

RELIGION AND LITERATURE

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FIFTY years ago I should have had an easy task with this subject. I should have quoted Matthew Arnold to the effect that poetry is the abiding element in religion, and then borrowed a few pages from one of the innumerable books and essays on the religious teaching of (say) Wordsworth, or Browning, or Tennyson. The conclusion would have been that if we look into the matter carefully, religion and literature are one and the same.

It would be difficult to do that now. We do not like 'pots of message'. If we hear someone saying "God's in his heaven, All's right with the world", we are apt to turn away embarrassed. And we have trouble with the word 'religious'. Dr. Leavis in his book on the English Novel quotes a passage from D. H. Lawrence's letters which ends: "One has to be so terribly religious to be an artist"; and we all remember Shakespeare's coward: "a most devout coward, *religious* in it". So the best thing we can do is to start from the beginning and ask ourselves, first, what literature is.

Literature has clearly to do with letters, but a list of isolated letters—a child's A B C, for instance—is not literature. To be literature the letters have to be made up into words. But, again, not words in isolation. A dictionary, although it has its own interest, is not literature. To be literature the words made up by the letters have to be grouped together so as to *mean* something. The letter 'I' by itself is not literature (though some of our younger writers with their autobiographies at 20 seem to think so). Nor are the letters A B I K N O W A N K. But group these letters into words and the words into meanings and we get: "I know a bank"; as in the Shakespearean "I know a bank whereon the wild thyme blows".

What makes this line literature? Is it the *form*—the lilt of the verse, the music of it, the order of the words, the rhythm? Or is it the *content*: in this case, the information that specimens of a certain shrubby aromatic herb of the *Labiatae* family can be found in such and such a location? If it were the *form* which made it literature, what are we to say of: "I know a bank wherein the dollars are kept"? The rhythm is

the same, and so is the syntax and the shape of the sentence. If the *content*, surely the content is given more reliably in the most un-literary handbook of botany.

We may consider another Shakespearean bank:

How sweet the moonlight sleeps upon this bank.
 Here will we sit and let the sounds of music
 Creep in our ears: soft stillness and the night
 Become the touches of sweet harmony.
 Sit, Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven
 Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold.
 There's not the smallest orb which thou beholdest
 But in his motion like an angel sings,
 Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins.
 Such harmony is in immortal souls.

In these lines too there is a 'something'. But what is it? The communication of fact? But these are *not* facts, at least in the normal sense of the word. If I am told that there is gold in the South African mines or in the Bank of England or at Fort Worth, I can go and look at it, or ask somebody I trust to look at it and report to me. The statement can be verified by experience. But the *floor of heaven*? Inlaid with patines of *bright gold*? Do we see it; *can* we see it; have any of our *friends* seen it? The plain man says, Fantasy! Is literature then nothing but fantasy, an irresponsible creation of an over-heated, under-nourished, brain? The young-eyed cherubins? Show me a cherub (our plain man would say), and I can tell you whether he is 'young-eyed' (whatever that may mean) or not; but first catch your cherub! Miss Ridler in her Memoir of the late Charles Williams quotes an early poem of his, running:

I saw Shakespeare
 In a Tube station on the Central London:
 . . . the notes for *The Merchant*
 Were in his pocket
 Beginning (it was the first line he thought of)
 'Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins.'

It may have been the first line he thought of, says our plain man. The question is: Does it make sense? "There's not the smallest orb which thou beholdest but in his motion like an angel sings"? I fear that our plain man, knowing nothing of Pythagoras, will crudely and rudely say: Bunk. "Such harmony is in immortal souls?" Perhaps—if there *are* souls, and *if* they are *immortal*.

We may try again:

Sophocles long ago
 Heard it on the Aegean, and it brought
 Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
 Of human misery; we
 Find also in the sound a thought
 Hearing it by this distant northern sea.

