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POETRY, RELIGION, AND THE  
MODERN MIND

NATHAN A. SCOTT, JR.

For Professor William Locke  
Sincerely,  
Nathan Scott

Reprinted for private circulation from  
THE JOURNAL OF RELIGION  
Vol. XXXIII, No. 3, July 1953

PRINTED IN U.S.A.

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## POETRY, RELIGION, AND THE MODERN MIND

NATHAN A. SCOTT, JR.\*

THE notion, I believe, is worth entertaining that the prevailing conception of the proper uses of language provides the most revealing clue to the state of health of a people's culture. For the possession of meaning involves the possession of words, and to know the uses to which men believe words may be put is to have a deep insight into the dimensions of meaning which their culture is capable of assimilating. We might, indeed, move one step further and say that, when men begin to make their language the object of radical scrutiny and deliberate legislation, they betray their profound anxiety about the social and cultural vitality of the commonwealth to which they belong. To view our own culture, at any rate, from this standpoint is, I believe, to be confronted by the deep illness of our age.

That illness may be defined in terms of the belief, pervasive throughout our period, that the whole of experience may be subsumed under the categories of science—a belief which is accompanied by a consequent impatience with those elements of our experience that resist such

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disposal. It has, indeed, become the habit of our contemporaries to be chronically uneasy before what with a certain distrust they call "subjectivity"—that is, the spiritual, the internal, all those subtle modulations and resonances of the human story that cannot be flattened out into the equations of the natural and social sciences. Surely it is this general state of mind, for example, that provides the explanation of the phenomenal reception that a few years ago was accorded what has come to be known as "The Kinsey Report."<sup>1</sup> The uncritical enthusiasm with which the appearance of that document was hailed by great numbers of intelligent men and women proceeded, I am convinced, from their satisfaction with its physicalistic procedure of separating the sexual life from the total psychic structure, with its tacit suggestion that the entire range of man's sexuality may be described in purely anatomical and physiological terms. The Report's tendency to regard the sexual experience as totally comprised by the physical act and its adoption of purely quantitative principles of evidence doubtless appeared to the American public to confirm their own indisposition to involve themselves with all those "ideas that do not seem to be, as it were, immediately dictated by simple physical fact."<sup>2</sup> The cultural event, in other words, that was constituted by the Report's reception—unprecedentedly extensive for a scientific treatise—signalized the deep aversion in our period to ideas and modes of apprehending the human situation that are not easily re-

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ducible to the terms of positivist procedure.

The historical crisis of our time in which the moral neutrality of science has been so terrifyingly revealed has, of course, begun to force our generation to wonder whether, after all, there are not other approaches to truth besides those provided by the observational and experimental techniques of science. And philosophy, which most educated men of secular orientation tend to regard as the custodian of the traditional humanistic disciplines, has therefore again come to have a kind of ambiguous dignity in our cultural life today. The irony of the present situation, however, is that modern philosophy has no such platform as did nineteenth-century Idealism from which any truly subversive critical program might be directed against the positivistic nominalism that has become so deeply ingrained in that part of our culture where assumption rules. Recent developments in academic philosophy represent very largely a most unfortunate surrender to that tendency, and our most influential schoolmen today, in fact, call themselves "logical positivists" or, sometimes, "scientific empiricists." So, at a time when "thinking men and women . . . are exclaiming that, while science has made sufficient advance to satisfy all our material needs, what we most need, and must find if we are not to suffer shipwreck, is a new sense of values, a new religious awakening and a new orientation towards life, in short, a new philosophy"<sup>3</sup>—at a time when this is coming more and more to be the general testimony, it turns out that our most advanced philosophers have become "the dogmatic theologians and heresiologists of the Orthodox Church of Natural Science."<sup>4</sup> In this role they assure us that it is the business of philosophy not to study experience but

rather to study the logical structure of sentences, particularly of those sentences which have to do with the structural relationships between actual sense data, since the knowledge of the basic structure of nature is the only kind of knowledge that is possible for man. Man may have other desires and needs besides those which are satisfied by scientific knowledge, these philosophers tell us—such cravings as are ministered to by art and religion—but the myths which he fashions to satisfy these requirements of his nature have significance only in the private world of individual subjectivity. And the private world of individual subjectivity exists outside of that public world described by science upon which meaningful discussion may alone be based, since it is of this world alone that we can have genuine knowledge. The well-known popularizer in this area of study, Lancelot Hogben, remarks, for example: "So soon as we engage in public discourse we are compelled to seek for a neutral ground. We agree to leave our private world behind. To make discourse possible we accept this neutral ground as the real thing. This neutral ground," he says, "is the public world of science."<sup>5</sup> And we assume that he means to tell us that apart from the world which is the object of scientific study, intelligible discourse is impossible.

