

# Liturgy and Literary Tradition<sup>1</sup>

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In this paper I want first of all to examine what the liturgy essentially (or rather existentially) is: and then, having made my view of that question clear I want to make some brief suggestions as to how this conception of the liturgy might be grasped by undergraduates taking a combined honours course in theology and English literature. I am going to discuss this particular combination of subjects, partly because it is explicitly mentioned by Laurence Bright in his paper in the symposium, but also because I think it is a combination particularly interesting in itself. What I have to say must not be construed as constituting a syllabus for a course, let alone as a substitute for the teaching of the history of liturgical forms and their relation to the theological preoccupations of their periods. What I want to do is simply to suggest how, within a course combining this study with that of our literary tradition, illuminating comparisons can be made and insights given. In order to do this I shall be concerned, inevitably, with the similarities rather than the differences between liturgical and literary activities, but it must be remembered that there may be as much value in showing the differences as in making comparisons. I am not supposing that theology is a species of literary criticism, but simply suggesting how literary criticism can help us to grasp certain fundamental points about the nature of liturgy.

In my view the liturgy ought to be regarded as the 'creative centre' of the whole theological enterprise. I hope that this claim will not just seem to be a piece of academic imperialism, but will emerge naturally from the view of the liturgy which I want to put forward. Liturgy, as I see it, is not just one subject among others, but is the focus towards which everything else must be directed. This is because, as the Vatican Council says, the liturgy 'is the outstanding means whereby the faithful may express in their lives, and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true church'. The liturgical life of the Church is, quite simply, *the* Christian life. There is no other.

Let me try briefly to substantiate this assertion. It is becoming increasingly recognised that it is the assembly of the faithful for the

<sup>1</sup>This was the fourth paper read at the Leicester Conference which was described in our last issue.

liturgical celebration which constitutes the Church as a visible, articulated community in the world. If we want to encounter the Christian community as such, it is only in the liturgy that we can do so. Furthermore, this gathering is the earthly prototype of the community of the saints in heaven. It shows us, as clearly as we can ever expect in this life, what heaven is like. For it is the context in which Christ, in his glory, comes to us, and pitches his tent among us. Everything which the Church does, and every element in its structure, is directed to this end. All this is clear from the Council's *Constitution*.

There are two difficulties about this idea. The first is that the liturgy is something celebrated only intermittently, whereas the life of the Church is continuous. The second is that the liturgy is essentially public, whereas there is a true place for the worship of God in private. The common way of thinking about the first problem is to picture the liturgical celebration as just being something which, by helping us at regular intervals to receive grace, gives us the power to go out and sanctify the everyday world. The grace which the liturgy generates (God being the stoker behind the scenes) is transmitted to the outside world by being appropriated by the faithful. To change the metaphor, some of the liturgical grace rubs off on to the secular world through contact with those who have been impregnated with it. Now there is some truth in this picture, but I think that nevertheless it puts the emphasis the wrong way round. The world is not sanctified outside the liturgy, by having liturgical grace rubbed off on to it, but is sanctified (if anywhere) *in the liturgy*—for it is here that the source of holiness (who is God) is most completely present. The point of our spending most of our time outside the celebration is in order that we may absorb the world into ourselves, and so bring it with us into the liturgy. The movement is centripetal, rather than centrifugal. We need to go out into the world, not just in order to permeate it with our own holiness, but in order to be able to bring it back with us into the celebration, and so bring it into the range of the radiance of God's holiness. We need to see matters in this way in order to understand how it is that the activity of the world, for a Christian, is not something which goes on outside the liturgy but is indeed something ready to be made over, sacrificed, rendered holy by being brought really and substantially into the orbit of the celebration. In this way it is possible to see that the intermittent character of the liturgy is essential to its missionary character but that the liturgy is, nevertheless, truly the Christian life, and not just a part, not even the most sublime part, of a life conceived on some other terms. The importance of this

way of looking at the matter is that it forces us to see that the sanctification of the world is not a matter of the world coming into contact with us, but of its being brought into contact with God. Hence we regard the world as a thing of intrinsic interest and importance in itself, which we need to look at objectively and understand, because only then can we bring it, without distortion, into the liturgy with us. This is one way of defining 'lay', as Yves Congar has said: seeing the world for itself, and not important only on account of its pointing to something beyond itself, not just as a jumping-off ground.

The problem of private worship can be solved by another metaphor. (All theology is a question of using the right metaphors). It is usual to think of private prayer as being outside the liturgy altogether. (Liturgy is, by definition it is said, the official, public worship of the Church.) So it can only be connected with the community of the Church *indirectly*. Of course both liturgical worship and private worship are carried on within the community of charity: but they do not interpenetrate each other. The trouble with this idea is that it defines charity without direct reference to the one really encounterable Christian community, which is the liturgical gathering. Charity, as I see it, is something which can only exist communally. (It is one of the crass mistakes of some New Moralists to think of love as a shapeless interior surge unrelated to any particular kinds of visible behaviour. Charity is not just a certain God-given interior surge towards other people on the part of individuals. It is a real relationship between people joined together in a community, and can only exist at the level of activity.) If charity is a communal gift, encounterable as a communal activity, then private worship has to be linked substantially to this communal activity. It needs to be seen as part of the work of building up the community, and we need to be conscious that it is only possible because of the prior, communal, action which, so to speak, releases its energy. It is in private worship that we can become catalysts for a reaction between the world and the holiness of God. It is part of our bringing the world as an offering to him. I believe that the Vatican Council's constitution is interesting here in its use of metaphor. While it recognises that private prayer is not, in itself, participation in the liturgy as such, nevertheless the liturgy is the 'summit' (*culmen*) to which all Christian activity is directed. Now the summit is continuous with and grows out of the whole structure of the mountain: and similarly, private prayer is continuous with, and cannot be sharply distinguished from, liturgical worship. Private and public worship are not distinct kinds of worship, but are related in a more substantial way, so that the

test of validity is whether a certain practice is directed towards liturgical worship and can be seen as coming under its supremacy or not.

