

# Prophecy and Literature



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## PROPHECY AND LITERATURE

Poetry is commonly linked to prophecy, in a wide variety of cultures and in diverse times and places. In the West, this connection is omnipresent, with key moments including Ancient Greece, the Renaissance, Romanticism, and twentieth-century mantic movements in poetry. What, then, in different cultures, have been the implications of the link between prophecy and literature? What have poets and writers done with it? What are the connections between literary prophecy and other varieties? This essay explores these questions, responding to the invitation posed by 'Insights' to capture work in progress. I begin by mapping prophecy, poetry and literature over some broad terrain. Secondly, I discuss why I believe the period of the European Renaissance and Reformation to be particularly promising for a study of poetic prophecy, grounding this in a number of observations which belong to histories of literature, on the one hand, and of religion and society, on the other. Finally, I allude briefly to research in progress which takes two sixteenth-century 'bestsellers' as case studies, namely the Christian poetry of Guillaume de Saluste Du Bartas [1544–1590] and the comic fictions of François Rabelais [1483?–1553]. Both texts have important things to tell us about the implications of conceptualising poetry as prophecy in the Reformation. In particular, poetic prophecy appears to be concerned with creative presentations of time, history, Creation and Apocalypse, and, secondly, with the pursuit of truth through fiction, comedy and ambiguity. Literature from this period can tell us something about what the Reformation did with the notion of poetic prophecy, and how poetic prophecy related to the explosion in other modes of prophecy, and to the Reformation's reflection on religious belief, history, confessional division and violence. Finally, a study of literary 'prophecy' in Renaissance texts may also contribute towards a prehistory of the concept of literature.



The Muses [...] breathed a divine voice into me, so that I might glorify what will be and what  
was before  
(Hesiod, *Theogony*, c.700 BC)

Cover my belly with hands of moss, fill up my ears with your  
lightning, blind me with prophetic rainbows  
That I taste the shit of Being at last, that I touch Thy genitals  
in the palmtree,  
that the vast Ray of Futurity enter my mouth to sound Thy  
Creation Forever Unborn, O Beauty invisible to my  
Century!  
(Allen Ginsberg, 'Magic Psalm,' 1960)

O, Father, grant that in an eloquent voice  
I sing to our descendants the birth of the world  
(Du Bartas, *The Week or Creation of the World*, 1578)

I am speaking like Saint John of the Apocalypse: 'We bear witness of that we have seen'  
(François Rabelais, *Pantagruel*, 1532)<sup>1</sup>

In the epigraphs above writers of poetry or fiction aspire to resemble prophets. They wish to be inspired by the Muses or the Christian God or desire; in touch with an extraordinary source of knowledge; given special visions to recount; and granted a privileged perception of time, or a special access to the distant past or the future, more specifically Creation or Apocalypse. What, then, in different times and different places, have been the implications of this link between prophecy and literature? What have poets done with it? To what extent has it been employed by writers of novels or other prose genres? In which ways do they also lay claim to prophecy? And how do literary prophets cast new and different light on time, on history, on its beginning and its end? What is the place in such prophecy of the literal and the figurative, the allegorical and the ambiguous? And what are the connections between literary prophecy and the varieties of what we might call 'prophecy proper'? How has literary prophecy functioned in times of prolific political or religious prophesying? What is the relationship between figures like Nostradamus, who prophesied in verse, and the inspired, or prophetic, poets who were his contemporaries? This essay will begin to explore some of these questions, in response to the invitation posed by *Insights* to capture work in progress. I will start by mapping some broad terrain, before suggesting why the period of the European Renaissance and Reformation is a particularly interesting one, both for an investigation of the ways in which the idea of poetry as prophecy can function in a particular culture, and also as part of a more long-view history of conceptions of literature. Finally, I will very briefly discuss two case studies which I am currently working on, and how they illuminate the questions posed above. The crux of these questions, I will suggest, is what they tell us, first, about the role of literature – or literary 'prophecy' – in the Reformation, and the necessity of analysing it together with other Reformation modes of prophecy, and, second, about conceptions of literature and its relationship to other forms of discourse.

