

Theology and Culture

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There is a moment in *Twelfth Night* when Feste, the Fool, calls upon Malvolio, who has been shut up in a dark cell as a dangerous madman. Feste, to render himself the more credible as a prison visitor, puts on a parson's gown and a parson's voice and, announcing that he is Sir Topas the curate who comes to visit Malvolio the lunatic, counsels him with words of learned but wholly irrelevant comfort. Malvolio, in frustration at this pastoral nonsense, most violently asserts that he is in no way mad, so the pretence clergyman agrees to test the prisoner's wits by posing some deep question. 'What', he asks, 'is the opinion of Pythagoras concerning wild fowl?' From that encyclopaedic knowledge of the classical world we expect in a renaissance man, Malvolio answers that the philosopher held 'that the soul of our grandam might haply inhabit a bird'. Ruthless as if he were conducting a seminar, the Fool then asks him: 'What think'st thou of his opinion?' Malvolio rather carefully replies: 'I think nobly of the soul and no way approve his opinion'. But at this the clergyman seems quite convinced that Malvolio is indeed mad, declaring as he hurries away, 'thou shalt hold th'opinion of Pythagoras ere I will allow of thy wits'.

This absurd interlude seems to many, I suspect, a paradigm of theological talk. A madman and a fool disputing about the soul, and as if this were not itself at sufficient remove from reality, disputing about whether the human soul might animate a bird. I should like to suggest to you, however, that while this dialogue may very well present an unkind parody of the manners both of the student of religion and of the believer, its satire does not, even glancingly, touch the theologian's enterprise.

Malvolio exhibits, in this exchange, two virtues proper to the student of religion. Feste appears to have the habits of mind of a believer. Neither is at all like a theologian.

Malvolio has made himself tolerably well-informed concerning the belief of others, and he conveys that belief to those of his own society in an image which is both adequate and comprehensible. The tradition of the transmigration of souls is quickly characterised by his example. It is indeed, a commonplace of the literature. And it receives from Feste a commonplace response. The great Tertullian in the second century had mockingly observed

that if a man act on the theory of metempsychosis 'he must be careful not to eat a bit of his grandfather in his beef', (*Apologeticum*, XLVIII, 1).

Feste is not at all the respectful and mediating student of religion. He makes quick fun of both christian and pagan belief. Malvolio, being a kind of Puritan himself, had assumed that a gowned clergyman would think nobly of the soul and no way approve the opinion that a human soul might animate a stone or vegetable or bird. But, as the pretence Sir Topas, Feste insists that Malvolio should not only share the belief but that he should act up to it. Sir Topas is not interested in the academic study of religion but in faith and morals. He requires an absolute assent to the doctrine of metempsychosis so that he may be assured that Malvolio will behave correctly towards birds and grandmothers. Coupling single-minded faith and imperious morality, Feste does quite a good imitation of the believer.

Sir Topas is evidently that kind of true believer who preaches the gospel, gives bread to the converted, and convinces the doubtful by the threat, and at last the reality, of dungeon, fire and sword. As officials of the synagogue excommunicated the followers of Jesus, as Christian bishops dispossessed one another of sees and patriarchates in the cause of the philosophical orthodoxy of Arius or the incarnational modernism of Athanasius, as pious enthusiasts authorised burnings in Prague, Oxford, Geneva and Salem, as Archbishop Tait employed the 1874 Public Worship Regulation Act to master the Revd. C. J. Ridsdale of St. Peter's, Folkestone, so Sir Topas, having declared Malvolio to be as impious as 'the Egyptians in their fog', decides that he should remain a prisoner until he conform his opinion to orthodox belief.

It is a remarkable grace in Malvolio that, however well Feste counterfeits the curate, and however likely it seems that he will never get out of his prison, he makes no attempt to recant his opinion. Malvolio is, in this, so attractive a character that I could wish he were, yellow stockings, cross-garters and all, a theologian. But he remains simply a student of religion, properly aware of his own sanity, remarkably clear-headed about the tenets of the pythagoreans, and convinced of the nobility of the soul.

Maria remarks that 'yond gull Malvolio is turn'd heathen', and that 'no christian that means to be sav'd by believing rightly' would act as he does, but a man's faith and morality, be they never so ungodly, need not prevent his being a decent student of religion. Malvolio, however, lacks perfect virtue as a paradigm for such a student. He cannot keep patience with the men of religion that he meets. His prison experience has, unfortunately, persuaded him that all christian ministers are, as he declares, 'asses'. Those who would further the study of religion must maintain a more equal mind.

