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POETRY AND RELIGION: A RELATION RECONSIDERED

By Nathan A. Scott, Jr.

[*Dr. Scott is Assistant Professor of Theology and Literature, Federated Theological Faculty, University of Chicago. At the invitation of the Board of Trustees of C.T.S., he is now serving as a member of the Administrative Council of C.T.S. This article was written for the* Register.]

THERE are many interesting indications in the Protestant theological community today of a quickening of interest in the arts and particularly in literature. There is a body of important theological criticism that is beginning to emerge and that is attracting wide attention. Our major journals—in which, in contrast to their Roman Catholic analogues, one never saw a few years ago serious essays on literature and the arts—are beginning to devote considerable space annually to discussions in this field. Theological discussion groups here and there are turning to a consideration of contemporary movements in imaginative literature. Those of us who are professionally identified with this field of discourse are widely used as lecturers on college and university campuses. And in many ways perhaps the most significant development of this sort has been the establishment by the University of Chicago's Federated Theological Faculty of the new field of Religion and Art, which has the same status in its curriculum as that enjoyed by such traditional disciplines as Bible, Theology, and Church History—candidates for degrees having to take certain basic courses and being required to pass comprehensive examinations in this field, as in the six other fields in the curriculum. And this represents what is perhaps one of the most fundamental innovations in American theological education of our time, for in no other major center of theological study in America is the systematic application of the categories of the Christian faith to literature and the arts accorded such central importance in the structure of the curriculum.

But these are only a few of the many signs that might be catalogued at much greater length of the new interest among

Protestants in a dimension of culture which, until quite recently, they had generally ignored. And yet, admirable as the direction may be in which they move, these developments are not without a certain unfortunate dubiety of emphasis. For, when they are critically examined, they must be found occasionally to reflect a somewhat too inflexible resolution on the part of the religious community to use the arts for its own special purposes and to cast them aside with a gesture of impatience when they intractably resist such plunderage. In a recent encounter, for example, with a group of clergymen before whom I had been discussing contemporary movements in poetry and the novel I found one gentleman whose remarks did not suggest that he had had any direct transactions of his own with recent literature but which did indicate that he had somewhere overheard the rumor that T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden are "Christian" poets. So he was quite prepared to acknowledge that these men might possibly have important things to say to us, but, having also overheard somewhere else the rumor that William Faulkner is a dangerously decadent artificer in obscenity and violence, he was unyielding in his insistence that Mr. Faulkner's work should be denounced as a corrupting force in our cultural life today. He concluded his remarks with the rather crudely phrased question: "Why is it that these modern writers must always wallow around in so much filth?" And he was quite blunt in his refusal to lend an attentive ear to my representation of Faulkner as one of the most serious moralists of our period whose work often reveals a great and powerful imagination controlled by a body of assumptions that are a detrital residue of a Protestantism that was once the formative factor in the regional culture out of which he comes.

Now it is, I fear, such an attitude that often controls the Protestant intelligence in its dealings with the modern arts. It is an attitude that is characterized by a great eagerness to pre-empt the work of those artists who are themselves prepared unambiguously to give their suffrage to a recognizably orthodox version of the Christian faith; and it is an attitude that is also characterized by an unwillingness to enter into a reciprocal relationship with the work of those artists who represent complications of belief that do not, on first examination, appear to be easily assimilable to a Christian vision of things This is, of course, a kind of inflexibility that is untrue to the genius of what Professor Tillich has called "the Protestant principle,"[1] and it must always be a disabling embarrassment to Protestantism, as it seeks to relate itself to the frontiers of thought and expression in its cultural environment.

It was something of this sort that some months ago I sensed as lying behind the conception of a certain project in literary discussion, being launched under religious auspices, in which I had been invited to participate. And I expressed my misgivings about it in a letter to a friend who, as a brilliant younger figure in American philosophy and a member of the Yale department, had also been invited to join in the undertaking. This is a part of what he said in reply, and his response provides me with a kind of text upon which to base this present lesson:

> I could not be more in agreement with you. . . . What I would reject are those who simply want to use one of the cultural channels—art, literature, etc.—in what Tillich would call a heteronomous way, simply as another mouthpiece for expressing the new faith—i.e., the new paradoxical extravaganza just imported from abroad. Cultural mediation is a difficult

[1] See Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948), Secs. II, III, and IV.

