

# POETRY CRITICISM AND THE CHRISTIAN GOSPEL

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Religion is not simply one area of life. From the standpoint of the Christian gospel it is the deepest dimension of all life. Religious poetry, and for that matter some secular poetry, have been the instrument of the expression of the utmost reaches of literary sensitivity in spiritual understanding and feeling. Religious poetry is not only the vehicle for the poets communications, but also stimulates the reader to follow the poet, who may be thought of as a sort of literary Pied Piper, into these heights, and realize his own unique spiritual potential. This is so because of the strong affinity between poetry and religion. Poets know that they deal with the same objective world as the scientist, but poetry deals with double entendre which scientists reject. Poetry and religion insist upon saying things that can not be verified. They say things which lift the heart, give it wings, delightful glimpses of aspects of reality which the reader has not been able to create for himself. Poetry has much in common with theology, yea even with a theology of revolution. Prose may perform these functions, but rarely fires the imagination, or gives it rise to ecstasy, as poetry may do. Syntax is difficult in poetry. In prose language may be subjected to rules of syntax. Music, painting and sculpture, though breaking radically with the classical dimnesions of the past, are by their very form and nature more apt to be limited to specific modes. The reading of poetry calls forth, or recalls forms of reality that could not otherwise exist.

Whether it be religious or secular poetry, there are certain guide lines to be reminded of in reading poetry. There is a necessity to learn to read. This learning to read is to learn the opening of ourselves in dialogue with the text - a progressive way of opening the text. Where progressive deepening ceases - dialogue ceases. Rene Graziani makes a pertinent and interesting comment on this in an article on John

Donne's work: "Donne envisages, or experiences, a love in which physical and spiritual awareness are perfectly integrated, and the final offhand invitation to the high minded spectator works as a kind of challenge to the reader to accept it. Moreover Donne's tone registers considerable skepticism about his reader's ability to credit it. Thus the spectator and what he stands for are placed in a sort of ironical limbo between sublimity and absurdity. The ambivalent response he elicits is directed not so much to the ideal of spirituality and sense perfectly in harmony, as to the possibility that it can be realized in the course of human love.

One might add, finally, that the spectator also reflects Donne's habit of having someone in a poem to address directly, another felt presence, with whom to conduct a dialogue. In the *Extasie* Donne can only speak with his Mistress, not to her. One appreciates why A.J. Smith thought it a poor joke of Donne's to call their extraordinary communication a 'dialogue of one'. Taken in a slightly extended sense, however and one that is certainly implicit in the circumstances of writing such a poem, the phrase can epitomize an elusive aspect of the subtle drama of much of Donne's finest work".<sup>1</sup> And one recalls the delicate beauty of Donne's *A Valediction: forbidding mourning*,

Our two soules therefore, which are one,  
Though I must goe, endure not yet  
A breach, but an expansion,  
Like gold to aery thinnesse beate.

Certain texts come to us ever progressively refining. There is writing that is saying something rather than the content. The meanings of poetry are important - whether they be religious or secular. One must understand the ideas of a poem in order to understand it - to comprehend the ideas, and also to be in the humility of gratitude and admiration in order to come into relation with it as it keeps coming back to a continuing relation - a kind of speaking more than is said. We tend to read the Bible and other literature alike without being open to the text and to another person.

1. *The Review of English Studies*, Vol XLX No. 14 "John Donne's *The extasie and Ecstasy*"  
Rene Graziani

this it will take a long time. Karl Barth says that scripture is difficult and we should not adopt any way of reading it that will minimize the difficulty. He maintains that the struggle with the text and our prior understandings is most rewarding which is true also of poetry - and perhaps especially modern poetry. One brings all his experience to the poem as a human being. What does the poem communicate? Part of the pleasure of the poem may be the appeal to something you may have forgotten and recall with keen pleasure when reading the poem. Perhaps the poem is a strategy to bring you into contact with a certain experience of the poet. You must allow yourself to evoke what is recalled in your experience relevant to the poem. And the poem must be allowed to allow us to adjust to our own experience, so that our experience can be reformulated and reshaped. This is the special strength of religious verse. We respond instantly to the beautiful cadence of Psalm 42 because it is an experience Christians identify with naturally:

As a hart longs  
for flowing streams,  
so longs my soul  
for thee, O God.  
My soul thirsts for God,  
for the living God.  
When shall I come and behold  
the face of God?  
My tears have been my food,  
day and night,  
while men say to me continually,  
"Where is your God?"  
These things I remember  
as I pour out my soul:  
How I went with the throng,  
and led them in the procession to the  
house of God,  
With glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving,  
a multitude keeping festival."

or Psalm 122 - "

“I was glad when they said to me.”