The student of religion practises a discipline requiring a modest restraint. He is set to observe and compare and appreciate the ways in which men have hoped to express their sense of an order beyond the muddle of present experience. There is a habit of innocence he must acquire. Innocence of those personal and cultural prejudices which dispose us to esteem one imaginative usage as a more appropriate expression of the divine, more legitimate perhaps, more credible, than another. And he must acquire a habit of hesitancy. The student of religion must not be quick to interpret when, as must often happen, he recognises in some foreign culture, varieties of those images which he had thought peculiarly his own, belonging with his grandfather's clock and his mother's cooking. There will be much to give him pause.

A scholar brought up among the Dakota to believe that if the bones of an animal are preserved unbroken after the feast and buried in the hunting ground, they will quicken and rise with new flesh, may well wonder when he first learns of Ezekiel's vision of sinews and flesh coming upon dry bones, (*Ezekiel*, 37: 1-8), or the tradition of the eskimo in western Greenland that the candidate for the shaman's status should lie in a grave for the great bear demon to come and eat him to the skeleton so that on the third day his bones may be clothed in a magic body, or the early christians' insistence that the soldiers on Golgotha did not break any bone of the Saviour who rose on the third day with a body that could pass through walls, digest honeycomb, and ascend to heaven. And if the Dakota student of religion must persevere in delight at all these wonders, so too must the jewish student, the eskimo, and the christian. Each must submit to the discipline of accepting that others have come quite differently to imaginings quite like their own.

Believers are as likely as students of religion to concern themselves with images which possess a significance in some alien culture. Belief is not always confined to native expressions.

At the turn of the century there was some scandal as a don on his deathbed was heard to murmur the old mesopotamian lament, 'O Tammuz, Tammuz', now no-one turns his head to see the young people in the saffron robe in Oxford Street, and in San Francisco those who maintain motor-cycles are commonly, I gather, to be found among the devotees of Zen. These are just as convincing signs of belief among us as the Salvation Army bonnet, the Gregorian chant, or Alternative Series 2.

Students of religion inquire into the most curious tribal rites. Believers, it is well-known, will credit anything as long as it is stranger than fact. The theologian is not so outlandish as they. His imagination is more domestic. His language that of the native in his culture.

Lest there should be anyone who like Marshal Goerring reach-

es for his gun at the very name of culture, or, more likely, I hope, anyone who supposes that I refer to anything so demanding as that 'pursuit of perfection' which Matthew Arnold conceived to be the occupation of the man of culture, I had better say quite simply that I am employing 'culture', rather in the manner of a microbiologist observing a saucerful of beasties, to denote that local supportive environment upon which a woman or man depends for psychological awareness.

And I am chiefly concerned with that sort of theology which is in some places termed 'dogmatic' and in others 'systematic' but is everywhere the study of doctrinal formulations.

The theologian's provincialism has its own responsibilities. He works among the images which come soonest to him and to his fellows in hope of some clear apprehension of the inwards of their experience and their dream. While in some cultures he may be dealing with a quite simple cluster of images, in others, our own for example, the theologian must be familiar with a most complex tradition. Among us the talk is chiefly of semitic, greek, and teutonic usages, of angels, furies and Rumpelstiltskin, but the theologian must be ready to assist when the conversation turns to jinns and porro men. He has to explain how it was that such popular images worked in the past, to try for his fellows how far those images will yet sustain their talk of large matters, and to secure that they may be available for use by later generations.

I have been suggesting that Feste and Malvolio may be taken as parody figures of the believer and the student of religion. Who shall stand for the theologian?

There enters pat upon the close of the prison scene, that dullish chap, Sebastian. Sebastian is rather puzzled. He has endured shipwreck, he has been rescued from the sea, he walks again on dry land, but nothing is quite as it was before he was swept into the waves. Sebastian moves in a recognisable world, yet he is surrounded by strangeness. He understands what the people in the street are saying, but he is not at all sure what they mean. Happily bourgeois, lodging in the suburbs, a tourist in a foreign town, Sebastian, when Olivia on their first meeting declares her passion for him, is curious to distinguish what is really happening from dream or from madness, but, as events move swiftly towards his marriage with this lovely stranger, he ceases to worry whether he is mad or the lady is mad, and enters willingly upon the strangeness, 'ready to distrust mine eyes, and wrangle with my reason'.

