

SPIRITUALITY AND THE ARTS

The Healing Nature of Poetry and Jazz

Gerard Garrigan

WHEN ASKED WHAT POETRY IS, the great American poet Emily Dickinson replied: 'If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry'.¹ Great poetry does 'take the top of one's head off' and opens us to a reality that was present but unnoticed until the poet skilfully made it known by presenting it in a compelling, novel way. Dickinson also wrote in one of her poems: 'Tell the truth but tell it slant'.² This communication of a previously unknown truth in the poet's fresh and singular way, 'telling it slant', has an effect of healing on the reader of the poem, for truth is always healing. Through poetry we come to know a truth more clearly and fully, that truth which ultimately comes—as does all truth—from God, who is *the* Truth and the source of all truth.

Poetry's healing effect of freshly communicating a truth to us is the same effect that Jesus Christ, our Lord and God, who is the Truth, achieves through his parables in the Gospels. In them he opens the minds and hearts of his hearers to a present but unnoticed truth, 'taking the tops of their heads off' to enable that truth to be discovered by them for the first time. Like Jesus' parables, poetry changes our hearts and minds with its fresh and inspired, slanted truth. Our coming to see the truth always brings us closer to the Truth who is God, who is love—as St John teaches us—and love is always healing.

The healing power of music can be thought of along the same lines as the healing power of poetry. Music is 'the food of love', as

¹ Emily Dickinson, quoted in T. W. Higginson to Mary Elizabeth Channing Higginson, 16 August 1870, in *Emily Dickinson: Selected Letters*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson (London: Oxford U, 1971), 208.

² *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), 506.

Shakespeare tells us, and love on this earth is but a finite, partial expression of God who is Truth in its fullness and who is love.³ And, again, God, who is love, always heals. Great music brings about that healing in such a mysterious, powerful and singular way. I think, but I cannot adequately describe how or why, music, of all the arts, most closely approaches the divine. Music mysteriously somehow communicates the sublime, the transcendent, the ineffable to me as no other art form does. Perhaps it is just this ineffability of music that touches me, that heals me as no other art form does.

Music has a healing effect because it is ‘the food of love’ and God is love and God, by nature, always heals. Jazz achieves this healing effect in me more than any other genre of music does. I love the remark often attributed to Louis Armstrong: ‘If you have to ask what jazz is, you’ll never know’. When one speaks of jazz, one must speak of improvisation, which plays such an important part in it. This joyful, delightful, enlivening quality that comes from improvisation in jazz is described in my poem ‘I Heard Jazz on Christmas Night’:

I Heard Jazz on Christmas Night

I heard jazz on Christmas night
 Sung by angels improvising
 Syncopating, swinging, jiving
 Riffing on that ‘Gloria’
 Lord have mercy
 They were hot
 While others heard them
 Straight and white
 I heard them scat
 And they were *tight*

The originality that is so essential to the healing power of jazz is spoken of most eloquently by the great jazz saxophonist Lester Young: ‘Well, the way I play, I try not to be a “repeater pencil”, you dig?’⁴ ‘Originality’s the thing. You can have tone and technique and a lot of other things but without originality you ain’t really nowhere. Gotta be original.’⁵

³ Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*, I. i. 1.

⁴ Lester Young, interview with François Postif (1959), in *A Lester Young Reader*, edited by Lewis Porter (Washington: Smithsonian, 1991), 186.

⁵ Lester Young, interview with Allan Morrison (1946), in *Lester Young Reader*, 131.



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I find improvisation, the originality that great jazz musicians are able to produce so wondrously, to be exceedingly healing. Each of us is unique, uniquely made in the image and likeness of our God who is love. And each jazz musician brings the originality that the Spirit of God works through him or her in the most delightfully singular way in his or her improvisation. This brings real healing to my soul. And, in these days of the plague of the pandemic, we especially need to be reminded that God's beauty, delight and love are still all around us, because God is still present everywhere, ever-present even in these days of suffering.

In These Trying Days of Plague

In these trying days of plague
These days of fright and of despair
We become so blind, quick to forget
God's mercy, great mercy, beauty -
His everlasting beauty everywhere
Oh, yes, His great, great mercy,
His everlasting beauty still everywhere

The musical form that is jazz came out of the suffering of the African-American people, a suffering born from the great evil of slavery and the racial hatred and injustice it engendered. The African-American jazz musicians, through the improvisation of a new genre of music, were able to express joy and beauty and truth. It brought them, and still brings us today, the healing of love born and triumphant in the midst of great suffering. These great musicians took the conditions of

their lives and their times, full of the suffering caused by racism, and transcended them by their original, healing music, which is jazz. We need to do the same. We must also find the true, the good, the beautiful, the joyful amidst the sufferings of our day, in this time of pandemic suffering.

Jazz proves to us that the human spirit cannot be defeated, because we are children of God, made in his own image and likeness. Our God has overcome the world and all of its suffering, even death itself. Our spirits are of God and God has redeemed us by his own suffering, death and resurrection. He has won for us a fullness of joy that never ends. And so, let all of us improvise with our own lives, each of them delightfully original, in these days of suffering, to find the beauty, the joy, the truth and the healing that jazz expresses so delightfully. By doing so, we will transcend and enjoy a foretaste of the limitless, unending joy that awaits us in heaven, in that place alone, where suffering and death are no more, but only the fullness of life and love.

As the jazz genius Duke Ellington reminded us: 'It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing'. And so, let each one of us live our own improvised lives in this extraordinary time with the delightful originality with which our loving God created us to his glory with joy, with verve, with zest, with hope, and most of all, with *swing*.

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