The idea that the liturgy presents us with a foretaste of heaven is very important because it emphasises the function of the liturgy as a mediator, or vehicle by which two worlds can communicate with each other. But the liturgy is not only the mediator between heaven and this world: it is also, and for the same reason, a mediator between the workaday world and the community of the Church as such. It stands midway between the practical and the theoretical elements in Christianity. On the practical side it is something done: on the theoretical side it is something which shows forth a doctrine. In it theology becomes an activity, instead of remaining purely an abstract study; and at the same time, the activity of the world is given meaning in it by being brought into living contact with theological truth.

The study of the liturgy, therefore, can only be complete if it is approached from two sides at once. One side is mentioned by Laurence Bright in his paper in the symposium, where he suggests a study of liturgy 'not merely as a description of what once took place (an archaeological treatment) but as relating the theological outlook of the Church at different periods to its liturgical expression'. I am not competent to demonstrate in this paper how that might be done. What I want to consider here is the other side of the question: namely how to make a study of the relationship between the culture of the surrounding world and liturgical activity of the Church. In doing so I shall, inevitably, have to speak a good deal of the whole of what I want to call the biblical culture, not just of the liturgy as such; since it seems to me that, in a sense, the liturgy is simply the means by which the biblical culture is made permanently and actively available to the ordinary Christian.

The liturgy is simultaneously a life to be entered into and something to be consciously learned. We need to be educated in it. But of course, the liturgy is already within us, and we in it, enveloped by it as the life being lived by the people of God. Theology cannot therefore look at it altogether objectively. If the old notion of the liturgy as simply the public activity of the Church were true, then of course we could reasonably think it possible to step outside it and look at it in this way. We would then take the teaching of liturgy to be simply the study of the history of liturgical practices. But such a study, important though it may be, by-passes the important fact that, since all the life of a Christian is liturgical, we can no more step outside the liturgy than we can step outside our own bodies. Like the 'beast' in William Golding's *Lord of the*

*Flies*, we have to realise that the liturgy is simply 'us'. (The only activity of the Church which falls outside the liturgy altogether (that the Council recognises, precisely because it concerns those who are not yet within the liturgical community, is preaching the faith to unbelievers.) So in studying the liturgy, as Christians, we are simply studying our own life-processes. The study must be one of discovery as well as scholarship (though scholarship has its place in the process of discovery.) Until we have discovered what kind of life this is which we have within us, formal theology cannot help us to systematise it properly. We first of all have to see that what we are studying is not something apart from our life, but is simply the Christian structure of the life we already have, given to us by tradition. (We cannot speak of our liturgical life, as we speak of our sex life or our academic life, or as some so-called 'spiritual' writers would wish us to speak of our 'spiritual' life. We can only speak of ourselves, living a liturgical life simply because we are Christians).

Nevertheless, even if the liturgy is not primarily a subject to be taught, but a way of life to be entered into, this does not mean that education in the liturgy is not of crucial importance. For education is both a process of gathering experience through study and a process of being initiated into a society and being given a role in it: and this double task concerns liturgical education as much as any other. Education in the liturgy is both a deepening of our awareness of what the life of the community is like and an active process of being offered a place within it. But as I have insisted this can only be done by an exploration of ourselves. In discovering our own deepest being, we shall discover at the same time the true significance of the actions and concepts which constitute the liturgy.

Now what we are is largely a matter of what our social environment is, and how it shapes us by its traditions and customs. Hence identifying those aspects of our entire cultural past which are still actively present within us, and are at work in the process of our present growth, is the first step towards discovering what the liturgy means to us here and now. It is because the study of literature is the study of some of the most accessible parts of that cultural tradition that I would claim a particular significance for it in the process of self-discovery.

Let me elaborate this point somewhat. It is one great permanent achievement of English literary criticism in this century to have restored the concepts of tradition and culture to their rightful place in our thinking. One can say that this revolution in criticism, begun by T. S. Eliot, taken up by Dr Leavis and his followers and carried into the present period by writers like Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams con-

stitutes a major intellectual breakthrough, comparable in its way to the rise of linguistic analysis in philosophy or of Biblical studies in theology. (Indeed all these movements can, and I think should, be seen as converging towards a new synthesis, of which only the dimmest outlines can as yet be discerned. This future synthesis is surely the true point of the ecumenical movement, not merely a union of Churches, but a diversified yet organically connected community of cultures and disciplines).

