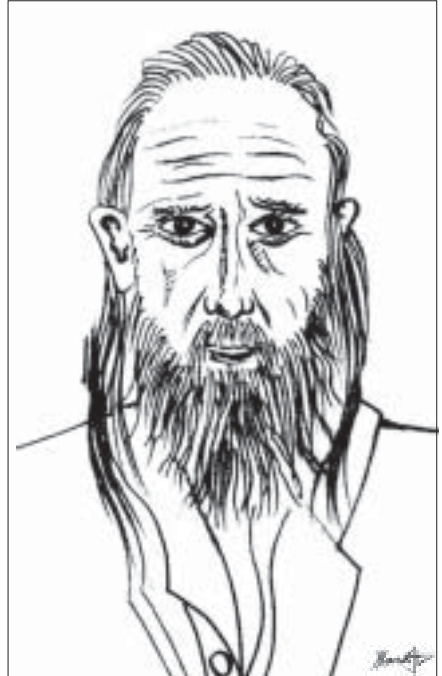


Looking for a place to stand: Jerusalem – a dance opera by Michael Parmenter



Auckland – City of Sails, tourist gateway to New Zealand.



“Auckland, you great arsehole.”¹

*green volcanoes
And the whisper of the human heart.
Boredom is the essence of your
death.*²

Not quite a tale of two cities, but certainly a juxtaposition of two different perspectives – in this case, a postcard portrayal of Auckland and Baxter’s “Ode to Auckland” – and a feeling that the friction created between the contradictions somehow penetrates to the core of urban life and human experience. The city – any city – is simultaneously Babylon, a place of alienation, exile, estrangement, and violence, and Jerusalem, a place defined by promise and filled with possibility.

Poets and artists work in the tension created by these contradictions and, as a result, their works often press upon their audience two related questions: What does it mean to be human?;



Auckland – New Zealand’s largest and most cosmopolitan city, the centre of commerce.

Auckland, the sound of the opening and shutting of bankbooks,
The thudding of refrigerator doors,
The ripsaw voices of Glen Eden mothers yelling at their children,
The chugging noise of masturbation from the bedrooms of the bourgeoisie,

*The voices of dead teachers droning in dead classrooms,
The TV voice of Mr. Muldoon,
The farting noise of the trucks that grind their way down Queen Street
Has drowned forever the song of Tangaroa on a thousand beaches,
The sound of the wind among the*

and, What form does hope take?

Art, in this context, is not to be equated with merely producing an object of beauty, but rather is to be regarded as a vehicle through which the basic human quest for hope and meaning might be pursued. Because it is a quest that the artists themselves are engaged in, their works are often heavily autobiographical, borne out of a deep personal struggle. Tortured souls, we

sometimes call them – the likes of Baxter and McCahon – poets and artists whose genius lies not just in the techniques of their craft, but also in the extent to which the contradictions they struggle with somehow enable

the rest of us to look at life differently than before and question certain assumptions about what our society would have us believe and how it would have us act.

In the same year that he presented his autobiographical work, *A Long Undressing*, Michael Parmenter produced the theatrical spectacle, *Jerusalem*, which played to packed houses and critical acclaim around the country. Surprisingly perhaps, in an age when New Zealand society is distancing itself from its Judeo-Christian roots, the overtly biblical and theological material that exerted a powerful influence over the dance, both structurally and in content, did not seem to have an adverse effect on the way the dance was received by the public. Possibly this was because of the respect Michael commands as a dancer and choreographer. Possibly, too, when we consider Michael's life, as many people used to consider James K. Baxter's life, we don't get the impression of someone who is trying to be more religious. Rather,

we see someone who is struggling to come to terms with his own humanity and to become more human. It is this struggle that people relate to most profoundly, for they recognise in his struggle something of their own.

Dancing on a fault line is how Michael described his life in *A Long Undressing*, as he talked in very personal terms about his desperate search for a place to stand, a piece of

“Dancing on a fault line is how Michael described his life in A Long Undressing, as he talked in very personal terms about his desperate search for a place to stand, a piece of ground that might bear his weight.”

ground that might bear his weight. *Jerusalem* could be regarded as an expansion of that motif, as Michael, drawing on the Psalms of King David and the poetry of William Blake and James K. Baxter, depicts a movement from alienation to homecoming, from despair to hope, from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Following the Prelude, the dance

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consists of three sections: Babylon, Jerusalem, and New Jerusalem.

