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THEOLOGY AND IMAGINATION

BRIAN HEARNE

IT IS AN EVER-RECURRING ALLEGATION against Christianity and its stern moral teaching that it leads to a neglect of the world's loveliness, that it is founded on a death-wish. "Thou hast conquered, O pale Galilean,/ and the world has grown grey with thy breath" is still the war-cry of humanists such as Ayer and Russell, although they use more modern language. Camus' Outsider rejects all the certainties of the priest who is trying to console him as he awaits execution—one lock of a woman's hair is worth far more than these cold and lifeless theories.¹ An Irish writer is even bitterer than this. "They [i.e. priests] hate life, they hate people like us, they hate love. . . . Their love of God simply must become hatred of life".² Does religion atrophy and crush human hopes? Or, to put it more mildly, is it at best a sort of non-participating spectator, standing outside the mêlée of human life? There certainly is a gap in the lives of most people between their real joys, their meaningful experiences, and the world that religion offers them. The work of the Second Vatican Council has been very largely that of trying to present an integral vision of Christianity, facing up to the realities of human life and history, no longer turning its back on them defensively. Revelation can be seen now in relation to its correlative: man's need and yearning, which Modernism put as the formal element in Christianity (the symbolist poetry movement in theological form). In general, one may say that human nature has been rediscovered in its theological dimensions, so that a theologian like Karl Rahner can treat of Revelation in terms of an inner, transcendental revelation in all who are called to the life of grace (i.e. all men) and historical revelation as the predicamental expression of this.³

Each of us has our own incommunicable joys—the smile of a loved one, children playing, walking through green fields, a graceful stroke in cricket, a cloud passing overhead, wine that gladdens the heart, light streaming through a window in the evening, some dear

1. "*Aucune de ses certitudes ne valait un cheveu de femme*", p. 176, Gallimard 1957.

2. Michael Farrell, *Thy Tears Might Cease*, Hutchinson 1963, p. 349.

3. Rahner and Ratzinger, *Revelation and Tradition*, Burns and Oates 1966 (Quaestiones Disputatae no. 17).

perpetual place—and if our religion has no place for these, then quite simply it is inadequate and our humanity is greater than it. But the glorious truth of the Christian faith is that all these things are good, are blessed by God, and reveal Him to us. Even Karl Barth, the most intransigent foe of natural theology, admits that God can make Himself known by such means as “Russian Communism, by a flute concerto, by a flowering bush . . .”.⁴ “The glory of God is man fully alive” is Saint Irenaeus’s expression of Christian Humanism and a better has never been found. The scholastic tradition has lost this concept of living experience in its efforts to investigate every problem by using the tools of rational analysis and argument; this necessarily involves a reluctance to leave any question unanswered, so that one sometimes gets the impression of a completeness that is artificial and imposed, e.g. in the treating of the mystery of evil.

THEOLOGY LIVING AND PERSONAL

Theology is the exploration by man of what he believes in order to gain insight into his personal commitment to God—this is where it differs from all other sciences. According to Saint Thomas, it transcends the distinction between the speculative and the practical sciences for this very reason.⁵ It is concerned with the living God in His relations with us, as He has revealed them to us in His Son. It cannot be compared to a science such as mathematics or logic—it is more like literary criticism, which is of value only in so far as it elucidates a creative work. If theology is not living and personal, it is not theology at all. If it does not lead us to a deeper awareness of God, then it is futile word-manipulation and concept-juggling. In a sense, of course, our words are always futile when we speak of God—no matter how carefully chosen and pruned, they slide, slip, and crack under the strain. Only one Word is adequate—the Word of God, and it is precisely because He is made flesh that we can hope to understand what He says or what He is, for both are ultimately the same: it is in Christ’s humanity (in both senses of the term) that God is revealed. There is an important consequence here for theology; what we learn from God’s initiative in speaking His Word in the tangle of human history is simply this: that mercy has come to us, that we are saved in hope, that our destiny is greater than we can envisage. In other words, what God reveals to us is not a

4. *Kirchliche Dogmatik*, I, i, p. 55.

