



As Reviewed By:
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Four Ways of Encountering Poetry and Religion



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The question of the relation between poetry and religion is both difficult and unavoidable. It is difficult, indeed, precisely because it is unavoidable. Whatever effort we make, by whichever avenue we attempt, to define poetry, we meet with some implicit or explicit definition of the religious. At the risk of exaggeration, I would even say that, at every turn, we find the religious and the poetic binding themselves in one of several distinct ways, and that the particular mode of this binding actually goes a good way toward explaining the variety of aesthetic or craft choices poets have made since the early nineteenth century. While denying any identification of poetry and religion, I have to acknowledge that those central narratives we tell ourselves about modernity have spurred us toward such a conjunction precisely because those narratives seem to exclude both the religious and the poetic as superceded or rationally inassimilable. If we lament the ubiquity of regimes of global capital, depending on our affinities, poetry or religion become the last preserve of natural space outside the steel and concrete of the market place. Similarly, if we decry the worship of science that pervades our mass culture (and which *occasionally* besmears the work of scientists themselves), faith and art emerge as our marginal modes of salvation.

Sometimes religious persons do not mention art. If they are evangelicals or simply have bad taste, it is best on doctrinal and aesthetic grounds that they so refrain (the consequence of not refraining appears most vividly in the grotesque confessions of Mary Karr's recent essay, in *Poetry* magazine, where a tone-deaf vulgarity and indecorous need for confession makes Catholicism and poetry both seem mere substitutes for sloppy drunkenness and sexual fetishes). Nearly every

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poet, on the other hand, must levy a platitudinous charge of poetry as a kind of prayer, because the space of the aesthetic threatens to vanish if cut off from the realm of worship, which mediates like nothing else the relation of interior life and external world. Even Samuel Beckett claimed that all poetry was prayer, though his purpose was to distill the poetic essence from prosody, rather than make any pious claims. In any case, between Kant, Chateaubriand and the very recent explorations of image and Christian Platonism found in Bill Coyle's fascinating lyrics, this bundling typically manifests itself under the following rubrics: that of ethics, first, and of ritual, second. Less obviously and frequently, it appears under that of analogy, third, and ontology, fourth. Let us scrutinize these four ways of relating religion and poetry in some detail.

First, of ethics. Most readers are now familiar at least with the ideas of Matthew Arnold's famous work of criticism, *Literature and Dogma*, where his long apologetic for culture against a reductive scientific materialism takes the curious shape of a defense of what he calls the "literary presentment" of religion against "dogma," by which he intends, "a scientific and exact presentment of religious things." For Arnold, the poetic or literary aspects of religion were far more important than the delineation of precise doctrines; the essence of the religious was not to be found in propositions on the mysteries of the Holy Trinity, the hypostatic union, or the incarnation. Those were merely the results of misinterpretation, where theologians had taken, for example, St. Paul's *literary* language wrongly by reading it in what Arnold calls "*scientific terms*" (170). By doing so they had missed the figurative significance of his writings, which, through a twist in Arnold's argument, actually means theologians had taken Scripture as having definite or actual meanings where in fact it had none. Scriptural language was, by and large, a complex of figures of speech that expressed feeling and emotion but did not signify anything that could be paraphrased.

We shall return to this idea in considering the obverse of ethics, ritual, but here let us observe the next move Arnold makes. No sooner has he reclaimed Scripture for the poets in an ostensible act of deference to the genius linguistic expression displays in capturing the intensities of human feeling, than he declares that terms like "morality," "conduct" and "perfection" may stand for "thoroughly definite and ascertained" ideas, but the word "God" and similar language are grounded in no such supporting ideas. When we say "that's immoral," we know intuitively what we mean. When we say "God," Arnold tells us, we are merely throwing out "poetry and eloquence," a language of pure texture without content.

Following Immanuel Kant in his *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793), Arnold then claims that “conduct” is “three-fourths of life” and constitutes the essence of religion as well. Everything else that might be taken for religion, from the language of Scripture to the rituals of the Church, to, most especially, doctrines of the faith, is just so much accretion, so much texture, clinging to the compacted core of morals that is religion.