### *Poetry and Prophecy*

Poetry is commonly bound up with prophecy, not only in the West, and not only in the past, but in a wide variety of cultures, and in diverse times and places. In some societies, the anthropologist John Leavitt observes, poet and prophet form a single social role. In others, the poet is distinct from the prophet, but is understood to be impelled by forces beyond himself, forces linked to the divine or demonic; thus metaphors for poetic inspiration often involve the breath, identified with the spirit or soul in many languages. Or, conversely, prophets may employ language which is marked in various ways, in other words, language which might be termed poetic (Leavitt, 1997). Literary historians have analysed models of poet as prophet in some cultures, as well as their implications for literary creation and its status. Anthropologists have examined the experience of poetic inspiration, often from a comparative cross-cultural perspective (Leavitt, 1997). Finally, prophecy – and poetry modelled as prophecy – must surely be of great interest to linguists, at least insofar as relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1995) is concerned with the attribution of the responsibility of utterances. Indeed, for this reason, prophetic poetry might be one place to begin to establish a dialogue between linguists and literary scholars about the sorts of thinking which literature does.

In the West, the connection between poetry and prophecy is omnipresent. Evident in both ancient Greece and (to a lesser extent) biblical Israel, it has remained strong. In 1821, Percy Bysshe Shelley asserted in his 'Defence of Poetry' that prophecy was 'an attribute of poetry,' since the poet 'beholds the future in the present, and his thoughts are the germs of the flower and the fruit of latest time' (2003, p. 677). In 1960, the North American Beat poet Allen

Ginsberg claimed in 'Magic Psalm,' the poem quoted in my epigraph, that 'I am Thy prophet come home this world to scream an unbearable Name thru my 5 senses' (2009, p. 113). Needless to say, I could have selected countless other examples. In poems from the last few centuries, the extraordinary source of inspiration may be more likely to be nature, or love, or drugs, or desire, rather than the divine in a narrow sense, or may be simply unknown, but the sense of poetry as a language or voice coming from elsewhere to express inspired truths remains. Nonetheless, the strength of the relationship between poetry and prophecy in the West has waxed and waned, so that surveys of it (Kugel, 1990; Leavitt, 1997; Wojcik and Frontain, 1984) tend to highlight particular key moments, such as the Archaic period in ancient Greece, the Renaissance, Romanticism and Beat Poetry.

As Kugel explains (1990), the notion of the divinely inspired poet was extremely pervasive in ancient Greece, while, conversely, prophets such as the Pythia at Delphi spoke in hexameters, the verse form used for epic poetry and hymns. In biblical Israel, there is some evidence of a kinship between prophecy and poetry. Then, perhaps because of the influx of Greek ideas, around the start of the Common era, Jewish commentators such as Philo of Alexandria, or the historian Josephus, came to view Old Testament prophets as divinely inspired. These ideas passed into the early Church, influencing Jerome and Augustine, and through them the culture of Western Christianity throughout the Middle Ages and indeed into the modern period. The Sibyls, too, served to strengthen the link between prophet and poet, since they appeared to be inspired pagan poets voicing Christian truths. Other Greek and Latin poets were similarly interpreted as prophetically expressing Christian truths of which they were unaware. Homer and Hesiod had claimed to receive from the Muses the ability to sing hidden truths, in particular of the past and the future, so Christian exegetes simply had to imagine that these truths included Christian ones. Virgil's Fourth Eclogue was particularly promising, since it made reference to Sibylline prophecy in order to propose a new birth of time involving a child, a virgin and a perfected Edenic world (Clausen, 1990). In the Renaissance, notions of poetic inspiration gained renewed impetus, thanks in large measure to a valorisation of poetry and to the elevation of the poet as a revered figure, together with influential translations of Plato, and extensive neo-platonic commentaries by Marsilio Ficino in particular (Castor, 1964, pp. 24–36; Galand-Hallyn and Hallyn, 2001, pp. 91–156; Leconte, 1993, pp. 217–374). In the mid eighteenth century, once again, the idea of inspiration began to regain currency, assisted by Robert Lowth's 1753 *Lectures on the Sacred Poetry of the Hebrews*, which argued that poetry and prophecy had 'one common name, one common origin, one common author, the Holy Spirit' (Kugel, 1990, pp. 22–3). Poetic prophecy was central to German, British and French Romanticism. Finally, in the twentieth century some of the most influential movements in poetry, such as Beat Poetry, were 'openly, sometimes aggressively, mantic in orientation' (Leavitt, 1997, pp. 19–23).