The first milestone in the recovery of the concept of tradition was T. S. Eliot's essay, published in 1919, on *Tradition and the Individual Talent*. Now that we take the fruits of this work for granted it is hard to appreciate how revolutionary it was. Eliot began like this:

In English writing we seldom speak of tradition, though we occasionally apply its name in deploring its absence. We cannot refer to 'the tradition' or to 'a tradition': at most we employ the adjective in saying that the poetry of so-and-so is 'traditional' or even 'too traditional'. Seldom perhaps does the word appear except in a phrase of censure.

The extent to which this statement is now false is a measure of the importance of Eliot's work. He goes on to point out that one aspect of our rejection of the concept of tradition consists in a tendency to praise 'those aspects or parts of a writer's work in which he least resembles anyone else'. On the contrary, he asserts,

If we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.

Awareness of tradition, therefore, is awareness 'not only of the pastness of the past but also of its presence'. A good traditional writer has not only 'his own generation in his bones, but a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order'. The whole literature of the past is still alive in the new writer's consciousness and is hence liable to modification by his new sensibility. It is constantly open to revaluation precisely because it is not a dead and completed inheritance, but something alive and continuing.

Further, the tradition is so much bigger and more enveloping than the individual writer that he is no more than a catalyst whose presence causes a new set of reactions in it and so keeps the tradition alive. For the

tradition belongs to the community, and the individual writer has his responsibility to that community. He is the more important the more he stands within the community which possesses the tradition, sinking his own egocentricity for the sake of the common good. Culture therefore is a communal affair, the inheritance of a coherent, distinctive and living civilisation, which comprehends all the activities of the members at all levels of sophistication and refinement.

The insight which lies behind Eliot's thought must be distinguished from the particular emphasis given to it by his own background and preoccupations. We can see two separate strands developing from it and can also see that these themselves have different roots in the past. Eliot himself is a product of a highly articulate and conservative world of New England puritanism. The natural bent of his mind was therefore educational and religious. His Anglo-Catholicism is not a reaction against this earlier mode of thought, except at a relatively superficial level. His own way of developing the ideas latent in *Tradition and the Individual Talent* has therefore lain in elaborating a view of Christian education in a European Christian setting determined in its cultural aspects by its classical and renaissance past. It is now possible to see in the light of his own work (itself an example of the process of revaluation I have spoken of) a coherent tradition of culture in which some main landmarks are Homer, Virgil, Dante, seventeenth-century Anglicanism and that part of Matthew Arnold which looks on high culture as the bulwark against anarchy. This is the version of the European tradition which shapes Eliot's vision, and while we can all see that it has a certain validity (for the coherence of Eliot's work has, in a sense, made it valid for us) we can also see, I think, that it is only one version out of several that are possible.

There is another version, opposed to the classical, aristocratic and cosmopolitan tradition in European culture in various ways, but which writers who have come after Eliot have shown to be at least as valid as his own. This tradition is vernacular, popular and (in the European context) provincial. For us, some landmarks in this tradition might include Beowulf, Langland, Bunyan and William Morris. Beowulf stands as the vernacular epic of moral grim single-mindedness, over against the Homeric epics of non-committal moral comprehensiveness. Langland represents the sprawling vernacular of the English middle ages, the world of agricultural labour and deep-rooted mysticism spilling haphazardly over into politics and satire, over against the highly organised and systematic structure of the Divine Comedy. Bunyan represents



a rich popular provincialism and puritanism over against the sophistication and wit of Donne and Lancelot Andrews. William Morris represents the combination of high culture, manual labour and democratic participation over against the élite view of culture, associated with professional intellectuals and ancient universities, which we see in Arnold. Just as Eliot's version has borne fruit in the establishment of an association of Catholic Christianity with the vision of a united, European high classical culture, so the other tradition has borne fruit too in the association of literature with sociology and with the establishment of the place of provincial working-class culture in the total European picture. Significantly, Eliot's criticism has tended to concern itself with poetry and poetic drama (traditionally upper-class arts since the rise of industrialism) while other writers have tended to concentrate on the novel and the prose drama, the literature of the lower grades of English society.

Now it is obvious that we are not necessarily involved in making a choice between these large, generalised views of the tradition which has shaped us. My main point is to draw attention to their presence, and their continued life, in our present age. They have both something to tell us about what we are like, and how we have become the people we are. Both traditions are in our bones.

But it is sometimes suggested that, as Christians, the choice does have to be made. For it is suggested that only the first represents the European Catholic tradition and the second only a humanitarian tradition. Especially as regards the post-industrial world this suggestion is plausibly made. Whether a writer is in favour of it (like Christopher Dawson) or against it (like George Orwell) something like Eliot's analysis is often taken to be the authentic Christian tradition. (Perhaps the curiously bastard quality of the Belloc-Chesterton vision of Christendom is due to an attempt to assimilate both versions at once.) But what is far more important than the question of whether we have, in the end, to make a choice between these versions is the fact that both leave out the central element in Christianity. This is the Jewish and middle-eastern basis of it all. The European tradition may be rooted in Christianity: but Christianity is not, fundamentally, rooted in Europe, but in Palestine. Europe has only partially and often distortedly mediated this oriental element to us: and it is the significance of the biblical movement to have shown us that Christianity only makes sense, in the twentieth century, if we are prepared to look back into its Jewish origins. A purely European Christianity is irreconcilable with the scientific industrial culture of



modern man: but a Christianity conscious of its alien, eastern roots not only makes sense in itself, but helps the industrial culture to make sense of itself as well, by supplying it with an element of profundity and mystery which it cannot by itself provide. The cultural importance of the liturgy is precisely that it brings to us, alive and speaking face to face (not just out of archaeological ruins and tattered books) the dynamic oriental culture of Christianity. The Church is the new Israel, grafted on the old Jewish roots, and lives by drawing its sustenance from them, as St Paul insists in the epistle to the Romans.

