
Literary Play and Religious Referentiality

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In the last few years the attentive reader can distinguish the interesting outlines of a struggle over the most appropriate relationship between literature and religion. Thus Edward Said complains of the "dramatic increase in the number of appeals to the extrahuman, the vague abstraction, the divine, the esoteric and secret," whose causes are found in "exhaustion, consolation, disappointment." According to him, these appeals seek "the secure protection of systems of belief," and are solidary with the "ahistorical, manifestly religious aestheticism of the New Criticism." Their "cost...is unpleasant to contemplate" and the duty of the true critic is to restore criticism into a "truly secular enterprise."¹ This point of view is also expressed, but in a much more polemical and accusatory tone by Jonathan Culler: "Our most famous critics...are promoters of religion...They make religion a substitute for literature...Religion is the most potent repressive force in America today, but teachers of literature do not raise their voices against it—thinking it irrelevant but all the while honoring the Hartmans and Fries who promote religious values and attitudes," who concludes by a stentorian call to arms against the Bible as a "powerfully racist and sexist document."²

On the other hand, George Panichas recently criticized René Wellek and his tradition for setting up a humanism and a system of

critical and aesthetic values from both of which consideration of moral values is conspicuously absent.³ Likewise Donald Davie stated that Eliot's experience of salvation and damnation has not been adequately discussed so far because "there is no currently acceptable mode of critical biographical discourse that can accommodate it."⁴ Finally George Steiner has asked for a return to the religious foundations of criticism, saying, "It is loans of terminology and reference from the reserves of theology which provide the master readers in our time...with their license to practice. We have borrowed, traded upon, made small change of the reserves of transcendent authority..." "He asks" "What would it mean to acknowledge, indeed to repay these massive loans?" and answers, "I cannot arrive at any rigorous conception of a possible determination of either sense or stature which does not wager on a transcendence, on a real presence, in the act or product of serious art, be it verbal, musical, or that of material forms."⁵

Clearly, we are faced with divergent perceptions of reality: either literature and literary criticism are too involved with the realm of the religious, or not enough. I would propose that both sides in this dispute are right to an extent. Said, Culler, and the many who share their views are right because indeed all too often criticism has acted in a sneaky and almost naughty way as a substitute for religious theorizing: an insidious procedure that may have yielded pleasing and nourishing fruit from the New Critics to Northrop Frye and Harold Bloom, but one that in the long run serves ill both literature and religion, because it evades distinctions and indulges in theoretical promiscuity. Steiner, Davie, and Panichas are right at the same time. Whereas the number of interdisciplinary studies of all kinds on literature and politics, or literature and the arts, or literature and philosophy has multiplied manifold in quantity and quality, little if any similar movement could be recognized in the interdisciplinary field of literature and religion until the last few years. Therefore on the one hand we can notice too much involvement and mixture between the literary and the religious, on the other hand there is clearly less than enough objective interdisciplinary study of this field. Why does this state of affairs obtain?

Along with some interesting social and institutional causes that will not be discussed here, a very important cause of this situation is methodological in nature. To be sure, there are now, as there have always been, studies of religious history or literature as a subgenre, pointing out particularly in the Middle Ages, less often in other periods, connections of different kinds. Once in a while we can also read thematic studies. Examples of this kind could be Theodore Ziolkowski's

book on the figure of Jesus in literature or the studies on David as a literary figure.⁶ However, what is missing is a more open recognition and critical investigation of the internal structures of discourse and thinking.⁷ This is to be regretted, because the preconditions for this type of analysis already exist. I refer at one end to the studies in the history of culture that take quite seriously the categories of mythical and religious thinking; of the many works of this type I can mention Eric Voegelin's study of historical development, Mircea Eliade's history of religious ideas, and Karsten Harries's investigation of rococo art.⁸ At the other end we have an increasing body of modern research on scriptural texts with the tools of literary investigation. Of this large body I would like to single out the studies of Robert Alter and Edward Leach as examples of what I have in mind.⁹

However, between these two fields there are open spaces much less often frequented,¹⁰ even though they seem to be the most important in any discussion of interplay, intertextuality, or plain relationship between literature and religion. These are spaces in which the theoretical debate of a literature-religion rapport is settled, with its reflection on mutual historical influences (and on what grounds these are possible at all), discourse and language analogies and interpenetration, and finally play as a kind of common denominator, the topic addressed by many papers in the present volume. My own presentation will deal with some possibilities for organizing these open spaces and constituting a somewhat more complete system for approaching competently the interactions between literary and religious texts. I will begin with a brief account of two theoretical models and will then try to describe the main level at which literary-religious interactions are significant.