Hogben echoes at this point, of course, a school of thought in modern philosophy that takes its origin, on the one hand, from British philosophers like G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell and, on the other, from Continental thinkers like the brilliantly eccentric Ludwig Wittgenstein and his colleagues in the so-called "Vienna Circle" of Schlick and Carnap and Neurath. And their progeny on the contemporary scene include men like A. J. Ayer in Britain and C. L. Stevenson

in this country and most of the young people who teach philosophy today in our universities. For this whole modern movement philosophy and theology and poetry are all "a kind of mental cramp produced by linguistic disorder"<sup>6</sup>—a disorder growing out of our failure to employ a consistently univocal speech which represents, these men believe, the only valid use of language. The highly intricate subtleties of their doctrine cannot, of course, be systematically explored on the present occasion, which necessitates that we try to define their position by reducing it to its final implication. And when this is done, it appears that the positivists are talking, fundamentally, about the problem of language and are distinguishing between what they consider to be its two main uses. On the one hand, they tell us, we may speak scientifically or referentially, and to speak in this manner is to speak sensibly, or, on the other hand, we may speak emotively or homiletically, and to speak in this manner is to spout nonsense. Their point is that scientific or referential statements are meaningful because they are verifiable: they propose, that is to say, assertions about sense data, the accuracy of which may be checked by empirical observation. If I were to say, for example, that in the 1600 block of Pennsylvania Avenue in the District of Columbia there is a building called the White House in which the President of our country resides, I should be speaking sensibly, so the positivists would argue, for anyone who cared to go to Washington and make the proper investigations could easily verify the truthfulness of my statement. But for T. S. Eliot to declare, for example, as he does in *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, that "the evening is spread out against the sky/Like a patient etherised upon a table"—for Eliot

to speak in this way is for him to put forward a statement with which the grammarian cannot deal, since it is an example of what I. A. Richards in his early book *Science and Poetry* called a "pseudo-statement," that is, a statement which designates a state of affairs whose existence cannot be empirically established. Or, again, if Cleanth Brooks, let us say, were to argue that Eliot's poem is a better poem than *The Hamlet* of Archibald MacLeish or if Jacques Maritain were to argue for the existence of God, they would both be told that they were speaking emotively and therefore nonsensically. Brooks would perhaps be reminded by A. J. Ayer that "one really never does dispute about questions of value,"<sup>7</sup> and Maritain would be told that metaphysical and theological sentences, though they purport to express genuine propositions, actually express neither tautologies nor empirical hypotheses. "And as tautologies and empirical hypotheses form the entire class of significant propositions," Ayer would say, "we are justified in concluding that all metaphysical assertions are nonsensical."<sup>8</sup> The nonsense of Brooks and Maritain might not, of course, be altogether useless, Ayer would admit, for through it they might express their feelings and might even change other people's feelings; but their language would patently not be of the sort whose truthfulness could be fruitfully discussed: at best, their respective disciplines could be regarded only as abortive proliferations of psychology and sociology. But they, of course, might perhaps be forgiven for regarding Ayer's a priori settlement of the matter as somewhat highhanded.

What it is of some interest, though, for us to observe at this point is that the high priests of the new orthodoxy in modern philosophy concur with the greatest

of the pagan philosophers—for reasons, however, which are theirs and not his—in believing that poetry must be banished from the Just City, and not poetry alone, they say, but metaphysics and theology as well. And this suggests to us, therefore, that perhaps poetry (which I take simply to be the supreme instance of imaginative literature) and theology (which I take to be the supreme expression of the metaphysical enterprise) have a more than tangential relationship to each other. So it is, I think, appropriate that those of us who are today concerned about the one should at the same time be concerned about the other and should seek to defend both against a certain fashionable and sophisticated barbarism in our own time that would regard them both as being, in Arthur Mizener's phrase, "amiable insanity."

Our understanding of the relation of imaginative literature to religion, or theology, is, of course, greatly clarified when we remember that the disparagement of their cognitive seriousness is a strain in modern culture that antedates by at least three hundred years the neopositivism of Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, of *The International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, and Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*. Indeed, a main segment of contemporary criticism has been devoted to the insistence that, in order fully to understand the modern divorce between intellect and imagination, between sense and sensibility, we must go back to the seventeenth century. Herbert Muller says that we should go back to the empiricism of Johannes Kepler.<sup>9</sup> Basil Willey feels that Descartes's disjunction of "mind" and "matter" is the point at which historical analysis of these matters should begin,<sup>10</sup> and L. C. Knights directs us back to Francis Bacon.<sup>11</sup> My own feeling is that Hobbes, if not perhaps an ultimate

source of the modern "dissociation of sensibility," at least provides us with highly relevant evidence of the roots from which many of our cultural predicaments are sprung. Perhaps it is true that Descartes's division of reality into thought and extension, his doctrinaire claim of a superior status in reality for those things which may be weighed and measured, and his assumption that the denotative language of mathematics is the clearest language and therefore the surest way of arriving at truth—perhaps it is true that his main legacy was hostile to both religion and poetry and consequently "reinforced the growing disposition to accept the scientific world-picture as the only 'true' one."<sup>12</sup> Perhaps it is also true that Bacon, in his role as propagandist, greatly advanced the whole program of modern scientific rationalism and that he too was a primary directive force. But I suspect that it is from Hobbes that we most directly inherit much of the tension in modern culture between the world of religion and imaginative literature and the world of science and philosophy. And his modernity nowhere shows itself more plainly than in his concern with the problem of language—which is the chief interest of contemporary philosophy—and his extreme nominalism relates him directly to our neopositivistic semanticists, to men like C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards and Charles W. Morris.

Hobbes belonged, of course, to an age the progress of whose thought was to reveal, increasingly with its unfoldment, the irony of late scholasticism. Ockham, for example, when he insisted upon the independence of theology from reasoning based upon evidence of the senses, had done so not for the sake of thereby making theology irrelevant to the pursuit of truth but in order to establish it more

securely upon the basis of its unique procedures—between which and those of the experimental sciences he could conceive of no serious conflict. He believed, as did the nominalists generally, that there were truths of nature and truths of spirit, that both had their validity, and that there need be no unfriendly struggle between them. But then, of course, by the advent of the seventeenth century the ideologues of the new science had lost Ockham's conviction that science must be the handmaid of religion and, having become more interested in the world of nature than in anything else, could use his separation of religion from science to dispose of it altogether.