The liturgy is then the perpetuation of the Jewish culture; the life of the people of God in which the redemption both transforms and preserves its parent culture. Thus there is a third distinctive version of the tradition which has made us what we are: its landmarks include Abraham, Sinai, the temple, the death and resurrection of Jesus and the mass as celebrated over the centuries in Europe. For the Roman rite is only partly a European phenomenon: and despite all its influence in the European tradition it has also acted as the vessel, half submerged but never sunk, of a different cultural tradition. The preservation of the Bible, as a living word, *has* been achieved. While it is true that this literary monument of the east has come to us only through members of the European traditions, it is also true that, as members of the liturgical community and its traditions, they stood apart at times from the other elements in Europe and contributed something different to its formation.

Our task then is to discover ourselves in the liturgy and the liturgy in ourselves. In order to do this we must simultaneously assimilate fully, on its own merits, the tradition which has shaped us as Englishmen and assimilate the distinctive tradition which ought to shape us as the people of God. The liturgical life of the Church in England is simply the process of ordering the relationship between these two pressures upon us. And the study of the liturgy, in a university, must be a study both of the literary tradition of the culture in which we find ourselves and the study of the biblical culture which lies behind us, and which has come to us embedded and often distorted but still distinguishable in the first. This way of looking at the liturgy is not, it seems to me, just one way of studying it effectively: it is the only way. Only by relating the academic study of liturgical forms, and their origins, to the tradition of England as it comes to us here and now we can maintain a sense of relevance and direction. It must be a constant control for us, when looking at (say) Hippolytus or St Gregory or Solesmes to bring with us a consciousness

of what it means to be in the society which has produced George Eliot and Galsworthy and Harold Pinter.

What can this mean in practice? We have to begin to answer this question by realising that the liturgy as we know it is culturally alien to the society which has grown up in England in the last two hundred years. I am not here just referring to the Latin language and the semi-feudal social relationships and the Irish emotional climate we experience, but to the very concepts which liturgical action presupposes, and the history which lies behind them. We cannot bring back a feeling of the relevance of these basic roots of the liturgy by simply *inventing* liturgical forms which seem appropriate to the modern world. To do so is merely to create, in the liturgy, what Coventry Cathedral has created in ecclesiastical art, with its natty 'clip-on' chapels and jazzed-up choir-stalls: namely a radical separation of concept and expression wholly inappropriate and false in a post-Wittgensteinian epoch. We have to accept the fact, which is absolutely central to the whole idea of Christian liturgy, that the liturgy is already with us, enveloping us, and existing as the first datum of our Christian existence. To build upon, and not reject what tradition has bequeathed to us is the first premiss of any liturgical renewal. What we already possess is the only material we have to work with.

What impression does the reasonably alert person of today have of this raw material? I think that the dominant impression is of something radically incomplete, even incoherent but all the same profoundly suggestive. We find a world of ritual, ceremony, incantation, symbolism and mystery, clearly at odds with the workaday world around it, but not wholly nonsensical. What makes some sort of sense of it is that at a certain level it bears an intelligible relationship to current modes of thought in other fields. The sensitive student will have a feeling that psychology, anthropology, literary criticism and comparative religion at the present time all suggest that these mysterious rites do speak to modern man at a profound, if untapped and even repugnantly primitive level of his being. He will have some faint, unformulated sense that there is a cultural continuity between what he has read in these areas of study and what he ought to find in the liturgy. The very mediaevalism of much Catholic thinking will itself give him a link with a communal life at an earlier stage of human development, rooted in the soil and the seasons, in which the liturgy did have a central place in culture. This will give him a sense of dissatisfaction with the state of things today which is both disturbing and potentially creative. But if he is to make a signi-

ficant contribution, he must become as fully aware as possible of the historical context in which he is living, and the inner meaning of the developments he is witnessing around him. For this reason I think that the first step in understanding the liturgy as a living world must be to make connections between it and the literary tradition of our own country. In order to do this it is necessary for the student to take both sides of the relationship with equal seriousness, and look into them in equal depth. We must not allow it to be thought that in reading the secular literature we are simply making use of it for a theological purpose: it has to be understood on its own terms, for what it is, and the connections we make must arise from this disinterested reading.

I want now to consider very briefly one or two moments in English literary history, taken more or less at random, which any student of English in a modern university is likely to encounter as part of his curriculum. The four points I have chosen are represented by *Beowulf*, the mediaeval drama, the *Pilgrim's Progress* and the nineteenth-century novel. My purpose is not exactly to consider them from the literary-critical angle, nor for what they tell us about the state of religion at various times, but rather to indicate how a study of them may help us to see the course our tradition has taken, and how it has made us what we are, and hence how the connection with the biblical-liturgical culture might be made effectively.