I

Hans Urs von Balthasar is perhaps the most profound and widest-ranging Catholic thinker in the second half of the twentieth century, although this fact is little recognized as yet. He is also an innovative and associative thinker of stature comparable to a Wittgenstein, or a Heidegger. From a Catholic point of view, he belongs with Henri de Lubac, Jacques Maritain, and others in the category of pre-Conciliar liberals who had difficulty with their authorities in the 1940s (for instance, Balthasar had to step out of the Jesuit order then) only to find themselves outside the mainstream of liberal Catholic intellectual opinion after the 1960s. But this difficulty is of minor significance compared to Balthasar's scholarly achievements—so impressive in

their quantity and range—which cannot be even summarized here. Suffice it to mention—besides monographs and anthologies on Origen and St. Maximus the Confessor—a three-volume study, the *Apocalypsis der deutschen Seele* (1938-1940). This volume is a very thoughtful review of developments in German intellectual life from pre-romanticism to the modern period, which is a kind of counterpart to Lukács's later and shorter *Zerstörung der Vernunft*, written from a religious rather than from a materialist perspective. The works that are most important, from our point of view, and that are also undoubtedly the greatest embodiments of Balthasar's thinking are *Herrlichkeit* and *Theodramatik*.¹¹ I will sketch out some of the main concepts used in them, indicating briefly their relevance for interdisciplinary studies.

Herrlichkeit is a work that purports to approach the numinous not primarily from the point of view of the good or the true, but rather from the point of view of the beautiful. The title word carries a large number of connotations, such as glory, splendor, lordliness, radiance, or the sublime, but its central meaning is presented in volume 3 of the work: it is the Aramaic *khabôd*, the divine quality that is essential in the Hebrew Bible. The analysis in that volume is continued by a subvolume devoted to the New Testament, and a volume from a more ecumenical angle was also planned but never written by Balthasar. The investigation is preceded by studies of this problem in the history of metaphysics, as well as in the work of twelve poets, mystics, and theologians. Among them were Bonaventure, Dante, Pascal, Hamann, G. M. Hopkins, Solov'yev, Péguy, and others each of whom, according to Balthasar, tried to provide a version of a theological aesthetic. It is important to underline that the author's own position, as it can be deduced from this volume as well as from his work as a whole, is not chiefly in the tradition of scholasticism and neo-Thomism, but rather is patristic and neo-Platonic. Occasionally it was even characterized by critics as gnostic. All these modes of intellectual activity deal in the foregrounding of the ineffable, the visionary, and the role of imagination.

Balthasar finds that the process of religious understanding and the process of literary meaning formation present huge areas of analogy, particularly in the dialectic of the subjective and the objective. In both, subjectivity organizes and crystallizes the objective reality that is its target and center, while the aprioric absent objectivity will channel and steer subjectivity. In its turn, this process shows similarities with "aesthetic necessity," where the being of a literary work seems to require its details, but at the same time this overall comprehension depends "always already" upon the existence of the work in its com-

pleteness. Religious knowledge and experience, like aesthetic knowledge and experience, entail forms of collaboration of rationality with irrationality, chaos, and silence.

Balthasar also tests out other pairs of opposition in literary and theological discourse. One of these is the relationship between *lumen* and *figura* (i.e., the divine and the historical) in theological discourse with inspiration (or project) versus shape (or *Gestalt*) in literary and critical discourse. Another one is the relationship between image and reality in the discourse of sacrality and in trinitarian dialectics as analogous to the problematic of differing levels of reality on which we can place a literary fact. Balthasar believes that "mental forms that grew in the kind of surroundings in which beauty is also rooted, that is to say, halfway between a *Mythos* that deifies and sacralizes everything, and a *Ratio* that demystifies and secularizes everything, often came closest to the truth." (*H*, I, 637). He aligns himself with the old tradition that regards the Bible as *ars Dei*, a divine work of art (*H*, I, 511), and he is convinced that Christianity is an ultimately aesthetic religion (*H*, I, 208).

These principles, presented with awesome erudition and in extravagant demonstrative breadth in *Herrlichkeit*, receive an even more pointed treatment in *Theodramatik*, which is intended as a kind of companion to the earlier work, presenting the theological tenets in their dynamic, rather than as a static picture. In fact one can recognize the same general fund of ideas, but this time not within the general metaphorical framework of glorious radiance, but rather with a referential level drawn from dramatic literature and performance. Actually, the whole first volume of the five that compose *Theodramatik* is devoted to an analysis of theatrical mechanisms, and this analysis is then consistently applied to the key aspects of salvation history, trinitarian interrelationships, eschatological outlook, and the relationship between the human and the divine. As might be expected, Balthasar emphasizes that in his view the dramatic functions and operators are, at the immanent level, aspects and consequences of their transcendent counterparts. Thus he discusses human freedom as relative and as the upshot of absolute divine liberty (*Th*, II, 1, 170–305). Nevertheless, the fact remains that throughout *Theodramatik* it is the aesthetic categories of drama that are drawn upon and are used to organize and to illuminate the mass of theological information to be shaped.

