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Language-Event as Promise: Reflections on Theology and Literature

There can be little doubt that the field of theology and literature has become a kind of latter-day Babel. The academic discipline developed as a reaction against what seemed to be the excessively purist approach to criticism of the formalist critics, concerned with form more than, if not rather than, content in literature. The New Critics themselves owed their beginnings to the dialectical processes of academe, reacting as they did against the uses of literature in historical, psychological, and sociological criticism. If any entente has been achieved recently between the warring factions of literary and theological critics, it has been around the growing acceptance of the fact that theological criticism of literature must respect the autonomy of literature – that the latter is governed by its own laws and cannot be subjected to alien critical norms. The growing consensus, born of a reasonable dialogue beween critics and theologians, is that literature must be taken on its own terms, that its success or failure must be judged according to its own laws of inner consistency and coherence, that literature cannot be treated simply as evidence of a prevailing theological climate or as an exhibit in the history of theological development.

The most interesting recent developments in the search for a common ground between literature and theology have undoubtedly been in the area of philosophy of language, since language is obviously common to both literature and theology. Indeed, in the opinion of Gerhard Ebeling, developments in the theory of language are laying the foundation for dialogue among the humanities, epistemology, ontology, and theology.[1] My concern here, therefore, in exploring the possibilities of a more peaceful union between theology and literature, will be to analyze the nature of language in relation to man and reality, thus opening the way for a discussion of the interpretative function of language in theology and literature. This will lead us logically into an analysis of the role of the critic in the light of the primary hermeneutical function of the literary text.

In much of what follows concerning the relation of language to existence, it will be clear that I am greatly indebted to the illuminating hermeneutical studies of Gerhard Ebeling and Ernst Fuchs. It should be noted that 'language' in this context does not necessarily imply simply the spoken or written word. Language includes all that Martin Heidegger calls 'primordial discourse' – talk, gesture, deed, and even silence.

Reality is present to us in language; the world in which we live is largely inherited through the language tradition that is passed on to us. And the language tradition which we inherit includes self-understanding, because the

1. Cf. Gerhard Ebeling, *Word and Faith* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 317.

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world embraces self. This self-understanding, however, transmitted by language, is constantly thrown into question by our own fresh experience of reality. New experience may or may not involve a shift in self-understanding; when it does, there arises a major crisis of language, because the new self-understanding constitutes a break with the inherited common understanding which was the basis of dialogue. Ebeling writes: 'The fact of reality's confronting me and the manner in which it does so are conditioned by the language spoken to me. And again, the understanding of language spoken to me, together with my own ways of using language, are conditioned by the way in which reality confronts me and the manner in which I let myself be confronted by it.'[2]

The crisis caused by the breakdown of common understanding will be painfully obvious to anyone who is familiar with recent theological development within the Roman Catholic Church. The language tradition which had survived since the Council of Trent and through which the reality of the sacramental life of the church was transmitted to the young was one which presented the sacraments as causes of grace (understood as a physical reality infused into the soul) and men as primarily passive recipients of that grace. A fresh confrontation with the personal dimension of worship produced a language of encounter, which resulted in a radically new understanding of the sacraments and of man's active, personal participation in ritual. A dialogical crisis of major proportions has ensued; the old language no longer speaks reality to the young. We can readily see, therefore, how we fall prey to a language tradition, unless we investigate the history of that tradition or dispose ourselves to reality in a new way; both investigation and disposition have played an important part in the development of the new tradition in sacramental theology.