In his puzzling acceptance of the oddity of the ordinary world, his recognition that those around him offer, as they talk so strangely, the only language in which he could make a sense for himself, and, most particularly, in his readiness to take into account more than his senses and his reason supply, to hesitate in making a distinction between reality, dream and madness, Sebastian dull as he

seems, may stand for the theologian.

Malvolio, the student of religion, may demonstrate his own sanity by reference to the oddity of other men's beliefs; Feste, the believer, may think himself a fit person to decide whether a man be mad or no; Sebastian is wary of such judgments. The way of the world around him is, he perceives, certainly very strange, yet he acknowledges it would be rash to term it madness. A good theologian should imitate him in this. He may well make it his boast that he cannot tell madness from sanity, wonder from ordinariness. There is good precedent for this. The shaman is known in his village as 'the healed madman', but Jesus' own relatives set out to restrain him 'because they said that he was out of his mind', (*Mark* 3: 20), while his enemies dismissed him on the evidence that 'he has a demon and is mad', (*John*, 10:20), and when Jesus talked of his coming death they declared 'You're mad', (*John* 7:20). And so it has been with christian theologians. The philosophic Athenians smiled politely at 'the strange things' Paul preached before the Areopagus, (*Acts* 17:20), more roughly the governor Festus interrupted him with the decision 'Paul, you are mad', (*Acts* 26:24), and Paul himself came to accept that christian belief must seem 'a madness to the pagan' (*I Corinthians*, 1:23). Those who have been patient under such accusations may be expected to have a sympathetic understanding of the strangeness of others. That doctrine of metempsychosis, for example, which the others seem to think is about birds and grandmothers the theologian may recognise as the hint of a larger hope.

We in our hellenist tradition think the doctrine of metempsychosis peculiarly pythagorean; Clement of Alexandria patriotically attributed it to egyptian teachers (*Stromata*, V, 14:99, 3 and VI, 4:37, 7); buddhists, and brahmans too, have their own notions of how the doctrine came to be so important among them. Other suggestions are made in the Hermetic literature and the jewish Cabbala. The doctrine persists in so many cultures not because of a universal concern for birds and grandmothers, but rather because of our general human desire to experience something better than our present condition, and our equally general suspicion that there is little likelihood of our doing so if we stay within the confines of the here and now. We want to get out.

We want to get far out. No-one, not even the least ambitious grandmother, would wish to stay as a bird. The doctrine of metempsychosis is a doctrine of progress to perfect freedom. There is something in every culture to correspond to the tibetan buddhist prayer that the soul may rise through the six heavenly spheres and not be delayed in any unwanted incarnation before reaching the region of Avalokitesvara. A christian version of such a care for the soul on its dangerous journey may be discerned in the writings of Gregory of Nyssa. He not only ruled out any distressful possibil-

ity of a human soul having to fly as a bird or swim as a fish, (110C; see *De Anima*, XXXII, 6D), but promised that the soul could return to earth if the highest heaven proved too rare an atmosphere, (112C-113C). Like the angels, men might descend as well as ascend.

Clement of Alexandria was rather more optimistic about the upper reaches of the universe. From fragments which survive from a lost work, the *Hypostases*, it seems that he envisaged the soul animating a series of forms in a happy ascent through the angelic spheres, shedding earthly encumbrances as it went. That Christians enjoyed a peculiar confidence in this matter was their common boast. The heresiarch Carpocrates, not at all worried by his own suggestion that the seven spheres of existence, including the earth itself, were made by demons, was able to envisage human souls surviving quite well if they found themselves for a while in any sphere, and to be confident that the Christian soul would, however delayed on the way, at last enter triumphantly into the final heaven. Christ at his ascension had made a way through the realms of those demons whose very names proclaimed their tyrannous force, *Thrones, Dominions, Powers*, and Christians could now follow along the way, (cf. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, I, 25, 1f). Carpocrates' heretical character was plain for all decent folk to see in his veneration of Pythagoras alongside Jesus, but his general thesis of the conquest of the demonic rulers of the seven spheres was perfectly orthodox. Paul had assured the Christians at Rome that they could not be kept from the kingdom by *angel or prince, by power or height or depth*. These are the enemies Carpocrates had in mind and Paul names them in the precise terms of contemporary astrologers, (cf. *Romans* 8:38ff.). Paul had himself already made the journey, whether in his present body or not he was not sure, to the third sphere, (*II Corinthians*, 12:2). And he delighted in the baptismal song of the community at Ephesus, which celebrated not the Lord who had risen from the dead and found himself back in this world again, but the Lord who had ascended through the spheres to the astoundment of the humbled spirits of air, (cf. *I Timothy*, 3:16).