“Let us go to the house of the Lord.”

Someone has said that poetry is analogous to a loom with many strands and colors. The aim would be to identify these several kinds and contexts. Northrup Frye suggests there are five phases which need to be singled out for examination. A consideration of these will be helpful in understanding the remarkable affinity of poetry and religion.: (1.) The literal or descriptive phase where the capacity of the words point out something beyond them. In the literal phase the words point inward to each other. E. E. Cummings, in “In Praise of Day”, has made words function in an unusual way. By virtue of its position a word has two or three meanings - thus the word achieves intensity - participial adjectives define the human being-hearing, touching, seeing. The whole fabric of creation is made to function as testimony or something which is not present or imaginable. The lyrical must arise out of something inexpressible expressed - unexperienced which must be experienced-disquiet that pervades - the imagination of the unimaginable. (2.) Symbol as motif; (3.) Symbol as image; (4.) Symbol as Archetype - Myth (5.) Symbol as Monad, or anagogic phase which refers to the mystical or spiritual meaning of words. Some works push us beyond the literary to something more ultimate. That is literature may suggest some ultimate dream as in Dante’s Divine Comedy, or ultimate concerns such as Paul Tillich speaks of: “There are innumerable concerns in our lives and in human life generally which demand infinite attention, unconditional devotion, ultimate passion. They are important, often very important, for you and for me and for the whole of mankind. But they are not ultimately important. <sup>2</sup>“It is this distinction that Frye is pointing out. The limited human imaginative desire points to something but cannot reach toward what it points - but which is a hypothetical

1. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957

2. *The New Being*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955, p.153

possibility. Many, if not all of these phases, are evident in Gerard Manley Hopkins's Poem God's Grandeur:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do not men then now reckon his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.  
And for all this, nature is never spent;  
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs -  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with Ah! bright wings.<sup>1</sup>

We need to be aware of the nature of poetic language. Some of our prior assumptions about this are unfounded. The distinction between poetic and prose language cannot be because they employ different principles with regard to language, even though one may have the advantage over the other. The syntax of ordinary language is pertinent to poetic language. It is exactly what he is doing something to, and what he cannot do without. The act of translation from metaphor to syntax is essential in the sense if one does not orient himself in regard to this, he may disregard the minimum assertions the poem is making, and the assumption is that the syntax is the same. The occurrence of rhyme and meter does not turn it into poetry - the words "Poetic" and "Prosaic" are used indiscriminately. There should be no special vocabulary for poetry. There should be no special subject matter for poetry. A metaphor is a figure of speech in which a word or a phrase literally denoting one idea or thing is used in place of another with the idea of replacing one for the other. Imagery is the presentation in poetry of

1. Tom Driver, Robert Pack, *Poems of Doubt and Belief*  
The Macmillan Company, New York, 1964, p9

any sensation or experience. Imagery is poetry expressed in figurative language. A simile is a comparison between two things, expressed in such a way as the comparison is by verbal description. In a metaphor the expression of the comparison is eliminated and the two subjects are identical. We are familiar with such as these - 'My love is a rose' - 'The sun is Apollo'. The two terms are brought together. A metaphor which is lacking in its first term is lacking in description of its terms for it requires a history of association. Some symbols may be well known. Some newer symbols may be known only to the poet. As we move from one to the other more is required of the reader. In a simile he tells you exactly. In the metaphor he raises a question. In the symbol more associative experience or history is required. An allegory is an extended metaphor - the whole form of the poem is standing as one half of the metaphor. It appeared in the 17th century, for example John Donne's *The Bride of Christ*. The two terms of the metaphor never had had any specific way for expressing them until Richards suggested "tenor" and "vehicle". The "vehicle" carries the burden. The subject of the metaphor is the "tenor". You may have a simile which has the force of a metaphor. However the metaphor brings more of the quality than comes from juxtaposition. Wheelwright would rather use two other terms - "epifor", and "diaphor". These forms are to be found in both religious and secular poetry - in fact they abound in it.

