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The Difficult Resolution

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IN *The Critical Quarterly* of Spring 1972, C. B. Cox, who with his co-editor A. E. Dyson has for some time been sounding a Christian alert about the direction and pre-suppositions of much contemporary literary activity, defined the terms in which he saw the struggle. He said that like Lionel Trilling in *Beyond Culture* he saw 'literary situations as cultural situations and cultural situations as great elaborate fights about moral issues'. In their very different ways the three authors of the books reviewed here* are writing from the same pre-supposition. Each of them is concerned with some aspect of the relationship between literature and not just religion, but the Christian religion. And each of them at some point sees the free choice of the individual will, to accept or reject the revelation of God's law for man, as the essential issue which the Christian faith defines and literature in its manifold ways explores.

The individual approaches of the three writers are completely distinctive, and indeed their purposes by definition are complementary rather than co-incidental. They must be seen, I think, against the increasing volume of writing which is fruitfully exploring the ground between serious creative writing and the insights of theology. Writers like Amos Wilder, Giles B. Gunn and Nathan Scott in America, and Martin Jarrett-Kerr, George Every, W. M. Merchant and David Anderson in England have already in the last few years done much to show the enrichment of insights possible, and also the dangers inherent, in a theological approach to literature or a literary approach to theology. The Bishop of Liverpool, the Right Reverend Stuart Blanch, makes clear in his introduction to *The World our Orphanage* the two main differences of approach. Acknowledging his debt to David Anderson,

**Shakespeare's God*. Ivor Morris. George Allen & Unwin. 1972. 496 pp. £7.75. *Religion and Literature*. Helen Gardner. Faber and Faber. 1971. 195 pp. £2.00. *The World our Orphanage*. Stuart Y. Blanch. Epworth. 1972. 134 pp. £1.00.

he points out that the latter's purpose 'was to expose the theological implications of the novels to which he addressed himself'. The Bishop's own purpose, by contrast, is a more specifically pastoral one, in that he has used 'the modern novel as a starting point for the investigation of the Bible itself'. His central concern is not the books about which he is writing, but the issues which they illuminate: 'I am writing about myself and about the society to which I belong and the people I mix with and the Church I serve.' He is doing so because in the light contemporary literature throws on today's man in today's situation he believes the immediacy and relevance of the Bible will be seen, and further, that God's dealings with man, which are the subject of the Bible, will be revealed in their vitality and grace. 'My purpose will have been achieved if I shall have provoked you to become a student of this remarkable book (the Bible) and an adherent of Him who is the subject of it.'

Unless one respects the Bishop's purposes his references to the contemporary literature he uses will therefore seem slight, partial, and summary. But within the terms he defines, his exposition of the books to which he refers is perfectly fair, and in places very illuminating. He is in no sense attempting literary criticism, but he is acknowledging one of the functions of literature which is amongst many other things expressive, even diagnostic. So he focusses upon one aspect after another of our shared contemporary life, the state, the individual, politics and so on, and sees them, as he makes clear by the end of Chapter II, in the context of the Word of God, that revelation which was God's gift to the Jewish people, which in Genesis is seen as the origin of all creation, which is at the centre of the cult in the two tablets of stone expressing the Law, and which in the New Testament is, in the fullness of time, expressed in the Incarnation. I liked very much the freshness of his exposition of this and the fruitful analogies he drew between, for instance, the attack of the prophets on Hebraic cultic practices and our anti-institutionalism of today. His insights are both subtle and commanding in such cases. He notes, for instance, the difference between attacking 'the institution' (which the prophets were not, and on the whole are not) and attacking 'the establishment'—which one would see as almost the definitive exercise of the prophet. The Bishop adds a delightful embryonic *Devil's Dictionary* definition of 'the establishment', 'a power structure to which I do not belong and of which I disapprove', and then goes to the root of the matter: 'As I am writing in the context of Holy Scripture I would say that I mean by "establishment" that subtle alliance between temporal and spiritual power, sometimes overt, sometimes unseen, which manipulates human society with a view to its own survival.'