For instance, Balthasar discusses the relationship between person and mission (in the case of Christ, but equally in the case of every human being) by using the reference to character and acting and by investigating the way in which they have access to reality (*Th*, I and II). Another good

example could be Balthasar's discussion of the nature of trinitarian divinity, in which he rejects both a transcendent-abstract conception (e.g., a Deist one), and an immanent-mythical conception of plural natural divinities. To explain his own mediating conception, Balthasar resorts to a trio of dramatic concepts and their application: author-actor-director. Historically this analogy is expanded by another triad: audience-production-horizon, which is seen as the transposition of the first triad (*Th*, I, 247–301 and II, 2, 487–89).

A further example is furnished by Balthasar's highly useful examination of the dialogic principle (*Th*, I, 587–604). In discussing present-day trends of Protestant and particularly of Catholic theology, Balthasar enumerates nine trends and themes (*Th*, I, 23–46), one of which (along with "political," "orthopractical," "functional," and others) is the "dialogical" (*Th*, I, 31–34). After developing his "theodramatic" thesis, he returns to the dialogical principle and shows how it is rooted in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century Catholic, but even more emphatically, Jewish thinkers who had both secular and religious purposes. Among these we can mention Ferdinand Ebner, Gabriel Marcel, Martin Buber, Franz Rosenzweig, as well as to a lesser extent Hans Ehrenberg, Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy, Löwith, and Jaspers. This dialogical principle is shown to spring from sources in romanticism and in *Lebensphilosophie*. In its fuller theological and philosophic development, the dialogic principle provides a flexible approach and a broadly humanistic horizon for investigating the relationship between the transcendent and the immanent, or the numinous and the natural. In a symmetrical reversal the dialogical model—which of course is dramatic and literary to begin with—can return enriched from its philosophical and theological adventure to serve as a guide for our understanding of narration and the reading process. It is, incidentally, difficult to believe that this is not what happened in the case of Bakhtin. Even though Bakhtin was not in direct contact with the "dialogical group" (as Balthasar called it), he grew out of similar neo-Kantian roots, and he was equally steeped in religious preoccupations that he could not articulate openly because of the servile and oppressive circumstances in which he was unfortunately obliged to function. It is plain that we can reach a fuller understanding of Bakhtin only by reference to the dialogical tradition and its theoretical implications.

Finally it should be mentioned that Balthasar provides us with models of interdisciplinary studies embedded in his major works. Thus the thematic essays on *theatrum mundi* (*Th*, I, 121–238), or the world as stage, as well as the essay on holy fools in literature (*H*, III, 492–551) are

models of their kind, which even a specialist such as Curtius might have envied.¹² It should be obvious even from these cursory remarks that the labyrinthine work of Hans Urs von Balthasar provides suggestions for approaching the literature-religion connection from diverse directions.

II

Jean Luc Marion, the other main character of this short story was born in 1946, is teaching at the University of Poitiers, and has written a brilliant dissertation on Descartes, of which I must underline in particular his bold attempt to uncover a white or (even better) a "blank" theology in Descartes, that is to say a theology of absence in the work of the father of modern rationalism.¹³ This was, in a way, the foundation for several further book-length studies, of a more unabashed intertextuality; I will refer in some detail to one: *L'idole et la distance*. The book is formed out of studies on Nietzsche, Hölderlin, Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite, and Heidegger. Marion seeks a vantage point from which the relationship between signifier and signified can become a truly productive one, whether for literary analysis, intellectual spirituality, or philosophical meditation. He thinks that by transferring these categories fast enough from one field to the other and back we can draw some more useful and insightful conclusions than if we were to confine ourselves to literature or to some combinations of literature and social reality. He also emphasizes quite clearly that it is the opening towards transcendence, incorporated and codified in the theological discourse, that plays a key role in the cognitive integration he seeks.