Imagination brings the poetry to life and makes the poetry itself more alive. The metaphor may place two images side by side in such a way as to evoke the imagination of the reader, but if our imagination does not act, we are asleep to the poem. We must respond actively in order to savor the full essence of the poem. Imagination has something to do with the picturing of things that are not directly visible to the eye - the entertainment (reaching out) of the mind for which it cannot immediately account. The sense of sight may also pertain to patterns communicated to other senses. Kant talks about transcendental imagination: the numinous is what is there- which must be created in forms which are made possible by the combination

of the senses and the numinon. The pictures which are created are the pictures of the eye-brain. Imagination is not what is immediately given but creates something out of what is given - an ordering of perceptions so to speak. A definition of imagination ought to exclude pictures given by power extensions of the physical eye such as the telescope, the microscope, Photography becomes artistic only when it manages to capture something which the eye's ordinary perceptions would not catch, for example the bird's wing in flight. The camera simply covers a limitation of the eye. A photograph which adds insight to sight seems to be going beyond the realm of vision. When imagination is used to speak of that which is easily understood or easily given in a way not worthy of question shows no imagination. What one knows of a certainty he does not usually comment upon. The relationship between the thinker and the thought determines the presence or lack of imagination. It does not follow that all ideas that are not clear and distinct or that the mind cannot presently account for are imaginative. The opposite of the imaginative is not the true or correct, but the unquestioned. The number of things unquestioned which are imaginative is limited. The unimaginative is the cliché. The acceptance of mores and conventional ideology is considered to be unimaginative as may be readily observed in the cyclical rebellions of youth. The imaginative man is the man who knows how to question what has heretofore been taken for granted. This is brought out very clearly in Michner's novel "The Source", when the nomad wife tries to convince her husband to leave the nomad life and live the life of a settled farmer. The questioning nature and the formative nature are moved by imagination as well as fact and experience or knowledge. We need to be reminded of the dialectic between logic and thinking. There is no field of thinking -even poetry- where you may not express yourself logically - nor where imagination is not part of thinking - even

science. We have a dialectic between logic and thinking - and we do not know what the third force might be. There is mutual antagonism but they are mutually dependent. When you assume arbitrary limits, you err. Science and logic remind poetry and imagination that there is a gap between what they are pointing out and visa versa. Read a poem not as if the poem were going to lead you into another realm but to grasp the other dimension possible. And this is particularly true in the case of religious poetry.

Astonishment and wonder are attitudes of poets with which we readily identify: "The life of poetry, quite apart from faith or doctrine, is dependent upon the poet's astonishment when he looks at the actual world This is especially true of lyric poetry. Where the poet's fascination and surprise help to shape his poem, something akin to a religious attitude arises.

"The dearest quality of poetry is that it catches us unawares and fills us with wonder. Perhaps we are made to wonder that things are, that existence is. Perhaps we are taught suddenly that old things gain new life from new arrangement...where the imaginative power of finding the new in the old is lost, the human spirit dies and with it all possibility of man's being addressed by the divine Spirit".<sup>1</sup>

We have been considering guide lines which make the reading of poetry a more fruitful experience for the reader. We can realize from the discussion what an effective mode poetry has been for the expression of religious thinking and feeling. And thus we find that the primary source for the poetry of the Christian Gospel is the Bible: "More than one third of the Old Testament is poetry - not only those books whose titles announce the fact, like the Psalms and the Song of Songs, but most of Isaiah and Jeremiah, and those of equally great but less voluminous poets from Hosea to Malachi...In fact, the oldest books in the Old Testament, Amos and Hosea, are poetry...one of the oldest and finest...(poems) in the Old Testament is

1. Ibid, Driver p5



the War Song of Deborah in the fifth chapter of Judges. This is a striking fact when we consider the significance and authority of the Bible: From the earliest period of its history the Christian Church has regarded the Scriptures as being in some sense the special revelation of God, and therefore as being in some sense the final standard or norm of Christian truth. The Old Testament seems to have been accepted from the beginning as an authoritative revelation of God, and it was not long before writings which came ultimately to form the New Testament were also in circulation, carrying a similar, though not precisely assessed authority.”<sup>1</sup> Both unfold the dynamic concepts of God, of man’s alienation from God, of nature, of society and of man himself. These and the interplay between them became the themes of poetry at surprisingly early dates. The triumphal ode of Deborah, composed about 1100 B. C., celebrated a great victory of the Israelites over their Canannite enemies. It opens with these stirring lines:

Praise ye the Lord for the avenging of Israel,  
When the people willingly offered themselves.  
Hear, O ye kings; give ear, O ye princes;  
I, even I, will sing unto the Lord;  
I will sing praise to the Lord God of Israel.  
Lord when thou wentest out of Seir,  
When thou marchest out of the field of Edom,  
The earth trembled, and the heavens dropped,  
The clouds dropped water.  
The mountains melted from before the Lord.

