

# Raging Beasts and Fiery Dragons: Revelation and the Role of the Imagination in Theological Construction and Interpretation.



**Detail from the St John Altarpiece, Hans Memling 1474-1479**

**Memling Museum, St Jeans Hospital, Bruges**

I will open my mouth in a parable;  
I will utter dark sayings from old,  
things that we have heard and known,  
that our ancestors have told us.  
We will not hide them from their children;  
we will tell to the coming generation,  
the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might,  
and the wonders that he had done.

**Psalm 72:2 - 4**

In the preface to his 1931 commentary on the Book of Revelation Carrington declares that:

In the case of the *Revelation* we are dealing with an artist greater than Stevenson or Coleridge or Bach. St John has a better sense of the right word than Stevenson; he has a greater command of unearthly supernatural loveliness than Coleridge; he has a richer sense of melody and rhythm and composition than Bach . . . The imaginative structures of the *Revelation* are built up of great spiritual ideas. Behind the rush and melody of the words, behind the glorious display of images and symbols which are a triumph of art merely in themselves . . . lies an architecture of ideas which leaves Shelley or Milton or Dante far behind. Behind the phenomena of nature and history and personality, St John has seen great laws and principles and influences working themselves out; the colossal invisible energies which explain the crash of mighty empires and the triumph of despised truth. He has seen the limitless joy and energy of creation as it vibrates in unity and obedience; he has seen the glitter and loathsomeness of sin as it rises out of the unknown abysses of the human mind; he has seen the utter purity and intense heat of truth and justice going out to battle with flaming eyes; he has seen the corruption and cynicism of a religion which prostitutes itself to the cult of success; he has seen the flames in which sin destroys itself; he has even seen the pure and paradisaical life of the blessed in their meekness and singleness of heart.<sup>1</sup>

The enthusiasm with which Carrington approaches the final book of the Bible leaves no doubt that this is not shallow water that we can pass through with little impact or even sidestep if other more appealing texts clamour for our attention. It is rather a deep and perhaps even a potentially bottomless pool in which the unwary could easily flounder, which may explain why it receives so little attention in our churches and is seldom part of the weekly readings. The Times Literary Supplement review of Carrington's work, which refers to Revelation as a once 'hopeless riddle . . . to even the sanest and greatest scholars', concludes, however, that the commentary is 'admirably suited in style and spirit to the ordinary cultivated reader' with Carrington finding 'blazoned in the symbols of "The Revelation" a scheme of thought most tightly reasoned and free from any tiresomeness whatsoever'<sup>2</sup>

Regardless of what this 'tiresomeness' that it is now freed from may be, Revelation does, though, still present a challenge on many levels and not least in how we interpret the vivid images and scenes that are portrayed as John's vision unfolds. These are vividly brought to life in the Memling

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<sup>1</sup> Carrington, 'Revelation', xvii-xviii.

<sup>2</sup> The Times Literary Supplement, Thursday, September 3, 1931.

altarpiece depicting an unearthly battle between fiery dragons, mysterious horsemen, terrifying beasts, and warrior angels.<sup>3</sup> But, too often these images have served only to distract, with the great spiritual ideas that Carrington refers to, lost in interpretation that has reduced them, in the eyes of many, to fantasy that has little relevance to the world today.<sup>4</sup>

Strange as these images might initially seem, they are, however, remarkably familiar if we consider the contemporary images of the struggle between forces of good and evil in films such as *Lord of the Rings*, the *Harry Potter* series and, most recently, the unusually titled *Cowboys and Aliens*, as well as those depicting the ever popular comic-book heroes! Clearly the imagination of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is closer to that of the first century than may first be thought but the images in *Revelation* go even further back into the remote mists of the ancient imagination where the search for meaning first began.



Throughout the history of our world there have always been dragons to slay, evil powers to overcome and trials to withstand, be they in the form of natural forces, oppressive regimes, corrupt institutions or unjust societies – whichever way the ravages of nature and the traits of human greed and lust for power have been manifest. Attempts to understand and overcome such conditions are on-going, driven by a deep need for hope and the promise of transformation that are no less a part of our contemporary society than they were in the time that *Revelation* was written.

