical beauty of what she refers to here is beyond words. Yet by means of her words she conveys a sense of the ineffable sweetness of this encounter between God and the soul. Some of the luminous connotations of the words ‘light’ and ‘tendernesses’ of the previous line, ‘fall’, as it were, in a drift of grace, down onto the words that follow them, which say ‘there is no speech at all’, so that while they do not describe this loving encounter, they none the less convey something of its mystical loveliness.
Though the emphasis in Powers’ poetry is on the love of God, and on the hope that trust in His love inspires, she is unequivocal here that the symbol which truly represents human life is not that of a ‘proud queen in her cloth of gold’ but rather that of a ‘poor dishevelled woman weeping’, and though she often in her poetry conveys resplendent visions of heavenly joy and beauty, she here overlays her own visionary poetry with two words: ‘the Magdalen’.

Powers believes that the Christian’s life should be ordered in accordance with the Will of God. ‘The “marks” of that order’, Summers says, are ‘joy and peace. When these [are] absent, a searching of the self and a passionate attempt at resolution [are] necessities. Suffering for which some resolution or evaluation [can] be envisaged [is] the subject of the most moving [metaphysical] poetry’ (1974: 179). The consolation which ‘the resolution or [the] evaluation of suffering’ affords in metaphysical poetry is evident, for example, in Powers’ poem ‘Night of Storm’:

*The times are winter.* Thus a poet signed
our frosty fate. Life is a night of snow.
We see no path before us, nor behind:
our faithless footprints from our own heels blow.
Where can an exile out of heaven go, with murk and terror in a trackless place
and stinging bees swept down upon his face?

With stark economy Powers describes the metaphysical despair that she believes inhabits faithless human life: ‘Life is a night of snow’. In the darkness there is no path, but only ‘murk and terror’, and the stinging pain of ice and snow assaulting the defenceless face. For this ‘exile out of heaven’ there is nowhere to go. By outside of heaven she means outside of all the qualities of life that reside in the connotations of ‘heaven’: light, joy, peace, beauty, love, warmth, safety, and comfort, to name but a few. Outside of all these qualities can only be their bitter opposites: darkness, sadness, restlessness, ugliness, lovelessness, icy coldness, terror and relentless, stinging pain. But for Powers there is ‘a resolution to this suffering that can be envisaged’: an exile’s own soul, the ‘supplicant’ within, pleads with the exile with infinite tenderness:

O most
wretched and blind, come home!

The lovely word ‘home’ dismantles the miserable word ‘exile’, and makes unequivocal
claim to our true origin and destiny: ‘heaven’. Powers’ metaphysical metaphor has the
soul flooded with the light from ‘the great lantern of the Holy Ghost’. Every desperate
quality of our erstwhile ‘frosty fate’ is here radiantly cancelled by the burning of this
light. The words ‘great lantern’ convey warmth after frosty, snowy cold, and the light
dispels all the ‘murk’ and ‘terror’ of ‘trackless’ darkness. Powers’ quiet use of the word
‘home’ makes an astonishing metaphysical claim. We are not refugees or mendicant
supplicants in this resplendent place: we are at home, we have the rights of a member
of the household, we are a member of the family. Such is the generosity of the love of
God, Powers believes, that He is the ‘supplicant’. Our soul, His abode within us, is His
messenger to beg us to come home to Him! The resolution to Powers’ poem is that in
the transforming light of His love even our suffering, our ‘world of frost’, is redeemed,
is revealed as being in fact ‘a drifting miracle’. Powers’ last lines carry utter resolution:

What had been night
reels with unending eucharists of light.

The word ‘reels’ has connotations of boundless joy, even something of Bakhtin’s
carnival, and of course the word ‘eucharists’ carries the bounty of the feeding of the
beloved in the manna of the Old Testament, and the feeding of the beloved in the Body
metaphor for heaven itself: ‘unending eucharists of light’. In this metaphysical poem
Powers has shaped the imperfect materials of her own suffering as well as joy into
what Summers calls ‘a pattern symbolic of the divine order’ (Summers 1974: 179).

Metaphysical poetry, such as that of Powers, approaches suffering as a mystery by
means of which God’s grace can be mediated to the acquiescent recipient of ‘the great
gift’. Powers’ poem ‘Suffering’ is explicit in its delineation of the metaphysical paradox
that is suffering seen as a blessing:

All that day long I spent the hours with suffering.
I woke to find her sitting by my bed.  
She stalked my footsteps while time slowed to timeless,  
tortured my sight, came close in what was said.

She asked no more than that, beneath unwelcome,  
I might be mindful of her grant of grace.  
I still can smile, amused, when I remember  
how I surprised her when I kissed her face.

This poem bears all the hallmarks of metaphysical poetry. It is an extended conceit which resolves itself in a vivid concrete image which is a dramatic triumph. The theological point of the meditation is that suffering offers a ‘grant of grace’, and that ideally it should not be endured with grim resignation but should rather be willingly accepted as coming from God who is the source of all grace. However, Powers takes the wind out of suffering’s sails, in a sense, in a moment of metaphysical wit: she not only accepts the ‘unwelcome’ visitor ‘sitting by [her] bed’, she lovingly embraces her with a kiss. Powers never offers pious platitudes. The poem does not underestimate suffering: the words ‘long’, ‘stalked’, ‘timeless’, and ‘tortured’ convey the grim reality of suffering, and the poem acknowledges that regarding it as ‘unwelcome’ is a natural and appropriate response to suffering. ‘[T]he disturbing elements in experience [are] honestly recognised’ (Knights 1978: 245). In this poem Powers’ realism is evident, but at the same time the poem makes an unequivocal assertion of faith that even suffering can be a conduit for the grace of God. Her honest recognition of the ‘disturbing elements in experience’, lying in her painful words ‘long’, ‘stalked’, ‘timeless’, and ‘tortured’, nevertheless resolve in the metaphysical note on which the poem closes, with a smile at the remembrance of a kiss of loving acceptance. The spiritual calibre of the acceptance Powers shows in the closing line of this poem arises from the metaphysical serenity lying at its heart: it is not mere disillusioned resignation but faith-sustained acceptance, as Powers demonstrates in her kiss.

In her poem ‘Richer Berry’ Powers deals with the spiritual paradox that suffering sometimes carries greater blessing than its more attractive converse:

Now that the bright red berries lend  
color to the June berry tree
my need is urgent to befriend
denial and austerity.

She acknowledges the seductive lure of luscious ‘fruit’ and ‘delicious’ ‘feasts’, but she
asserts her insight that ‘the harsh cold’ will certainly ‘take all fruit’ ‘save what is stored
in memory’s bins’. She is one with Newman here in her intuition of the potentially
‘dulling’ effect of ease and plenty and she makes a clear-eyed choice for rigour:

I shall take hunger first, on which
the spirit thrives best, anyway.

These metaphysical poems of Powers’ have, as Helen Wilcox maintains reading
religious metaphysical poetry always does, involved the reader in ‘an encounter
with some of the central concerns of theology: the nature of God, the power of
grace, the experience of sin and despair, and the language of spirituality’ (Wilcox

This chapter has made seven observations about metaphysical poetry and has
supported these observations by means of analysis of instances of the metaphysical in
Powers’ work.
CHAPTER SEVEN: ENIGMATIC LUSTRE: EIGHT ASPECTS OF THE METAPHYSICAL IN POWERS' POETRY

Metaphysical poetry ‘makes the footfall of meaning enigmatically lustrous’ (Steiner 1989: 161)

This chapter describes eight metaphysical characteristics of Powers’ poetry in order to substantiate my thesis that Powers is a metaphysical poet. The description of these metaphysical characteristics is supported by analysis of Powers’ poetry.

A first metaphysical aspect of Powers’ poetry is that she speaks to the metaphysical dilemma to which Hass maintains ‘only literature can, and must, speak’, that is, to the dilemma of ‘the broken God without a home’ (Hass 2007: 856). Hass points out that literature and theology today stand as the place where textuality is implicated in our most intense cultural conditions. At this place we have moved beyond a matter simply for ‘literature’ or ‘religion’ alone, or even in concert. If the earlier Eagleton was right, that the study of English literature in the nineteenth century arose as the result of ‘the failure of religion’, then we might venture to say that the study of the text and textual hermeneutics in the twenty-first century will continue because of a particular resurgence of religion. But this resurgence is global, bound up with the interplay of all cultural forces, and germane to all disciplines seeking out how to position humanity amid the turbulence of its own violent times. If religion is back, it is back not as the totalizing foundation and confirmation of all reality. It is back as warring and wounded sovereignties without sure domains to rule. Literature can, and must, speak to this dilemma: the broken God without a home (2007: 856).

Powers speaks to the dilemma of the ‘broken God without a home’ in her poem ‘The Master Beggar’: He is ‘worse than the poorest mendicant alive’; He takes up His post on ‘every block of every street’; He is a ‘beggar’ who ‘stands apart’ on ‘some bleak corner, tear-frequented’. She shows in her poem ‘The Uninvited’ her deep awareness of the suffering of the poor and the vulnerable:

I know them well.
Those who come out of life’s sequestered places:
the lonely, the unloved, the weak and shy,
and in her poem, ‘The Masses’, she contemplates the mystery of God’s personal love for every least and last one of His ‘human multitude’, whom He conceives in love, brings forth ‘in lone nativities’, and bears ‘in separate tenderness, one by one’. According to the theology in which Powers’ poetry is situated, ‘God has the freshest and keenest memory of the least and most forgotten’ (Gutierrez 2001: 19).

In her poem ‘Michigan Boulevard, Chicago’ she speaks of her ‘myrrh and frankincense and gold’ which she brings as gifts to where the ‘star’ shines as ‘[h]unger and loneliness and poverty’ for the ‘Child’s’ ‘delight’.

These examples from Powers’ poetry demonstrate that she speaks to the metaphysical dilemma to which Hass maintains only ‘literature can, and must, speak’, that is, to the dilemma of ‘the broken God without a home’ (Hass 2007: 856).

A second metaphysical characteristic of Powers’ poetry is that in her poetry she addresses the metaphysical issues of ‘the inaudibility of the word, of the silence and darkness of God’ (Jasper 2007: 28). Jasper points out that as long ago as 1967, George Steiner published a volume of essays entitled *Language and Silence*. Steiner and many others after the Holocaust, such as Theodore Adorno, have struggled with the question as to whether it is possible to say anything after such an event in human history. Arguably, however, where theology has stumbled and fallen silent, the voices of the poets and writers have continued to speak and be heard. [Powers, I contend, is one of those speakers.] Literature continues to speak, even in the midst of silence, because it has always been sensitive, in a way that theology paradoxically has often not been, to the inaudibility of the word, to the silence and darkness of God (2007: 28).

Powers is a poet who speaks of ‘the silence and the darkness of God’ in, for example, her poem ‘There is a Homelessness’:

There is a homelessness never to be clearly defined.  
... it is the grief of all those praying  
in finite words to an Infinity  
Whom, if they saw, they could not comprehend,  
Whom they cannot see;
in her poem ‘Track of the Mystic’:

Great was his torment who could not discern
this night was God’s light generously given,
blinding the tainted spirit utterly
till from himself at last he struggled free;

and in her poem ‘On Reading Saint Peter of Alcantara’:

Go alone, he says to the land of the living,
barefooted, poor,
... On this bleak way only
are your steps secure.
Enter in by the gate humility,
his word admonishes, and there embrace
the chill and sharpness of a lonely place ...
This is the season of the soul’s undoing,
the terrible gateway into the profound.
Lights focus on the years of waste and sinning,
and in God’s presence shame has depths to sound.
Take off your shoes here; it is holy ground ...
Set out, O soul, in darkness and alone.

In these instances of her poetry Powers can be seen to address the metaphysical issues of ‘the inaudibility of the word, of the silence and darkness of God’.

A third metaphysical aspect of Powers’ work is that in her poetry she gives faith ‘a visionary expression’ because, as Jasper maintains, poetry, like theology, ‘has long understood its task as the articulation of that which is essentially “unsayable” but yet known and acknowledged’ (2007: 22). Jasper maintains that

most recently, the growing interest in mysticism and negative theology has opened up new channels also in literature and theology. If deconstruction in literary theory and studies has worked against structures and systems, not least the systems of theology, then it has allowed the return to certain alternative traditions of radical dissent: mystics, at least within the Christian tradition, have often had the characteristics of being at once saintly and persecuted. In a major work entitled in English The Mystic Fable (1982) Michel de Certeau asserts that, at least since the seventeenth century, mysticism has been primarily a literary phenomenon. It is hardly surprising then, as theological interest in and studies of mysticism
proliferate, that the study of literature has begun importantly to suggest that our own time is experiencing not so much a dilution of belief as a shift away from traditional theological and ecclesial forms of belief and that literature is (and perhaps always has been) a major expression of religious beliefs and experiences that have often been suppressed by the very guardians of theology. Altizer said in his essay on William Blake that ‘faith has never been able to speak in the established categories of Western thought and theology because it has so seldom been given a visionary expression’ (2007: 27).

Powers, in my opinion, gives faith ‘a visionary expression’ in her metaphysical poetry, as can be seen in the analyses throughout this study. Jasper writes of ‘the central importance of the “theological horizon” in the literary landscape of the twentieth century, a time characterised by fragmentation and isolation. The enduring stability of the literary imagination and the poetic [is] fundamental in the construction of religious belief’ (2007: 19). In my opinion an effect of the ‘visionary expression of faith’ in Powers’ poetry is ‘the construction of religious belief’, and I maintain that this is a metaphysical quality in the poetry arising from the pressure to transcendence that is a characteristic of metaphysical poetry. This ‘visionary expression of faith’ can be seen in the following examples from Powers’ work:

One muses as to what it will be like to step at last from final forest into the infinite meadows of unending peace, a place all light and yet not lighted by the harsh, obtrusive sun that walks our sky, light that the soul assimilates until not witness but participant it stands, taking of Godhead its amazing fill ‘The Moment After Suffering’;

Set out, O soul, in darkness and alone. It is by flight alone that you are freed. Go forth then without speech or salutation and make your borders peace. Admit no ill into your emptied heart, for in aloneness God speaks; He names His way where all is still, and what He hollows out His mercies fill. Set out then in the riches of your nothing. Enter into the solitudes of God. ‘On Reading Saint Peter of Alcantara’;
I saw him on the higher road to heaven:  
    his veins ran gold; light was his food and breath.  
    Flaming he melted through the wall of death.  
'Track of the Mystic'.

It can be seen in these instances of the metaphysical in her poetry that Powers gives faith ‘a visionary expression’ (Jasper 2007: 27).

A fourth metaphysical characteristic that is evident in Powers’ work is that she can be seen to inhabit ‘the metaphysical paradigm of the ascetic and sacred body: whose beauty is known in suffering and joy’ (Jasper 2009: xi). She embodies in her poetry instances of what Jasper calls ‘liturgical living’ (2009: xiii) which can have the metaphysical effect of being able to bring about ‘a moment of repentance’ and ‘openness’ in its readers, and which can offer ‘a coherent vision’ which can assuage something of the pain of a ‘world in a condition of social and religious fragmentation’ (2009: xiii).

That Powers inhabits ‘the metaphysical paradigm of the ascetic and sacred body’ can be seen, for example, in her poem ‘I would Define My Love’, which delineates the suffering inherent in faith:

    I would define my love in some incredible penance  
        of which no impotent language is aware;

and in her poem ‘Encounter of Love’ which delineates both the ‘suffering and joy’ of a close encounter with God:

    A mind too small, a heart too small where sky  
        and land and even soil and refuse shone.  
        Then even silence died, pauper and fool.  
        Nothing but pain could go to meet such love.

Powers’ poem ‘Total Virgin’ is a description of the holiness of the Virgin Mary, and by extension, of all who love God single-mindedly and who thus inhabit ‘the metaphysical
paradigm of the ascetic and sacred body: whose beauty is known in suffering and joy’ (Jasper 2009: xi):

She was a maiden promised to one lover
whom she was always seeking.
Though He hid in her heartbeat and settled Himself
behind her breath,
He was distance, too. Journeys dwindled to places
beside her own, and miles melted beneath
her steps of wanting. She could by-pass all
meadows that trap us with their poisonous flowers
and their soliciting pools
and winding lanes that skirt the only death.

She was out on a road alone, hastening onward,
gathering all as gift, the small and great
fragments of mystery and reality.
Everything was for Him, even her own being.
Since love marks neither measurement or weight
she carried all, without touching or tasting.

This poem not only brings to mind Soren Kierkegaard’s dictum that ‘purity of heart is to
will one thing’ (Kierkegaard 1938: 3,1), it embodies the dictum. The lines

Gathering all as gift, the small and great
fragments of mystery and reality

serve both as a description and an analysis of holiness. The purity of heart that wills
only one thing lies in the opening lines: only one beloved, and Him constantly sought.
The physicality often found in metaphysical poetry is striking in its intimacy in the line:
‘He hid in her heartbeat and settled Himself behind her breath’. A. S. Byatt maintains in
her foreword to Willa Cather’s novel Lucy Gayheart that Cather’s writing is a work ‘of
achieved simplicity and [work] to which the usual phrase “deceptive simplicity” does
not apply’ (Cather 1985: 233). In my opinion this is true in many instances of Powers’
poetry, and it is certainly true of this line, which inimitably conveys the nearness of
God. What Powers achieves is not complexity masked as simplicity, but rather writing
which is theologically complex expressed in poetry which is not ‘apparently’ simple, but
which is transparent, consisting of limpid metaphors lying quietly on the depths
beneath them which invite contemplation.
Stanza one offers a dissection of the anatomy of purity:

She could by-pass all
dead meadows that trap us with their poisonous flowers
and their soliciting pools

because her single-mindedness held her inviolate in the face of temptation. Powers’
words ‘meadows’, ‘flowers’, ‘pools’, and ‘lanes’ evoke the seductive attractions of the
things which would dissipate attention to the one thing worth willing, and Powers
delineates the destructiveness of anything which derails the living of a focused life:
‘flowers’ that assume exaggerated importance become ‘poisonous’, just as illicit ‘pools’
‘solicit’, and ‘lanes’ wind away from the straight path. Powers’ words ‘the only death’
[my emphasis] are apparently simple here, but in fact they constitute the whole of
religion: they make the metaphysical claim that there is no death except the death that
comes of not ‘seeking’ only the ‘one lover’. To seek the ‘one lover’ with ‘all your heart
and with all your soul and with all your mind’\(^74\) is to obey the first and greatest
commandment and can be called ‘liturgical living’ (Jasper 2009: xiii).

This kind of poetry can display ‘a certain deftness to undercut and invert settled
assumptions, [and] to break through false appearances’ (McDermott 2009: 52), as
Powers can be seen doing in this poem. She lays bare the seductive distractions that
can lurk in apparently harmless things, symbolised in her poem by the lovely words
‘meadows’, ‘flowers’ and ‘pools’. The subject of this poem, Mary, inhabits ‘the
metaphysical paradigm of the ascetic and sacred body: whose beauty is known in
suffering and joy’ (Jasper 2009: xi) and Powers’ poem inhabits it also.

Jasper maintains that Detweiler’s book ‘Breaking the Fall’, 1989,

explores the issue not so much of religious texts, as of a religious reading, and the
nature of a religiously reading community as a kind of ‘church’ of readers. Detweiler
[has] a sense of a world in a condition of social and religious fragmentation,
preserved only by the coherent vision of poets and imaginative writers (Jasper
2007: 20).

\(^74\) Matthew 22: 37.
In my opinion Powers’ metaphysical poetry conveys ‘a coherent vision’ which can assuage something of the pain of a ‘world in a condition of social and religious fragmentation’ because her poetry inhabits ‘the metaphysical paradigm of the ascetic and sacred body: whose beauty is known in suffering and joy’ (Jasper 2009: xi). Thus a note of consolation can be heard in the closing lines of her poem ‘Los Angeles Earthquake’:

I think I could reassure him now:
new earth, new heaven. See, the end is sweet.
My brother, sleep. You’ll need your whole great strength
for later rising in some glorious dawn.

And in the closing stanza of her poem ‘For a Silent Poet’:

Weep not that visit of a brief duration.
You are a guest yourself and you must know
that in you lie the instincts of migration,
and where the bird went, one day you will go.

Jasper comments on ‘the endless dramatic challenge which literature presents to the religious conscience and to the conclusive tendencies of theology, not least in a twentieth century soaked in blood and human cruelty; too often a theology of the Cross denies the tragic reality of the human condition’ (2007: 22). This Powers does not do. Though the emphasis of her poetry is resplendently on hope, and on the love of God, as can be seen in the closing line from ‘Los Angeles Earthquake’:

new earth, new heaven. See, the end is sweet,

yet she never elides the mystery of suffering that is intrinsic to the human condition and to spirituality, as lines from her poem ‘The Book and the Cup’ show:

Yet since the will of God presents this book,
I would not turn from it to look upon
the fairest poetry that earth has given.
I would not trade this cauterizing cup
for all the wines in heaven;
and lines from her poem ‘Human Winter’:

   So chilled am I by this presence of human winter  
   I cannot speak or move;

and lines from her poem ‘Beauty, too, Seeks Surrender’:

   The yielded soul that lifts its gaze  
   to harms past nature’s claim  
   expects to have experience  
   of blade and file and flame;

and lines from her poem ‘One Answer’:

   Silence cried out and crumbled at her feet.  
   Nothing but pain could go to meet this love.

Powers’ poem ‘Take Your Only Son’ turns an unflinching face to the sorrow and suffering which is often to be found portrayed in metaphysical religious poetry which never denies ‘the tragic reality of the human condition’ (Jasper 2007: 22):

   Hope may shout promise of reward unending  
   and faith buy bells to ring its gladness thrice,  
   but these do not preclude earth’s tragic ending  
   and the heart shattered in its sacrifice.

The almost unbearable theological conundrum, that the God who says ‘ask and it will be given to you’,75 does not apparently answer heartfelt pleas, is faced with desolate clear-sightedness:

   Not beside Abram does my story set me.  
   I built the altar, laid the wood for flame.  
   I stayed my sword as long as duty let me,  
   and then alas, alas, no angel came.

The deep pain occasioned by God’s seeming indifference is conveyed with eloquent economy by the simple repetition of the word ‘alas’.

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75 Matthew 7: 7.
Jasper maintains that poetry, like theology, in its vocation to offer ‘a coherent vision’ which can assuage something of the pain of a ‘world in a condition of social and religious fragmentation’ (2009: xiii), ‘has long understood its task as the articulation of that which is essentially “unsayable” but yet known and acknowledged’ (Jasper 2007: 22). He points out that George Herbert, for example, ‘in the early seventeenth century, explored the nature of prayer as that which is beyond explanation, in a series of metaphors and images ending with the utterly simple yet mysterious phrase: “something understood”’ (2007: 27). I contend that Powers too articulates that which is ‘essentially unsayable’, and often too in metaphors and images that are ‘utterly simple’ and that these are metaphysical qualities in her work. She can be seen conveying ‘with telling simplicity’ consolation that is ‘essentially unsayable’, yet longed for by mankind struggling to live in a world ‘soaked in blood and human cruelty’ (2007: 22), even if the longing is strenuously unacknowledged, in the following examples from her work:

from ‘For a Child of God’:

    All day and when
    you wake at night
    think of that place
    of living light,
    yours and within you
    and aglow
    where only God
    and you can go.

    None can assail you
    in that place
    save your own evil,
    routing grace.
    Not even angels
    see or hear,
    nor the dark spirits
    prowling near;

from ‘The Kingdom of God’:

    Come home, roamer of earth, to this room and find
a timeless Heart under your own heart beating,
a Bird of beauty singing under your mind;

and from ‘Night Prayer: To the Prophet Elijah’:

Here I touch space that borders the eternal;
here, undistracted by the clock’s poor rhyme,
I stand, an emigrant of earth whose place
is nearer heaven, being near to grace,
and hold my heart out, over the sill of time.

Powers constructs what could be called a ‘Double Estate’ in which this world ‘is furnished with the Infinite’. The discipline that wrought many of her poems is the metaphysical one, in Banzer’s words, of a ‘compound vision by which the eternal is argued from the transient, the foreign explained by the familiar, and the fact illumined by the mystery’ (1998: 417). A ‘witty double consciousness’ issues in her ‘sense of the communion of mystic with material in language drawn from both worlds’ (1998: 419). Her religious ‘reflective practices put [Powers] forever in the divine presence’ (1998: 423). Her ‘one abiding association’ (Coulson and Allchin 1970: 82), which is Christ, results in her ‘custom of seeing “comparatively”, of fitting all experience, sublime or ordinary, into one plane and finding it the haunted “Ground Floor” of a familiar Infinite’ (Banzer 1998: 423). McCann observes that by means of her ‘wit and wordplay, [her] wry, uncompromising glances and [her] startlingly apt observations’ she examines her experience, and her poetry, ‘intensely physical and metaphysical’, constitutes an exploration of ‘spiritual possibility’ (2009: 749). This ‘spiritual possibility’ is her ‘haunting preoccupation’, and she ‘tries to look at faith from all sides’. Her work is ‘grounded in particulars of place but place subtly acquires metaphoric freight that transforms the scenes and suffuses them with light and shadow’ (2009: 750). In the lines,

I have climbed up out of a narrow darkness
on to a ledge of light.
I am of God; I was not made for night
from the poem ‘The Ledge of Light’, the metaphor is entirely physical. The reader can see the poet climbing up and out of a dark, small room onto a ledge looking outwards into the open air. Thus far the poem is ‘grounded in particulars of place’. But the third line of the poem suddenly ‘acquires metaphoric freight’ that ‘transforms the scene’ and ‘suffuses’ it with metaphysical significance. It makes a theological claim with serene conviction and elegant simplicity: ‘I am of God’. This simplicity allied to complexity is a hallmark of metaphysical poetry. The words ‘I was not made for night’ function in the same way: they are transparent, so that the quiet assertion they make allows the depths of theology inherent in their simplicity to lie revealed. In the view of a religious metaphysical poet, such as Powers, God is ‘poet of the world’ (Faber 2008: 15), and in her striving to write God’s poetry which, in my opinion, she intuits and discerns in this poem, she, as is typical of metaphysical poets, ‘attends to language with a rigor and devotion like none other’ (McDermott 2009: 52) so that she offers ‘a coherent vision’ of the ordinary imbued with the sublime which can assuage something of the pain of a ‘world in a condition of social and religious fragmentation’ (Jasper 2009: xiii).