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The entire ode (31 verses) is too long for reproduction here but it is significant both as a beautiful example of the earliest Hebrew poetry and for the fact that “The book of Judges exhibits a people with a dynamic concept of God reflected especially in the Song of Deborah... They trusted an ever-present and powerful God (5:4-5), one who wrought victory for them, and without whom they could do nothing. Everywhere

1. The Interpreter’s Bible. Vol. 1 p.3.  
Abingdon-Cokesbury Press. N.Y. 1953
2. Ibid. Vol 2. p 719

we may observe the popular impression of the reality of God. His activity is manifested in the operations of the various groups when they remained loyal to his commands. Progress and blessing are invariably associated with obedience and righteousness.”<sup>3</sup> Obedience and righteousness - and their reverse. As the poet contemplated the various facets of religious faith and found them crystalizing in his own experience again and again he burst into songs and prayers expressing his joy, his wonder, his despair. Among these poets were “prophets who were” seers and lawgivers. They state in words their perception of man’s relation to the universe, their vision of man’s relation to his fellow men and to himself. What, till now, had been a general feeling, awakened by a performance, had now become a state of mind, a conviction roused by a statement, an inspired affirmation.”<sup>1</sup> This has reference to certain rites which were observed, perhaps dances, probably communal singing, where not much demand was made on the intellectual powers of the individual. “In the Psalms, Jewish religion, which had been largely national and official, becomes personal; we may almost say democratic. Certainly it is not confined to the hands of a few priests or prophets, but now finds rich expression from scores of hearts. More than ever before, The Psalms tell us, Judaism now became a personal experience and found individual expression. This is the great religious meaning of the book of Psalms. It is a great collection of personal religious experience. It is this that has so endeared it to every Christian generation.

These expressions range all the way from the deepest almost despairing sense of sin and guilt (130) and appeals for God’s help (22; 25), to hope and trust (16), gratitude for God’s goodness (21; 92), and his personal care (23), fellowship with him (73), delight in his word (119), and in the glory of nature (19), praise of him (95; 136; 148; 149), and a sense of the glory of God (96). The old prophetic

3. Ibid. Vol 2.p 686

1. Gerald Heard, *The Human Venture*, Harper & Brothers, New York. 1955, p 20

concern for uprightness of life and justice in human relations appears in Psalms 12 and 15.”<sup>2</sup> Over the centuries much of the exuberant spontaneity of Psalm 150 was lost and worship services became stiff and conventional. But none of that for the writer of Psalm 150:

Praise the Lord!  
Praise the Lord in his sanctuary;  
praise him in his mighty firmament!  
Praise him for his mighty deeds;  
greatness!

Praise him with trumpet sound;  
praise him with lute and harp!  
Praise him with timbrel and dance;  
praise him with strings and pipe!  
Praise him with sounding cymbals;  
praise him with loud clashing cymbals!  
Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!  
Praise the Lord!.

The one hundred and fifty Psalms which comprise the book of Psalms were brought together a few centuries before the Christian era. They are dear to the heart of the believers of all ages... “The psalmists thought and feelings are turned Godward, and their words furnish us with the supreme example in the Old Testament of man’s search for and experience of God. The Psalms thus give us glimpses into the inner religion of some of Israel’s select souls... The Psalms are also notable as being the literary record of a reproducible religious experience. What lies behind these outpourings of Israel’s soul can, in fact, be reacted both by the sinner and by the saint, by the wayfaring man and by the scholar. Later generations can imitate the psalmists, they can stand as it were on their shoulders; they can think their thoughts after them and catch some of their faith and vision; they can, in short, be led by them into the secret of the Most High. Thus the Psalms have served to school

2. Edgar J. Goodspeed - How to Read the Bible  
The John C. Winston Company, Philadelphia  
P. 107

the children of men in the mysteries of God. they have been the human vehicle whereby the grace of heaven has come with the comforting and strengthening power into the lives of those who fear the Lord.”<sup>1</sup> The Psalms are timeless, and have been so loved and read through the centuries, that one wonders if this is why there was so little poetry in the New Testament, though it is quite likely that in their zeal to present Christ, they labored to present his life and teachings, and to lay the foundations of the Christian Church.