The materialism of Hobbes was, in other words, an inevitable development of his period, and it gains its most succinct statement in the forty-sixth chapter of the *Leviathan*, where he says:

The *Universe*, that is, the whole masse of all things that are, is Corporeall, that is to say, Body; and hath the dimensions of Magnitude, namely, Length, Breadth, and Depth: also every part of the Body, is likewise Body, and hath the like dimensions; and consequently every part of the Universe, is Body; and that which is not Body, is no part of the Universe: And because the Universe is All, that which is no part of it, is Nothing; and consequently *no where*.

Matter, that is to say, was for him the final reality—the ultimately irreducible particles which occupy space and which make themselves known to the human percipient “by the pressure, that is by the motion, of externall things upon our Eyes, Eares, and other organs thereunto ordained.” Only those perceptions, in other words, which come to us through the external senses are real, and language is therefore properly used only when it is employed for the presentation of the evidences of sensory experience and of the material reality which that experience

conveys. Indeed, he leaves us in no doubt at all as to what his intention is. He says:

Speciall uses of speech are these, First, to Register, what by cogitation, wee find to be the cause of any thing, present or past; and what we find things present or past may produce, or effect: which in summe, is acquiring of Arts. Secondly, to shew to others that knowledge which we have attained; which is, to Counsell, and Teach one another. Thirdly, to make known to others our wills, and purposes, that we may have the mutuall help of one another. Fourthly, to please and delight our selves, and others, by playing with our words, for pleasure or ornament, innocently.

To these Uses, there are also foure correspondent Abuses. First, when men register their thoughts wrong, by the inconstancy of the signification of their words; by which they register for their conceptions, that which they never conceived; and so deceive themselves. Secondly, when they use words metaphorically; that is, in other sense than that they are ordained for; and thereby deceive others. Thirdly, when by words they declare that to be their will, which is not. Fourthly, when they use them to grieve one another. . . .

What Hobbes wanted, obviously, was a plain, straightforward language purged of all the rich ambiguity of Elizabethan and Jacobean diction—what Thomas Sprat in his *History of the Royal Society* (1667) called “a close, naked, natural way of speaking . . . bringing all things as near the Mathematical plainness as they can. . . .” And these canons could be satisfied neither by the language of poetry nor by the language of religion. Poetry, in fact, was in his view sheer frivolity—though religion could be admitted on tolerance into his Commonwealth, since it might serve as a guarantor of civil peace and order. Both, however, were to be distrusted, since theirs is characteristically a language that is riddled with metaphor and analogy and that fails therefore of the kind of univocal clarity that Hobbes considered essential for all serious and responsible dis-

course. Words, he believed, may be properly used only to designate real things and the connections between real things—according, of course, to his own criterion of reality that was based upon the scientific materialism of Galileo. And all other uses of speech may “please and delight our selves, and others . . . innocently,” but they will ultimately deceive and lead to absurdity.

Hobbes' segregation of the symbolic, of the metaphorical and the analogical, from serious discourse is revealed most plainly in his theories of Fancy and Judgment. This phase of his thought is extremely confused, and it is often very difficult to detect consistency. The chief source of the obscurity is what appears to be his desire at times simply to define Fancy as the act of the mind whereby “unexpected similitude” is discerned in “things otherwise much unlike” and to define Judgment as the act of finding dissimilitude in things that are identical. And, so defined, Fancy and Judgment make up what is called Wit. But one feels that his deeper instinct is to contrast Fancy and Judgment in such a way as to make Fancy represent extravagant indiscretion, the kind of undisciplined vivacity of mind whereby the contents of the memory are quickly reviewed and superficially congruous ideas combined to make pleasant pictures and pretty images, while Judgment is serious intellectual discernment and therefore quite different from the frivolous gaiety of Fancy. However pleasant and pretty, though, the constructions of Fancy may be, it will not be assumed, Hobbes took for granted, that they are conformable to truth and reason. For “truth” is the possession of Judgment and of reason and is often to be had only after the mind has disabused itself of those phantasms which are the creations of Fancy. Fancy,

the faculty of the mind which is operative in poetic and religious experience, is, in other words, a principle of triviality, and the “emotive” language through which it articulates itself, though it may “please and delight our selves, and others,” is incapable of giving a responsible version of experience.

This, then, was the main legacy which Hobbes bequeathed to the chief theorists of neoclassicism, to Dryden, to Locke and Addison, to Hume and Reynolds—and even as late as Wordsworth and Coleridge the doctrines of Fancy and Judgment, in the modified form of the Fancy-Imagination distinction, are still playing an important role in English poetics. The distinction could, of course, be maintained, as Basil Willey has said, only by generations who had been taught to believe that “the fact-world of modern scientific consciousness was the primary datum”<sup>13</sup> and who were the inheritors of a tradition which, stemming from Hobbes, “stood for common sense and naturalism, and the monopoly of the scientific spirit over the mind.”<sup>14</sup> The poet had been given to understand, as Locke put it in the *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, that all he had to offer were “pleasant pictures and agreeable visions,” and, however attractive these might be, he was assured that they consisted in nothing “perfectly conformable” to truth and reason. Poetry had, in other words, “been reduced . . . to providing embellishments which might be agreeable to the fancy, but which were recognized by the judgment as having no relation to ‘reality.’”<sup>15</sup> And as both religion and poetry sprang from quite other modes of knowing than the faculty designated by neoclassicist theory as “judgment,” the result was that religion sank to deism and poetry was “reduced to catering for ‘delight’”<sup>16</sup> or to making

