Poetic and Religious Imagination
Rowan Williams
Theology 1977 80: 178
DOI: 10.1177/0040571X7708000305

The online version of this article can be found at:
http://tjx.sagepub.com/content/80/675/178.citation
Poetic and Religious Imagination

ROWAN WILLIAMS

Follow, poet, follow right
To the bottom of the night.
With your unconstraining voice
Still persuade us to rejoice.

With the farming of a verse
Make a vineyard of the curse,
Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress;

In the desert of the heart
Let the healing fountain start,
In the prison of his days
Teach the free man how to praise.

Thus W. H. Auden, in his poem on the death of Yeats. And, as Hannah Arendt emphasizes, there is obviously no question here of the poet praising the best of all possible worlds, congratulating the Creator on a highly satisfactory performance. Poetry it seems is not grounded in some celebratory sense of being at home in the world, but rather in the acute awareness of the world not being at home in itself, in a sense of dislocation. It is never the business of art to say, This is good, or (the corollary of that) I am good; only to say, This is, and, I am. Hence what Eric Gill aptly called the ‘lover’s quarrel’ between art and ‘prudence’ or moral sensibility; art may be about world-views, even metaphysics, yet it is fundamentally inimical to ideology of any kind. The serious artist should easily comprehend the passion with which Job turns away from the neat, facile explanations, solutions and evaluations which his comforters import into his disordered experience. The brutal and overwhelming monologue which Yahweh addresses to Job and his friends is essentially a long statement of the utter alienness and inaccessibility of the order of the world to the mind of man, the impossibility of an ordered linguistic picture of it. If there are things which God alone sees (‘Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?’) how can speech about them ever be possible? The morning stars and the sons of God who stand at the creator’s side are entitled to their shouts of joy at the world; but man is not so graced. Can you draw out leviathan with a hook? can you harness the monsters? Then the

extraordinary volte-face: let Job intercede for his friends, because he has 'spoken well of me', and they have not. Job, with savage persistence, has demanded justice, vindication, *justificatio*, but he has not looked for it in the world, in the language of men. God is not a man who can give a conversational reply (9.32), yet Job continues to demand an answer; he refuses both resignation to the world as it is, and facile justification of the world as it is, because his instinctive and most basic conviction is that 'the world is not enough' (to borrow the title of Zoe Oldenburg's powerful novel on the Albigensian crusade). Mere resignation is a betrayal; structuring and explanation is a blasphemy. What is left, then, if the world is neither to be accepted nor to be rationalized? What remains is Job's protest. Job understands his experience as a question which can only be answered with more questions. His world is not a complete structure to which there can be only a passive response, nor is it a problem to which he, his consciousness, is the solution. It is a disordered flux within which he has to find a place; but this finding of a place (a possible definition of personal maturity) is also to adopt a 'position', in every sense: to make an *option* about reality, to be committed to a 'direction' (not an explanation; I hope the distinction is clear) of and in the world. My intention in what follows is to explore what is involved in making such an option, what it is to struggle towards a vision of the wholeness of the contradictory world; and so, I hope, to suggest what the poetic imagination and the religious imagination may have in common and what they have to offer each other.

What we are confronting is the metaphysical or ontological dimension of poetry, so brilliantly expounded in the long essay by Jacques Maritain from which I borrowed the original title of the present paper. Poetry is not most fundamentally concerned with the expression of personality (that is the province of mere 'literature', according to Maritain, a less serious and far more ambivalent exercise). It is the 'recomposition' of 'a world more real than the reality offered to the senses'. This does not, of course, mean that the poet is a kind of Tolkien, inventing an enormous, coherent, self-sufficient system of 'alternative reality' (though fantasy is a significant—and underrated—expression of the poetic impulse). But what, then, is this 'recomposition'? It is almost a definition by negation—'Whatever “truth” is, it is not merely the world I know'; it is to put the world under judgement. How? By making a new thing. The poet *adds* to the world (as does every artist), to the totality of language; thereby proclaiming his dissatisfaction with the existing world and existing linguistic options. The reality before him is obscurely incomplete: it proposes to the poet the task of making it *significant*—

---

2 Ibid., pp. 75–6.
3 Ibid., p. 75.
which does not mean imposing upon it an alien structure of explanation. Significance is a function of communication, and as such is social and political: it is a setting of something in a new context, a creation of new possibilities of understanding and appropriating the world in human language. It is a popular but fallacious opinion that ‘meaningfulness’ is primarily an individual matter, and that therefore the artist can say no more than, ‘This means something to me’. Significance, however, is a venture into the public sphere. Instead of the ‘this is good’ or, ‘I like this’, of individual meaningfulness, the artist says, ‘Here is a world under judgement, a revaluation of my history, which I offer to you as a possible aid in the revaluation of yours’. It is not a presentation of the world in terms of my consciousness, but a presentation of myself and my world in terms of something not yet fully realized or grasped, a statement of the incompleteness of myself and my world which I make available to you insofar as we share a world or a language.