Act I: Babylon

We begin with Babylon, the centre of the ancient Babylonian Empire, which in 587 BCE overran Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and deported the people, thereby ushering in a 67 year period that, for the Israelites, became known as the Exile, a physical dislocation and spiritual crisis that etched itself deeply into their collective memory

and consciousness. Psalm 137 captures something of the deep-seated despair and intense loathing of all that Babylon had come to represent:

By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our harps. For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? ... O daughter Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!
An important

aspect of the Israelite anguish during this period was coming to terms with the feeling of divine judgement and abandonment. The real crisis was not so much physical as spiritual. It was a crisis that demanded interpretation. The people needed to come to terms with their past and how they came to be in Exile; they needed to ask if the crisis they were experiencing had any purpose (which would at least make it bearable); and they needed to know what the future held (Would they be restored? Was there a hope worth holding on

to?).

Exilic prophets such as Isaiah and Ezekiel played a pivotal role here, not only at the time, but also subsequently, as the canon of Hebrew Scripture was formed and their proclamations were preserved in written form. This canon of Scripture came to include post-Exilic voices too, like the author of the book of Daniel who, from his vantage point of the second century BCE, portrayed the Exile in terms of a burning fiery furnace, a furnace of

pain, horror, and devastation of the soul. The Israelites had watched the fire of God destroy their beloved city. Now the fire had pursued them into the horrors of the Exile. But fire does not only destroy; it also refines and purifies. The fires of the Exile were nothing less than the consuming love of the God of Israel who was indeed more powerful than the Babylonians and their God.

This apocalyptic portrayal of Babylon was carried over into the Book of Revelation, which concludes the Christian Scriptures. There, Babylon is described in terms of a Great Whore, a large, simple caricature that denotes the powerful, seductive presence of those who would obstruct or subvert the life that God intends for humankind. In employing this image, the author of the Book of Revelation is talking about Babylon not as an historical fact but rather as a metaphorical reality. Babylon, the city of ancient Mesopotamia, has become a metaphor for the Roman Empire. Babylon, viewed from the perspective of the marginalised and dispossessed, represents a way of life that is inherently destructive even as it seductively offers progress, comfort, security and pleasure. Babylon represents a domination system that claims to give life, yet is frighteningly coercive and unrelenting in its demand for conformity and subservience.

For William Blake, Babylon was late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century London with the “dark satanic mills” of the industrial revolution. For Baxter, it was Auckland. This is given powerful expression in *Jerusalem*, in which Babylon (alternately London and Auckland) is depicted musically, poetically and visually as a city with walls that imprison its inhabitants, denying them freedom and turning them in upon themselves, a place that generates discord, exploitation, conflict and violence, a soulless, dehumanising place where people

become like the machines that dominate their lives, a place of mind-deadening banality and indifference, a place where people live in squalor and are enslaved by addiction, a city “buildd in the waste and bounded in human desolation”.

At the centre of this dark scene a paraphrase of Psalm 88 is rendered, a lament that takes the audience beyond a mere portrayal of humanity’s plight, as represented in the Babylon metaphor, to utter a dramatic, vicarious cry of despair and desolation. This cry is underscored by Baxter’s despairing, haunting conclusion: “In forty years, I haven’t found a cure for being human.”

Act II: Jerusalem

By the end of the 1960s, having spent most of his adult life in cities, Baxter had become disillusioned with urban life which, he believed,

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created not a community of neighbours but a society of strangers. He lamented the hold that money and possessions had over people, the social conformity that was generated under the name of education, and the systemic disregard for the dignity and worth of the human person, especially those who didn’t fit the mainstream conception of normal. Babylon, the reality of urban life, enslaved people and exerted a terrible toll on their lives. Baxter longed for an alternative, and he found it in Jerusalem – not the city in Palestine, but the mission station on the Wanganui River. The idea of going to Jerusalem and establishing a community there came to him in a dream. It was like a call.

Act II of *Jerusalem* opens with a portrayal of this call. As Baxter, otherwise referred to in the

programme as the Prophet (dancer: Taane Mete) sleeps, the spirit of King David, otherwise referred to as the Poet (dancer: Michael), comes to him, encircling, embracing, caressing, supporting, and eventually carrying him – effectively drawing him into a new mode of existence, implanting in him a vision.

