

POETRY AND RELIGION

BY W. MORISON

STOPFORD BROOKE, in an article in the *Hibbert Journal*, on Shelley's *Interpretation of Christ*, says, 'there is no more magnificent embodiment of the noblest doctrine of Jesus, even to the redemption of the world by faithful suffering in the cause of truth and love, than the *Prometheus Unbound*.'

Mr. Wilfrid Ward, in his recently published Lowell Lectures, says of Newman that in his hymn 'Lead, Kindly Light' he 'spoke more truth than he could speak in any philosophic tone.' These are noteworthy tributes to poetry as preëminently the vehicle of religious thought and feeling, coming as they do from men of such opposite types, one holding to the religion of authority, the other to the religion of the spirit, one with a theology as rigid as the other's is free and genial.

In this high homage to poetry there is a general concurrence. 'When the poet sings,' says Emerson, 'the world listens with the assurance that a secret of God is to be spoken.'

That poetry is the natural language of religion is shown by the fact that many of the Sacred Books of the world consist entirely of poetry, and that in the Sacred Books of all peoples it is the poetry that is most treasured. In our own Scriptures there is no book that has kept such a hold of the human spirit as the Psalms. Always and everywhere the religious spirit, in its loftiest moments, has found its most satisfying expression in poetry.

The kinship between the two is so close that, like Hippocrates's twins they weep or laugh, they live or die together.

It was a saying of Coleridge that the poet is always a religious man. It is at least beyond all doubt that the lack of Faith deprives the poet of his richest material and most powerful inspiration, and tames the action alike of his imagination and his heart. Of this disability the poets of Doubt have been conscious themselves. Who can read, for example, the poems of Matthew Arnold or Clough without perceiving that it is to this cause the melancholy that is in them is due? In Arnold's case it led to his abandonment of poetic work.

What Francis Thomson said of the child is true of the poet — the eternal child — 'he believes in love, he believes in loveliness, he believes in belief.' The poet has faith in a divine source and centre of the universe. He believes that Nature will not betray the heart that trusts her. With an anarchic or materialistic or agnostic view of the world one may be a verse-maker but never a poet. The more affirmative a poet is the more he lends himself to the inspirations of faith and hope that visit him, the more he is a poet. Poetry and doubt agree so ill that they cannot live together. A breath of poetry will, in a moment, revive faith when it has been drooping!

A chorus ending from Euripides, and that's enough!

I

One of the most obvious points in the affinity between poetry and religion is the universality of their appeal. Their constituency is not like that of science

— of any science — select and sectional. It embraces the whole of human kind. All men, whatever be their casual differences can understand and respond to their speech. They have to do, not with the structure, but with the soul of things. Their knowledge is not reached by intellectual processes, nor are their beliefs the result of reasoning — they are immediate and intuitive. It is the meaning of things for the heart of man that they interpret. Religion is as independent of its science as sensibility to the beauty of nature or art is of æsthetic science. So is poetry. Both are concerned with the *whole* of things, with the life that is in them, and that informs all their parts. They do not analyze them — they commune with them. They come to know them by congenial acquaintance, by keeping themselves in presence of them and receiving the impression they make on the heart. Religion is native to every man. All the great things of the spirit are as open to the heart as all the great things of the senses are to the eyes. ‘The soundless depths of the human soul and of eternity have an opening in the breast of the simplest.’ What the loftiest spirit has thought or felt he has the capacity to think and feel. The greater a religious teacher is, the more vital the truth he has in him to communicate; he is the less selective of his disciples, he speaks the more in a universal language. There is nothing more remarkable about The Greatest than that He had no respect of persons in seeking an audience for the truth. To none did He speak more readily than to the simplest of the people. If any did not understand Him, He said it was because they were too wise. The things that were hid from them were revealed unto babes. He evidently regarded Himself as a simple speaker, and all that He taught as natural, instinctive and inevitable truth. He spoke as

though all He said was self-evident; everyone had only to go deep enough into his own heart, to find it there.