Inquiring more carefully into what would be required for human beings to climb to the highest heaven, the author of the fourth gospel, perhaps himself a member of the Ephesian community, presented Jesus as a ladder set between heaven and earth. The disciples would see heaven opened, 'and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man', (*John* 1:51). That here, as in Jacob's dream at Bethel, (*Genesis*, 28:12 ff), the angels first ascend and then descend shows these spirits to be but the forerunners of the human beings who are to mount to heaven.

Jesus, in this tradition, has become not only Jacob's ladder, but the notched tree up which the shaman climbs to meet the spirits, the rope of the fakir's vanishing boy, the stair by which the Buddha moves between the Trayastrimsa heaven and 'the human path', the ziggurat down which the mesopotamian gods moved to meet their astrologer-priests; Jesus has become Jack's beanstalk.

The first christians challenged their contemporaries to discover in Jesus the realisation of all they had meant by their image of the heavenly stair, and of those other powerful images of the bread of life, the fountain of living water, the door into the garden of happiness, the feast, the shepherd and the king. Their missionary successors presented Jesus as an effective language for the old desires of our race. No imagination was alien to them as they celebrated Jesus as the Christ, the second Adam, the lamented Tammuz, the rescuer Orpheus among the dead, the rising sun of Apollo, and the white-haired Balder. They have painted him in the robes of the mandarin and sung him walking on England's mountains green. They have, like the synoptic gospeller, announced him as the Jonah who was three days beneath the waves in the dark belly of the whale, (*Matthew* 12:40), and, like Mr Tim Rice, sung him as the Lord of the waters in Herod's history-defying snatch:

Prove to me that you're no fool,
Walk across my swimming pool.

In such imaginative praises there could be 'no room for distinction between greek and hebrew, between the circumcised and the uncircumcised, between barbarian and scythian, slave and free man', (*Colossians*, 3:11).

And those theologians who have been most anxious to maintain a rigorous excommunicating orthodoxy have recognised in such images the precise expression of their beliefs. The bishops who met for the Council of Nicaea in 325 found no clearer way for their creed to state the oneness of the Lord Jesus with the Father than the primitive image of a fire in the dark. They defined their faith in terms of the relay runners bearing from torch to torch the flame that had been lit at the start of their course: Jesus is 'light from light'.

Not all theologians have been as gracefully intelligent as the bishops at Nicaea. There have, indeed, been a great many who have dismissed the uses of imagination, and who have esteemed the great images of the race fit merely to illustrate the platitudes of aunts, headmasters and local magistrates. This is a recurring insensitivity. While Empodocles might remark nicely 'I have been a shrub and a fish' and rejoice to be now a human being, (cf. *Diels*, B117), Tertullian took the doctrine of the transmigration of souls

to be a way of talking about the maturing individual who in his life passes through ages in which he might be likened to a block, a sapling, or a hawk, (cf. *De virginibus velandis*, I, 6). The doctrine could only be so understood on the assumption that men are content with the opportunities of their present sphere of action and do not yearn for something more. A like reduction of the aspiring image was made by the renaissance scholar Pomponazzi, who, remarking that men may turn into beasts by neglecting reason, wondered if 'this is, perhaps, what the Pythagorean fable means when it says that men's souls pass into different beasts'. Dullish accommodations of the image were made, too, by Pico della Mirandola, who shared Pomponazzi's opinion of the superiority of human beings to animals. A Dean of St. Paul's rather unpleasantly suggested, that a soul's experience of animal nature would merely prepare it for the full depravity of being human.

John Donne, however perversely innovative his *Progress of the Soul*, is recognisably a member of a merely moralist tradition. The structure of his savage entertainment does not, any more than the conventions of Pomponazzi and his ilk, allow the image proper force. It is a disappointment that so lively a poet should in this be as insensitive as the prose fellows.

A not dissimilar disappointment attends on any theology which translates the christian mode of such an image into the acceptable commonplace of polite psychology. Diverting for example, those who hesitate at the ascension narratives by talk of the mounting enthusiasm of the disciples as they set out in widening circles from Jerusalem. It is such a disappointment which attends, I fear, upon the work of Rudolf Bultmann, the most distinguished christian theologian of the twentieth century, so far.