The great period of Anglo-Saxon literature, of which *Beowulf* is the greatest single surviving fragment, is profoundly influenced in its religious outlook by two factors. One is the memory, and often the actual presence of the old paganism of the pre-Christian germanic culture mixed up with Christianity itself: and the other is the pervasive effect of Gregory the Great's work in popularising a theological outlook which emphasised the gulf between this world and the next, between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of the devil, and the idea that the world was little more than a battlefield for the opposing forces of the saints (God's heroes) and the spirits of darkness. In a world which knew little of secondary causes it was easy to move from 'the natural phenomena of daily experience to the unseen agents of the spirit world',<sup>2</sup> and hence to accommodate the old pagan religion, with its ogres, trolls and evil spirits within a Christian framework. The ogres become devils from hell: the heroes become saints: the ordinary man is left to fend for himself between the two camps, and is encouraged to maintain his

<sup>2</sup>cf. R. W. Southern *The Church of the Dark Ages in The Layman in Christian History* (S.C.M. 1963), p. 89.

allegiance to the one rather than the other by the fear of eternal torture, in a world of radical physical and psychological insecurity. It is against this background that we ought to study the effects of the liturgical practices of the period: and reading *Beowulf* would be an admirable preparation for this.

It is a Christian poem for a Christian audience, but the story is itself drawn from pagan germanic folk sources. We would be quite wrong to suppose that the society in which it was composed was simply crude, barbaric and uncultured. On the contrary the poem is a triumph of sophistication, presupposing a high degree of understanding and detachment on the audience's part. It is a poem of contrived art within a well-established epic convention. The poet can deal with a pagan story, on its own merits, presupposing not only an easy familiarity with its outline, but also a capacity in the audience to accept it objectively, without having to be given an apologetic commentary alongside pointing out its defects from the Christian point of view. The audience were quite capable of seeing this for themselves, and enjoying the story and the poetry without feeling worried about its pagan implications. The fact that they were largely illiterate, and depended on oral tradition for their culture adds a further point of interest in this context.

*Beowulf* illustrates the ability of a Christian society to make moral capital for itself out of a foreign culture and a foreign ethic. God is to man as a patriarchal tribal chief is to his followers—men whose whole economic, legal and cultural existence depends upon him. The eschatological heavenly banquet is a kind of tribal feast in which the king gives out rewards in terms of strong drink and gold ornaments. In all this we can see, in our own literature, processes at work which have obvious analogies to the processes of cultural diffusion and development which lie behind the Bible. We can gain an understanding of these processes the more easily because in this case there are no problems of inspiration and inerrancy, no taboos and theological blockages in our way. We can concentrate purely on the human process, at the cultural level—and this is what we need first of all to appreciate if we are to get a grasp of what the biblical world is like. But there is a further interest in that here we have an example from our own cultural past; something which is, indeed, still alive for us. The more people read English at universities, or buy paper-back translations of works like *Beowulf*, the more widely diffused will be the general awareness of the kind of thing a 'primary epic' is, and hence what genre of literature we are dealing with in some of the Old Testament books.

Poetically, *Beowulf* is also interesting from our point of view. For it illustrates the way in which a living Christian tradition can add a new dimension to pre-Christian themes and images. The poem is full of fire and water symbols. Beowulf is a saviour hero whose task is to combat the demons who, despite their obvious folk-basis, are explicitly given a diabolical origin by the poet. The first struggle, with Grendel and his mother, concerns demons from hell who live under the earth, in a subterranean lake. They are descended from Cain, whose evil progeny disappeared in the flood and were transformed into devils underground. (It is worth noting, as an example of Gregory the Great's theological views, that he believed that volcanos were passages to hell, and their continual increase in numbers was due to the ever increasing number of people being damned, thus causing traffic-bottlenecks).

Beowulf's descent into the lake to exorcise the demons takes on a multiple suggestiveness. Firstly it is a variant of the waste-land myth, in which life can only be brought back to an afflicted country by the release of the waters from control by evil powers. Secondly it seems to be a kind of baptismal rite, which is a natural extension of the same general idea. Finally, it represents a harrowing-of-hell; the release of those trapped by evil powers through the *transitus* of a saviour from life, through death and back to life. (It is highly significant that Beowulf's friends take him for dead when they see his blood welling up to the surface of the lake.)

The second struggle of Beowulf is with a dragon laying waste his own kingdom. The dragon's wrath has been aroused by the violation of an ancient treasure-hoard. Beowulf kills the dragon, but at the cost of his own life. Some solitary, unknown person in the remote past brought, indirectly, all this calamity upon the people by the violation of a sacred taboo, thereby putting the treasure under the dragon's control. This part of the poem is full of fire-imagery: it illustrates Eliot's purgatorial vision:

The only hope, or else despair  
Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre—  
To be redeemed from fire by fire.

(*Little Gidding* IV)

I don't think I need labour the point any further: the value of looking at a poem like *Beowulf* in this way is obvious for anyone who (say) is involved in trying to get to grips with the real meaning of Easter in the liturgical life of the Church. But I think it is worth saying that very few students of Anglo-Saxon are ever clearly presented, as a matter of course,

with any such ideas. There are plenty of articles on the literary sources and analogies, and the philological complexities, and a few on the poetic and narrative interest. But hardly anything on the true significance, for the kind of Christian audience for which the poem was written, in the theological and liturgical atmosphere of the period, of the poem as an example of the religious and cultural presuppositions which a poet had available to him and the kind of poetic use he could make of them. If there were, this kind of reading could become the basis of a genuine illumination both of the literature and of the Christianity of the period.