There is no speech which so corresponds with the universality of religion as poetry. One only needs to be a man to understand it; it requires but a human heart to interpret it. One touch of poetry makes the whole world kin.

There is no lock for thee
All doors await thy hand.

The poet’s voice carries beyond the intellect and the reason to the same inmost region of the nature where religion has its seat, and at the height of its power ‘wakes up what has long been wordless in the infinite deep of our own soul.’

II

The passion of poetry is another element in its congeniality with religion and in its peculiar power in the expression of religion. All the living beliefs of the soul, all its deepest convictions, all its aspirations, hopes, and fears, inevitably move it to impassioned expression. The thoughts breathe, the words burn. Where there is vivid vision and a high emotional temperature, language always becomes imaginative, and when poetic genius is conjoined with the religious spirit, speech reaches its greatest power in kindling the same convictions and affections in others. The passion there is in the words (to use a phrase of Wordsworth) carries them alive into the heart. We cannot read unmoved words which palpitate with the deepest emotions of the writer. Didactic writing may set down sound and lucid statements of the truth, but just in the measure in which language is poetic in essence, if not in form, will it communicate a *feeling of the truth*.

The truest doctrine unimpregnated by a passion of personal conviction and faith can no more excite the religious spirit in man than can the most care-

fully built fuel without a kindling produce heat.

Besides the absence from the poet's mind of didactic purpose, the fact that he writes from the sole impulse of self-expression, by reason of the proof it furnishes of spontaneousness and sincerity gives his words a power of persuasiveness such as the professing teacher can never reach. A simple lyric will move the heart more than whole tomes of the soundest divinity. The writer who, in revealing the moods of his own soul, in admitting us to his spiritual experiences in any of its critical moments, puts into words our own unspoken thoughts and feelings, not only gives us the delight of self-expression but also that feeling of community with our kind which is so essential a part of religion. Poetry and religion are alike in admitting us to a larger life than our own in lifting us out of the narrow thoughts of the private spirit, in inspiring us with generous affections, in inciting us to put the highest price on those things in life which we can most share with others, in which everyone is the richer, the more others possess them, the more, as Dante expresses it, one can say of them, they are yours as well as mine.

III

Poetry and religion are alike in their sense of the mystery of the universe. They have the same feeling of reverent wonder in the contemplation of the world and of man — a feeling which is habitual, which never loses its freshness, which even what is most common and familiar will excite as though it were novel and contemplated for the first time. They are vividly conscious of the things which bring to a stand every faculty of man but wonder, which no science can account for or explain, of the problems which no philosophy can solve, of the mysteries which 'Heaven will not have earth to know.'

They are impatient of enclosures. Their horizon stretches beyond the walls of any system. The best words that can be spoken express for them but a fringe of the truth; the whole is unspoken and unspeakable. They are free from the illusion of finality and completeness. They are conscious that it is but its cloudy border which truth 'spares to the foiled searching of mortality.' They are averse to definitions. They well understand how the mysterious antagonist with whom we wrestle for the secrets we fain would know, like Jacob by the dim tracts of Penuel, refuses to give us His name. A name becomes an inhibition to all further pursuit of the truth. No name can house the infinite. The more a man has of the religious spirit the less will he allow formulæ to tyrannize over him — the more will he be a free thinker. Religion, as Schleiermacher has well said, is a taste for the infinite.

And as the man of religious spirit is free from the illusion of finality he is also unconcerned for a premature consistency. He makes no pretension to totality or harmony in the perception of the various perspectives of truth. He is suspicious of the 'beautiful coherence' of systems. Here, too, the poet is in sympathy with him. He has the same taste for the infinite. He thinks as freely. His own vision is his authority. He looks into his own heart and writes. He prefers to tell the hour by looking at the sun rather than by consulting any time-keeper. He will run the risk of losing precision for the pleasure of original observation and of verifying the truth for himself. He is not afraid of contradicting himself so long as he veraciously reports what he at the moment sees and feels.