The imagination is the ability ‘to think of what does not exist, to see beyond the immediate and obvious to the possible’ (Deane 2008: 7). Deane considers that in metaphysical poetry the poet ‘shift[s] from something known to the unknown, seeing in symbols something other than those symbols’ (2008: 7). In my opinion, attentive reading of a poem ‘which shifts from something known to the unknown’, that is, of a metaphysical poem, may enable the attentive reader to ‘see beyond the immediate and obvious to the [resplendently] possible’, as Powers explains in these lines from her poem ‘O Spirita Sancta’:

When quiet has possessed you,  
and dark has fled with dim,  
you, on a mount of morning,  
will be aware of Him.
God’s action is His Word, as Scripture says, and, indeed, His ‘only action’ is through the Word’ (Davis 2007: 89). Words, therefore, the stock in trade of the poet, can be seen by extrapolation to be intrinsic to any relationship with God, to what Jasper calls ‘liturgical living’ (2009: xiii). In the opinion of Davis ‘every poem fills in a gap, such that the poem becomes the means of voiding the void, of closing the gaps — both between God and man and between man and man’ (Davis 2007: 90). In her poem ‘O Spirita Sancta’ Powers enunciates the beauty which speaks the word which closes a gap:

So beauty’s bird,  
wind-wisdom seeking,  
and sorrow’s flood,  
and love’s flame stirred,  
are one voice speaking  
a word called God.

According to the theology of this poem every aspect of human life, as in wisdom, sorrow and love, inheres in the Word that is God, and beauty, rightly seen, mediates that Word to us. The poem, in an instance of metaphysical sophistication, simultaneously acts and describes its action: Powers writes beautiful words to explain that beauty speaks the Word that is God. Thus she speaks the word that speaks the word that the Word is God, and her speaking of the words of her poems offers ‘a coherent vision’ which can make her reader ‘aware of Him’ (‘O Spirita Sancta’) and ‘which can assuage something of the pain of the human condition’ (Jasper 2007: 22).

These examples from Powers’ work show that she inhabits ‘the metaphysical paradigm of the ascetic and sacred body: whose beauty is known in suffering and joy’ (Jasper 2009: xi), and that she embodies in her poetry instances of what Jasper calls ‘liturgical living’ (2009: xiii) which can have the metaphysical effect of being able to bring about repentance in its readers, and which can offer a healing vision which may assuage something of the pain intrinsic to human life.

76 John 1: 1,2,3: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.
A fifth metaphysical quality of Powers’ work is that in much of her poetry she ‘conjures’ ‘numinous’ experience in metaphors which ‘court revelation’ and which inhabit ‘domains of beauty’ (Lundin 2009: 51), so that ‘the sweetness of the truth, the beauty of the form of the given’ (McDermott 2009: 55) lie revealed, and that which is ‘essentially “unsayable” is articulated’ (Lundin 2009: 51). Lundin, in Invisible Conversations, describes the way in which metaphysical metaphor functions: it ‘catches likenesses by entertaining unlikenesses, [it] conjures a numinous mysterious experience; metaphor courts revelation, invites contact, with domains of beauty – [with] the inmost character of things that remain[s] otherwise untouched’ (Lundin 2009: 51). Powers can be seen doing this, for example, in her poem, ‘Young Maidens Running’, written for the young novices of her convent:

Saint I defined for you: a slow serene
candle in a cathedral solitude,
a virgin lily in a nameless wood.

Yet you are flowers of petalled fire that lean
on a swift wind or waves that ride the sea
in tender rushings toward divinity.

O living phrases from the Canticle!
I sing you, maidens that arise and run
in the stained footsteps of the King’s young Son.

Hence must I now for saint a new concept tell:
a maiden racing toward a sole desire
with garments glowing and her face on fire.

Powers opens this analysis of spiritual ardour with wry self-irony: she has been guilty of pious sentimentality in her definition of sanctity, choosing clichés to embody holiness. But in her second stanza she vividly evokes the passion and the energy that inform true holiness in her words ‘fire’, ‘wind’ and ‘waves’ which replace the wan and self-consciously ethereal metaphors of stanza one, ‘slow’, ‘serene’, ‘cathedral solitude’, and ‘virgin lily’.

As always, in the theology of Powers’ poetry, the clear-eyed acknowledgement of suffering lies alongside the rapture: here the beauty of the ‘flowers of petalled fire’
that are the ardent novices, and the beautiful title of ‘the King’s young Son’ in whose footsteps they run, function in tandem with the blood stains from the crown of thorns, the scourging at the pillar and the carrying of the Cross, evoked with eloquent economy by the words the ‘stained footsteps’.

The dominant note of the poem, however, ‘invites contact with domains of beauty – [with] the inmost character of things that remain[s] otherwise untouched’ (Lundin 2009: 51). The final stanza describes in effect the ardent spirit of a young lover of Christ, but as is characteristic of metaphysical poetry, the evocation of rapturous spiritual devotion is couched in the physical and described in terms of human beauty so that the reader is enabled to see the unseeable ‘inmost character’ of sanctity:

Hence must I now for saint a new concept tell:
a maiden racing toward a sole desire
with garments glowing and her face on fire.

Metaphysical poetry is often accused of being abstruse. This very seeming inaccessibility constitutes one of the unique effects of metaphysical poetry in that its ‘attention to the difficulty of language, its acceptance of artificial disciplines, and its non-rational mode of knowledge can work together to expose evil and recreate the world according to the form given in creation’ (McDermott 2009: 46) so that ‘the sweetness of the truth, the beauty of the form of the given’ (2009: 55) lie revealed.

In the opinion of McDermott, ‘poets recognise that language has a habit of lying. The way of evil in language is the way of ease, the glossy generalisation or comfortable cliche’?77 (2009: 54). By opting for the difficulties of language, poetry ‘forces a moment of repentance’ and reasserts ‘the beauty of the form of the given’ (2009: 55). Thomas Merton says: ‘We are afflicted, hesitant, dubious in our speech, above all where we know we are obliged to speak. Language has been so misused that we fear and mistrust it’ (1968: 92). When a poem ‘forces a moment of repentance’ and openness, we find

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77 Matthew 12: 36: I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken.
we have an ‘inborn natural sense of the *logos*, a ‘love for reasonable expression’, a ‘healthy delight in it’ (1968: 93). Merton says that

Clement of Alexandria remarks that Christ our Lord, taking bread, first spoke, blessing the bread, then broke it and gave it to His disciples, for He willed them to know what it was that He was giving them. The word, therefore, was as important as the act, and in both the Lord, Himself the Word of God, gave Himself to us. Clement says: ‘Reasonable speech, logos, regenerates the soul and orients it towards the noble and beautiful act. Blessed is he who is adept in both word and work. That which the act presents to our sight, is made intelligible by the word. There is a saving word just as there is a saving work. And justice does not take shape without *logos*’ (1968: 94).

Powers’ metaphysical poetry functions as ‘saving word[s]’ (Merton 1968: 94) which ‘court revelation’ and which inhabit ‘domains of beauty’ (Lundin 2009: 51). In her poem ‘The Book of Ruth’ she addresses those living in a pagan darkness of sinfulness and self,

(a phrase which could probably be said to be synonymous with Everyman), but she has no harsh words for them. Instead she offers infinite reassurance: she urges them, in ‘saving word[s]’ which may ‘regenerate the soul’, to seek

Him who is slumbering with His heart awake,  
the Godhead who is  
the soul’s eternal lover.

In much of her poetry, she embodies numinous experience in metaphors which evoke something of the sweetness and the beauty of ‘the form of the given’ (McDermott 2009: 55) so that that which is ‘essentially “unsayable”’ is articulated (Lundin 2009: 51).

A sixth aspect of Powers’ metaphysical poetry is that it uses language in a distinctively rigorous way; it pushes language ‘to its limits, to compress meaning in odd economies, to delight by unexpected felicities of phrase, and to instruct by sweetly ordering its objects’ (McDermott 2009: 46). An aspect of metaphysical poetry’s rigorous use of language is what Gardner terms its ‘concentration’ by which she means that the reader
is ‘held to an idea or a line of argument. Metaphysical poetry demands that we pay attention and read on. [It] is always closely woven’ (Gardner 1967: 17). This characteristic of metaphysical poetry can be seen, amongst others, in Powers’ poem, ‘The Book of Ruth’. The poem is a meditation which resolves in its last line: only the love of God, in Powers’ opinion, can render human life bearable and human destiny resplendent as

    only love is erudite to master
    the molten language of eternity.

The ineffable consolation of the lesson of this meditation is that when,

    in the last recesses of the will
    and in the meshes of the intellect
    the quivering last sounds of earth are still,

then we will hear the voice of God, His ‘answer’ to our cry of ‘Lord, lord’. Our love will learn the ‘liturgy’ which is His Love ‘call’. This blessed back and forth flow of love between God and us will empower us to ‘master the molten language of eternity’, and everything that has been given up for Him will be regained in Him.78

McDermott maintains that ‘when poetry triumphs over difficulty, it can reveal the sweetness of the truth, the beauty of the form of the given’ (2009: 55). Lines from Powers’ poem ‘O Spirita Sancta’, could be said to ‘reveal the sweetness of the truth’:

    Know that One dwells there with you.
    His breath is on your face,
    though He wills not to ruffle
    your bridal lace.
    And yet your tears so blind you
    to your own sightliness
    that you have not discovered
    your wedding dress.

78 Matthew 6: 33: But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.
The tender intimacy typical of metaphysical poetry lies quietly in the breath on the face and the carefulness for the bridal lace. And then, in the following stanza, the sudden neglected positive, in ‘your own sightliness’, joyfully confounds expectation: the reader expects the contrition which is the proper attitude of the sinful creature towards her Creator, and indeed we have the tears which acknowledge unworthiness, but Powers, with a boldness typical of metaphysical poetry, overreaches the solemnity of penance to reveal ‘the beauty of the form of the given’ (McDermott 2009: 55). The theology of the line is that mankind was created beautiful and is restored to that beauty in Christ, but where prose would need many words to convey this, Powers does it in the ‘achieved simplicity’ (Cather 1985: 233) of the ‘sightliness’ revealed in a bride of Christ.

Lines from Powers’ poems ‘Celestial Bird’, ‘Shining Quarry’ and ‘The Evening Chimes’ offer luminous examples of the metaphysical poet’s ability to ‘delight by unexpected felicities of phrase, and to instruct by sweetly ordering … objects’ (McDermott 2009: 46):

O sweet and luminous Bird,
having once heard Your call, lovely and shy,
I shall be hungry for the finished word.
Across the windy sky

of all voiced longing and all music heard,
I spread my net for Your bewildering wings
‘Celestial Bird’;

Since the luminous great wings of wonder stirred
over me in the twilight I have known
the Holy Spirit is the Poet’s Bird.
‘Shining Quarry’;

and

Yet anyone who listens may become
hermit or anchorite under that shower
when the great chimes-tree shakes its leaves of light.
‘The Evening Chimes’.
In the poems considered under this sixth point Powers can be seen to be using language in the way that is characteristic of metaphysical poets who use poetry ‘to push language to its limits, to compress meaning in odd economies, to delight by unexpected felicities of phrase, and to instruct by sweetly ordering its objects’ (McDermott 2009: 46).

A seventh aspect characteristic of metaphysical poetry that is abundantly evident in Powers’ poetry is that it evinces a ‘certain pungency’ of thought, or turns of phrase, which makes metaphysical poets deserve the praise of being ‘fine and wittie’ (Gardner 1967: 28). In Powers’ poetry metaphysical wit takes the form of paradox, irony and even a reverent audacity. It is never blatant or overstated but is essential to the dramatic effect and the theological significance of the poems in which it occurs. Throughout this thesis I refer to her quiet metaphysical wit. It is invariably understated. It may present as reverent audacity; as seeming presumptuous familiarity; as paradox. It is an attribute of the so-called ‘difficulty’ of the poetry, of the intimacy, of the dramatic immediacy, and of the vivid imagining of commonplace situations that unfold into metaphysical and theological complexity. Earl Miner, in his book *The Metaphysical Mode from Donne to Cowley*, makes the point that ‘argument is, in some sense, an element in a great deal of poetry from Donne to Cowley, and it is also obvious that argument somehow involves that wit which, from Dryden on, critics have associated with metaphysical poetry’ (1969: 213). Powers’ wit, in my opinion, is fugitive and understated, and often takes the form of theological paradox, but it is intrinsic to her work as can be seen in analyses throughout this thesis.

The poem ‘I Would Define My Love’ is a fine example of what might be called metaphysical wit: it uses words, the tools of the poet, in order to move towards saying the unsayable and it says this by decrying words even as it uses them: ‘I write the grave inconsequence of words’. Powers implies that words are dangerous, even gravely so, because they can give the illusion of action, and that without ‘the seal of action’ they

must come to naught,
lost in the blowing pockets of the air.
Therefore, she says, she

would flee the grim inaction of words
and the paralysis of wish and dream.

She chooses instead to page

hurriedly
through wordless volumes of reality
to find what love has indicated there.

It is metaphysical irony that she uses the metaphor of reading to unsay the value of reading: ‘to page’ is a metaphor of the book, and to indicate is to make an intelligible mark of some kind, also a metaphor intrinsic to literacy. Yet here the volumes – also a metaphor of the book – are wordless, though they can be paged, and though love ‘indicates’ in them. The final two lines of the poem reiterate the paradox: she wishes to ‘define’ her love – again a word to which words themselves are intrinsic – but this definition will be compounded of penance which will be beyond words; ‘impotent language’ ‘will be unaware of it, it will be therefore unsayable, and indeed, she says, it will be ‘incredible’. Perhaps she means that it will be ‘incredible’ because it will be unsaid. This is an example of the so called difficulty of metaphysical poetry, poetry which moves to present the ‘conceivable which cannot be presented’ (Detweiler and Doty 1990: 176). The irony that this insight about ‘the grim inaction of words’ is itself composed of words is an example of metaphysical wit.

Clever antithesis and wit are hallmarks of metaphysical poetry. This can be seen in Powers’ poem ‘For a Proud Friend, Humbled’:

In that least place to which all mercies come
I find you now, settled in peace, at home,
poor little one of Yahweh. On your face
only response of love lies, with no trace
or drifting hint of what had brought you low.
Down steps of like unworthiness I go
weighted with heart (and how heart can oppress!)
to see you humbled into gentleness
(and into innocence) so utterly.
Pray me, my blessed, into your company.

Metaphysical paradox is the metier of this poem from the first line. The friend is in ‘the least place’, that is, shorn of every merit and charm, yet this is the place ‘to which all mercies come’. If ‘all’ mercies come to this lowliest of places, then no mercies go anywhere else. This is, paradoxically, then, the most blessed of places. Furthermore, this place is peaceful, which is a great blessing, but more paradoxically still, it is ‘home’. Ideally, ‘home’ signifies the safest, dearest and best of places known to man, and Powers here maintains that we are truly at peace and at home only when we have been divested of every extraneous attribute whereby we could elicit praise or admiration of ourselves. When we are a ‘poor little one’, that is, bereft and vulnerable, then ‘love’ will ‘lie’ on our faces. ‘Love’ is the repository of every beauty, therefore when ‘only’ love lies on our faces we will be truly beautiful, and this will only be when we are in ‘that least place’.

The poem is paradoxical again in Powers’ understanding that the way to this beauty is ‘down steps of unworthiness’, ‘weighted with heart (and how heart can oppress!)’ whereas so-called worldly wisdom urges us to ascend to higher status by means of conspicuous worthiness. Powers brings what is in effect a metaphysical meditation on the nature of beauty to its resolution by delineating its inner attributes also. The ‘love’ ‘lying’ on the face is beauty’s outer visible attribute; its inner attributes are ‘gentleness’ and ‘innocence’.

The lesson to be learned from this meditation is that to be thus humbled is paradoxically to be in a ‘blessed’ state, a state to which to aspire by means of prayer. According to Raniero Cantalamessa,⁷⁹ to strive to reach this ‘blessed’ state is to emulate the pearl diver who ‘heads down towards the bottom of the sea’ by dint of enormous effort, until, with ‘unrestrained joy he catches sight of a half-open shell at the bottom of the sea through which he can glimpse a shining pearl’ (1997: 165). The ‘shining pearl’ is the precious beauty of the ‘response of love’ that lies on the face of one thus humbled into ‘gentleness’ and into ‘innocence’. Powers’ reference to

⁷⁹ Sometime preacher to the Papal Household.
innocence in her poem ‘I Do Not Touch You’, in a simile redolent of somnolent sweetness, ‘that concentrate of peace, / [which] spreads like the haze of a soft summer noon / and encircles me’ complements her delineation of it as ‘blessed’ in this poem, and her insight that the human heart is reluctant to learn this blessed humility is reiterated in the poem ‘Belmont Harbor’:

Ah, slowly the heart learns, and with what error and what regret!

The poem, ‘The Rock Too High for Me’, also deals with the apparently paradoxical nature of God’s Love: it is a love which ‘bathe[s]’ in ‘an immeasurable forgiveness’, and which ‘wakes the furthest trust’, yet it is also a love which ‘cast[s] down’, it wreaks ‘undoing’, it ‘dashe[s] from heights’, it devises for its beloved ‘lodging in a lowly place’. This is the mystery of suffering which Powers never seeks to elide, but, inherent in her acknowledgement of suffering, is her faith that God, even as He ‘dashe[s] down from heights’, simultaneously ‘kindly’ offers the ‘wit to have peace in the shadows where I stand’. Metaphysical poetry, in my opinion, is a celebration of this God-given ‘wit’ by means of which, often with reverent audacity and seemingly presumptuous intimacy, it ponders the relationship between God and man.

Powers’ poem ‘Enclosure’ too demonstrates qualities which are attributes of her restrained, metaphysical wit. She opens with an urgent direct question which sets up her paradox:

Gypsy by nature, how can I endure it –
This small strict space, this meagre patch of sky?
What madness once possessed me to procure it?
And deed it to myself until I die?
What could the wise Teresa have been thinking
to set these bounds on even my little love?
This walling, barring, minimizing, shrinking –
how could her great Castilian heart approve?

And yet I meet the morrow with composure.
Before I made my plaint I found the clue
and learned the secret to outwit enclosure
because of summits and a mountain view.
You question, then, the presence of a mountain?
Yet it is here past earth’s extravagant guess –
Mount Carmel with its famed Eliaion fountain,
and God encountered in its wilderness.

Its trails outrun the most adept explorer,
outweigh the gypsy’s most inordinate need.
Its heights cry out to mystic and adorer.
Oh, here are space and distances indeed.

She is a ‘gypsy by nature’ and yet she has voluntarily joined an enclosed religious order. Furthermore, she has taken final vows so that she is ‘deeded’ to this ‘small strict space’, by her own ‘mad’ wish, until she dies. She describes her circumscribed life vividly: ‘this meagre patch of sky’. The contrast which she sets up between her ‘gypsy’ nature and this ‘walling, barring, minimizing, shrinking’ space is dramatic so that when she deconstructs it in her last three stanzas, after having set it up in her first two stanzas, the dismantling is the more telling. In stanza two we see the seeming audacity, which none the less is always reverent, with which she sometimes addresses and refers to God, and in this case, to St Teresa, first female Doctor of the Church80, and the founder of her order of Discalced Carmelites:

What could the wise Teresa have been thinking ...?

The effect of this emotional tone is dramatic and it arises from the intimacy borne of Powers’ very close acquaintance with the great saint in her writings and in Powers’ love for her. It is a quality characteristic of the calibre of wit of metaphysical poetry that the ‘utterance, movement and intonation are those of the talking voice’ (Leavis 1962: 32). This personal tone, striking in this line, establishes a bond of intimacy between Powers and both the subject and the reader of her poem.

Stanza three moves from the dramatic paradox and the very personal tone into the metaphysical: she claims to have

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80 Certain ecclesiastical writers who have received this title on account of the great advantage the whole Church has derived from their doctrine.
found the clue
and learned the secret to outwit enclosure.

The ‘clue’ and the ‘secret’ appear to be paradoxical: they are ‘summits and a mountain view’. She forestalls our objection, with quiet humour at our expense, that, given the locality of her inner-city enclosed convent, this is an impossibility. Nevertheless, she asserts the ‘presence’, not only of a mountain, but of a mountain ‘past earth’s extravagant guess’. Now we, who thought she was foolish or delusional, are shown to be the poorly sighted ones who cannot see the radiant spiritual beauties because our sight is ‘earth’ bound. She, however, who sees clearly past even ‘earth’s extravagant guess’, sees and affirms the reality of

Mount Carmel with its famed Elian fountain,
and God encountered in its wilderness.

She not only expresses serene faith in the spiritual realities apprehended by the ‘adorer’ in mystical prayer, but asserts the infiniteness of their ‘space and distances’ so that she who appears to be enclosed is in fact ‘on the higher road to heaven’ and her veins run ‘gold’, and ‘light’ is her ‘food and breath’ (‘Track of the Mystic’).

Clark also speaks of the intimacy characteristic of metaphysical poetry, which she describes as ‘the private mode’ of metaphysical poetry, and ‘particularly a privacy suggesting a direct intimacy between the speaker and God, as well as a privacy expressing a shrinking from the world’ (1982: 204). This is literally true, in Powers’ case, as she entered an enclosed religious order, as she describes in this poem. Clark claims that ‘Only apart from the world, only by oneself, may one muse, may one’s heart be lifted up in the silent call of prayer; and, to these poets, only in such private musings was the surge of exaltation possible. Time is transcended by eternity, place by the totality of the universe in the musing of a private speaker, [and this issues in] the meditative strain in metaphysical poetry. Always [there is] the striving to ‘intensify [the] verse by meditations of a “holy life”’ (1982: 205). The effort in a metaphysical poem is ‘toward transcendence and the meditational structure hovers or muses over a subject until, or as long as, it proves capable of rapture’ (1982: 206). This can be seen
happening in this poem which closes on a note of understated rapture, the ardour carried only by the two words, ‘Oh’ and ‘indeed’, in a restraint that is characteristic of Powers:

Oh, here are space and distances indeed.

An example of concentrated metaphysical paradox which functions in Powers’ poetry as wit can be found in the poem ‘Renunciation’:

“To compose the most sublime poetry is of less worth than the least act of self-renunciation” – St Therese

Let the rapt poet with his dulcet art
this finer rhythm heed.
Past plodding iamb, dancing anapest
here is a lyric of the absolute
for genius to create or scholar hold –
book to the light – and read.

Those walking toward the angels always rise
from sound to silence; the harmonious soul
goes outward from the discord of the senses,
lays down the tasted and the spoken word
and is made whole
by the unsavored, the inaudible.
Secret to ears of earth yet loud in heaven
is this pure music, rhythm’s utter gain.
As we approach God and as we hear
its soundless cadences, our hungers strain
to sate themselves on metaphors of suffering
and new melodious similes of pain.

Powers opens with a witty reminder to herself to bear always in mind that the ‘finer rhythm’ of the ‘inaudible music’ of heaven is immeasurably superior to the ‘dulcet art’ of a ‘rapt poet’, such as herself. This poem is a description of ‘a lyric of the absolute’, which has a ‘finer rhythm’, and which rises ‘from sound to silence’. This is metaphysical paradox which uses terms which seem to contradict each other to approximate a description of the indescribable: This ‘lyric’ is from its inception audible, as it rises ‘from sound’ to ‘silence’, and it has rhythm, a ‘finer rhythm’, which is an attribute of the
audible. It is silent because it is ‘secret to ears of earth’, yet it is ‘loud in heaven’. Those ‘walking towards the angels’ ‘hear’ its ‘cadences’ though they are ‘soundless’. Though they ‘hear’ the ‘soundless cadences’, yet by the cadences’ inaudibility, which is an essential attribute of their ‘absolute[ness]’, those who ‘hear’ them are ‘made whole’. Thus Powers anchors her poem, which is a description of the indescribable, of mystical prayer, firmly in concrete bodily images which seem to unsay each other, but which none the less approach the numinous obliquely in subtly accumulating metaphysical nuances. This embedding of the metaphysical in the physical is characteristic of metaphysical poetry.