But what can we do with this poetry-prophecy connection, other than surveying its highlights? My current project takes one of the key moments from the survey sketched above, namely the Renaissance, but, rather than turning primarily to the most explicit and emphatic Renaissance proponents of poetic prophecy, I am interested in the implications of models of poetic prophecy which – while appearing in well known and widely read texts – have in themselves attracted less attention. The goal is to trace more fully the variety of functions which poetic prophecy served, for it seems to me that the Renaissance and Reformation put poetic prophecy to particularly interesting uses. The context for this was, on the one hand, that the notion of poetic prophecy was revitalised, and, on the other, that prophecy acquired a range of functions linked to the Reformation and to its reflections on religious belief, Christian history and confessional difference. In addition, Renaissance explorations of poetic prophecy may have had implications for thinking about not only poetry, but also literature more generally, both then and now.

## Literature and Prophecy

Kugel notes that links between poetry and prophecy are important in part because they touch upon the poet's 'mythology' as it 'developed in the formative period of the Western literary tradition' (1990, p. 2). However, we should note that claims to prophecy are also made by writers we would not describe as poets, and about forms of literature we would not describe as poetry. In 1927, E. M. Forster suggested that novels could have a prophetic aspect, which for Forster was indebted to 'bardic influence' or 'song,' to poetry understood less as metrical form than as a certain relationship to meaning (Forster, 2005). In this volume of *Insights*, the novelist Andrew Crumey asks 'Can Novelists Predict the Future?' Crumey responds that factual predictions – such as the number of moons which Jonathan Swift predicted would be discovered around Mars – may be little more than lucky guesses; however, novelists can be 'prophetic' in the sense of being especially attuned to, or in touch with, the presence of the future in the present time (so that, Crumey suggests, the mark of true prophecy may be that the prophet does not witness its fulfilment). There is a sense here of the novelist as somebody who, like the inspired poet, is in contact with an extraordinary source. Furthermore, one is reminded of the importance in notions of poetic prophecy of time – or of an extra-temporal perspective – of, for example, Hesiod recounting 'what will be and what was before' (as in my epigraph), of Homer simultaneously present in different times and thus able to recount the distant past to people of the future (Graziosi, also this volume of *Insights*), or indeed of Allen Ginsberg 'sounding' a 'Beauty invisible to my Century' (epigraph) and explaining that 'What prophecy is is not that you actually know that the bomb will fall in 1942. It's that you know and feel something which somebody knows and feels in a hundred years. And maybe articulate it in a hint – [a] concrete way that they can pick up on in a hundred years' (Plimpton, 1999, p. 45). The point of noting these parallels between Crumey's words and those of various poets, past and present, is to indicate that we can put to one side questions of specifically poetic form: the novel, too, may be a 'revelation' in the strong sense of the term, and prose texts can be suitable objects for a study of poetic prophecy. What is at stake is not simply the 'mythology' of the poet, or poetry narrowly understood, but rather ideas about literature more generally.

Viewed from a historical perspective, it is, in any case, misleading to consider the connection between poetry and prophecy as relevant only to what we in the modern West most often term poetry, that is, as the Oxford English Dictionary puts it, 'composition in verse or some comparable patterned arrangement of language in which the expression of feelings and ideas is given intensity by the use of distinctive style and rhythm [...] traditionally associated with explicit formal departure from the patterns of ordinary speech or prose.' Histories which trace concepts of prophetic poetry move between periods where 'poetry' is clearly aligned with verse and those in which it is not. For example, the Bible, and especially the books of the prophets, were crucial in conceptualising a link between poetry and prophecy, yet the dividing line between what we call biblical 'poetry' and biblical 'prose' is far from clear. Moreover, it is difficult to assert that the Hebrew prophets express themselves in poetic form. Most songs, proverbs and sayings in the Bible are characterised by the repeated use of a terse binary sentence. By contrast, much of the prophetic utterance of Jeremiah, Ezekiel and many of the 12 minor prophets occupies a kind of stylistic 'middle ground,' in which terse binary sentences blend in with longer, less easily characterised sentences (Kugel, 1990, pp. 3–5).