Again we turn to the Interpreters Bible for William R. Taylor’s very excellent presentation of the poetic structure of Hebrew poetry which is distinctive. The Hebrews were unfamiliar with meter in the European sense. But a line of Hebrew poetry is usually broken into two or more parts, each of which is called a “stich.” and each stich has two three, or four stressed words. These stressed words, especially if their number is constant in the successive lines, give a poem a certain recognizable rhythm. The term meter then comes to mean the arrangement of accented words words which a given poem displays. For instance.

Save mé, O God, by thy náme  
and vindicate me by thy might  
Heár my prayer, O God;  
give éar to the words of my móuth (54:1-2)

This is said to employ a 3+3 meter. Other meters are 2+2, 3+3, 3+2+2, 2+2+2. In many cases one meter is not used consistently throughout a psalm, and various mixtures appear.

B. Parallelism.- It was Robert Lowth who in 1753 first noted that the lines of Hebrew poetry, or the parts of a line, were closely related to one another, and he called this relationship “parallelism of verse - members”, of which he indicated three types: (a) Synonymous, in which the second stich or line repeats the thought of the first:

Hear this, all peoples!  
Give ear, all inhabitants of the world. (49:1)

1. Cf The Interpreter’s Bible Vol.4, p 3-4.

(b) Antithetic, in which the second stich presents some antithesis to the first:  
For the Lord knows the way of the righteous,  
but the way of the wicked will perish (1:6)

(c) Synthetic, in which the second stich supplements or completes the first:  
I cry aloud to the Lord,  
and he answers me from his holy hill (3:4)

(C) Stanzas.- There is some evidence that many of the Psalmists grouped their lines into what we may call “stanzas” or “strophes”, some of which are couplets, others are longer. In some cases stanzas are clearly indicated by the content of the poem, in others by the appearance of a refrain. There is, however, no convincing evidence that all psalmists employed stanzas, or that stanzas within a single poem were necessarily of equal length. Ps. 114 illustrates the use of couplets; Ps.107, stanzas of unequal length; and Ps. 42-43, a refrain (42:5, 11; 43:5)

(D) Acrostic Structure.- A number of psalms (ps. 9-10; 25; 34; 37; 111; 112; 119; 145) are based upon the acrostic principle, that is, each stich, line, or couplet commences with a fresh letter of the Hebrew alphabet. The most extreme example of this is Psalm 119. Such a method of composition was a literary fad, and it made for considerable artificiality in the psalmist’s achievement. <sup>1</sup>

A very specific frame of reference for the problems of existence is provided by the poet in the book of Ecclesiastes:

Everything has its appointed hour,  
there is a time for all things under heaven:  
a time for birth, a time for death,  
a time to plant and a time to uproot.  
a time to kill, a time to heal,  
a time to break down and a time to build  
a time to cry, a time to laugh,  
a time to mourn, a time to dance,  
a time to scatter and a time to gather,  
a time to embrace, a time to refrain,  
a time to seek, a time to lose,

1. Ibid Interpreters Bible Vol. 4 p11-12

a time to keep, a time to throw away,  
a time to tear, a time to sew,  
a time for silence and a time for speech,  
a time for war, a time for peace.

We can begin to trace definite patterns in the development of man's psychological insights and approach to human problems. They reveal an amazing degree of awareness of the inner relatedness of things, of the rhythm of life. Paul Tillich ties this in to the Christian Gospel: "You have read words of a man who lived 200 years before the birth of Jesus; a man nurtured in Jewish piety and educated in Greek wisdom; a child of his period - a period of catastrophes and despair... His description of the human situation is truer than any poetry glorifying man and his destiny... The very fact that this book is part of the Bible shows clearly that the Bible is a most realistic book. And it cannot be otherwise. For only on this background the message of Jesus as the Christ has meaning. Only if we accept an honest view of the human situation, of man's old reality, can we understand the message that in Christ a new reality has appeared. He who never has said about his life "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity", cannot honestly say with Paul, "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. There is a time, an appointed time for all things under heaven, says the preacher. The most extreme example of this is Psalm whole of human existence showing that everything has its time".<sup>1</sup> That the poet does 'embrace the whole of human existence' is one of the clearest reasons for the remarkable affinity of poetry and religion.

