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Introduction

"Can Poetry Matter" [to Christian Theology]?

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Poetry as Christian Theology and Witness?

An essay written in 1991 for *The Atlantic Monthly*[1] by the poet and literary critic Dana Gioia generated thunderous reaction, sending rumbles through the offices of academics and public intellectuals alike. Gioia's theme was as straightforward as it was provocative. He asked, simply: "Can Poetry Matter?" Inquiring after the decline in poetry's "cultural importance" Gioia laid down a gauntlet of sorts, one charged with implications not only for the status of poetry in contemporary Anglo-American society at large, but for a diverse range of more specified intellectual enterprises as well. It is not the aim of my book to explore his concern in all of its facets, nor to defend in a broad sense the importance of poetry to culture, but to take up Gioia's challenge and apply it to one area of inquiry in particular. The question I want to raise is: *Can poetry matter to Christian theology?*

For generations Christian thinkers, including Christian poets, have thoughtfully engaged the question of poetry's contribution to human thought and culture, often with both implicit and explicit religious overtures. One of Britain's most intellectual poets, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, once claimed, "No man was ever yet a great poet, without being at the same time a profound philosopher. For poetry is the blossom and the fragrancy of all human knowledge, human thoughts, human passions,

1. Reprinted in Gioia, *Can Poetry Matter?*

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emotions, language."[2] The genius of the poet, he adds—like all human genius—displays a "*mind that feels the riddle of the world, and may help to unravel it.*"[3] This is high praise for poets and their art, suggesting an expansive scope of qualities including the role of the poet as one of the world's most sensitive interpreters. Coleridge's estimation echoes that of his predecessor William Blake, who advanced the even more forceful claim, "If it were not for the poetic or Prophetic character the Philosophic and Experimental would soon be at the ratio of all things, and stand still, unable to do other than repeat the same dull round over again."[4]

Some may regard such sweeping acclamation as anachronistic, the bygone naïveté of Romantic exuberance. But poets in more recent times have voiced similar enthusiasm for the potency of poetry, and some have done so with equally trenchant metaphysical or spiritual implications. In his 1950 essay "What Dante Means to Me," for example, T. S. Eliot asserts: "the great poet should not only perceive and distinguish more clearly than other men, the colours or sounds within the range of ordinary vision or hearing; he should perceive vibrations beyond the range of ordinary men, and be able to make men see more at each end than they could ever see without his help."[5] The great poets, and any who would seek to emulate them, adds Eliot, share

> the obligation to explore, to find words for the inarticulate, to capture those feelings which people can hardly even feel, because they have no words for them; . . . .
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> . . . The task of the poet, in making people comprehend the incomprehensible, demands immense resources of language; and in developing the language, enriching the meaning of words and showing how much words can do, he is making possible a much greater range of emotion and perception for other men, because he gives them the speech in which more can be expressed.[6]

The poet as interpreter and articulator of the extraordinary as well as the ordinary; the poet as explorer, as philosopher and visionary, as an

2. Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, 532.
3. Ibid., 475; my italics.
4. Blake, *Complete Writings*, 97.
5. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic,* 134.
6. Ibid.

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"enricher" of speech as well as its special servant—without doubt, in the estimation of these poets poetry mattered a great deal; but in what sense for Christian theology? Their accolades clearly register a spiritual or religious temperament regarding the significance of poetry. Furthermore, in regard to the witness of Christians, who among them would not similarly aspire "to make men see more" and "comprehend the incomprehensible," or to "make possible a much greater range of emotion and perception for others"? R. S. Thomas once proposed a more explicit connection in this regard. In his essay "A Frame for Poetry" he states: "it is within the scope of poetry to express or convey religious truth, and to do so in a more intense and memorable way than any other literary form is able to. Religion has first of all to do with vision and revelation, and these are best told of in poetry."[7]

Space does not permit us to weigh the merits of all these claims. But I seize upon one set of attributes that Eliot ascribes to poets and the yield of their art as a standard for my own convictions about why, and how, poetry matters to Christian theology. In sum, poets (most especially "great" poets) are masters of speech, with a distinct capacity, as Eliot puts it, for "developing the language, enriching the meaning of words and showing how much words can do." By virtue of this proficiency, I would argue, they offer a model to the witnessing Church. Poetry matters to Christian theology, in other words, because it presents the Church with gifts of speech that intersect vitally with its most prominent public task: the holding forth of the gospel in ways that enable others to perceive its meaning (the "extraordinary" within the "range of the ordinary"). For reasons I will introduce here, then seek to demonstrate in our studies of three long poems by Charles Williams, Micheal O'Siadhail, and Geoffrey Hill, the poet's gift of speech emerges as a cardinal attribute that commends its appropriation within Christian theology.