Poetry and religion agree not only in feeling the presence of the mysterious and the infinite, they accept it with delight. For both it has a fascination —

a charm. 'I love,' said the author of *Religio Medici*, 'to lose myself in a mystery; to pursue my reason to an *O altitudo!*' The secret of the charm is well discovered to us in the words of Carlyle: 'Well might the Ancients make Silence a god; for it is the element of all godhood, infinitude or transcendental greatness; at once the source and the ocean wherein all such begins and ends. In the same sense, too, have poets sung "Hymns to the Night"; as if Night was nobler than Day, as if Day was but a small motley-colored veil spread transiently over the infinite bosom of Night, and did but deform and hide from us its purely transparent, eternal deeps. So, likewise, have they spoken and sung as if Silence were the grand epitome and complete sum total of all Harmony.' Emerson says the same thing in his own way: 'Silence is the solvent that destroys personality and gives us leave to be great and universal.' There is a greater charm in anything that is transcendently great than in any perfection we can see the end of. The mysterious — the infinite — so far from being depressing to the poetic or religious mind is exhilarating. In those passages of the Scripture in which the sense of mystery is most fully confessed, the language breaks into a rapture; it rises into the purest poetry. There is no book in the Bible which treats more of the mysteries of life than the book of Job; and there is none in which the poetry is more sublime: *There is a path which no fowl knoweth and which the vulture's eye hath not seen. The lion's whelps have not trodden it, nor the fierce lion passed by it. Where shall wisdom be found, and where is the place of understanding? The depth saith — It is not in me, and the sea saith — It is not with me. It cannot be gotten for gold, neither shall silver be weighed for the price thereof. No mention shall be made of corals or of pearls, for the price of*

*wisdom is above rubies. . . . Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? It is as high as heaven, what canst thou do? Deeper than hell, what canst thou know? The measure thereof is larger than the earth, and broader than the sea. In the New Testament thankfulness for the things that are not known and that pass understanding is more rapturous than for the things that are known: *O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God; how unsearchable are his judgments and his ways past finding out. Of him and through him and to him are all things; to whom be glory forever.**

The sense of the mystery of life, so far from depressing man in the scale of being immeasurably raises him. To be haunted by it, to have the impulse within us, to lift our eyes and stretch forth our hands to something above ourselves — *does it not relate us to the infinite and the eternal?* It is the element in which we live and move and have our being. The infinite is immanent in everyone of us, in every creature of God, in the meanest life, in the commonest things.

O world invisible, we view thee;
O world intangible, we touch thee;
O world unknowable, we know thee;
Inapprehensible we clutch thee.

IV

Poetry and religion are akin in their idealism. They have the same feeling of the infinite on the moral as on the intellectual side. Their aspirations are insatiable.

The prize well grasped is not worth a thought
When the ungrasped gives a call.

All the greatest poets have faith in the practicableness of the highest and best aspirations of the soul. Nor do they regard them as realizable only by a few rare spirits. They believe in a

law of moral gravitation, in accordance with which 'the will of the pure runs down from them into other natures like water to a lower level.' In a law of moral illumination in accordance with which the light which first breaks on the mountain peaks descends to the valleys and floods them with its radiance. They believe that a fresh vision of the truth once promulgated can never be put aside.

One accent of the Holy Ghost
This heedless world hath never lost.

The Christian idealism, the audacity of its optimism has nowhere out of Scripture received such expression as it has in poetry, as, for example, in Browning's *Abt Vogler*:

All we have willed or dreamed of good shall
exist.
Not its semblance, but itself; no beauty nor
good, nor power,
Whose voice has gone forth, but each sur-
vives for the melodist,
When eternity affirms the conceptions of
an hour.
The high that proved too high, the heroic
for earth too hard,
The passion that left the ground to lose
itself in the sky,
Are music sent up to God by the lover and
the bard;
Enough that he heard it once, we shall hear
it by and by.

To religious and poetic minds the infinite in the moral ideal is also exhilarating. Not that they are untroubled by the pressure and power of moral evil in the world and by all the suffering it entails — not that they live in an aerial region where the still sad music of humanity does not reach them: not that they are unvisited by moods in which they feel 'the burthen and the mystery, the heavy and the weary weight of all their unintelligible world.' But they have in them a secret resource by which the burden is lightened. The poet we have just quoted tells us elsewhere what it is.