The imagination has always been an integral part of this search for meaning. C.S Lewis describes the imaginative impulse as a primal desire of man ‘working under the special conditions of our time...to visit strange regions in search of such beauty, awe or terror as the actual world does not supply’.<sup>5</sup> At a later date he develops this in stating that, ‘For me, reason is the natural organ of truth; but imagination is the organ of meaning. Imagination, producing new metaphors or revivifying old, is not the cause of truth, but its condition.’<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> St John on the Island of Patmos, Hans Memling 1474-79, Bruges.

<sup>4</sup> G.K Chesterton once remarked that ‘though St John...saw many strange monsters in his vision, he saw no creature so wild as one of his own commentators.’ Cited in Peterson, ‘Reversed Thunder’, xiii.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis, ‘Of Other Worlds’, vi.

<sup>6</sup> Lewis, ‘Bluspels and Flalansferes’, 265.

This paper will therefore examine the role of the imagination, not only in theological construction but also as a hermeneutical tool in the interpretation of this complex text as we read it in the context of our 21<sup>st</sup> century societies. In doing so it will focus specifically on Chapter 12 from two perspectives:

1. As the beginning of the cosmic drama that will be played out in the following chapters in the form of ‘a movie that thrills audiences with special effects, as heroes and villains traverse the galaxies in battles for control of the universe.’<sup>7</sup>
2. As a ‘classic example of how an author has drawn on various sources, including pagan myths, to make a Christian point’<sup>8</sup> thereby bringing to fulfilment in Christ all the primal myths and the truths they enshrine as, ‘in Christ myths become reality in human history’.<sup>9</sup>

Before turning to the text, however, in view of its claim of transmitting divine revelatory truth, it is important to consider the argument that any purely spiritual occurrence requires a physical concomitant, since ‘a religion cannot live on purely ‘spiritualised’ dogmas and...reification is necessary even if only to serve the purpose of a ‘vessel’ for the spirit’.<sup>10</sup> Key here is the type of ‘vessel’ that may be used and whether it is acceptable to, or can be understood by, the 21<sup>st</sup> century mind-set; in particular a mind-set struggling to maintain the traditional view of the revelatory process both in itself as a supernatural event and in its objective of communicating supernatural concepts, in the light of reason and rationality.<sup>11</sup> It is therefore important to remember that inevitably divine revelation ‘is a phenomenon that adapts itself to the environment and takes on the colour of the environment in every way’.<sup>12</sup> For the supernatural to enter the natural world it must take on the characteristics and temperament of the physical as, in the words of the Sufi Rumi;

when the sea is poured into a jug, the sea perforce complies with the jug. The sea doesn’t stop being sea, but what reaches us is what’s in the jug and, unavoidably, the sea complies with the jug’s dimensions and capacity.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Koester, ‘Revelation and the End of All Things’, 117.

<sup>8</sup> Witherington, ‘Revelation’, 164.

<sup>9</sup> J.R.R. Tolkien, cited in Witherington, ‘Revelation’, 165.

<sup>10</sup> Rahman, ‘Islam’, 14.

<sup>11</sup> Rippin, ‘Muslims’, 201.

<sup>12</sup> Soroush, ‘Islam’, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Rumi, *Mathnawi*, Vol 2, 20 as cited by Soroush, ‘Islam’, 10.

In this respect the text of Revelation had to be in keeping with the imagination, linguistic ability and environment of the author and particularly within the capacity of the imagination and outlook of the initial recipients. The challenge that arises, therefore, is how we can connect with this from a distance of nearly 2000 years and in doing so allow the text to perform its transformative mandate as the living phenomenon that it was first intended to be. It may well be that it is the imagination that it is the vital link and with this in mind we will now turn to Chapter 12.

### **Revelation 12:**

1 A great portent appeared in heaven: a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars.

2 She was pregnant and was crying out in birth pangs, in the agony of giving birth.

3 Then another portent appeared in heaven: a great red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and seven diadems on his heads.