Furthermore, until at least the eighteenth century, definitions of poetry were current which did not focus on marked language or verse. The Oxford English Dictionary gives one definition of poetry as 'imaginative or creative literature in general; fable, fiction'; the definition is supported by quotations from up to 1601. D'Alembert's 1765 definition in the *Encyclopédie* (XII, 837–8)

accepts verse as a characteristic of poetry but rejects it as a candidate for the essence of poetry, determining that the latter lies rather in imitation. In the Renaissance, poetry was, following the publication of Aristotle's *Poetics*, increasingly separated from the art of versification (Castor, 1964). Aristotle located the distinctiveness of poetry in *mimesis*, interpreted by the Renaissance to mean imitation of life or other authors, or a vivid portrayal; poetry written in prose was possible (Castor, 1964, pp. 51–76; Vickers, 1988, pp. 719–20; Chevolet, 2007, pp. 263–504). Poetry was also frequently defined precisely on the grounds of inspiration (so that the poet-prophet analogy risks becoming no more than a tautology), and it was commonplace to distinguish poets from mere versifiers on these grounds (Castor, 1964, pp. 24–36; Lecointe, 1993, pp. 217–374). Furthermore, prose could be described as 'poetic' (Lecointe, 1989), and, in the case of François Rabelais at least, even the author of prose could be 'place[d] among the poets' (Pasquier et al., 1996, vol. II, p. 1410).

Why does this matter? One might say, simply, that what is meant by 'poetry' shifts over time, and that competing definitions of it tend to be available in any one period, not least the contemporary one. Nonetheless, the works which a given culture identifies as poetic are those which are most likely also to be designated prophetic (exceptions like Crumey or E. M. Forster notwithstanding). However, it is perhaps not enough to supplement the poetry-prophecy narrative with this caveat. It may be worth re-examining implications of the poetry-prophecy connection in historical periods which defined poetry differently from the way we moderns define it, but in which modern scholars have focused on poetry according to the modern definition. In fact, one of my case studies focuses on François Rabelais, a sixteenth-century writer of prose fiction, who in 1607 was placed by Étienne Pasquier 'among the poets.' Furthermore, the shifting boundaries of 'poetry' over time might mean that the poetry-prophecy story has implications for conceptualisations of 'literature' more broadly, now as well as then. That is, if modes of writing we would define now as 'literary' could previously be conceptualised as 'poetic,' then the conceptualisation of 'literature' may owe something to past conceptualisations of 'poetry.' This is one reason why the period of the Renaissance and Reformation – which could identify prose as 'poetic' and a writer of prose fiction as a 'poet' – seems to me a promising focus for a study of poetic prophecy. In what follows, I will indicate other reasons for this focus, by means of three observations which might, at first sight at least, seem to belong to quite separate histories: of literature, on the one hand, and of religion and society, on the other.

### *The Renaissance and Reformation*

First, the Renaissance attributed considerable importance to the conceptualisation of 'poetry' as 'inspired,' and is an important moment in the story of the poetry-prophecy connection, yet we do not know as much as we might about the ways in which this connection was understood, or the variety of things which were done with it. In the French context, modern scholars know well the shapes the idea took for the famous Pléiade poets, such as Pierre de Ronsard or Pontus de Tyard, who, in the second half of the 1540s and first half of the 1550s, made reasonably programmatic statements about it, in treatises as well as within their poems (Castor, 1964, pp. 24–50; Lecointe, 1993, pp. 349–65, 2001; Pot, 1990, 1997; Silver, 1973). The poetic activity in which they were engaged at that time, and which they thereby justified and promoted, was primarily Petrarchist love lyric, as well as Pindaric odes. However, notions of poetic prophecy are present in other sixteenth-century French literature as well, both before and after the 1540s and 1550s. For example, they appear in poetry focused on explicitly Christian themes and in which, therefore, the implications of comparing oneself to a prophet are potentially very different. They also appear in prose. For example, as is clear in the epigraph at the beginning of this essay, Rabelais plays with the notion of his own status as a prophet; while

this is certainly at least in part in the comic mode, this should not blind us to the possibility that something important might be going on.

Such versions of the idea of poetic prophecy have been much less examined and analysed than those promoted by the Pléiade. At the same time, current research points to some intriguing possibilities, particularly concerning the role of literature in relation to Christianity, at the time, of course, of the religious reflection and confessional conflict of the Reformation. For example, Lecointe hypothesises a link between the shape of French versions of poetic prophecy, on the one hand, and reformist or Protestant ideas of grace on the other (Lecointe, 1993, pp. 351–3, 368–9). To put it somewhat schematically, reflection on the inspiration/art opposition in poetry and on the grace/works opposition in theology may have affected each other. Critical attention has also focused on presentations of prophecy in poems engaged in confessional polemic: the *Tragiques*, the famous epic poem by the militant Calvinist Agrippa D'Aubigné, which places the events of the French Wars of Religion within the framework of Christian history and its apocalyptic end (Junod, 2008, among others), or Ronsard's polemical exchanges with Genevan theologians (Crosby, 1971; Pot, 1998; Quint, 1983, pp. 24–30). Some of this research addresses in interesting ways the relationships between prophetic poets and figures in the theological or political domain who might be perceived as prophets or themselves lay claim to prophecy: this is an issue which would be worthy of more sustained attention. Finally, the relationship between poetic prophecy and Christian prophecy is crucial, I think, in relation to literature beyond the specific case of polemical literature: both my case studies suggest, although in different ways, that this relationship is important to how these literary texts reflect on their role.

