POETRY, POETICS AND THE SPIRITUAL LIFE

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MY THOUGHTS HERE have mostly to do with appreciating the dynamics of theology and spirituality as analogous to the dynamics of poetry. They flow from meditations on the poetic ideas of the philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), and they reflect some aspects of the theology of Karl Rahner (1904–1984) as well. Poetics is the theory of poetry; and it is connected with philosophical issues concerning language, expression and communication as basic prerogatives and possibilities of human beings. For Heidegger, poetry is not a late-emerging use of language to embellish direct expression, but rather constitutes the original basis of language in the way humans complete the natural world by giving things names and descriptions. Heidegger saw poetic or meditative thought as the chief prerogative of the human mind and the chief means of finding and achieving fulfilment for human beings.

But Heidegger also perceived that the prevailing values of the modern world were inimical to this fulfilment. Exploring the implications of a poem or of a verse in scripture may seem to be a waste of time in a culture where material needs compete urgently for time with spiritual rest and growth. Parents need to build a home and acquire temporal goods, while managers need to hire efficient people, keep down costs and show profits. Moreover we live in a time when the reality of technology needs continuously to be faced and evaluated. The use of technology is advancing, and while it brings progress and success, it also threatens to take the control of many things out of the hands of human beings, who ought to be free to write their own destiny. The ever more refined and arcane nature of technical knowledge makes ordinary citizens, workers and consumers ever less capable of

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understanding, controlling, doing without, or fixing and adjusting the products and instruments that they use. At the same time, the tools of technology penetrate our most intimate lives and make universally available data out of our most private thoughts and moments.

Heidegger is, above all, the prophet who warned about the negative features of technology. But it is the whole culture of technology that concerns him, not just the efficient machines that may take away our jobs. We hurry past each other, ignoring much that is most valuable in other people, and we are only vaguely aware of our own spiritual needs. We collect signs and trophies of success, but suffer from an inner lack of depth and direction. The economy rewards people who can calculate and show profits rather than people who can wonder and marvel over transcendental values. The very mode of thinking by which we calculate innovation, advantage and profit in the marketplace tends to destroy, not just to displace, poetic thinking and contemplation. Heidegger's humanistic commitment to poetic thinking serves as a natural and philosophical basis for spirituality. The thinking process involved in praying is naturally grounded in a poetics that is receptive to the spoken and written word.

Spirituality and Being

The name of Heidegger is not readily or necessarily connected with prayer and spirituality. Heidegger is associated with German philosophy, phenomenology, hermeneutics and existentialism. But he was raised as a Roman Catholic and spent brief periods in his youth as a Jesuit novice and as a Catholic seminarian, apparently giving up these vocations for reasons of health. He studied at Freiburg im Breisgau under the phenomenologist Edmund Husserl and wrote a dissertation on the medieval theologian Duns Scotus. Thereafter, Heidegger abandoned all direct interest in Catholicism and in religion. The theme, the thinking and the experience of Being (*Sein*) were the mainstays of Heidegger's philosophical writing.

Being designates the totality of reality, and also whatever it is about any particular being that separates it from nothing and makes it exist. To theologians and religious thinkers, Being designates God as infinite reality, as well as the totality of finite beings. In Heidegger's philosophy Being is generally taken to be finite but, even so, it is transcendent and all-inclusive. Being reveals itself to and through the human individual as *Dasein*, or human existence. *Dasein* is the kind of being in which

Martin Heidegger

Being understands itself. *Dasein* does not know Being merely as an object apart from itself, but rather, as the being in whom Being itself becomes self-conscious. Crucial to *Dasein*'s understanding of Being is its understanding of itself as a project of self-appropriation over time, of progressive self-understanding and authentic existence. Thus, in human consciousness and experience, Being becomes aware of itself. It takes subjective self-knowledge as well as objective knowledge in order to know Being fully.