4 His tail swept down a third of the stars of heaven and threw them to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman who was about to bear a child, so that he might devour her child as soon as it was born.

5 And she gave birth to a son, a male child, who is to rule all the nations with a rod of iron. But her child was snatched away and taken to God and to his throne;

6 and the woman fled into the wilderness, where she has a place prepared by God, so that there she can be nourished for one thousand two hundred sixty days.

7 And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back,

8 but they were defeated, and there was no longer any place for them in heaven.

9 The great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

10 Then I heard a loud voice in heaven, proclaiming, "Now have come the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah, for the accuser of our comrades has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God.

11 But they have conquered him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they did not cling to life even in the face of death.

12 Rejoice then, you heavens and those who dwell in them! But woe to the earth and the sea, for the devil has come down to you with great wrath, because he knows that his time is short!"

13 So when the dragon saw that he had been thrown down to the earth, he pursued the woman who had given birth to the male child.

14 But the woman was given the two wings of the great eagle, so that she could fly from the serpent into the wilderness, to her place where she is nourished for a time, and times, and half a time.

15 Then from his mouth the serpent poured water like a river after the woman, to sweep her away with the flood.

16 But the earth came to the help of the woman; it opened its mouth and swallowed the river that the dragon had poured from his mouth.

17 Then the dragon was angry with the woman, and went off to make war on the rest of her children, those who keep the commandments of God and hold the testimony of Jesus.

18 Then the dragon took his stand on the sand of the seashore. NRSV



**The Dragon seeks to devour the infant**

**Giusto de Menabuoi, Baptistry Padua, 14<sup>th</sup> century**

## The Woman and the Dragon

Revelation 12 has been described as the beginning of a great sky-drama that serves as an epic intermission between the terror of the trumpets and the further judgements to come.<sup>14</sup> The normal limitations of space and time are forgotten as the warring parties traverse a battlefield that stretches from the heights of heaven to the abyss beneath the earth.<sup>15</sup> In summary;

A woman appears in the sky with her feet above the moon and stars encircling her head, yet she flees from heaven to seek refuge on earth (12:1,6). Her adversary the dragon has a serpentine tail that sweeps across the vastness of the night sky, brushing myriads of stars down to the ground (12:4). Angelic warriors grapple with the dragon and his henchmen in the skies, sending them tumbling from space to earth where the battle continues (12:7 – 12). The dragon angrily dusts itself off in order to embark on a new chase scene, and the woman who once stood above the moon sprouts wings so that she can fly away from the dragon (12:13 – 14). In what modern audiences would consider a feat of animation, a river gushes out of the dragon's mouth, while the earth opens up a mouth of its own in order to swallow the river (12:15 – 16).<sup>16</sup>

There are echoes abounding throughout the chapter of ancient myths with probably the closest being the Greek tale of the dragon Python and the goddess Leto. One form tells of the dragon's pursuit of Leto on learning that she would bear a child who would kill him. Leto was carried off by the north wind to Poseidon, who placed her on an island which he sank beneath the sea until Python retired to Mt Parnassus. Leto then gave birth to Apollo who within four days slew Python on the mountain. An earlier Babylonian myth describes a war between Tiamat the seven-headed sea monster and the gods of heaven in which a third of the stars are thrown from the sky. It is ended by Marduk, a young god of light who hewed the sea monster in pieces, and there are echoes of Marduk's mother in the portrayal of the woman in Revelation 12. In Egyptian mythology, Isis, the wife of Osiris, gave birth to Horus, the sun god. She is portrayed with the sun on her head and the dragon Typhon was pictured as red but also as a crocodile or serpent. The dragon slays Osiris and pursues Isis as she is about to give birth. After giving birth she escapes to an island in a papyrus boat. Her son Horus eventually overcomes the dragon which is finally destroyed by fire.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Easley, 'Living', 50.

<sup>15</sup> Koester, 'Revelation', 116.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, 116-117.