Bultmann would have us rid christian theology of all that belongs with 'the cosmology of a pre-scientific age'. We do not, he remarks, now see ourselves as the natives of a third world to which angels from heaven and demons from hell may wing their way. We are not familiar with the *height* and *depth* of the old astrology. We do not credit resurrection from the grave or ascension to the clouds. We are not to be persuaded to rummage for our self-understanding in a discarded cosmology. Nor should a christian attempt such persuasion. The work of Christ has been accomplished not in a mythic action among the spirits but in the historical event on Calvary. Whatever needs to be said of Christ can be announced in the ordinary terms of history and geography, and of psychology. Whatever needs to be said of our condition can be admitted in as ordinary terms.

Thinking the peasant imagery of the old agricultures to be unsuited to the bourgeoisie of a technocratic society, Bultmann looked for a language in which he might appropriately announce the good news for his fellows. Famously, he discerned in the philo-

sophic vocabulary of Heidegger an adequate resource for all he wanted to say about human existence. He expressed the significance of the crucifixion for his contemporaries in terms of *Facticity*, *Existentiality*, and *Forfeiture*.

Bultmann's particular account of what language is still usable seems to me far from proven. I am not convinced that most folk or even many folk, would immediately recognise their present experience in the terms Bultmann proposes, nor do I think that even those who are satisfied with a Heideggerian analysis of their existence are so far removed from our ordinary cultures as to deny themselves, in deference to the success of the Copernican revolution, the atomic theory, and the rocketry of Cape Kennedy, the use of such expressions as 'sunrise', 'solid gold', and 'honeymoon'.

I admire the pastoral scholarship of Bultmann but would rather that such a theologian had attempted an enlargement of our sympathies. The particularities of any philosophic system, even if so justly admired among us as that of Heidegger, will not accommodate all we require to aid us towards self-understanding. We are troublesomely higgledy-piggledy persons. And so generous a theologian as Bultmann should not be reckoned with those who would narrow the range of our talk. But, unhappily, the structure of Bultmann's enterprise proves at last as confining as the mean dimensions proposed by theologians far less interesting than he.

Dull men of limit have too often been in command of the christian language. Their constraints have been applied to every expression of christian excitement. By their practice the wonder of the world has been diminished into metaphysical definitions, liturgical calendars, and ethical conventions. They have reduced the recognition of the Lord who is as familiar with the divine as with the human to a mere doctrine of two natures in one person, and have then got into muddles when they have to explain what they mean by 'person'. They have reduced the celebration of the Lord who makes for his people a stair into highest heaven to a mere historical event annually commemorated, and have then been at a loss to deal with the questions which historians commonly ask about events. They have reduced the parable of the Good Samaritan who binds up the wounds of the afflicted and promises to come again, which is most evidently a parable of Christ himself, to a mere moralising about 'doing likewise', and have then been unable to say anything useful about the literary form of so successful a piece of story-telling.

With a mean consistency those who operate these reductionist stratagems have been eager to diminish themselves. They have let others lay hands on them. They have taken orders. They have become clergymen. Jesus who was famed as the teller of stories, who was understood as the fulfilment of other men's stories, who made stories come true, sent out his disciples from the hill-top starting-

place of his ascending glory to tell his story. Women and men at the ends of the earth should hear that the wonder was for them. But we have now and have had for some time the clerical generation of Sir Topas, making appeal to an historical foundation and succession, insisting upon some doctrinal orthodoxy, and determining to be the guardians of a moral code.

Having done all this, they should not look quite as surprised as they sometimes do that other women and men find them rather tiresome and intrusive persons.

'Succession' 'orthodoxy', and 'code', are terms which bear with them the promise of an order. They refer to settled conditions. And this, for many, is the attraction of the Church. But the various forms of ecclesial order show signs of having been too quickly established. Christian structures have customarily failed to express what Isaiah called God's 'strange work', (*Isaiah* 28:21).

Those whose acquaintance with *Twelfth Night* is rather more lively than I would wish will remember now that even Sebastian, my paradigm theologian, consents to take his assigned part in the order of the Church. Olivia brings him a priest from the chantry by and without a pause he accepts the clergyman's direction: 'I'll follow this good man'.