The latter phrase points up the theme of the entire book and in particular that of the chapter I personally found most moving and searching, *The Spire and the Cross*. What the Bishop has done here is

to bring home afresh the grace of God's Law for man and the way of service and obedience that this involves for the Church and for the individuals who are incorporate within it. 'The Church remains what it has always been from the beginning of humanity—God's agent in the fulfilment of God's purpose for humanity. But the means? It is a painful thought only slowly and reluctantly admitted to our consciousness, that God's triumph lies the other side of the Church's humiliation. "He shall see of the travail of his soul and be satisfied," but it is the satisfaction not of him that exercises imperium, but of him who endures dereliction. Not a spire but a cross.'

This acceptance of obedience, this choice by the human will in accepting the service of God, is seen in the context, as I have said, of revelation. The same emphasis on moral choice in the context of revelation appears in what is otherwise a totally different book, Ivor Morris's major work on the role of religion in Shakespeare's tragedies, *Shakespeare's God*. This is a scholarly work of immense scope, as by its terms it has to be. It examines the nature of tragic 'truth'—in what terms it can be defined: the nature of dramatic art, particularly as practised by Shakespeare; and the theology of human tragedy, if I may so term it. By this I mean the theological structures of the Christian creed and the state of modern man within that framework. Bringing these together finally he examines the four major tragedies in the light of the insights he has expounded, and suggests an evaluation of the role of each of the central figures of the book rooted firmly in the Christian understanding of the unchanging Providence which forces men to their choice.

'The essence of tragedy,' Ivor Morris writes in Chapter 12 'is a choice seriously made in certain given circumstances which must inevitably result in suffering and defeat.' He is defining the tragedy of man, at this point, in the theological context expounded by St. Augustine (De Trinitate X.v.7.): that the 'exercising of any will to transience or to creaturely excellence in any form in the realm of the temporal which is not dedicated and bound to the service of God beyond any concern for the self is the very definition of the greatest of the sins. It is also the most characteristic human will and activity'.

It follows, since his concentration is on four major Shakespearean tragedies in the light of this, that his book is primarily directed at the academic world and secondly that he is attempting the immensely difficult task of giving equal weight to the theological illumination and the literary evaluation possible in such an exercise. The range of his references is very wide indeed, though he has on the whole concentrated on the Early Fathers and the Reformers for his statements of Christian doctrine, and the twentieth century theological battles are mainly (rightly I think) ignored. He is concerned more with as precise a statement as possible of God's words to man than with questioning their punctuation. But this leads us to several interesting aspects of

his general thesis which we might note in passing. One is that he pin-points (in Chapter 4) the difficulties inherent in putting together the conceptual thinking inherent in theology, and the poetic activity, which is of a different order. He quotes L. C. Knights who focussed the peril that arises for criticism if 'you invoke a conceptual framework which you proceed to show the plays as illustrating'.

This is a permanent danger for Christian critics and has been explored very thoroughly by the writers I mentioned at the beginning of this review. Niebuhr's discussion, as quoted by Ivor Morris, was particularly helpful in this area, as bringing together the various forms of 'revelation' within that framework of time and space which definably they must have for mankind:

'The artistic perception can therefore be equated with the Christian consciousness in that, as Reinhold Niebuhr puts it, time and what is contained in time is real only as it gives expression to principles and powers which lie outside it.' 'Yet every suggestion of the principle of a process must be expressed in terms of the temporal process, and every idea of the God who is found of the world must be expressed in some term taken from the world.'

This leads Morris, valuably, to see 'revelation' as paradoxically within the mundane as far as tragedy is concerned. He roots this in Calvin's comment that 'the ungodly', having alienated themselves 'from God and his household, do not understand that they are still within the reach of God's hand'. Hence his argument that 'tragedy's religious import might lie in its very subjection to the mundane, rather than "piecing out" its view of man's world with "perceptions belonging to revelation".'

