

On trying to write about the Bible

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I

THE first necessity in undertaking any action is to have the object clearly in mind. In the first instance this essay arose from the need to explain to my pupils, both in tutorials and in lectures, the extent, complexity and depth of the influence of the Bible on English literature up to, say, the turn of the present century. The embarrassments caused by ignorance will be familiar to many teachers. One may condone, say, unfamiliarity with the more recondite Greek myths (though it is startling to find a second-year honours man glossing a familiar passage of *Richard II* with the comment, 'Phaethon was a Greek General who kept many mistresses' — presumably the 'unruly jades') or of the by-ways of Donne's alchemy and astronomy. It is now no more than a pious hope that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* should be a student's bedside book. But how does one begin to teach seventeenth-century literature to someone who has never heard of the Garden of Eden, the Flood, the Parable of the Sower? Where does one start with, say, Milton, Blake, Rossetti? It is very clear that allusions which would have been wholly clear to the educated grandparents of the students of the 'sixties, and accepted (though at varying levels of sensibility) without the need for notes or glosses, were today being missed, or, worse, being wholly misunderstood. And this did not apply only to the recognition of symbolic values such as those of the Tree, the Lamb, the Serpent, the Dove, or to the mass of proverbial statement which was once familiar; but to a general outline of Biblical knowledge and the more famous episodes narrated in it. One might have thought that some such outline would be assumed, whatever the school and family background; but it is clear that it is no longer so. A famous American university has had to organize a course, with pictorial illustrations, on elementary Hebrew, Greek and Latin mythology as a background to its work in English. In a final honours

examination at Cambridge more than half the candidates missed or misconstrued the simplest of Biblical allusions. An examination of two lines from Swinburne

Foams round the feet of pleasure
The blood-red must of pain.

provoked a series of notes on the Categorical Imperative of Kant as understood by Baudelaire. If one were to declaim, from a dais, say Housman's

Ho, everyone that thirsteth
And hath the price to give . . .

few would recognize it as an ironic inversion of *Isaiah* LV. Kipling's *The Vineyard*, on the entry of the Americans into the last phases of World War I, is often greeted with bewilderment. So is any allegory other than the very simplest: such as *Animal Farm*. Theological and doctrinal references in Shakespeare are, in general, neither profound nor obscure, yet they too are frequently misunderstood. To expound the depth-imagery in George Herbert, as Rosamund Tuve has so admirably done, is to introduce for many students a wholly new dimension; the same is true of Hopkins, and more so of the later Eliot.

Yet here was not only ignorance but, all too often, an arrogant contempt. A common retort was that the Bible consisted of long-disproved or exploded myth without interest or value in the present-day world. The Bible was religious, and religion was in any event the Marxian opiate. Some shadow of the Wilberforce-Darwin controversy still hung like a cloud. Other attitudes ranged from an uncompromising fundamentalism (even in terms of geology — one recalls Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son*) to a contempt for 'Hebrew old clothes'. One part of the problem was to try to awake interest in the Bible as a book. To do that it was necessary to clear one's own mind as to possible methods of approach.

II

The first step, the most difficult and the most dangerous, was to attempt to isolate the Bible as 'literature'; that is, to disregard questions of religious faith and dogma while indicating some kind of spiritual values. But what sort of 'literature' is this? Clearly, it is an Eastern book, and some consideration of its background and *mores* was necessary if its relevances to the West were to be

brought into some kind of perspective. Yet the average undergraduate could hardly be expected to read, say, the Korân, the Granth Sahib, the Vedic Upanishads, the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*; and his reading of *The Thoughts of Chairman Mao* are likely to be less satisfactory for purposes of comparative religion than those of Confucius. At the same time it was important that a student should know a little of contemporary literatures of the Middle East; various excellent anthologies are available. Here it was necessary to point out that the continuous absorption of every kind of influence from Israel's neighbours, and the similarity of their 'fables' (and often those of the Greeks) to those set out in the Bible, did not — as many seemed to think — vitiate the Bible as a work of literature. At this point one could perhaps gesture towards the sources, the endless borrowings, of, say, Vergil, Dante, Chaucer, Shakespeare.