If you have so far assented to my distinguishing the theologian from both the student of religion and the christian believer, you may, at this intelligence, grow restive. All that you may have anxiously suspected must seem now confirmed of the theologian being not the explorer of our common culture, but a disingenuous missionary for a faith, watching for the fit moment to press a religious tract into the undergraduate's hand, converting the College porters, and carrying a hopeful crozier in his knapsack.

It may not cause a great deal of anxiety in the minds of decent folk that theologians should spend their energies in harring their own kind, that the doctors of mediaeval Paris should have procured a condemnation of some theses of Aquinas, or that, in nineteenth century Oxford, Newman should have persecuted the Regius Professor of Divinity, or even that, just a decade ago, my inoffensive self should have been required at one institution to make a public assent to the local teaching about Indulgences. These civil broils among the theologians are, certainly, unseemly in a university and conform ill to the pattern of academic behaviour. They should be discouraged by all decent dons. But at least they do not interrupt other men's business. Those who would disregard them may do so. A more general consternation may occur, however, when a theologian attempts to shape the disciplines of other scholars according to the peculiarities of his imaginative tradition. For example, when Flavius Claudius Julianus, unkindly popularised as 'Julian the Apostate' by his christian detractors, became emperor in the middle of the fourth century, his theological enthusiasm for

the world of the Eleusinian mysteries led him to insist upon the restoration of the old pagan instruction in the Imperial schools. And there were enough theologians in the schools of Islam in the twelfth century to ensure that Averroes, their greatest philosophic thinker, should be prevented from teaching in his native Spain. And as late as 1861 the theological establishment at Cambridge barred the senior wrangler from a fellowship on account of a religious test. Those academic theologians who, in the cause of religious orthodoxy, have put such constraints upon the literary critics, the philosophers, and the mathematicians in their universities may invite the judgment that the study of theology leads merely to the least attractive practice of belief, and that there is an incompatibility of the theological temper and that advancement of humane learning for which a university is established. But these are decadent instances.

The theologian who is obedient to the demands of his discipline will know it his privilege to admire whatever others are doing in expectation of an order beyond our ordinary muddle, whatever phrases they shape to express such an order, whatever courage they show in confronting the contrary evidence of chaos. Rather than indulging a narrow prejudice, a theologian should aim at discerning some signs of inward harmony in our studies. If he promote any formulation of the coherence of human endeavour it must only be because there has come upon him what Wallace Stevens called 'a blessed rage for order', a rage to order words of the sea and of ourselves and of our origins.

I am delighted to report that at the close of the play Sebastian does speak of just these matters. His very appearance prompts an expectation of strangeness in the ordinary, what Orsino calls, on looking at the twins, 'A natural perspective, that is and is not'. Putting that crude Hegelianism aside, Sebastian speaks of his drowned sister, his own rescue, and their home in Messaline. At his words Olivia realises that 'place, time, fortune, do cohere', and Orsino welcomes the 'golden time'. Attending to Sebastian's questions, they at last understand the truth of their relations with each other. And Sebastian, as he provokes these understandings, comes himself into a satisfying relation with the people of Illyria.

While Malvolio rushes from the company, declaring that he will be reveng'd on the whole pack of them, and while Feste removes himself from the action to sing an epilogue, Sebastian celebrates his reunion with his sister Viola, clasps hands again with his friend Antonio, and delights to become the husband of the lady Olivia; inhabitants of one world, they speak the same language.

Equally, the theologian, as he joins in our general conversation, may recognise the fit phrases for his enterprise. He may properly expect to hear the words he needs in the works of poets, novelists and dramatists. It is, after all, their especial responsibility

to maintain the vitality of all our words. The anglo-saxon poet of *The Dream of the Rood* kept the viking images alive in his celebration of Christ as the young warrior, 'the Frey of mankind', who climbs eagerly upon the cross to achieve the heroic rescue of his folk. Milton was ambitious to treat 'the matter of Britain', and Tennyson actually did renew the Arthurian world. Queen Victoria, the famous author of a *Highland Journal*, rather overdid her support for the language of the spheres when she exclaimed at D'Israeli's Suez purchase that she was 'in the tenth heaven'. Contrariwise T. S. Eliot was so subtle in such matters that no critic had noticed the Alkestis myth in his *Cocktail Party*. He had at least not done anything so feeble as E. M. Forster's short-story propaganda for the Great God Pan.