the effort to conform with truth and reason. So, on the one hand, one comes upon men like Locke and Shaftesbury and Butler and Hume who were intent upon establishing the existence of a purely verbal God and who were making of theology little more than "an arbitrary code of morals and a pseudo-science of entities which cannot be known through the senses."<sup>17</sup> While the poets, having been told by Hobbes and Locke that they could not trust what they *felt* (Fancy) as human beings or as poets but only what they *thought* as men of sense and Judgment, were avoiding the bold metaphors and drastic ironies of the school of Donne and subjecting their language to the sobrieties of the barest denotation in the manner of Pope's *Essay on Man*. Or, if they were not producing a poetry of *thought*, they were producing a poetry of *feeling* in "conscious disregard of contemporary truth-standards"<sup>18</sup> in the manner of Gray's *Odes*. But in any event we may hold Hobbes responsible in large part, as John Crowe Ransom has suggested, for "the chill"<sup>19</sup> which settled upon both poetry and religion in the century that followed—a condition that T. S. Eliot has covered in his famous phrase "dissociation of sensibility."<sup>20</sup>

Now it is a commonplace of the school textbooks that by the last decade of the eighteenth century a reaction against neoclassicism had set in, the principal documents of which we may regard as being Wordsworth's *Preface to the Lyrical Ballads* and Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. And the main object of the Romantic revolt against the eighteenth century we may define as having been that of rescuing the doctrine of the imagination from the desuetude into which it had fallen in the hands of neoclassical theorists. For a century English thought had been dominated by the materialism

of Hobbes and the sensationalism of Locke, which had served neither poetry nor religion well, because, the Romantics believed, the world described by Hobbes and Locke is not a world susceptible of imaginative prehension. Locke's Deity was, of course, "that of the eighteenth century as a whole—a Deity to be approached by demonstration, and whose existence, proclaimed by the spacious firmament on high, is as well attested as any proof in Euclid."<sup>21</sup> And though he regarded the imagination, or rather what he and Hobbes called "Wit," as being the constitutive principle of poetry, he could approve of it only in so far as it was controlled by Judgment, a principle which he defined in the *Essay concerning Human Understanding* in such a way as to leave us in no doubt at all as to his sense of its extreme opposition to Wit. "This," he says,

is a way of proceeding quite contrary to metaphor and allusion, wherein for the most part lies that *entertainment and pleasantry of wit* which strikes so lively on the fancy, and therefore so acceptable to all people, because its beauty appears at first sight, and there is required *no labour of thought to examine what truth or reason there is in it*.

Implicit in his entire understanding of both poetry and religion, in other words, was the assumption that the "inanimate cold world" of mechanistic materialism constituted the whole of reality. And though a kind of attenuated religion and the kind of literature produced by the contemporaries of Dryden, Pope, and Johnson could maintain themselves on such a basis, the Romantics believed it to be in principle hostile to every aspect of the spiritual life. We are not, they said, wholly passive recipients in the process of perception, mere registrants of impressions from the external world without, as Locke had contended. Nor is the world

itself simply a system of matter organized along the lines of mechanism; it is, fundamentally, they felt, a universe of spirit whose glory and mystery are more deeply to be grasped by the imagination than by the analytical reason. So, Coleridge concluded: "If the mind be not *passive*, if it be indeed made in God's image, and that, too, in the sublimest sense, the *Image of the Creator*, there is ground for the suspicion that any system built on the passiveness of the mind must be false as a system."<sup>22</sup>

Though some of the Romantics—Blake, for example, and Keats perhaps—were not so philosophically sophisticated as Coleridge and did not perhaps even share his philosophical preoccupations, they were all profoundly at odds, whether consciously so or not, with the sensationalist view of the world; and they were at one with each other in their belief in the primacy of the imagination. The basic article of their creed was given by Coleridge when he declared: "The primary imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I am."<sup>23</sup> And on another occasion he remarked: "Imagination is possibly in man a lesser degree of the creative power of God."<sup>24</sup>

It is, of course, essential that we remember that Blake and Coleridge and Wordsworth and Shelley apotheosized the imagination in the name of an ulterior reality and a transcendental truth to which they believed it alone gave sure access. They were, in fact, possessed by a sense of the *numinous*, and it was the habit of their natures to utter an *o allitudo* in the presence of what Rudolf Otto in our own time called the *mysterium tremendum*. Indeed, as C. M. Bowra has said:

The Romantic movement was a prodigious attempt to discover the world of spirit through the unaided efforts of the solitary soul. It was a special manifestation of that belief in the worth of the individual which philosophers and politicians had recently preached to the world.<sup>25</sup>

Their insistence upon the imagination was, in other words, determined by their conviction that it must be related to truth and reality and that it alone could give transport to the world beyond. The Romantic "imagination," that is to say, was not the neoclassical "fancy": it was, in fact, distinguished quite as sharply from "fancy" as, in neoclassical theory, "judgment" had been set apart from "wit." And Wordsworth and Coleridge would have concurred with Ruskin, who was much later to declare in the second volume of *Modern Painters*: "There is in every word set down by the imaginative mind an awful undercurrent of meaning, and evidence and shadow upon it of the deep places out of which it has come. . . . Imagination cannot but be serious; she sees too far, too darkly, too solemnly, too earnestly, ever to smile."