Stanza two also moves from the concrete into saying the unsayable: ‘those walking [a concrete word] towards the angels’ ‘rise’ ‘from sound to silence’. Powers uses another word which inheres in sound to describe the inaudible: the ‘harmonious soul’ is rendered ‘whole’ by the ‘inaudible’. With quiet metaphysical wit she dismantles her own poetry as she writes it: she is using words to ‘lay down’ words (as in, to put words aside), she wishes to ‘lay down’ words in order to be ‘made whole by words’, ‘to lay down the tasted and the spoken word’ in order to be ‘made whole’ by ‘unsavored’ words. Yet the concrete images which convey her mystical theology evoke sensuous connotations, as in the words ‘rhythm’, ‘create’, ‘hold’, ‘read’, ‘walking’, ‘rise’ ‘goes outward’, ‘is made whole’, ‘tasted’ and ‘spoken’, even as she seeks to ‘go outward from the discord of the senses’. She describes a ‘silence’ which is beyond ‘the spoken word’ and the senses, by means of poetry which speaks words which inhere in the senses.

The final lines of the poem reaffirm the paradox: as we ‘approach’ God, a word which extends the physicality of the earlier word ‘walking’, we ‘hear’ ‘soundless cadences’. These two words unsay each other: a ‘cadence’ is by its very nature a heard sound, but here the poem reaches beyond sensual hearing into celestial hearing. Her words ‘hungers’ and ‘strain to sate’ are also intensely sensuous words, used here, paradoxically, to describe that which lies beyond the physical in the realm of the metaphysical. A further nuance of complex theology is conveyed by Powers’ use of physical images to present the unpresentable: man is not to be saved as an incorporeal
C. S. Lewis’s wry and inimitable description of a human being comes to mind here: ‘an organism which is also a spirit; ... that terrible oxymoron, a “spiritual animal”... a poor primate, a beast with nerve-endings all over it, a creature with a stomach that wants to be filled, a breeding animal that wants its mate, [called to] become a god’ (1980: 85). Therefore, according to the theology out of which Powers writes, our words, our hungers of all kinds, too will walk towards the angels, will approach God, and we, body and soul, will ‘hear’ the ‘soundless cadences’.

Yet another paradox lies alongside this in the final line: Powers acknowledges the mystery of suffering and yet unsays it as she says it, in an unstated and yet proffered word of comfort. ‘Suffering’ and ‘pain’ she states are somehow intrinsic to this ‘walking toward the angels’, this ‘approach’ to God, and yet it is suffering which will make us ‘whole’ and therefore we will ‘hunger’ for it, and the pain will be ‘melodious’. Hope and consolation are offered by the sweet sounding word ‘melodious’ which disarms the word ‘pain’. This poetry is paradoxical because it is metaphysical: when we approach ‘these overwhelming, commonplace inexplicabilities’, such as the mystery of suffering, we are ‘close neighbours to the transcendent’ (Steiner 1989: 215), and the writing and reading of such poetry is necessarily ‘a metaphysical, and in the last analysis, a theological’ act (1989: 216).

Gardner too cites ‘concise expression of theological paradox’ (1967: 23) as a characteristic of the wit of metaphysical poetry. An example of this quality can be seen in Powers’ poem ‘The Little Nation’:

> Having no gift of strategy or arms,  
> no secret weapon and no walled defence,  
> I shall become a citizen of love,  
> that little nation with the blood-stained sod  
> where even the slain have power, the only country  
> that sends forth an ambassador to God.

81 1 Thessalonians 5: 23: May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.
The opening lines set a scene of powerlessness which transmutes with a dramatic \textit{volte face} into the grandeur of sending ‘an ambassador to God’. Powers enhances both the vulnerability and the glory of the two prongs of her paradox to render it the more dramatic. The nation of ‘love’ is ‘little’, and its sod is ‘blood-stained’, but the blood that stains the sod is the Blood of The Lamb and of His holy martyrs, and ‘the slain’ in this country rise again, first Christ, and then those who die in Him.\textsuperscript{82} Thus she presents the dramatic irony that the ‘little’ weaponless, defenceless nation sends an ambassador, with all the connotations of power, ceremony and dignity of that word, to God.

In stanza two Powers reinforces her image of vulnerability by describing this ‘land’ now as ‘all unprotected like a sleeping child’. But again she arms her imagery hard upon the heels of having disarmed it. She knows very well how ‘reckless and unwise’ such defencelessness is considered to be in the eyes of the world, so she warns with wry and rather grim humour:

\begin{quote}
Who doubts that love has an effective weapon \\
may meet with a surprise.
\end{quote}

With witty paradox she has emptied out the conventional meanings of the words ‘arms’ and ‘weapon’, the meanings proper to those words as used of ‘evil’ and ‘wars’, and instead she uses death as death to self and weapon as irresistible love.

Another example of this ‘concise expression of theological paradox’ is Powers’ analysis of what mysticism calls ‘the dark night of the soul’\textsuperscript{83} in her poem ‘There is a Homelessness’, which says and unsays itself in order to say the unsayable:

\begin{quote}
There is a homelessness, never to be clearly defined … \\
It is the pain of the mystic suddenly thrown back from the noon of God to the night of his own humanity. \\
It is his grief; it is the grief of all those praying in finite words to an Infinity \\
Whom, if they saw, they could not comprehend;
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{82} 1 Thessalonians 4: 16: for the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first.

\textsuperscript{83} ‘Dark Night of the Soul’ 1578 or 1579, a poem by St John of the Cross which narrates the journey of the soul from its bodily home to its union with God.
Whom they cannot see.

Powers evokes ‘God's metaphysically mystical presence’ here but the theological reality she is describing is so abstruse that it ‘is only “visible” as a mental shadow, and as that, it is only an implied presence. This meeting, mind to mind, across the gaps of thought, creates a shiver of recognition so dark in “splendour” that it can blind us’ (Davis 2007: 92). Paradox is intrinsic to this mystical blindness which Powers describes as ‘the night’ of our ‘own humanity’ in which ‘presence paradoxically depends on absence, realisation on derealisation, graspsability on ungraspability’ (Higgins 2008: 199).

Powers’ poem ‘Celestial Bird’ is a lambent paradox that is a meditation on the Holy Spirit:

O sweet and luminous Bird,  
having once heard Your call, lovely and shy,  
I shall be hungry for the finished word.  
Across the windy sky

of all voiced longing and all music heard,  
I spread my net for Your bewildering wings,  
but wings are wiser than the swiftest hands.  
Where a bird sings

I held my heart, in fear that it would break.  
I called You through the grief of whip-poor-wills,  
I watched You on the avenues that make  
a radiant city on the western hills.

Yet since I knew You not, I sought in vain.  
I called You Beauty for its fleet white sound.  
But now in my illumined heart  
I can release the hound

of love upon whose bruising leash I strain.  
Oh, he will grasp You where You skim the sod,  
nor wound Your breast, for love is soft as death,  
swifter than beauty is, and strong as God.
The poem uses as its metaphor for the Spirit a ‘sweet and luminous bird’. She asserts that our thirst for God is unassuageable once it has even just stirred:

Having once heard Your call, lovely and shy
I shall be hungry for the finished word.

The poem enunciates the theological paradox that though God is in Nature, and in all His creatures, yet He cannot be found in either Nature or in Beauty, or in anything at all, until He has first been found in one’s own ‘illumined heart’. Once He is known in the ‘illumined heart’ then we can call to Him ‘through the grief of whip-poor-wills’, and watch Him

on the avenues that make
a radiant city on the western hills.

Powers closes her poem with an clever metaphysical conceit: Our love for God, which love first comes from Him Himself,\textsuperscript{84} we can release as a ‘hound of love’ to catch the Holy Spirit, the ‘celestial Bird’. Thus we may use an attribute of God to catch God. This is what might be called reverent metaphysical wit.

Certainly this metaphysical poetry can be seen to evince ‘concentration’ of language, and a ‘certain pungency’ of thought, or turns of phrase, which makes [it] deserve the praise of being ‘fine and wittie’ (Gardner 1967: 28).

And lastly, a definitive quality of metaphysical poetry which is evident throughout Powers’ work, is that it has a ‘fondness for conceits’ (Gardner 1967: 19), and a ‘logical rigour’ that is characteristic, and to which the argument of the poem is of intrinsic importance. A ‘conceit’ is a comparison ‘whose ingenuity is more striking than its justness, or, at least, is more immediately striking. All comparisons discover likeness in things unlike: a comparison becomes a conceit when we are made to concede likeness while being strongly conscious of unlikeness’ (1967: 19). Powers’ poem ‘And in Her

\textsuperscript{84} 1 John 4: 19: We love because he first loved us.
Morning’ uses audacious metaphor that is arresting, compelling and ultimately illuminating:

The Virgin Mary cannot enter into
my soul for an indwelling. God alone
has sealed this land as secretly His own;
but being mother and implored, she comes
to stand along my eastern sky and be
a drift of sunrise over God and me.
God is light and genitor of light.
Yet for our weakness and our punishment
He hides Himself in midnights that prevent
all save the least awareness of Him.
We strain with dimmed eyes inward and perceive
no stir of what we clamoured to believe.
Yet I say: God (if one may jest with God),
Your hiding has not reckoned with Our Lady
who holds my east horizon and whose glow
lights up my inner landscape, high and low.
All my soul’s acres shine and shine with her!
You are discovered, God; awake, rise
out of the dark of Your Divine surprise!
Your own reflection has revealed Your place,
for she is utter light by Your own grace.
And in her light I find You hid within me,
and in her morning I can see Your Face.

This is certainly a metaphysical use of metaphor and in its wit could be said to be a conceit: Powers describes her soul as a ‘land’ ‘secretly’ occupied by God. The Virgin Mary she describes as the sun ‘standing along’ her ‘eastern sky’. This sun, which is Mary, is a ‘drift of sunrise’ over the land, that is, over Powers and God, who is secretly occupying the land. I would say thus far that this is certainly an ingenious use of metaphor and unusual enough to say that we are ‘made to concede likeness while being strongly conscious of unlikeness’ (Gardner 1967: 19).

The poem seems to unsay itself in that by line seven God, rather than His mother, is a ‘light and genitor of light’. This is a more conventional metaphor but Powers immediately disarms it:

Yet for our weakness and our punishment
He hides Himself in midnights that prevent
all save the least awareness of Him.

He who is light is now darkness, ‘midnights’. Powers follows this fairly conventional
metaphor, God as darkness, with a metaphor for human belief which thinly disguises
endemic unbelief:

We strain with dimmed eyes inward and perceive
no stir of what we clamoured to believe.

We cannot see much at midnight, thus our eyes are ‘dimmed’. Yet we ‘strain’ to see,
and with our human alacrity in seeing virtue in ourselves, we feel our straining ought to
be rewarded with sight. Powers gently jokes with the reader by ending her line on the
word ‘perceive’. ‘Yes’, the reader for a second thinks, ‘thanks to straining, we perceive’.
But no, immediately in the next word in the next line Powers deconstructs our vanity:
we perceive

no stir of what we clamoured to believe.

Powers’ word ‘clamoured’ carries all the loud professions of faith with which we
disguise what is really our lack of certainty. Like ‘doubting Thomas’ we need to see in
order to believe, but the poem asserts thus far that we do not see, we see ‘no stir’.
Now Powers moves with metaphysical wit to extend her metaphysical conceit of Mary
as the sun. She says:

Yet I say: God (if one may jest with God).

This is the reverent audacity, the daring intimacy sometimes seen in metaphysical
religious poetry. She jests gently with God in a dramatic resolution to her conceit: God
is in hiding; but His mother, in that she reflects His light, is the sun

whose glow
lights up my inner landscape, high and low,
and so Mary’s shining lights up God and exposes His hiding place. Powers says

You are discovered, God: awake, rise
out of the dark of Your Divine surprise!

Now, with ingenious paradox that is entirely orthodox theologically, and witty
metaphysically, she resolves her spiritual conundrum: no one shines of his or her own
self. God alone is the Light. But His mother Mary reflects His light, as does every lover
and follower of His. So He is revealed by His own light, as it reflects off His mother, who
‘is utter light’, but only by His grace. In His light, then, which shines from His mother,
Powers sees Him within herself. When Mary rises as the sun, shining with her Son’s
light, Powers can see His Face:

for she is utter light by Your own grace.
And in her light I find You hid within me,
and in her morning I can see Your Face.

Certainly the charge of ‘difficulty’ might be levelled against this poem and the conceits
it uses. Certainly it is metaphysical as with wit and intimacy it approaches and
addresses issues that are concerned with trying to understand and describe the nature
of reality. Certainly too it has ‘the quality of lucidity substantiated and forms the limpid
element in which the mind and the [spirit] move at ease’ (Bedford 2002: 118). It is a
‘picture of meticulously observed spiritual experience’ (Summers 1974: 169), and it is
therefore eminently metaphysical.

In metaphysical poetry there will be logical rigour because its aim is to persuade as well
as to delight. If the first impression a conceit makes is of ingenuity rather than of justice,
it nevertheless ‘aims at making us concede justness while admiring ingenuity’ (Gardner
1967: 21). This, I maintain, is what Powers’ poetry does, for example in her poem
‘Morning of Fog’. The conceit she uses in this poem is ingenious. Her complex metaphor
is of life as we know it as death; of a city of living humans as we know them to be as a
dream city of phantoms where only ghosts roam; of life on earth as we know it as a day
of exile in a city of death; and of death as we know it as a return to a city of life,
where the streets are washed with light
and the windows burn.

All our usual associations are inverted: the seemingly living city is dead; the daylight in it is grey; morning, which should bring a fresh start, gives

nothing but a dull
cold sense of having died;

the towers teeming with busy life are ‘like dreams’; down the streets, what seems to be beautiful is really ‘gray fogs of sorrow’; where people with warmly beating hearts should be, are lost ghosts with chilled spirits; and finally, in the resolution of the paradoxical inversion, the fall of night which should bring darkness, and is often symbolic of death and the ending of life, is in fact a ‘return’ to a vibrant city of resplendent light. In my opinion the final line of the poem elicits a concession of justness from the reader because its luminous beauty, following on as it does from a litany of greyness, dullness, sorrow and deathly chill, offers a striking metaphysical insight into the moment of death: it will be a leaving of the grey city of seeming life which is really death and a return to the city

where the streets are washed with light
and the windows burn.

Gardner says that: ‘in all metrical compositions the force of the whole piece is for the most part left to the shutting up; the whole frame of the poem is a beating out of a piece of gold, but the last clause is as the impression of the stamp, and that is it that makes it currant’ (1967: 22). The closing lines of the poems often succinctly state the lesson which is to be learned from the meditation which is the poem so that the lesson may go on reverberating in the mind and heart of the reader when the reading is finished. This is the effect which the evocation of heaven which constitutes the closing lines of this poem has – it sets ‘the impression of the stamp’ and ‘makes it currant’:

where the streets are washed with light
and the windows burn.
According to Gardner a ‘metaphysical conceit is not indulged in for its own sake. It is used to persuade, or it is used to define, or to prove a point’ (1967: 20), which is why logical rigour is important in metaphysical poetry. Thomas refers to Yeats’ comment that ‘out of his quarrel with others a man makes rhetoric, but out of his quarrel with himself poetry’, and he offers his opinion that what Herbert had was an argument, not with others, not with himself primarily, but with God; and God always won’ (Thomas 1967: 12). ‘Argument is, in some sense, an element in a great deal of poetry from Donne to Cowley, and it is also obvious that argument somehow involves that wit which, from Dryden on, critics have associated with Metaphysical poetry’ (Miner 1969: 213).

We see Powers arguing with God, and ultimately her total capitulation to Him, in her poem ‘The Master Beggar’. She bombards Him with defiant, even petulant questions that smack of accusations and challenges: ‘Worse … are You to me, Jesus of Nazareth’; and ‘Must You take up Your post on every block of every street?’; and ‘Do I have no release?’; and ‘Must all my purse be emptied in Your hand?’; and ‘what would You have of me?’, before her heart melts in the face of His steadfast love:

I too would be a beggar. Long tormented,  
I dream to grant You all and stand apart  
with You on some bleak corner.

Even in the midst of her loving capitulation Powers highlights the metaphysical paradox that lies at the heart of Christianity: He is God Almighty, and she is a human being, yet she ‘grants’ Him her company. She who is, in the final analysis, utterly powerless, is empowered by His love to be the one who bestows, the bountiful one, in her relationship with Him.

The metaphysical poetry of the seventeenth century was ‘an imitation of God’s creation and possessed the divine power of moving the affections’ (Summers 1974: 163). The emotional appeal combines with the argument in metaphysical poetry to move the reader towards God. In my opinion this is true of Powers: she voices something of God’s yearning appeals to us and so may move us towards Him:
O most
wretched and blind, come home!
‘Night of Storm’;

O come and take my hand, you whom I love,
and let us find that place
‘Place of Ruin’;

O Little One, believe that earth is alien.
Let its concerns all unremembered lie.
Say to the storm or sweetness passing by:
I am with God and toward my godhood tending.
I near the foothills of eternal day
O far
O far away.
God speaks to me. Earth has no more to say
‘The Song of Distance’.

These poems have demonstrated that Powers’ poetry exhibits metaphysical poetry’s
‘fondness for conceits’ (Gardner 1967: 19), and the ‘logical rigour’ that is characteristic
of it, and to which the argument of the poem is of intrinsic importance so that the
emotional appeal combines with the argument to, possibly, move the reader towards
God.

This chapter has examined eight metaphysical characteristics of Powers’ poetry.
Examination of the metaphysical aspects of Powers’ poetry runs throughout seven of
the nine chapters of this thesis, but has narrowed and intensified in focus in this
Chapter and will continue to do so in Chapters Eight and Nine.
CHAPTER EIGHT: COMMUNION OF MYSTIC WITH MATERIAL: EIGHT FURTHER ASPECTS OF THE METAPHYSICAL IN POWERS’ POETRY

‘communion of mystic with material in language drawn from both worlds’ (Banzer 1998: 419)

This chapter will continue the close examination of the metaphysical qualities of Powers’ poetry in a consideration of eight further aspects of the metaphysical in her work.

Firstly, Gardner contends that ‘brilliant abrupt openings are characteristic of metaphysical poetry’ and are ‘like the lump of gold flung down on the table to be worked’ (1967: 21). It will be seen that Powers very often uses ‘brilliant abrupt openings’:

God sits on a chair of darkness in my soul
‘The Garments of God’;

O God of too much giving
‘But Not With Wine’;

God is not garden anymore
‘Not Garden Any More’;

God is today
‘God Is Today’;

God is the strangest of all lovers
‘God Is a Strange Lover’;

The times are winter
‘Night of Storm’;

I love you, God, with a penny match of love
‘This Paltry Love’;

Come is the love song of our race
‘Come is the Love Song’;

Here on the flyleaf of the garish day
‘I Would Define My Love’;
I know the manuscript the Uncreated writes
‘Manuscript of Heaven’;

This is the edge of time
‘Night Prayer: To the Prophet Elijah’;

I walk in a cloud of angels
from ‘In a Cloud of Angels’;

I live my Advent in the womb of Mary
‘Advent’;

The door to God
‘This May Explain’;

Come, death
‘The Monk at Quadragesima’;

I am reading out of the book of my own evil
‘The Book and the Cup’;

The soul is a terrible thing
‘The Soul Is a Terrible Thing’;

Out of what door that came ajar in heaven
‘The Books of Saint John of the Cross’;

One time as a child on the rim of creation
‘One Time as a Child’;

Prayer is the trap-door out of sin
‘Prayer’;

Only one voice
‘Only One Voice’;

I take my lesson from the chickadee
‘Look at the Chickadee’;

Here is a very Magdalen of bird
‘Bird at Evening’;

That God made birds is surely in His favor
‘Birds’.
These intimate, often surprising, openings give even poems which are meditations not anchored to a specific occasion the flavour of spontaneous thought, which is a characteristic of metaphysical poetry.

Secondly, poems which have the right to the title metaphysical in its true sense raise, even when they do not directly address, the great metaphysical question of the cohabitation of body and the soul. Powers’ poems can be seen to do this, for example, in the poem ‘Human Winter’:

No fire could warm this place
though the air hang in sultry shred and the roof perspire;
nothing here is amenable to fire.

Words fall in slow icy rain and freeze
upon the heart’s sudden dismantled trees,
and branches break and fall.
From the wind of inclement glances I cannot shield myself
who find their frost too subtle to forestall.
I am waiting for the snow of my own obscurity to settle
and cover me, frozen ground
to blunt all sharp insufferable sound,
to meet the angles of cold and obliterate them all.
I long to rise in this room and say, ‘You are not my people,
I come from a warm country; my country is love,
nor did I wish to come here; I was misdirected’.
But their frost is not defied and their cold is not rejected.
So chilled am I by this presence of human winter
I cannot speak or move.

This poem certainly raises the great metaphysical question of the relation of the spirit and the senses and, though it does not discuss it explicitly, it is in fact the subject of the poem. Powers’ Wisconsin youth is vividly present in her depiction of cold, and the crystal intensity of her description of icy rain, freezing branches, bitter wind, subtle frost, frozen ground, obliterating snow and chilling presence gathers momentum that culminates in its deathly metaphorical resolution: this is a ‘human winter’ that so chills her that she ‘cannot speak or move’. This is the point of relation between the ‘spirit and the senses’ in this poem: the wintry scene, that in nature could be austerely beautiful, leads to catatonia when it is translated into the human spirit.
The poem is in fact a delineation of the deadly effects of lovelessness. The ‘words’ of love ‘freeze’ in these stony hearts and are then paradoxically destructive in a climate that is icily inimical to them: the ‘branches break and fall’ from the heart’s ‘dismantled trees’, shattered by the cold which nothing can withstand. The spirit is paralysed in this poem though it tries to ‘shield’ itself, to ‘wait’ for a numbing blanket of despair to ‘cover’ it, to ‘rise’ up and protest with the excuse that it ‘was misdirected’. Powers offers no hint of any chance of survival in this ‘human winter’. She simply says, by not saying, that, in her opinion, human relations, unleavened by Divine love, can chill utterly and terminally to the bone.

She further delineates the piteously bleak state to which human beings reduce life for their unloved brothers in the poem ‘The Uninvited’:

Who walked these streets of night? I know them well.  
Those who come out of life’s sequestered places:  
the lonely, the unloved, the weak and shy,  
the broken-winged who piteously would fly,  
the poor who still have starlight in their faces.

Her metaphors for woundedness, ‘the broken-winged’, and poverty, the homeless with ‘starlight in their faces’, evoke what they describe with an economy that is simultaneously understated and vivid.

These poems evoke, even when they do not explicitly discuss, the great metaphysical mystery of the relation of the spirit and the senses, the soul and the body.

Thirdly, according to Gardner, an aspect of ‘the strength of the religious poetry of the metaphysical poets is that they bring to their praise and prayer and meditation so much experience that is not in itself religious’ (1967: 26). This aspect of metaphysical poetry is evident in Powers’ poem ‘The Soul That Cries to God’:

The soul that cries to God out of the hot heart of contrition  
is indisputably heard.  
Here is the pact of love; it is triply signed
with a sure eternal seal.
Though the whimpering call creeps out from the
den of the coiled serpent
that hides from God and lies in wait for the
Virgin’s heel,
it stirs a sudden hastening out of heaven
to the place of the cry. God takes this piteous one
at its urgent word.
He bundles it into His ship, with all its holdings,
and the island of sin is left behind,
in distance blurred.
And He Who redeems will use for the soul
the full extent of its cargo:
the songs, the memory’s trivia, the sweet or acrid tears,
the spoils or the debt of frightening arrears.
Ingenious to save, in the end His love
will put to divine advantage
the wisdom (if wisdom could be the word) of the wasted years.

In this poem she states that God enters into a ‘pact of love’ with the contrite believer.
The ‘pact’ is ‘triply signed’ by the Trinity ‘with a sure eternal seal’. What the pact entails
is that God ‘hastens’ out of heaven at our least ‘whimpering call’ to ‘bundle’ us and ‘all
[our] holdings’ into ‘His ship’.

Powers makes an unequivocal claim that nothing of our
lives is lost to us in the redemptive love that values our every moment:

He Who redeems will use for the soul
the full extent of its cargo:
the songs, the memory’s trivia, the sweet or acrid tears,
the spoils or the debt of frightening arrears.

With metaphysical intimacy she comments admiringly that God ‘is ingenious to save’,
and that, by a divine inversion,

His love
will put to divine advantage
the wisdom (if wisdom could be the word) of the wasted years.

The wry note of humility in her self-ironic comment in parenthesis is also typical of
metaphysical religious poetry. The attribute of the generous inclusivity of the love of
God is portrayed in this poem: ‘the songs, the memory’s trivia, the sweet or acrid
tears’, the myriad moments of human experience are not apparently theological, and in fact they are probably mostly sinful, but they nonetheless participate in our redemption. Powers includes even overt evil in this redemptive ‘bundle’ to safety in ‘His ship’: her words are ‘spoils’ and ‘frightening arrears’, and even if the ‘whimpering call’ for help ‘creeps out from the den of the coiled serpent’ itself, God will ‘hasten’ out of heaven to rescue the ‘piteous one’. She makes the theological point that God redeems not just our souls but our bodies also, and our every least moment, if we will only ask Him to. The verbs she uses for the redemptive activity of God in this poem are affecting and charming in their eager physicality: God ‘hastens’, He ‘bundles’, He ‘ingeniously’ finds a way to save us, so heartfelt is His longing for us.

This poem demonstrates an aspect of the strength of the religious poetry of the metaphysical poets which is that they incorporate into their prayer and meditation so much of human life that is not apparently religious.