5. *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 1, art. 4.

theoretical doctrine about Himself but His attitude to us, an attitude of pity and loving kindness. In Christ, God reveals Himself as the Father of men, as Saviour of the World, as Sanctifier of His chosen—giving us glimpses of His inner life, but only indirectly, obscurely. In the Resurrection of Christ, God spoke His final word, the word of reconciliation and pardon, and once again creation is “very good”. But in the history of the world, in the mystery of human life, no change is apparent. An event in history yet outside it has transformed the meaning of life, but only in hope, in an eschatological perspective; life in its concrete reality remains a riddle, human relations remain unfulfilled—man knows God has spoken, but the Word seems to have been forgotten, to have passed into the void like any poor human word. At this point, we can turn to the problem—what is the authentic human way of knowing? Is a theory sufficient to give the key to the meaning of life? There is a danger for Christians here: we who are the privileged witnesses to the mystery of Christ may be tempted by that very fact to think of ourselves as superior beings, enlightened where others are in darkness, for whom reality presents no insoluble problems.⁶ But Christianity is not a theory that solves everything, and if we give in to this attitude, to which the ecclesiological equivalent is “triumphalism” (to use the word coined by Monsignor de Smedt and now very much in vogue), we will be in danger of closing ourselves up in face of the dark mysteries of human existence before which Christ the Son of God sweated in anguish. For Christ’s mystery is ever active in the world and, in Pascal’s immortal phrase, He is in agony until the end of time.

AN UNDERSTANDING OF MAN

Quite simply, the Christian may think superficially that he knows all the answers when he may not have even asked the questions—and this is true of the theologian perhaps to a greater degree than of the ordinary believer, since the professional hazard of every thinker is the temptation to withdraw into an ivory tower to brood over one’s ideas, and to shut out everything else. This is well illustrated in the history of salvation, especially in the Gospels. God spoke His Word at a particular time, in a particular locality: He revealed Himself in the midst of the daily life of a particular people. The most highly educated, the most religious, among this people rejected Him, because they knew they were the chosen people, they

6. Cf. the article “The Church and Racism in the United States” by Thomas Merton, in *New Blackfriars*, January 1965, for a development of this point.

already knew all the answers—God, for them, had been whittled down into an interminable list of prohibitions and prescriptions, with nothing omitted, nothing left to chance. And really, they didn't know the questions, the same question that we, for the same reasons, are in danger of sidestepping. What questions? Well, fundamentally, our obscure, unformulated ones: the ultimate question-mark of man's personality; his impalpable, mute sense of transience and alienation, the split between dream and harsh reality; his strange upsurgings of longing, of vague stretching out to others—in short, man listening to the echoes of his own heart as he slowly learns that fulfilment, perfect happiness, is a chimera, unattainable, yet still desired.

This was the basic insight of the modernists: that revelation and grace are strictly meaningless unless they are in some way an answer to these questions, but for Loisy and Tyrrell the Christian story was reduced to an external correlative of man's needs and nothing else. The point to be stressed here is that man's sense of his misery is what opens him to the merciful love of God as shown in Christ Jesus. It is clear in the Gospel that it was the poor, the simple, the sinners, the suffering, who came flocking to Christ. The rich, the contented, had nothing to get because they had nothing to ask. Their self-satisfaction had drugged them to a false sense of security—they were not aware of the human condition. They may have been good theologians, but they knew nothing of God because they knew nothing of man, and it was in man that God revealed Himself. Christ said "blessed are the poor, blessed are they that mourn", not as if want and sorrow are good things but because they are part of the reality for man, who is condemned to pain, suffering and death by his guilt, his rejection of God. If man tries to escape this reality and to seek happiness by his own powers, in his own way, he is making it impossible for God to redeem him. This is perhaps the "unforgivable sin"—a blindness to one's existential situation and to one's utter need for God, the quenching of the spirit who groans in each of us for redemption. God has spoken in Christ His suffering servant, and every human being must re-enact in his own life the passion and death of the Lord. Deep insights into the significance of suffering can be found in art and literature—Professor Cazamian has said "all literature is about death". Keats in his second *Hyperion*, Owen in his war poetry, Eliot in his Tiresias, the seer who has foresuffered all, Pasternak in his great novel—all these are examples of writers moving towards a vision of the crucified Christ, however darkly, however implicitly. Dante's masterpiece is seen by

Fergusson⁷ as the exemplar and archetype for this movement of agony, purification, perception.

All this means that theology must be truly in touch with man or it is failing in its vocation. There can be no authentic theology where there is no insight into the problems of human life, and, for the twentieth century, theology can have but little significance for men unless it shares in the *Angst* of our time, shares in it so as to find in it Christ agonising in His brothers—in war-torn Vietnam and the Congo; in famine-stricken India; in the oppressed peoples of South Africa, America, China; in the cancer patients of the hospital down the road; in the bereaved family next door.