It seemed helpful to attempt some analysis of what an Elizabethan critic would have called 'the kinds', breaking down this mass of epic, fable, ritual, songs, prophecies, proverbial sayings, chronicles of politics and warfare, esoteric symbolism and occult writing; and to eliminate from immediate consideration the more dreary tracts, such as those of genealogies and law codes; retaining those portions or books which could be studied as unified pieces of writing.

One way into the mind of this 'new reader' seemed to be through the geography of the 'Fertile Crescent', the whole panorama of Middle East politics perpetually determined by its physical features which in turn governed its communications in peace and war; its water, food, minerals, and, today, its oil. And the considerations that determine and dominate war and politics acquired a new relevance from recent events. The warfare of the Bible is an almost unending source of interest and instruction. The use of the high ground to overlook one's enemy, or to retreat to where the armoured divisions, the iron chariots of the Philistines cannot follow, is still a leading principle of war. The Jordan Valley is, as it always has been, a national and controversial boundary. The raids by air, long-range artillery and modern communications have done little more than accentuate the soldiers' problem of this strange and spectacular terrain, the juxtaposition of the desert and the lands of plenty.

Another aspect which can be stressed at this stage is the violent emotional and psychological contrast with the desert, and the shock experienced by a nomadic people entering a wholly new and settled land. The tree-less wilderness, the land of dust and thunderstorms (out of which the storm-god Jahweh might speak) the fear of the sea and its monsters, memories of the Nile and its fabulous beasts; all these were important factors. Israel found that the fertile wooded valleys were presided over by the tutelary deities, the Baals with their altars on the high places, and those entering upon their inheritance might do well to placate them. Hence the perpetual 'whoring after strange gods' and seductions by the attractive orgiastic religious that came from the sea; as well as the constant danger of racial miscegenation from the outland women on the borders.

III

I have stressed these matters because I think that we tend to underestimate the sheer difficulty, and the amount of study that this kind of reading demands. The stories of childhood are remembered, perhaps, as conditioning the adult reader into a false sense of security as to the texts, and an undue simplicity as to their contents. Many students seem to develop a certain cynical resentfulness when, as it seems to them, the 'myth' as stated in the Sunday School is diminished to the level of Father Christmas. There are, of course, many levels. But from the point of view of a student about to make a fairly serious study (as of a major English author) one might suggest that the time necessary is comparable for that required for Shakespeare — his background and two-dozen plays — or for Dante; rather more than that required for Milton or Donne. He will require what I would call an initial perspective of the Middle East over some six centuries; geography, history and a little ethnology; some comparative religion, particularly Greek and Sumerian; some anthropology and archaeology. He should know sufficient textual criticism to distinguish, say, between the three *Isaiabs*, and some at least of the stratifications in *Genesis* and *Job*. He will have to tune his ear, and his patience, to special kinds of narrative and poetic statements; and he must study the Hebrew poetic forms. Patience: because he must be aware of a different tempo of

thinking; he must understand and sympathize with the repetitions, the synonymous and incremental structures, the techniques of intensification, and the principles (in all religions) that determine liturgical and prophetic utterance. At the same time he must beware always of attempting to relate the values of the East too closely to those of the West — and the reverse holds good — without making some attempt to allow for the contextual situation in space and time.

A fruitful approach, and one of the utmost importance, is through myth. I prefer to call this mythologem (following Jung and Kerényi) in order to avoid its pejorative connotations, as of magic or fairy-tale. The very nature of 'myth' is imperfectly understood by many readers; and this misunderstanding seems to be at the root of the conflict with the fundamentals, as well as the justification for the demythologizers. There are many books that handle this theme with sanity and discrimination, and I do not propose to consider them here. It will be obvious that the student will have to touch on iconology and iconography. He will be confronted with its whole seminal character, as involving nearly all the archetypes of Biblical imagery. The average student is, I have found, astonished to discover these roots, and their ramifications in depth. I have already mentioned Tree, Lamb, Serpent; we could go on to consider the Garden, Wall, Fountain and Spring: sheep, oxen and goats; the symbolism of eagle, dove, sparrow, pelican, owl; the mandrake in all its complexity; the greater and the lesser rains; the voyage over sea and desert; oil, vine and corn; leviathan and behemoth and the great fishes of the deep.