These are instances of a general concern among men of letters for the survival among us of the old way of imagining. Others have been more particularly expressive of the theologian's concerns. It would, I suppose, be somewhat rash to claim that Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is chiefly concerned with that matter of metempsychosis about which Malvolio and Feste disputed. But certainly, very early in the play, Shakespeare shows his audience what it is that prompts men to look for a migration out of their present sphere. Bottom's pleading that he may in the mechanical's interlude, impersonate the tyrant, the lady, and the lion, both suggests his desperate desire to get out of the weaver's shed and prepares the audience for the forest translation when Bottom does indeed get out of his ordinary world and live an animal's life in the sphere of aery spirits. Bottom, wearing the ass's head, makes love with the magic queen of fairyland. When he returns to his fellows Bottom speaks of his experience as a dream, he thinks it might be expressed as a poem, and he finds the words for his ballad in the language which a theologian should recognise immediately. Bottom declares in understandably confused mode: 'the eye of man hath not heard, the ear of man hath not seen, man's hand is not able to taste, nor his tongue to conceive, nor his heart to report' what has happened in the wood. (cf. *Isaiah* 3:16; *I Corinthians* 2:9).

Shakespeare's recourse here to the language in which Isaiah and, after him, Paul, had hoped to express their visions of the heavenly sphere, should not encourage the theologian to think that he has now only to employ biblical expressions for his notions to be generally understood and accepted.

Those biblical expressions are not so immediate to us now. A modern writer who would suggest to us that we may enjoy a proper strangeness has to reach deeper within the caves of mind. Virginia Woolf, in what I take to be her most interesting novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, writes of just such matters in a wholly convincing manner. A good part of the book is concerned with Septimus Warren-

Smith, a young man of some intelligence and talent, who has come back from the First World War battlefields almost persuaded that 'the world itself is without meaning'. His dead comrade beckons to him, he sees trees walking, he hears birds sing in greek, he receives divine messages. Septimus, the seventh son, experiences the ancient mysteries in the midst of the London traffic: 'I leant over the edge of the boat and fell down, he thought. I went under the sea. I have been dead and am now alive'. On his return he knows himself to be 'the Lord who had gone from life to death' and now can tell them all. The doctors, to whom Septimus' wife naturally takes him, talk complacently of schizophrenia and shell-shock, and a lack of the proper sense of proportion. As the guardians of sane society, they arrange for him to be sent to a home. He commits suicide. But as he hurls himself from the window ledge he offers his death to others. 'I'll give it you'. On the other side of London, at a party, Mrs. Dalloway overhears the brutish doctor talk of the death of a young man she never met. Clarissa Dalloway had hoped that her party would be an occasion at which she might enjoy a harmony within herself and an order in her relations with others. And, as she stands alone at the window, in some mysterious way the chiming of the clock, the race of the clouds across the sky, and the old lady crossing the room in the house opposite, communicate Septimus' meaning to her. The madman who could only speak in the old images of the drowned and rising god has made sense for her. She knows now how she may assemble the company. And she becomes herself. The novel ends on the phrase, 'For there she was'.

It is this same awareness of the ancestral images revealing for us now a way into integrity that Peter Gabriel expresses in his song-sequence *The Lamb Lies down on Broadway*. His hero, Rael, comes to the doors of perception like Ishtar at the Gate of Death, or Aladdin at the cave entrance, or Alice at the Looking Glass, or the one who knocks and has it opened unto him, (cf. *Matthew*, 7:7; *Luke*, 11:9). He goes through and finds that he is at 'the bottom of a staircase that spirals out of sight'. Climbing the stair he confronts a series of mythic ordeals. Through the tunnel of night, the chambers of the Lamia and the Shipperman and the black bird of Tweedles Dee and Dum, he passes into a darksome cave. He feels he is 'some kind of Jonah, shut up inside the whale', but issuing forth he comes to the edge of swirling waters. 'I've got to ditch my fear—take a dive'. Jumping into the rapids to save a drowning man he discovers he has taken a grip on himself, 'It's real'. He is, of course, like Bottom, and like Septimus, esteemed a madman. Doctors are summoned. On 22nd Street they tie him 'in the cushioned straight-jacket'.

These things are madness as much to the sane believer as to the sceptic. Those who have framed a christian faith in the terms of

some sane language, platonist, aristotelian or existentialist, or who have put everything away in the categories of history, doctrine or ethics, will not recognise the sense of such imagery. But Rael's song is the song of our own experience.