Where there is shared understanding, however, we experience language as event: the power of speech to create unity. For through language we expose our mental images to agreement or contradiction by others. Language-event can consist either in imparting information or in sharing. When information is imparted, man experiences a thing and he is cast in the role of observer. When there is sharing, man experiences a personal benefit; something happens to him because he has shared an encounter. Only in this latter sense of sharing can language-event truly be considered communication. 'Word is therefore rightly understood,' says Ebeling, 'when it is viewed as an event which – like love – involves at least two. The basic structure of word is therefore not statement – that is an abstract variety of the word-event – but apprisal, certainly not in the colorless sense of information, but in the pregnant sense of participation and communication.'[3]

In the strict sense of the Hebrew *dabar* (word), language is also 'happening word.' It is not enough, Ebeling insists, 'to inquire into [language's] intrinsic meaning, but that must be joined up with the question of its future,

2. *Ibid.*, p. 248.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 326.

of what it effects.'[4] Language as event, therefore, is both meaning and power – meaning because it implies a shared understanding, and power because it effects a response from man, it sets him in motion, it discloses a future. Thus, man exists linguistically between call and response. The word is spoken to him; it not only urges a response, it actually gives the power to respond. And the word that is spoken is, according to Ernst Fuchs, an announcement of time. For 'what is distinctive about language is not the content of the individual words, not the thought or the designation, but rather its use, its application, its concentration upon the time and thus upon the distinction of times.'[5] What language announces is 'what it is time for.'[6]

As communication, language is also promise. It is most surely promise when it announces what has not yet come to be, in such a way that the future possibility is present in hope as realizable. And so in language the speaker pledges and imparts himself to the other, and opens a future to him by awakening a genuine hope within him.

Now this kind of analysis of language as event has undoubtedly influenced recent Roman Catholic theology. The primordial language of the sacraments, word and action, is salvation-event for man because it constitutes man's encounter with God. The sacraments are meaning, power, and promise. But the saving event of grace, mediated through the primordial language of the sacraments, is certainly not limited to the sacraments alone. For, as a result of the incarnation, God's grace is mediated to men by men. God, by limiting himself in the incarnation, announced his need for men to continue the work of redemption. Grace now is incarnate among men in a radical way; and wherever reality is opened up to men through word and gesture, there indeed is grace-event.

So also, for the believer, the word of God is authentic language, which both announces what it is time for and gives the power to respond. It is important to note here that God's word announces time and power, not because it is God's, but because it is word. The incontestable authenticity of that word and the efficacy of its power, however, are dependent upon God's presence in the word. It brings a new language tradition into existence, out of which man can live. If language is gift that gives birth to man's self-understanding, God's word is gift that gives birth to the self-understanding of faith.

The traditional approach to God's word has been that, owing to its opaqueness, it requires interpretation – an approach based originally, no doubt, on the assumption that verbal statements pose the problem of understanding. Within the Protestant churches, the science of hermeneutics – the interpretation of Scripture – became extremely important because of the Reformers'

4. *Ibid.*

5. Ernst Fuchs, 'The New Testament and the Hermeneutical Problem,' in James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., eds., *The New Hermeneutic* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 125.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 126.

doctrine of *sola scriptura* as the basis of faith. The doctrine of tradition was Catholicism's answer to the hermeneutical problem; revelation received from God in the Scriptures could be interpreted authentically only by the living teaching authority of the church.

Ebeling insists, and rightly so, that the assumption concerning the need for interpreting God's word was a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of language.

> The primary phenomenon in the realm of understanding is not understanding *of* language, but understanding *through* language. The word is not really the object of understanding, and thus the thing that poses the problem of understanding, the solution of which requires exposition and therefore also hermeneutics as the theory of understanding. Rather, the word is what opens up and mediates understanding, i.e., brings something to understanding. *The word itself has a hermeneutic function.* If the word-event takes place normally, i.e., according to its appointed purpose, then there is no need of any aid to understanding, but it is itself an aid to understanding.[7]

Interpretation is required, therefore, *only* where language-event is impeded for some reason or other. The function of hermeneutics is to make room for the word's own hermeneutic function; it serves the word's intelligibility. The text wants to speak to man because it is language. This is its proper vocation. And if, in the final analysis, man is to be interpreted by the text – the possibilities of his situation to be illumined by it – it is the task of the interpreter to place the text where it speaks to man. Its proper place is where it becomes language-event for him, where understanding is shared and unity effected. Thus the interpreter's role is clearly ancillary to the text, for the language of the text has priority over the thought of the interpreter.