"We, who were prophets and priest-man  
For the kings to the east and the east-man,  
The bugles of God to the beast-man,  
- His terrible seal on our brow, -  
Physicians of music, and makers

1. Paul Tillich;  
The New Being, p 161-162  
Charles Scribner's Sons, 1955.

Of language and law, and the breakers  
Of battle, strength-lifters, heart-shakers'. -  
We are nice poets now!

So a modern American poet has described the towering figures of the old poet-prophets of Israel. And never was poetry put to grander uses than those to which they put it! Good literatures have a way of beginning with poetry, and Hebrew literature was no exception. The oldest books in the Bible are poetry - Amos, Hosea, Micah, Isaiah - the work of the prophets of the eighth century before Christ.<sup>2</sup> And we add who would have the temerity, or the imagination, to call the noble dignified prophets of God - "the bugles of God"! Yet their resounding bugle tones have sounded through the centuries, into the Christian Gospel, marching through the centuries in the hearts of God's people throughout the whole wide world.

I hate, I despise your feasts, and I take no delight  
in your solemn assemblies  
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings  
and cereal offerings,  
I will not accept them, and the peace offerings of  
your fatted beasts  
I will not look upon.  
Take away from me the noise of your songs; to  
the melody of your harps I will not listen.  
But let justice roll down like waters, and  
righteousness like an everflowing stream.

Amos 5:21-24 (RSV)

"With what shall I come before the  
Lord,  
and bow myself before God on high ?  
Shall I come before him with burnt offerings,  
with calves a year old ?  
Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams,  
with ten thousands of rivers of oil ?  
Shall I give my first-born for my transgression,  
the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul ?"  
He has showed you, O man, what is  
good;  
and what does the Lord require of

2. Ibid Goodspeed P.62

you  
But to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God ?

Micah 6: 6-10

The relevance of these poets to our day is seen in Peter L. Berger's book "The Noise of Solemn Assemblies"<sup>1</sup>, in which he points to the fact that organized religion may leave out the essence of a twentieth century response to God, who stands over against society in judgment. Berger considers in practical detail personal commitment, theological construction, and the relating of the Christian faith to the real problems of our world.

The Old Testament preserves two great dramatic poems—Job and the Song of Songs. Professor Terrien's introduction to it is a masterpiece:<sup>2</sup> "The literary mastery of poet is unsurpassed in the Old Testament, and his stylistic versatility, vigor, conciseness, and elegance are probably superior to those of any other Hebrew poet. Like the best wise men, he was able to fashion his thought and sharpen it into gnomic terseness (as in 6:14), to clinch an argument with a proverbial quotation (as in 6:6), to pack a rhetorical question with double entendre (as in 22:2, and to titillate the hearer's wit and imagination with enigmatic aphorisms (as in 17:5)... evoke a scene with the touch of the storyteller (as in 4:12-16)... His versatility of style was coupled and enhanced with an exquisite sense of the beauty of nature which furnished him at will with ready imagery. The theme of the failure of friendship, for example, led him to picture the swollen streams, overflowing with snow water in springtime, soon to vanish in torrid wastes (6:15ff.). Thus he could summon for the sake of heightening the effect or of coloring the debate, all sorts of visions and vignettes: the thunderstorms and the desert hurricanes (21:18; 27:21 ;

1. Peter L Berger, *The Noise of Solemn Assemblies*,  
Doubleday & Company, Inc 1961.



etc), the flash floods in mountain valleys (14:19); the hunger of the lioness and her whelps (4:10-11; cf. the five synonyms for the soaring of vultures (5:7) or the swooping of eagles (9:26), the shock of heavy grain at the threshing floor (5:26), the sands innumerable along the surf (6:3), the wild ass grazing against the distant sky (6:5), the papyrus growing in the marsh and the reed blooming in the canal (8:11), the constellations moving in the night, not only the Bear and Orion or the Pleiades, but even the Southern Cross (9:9), and the morning stars.