My second illustration—the mediaeval religious drama—has a more immediate reference to the liturgy, though I know of no works by literary critics which really make the point. It is now a well-established fact that the first germ of the mediaeval mystery plays as we know them in their great cycles associated with cities like Chester, York and Coventry, was a liturgical ceremony. It consisted in the dramatization, in the sanctuary of the Church itself (particularly in monastic churches) of the story of Easter morning.

In the liturgy of Easter Sunday . . . 'tropes' were being added, in the time of Charlemagne's revival of learning and culture in the eighth century. These were musical embellishments, later given words from scriptural or other sources, in the liturgy itself. Thus after the Easter Sunday Introit the choir would sing the following trope:

'Whom do you seek in the tomb, O followers of Christ?'

'Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified, O heavenly ones'

'He is not here, he is risen as he foretold. Go, announce that he is risen from the tomb'.

Later these words would be made into a kind of miniature dialogue by the choir, or by individual members of it, accompanied by dramatic actions representing the parts of the Marys and the angels, in the chancel of the church.<sup>3</sup>

Now the interesting thing that is never discussed is why anybody should feel the need to elaborate an already elaborate liturgy in this way. The tropes themselves were, of course, simply extensions of the music of the liturgy: but here, in the development of little plays in the church we have something which is not liturgical at all, but dramatic. That is to say, it is an action based on the notion of impersonation, not on the notion of 're-presentation' in the strict sense, which lies behind liturgical celebration. It is true that theories of impersonation in the liturgy were held at this period—and this would in itself be a useful point at which to

<sup>3</sup>cf. my *Culture and Liturgy*, pp. 84-85.

begin a study of what the liturgy meant to Christians. But if the mass was already thought of dramatically, this makes it more, rather than less, difficult to see the need for this new and different kind of dramatic activity. I think myself that the answer can only be that it was the deficiencies of a non-participating liturgy, in which the true meaning was lost in the midst of artistic elaboration, which caused this dramatic intervention. Here at last was something which really conveyed the fact and the meaning of Easter. The extraordinary popularity of the religious drama, not only when it became a great social occasion in the neighbourhood, but even before, when it was still a strictly ecclesiastical affair, performed in the church in Latin, tends to show that the drama was able to give a meaning to the Christian events which the liturgy itself was unable to do. This is not just a matter of a popular, vernacular drama for the masses who could not understand Latin: it concerned everyone, clerics included, because it was not primarily the language, or the liturgical forms, which were unintelligible, but the very concept of salvation history, and the theology of the sacraments. All this has an obvious lesson for us. It shows that the kind of understanding required for a living liturgy is not just a matter of a familiar language, but a matter of theological awareness combined with, and arising out of, active participation by all. We have here, in the origins of our own drama, a vivid commentary on the importance of the liturgical renewal of the present day. But once more, we shall not find this kind of observation made by literary scholars when they deal with the religious drama, because they are not, in general, aware of the theological issues involved in particular forms of liturgical celebration. But neither do we find the historians of the liturgy looking to the popular drama as material for making their theological commentary meaningful in historical and cultural terms. Yet it is only in these terms that more than a tiny handful of specialists will ever begin to see the significance, both for religion and for cultural history, of such developments as those I have described.

*Beowulf* comes from a period in which the liturgy seems still to have had living and familiar contact with external life, and truly gave it a meaning. The mediaeval drama marks the collapse of this contact in a welter of elaboration and the loss of a sense of personal participation in which the meaning can be found for oneself. The rise of English puritanism in the time of Bunyan offers us the possibility of an alternative way of linking liturgy and life: the way of the gathered community. But it also marks the rise of the moralist emphasis in English culture which we have never lost, and which has, until our own day, made it hard for us



to grasp the basis of the Catholic liturgical life, which is something to which moral effort is only a preliminary. (The moral life, like the life of private prayer, is only part of the 'mountain' of Christian existence of which the summit to which everything is directed is the liturgy. This is something which Christian moral theology has largely forgotten).

Bunyan, of course, is a mediaeval writer in many respects. His allegorical technique, the sources of his literary culture, and the social structure of the Bedfordshire villages were all largely mediaeval. Even the moral tone of earnestness and self-consciousness has some connection with late mediaeval thought. (Roger Sharrock sees Chaucer's Parson as a species of puritan pastor, with his sense of the importance of his own moral rectitude: 'if golde ruste, what then shal iren do?'<sup>4</sup>) But what is new, because it is based on a new theology, is the interest in the psychology of inner moral growth, and its expression in the habit of mutual self-examination among the gathered churches of Puritan Bedfordshire, which led to a new interest in the spiritual autobiography—of which *Grace Abounding* is only the best known example.

The stages of a Calvinist conversion were already well mapped out, and *The Pilgrim's Progress* as well as *Grace Abounding* are based upon it. There were stages in a growth of the awareness of God's presence and his mercy: but what is important is that they were expressed in terms of moral striving on the side of the human being. Bunyan's problem is 'what must I do to be saved?' This contrasts with Will Langland's problem, in *Piers Ploughman*, which is 'What must I become if I am to be saved?'