Now one may readily grant the need for interpreting God's word in order for it to become event for us, because of the philological and historical problems which obviously impede its hermeneutical function, and yet question the necessity of interpretation where the human language of literature is concerned. The language of literature is, in a very special sense, authentic language – 'the voice of being naming itself through the mouth of the poet.'[8] In fact, according to Martin Heidegger, 'the primordial function of language is understood best by the true poets ... The poet names being and so brings it to stand. Being calls to man, and in responding he, in turn, calls being out of chaos, so to speak, by giving it a place to dwell in language.'[9] However, the same grammatical and historical problems which face us in connection with God's word can and do arise from any literature. The language of literature itself, which has been described by Victor Shklovsky and Boris Eichenbaum in terms of 'defamiliarization' and 'roughened form,' is a means,

7. Ebeling, *Word and Faith*, p. 318.

8. Robert W. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966), p. 40.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 39.

Eichenbaum says, 'of destroying the automatism of perception.'[10] To speak of the destruction of automatisms is to suggest the need for interpretation – for placing the literary text where its 'roughened form' can speak to the inexperienced reader.

Flannery O'Connor's short story 'Revelation' is an excellent illustration of the hermeneutical function of language and of a literary text, and reference to it would undoubtedly clarify this new approach to hermeneutics. 'Revelation' is a story about the power of language. The protagonist, Mrs Turpin, is a good woman, whose one shortcoming apparently is that she has constructed an artificial hierarchy of social classes, in which she can place anyone she meets. She pities white-trash and Negroes, who are obviously less well off than she is, because they cannot seem to make anything of themselves or do anything with what is given to them. The conflict in the story results from the confrontation of her condescending social philosophy with the revealing word of judgment spoken to her by Mary Grace, who calls her an 'old wart hog' and tells her to go back to hell where she came from. Mary Grace, as her name itself suggests, announces the time of repentance. Ruby Turpin is thus suspended between word and response, between judgment and acceptance. The word of judgment interprets her because it clearly places her where she has placed white-trash and Negroes – last! Before she can accept the judgment leveled against her, she goes through the tortures of a self-righteous Job. But she does eventually respond; the word has effected her acceptance of a new vision of reality and the ordering of classes. The authentic language of judgment was spoken to her, and it brought forth new life by announcing its possibility. Her encounter with Mary Grace was event and promise.

Although Mrs Turpin tries initially to interpret the word, to remove its sting, she eventually allows it to interpret her, to shatter her illusions of superiority to 'trashy' people – the folly of her social condescension based on material possessions. Flannery O'Connor has given brilliant artistic expression to the Christian belief that the first shall be last and last first. But we have until now discussed only the hermeneutical function of the word *within* the story. The story itself speaks this word of judgment to the reader. It interprets as well the folly of our own human tendency to reverse God's order of reality, to consider ourselves superior to others, to make our ways God's way. It forces us, through the shared experience of Mrs Turpin's ordeal, to accept the fact that the word must interpret us, not we the word. The function of the critic, the interpreter, is to place this story where it will say this to the reader. For having been addressed by the word, he must be able to speak what he has heard.

Flannery O'Connor's short story is a contemporary parable. Its meaning is – as Robert Funk has demonstrated in the case of the parables of Jesus – that the Pharisee is the one who insists that he is the interpreter of the word, whereas the sinner allows himself to be interpreted by it. Funk's analysis of

10. Boris Eichenbaum, 'The Theory of the "Formal Method,"' *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), p. 114.

grace seems pertinent to our discussion of 'Revelation' as illustrative of the hermeneutical function of the word, of language-event as grace. 'Grace,' Funk writes, 'always wounds from behind, at the point where man thinks he is least vulnerable. Grace is harder than man thinks: he moralizes judgment in order to take the edge off it. Grace is more indulgent than man thinks: but it is never indulgent at the point where he thinks it ought to be indulgent.'[11]

What, then, is the role of the critic in the light of the primary hermeneutical function of the text? From a literary-critical point of view, what does it mean to say that the function of the hermeneut is to place the text where it will interpret the reader? The critic must be able, first of all, to answer the difficult epistemological questions: what constitutes the literary work, and how does it exist? Then he must apply his theory to the particular work which he is 'placing there.' Here Wellek's and Warren's *Theory of Literature* will guide our investigation.