Here are the roots of one of the great problems of any art—but perhaps especially of the art that works with words themselves. Absolute innovation is not possible. To add to the world, to extend the world and its possibilities, the artist has no option but to take his material from the world as it is. The dictionary is all he has. Is his recomposition then nothing deeper than a more or less arbitrary rearrangement of a determinate set of symbols? The Polish poet, novelist and critic, Jerzy Peterkiewicz, in a profoundly important study, has demonstrated how the poetic sensibility as it matures moves away from the ‘magical’, incantatory level, at which the resources of language are simply exploited as a means of escape from the real pressures, the serious question of the world, towards the critical moment when the need for direct communication is experienced. The poet has to break away from ‘possession’ (the demonic resonance is deliberate), the destructive sterility of a consciousness dominated by the bewitching power of words, by a vastly complex, rich and satisfying linguistic past. ‘But this at once raises the most difficult problem of all. Is any language of poetry a possessed language? If so, the poet free of possession could be imagined creating outside—or rather, without—language, in some unrecordable form moulded from silence.’ If Peterkiewicz is right, every poem is a step along the road to a liberation from words, from the determinations of the language of men. *Every* verbal structure is an offence against the impenetrability of things, an imposition of alien and subjective constraints; no poetic form is transparent enough not to stand between us and honesty. Even ‘the prophet’s leap’, the founding of poetry upon the moment of ecstatic inspiration, is commonly a self-deluding...

---

2. Ibid., p. 23.
luxury. And the final step brings the poet to a complete imaginative void, the dark night of an utter alienation from the 'available' world, 'the desert of the heart'.

Insofar as poetry is a re-creation of things, this seems inescapably to be its destiny. Before authentic re-creation is possible, there must be an entirely committed immersion in the world, a watching and listening in silence; but the deeper this immersion becomes, the less is it possible to translate the world into new words, new images. After Yahweh has mercilessly thrust Job into the terrible contingency and unreasonableness of things, has shown him the distance between the world and the powers of consciousness, Job has no option but dumbness. He lays his finger on his lips (40.3–5), he abhors himself and repents (42.1–6). The facile use of the 'linguistic past' is first abandoned, as the poet learns properly to listen to language, to the world, and what he hears is, ultimately, a speech too vast to be rendered, interpreted, translated in his language, through his person. If there is an 'other side of silence', if there is such a thing as honest poetry (or drama, or fiction, or sculpture, or even music), it is the fruit of this 'self-nourthing': the experience of the world as utterly resistant to the self. This, I think, is the quality of experience which Simone Weil called the sense of 'necessity'—the inescapable flux of 'the way things are', at once orderly (because mechanical) and orderless (because purposeless).

. . . The world moves
In appetency, on its metalled ways
Of time past and time future.

(Burnt Norton, 124–6)

Or, as Simone Weil herself has it, 'The pride of the flesh consists in believing that it has a hold on the future': the world moves towards its future, but this is not at my disposal. All that is left to do is to respond authentically to the present. 'The poet-prophet deludes himself by trying to trace the contours of the future in the events which mask the present for him; the poet-activist bangs the surface of what is contemporary, hoping to impress himself on the days before they vanish in the noise he is making.'