In one respect, Arnold seems to have moderated Kant’s own argument. For Kant had claimed that “*Whatever, over and above good life-conduct, man fancies that he can do to become well-pleasing to God is mere religious illusion and pseudo-service of God.*” We have seen that Arnold eviscerates the word “God” of meaning, perhaps more so than does Kant. But he does not so forthrightly dismiss the literary aspects of religion as accumulated distortions, as illusion. Religion, for Arnold, is “ethics heightened,” and literary language is the means that allows for the heightening, ensuring the social dissemination of rules of conduct. Here lies the most important point in Arnold’s argument. The literary, the poetic, legitimately persists as part of religion, but only because all these terms are inscribed within the circle of morals. No statement that does not flow swiftly back to the governance of conduct can be considered true religion, and since Arnold could see no “moral” implication in the Trinity, he wrote it off as “dogma,” as a pseudo-scientific statement that neither describes things as they are nor as they ought to be. We may add that Arnold simply had such a materialist notion of what it meant to be a “thing,” that the Trinity (which cannot be called a “thing” by even the most pious moderate realist philosopher) must have seemed doubly removed from reality for a swarthy, practical Englishman.

Kant’s and Arnold’s claims betray a lack of historical sense as well as a naïveté about the practice of Christians and the faithful of other religions. This is most obvious in their mutual willingness to use “religion” as a genus of which Catholicism, Protestantism, Islam and Hinduism are all species. Though such taxonomy may sometimes help us heuristically, and in certain respects may result in our defining some true essence called “religiousness,” it was used by both writers, and continues to be used, as a reductive way to identify Protestant Christian ethics with ethics itself and to use that ethics as a measuring stick for all religions. This, finally, allowed Arnold to drop the term “religion” altogether and replace it with its no less problematic modern pseudonym, “culture.”

Their claims open up, however, an alternative path from religion to poetry. As

we have seen, Arnold *does* allocate a place for the literary in religion. If one chooses to re-center religion in *that* place rather than in the ethical, one may conclude that *ritual* is the essence of religion. And ritual—especially to one living in these centuries of industrial rationalization and the atomizing logic of the market economy, of lonely crowds and internet predators—*ritual* can easily be configured as simply a communal work of poetry: the order of the Latin Rite operates in homologous fashion to that of meter and rhyme in the stanza. Everything is joined in rhythm. As we saw, for Arnold, this homology was legitimated as a means to ethical ends. For the heirs of Arnold, most particularly W. B. Yeats, religious ritual stands out as the consummation of the poet's desire. Not only is the ritual *a work of art*, but it is the reception of that work, requiring as it does for its completion the presence of an audience—an audience that is not merely witness to spectacle but absorbed within its movement. In his *Autobiographies*, Yeats writes against the rationalism of the modern world and proclaims his own variety of religiosity thus,

I am very religious, and deprived by Huxley and Tyndall, whom I detested, of the simple-minded religion of my childhood, I had made a new religion, almost an infallible Church of poetic tradition, of a fardel of stories, and of personages, and of emotions, inseparable from their first expression, passed on from generation to generation by poets and painters with some help from philosophers and theologians.

This vision of poetry as ritual led Yeats to his famous call for a Unity of Culture and his founding of an Irish national theater. What is most seductive about such a formulation is that it sets the artwork off as autonomous, raising it beyond the practical involvements of ethics, without denying it a place in the world or in society. Religion serves as a euphemism that does not mask or deny, but illuminates the power of poetry.

Yeats, understandably, was not alone in attaching poetry to ritual. The primeval origin of the poetic in the sacred is generally acknowledged by such disparate figures as Dana Gioia and Theodor W. Adorno. Gioia, following T. S. Eliot and much of the modernist tradition, holds up this relation as something wondrous to be recovered. In "Notes on the New Formalism," he emphasizes the way in which form in poetry traces as if in subscript the larger forms that inscribe the sacred on human experience:

Meter is an ancient, indeed primitive, technique that marks the beginning of literature in virtually every culture. It dates back to a time, so different from our specialized modern era, when there was little, if any distinction between poetry, religion, history, music, and magic.

Adorno, fulfilling his role as a post-Marxist dedicated to the idea of a society secularized according to the anti-reason of art as opposed to the current, horrifying secularity of capitalist rationalization, argued during his life along inverted lines. He considered much of the exultation over poetry and religion's interpenetrating in ritual and giving birth to one another as "largely a romantic projection." Nevertheless, he admitted the aboriginal relationship of art and religion and allowed that "Every work of art still bears the imprint of its magical origin." What becomes troubling about both these assertions is that, despite their sometime nostalgia for a unity of culture that subtends a unity of disciplines (where the artist and cleric cross identities in the vatic), most such claims are merely an attempt on the part of poets and aestheticians to recover a social place for their art and hence re-inscribe the very divisions they wistfully would erase.