*The Pilgrim's Progress* has also an important historical interest in two respects. Firstly, it combines the problem of personal standing before God with the problem of facing the hostility, misunderstanding and ridicule of the world. Christian's struggle is both a battle against hypocrisy, despair and presumption in his own soul, and a battle against external powers—The Church of England, the civil authority, Rome, and the evil influence of those who had fallen from a 'godly' way of life. The book is a document illustrating the history of a small gathered Christian community at odds with its world, and trying to maintain the purity of its traditions against both internal and external enemies. But it also illustrates in its own development (particularly in the change of emphasis between Part I and Part II, which is the story of Christian's wife and family on the same journey) the problem of the clericalisation of a once egalitarian community. Bunyan was now a successful and

<sup>4</sup>cf. Roger Sharrock: *John Bunyan*, London 1954. I am indebted to this book for much of this section.

well-known pastor, responsible for a flock and faced with many human problems in his ministry. Part II is partly an attempt to deal with these.

Here, I suggest, we can see in our own cultural tradition a situation which could give us the 'feel' of what it was like to be in the early Church. We can see analogies to the problems which faced St Paul; and could perhaps understand more clearly, and in relation to our own situation, the cultural and theological climate of his time. But that is not the most important feature of Bunyan's work for us. The significant thing is the close interweaving of social and moral strands, and the understanding of their mutual pressures, which has become one of the striking characteristics of the English cultural tradition. Indeed, for Dr Leavis it is the 'Great Tradition'. It is certainly 'in our bones': and we need to see how it arose out of a community awareness of a special kind, and was nourished by a particular form of community worship. The Puritan liturgical community is an important influence in our tradition: and understanding it could help us to see how a certain theology, embodied in a certain liturgical form, has been the vehicle of a characteristic cultural development. This is an example of the way a liturgy mediates between two worlds, which is outside the normal scope of liturgical studies, and may perhaps be of particular value for that reason. Here we can see how the life of a gathered assembly can nourish the growth of self-knowledge; we can understand better what is the logic of its development and what are the dangers which beset it.

In the reading of *The Pilgrim's Progress* we can see the beginnings of the English novel. (It is not a novel, but has been read as a novel, and that is the point.) Now, although it is a book about what Angus Wilson has called 'transcendental' good and evil—the notion of evil in the world as a mystery to be experienced but never wholly explained—Bunyan has in fact treated it so systematically, and with so much human insight, that what now strikes us most is the moral interest. The Puritan moral tone has, I think, been largely responsible for the predominance of the moral and psychological over the dimension of metaphysical mystery in the English novel. (The latter has been left to poets. Whenever we come across a novel in which the mystery of evil overshadows the moral problem of wrong action, we tend to think of it as a 'poetic' work rather than as a 'pure' novel.) The dominant fact about the English novel is that it is very largely a matter of morals without religion. By the middle of the eighteenth century, in the works of Richardson, Fielding and Smollett the original religious basis has all but disappeared, and what we have been left with since then is a profound moral concern, expressed

by way of protest, satire and burlesque, about the condition of society and of human relationships.

Our social development since the eighteenth century has been largely concerned with the industrial revolution and its related social upheavals. These are practical rather than theoretical concerns, but they are nevertheless about people as well as things. The novel, which has been mainly a middle and lower-class literary form (as distinct from poetry which, in the same period, has been an aristocratic or upper-class interest) has naturally reflected this practical emphasis, especially when the social changes have resulted in the creation of new social injustices or the discovery that old injustices are no longer necessary or tolerable. The novelist has been concerned, therefore, with the creation of a fictional world full of interesting human relationships, and which has an oblique but nevertheless undisguised reference to the world of real life. He has discussed these relationships, with an ever increasing technical command and assurance, without finding it necessary to raise those ultimate metaphysical questions which the poet finds himself faced with all the time. For poetry is, you might say, necessarily religious (and here I don't mean to say that it is therefore a higher form of art): and it deals with its problems by way of those literary techniques—myth, symbol, patterns of imagery and unconscious associations—which are characteristic of religious expression. The biblical culture is a poet's, not a novelist's world.

The 'morals without religion' novel finds its apotheosis in the mid-nineteenth century, in the works of George Eliot. The tradition of criticism which belongs to this phase all points in the same direction. The great Victorian novelists were praised by their contemporaries and immediate followers above all for their characterisation, their psychological insight, their power to tell a good story, and their entertainment-value. Now it is a characteristic of the greatest of them that, while they leave religion out of account (except as part of the human landscape which they set out to discuss and criticise) this does not result in any loss of the sense of vitality. They have life, and they have it abundantly. Indeed they have it far more than the second-rate novelists who *were* concerned with matters of religion. For an age in which Christianity is finding it necessary to emphasise the goodness and the necessity of the purely human, of the natural as against the supernatural, of Christ the man as well as Christ the Son of God, the English novel is an important document to study. If we wish to assert that it is only in Christianity that we can fully have life, and have it abundantly, then we must come to

grips with the novel and understand its inner logic. If we do not we shall be unable to understand the depth of the Englishman's distrust of metaphysical absolutes and his moralistic preoccupations with purely human relationships.