So the highest office of poetry is not that of generating chimeras and fictions; on the contrary, the poet, "deeply drinking-in the soul of things," penetrates to their melancholy depths and gives us a directive wisdom. Which had, of course, been precisely the contention of Hobbes and Locke, and thus Cleanth Brooks is justified, I believe, in making the point that the Romantic revolt actually altered very little the prime essential of neoclassical poetics. For whereas Hobbes and the members of the Royal Society were willing to tolerate the poet so long as he discussed in a logically decorous way with his contemporaries the principles of mechanico-materialism, Wordsworth and Coleridge could, on the other hand, approve only of the poet who, as an

oracle of a transcendent reality, sought to "disimprison the soul of fact" and give a vision of the Absolute, to "incite and to support the eternal." By both schools the poet is viewed primarily as a serious expositor who, in foregoing the abrupt conceits and daring imagery of Fancy, seeks to achieve what Dr. Johnson called "the grandeur of generality." And so we should, therefore, not find surprising the reservations which both schools had about the metaphysical poets of the early seventeenth century and which, were their chief spokesmen to be miraculously resurrected today, they would doubtless have about much that has happened in modern poetry since Eliot spoke of the evening "spread out against the sky/Like a patient etherised upon a table."

Archibald MacLeish's dictum in our own time: "A poem should not mean/But be," could not, in other words, one suspects, have easily gained acceptance by the Romantics, for to them poetry was that superior activity of mind—"Reason in her most exalted mood"—whereby Truth in its loveliest and most ultimate forms may be apprehended. And, in this as in many other respects, it is Shelley who provides us with what is perhaps most nearly a normative expression of the Romantic mind. The document which I have in mind is his *Defense of Poetry*, in which he begins by distinguishing between "two classes of mental action, which are called reason and imagination." Reason, he says, is the "principle of analysis, and its action regards the relation of things, simply as relations; considering thoughts, not in their integral unity, but as the algebraical representations which conduct to certain general results." Imagination, on the other hand, is "the principle of synthesis,

and has for its object those forms which are common to universal nature and existence itself." "Reason is the enumeration of quantities already known; imagination is the perception of the value of those quantities, both separately and as a whole."

Shelley goes on to argue that "poetry, in a general sense, may be defined as 'the expression of the imagination'" and that "a poem is the image of life expressed in its eternal truth." The art of poetry is, in other words, an art of haruspicy: "A poet," he says, "participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one." He is a seer and a priest who mediates to the human community that indestructible spiritual order which is dimly glimpsed in the "partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion." He "defeats the curse which binds us" to the phenomenal world and "redeems from decay the visitations of the divinity in man." Shelley says:

Poetry turns all things to loveliness; it exalts the beauty of that which is most beautiful, and it adds beauty to that which is most deformed; it marries exultation and horror, grief and pleasure, eternity and change; it subdues to union, under its light yoke, all irreconcilable things. It transmutes all that it touches, and every form moving within the radiance of its presence is changed by wondrous sympathy to an incarnation of the spirit which it breathes.

So it is our best hope of a better world:

The most unfailing herald, companion, and follower of the awakening of a great people to work a beneficial change in opinion or institution, is Poetry. . . . Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.

Shelley provides us, then, with an extreme example of the woolliness in which

the Romantics, in their theoretical moments, came usually to be bogged down; it is what T. E. Hulme called their "spilt religion," their predilection for creating their metaphysics and theology out of their poetic experience rather than formulating poetic attitudes on the basis of metaphysical-theological principles. The ironical result, in other words, of their effort to rescue the imagination, in both its aesthetic and religious phases, from neoclassical rationalism turns out to be a further sentimentalization of religion and a general debilitation of poetry.

From Shelley, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and his confusion of poetic and religious experience it is, of course, but a step to Matthew Arnold's disquisitions on poetry and the higher seriousness in the latter half of the century, though the author of "The Study of Poetry" more nearly takes his moorings in Wordsworth than in Shelley. With Arnold the effort of a department of the modern mind to defend itself against the attacks of positivism and science achieves the completion of a result already foreshadowed in the Romantics—namely, the usurpation by poetry of the place of religion. And, when Arnold assures us that religion is nothing more than "morality touched by emotion," he again brings to a point of culmination the tendency of the Romantics "to leave Religion to be laid waste by the anarchy of feeling."<sup>26</sup> The language of *God and the Bible* clearly indicates that he could not regard it as any longer possible for a man of intelligence to hold seriously any orthodox version of Christian metaphysics; its assertions, he says,

have convinced no one, they have given rest to no one, they have given joy to no one. People have swallowed them, people have fought over them, people have shown their ingenuity over

them; but no one has ever enjoyed them. Nay, no one has ever really understood them.

But, in the very first paragraph of "The Study of Poetry," he tells us:

The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry, where it is worthy of its high destinies, our race, as time goes on, will find an ever surer and surer stay. There is not a creed which is not shaken, not an accredited dogma which is not shown to be questionable, not a received tradition which does not threaten to dissolve. Our religion has materialized itself in the fact, in the supposed fact; it has attached its emotion to the fact, and now the fact is failing it. But for poetry the idea is everything; the rest is a world of illusion, of divine illusion. Poetry attaches its emotion to the idea; the idea *is* the fact. The strongest part of our religion today is its unconscious poetry.

So, farther on in the essay, he declares:

More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.