Dasein is characterized by the existential conditions of *Being-in-the-world* and *Being-with* (*Mitsein*). *Being-in-the-world* designates our human condition of being rooted and grounded in the concerns of the world. Similarly, *Mitsein* means that we are with others, influenced by them, and care about them. In phenomenology, the most basic relationship between subject and object, or between the self and the world, is called *intentionality*. Intentionality is the fundamental structure of experience and of reality as such: a constitutive relationship of mutuality and reciprocity between consciousness and the things consciousness knows. Human consciousness is always *conscious of* the world and of objects in the world. The intentional relationship between *Dasein* and the world in Heidegger is called *care* (*Sorge*). Care is the all-pervading attitude or operative intentionality between human beings and the world. Through it the world and things known receive completion as they become objects of knowledge, concern and consideration. This mutuality appears, for instance, in William Wordsworth, who contemplates the growth of mind in his poetry, and who celebrates the exquisite fit between mind and world.[1]

[1] See William Wordsworth, 'The Recluse', in *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 1994), 263: 'How exquisitely the individual Mind / (And the progressive powers perhaps no less / Of the whole species) to the external World / Is fitted: — and how exquisitely, too'.

In Heidegger, behind all other considerations is that of the exquisite fit between *Dasein*, or the human existent, and *Sein*, or Being itself.

For a period in his career Heidegger worked at the University of Marburg, where he became associated as a colleague with Rudolf Bultmann, a Lutheran theologian and scholar of the New Testament. For Bultmann, authentic existence involves accepting the grace of God and living responsibly as a person for the sake of the Kingdom of God. The freedom of the children of God is also a prominent theme in his work, as in the letters of St Paul.

Although Heidegger had by this time turned away from religion, Bultmann's view of authentic existence is seen by many as entirely consistent with Heidegger's. Heidegger's phenomenology and ontology form a crucial background and framework for the theology of Bultmann and his followers, the so-called Old Marburgers. At one point, indeed, Bultmann himself is reported to have said that the basic message of the New Testament could be translated completely into the terms of Heidegger's philosophy. The early philosophy, in particular, as presented in Heidegger's major work *Being and Time*, had much to do with care, with the mystery of Being, with the dignity and vocation of human beings as *Dasein*, with freedom and with the call of conscience in the modern world. For him, human beings are called to be 'shepherd[s] of Being' and hearers of the poetically spoken words of Being.[2] The word shepherd connotes intimacy with Being as the object of one's concern and a protectiveness toward it. The shepherd is also a guide or leader whose voice is important to the sheep who heed his or her call. Much of Heidegger's thought can be seen to run consistently in parallel with the main messages of the Christian scriptures, since both Christian preachers and existentialist philosophers call their audiences in different ways to decisive conversion and to authentic existence.

Heidegger's Way

Heidegger was attracted to poetry as a mode of discourse that allows the most basic attitude or disposition of human existence to be articulated and celebrated. Philosophy is an abstract and analytical

[2] Martin Heidegger, 'Letter on Humanism', in *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1927) to the Task of Thinking (1964)*, edited by David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 221.

discipline that primarily uses argumentation and logical analysis, so it lacks aspects such as affect, appetite and celebration that must eventually be part of any description of human experience. Philosophy in general does not know what to do with the categories of gift, surprise, gratitude, invitation, grief, longing, wonder, delight, lament and praise. As soon as we move to poetry, we enter a mode of expression in which these realities are easily accommodated. Heidegger advises us to think with the poets; thus we will experience Being as it comes to us on its own initiative. We then respond with gratitude, as he writes: *Denken ist danken.* To think is to thank.[3]

Heidegger's Way (*Weg*) is a means of access to Being through a rigorous but informal method of meditating on the work of an individual poet that allows the poetry itself to lead the philosopher as companion in thought. Heidegger's Way has an aura or connotation of quest, wandering, adventure and discovery about it as well. Only partly objective and analytic, the Way is primarily intuitive and aesthetic, and engages the philosopher on a level where involvement and personal stakes are high. Each poet whom Heidegger considered had a very different way of proceeding from the others, but Heidegger's Way is his commitment to staying engaged and to being guided by each of them.