It is impossible to do justice to the breadth of this study in one brief review, but it will be apparent from the foregoing that the range and depth of theological insight in which *Macbeth*, *Lear*, *Hamlet* and *Othello* are then assessed is very considerable. In his study of the revealed nature of God and man's role in relation to him, his emphasis is on the fact that 'righteous no man may be—but God is faithful'. Hence the coherence of great tragedy. In Chapter eight he summarises the scope and possibilities of the human will (that which exercises the 'choice seriously made' which defines tragedy, as above). There are three major facts, he says, about it in Christian thinking. 'The first is an inevitable and ineradicable tendency of men to sin despite their own will. The second is the *supreme importance of human decision* (my italics) and the consequent need to preserve the idea of the validity and capacity of the functioning will. The third is the subjection of the human will in its sinning and its choosing . . . to the omnipotent will and purpose of God.'

It is against this background that Morris makes his assessment of the Shakespearean plays, and in his respect for what the plays themselves state through their own inherent dramatic structure and form I would

say he is true to the conclusion he finally draws about the proper role of a Christian critic: 'A theological assessment of tragedy . . . will be valid if its perceptions and judgments appear more incisive, profound and just, in their application both to the drama's detailed unfolding and to the wider significance which it evokes, than those attainable by a secular criticism.' It is this which he has achieved, and the book as a result is one to return to continually for new enrichments.

In emphasising the paradox of the free activity of the human will in its subjection to the omnipotent will and purpose of God, Ivor Morris is expressing a theme which runs throughout the third of these books, Helen Gardner's *Religion and Literature*. This book falls into two sections, one, on *Religion and Tragedy*, being the T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures given in 1968, and the other, *Religious Poetry*, linking with it but in fact predating the first section, the Ewing Lectures of 1966. In this latter section Dr. Gardner attempts a definition of religious poetry in preparation for the anthology of religious verse she has in fact just published, and she differs from most of her predecessors as anthologists of religious verse in the definition she makes. After describing—and noting the difficulties of—the concepts of religious poetry used by T. S. Eliot, Lord David Cecil, R. S. Thomas, and Nicholson and Lee, she finally ventures her own:

'To define religious poetry as poetry that treats of revelation and man's response to revelation does not equate religious poetry with Christian poetry; but the great majority of English religious poems on this definition will be found to be Christian poems in this sense.' Having sounded the note of *revelation* as that which is definitive in religious experience, she then points to the paradox we have just seen explored: 'Since "No" is a response as well as "Yes", we can include as religious poems some poems in which the response is rejection of the Christian revelation and doubt of its truth.'

Dr. Gardner's style is, as always, marvellously lucid, and her exposition of various poems in this second section of the book, on the basis of these two definitions, is both searching and creative. Perhaps even more powerful, however, is her analysis in the first section of the book. Here she is dealing with the same breadth of question as Ivor Morris, and after looking at various concepts of tragedy she concludes with—inevitably and properly—a paradox. Tragedy is revelation in that 'there is a general consensus that tragedy presents an image of life that enables us to see into the truth of things'. 'Tragedy is synthesising, in that all tragic theories that are tolerable 'discern in tragic art, or in the "tragic vision", the co-existence of contraries, a union of opposites, whether in the emotions aroused or in the concepts embodied'. And finally she gives her own formula, in the light of which she explores tragedy in the ancient world, Shakespearean tragedy, and the concept of the tragic today. It is this formula which seems to me to focus the work of all three of these writers and put them in the front line of that

situation which Cox was talking about in *The Critical Quarterly*: “‘cultural situations” which are great elaborate fights about moral issues’. For Dr. Gardner reminds us of Beethoven’s words scrawled over the opening bars of the last movement of his last quartet: ‘Muss es sein?’ ‘Es muss sein.’ Must it be? It must be. The affirmation, Dr. Gardner points out, is in the same words as the question: protest and acceptance, the struggling against and the affirmation are ‘like expressions on the same face’. They are indeed expressions on the same face; it is a human face and it is looking at God. ‘Some,’ she says, ‘find the essence of tragedy in the power with which the question finds out’; others find it in the difficulty of the final resolution.

For above the whole last movement of that last quartet Beethoven wrote ‘Der schwer gefasste Entschluss’: ‘The Difficult Resolution.’ It is that ‘difficult resolution’ which makes the work of writers like these three of such tremendous importance today in the ‘great elaborate fight’ which is our cultural situation.