Wellek and Warren reject the five traditional answers to the first epistemological question – those which considered the 'poem' (a brief synonym here for 'literary work') as an artifact, as the sequence of sounds uttered by the reader of the poem, as the experience of the reader or of the author (whether conscious or unconscious, or both), and finally as social and collective experience (sum or denominator).[12] Basing their argument on the thought of the Polish philosopher Ingarden, they consider the poem as a system or structure of norms made up of several strata: the sound-stratum, units of meaning (style and stylistics; image, metaphor, symbol, and myth), the fictional world of the work (plot, character, and setting), and finally the metaphysical qualities of the work ('attitude toward life' or 'tone' which they feel is implicit in the consideration of world). Every individual experience of the poem, no matter how it is derived, is only a partial attempt at grasping the structure of norms.

The answer to the question of *how* the poem exists must fall somewhere, Wellek and Warren assert, between the extremes of Platonism and Nominalism. In speaking, therefore, of the ontological status of the poem, they formulate a theory of mitigated realism, which is thoroughly Aristotelian in inspiration. Recognizing that there is both a timeless (unchanging) and temporal (changing) aspect to each poem, they appeal analogically to the Aristotelian distinction between substance and accidents – without, however, identifying it as such. They use the analogy of man, who remains the same individual somehow while changing constantly in the course of his lifetime. However, a poem does not have the same ontological status as a man, so they are right in calling the poem an object of knowledge *sui generis*; their example suffers from the inadequacy of most analogies, and they seem to be aware of this.

Wellek and Warren define the poem's mode of existence positively as 'a

11. Funk, *Language, Hermeneutic, and Word of God*, p. 18.

12. Cf. Rene Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 3d ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1962), pp. 142–50.

system of norms of ideal concepts which are intersubjective.'[13] These norms exist in collective ideology and are experienced by men, through history, upon contact with the written or oral (perhaps imperfectly preserved) poem. The structure of norms which *is* the poem (and is always imperfectly known) functions as a kind of form which is experienced by the critic and which, therefore, does not exist in the mind in the same way in which it constitutes the poem – and yet is based on what is actually there.

The interpretative task of the critic, then, which I insist must always be considered as ancillary to the hermeneutical function of the text itself, is to disclose – to the best of his ability – this structure of norms which constitutes the literary work. This critical enterprise enhances the possibility of the text becoming language-event for the less experienced reader.

In addition to his hermeneutical function, the critic must also perform an evaluative function. It is in this area of evaluation that the autonomy of literature is most seriously called into question, especially by those who consider literature a mask for doctrine or who have any other disciplinary bias with which they approach literature. In determining what is literature, and whether something is great literature, the critic must be extremely cautious concerning the origin of the norms which serve his judgment. If the autonomy of literature is to be preserved – and this is the assumption on which my analysis of criticism is based – then the critic must avoid both subjecting literature to a set of alien norms and assuming that literature is fundamentally religious.

Critics must evaluate literature in terms of its own value, which is 'aesthetic,' in accordance with the very nature of literature. Organization and function are crucial for determining what is literature; it is not so much the materials used as the manner in which, and the purpose for which, they are put together that must be considered. Before discussing the question of organization, I would like – with Wellek and Warren – to concede to literature a wide range of possible functions: utility and pleasure (which ought not merely to coexist, but rather to coalesce), discovery or insight into the truth, responsible propaganda, and catharsis of emotions. All of these functions, it seems to me, are consistent with, or amplifications of, the hermeneutical function of literature, which is inherent in its nature as language-event. These more concrete purposes simply specify the kind of language-event that literature is or can be.