In Heidegger, poetry is, at its most elemental level, an expression of the *ontological difference*—the difference between particular beings and Being itself. Poetry may extol and explore the Holy, the Sublime or Beauty itself, as distinct from objects or people that exemplify these transcendent traits in only finite and limited ways. Poetry puts into specific and original language the voice of Being itself as effusion of life, originality and exuberance. We can hear the voice of Being through the language of the particular poem and through the things and objects contemplated in the poem. The words are chosen and particular, but the meaning behind them is bountifully and providentially bestowed by Being and is universal or cosmic in importance. In poetry, as distinguished from any other kind of language, Being speaks for itself. The poet is the herald, the voice or the channel for receiving and transmitting Being. The

In poetry … Being speaks for itself

[3] See Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?* translated by J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper and Row, 2002), 139 onwards.

Friedrich Hölderlin

poet is only a being, and not Being itself. But the poetry that the poet writes, if he or she is a great poet, shows the tension between beings and Being. The great poet helps to put the realisation of the ontological difference into language, or serves as the channel for Being to do so. The poet's greatness is far less a matter of craft and skill than of attunement or listening to Being.

In selecting the poets about whom he wrote, Heidegger was crucially concerned with the vocation to which they were called and the depth of commitment each of them had to the calling and craft of writing poetry. They were fated to be poets; Being itself claimed them in such ways as to make their voices the voice of Being itself. Fate or destiny revealed itself in what they had to say. There is a religious or mystical tone to the way in which Heidegger talks about these poets, and in the commitment Heidegger shows to meditating assiduously upon their works. Indeed, Heidegger's reading of his chosen poets closely resembles the kind of exegetical and meditative work that a student of theology and sacred scripture might carry out in respect to the Bible. Just as the theologian feels guided by God in his or her work of interpreting holy scripture, so Heidegger feels his way, almost religiously, as shepherd of Being, focusing on particular themes in the works of poets who embody many other ideas and feelings in unique configurations.

The poets held in highest respect by Heidegger included Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), Stefan George (1868–1933), Georg Trakl (1887–1914), Eduard Mörike (1804–1875) and, above all, Friedrich Hölderlin (1770–1843). All of these poets suffered in different ways through inner anguish and a struggle against circumstances. For Heidegger, their anguish was due to their inner experience of the ontological difference. Each of Heidegger's poets is unique in what he

has to say and in how he says it. It seems that Being chooses to speak or to reveal itself in very different voices.

An important collection of Heidegger's writings is called *Holzwege*, a word that means 'wood-paths', referring to the trails that loggers leave behind after they have finished working in a certain area of forest. Heidegger enjoyed walking and wandering along such paths in the wilderness near his cabin at Todtnauberg, in the Black Forest. *Holzwege* contains some of Heidegger's meditations on, to him, the quintessential poet: Friedrich Hölderlin. It was Hölderlin's destiny, according to Heidegger, to reveal in his poetry the very nature of poetry as such; this also implies or entails that Being reveals itself by its own initiative in his poems.

As a young man Hölderlin returned to his native Swabia after a sojourn in France. In his poem 'Homecoming: To Kindred Ones', he describes his arrival after walking through the Alps to Lindau on Lake Constance. To Hölderlin, Being speaks through the poet as the Holy or the Serene. Meditating on this poem, Heidegger reflects that all poetry is essentially homecoming (*Heimkunft*). This implies returning home after a sojourn in a distant place and an arduous, if not also dangerous, journey back.