A fourth aspect of metaphysical poetry is that it often entails an ‘intensely individual treatment of common themes’ (Gardner 1967: 27) and Powers’ work very often evinces this characteristic. Prayer is the ‘common’ theme of Powers’ ‘intensely individual’ poem, ‘The House at Rest’. Her meditation is based on a few lines from St John of the Cross:

On a dark night
kindled in love with yearnings –
Oh, happy chance! –
I went forth unobserved,
my house being now at rest.

She opens her poem by pondering the vexed question of how to still the restless mind and heart for meditation:

How does one hush one’s house,
each proud possessive wall, each sighing rafter,
the rooms made restless with remembered laughter
or wounding echoes, the permissive doors,
the stairs that vacillate from up to down,
windows that bring in colour and event
from countryside or town,
oppressive ceilings and complaining floors.

The house must first of all accept the night.
Let it erase the walls and their display,
impoverish the rooms till they are filled
with humble silences; let clocks be stilled
and all the selfish urgencies of day.

Midnight is not the time to greet a guest.
Caution the doors against both foes and friends,
and try to make the windows understand
their unimportance when the daylight ends.
Persuade the stairs to patience, and deny
the passages their aimless to and fro.
Virtue it is that puts a house at rest.
How well repaid that tenant is, how blest
who, when the call is heard,
is free to take his kindled heart and go.

She takes St John of the Cross’s metaphor and extends it in a metaphysical conceit
which runs throughout the poem until it resolves in peace on the threshold of mystical
prayer. The three stanzas of the poem describe the stages of meditation as it draws
closer to contemplation by means of the metaphysical conceit of a sighing, echoing
house with ‘oppressive ceilings and complaining floors’ gradually settling down to
‘accept the night’, to allow darkness to ‘erase the walls and their display’, to acquiesce
in a silence which impoverishes the rooms ‘till they are filled with humble silences’, to
deny the clocks and ‘all the selfish urgencies of day’.

The metaphor acknowledges that solitude, as well as silence, is a prerequisite for
contemplative prayer:

Midnight is not the time to greet a guest.
Caution the doors against both foes and friends.

‘Patience’ and ‘virtue’ are the states of mind that enable the ‘tenant’ to hear ‘the call’
when it comes, to respond with a ‘kindled heart’, and to ‘go’. Her implicit theological
point is made by her metaphysical use of the word ‘tenant’: we are not permanent
inhabitants or owners of our earthly lives. We are only tenants, preparing, by practising ‘virtue’ during our stay here, to answer the call to ‘go’, into union with God in prayer and, ultimately, to our true heavenly home. This poem is an example of the way in which metaphysical poetry often entails strikingly individual treatment of common human issues.

A fifth characteristic of Powers’ metaphysical poetry is that metaphysical poems often create for us ‘particular situations out of which prayer or meditation arises’ (Gardner 1967: 27). Powers can be seen creating a situation ‘out of which meditation arises’ in her poem ‘The Tear in the Shade’:

I tore the new pale window shade with slightly more than a half-inch tear.  
I knew the lady would be shocked to see what I had done with such finality.  
I went outside to lose my worry there.  
Later when I came back into the room it seemed that nothing but the tear was there.  
There had been furniture, a rug, and pictures, and on the table flowers in purple bloom.  
It was amazing how they dwindled, dwindled, and how the tear grew till it filled the room.

This is a carefully described ‘particular situation’. Powers sets the scene for what is an instance of psychological and theological insight with painterly attention to detail. There is a room with a shade, furniture, a rug, pictures, and on the table, ‘flowers in purple bloom’. The simple inclusion of the adjective ‘purple’ transforms the description from a generic to a particular one. And here the little drama that swells throughout the poem until it obliterates everything not itself takes place:

I tore the new pale window shade.

Powers traces the cancerous growth of guilt in unassuming comments: first is the guilty knowledge:

I knew the Lady would be shocked to see what I had done;
then the attempt to shrug off responsibility:

I went outside to lose my worry there;

then the dismayed realisation of the swollen significance of the small initial fault; and finally the obsessive clutch of full-blown guilt that can see and think of nothing but what it has done. All sense of proportion is lost, all ability to relate to the world around is dulled, and there is no room for any emotion but fear: everything
dwindled, dwindled
and only the
tear grew till it filled the room.

Powers invests this scene with horror. Her point is dramatic: this was a relatively small fault, but, evaded and unresolved, it assumes a pathological proportion. Thus she dissects the anatomy of a diseased conscience. The parallel spiritual effects of guilt are unstated but implied in the poem: scripture calls on man to repent in order to be saved.\(^8^5\) Just as the poem delineates the psychological effects of unresolved guilt, so it implies the destructive effects of unresolved spiritual guilt. Thus in this apparently simple, short poem a small ‘particular situation’ has given rise to a vividly imagined meditation on guilt, and by implied extension, on repentance.

The poem ‘The Vision’ is a striking example of the fact that metaphysical poems can create for the reader situations which can inspire prayer or meditation. This poem, which is a prophetic vision reminiscent of those in the Old Testament, such as Isaiah’s\(^8^6\) and Jeremiah’s,\(^8^7\) is an example of the intimacy and dramatic immediacy that arise out of Powers’ mysticism and her contemplation, that is, out of her vivid imagining of a metaphysical truth:

\(^8^5\) Acts 8:22: Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord.
\(^8^6\) Isaiah 6:9: He said, ‘Go and tell this people: Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving’.
\(^8^7\) Jeremiah 2: 1, 2: The word of The Lord came to me saying: ‘Go and proclaim in the hearing of Jerusalem’.
He said: write down the vision that you had, and I wrote what I saw.

I saw the world kissing its own darkness.

It happened thus: I rose to meet the sunrise and suddenly over the hill a horde appeared dragging a huge tarpaulin. They covered unwary land and hapless city and all sweet waters and fields. And there was no sunrise.

I strained my eyes for a path and there was no path. I bumped into trees and the bushes hissed at me, and the long-armed brambles cried in a strident voice: never through here! But I struggled on, fumbling my beads of no.

I came to a dark city where nobody knew that there was darkness. And strange! Though there was no light I still could see what I did not want to see: people who moved to the loveless embrace of folly. They ate her gourmet foods; they drank her wine, danced to her music that was crazed with rhythm, were themselves discord though they knew it not, or if they knew, cared less.

Outside the city wall I stood in thought, parried a moment with a frightening urge to court the darkness; but I held back, fearing the face of love.

Crossing a field I wandered through a desert when suddenly behind a rock I found a little sagebrush where a fire was burning, shining and dancing. After my first amazed worship of silence I was loud with praise.

I watched with fear the darkness circling it, lunging against it, swirling a black cloak to suffocate the light, until the shades broke loose and one by one in terror fled.

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88 Exodus 3: 2 There the angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though the bush was on fire it did not burn up.
The flame burned on, innocent, unimperiled. 
There was no darkness that could put it out.

The poem opens with characteristic dramatic immediacy: ‘He said’. There is also the intimacy of tone with which religious metaphysical poets tend to talk to or about God. Without overt reverence, or any use of the courtesy appropriate to conversation with majesty, she simply refers to God as ‘He’. God gives a quiet instruction and she obeys without question. So calm are the two opening lines of the poem that the reader is the more shocked by the vividly physical metaphysical metaphor which follows:

I saw the world kissing its own darkness.

Powers gives this appalling metaphor a line break both before and after it to emphasise its narcissistic, necrophiliac horror. An extended metaphor, a device often used by metaphysical poetry, follows this apocalyptic line. A mystical experience is recollected so vividly that it is recreated. The recreation is at the same time also a contemplation. Powers juxtaposes the conventional with the unexpected, giving her imagery the dramatic quality typical of metaphysical poetry. She opens with the conventionally romantic, which turns quickly to the incongruous, and then to the terrifying: ‘rose to meet the sunrise’, is followed by the incipient threat of ‘tarpaulin’, which extends in the ghastly smothering of ‘sweet water and fields’ ‘covered’. The last line of this stanza evokes horror with quiet understatement:

And there was no sunrise.

Stanza three conveys the pathological alienation that Powers believes we suffer when we are at odds with God by means of a conventional metaphor taken from nature used to metaphysical effect: the bushes ‘hiss’, and the brambles, with their sinister ‘long arms’, cry ‘never’ in a ‘strident’ voice. She is metaphysical again in the line, ‘fumbling my beads of no’, in which apparent simplicity overlays complexity. The line carries connotations of the rosary in the word ‘beads’, of vulnerability in the word ‘fumbling’, and of shock and revulsion in the word ‘no’.
There is a metaphysical inversion in stanza five: the people are in the absolute dark, there is ‘no light’, but they do not know it is dark. The line carries all the connotations of darkness, some of which are: bumping into things, losing things, fear, not being able to see smiles or dear faces or lurking menace and being lost. But so entirely alienated are these people that, though they are in this perilous condition, they do not know it. These lines are in fact an analysis of the condition of mankind when it is out of touch with God: the inhabitants of the ‘dark city’ were ‘themselves discord though they knew it not’. A wealth of theology lies in this sombre line. God is the Light and the genitor of light.\textsuperscript{89} Outside of Him therefore there is no light, hence this is a ‘dark city’.

Furthermore, the beauty of everything inheres in its accordance with His perfect will. Therefore, that which lies outside of His will has no beauty or any of the attributes of beauty. It follows logically, then, that in this ‘dark city’ there can be no harmony, which is one of the attributes of beauty, but only ‘discord’. Powers quietly but devastatingly delineates what she perceives to be the full effects of living outside of the will of God: the people do not merely act in a discordant way, they are entirely consumed by discord and have in fact literally become embodiments of discord. In a last diagnosis of pathology, she says they may even have insight into their dire condition, but they ‘care less’.

Stanza six looks the seduction of temptation full in the face: she feels an ‘urge’ that is ‘frightening’ in its strength to ‘court the darkness’. Clearly this ‘darkness’ can dissemble so that it appears desirable, and it can exert a terrible attraction so that one can be lured into ‘courtship’ of that which will destroy one. Powers finds the strength to resist the temptation by ‘fearing the face of love’. This clause deconstructs itself in metaphysical paradox: Scripture says that ‘There is no fear in love. Perfect love drives out fear’,\textsuperscript{90} therefore Powers cannot logically or theologically have fear and love in the same clause. However, the seeming paradox is resolved at an unstated level: the word ‘fearing’ is invested with reverent tenderness by its proximity to the ‘face of love’. It is

\textsuperscript{89} 1 John 1: 5: This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.

\textsuperscript{90} 1 John 4: 18.
not ‘fear’, as in terror of wrath or danger, but ‘fear’ as in extreme unwillingness to commit the sacrilege which rebuffing such infinite love would entail.

Powers uses the word ‘fear’ again in stanza eight. She fears the darkness will ‘suffocate the light’. Here she is being protective of God! This sentence demands an exclamation mark. This is reverent metaphysical wit, in a sense: it is of course outrageous, even ludicrous, for a creature to feel protective of the Creator. But what Powers is in fact conveying with radical understatement, that is nonetheless deeply moving, is the astonishing intimacy, even equality, of the relationship between God and His beloved, that is, between Powers and her Beloved. Scripture tells us that God ‘made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness’. Powers presumes, with presumption which yet remains reverent, on this equality between God and herself, appropriating the tender equality of lovers, expressed here in her ‘fearing’ for her Beloved’s safety. Powers’ shares Arnulf of Louvain’s spirituality here, expressed in his hymn ‘Salve mundi salutare’, (1250), in which he prays for the blessing to be allowed ‘on earth to comfort Thee’. This poem has created for the reader, out of a vision of the parlous state of a Godless world that came to the poet when she got up very early one morning, a meditation on the love of God.

The poem ‘The Mercy of God’ too describes a moment which could inspire prayer or meditation:

I am copying down in a book from my heart’s archives
the day that I ceased to fear God with a shadowy fear.
Would you name it the day that I measured my column of virtue
and sighted through windows of merit a crown that was near?
Ah, no, it was rather the day I began to see truly
that I came forth from nothing and ever toward nothing-ness tend,
that the works of my hands are a foolishness wrought in the presence
of the worthiest King in a kingdom that shall never end.
I rose up from the acres of self that I tended with passion
and defended with flurries of pride;
I walked out of myself and went into the woods of God’s mercy,
and here I abide.
There is greenness and calmness and coolness, a soft leafy covering

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91 Philipians 2: 7
from the judgement of sun overhead,
and the hush of His peace, and the moss of His mercy to tread.
I have naught but my will seeking God; even my love burning in me
is a fragment of infinite loving and never my own.
And I fear God no more; I go forward to wander forever
in a wilderness made of His infinite mercy alone.

The poem opens with the dramatic directness and the use of ordinary things we expect
of metaphysical poetry:

I am copying down in a book.

Yet immediately the metaphor becomes metaphysical: ‘from my heart’s archives’.
There is the intimacy typical of metaphysical poetry in the direct appeal to the reader:
‘Would you name it the day that I measured my column of virtue / and sighted through
windows of merit a crown that was near?’ Powers moves swiftly to dismantle her
pride: ‘Ah, no, it was rather the day that I began to see truly / that I came forth from
nothing and ever toward nothing-ness tend.’ This moment of honest insight allows her
to acknowledge that her ‘column of virtue’ is self-deception, that the ‘window of merit’
through which she surveyed her crown of achievement is a narcissistic picture window,
a pathological mirage. Her confession of radical unworthiness enables the poet to ‘see
truly’ so that she attributes the crown appropriately to ‘the worthiest King’. Now that
the truth has set her free
\[\text{92 John 8: 32.}\]

she is able to rise up ‘from the acres of self’ and the ‘flurries
of pride’ and walk ‘out of [her]self’ into the ‘woods of God’s mercy’. The simple
physicality of this image, at once ordinary and arresting, is typical of metaphysical
poetry.

An extended metaphor of nature as God’s mercy follows with translucent simplicity.
Forest metaphors convey the beauty, the freshness, and the sweetness of God’s
presence: ‘greenness and calmness and coolness, a soft leafy covering’, and these are
followed by the striking and sensuously evocative metaphor of ‘the moss of His mercy’.
No matter how jagged a rock may be, a covering of moss overlays it with a verdant
softness which allows it to be safely, if carefully, traversed, and Powers shows this to
be the effect of God’s mercy in the travails of human life: come what may, she believes, the one who has risen up from ‘the acres of self’ and entered into the ‘hush of His peace’ will have the ‘moss of His mercy’ to tread upon along the way.

The poem closes by restating the metaphysical paradox that life on earth remains in many senses a ‘wandering’ in a ‘wilderness’ (of the pain that is a fact of human life) but that now the wandering is no longer a lostness in the wilderness. Now, thanks to Christ’s mercy, it is an infinitely safe wandering ‘in a wilderness made of His infinite mercy alone’.

Certainly a close reading of poems such as these could constitute an encounter with the metaphysical which could inspire prayer or meditation.

A sixth characteristic of metaphysical poetry which Powers displays is that her poems do not only inspire meditation but are very often meditations themselves. ‘During the latter half of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth, all the important treatises on meditation show a remarkable similarity in fundamental procedure directly due to the widespread influence of The Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola’ (Martz 1954: 25), and the earlier devotional books of St Thomas à Kempis, known collectively as The Imitation of Christ. Martz maintains that ‘the art of meditation played a fundamental part in the development of [the metaphysical] qualities of metaphysical poetry, [and] that individual mastery of the art of meditation would lie behind the poetry and be the essence of the kinship [of the metaphysical poets]’ (1954: 25). Thus his idea is that rather than a ‘metaphysical tradition, what we see in the poetry is a “meditative tradition”, which it is possible to trace in a stream of meditative poetry coming out of the Jesuit methods of meditation, and leading to Donne and Hopkins’ (1954: 3), and, I maintain, to Powers.

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93 Psalm 107:4: Some wandered in desert waste lands, finding no way to a city where they could settle.
94 1522 – 1524.
95 based on the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola (1522 – 1524) and the earlier devotional books St Thomas à Kempis.
Meditation, as practised in the seventeenth century, was not a formless musing, it followed a disciplined pattern. Martz quotes Joseph Hall’s 1606 treatise, The Arte of Divine Meditation: ‘Our Meditation must proceed in due order, not troubledly, not preposterously: it begins in the understanding, endeth in the affection; it begins in the braine, descends to the heart; begins on earth, ascends to Heaven; not suddenly, but by certain staires and degrees, till we come to the highest’ (1954: 25). Martz maintains that ‘it is this habit of feeling theological issues as part of a concrete, dramatic scene that the meditative writers of the latter half of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth century stress as all important for the beginning of a meditation’ (1954: 30). This is what Powers does, for example in her poem ‘The Books of Saint John of the Cross’:

Out of what door that came ajar in heaven
drifted this starry manna down to me,
to the dilated mouth both hunger given
and all satiety?
Who bore at midnight to my very dwelling
the gift of this imperishable food?
My famished spirit with its fragrance filling,
its savor certitude.

The mind and heart ask, and the soul replies
what store is heaped on these bare shelves of mine?
The crumbs of the immortal delicacies
fall with precise design.

Mercy grows tall with the least heart enlightened,
and I, so long a fosterling of night,
here feast upon immeasurably sweetened
wafers of light.

In this poem the mystical inspiration of the writing of St John of the Cross is given concrete evocation in a vivid and dramatic way: ‘Out of what door that came ajar in heaven’. Here the simple, seemingly casual, concrete image is of a commonplace door swinging open a little. It is not flung wide open, it is only ‘ajar’. But it is a door in heaven! This incongruity, the concrete simplicity in a present moment that yet describes a spiritual moment, is a metaphysical attribute. The next line continues the evocative mix of poetic imagery, theology and seeming simplicity: ‘drifted this starry
manna down to me’. The theology lies in the manna, the mysterious heavenly nourishment sent by God to the Israelites out of heaven. 96 ‘Drifted’ carries the quiet simplicity of what is actually an astonishing event. And the ‘starry’ of ‘starry manna’ carries the sensuous beauty of the stars and the mysterious vastness of the night sky.

The word ‘dilated’ in the next line gives dramatic concreteness to the theological assertion. The mouth of a real, hungry person gapes open in famished entreaty. Close on the physicality of that vivid image comes the theological complexity: both the hunger and the satiety are simultaneously mysteriously ‘given’. Powers’ theological point is that the longing for God and the fulfilment of that longing are inspired together and originate in heaven behind a ‘door’ which falls open out of mercy.

Stanza two speaks of imperishable food brought to the house itself in an instance of tender generosity. ‘Dwelling’ conjures up a simple but real place of living. At the same time the ‘imperishable food’ brings to mind the Eucharist, eternal food, prefigured in the biblical manna. 97 ‘Famished’ dramatically extends the metaphor of the ‘dilated mouth’ from stanza one. This dramatic drawing out of metaphor into conceit is a metaphysical quality. ‘Fragrance’ of line three carries the poetic loveliness, and at the same time, ‘savor’, with its physical connotation of taste, carries the theological claim of ‘certitude’, the proposition that faith feeds and inspires faith.

The dramatic concreteness continues in stanza three. The inside of the poet’s soul is described as ‘these bare shelves of mine’. The concrete image of the house or dwelling is extended and the ‘bareness’ of the shelves reinforces the words ‘dilated mouth’, ‘hunger’ and ‘famished’. The words ‘fall with precise design’ convey reams of theology about the nature of God’s love for each individual in four quiet words. There is nothing haphazard about His care for His children. There is ‘design’, and it is ‘precise’. This minute care is revealed as a mystery because it lies impenetrably alongside the mystery of human suffering, which Powers never seeks to elide or minimise.

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96 Exodus 16: 14,15: When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other, ‘What is it?’ for they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, ‘It is the bread the Lord has given you to eat’.

97 Exodus 16: 14,15.
The final stanza states a theological proposition with inimitable simplicity. The poet is a ‘fosterling of night’. Theological complexity simply expressed in this way is a metaphysical quality in the poem. The theological claim is that we are children of light, not of darkness. We live in the darkness of sin but we are only foster children of night. Our real home with our true Father is light. The whole salvific history of God’s relationship with man lies in the last three seemingly simple words of the poem: ‘wafers of light’. These are Eucharistic wafers, the Body of Christ given on the Cross to save mankind from death or night. The plenitude of the love of God is expressed in the word ‘feast’, and the loveliness of the taste of God is evoked by the words ‘immeasurably sweetened’ which recall and extend the ‘fragrance’ and the ‘savor’ of the second stanza.

This poem might be said to feel a ‘theological issue as part of a concrete, dramatic scene’ which, as ‘the meditative writers of the latter half of the sixteenth century and the first half of the seventeenth century stress’, is ‘all important for the beginning of a meditation’ (Martz 1954: 30).

As a form of devotion, meditation involves thought, imagination, and feeling. ‘One meditates by first choosing a topic: a scene from the Bible, for example, such as the Annunciation or the Crucifixion, or an object in nature, or one of the Four Last Things: death, judgement, hell and heaven. With the aid of the imagination and the reason, this topic is then fleshed out and analysed’ (Low 1978: 228). Two of the common methods for doing this were called ‘composition of place’ and ‘composition by similitude’. ‘Composition of place’ means that ‘a scene is made mentally real by imagining it in detail’. ‘Composition by similitude’ means ‘taking an abstraction – death, love, sin – and making it more powerful imaginatively by embodying it in a concrete image or metaphor. The end products of meditation are emotions and resolutions, raised up in the course of the exercise’ (1978: 228).

Such spiritual exercise or meditation, patterned on the writings of St Ignatius and St Thomas, reminds the faithful of Christ’s words that ‘I am the light of the world.'
Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life⁹⁸ and instructs us that ‘by these words, Christ urges us to mould our lives and characters in the image of His, if we wish to be truly enlightened and freed from all blindness of heart. Let us therefore see that we endeavour beyond all else to meditate on the life of Jesus Christ’ (à Kempis 1963: 37).

A structured meditation of this kind takes the form of a dramatic statement of the topic to be considered; followed by an expression of the purpose of the meditation, of the end to be achieved and of the method of the meditation; followed by a summary and the process of understanding; and followed at last by resolutions arising from the meditation. An analysis of the poem ‘Look at the Chickadee’ serves to show that Powers, as a metaphysical poet, uses this formal meditative pattern and writes out of this meditative tradition:

I take my lesson from the chickadee
who in the storm
receives a special fire to keep him warm,
who in the dearth of a December day
can make the seed of a dead weed his stay,
so simple and so small,
and yet the hardiest hunter of them all.

The world is winter now and I who go loving no venture half so much as snow,
in this white blinding desert have been sent a most concise and charming argument.
To those who seek to flout austerity,
who have a doubt of God’s solicitude
for even the most trivial of His brood,
to those whose minds are chilled with misery
I have this brief audacious word to say: look at the chickadee,
that small perennial singer of the earth,
who makes the weed of a December day the pivot of his mirth.

The line ‘I take my lesson from the chickadee’ is the dramatic statement of the topic of the meditation. The learning of a lesson from the chickadee,

⁹⁸ John 8.12.
who in the storm
receives a special fire to keep him warm,

and

who makes the weed of a December day
the pivot of his mirth

is the purpose of the meditation, and the end to be achieved by the meditation; and
the means by which the end will be achieved is the attentive observation of the
chickadee,

who in the dearth of a December day
can make the seed of a dead weed his stay,
so simple and so small,
and yet the hardiest hunter of them all.

The summary and the process of understanding ought to follow: the poet offers

a most concise and charming argument

and a

brief audacious word to say:
to those who seek to flout austerity,
who have a doubt of God’s solicitude
for even the most trivial of His brood,
to those whose minds are chilled with misery,

that they should

look at the chickadee,

and follow the brave example of

that small perennial singer of the earth,
who makes the weed of a December day
the pivot of his mirth.
Logically, a resolution to show cheerful gratitude even for small mercies should be the fruit of this meditation, and the implied metaphysical outcome of the meditation should be that those who ‘doubt God’s solicitude’ and whose ‘minds are chilled with misery’, will, if they follow the chickadee’s plucky example, too receive ‘a special fire’ to keep them warm.

It is the ‘very purpose of a supernaturally derived discipline, as used in poetry, to set the substance of natural life apart, to give it a form, a meaning, and a value which cannot be evaded ... for the poet the discipline, far from seeming secondary, had an extraordinary structural, seminal, and substantial importance to the degree that without it he could hardly have written at all’ (Martz 1954: 67). Powers’ poem ‘The Cedar Tree’ is an example of the way in which, by meditating upon a topic she ‘set[s] the substance of natural life apart, to give it a form, a meaning, and a value which cannot be evaded’. She opens with the clever, or strong opening typical of metaphysical poetry, a seeming contradiction which actually offers theological complexity with the utmost economy:

In the beginning, in the unbeginning of endlessness and eternity ...

She follows with a statement of the subject of her meditation:

God saw this tree.
He saw these cedar branches bending low under the full exhaustion of the snow.
And since He set no wind of day to rising, this burden of beauty and this burden of cold, (whether the wood breaks or the branches hold)
must be of His devising.

There is a wealth of theology in these seemingly descriptive lines: the simple form contains depth of statement about the nature of God and about the status of Creation.

The crux of the meditation is in the extension of the metaphor in the second stanza:

There is a cedar similarly decked
deep in the winter of my intellect
under the snow, the snow,
the scales of light its limitations tell.