The relationship between poetic prophecy and other sorts of prophecy brings me to a second reason for studying poetic prophecy in the Renaissance and Reformation. While prophecy played an important role in thinking about poetry and sometimes prose fiction, at the same time, outside of the 'literary' domain, the sixteenth century witnessed an intense interest in prophecy, inextricably interlinked with the Reformation (Barnes, 1988; Crouzet, 1990, *passim*; Hotson, 2000; Niccoli, 1990, among others). For a start, the upheavals of the Reformation seemed so significant that many people thought that they must be part of the final phase of history, and that the prophets of the Reformation (whether seen as false or true) must be those expected to arrive as the Apocalypse approached. Moreover, as religious beliefs and dogma were contested, prophecy provided an important tool for use in competing attempts to determine Christian truth. There was a revival of prophetic readings of biblical texts such as Revelation and Daniel (Backus, 2000), as well as of medieval prophets such as Joachim of Fiore (Reeves, 1969, 1976). Prophecy and interpretations of prophecy abounded, and so did accusations of false prophecy. Renewed attention was paid to astrology, apocalypticism, portents, signs and divination. For this reason, it could be fruitful to engage in a sustained reading of the two contexts of literary history and religious history together, considering what it means that, at one and the same time, prophecy was becoming more important in both the literary and the religious and political domains: what different sorts of functions did various modes of prophecy serve, and what sorts of relationship existed between them?

The point here is not to suggest any watertight division between literary and non-literary prophecy. Indeed it would be impossible to draw an absolute dividing line between 'prophecy' which is literature, on the one hand, and prophecy which relates political or religious futures and histories, on the other. For a start, as we have seen, religious and political topics were treated in literature, including poetry. Conversely, some political or religious prophecies which we moderns would not define as literature nonetheless have literary qualities, and a relationship to literary texts. Nostradamus composed enigmatic prophecies in verse, described himself 'as



if transported by a poetic fury' (Crouzet, 2011, cited p. 92), and has been compared to writers we consider as literary, including Rabelais and various poets (Carlstedt, 2005; Crouzet, 2011). Prophecies of political import which circulated in England at around the same time were also 'figurative and literary,' so that 'the literary text played a significant role in political events' (Jansen, 1991, pp. 155–6). Nonetheless, there were certainly different modes of prophecy and, moreover, some defined themselves in relation to others. My analyses of sixteenth-century literary texts, like those by Du Bartas and Rabelais, will suggest that they explore the status and role of their own 'prophecy' in part by differentiating it from other contemporary modes of prophecy available.

Finally, as intimated above, a third reason for studying poetic prophecy in this period is that it defined poetry in a number of ways, of which verse and metre were only one possibility. Thus, as the example of Rabelais suggests, the conceptualisation of poetry could be employed to think through the status or nature of prose literature. This is all the more likely given that imaginative or fictional prose and poetry did not belong to an overarching category of 'literature' like ours. Sixteenth-century texts which we call 'literary' might have belonged to particular genres such as romance or epic, or have been conceived as a mixture of such genres; but they were not cut off from other sorts of prose by inclusion in a category of 'literature.' 'Literature', with the sense of literary works and specifically 'writing which has claim to consideration on the ground of beauty of form or emotional effect' is, as the Oxford English Dictionary (OED) notes, of very recent emergence in both English and French. 'Literature' and 'littérature' meant knowledge of texts and authors, or the mastery of reading and writing (Caron, 1992, pp. 162–84; OED). The French expression 'belles lettres' was defined primarily by aesthetic qualities, and is undoubtedly a forerunner of our category of 'literature,' but even that was born only in the first half of the seventeenth century (Caron, 1992, pp. 102–50), and imported into English in the eighteenth (OED). In the absence of a category like 'literature,' then, notions of 'poetry' were undoubtedly important for conceptualising the status and nature of texts which we would describe as literary.