Marion begins, I believe, by an acute sensitivity to the analogies between two separate lines of thinking. On the one hand he considers the modern school of absence and deconstruction, of radical skepticism and relativity, as illustrated by Derrida and prepared philosophically by Nietzsche and Heidegger. On the other hand he considers the long and powerful tradition of negative theology, or the apophatic way. This theological tradition, whose first great representative was the shadowy and mysterious Pseudo-Dionysus the Areopagite, and which reached a late culmination in the theoretical work of Nicolaus Cusanus and in the poetical work of San Juan de la Cruz, claims that the approach to God can only be negation, by a stripping of attributes and qualifications: we can only say what God is not. Cusanus concludes that God is neither expressible, nor inexpressible, nor both expressible and inexpressible; He neither is, nor is not, nor is and is not at the same time; He simply

does not fall under the category of Being.¹⁴ We can mention, in passing, that apophatism is stronger in Eastern than in Western Christianity, and equally important, that it is by no means limited to Christianity. Examples that come readily to mind are branches of Buddhism, such as Zen, as well as some central tenets of Judaism, such as the refusal to voice the tetragrammaton indicating the name of God. (Marion does refer to the latter of these two examples, though not the former.) In any case, Marion perceives the two traditions—modern skepticism and negative theology—as being related and convergent and as gaining through mutual illumination (*M*, 191).

The key distinction proposed in Marion's study refers to *idol* and *icon*. According to him *idol* is an epistemologically local name or image of divinity (*M*, 24–25). It refuses distance, and instead tries to appropriate and stabilize transcendence and sacrality; the human experience of the divine requires precedence over the divine itself; the transcendent signified has to submit to conformity and reification. By contrast the *icon* (and this will certainly come as a surprising reading to those who have grown up on the definition of W. K. Wimsatt) tries to capture neither the human signifier, nor the divine signified but merely the relationship between the one and the other (*M*, 25–27). Therefore it manages to admit and incorporate distance and absence—the withdrawal of God. Let me add here that in this book and in a subsequent one Marion extends the implications of this statement to the point where God is made independent of the category of Being, that is, of existence or nonexistence (*Dieu sans l'être*). For the literary discourse the implications are equally momentous. Turning upside down the aphorism of Wittgenstein, Marion claims that "Ce qui ne peut pas être dit ne doit pas être tu" ("What cannot be said must not be passed over in silence") (*M*, 232). At the same time however he quotes approvingly Wittgenstein's view that words are not the translation of something that was already there and preceded them. According to Marion this could be expanded to the relationship between reality and concept, the latter being the utterance of something that will and does remain inexpressible (*M*, 27). This type of project can find ready parallels in modern critical views of the relationship between text and literary comment, as well as to the one between social practice and language, from Roland Barthes to Stanley Fish.

Marion follows the variations of these categories and of others. He regards Nietzsche's philosophical operation as a destruction of idols and the clearing of an anonymous space which leaves room for an anarchic invasion of sacrality; conversely, the withdrawal of the divine and the creation of distance can be regarded as an ultimate form of

revelation (*M*, 114). In Hölderlin's poems and fragments, Marion discovers first of all a meditation on the retreat of the gods and on the absence of the Father. The simplest model for his analysis is a short letter to Hölderlin's mother sent by Hölderlin in the years after his mental breakdown. This brief note carries no semantic charge, or contains no message. The letter is abstract and nude; it is a signal merely describing the vast distance separating the ill poet from a healthy and remote mother. Marion believes that this type of relationship was already present in Hölderlin's poetry: the withdrawal of the gods is the most radical mode of divine presence, and the best kind of proximity is distance and abandonment. It is part of this divine concealment that its revelation is effected in the epistemologically weak and socially disenfranchised and poverty-ridden figure of the Son (*M*, 148). Another chapter in Marion's study discusses Pseudo-Dionysius in linguistic terms, as a model for the type of discourse that can be used in connection with divinity and sacrality: erotic and encomiastic discourse, as opposed to theoretical and epistemological discourse. This serves as an introduction to a discussion—based largely on Heidegger—of the modalities in which God has no part in the ontic antinomy of being/nonbeing, but must be seen outside it (*M*, 294).

Marion's greatest merit is his discovery of an analogy between the categories of structural semantics (and poststructuralist philosophy) and the categories of theological discourse. Like Hans Urs von Balthasar, Marion does not seek in object, imagery, and contents the intertextuality of the religious and the literary, but in something else. Each of the two areas covers a mass of meanings and objects upon which organizing categories and interpretive lines are applied; it is this formal carving out, and the discourse principles behind it, that are considered legitimate partners in comparison and analogy.