Although Gioia and Adorno are in different ways more than perceptive enough to escape this charge, we see it with at times painful obviousness in the critical writings of John Crowe Ransom. After a prolonged effort to understand the nature of religion, in *God without Thunder* (1930), and to "defend" it as the site of myth, ethics, ritual and mystery, he finally settles for the reductive claim that religion cannot survive poetry. That is, the practical function of religion is to serve as passive medium for the transmission of poetry into culture. All such evidence seems to insist that one's idea of religion as essentially ethics or essentially ritual will necessarily inform one's idea of poetry as one or the other. On one side, we find religion and poetry inscribed as a means to ethics, on the other we end up with ritual and religion reined in as the mere apparatus of poetry. If we looked in closer detail, we would likely find that both these definitions coexist in the same arguments, in the same texts, as they clearly do in Arnold's. Even taken together, however, they are quite inadequate unless we supplement them with two more attributes that may be brought out by two largely independent perspectives.

If one casts aside Arnold's own casting aside of "dogma" as a superfluous growth on the side of religion, one might safely ask whether *theology's* relation to poetry would not be a more fruitful avenue than those we have explored. That is, if we accept that "religion" is a very big-ticket item indeed, not to be exhausted by any one definition, much less those of "ethics" or "ritual," we are free to consider that poetry might stand in some practical relation to the somewhat more specific theological and philosophical searches for truth. It also frees us to reclaim Christianity, at least, as a way of knowing, which it was historically, as opposed to a mere object of the will, as it has become in popular discourse. That is, I would like to

suggest we think through the nature of art within a framework that begins in and includes theology. When we view religion as the mere object of our wills, then we cannot have a theology, but only, for example, a possession called Christianity. As a possession, Christianity results in the aforementioned obscenities of Mary Karr, which show how one can describe one's own religious experience without having one's behavior affected by it, or in the therapeutic professions of President George W. Bush, where the naked Cross hangs like a merit badge from his left breast pocket.

No sooner have we opened up a new world of possibilities by trying to think *Christianly*, however, than such a phrase as "theological and philosophical searches for truth" narrows it in two ways. First, in admitting the possibility of a relation between theology and reason, we instantly exclude from consideration all signature Protestant theology because it is founded on the claim of an opposition between faith, which comes from God, and reason, which is generated only within the fallen human intellect. Because, in other words, faith is blind for the Protestant, the resultant theology generally closes off the possibility of understanding poetry, or any made image, as but the things of this fallen world. In contrast, Catholic theology is founded, as Pierre Rousselot rightly emphasized, on the eyes of faith. As Hans Urs von Balthasar suggests, faith and theology offer something to man "in such a way that man can see it, and understand it." Second, and following from this, we assert that philosophical and theological investigation have as their goal something called Truth with a capital "T" and that one can judge truths with a small "t" as the near or exact correlation between an idea and the reality it describes. Arnold's claim for religion as morals was based upon a denial of the presence of any truth claim in religious or literary language. Similarly, Yeats' embracing of the poetic and ritualistic served primarily to set apart aesthetic practice from either speculative truth or practical action. In a different way, post-structuralist philosophy denies the possibility of metaphysical knowledge that makes "the True" a valid intellectual category. When I insert "theology" in place of "religion," however, I am insisting on a relation of poetry to truth, or at least to the investigation of truth. Our masters in considering such a relation necessarily become Aristotle and, in a more profound way, St. Thomas Aquinas.

Let us consider the final two rubrics we noted at the start of this essay: analogy and ontology. They are concepts that originate in classical philosophy and which were embraced in practice by Aquinas, primarily, it will be noted, because the Angelic Doctor argued from Aristotle's physics, metaphysics and natural theology

out into the echoing darkness and blinding luminescence of sacred theology. To be clear, ontology means simply the study of the essences of substances and accidents in their potency and actuality. In isolation, it is a modern term, but in practice it describes the necessary intellectual movement where the mind penetrates a thing, a being, to discover the depths of Being. By analogy, a more familiar term, I intend those acts of identification and comparison, where different things have reference to something one (e.g. God is our Father, and the father of the sun and moon as well, therefore St. Francis refers to Brother Sun and Sister Moon), or where two different things are identified in some particular aspect (e.g. death, Stevens tells us, makes beauty possible; mothers give birth; therefore death is the mother of beauty). It would make philosophical sense to consider ontology, as a study of being, first and then proceed to analogy, where beings enter into conceptual relation. The history of poetic practice, however, compels us to consider them in the opposite order.