In these lines we have something of another kind. But what is it? An expression of passing spleen? Surely not; but it is not, either, the

general proposition, communicated for our information, that we have always had things bad.

Consider something not so familiar:

Because I could not stop for Death
He kindly stopped for me;
The carriage held but just ourselves
And Immortality.

Too easy? And yet, what an audacious figure: Death passing in a carriage and giving an impatient traveller a lift; and the traveller finding that Death—*Death*—has another passenger already, Immortality! This is not just a jingle. But it is not, either, a plain statement of fact. Yet it sticks in the mind, nourishes the mind. Once heard it is hard to forget.

2.

Let us look at something on the grander scale.

We all at school had to 'do' *Macbeth*. It is a good choice. There is a first-class murder, a first-class ghost (indeed, a whole series of them), a bevy of first-class witches; a few battles, all of them gory; and, finally, a first-class surprise in the best blood-and-thunder tradition. As a Western, the play ranks high. It is also an improving narrative. It presents the first-class (although not unfamiliar) moral that murderers come to a bad end.

Shakespeare turned this yarn into literature. One of the more striking points of the play is its swiftness of movement: the murder occurs very early and all the rest presses on—we are hardly out of one thing before we are in the middle of another. But this rapidity has its foil (and this is a second and still more important point) in the pauses given for reflection: a memorable one is the knocking at the gate. It is to the nature of these that I draw your attention. They are not moral essays, sermons, 'messages'. They are actions, but actions of a special kind. They display the truth beneath the outward show, the reality behind the appearance, *in their very selves*. They *are* truth, reality.

For example. It will be remembered that Macbeth himself has scruples, scruples of honour, scruples of decency, moral scruples: the victim is a guest, a benefactor, a king. These scruples are swept away by his wife. *She* is the lion-heart, the super-man, the strong one. But *is* she? A great pause is made by the sleep-walking scene. In this scene morality (if that is the right word) becomes articulate in the very action: "the stone cries out of the wall and the beam out of the timber answers it".

We may recall Lady Macbeth's end. A cry is heard in the castle and Macbeth asks what has happened. He is told the queen is dead. That is all. We are not informed, *he* is not informed, how she died. No speeches are made over her dead body, no epitaph chiselled on her grave. She had spoken her own epitaph already: "Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand". She *said*: "What need we fear who knows it, when none can

call our power into account?"; and it was a true saying IF none can call our power into account and IF we forget that WE know it. But we *do* know what in this life we do. Our power *is* called into account. It is called into account by our own selves. The knowledge is within and for that reason inescapable. We can never escape *ourselves*.

But *Shakespeare* does not say that, and he certainly does not *say* it. He gives us no "pot of message". We are offered no wise saws on the sacredness of life, the sin of murder, the vanity of power, the emptiness of ambition. We are shown *Lady Macbeth*: "Lo you! here she comes. This is her very guise; and upon my life, fast asleep. Observe her. Stand close". See how the particularity, the concreteness, is brought out. It is a hospital case. Two people are watching, one a doctor, one an attendant. The doctor asks: How came she by that light? and the waiting-woman says (concreteness again!): "Why! It stood by her: she has light by her continually; 'tis her command". A moralist might have said that the black heart cannot abide darkness, its own darkness. Shakespeare says it too, but in a different way. Or rather, he does not *say* it at all. It is *acted* (or, as the modern critics say: *enacted*) before our eyes. The doctor asks (clinically, as it were): "What is it she does now? Look how she rubs her hands!" The waiting-woman is just beginning her hospital-nurse's report that it is a habit with the patient when Lady Macbeth herself breaks out with:

Yet here's a spot. Out damned spot! Out, I say!

One, Two:

[this is the remembered castle clock tolling the awaited hour]

Why then, 'tis time to do it. Hell is murky! Fie, my lord, fie! A soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it when none can call our power into account?

And then that horrible flash-back: "Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him"?