In Mörike it is probably the qualities of seclusion or hiddenness and monastic solitude that speak for Being. In Stefan George and Gottfried Benn (1886–1956), Heidegger contemplates the miraculous eruption of the word out of silent, impersonal nature and, with it, the birth of culture that both completes and transforms nature. In Rilke, the poet's vocation is to draw into himself or herself a variety of experiences and to transform them into beauty, preserving them in a 'cosmic inner space' (*Weltinnenraum*). All human beings are in some sense poets, or 'bees of the invisible', who carry on the same work of creating a realm of beauty within themselves.[4] Being reveals itself, after a lengthy period of creative anguish, as song (*Gesang*) that celebrates 'superabundant existence'.[5] Rilke's work represents an alternation between lament, as exemplified in his *Duino Elegies,* and praise, as superbly expressed in his *Sonnets to Orpheus*. Heidegger cryptically

[4] Rilke, letter to Witold van Hulewicz, 13 November 1925, in *Letters of Rainer Maria Rilke*, translated by Jane Bannard Greene and M. D. Herder (New York: Norton, 1947–1948), volume 2.
[5] See Rilke, 'The Ninth Elegy', in *Duino Elegies and Sonnets to Orpheus* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 59.

explains: 'To sing the song means to be present in what is present itself. It means: *Dasein* [superabundant or exuberant] existence.'[6]

Turning towards Trakl, Heidegger chooses the trait of *apartness* (*Abgeschiedenheit*) as the focal idea in the poet's work. Heidegger writes: 'Wandering in apartness, beholding the sights of the invisible, and consummate pain—they belong together'.[7] In Heidegger's meditation on Trakl, apartness becomes one of the criteria for good poetry and for a good poet. The word *Abgeschiedenheit*, which can also mean *departedness*, is derived in one sense from the state of both absence and presence that characterizes the beloved dead who are no longer among us.

Heidegger had also cited parting or *Abschied* as a dominant theme in Rilke's poetry. In Trakl it most likely also applies to, or is derived from, the poet's strange behaviour and mentality. Trakl lived in a world of poetry that transcended ordinary awareness. He had been diagnosed as schizophrenic, and his mental health problems—like Hölderlin's through much of his life—might have seemed like the sad side effect of the gift of poetry. Heidegger seems to have thought, with Plato and the ancient Greeks, that poetry itself was a kind of blessed mania or being beside oneself.

Apartness is also a term used by the medieval mystical theologian Meister Eckhart, as is another significant word for Heidegger, *Gelassenheit*. This is the German title of Heidegger's book about meditative or poetic thinking, translated into English as *Discourse on Thinking*. In the book, *Gelassenheit* is translated as *releasement*. The ideas of apartness and releasement are closely related. *Gelassenheit* suggests the letting go that is part of spiritual poverty or spiritual liberty; it suggests as well a freedom from attachment to the things of this world. *Abgeschiedenheit* suggests going away somewhere, or leaving everything behind and turning from worldly concerns to a life of poverty, emptying the mind of cares that might distract it from the spiritual life. These two words connote a monastic austerity that is analogous to the life and vocation of the poet. *Apartness* in Trakl implies or insinuates closeness to the Holy, an idea that Heidegger also equates with Being in his discussion of Hölderlin's poetics.

[6] Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, translated by Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 138.
[7] Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, translated by Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 190.

Apartness can additionally be understood to suggest the distance of the poet from modern technological and calculative thinking. In Hölderlin, especially, there is an idea, taken up by Heidegger, of the absence of the gods, and an affirmation that the modern age is a very 'destitute time'.[8] Hölderlin speaks in terms of the Greek gods, mentioned in the plural, when he also means to speak of the God of monotheism. The destitute time is a time of need, of difficulty, and of disorientation for human beings. In this time, as Hölderlin writes, the gods or God are not only withdrawn and unavailable, but they (or he or she) are sorely missed and we long for them, even if the modern consciousness is not capable of feeling or understanding its own deepest yearning.