The most important fact about the history of the novel in this century has been the collapse of the assurance with which we used to regard the moralistic novel. The social and psychological complexity of our own age has blurred the once sharp distinctions which seemed so clear to Dickens between good men and bad: and its experience of evil in men, in wars and revolutions, as well as in the individual psyche has made George Eliot's humanistic solutions, and her sense of a balance in human affairs no longer plausible for us. D. H. Lawrence tells us that we must not look for the 'old stable *ego* of the character' in his work, and James Joyce has even found the English language itself an insufficiently complex instrument for expressing his vision. There is a marked tendency to return to thinking in terms that are, at least, potentially religious. The mystery of evil, rather than the moral problem of wrong action is at the centre of best selling novels like those of Graham Greene and William Golding. In criticism, there is a tendency to look even at the nineteenth-century novel in poetic rather than purely moral or motivational terms: to see behind the stable characters and the clear story-line patterns of imagery or linguistic characteristics or half-buried analogues of myths which speak to us at the deepest levels of our existence.

From a Christian point of view this might seem to be a thoroughly good development. If writers are tending to revert to a form of expression which is at least potentially religious, this is something upon which to build a new twentieth-century Christian culture. Out of the ruins of the nineteenth-century moral tradition we may be able to recreate a more profound awareness of man's ultimate destiny. While this is a tempting way of thinking, and has some truth in it, there are dangers in it all the same. The most important is that of simply reverting to an older mode of thought which ignores, or even condemns, what has been achieved in the interval. The fact is that nothing will ever be the same, and we have to remember that not only will the foundations of the new culture have to be built on ruins, but that they are ruins of a particular kind, and these must determine what we can build upon them. We have to enter into the experience of a period in which a profound and passionate moral concern with the good of man was felt to be quite normal without any ultimate questions having to be raised. This is a process which committed Christians, Catholics perhaps

especially, may find very painful. It is not just that we have been brought up to believe that there can't be morals without religion. We have also believed, too uncritically, that faith in Christ brings a more abundant life. However this may be valid as a matter of ultimate truth, one fact which the English nineteenth-century novel establishes is that abundant life has very little to do with dedication to 'Christian moral values'. Indeed vitality and moral rectitude are in continual tension there; and very often the concern of the novelist is to show that, on any decent human evaluation, abundant life is more worthwhile than obedience to those values as they are experienced in the concrete in a particular social world. The novelist poses for us, acutely, the apparent conflict between the demands of 'life' and the demands of 'morality': and if we are to show, to the contemporary world, that this conflict is only apparent, we must do so without blinking any of the issues, and without shirking any of the depths, which the novelist reveals to us.

This is where I believe the liturgy has its most important part to play as a way in to Christianity for modern man. For it is a living embodiment of the demand which is continually being made by men, out of the pressure of their concrete experience, for an adequate response to the ultimate questions of good and evil in the world, which the moralistic tradition cannot provide. In a society which has come to reject the old moral attitudes there are only two possible solutions: the first is to reject any firm and absolute moral commitments, and to go forward in the belief that all moral questions are soluble in particular human terms—a pure situations ethic. The second is to look for some new way of relating adherence to firm moral values to the achievement of abundant life. For it is certain that this relationship has been lost: and that the current despair of moral absolutes, on the part of the most intelligent members of our society, is due to their recognition that there is, at present, no way of linking them with 'abundant life'.

The vitality of the Church's liturgical life could become the answer to all this. For here is activity which lives at the deepest level of poetic experience, redolent at every point with life and energy, but which is yet linked to a morality of absolute seriousness. There is no doubt that many people find the Church's liturgy, even if they do not believe in it, profoundly significant at the level of poetry and art. It is something which a large number of people who have completely rejected Christianity still regard as culturally and psychologically significant. It is in their bones, even if they do not wish to acknowledge it.

Now one of the reasons why it is hard to acknowledge the liturgy, for

English people, is precisely its apparent disregard for the moral element in Christianity. There is a suggestion of irresponsibility, a lack of earnestness in a liturgically based religion, with its *ex opere operato* methods. Christianity is morals for most Englishmen, as Richard Hoggart has pointed out. (*Uses of Literacy*, p. 91.) The doctrinal aspect is largely meaningless, because it has no apparent application to life. The study of the liturgy in the comprehensive cultural way which I have tried to sketch out might be the basis for a new understanding of the true relationship between moral and dogmatic theology—a relationship almost wholly lacking at the present time. For in understanding, in a concrete way, the development of a moral attitude divorced from religion, we shall be able to see more clearly the problem of moral teaching that we are faced with today. An understanding of the modern liturgical movement, from the gothic romanticism of Guéranger to the social involvement of the present, as part of a general cultural shift which can be seen in the development of the novel also, would be an important, integrating element in a theological course.

I shall not attempt to sum up what is already far too long a paper. I hope I have made a few suggestions as to how the study of the liturgy from the angle of cultural tradition could be valuable in a university course combining literary and theological studies. It remains to discuss how the development of dogmatic and pastoral theology could be fitted into such a scheme. But that I shall have to leave to those who are far more competent than I am in the history of the liturgy and its relationship to theological growth of the Church's teaching.