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and, it may be even, tragic business, in the sense that one has to take the medium seriously and grant it a limited autonomy—which means that it has an effect on what you are trying to say: the cultural channels, in other words, are not simply transparent props or tools or loud-speakers with which to amplify the voice. Perhaps the test of a man's genuine interest in this regard is to ask him whether he recognizes this relative autonomy and whether he is willing to accept all the consequences it may entail.

Now this is an excellent statement of what is, I think, an essentially true position, and at this point it comes pat to my purpose, since it enables me to commemorate the fact that it is precisely upon the autonomy of the art that the major theorists of poetry in our time have insisted.[2] And in this connection what has been their general testimony is very nearly summed up by Allen Tate, when he remarks in the Preface of his book *On the Limits of Poetry*, in commenting upon his title with its echo of Lessing, that in the essays that are here collected he finds himself to be

> talking most of the time about what poetry cannot be expected to do to save mankind from the disasters in which poetry itself must be involved: that, I suppose, is a "limit" of poetry. Lessing says that poetry is not painting or sculpture; I am saying in this book, with very little systematic argument, that it is neither religion nor social engineering.[3]

Neither religion nor social engineering . . . nor philosophy, nor science nor politics, but, as T. S. Eliot has said, simply "excellent words in excellent arrangement":[4] this is what poetry is. Which means, I take it, that the language of imaginative literature does not lead us beyond itself into some external realm of meaning; it is, rather, a language that is so thoroughly composed and that is so heavily charged with imaginative intensity that, unlike other forms of discourse, it is capable of capturing attention *intransitively* upon itself.[5] It is, indeed, the one form of discourse that, in its operations, manages to avoid any bifurcation between the thing or event and the words which refer to it. The language of poetry does not convey any rhetorical propositions about the issues of religion or politics or psychology or science; that is to say, it does not conduct the mind beyond itself to anything at all but rather leads us deeper and deeper into itself, in a process of exploration. And the "import" of poetry, as Mrs. Langer has said, "is not the literal assertion made in the words, but the way the assertion is made and this involves the sound, the tempo, the aura of associations of the words, long or short sequences of ideas, the wealth or poverty of transient imagery that contains them, the sudden arrest of fantasy by pure fact, or of familiar fact by sudden fantasy, the suspense of literal meaning by a sustained ambiguity resolved in a long-awaited key word, and the unifying, all-embracing artifice of

[2] By the term "poetry" I mean all the high forms of imaginative literature—the poet, I take it, being, as Coleridge suggests in the *Biographia literaria*, every writer (not simply the writer in verse but also the novelist and the dramatist) who handles language with such artistry that we are compelled to perform before his work an act of rapt attention.

[3] *On the Limits of Poetry: Selected Essays, 1928–1948* (New York: Swallow Press and William Morrow & Co., 1948), p. xi.

[4] T. S. Eliot, "Preface to the 1928 Edition," *The Sacred Wood* (4th ed.; London: Faber & Faber, 1934), p. ix.

[5] See Eliseo Vivas, "A Definition of the Esthetic Experience," in *The Problems of Aesthetics*, ed. Eliseo Vivas and Murray Krieger (New York: Rinehart & Co., 1953), pp. 406–11. It is to Professor Vivas that we are indebted for the definition in contemporary aesthetics of the poetic experience in terms of "intransitive attention." This concept receives further elaboration in his recent book *Creation and Discovery* (New York: Noonday Press, 1955).

rhythm."[6] The values of poetic art, in other words, are terminal values, and poetry does not "say" anything about anything at all. If, in short, you look for doctrine in it, you will have misconceived its true nature, for the poet is not a philosopher or a theologian but rather an artist who contrives, in Coleridge's phrase, a "species of composition"—and the word "composition" is here to be taken in its literal meaning of something shaped or fashioned, in this case a patterned mosaic in language.

But it is of the nature of a "composition" to *organize* something—and surely, someone will rejoin, poetry organizes something other than, say, merely the idea of poetry itself, and indeed it does. And Coleridge tells us in the famous fourteenth chapter of the *Biographia* what is here involved, when he speaks of the poet's fundamental problem as being that of "the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities."[7] Now one reckless way of interpreting this oft-invoked formula—and the history of its exegesis furnish many examples of recklessness—is to regard the "discordant qualities" which the poet strives to reconcile as growing out of that particular tension between order and disorder which is central to the poetic process. That is to say, the poet, when he sits down to write his poem or his novel, is in the situation of being one who has attained an expert skill in the supervision of words and who therefore possesses, whatever else he lacks, an *ordered* language—within which, now, he seeks to contain the *disorder* of experience and to do so in such a way as to create an "impractical stasis" that commands an act of "intransitive attention."[8] And every successful work of literary art might be regarded as being the result of the poet's conciliation of these discordancies.