In lending words to his hero, he suggested the conflict of moods (as in 7:21); in ascribing utterances to the friends, he was fair toward ideas which he rejected, in daring to make audible "the voice from the whirlwind", he could transcend the human lack of perspective and borrow for a while the eternal glance. As a dramatic poet, he was the Shakespeare of the Old Testament; as a theological poet, he was brother of the Hebrew prophets".<sup>1</sup> Dr. Terrien's beautiful language makes the dry bones of the previous "guidelines" for reading poetry come alive. Dr Terrien sums up this poetry of pure religion: "The poet stands with the prophets and the psalmists at the core of Hebraic faith, and like some of them he goes beyond the limits of the Old Testament; for above the peculiarities of race, ritual, and law he knows and shows that the chief and highest end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. Indeed, the poet of Job conveys the poetry of pure religion because he understands, almost as well as Paul, that righteousness is not the work of man but the gift of God. The book of Job is not at the fringe of the Old Testament literature. Like the prophecy of Second Isaiah, it asks the most profound question of Hebraism and it lead directly to the New Testament."<sup>2</sup>

The limitations imposed by a short study of the nature of this paper are obvious and vexing. Even though one is actually unable to make an exhaustive

1. Ibid Interpreters Bible, Vol. 3, p 892-893

2. Ibid p 902

presentation, one regrets having to pass over such important books as Isaiah and the Song of Songs. One has to do this so there are of course these and other significant omissions. The strong links between the Old and New Testaments have been pointed out.

We find that the literary style of the New Testament is largely biographical, historical and epistolary. And there is little poetry scattered throughout it as in the Old Testament. We miss the lilt of poetical utterance though the words of Jesus often create poetical nuances: "When Jesus looked and saw the lilies of the field and said to those around him, "I say unto you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these", he gave the blossoms an eternal beauty; and when Shakespeare, looking at another flower in an English field, said, "Daffodils that come before the swallow dares, and take the winds of March with beauty", he gave the flowers a beauty and a courage unrecognized before...<sup>1</sup> Goodspeed points out the link between New Testament poetry and later Christian poetry: "In the New Testament only one writer ... a Greek, Luke, the first Christian historian. He has enriched the opening scenes of his first volume with a series of hymns composed very much in the Jewish style, but colored with the new Christian faith. We know them by their Latin names, the Magnificat, (Luke 1:46-55), the Benedictus, (1:68-79), the Gloria in Excelsis, (2:14), and the Nunc Dimittis, (2:29-32). To these should be added the Song of Elizabeth, (1:42-45). They constitute an indispensable link in the development of Jewish-Christian hymnology, which has formed an almost continuous movement over well-nigh three thousand years."<sup>2</sup>

"My heart extols the Lord,  
My spirit exults in God my savior.  
For he has noticed his slave in her humble station,  
For from this time all the ages will think me favored .....

1. Sean Casey "The Harp That Sings"  
New York Times Magazine, Jan 11, 1959.
2. Ibid Goodspeed, p 68

He has done mighty deeds with his arm,  
He has routed the proud-minded,  
He has dethroned monarchs and exalted the poor,  
He has satisfied the hungry with good things, and  
sent the rich away empty handed.  
He has helped his servant Israel,  
Remembering his mercy,  
As he promised our forefathers  
To have mercy on Abraham and on his descendants  
forever”.

(Luke 1:46-48, 51-55)

Christian hymnology has been enriched by contributions of Christians in many lands over the years. New productions are inspired by new concepts and conditions. A Japanese hymnal published in 1955 includes hymns from Latin, Greek, Italian, German, French, Danish, English, Chinese and Japanese sources. “The Hymnbook has a central place in the worship of the Church. The psalmist invites us to “sing to the Lord a new song”. St. Paul urges the church to praise God “in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs”. The Reformation began in a burst of congregational singing. In our worship the people have always taken an active and significant part, and a zeal for corporate worship has featured every period of renewal within Protestantism. Our hymnbook, therefore, bears testimony to our concern that worship should be first an act of prayer and praise to God, understood and entered into by the whole company of the faithful. This is especially true for those who stand within the Protestant tradition. By our hymns we mark the changing yet recurring accents of the Christian year; we balance and deepen our devotional life; we convey to the members of each congregation the meanings of the gospel and voice the corporate claims and loyalties of our faith. Each generation responds to the call of Christ in its own distinctive way. There is need for periodic revision of our hymnals, none of which contain, in any case, more than a fraction of the great store of texts and tunes available for congregational worship gathered over the centuries”.