To sum up all the preceding ideas: what is needed is a kind of theological anthropology, a means of deepening the awareness of the human condition, of quickening our understanding and love for all men, of convincing us of their inexorable need for God. Perhaps we can express this in terms of a renewed Advent emphasis in theology, an awakening to "the Great Day of the Lord" that is to come; a theology of the silence of God, of His absence, even. Bultmann puts the same idea in different words: "If theology is to avoid mere speculation about God or mere talking about the idea of God, and if it is to speak of the real living God, then it must speak of God and of man at the same time".⁸

It is now time to draw some loose ends together. The two main points made above are: (a) the imagination's essential role in knowing things in their elusive and unique reality, and (b) the need for theology of a deep understanding of man, without which knowledge of God is empty and illusory.⁹

THE POWER OF IMAGINATION

The two points are closely inter-connected, since the imagination is vital also in the second. Newman's distinction between real and notional assent is helpful in showing this: notional assent is the knowledge of the reason, a theory, which does not strike home to the heart but remains on the surface like a stone on the surface of a

7. Cf. F. Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theatre*, for some applications of this.

8. *Glauben und Verstehen*, I, p. 117.

9. After this essay had been finished, I came across an interesting article by Father Piet Fransen in *The Heythrop Journal*, 1963, entitled "Three Ways of Dogmatic Thought". These ways are the psychological, the essentialist, the existentialist, and the first and third are obviously identical to the main themes of this essay. It is reassuring that Father Fransen also points out the limitations of the scholastic approach for contemporary theology!

frozen lake—it has no “reality”, no effect on the knower. Real assent, on the contrary, is knowledge that is personal, gripping, emotional—the act of a full human being, of man attending in his wholeness to things.¹⁰ Ronald Knox applied this to the religious sphere when he wrote that he was seeking a proof for God’s existence that would bring the unbeliever (and the believer, too) to his knees instead of the detached and indifferent attitude that is the usual response of modern man to the “five ways”. Now it is only through the imagination that such knowledge is made real, is realised, in a vivid, concrete apprehension, in a living awareness. This is in no way a limitation, it is rather man’s glory to be the microcosm of the entire created universe, sense and spirit, visible and invisible, which meet in his imagination. It is here that language and art have their source, since these are man’s attempts to capture in matter the elusive smile of the spirit, to make it visible to the senses—and in this way the Incarnation of the Son of God, the revelation of the Godhead in time and space, can be understood as the reality that fulfils the deepest aspirations of man. A few lines from the last movement of “The Dry Salvages”¹¹ sum up all that I am trying to say:

For most of us, there is only the unattended
Moment, the moment in and out of time,
The distraction fit, lost in a shaft of sunlight,
The wild thyme unseen, or the winter lightning
Or the waterfall, or music heard so deeply
That it is not heard at all, but you are the music
While the music lasts. These are only hints and guesses . . .
The hint half-guessed, the gift half-understood, is Incarnation.

The depth and mystery of man’s being, history, relationships, are brought alive in his heart through the power of the imagination; and although man may accept the *idea* of his misery and his grandeur, it is only when he *feels* the burden of his mystery that it means anything to him or that it will change his life.

THE ARTS AND THEOLOGY

We can now go on to examine more directly the relationship of art and literature to theology, i.e. the role that art can play in en-

10. *The Grammar of Assent*, eighth edition, London 1889, pp. 34-97.

11. T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*, Faber and Faber 1943.

riching and personalising the concepts of theology. Since many people think of art in terms of decoration and of poetry as a rather exotic if harmless hobby, it seems absurd to them to claim that these "pastimes" have a vital place in the study of theology. Perhaps the simplest answer is to refer to the conciliar document *Gaudium et Spes*, where a brief but pregnant paragraph is devoted to the role of art and literature in the life of the Church (no. 62). Nevertheless, though it is most heartening to see such an explicit recognition of the Christian relevance of art and literature in the Council's teaching, it is hardly necessary to have to rely on this statement to prove our contention. It is an easy matter to prove it if we build on what has been already discussed. In art, man's dumb aspirations and hidden perceptions of the mystery of his life and of the universe grope into consciousness and find symbolic expression. Art is thus a form of knowledge, a cognitive process, through which a human person comes to an awareness of his individual being, of the humanity which he shares with others, of the perpetual flow and change which are the consequence of man's spatio-temporal existence. This has nothing to do with romantic grand opera emotion, although feeling is of course involved. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, already quoted in this essay, spring again to mind as an example of a work that is humanly and theologically inexhaustible because it rises from a search for reality, beginning with the intense experience of the rose-garden, the sunlit pool, the laughter of children, tending on to the "completion of the partial ecstasy", moving into "another intensity / For a further union, a deeper communion / Through the dark cold and the empty desolation", until finally, "The fire and the rose are one". This poem continually presents the searcher, *homo viator*, with new insights, although the basic message is the one embodied in every work of art to some degree at least, namely, that the human condition is one of sorrow and of failure, and occasionally of joy, which momentarily lights up all the dark shadows, but fundamentally of tending on, of dissatisfaction with the present. Thoreau's famous *mot* is relevant in this connection, that most men lead lives of "quiet desperation". In art, this deep-rooted hunger seeks expression, yet, strangely, the desperation seems to transform itself into hope—all art is in some way eschatological, the mind is drawn beyond the immediate horizons of desire. This may explain the fusion of such opposite emotions as joy and sorrow that is felt unmistakeably at certain times in art; for example, very frequently in the music of Mozart, it is impossible to describe what one hears as either joyful or sad.