<sup>17</sup> Witherington, 'Revelation', 165

Various Roman emperors claimed associations with such myths for themselves with Domitian implying that he was the incarnation of Apollo. The woman in the stories could be identified with the goddess Roma, queen of heaven and mother of the saviour, and the emperor and his wife were portrayed on coins as the sun and moon with Nero bearing the radiant beams from his head that were Apollo's trademark.<sup>18</sup>

In this respect, Revelation 12 functions as a 'counterclaim to such notions' and 'anti-establishment mythology' in the strongest sense<sup>19</sup> with a story unfolding that places Jesus as the real conqueror of evil and the woman from whom he comes – as either Mary<sup>20</sup> or the community of God's people - the real queen of heaven and mother of the Saviour.

Within John's composition there are parallels to Isaiah 66:6 – 9 with links to mother Zion and the community of God's people.<sup>21</sup> The woman's crown is the *stephanos*, the victors' laurel wreath with its twelve stars possibly referring to the tribes of Israel as a symbol for the whole people of God.<sup>22</sup> In contrast the dragon's seven crowns (*diademata*) may represent evil in its attempt to usurp all power.

The passage pulsates with allusions to the Old Testament with the listener or reader continually drawn back to books such as Psalms, Isaiah, Job and Daniel as the ancient pagan myths are reinterpreted in terms of Jewish traditions and expectations. Psalm 2 provides the background to the birth of the child who will rule the nations with a rod of iron; the imagery conveying absolute power over the nations and possibly even the power to judge challenging the divine claims and presumptions of the imperial cult.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the immediate threat of the dragon the child is snatched away and enthroned in heaven, pointing to Christ's deliverance from death and exaltation to heavenly reign.<sup>24</sup> The woman escapes by fleeing to the desert where there is refuge and nourishment and, if she does represent the people of God, this may well be an allusion to the Exodus/Sinai events.

### The Woman is given Wings; The Bamberg Apocalypse c. 1020



<sup>18</sup> Adapted from Koester, 'Revelation', 118.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 166.

<sup>20</sup> The interpretation favoured by some Catholic scholars.

<sup>21</sup> Witherington, 'Revelation', 167.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 168.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 169.

<sup>24</sup> Koester, 'Revelation', 119.

For Peterson there is an additional challenge here for the interpretive imagination in seeing another version of the Christmas story in this passage. He suggests that;

It is St. John's Spirit-appointed task to supplement the work of St. Matthew and St. Luke so that the nativity cannot be sentimentalized into coziness, nor domesticated into drabness, nor commercialized into worldliness. . . The splendors of creation and the agony of redemption combine in this event, this centre where God invades existence with redeeming life and decisively defeats evil. It is St. John's genius to take Jesus in a manger attended by shepherds and wisemen and put him in a cosmos attacked by a dragon. . . Our response to the Nativity cannot be reduced to shutting the door against a wintry world, drinking hot chocolate, and singing carols. Rather we are ready to walk out the door with . . . high praises of God in our throats and two-edged swords in our hands.<sup>25</sup>

An interpretation that may well have had more resonance for a persecuted Christian community living in constant fear and uncertainty and providing an interesting challenge for Christians today.

### War in Heaven

In verse 7, as a consequence of Christ's enthronement,<sup>26</sup> an epic battle in heavens begins with Michael the archangel, depicted by Raphael in the act of trampling Satan,<sup>27</sup> mounting an attack on the dragon. From various sources Michael is:

- The Mediator between God and humanity and the angel of the nation Israel fighting against the angelic leaders of the Gentile nations. (Test. of Dan. 6:2; Dan. 10:13,21)
- One of four archangels who cast the fallen angels into the fiery furnace on judgement day. (1 En. 54:6)
- The prince of Light who leads the children of light into battle against Belial. ( War Scroll 13:10-12; 17:6-8 Qumran literature)
- The heavenly protector of God's people. (Dan. 12:1)



<sup>25</sup> Peterson, 'Reversed Thunder', 121-22.

<sup>26</sup> Koester, 'Revelation', 122.

<sup>27</sup> The Trampling of Satan, Raphael, c. 1503-4, Louvre, Paris.