If all this is so, what is honest poetry? Peterkiewicz suggests that it is the recovery of the childlike capacity to live in the gratuity of the present, to attend to and rejoice in pure particularity, which may or may not be apt for utterance in words (the poet may 'astonish his own poetic desire by feeling no need of a voice'). This seems to me so

1 Ibid., pp. 85–96. As I have said elsewhere, I believe this to be (contrary to widely received opinion) the main theme of Eliot's 'Burnt Norton'.
2 Ibid., p. 97.
4 Peterkiewicz, op. cit., p. 123.
5 Ibid., pp. 122–6.
6 Ibid., 126.
nearly right that I am reluctant to qualify it; yet I have to say that this on its own sounds too much like another, subtler and more refined, retreat from the historical world to be entirely acceptable. Is there, on such a model, a real redemption of language, of the past, of the world? Is there any hope that the poet—like Plato’s philosopher—will re-enter the cavern of language, even at the risk of losing direct vision, for the sake of the speech of all men? (‘To purify the dialect of the tribe.’) Can he, in the light of what he has touched in his noche oscura, venture again deliberately to engage in the common speech of man, not merely to rest in the pure instant of gratuity or ecstasy? Job dared to beget more sons and daughters; the poet should do no less. The return to language requires an act of faith; and an acceptance of the probability of failure. It is, as such, an exercise in radical humility and an expression of the hope of ‘grace’, communication surviving the perils of words.

A caution must be entered here. It is all too easy, in making a point such as I have just made, to slip into a very dangerous and linguistically destructive fallacy: to regard the poem as an ‘accidental’ form for a ‘substantial’ message, or ‘point’—the idea of an eternal truth under transitory and conditioned veilings. This is far from the reality. There is no underlying ‘clear and distinct idea’ which has to be lucidly and intelligibly expressed (when will our liturgical reformers grasp this?). There is an impulse to make and re-make, to share an apprehension of how things are by the very act of utterance. Saunders Lewis writes: ‘The poem is not the completion of anything foreseen or preconceived. . . . So that the poem does not recollect or recreate on experience. The poem is the experience: it creates the experience for the poet just as much as for his first audience.’ Strictly speaking, the poet ‘immersed’ in the dark night of the world does not know until he speaks, until he names what surrounds him; and this naming is his poetry. That is why paraphrase or restatement of any kind is anathema to the creative writer. Linguistic forms cannot be modified without a modification of their ‘content’—and of the whole sensibility and ‘form of life’ in which they are used. The poet’s problem of communication is not how best to express a set of ideas, clothing thought with imagery for the sake of greater vividness; this would simply take us back to explanations of the world, decked out in eye-catching metaphor. No, it is a problem of bridging the space between my speech and yours, my history and yours—the problem of ‘possession’ again. No two person’s languages are occupied by the same daimon. It is a problem of availability, how to offer possibilities to other men.


Inescapable here is the sense of irony which characterizes so much of what is written 'at the limits of language'. Kierkegaard understood irony as 'absence', the absence of the speaker from his words; ultimately, the absence of the person from the world. This, however, is to put it in rather extreme form. The ironist is, at one level, absent from his speech, but never totally so: if he were, his words would be the arbitrary symbols of madness. Irony is exercised conjointly with 'critical control',¹ the recognition that what is uttered must have integrity, or 'spiritual unity', or what Maritain would call 'splendour of form'.

The ironic dimension might better be regarded as a speaker's freedom, not from, but beyond his words. Once again, it is Eliot who most sharply articulates this with one of the most morally and aesthetically shocking lines in contemporary English literature—'That was a way of putting it—not very satisfactory' (East Coker, 68). The poet is committed to what he says, but never totally defined by it (and surely this is a characteristic of all personal utterance?). There is always more to be said, but never in the simple mode of stating, 'I have not yet made my message clear.' The relation of theme to possible forms is not that of centre to circumferential and separate points; new formal possibilities are created in and by each utterance demanding response and correction. And the theme is the as yet unknown unity between utterances, an end, not a beginning. 'Art rights itself by advancing further, not by stopping'.² In this way, each poem becomes for the poet a part of the world whose incompleteness he struggles with, questioning him in precisely the same manner. As he grows in maturity of understanding and expression, the close he comes to the elusive unity he is feeling for; yet, at the same time, the more his irony will develop, the less tempted will he be to rest on what he has said. He will look for further ways of exploring his freedom, which may lead him away from poetry (as usually conceived) altogether. Peterkiewicz himself turned to the novel, Eliot to a highly enigmatic style of comedy; Shakespeare has, in The Tempest, left us one of the most poignant testimonies in the whole of literary history to the conflicts, triumphs, disasters, and—bitterest of all—half-successes of the poetic enterprise, concluding with an abdication of art in a speech of such extraordinary nakedness that it is practically impossible to include in a performance. Like all of the last plays, but more than all the others, its world is permeated with irony, with absurdity, arbitrariness, self-mockery, and elemental lyrical simplicity; and its conclusion is a haunting plea for a final release from words, a release into unalloyed freedom, to be effected only by the consent and compassion of those to whom he speaks.