But how does the critic evaluate literature on purely aesthetic grounds? Wellek and Warren insist, and rightly so, that the critic need not agree with the Weltanschauung of the author; yet they do not say, on the other hand, that the world-view of the author is irrelevant to the aesthetic judgment. They would modify Eliot's notion that the critic must accept the world-view of the work 'as coherent, mature, and founded on the facts of experience.'[14] Coherence is already an aesthetic criterion; and maturity, for Wellek and Warren, becomes 'inclusiveness' and 'awareness of complexity.' Moreover,

14. *Ibid.*, p. 246.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 156.

correspondence with experience is not a simple comparison of the author's world with the critic's experience. The critic must compare the work's total world with his own total experience; and the judgment of correspondence 'registers itself in aesthetic terms of vividness, intensity, patterned contrast.'[15] A work is successful when the materials are completely assimilated into the structure of the work. And the criterion of greatness is 'inclusiveness'; the tighter the imaginative integration of diverse materials, the higher the literary value of the work.

While affirming the objectivity of literary norms, Wellek and Warren want also (and reasonably) to reject the absolutism of a 'fixed rank' assigned to a work. As the canon of appreciation shifts and is intensified in the process of history, critical judgment will always be based on value discovered *in* the work itself; thus, if classics retain their place, it is by a series of changing appeals based on the works themselves.

Where, Wellek and Warren ask finally, is the critic to locate aesthetic value? Is it in the work, or in the reader, or in the two as related to each other? Although Wellek and Warren say that it is a matter of opinion whether one chooses the first or third answer, they seem to prefer the third. The poem is not simply a potential cause of the reader's aesthetic experience; it is a specific, highly organized, *controlled* cause of that experience. These potential values in the work itself are realized only when they are contemplated by competent readers. Hence the need, in my opinion, for an interpreter who can place the text where it will become event for less experienced readers.

There is, however, another evaluative function that the literary critic who is also a theologian will want to perform; and that is to judge whether or not the work is open to a Christian interpretation. For it hardly seems to be a case of having our cake and wanting to eat it too, if – after insisting that the ultimate judgment of literature and its greatness must be made according to the aesthetic norm of imaginative integration – we rightly acknowledge that the Weltanschauung of the work can also be judged according to a norm which is extra-aesthetic, if not extra-literary. The aesthetic norm judges the fictional world according to its own inner consistency and coherence; whereas a literary norm implies that, if the theological critic looks for a correspondence between the fictional world and a Christian understanding of reality, he does not expect this correspondence to be expressed in anything other than the language of literature. Thus, he is not looking for theological language, nor will he translate the language of the work into doctrinal statements. He will be searching for a literary analogue of the Christian understanding of man and of the world.

He will be working, therefore, with specifically literary structures such as image and metaphor, plot, character, and setting – devices which constitute the literary 'tone' of the work or its 'attitude toward life.' He will concentrate exclusively on the work itself and avoid any inferences concerning the intentions of the author. It is the realized intention, at best, that counts.

15. *Ibid.*

Illustration of this twofold process of evaluation would undoubtedly serve to illuminate the distinction that I am trying to make. In designating works as good or even great literature, on the one hand, and yet as closed to a Christian interpretation, on the other, one senses the dilemma of the orthodox theologian who, while believing in the reality of hell, is nonetheless reluctant to say that anyone is definitely there. However, it seems to me that, if a theological critic is going to assert that a particular work is reflective of the Christian imagination, he ought to be able to say that its orientation is affirmatively Christian. Two works in particular come to mind which have been considered good, if not great, literature – a judgment based on aesthetic norms – yet which seem to me, at least, to be lacking any recognizable analogue of a positive Christian attitude toward life: Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger*. I have purposely chosen works which represent characteristically different literary periods. Both works employ imagery which is specifically Christian; yet in their totality, in my opinion at least, they represent world-views which fall short of Christian affirmation.

In *Waiting for Godot*, Estragon and Vladimir are awaiting the appearance of Godot; he never comes, and the assumption is that he never will. Some critics see the play as a meaningless parable about man that becomes a parable about the meaninglessness of man, since Estragon and Vladimir have confused the fact that they remain with the expectation that they must be waiting for something. There is, however, a more benign interpretation – and apparently more faithful to the total structure of the play – which sees neither affirmation nor negation of meaninglessness in the play, and interprets the 'waiting' as habit which deadens the horror of existence and affords man distance from suffering. Yet even this position, which interprets the play as striking a delicate balance between affirmation and negation, obviously belies the possibility of discovering Christian affirmation in the drama.

Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger*, which Bernard DeVoto calls a 'minor masterpiece,' is even less susceptible of a Christian interpretation. Structurally, the novel presents itself as a kind of anti-gospel in which Satan 'saves' Theodor Fischer through an educative process which moves from defamation of the moral sense in man, through an experience of universal and necessary human misery, to a negation of any reality outside of the self. Although some critics deny that the novel is really about solipsism at all, they admit that the world-view is unredemptively negative – an expression of the human experience of life as simply so absurd that it has to be a joke. Now, although I would admit that this work, like Beckett's play, expresses a genuine aspect of human experience and expresses it well, it also falls short of what I would consider to be a minimally affirmative literary expression of the Christian imagination.

It seems to me that if literature, which is such a highly controlled cause of our aesthetic experience, is to be considered Christian, it must – in the idiom of literary affirmation, that is, in its 'tone' or 'view of life' – be open to the

future; it must somehow be an event of promise. For I consider the openness *of* literature to the Christian experience to be nothing else than openness *in* literature to the future, an openness based on hope, which is central to the Christian proclamation. For there to be hope in literature, the 'tone' of the work must steer a middle course between despair and presumption, between Sisyphus and Prometheus. And if literature is to be an event of promise for the reader, it must in its total effect offer him an experience of man as a creature who hopes, who imagines the future, who can sustain present suffering because of the promise that awaits him.

To insist that the eschatological dimension of Christianity is essential to its proclamation does not, obviously, mean that a poem must speak of heaven or that a novel must have a happy ending. The Christian imagination is essentially an imagination of promise, an openness to every present because of the possibilities that it unfolds, a refusal to seek escape, through any subterfuge, from the ravages of time – either through nostalgia for the past or by flight into the timeless world of aesthetic or religious experience. The Christian imagination is grounded in history, aware of the irreversibility of time, anxious for the fulfilment of its dreams.

According to Christian understanding, man, rooted in history, is also a developing creature and a related creature. Thus, within, and even because of, the temporal dimension of the Christian experience, there are developmental and relational dimensions. For literature to be called Christian, therefore, it must also portray a world-view in which man is capable of personal development and growth through social interaction. The characters in a novel need not, indeed, necessarily develop in the course of the narrative, but the possibility of development must be there – and the reason should be clear why they have not matured.

To speak of hope and promise as the core of the Christian imagination is to use a language of eschatology, though in a way which is peculiar to our age. Only within the past few decades has Christian man, through his consciousness of space-time in an evolving universe, expressed his eschatological self-awareness in terms of the hope of history and the promise of the world. In the words of Jurgen Moltmann, this is an age of ' "creative expectation," [of] hope which sets about criticizing and transforming the present because it is open towards the universal future of the kingdom.'[16] Only within this period has Christian man understood the promise of grace as making him more human. For whether one speaks in terms of the call to authentic existence (Bultmann) or of hominization and personalization (Teilhard de Chardin), one is using the language of promise peculiar to the contemporary world. Thus, to search for the literary analogue of the present Christian understanding of the world in the literature of an earlier period is to confess a basic misunderstanding of the historicity and linguisticality of human existence.

16. Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 335.

The task of historical evaluation which the theological literary critic faces is indeed complex. It should be clear from the foregoing observations that he cannot use contemporary eschatological language for judging the openness of the literature of former periods to a Christian interpretation. The historical process has to be judged by a variable scheme of norms, which are themselves derived from history. (This procedure does not involve a vicious circle of any sort, because Christian self-understanding of a particular period can and must be supported, if not derived, from extra-literary sources, even if the ultimate evaluation of a given work must be made in terms of its literary analogue.) The procedure of interpretation, evaluation, and appreciation is dynamic, therefore, and changes with the passage of history. Thus, even though the procedure is not circular, because of the tentative nature of our grasp of previous linguistic traditions it may lead to conclusions which are, at best, slender and debatable.