Indeed, as the Renaissance sought increasingly to think through the status of vernacular prose literature, in the context of the rise of national identities and of a sense that languages and literatures could be symbols of these, one strand of this – in the Italian and French contexts at least – was to conceptualise prose in terms borrowed from poetry. As Jean Lecointe showed (1989), while the Greeks and the Romans had evoked the poetic aspects of some prose works, especially those of Plato, some Renaissance writers inspired by Neoplatonism went further than the Greeks and the Romans in that they formulated a notion of 'poetic prose' and, moreover, identified their own prose as poetic. In late fifteenth-century Italy, 'poetic prose' was explicitly thematised by Marsilio Ficino, the enormously influential commentator on Plato. In France, in the 1540s and 1550s, writers such as Hélienne de Crenne, François Habert and Louis Le Caron described their own writing as 'poetic prose.' What they seem to have meant by 'poetic' is not primarily a particular rhythm or metre or syntax, although such matters were implicated: rather 'poetic' appears first and foremost to indicate inspiration, as well as (to varying degrees) figures, fictions and allegories. It is in this early sixteenth-century context (if slightly prior to publications by some of the writers mentioned above) that Rabelais, a writer of prose fiction, playfully explores the possibility that he is a prophet.

Such issues invite consideration in different European contexts and literatures. Nonetheless, the French Wars of Religion are one reason why France is a significant starting point, insofar as tensions in France generated particular modes of literary prophecy. Although the texts in my initial case studies are not primarily polemical (and, in one case, carefully avoid confessional polemic almost entirely), the Wars of Religion, or the tension immediately preceding them, are

relevant to both. The two texts to which I have alluded as case studies were both very widely read in the sixteenth century and both originally written in French. They are, however, very different from each other: Guillaume de Saluste Du Bartas's *Week, or the Creation of the World* is a natural-philosophical (scientific) and religious poetic epic of Creation, whereas François Rabelais wrote a series of comic prose fictions about giants called Gargantua and Pantagruel. The texts were also published in rather different circumstances: Rabelais's fictions were all first published prior to the outbreak of the French Wars of Religion which would dominate the second half of the sixteenth century, whereas the *Sepmaine* was first published in 1578. Despite their differences, both texts have something to tell us about the implications of conceptualising literature as prophecy. In the remainder of this essay, I will describe these texts and briefly gesture towards some of the questions which will be explored more fully in later essays.<sup>2</sup>

### *Prophecy and Biblical Poetry: Du Bartas*

Du Bartas presented his poetry as 'in part prophetic' (1935–40, vol. I, p. 220). Poetry was a 'pure celestial gift' available to no-one 'if sacred fire has not seized his breast' (1935–40, vol. II, pp. 174–5), and Du Bartas had been chosen to receive this gift: 'Clear source of learning, soul of the Universe, / Since it has pleased you to choose the humble tone of my verse, / To sing your fair praise: make flow from my pen / Celestial nectar' (Du Bartas, 1935–40, vol. II, p. 223). Du Bartas's 'Uranie' (1574), or 'Urania,' a poem about poetry, argued that since poetry comes from God it should be used to celebrate him (1935–40, vol. II, pp. 172–85). Thus the poet's most widely celebrated poem, *The Week, or Creation of the World*, recounted the Creation, following Genesis, while also treating natural philosophy and natural history. The poem is divided into seven books, called 'days,' each of which deals with the phenomena God created on that particular day of Creation. The poem was first published in 1578, and rapidly became a European bestseller. It was published in at least 200 French editions between 1578 and 1632 (Banderier, 1996; Bellenger, 1993, pp. 163–7), and inspired a flurry of imitations (Dauphiné, 1983, pp. 23–6), two commentaries in French, translations into English, Dutch, Latin, German, Italian, Polish, Danish and Swedish (Bellenger, 1993, pp. 158–61), and a number of imitations (some of which focused on the Apocalypse rather than the Creation).

