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The Big Bang and Paradise Lost  
in Michael Symmons Roberts' "Last Words"  
by Thomas Dilworth

[An expansion of an article entitled 'The Big Bang: Physics and Metaphysics', published in *ANQ: A Quarterly Journal of Short Articles, Notes, and Reviews* (7 June 2025), <https://doi.org/10.1080/0895769X.2024.2364274>]

Abstract: Among the best of the poems commemorating the attack on the World Trade Center on 9/11, Roberts' "Last Words" is an important aesthetic achievement. It is subtly unified by motifs of touch, paradise lost, and the Big Bang. Emerging from tv and radio imagery, the Big Bang is symbolically continuous with the explosions that brought down the Twin Towers and is indicative of the 'fallen' condition all mortals endure.

Keywords: 9/11, touch, paradise lost, Big Bang

"Last Words" by Michael Symmons Roberts is probably the most poignantly moving poem of the twenty-first century. It was commissioned by the BBC and read on Radio 4 on the first anniversary of the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center in New York. The poem is currently readable solely online, where it elicits extremely positive responses.<sup>1</sup> Its twelve numbered stanzas, each of between ten and fifteen lines, are probably (but some not necessarily) spoken by different unnamed people who died on 9/11 at the World Trade Center. All but one stanza repeat and expand telephoned, recorded love-messages. Ten of the stanzas incorporate the words "I love you"—in the other two the love-message is implied—in a brief monologue that expands on the calamitous moment of the attack by considering the year that has passed since then. Similarity of messages, incantatory repetition, and affinity between words unify as a single poem what would otherwise be a sequence. In its deep form, this unity is achieved in resonance between images that constitute motifs.

The most thoroughgoing of these motifs consists of images of touch. They range from acts of human intimacy to (implicitly) the violent penetration of the Twin Towers by passenger airplanes, a violent mockery of coitus. A listing of these images—in the footnote below\*—involves repetition of the word “break” or “breaks,” evoking the abrupt breaking off of so many lives as well as the breaking of the Twin Towers. The final word in the poem is “*press*,” not so much concluding the poem as abruptly breaking it off *in medias res*—again like the lives unexpectedly ended. Pressing a button to hear a saved message is an act of love, one physically continuous however with the explosively violent touch that commits mass murder. Physical life encompasses both procreative and destructive extremes.

Evoked by means of subtle allusions and further unifying the intrinsic form of the poem are two aligned motifs deriving from separate origin stories, one cultural the other scientific. These motifs are paradise lost and the Big Bang, the latter aligned also with touch.

Deriving from chapter 3 of the book of Genesis, the myth of paradise lost informs western culture through Christian theology, and visual art and literature, chiefly Milton's epic entitled *Paradise Lost*. In “Last Words” the motif of paradise lost begins in the final word of a speaker's wish that his or her message of love could have been delivered on “slips of sugar paper in / the beaks of birds of paradise” (ii 8-9). The motif develops implicitly in a wish by another victim that his or her family remember, instead of the 9/11 attack, “last Sunday / in the park when summer / leaves were turning” (v 4-6), a sign of fall, homonymous with the Fall (from Grace) and verbally redolent of the Twin Towers falling. He or she also urges memory of the lovely sight and sound of “aeroplanes” that “passed above our garden” (viii 2-4). All parks and gardens have as their underlying archetype the Garden of Eden. The association with Eden and the Fall is strengthened by the poem's focus on lovers or partners or spouses, all (or most) having