IV

It is clear that the Bible offers a most extensive and varied field for 'pure' literary criticism. Over it loom the many philosophies, controversies (inevitable in any language) of translation. Each age provides its own theories, embodies the findings of its scholars in philology, semasiology and the rest:

Greek endings with the little passing-bell
That signify some faith's about to die.

The difficulties and humiliations of translations are commonplaces of literary history. Their controversies still centre about the

question: 'What does this mean?' Mere questions of fact in the conversion of the Hebrew arise continually. We have such notorious instances as Isaiah's 'Thou hast multiplied the nation and not increased the joy', which should read 'Thou hast multiplied the nation, and increased the joy'. A storm was aroused when a verse of *Psalms* 23, 'Yea though I walk through the Valley of the Shadow of Death . . .' was correctly rendered as 'Yea, though I walk through the darkest valley . . .' and a hallowed phrase was broken. The Tudor translators placed a greyhound among the four things that were graceful in their going: a war-horse or a cock should have joined that strange but credible company of well-girt things of *Proverbs* 30, 31.

But the 1611 Version, even though in 'the meanest style' and in a language already obsolescent, achieved its own unique success. Who can doubt that this achievement was to transpose the phonetic and semantic rhythms of the Hebrew and Greek into an almost flawless unity: making something new according to the laws of probability, necessity, and poetic or divine inspiration?

Yet anyone who dares to write about its intrinsic qualities in English should have (as I have not) a profound knowledge of Hebrew and Greek. The basic structure of Hebrew poetry is not difficult to understand, and the English stress system — perhaps with ancestral memories of Langland and Latimer — can be modified to give some shadow of it. What cannot of course be rendered is the word-play, the puns, the echoes of previous contextual usage, whether in the household language or in the sacred books. We can gather something of the importance of confirmatory quotations and reference ('As it is written') from the New Testament; we can sometimes deduce the specially-favoured works.

The literary reforgings of the sixteenth century are a study in themselves, providing infinite *exempla* of the search for rhythmic energy and exactitude of the just word. It was not pure fantasy that caused Kipling to write a short story in which he imagined that the Oxford Group of the King James translators called in Shakespeare to put the ultimate polish upon the opening verses of *Isaiah* LX: 'Arise, shine, for thy light is come.' We may think that all translators into English have been fortunate in the

affinities that Hebrew, and the Greek of the Gospels, have for this language. The Letters, often complex or tortuous as rendered into Tudor English (because of their philosophical or technical language that seventeenth-century writers had not yet encompassed) often acquire a new lucidity from the admirable modern versions. Apocalyptic writing, with its arcane and sometimes turbulent imagery, does not transfer easily into any language, and is in itself an highly specialized study. When statements, such as the Lesson for the Burial of the Dead, have a strong rhetorical or mystical content, the language of the Authorized Version seems more suitable. And all the while there is this problem of the *patina* acquired through usage. We have to consider what words are absolute and irrecoverable. Is 'lively' in the liturgy to be replaced by 'living', which is clearly not the same thing? What is the difference between 'O' and 'Oh'? And how does one direct Mr Sludge as to which version he should now use in his study of 'the first chapter of St John'?

The problem about writing on the translations is the infinite number of *exempla* on which one can draw. I have found it helpful to direct the attention of students to the Vulgate, and especially to the Psalms in the Roman Breviary: particularly for the compressed and multiplex resonance of the Latin. Side by side with these it is useful to consider the French Versions of the Psalms in the same manner; in order to demonstrate the effect of the absence of stress, and the expansion needed to set over the Latin. Here one draws attention to the three types of cadence, the *cursus tardus, planus* and *velox* of the medieval Latin, imported through the Vulgate and the Mass, to give their particular effect of resolution of chords: in contrast with the so-called 'English' cadence that uses the strong final beat. And the Prayer Book Liturgy is also central when discussing problems of rhythm.