The *Week* provides an opportunity to probe the implications of poetic prophecy for a poet who treats Christian themes. In the latter part of the sixteenth century a movement emerged – in which Du Bartas is an absolutely central figure, not only in France but also elsewhere in Europe – to write poetry about Christian themes, to use the divine gift of poetic inspiration to sing about the divine rather than about Petrarchan ladies or other idols, as had been the dominant tendency earlier in the century. Christian poetry of this period has been the subject of a number of fascinating books which show how poets moulded the Christian material which they borrowed, so that their poems constitute more than simply versified equivalent versions of an original prose text (Bourgeois, 2006; Cave, 1969; Jeanneret, 1969). However, more can be said about how such poets reflect on poetic prophecy and how this contributes to their shaping of the Christian material. We know rather more about the use of poetic prophecy by poets who wrote primarily on more secular topics, or on religious matters from a polemical standpoint. Du Bartas, on the other hand, was neither a secular nor a polemical writer. Significantly, he was widely read by both Protestants and Catholics. He wrote about biblical subject matter, while carefully avoiding matters of confessional contention. At the same time, some of the specificities of what Du Bartas does with poetic prophecy are, I will argue, indebted to his Calvinism. The apocalyptic poets who follow Du Bartas and are influenced by him – who include a member of the hardline Catholic League, a Catholic Augustinian canon regular and a militant Protestant – similarly engage with the model of prophetic poet, but with rather different results.

What interests me in particular in Du Bartas and his imitators are their various treatments of history and time, and the ways these appear to be linked to a notion of poetic prophecy. Du Bartas and his imitators treat not simply Christian themes but rather Christian history more specifically. In his principal bestseller, the poem under discussion here, Du Bartas treats in particular the beginning of that history, the Creation; the end of that history, the Apocalypse, also emerges at various points in Du Bartas's poem, and then becomes central in a number of imitations of it. Du Bartas and others might thus be compared with biblical prophets such as Moses or John of Patmos; after all, Moses had been described, for example by Thomas Sébillet in his 1548 *Art poétique français*, as the 'first divine poet' (Sébillet, 1990, p. 54). And, as noted earlier in this essay, and suggested by my epigraphs, particular approaches to time and temporal perspectives often seem to be a key part of literary prophecy. This is very much the case for Du Bartas. In the citation used as an epigraph at the start of this essay, which is taken from the opening lines of his poem, it is poetic prophecy or inspiration granted by the Christian God which will enable the poet to recount the birth of the world to his descendants. The Christian poet thus resembles the archetypal inspired poet, Homer, who – thanks, in his case, to the Muses – also sang of a distant past for a distant future (Graziosi, this volume of *Insights*). And, again, like the *Iliad* (Graziosi), Du Bartas's poem 'telescopes' time. The poet seems to be able to view different times in the same space, the prelapsarian world in the present one, along also with indications of the end of the world. In short, I aim to show that Du Bartas and other Christian 'epic' poets explore history, time, Apocalypse and Creation in distinctive ways which are indebted to models of poetic prophecy, and which can be profitably compared to other Reformation modes of prophecy, and read as a distinctive contribution to the Reformation fascination with chronology, time and Apocalypse.

### *Prophecy and Comic Prose: Rabelais*

Rabelais's writing is enormously different from Du Bartas's Christian poetry, although it was similarly very popular both in France and in translation. For a start, it is in prose. More importantly perhaps, while it certainly contains serious meanings, including about the religious domain, its subject matter is not biblical and believed to be true, but rather fictional and telling of giants. It is also very funny, with humour ranging from the bawdy to the sharply satirical. However, one way of getting a hold on this tricky relationship between serious meaning and comic fiction might be provided precisely by an analysis of Rabelais's suggestions about prophecy; at the same time, Rabelais's comic fictions also offer a very different example from Du Bartas's poems of what could be done with poetic prophecy in the Renaissance and Reformation.

Rabelais is unquestionably interested in prophecy, and in exploring the claims of different modes of prophecy or inspired discourse. This is apparent in his authorship of mock prognostications, but also in his fictions about giants, which often (especially in the *Third Book*) foreground episodes of possible prophecy or divination, and in which characters encounter and debate potentially prophetic texts, such as the apparently apocalyptic 'Prophetic Enigma' poem which concludes *Gargantua*. Most importantly for my purposes here, though, Rabelais posits the status of his own work as prophecy. In the prologue to the first edition of the first of Rabelais's fictions to be published, the 1532 edition of *Pantagruel*, Rabelais likened himself directly to a biblical prophet, John in the Book of Revelation, whose visions form the basis of the Christian conception of the Apocalypse, and were of great interest in the heightened apocalyptic atmosphere of the early Reformation. Rabelais writes: 'I am speaking like Saint John of the Apocalypse: "quod vidimus testamur"' (Rabelais, 2006, p. 13);<sup>3</sup> the Latin text is a direct quotation from the Gospel of John (3.11, 'we testify about what we have seen'; cf also the first

words of the First Epistle of John), who was believed in the Renaissance to be identical with the John who was author of the Book of Revelation.