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\* These tactile images are: the “Kiss,” and metaphorical foot “prints” and the word “break” in “kiss the kids goodbye ...I lay these voice prints like a set of tracks ... beneath the break-less canopy” (i 2, 5, 8); the metaphorical finger- or foot-“print” in “this / magnetic print” (ii 2-3); the words “fingertips” and “sift” in “fingertips, as delicate as brushes, / sift through sediment” (iii 8-9); the words “silk,” “billowing,” and “pulse” in “a sealed silk bag ... billowing curtains ... you hear the pulse in your wrists” (iv 5, 9, 11), the expression “hand-in-hand,” and the phrase “throwing fists” (v 7, 8), the word “breaks” in “then breaks” “the silence” (vii 14, 9), the action in “you rifle through / black boxes” and the act implied by “the aerial pulled out” (ix 2,7), the words “breaks,” “splinter,” and “struck” in “the network breaks ... “vowels splinter in my throat, / as if struck by a sudden despair” (x 8, 9-10), the expression “tongue-tick” (xi 9), “a kiss so strong / it leaves a bruise,” and finally (the last word) “*press*” (xii 4-5, 13).

Adam and Eve as their archetypes. Giving formal expression to the motif is the numerical evocation by the poem's twelve stanzas of the twelve books of Milton's *Paradise Lost*. In evoking the Fall, "Last Words" is hardly unique among 9/11 poems, for which the myth of paradise lost is a frequent trope (Gray 2).

Allusions also establish the motif of the Big Bang, the modern origin story of secular physics. It is an on-going explosion, the creative and destructive cause and continuation of physicality. The suffering and mortality necessitated by this continuing cosmic event link it with the motif of the Fall. The Big Bang is the physical fact; paradise lost, its myth and metaphor.

Allusions in the poem to the Big Bang first occur in imagery that initially seems utterly mundane and relatively unimportant. In stanza ix, a dead person tells his or her surviving beloved that there was no time to leave a message. (The italicized first line is a refrain introducing each of the twelve stanzas.)

*You have a new message:*

Still, a year on, you rifle through  
black boxes, mail-boxes, voice-boxes,  
in search of my final words.  
You hunt them in the white noise  
between stations on the radio, the blank  
face of a TV with the aerial pulled out.  
You walk in crowds, wondering  
if my words were passed to him,  
or her, as messenger. If I'd had time  
to leave you words, you know, I'm sure,  
they would have been I love you.

The understated, domestic imagery in lines 5-7 here seems solely to stress that the message looked for has not been received. "The blank / face of a TV with the aerial pulled out" and "the white noise / between stations on the radio," echoes the "radios de-tuned" earlier in the poem (vii 6). The imagery contributes to the general theme of noncommunication—all the speaking by the dead throughout the poem is unheard by the living spoken to. But that pales in comparison to what this imagery implies.

In 2001 nearly all televisions were still analogue.<sup>2</sup> The screen of an analogue TV, switched on but without an arial, is not actually "blank" but full of dancing micro-static. As has been known since the mid-1960s, the cause of that static is the electromagnetic microwave radiation of the Big Bang.<sup>3</sup> The same microwave radiation also causes the static of a "de-tuned" "radio between stations." Consequently, "the white noise ... on the radio" and "the blank / face of a TV" are actually live-broadcast receptions of the mega-explosion in which, according to the standard cosmological model, the physical universe originated. The Big Bang introduced and sustains physicality, and is blowing it apart—so that the galaxies and solar systems increasingly move farther away from one another. This on-going explosion is the prototype for the telephoned love message in stanza xi, lines 2-6:

Where did my last words go?  
 Out and out on radio waves  
 Into the all-engulfing emptiness,  
 Fading to a whisper as they cross  
 From sky, to space, to nothing.

As understood in physics, the Big Bang is the first and last explosion, which is unending, will isolate in a cold death all that it has generated, and therefore symbolizes the ultimate futility of physicality.

The explosions on the morning of 9/11 killed 2,753 people.<sup>†</sup> These explosions rhyme with and are part of the continuing cosmic explosion, which—as we have known since 1998—is accelerating. In contrast to the Big Bang, the fiery explosions caused by the two airliners colliding with the Twin Towers are miniscule, their horror lost in the original, continuing, vastly greater, ultimately desolating Ur-explosion, which is the basis of our physical existence and seems to shrink all else to Keatsian nothingness.<sup>4</sup> But emotionally, of course, the explosions on that fateful morning are, for those who lost loved ones, more immediately and powerfully felt—so that the 9/11 explosions and the Big Bang are, in a sense, equivalent.