And the last stanza gives the meaning and the value to the form as it makes the theological point of the extended metaphysical metaphor, which is the lesson of the meditation, that God reckons with infinite care the measure of the burden placed by life on every individual, and that the outcome, whatever it may be, is in His keeping:

I clasp this thought: from all eternity
God who is good looked
down upon this tree
white in the weighted air,
and of another cedar reckoned well.
He knew how much each tree, each twig could bear.
He counted every snowflake as it fell.

The astonishing and utterly consoling claim, that God attends to our every second with devoted care, Powers conveys with quiet and yet vivid simplicity:

He counted every snowflake as it fell.

Meditation is a discipline directed toward creating an act of pure attention: ‘you choose that object to concentrate upon which will best focus your consciousness’ (Martz 1954: 67). This insight into the nature of meditation is supported by contemporary neuroscience, as discussed in Chapter Five.

Often in metaphysical poetry

the musing takes on the quality of address, and the grammatical modes are more often than in most other styles the less ordinary: interrogative, imperative and vocative. The impulse behind meditation, like its private character, is something shared with the other dominant structures – the dramatic and the narrative. The meditative does not create the intense scene of the dramatic nor work as directively as the narrative, but it does seek intensity and movement. The effort toward transcendence is, then, a common motive in Metaphysical poetry, [as also seen in Powers’ poetry], and the meditational structure hovers or muses over a subject until, or as long as, it proves capable of rapture (Summers 1954: 206).
The meditational approach sometimes has an element of drama, usually when it is a colloquy between man and God, or Body and Soul, or when the poet addresses God directly as Powers does, for example, in her poem ‘Manuscript of Heaven’:

O Great Immortal Poet.

The poem ‘The Cloud of Carmel’ is a colloquy between Powers and Mary: Powers says:

Cloud, encompass God and me.
O, wrap me, Cloud ... light cloud of Carmel
... Say to my soul, the timorous and small
house of a Presence that it cannot see
and frightened acre of a Deity,
say in the fullness of your clemency:
I have enclosed you all.

and Mary replies:

O hut of God, deepen your faith anew.
Enfolded in this motherhood of mine,
all that is beautiful and all divine
is safe in you.

This is wonderful instance of reverent understated metaphysical wit and metaphysical paradox: God Himself, ‘all that is beautiful and all divine’, is safe in us!

According to Martz poetic meditation, such as Powers’ poetry, is ‘intense, imaginative meditation that brings together the senses, the emotions, and the intellectual faculties of man in a moment of dramatic, creative experience’ (1954: 1). Powers’ poems are such moments of ‘dramatic, creative experience’ which constitute meditation. This calibre of meditation in her work is a metaphysical quality. The metaphysical nature of her work can clearly be seen, for example, in her poem ‘Only one Voice’:

Only one voice,
but it was singing
and the words danced and as they danced held high –
oh, with what grace! – their lustrous bowls of joy.
Even in dark we knew they danced, but we –
none of us – touched the hem of what would happen. 
Somewhere around a whirl, swirl, a pirouette,  
the bowls flew and spilled,  
and we were drenched, drenched to the dry bone  
in our miserable night.

Only one voice,  
but morning lay awake in her bed and listened,  
and then was out and racing over the hills  
to hear and see.  
And water and light and air and the tall trees  
and people, young and old, began to hum  
the catchy, catchy tune.  
And everyone danced, and everyone, everything,  
even the last roots of the doddering oak  
believed in life.

As is often noted in the course of this thesis, Powers never elides the mystery of suffering that human life and a close approach to God seem invariably to occasion. But this poem is about the mystical rapture which Powers says suffuses, that is overlays, underlays, and entirely infuses, all near approach to God despite the unavoidable mystery of suffering: the one voice in the mystical ecstasy described in this poem ‘was singing’. Powers’ metaphor for the song of God is radiant: the words of the song

    danced and as they danced held high –  
    oh, with what grace! – their lustrous bowls of joy.

Now Powers moves from portraying an intimation of glory into a description of religious ecstasy:

    Even in the dark we knew they danced,  
    – those praying are approaching the threshold of glory,  

    but we –  
    none of us – touched the hem of what would happen.

Powers keeps her metaphor anchored concretely in the immanent, in real dancing as we know it, so that we can begin to apprehend, through our human experience of dancing, something of the transcendent miracle that then happened:
Somewhere around a whirl, swirl, a pirouette,  
the bowl flew and spilled,  
and we were drenched, drenched to the dry bone 
in our miserable night.

The next stanza shows the ‘lustrous bowls of joy’, which are the words of God’s love-song sung to us, being poured out without reserve over all the earth, into every element and everything in nature and every human:

   water and light and air and tall trees  
   and people, young and old, began to hum  
   the catchy, catchy tune.

Powers makes the theological point here that holiness and the exquisite joy it entails are not elitist, or esoteric: anyone, even a small child, can learn a ‘catchy’ tune, and she reiterates that God, in His concern that nearness to Him be accessible to all His children, makes His tune not only a ‘catchy’, but a ‘catchy, catchy’ tune. Powers’ spiritual insight here is akin to Von Balthasar’s insight that ‘the beautiful brings with it a self-evidence that enlightens without mediation’ (1984: 37), and to Newman’s words that ‘the atonement of Christ is not a thing at a distance, or like the sun standing over against us and separated off from us, but that we are surrounded by an atmosphere and are in a medium, through which His warmth and light flow in upon us on every side’ (Dessain 1962: 224).

Powers closes this poem with a transcendent vision of a glory-filled Creation: she is inhabiting the future here in a fully realised vision which is prophecy, which brings a future moment fully into the present so that the future, in her poem, partakes of the ‘sacrament of the present moment’ (De Caussade 1966: 18):

   And everyone danced, and everyone, everything,  
even the last roots of the doddering oak  
believed in life.

This poem is an ‘intense, imaginative meditation’ on the Holy Spirit which brings together the senses, the emotions and the intellect. It opens abruptly, as is often the case with metaphysical poetry: ‘Only one voice’. Immediately theological complexity
presented as simplicity is evident. The intellectual theological claim is that there is only one authentic voice, which is the voice of God. The sensuous immediacy of the meditation is in the second line, ‘but it was singing’. ‘Singing’ carries connotations of accessibility and of sweetness. This spirit is no ascetic, austere presence. The dramatic picture of joy spills into the third line: ‘the words danced’. This is again a physical, joyful embodiment of the Spirit. The intense emotion is felt in the fourth line: ‘oh, with what grace!’ This is an outpouring of spontaneous, loving admiration. The metaphysical quality lies in the witty fact that this little out-rushing of rapture is for a spiritual experience which is here presented with sensuous emotional immediacy. The ingenious extended metaphor continues: the words of the Spirit’s song ‘dance’, and hold up in offering ‘lustrous bowls of joy’. There is visual and sensuous appeal in the metaphor of the dancing words and the connotations of ‘lustrous’ are beguilingly lovely. Underlying the dramatic, lyrical and sensuous metaphor is the intellectual exposition of the theological attributes of the nature of the Holy Spirit. This Spirit sings, it dances, its words are glowing receptacles of joy.

This is no dry meditation on the nature of the Holy Spirit, but it is a serious meditation on the subject nonetheless, which is simultaneously a solemn meditation and a rapturous outpouring of praise. Line five has a metaphor for suffering which is entirely metaphysical: ‘Even in dark’. Here we have the seeming simplicity, the dramatic immediacy and the underlying intellectual complexity typical of a metaphysical use of metaphor. ‘Dark’ carries all its visual and emotional connotations, but also the theological statement that where the ‘Light of the world’ is absent, that is, where Christ is absent, there can only be darkness. Into the darkness the Spirit comes, bringing the Light of the world. This is a theological proposition. But the next lines drench the theology in sensuous beauty and rapturous comfort in an extended metaphor that is essentially metaphysical: the dancing words of the Spirit’s song spill their precious cargo of liquid joy, and the suffering person, in the ‘dark’, in the ‘miserable night’, is ‘drenched, drenched to the dry bone’. The word ‘drenched’ is repeated for dramatic and sensuous effect which is heightened by the bleakness of the ‘dry bone’. The words ‘drenched’ and ‘dry bone’ are reinforced by the biblical resonances they evoke: ‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says to these bones: I will make breath enter you and you will
come to life';\(^99\) and, ‘I will pour out my Spirit on all people’;\(^{100}\) and, ‘I will pour water on the thirsty land, and streams on the dry ground; I will pour out my spirit on your offspring’.\(^{101}\)

The New Testament occurrence of the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles as they huddled in hopeless misery after the Crucifixion\(^{102}\) is also present in this line, as are the infinitely tender words ‘To him who is thirsty I will give to drink without cost from the spring of the water of life’,\(^{103}\) and ‘Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst’.\(^{104}\) Thus the poem serves as a secular scripture which comments joyfully upon the sacred scripture which imbues it: the ‘aesthetic emotion [in the poem is] a metaphysical moment of harmony, the perception of a coherent universal plan in a world of unrelated appearances. Feeling and thought could not survive separately, because both belong to, participate in, and signal a larger order, a unifying principle that governs all of life: human and natural, spiritual and physical, past, present and future’ (Hannoosh 1987: 349).

Thus a metaphysical poem which unites feeling and thought, such as Powers’ poem ‘Only One Voice’, simultaneously achieves and celebrates such a moment of metaphysical harmony. It is a poem which is an ‘intense, imaginative meditation that brings together the senses, the emotions, and the intellectual faculties of man in a moment of dramatic, creative experience’ (Martz 1954: 1).

A seventh characteristic of metaphysical poetry which Powers displays is that metaphysical poetry sometimes moves beyond meditation into contemplation, the most mystical form of prayer. Contemplation is generally considered to be the highest

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\(^{99}\) Ezekiel 37: 5.
\(^{100}\) Joel 2: 28.
\(^{101}\) Isaiah 44: 3.
\(^{102}\) Acts of the Apostles 2: 1-4: When the day of Pentecost came they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit.
\(^{103}\) Revelation 21: 6.
\(^{104}\) John 4: 14.
form of devotion and its two primary marks are direct experience of God and passivity. Powers describes this direct experience of God in the lines

Christ’s torn veins spread a soft covering over her hair and face and colored gown. She took her First Communion in His Blood.

from the poem ‘The Blood’s Mystic’; and she describes contemplative passivity, or abandonment to the will of God in the lines

A wild parakeet
ceded its being to a mourning dove
where her love brooded, too contemplative
to lift the brief distraction of a wing

and

the fountained Christ
Whose crimson-signing stills our creature stir,

and

the weight
of the warm blood that slowed and silenced her

from the same poem, which uses sensuous and intellectually complex metaphysical metaphor to convey some of the effects of contemplation.

Mystical prayer is considered to be indescribable save in such terms as nothingness, darkness, or unknowing. This can be seen in Powers’ poem ‘The Place of Splendor’ which describes the ‘tremendous mystery of God’s love’ and the mystical prayer by means of which He can be approached. That is, it describes the indescribable:

Little one, wait.
Let me assure you this is not the way to gain the terminal of outer day.

Its single gate
lies in your soul, and you must rise and go
by inward passage from what earth you know.

The steps lead down
through valley after valley, far and far
past the five countries where the pleasures are,
and past all known
maps of the mind and every colored chart
and past the final outcry of the heart.
No soul can view
its own geography; love does not live
in places open and informative.

Yet, being true,
it grants to each its Raphael across
the mist and night through unknown lands of loss.

Walk till you hear
light told in music that was never heard,
and softness spoken that was not a word.
The soul grows clear
when senses fuse: sight, touch and sound are one
with savor and scent, and all to splendor run.

The smothered roar
of the eternities, their vast unrest
and infinite peace are deep in your own breast.

That light-swept shore
will shame the data of grief upon your scroll.
Child, have none told you? God is in your soul.

The intimate, abrupt opening of this poem, 'Little one, wait', is typical of metaphysical poetry, and metaphysical 'difficulty' or intellectual complexity is apparent in the very first lines: 'the terminal of outer day'. A terminal is the end point to which a journey tends. The 'terminal of outer day', then, is the end point to which prayer, and life on earth, tends. Powers uses the singular: she believes there is one terminal and the way to it is through a 'single gate'. The poem offers to show the way. The usual connotations of 'journey', as in towards a terminal, are outer, away, along. Indeed, Powers uses the word 'outer'. But, paradoxically, she is describing not an 'outer' journey, but an inner one. This prayer journey is not sedentary or passive. It is strenuous and active: one must 'rise' and 'go'. There is metaphysical paradox here: a
very active leaving from ‘what earth you know’ must be done, not to go out, but in, not away, but in more deeply.

A note of warning sounds in the blunt line: ‘The steps lead down’. There is no palliative softening of where one must go. It will be ‘through valley after valley’, with all the sorrowful connotations of ‘valley’, as in the ‘valley of the shadow of death’,\textsuperscript{105} and the ‘valley of tears’,\textsuperscript{106} ‘far and far’. There is no pleasant comfort here: ‘the five countries where the pleasures are’, that is all the delights afforded us by our senses, must be left ‘far and far’ behind. It is also a leaving behind of everything known, understood and felt: no ‘maps’, explanatory ‘colored chart[s]’, or ‘final outcry of the heart’, are of use on this journey. Powers makes very clear the paradox that education is irrelevant here: knowledge of geography and marshalling of information do not equip one for this journey. Self-reliance is of absolutely no avail here, therefore love

\begin{quote}
grants to each its Raphael across  
the mist and night through unknown lands of loss.
\end{quote}

This is metaphysical paradox: Powers implies that if we don’t set out on this journey we will retain the benefits, such as they are, of our senses, minds, and hearts, and we will enjoy at least an illusion of self-sufficiency. If we do set out on this journey towards God we will not see, as we will travel through ‘mist’ and ‘night’; we will know nothing, as the lands through which we will travel will be ‘unknown’; we will feel only bereavement, as these will be the ‘lands of loss’; we will be, in fact, radically and terminally un-self-sufficient. We will, however, each have our own guardian angel! There is some quiet metaphysical wit here. God is no-one’s debtor:\textsuperscript{107} if we give up our rather puny human abilities for Him He will reciprocate with nothing less than a personal guardian angel. In stanza seven the poem moves into presenting that which is ‘conceivable which cannot be presented’ (Detweiler and Doty 1990: 176), yet here Powers imagines it: mystical union with God. If we persevere in prayer, ‘walk’ in prayer, as it were, we will

\begin{footnotes}
\textsuperscript{105} Psalm 23:4: Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I shall fear no ill.
\textsuperscript{106} Medieval hymn, ‘Salve Regina’, probably composed by the monk Herman of Reichenau.
\textsuperscript{107} Hebrews 6: 10: God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him.
\end{footnotes}
Powers presents some of the attributes of mystical prayer by means of radiant paradoxes: we will ‘hear’ ‘light’, yet that which we will ‘hear’, will be ‘told’ in ‘music that was never heard’; we will ‘hear’ ‘softness’ ‘spoken’, yet though ‘spoken’, it ‘was not a word’.

Stanza eight resolves the ‘mists’ and ‘night’ of stanza six into ‘splendor’. Now all the senses, and all the delights they betoken, which were relinquished, are resplendently restored: they ‘fuse’ into bliss and ‘all to splendor run’.

Powers’ final stanza offers a metaphysical metaphor for union with God which is luminescent and simultaneously simple and inexhaustible: ‘That light-swept shore’. To come ashore is to land safely; to reach land is to have survived the perils of the sea; to be ‘light-swept’ is to be swept clear of every trace of darkness and storm. Powers makes a quiet but entirely confident claim in her penultimate line: she believes we will survive our life’s grief, ‘the data of grief upon [our] scroll’, and when we see by that ‘clear’ light, we will see that our grief is ‘shamed’, as in outdone, by the light.

Powers’ closing line has the directness and reverent audacity typical of religious metaphysical poetry:

Child, have none told you? God is in your soul.

The entire Gospel, the good news, lies in her one line. We are addressed by the word most appropriate to us, ‘Child’, as Christ said that unless we become like a little child we cannot enter the Kingdom of heaven. Powers conveys the astounding theology of her closing words simply by means of putting the word ‘God’ in italics. There is an

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108 Luke 2:10: But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people’.

109 Matthew 18: 2,3: He called a little child and had him stand among them. And he said: ‘I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven’. 
element of the drama and wit characteristic of metaphysical poetry in this simple statement which goes on reverberating after the poem closes. It simultaneously expresses and elicits the reverent amazement which is appropriate to it and which is its substance and effect. This poem moves beyond meditation into contemplation, the most mystical form of prayer.

And a last quality of Powers’ metaphysical poetry noted in this chapter is that ‘signs are very important in metaphysical poetry [and thus in Powers], because they must be used to meditate upon difficult metaphysical concepts (McCann 2009: 193). This can be seen for example in her poem ‘Not Garden Any More’:

God is not garden anymore, to satiate the senses  
with the luxuriance of full exotic wilderness.  
Now multiple is magnified to less.  
God has become a desert now, a vast unkown Sahara  
voicing its desert cry.  
My soul has been arrested by the sound  
of a divine tremendous loneliness.

I write anathema on pool, on streams of racing water.  
I bid the shoot, the leaf, the bloom no longer to intrude.  
Beyond green growth I find this greater good,  
a motionless immensity of oneness.  
And Him I praise who lured me to this edge  
of uncreation where His secrets brood,  
Who seared the earth that I might hear in silence  
this infinite outcry of His solitude.

This complex metaphysical poem, the subject of which is mysticism, uses signs, paradox and negative theology to say the unsayable. Negative theology seeks to describe God by saying what He is not. Here Powers uses the sign of a luxuriant garden to say that He who used to inhabit that sign no longer does: He ‘is not garden anymore’. The third line is pure metaphysical paradox: ‘Now multiple is magnified to less’. The word ‘less’ is deconstructed in this line to become a sign that denotes the opposite of itself. The meaning is obscure: it requires of an interpreter of its sign a relinquishment of intellectual understanding and a reliance instead on the paradoxical goodness of a God.
who can magnify multiple into less. It must be taken on faith that the sign of ‘less’ is revealed in fact to be of a fullness that is greater than that of the sign of ‘multiple’.

Line four uses a sign for God that is radically opposite to the lush garden sign that is sometimes used to denote Him: now He is a desert, ‘vast’ and ‘unknown’, and the most astonishing paradox of all waits to ‘arrest’ the soul in this desert sign: ‘a divine tremendous loneliness’. This is the glorious paradox which underlies Christianity: God, who is omnipotent and omniscient, longs for His creatures and is unassuageably lonely without them.

In stanza two Powers rejects all signs for God that betoken verdant beauty and plenty: she writes ‘anathema’ on pool, on streams, on shoots and leaves and blooms, she looks beyond the fruitful sign of ‘green growth’ to embrace instead ‘this greater good’ at the austere desert ‘edge of uncreation’. She fully accepts the blessing that inheres in the mystery of suffering: she uses the sign of ‘seared earth’ to denote her taking up of the Cross to follow the Lord. It is when her ‘earth’ is ‘seared’ that she is able to

hearing in silence
this infinite cry of His solitude.

Jasper observes that in the ‘De Doctrina Christiana’ Augustine defines the reference frame or mental set which enables Christians to discern the spiritual sense in material things’ (1984: 171). This is what Powers does in her metaphysical poetry: she enables us to discern the signs, that is, the ‘spiritual sense in material things’. Augustine, in Book 1, chapter 4, number 4, of his De Doctrina Christiana, says: ‘Thus in this mortal life, wandering from God, if we wish to return to our native country where we can be blessed, we should use this world so that the invisible things of God being understood by the things that are made may be seen – that is, so that by means of corporal and temporal things we may comprehend the eternal and spiritual’ (11/04/2013: 397-426. http://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/doctrine).

110 Romans 1: 20: For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.
Powers’ poem ‘Return’ is an example of how in a poem, by means of corporal and temporal signs, we may ‘comprehend the eternal and spiritual’. Indeed, Powers asserts that not only ‘may’ we ‘comprehend the eternal and spiritual’ by ‘means of corporal and temporal’ signs, but that we must so comprehend them. We are creatures and can only approach God through His Creation:

This was the fever that beset my years,
that led by pride, I put my aim too high.
I strained my spirit, grasping at the moon;
my heart I wearied, reaching for the sky.

My thoughts like ways and social climbers were
who spurned their childhood home for vistas dim.
I cast the little virtues from my hand
and wrote brief notes to stars and seraphim.
I must come home again to simple things:
robins and buttercups and bumblebees,
laugh with the elves and try again to find
a leprechaun behind the hawthorn trees.

The words ‘grasping at the moon’ carry connotations of childishness. Babies cry for the moon. Powers is withering in her self-analysis: her pride made her sick so that ‘fever ... beset’ her years as she ‘strained’ her spirit and ‘wearied’ her heart crying for the moon. Her pitiless self-criticism continues in stanza two: her thoughts were pretentious, like social climbers who felt they were better than their roots, and aspired to better things. Line three of stanza two is metaphysical in its simultaneous simplicity and psychological, intellectual and theological probity:

I cast the little virtues from my hand.

She describes her own life here, but I suspect this line could serve as an epitaph for Everyman himself. The words ‘the little virtues’ cast a searching light into every nook and cranny of daily living, even when one is alone, as virtue, or the lack of it, in private and in thought needs no company. The noxious futility of paying attention ‘to stars and seraphim’ to the neglect of the sacrament of the present moment, of the quotidian duties of the here and now, ‘the little virtues’, is excoriated by means of mocking
understatement rather than fulsome condemnation: ‘[I] wrote brief notes to stars and seraphim’. The connotations of ‘social climbers’ are extended here in the ‘brief notes’ that fluttered between social aspirants in Powers’ day, much as ubiquitous social media communications do now.

The first line of the third stanza is an exhaustive analysis of holiness, and incidentally, but also intrinsically, of happiness:

I must come home again to simple things.

The word ‘home’ carries the philosophical and theological thrust. The simple things of every moment of every day are our home, and indeed our only home, as we only actually inhabit the present moment. As Augustine has it in his Confessions, Book X, Section XV: ‘men go to admire the high mountains, the vast floods of the sea, the huge streams of the rivers, the circumference of the ocean and the revolutions of the stars – and desert themselves’ (1957: 190). This she exhorts herself, and her reader, not to do, but rather to pay close attention to the sacrament of the present moment in ‘the simple things’ which serve as signs of the eternal. As Ben Jonson says in his poem ‘A Hymne to God the Father’ (Jonson 1967: 93):

But, I’le come in,
Before my losse
Me farther tosse,
As sure to win
Under his Crosse.

Powers’ line ‘I must come home again to simple things’ emanates from the same metaphysical insight that Jonson here embodies with inimitable simplicity.

Powers enjoys a little joke at our expense in the last three lines of the poem. ‘[T]he simple things’ she calls us ‘home’ to are ‘robins and buttercups and bumblebees’, and she exhorts herself (and us) to remember how to

laugh with the elves and try again to find
She makes what seems to be a perilous approach to the sentimental and the whimsical here but this is where her quiet, playful humour lies. We brush off such ‘simple things’ as childish when they are in fact signs of nature at its loveliest, and also, of grave consequence for us, for without bees, for example, very many plants could not be pollinated, and the ecology would be seriously compromised. She tempts again to derisive flippancy with the ‘elves’ and the ‘leprechauns’, but in fact she is using them as signs to refer to the stories and myths that have always served to keep our communities intact and that are essential elements of our spiritual, emotional and psychological health. Rainer Maria Rilke’s words in his *Letters to a Young Poet* come to mind here: ‘How could we forget those ancient myths that stand at the beginning of all races – the myths about dragons that at the last moment are transformed into princesses? Perhaps all the dragons in our lives are only princesses waiting for us to act, just once, with beauty and courage’ (Rilke 2011: Letter 8).

The expansion of the self, not as in an expansion of selfishness, but as in an expansion of personal authenticity, which genuine confrontation with a text entails, ‘becomes to the Augustinian interpreter participation in sacral history, in the Incarnation’. This is what happens in Powers’ metaphysical poetry: the poet, then the poem, then the reader of the poem, (should she so choose), ‘participate[s] in sacral history, in the Incarnation’ (Jasper 1984: 172).

According to Steiner, signs ‘constitute the Hebraic-Hellenic copula on which our *Logos*-history and practice have been founded. “The age of the sign”, says Derrida, “is essentially theological”’ (1989: 119). Powers’ poetry uses signs because it is metaphysical. Metaphysical poetry, because it deals with metaphysical issues, must use signs because metaphysical issues, though they may be perceived to varying degrees, are not easy to present. This use of signs is particularly evident in the poem ‘The Moment After Suffering’:

> Time’s cupped hand holds

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no place so lenient, so calm as this,  
the moment after suffering. It is like  
a sunlit clearing after densest wood,  
bright by antithesis.  
One sits upon a stump to get one’s bearing  
and to admire such evidence of day.  
Thicket and tangle fade; the furtive creatures  
of darkness take their leave and slink away.  
One feeds upon a succulent rich wisdom  
that, to the mind’s surprise, has naught to do  
with late abjection; it is revelation,  
God-fathered, heaven-new.  
Oh, there are woods, of course, long forest stretches  
of wide inhabited darkness to be crossed,  
with pain and hunger, fear of unnamed creatures,  
an imminent certainty of being lost.  
But even these elude this meditation,  
or if intrusive bring yet more release.  
One muses as to what it will be like  
to step at last from the final forest into  
the infinite meadows of unending peace,  
a place all light and yet not lighted by  
the harsh obtrusive sun that walks our sky,  
light that the soul assimilates until  
not witness but participant it stands,  
taking of Godhead its amazing fill.