That Peter Gabriel should be confident of our contemporaries responding intuitively and intelligently to such a language must encourage the theologian. The success of the Genesis album warrants his supposing that he could gain a hearing if he were now to turn the conversation to the imagery which has sustained christian faith, if he were to talk of baptism as a drowning in waters from which a man may rise to new life, or the cross as the monstrous burthen which a man must bear upon his back to the mountain's top in his trial by ordeal, of the eucharist as the food given for the journey that we make to the promised kingdom, of heaven as the shining city which opens wide its gate, of trumpets sounding on the other side, of an ascent into glory.

Those who have sympathised with Bottom in the wild wood, with Septimus in Regent's Park, with Rael on Broadway, may recognise this conversation as their own.

We do not, of course, suppose that everyone who speaks our language will have something interesting to say. We attend to those who tell us of Bottom, and Septimus, and Rael, because they manage a disciplined account of experiences which we express hesitatingly, awkwardly, inadequately. Whatever attraction there was once in the argument from design in nature to the certainty of a creator God is now, maybe, to be discerned in a conversation which reaches from the creative writer to the intuition of a divine design. That the matter of our experience can be contained within the forms of literature may persuade us that there could be an order in our lives.

It is not the man of letters only who may be in his culture the exemplar for the theologian. The hieratic theology of ancient Egypt was done according to the paradigms of art and architecture. Theologians then expressed the intelligibility of the universe in the symmetrical terms of the wall-painting and the temple colonnade. Among the greeks there were some to say that the cosmos turned in a dance according to the music of the spheres. They had evidently been excited by the formation dancers in the orchestra. To Jeremiah, the potter at his wheel, fashioning clay in whatever shape he pleased, offered a figure of the divine dominion, (*Jeremiah* 19:11; *Lamentations* 4:2). The hebrew psalmist, however, adopted literary forms. He achieved a convincing expression of a divine order by his brilliant use of the caesura. Balancing the elements of his world on either side of this sharp break in the verse line he suggested both the divided character of our existence and his certainty of a controlling intellect. Words of the sea and of ourselves give place to words of the divine and of providence:

Out of the deeps I have cried to thee,
 Lord hear my voice Psalm 130.1

Perhaps because the psalm collection so early became the prayer-book of the christian churches, and was committed to memory by so many religious women and men, this literary paradigm has been of shaping importance for the christian theological tradition.

Augustine, for example, who may be reckoned the most influential if not the greatest of christian theologians, came to appreciate the verses he wrote when he was an undergraduate as exemplary for his later theological work. The principles of verse composition did not permit him to place a metrical foot in any position in the line that took his fancy. Each differing foot had to be set as the differing structure of the lines demanded. 'And yet the art of poetry, by which I composed, does not vary from one line to another: it is the same for all alike'. So the justice of the designed world is not an order of uniformity but of appropriate stress at different times and places. Augustine lamented that his blindness to the kind of order manifest in poetry had, when he was younger, prevented his appreciating the acts of patriarchs and prophets and their significance for his own conduct. (cf. *Confessions* III, 7).

Only if he exhibits the precision of a poet may a theologian hope to convince his fellows that he speaks of an order in which they should have some interest. What has been so suddenly claimed in a rush of infallible definitions, divine liturgies and puritan ethics, he must suggest in a more persuasive voice. Then those who have recognised the congruence of their familiar language with the christian words for the world, may further wonder if there might not be a congruence of the substance of their hopes with that order christians announce in the world, If Jesus might not be for them, as the author of the epistle to the Colossians declares him to be, 'the image of the invisible God', (*Colossians* 1:15).

It is the privilege of the theologian to assist at such moments of wonder.

And it is at such moments that he approaches whatever truth there may be for him. The student of religion reports what others have established should be said and done in their worship. His truth is generally of the past. The believer announces the lively action of the divine within him. His truth is generally of the present. The theologian concentrates his mind not on the recorded curiosities of others, not on his own peculiar satisfactions, but on the hope he shares with the women and men of his culture that they may one day discern whatever is real. His truth lies in the future.

In some other place he might take it upon himself to suggest that our largest expectations are realisable in the particularity of Christ, but in a university it is his work to contemplate the dreams

of women and men, to formulate a language for their madness, to assure them that their strangest experiences are indeed significant, and to encourage their expectation of getting out at last.

This assuredly, is a work only to be accomplished by an uncommonly sensitive and talented woman or man, and lest, by suggesting what you may rightly expect in a theologian, I have but persuaded you of mine own unfitness for the theological enterprise, I had better at once regain the safety of my chair.

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