One implication of this approach—by no means a trivial one—is that if opening to transcendence is a central trait of humanness, then indeed aesthetic activity is the zone most closely neighboring the religious one. This line of argumentation is not entirely new; at different points in history (most recently in the early nineteenth century and in the late nineteenth century) it was made by numbers of poets and thinkers of different religious persuasions (or none at all). Nevertheless, it never gained more than marginal and grudging acceptance inside the religious systems themselves, and it was looked upon with mistrust or even outright hostility in the society at large. Perhaps some more modest claims as to the connections and interactions between religious and aesthetic languages will have better chances of obtaining validity.

III

What then are the roles of religion in comparatist studies and what are the modes of its relatedness with literary culture? I think that a few general principles can be easily enounced. The first is that the relation literature-religion is a legitimate and important object of study. Any intolerant attempt to suppress it must be rejected, not only because it is incompatible with the spirit of free research, but also because such censorial violence leads to unwelcome compensatory effects, for instance, the return of religious categories and attitudes in concealed forms. Those who ought to be particularly supportive of interdisciplinary literature and religion studies are undoubtedly the sociological, historical, and Marxist critics, that is to say all those who strive for an understanding of the true environments and determinations of a work. (One assumes that it is easier for psychoanalytical and formalist critics to ignore the religious contexts and dimensions of authors and works, although in fact they do it less often). It is important to remember that all human societies known to us have shown a constant concern with transcendent matters and openings. The greatest women writers of the Middle Ages wrote in the idiom of mysticism. As often as not, political conflicts and ideological debates were cast in the language of theological disagreement, until 300 years ago in the West, until more recently elsewhere; indeed, whenever we look more attentively at the modern world we find that religious motivations are quite a bit weightier than we are comfortable with, or suspected them to be. A generation-and-a-half ago critics were asking each other how many children Lady Macbeth had, much in the spirit in which they ask themselves nowadays what the power relations were at the court of Louis XIV. These are worthy curiosities, but they will never allow us to find out as much about the scope or the failings of a given cultural universe as inquiries into the religious horizons of Racine and Calderón, Christine de Pisan, Jonathan Swift, or Amos Tutuola.

The second principle is that sectarian and confessional bias must be an object of concern, but only of moderate concern. Normally divisiveness along ideological lines should not be more serious in this field than divisiveness along the lines of political choice in the study of literature and politics. In the latter a liberal student will differ from a Marxist in obvious ways, but this does not compromise the field of study. Similarly, I would contend that the open discussion of interdisciplinarity with religion could only gain by a clear definition of points of view and assumptions. Disagreement, here as elsewhere, can

well have a bracing and healthy effect. That some will regard Milton's or Blake's poems as debased and infected by their involvement with a religious dimension, while others will see them as enhanced and exalted, is less important in this context than the hows, whys, and whats of an involvement that could be ignored only by a severe curtailment of the range of meanings present in them. In the case of Milton and Blake, the interdisciplinary aspect of literature-religion is in fact rarely overlooked, and the examination of Milton's scriptural implications has recently become a most flourishing branch of Milton studies. However, to take another pair of examples, Swift and Pope are seldom discussed in terms of their religious motivations and frameworks. A better understanding of Swift's Augustinian roots and Pope's relatedness with Molinist and Fénelonian ways of thinking could add a lot to our fuller understanding of the authors, even if the critical research disagrees with these particular tenets. Similarly I think that the stands of many authors from Rabelais to Diderot or from Shelley to Hardy could be better understood—whether we like them or not—by a knowledge of the background structures (religious and clerical) they were reacting against.

The third proposition that I will enounce is that even at this early stage the field of study appears organized along some main lines and around some key topics. Some of the main of these are: imagery drawn from religious sources, typologies, ideas, and, in particular, a sensibility shaped by religious patterns, the literary and aesthetic dimensions of religious texts (whether those with canonical status or others), and the analogies and oppositions of literary and religious discourse (and, likewise, of the corresponding critical discourses). Let me dwell a little upon each of them. Imagery drawn from religious sources refers not only to symbols, motifs, and archetypal human figures and situations, but more narrowly to those that can be somehow shown to be mediated through an organized historical religion rather than to belong to some common archetypal fund. This kind of distinction could in fact provide some essential debating points. Typologies, like religious imagery are reasonably well frequented, though perhaps not in a systematic way. I would notice here however that if typologies and ideas inspired by the universe of religious representations are more often discussed, this is not always true about the even more important categories of sensibility shaped by religious patterns. This is a particularly fruitful area however. I think of the works of Henri Brémond,¹⁵ but even more of studies linking pietist and methodist sensibility with literary developments in the second half of the eighteenth century or reformatory and counter-reformatory enthusiasm with the aesthetic events of the sixteenth and