Suffering is permanent, obscure, and dark
And has the nature of infinity,
Yet through that darkness, infinite though
it seem

And irremovable, gracious openings lie
By which the soul, with patient steps of
thought

Now toiling — wafted now on wings of
prayer

May pass in hope, and though from mortal
bonds

Yet undelivered, rise with sure ascent
Even to the fountainhead of peace within.

The challenge of evil and of suffering provokes man to his being's height and rouses within him those hidden powers by which he is able to subdue them to himself.

V

Poetry and religion are, to use Shakespeare's phrase, 'of imagination all compact.' Wordsworth in his essay supplementary to the preface of the second edition of the *Lyrical Ballads*, says of the *rationale* of their community in this respect: 'The concerns of religion refer to indefinite objects and are too weighty for the mind to support without relieving itself by resting a great part of the burden on words and symbols. Its element being infinitude and its trust the supreme of things, it submits itself to circumscription, and is reconciled to substitutes. Poetry being ethereal and transcendent is yet incapable to sustain its existence without sensuous incarnation.' It is only by metaphors we can express the invisible. So the language of poetry and religion is always woven by the imagination. The formula is foreign to their genius. Imagination is in living sympathy with *the whole* of things, with the infinite that is immanent in them all; the formula abstracts and separates. The image is not only the most vivid expression of the spiritual and the invisible; it has above every other the supreme quality of inevitableness. 'A happy symbol,' says Emerson,

'is a sort of evidence that the thought is just. I had rather have a good symbol of my thought or a good analogy than the suffrage of Kant or Plato. If you agree with me, or if Locke or Montesquieu agree, I yet may be wrong. But if the elm tree thinks the same thing, if running water, if burning coals, if crystals, if alkalies in their several fashions say what I say, it must be true.' The secret of the trustworthiness of the imagination is to be found in Newton's dictum that the universe was made at one cast. The central unity makes it possible for anyone who has perceived any aspect of the truth to find symbols for it on every hand. Figures are the natural language of all passionate beliefs and emotions, of all the elemental affections of the soul of man. The opulence in figures which distinguishes both the poetic and the religious genius is the sign of a true vision.

From the Poetry Review

The richer poetry is in musical quality — the more it can be sung — the more confidence we may have that the thoughts and feelings it expresses are true and trustworthy. So Carlyle, following a suggestion of Coleridge, says: 'A musical thought is one spoken by a mind that has penetrated into the inmost heart of a thing; detected the inmost mystery of it, namely, the *melody* that lies hidden in it; the inward harmony of coherence which is its soul, by which it exists, and has a right to be here in this world. All inmost things we may say are melodious; naturally utter themselves in Song. The meaning of Song goes deep. Who is there that in logical methods can express the effect which music has on us? A kind of inarticulate, unfathomable speech which leads us to the edge of the Infinite and lets us for moments gaze into that.'

G. K. CHESTERTON: A STUDY

BY E. T. RAYMOND

MR. CHESTERTON, as a jesting philosopher, suffers one considerable disadvantage. Serious people tend to like his jokes and distrust his philosophy. Flippant people are willing to respect his philosophy at a distance, but refuse to be amused by his pleasantries.

There is a highly intellectual set of men — their view is expressed by Mr. A. G. Gardiner — who will not have Mr. Chesterton as a thinker, but roar their sides out when he says, 'Pass the mustard.' They insist on treating him simply as an embodied, even over-

embodied jest, as 'your only jig-maker,' a 'Thousand Best Things,' bound, like the books of Meudon, in human skin. On the other hand, the professional merry-makers find little amusement in Mr. Chesterton. Mr. Chesterton and Mr. Cadbury parted. Mr. Chesterton and Sir Owen Seaman have apparently never met. The greatest joke of the age is never seen in *Punch*.

It is, I suppose, Mr. Chesterton's own fault that he is so generally conceived as a chuckle, *et præterea pâr-*