This takes us beyond irony itself, reminding us that the poet is not

¹ See Saunders Lewis, op. cit., p. 175. ² Maritain, op. cit., p. 73.
a 'privileged' man, without needs and independent. If irony is total absence, the poet can never be entirely an ironist: he has at last to confess what his whole utterance has pointed towards, his own incompleteness, exigency and poverty. To others, he may offer new possibilities, a renewal of speech, a kind of transfiguration or resurrection of language; but he, no less that other men, is in need of mercy. His irony is a measure of his impotence to save himself: his words remain his words, he cannot avoid self-assertion, of however refined a kind. Returning yet again to the *Four Quartets*, we might trace this aporia in the movement of 'Little Gidding', a movement through disenchantment, culminating in the irruption of an assurance of grace and forgiveness in IV, which makes possible the last affirmations of V. Every word is a step towards death, yet the exploration must continue: death is the cost of honesty, of seeing clearly. Only here, I believe, does Petr- kiewicz's sense of gratuity come into operation. Beyond silence lies, not childlike directness, but the irony of a recommitment to the world, a discovery of the cost of speech; beyond irony, the discovery of the promise of reconciliation with the present by means of some unimagi- nable future ('all shall be well'), and so, the assurance that the return to words is not simply a pointless and disastrous martyrdom, but is itself obscurely redemptive.

Utter, unqualified silence is not a final option for the poet, because it is a retreat into pure subjectivity, 'experience'. The poet, if he is at all serious, is already committed to the world, he has made moral options in his initial movement of protest, and so has bound himself to the task of changing the world, giving it 'direction', as was said above. His calling is to compassion. Simone Weil states that 'Praise to God and compassion for creatures' arise from 'the same movement of the heart', and that their apparent contradiction is no more than superficial. To 'consent to' the world is to recognize it as abandoned by God, devoid of the unambiguous signs of God's presence and activity, marked by the signs of absence; and this 'consent' is the source of compassion for the whole creation. It is this compassion, and nothing else which makes God present in the world, uniting creatures to God. To feel and show compassion to a creature is to accept it unconditionally, and this unconditional acceptance is precisely the action of God (hence, 'Com- passion directed to oneself is humility', the acceptance of what one is). At the same time, consent to the world, to time, to ‘necessity’, is praise of God—as Job's questioning is praise of God, paradoxically—in its recognition that ‘necessity’ is not a final reality. The absence of God in the world defines the glory of God 'outside' the world; thus the ulti-

2 Ibid., pp. 103–4. I should add that there are aspects of Simone Weil's argument here which I am not very happy with—a characteristic hint of Manichaeism, which I make no attempt to defend.
mate paradox, Christ’s cross as God’s glory. To see the creation as ‘necessity’ is to see it, not simply as flux or ‘process’, but as that from which God withdraws to let it be itself, and so to see the fullness of reconciliation and accepting love ‘behind’ the world. And (though Simone Weil does not carry the argument quite so far) the compassionate man, whose acceptance excludes nothing, directs the world towards reconciliation, brings the ‘glory of God’ into the world, even as he protests at its outrage. His protest witnesses to a ‘possible future’, the knowledge that things might be otherwise, a new world: in this sense, God is the future (as Jürgen Moltmann and others have put it), the possibility of reconciliation. And the protest of compassion is his effective presence in the world, and so, in itself, a step towards the realization of that possibility—the pledge of the Spirit, as the Christian theologian might say.