But perhaps we are closer to Coleridge's actual implication if we regard the poet's conciliatory function as being exercised simply with respect to the discordancies within experience itself. This conciliatory function, however, as it has been displayed in the greatest literature in the tradition, has not involved—if I may paraphrase a famous line of Samuel Johnson's—any yoking together by violence of heterogeneous ideas, for this is not the way of the poet but, as we vulgarly say, of the "theoretician."[9] The poet's way has, rather, involved such a *dramatization* of the discordancies of life as renders them seizable by the imagination: "thesis" and "antithesis" have not been contained within some false and superficial "synthesis," but rather they have been *rendered* in all the ragged unevenness of their contradiction. The experiential urgency of the antinomy has, in a way, been "frozen," "as permanently as a logical formula, but without, like the formula, leaving all but the logic out"[10]—so that it has been made capable of captivating "the contemplative eye of the mind."[11] That is to say, the poet is distinguished not so much by his skill in producing rhetorical *explanations* of the "opposite or discordant qualities" in experience as he is by his skill in *rendering* these qualities,

[6] Susanne K. Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* ("A Mentor Book" [New York: New American Library, 1948]), p. 212.

[7] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia literaria*, ed. J. Shawcross (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907), II, 12.

[8] My terms again are Professor Vivas' (see *Creation and Discovery*).

[9] Can I say, without sounding too terribly schoolmasterish, that the usage is vulgar, simply because the man whose stock in trade is "theory" of some sort is not a "theoretician" but a "theorist"?

[10] Tate, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

[11] William J. Rooney, *The Problem of "Poetry and Belief" in Contemporary Criticism* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1949), p. 72.

in *dramatizing* them, in making them *concrete* before the gaze of the mind. Or, as a final way of putting it, we may say that in his "compositions" he organizes the common human experience: he gives us a version of our human situation, but he gives us no *propositions* about it; he simply makes us look at it, and the meaning of what we look at appears to be quite indistinct from the form in which it is presented to us—so much so, indeed, that, in describing the mode of poetry's existence, we feel compelled to use such language as my friend used in his letter to me and to speak of its "autonomy."

When we characterize poetic art, then, as "autonomous," we are saying, as Archibald MacLeish has remarked in a recent essay, that "Poetry is not interpretation,"[12] or, as he put it some years ago in his poem "Ars Poetica,"

> A poem should not mean
> But be.

But this is not at all to say that the high forms of imaginative literature do not speak of the common human experience, for they do—but they do so not by way of generalizing upon it but rather by way of forcing us deeper and deeper into it. They impose an order upon it, but it is an order "which leaves it still the chaos and confusion which it really is. . . . In poetry—in the greatest poetry—experience *as it is* may be possessed."[13]

Now this characteristic of art (and it is true not only of literature but also of music and painting) must, I suspect, have figured in the thinking of Kierkegaard when he stressed, as he often does in his writings, the profound difference between the aesthetic mind and the religious mind. For the aesthetic mind is, in Kierkegaard's concept of it, primarily characterized by an openness to experience and by the lack of any impulse to *judge* the experiences which the human adventure brings our way. And this is why, he would say, it lacks the *seriousness* of the ethical mind and the religious mind, for, though receptive to all experiences, it does not, in the name of a particular experience, make any attack upon reality. It refuses to "get out of the poetical and into the existential"; it finds the human drama enormously *interesting*, but it is not led by its contemplation of it to make any decisive *choices* or to embrace any radical imperatives. This is Kierkegaard's conception of the aesthetic mind and of the great remove at which it lives from the existential realm, which is the realm of religion And it is a conception which is adumbrated in these lines from Auden's "New Year Letter," in which he says:

> . . . art is a *fait accompli.*
> What they should do, or how or when
> Life-order comes to living men
> It cannot say, for it presents
> Already lived experience
> Through a convention that creates
> Autonomous completed states.
> Though their particulars are those
> That each particular artist knows,
> Unique events that once took place
> Within a unique time and space,
> In the new field they occupy,
> The unique serves to typify,
> Becomes, though still particular,
> An algebraic formula,
> An abstract model of events
> Derived from dead experiments,
> And each life must itself decide
> To what and how it be applied.[14]

Here, then, we have immediately before us the great and profound difference between the poetic orientation to reality

[12] "The Language of Poetry," in *The Unity of Knowledge*, ed. Lewis Leary ("Columbia University Bicentennial Conference Series" [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1955]), p. 230.