Rabelais contrasts his 'speaking like John of the Apocalypse' with speaking like the Jews do about the Law. As critics have observed (Duval, 1991, pp. 6–9), this evokes a Pauline distinction between two modes of understanding, between the literalness of the Old Testament and the spirituality of the New Testament. In order to understand the implications of this, we should note that Rabelais places his claim to speak like John in the context of a discussion of the truth status of his book, and contrasts this mode of speaking not only with speaking like the Jews do about the Law, but also with lying. The implication seems to be that John on Patmos – and Rabelais (or his narrator) – 'tell the truth' in a non-literal or indirect way: Rabelais points to a model of literary 'prophecy' – or fiction – as an indirect presentation of truth. Some key episodes within the fictions, such as the Papimaniacs and their holy book and 'Good Christian' pears, also appear (for reasons which I cannot develop here) to be bound up with a notion of a literary prophecy whose truth is grounded in fiction and in funny, creative and semantically duplicitous uses of language. Similarly, Rabelais's repeated criticisms of false prophets – or *cagotz* – also point to a literary mode of prophecy, as an alternative to false prophecy, because of ways in which the *cagotz* are opposed to Rabelais and to the readers who 'believe' his fictions. In short, then, Rabelais explores a literary 'prophecy' which builds upon and varies notions of the Pauline Word by foregrounding fiction and semantic ambiguity. It is this which my current research aims to analyse.

This Rabelaisian literary 'prophecy' cannot be adequately interpreted without engaging with issues around other sorts of Reformation prophecy, such as the violence generated by claims to religious truth, or the dichotomization in confessional polemic between 'us' and the hypocrites who ape the godly (a dichotomization which Rabelais's opposition between us and them recalls, but with important differences). So, in part, my research aims to show what could be done with literary prophecy in the context of the Reformation and its various other modes of prophecy. At the same time, this work might also form part of a more forward looking history. I have suggested that we might locate in Rabelais a mode of 'prophecy' concerned with semantic ambiguity. This sounds not unlike some modern conceptions of literature as a mode of writing which contains uncertain meaning, yet in some sense expresses truths. Certainly pre-modern writing which seems 'literary' to us, insofar as it puts a lot of strain on language and meaning, is often, as is the case with Rabelais, involved with questions of religious truth and how to approach it. This does not in itself imply that writers like Rabelais have themselves any concept of their writing which resembles our concept of literature. However, if writers such as Rabelais do conceive of their writing as a mode of prophecy which seeks truth through semantic ambiguity, perhaps we might consider this as something like a prehistory of literature: Rabelais's 'literary prophecy' is concerned with religious truth and thus differs in that respect from the modern secular category of literature, yet it does seem to be a mode of language perceived to differ from other sorts in its uses of ambiguity and fiction to approach truth. One working hypothesis, then, is that prophecy (and the apocalyptic) have something to do with a nascent concept of writing which is something like our notion of literature. Thus the Renaissance and Reformation might – even in the absence of a category of 'literature' – be an important moment in the conceptualisation of literature, as well as of poetic or literary 'prophecy.' At the same time, the Renaissance and Reformation is a significant moment in which to analyse also the role of literature, or literary 'prophecy,' alongside other modes of prophecy.



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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Hesiod (2006) *Hesiod*. Edited and translated by Most, G. W. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press. Two volumes, Vol. I, p. 4, II. pp. 32–4. Ginsberg, A. (2009) *Howl, Kaddish and Other Poems*. London: Penguin, p. 114. Du Bartas G. d. S. (1935–40) *Works*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, Vol. II, p. 195. Translations from Du Bartas are my own. Rabelais, F. (2006) *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. Edited and translated by Screech, M. A. London: Penguin, p. 13. Rabelais, F. (1994) *Œuvres complètes*. Huchon, M. (ed.) Paris: Gallimard, p. 1238, n. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Studies of Rabelais and Du Bartas are scheduled to appear in *Literature and Theology* in December 2012, and in Gilby, E. and White, P. (eds.) (forthcoming) *Method and Variation*. Oxford: Legenda.

<sup>3</sup> The study of Rabelais is scheduled to appear in *Literature and Theology* in December 2012.

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