Human *speech* is by its very nature general. It talks abstractly of guilt: guilt which cannot rest; restlessness which cannot sleep; memory embedded in habit; habit useless when deprived of normal purpose. Lady Macbeth, before our eyes, washes—*tries* to wash, tries *unsuccessfully* to wash, goes on *endlessly* trying unsuccessfully to wash—her blood-stained hands.

3.

A theme of major human concern; deeply felt, deeply pondered over; digested thoroughly; re-produced in a striking and considered form; presented intensely in the concrete activity of a particular person in a particular situation factual or imaginary ("Because I could not stop for Death, he kindly stopped for me"; "Sophocles long ago heard it on the Aegean")—is it not this, or something like this, something like what we have in this play of Macbeth, which constitutes the finished pattern of literature; or if not *the* finished pattern, at least *one* finished pattern, a pattern to which literature can be held to aspire and by

which, as by a standard or an ideal, it can be judged? If we grant that, we are in agreement with D. H. Lawrence, at least in so far as the art of literature is concerned, that all art is *religious*: "One has to be so terribly religious to be an artist"—'terribly' not in the colloquial sense of 'very' but in the literal sense of proceeding from terror and arousing terror, the terror expressed in the Biblical phrase "how awesome is this place", the terror not of fear but of reverence which Milton pronounced akin to beauty and love. It has been said of religion that it is an attitude of humility towards universal being, and it certainly is at least that as well as much more. But as merely that, as the attitude of humility towards universal being, is it not basically what Lawrence was thinking of when he used the word 'religious' to characterize the activity of the artist?

The two terms of our subject are thus brought together. There is sense in talking of literature and the work of the literary artist as religious. Literature is not simply an expression and communication of an experience. It is an expression tempered by a grasp of its wider relevance. Nor is it, as it is often said to be, just a report of the human situation. It is never a plain reproduction, a bare statement of spiritual facts. It is worth recalling some efforts in that direction. The American novelist Dos Passos is an interesting instance. Dos Passos tried to present the human situation in the form of a series of snaps, reminiscent of the cinema, showing the simultaneous activities of different people in different places and circumstances. The effect on me at least of Dos Passos's work is one of *incoherence*; and that is the opposite, if not the negation, of art. This point (and a most important point it is) lies at the centre of the teaching of a great American critic, Mr. Yvor Winters, whose work has just been made available in this country. He insists rightly that, however *incoherent* the material, the artist's function is, precisely, to give coherence. Mr. Winters calls the opposite view—the view that incoherence should be presented *incoherently*—the "fallacy of imitative form"; that is, as he says:

the attempt to express a *state* of uncertainty by uncertainty of *expression*; whereas the sound procedure would be to make a *lucid and controlled* statement regarding the condition of uncertainty, a procedure, however, which would require that the poet *understand* the nature of uncertainty, not that *he* be uncertain. (*In Defence of Reason*, p.87)

'Form', he says generally (p. 64 n.),

is expressive invariably of the state of mind of the author. A state of formlessness is legitimate subject-matter for literature, and in fact all subject-matter, as such, is relatively formless; but the author must endeavour to give form, or meaning, to the formless. In so far as he endeavours that his own state of mind may imitate or approximate the condition of the matter, he is surrendering to the matter instead of mastering it. Form, in so far as it endeavours to imitate the formless, destroys itself.

Literature in fact is an imposition of order on experience. It is not simply an account of experience.

4.