To speak of Arnold is, of course, to be brought back into our own immediate time, for, as Eliot remarked some years ago in his Norton lectures, "we are still in the Arnold period,"<sup>27</sup> and, as he has also said, were Arnold to be resurrected in the contemporary world, he would have his work to do over again. Arnold's problem—which still is ours—might be said to have been essentially that of the Romantic generations before him, of somehow vindicating the life and works of the imagination against the imperialistic claims of modern positivistic science. And his way of dealing with that problem was to give up the ghost so far as religion was concerned and to grant the impossibility of its continued maintenance in any form continuous with historic Christian orthodoxy. Religion could, in the modern world, be regarded

only as "morality touched with emotion," and it was imaginative literature, Arnold believed, that could best "touch conduct with emotion." So literature, in other words, like science, was to be valued as an aid in the practical mastery of the world; it was itself, in fact, a kind of descriptive science, dealing with that level of experience which is touched with emotion. And so viewed, he declared, its future "is immense."

The most famous advocate of this view of our subject in contemporary discussion has been I. A. Richards—or, as one must now say, the "early" Richards, since the more recent phase of his development, first signalized by *Coleridge on Imagination*, seems to represent a considerable modification of the position which he earlier formulated in such books as *The Meaning of Meaning*, *The Principles of Literary Criticism*, *Practical Criticism*, and *Science and Poetry*. The early Richards, however, was much more strict in his logic than was Arnold. For, though he too regarded poetic language as being essentially a rhetorical vehicle of ideas, he did not share Arnold's supposition that it could live in honorable peace with the rhetoric of science. The author of *Science and Poetry* was, of course, a positivist who held that view of language which I outlined earlier, in accordance with which it is argued that language may be used either emotively or referentially—the former characterizing poetic and religious discourse, the latter scientific. Richards' way of putting this was to say that poetry is constituted of "pseudo-statements" whose truth claims cannot successfully rival those of the "certified scientific statements" of technical discourse. But why, then, one wonders, if this is the case, should poetry be tolerated at all? The answer to this question may be found in his total outlook

which, in 1926, the year that *Science and Poetry* came out, was a hodge-podge of philosophical materialism and ethical utilitarianism, at the base of which lay a theory of value that was derived from psychological behaviorism. He regarded the mind as a system of impulses or "interests," each one of which contends with all the others for the mastery. Here, for example, is a central passage from *Science and Poetry*. He says:

Suppose that we carry a magnetic compass about in the neighbourhood of powerful magnets. The needle waggles as we move and comes to rest pointing in a new direction whenever we stand still in a new position. Suppose that instead of a single compass we carry an arrangement of many magnetic needles, large and small, swung so that they influence one another, some able only to swing horizontally, others vertically, others hung freely. As we move, the perturbations in this system will be very complicated. But for every position in which we place it there will be a final position of rest for all the needles into which they will in the end settle down, a general poise for the whole system. But even a slight displacement may set the whole assemblage of needles busily readjusting themselves.

One further complication. Suppose that while all the needles influence one another, some of them respond only to some of the outer magnets among which the system is moving. The reader can easily draw a diagram if his imagination needs a visual support.

The mind is not unlike such a system if we imagine it to be incredibly complex. The needles are our interests, varying in their importance, that is in the degree to which any movement they make involves movement in the other needles. Each new disequilibrium, which a shift of position, a fresh situation, entails, corresponds to a need: and the waggings which ensue as the system rearranges itself are our responses, the impulses through which we seek to meet the need.

Now it is impossible for all our needs and interests to be gratified, but those things are to be valued most highly, Richards argued, which satisfy the greatest number of our desires in the least

wasteful manner—that is, “with as little conflict, as little mutual interference between different subsystems” of our activities as there need be. And if one asks what it feels like to achieve this maximal satisfaction of interests, Richards’ answer was simply that “it feels like and is the experience of poetry.”

The way of poetry is not the only way of dealing with the tensions arising in the human psyche out of conflicts between “appetencies.” These conflicts may be dealt with either by way of “conquest” or by way of “conciliation.” But the way of “conquest,” whatever may be the attractiveness of stoicism, is not to be recommended, for, he says:

People who are always winning victories over themselves might equally well be described as always enslaving themselves. Their lives become unnecessarily narrow. The minds of many saints have been like wells; they should have been like lakes or like the sea.

The way of “conquest” does not, in other words, result in that organization of our interests which is least wasteful of human possibilities. The better way, therefore, is the way of “conciliation,” and this is the way of poetry. For poetry, we must remember, is constituted of “pseudo-statements,” and Richards’ definition of a “pseudo-statement” was this: “a form of words which is justified entirely by its effect in releasing or organizing our impulses and attitudes (due regard being had for the better or worse organizations of these *inter se*).” “The artist,” he said, “is concerned with the record and perpetuation of the experiences which seem to him most worth having. . . . He is the point at which the growth of the mind shows itself. . . . His work is the ordering of what in most minds is disordered.”

This, then, I take it, is the meaning that lay behind Mr. Richards’ now famous declaration that “poetry is capable

of saving us.” But, when he made this declaration, he did not at all mean to deny that poetry is, nevertheless, nonsense. For his criterion of meaning was a positivist criterion, and in reply to Hart Crane’s remark that “the window goes blonde slowly” or Dylan Thomas’ resolution to “enter again the round / Zion of the watery bead / And the synagogue of the ear of corn,” he would have said that neither statement can be fitted into an ordered system of logical propositions, since neither statement exhibits a univocal relation between itself and an observable fact. Yes, both poetry and religion (or what Mr. Richards called “the Magical View”), since they rest upon “pseudo-statements,” are utterly nonsensical, and it is foolish to debate the truthfulness of their assertions, “truthfulness” being a property only of referential or “certified scientific statements.” But poetry has, at least, a medicinal value: it organizes and releases our impulses; and the poet therefore, in his role as physician, is to be tolerated.