Making a case for such assertions proves far from straightforward, however. To say that poetry manifests a form of Christian theology and provides a vital resource for Christian witness raises questions not only about poetry but about the tasks of theology as well. Theologians, for example, may find little difficulty with esteeming poetry as a resource of *some* kind, certainly as it pertains to various forms of Christian practice or manner of expression. And yet, to up the stakes a further notch,

7. Thomas, *Selected Prose*, 69.

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the question may be asked: Are poetry and poetic studies even subjects proper to Christian theology? Theological inquiry at its best is expressly an intellectually rigorous enterprise, and often a highly technical one at that. How, then, do products of the creative imagination such as poems figure as resources within the characteristically "rational" discourses of theological investigation? Hence, the question also arises not only whether or how but *where* specifically within the disciplines of academic theology, and by extension the Church, poetry proves valuable as a resource.

In contending that poetry and its study have an integral place *within* the broader curricula of theology, readers may note that I already have injected one significant delimitation that further exacerbates the concern some academic theologians may feel at this point. Specifically, my focus rests on the contribution of *poems* to Christian reflection and practice, and not, for example, "poetics" as a theoretical category. This distinction prompts us to consider and address a range of attitudes, and to anticipate a possible objection. On the one hand, most Christian thinkers and scholars would readily acknowledge that poetry has always held a place in Christian experience and practice. The prevalence of poems and poetic forms in Scripture, liturgy and Christian worship, along with the millennia-long tradition of Christian poetry and hymnody, irrefutably establish poetry's contribution to Christianity's public expression. Why, we may therefore wonder, is it even necessary to argue for the inclusion of poetry in Christian theology, given this legacy?

In response, I would point out that, on the other hand, the assumption that poems represent a focus of study suitable to the rigors of "serious" theological inquiry faces certain longstanding biases about what constitutes genuinely intellectual theology. Certainly it is evident that the study of verse and verse forms proves to be an important factor in biblical exegesis or an element in the study of the tradition. But more generally, some may argue: Is it not the case that poetry's contribution (even in its biblical forms) lies in its ability to *enhance* theological ideas, propositions and arguments, as a sort of aesthetic punctuation point helpful for generating authentic religious emotions about the subject being presented or discussed? This being the case, the argument may continue, we should not confuse an emotive form of expression with the more serious intellectual content that such an expression merely embellishes. To address a view of this kind I offer two further

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clarifications and a challenge, as preliminary points for the larger aims of my book.

First, we note that despite the growing interest in literary studies as a focus for theological inquiry, a "cognitive" bias with regard to poetic verse continues to pervade the attitudes of theological scholarship.[8] We see this most evidently in the relative absence of poetic studies in current theological curricula, as one important tool for the development of well-equipped theological minds.[9] To be sure, in recent decades a plethora of projects spanning nearly all the disciplines of academic theology and religious studies have highlighted the value of at least "the poetic" as a theoretical category significant for Christian theology.[10] Only rarely, however (with the notable exception of scholarship in the area of biblical poetics) have these investigations included an extensive, formal study of poems. In making such an observation I do not intend to diminish the value of these appropriations of poetic theory for the purposes of Christian reflection; but it does recognize a gap. The question of how *poetry* matters to Christian theology asks, among other things, what poems *do* that proves significant or valuable. To pose such a question does not declare a preference for the practical over the theoretical. Rather, it trades one set of theoretical concerns for another. Accordingly, my project regards not how *poetics* represents a helpful category for Christian theology, but how an analysis of poetic *performance*—not, strictly, that of the poets but of their *poems*—comprises a further application of a theoretical as well as a practical interest in poetic studies on the part of theological thinkers.[11]

In this vein, secondly, the question of what poems do also invokes a methodological consideration central to the ambition of my study, and which is integral to the *gap* my book aims to fill. Put simply, when

8. Obviously, this kind of bias does not reflect an attitude towards poetry (as well as other literary genres and artistic media) exclusive to academic theologians. For similar critiques in the areas of philosophy and ethics see, e.g., Cavell, *Disowning Knowledge*; and Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge*.