Analogy offers us a simple but pressing question. Arguably, it is not a mere example of, but the *foundation* of, every figure of thought we can conceive and on which we rely in much of our speech and writing—especially poetry. One cannot make a metaphor or (God forbid) a simile without having analogy first; it is conceptually *prior*. One cannot make poetry without such figures; except, perhaps, in some of its very recent anti-linguistic, materialistic formulations that seek to subvert the essence of words as signs of things, but I am not sure we are there any longer dealing with poetry. We speak there rather of an academic fad whose ugliness is surpassed only by its contempt for the human spirit in which it claims not to believe. No more can one make any significant observation about the structure of the world, real or imagined, without analogy. Because of Aristotle's meditations on metaphor and the philosophic character of poetry, and because of the evident centrality of figurative language to poetry, we may be tempted to think that analogy is the property of the poetic *par excellence*. Indeed, John Hollander made roughly this claim long ago in his *Rhyme's Reason*. We should not accept this too readily, however, despite the consolation it might offer to the poet.

Cajetan, the early commentator on Aquinas' writings, insisted that the knowledge of analogy was essential to any knowledge of metaphysics. Aquinas himself demonstrated that all theology must be conducted by analogy. In both metaphysics and theology, we have at work the *analogia entis*, the analogy of being, which allows us to draw relations between different entities or relative beings, as well as between those beings (ourselves for example) and the absolute being of God.

Metaphysics has generally been called “first philosophy” for a reason. Understanding ourselves as existents, as beings, precedes conceptually if not temporally all other knowledge. Theology has also made claims to being first philosophy because, for the faithful, it organizes and informs all other categories of speculation. But, if we consider the radical Thomistic distinction between mere entities, those things like ourselves that *have* existence, and the concept of God as *Being Itself, Existence Itself*, which grounds existence and brings us into being only through our participation in its own, then we might more profitably think of theology as “final philosophy.” That is, we always perform (as opposed to theorize) metaphysics first, because its analogical propositions exist *in nuce* from the moment we begin perceiving things in reality (Metaphysics waits in the wings for our agent intellects’ first act of abstraction from the phantasm). And we, in some sense, must perform theology last because it marks the farthest limit of analogy, where, as it were, tenor and vehicle, object and referent, are stretched to the point of breaking. Metaphysics is the minimum vanishing point of knowledge and experience, theology the maximum. As Alasdair MacIntyre argued decades ago, every kind of knowledge, every intellectual act between these two vanishing points, is also made possible only by analogy. Even the sciences and pure mathematics are molded from analogy:

To talk of physical reality in classical mechanics is to talk in terms of an ideal system of moving bodies such as this world never knew. But we draw analogies from the world we know. And, if we depend on the world of experience for our analogies, they enable us to go beyond experience both in prediction and in the organization of our knowledge in every-widening conceptual frameworks.

We should not let the immense importance of MacIntyre’s claim distract us from our more humble task of threading poetry and theology together with the analogical needle. In offering these speculations, I merely wish to call into question the dismissal of theologians by poets like Czeslaw Milosz and Howard Nemerov, the latter of whom memorably quipped, “Without God, life would not be serious; and without theology it would not be nearly so funny.” Analogy is fundamental to poetry, but in an important way it belongs to metaphysics and theology first. *Is* it not conceivable that the constant groping with language that constitutes poems themselves, as well as the life-long act of making poetry, might be in truth the attempt to negotiate between those two vanishing points of knowledge and experience? T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* forces that possibility upon us. Recall his “East Coker,” where he speaks of “worn-out poetical fashion. / Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings.” And again, recall “Little Gidding,” where the “familiar compound ghost” tells Eliot’s persona, “last year’s words belong

to last year's language / And next year's words await another voice." These passages clearly refer to the difficulty of poetic making, but the slipping and evanescence of language also refers in the poem to the apophatic theology of St. John of the Cross, where the limits of analogy stretch to breaking and set the darkness echoing. The "unsatisfactory way" of putting things in words does not make words merely contingent or provisional; it does not indicate we might put words aside someday for pure ideas. Rather, words slip out of places that only other words can fill, and, for those who enter into the vision of prayer, words do not give over to thought or idea, but are embraced analogically within the Word which once was as "enfleshed" as they.