The vision that Baxter set about implementing in 1969 was for an authentic community, a microcosm of possibility, based on five spiritual aspects of Maori communal life: arohanui (the love of the many); manuhiritanga (hospitality to the guest and stranger); korero (speech that begets peace and understanding); matewa (the night life of the soul); and mahi (work undertaken from communal love).

Baxter was especially concerned to provide a place where young people, whose parents were unable to accept or adjust to their movement

towards independence, would find unconditional acceptance and encouragement. These were the nga mokai, the orphans. Then there were the nga raukore, those who like trees that

have been stripped bare by the heavy winds of the world – the substance abusers and addicts, the young who felt disenfranchised by, and disillusioned with New Zealand society.

While the formation of such a community will inevitably be driven by a certain idealism that is unsustainable over a long period of time, the reality of communal living in close-knit and fairly squalid conditions also produces an earthy realism and, in Baxter’s case, an earthy spirituality. This is evident in “Jerusalem Sonnets”. Michael’s inclusion of a selection of extracts from these sonnets as Baxter’s sense of call deepens has the two-fold effect of highlighting the sheer physicality of the task (“Lord, do you or don’t you expect me to put up with lice?”) and the magnitude of the struggle (“Those hard steps

taken one by one lead out of all protection; ... to be is to die the death of others, having loosened the safe coat of becoming”).

As the extracts from the Sonnets are recited, the near-naked form of the spirit of David gently undresses Baxter and dons his clothes. At the completion of this sartorial exchange, the two dancers commence a wonderfully tender, grace-full, choreographed movement that culminates in an intertwining of their cruciform bodies, with the Poet gently bearing the weight of the Prophet. As this dance, appropriately entitled “Stripped”, unfolds, Sonnet 37

forms a musical backdrop. It is a Sonnet in which Baxter testifies to all that God has taken away from him, not in a negative sense, for this God, Baxter says, is kind to his infirmity, but in the sense that, as we are progressively stripped of those things that define our vain attempts to secure our human autonomy, so we find ourselves becoming more open to others and to God – that is to say, in a paradoxical way, through this journey of subtraction, we become more, not less, human. In losing ourselves we find ourselves.

There is a resonance here between Baxter’s experience and the biblical notion of kenosis, or self-emptying, which is most vividly expressed in the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Philippians, where readers are exhorted to let the same mind be in them that was in Christ Jesus, “who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but *emptied himself*, taking the form of a slave being born in human likeness; and being found in human form, he *humbled himself* and became obedient

to the point of death – even death on a cross.” According to Paul, then, Christ would have his followers walk with him the descending way of humility and service, rather than the ascending way of power and prestige.

Baxter talked about his own experience of kenosis in the “Jerusalem Daybook”: “One learns the theology of kenosis,” he said, “not out of a book but by tramping

“Catharsis has been reached – the realisation that the cure for being human cannot come from within, but must come from outside of ourselves.”

forty miles with sore feet in the rain. It is a different man who takes his coat off at the end of the journey. The soul has to be wounded as well as the body. Wounds are like fountains in the soul. Through our wounds we achieve availability.”

Like many mystics and ascetics before him, Baxter found, as he embraced the theology and praxis of kenosis, that he identified more and

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more with the crucified Christ, even to the extent that he perceived the voice of his Lord beginning to speak through him. He signed off his “Jerusalem Sonnets” by referring to himself as “Hemi te tutua”, Hemi the nothing. As his physical health deteriorated, he began to see his impending death as the price he must pay for the love of *nga mokai* and *nga raukore*, and he perceived himself as a kind of lightning

conductor of their suffering, their tensions flowing into him “as electricity flows into the wire that conducts it to the ground.” Their thoughts became his thoughts, their pain his pain, their blood his blood. Such was his identification with them that it seemed to Baxter that he had given them the very marrow of his bones to eat.

The exchange motif, which features so prominently in *Jerusalem*, has strong biblical and theological roots. The Apostle Paul, for example, spoke of the gospel being grounded in a divine-human exchange, in which Christ is said to have taken upon himself that which

is ours – the poverty of the human spirit – in order that we might share in that which is his – divine peace and righteousness.