It is necessary to attack certain 'vulgar errors'. Prophecy is not primarily concerned with forecasting the future: each prophet plays a highly complicated part which must be related to his contemporary situation, social and political; as well as his own personality. The Proverbs of the Bible, many of them are still common coin, have little to do with their Victorian counterparts; they represent, rather, the distillation of wisdom that is part of the intellectual and social currency of the East. It is

desirable to put the 'bloodthirstiness' of some of the Old Testament in its proper perspective: both in relation to the situation of Israel and the customs of warfare of the time. The same is true of the rituals of sacrifice, to many tedious and even revolting. We may point out that if our civilization had to butcher and dress our own meat we should take a very different view. And the hygiene of the Old Testament still remains exemplary in the Middle East.

It is important to confront the Bible in its aspects of a study of Evil. If it were not so its stature as a book would be infinitely less. Every provision of the Decalogue is broken many times; sins are committed that were, no doubt, beyond the imaginings of Sinai. Some of these we must consider in an Eastern context: notably the terrible power of false witness under the legal provisions of the times. Some of these we may with advantage regard ironically today:

Do not adultery commit:
 Advantage seldom comes of it.
 Thou shalt not kill, but needst not strive
 Officially to keep alive.

Raids and wars are commonplace: they are conducted to the point of mutilation or extermination, after the customs of the nations who surrounded Israel. The horrors of the Captivities are the commonplace of all history. The prayers of the Psalmists and Prophets for revenge are often far from edifying, and often quoted as a cause of offence today; but they are no worse than the agonized implications of any war. What the reader may often protest against is the exhibiting of Jahweh as the God of Battles, 'to whom vengeance belongeth'. We may remember that Bishop Ulfilas, in his translation, 'prudently suppressed the Books of the Kings, lest they should exacerbate the warlike tendencies' of his Gothic diocese. The Bible, like Shakespeare, has many sides. One of its dangers (and this accounts for the suspicion of the early Church as to the unmediated Book) is that it is a kind of reservoir from which the most varied and contradictory texts may be drawn. Even the New Testament has many sides, as Blake noted; and certain of the Parables, had they been set in a purely Jewish context would have been condemned by us as characteristically 'Jewish' in their tone and intentions.

V

One difficulty is that modern critical language does not seem helpful in trying to write about the Bible. This is a literature that is at once extremely simple, dealing with the subjects of the utmost profundity, in a language which in itself can be on the whole simple (the Scottish Ballads, and perhaps Wordsworth's intention as expressed in the First and Second *Prefaces*, may usefully be kept in mind), but which may be deceptively complex. Examples are, of course, the apocalyptic writings; but more so those portions of the New Testament which employ a specialized vocabulary: itself a kind of outgrowth of the contexts and events discussed. Such words are *grace*, *the church*, *the spirit*, *baptism*, *atonement* which demand historical and philosophical analysis. At the same time the terminology of today has little to offer. There is little 'ambiguity', 'tension', 'humour'; though there is a good deal of irony. The style in its very simplicity, *litotes*, understatement, exemplify the high moments of constraint to which speech can rise under the extreme pressure of emotion.

So I spake unto the people in the morning: and at even my wife died; and I did in the morning as I was commanded. (*Ezek.* 24: 18)

'He [Judas] then having received the sop went immediately out; and it was night'. (*John*, 13: 30)

We recall, perhaps, Matthew Arnold's touchstones as examples of this kind of intensity: 'And never lifted up a single stone' or Cleopatra's

Peace, peace!
Dost thou not see my baby at my breast
That sucks the nurse asleep?

We are dealing with distillations, as it were, of man's spirit. Yet such words as *awe*, *glory*, *sublimity*, *truth*, would cause critical embarrassment in many quarters. Not many would be prepared to sympathize with the position of, say, Rudolf Otto in *Das Heilige*, or in Reinhold Niebuhr's *Beyond Tragedy*. Nor are we helped by the turbulent and adulatory encomiums of much popular writing — and still more lecturing — on the Bible.