seventeenth centuries. It is clear to me that the nineteenth and twentieth centuries offer here a vast field of interdisciplinary investigation that is underfrequentated. The third broad topic I have distinguished was virtually ignored in the past but has grown dramatically in the last twenty to thirty years: the treatment of religious literature with the analytical methods of modern criticism, that is mostly structuralist criticism, but also simply narrative analysis. These methods we have seen applied chiefly to the books of the Bible, and in fact the Old Testament slightly more often than the New Testament. What we still lack is the application of similar methods to canonical books of other religions, from Islam to Asian religions, but also to the huge mass of texts surrounding the texts with sacred status: apologetic writings, commentaries of all kinds, hagiography, and related writing.

The last large area that I can detect (and I do not mean this as an exhaustive list) is the area of discourse analogies. My brief presentation of Marion and Hans Urs von Balthasar has already suggested what I have in mind. The field itself holds tremendous possibilities. One can wonder, for example, to what extent modern poststructuralist, deconstructionist, and relativist interpretations are related to the family of casuist, talmudic, jesuitical, gnostic, and heretical freewheeling and imaginatively associative theological discourse. One can study historically the transfer of philological and text-critical methods from biblical literature to the writings of classical antiquity and from there to modern literatures in the vernaculars. One can easily conceive a consistently adversarial reading of theological discourse originating from Foucauldian, feminist, or other sources, something that hardly exists nowadays. More important than any of the above is the contribution of biblical studies to the research of textuality and meaning. In fact it must be a source of never-ending wonder how the study of the emergence of meanings out of texts can afford to ignore the one field—biblical studies—where a huge experience of the kind has been accumulated over many centuries. Meaning-formation in this large special field, on the basis of a set of privileged texts could and did lead to decisive turns in cultural and ideological orientation, and more than once to political conflict and military violence. The enormous stakes of these textual analyses make them ideal enlarged objects in which meaning-formation processes can be observed. An interdisciplinary study of literature and religion could contribute in essential ways to our knowledge about the human race as an interpretive and self-interpretive entity.

I will now turn to the fourth and last of my conclusions, which has

to do with differentiation rather than with generality. The interesting methodological question arises—whether the time-honored archetypal criticism is actually identical (or overlaps in large areas) with an interdisciplinary study of religion, the former providing much of the raw material and, often, the tools for the latter. Archetypal studies have also the advantage of being relatively more value-free and objective, and therefore less controversial. The fact remains that they are not identical. Mythical archetypes provide a general level of reference for any literary work; in its generality this level is necessary but not sufficient. Religious intertextuality provides the kind of historical and specific referentiality that literary works need in order to preserve their own autonomy and dignity. Historical accuracy is also involved here. Discussing *Pamela* in Jungian or Freudian terms is certainly an interesting exercise, but it is only and exactly that: an exercise. Samuel Richardson was thinking in neither Freudian nor Jungian categories, but rather in the only ways he knew how to think: those of dissident Protestantism, virtue preserved and virtue lost, free will, salvation and sin. These are categories that belong to a specific place and time, to a specific social and intellectual environment, to a specific religiosity. It goes without saying that a fuller understanding of an early Chinese novel or of an Indian epic will in turn have to draw not upon a general archetypal comparative background, or not only upon it, but upon the specific religious-intellectual categories that surrounded its author and its original audience.

Abraham Avni proposed already fifteen years ago that a classification of a world literature that wants to go beyond the confines of Eurocentrism could use as a measuring device *The Book*, that is, relationship to the Bible. He established a number of categories, such as cultures untouched by *The Book* (Maya, Aztec, Old Slavic, Scandinavian, etc.), indirectly influenced, and so forth, and inside European culture Avni established periods shaped by the biblical discourse, periods of tension with or withdrawal from the biblical text, and so forth.¹⁶

This is a very intriguing idea, and it deserves more attention than it has received until now. Personally, I could not accept it as a classification criterion without some further qualifications. But it does remain extremely suggestive, particularly for those among us who are genuinely preoccupied by the need to develop categories that could globalize comparative literature. I think that the literary-religious intertextuality provides us with an important avenue towards a more global outlook. Understanding each literature's or each culture's relationship with its own religious categories and sensibilities will give us in turn a broad

common platform (the history of religions) and the important benefit of the methodological experience provided by the comparative study of religions.