- The opponent of the devil. (Jude 9)

In defeat the dragon is identified as the Devil or Satan, now banished from heaven and a role in the heavenly court as prosecuting attorney (Job 1-2),<sup>28</sup> and cast down to earth. Koester suggests that this offers readers an incentive to persevere despite the on-going threat of evil as:

From an earthly perspective, evil can seem so pervasive as to be unstoppable. Where the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer, the Devil seems to reign. From a heavenly perspective, however, evil rages on earth not because it is so powerful but because it is so vulnerable. Revelation likens Satan to a rogue animal that the forces of God have corralled, driving it off the expansive plains of heaven and into the fenced-in area of earth. The beast rampages within its newly limited circumstances, seeking to do as much damage as possible during the short time that remains until the company of heaven slips the noose around its head, binds its legs, and chains it up so that it can do no further damage (12:11; 20:2). Those who think that Satan rages because he is invincible will give up in despair; but those who recognise that Satan rages on earth because he has already lost in Heaven and is now desperate, have reason to resist him, confident that God will prevail.<sup>29</sup>

In this sense, regardless of how we may see Satan manifest today – be it in the cruelty of oppressive regimes, the corruption of financial institutions, the disintegration of communities due to the neglect of the needy, the abuse of alcohol and drugs and the general greed and self-seeking that seem to be the hallmark of a rights- based society – the words of Revelation still have the capacity to provide hope for an increasingly weary world

In the final section of the chapter, as the Dragon once again pursues the woman, John uses imagery that links to familiar stories in the history of God’s people.

- As Eve was warned about the pain of childbirth, the woman cries out in the agony of giving birth. (Gen. 3:16; Rev. 12:2)
- As God promised that Eve’s offspring would bruise the serpents head, the ancient serpent is thrown down to earth. (Gen. 3:15; Rev. 12:9)
- As the people of Israel fled through the sea to escape destruction when God, who is able to divide the sea and break the heads of the dragons (Ps. 74:12-15), carried them as if on eagles wings (Ex. 19:4) to a place of refuge in the wilderness, the woman is delivered from the

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<sup>28</sup> Witherington, ‘Revelation’, 170

<sup>29</sup> Koester, ‘Revelation’, 123.

dragon. She is able to resist the torrent of water unleashed against her and is given eagle wings to carry her to safety in the wilderness where she is nourished.<sup>30</sup>

The Chapter finishes, however, on a sombre note with a continuing threat to the faithful community as the dragon sets off to wage war on them, taking a stand on the seashore. Ominously there is more yet to unfold, but this threat can no longer dim the hope and glorious expectation of salvation through the proven power of the kingdom of God, the authority of the Messiah and the conquering blood of the Lamb; a key image which will be examined in another paper.

In this respect the message of the chapter is simple but it has frequently, as with much of the book, been obscured by interpretations that serve only to limit its potential. Traditionally there have been four major approaches to interpreting the text<sup>31</sup> but too often, in attempting to identify and pin down specific references and images within a historic timeframe or even only within the spiritual realm, its voice has been constrained and it has been unable to speak into new contexts with the power that it held for its first recipients.

As we come to it today, with all the resources of science and reason that our 21<sup>st</sup> century world regards so highly, it is worth remembering that Einstein once said that ‘the imagination is more important than intelligence. . . [with] no meaningful use of intelligence unless there is imaginative perception.’<sup>32</sup> Witherington builds on this in stating that ‘Revelation is a book that must be grasped by the imagination not merely by intelligence. The idea is not just to inform us but to transform us by what we see and perceive through this work. What is required is not that we read more but that we listen carefully: not study more but see believingly.’<sup>33</sup>

In this respect it is true that ‘in the work of hermeneutics, we find imagination coming in at the initial stages and imagination going out at the final ones.’<sup>34</sup> The imaginative contribution of both author and reader or listener are vital to the revelatory process releasing the human spirit from the bondage of reason and allowing the discovery of new depths of reality with the infinite present in the finite.<sup>35</sup>

The imagination allows us to recover narrative and story as modes of religious expression that free our understanding from both the extremes of what Trotter describes as blatant literalism and the cloudy abstraction of vague transcendentalism where metaphor, analogy and image lose all

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 124.