SURPRISED BY JOY

In his spiritual autobiography, C. S. Lewis has described in moving terms the value of certain brief glimpses of joy in his life, which later gave meaning to his conversion to the source of all joy. These moments of imaginative vision, of incommunicable perception, which we all know, defy analysis: they are not even necessarily "happy" experiences, but it does seem that they are always full of hope—"We feel that we are greater than we know", and that "all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well". Art at its highest is concerned with these experiences, and with the communication of these moments that elude analysis and yet are the main-spring of our existence: this is not to imply that the short lyric is the essential literary form, since a long cumulative work may be more effective than a burst of song. But it is true that joy is not a stable, permanent thing—it is fleeting and ungraspable and it comes to us only when we are not expecting it, when we are surprised by it. Theologians are wary about speaking of God's sensible action in man, but surely we are justified in asserting that the divine elusiveness is a characteristic of our joy, and that it is given to us by the Holy Spirit, who is the Joy of the Father and the Son, especially as this joy is invariably full of humility and confidence. When art captures a fleeting joy and makes it in some sense eternal, it enables us to grasp something of the meaning of our density. In these intense moments the human personality seems to be in full possession of itself, compared with the scattered and piecemeal activity of other times, when we "cannot bite the day to the core".¹² The business of art and literature is, as we have seen, the exploration of these confines, of the heights and depths of the human mind, caught among the obscure but rich streams of history. To claim that joy is the central feeling in art by no means implies that man's misery and squalor must be ignored by writers, since joy, in this sense, does not mean happiness, and it may even be close to grief—it rather has the meaning of hope—a vivid, inarticulate, unfulfilled desire for something we cannot define or describe. Man's state is one of misery; he has no control over his life, which he can lose at any moment by the most trivial cause, nor over circumstances, nor over the future, nor even the present; his proneness to sin rather than to love, to egoism rather than to service—these are the realities of the human situation, and it is only in confronting them that we lay

12. From Edward Thomas's poem "Glory", all of which is highly pertinent to the theme of this essay. See *Collected Poems*, ed. W. de la Mare, London 1928.

ourselves open to the onslaught of joy, which is not and cannot be in our control. Incidentally, the emphasis on intense personal experience in no way means that we are propounding a sort of search for ecstatic moments as the human ideal—such a search would be self-defeating, since, as has already been pointed out, these moments *cannot* be sought, they only come unexpectedly, “with a shock of mild surprise”, and also, since they are not ends in themselves, but pointers towards some mysterious, infinitely desirable reality. This fact seems to strike home to even the most aesthetic of the aesthetes at some time or other—Huysmans and Rimbaud both came to realise the inadequacy of mere aesthetic experience, no matter how intense this may be. Nevertheless, in the experience of joy, man gains a glimmering, feeble, but real light about his nature and goal, and by learning experientially what he is, he learns also what God is for Him—the One who draws each of us on with His unutterable love, so that, turning to Him with our whole being in the freedom of love, we may find in Him the fulfilment of all our partial ecstasies.

THE DARK SIDE

Modern literature and art are frequently accused of pessimism and despair, and there is no doubt that they are more concerned with man's darkness and hideousness than with his light and beauty, or, more simply, they describe man deprived of God, for it seems unrealistic to an age that is living after two world wars, with the smell of charnelhouses such as Dachau, Belsen, Treblinka, Auschwitz still reeking in our nostrils, to see man in any kind of a cheerful light. But he is still man, noble even in his depravity, and there is a strange dignity even in the most hopeless figures of modern literature, such as Samuel Beckett's tramps and cripples. Literature has no illusions about the kind of thing that man is, and it is only on this basis that a finally optimistic vision of man can have any meaning—otherwise it is a superficial and blind cheerfulness. The Christian has to try to see what is in man, with the eyes of Christ,¹³ and literature is a great help in this respect, since it probes our humanity and makes us discover undreamt-of regions in our heart, where joy is a rare visitor but all the more precious for that. Francois Mauriac's *Le Noeud de Vipères* is a fine illustration of man's inner darkness, of “the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart”, but all art tends to the same kind of penetration—most of Rouault's painting is a similar commentary on the sin of man, the *homo homini lupus*, the cruel