This poem is metaphysical in the way it looks closely at signs, at ‘material things’, in  
order ‘to discern spiritual sense’, so that ‘by means of corporal and temporal things we  
may comprehend the eternal and spiritual’ (Jasper 1984:172). The reader of this poem  
may become ‘an Augustinian interpreter’, that is, she is invited to see signs of the  
sacred and the eternal in the immediate and the commonplace’, and, in effect, to  
‘participate in sacral history, in the Incarnation (1984: 172). According to Schuchard,  
‘metaphysical poets possess three qualities: the gift of magnificent sentences, the gift  
of exposition, and the gift of incarnation, or of fusing sense with thought’ (1994: 58).

This poem, ‘The Moment After Suffering’, fulfils all of these criteria. As so often in  
metaphysical poetry the poem opens with a concrete metaphor which presents  
abstract concepts with deceptive simplicity. ‘Time’s cupped hand’ is an astonishing  
metaphor. There is nothing elaborate in this image. The cupped hand may be at the
end of any arm, male or female, old or young, rich or poor, washed or unwashed – indeed, even on a whole or disabled body – there is only one cupped hand. Thus a theological analysis of an instance of ‘unending peace’ is presented with the utmost simplicity and physicality. A presence lies quietly behind the metaphor: to cup the hand is a sentient action: something that flows, such as water, or, in this case, time, is for a while ‘cupped’, dammed, held stable in a conscious action. This hiatus in the flow offers a moment of calm in the otherwise constant movement of the pouring out or gushing away. The word ‘lenient’ extends the metaphor. Leniency is mercy shown by a righteous judge; a merited punishment is mitigated. ‘Time’ is here shown to be compassionate. The word ‘calm’ enhances the quietness and stillness of this gentle moment. Thus in the first three lines of the poem the sign of the ‘cupped hand’ has conveyed abstract qualities, such as thoughtfulness, compassion, and healing quietness which here constitute nothing less than analysis of some of the attributes of God. The next three lines are a seemingly simple simile which functions as a sign of a moment of purest mercy: the moment of calm

is like
a sunlit clearing after densest wood,
bright by antithesis.

They in fact extend the metaphor of the opening three lines and are themselves an analysis of the quality of mercy. The words ‘densest wood’ convey with forbidding economy the dark, frightening struggle that comprises suffering, and the words ‘a sunlit clearing’ carry the uncluttered quietness, the bright calm, the light-filled openness of a sudden ‘clearing’ stumbled upon out of the frantic struggle with the ‘densest wood’. There is a quiet moment of metaphysical wit here. The point of the lines is reiterated in a three tier repetition: ‘sunlit’ is extended by ‘bright’; ‘densest’ by ‘antithesis’; and the content of the simile is underlined by the contrasting words of the simile itself, ‘sunlit’ / ‘densest wood’.

The use of homely, concrete signs to convey the ineffable is typical of metaphysical poetry as seen in the next lines: ‘One sits’, ‘One feeds’. This use of metaphor comes from the same metaphysical area as the ‘cupped hand’ of line one. Apprehensible
bodily parts and actions are used to say the unsayable. ‘One sits upon a stump’: again the clear eye of close attention looks intently at a simple human impulse, to rest on any immediately available perch after the extreme effort implied by struggling through ‘densest wood’. By the straightforward presentation of this quiet image of things ‘corporal and temporal’, the weary body, the gnarled stump, ‘we may comprehend the eternal and spiritual’, we meditate upon the nature of Godhead itself: our soul takes ‘of Godhead its amazing fill’. ‘One sits upon a stump’ extends the metaphor of ‘densest wood’, and the compassionate psychological insight conveyed by the full line, ‘One’s sits upon a stump to get one’s bearing’ is striking in its simplicity. All the bewildered terror of the struggle in the ‘densest wood’ is conveyed with absolute economy but nonetheless with dramatic vividness by the sinking down in utter relief on the stump followed by the wondering look around the restful clearing.

The lines that follow are an analysis of a moment of grace. A theological mystery is scrutinised by means of concrete signs:

Thicket and tangle fade; the furtive creatures of darkness take their leave and slink away. 
One feeds upon a succulent rich wisdom that, to the mind’s surprise, has naught to do with late abjection; it is revelation, God-fathered, heaven-new.

The ‘thicket’, the ‘tangle’ and the ‘furtive creatures’ are signs for the mystery of suffering, and the poem does not seek even for an instant to evade this mystery. What concerns Powers in this poem are the equally mysterious and radiantly beautiful moments of God-given grace that come to people in the midst of suffering and that give a blessed sign and glimpse of

what it will be like
to step at last from final forest into the infinite meadows of unending peace.
Stanza two looks the suffering inherent in human life unflinchingly in the face in metaphors which extend those of stanza one, and which function as signs for metaphysical concepts:

Oh, there are woods, of course, long forest stretches
of wide inhabited darkness to be crossed,
with pain and hunger, fear of unnamed creatures,
an imminent certainty of being lost.

But the poem is a meditation on the nature of heaven rather than a meditation on the mystery of suffering. The resolution of the meditation gathers the signs that serve in stanza one to convey some of the attributes of grace into a resplendent analysis of the unimaginable moment, a moment nevertheless here imagined, when one steps into heaven. The signs Powers uses here are: ‘infinite meadows of unending peace’; and ‘a place all light’. The words ‘infinite meadows’, with their intrinsic qualities of unending lovely greenness and limitless, gracious, openness here not only extend but perfectly complete the smaller ‘clearing’ that gave a moment of blessed respite after ‘densest wood’ in stanza one, and the word ‘sunlit’ that lightened the ‘clearing’ in stanza one, is here resolved for all eternity into ‘a place all light’. The theology of the poem gathers here into its metaphysical resolution: this place is ‘all light’ but the light does not come from the ‘sun that walks our sky’. Neither does it emanate from the Godhead, but it is rather the Godhead itself. Powers’ metaphysical proposition resides in the last three lines of the poem:

light that the soul assimilates until
not witness but participant it stands,
taking of Godhead its amazing fill.

These three lines are an example of the fusing of sense with thought that finds expression in magnificent sentences in metaphysical poetry.

Corporal metaphor runs through this poem right until it is divinised in the resolution of the poem. In the course of the poem the subject ‘struggles’, ‘sits’, ‘feeds’, ‘crosses’, ‘fears’, ‘muses’, ‘steps’, ‘witnesses’, ‘assimilates’, and, ultimately, ‘stands’ as participant, to take its fill of Godhead. It is again striking that the impact of this poem
emanates exclusively from verbs: this is a poem written out of the being mode. There is a confident agency about taking one’s fill. This is no pouring of Godhead into a passive recipient. This is a creature who, because it is the beloved of the Creator, may take its stand, and not only be an active participant, but take as much as it likes, take ‘its amazing fill’. With reverent metaphysical wit Powers comments on her own metaphysical insight in this poem: ‘amazing’. This poem uses signs, as metaphysical poetry must, to ‘meditate upon difficult metaphysical concepts’ (McCann 2009: 193).

This chapter has continued the close examination of the metaphysical qualities of Powers’ poetry in a consideration of eight further aspects of the metaphysical in her work. Analysis of Powers’ poetry has run throughout this chapter in illustration of these metaphysical qualities.
CHAPTER NINE: A ‘SHINING THROUGH’: EIGHT FINAL ASPECTS OF THE METAPHYSICAL IN POWERS’ POETRY

*To live with the Spirit of God is to be a lover.*
*It is becoming love, and like to Him*
toward Whom we strain with metaphors of creatures
‘To live with the Spirit’

This chapter makes eight final points about the metaphysical nature of Powers’ poetry. The ultimate claim of this chapter, and indeed of this thesis, is that what takes place in Powers’ work is a ‘shining through’ (Steiner 1989: 226).

A first point is that Powers’ poetry demonstrates that whereas ‘argument and persuasion, and the use of the conceit as their instrument, are the elements or body of a metaphysical poem’, the ‘soul’ of the metaphysical poem is the ‘vivid imagining of a moment of experience’ (Gardner 1967: 21). Sometimes the ‘vivid imagining’ is of an actual occasion and sometimes it is of a spiritual experience. Very often it is both: in the poem ‘The Great Mystery’ the subject is death but Powers uses a metaphor of a little girl standing on her tiptoes to try to peep through a door. No image could be more concrete or more ordinary. But this door is ‘that solemn door’ which is death, and Powers’ resolution to her meditation, which complies with metaphysical religious poetry’s impulse to ‘ponder our deaths while we live’ (Rubenstein 2007: 179), is unequivocally hopeful:

I reach and find the keyhole still too high,
though now I can surmise that it will be
light (and not darkness) that will meet the eye.

In the poem ‘The Books of Saint John of the Cross’ the occasion is reading but the imagining is visionary:

Out of what door that came ajar in heaven
drifted this starry manna down to me.
In ‘The Hidden Christ’ the occasion is Christmas Eve, and the vividly imagined experience is of going into the Christmas grotto to worship the Baby only to find it empty. The imagined experience of the poem then moves into the purely metaphysical in that it is imagined experience of spiritual truth:

I found Him (and the world is wide)
der in His warm ubiquity.
Where heart beat, there was Christ for me.
I went back to the Christmas cave,
glad with the gain of everywhere.
And lo! The blessed Child was there.
Then at His feasting board He gave
embrace. He multiplied His good
and fed in me the multitude.

This poem unites the senses and the spiritual imagination. Scenes of the candle-lit nativity grottoes of Catholic childhood mingle with the metaphysical religious insight that Christ is not to be found in sentimental religiosity but in other people, and that if He is found in His ‘warm ubiquity’, then He is found also in the manger. The shadow of the Cross lies over this complex meditation too, though it is a nativity scene: His ‘feasting board’ is the Eucharist in which He feeds ‘in me the multitude’. This poem, in its melding of the senses and the spiritual imagination, demonstrates that whereas ‘argument and persuasion, and the use of the conceit as their instrument, are the elements or body of a metaphysical poem’, the ‘soul’ of the metaphysical poem is the ‘vivid imagining of a moment of experience’ (Gardner 1967: 21).

A second point is that, as Gardner states, the ‘greatest glory’ of seventeenth century metaphysical poetry was the drama. Hence strong dramatic imagination transforms the lyric and makes a metaphysical poem ‘more than an epigram expanded by conceits’ (1967: 23). Powers is often dramatic, and at the same time fully meditational. That is, she will be found speaking and thinking but not necessarily at a dramatic time and place or in a narrative sequence. Yet ‘there is a drama of prayer, not a drama enacted at a time or place. There is also something akin to drama in the constant pressure toward transcendence – of place to heaven, of time to eternity’ (Miner 1974: 201).
Powers’ poems are never dry meditations. She shows an ‘unfailing sense of the dramatic nature of human life which is communicated in vivid, almost cinematic terms’ (Poplawski 2008: 203). Her ‘strong dramatic imagination’ transforms the poems so that they become what Steiner calls ‘mastering intrusions’ (Steiner 1989: 143), the effect of which is a ‘pressure toward transcendence’ (Miner 1974: 201). They ‘change the light whereby the reader sees’ (Steiner 1989: 143). Her poem ‘The Mercy of God’ is a meditation on God’s mercy, but its dramatic and luminous imagery makes it a vision rather than a thought process. She is making notes in her ‘heart’s archives’. She rises up from her ‘acres of self’. She walks ‘out of’ herself into ‘the woods of God’s mercy’. Her delineation of His mercy is anything but a theological catalogue of the qualities of an attribute of the Divine. It is a lyrical praise-song to His mercy that evokes what it describes: in the ‘woods of God’s mercy’ she finds

- greenness and calmness and coolness. A soft leafy covering from the judgement of sun overhead,
- and the hush of His Peace, and the moss of His mercy to tread.

Another example of her ‘strong dramatic imagination’ can be found in the poem ‘The Mountains of the Lord’. In this poem Powers sets up a dramatic three-cornered conversation in which she questions ‘innocence never lost’ and ‘innocence restored’ as to what they saw and heard ‘amid holy places’. ‘Innocence never lost’, ‘the untarnished spirit’, answers her first in exquisite images of a ‘gleaming’ City, a ‘triumphant road’, an unquenchable Fire, a Harp which plucks ‘its own serenade’, ‘Living Water from cool streams’,

- Wind that blows far down earth’s shade
- the scent of petals from eternal dreams,
- tables spread on greensward and in grove with Bread the angels coveted afar,

the

- shadow of a Dove
- who made a marriage with a Morningstar,

summits
lighted by love, the unconsuming flame,

and

the Bridegroom’s Voice that called my name.

In this stanza Powers has been using metaphor to describe mystical qualities. In effect she is describing the indescribable, presenting that which we can dimly intuit but which we struggle to articulate.

In the next stanza Powers asks ‘innocence renewed by grace’ what she saw and heard on ‘hills beatified’. Now Powers is writing out of intimate human experience and she is describing a setting and a scene we all know only too well. The ‘penitent’ replies with ‘words of light’ about what she saw under the night’s impenetrable cover wherein she walked beset by many fears.

In dramatic contrast to the luminous scenes encountered by ‘innocence never lost’, ‘innocence restored’, though she is ascending the same ‘mountains of the Lord’ as ‘innocence never lost’, walks in ‘impenetrable’ darkness, prey to ‘many fears’. This is an unvarnished diagnosis of our human state as damaged by sin. There is not a shred of pious sentimentality about the bleakness of much of human life. But the redemption available to mankind Powers presents in the word ‘penitent’. Because of penitence, innocence has been ‘restored’ with a glorious result for the penitent: she still does not see what her sinless sister sees, but instead she sees ‘the radiant face of Christ the Lover’. Her wilful loss of innocence necessitated her redemption by ‘Christ the lover’, and now, as the redeemed, she is enabled by Christ to speak in ‘words of light’. It is Powers’ last line which carries the dramatic resolution to her vividly imagined scene:

the radiant face of Christ the Lover,

seen by the penitent,
was wet with tears.

This single vivid image of a loving face wet with tears presents Christ’s suffering tenderness towards mankind with masterly concision and moving understatement. Certainly here Powers’ ‘strong dramatic imagination’ can be seen to ‘transform the lyric’ and to make this metaphysical poem ‘more than an epigram expanded by conceits’ (Gardner 1967: 23).

A third point is that, as Hannooish maintains, ‘metaphysical poetry raises and struggles with crucial moral questions in poetry which engages the mind, the heart and the spirit’. She points out that Eliot defines metaphysical poetry in his Clark lectures on the ‘Metaphysical Poetry of the 17th Century’, as ‘that in which what is ordinarily apprehensible only by thought is brought within the grasp of feeling, or that in which what is ordinarily felt is transformed into thought without ceasing to be feeling’. She maintains that the metaphysical religious poet’s ability to reunite thought and feeling is a moral attribute of the poetry arising from the poet’s adherence to a system of belief capable of sustaining the integration of thought and feeling. The metaphysical poet ‘not only reflects such a harmonious order, but also, by his poetry, perpetuates it; his sensibility can devour and amalgamate all experience, however varied, whereas the normal man perceives his experience only as fragmentary moments’ (1987: 348).

T. S. Eliot points out that a hallmark of metaphysical poetry is that ‘the meaning is clear, and the language simple and elegant’, and that while ‘the structure of the sentences is sometimes far from simple, this is not a vice; it is a fidelity to thought and feeling’. A distinguishing feature of metaphysical poetry is that the poetry is ‘a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, or a recreation of thought into feeling’ (Eliot 1962: 25). An analysis of Powers’ poem ‘Draw Me: We Will Run’ illustrates this quality:

Draw me, the spouse sang; draw me; we will run.
And morning enters here; a secret sun
bursts from the skyline of the pronoun we:
all whom I love I bear by grace with me.
I carry them, sweet burden as I go
up through the mountain darkness, through the slow
labored ascents. No goal is set too far if where I am, my heart’s elected are. No cliff cries halt between me and their good beyond. And the propitious likelihood that I can sanctify myself for them inspires each new ascetic stratagem. O God, my Hive, protect me as I come, a laden bee bearing its treasure home.

The poem is a metaphysical meditation on love and death. It has the abrupt, direct opening typical of metaphysical poetry: ‘Draw me’. The line ‘And morning enters here’ sets a luminous scene for the theology that ‘bursts’ from the dramatic metaphor which follows. First Powers evokes the connotations of ‘morning’ with its freshness and golden light; its promise of new beginning; its unsullied purity; and then she springs her dramatic metaphysical claim:

    a secret sun
    bursts from the skyline of the pronoun we.

The tranquil image of the dawn, of the rising sun shining out of the word ‘skyline’, is astonished by the jubilant pronoun ‘we’. The emphasis is Powers’ because this word carries the loving miracle proclaimed by the poem: the ‘we’ denotes Powers and all whom she loves and whom she bears by grace with her.

The beginning of the conceit which extends to the end of the poem is in the next line: ‘sweet burden’. This ‘sweet burden’, by the end of the poem, has become honey: the poet has become a bee bearing the ‘sweet burden’, and God has become the Hive, the home and the destination of the honey-laden bee. This development of a clever conceit, of an unusual comparison, is at once a meditation, a theological proposition and an ingenious extended metaphor, all of which characteristics mark it as metaphysical. The metaphysical conceit, that is the unusual metaphor, as used here by Powers, is ‘an argument to persuade’; it has ‘justness and ingenuity’ (Gardner 1967: 21); it is theological; and it ‘expresses deep thoughts in common language’ (1967: 24).
Wit is typical of metaphysical poetry. Powers’ phrase ‘my heart’s elected’ has clever play on the word ‘elected’. It carries connotations of predestination, but here it denotes choice and free will. These ‘elected’ are ‘my’ elected, freely chosen by ‘my’ heart. This is a striking theological proposition: that we are free to choose our beloveds, and that they are then in a sense ‘elected’, as in saved, by virtue of being carried by us into the Hive. We thus become, in a sense, their co-saviours: once we have chosen them, God will not interfere with our choice. We will bear our ‘treasure’ home, because He draws us who carry them, and furthermore, we may invoke divine protection as we do so. The theological doctrine of the organic nature of the Body of Christ is implicit in this metaphor also: ‘I can sanctify myself for them’. What I do blesses them. This is the doctrine of the communion of saints in its fullness: not only that we can be blessed by the prayers of the other members of Christ’s Body, the saints, but that we can bless them.

‘Draw me’ in stanza four is an echo from the ‘Song of Songs’. The beloved, who is the poet, asks the bridegroom, who is God, to draw her. This echo extends and finds its fulfilment in the metaphor of the bee drawn by the hive. The return to the hive with the raw material for the making of honey is the whole purpose of the existence of the bee and of the flight of the bee. Thus Powers makes the daring, though absolutely orthodox, theological proposition that God needs us to bring each other into the hive so that He and we in partnership can produce the honey of perfect love. God is the Queen, in this metaphor, but, just as in a beehive the Queen is dependent on the bees for food and life, so, in a theological paradox, the omnipotent God is shown to be dependent for life and sweetness, and all the connotations of honey, on the very creatures created by Him and dependent utterly upon Him. This is an example of metaphysical poetry at its best.

That the thought is strenuous, the theology is rigorous and the expression is sensuous is seen in ‘morning enters here’. The connotations of ‘morning’ suffuse the line with

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111 Song of Solomon 1: 4: Take me away with you – let us hurry!
freshness, and the sudden radiance of the ‘secret sun’ bursting from the skyline gives a visceral glow of gold to the intricate thought summed up in the word ‘we’. The lines

All whom I love I bear by grace with me. 
I carry them, sweet burden, as I go

are doctrinally intricate, encompassing the doctrine of grace and the theology of intercession, but the rigorous thought is presented in a vivid picture of a running lover carrying a ‘sweet’ burden. The connotations of the word ‘sweet’ season the sombre words to come, the ‘mountain darkness’ and the ‘slow labored ascents’. These words give stark glimpses of a theology of suffering, but the theology does not remain abstract, it is given dramatic immediacy by the word ‘dark’, and by the physical strain coming out of the words ‘labored ascents’. The penultimate line of this poem:

O God, my Hive, protect me as I come,

Gives, in one honey-drenched image, an analysis of the nature of God and of heaven which would require reams of prose to express in all its depth. The witty extended metaphor, which is in fact a meditation on the nature of God, the nature of love and the purpose of life, comes to completion in the last line:

a laden bee bearing its treasure home.

The bearing of the burden up the ‘labored ascents’ is triumphantly transmuted into the vibrant image of the homing bee bearing no longer a burden but a treasure, winging swiftly towards its place of purpose, order and safety, its ‘home’. This line carries audacious and comforting theology and is an analysis of the nature and efficacy of prayer: Powers proposes that we are able to participate in the salvation of those we love because, by means of prayer, we can carry them into heaven with us. We do not effect their salvation, it is by the grace of God that they are saved, but such is the loving kindness of God, that He shares agency with us in allowing for the efficacy of intercessory prayer. As a parent and a lover Himself, He knows that these functions would be unbearable without the comfort of mediation on behalf of the beloved.
In metaphysical poetry the ‘thought issues forth from (in old-fashioned phrase) the heart, and its subtlety is something unearthly. There is a solid substratum of original thought in [metaphysical poetry]; and the thinking is surcharged with emotion’ (Clark 1982: 75). These words are an apt description of this poem: the ‘solid substratum of original thought’ is seen in the paradox that develops throughout the poem until its culmination in its resolution in the last line, and the inimitable evocation of the ‘surcharge of emotion’ that informs the poem can be seen at its most intimate in the closing lines

O God, my Hive, protect me as I come,  
a laden bee bearing its treasure home.

The poets of the seventeenth century, ‘the successors of the dramatists of the sixteenth, possessed a mechanism of sensibility which could devour any kind of experience’ (Eliot 1962: 27). After them poetry changed, as in, for example, the poetry of Milton and Dryden, so that as language became more refined, feeling became cruder. Eliot ponders the question of ‘what would have been the fate of the “metaphysicals” had the current of poetry descended in a direct line from them, as it descended in a direct line to them?’ (1962: 28). In my opinion, Powers does in fact descend from them in a real sense, because of her religious sensibility which is based, as theirs was, on medieval Christianity, the liturgy of the Church and devotional practices based on Thomas à Kempis and Ignatius of Loyola.

Powers can be seen in these metaphysical poems to have ‘raise[d] and struggle[d] with crucial moral questions in poetry which engages the mind, the heart and the spirit’ (Hanoosh 1987: 348).

A fourth characteristic of metaphysical poetry that is frequently to be found in Powers’ work is that the dominant effort in metaphysical poetry is towards a raising of musing and colloquy to exclamation or apostrophe. Examples of her use of exclamation and/or apostrophe can be seen in the following poems:
in ‘Repairer of Fences’:

Fumbler and fool that I am, with things around me of fragile make like souls, how I am blessed to hear behind me footsteps of a Savior!

in ‘The Ledge of Light’:

Oh, God is vast!

in ‘The Spirit’s Name’:

O Dove, O Flame, O Water, Wind, and Cloud! O Love that lifts us wholly into God!

in ‘Night of Storm’:

O most wretched and blind, come home! Where love has been burns the great lantern of the Holy Ghost. Here in His light, review your world of frost: a drifting miracle!

in ‘Come, South Wind’:

I am saying all day to Love who wakens love: rise in the south and come! O south wind, listen to the woe I sing!

in ‘Young Maidens Running’ (For the novices):

O living phrases from the Canticle!

in ‘And in Her Morning’:

All my soul’s acres shine and shine with her! You are discovered, God; awake, rise out of the dark of Your Divine surprise!
in ‘If You Have Nothing’:

If you have nothing, gather back your sigh,
and with your hands held high, your heart held high,
lift up your emptiness!

in ‘On Reading Saint Peter of Alcantara’:

How glorious, O soul, is this your journey!

in ‘The Book and the Cup’:

Oh, to be lost, destroyed, obliterated!
To have the self in me erased and done!

in ‘Wanderer’:

Oh, Someone came and found me;

in ‘Enclosure’:

Oh, here are space and distances indeed;

in ‘Track of the Mystic’:

I saw him on the higher road to heaven:
his veins ran gold; light was his food and breath.
Flaming he melted through the wall of death!

in ‘Millet’s “Feeding Her Birds”’:

or if there must be words, to speak none other
than: O my Mother God, my God and Mother;

in ‘The Sign of the Cross’:

This is the badge of the friends of the Man of Sorrows:
the mark of the Cross, faint replica of His,
become ubiquitous now; it spreads like a wild blossom on the mountains of time and in each of the crevices. Oh, seek that land where it grows in rich abundance;

in ‘Belmont Harbour’:

Ah, slowly the heart learns, and with what error and what regret!

in ‘Robin at Dusk’:

Oh, that a song of mine could burn the air with beauty so intense;

in ‘The Hermit Thrush’:

Yet, past all loss, heaven leans down to argue: ah, in love’s denser wood and far more fair sings the more hidden soul its purer music. Enter, it says, oh, go and listen there;

in ‘The Far Island’:

Have pity, saints of Erin; help my ship out to the blessed isle! And till I be anchored in God my postexilic Good, O Columbkill the exile, pray for me;

in ‘Celestial Bird’:

O sweet and luminous Bird;

in ‘The Spirit’s Name’:

O Dove, O Flame, O Water, Wind, and Cloud! O Deifier;

in ‘Come Is the Love Song’:
O Wisdom, Adonai, Root of Jesse
O Key, O Orient, King and Cornerstone,
O our Emmanuel;

In ‘Manuscript of Heaven’:

O great
immortal Poet;

in ‘Green Is the Season’:

O leaves of love, O chlorophyll of grace;

In ‘Draw Me : We Will Run’:

O God, my Hive;

and finally, in ‘Doxology’:

And lo, myself am the abode
of Love, the third of the Triune,
the primal surge and sweep of God
and my eternal claimant soon!
Praise to the Father and the Son
and to the Spirit!