Not all poets—as the reader may have observed—are, in any sense, believers; and it would be gross to attempt to impose any kind of religious label upon the honestly agnostic or the conscientiously Godless. Yet, in the perspective I have outlined, it may be that ‘God’, as a point of hope, of ‘alternative possibilities’, is a ‘formal necessity’, just as the absence of God as an accessible source of explanation is a ‘formal necessity’ for the artist today. The movement I have tried to trace—protest, disillusion with language, silence, irony, and the simple hope of ‘grace’—is something which seems to be intrinsic to the business of art, any art, that is, which eschews imitation, ideological imperialism, moralising and explaining. Dylan Thomas, introducing his Collected Poems, memorably wrote, ‘These poems were written for the love of man and in praise of God, and I’d be a damn’ fool if they weren’t.’ ‘The love of man’: the movement of compassion, anger, objection; and the ‘praise of God’: the movement of hope, the awareness of grace. Neither cancels the other or modifies the other, however interlocked they are. The hope of grace cannot absolve us from that fanatical attention to particulars, to what the world is, to the linguistic past, without which our notions of ‘experience’ and ‘reality’ will be cheap and trivial. And the stirring of pity (unpopular word!) cannot absolve us from the looking towards a future in which the trap of the past, the history of disaster and of failure (‘Sing of human unsuccess’) can be transcended; without this, there can only be cynicism, fatalism, or despair. On both these counts the poet is a humanist and a radical; that is to say, he is concerned with man and his future, or his redemption. He is also a converted man, one whose knowledge has changed him. He is the beginning of a new world, in his remaking, his reappro-

1 On this, see ch. 9 (‘Empiricism and Transcendence’) of Professor D.M. MacKinnon’s The Problem of Metaphysics, CUP, 1974 (pp. 104–3).

2 Maritain, op. cit., p. 75.
Rowan Williams

pration of his speech and his history. He is himself, for his hearers or readers, a sign of hope, however confused or desperate his biography may be. He has come back alive, though not unscathed, from the borders of language to confirm our suspicions that the world is not to be merely accepted, but accepted and transformed; to teach us how to praise the elusive possibility of God, the future we can never quite succeed in naming. Even our praise prays for grace to praise aright.

 Alive, though not unscathed. Wrestling Jacob, pace Charles Wesley, did not succeed in wringing a name from his adversary, whose answer to Jacob’s importunity is a crippling wound. If for the Christian the name of God is Christ crucified, the ultimate symbol of dislocation, for the poet the marks of his discontent and dislocation must be the ‘name of God’ the impulse which refuses to allow him to retreat from the exposed frontier, the deserted riverbank in the dark, but pushes him always back to his adversary and questioner, savage Yahweh assaulting him out of the whirlwind. The poet praises, but he does not simply and unequivocally affirm and celebrate; if nothing else, he can praise the strength and resilience of his adversary, and of the world which he sees reflected in the adversary’s eyes. ‘Hast thou perceived the breadth of the earth? declare if thou knowest it all’.1 No, but the poet can, ironically, desperately, or prayerfully, or all three, struggle to speak of such breadth as he has perceived, and so, perhaps, not easily, ‘persuade us to rejoice’.

It seems appropriate to end with a recent work by a poet who shows to a remarkable degree the combination of irony, despair and prayerfulness I have suggested as characteristic of the poet at the frontiers. Here is the unmistakable ‘night battle’, wounds, failure, and compulsion to continue; the poem as a step towards death.

You have no name.
We have wrestled with you all
day, and now night approaches,
the darkness from which we emerged
seeking; and anonymous
you withdraw, leaving us nursing
our bruises, our dislocations.

For the failure of language
there is no redress. The physicists
tell us your size, the chemists
the ingredients of your
thinking. But who you are
does not appear, nor why
on the innocent marches

1 Job 38.18
It is unfortunate that the insights of process thinking have not received in Britain the attention which they deserve. Even when something is known about them, the usual attitude is one of dismissal, sometimes uninformed attack, or scandalous misrepresentation. None the less, some of us are convinced that such a theology has much to offer; and in no area, perhaps, is that more true than in Christology. The present essay—brief as it is and hence little more than 'programmatic', as the continental writers say—seeks to indicate the general line of such a Process Christology.

I begin with a summary of the main emphases in process theology in general. Building on the work of Alfred North Whitehead, the Anglo-American philosopher who died in Cambridge, USA, the North American process theologians would say: (1) the world is a dynamic totality of events ('energy-events', in John Hick's phrase) and not of things; (2) hence it is a process, from the given past through the present where decisions are taken relevant to that past and towards a future 'subjective aim' or satisfaction; (3) relationship between events is such that everything influences or affects everything else, with a 'prehension' or grasping in which each event feels and employs past occasions for the realization of its own aims; (4) there is a genuine quality of freedom running straight through the cosmos, reaching its maximum (so far as we know) at the level of human decision; (5) all constituent events are bi-polar, comprising abstract possibility and concrete actualization; (6) some events are more important than others, although all have some importance as indicative of the basic thrust or drive which moves creatively through creation; (7) persuasion, lure, or love is more effective