In *Jerusalem*, Michael chooses to open the section that he subtitles “The Exchange” with a paraphrase of Psalm 51, which is said to have been written by King David after his adulterous and exploitative relationship with Bathsheba had

been exposed by the prophet Nathan. The Psalm is simultaneously a plea for divine mercy and an expression of deep yearning to be created afresh with a clean heart and a new spirit. Nothing is held back. The most striking thing about this psalm is

the totality of the psalmist’s vulnerability. The time for self-justifying and self-serving discourse, having failed to convince, has run its course. David has been brought to a point where he realises that no amount of selective amnesia, spin-doctoring, positive thinking and political manoeuvring can deal with the truth of who he is and what he has done. Something fresh is required, some kind of exchange

perhaps, wherein the burden of guilt and the sheer weight of the human condition might be lifted, and in their place a new spirit of mercy, joy and freedom might be allowed to take root. That is the essence of his cry to the Lord. Catharsis has been reached – the realisation that the cure for being human cannot come from within, but must come from outside of ourselves.

As this Psalm is being sung, the nga mokai who have gathered around Baxter disrobe, just as he disrobed. It is as though the psalmist's yearning for a clean heart and a new spirit has become their yearning; his vulnerability has become their vulnerability. And the act of disrobing gives powerful visual suggestion to the idea that the only means of entry into this new form of existence that God intends is through a kind of death and resurrection, as we, like King David, and like Baxter too, must die to the old in order to be born afresh into the new.

It is possible to detect in *Jerusalem's* emphasis upon exchange the influence of Rosemary Haughton (author of *The Passionate God*) and Charles Williams (author of over 40 books, including *The Descent of the Dove*) on Michael's thought. For these authors, the language of exchange is a way of talking about the nature of life itself, for life is inherently relational and interactive. It is dynamic. Nothing exists in isolation. Reality consists of many levels of exchange. The fullest energy of exchange of life is love. But love encounters obstacles. It is often experienced not as a natural exchange of life as in plants or in ordinary sexual feeling, but as concentrated at one point, where it is enabled to break through the highly defended barriers between two conscious, complex and often resistant human beings. When this happens, love becomes a power for transformation.

Haughton and Williams suggest that this is the kind of love which defines the character of God and was revealed most profoundly in the man, Jesus of Nazareth. It is a passionate, romantic love bursting

forth from a passionate, romantic God. It is an energy that smashes through the surface of everyday awareness and makes possible an exchange of spiritual power and knowledge that reaches through every aspect of body, mind and spirit

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to transform the way we look at the world and relate to it. This is the kind of experience that people are recorded in the Gospels as having when they met the One whose life led them to perceive that the very being of God could be defined in terms of Love, and who himself became known and proclaimed as Love Incarnate.

“Perichoresis” comes from the same root as the word “choreography.” It suggests that the inner being of God is characterised by an eternal dance of togetherness. This divine dance is not self-enclosed. It is expansive and inclusive ... ”

Part of the appeal of thinking about God in terms of passionate, romantic love is that it helps us to counter the popular portrayal of God as a stern, demanding Deity standing over us in judgement and

consigning to eternal damnation those who breach the divine Law unless they confess their sins.

One suspects that this paradigm shift was important for Michael on a personal level. A childhood lived under the shadow of ritualised abuse that went by the name of discipline, and a Brethren faith that instilled in him a deep suspicion of the flesh, had left him deeply unhappy and insecure. Without being fully conscious of it at the time, he longed for a new way of understanding himself and his relation to the world. In *A Long Undressing*, he testified to the role that dance played in this regard. Through dance, he learnt that touch with another person did not require him to harden his body in defence or defiance. As he learned to trust other dancers with the weight of his body, or more surprisingly, that others would entrust their weight to him, he began to question the presumption that original sin is a valid starting point for knowledge of the world. The interconnected energies of the dance, the galvanic space between dancers, he says, called his heart to seek relation, as opposed to solitary contemplation, as the core of spiritual living.

In this respect, Michael would find strong support from some of the Church's earliest and most influential theologians who developed the doctrine of the Trinity. John of Damascus, an eighth-century theologian, proposed that there is an exchange of energy between the persons of the Trinity by virtue of their eternal love. He used the word “perichoresis” to describe this dynamic. “Perichoresis” comes from the same root as the word “choreography.” It suggests that the inner being of God is characterised by an eternal dance of togetherness. This divine dance is not self-enclosed. It is expansive and inclusive, constantly seeking to include the whole of creation in its liberating rhythm and movement. The notion of a passionate, romantic God fits well with this ancient doctrine.