1. Pilgrim Hymnal, The Pilgrim Press - Boston, 1964, Preface p.v.

There is of course a great store of orthodox poetry, "which gives lyric voice to the content of revelation or which dramatizes moments in the life of faith". The movement is not always positive for the spirit is free, and freedom means freedom to rebel. Upon the faith of the Old Testament is laid the Christian message: "If I were asked to sum up the Christian message for our time in two words, I would say with Paul: It is the message of the "New Creation"<sup>1</sup>.... If anyone is in union with Christ he is a new being; the old state of things has passed away; there is a new state of things". Christianity is the message of the New Creation, the New Being, the New Reality which has appeared with the appearance of Jesus who for this reason and just for this reason, is called the Christ. For the Christ, the Messiah, the selected and anointed one is He who brings the new state of things... We belong to the Old Creation, and the demand made upon us by Christianity is that we also participate in the New Creation". The poets' responses have been the outpourings of their prayer and praise, their estangement and contention, their meditations and spiritual journeys, of commitment, of their suffering, and of reconciliation. "In no poetry more than the religious did the English genius in the seventeenth century declare its power of reacting on the traditions and fashions which, in the Elizabethan age, had flowed in upon it from the Latin countries of Europe. There are individual poets who have risen to greater heights of religious and mystic feeling - some of the medieval hymn writers, Dante, perhaps John of the Cross - but no country or century has produced more devout poetry, resting on the fundamental religious experience of alienation from and reconciliation to God, complicate by ecclesiastical and individual varieties of temperament and interpretation, than the country and century of Giles Fletcher and John Donne, Herbert and Vaughn, and Traherne and Crashaw, of John Milton, to say nothing of regat poetpreachers like Donne and

1. O Cit. Tillich, p.15

Taylor, or the allegory of Bunyan and the musings O Sir Thomas Brown.”<sup>2</sup>

And the outpourings continue as man's search for truth continues each age pondering its own conceptions and struggling to free itself from what is now called "The Establishment". The preface to an anthology of modern religious poetry states: "Our purpose in assembling this anthology is to demonstrate what may be a surprise to many - that the mode and vocabulary of religious inquiry and expression have remained, even through our "scientific century"; a major concern among poets ... and for those who, perhaps like myself, have come to hold an atheistic position, who cannot reconcile the idea of God with his own experience and his own reading of history, who, for example, read the story of the fall from the Garden of Eden as a parable of man's infancy and the infancy of a civilization, still, a religious poem, seriously and perplexedly felt, remains a pertinent and moving description of mankind seeking its origin and destiny." (Robert Pack). The introduction (Tom Driver) "Our test put to the poems we would include has not been orthodoxy of any kind. It has merely been to find genuine poetry that points by positive or negative declarations, to the question of a reality transcending man and nature. On the one side of metaphor lies science. On the other side lies a mystery that we sense to be unfathomable. Here are the poems that move toward the boundaries of metaphor on the side of unfathomable mystery. So far the human spirit goes. Beyond, there is only the invocation and the unpredictable breath of the spirit."<sup>1</sup>

Professor Milward of Sophia University in Tokyo has written a book called "Christian Themes in English literature,"<sup>2</sup> which provides a very comprehensive survey of the matters with which this essay has been concerned. Masao Hirai in his introduction to the book has touched the note which should be applied to the read-

2; Herbert J. C. Grierson, *Metaphysical Lyrics and Poems of The Seventeenth Century*, Oxford University Press.

1. 6 erld Hear D - p. 291

2. Tomf. Driver & Robert Pack, *Poems of Doubt and Belief* - p.

ing of any religious poetry: ... this new book ... is challenging, in the sense that it urges us, at once bitterly and tenderly, to scrutinize our own attitude to the problems of art and of life.”<sup>3</sup>

From the standpoint of religion, there is even a more profound point of view: “We have seen from the story of mankind, as viewed from the standpoint of religion, from the point of view of coherence, that because conscience inevitably evolves, man is always being challenged to make a creative response on the three circuits of his experience. He must have his own interior peace of mind, be able to face himself, be able to handle himself, be able to be content with himself. But this is not possible unless he can recognize that self is his *societas*, the communion of all mankind. And having done that, he discovers that this being, on its outer frontier, spreads onward not only to embrace all life, but the universe in the act of creative orientation.” Tom F. Driver & Robert Pack, *Poems of Poetry, Criticism and the Christian Gospel*.

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