9. There are notable exceptions to this situation. My own alma mater Yale Divinity School, e.g., offers a Master's concentration track in religion and the arts, which includes literature.

10. I have included a number of these works in the bibliography.

11. For an insightful discussion of poetry's, and language's, performative properties as a theological response to the epistemological challenges advanced by contemporary literary critics, see Dawson, *Literary Theory*.

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we pursue the possibility that poems make a substantial contribution to theological reflection and articulation, then only by a protracted study of their form and style can we discover what specifically that contribution includes. In short, such an undertaking calls for the *close reading* of poems. In the area of biblical studies, Robert Alter has made these points the premise of his analysis of the Bible's poetry. As he summarizes his objective in the concluding chapter of his book *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, worth quoting at length:

> The aim of my own inquiry has been not only to attempt to get a firmer grasp of biblical poetics but also to suggest an order of essential connection between poetic form and meaning that for the most part has been neglected by scholarship. . . . [P]oetry is quintessentially the mode of expression in which the surface is the depth, so that through careful scrutiny of the configurations of the surface—the articulation of the line, the movement from line to poem, the imagery, the arabesques of syntax and grammar, the design of the poem as a whole—we come to apprehend more fully the depth of the poem's meaning.
>
> The choice of the poetic medium for the Job poet, or for Isaiah, or for the psalmist, was not merely a matter of giving weight and verbal dignity to a preconceived message but of uncovering or discovering meanings through the resources of poetry. In manifold ways . . . poetry is a special way of imagining the world or, to put this in more cognitive terms, a special mode of thinking with its own momentum and its own peculiar advantages.[12]

He then adds, with an eye to the extra-biblical poetic tradition in the West, that like that poetry the Bible too "uses poetry to *realize meanings*," yielding the recognition that "the spiritual, intellectual, and emotional values of the Bible that continue to concern us so urgently are *inseparable from the form they are given in the poems*."[13]

The direction Alter takes in his study—beginning with the form of a poem and then proceeding to "uncover" or "discover" in it the meanings that *emerge* from these poetic surfaces—represents the method by which I will proceed in the study of our three twentieth-century "Christian" poems. In this respect, one may regard my project as a demonstration in pursuit of a method. In other words, I seek first to demonstrate what

12. Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 205.

13. Ibid.; my italics.

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poets do in their poetry (as well to elucidate what these poets think about poetry) in order to show how poetic creativity manifests a significant way of *doing* theology. In the process—and this is both the challenge I have engaged and a challenge my project returns to others—I will show further how Christian theology properly conducts an investigation into the contribution of poetry with regard to theology's native interests; that is, by reading poems. Accordingly, this procedure will also indicate the set of skills needed: skills which include sensitivity to features of the poetic medium (such as Alter outlines above), the ability to perceive and formulate connections between poetic form and theological meaning, and then to apply the results of such studies to particular contemporary theological priorities. By virtue of this approach we understand that poetry's contribution to serious theological inquiry comprises an *emergent property*. Whether or not poetry and poetic studies represent a properly intellectual focus of investigation for serious theology is a matter that cannot be adequately engaged or decided without first doing the work of seeing, through close inspection, how such an intellectual yield in fact emerges in poems themselves. This is one burden of my book, and its outcome will be one of the fruits of my focus on poetic form.

At the same time, to return to the issue of where to locate poetry and its study within Christian theology, questions about the task of theology lead us to ask: Which theological interests and tasks in particular does the study of poetic verse especially enable? More is at stake than claiming for poetry or for its study an intellectual stature. Our answer to the question, "Can poetry matter for Christian theology?" must also demonstrate that poetry contributes to what *matters* to the Christian Church in this age.