<sup>31</sup> Historicist, Preterist, Futurist and Spiritual. See *Revelation: Four Views, A Parallel Commentary*, S. Gregg (ed).

<sup>32</sup> Browne, ‘Ministry of the Word’, 115.

<sup>33</sup> Witherington, ‘Revelation’, 72.

<sup>34</sup> Bryant, ‘Faith’, x.

<sup>35</sup> McGrath, ‘Christian Theology’, 97.

credibility.<sup>36</sup> In an Hasidic tale we are reminded that the revelatory use of ‘story’ does not diminish its power but instead, in recognition of the human condition, enhances it:

A rabbi went to a place in the forest, lit a candle, said a prayer, and told a story. *His* student could not find the place in the forest, but did light a candle, say a prayer, and told a story. *His* student could not find a candle, but he said a prayer and told the story. *His* student forgot the prayer, but he told the story.<sup>37</sup>

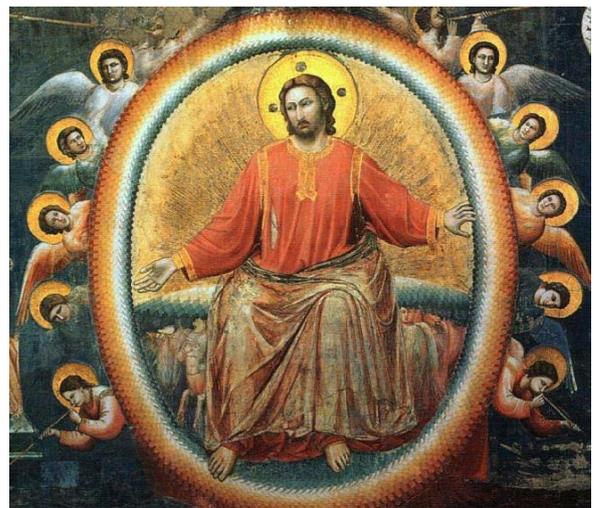
With this in mind we can then move from our starting point in Carrington’s glorious eulogy – as a celebration of Revelation in its on-going life rather than in its demise – to close with the words of Isaiah providing an objective for our interpretive efforts:

‘So is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.’ Isaiah 55:11

That purpose is transformation and if the imaginative structures that make up the book of Revelation provide hope in the promise of the fulfilment to come, then we need no longer live in fear of our raging beasts and fiery dragons in whatever form they might take. We can instead join the worshipping communities that resonate throughout the book in celebrating the hope and promise that it offers and saying:

Amen. Come Lord Jesus!

**Detail from the Last Judgement Fresco, Giotto  
Arena Chapel, Padua, 1306**



**Sarah Beattie 2011**

<sup>36</sup> Trotter, ‘Theology and Imagination’.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

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## Questions

- **How does Revelation remind us of the indescribable nature of God and the limitations of language?**
- **How does Revelation address our tendency to want to fit God and his revelation into our own comfortable categories thereby confining him to the limitations of our imagination and desires?**
- **How does Revelation challenge us to move beyond those limitations?**
- **When reading Revelation is it true that ‘in the work of hermeneutics, we find imagination coming in at the initial stages and imagination going out at the final ones.’**

**The Kingdom of God**  
**'In No Strange Land.'**

O world invisible, we view thee,  
O world intangible, we touch thee,  
O world unknowable, we know thee,  
Inapprehensible, we clutch thee!

Does the fish soar to find the ocean,  
The eagle plunge to find the air –  
That we ask of the stars in motion  
If they have rumour of thee there?

Not where the wheeling systems darken,  
And our benumbed conceiving soars! –  
The drift of pinions, would we hearken,  
Beats at our own clay-shuttered doors.

The angels keep their ancient places; –  
Turn but a stone, and start a wing!  
'Tis ye, 'tis your estranged faces,  
That miss the many-splendored thing.

But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)  
Cry; – and upon thy so sore loss  
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder  
Pitched betwixt heaven and Charing Cross.

Yea, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,  
Cry, – clinging Heaven by the hems;  
And lo, Christ walking on the water  
Not of Gennesarath, but Thames!

**Francis Thompson**