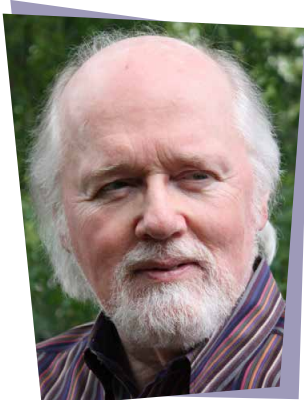


**O**ne casualty of the pandemic is the loss of “presence”. I am thinking about those times when we embrace a loved-one, sit at a table, share a meal and have meaningful conversation, gathering with others to experience the joy of music or the narrative of drama. Sure we have Zoom, but virtual connection for all its benefits does not deliver what an in-person encounter is able to do. While this theme is important I want to comment on the issue of presence in a quite different context.

*Real Presences* was published in 1989 and I have returned to my copy many times since then. George Steiner the author – is an insightful writer but not an easy read. His wealth of knowledge provides the reader with distilled wisdom on matters fundamental to human life. In this small but widely influential book Steiner probes the meaning of language and of art – concluding that both offer us grounds for embracing belief in the transcendent. Talk of God in our contemporary world, he suggests, “is a phantom of grammar” where there appears to be nothing to underwrite His presence. The divine has not disappeared from our discourse but remains as a relic from the past. Today we are more likely to affirm divine absence than divine presence.



Steiner wishes to contend for the reverse arguing that the very “capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling, is in the final analysis underwritten by the assumption of God’s

presence”. He goes on to say “... the experience of aesthetic meaning in particular, that of literature, of the arts, of musical



3rd Century fresco Catacomb of Priscilla – Rome

form, infers the necessary possibility of this ‘real presence’. The seeming paradox of a ‘necessary possibility’ is very precisely, that which the poem, the painting, the musical composition are at liberty to explore and enact.” (pf.3-4). What is being said here is that the possibility of a transcendent reality is inherent in the structure or form of language and art. Language and art bear the imprint of the divine in how they work. God’s presence may be discerned in subtle and indirect ways. This way of thinking may be unsatisfying to those of us who prefer things to be direct and obvious. The divine reality like so much else in our world can be discovered unexpectedly. Though we have revelation – traces of the divine – can be found in common human experience – not least in language and art.

In the world of the arts one of the ways presence diminishes is that writings about art can move us away from the work itself. Steiner is impatient with the layers of critique that can accompany a piece of music or a visual artist’s work. The critic speaks, other critics respond and others respond to

them and the cycle continues while we drift further and further away from the work – which gets lost in the process. This is not an effort by Steiner to eliminate critique or commentary but only to note how it may impact presence. He borrows from Ben Jonson (d. 1637) the term ‘ingestion’ believing this is a good metaphor for how we may receive the arts. (p.9) Our experience of art is most valuable when we internalize what we see or hear. Treating it less like an object and more like an encounter. Today art can remain external – “the distinction is that between ‘consumption’ and ‘ingestion’”. Good poetry, music, visual art, or drama reward the time it takes to “ingest” what the work carries for us. Something all too rare in a culture of instant gratification.

The biblical narrative advocates for presence. Not least in the story of Advent and Christmas – Emmanuel – God with us. But throughout the biblical story the darkness of divine absence and the light of divine presence are at play. One of the ways darkness intrudes is through human forgetfulness and our occupation with

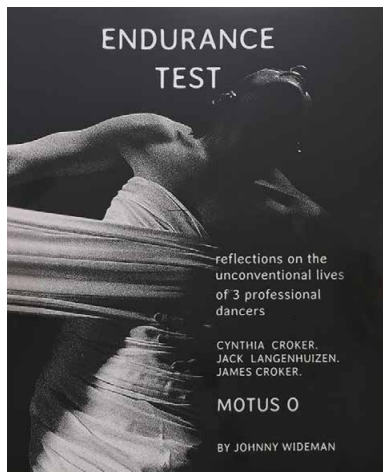
## The loss of “presence”

*continued from page 1*

the merely temporal. Our capacity to see becomes limited and we lose any sense of what the poet G.M. Hopkins meant when he wrote “The world is charged with the grandeur of God.” This perspective requires a sacramental view of the world – the belief that the divine can be discerned in the ordinary. Robert Johnston has argued in his book *God’s Wider Presence* – that if God can be seen in nature perhaps it is also true to say the God can be encountered in culture – in things made with human hands – and for Johnston – film is an important site for such an encounter. In *Image and Presence*, Natalie Carnes contends that images are more than lifeless objects. In recent writing on visual art there has been a tendency to reach into the storehouse of theological language – to describe images as more than lifeless objects. Theology has a rich tradition speaking of presence – specifically the presence of Christ in the world. Nowhere is this language more direct than in reference to the incarnation. “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory....”. The Word that became flesh is referred to as the “express image of God” (Hebrews 1:4). Advent is a season in which we are called to acknowledge afresh the divine breaking into history – purposed for the redemption of the world. On the fragile presence of an infant rests the hope of humanity. Perhaps at a times like ours when the world has been stripped of divine presence – and the merely material holds priority, we might also remember or is it rediscover that “the world is charged with the grandeur of God.” To do so requires double vision – the ability to see what appears and what is beyond appearances. The arts are a path toward and portal into real presence.