With this most important principle firmly in our minds we are at long last nearing our problem. For religion—any religion—asserts *reality*. Can we say the same, *in the same sense*, of literature? If literature is a giving of form to, an imposing of control on, the matter of experience, it can only begin to touch religion if that form, that control, is *real*, that is, in the matter of experience already. But are we entitled to say this? Are we sure that the form expressed by literature is *already present* in its matter; or on the contrary are we perhaps compelled to admit that it is not there at all but is the product of an individual whim, a fantasy of no intrinsic inherence in the real? If the form is, in Mr. Winters's phrase, expressive invariably of the state of mind of the author, what guarantee can we have that the author's state of mind, which is his own private possession, reflects the human situation as *it exists on its own*? Mr. Eliot says somewhere that it is ultimately the function of art to impose a credible order upon ordinary reality and *thereby to elicit some perception of an order in reality*. Our question turns on that word 'thereby'. If art *imposes* a credible order upon ordinary reality, does it *thereby* (that is, inevitably, by the very nature of the case) elicit some perception of an order *in reality*?

We may consider some arguments to the contrary. The first and most usual is that poets differ from one another in their accounts of experience, just as one and the same novelist may portray variously the world he knows or thinks he knows. But could we expect otherwise? The world is a big place. The potentialities of experience are countless; and the power of absorption and re-presentation, even of the greatest mind, is, by the very nature of humanity, finite. Yet the task is there: the imposition of form on a recalcitrant matter; and it may still be that the *successful* imposition is not an imposition at all but a revelation of what is already there, the matter not being in fact recalcitrant since to the seeing eye it contains its proper form already. Again: critics, we are told, disagree. But has not too much been made of this? Disagreement is possible only on common ground. The critics are like litigants bringing a case before the courts. They admit one common jurisdiction. And do we not exaggerate the extent of these disagreements? Sophocles and Shakespeare, Aristotle and Dr. Johnson, would (we can be sure) have got on well together. True, the impermanent *is* impermanent. What of it? That is just what we should have expected it to be! But by the side of the *impermanent* there is the permanent, and it is the permanence of the permanent which is impressive: think of the *Agamemnon*, the *Apology*, *Macbeth*. When we applaud a production of *Macbeth*, we are *not* saying: "Oh, if I had been in the Globe theatre in 1606, I should be applauding this new play". We are applauding NOW; and by this present applause of ours we are saying that by any standard, and in any place and time, what we have been seeing and hearing is of the highest quality. We see an Altamira

bison—some thirty or forty thousand years old, they say—or a Chinese vase of unknown provenance. When we express our rapt and unqualified admiration, we are not only denying the so-called relativity of aesthetic judgements. We are affirming, with the most positive of theologians, *quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus*. We are asserting a universal standard. We are speaking in terms independent of space and time, and claiming to make a judgement independent of space and time.

Our general position therefore can be advanced yet further. Not only is it reasonable to say that the creative artist is religious and acts religiously. His creation, and our appreciation of it, partakes of a timeless realm, the realm of spiritual values.

5.

Yet *in this realm*, is literary activity identical with that of religion?

We must be careful here and tread delicately. As I understand it, within this realm religion goes farther than literature and in a different direction. They meet, as it were, but then part. They share a basic ground but religion ventures on. This common ground I find best described in the Preface with which that fine poet and critic Robert Bridges introduced his admirable anthology *The Spirit of Man*. Its "main implication", he wrote, is that "spirituality is the basis and foundation of human life—in so far as our life is a worthy subject for ideal philosophy and pure aesthetic—rather than the apex or final attainment of it. It must underlie everything. To put it briefly, man is a spiritual being, and the proper work of his mind is to interpret the world according to his higher nature, and to conquer the material aspects of the world so as to bring them into subjection to the spirit".

Thus literature, according to Bridges, brings us to the world of the spirit and shows us how to interpret the material in terms, the proper terms, of the spiritual.

This appears most clearly in the masters of the Romantic movement. We all remember Keats:

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter; therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endeared,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tune.