However Christian theologians may debate the definition or scope of their task, few (if any) would resist the contention that theology is by nature a *responsive* as well as a descriptive and declarative discipline. This recognition also bears with it the understanding that theology is by necessity an *integrative* discipline. Both features prove critical to theology's tasks whether in response to its own texts and traditions, or to the culture(s) in which theologians live. The constant flux of issues that confront the Church in any age or culture demands flexibility on the part of its interpreters when formulating adequate responses to the emergent needs of believers as well as their unbelieving neighbors. Together with the effort to make provision for these ever-shifting con-

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ditions, theologians have also to incorporate a variety of creative forms and diverse resources into their respective projects.[14] Nowhere has this need appeared with such urgency than in that area highlighted above: the Church's public witness.

In addition to the abiding concern to articulate the substance of the faith in its biblical and historical aspects, Christian thought has always sought to give an account for its claims within and with respect to its cultural setting. Paul's injunction "But we persuade men" summarizes the ambition of the witnessing Church for all ages and in all cultural situations, as does the exhortation from I Peter 3:15 to "always be prepared to give an account/defense for the hope that is within you." With either declaration, the "equipping of the saints" as well as the disposition and needs of the uncommitted are brought to the fore. Suffice it to say, theological inquiry involves responsive, and responsible, service to both audiences. Furthermore, because Christianity has shown itself to be an eminently translatable faith, able to adjust to all variety of cultural situations without loss to its essential message, the question for a responsive theology becomes: What are the particular needs of the witnessing Church and its audience in this age and culture, and how might Christians effectively engage people in light of these conditions?[15]

That this is a question proper to theology seems indubitable. As Rowan Williams has asserted about theology's "communicative" task,

> Theology seeks also to persuade or commend, to witness to the gospel's capacity for being at home in more than one cultural environment. . . .
>
> The Christian movement . . . is a *missionary* movement: that is, it works on the assumption that it has something to say that is communicable beyond its present boundaries and is humanly attractive or compelling across these boundaries. It assumes that it has the capacity and the obligation to seek to persuade

14. It is on the basis of this sense of the theologian's vocation that David Tracy issues his plea for "the necessity for interdisciplinary methods in theology"; *Analogical Imagination,* 448.

15. I here restrict the scope of my own concern to the conditions obtaining for the contemporary "Western" Church in "North Atlantic" societies (as Rowan Williams labels them), although any culture manifesting those same conditions falls within this purview.

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> persons from all imaginable human backgrounds that it is decisively relevant to their humanity. . . .[16]

To extend Williams' account to my own focus specifically, we may then ask: How can poetry enable the Church to address and attract people "across the boundaries" in order to persuade people about the decisive relevance of the Christian gospel? My initial answer, already given, regards poetry's "gift of speech"—its development of language that enriches the meaning of words, as T. S. Eliot contended. Some refinement of that assertion is in order. Naturally, the answer we formulate to this question depends upon which boundaries exist and which conditions we identify as particular challenges to Christian witness today. Accordingly, within those societies we designate as "modern" or "late-modern," we may ask further: How do the attitudes, sensibilities and needs of people whom we characterize in these terms present a challenge to Christian persuasion, which the formal study of poetry distinctly enables Christian witnesses to address? The combination of these three elements—that of Christian witness and the equipping role of theology in its communicative task, the conditions of late-modernity which give direction and particular urgency to this task, and the potential of poetry to effect a boundary crossing by virtue of its formal performance—represents the nexus of my methodological approach to poetic studies. It is in this sense that I advocate the study of poetry as a mode of theological inquiry, and commend poetry (at least the poetry I examine here) as a manifestation of a robust public theological witness.

Having framed my discussion within theology in these terms, what remains to be examined by way of introductory remarks involves further clarification of those cultural conditions which require the kind of theological *redress* that poetry affords. In the final section, I will then indicate the contribution of the poets and poetry I have selected, and describe how I intend to proceed through my study of this primary material in reading poetry as a mode of theological discourse specially suited to the needs of the witnessing Church.

16. Williams, *On Christian Theology*, xiv, 230.

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