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] W. H. Auden, "New Year Letter," *The Collected Poetry* (New York: Random House, 1945), p. 267.

and the religious. The former, it appears, leads to a desire to *face* experience, in all its concrete richness and plenitude, whereas the latter prompts us to make *decisions* as to how and where we should *apply* or adjust ourselves to the problematic circumstances of life.

So we confront the question now as to whether or not the aesthetic mind has any really fundamental significance for the religious mind. And it is a question the answer to which immediately begins to become apparent when we regard the chief faculty of the aesthetic mind as being the imagination and the chief faculty of the religious mind as being the will, for surely we ought to have no difficulty at all in seeing that the will cannot be effective unless it has a clear and lucid awareness of the situation in relation to which it must act and that it is not within its capacity to provide itself with this awareness. Indeed, it is just here that we may perceive the great and indispensable service which the imagination may perform for the religious life, for, by virtue of the heightened awareness of life that it affords, "it saves the energy of the will from wastage"[15] and therefore makes possible a religious response to life that is relevant to the actual facts of human experience.

Here we have, it seems to me, what must always be the most compelling reason for the religious community's remaining attentive before the revelations of the arts, and particularly of the arts of language. For the poets—that is, the artists of language—are the most sensitive seismographs of the times; they

are apt to be the first to register the profound tides that move society and culture. They are the sensitive ones that first register and react to changes in the climate. They fish in deep waters and bring to light evidence from the inner world and the underworld by a kind of divination, evidence which we may well take into account. This is a part of the mystery of the word. On the one hand there is the power of the word to create new worlds and destroy old, and the new poets are at it today as poets have always been. But there is the attendant and perhaps prior power of the word to get hold of yet obscure meanings and directions and values, and crystallize them. The new poets are doing that today.[16]

And this is why their work must be studied closely. For in such modern books as Franz Kafka's *The Trial*, Elias Canetti's *Auto da Fé*, William Faulkner's *Light in August*, Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, and Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* we behold the full body of our time, and, in doing so, we peer into the dark, secret labyrinths of ourselves. We regard ourselves "as it were at second hand, . . . refracted into *personae* (masks) of . . . [our] condition *with the masks removed!*"[17] We are not, to be sure, thereby *engaged* by any moral or religious imperative, for, as we have observed, the poetic experience does not terminate in *commitment;* and yet, as it has been argued here, the ultimate religious commitments that we must finally undertake are not likely to be entered into with discretion if we are without the insights that that experience affords. This is, I think, what Professor Stanley Hopper means when he tells us in his brilliant book *The Crisis of Faith* that "poetry will not save the world. But poetry can force the soul into the precincts of its last evasion."[18]

[15] D. G. James, *Scepticism and Poetry: An Essay on the Poetic Imagination* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1937), p. 124.

[16] Amos N. Wilder, *The Spiritual Aspects of the New Poetry* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1940), p. 3.

[17] Stanley R. Hopper, "The Problem of Moral Isolation in Contemporary Literature," in *Spiritual Problems in Contemporary Literature*, ed. Stanley R. Hopper (New York: Harper & Bros., 1952), p. 162.

[18] Stanley R. Hopper, *The Crisis of Faith* (New York and Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1944), p. 126.

There is an English lady who writes as a poet and a critic and who remarked a few years ago of Kafka (as I have elsewhere noticed)[19] that she had always had the feeling that "he is, with enormous effort, getting from somewhere that I have never been, to somewhere else that I would not want to go to anyway." And this is likely, I suspect, to be the testimony of those who resist that insulation of the ego from itself which is the means by which great literature forces us into the precincts of our last evasions. We should, most of us, like to think that "conditions" and that our own souls are not in the wretched plight in which so many of the great writers of our day have implied that they are. Indeed, we tell ourselves that things mightn't even be so bad as they are were our literary artists not so insistent upon the unsatisfactoriness of modern life; we often naïvely suppose, as Allen Tate has noticed, that "there would be no hell for modern man if our men of letters were not calling attention to it."[20] And so we believe that where Joyce and Kafka and Faulkner and Malraux have come from is a place to which we have never been and that where they go is a place whose terrain we could not possibly recognize. But this is, of course, the pathetic illogic of the self-deceived and of those who would evade the awful embarrassment that overtakes us in the moment of confession which is the moment to which the great poets finally bring us. For, in making us see ourselves, they make us see that we are less than what we should and might be. This is not a moment of *decision* but a moment of *discovery;* yet what we must see is that the *decisions* which high religion elicits may not be made with the fullest sense of the human realities upon which they bear if they are uninformed by that deep knowledge of the human condition which the poetic experience affords and which is its great gift to the spiritual life.