On this Sir Maurice Bowra observes:

In this conception of this unheard music Keats expresses with great force something which lies close to the centre of all truly creative experience. Great as was his physical sensibility and his appreciation of everything that came through his senses, he knew in the very moment of enjoying it that it was not everything and not enough. Anything so vivid and yet so transient must be related to some larger reality which, being permanent and complete, gives a satisfying basis to it. We may legitimately call this reality an ideal world, if by that we mean an order of things which gives substance and significance to the gifts of the senses. (*The Romantic Imagination*, p. 141)

Sir Maurice thinks this belief not irrational. "Great art", he goes on to say, "cannot but suggest something beyond its immediate or even

its remoter meanings, an indefinable 'other' which is the most important thing it has to give. In our apprehension and enjoyment of this, we almost forget the details of an actual work of art and pass beyond them into a state which may be called silence because it speaks not to the ear but to the spirit".

This passage is a notable re-statement of the belief in the existence of a spiritual world which sustains and upholds the world of ordinary living. It is this belief which constitutes what I have called the common ground between literature and religion. I have now to suggest to you that, although holding this ground in common, literature and religion part company. Religion is something other than the apprehension and enjoyment of a (or should I say, *the?*) spiritual world.

Literature may be looked upon, in the light of what we have said, as the self-expression of life when come to consciousness of itself in its particularity, its intensity, its depth; in its disarray and confusion, its strugglings and its failures, as well as in its successes; its wastes and its tragedies and its triumphs, its vilenesses and its nobility. This is, in Eliot's phrase, 'ordinary reality', and upon it literature "imposes a credible order thereby eliciting some perception" (whether a true perception or not we have left undecided) "of an order *in* reality". But it then "leaves us" (I am continuing the passage from Eliot), "as Vergil left Dante, to proceed towards a region where that guide can avail us no farther".

Why can it avail us no farther (I have now ceased quoting Eliot)? It is because religion is all that we have claimed for literature and *in addition something more*. It is not only the apprehension of the spiritual foundation of life. It is also the apprehension that that life is *guided*. I am not saying that the being guided is a fact. That is a problem for metaphysics. But in the European sense of the word—and I say so explicitly for reasons obvious to any student of religion—where there is no consciousness of guidance, there is no religion:

He that dwelleth in the secret place of the Most High
 Shall abide under the shadow of the Almighty.
 I will say of the Lord, He is my refuge and my fortress;
 My God in whom I trust.
 For he shall deliver thee from the snare of the fowler,
 And from the noisome pestilence.
 He shall cover thee with his pinions,
 And under his wings shalt thou take refuge:
 His truth is a shield and buckler.
 Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night,
 Nor for the arrow that flieth by day;
 For the pestilence that walketh in darkness,
 Nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday.
 A thousand shall fall at thy side,
 And ten thousand at thy right hand;
 But it shall not come nigh thee.

In this psalm there are two complementary conceptions: on the one hand, the secret place of the Most High, the shadow of the Almighty, refuge, fortress, the permanent in which we can abide; on the other

He shall give his angels charge over thee,
To keep thee in all thy ways.
They shall bear thee up in their hands,
Lest thou dash thy foot against a stone.

This is religion as expressed poetically, not in the formulae of a creed, but it expresses vividly what we may suspect to be its essence. It is not just the grasp of the spiritual or the attitude of humility towards universal being. It is not just the acceptance of fact and the recognition in it of an over-riding spiritual order. It is in addition the conviction that universal being is getting somewhere and that in its course it gives man a helping hand. It not only glimpses and perhaps describes a spiritual realm. It asserts that in some way man is a *part of* that spiritual realm and is ultimately in the hands of spiritual forces. When the prophet wished to describe the coming of the spirit upon him, he said: "The heavens were opened and I saw visions of God". Literature, too, sees the opening of the heavens; it offers a vision of a permanent and underlying order in creation. Religion adds that that order is not only an *object of* contemplation, to be apprehended and enjoyed. It is a helping *subject, itself* apprehending, *itself* enjoying, *itself* creating. Religion's "fundamental discovery", to borrow a phrase of De Chardin (*ap. Corté* p. 53), is "that we are borne on by an advancing wave of consciousness".

6.