IV

The studies included in the present volume represent yet another avenue of cultural intertextuality: play as a mediating structure. Naturally enough, this kind of approach falls in with “discourse analogy” models discussed in the body of my article. However, it is also specific enough to provide—with laughter and irony—some connections that have been rarely, if ever, explored. Play, imagination, narrativity—these are constitutive and basic features of any human condition no less than sexuality, hunger, fear, the search for power, or the need for transcendence. Narrative play intervenes in each of these, shaping (un)consciously these inchoate substantial contents of human existence. One way of looking at literature is to regard as “*theologia ludens*”—God-science at play—the sweetly palatable mode of dealing with ultimate existential interrogations. Another one can well be that, like everything else, the realm of the religious is a product of our restless and interminable impulse of imaginative play, ever again inventing possible and alternative universes. And yet others can be thought of. Essentially this is what the current volume is all about: the micro-interactions, the random plays and palpations, the tiny tropistic moves of the literary that we notice in the space between the religious and the literary.

The articles that follow are arranged merely in chronological order, from the midrashic implications of early biblical texts to exegeses of some twentieth-century authors like Max Jacob, Georges Bataille, or Péguy. The main exceptions are the first and the last articles of the volume—my own and that of Louis Dupré—which are more theoretical. Mine has the more modest goal of trying to clear the ground methodologically and map out some main critical options. The essay of Louis Dupré is, one can safely say, an outline of the context in which, from the point of view of a philosophy of culture, the interactions of literature and religion can play their part. For him the incurable shattering of assumed epistemological organicities and durabilities of the past is—who knows?—the lucky chance that the limited but palpable concrete collaboration of literary and religious discourses needed.

It is precisely in the general spirit of Dupré’s discrete world view that the essays of Judah Goldin and Jean-Michel Heimonet are held. The

former foregrounds with enormous erudition the essential power of detail in the study and interpretation of biblical texts, while the latter subtly exposes the "monsters" growing out of the homogenizing and leveling ideological structures that tend to ignore the power and dignity of details. Both seem unafraid of a world that is "shattered," and tend to suggest (at least implicitly) that sacral play reunites fragments in ways that are not immediately recognizable, but are nonetheless effective.

Whether laughter is a form of chaos or has an ordering potential is a question quite germane to the one regarding the ontological dignity of the detail. Traditionally we were talking about the decomposing and corroding power of laughter. But what if in and through the comic (as perhaps already Dante intimated) some vague feelings of the transcendent are also pervasive? The chaotic playfulness of laughter may create a medium in and through which hazy outlines of a superior order can be glimpsed. When Sanford Budick writes about Milton, Barbara Kurtz about Calderón's *Autos Sacramentales*, or Eric Ziolkowski about Kierkegaard and Carlyle, this is an important theme they are tackling, beyond the specific points they choose to make. Arthur Quinn on Old Testament texts is perhaps even more specific in dealing with the relationship of sacrality and the comic.

Finally there is, of course, order itself, a concern in all essays of the volume, but more specifically in those of Mary Anne O'Neil, Robert Royal, Giuseppe Mazzotta, and Louis Dupré. Play is, after all, not only arbitrary, imaginative, and chaotic, it is also (in the most modern physical-mathematical sense of the term "chaotic") an activity of order. Play is perhaps the one utopian and much-yearned-for site where complete freedom and complete order can ecstatically embrace and triumphantly rest in at the same time, the golden dream of the founding fathers of aesthetics, from Leibniz and Baumgarten to Kant and Schiller. Does the intertextuality of the literary and the religious provide us with any clues as to how to reach such a desirable place? Dupré believes that the theodramatic of Balthasar, O'Neil believes that the ironic meditations of Max Jacob (with their Salesian inspiration), and Royal argues that a future-oriented energy can organize value-systems.

Giuseppe Mazzotta, who has the additional merit of bringing to the attention of the American public an author of enormous consequence on the literary scene of the Italian twentieth century, is persuaded that order can only be the consequence of play, much as the poets are (and have been for a long time) the best heralds and communicators of spirituality, saintliness, and perhaps even theology.

All these profound and excellent contributions may be more or

less persuasive at different levels, expressing, as they do, different theses. Their combined impact, however, is impossible to overlook: they affirm massively the role of comparative literature as a vibrant center of humanistic studies.¹⁷ The intertextuality of literature and religion fits in well with other kinds of interdisciplinarity and intertextuality that are now being explored. It reaffirms a certain roundedness and integrity of humanistic values that preserve their traditional worth and flexible durability in the face of multiple attacks from different directions.