John .

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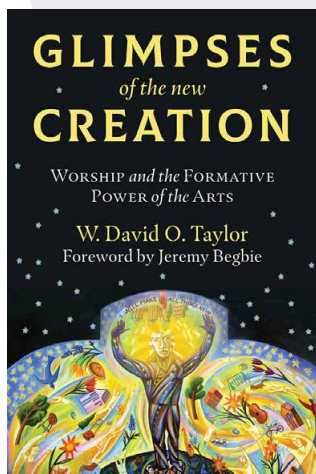


interviews of the three principles offering a behind the scenes look at the workings of Motus O and more particularly glimpses into the lives of these visionary and courageous artists. On a number of occasions we have had Motus O perform at IMAGO events never failing to capture a wide range of emotions and the unanimous approval of the audience. What has kept them going is the experience and promise of “transformation”. A belief that creative artistry – dance – can actually make a difference. Congratulations Jack, Cynthia and James.

## MOTUS O – 30 years.

The dance theatre group Motus O was an early project under IMAGO. They soon acquired their own charitable status and launched a journey now 30 years long. Jack Langenhuizen, Cynthia Croker, and James Croker have anchored this extraordinary initiative doing over fifteen productions and scores of workshops. In September I was pleased to attend their 30th anniversary celebration and to discover there is more to be done by this imaginative trio.

Johnny Wideman an actor, playwright and a friend of Motus O put together a book titled *Endurance Test – Reflections on the Unconventional Lives of 3 Professional Dancers*. The book consists of extended

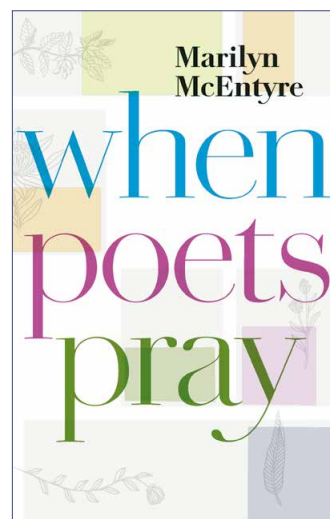


the physical, emotional and imaginative features of our creaturehood. Music, visual art and architecture, poetry, narrative, theatre and kinetic arts each have a chapter that focuses on their place in the overall liturgy and life of the church. At the heart of this work is the conviction that art woven into the fabric of worship can have a formative influence on the worshippers. It is suggestive rather than directive in its observations and wise in its discerning of cultural and theological diversity in the church. This is a valuable resource both for those in the pew and those in leadership. If our faith communities would embrace the idea that art may provide “glimpses of the new creation” our personal and corporate lives would be enriched and potentially transformed.

## Book Notes

W. David O. Taylor, *Glimpses of the new Creation: Worship and the Formative Power of the Arts*, Eerdmans 2019 (288 pp)

David Taylor has become an important voice in the world of art and faith. His most recent book is a valuable contribution to the conversation about art in the church. The author provides a serious call for faith communities to envision how the arts may serve the church. The three opening chapters take up in turn – the meaning of worship, the meaning of art and the theological meaning of art in worship. Throughout there is a clear sense of the significance of the aesthetic dimension of our humanity that engages





## The Magi

The earliest expressions of visual art that emerged from the Christian narrative and the community of those who took the name Christian reach back to the 3rd and 4th centuries. They are works found in the catacombs of Rome. Some tell a story while others are of a more iconic nature. These images played an important role in early faith communities. Christians were a minority in Rome and the surrounding city was replete with images that resonated with the religious and philosophical sensibilities of Roman culture. Christians – many new to the faith – would benefit from the reminders depicted in biblical imagery in the catacombs.

The story of the Magi provides an exotic element in the biblical narrative of Christmas. These strangers from the East travelled far and brought costly gifts on their journey to pay homage to the infant Jesus. This is the story for Epiphany – the time of “manifestation” when the babe who will be king draws the attention of the stranger – reminding us that the promised One of Israel has a redemptive reach well beyond the borders of his own country.



Detail from the Sarcophagus of Crispina – 4th Century

The painting on the front page is from the Catacomb of Priscilla dating c 250. It is located at the top of an archway with the wise men each in different colour clothing walking at the pinnacle of the arch in anticipation as they approach the mother and child. The image above is a detail from a sarcophagus which depicts the wise-men bearing their gifts with camels in tow. The

Holy Mother is seated on a throne-like chair with the child Jesus on her lap. The wise men come in orderly fashion to present their gifts. Their clothing makes clear that they are strangers from a foreign land. Images such as these were instructive in telling the biblical story and served to imprint the memory with the story of the coming of the Messiah.