In *Jerusalem*, the experience of liberation is conveyed through a

lively, joyous, uninhibited dance during which the nga mokai get dressed again, but not necessarily in their original garments. This cross-dressing scene is suggestive of the Apostle Paul's claim to the church in Galatia that in Christ there is no longer male or female, slave or free, Jew or gentile. In this new Jesus-community the stereotypes, divisions and conflicts that define so much of the dominant culture have given way to a new reconciled unity in which shalom or peace is allowed to flourish.

As nga mokai join in their celebratory dance of freedom, though, Baxter remains strangely detached, for his attention has been drawn to an unclaimed purple garment that lies in the middle of the stage. He lifts it up and prayerfully holds it out, as though he is asking God if he is meant to wear it, and then reverently puts it on. The symbolism is poignant. The gospel records of Jesus' life tell us that when Pontius Pilate ordered Jesus to be flogged, the soldiers wove a crown of thorns and put it on his head, and they dressed him in a purple robe. It was meant as an act of mockery and derision. Yet, paradoxically, it became an unwitting witness to the nature of Jesus' sovereignty and rule – not through the assumption of political power and the use of military force, but rather via the way of suffering love. In this context, Baxter's decision to don the purple garment represents his identification with the suffering of Jesus and his acceptance of the fact that, like Jesus, he too must suffer and die. The path of kenosis has been chosen and the robe of kenosis must be worn.

If there is an increasing likeness between Baxter and Jesus as *Jerusalem* progresses, so too is there an increasing likeness between the nga mokai and Jesus' disciples. Neither group fully understands what is unfolding in their midst. The nga mokai set a table for a celebratory banquet, but the feast is layered with meaning, and it becomes a Last Supper in which Baxter not only presides over the meal, but also in a sense gives

himself to them: "Tribe of the wind," he declares, "you can have my flesh for kai, my blood for drink."

The meal culminates in a very moving dance in which, as Psalm 147 is sung, the nga mokai rise and, taking the lanterns from the table, walk in an interweaving pattern, passing the lanterns from one to another as they cross over. In this simple but effective movement, God's eternal dance of togetherness seems to be encapsulated and the high point of Jerusalem is reached. Psalm 147 gives poignant expression to the movement: "The Lord builds up Jerusalem; he gathers the outcasts of Israel; he heals the brokenhearted, and binds up their wounds. ... Praise the Lord, O Jerusalem! Praise your God, O Zion!"

From the heights to the depths, from the Last Supper to the Garden: The supper is ended. The nga mokai, like Jesus' disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane, have fallen asleep. Baxter alone is awake and, like Jesus, prayerfully makes that final choice to walk the way of the cross or, in the words of William Blake, he chooses to put on "the black shoes of death". Dawn breaks, the nga mokai awaken and, as "Fade away in Morning's Breath" is sung they file past Baxter and, one by one, kiss him farewell.

Here the analogy with Jesus and his disciples is stretched to breaking point. For, in the Garden of Gethsemane, the kiss that Jesus received (from Judas, not from each of the disciples) was not a kiss of farewell; it was a kiss of betrayal, signalling to the soldiers that this was the man they must arrest. One of the confusing aspects of *Jerusalem* is that, whilst it gives admirable expression to the extent to which Baxter identified with the life and suffering of Jesus, even to the point of accepting the reality of impending death, it fails to sufficiently identify and explore the significance of the differences. Thus when we come to the crucifixion scene, which is subtitled "The Sacrifice", it is unclear what is the nature of Baxter's sacrifice and how it might relate to that of the Lamb who "died

for the sins of the world". Indeed, when Baxter died in 1972, he died not at the hands of hostile authorities in a manner that might be construed as sacrificial or redemptive, but from a heart attack after a long period of illness during which time numerous friends and acquaintances spoke of how miserable and dispirited he was. "Ode to Auckland" was his last poem.

Act III: New Jerusalem

The confusion that is generated in relation to the concluding sections of Act II is carried over into Act III, where the nature of the relationship that obtains between Jerusalem and the New Jerusalem is unclear. Possibly one of the reasons for this lack of clarity is that the dance understates the problems that beset Baxter's Jerusalem (and which beset every attempt at communal life), with the result being a rather idealised picture that begs the question: If life in the Jerusalem community was so positive, why did it not prove to be sustainable, and why do we need a New Jerusalem?