This final poem above, rises to that spiritual ecstasy which has led many people to speak of metaphysical poetry as mystical in its ardent resolution:

... May I be,
O Water, Wave and Tide in One,
Thine animate doxology; ...

Powers can be seen here to be writing out of the same quality of spirituality as the ‘beautiful Benedictine Advent Lyrics of the Exeter Book (late eighth century) [which offer] a concise capturing of a theme of a deep desire for closure, for a turn to meaning, as in the seven Latin “O” antiphons for the final octave of Advent until the Christmas Eve vigil (all drawn from messianic passages in Isaiah to characterise the anticipated Christ): “O Sapientia”, “O Adonai”, “O Radix Jesse”, “O Clavis David”, “O
Oriens”, “O Rex Gentium”, “O Emmanuel” (Jeffrey and Maillet 2011: 150). Powers frequently demonstrates that the dominant effort in metaphysical poetry is towards a raising of musing and colloquy to exclamation or apostrophe.

A fifth point is that in Powers’ poetry ‘the achieved attitude – accepted and accepting – marks the final release from anxiety’, so that, though the poetry shows ‘mature acceptance of suffering, [and] never mere disillusioned resignation’, one of the effects of the poetry is that death ‘is robbed of its more extreme terrors and the recurring stress of [the] poetry is on life’ (Knights 1978: 247). This quality of achieved trust can be seen in Powers’ poem ‘Humility’:

Humility is to be still
under the weathers of God’s will.

It is to have no hurt surprise
when morning’s ruddy promise dies,

when wind and drought destroy, or sweet
spring rains apostasize in sleet,

or when the mind and month remark
a superfluity of dark.

It is to have no troubled care
for human weathers anywhere.

And yet it is to take the good
with the warm hands of gratitude.

Humility is to have place
deep in the secret of God’s face

where one can know, past all surmise,
that God’s great will alone is wise,

where one is loved, where one can trust
a strength not circumscribed by dust.

It is to have a place to hide
when all is hurricane outside.
This poem sets up dialectical opposites in a paradox that runs throughout the poem and that resolves itself finally in a serene assertion of resolution that is not undermined by the quiet, simultaneous recognition of the reality of its opposite. The first couplet initiates the series of contrasts in which stillness and all weathers vie with each other until the quiet but confident resolution tips the scales in favour of humility and of God. At first suffering seems to gain the upper hand: in the second couplet ‘morning’s ruddy promise’ ‘dies’; in the third, ‘sweet spring rain’ ‘apostasizes’ in ‘sleet’; in the fourth, there is a ‘superfluity of dark’. But by the fifth couplet equilibrium is established in the face of adversity: ‘no troubled care’ is felt ‘for human weathers anywhere’; and by the sixth, humble gratitude has found the heart to take warmly any good afforded it. In the seventh couplet, by means of the grace of humility, the subject of the poem has moved beyond the seeming vicissitudes of fate into the perfect acceptance of God’s will that sees that the vicissitudes are only seemingly random, that, in fact, all lies securely in His will. By the ninth couplet an eternal love, in which utter trust can repose, reigns supreme.

And finally, Powers re-acknowledges the unavoidable ‘hurricane[s]’ of life, but now the subject of the poem is no longer ‘under’ the fickle weathers, as she was in couplet one, but, by means of the virtue of humility, she has ‘no troubled care’; she is able to perceive the ‘good’; she has a place ‘deep in the secret of God’s face’; and she knows, ‘past all surmise’, that she is loved and securely hidden from all ‘hurricane outside’. In this metaphysical poem Powers has described ‘the quality of achieved trust that marks the final release from anxiety’ (Knights 1978: 247).

An effect of reading the religious metaphysical poets is that some of the instinctive human fear of death is assuaged. This is certainly true of Powers’ poetry, as can be seen for example in her poem ‘The Homecoming’:

The spirit, newly freed from earth,  
is all amazed at the surprise  
of her belonging: suddenly  
as native to eternity to see herself, to realize  
the heritage that lets her be
at home where all this glory lies.

And in her poem ‘The Great Mystery’:

I tried as a child to pierce the dark unknown,  
straining to reach the keyhole of that door,  
massive and grave, through which one slips alone.  
And here, as there before,  
when fact arrests me at that solemn door,  
I reach and find the keyhole still too high,  
though now I can surmise that it will be  
light (and not darkness) that will meet the eye.

And in her poem ‘The Mercy of God’:

And I fear God no more; I go forward to wander forever  
in a wilderness made of His infinite mercy alone.

This last example ‘robs death of its more extreme terrors’, but not, in my opinion, of its  
awesome unknowability and vast solemnity, though in the very instant of asserting these qualities it simultaneously consoles by means of the word ‘mercy’. The effort towards death in this poem is paradoxically positive in direction.

Muggeridge says that ‘death has often in the past been celebrated rather than abhorred; for instance, very exquisitely, by the Metaphysical Poets, among whom John Donne may be regarded as the very laureate of death’ (1988 : 145). Certainly Powers’ lines

I can surmise that it will be  
light (and not darkness) that will meet the eye.

convey hope and offer consolation. Powers’ word ‘light’ here refers to the same metaphysical religious perception that C. S. Lewis describes in prose in his depiction of the moment after death in his book *The Screwtape Letters*:

He had no faintest conception till that very hour of how they [the inhabitants of Heaven] would look, and even doubted their existence. But when he saw them he knew that he had always known them and realised what part each of them
had played at many an hour in his life when he had supposed himself alone, so that now he could say to them, one by one, not ‘Who are you?’ but ‘So it was you all the time’. All that they were and said at this meeting woke memories. The dim consciousness of friends about him which had haunted his solitudes from infancy was now at last explained; that central music in every pure experience which had always just evaded memory was now at last recovered. Recognition made him free of their company almost before the limbs of his corpse became quiet (1974: 158).

This is what Powers calls ‘the surprise of her belonging’, the glorious ‘homecoming’ that ‘lets her be at home where all this glory lies’. The juxtaposition of Powers’ lambent compact poetry with Lewis’ wonderfully atmospheric prose, while it acknowledges the strengths of both, serves here to highlight the evocative concision of metaphysical poetry.

The striving towards the loving acceptance of God’s will in the mystery of suffering ‘is positive in direction in metaphysical poetry. The recurring stress of [religious metaphysical] poetry is on life’ (Knights 1978: 247). This is true of Powers’ poetry in which the emphasis is on joyful acceptance and never on stoical resignation, and the often exuberant stress is very much on life, as even the layout of the words in her poem ‘Everything Rushes, Rushes’ shows:

Everything in creation rushes, rushes  
toward God –  
so I, with eager voice and news-flushed face,  
cry to those caught in comas, stupors, sleeping:  
come, everything is running  
          flying,  
          leaping,  
          hurtling through time!  
          And we are in this race.

This exuberant stress on life Powers describes with the almost mischievous sense of paradox characteristic of metaphysical poetry in the poem ‘Gaelic Music’: our ‘frolics’, she says, ‘certainly’ do not tend

          toward rule. Nor yet, indeed,  
          toward indecorum.
This is a decorous sense of ‘carnival’, joyousness veering away from ‘rule’, but at the same time, reverence restraining from indecorum.

The poem ‘Yes’ also deals with the apparent paradox intrinsic to the human apprehension of the will of God. Powers renders both the pain inescapably involved in death to self, and the bliss of compliance with the will of God, in visceral metaphors of physicality and sensuousness. A refusal to obey God, she says, contained in the word ‘no’, which is in fact a refusal to die to self, forces ‘a spiked leaden ball’ up through her ‘heart and lips’, ‘rending as it arises leaving its blood and pain’. Thus, as scripture warns, to attempt to preserve the self is in fact to lose it in bitter pain.\(^\text{112}\) To comply with God’s will, on the other hand, which is to respond to God with the word ‘yes’, Powers says,

\[
\text{is the soft} \\
\text{unfolding of petals delicate with surprises} \\
\text{curve and caress and billowing delight}
\]

This could be called a form of glossolalia, a spontaneous outpouring of beautiful words describing bliss. The rapturous upsurging of ‘beatitude’ she signifies by omitting punctuation in these lines. Her closing metaphor for heaven is an instance of the perfection of good metaphysical poetry:

\[
\text{heaven for me will be an infinite} \\
\text{flowering of one species a measureless sheer} \\
\text{beatitude of yes}
\]

It is direct; it is understated; it is unusual; it is complex; it is sensuous in the very instance of its intellectuality: the word ‘flowering’ extends the lovely connotations of the earlier words ‘soft unfolding of petals’, ‘delicate’, and ‘curve and caress and billowing delight’, but the species which is so delectably flowering is the concept ‘yes’, which is so vast that the words ‘infinite’, ‘measureless’ and ‘beatitude’ inhere in it, and so absolutely perfect it is ‘sheer’. The unstated point of the poem is that, if this is the radiant outcome of ‘yes’, then what utter tragedy resides in the lunatic, self-

\(^{\text{112}}\) Luke 9: 24: For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.
destructiveness of the wilful choice of ‘no’, so vividly exposed by implied antithesis. The metaphysical paradox lies neatly at the heart of the poem: ‘Yes’ to death, as in death to self, leads to self-fulfilling life, whereas ‘no’ to death to self leads to the ultimate death in terminal self-destruction.

It can be seen in these poems that ‘the achieved attitude – accepted and accepting – marks the final release from anxiety’, so that, though the poetry shows ‘mature acceptance of suffering, [and] never mere disillusioned resignation’, one of the effects of the poetry is that death ‘is robbed of its more extreme terrors and the recurring stress of [the] poetry is on life’ (Knights 1978: 247).

In the sixth place, this chapter examines the treatment of the beauty of holiness in Powers’ metaphysical poetry in which literary attention to creativity, beauty, and aesthetic experience find their analogies in religious ideas of the ‘creation of the world, the beauty of holiness and religious experience’ (Rubenstein 2007: 83). In the second half of the sixteenth century and in the seventeenth century, when the great metaphysical poets were writing, the ideas of ‘God as the Great Artificer and as Absolute Beauty were theological conceptions with inevitable aesthetic corollaries, and the work of art could be valued exactly because it reflected the divine pattern’ (Martz 1954: 67).

Powers shares these spiritual presuppositions. For her the religious life is beautiful because it is ‘heedful’ of what she calls ‘the beautiful Will of God’ (‘The Will of God’), and an irreligious life lacks beauty because it partakes of the ‘negation of sin’ (‘The Will of God’). By extension, then, a ‘perfect’ poem which emanates from

        the upper region of pure thought
        where Eden’s lost integrities unfold
‘On Reading a Perfect Poem’

transmits the ‘singing’ of God which sounds

        through all creation,
and can be said to be beautiful. Powers conforms to the religious thought of the
sixteenth and seventeenth centuries which maintains that everything that truly exists
will have the qualities of beauty and truth because everything that truly exists, except
for sin, is good, in the sense that it fulfils its proper nature, which is to do God’s will. As
Martz points out, any object or fact can therefore become ‘a first term for almost any
number of true metaphorical comparisons, since every existing thing derives from and
reflects God’ (1954: 162). Metaphysical metaphors are therefore ‘true’ comparisons, in
this sense, because they arise out of ‘the song of the beautiful will of God’ and they
strive to transmit ‘this pure music’ (‘The Will of God’). The metaphysical poets of the
sixteenth and seventeenth centuries believed that man fulfilled his proper nature only
through the glorification of God. Powers believes this also: ‘Time has one song alone’,
and ‘no one enters heaven till he learns to sing with God’ (‘The Will of God’).

It is important to note, however, that this theological definition of beauty describes the
beauty of holiness. It has nothing to do with mere physical beauty or superficial charm.
Powers’ aesthetic is the same as that of Hans Urs Von Balthasar’s when he says that
Christ crucified, ‘the Gospel’s humiliated fool’, is the greatest beauty of all (1984: 26).
Powers writes out of the paradox of the beauty of the Cross which Newman describes
thus:

Adorable [He is] in the glory of His court, adorable in the beauty of His works, [but]
most adorable, most royal, most persuasive in His deformity (1849: 321).

Powers is explicit about the true nature of beauty in her poem ‘Without Beauty’:

The spirit travels unmolested
once she has measured beauty’s worth
nor weeps to see herself divested
of every comeliness in earth.

The body may grow poor and charmless,
and age inscribe its added jest.
The mind may stand, a not too harmless
buffoon in its own blunders dressed.
The troublous heart that hurried after each silly windfall of no gain may starve and die. Lament and laughter now ply their crafty trades in vain. Unloveliness becomes her treasure whom God’s attraction pleases well. She is His contrast and His pleasure whose beauty captured her from hell. And though she walks in rags and tatters, her face is to a sunset turned. And what she has no longer matters before this light that she has learned.

For God within her stoops to sharing the splendor that is His alone which still were hid had she come bearing one spurious beauty of her own.

The metaphysical paradox, ‘Unloveliness becomes her treasure’, that is the subject of this meditation on the nature of beauty, lies in the last stanza: God, who is all beauty and all splendour, is ‘within her’. Yet, until she acquiesces in allowing herself to be ‘divested of every comeliness on earth’, she cannot accept His sharing of His beauty and His splendour with her. Once she accepts that ‘what she has no longer matters’, she becomes recipient and sharer of the absolute beauty that is already ‘within her’, but which she can only see in ‘this light that she has learned’. Powers’ metaphor for a human life lived in faith is resplendent:

though she walks in rags and tatters, her face is to a sunset turned. And what she has no longer matters before this light that she has learned.

As so often in metaphysical poetry the meaning is carried by paradox: in nature, sunset betokens nightfall. Here, when the sun sets on the end of life, there is ‘light’, just as when every last beauty is gone from her, then there is only beauty. This pure beauty, which shines out of her when at last she becomes transparent to God’s beauty shining from within her, is achieved humility: as St Francis says, ‘What a [person] is before God, that [she] is and no more’ (Cantalamessa 1997: 165), but it is everything. C. S. Lewis too writes of the blessed paradox of the divinely clear gaze which is intrinsic to God’s love.
for mankind so that to evade it is the ultimate tragedy: ‘[God’s] love and His knowledge are not distinct from one another, nor from Him. We could almost say He sees because He loves, and therefore loves although He sees’ (1980: 84).

Herbert strove ‘to be true to his sensibility, to wash his sweet phrases and lovely metaphors with his tears and bring them to church well drest and clad: My God must have my best, even all I had’113 (Auden 1978: 235). Powers too strove to use her gift to its utmost and to use it to one end only, which is to give God her ‘best’, ‘even all [she] had’:

    oh, that a song of mine could burn
    the air with beauty so intense,

and

    I shall make one song and be
    aware of but one Listener.
    ‘Robin at Dusk’

L. C. Knights makes a point about the nature of beauty which I think is entirely true of Powers’ work: ‘What the [poetry] enforces is that to be “loose as the wind” is to be as incoherent and purposeless; that freedom is to be found not in some undefined “abroad”, but, in Ben Jonson’s phrase, “here in my bosom, and at home”’ (Knights 1978: 247). Again and again Powers reiterates this theological point:

    Here is the sacred Guest.
    There is a tenant here.
    Come home, roamer of earth, to this room and find
    a timeless Heart under your own heart beating,
    a Bird of beauty singing under your mind.
    ‘The Kingdom of God’;

    God sits on a chair of darkness in my soul;
    I need not go abroad
    to the hills of speech or the hinterlands of music
    for a crier to walk in my soul where all is still.

113 ‘The Forerunners’
I have this potent prayer through good or ill:
here in the dark I clutch the garments of God.
‘The Garments of God’;

and

God is in your soul.
‘The Place of Splendor’.

Helmut Hatzfeld says of St John of the Cross that the writing is ‘a sort of glossolalia, an attempt to transform verbally the experience of love, especially love of God, into a stream of metaphorical designations bearing on intuitively chosen objects of beauty and bliss’ (1946: 114). This is true of Powers also, as can be seen in these examples:

O sweet and luminous Bird,
having once heard Your call, lovely and shy,
I shall be hungry for the finished word.
Across the windy sky

of all voiced longing and all music heard,
I spread my net for your bewildering wings.
‘Celestial Bird’;

and

Yet anyone who listens may become hermit or anchorite under that shower when the great chimes-tree shakes its leaves of love.
‘The Evening Chimes’.

Powers’ ideas were by no means original:

It is difficult to ascribe to any one [person] – or civilization – the origins of the analogical habit of mind and the belief that order, measure, proportion and harmony are both divine and beautiful. [Herbert] could have found most of these concepts in St Augustine, the only early Church father whose works he mentioned in his will. The most important factor for the Christians who followed was that Augustine’s ‘synthesis’ was built around the central conception of the Christian God. Rightly understood, both ethics and aesthetics were only reflections (and not necessarily differing reflections) of the divine, creating Beauty (MacDonald 1974: 72).
This is equally true of Powers, whose religious life as a Carmelite nun was based on the very concepts which informed Herbert’s. Her belief that ‘both ethics and aesthetics were only reflections of the divine’ can be seen in her poem ‘Only One Voice’:

Only one voice,  
but it was singing;

Only one voice,  
but morning lay awake in her bed and listened;

And everyone danced, and everyone, everything  
even the last roots of the doddering oak  
believed in life.

Not only does this poem see ‘both ethics and aesthetics’ as ‘reflections of the divine’, but it sees an ultimately glorious resolution to the great metaphysical mysteries inherent in life when ‘everyone’ and ‘everything’ will dance and believe, and will resplendently reflect the divine.

The following words of Augustine’s from his *Confessions* can be used to describe Powers’ writing of the beautiful in her poetry:

What innumerable toys, made by divers arts and manufactures in our apparel, shoes, utensils, and all sorts of works, in pictures also in divers images, and these far exceeding all necessary and moderate use and all pious meaning, have men added to tempt their own eyes withal; outwardly following what themselves make, inwardly forsaking Him by whom themselves were made! But I, my God and my Glory, do hence also sing a hymn to Thee, and do consecrate praise to Him who consecrateth me, because beautiful patterns which through men’s souls are conveyed into their cunning hands, come from that beauty, which is above our souls, which my soul day and night sigheth after (1957: bk. X, Chap. Xxiv, 53).

This is an apt description of a Powers’ metaphysical poem: ‘beautiful patterns’ which through her soul ‘are conveyed’ into her ‘cunning’ words, and which ‘come from that beauty, which is above our souls’, which her soul ‘day and night sigheth after’ (1957: bk. X, Chap. Xxiv, 53).
These qualities can be seen in her poem ‘At Sunset’:

Night after night these sunsets spread their thrill,  
confound me in my dreaming for an hour.  
I lift my mind in wonder to the power  
of color glorified by light until  
I know the miracle each western hill  
sees when the scattered clouds come into flower –  
petals of shining roses and a shower  
of flushed gold falls, and my wild heart is still.

Now for a time the soul is visible,  
luminous wings lift out on either side  
and I am faint who house this beautiful  
gold bird; my clouds of thought are glorified.  
Color and light possess me. I am one  
with stars and moonlight and the dying sun.

In this poem, the beauty of creation is conveyed in a sensuous depiction of sunset which engages the mind, the heart and the spirit simultaneously, as metaphysical poetry does. The mind is enlarged by the meditation on the quality and the effect of beauty which runs throughout the poem, so that the ‘clouds of thought are glorified’; the ‘wild heart’ is ‘stilled’ into healing self-forgetfulness in wonderment as the ‘shower of flushed gold falls’; and the spirit feels faint at the ecstatic realisation that it houses the ‘beautiful gold bird’, the soul. Certainly this poem both feels and evokes a pressure to transcendence and is thus metaphysical. It trails luminescent metaphysical intimations after it closes in a witty pun in the words ‘dying sun’, as Powers, by her faith, is indeed one with the ‘dying Son’, who rose again, as the ‘dying sun’ of the poem will rise again in the morning.

Seventeenth century faith held that ‘God could, moreover, grant the grace for man to perceive the essential relationships between the physical and emotional world around man and the metaphysical significance inherent in all of creation’ (Summers 1974: 163). In Powers’ poem ‘Night of Storm’ she acts as a conduit for the grace of God which may allow the reader to perceive these ‘essential relationships’: what we see as a ‘world of frost’ is revealed in the light of Christ to be ‘unending eucharists of light’.
According to a sixteenth and seventeenth century religious outlook, the ultimate method of reflecting God’s glory was ‘the creation of a work of decency and order, a work of beauty’. Thus poems, as works of beauty, and as acts of worship, ‘were to symbolise in their forms the beauty of the divine creation. As acts of edification they were to communicate to others the rational fitness of the symbolic forms, and to inflame them with the desire to follow the “beauty of holiness”’ (Summers 1974: 169).

Herbert’s belief was that

form was that principle by which the spiritual created existence out of chaos, and Herbert assumed that that process could be rationally apprehended. Since the principle was divine and therefore universal, the understanding of the formal organisation of any one object or state or action gave a clue to the understanding of the rest. The poet’s duty was to perceive and to communicate God’s form. [I maintain this is exactly what Powers does.] In the process he would construct out of the chaos of experience and the mass of language another object which would reflect his discovery: literary form as we understand it was but a reflection of that form which was everywhere present, although often hidden to eyes that could not ‘see’ it. It, too, in its material embodiment, appealed to man’s senses and moved his affections. The rational contemplation of it should lead to an understanding of its symbolic significance (1974: 178).

As Von Balthasar puts it, ‘the beautiful brings with it a self-evidence that enlightens without mediation’ (1984: 37). Newman describes what the religious metaphysical poet sees and what she alerts her readers to:

To those who live by faith, everything they see speaks of that future world: the very glories of nature, the sun, moon, and stars, and the richness and beauty of the earth, are as types and figures witnessing and teaching the invisible things of God (Dessain 1962: 117).

Powers strives to convey the beauty of the ‘holy life’ by reflecting God’s glory in her ‘work[s] of decency and order, work[s] of beauty’ (Summers 1974: 169), and her beautiful patterns take a delight in the senses, which delight finds expression in metaphor.
Her poem ‘The Gift of Love’ is a fine example of a metaphysical poem, the aim and effect of which is to reflect and communicate God’s form, which is His love: it combines striking metaphor, sensuousness, wit, and metaphysical meditation:

My thoughts of you are fair as precious stones 
out of the memory’s deep mysterious mines. 
I cut and polish, hold the gems to light – 
color of sea water, color of wines 
coaxed from the earth’s sweetest fruits. I drop them 
down 
into my heart, into the lifted hands 
of love whose lone concern is your renown.

The central metaphor of thoughts as precious stones mined out of the memory evokes the beauty and richness of colour associated with precious stones, but, in compounded loveliness, the sensuous beauty of the gems held to the light is here enriched with the ever changing beauty of the sea, and the intoxicating flavour of ‘earth’s sweetest fruits’: turquoise, azure, purple, velvety black, cool green, golden, ruby, and more, ‘color of ‘sea water, color of wines’. The gems, the sea, and the wines make a powerfully sensuous appeal to all five senses. Of course all these memories, so sumptuously evoked, speak of the ardour of the poet. The wit and the metaphysical meditation come in the last four lines of this short poem:

I drop them 
down 
into my heart, into the lifted hands 
of love whose lone concern is your renown.

As the poem opens the poet is cutting and polishing the gems and holding them to the light. Now, in line five, she drops them. The line ends with these three simple words, giving the reader a small, sly shock, which causes the dramatic, involuntary little intake of breath which happens when one drops something precious. This effect is intensified by the next line which consists of only the word ‘down’. But Powers moves swiftly to undo dismay with the words of the next line: ‘into my heart’. The little scare has served to highlight the dropping into the poet’s heart of the memories, and the reader is now relieved that all is well, and is unsuspecting that a major metaphysical twist and
theological insight are poised to unfold in the last line and a half: the gems have dropped

into the lifted hands
of love whose lone concern is your renown.

The theological claims made by this line and a half are many and reveal themselves to be staggering when they are closely considered. Firstly, that God, ‘love’, is literally in our hearts. Secondly, that He waits there to catch our thoughts. We know that He is almighty and omniscient and omnipresent, yet the claim here is that He literally waits humbly for us to drop our thoughts down to Him. Thirdly, He waits with ‘lifted hands’. He is not passively present in our hearts, or inattentively present, He is longingly there, hands raised in hope, ready to receive our thoughts. Fourthly, the poet’s beloved, about whom the thoughts are cherished, is also the beloved of God, so much so that the renown of the beloved is God’s ‘lone concern’. It is not one of many concerns, or one of equal concerns, it is His ‘lone concern’. This is in fact a meditation on the nature and the love of God. At a metaphysical level the poem endorses the sense of wellbeing that the reader experiences when it transpires that the gems have not fallen to scatter and perhaps be lost. Indeed, all is well, as Julian of Norwich says, ‘all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well’ (Julian of Norwich 2001: 89), if our individual renown is, literally as well as metaphorically, in the hands of love.