For Heidegger humans have lost their bearings in the universe owing to this *default*, or mysterious and deliberate absence, on the part of the gods or of God. Heidegger suggests that this absence or default is due to the initiative of the gods themselves, and not solely to human perfidy or forgetting. And not only have the gods or God fled, but the divine radiance has become extinguished in the world's history. The world, unable to diagnose its own malady, has already grown so destitute that it can no longer discern the default of God *as* a default. As he meditates with Hölderlin, Heidegger projects his own spiritual anguish and apartness upon the world around him. He relates the dire state of modern culture to rampant technological thinking, which threatens to replace poetic or meditative thinking. However he is not without hope for a return of the gods in some future time.

Two Modern Poets: Wallace Stevens and T. S. Eliot

Wallace Stevens (1879–1955) and Thomas Stearns (T. S.) Eliot (1888–1965) are poets who came to terms in different ways with the anguish of living in destitute times. Stevens came from a German family background and grew up in Reading, Pennsylvania. He was concerned in his poetry with how the mind and imagination find or shape the realities of order and meaning in what he calls the 'slovenly wilderness', or chaos, of the world before it comes into knowing and active relationships with human concerns.[9] In terms that differ from

[8] See Friedrich Hölderlin 'Bread and Wine', quoted in Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought,* 94.

[9] As shown, for instance, in the poem, 'Anecdote of the Jar'. See Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poems* (New York: Vintage, 1990), 76.

those of Heidegger, Hölderlin, Wordsworth or Stevens, Eliot also contemplates intentionality as the exquisite fit between imagination and reality, with some degree of anxious concern for whatever reality might be before it is shaped by human knowing and wondering.

Stevens' first book of poetry was called *Harmonium* (1923), after a musical instrument that is played with a keyboard like a piano. Music matters a great deal to Stevens, and he is sympathetic to other poets who, like T. S. Eliot, hold to Walter Pater's idea that 'all art constantly aspires towards the condition of music'.[10] The harmonium was originally designed for church music, and its use as an image in Stevens' poetry may imply that, for him, poetry is derived, at least remotely, from sacred expression.

God, to Stevens, is a fiction that the human imagination persistently constructs, revises and projects. God is the 'essential poem' at the centre of things.[11] According to the critic Joseph Carroll, for Stevens God is also the 'originative fictionalizing principle'.[12] God, if there is a God, is the imagination itself as the principle that prompts and drives the mind to construct images approaching and approximating, but never quite attaining, the external and objective reality of God. As each of us constructs a succession of ever-improved fictions that aspire to serve as the 'supreme fiction',[13] we also construct our selfhood out of the myths we project. As to the reality of God, as independent of the imagination that never ceases to project images of what is supreme, Stevens remains agnostic.

In Stevens' work, poetry has replaced religious piety, and yet, the reality of God is a constant preoccupation. The imagination's transformation of chaos, welter and wilderness into order and meaningful experience is a matter for him of awe, reverence and ultimate concern. His epistemology, implicitly a religious quest, is always a matter of wonder and delight—the ultimate stuff of poetry. This concern of his for the mystery behind meaning more than qualifies Stevens as a poet who, in Heidegger's sense, dwells near the source of

[10] Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 86. And see T. S. Eliot, *To Criticize the Critic* (London: Faber, 1965).
[11] Stevens, 'A Primitive like an Orb', in *Collected Poems*, 441.
[12] Joseph Carroll, *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1987), 92.
[13] See Stevens, 'Notes towards a Supreme Fiction', in *Collected Poems*, 380.

Being, and whose voice is the voice of Being itself. Again, in Heidegger's terms, Stevens is a *shepherd of Being* and, if there ever could be such, a rival of Hölderlin. Though an agnostic, Stevens stands on the very threshold of faith.