To understand the concept of New Jerusalem we need again to turn to the Bible. In the book of Revelation, the ideal city is depicted as the place where human community lives in security and prosperity with the divine in its midst. Babylon represents the perversion of this ideal, what it comes to when, instead of the true God, humanity's self-deification constitutes the heart of the city. Conversely, the New Jerusalem represents the true fulfilment of the ideal of the city, a city truly worth belonging to. It takes up the ideal to which the earthly Jerusalem aspired but failed to realise. The fall of Babylon, which occupies so much of the book of Revelation, is what human opposition to God must come to, but it is not celebrated for its own sake. Babylon must fall so that the New Jerusalem may replace her. Her satanic parody of the ideal of the city must give way to the divine reality. The description of the New Jerusalem is a richly evocative image of a place in which people live in the

immediate presence of God.

The main focus of *Jerusalem's* portrayal of the New Jerusalem is on hope. While hope, by its very nature, is oriented towards the future, we can detect signs of hope in the present, even in the midst of death. As if to

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illustrate the point, Act III opens with a reading of Baxter’s poem “A Song to the Lord God on a Spring Morning”, in which the poet identifies in the soft morning light hints of resurrection glory: “The Maori bones beneath the grass of the graveyard sing of the resurrection day when the chains of darkness will be gone and the yoke of sorrow will be lifted from the necks of the poor.”

Baxter’s poem is followed by more excerpts from William Blake’s epic poem “Jerusalem”, during which the sleeping nga mokai awaken in the semi-darkness, look heavenward and, as the light gradually increases, commence a dream-like dance characterised by lightness of touch and synchronised rhythm. As the light increases so too does the intensity and complexity of the dance, which culminates in the tossing of dancers into the air. The dance is performed against the backdrop of a stunning reproduction of Colin McCahon’s “Otago Peninsula” (1946-9), which conveys a sense of intermingling between heaven and earth. The entire scene comes to a resounding conclusion with the descent of ropes to the pealing sound of church bells. Holding on to the

ropes, the dancers take ever-higher leaps into the air. Gravity is being defied, the weight of earth is giving way to the lightness of heaven, and hope emerges triumphant over death.

Conclusion

Karl Barth, one of the twentieth century’s greatest Church theologians, rated Mozart as his favourite composer. “If I ever get to heaven,” he wrote, “I would first of all seek out Mozart and only then inquire after Augustine, St Thomas, Luther, and Schleiermacher.” Barth loved Mozart because his music contained pain and joy, storm clouds and sunshine, tears and laughter. He “translated into music real life in all its discord. But in defiance of that, and on the sure foundation of God’s good creation, and because of that, he moves always from left to right, never the reverse.”

It is this movement from discord to harmony, from despair to hope, that characterises *Jerusalem*, confirms Michael Parmenter’s reputation as a dancer and choreographer of truly international stature, and propels him into the same orbit as Baxter and McCahon as New Zealand artists whose genius is found not merely in the techniques of their craft but also in the depth of their engagement with intensely personal (and often painful) issues of faith and meaning. *Jerusalem* is simultaneously a social commentary, an historical tribute, a theological work, and an autobiographical statement. What Baxter is to poetry and McCahon is to the visual arts in this country, Parmenter has become to the performing arts. *Jerusalem* stands as one of the great artistic accomplishments of our time.

Endnote

1. J.K. Baxter, “Ode to Auckland” *Collected Poems*, edited by J. Weir (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1995), 597.
2. Baxter, “Ode” 599-600.

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RENOVATIONS

A thought for David Hume concerning feline understanding

(1 Corinthians 15:52)

Peter, the cat, wasn’t pleased with all that was going on. Things were changing right before his whiskers – new spaces and places at every turn. He could walk through walls now, go new ways to old haunts. The old order had been changed, the patterns rearranged and new dimensions added.

So, if cats dream, and if at times it seems to them they might be dreaming, and if they know sometimes that it seems that way to them, then Peter, troubled by this rolling back of what appeared to be forever given, must have had to think hard how he could be sure he wouldn’t just wake up soon and find the floor and walls back as usual, the whole place as it was before he blinked.

Gavin Drew