The central conflict in the poem, between love and loss in death, is not absolute and not even real, since love and physicality belong to different ontological categories. Moreover, we

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<sup>†</sup> At the time of the publication of the poem, no one knew that there would subsequently also be at least as many premature deaths owing to health issues in first responders and removers of wreckage.

seem to go on loving people after they die. But do we really, if the loved ones no longer exist? Love is a transitive verb. For personal love to be real instead of mere fantasy, the loved one must somehow objectively exist. Such existence is the romance (i.e., improbable) premise of the poem, that the dead continue existing and talking to their surviving loved ones. This romance of the talking dead amounts to a metaphor for survival of death, a metaphor of which the meaning is made explicit in the final stanza by one of the dead attesting,

above and beyond is a network.  
A matrix of souls,  
as fragile as lace,  
but endless and unbreakable. (xii 9-12)

Does this imply redemption for physicality? Only in so far as it is a medium for the expression of love. In that respect, the title of the poem achieves allusive meaning in evoking 'The Seven Last Words' of Jesus on the cross. Theologically his crucifixion is, at the very least, a message of love. To the extent that the universe requires suffering and death of virtually everyone, physicality is a cross. As a medium of love, it implies as an alternative to itself a spiritual "network," which is the metaphysical counterpart to and archetype of the Internet and World Wide Web. Even as long ago as 2001, the Internet and the Web were among the media that communicated and made retrievable the 9/11 farewell love messages. An aspect of the importance of "Last Words" is that it reveals this basic truth about human existence, that physicality is a medium for communication.

In the final stanza, we are told that, unlike material networks, the "matrix of souls" is "endless and unbreakable" yet "fragile as lace." The contradiction is resolved if fragility here is a metaphor for the ease with which the metaphysical goes unnoticed or is ignored or can be denied by those who are preoccupied (as most of us are most of the time) with the physical.

"Last Words" is not only intensely moving emotionally but also, we have seen, aesthetically subtle in the articulation of its interrelated motifs. Thematically it is all-encompassing and profound. And in it there is not a false note.<sup>5</sup> This is great poetry.

Day, Thomas. "In Conversation with Michael Symmons Roberts," *PN Review* 37:55 (May/Jun 2011): 52-55, 80.  
Online: [www.proquest.com/docview/865653921?accountid=14789](http://www.proquest.com/docview/865653921?accountid=14789)

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<sup>1</sup> "Last Words" on Livejournal, online:

[exceptindreams.livejournal.com/400318.html?noscroll&utm\\_medium=endless\\_scroll#comments](http://exceptindreams.livejournal.com/400318.html?noscroll&utm_medium=endless_scroll#comments)

<sup>2</sup> In the US and UK transition from analogue to digital television began in 1998. In the US analogue transmission was terminated in 2008, in the UK in 2007.

[en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital\\_terrestrial\\_television#Analogue\\_to\\_digital\\_transition\\_by\\_countries](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_terrestrial_television#Analogue_to_digital_transition_by_countries)

<sup>3</sup> Called "Cosmic Microwave Background," this radiation is one of the most important scientific discoveries ever made. For detecting it in 1964, astronomers Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson received the 1977 Nobel Prize in Physics, [www.space.com/25945-cosmic-microwave-background-discovery-50th-anniversary.html](http://www.space.com/25945-cosmic-microwave-background-discovery-50th-anniversary.html) and [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cosmic\\_microwave\\_background](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cosmic_microwave_background).

<sup>4</sup> See Keat's sonnet, "When I have fears."

<sup>5</sup> The observation of the art historian Paul Hills, email to author, 29 Aug.2023.