Wallace Stevens

When Stevens writes about a wordless 'central poem'[14] beneath and beyond all the poems that are actually written, he is speaking both from the experience of a practising poet, and about the *originating fictionalising principle* behind all of human culture, in so far as that culture is a system of products of the imagination. It is not wrong to speak of Stevens's imagination as transcendent, even if, with him, we hesitate most of the time to call that transcendence by the name of God. Stevens generally prefers to leave God nameless and beyond human grasping; nevertheless, he constantly evokes wonder and speculation about a God who might inspire the transformation of chaos into order.

If Stevens lingers at the doubt-filled fringes of faith, then T. S. Eliot, feeling the chill of modernity as a destitute time, stands just inside the circle of Christian belief. Reared in St Louis and educated at Harvard, Eliot moved to London in 1915 and became a British citizen in 1927. In the same year, Eliot became a member of the Church of England, a step he celebrated in the poem *Ash Wednesday*. His style is difficult, compressed and eclectic. In *The Waste Land* (1922) he quotes from or imitates 35 different authors. This poem presents a sterile, godless region without a future, a symbol for the hollowness of modern life. In Eliot's early works, ours is an exhausted era, abandoned by God. He pictures the emotional starvation, purposelessness and shallowness of our time, a kind of life divested of meaning and imagination.

[14] Stevens, 'A Primitive like an Orb', 441.

Perhaps no other literature in English expresses better the yearning of the human soul for transcendent meaning than Eliot's *Four Quartets*. The allusion to music in the word 'quartets' is important; the poems must be read musically. These four poems take their titles from four places that are important to Eliot, but of very little significance in the wider world. They are: 'Burnt Norton' (1935), 'East Coker' (1940), 'The Dry Salvages' (1941) and 'Little Gidding' (1942). The poems present beauty, mysticism, and a relief from the dry pessimism of *The Waste Land* through the experience of eternity as it breaks into time. They present an answer to the problems of modernity as presented in Eliot's earlier poetry. As Hölderlin and Heidegger perceive the gods or God as hiding in default or in unexplainable absence, Eliot finds God in the darkness and dislocation of modernity itself. With searching irony and paradox, Eliot's *Four Quartets* present and probe the *nowhereness* or spiritual destitution of modernity, and the mystical inward destination we are called to in spite of it.

Burnt Norton is a place once visited by Eliot, a seventeenth-century manor house and garden. Helen Gardner points out that the house is not particularly interesting or beautiful, and that the garden is conventional, formal and now deserted. She says that this poem is about the private world of each one of us, a world in which what might have been persists in consciousness alongside what really was and is. Burnt Norton, Eliot's destination on a particular day, is the first of four *nowheres*, which in spite of being nowheres, take us to the mystical destination we always carry within ourselves. We can compare Eliot's nowheres to the image of 'the Palace of Nowhere', found in the poetry of Chuang-tzu, which was translated by Thomas Merton.[15]

T. S. Eliot

[15] *The Way of Chuang Tzu*, translated by Thomas Merton (Boston: Shambhala, 2004), 142.

East Coker is a village with which Eliot had family ties—an ordinary kind of village, and hence also a nowhere of sorts. 'The middle way' to which Eliot refers in 'East Coker' might be the Dharma, or teaching of Buddhism, the path between abnegation and self-indulgence, a way discovered by persevering right effort, and yet a way arrived at under the gentle force of cosmic beneficence.[16] It is only known by living in uncertainty, by surmise, by 'hints and guesses'.[17] Here definiteness is the enemy of wisdom, and vagueness itself the only certitude. If Stevens' agnosticism is always seasoned by his fascination with faith, then Eliot's modern faith is flavoured by its nearness to agnostic ambiguity.

The name 'The Dry Salvages' is probably a corruption of the French *les trois sauvages*. It refers to a small and dangerous group of rocks, with a buoy called a 'groaner' and a warning beacon, off the north-east coast of Cape Ann in Massachusetts. The word *trois* was corrupted into *dry* among the New Englanders. On the literal level the English name is ironic, because the rocks are constantly washed and lashed by waves of the sea. On the mystical level, these desolate and dangerous rocks represent for Eliot our times of aching longing and spiritual dryness, when unmerited saving grace washes redemptively over us. These rocks are one of Eliot's nowheres, which, again by paradox, lead him to a secret somewhere within.