**Marilyn McEntyre, *When Poets Pray*, Eerdmans 2019 (132 pp)**

**Luci Shaw, *The Generosity*, Paraclete Press, 2020 (125 pp)**

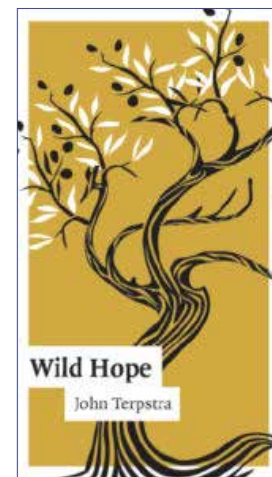
**John Terpstra, *Wild Hope: Prayers and Poems*, The St. Thomas Poetry Series, 2020 (91 pp)**

The eighteenth century author J.G. Hamann was an influential figure outside the mainstream of the thought of his time. His work is receiving renewed attention in current discussions in philosophy and theology. He once wrote that “Poetry is the mother tongue of the human race.” Just what this means is hard to say – but I believe it has to do with our awareness that we are participants in a creation – all of which is “gift” and our unique capacity for languages rises up to communicate our deepest inner experiences and the

sense that there is more. Thought of in this way poetry and prayer are not far apart.

Marilyn McEntyre’s book takes us on a journey to visit twenty four poets and poems that are prayers. She writes: “Poets slow us down. They teach us to stop and go in before we go on. They play at the edges of mystery...” Included are poets familiar, Richard Wilber, T.S. Eliot, Mary Oliver, and unfamiliar Lucille Clifton and Anna Kamienska. McEntyre includes a brief meditation with each poem. This is a gentle engaging and eloquent book that rewards slow reading.

Luci Shaw has been writing poetry for a very long time putting into words what her keen eye observes of nature and so invites us to see anew. The title of this collection she tells us is a reminder of the “prodigal green” that flourishes everywhere in nature. One might say that these poems are prayers of gratitude for the blessings we can enjoy in the rich surroundings of nature. Her title “The Generosity” acknowledges the world as gift – and the poetry a means of honouring the Giver. The poems are an invitation to see, to open eyes, heart and mind to



experience God’s good creation. “Wild Hope” is the latest collection of poems and prayers by Hamilton poet John Terpstra. His work is earthy – it is very much in touch with the temporal and the ordinary – though never locked in – always conscious of how the ordinary can be a window for seeing beyond itself. In the prayers the “Lord God in whom is heaven.” is not a distant deity but one always ready to engage with the rough and tumble, the grit and dirt of human life. The well-crafted lines of these poems and prayers draw the reader in and provide refreshment for soul and spirit. The poem which contains the title was written for the online Imago Reflection.



## An Advent Prayer

Dear God of Mary and Joseph  
of Elizabeth and Zachariah  
and Jesus born in a manger

we've entered the season  
of hope & peace & joy & love  
when you seem bent on showing us  
your willingness to do the impossible  
when we read again  
the lion laying down with the lamb  
led by a child  
when we sing with Mary  
the lowly lifted up  
the hungry filled with good things  
the rich sent empty away

and we feel these things resonate  
with the deepest part of our being  
as being true  
so absolutely incontrovertibly true  
although we have yet to see them take place

Our belief in you  
our willingness to continue along this path  
keeps us on the very edge  
of the joy  
that is in the vision of the prophets  
and the gospel writers  
even as present realities  
might seem to say we are fools

There are so many people who hurt, o Lord  
There are so many who grieve  
There is war. Corruption. Greed. Calamity

The rich are lying down with the wolf  
The lowly are being sent empty away  
and the little child is hungry

We have no words  
for all the ways  
things are wrong in the world

What we have  
are people quietly helping  
doing the impossible  
in your name  
and places in the world, where  
without fanfare  
the impossible has taken place  
and is

What we have is a faith  
that does not prevent us from walking into walls  
or keep us from troubles  
faith that is not certainty  
but trust  
trust

that has well-springs in scripture  
and is born of our experience  
of your love and benevolence  
toward us

trust that keeps us  
putting one foot in front of the other  
as we continue this slow trek to Bethlehem  
to enter again the peace and profoundness  
and impossibility  
of your stable birth

with nothing but the clothes on our backs  
and our hearts split wide open

*John Terpstra, In the Company of All: Prayers from  
Sunday Mornings at St Cuthbert's; The St Thomas  
Poetry Series, 2016*

## Final Words

This unusual year has curtailed a lot of activities – but has served to generate others. Planning for the IMAGO initiative on Stations of the Cross – Crossings noted in the last newsletter – is once again active after a brief pause. Scheduled now for Lent of 2022, we are currently looking at an all outdoor exhibition in the wake of the pandemic.

Early in the New Year IMAGO will enter the world of podcasting. A new venture for us – taking advantage of the recent trend toward “listening”. We will be able to draw on a wide network of people for conversation on art, faith and culture.

As we come to the conclusion of this unusual year we want to say thank you to all who have continued to support the work that we do – your support keeps us going – now in our 49th year. And may we encourage you to consider a year end gift to help give us a strong start in 2021. You may donate on line at Canada Helps or mail your gift to IMAGO, 630 Indian Road, Toronto, ON M6P 2C6.



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