[19] Nathan A. Scott, Jr., "The Testimony of the Novel," *The Intercollegian*, LXIX, No. 8 (April, 1952), 12.

[20] *The Forlorn Demon: Didactic and Critical Essays* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1953), p. 8.

FIVE YEARS IN A MARGINAL PARISH

By HAROLD W. HECKMAN

[*Mr. Heckman, C.T.S. '42, is minister of the Powder River Parish, Broadus, Montana. This article was written for the* REGISTER. *We hope that each issue will contain a report from the field of special interest to ministers in all kinds of parishes.*]

I

IT WAS not without misgivings that we accepted the call to this marginal parish. Our first night in Broadus was spent in the Powder River Hotel, a small, frame two-story building that stands on the corner where Highway 212 momentarily pierces the town; thence it stretches another eighty to a hundred miles in either direction across lonely grasslands and grotesquely eroded breaks before reaching another town.

It was Saturday evening, December 31, 1950. A New Year's celebration was under way; it was being celebrated in keeping with the mores of the town. In the early hours of the morning we were awakened by excited voices in the hotel lobby. Someone was shouting frantically into the telephone, the only telephone that con-

nected this inland village with the outside world. But the call was of no avail. An auto accident had already claimed another life, this time a local high-school girl.

With this inauspicious introduction to the town, we began our ministry that has quickly stretched into five years. It has been a ministry that has taught us much and certainly has not been without its compensations. We have learned what can happen when necessary resources are brought to bear on a community through a so-called "marginal" church—the resources not only of local leadership and finances but also of the wisdom, the shared experience, and the constant interest of the larger Christian community, the denomination. For there have been frequent visits of our leaders on both the state conference and the national level. There has been a continuing contact, so we have not been alone in this Powder River Parish experiment. It has indeed been a cooperative effort in which the wisdom of the larger fellowship has made itself felt in a particular local situation.

Now after nearly five years of concentrated effort what observations can be made about this marginal parish that was designated a "parish of promise"? But first a bit describing the parish situation.

II

This is an area that we Congregationalists occupy by comity agreement. So, when we came, the county as a whole was assigned to us as our parish responsibility. It lays in the short-grass country of southeastern Montana. While there is some wheat farming here, for the most part this is cow country. Everywhere the Hereford and the Angus dot the sprawling landscape. Powder River County is somewhat outsized, with an area of 3,285 square miles. Census figures show 472 ranches, with an average holding of 3,380 acres. So, with less than one person per square mile and only one town in the county, the problem of communication looms large.

But communicating the gospel is the work of the ministry as a whole. So, except for some external details, we did not feel our assignment was a unique one. Because of our particular geographic location, space was an additional factor with which to contend.

There is here space that separates people by twenty to forty miles from their neighborhood center. There are distances that put as much as seventy-five miles between a parish family and the parish church. But we soon discovered that there were also psychological barriers that sometimes separated people and neighborhoods. These barriers can be more real than geographical barriers. Thus one of our main efforts has been that of trying to create a sense of togetherness among our people. We have been faced with the problem of bringing more and more people under the leadership of one church without doing violence to their natural neighborhood and community grouping.

To begin with, we had to recognize the high financial cost of giving an adequate ministry in an area such as this. The problem is the same in our schools in this region. It is not unusual for a district to maintain a school and employ a teacher for three, four, or five pupils. The cost per child is extremely high, but there seems to be no satisfactory alternative. Our churches too are compelled to accept the fact that an effective ministry in the sparsely settled area will come high. We of the Great Plains have to cope in a particular way with this problem. We are striving to enlarge the area of service of each minister.

III

One of the characteristics of this parish is the lack of cultural distances between