Little Gidding is or was a place of pilgrimage for some Anglicans, including T. S. Eliot. Before the English Civil War an order of monks of the Church of England lived there. Now it is another nowhere kind of place; all that is left of the monastery is a tiny chapel in a field, which it shares with a pigsty. Little Gidding is connected historically with poetry: the metaphysical poet George Herbert, on his deathbed, entrusted his masterpiece 'The Temple' to Nicholas Ferrar, founder of the monastic community. King Charles I, who was beheaded by the Puritans under Cromwell and is regarded as a martyr by the Anglican Church, is known to have made several pilgrimages there.

These four *nowheres* point at length to a 'still point', to a deep nowhere within the poet himself, to a gaping emptiness which, in the realisation of its own emptiness, receives the promise of a great fullness.[18]

[16] T. S. Eliot, 'East Coker', in *Collected Poems, 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1974), 188.
[17] Eliot, 'East Coker', 199.
[18] See Eliot, 'Burnt Norton', in *Collected Poems*, 177, 180.

Already tasted, the coming fullness, which is eternal and in that sense is already here, takes away the taste for finite accomplishments and enjoyments. Pervasively austere or ascetical, Eliot's tone is his substance. He tries to secularise a mysticism that penetrates darkly into religious faith. The brooding music he suggests in his poetry is itself a metaphor for the mysticism that takes us far beyond expression in weak and futile words.

Heidegger and Rahner

The twentieth-century Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner (1904–1984)[19] is as prominent in Roman Catholic theology as Rudolf Bultmann and Paul Tillich are in Protestant theology. His work also bears comparison with the philosophy of Heidegger, both in importance and in content. We have seen that Heidegger was not far from theology in his concerns and contributions. Thinking the *ontological difference* in Heidegger has something in common with thinking the difference in Karl Rahner's theology between *transcendental revelation* and *categorical revelation*.

Transcendental revelation in Rahner is the veiled, wordless and anonymous revelation of the hidden personal God of Christianity. It resembles in important ways the self-manifestation of Being in the work of Heidegger. Transcendental revelation speaks to human beings as the horizon of all their knowledge, action and affection. It is an intuitive and implicit awareness of truths of ultimate significance that are also intimately important to human individuals.

Categorical revelation is the spoken address of the personal God—in the beginning as an address to Israel as a special people in history, and then, later on, as the Christian call to holiness and grace that is addressed to all humanity. Categorical revelation means that certain documents, and inspired traditions and interpretations of those documents in the believing community, are regarded as the very word of God. When the experiences of graced and inspired souls are recorded, recognised as precious to the community and preserved as religious treasures, then these become the bearers or containers of categorical revelation.

[19] Karl Rahner, *The Practice of Faith: A Handbook of Contemporary Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1983). Also see, Robert Masson, 'Spirituality for the Head, Heart, Hands, and Feet: Rahner's Legacy', *Spirituality Today*, 36/4 (Winter 1984), 340–354.

Being is the condition for the possibility of beings; and transcendental revelation is the condition for the possibility of categorical revelation. All human beings, regardless of their time and place on earth, and whether or not they have ever heard or read about categorical revelation, are addressed by transcendental revelation as part of the very definition and condition of what it means for them to be persons, or *spirits in the world*. According to Rahner, we are spirits in the world by the very fact that we are addressed and constituted by the abiding offer of grace and transcendental revelation. The presence of transcendental revelation as constitutive of our spiritual being is the condition for the possibility of categorical revelation.