Notes

1. Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 291–92.
2. Jonathan Culler, "A critic against the Christians," *Times Literary Supplement*, November 23, 1984, p. 1328. See also his *In Pursuit of Signs* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press), p. 161.
3. George Panichas, "A Failure of Nerve," *Comparative Literature Studies*, 21 (1984), 1, 103–14.
4. Donald Davie, "The Modernist Malgré lui," *TLS*, September 21, 1984, p. 1044.
5. George Steiner, "Viewpoint: A New Meaning of Meaning," *TLS*, November 8, 1985, pp. 1275–76. The text of the Leslie Stephen Memorial Lecture is expanded in *Real Presences* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).
6. Theodore Ziolkowski, *Fictional Transfigurations of Jesus* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972). R. J. Frontrain, Jan Wojcik, eds., *The David Myth in Western Literature* (West Lafayette, Ind.: Purdue University Press, 1980). Benvenuto Matteucci, *Per una teologia delle lettere*, 3 vols. (Pisa, Italy: Pacini, 1980).
7. There are interesting exceptions. See for instance Beryl Schlossman, *Joyce's Catholic Comedy of Language* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985) or Henry Sullivan, *Desire and the Latin Church* (forthcoming).
8. Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978–82), 4 vols. Eric Voegelin, *Order and History*, 4 vols. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956–1987). Karsten Harries, *The Bavarian Rococo Church. Between Faith and Aestheticism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1983).
9. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981); *The Art of Biblical Poetry* (New York: Basic Books, 1985). Edward Leach, *Struc-*

turalist Interpretations of Biblical Myth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979).

10. This is not to say that such studies are entirely lacking. See Peter Grotzer, "Literary Criticism and Religious Consciousness: Marginalia on Albert Béguin, Georges Poulet, and Marcel Raymond," *JAAR Thematic Studies*, 49 (1979), 2, 31–44. Thomas Pavel, "De la semantique mystique," *Liberté*, 161 (October 1985), pp. 72–84. For religiosity in general one can mention the works of Paul Ricoeur, Louis Dupré, and Raimundo Panikkar, among others.

11. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Herrlichkeit. Eine Theologische Aesthetik*, 3 vols. (Einsiedeln, Switz.: Johannes Verlag, 1961–68). Each volume is a multivolume work, so we are talking in fact of eight volumes, with an additional one forthcoming. *Ibid.* *Theodramatik*, 4 vols. (Einsiedeln, Switz.: Johannes Verlag, 1975–81). This is a work in five volumes. References in parentheses in the text are given to the author's way of counting.

12. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Reinhold Schneider. Sein Weg und Werk* (Koeln-Olten, Germany: Hegner, 1953); *Bernanos* (1954; Einsiedeln, Switz.: Johannes Verlag, 1971).

13. Jean-Luc Marion, *Sur la theologie blanche de Descartes* (Paris: Presses Universitaires Françaises, 1981). The other two important essays are *L'idole et la distance* (Paris: Grasset, 1977) hereafter in the text as *M*, and *Dieu sans l'être* (Paris: Fayard, 1984).

14. In *De deo abscondito*, quoted after the German translation, Nikolaus von Kues, *Drei Schriften vom verborgenen Gott* (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1958), ed. and trans. E. Bohnenstadt, pp. 4–5. Meister Eckhardt was the chief proponent of this kind of theorizing, in a poetical mysticism. It would be appropriate to quote here the medieval aphorism *Si comprehendis non est Deus*.

15. Ciriaco Arroyo-Morón, "The Spanish Source of *Hamlet*," *Hispanic Journal*, 1 (1980), pp. 5–23. Donald Davie, *Dissentient Voices* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982); *God and the Poets* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984). James Boulger, *The Calvinist Temper in English Poetry* (The Hague: Mouton, 1980). Henri Brémond, *Prière et poésie* (Paris: Grasset, 1926); Hans Urs von Balthasar, *op cit*.

16. Abraham Avni, "The Bible as Periodizing Factor in Comparative Literature," in Milan Dimic, Eva Kushner, Roman Struc, eds., *Proceedings of the 7th Congress of the I.C.L.A.*, 2 vols. (Stuttgart, Germ.: E. Bieber, 1979), 2: 73–75.

17. Perhaps the most simple and lucid discussion from a comparatist point of view is Theodore Ziolkowski's "Religion and Literature in a Secular Age: The Critic's Dilemma," *Journal of Religion*, 59 (1979), 1, 18–34. Other discussions of this kind are Helen Gardner's, *Religion and Literature* (Oxford: Ox-

ford University Press, 1971); Vernon Ruland's, *Horizons of Criticism. An Assessment of Religious-Literary Options* (Chicago: American Library Association, 1975); and William Mallard's, *The Reflection of Theology in Literature* (San Antonio, Tex.: Trinity University Press, 1977).