I shall consider ontology only in passing. The careful attention to the *thingness* of things that pervades the poetry of imagism and objectivism instantiates but one recent attempt of poets to perform ontological investigation on their own terms. A morbid chasm, however, opens within an admonishment like William Carlos Williams' that there should be "no ideas but in things" if we do not allow ontology to bridge into theology. The very term "thing," whatever its colloquial usage, is historically derived from metaphysics—a thing is what has existence *per se*. It is a substance: an existent standing beneath and one with any number of properties. When we admit the possibility that a thing might have an idea in it, in some sense, we are beating a fast track through metaphysics and ontology toward theology. As Jacques Maritain wrote in his brilliant *Art and Scholasticism*, "art's deepest exigency is that the work manifest not another thing already made, but the mind itself from which it proceeds." We exist complacently in the world with plums, wheelbarrows, and even contagion hospitals. Surely the reason these things stir us in poetry, if they do at all, is because the poem excites our ontological minds to probe the depths of being until the *analogia entis* begins to reverberate on the lower frequencies, until they cease to be mere things, or objects of perception, and become creatures of a Creator. Why else would we, with such frequency, pause within, or even throw off, the encompassing enchantment of narrative in order to fix upon the profundity of a single image? While it is essential for the health of poetry that poets rediscover the many genres available for verse, most especially that of narrative and epic poetry, we should not lose along the way the great ontological experience that lyric modes make possible. Poetry like Williams's, which throws away so much of the poetic luggage, nonetheless promises us to put language and reality in communion until they seem to leave time and space behind as incidental details. And yet, if such poetry does not probe the depths of beings to discover the Being present in them and keeping them in existence from an almost infinite remove, it risks either

degrading the real into a landscape with objects, or elevating individual things themselves to an independent importance that they cannot long sustain.

These do not exhaust our options, perhaps, but they certainly outline them. Both religion and poetry gravitate into relation under the rubrics of ethics, ritual, analogy and ontology. Individually, none of them seem exhaustive to me, or fully satisfactory. Taken together, on the other hand, we might get some purchase on why poetry and religion are so frequently associated, despite Adorno's protestations that their relation is merely historical and always problematic. By way of conclusion, I would like to suggest that it is with good reason so many poets, from Eliot and Ezra Pound to Seamus Heaney, James Merrill and Ciaran Carson, have taken the great Dante Alighieri for master. At first glance, Dante might almost seem a mere moralist, since he famously declared that the purpose of poetry was to praise and to condemn. The modernists, again only at first glance, seemed to take him for the great "ritualist" of poetry, showing as he did that all persons on heaven and earth could be brought together within the sacramental and poetic order of the universe. Encompassing both these, Dante's *Commedia* offers the prospect that on ethical, ritualistic, and finally metaphysical and theological grounds, all reality can be drawn into poetry. Poetry becomes the place in which all modes of thought and experience can eventually find repose. The reasons behind this poetic locus of totality and the promise it makes on behalf of individual poems are easy to explain. To be brief, nothing essentially defines a poem but rhetoric and representation. That is, words and imitations. Save the parameters of form, it is an infinitely capacious thing. And even those parameters make possible its infinity, for, to exist is to have form, and the formal properties of verse, though not coextensive with the being of poetry, bring it into its own uniquely grand reality to ever-greater degree.

For this reason, we have no difficulty detecting myopia in the stunted moralist claims of Arnold. For the same reason, we can perhaps understand why poetry has to be understood as a practical application of the analogical that vanishes in metaphysics and theology. For its figurative grasp does not, *contra* Arnold, renounce claims on the literal or the real, but rather continuously extends itself, admitting ever more reality into its body through the techniques of the analogical. The banal conclusion we must reach, then, is that poetry *is not* religion, but merely, again, the instantiation of rhetoric and representation; it *is* however (whatever the non-religious or ascetically pious in our company may prefer) inherently bound up with those ways of knowing that pass through the realms of psychology and physical reality on their way to a faltering, ever-inadequate grasp of the divine. Boccaccio said that "poetry is

theology.” It is not. But poetry cannot escape theology either, as any journey can never escape its end. Dante showed this perhaps best of all. Sadly, the work of most of his modern heirs, which fragments and reduces Dante’s grand structures, suggests that we are still far from understanding poetry as something more than a species of ethics or ritual. We, the lamenting moderns who depend on Dante’s *Inferno* to re-envision the daily horrors exploding in our streets, have yet fully to grasp poetry as the Tuscan, who knew much of suffering, certainly did: as a versatile, practical art that can welcome any good thing into its kingdom.

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