The entire body of doctrine which Richards so zealously advocated in his early books is of course, I believe, quite thoroughly riddled with error and wrong-headedness. But it continues to be a focal point in this area of contemporary discussion because it so well exhibits two characteristic tendencies of the modern secular mind: the first is its unwillingness to grant any cognitive power to the mythical and analogical language of poetry and religion; the second is its rather desperate desire, nevertheless, somehow to validate the life of the imagination, at least in its aesthetic phase, and its habit, therefore, of so increasing the superego of imaginative literature, of so heaping upon it responsibility for our salvation, as to make it in effect what Matthew Arnold made it—a surrogate for religion.

Now to this whole climate of opinion in our time certain representatives of religion and of poetry have reacted with extreme, and understandable, exasperation. On the one hand, there have been many who have despaired of setting up any significant conversation between the representatives of religion and the representatives of modernity and who, being influenced by Barthian theology, have gone on not only to accept the sharp disjunctions between "reason" and "revelation" of the positivists but to insist upon them, defiantly espousing in their own right the values of "revelation." And, on the other hand, there have been many representatives of imaginative literature who, in reacting against the kind of salvationist program for the arts proposed by such spokesmen for the modern temper as I. A. Richards, have gone on to insist upon such an autonomy for poetry and the other arts as would divorce them from all the other major areas of our value experience. Religion, for Karl Barth, in other words, is *totaliter aliter* than culture, and "God," he says, "is pure negation." While, on the other hand, W. H. Auden declares: "Art is not life and cannot be / A midwife to society." But neither of these extreme reactions has, I believe, sufficient relevance to the cultural predicaments of our time; and both, though based upon partial truths, tend to support real error, as they are voiced by their less moderate exponents.

Few, certainly, would deny that Dr. Barth and his school in Protestant theology have performed a service of inestimable value for modern Christianity in recalling it to a sense of its distinctness, to a sense of the abiding tensions between itself and the enterprises of human culture and thus of the impossibility of any permanent *modus vivendi* between them.

But surely Dr. Barth's strident declaration that there is no point of contact at all, no *Anknüpfungspunkt*, between the Christian gospel and the orders of culture is a much too drastic simplification of the delicate complexity of the problem. And, however understandable a result of our modern secular climate his extreme exacerbation may be, it hardly seems calculated to furnish the basis for any fruitful *rapprochement* between the Christian community and the larger community of the modern world.

One also has sympathy for the counterpart, on the side of art, to the Barthian reaction, in theology, to the whole modern climate of positivistic secularism—the reaction that has assumed the form of the various theories in modern criticism of the autonomy of the aesthetic experience and activity. Poetry, says Allen Tate in the Preface to his volume *On the Limits of Poetry*, "is neither religion nor social engineering." And this has been a main lesson of many of the great critics of our time—of men like T. S. Eliot and R. P. Blackmur, John Crowe Ransom and Cleanth Brooks, and many others. The language of poetry (and by poetry is meant, as was said earlier, literature generally), they have said, is not the language of science or of history or of metaphysics and theology. Which is, of course, for them not at all to say, as some of their less cogent disciples have suggested in their defense of "pure" poetry, that poetry is utterly divorced from all concern with existential issues. Nor do they mean, when they argue that poetic language does not properly eventuate in *statements* that compete with those of science and philosophy, what the positivists mean—that poetry is merely emotive. They do not, of course, want to impose such burdens upon poetry as Matthew Arnold proposed or as I. A. Richards

once expected it to assume, for they know that the function of poetry is neither religious nor medicinal and that it cannot "save us." They do not regard the poet as a rhetorician conveying truths found in processes external to those of poetry and dressing out "propositions. which could be stated more directly and more economically in abstract propositions."<sup>28</sup> But they yet regard poetry as in some sense cognitive, though critics like Tate and Brooks never cease reminding us that the poet's "truth" is given through his metaphors, which are his essential instruments for saying whatever it is that he has to say. And surely the discipline of reading the really great poems in our language—whether the poems be the later books of Henry James or the "Byzantium" poems of William Butler Yeats<sup>29</sup>—bears them out in their contention that the language of poetry is the language of metaphor, the language of wit and paradox and irony. Which is, of course, to say, as the theorists of "autonomy" argue, that the language of poetry is untranslatable, that it dramatizes attitudes and beliefs in terms that are not interchangeable with the language of other types of discourse. So "nonsymbolic surrogates"<sup>30</sup> are not to be found for the language of poetry which keeps to its own symbolic forms. "For precisely in that symbolic form," says Wilbur Marshall Urban in his fine book, *Language and Reality*,

an aspect of reality is given which cannot be adequately expressed otherwise. It is not true that whatever is expressed symbolically can be better expressed literally. For there is no literal expression, but only another kind of symbol. It is not true that we should seek the blunt truth, for the so-called blunt truth has a way of becoming an untruth.<sup>31</sup>