R. S. Thomas contends that the religion in metaphysical poetry ‘aimed to restore and preserve all that was sound and right, and to celebrate it in balanced and beautiful [writing]’, but he warns us not to think that ‘in consecrating himself to God, [the metaphysical poet] put entirely on one side the delights of the senses’ (1967: 10). We see this dual quality of metaphysical complexity and sensuous beauty in Powers’ poem ‘The Valley of the Cat-Tails’, which demonstrates her rich sensuality, though in this poem her tone is darkly ‘amethyst’, as it carries ‘the tinge of grief’. Her metaphor for her valley is ‘a woman unconsol’d’, her ‘tamarack swamps are sad’, her ‘dark pines’ and her ‘sacred birds’, ‘the ‘whip-poor-wills’, are dolorous. The ‘reeds that lift from every marsh and pond’ speak only of her ‘spirit’s poverty’, where no ‘waters dance or
flowers be’. The final stanza shows the glorious earth, ‘the carolling earth,’ draped in the ‘dark fears’ of the ‘woman unconsold’, a ‘mother’ who ‘teaches her young the alphabet of tears’. Powers’ poem conveys the languorous beauty of the sombre valley and leaves its metaphysical import unstated: ‘dark fears’, which preclude all awareness of God’s ‘caroling’ presence in His earth, leave one ‘unconsoled’, and entirely vulnerable to the ‘amethyst’ ‘tinge of grief’.

This examination of the treatment of the beauty of holiness in some of Powers’ metaphysical poetry has demonstrated that in metaphysical religious poetry literary attention to creativity, beauty, and aesthetic experience find their analogies in religious ideas of the ‘creation of the world, the beauty of holiness and religious experience’ (Rubenstein 2007: 83).

In seventh place is the point that love is the dominant theme of Powers’ work. Thomas says of Herbert that ‘He sings of sin and humility, and of the soul’s argument with God … [but his] main theme is love, Christian love; the love that is in God, and the charity that attends a true Christian. His love for God, despite its purity, was a creaturely love, and more than tinged with emotion’ (Thomas 1967: 13). These words are equally true of Powers. Her love sometimes wells up in irrepressible expressions of adoration:

O Wisdom, Adonai, Root of Jesse
and sign by which the mouths of kings are dumb,
O Key, O Orient, King and Cornerstone,
O our Emmanuel, come.
‘Come Is the Love Song’;

and

How did I ever come then to the light?
How did I ever, blind with self, discover
the small strict pathway to this shining place?
I who betrayed the truth over and over,
and let a tangle of dark woods surround me?
Simple the answer lies: down cliffs of pain,
through swamps and desert, thicket and terrain,
oh, Someone came and found me.
Powers’ poetry, in the opinion of this thesis, is metaphysical because it arises in and celebrates, in the words of Thomas, ‘a fruitful relationship between Christianity and poetry. The bridge between the two is the Incarnation. If poetry is concerned with the concrete and the particular, then Christianity aims at their redemption and consecration’ (Thomas 1967: 15). Thus Powers writes about little birds, a little child, white small houses, a tree in the snow, a ruined house: ‘concrete and particular’ things by means of which she perceives and conveys God. She inhabits a spiritual space described by Newman, who says that despite the sight of the world ‘full of lamentations, mourning and woe’ (1976: 162), nevertheless,

all that we see is destined one day to burst forth into a heavenly bloom and to be transfigured into immortal glory. Heaven at present is out of sight, but in due time, as snow melts and discovers what it lay upon, so will this visible creation fade away before those greater splendours which are behind it, and on which at presents it depends (Dessain 1962: 117).

I am in agreement with T. S. Eliot when he says that

when I claim a place for Herbert among those poets whose work every lover of English poetry should read and every student of English poetry should study, irrespective of religious belief or unbelief, I am not thinking primarily of the exquisite craftsmanship, the extraordinary metrical virtuosity, or the verbal felicities, but of the content of the poems. These poems form a record of spiritual struggle which should touch the feeling, and enlarge the understanding (Eliot 1962: 36).

These words are absolutely applicable to Powers’ work. Her poem ‘The Flower of Love’ should ‘touch the feeling, and enlarge the understanding’ of the attentive reader. And just as Eliot’s comments on Herbert perfectly fit Powers, so do Summers’, who writes about a poem of Herbert’s, that it is ‘intended as expression of love for God as well as neighbour. It offers fruits and flowers of the Christian life, wreaths of worship for God’s altar and the harvest of fruits of edification for others. As [an] act of worship [it] symbolises in [its] form the beauty of the divine creation. As an [act] of edification [it] communicate[s] to others the rational fitness of the symbolic form, and inflame[s]
them with the desire to follow the “beauty of holiness”. The poem is a picture of meticulously observed spiritual experience’ (Summers 1954: 172). These words of Eliot’s and Summers’, written of Herbert, I maintain are exactly descriptive of this poem of Powers’:

“Where there is no love, put love and you will find love”
St John of the Cross

Whoever first plants the seed in any soil
hitherto fallow,
and cultivates the shoot with humble toil
near steep or shallow –

They will be first to come upon the flower
whose instant glory
can recreate, even in this trivial hour,
the Eden story.

Blessed are they who stand upon their vow
and are insistent
that love in this bleak here, this barren now
become existent.
Blessed are they who battle jest and scorn
to keep love growing
from embryo immaculately born
to blossom showing.

Primarily for them will petals part
to draw and win them.
It, when the pollen finds their opened hearts,
will bloom within them.

In this poem Powers perceives and communicates God’s form. The poem both appeals to the senses and moves the affections. It is a meditation on the words of St John. The first stanza has a deceptive, concrete simplicity: it depicts the homely planting of a seed, not in a beautiful, specially selected garden, but in ‘any soil’. The second two-word line, ‘hitherto fallow’, despite its simplicity, is immediately theologically and intellectually tough, as is typical of metaphysical religious poetry. ‘Fallow’ soil is prepared but unplanted. Powers believes that human beings are all fallow, in that they have all been prepared for glory by the salvific death of the Redeemer, but no farmer
has as yet ‘put love’ into this fallow soil. There is nothing elitist or inaccessible about this promise of blooming, as no soil is intrinsically unsuitable: ‘near steep or shallow’. The simple image depicting ‘humble toil’ actually embodies theological depth: the transformative power of love does not depend on any quality in the recipient of itself, it itself imparts the redemptive transformation.

Nevertheless, the command of Jesus to take up the Cross daily is implicit in the words ‘cultivates’ and ‘toil’. A wealth of theology lies in the simple image, and the glorious outcome of faithful love is depicted with purity and simplicity: constancy in loving, despite bleakness, barrenness, jest and scorn, results not only in beautiful blossom, but in the blooming of Christ Himself in the person, as only Christ is ‘immaculately born’. This theological insight, which implies the words of St Paul that ‘Now I live, not I but Christ lives in me’,114 is quintessentially metaphysical.

The second stanza is metaphysical in the panoramic sweep of the scenario underlying the apparent simplicity of the four quiet lines: any little, common flower, blooming out of love, conveys ‘instant glory’, and the rich grandeur of the connotations of the word ‘glory’ suffuse the word ‘trivial’, in the next line, with the wonders of ‘Eden’ itself.

The final stanza concludes the meditation with metaphysical wit and paradox. The spiritual movement of the poem goes back and forth in an intellectually and theologically tough way: God initiates the movement by making the soil fallow; the loving believer responds to the initiative by planting an embryo of love; the flower blooms; and then the planter is himself drawn into the blossom and fertilised by the pollen of the bloom, if his own heart is open, as a fallow field would be. The lesson of the meditation is the dawning understanding that it is the Lord who initiates love, elicits love, and rewards with love. He blooms within those who respond to His love. In an echo of the beatitudes,115 the poem claims that those who love in this way are indeed ‘the blessed’.

114 Galatians 2:20.
115 Matthew 5, 3 – 10.
Thomas says of Herbert’s work that it demonstrates his ‘soul’s good form in work that has, at times, the simplicity and gravity of great poetry. It is a proof of the eternal beauty of holiness’ (1967: 17) These words can be seen to be applicable to Powers’ work, in, for example, her poem ‘Come is the Love song’. This poem bears all the hallmarks of metaphysical poetry and it might be said to carry the message of Powers’ life and work in its perception and evocation of God’s form which expresses His love:

Come is the love song of our race and come our basic word of individual wooing.
It lifts audacious arms of lowliness to majesty’s most amiable undoing, to Godhood flesched and cradled and made least.
It whispers through closed doors a hurry, hurry to Tierce and fiery feast.
The liturgy of Advent plucks its bud from the green shrub of love’s compendium:
O wisdom, Adonai, Root of Jesse and sign by which the mouths of kings are dumb,
O Key, O Orient, King and Cornerstone,
O our Emmanuel, come.
And Paschaltide prepares an upper room where burns the fuller bloom.
Come is the small sweet-smelling crib we carve from fir and bear across December frost.
It is the shaft of the flame-hungry Church in Paschal spring, or the heart’s javelin tossed privately at the clouds to pierce them through and drown one in a flood of some amazing personal Pentecost.

The opening is direct, even conversational, as is typical of metaphysical poetry:

Come is the love song of our race and come our basic word of individual wooing.

At the same time as being simple and direct, these two lines are intellectually rigorous, and initiate simultaneously a generalised theological reflection and a deeply personal spiritual reflection on the nature of God’s love. God’s love, which calls ceaselessly to us, Powers calls His ‘love song’. Man is the being to whom God cries, ‘Come you who are blessed by my Father, take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the
creation of the world’. It was for this the world was made, ‘that there should be beings capable of receiving God, entering into closest fellowship with Him, sharing all God is and has. The call to come to Him is not an afterthought as though God first made man and then decided to call him to intimacy with Himself. This divine call is what constitutes man’ (Burrows 1989: 10).

This meditation on God’s love, ‘the divine call that constitutes man’ (Burrows 1989: 10), runs throughout the poem and achieves resolution in the final lines of the poem. This too is typical of metaphysical poetry. ‘[T]he love song of our race’ is an entirely metaphysical metaphor. The whole of salvation history is encapsulated in a gentle metaphor: ‘the love song’. The connotations of ‘love song’ make limitless theological claims: a lover sings a love song. Therefore all the omnipotent, omniscient and omnipresent attributes of a glorious God are subsumed in the wistful tenderness of a lyrical outpouring of longing and sweetness which are the hallmarks of a love song. The object of a love song is the beloved, who is infinitely precious to the lover, and to whom the lyrical outpouring of love is directed. The human race is this beloved, not only as a race, but also as every individual member that constitutes it.

This love song is ‘our basic word’. ‘Basic’ means intrinsic, foundational, essential, and the adjective is used here of ‘individual wooing’. The word ‘wooing’ also carries the enchanting, alluring, longing connotations of ‘love song’. The astonishing theological proposition here is an example of ‘achieved simplicity’. It is so quietly put that it is only on reflection that the staggering nature of the claim becomes apparent: every human individual is the personal subject of the wooing of Almighty God! An exclamation mark is irresistible but it is the newly astonished mind and heart of this reader who involuntarily makes the exclamation. The poem merely makes a limpid statement consisting of two gentle metaphors, ‘love song’ and ‘individual wooing’.

The intellectual complexity typical of metaphysical poetry lies in the next two lines:

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116 Matthew 25: 34.
It lifts audacious arms of lowliness
to majesty’s most amiable undoing.

There is a circular paradox here: the ‘love song’ comes from God – the love song is indeed the Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, given for the salvation of the human race – but having been given, the ‘love song’ then lifts ‘audacious arms of lowliness’ to work on creation’s behalf the ‘most amiable undoing’ of ‘majesty’. All the lyrical paradox of the beatitudes lies in the words ‘audacious arms of lowliness’: the surprising inheritance of the meek is the earth. Here Powers makes a similarly surprising claim for ‘lowliness’: it can make ‘audacious’ claim on ‘majesty’ because mankind, along with Christ, can presume upon the extreme amiability of ‘majesty’, because He is, Powers says, ‘most amiable’.

The majesty of God, which is compounded of His almighty attributes, which are rightly to be feared, are tenderly, most amiably undone, because He is mankind’s devoted, infinitely tender lover. The word ‘undone’ also carries connotations of the gentle persuasion and sweet surrender that inhabit the ambience of the love song. There is delightful metaphysical paradox here: God is mankind’s lover, He is the initiator of love, yet He is the one who is undone by the very love which He enables. The staggering generosity of God is revealed here: all the beneficence is from His side, yet, with infinite courtesy, He makes it seem as though people, by their puny response, cause His undoing.

The mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation lie in the next line: ‘to Godhood fleshed and cradled and made least’. The lowly arms lifted up to God the Father on mankind’s behalf are the arms of God the Son, ‘made least’ for love’s sake. And God the Holy Spirit whispers through the ‘closed doors’ of human timidity the promise of a ‘fiery feast’ in the tongues of flame of Pentecost. The poem moves on through the great religious festivals of the church, Advent, Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, in the evocatively concrete metaphors characteristic of metaphysical poetry: Advent a ‘bud’ ‘plucked’ from ‘the green shrub of love’s compendium’, Christmas a ‘small sweet-smelling crib’, Easter a prepared ‘upper room’, and Pentecost a ‘fiery feast’, to end in
the same astonishingly personal way as it opens, with each individual hurling ‘the heart’s javelin’ at God in the clouds – with dramatic seeming-presumption – to become the ‘amazing personal’ recipient of a ‘flood’ of the Holy Spirit.

The primary imperative to imitate Christ, which is the foundational metaphysical thrust of Powers’ entire oeuvre, she defines in her poem ‘Sign at Sexagesima’ as

- a call
- to pattern and fulfilment in the new.

Her lovely word ‘pattern’ is the antithesis of the disorder and disharmony that make the world so distressing, the ‘heart-piercing, reason-bewildering’ fact (Newman 1976: 162) that we inhabit what St Bernard calls a ‘regio dissimilitudinis’ (Gilson 1990: 45), as described by Newman when, to his ‘unspeakable distress’, he looked out into this ‘living busy world, and [saw] no reflection of its Creator’ (Newman 1976: 162). Powers describes the effect of this appalling sight in her poem ‘Human Winter’;

- So chilled am I by this presence of human winter
- I cannot speak or move.

Despite the fact that we inhabit this ‘regio dissimilitudinis’ (Gilson 1990: 45), in the terminally chilling midst of a ‘human winter’, Powers’ locates God and His ambience, which is heaven, firmly within each person in her poem ‘Heaven’. Again the poet undermines the tools of her own trade with gentle humour even as she uses them:

- The gates of heaven are an allegory
- and only symbol shapes its guarded door.

Allegory and symbol are usually the wherewithal to attempt to say the unsayable, but Powers anchors the unsayable in a metaphysical metaphor that is as concrete as it is radiant: to die is to

- plunge headlong into glory.
With masterly economy and understatement that nonetheless convey volumes, she uses a metaphor to describe the vast reaches of theology:

a rumor of a light.

Stanza two again presents a metaphor for the nature and radiance of God that is striking in its originality, its evocativeness and its loveliness: God has ‘reservoirs of morning’, and all the liturgy of the church throughout the ages, which as Jeffrey and Maillet say, ‘typically expresses a deep desire for closure, for a turn to meaning that might transform the chaos of fallen experience into a new day of grace and peace’ (2011: 150), she captures in three simple words: ‘we distantly extol’. As a Carmelite nun she is fully aware of the wealth of poetry and age-old beauty in the liturgies of the Church, yet her phrase conveys with lucid economy the minuteness of the Church’s response to the vastness of the ‘reservoirs of morning’. The hopes of man for the consolations of heaven, so dimly envisioned, though so devoutly pondered upon by the faithful down the ages, she conveys in two words:

ungenessed joy.

This suggestive economy of expression, these limpid yet inexhaustible metaphors are a metaphysical characteristic of her poetry.

And lastly, the position of this study is that Powers is a metaphysical poet in that she knows, and she reminds her reader, “that we are men and we know not how; there is something in us that can be without us, [and we] cannot tell how it entered into us” (Steiner 1989: 226). She translates this insight ‘into living and lived form. [Hers is] the metaphysical assumption, where the metaphysical also extends to the religious. The aesthetic [in her work] is the making formal of epiphany. There is a “shining through”’ (1989: 226).

This ‘shining through’, which is the dominant effect of her metaphysical poetry, is evident in her poem ‘O Full of Lilies’:
Easter to me my little sister is,  
and I affirm her April’s eminence.  
No beauty of atoning penances  
prevails on light as does her innocence.

Our abstract night is into day transmuted  
when she makes entrance into any room.  
A call goes out to sunrise, April fluted.  
Wakened in dew, the Easter lilies bloom.

Wide rumor says she must dine on light  
to show such health of it in her clear face.  
The concept of the flowers is also right  
with gleam implicit in the scent of grace.

O full of lilies in the time of lovers!  
My little sister whom night did not mar  
wins Easter first; its lustre, one discovers,  
favors the gardens where the lilies are.

This poem is ‘the making formal of epiphany’, it is a beautiful announcement of God.  
Powers describes her own poem in her word ‘lustre’. She simultaneously describes and  
evokes the lustrous qualities and ambience of the Resurrection in her depiction of the  
Easter lilies. She draws the qualities of innocence, symbolised in the lily, into her poem  
in each successive line in an escalating litany of radiance. ‘April’ in stanza one carries  
the sweetness of Spring. Darkness is transformed into day, dawn is summoned, and the  
blessed dew falls in stanza two. In stanza three her metaphor for the beauty of the  
purity of innocence, and its symbol in this poem, the lily, is a definitive instance of  
metaphysical poetry:

Wide rumor says that she must dine on light  
to show such health of it in her clear face.

The metaphor is intimate and vividly physical: it is an image of eating and of a glowing  
face. But the food eaten is light itself, and the radiance on the face ‘of the one who  
dines on light’ is the radiance of Tabor Light, the radiance of God. Powers alludes  
obliquely to the luminescent theological insight that is the resolution of this meditation  
on the Resurrection in her final line: the lustre of Easter
favors the gardens where the lilies are.

The lilies are the signs for innocence in this metaphysical poem. They are fed by the dew of Easter morning. They dine on light. Their gleam and their scent are effects of grace. Because they are innocent the lustre of Easter lies on them, and by implication, may lie on us too, if we espouse the innocence that is the result of dining ‘on light’. The ‘night’ of the Crucifixion did not ‘mar’ the Easter lily because it rose with Christ in the dew and sunrise of Easter morning. The radiant, though unspoken, metaphysical affirmation that is an instance of “shining through” (Steiner 1989: 226) here, and in all of Powers’ poetry, is that, should they so choose, all people too may rise with Christ, and thus ‘bloom’ in the ‘gardens where the lilies are’.

These poems have shown that love is the dominant theme of Powers’ work and that Thomas’s words about Herbert, that ‘He sings of sin and humility, and of the soul’s argument with God … [but his] main theme is love, Christian love’ (1967: 13) are equally true of Powers.

This chapter has closed the examination of the metaphysical qualities of Powers’ poetry in a consideration of eight final aspects of metaphysical poetry as evident in her work.

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117 Romans 6: 8: Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.
CONCLUSION

Mind what you say in art.
‘To a Young Wood-Carver’

This chapter comprises a brief look at the closing lines of some of Powers’ poems and a reading of her poem ‘To a Young Wood-Carver’, which serves as a description of her own work and concisely illustrates her metaphysical qualities. It also resolves the undertaking made in the introduction to this study to establish whether words from Herbert’s metaphysical poem, ‘Prayer’ may be said to be descriptive of Powers’ poetry.

As a conclusion to this study it seems fitting to look briefly at some of Powers’ conclusions, which are the ‘last clause[s] [which serve as] the impressions of the stamp [on the lumps of gold that are the poems], and that make [the poems] currant’ (Gardner 1967: 22). They resolve her metaphysical meditations with evocative elegance, and they restate the ‘pressure to transcendence’ (Miner 1974: 201), which is the substance and the effect of metaphysical poetry, even as they formally close the poems, so that metaphysical reverberations may echo on in the mind, heart and soul of her reader:

I go forward to wander forever
in a wilderness made of His infinite mercy alone.
‘The Mercy of God’;

The flame burned on, innocent, unimperiled.
There was no darkness that could put it out.
‘The Vision’;

A bird that wings itself with resolute love
can travel anywhere.
‘The Legend of the Sparrow’;

I saw the radiant face of Christ the Lover,
and it was wet with tears.
‘The Mountains of the Lord’;

The city I love where the streets are washed with light
and the windows burn.
‘Morning of Fog’;
He never is night.  
‘God is Today’;

God is my repairer of fences, turning my paths into rest.  
‘Repairer of Fences’;

Who seared the earth that I might hear in silence  
this infinite outcry of His solitude.  
‘Not Garden Any More’;

A Bird of beauty singing under your mind.  
‘The Kingdom of God’;

Here in the dark I clutch the garments of God.  
‘The Garments of God’;

Still do the multititudinous blossoms fall.  
‘The First Pentecost’;

filling the hollows with heaven.  
‘This Is a Beautiful Time’;

you, on a mount of morning,  
will be aware of Him.  
‘O Spirita Sancta’;

Come but to kiss and cradle tenderly  
is Love Who seeks to mother.  
‘Ruah-Elohim’;

O Deifier.  
‘The Spirit’s Name’;

and hence I see  
in each soul that may brush against my soul  
God Who looks out at me.  
‘I Hold My Heart As A Gourd’;

And eager with delight gave to this lover  
the joy of endless dialogue with Him.  
‘About Bruno’;

someone is hidden in this dark with me.  
‘Advent’;

God speaks to me. Earth has no more to say.  
‘The Song of Distance’;
it will be
light (and not darkness) that will meet the eye.
‘The Great Mystery’;

You slay me, death, but then I rise to live
and you yourself are slain.
‘The Monk at Quadragesima’;

who, when the call is heard,
is free to take his kindled heart and go.
‘The House at Rest’;

oh, Someone came and found me.
‘Wanderer’;

and

Choose it, my heart.
It is a beautiful sign.
‘The Sign of the Cross’.

These examples of Powers’ closing lines demonstrate the evocative elegance with which, as she ends her poems, she reiterates the ‘pressure to transcendence’ (Miner 1974: 201) which is the effect of her metaphysical poetry.

Powers’ poem, ‘To a Young Wood-Carver’, can be said to describe her own work and has therefore been chosen as a final example of the metaphysical aspect of her work:

Through the mind’s motherhood
you hope to bring
out of this fragrant wood
a new warm thing.

A shepherd, child or elf,
here deftly sought,
will speak your hidden self,
disclose your thought.

Shaping your secret bent,
what you create
becomes your document
or duplicate.

Mind what you say in art.
Here sounds the cry
of that deep privy heart
God judges by.

Nor could the body’s child
so well express
how far you were beguiled
toward holiness.

In my opinion Powers’ words in this gentle poem describe her own work: out of the ‘fragrant wood’ of her faith and her language she ‘speak[s] [her] hidden self’, and ‘disclose[s] [her] thought’ so that her metaphysical poetry is the ‘document or duplicate’ which conveys her ‘deep privy heart’, and shows her attentive reader ‘how far [she was] beguiled toward holiness’. The metaphysical effect of the ‘pressure to transcendence’ (Miner 1974: 201) which her poetry exerts may ‘beguile’ her reader ‘toward holiness’ too.

Wilcox notes that ‘the metaphysical religious poet seeks out “quaint words” in order to speak of “heav’nly joys” and [that] it is precisely such “words” that have always “busied the whole church”’ (Wilcox 2007: 398). In my opinion these words describe the metaphysical poetry of Jessica Powers, which can be seen to use ‘quaint words’, as in striking metaphors, to speak of ‘heav’nly joys’.

Thomas’ words about Herbert may aptly be applied to Powers’ metaphysical poetry:

He commends a way of life for the individual that is still viable. It is reason, not so much tinged with, as warmed by emotion, and solidly based on order and discipline, the soul’s good form. This way of life he celebrates in verse that is sometimes quaint, sometimes over-ingenious, but never trite. It escapes prettiness, and has rather, at times, the simplicity and gravity of great poetry. It is a proof of the eternal beauty of holiness (Thomas 1972: 17).

This study has examined the poetry of Jessica Powers, which has not been read comprehensively in its metaphysical aspect hitherto, and which has been essentially neglected by scholars for eighteen years. In my opinion, Powers is a metaphysical poet of the finest calibre who merits the attention of scholars and readers, not only for the spiritual guidance and consolation which some readers may find in her work, but which
possible effects of the poems are not the subject of this study, but as a metaphysical poet of commanding skill and stature.

This thesis set out to show that Powers’ poetry exhibits many of the main characteristics of metaphysical poetry, as it is described in this thesis, in a way that is essentially akin to Herbert’s metaphysical poem, ‘Prayer’, analysed in the Introduction to the thesis. In the view of this thesis, Powers’ metaphysical poetry can justly be described by words from Herbert’s poem: her work is indeed, in my opinion, ‘a kinde of tune’, ‘expressions of ‘softnesse, and peace, and joy, and love, and blisse’, poems from ‘the land of spices’, and, supremely, poems in which some of the ineffable things of God can be ‘understood’.

It is appropriate that a line from Powers’ poem ‘Come Is the Love Song’, should end this study of the metaphysical aspect of her work with a metaphysical metaphor which could be said to both describe and embody her work:

Come is the love song of our race.
REFERENCES


Book of Wisdom. One of the Sapiential Books of the Septuagint Old Testament which includes also Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon and Sirach.


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