De Chardin's judgement is noteworthy because he was a paleontologist, occupied with the investigation of the severest questions of physical fact. But each of his words—"discovery", "borne on", "advancing wave", "consciousness"—raises very difficult issues, and we must seek easier ground. The point that concerns us at the moment can be put simply. We have seen that the harmonies of literature go beyond the facts of matter and the experimental sciences, and reach out to another world. "Such harmony is in immortal souls." It is the existence of such harmonies in literature (and elsewhere) which prompts us to think of immortal souls.

But NOT the other way round. This is not to *deny* the other way round, only to point out the difference between what is *given in* literature and what is *claimed by* religion. It may be that there is a valid religious experience of immortal souls enjoying, or even creating, eternal harmonies. It may be that theologians can demonstrate the existence of immortal souls and from them deduce the harmonies. For literature it is the existence of the harmonies which—demonstrates? alas, no (but it is doubtful whether there *is* such a thing as demonstration outside mathematics; even bombs sometimes do not go off); not demonstrates, but indicates, suggests, induces belief in, inclines the

mind to, points to the possibility of, the existence of immortal souls:

Soft stillness and the night
 Become the touches of sweet harmony.
 Sit, Jessica. Look how the floor of heaven
 Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold.
 There's not the smallest orb which thou beholdest
 But in his motion like an angel sings
 Still quiring to the young-eyed cherubins.
 Such harmony is in immortal souls.

You remember how it goes on:

But whilst this muddy vesture of decay
 Doth grossly close it in, we cannot hear it.

And, alas, we *do* not hear it; except perhaps, and at second hand, in some such verses as these.

7.

From the heights we may return to a few truisms. Literature, we may repeat, is not just a babble of words however musically arranged; and it is not the immediate response of a human song-bird to the promptings of basic emotions. It is interpretative, setting the facts within an order, an order which, on the testimony of poets and critics alike, we may fairly call spiritual. It is not just "the promiscuous adoption of all the matter offered to the poet by life, just as it was offered" (as Matthew Arnold reports Goethe's judgement on Byron). There is "the mysterious transmutation . . . operated on this matter by poetic form".

When Wordsworth in the *Prelude* came to describe this "mysterious transformation", he speaks of it in terms of "the observation of affinities In objects where no brotherhood exists To common minds". He then states clearly, as Dr. Lawrence Warner has recently reminded us, two possibilities. These 'affinities' not obvious to the ordinary man might be, he says, "my own enjoyments" "transferred to unorganic natures" by virtue of some mental habit, and therefore *not* of the nature of the objects themselves; or (the second possibility),

the power of truth
 Coming in revelation, I conversed
 With things that really are . . . (Book ii, 390ff.)

Thus Wordsworth seems to hold it both uncertain and immaterial whether he is "coercing" things into sympathy and thus illegitimately transferring his own human feelings to "unorganic natures"; or whether, the "power of truth coming in revelation", he is "conversing with things that really are". I submit to you that no religionist, and no religion, could speak of the objects of its concern in that way, as if it were uncertain or immaterial whether what it affirmed or dealt with was really there. At a pinch, literature may declare itself illusion. Religion never can. On the contrary, it is the abiding character of its object, its permanence, its everlastingness, which is one of its essential themes. For religion: "I am that I am"; "And even to (your) old age

I am the same, and even to hoar hairs will I carry you". But for literature:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And like this insubstantial pageant faded
Leave not a wrack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

8.

So we are left puzzling over at least two problems. The first (if I may put it summarily) is this: Literature recognizes or imposes an order; religion recognizes or imposes an order. Are these orders different from one another, or akin to one another, or the same as one another? And the second: Are these orders, the order of literature and the order of religion (or is the *one* order which possibly underlies both and is, in Bridges's words, their "basis and foundation" rather than their "apex and final attainment")—are these orders, whether two or one, in fact real; or are they, perhaps, not reality at all but only appearance or even illusion?