And yet literature, though it has its own special mode of existence and its own

unique procedures, does obviously deal with what we call human experience. In so doing, however, it does not, to be sure, in so far as it is true to its own nature, seek to give us some extra-poetic truth, what Professor Urban calls "blunt truth." It seeks to come to terms with human situations, and in so doing it gives us its special kind of symbolic truth which is different from the special forms of symbolic truth that science and religion give us. Its symbolic structures cannot be generalized out into the special types of notation employed by other forms of discourse, for poetry is the handmaiden neither of science nor of religion. But these structures, in the greatest poetry, when properly read, will be found to yield wisdom—and a wisdom which religion certainly should be prepared to include among its evidences. Indeed, Allen Tate has declared, perhaps a bit extravagantly, that "the high forms of literature offer us the only complete . . . versions of our experience."<sup>32</sup>

It is, therefore, altogether appropriate that those who are today seeking to relate the Christian faith to contemporary culture should be reading the important imaginative literature of our period and thinking about its significance for religious thought. And we may hope that such recent books as Amos Wilder's brilliant essay *Modern Poetry and the Christian Tradition* and the distinguished symposium *Spiritual Problems in Contemporary Literature*, edited by Stanley Hopper, augur an increasing concern in the theological community with these issues. "Theological study and discussion," as Amos Wilder has said,

give good heed today to contemporary movements in philosophy and science. They likewise concern themselves with the social phenomena of the time. But any true understanding of the modern situation requires similar attention to

the deeper cultural factors as they reveal themselves in the arts and in related symbolic expression. This is evidently not just a matter of studying the uses of the arts in the church: church music, church architecture, sacred poetry and hymnology, and religious drama. It is rather a matter of observing and interpreting the modern arts generally: poetry, fiction, drama, criticism, painting, music, etc., viewed as indices of the modern crisis and of the spiritual alternatives and trends of the time.<sup>33</sup>

In order for this task—which Paul Tillich calls the “theonomous analysis of culture”<sup>34</sup>—properly to be carried out, however, it is necessary, first of all, that the theological critic not be in too much of a hurry to find documentation of the *Zeitgeist* in the work of literary art under examination. He must be strictly concerned with the work of art as such, since that is the only relevant concern; and he must remember that poetry “is neither religion nor social engineering.” There is, of course, a point, as Urban has said, at which poetry may be seen to be “covert metaphysics,”<sup>35</sup> but the theological critic, in relating the truths given in poetry to those within the custodianship of theology, should not generalize them out into an *explicit* metaphysic, thus making of poetry, as did Matthew Arnold, “a kind of ersatz religion.”<sup>36</sup>

But then, of course, the enterprise of a theological criticism of literature cannot even get under way if the attempt is made to ground it upon such an intem-

perately arrogant view of the relation of Christianity to culture as that which informs the theology of Karl Barth. For the Christian critic must, perhaps above all, have the humility to recognize, again as Amos Wilder has said, that

the most remarkable feature with regard to the situation of the Christian heritage today is that its custody has to a considerable degree passed over into the keeping of secularized groups and forces. The disarray of institutional religion and the isolation of its more conservative bodies from modern life have left the gospel if not homeless at least in a highly ambiguous position. This has involved the “world” in a peculiar responsibility for the faith and in a process of travail with the faith, in considerable measure apart from the guidance of the church. In secular movements of thought, but especially in the arts and in imaginative literature, the vicissitudes of this struggle are disclosed.<sup>37</sup>

In other words,

large strata and movements in the western world are outside the church. But the religious tradition operates in them still in an indirect and disguised way. The river has gone underground; it has not ceased to flow.<sup>38</sup>

And those modern writers who have continued the explorations, the advance and the witness of the Christian tradition “at a distance from the main body” Wilder calls “the outriders of the faith”<sup>39</sup> who, though they may at times verge upon heresy, may yet in those very moments recall to us the truth that “the blood of the heretics is often the seed of the church.”<sup>40</sup>

#### NOTES

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4. *Ibid.*, p. 101.

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6. Barnes, *op. cit.*, p. 119.

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13. *Ibid.*, p. 301.

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15. Willey, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

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17. Michael Roberts, *The Modern Mind* (London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1937), p. 102.

18. Willey, *op. cit.*, p. 297.

19. Ransom, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

20. Cf. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets," in *Selected Essays: 1917-1932* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1932).

21. Willey, *op. cit.*, p. 279.

22. *Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Ernest Hartley Coleridge (2 vols.; London, 1895), I, 352.

23. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (2 vols.; Oxford, 1907), I, 202.

24. Coleridge, review of poems of Drake and Halleck in *Southern Literary Messenger*, April, 1836.

25. *The Romantic Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1949), p. 23.

26. Eliot, "Arnold and Pater," *op. cit.*, p. 351.

27. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism* (London: Faber & Faber, Ltd., 1933), p. 129.

28. Cleanth Brooks, "Metaphor and the Function of Criticism," in *Spiritual Problems in Contemporary Literature*, ed. Stanley Romaine Hopper (New York: Harper & Bros., 1953), p. 134.

29. Cf. Edmund Wilson's criticisms of the modern usage that reserves the term "poetry" for verse alone: "Is Verse a Dying Technique?" chap. ii of *The Triple Thinkers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1948).

30. Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn* (New York: Reynal & Hitchcock, 1947), p. 233.

31. (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1951), p. 500.

32. *On the Limits of Poetry* (New York: Swallow Press and W. Morrow & Co., 1948), p. 4.

33. *Modern Poetry and the Christian Tradition* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), p. xi.

34. *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), p. 58.

35. *Op. cit.*, pp. 498-502.

36. The phrase is used by Cleanth Brooks in "Metaphor and the Function of Criticism," *op. cit.*, pp. 131-32.

37. *Op. cit.*, p. 259.

38. *Ibid.*, p. xii.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 243.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 244.