13. See *Saint John* 2:24, 25.

judge, the depraved harlot: a long list of examples could be given, but the point is sufficiently clear. Incidentally, to return for a moment to Mauriac's novel, even there, its protagonist Louis experiences certain rare moments of joy, which, it is implied, later find fulfilment when love drives out the hatred in his soul.¹⁴

Man's soul has been compared to a dark jungle, with a little clearing of self-knowledge in the middle. It is these dark sunless regions that are explored by creative writers, and a Christian thinker who prefers not to plunge into their depths, where the moral categories and definitions don't seem to apply, is refusing to come to grips with his own humanity, with the mystery of existence, of sin, and, ultimately, with the joy of healing love and with God, since, as has already been insisted upon, man's emptiness is his only way to God and to redemption. Salvation is only a smug label, a meaningless slogan, if a man has no sense of time, of loss, of change, of exile, of death, of chaos. This is where a writer like Dostoevsky has so much to offer to one who is dissatisfied with jargon and wants to seek out the possibilities of convinced Christian living in the world of today—it is no accident that the novels of this great writer played a seminal role in the formation of the thought of Karl Barth, whose theology is characterised above all else by its living sense of personal commitment.¹⁵

The foregoing ideas will undoubtedly seem unduly pessimistic to some, since we are no longer in the domain of the serene certitude and intellectual harmony that shine through scholastic theology at its best, but, while not denying the dangers of the approach defended above (especially, I think, those of subjectivism, relativity, and perhaps immanentism—but with a certain amount of caution, these can be avoided) it does not seem unreasonable to claim that it is at least a necessary supplement to the rather impersonal methodology of Thomism. By it, we gain insight into the basic connecting-point (the *Anknüpfungspunkt* of modern theological controversy) between experience and revelation, between the immanent and the transcendent, and it enables us to penetrate the full human dimensions

14. The key passage is on page 39 of the Livre de Poche edition, Paris 1964: "*Les eaux ruisselaient; j'écrasais du fenouil entre mes doigts; au bas des montagnes la nuit s'accumulait, mais sur les sommets subsistaient des camps de lumière . . . J'eus soudain la sensation aigüe, la certitude presque physique, qu'il existait une réalité dont nous ne connaissions que l'ombre . . .*".

15. In fact, Dostoevsky is the most quoted author in Barth's *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, 2nd ed., Munchen 1922; it may also be noted that Barth's close friend and collaborator, Eduard Thurneysen, wrote his study, *Dostoevski*, shortly before this (Munchen 1921).

of the central Christian truth: that man need not fear his misery, his loneliness, his guilt, his death, since Christ has brought him hope. Our very inability to redeem ourselves, which is the leit-motif of modern writing, is paradoxically the ground of our joy, for Christ will not fail us if we open ourselves to His love—otherwise, we are indeed “ourselves alone”. Healing grace can come to King Lear when he learns to see his nothingness, to realise it so intensely that he smells it:

Gloucester: O let me kiss that hand.
Lear: Let me wipe it first, it smells of mortality.¹⁶

If one looks at modern writing in this light, it cannot be dismissed offhand as a sort of drooling self-disgust and sterile self-pity. It represents man as he is without God, naked, empty-handed, corrupt, “the thing itself”—yet in an attitude of waiting for the impossible. *Waiting for Godot* is the most significant title in recent literature.

Yet even this is not the only aspect, for human nature has its lighter side too and if human suffering and sorrow help us to penetrate more deeply the meaning of the passion and death of Christ, and thus to grasp God’s self-revelation with personal understanding, so also, human laughter and humour and gladness enable us to glimpse the destiny for which we have been created; and it is fitting to end on this happier note: Dante’s vision of the stars, of

*Lo bel pianeta che ad amar conforta
faceva tutto rider l’oriente*¹⁷

when he comes out from the dead air which had afflicted his eyes and his heart; the violin entry in the *Sanctus* of Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis*; the great chorus “*Es werde Licht*” at the start of Haydn’s *Die Schöpfung*; the conclusion of *The Brothers Karamazov*; Saint Luke’s account of the disciples and the risen Christ at Emmaus—these are just some examples of man’s power to sense, however dimly, the glory that is already his in hope, which is the incredible but certain promise of Christ’s resurrection.

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16. *King Lear*, act 4, scene 6.

17. *Purgatorio*, Canto I, 19, 20.