Perhaps, as Northrop Frye has suggested, we might take a fresh look at 'Longinus' *On the Sublime* and infuse new life into his terminology. But the older language would seem to involve

assent to a series of value-judgements: which, since they posit the fact of the supernatural, would command limited acceptance today.

The same is true of the arcane and apocalyptic portions of the Bible. The idea of a hidden and esoteric language is repugnant now. Few outside the circle of Blake scholars will consider the basic reading in Swedenborg and Boehme that is a necessary prelude to the study of that poet. And here there enters, as it does so continuously in literary criticism, the question of the willing suspension of disbeliefs. Are these disbeliefs themselves sufficiently real even to be formulated? We can, for the 'new reader' avoid a good deal of dogmatic theology (here it is useful to direct a student's attention to Arnold's *Literature and Dogma*), though one cannot avoid the use of the Covenant and the Messianic Promise to unify the loose textures of the Old Testament. It is probably wiser not to embark upon the doctrine of the Trinity: the rites of baptism and communion have enough ready parallels in other faiths to enable them to be approached at the appropriate levels. Moral teaching is valid in terms of what C. S. Lewis called the TAO: that body of commonly-accepted imperatives which, ideally, involves the widest acceptance in all religions.

Yet in the last resort, whatever the paths we may use to draw nearer to understanding (if not to sympathy) we must confront with our students the three great 'crooked questions'. We may gesture towards the progressive revelation of the Creator from the storm-god Jahweh to the Father of the Lord's Prayer: what spirals of language do we fling round that burning sun? What meaning (gesturing toward such writers as different as Vaughan and Von Hügel) can be given to the word 'Eternity'?

VI

There are other useful approaches. One is through history and archæology, to demonstrate the fallacy of popular myth. Another (and for a similar end) is to emphasize, from many angles, the textual problems; not as peculiar to the Bible, but as common to the transmission of all texts of comparable antiquity. Here H. J. Chaytor's *From Script to Print* (Cambridge, 1945) — so often used, since his death, without acknowledgement — is

useful. Basically, one must insist that here is a composite book, based on three main languages, themselves containing traces of many others, which contains in itself every conceivable editorial problem. Some knowledge of the Shakespearean 'disintegrators' of the 'twenties is valuable here. Its basic languages are difficult; on the one hand because of the very nature of the Hebrew, on the other because the Greek of the New Testament differs widely from the classical, and is both a household language and a complex theological vocabulary. If we take as our norm the King James Version of 1611 (and it seems to me necessary to take one such norm out of the many possible translations of the last hundred years) we have to reckon with originals that have been mirrored, refracted, distorted, by many literary processes. Who can be certain, after long silence and tradition, that the Aramaic originals have been set over into the words of Coverdale or St Jerome? And dare we base a dogma, or the authority of a confession, on three words in Latin? There is an appreciable number of instances when we do not know what Shakespeare or Donne wrote; or even Milton, *pace* Bentley's Edition. Perhaps it is heresy; but I cannot bring myself to believe in the inerrancy of the word as a basis for warfare, of whatever kind. One remembers Bacon: 'A great part of the mischiefs of the world arise from words.'

VII

For myself, I have found the most fruitful approach for students of literature is through 'the masterful images'; perennial, archetypal, of the language of the field or of the desert or of the market place. On them, and on the lucent sinewy language of understatement, the greatest poetry of the Bible seems to me to rest. To trace their repercussions in Western literature would surely be the work of many lifetimes. Yet it seems that it is through them that the awareness of the 'new reader' is most likely to grow. I can find no better words than those of Laurens Van der Post:¹

But we can at least know that there is a pattern in us, communicated by images that come like star-light into our spirit, and that by serving them with all our heart and mind, life on earth can become richer, freer and greater than it ever has been.

¹ Laurens Van der Post, *The Heart of the Hunter*, 1961, p. 254.