To the theologian, therefore, transcendental revelation is also the foundation of poetry. Rahner's theology is analogous to poetic thinking in which wordless revelation, like Stevens's central, unspoken poem, breaks into sound and language as spoken or categorical revelation. Intimations of Being, holiness and immortality appear as if on a purely natural basis in the works of the poets. These intimations may come into words as deep insights into human nature, behaviour and relationships, or as moments of transforming communion with nature. Poetry involves language, including speaking and writing, as what Heidegger called *existentials,* that is, as partially defining and mutually conditioning dimensions of our humanity. Language is an existential, because, like time, space, history, being-in-the-world and being-with, language is a partial aspect of our humanity that penetrates and influences all the other aspects of our humanity. Rahner coined the term *supernatural existential* to characterize the constant dimension of human existence in virtue of which we are always open to, or conditioned and addressed by, transcendental revelation and by grace.

Rahner writes about the poet and the priest in parallel. There is an abiding analogy between the poet who is addressed by the Holy, the Serene, the Joyous (in Hölderlin's terms), and the priest who dispenses the mysteries of God as minister of scripture and sacrament. The poet is or does, on the plane of nature and culture, what the priest is or does on the plane of grace and (categorical) revelation. Indeed, the priest as liturgist and preacher uses poetry, poetic thinking and rhetoric as the chief tools of his performance, which is analogous to a poetry reading or dramatic presentation. The hermeneutics of presenting the sacred

word is analogous to, and is dependent on, the power of oratory and the aesthetics of literary and creative writing.

Rahner says that poetry is *requisite* for theology; that is, that poetry is a necessary condition for receiving and articulating the truths of faith. Theology is poetic in so far as it deals with truths that cannot be presented literally in empirical ways and that cannot be verified by ordinary observations. These truths can be expressed only in poetic and figurative kinds of language that are powerful carriers of ethical, doctrinal and ultimate values. Poetry creates and combines expressions that are analogical, oblique and indirect, and yet effective, inspirational and transformative. In this way, poetry is the condition on the natural level that opens up the possibility for faith and revelation on the supernatural level. The foundation for theology lies in a poetics that deals with language as a condition for the possibility of divine utterance within the terms of human understanding.

Rahner says that poetry is* requisite *for theology

After one has accepted categorical revelation and has come to be converted and transformed by it, one returns to the work of poets such as Hölderlin, Rilke, Stevens and Eliot, and experiences the difference between transcendental and categorical revelation in a deeper and more appreciative way. The poets illumine for us the transcendental conditions of possibility that have allowed the truths of categorical faith and revelation to be expressed. Actual categorical revelation shines its light back upon the poetry that originally captured and harboured only a less specific and less explicit transcendental revelation. All poetry, and indeed the basic possibility and reality of poetic expression as such, is either a precondition for or a continuation of the poetry that lies at the basis of sacred scripture.

The language of faith and revelation is the language of poetry. Theology is based on poetry as creating the possibility for the kind of symbolic expression in which God self-reveals and self-donates in the human dimension of language. For Rahner, the ineffable mystery of God comes into expression as incarnation in the flesh and as inspiration to the mind. Poetry is the naturally created condition for the possibility of God's self-communication to the world and to humanity. Spirituality is enhanced as it meditates on the importance of poetry and poetics, and as it finds, even in non-religious poetry, an ally in deepening its appreciation of how God's self-communication is

made possible in the human ability to express its hunger for meaning, its wonder at creation, and its orientation to God.

Poetry is the most original form of language and it is the natural foundation of the spiritual life. We are spiritual beings and beings of the word and of language, and our spirits need to be fed and nurtured through the word. Poetic thinking is the foundation of religious and theological thinking, and is necessary for spiritual growth. If poetry as such is founded in the reality of transcendental revelation, then all poetry is directed to the discovery and appreciation of categorical revelation. All poetry points, however remotely and obscurely, to the gospels of Christianity, and to the yearnings of the heart expressed in holy scripture. The scriptures also point appreciatively toward secular literature, and again to the literature of other religions, as helpful and illuminating aids in the understanding of the Bible itself.

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