Lunar Shadows: Reflections on Literary Creation

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'De la poétique chrétienne', Chapter 13, pp. 269-289 of *Ombres de lune: réflexions sur la création littéraire*, Éditions Espaces 34, 2001. It is a paper originally given on 14 January 1992, at the centre de recherches 'Lecture de l'Écriture', Université de Lille III, directed by Jacques Sys. It was published in *Graphè*, 2, 1993, and is here kindly translated for *The Glass* by David Barratt.

1

I HAVE SUGGESTED IN THE COURSE OF THIS BOOK THAT THE PHENOMENON OF repetition, which allows us to probe in all sorts of ways the action and being of poetry and other forms of literature, for me takes its origin in an 'explanation of the earth' (Mallarmé) which is not Orphic but Christian. It is time now to look at this theological idea more closely.

In the light of the presence of the Bible in European literatures and elsewhere, in the light of its influence – whether we judge it a good or a bad thing – on so much writing, whether of prime importance or even of little, we have plenty of undoubted reason to decide that here surely is a field of study worthy of our attention and practically limitless. Biblical themes abound. Biblical stories disguise themselves in all sorts of ways. Characters re-appear in all sorts of climes: conversion in Puritan autobiography; the revolt of Satan in Romantic poetry; Herodias in 'decadent' literature … the prodigious possibilities will certainly satisfy the zeal of researchers. However, in tracing these external links between the Scriptures and literary works, we may get a hint of some more intimate relationship, which runs from the Biblical vision of the world to the very being of literature, because what seems to interest the Bible, beyond the manifold interests of books or of people, is what they are. It could be that literature is, from this point of view, either an attempt at metamorphosis, or on the contrary, a Luciferian insurrection, a murderous seduction of the reader.

Hence the interest of a Christian poetics, having as its ambition not the evaluation of texts according to their conformity to the spirit of the gospels, whether great or little, but the realising of what literature is in Biblical perspective. It is not a question of noting nor of judging, but of trying to understand. It's not a question, either, at least in the poetics I envisage – though I recognise obviously that there exist other ways of envisaging – of looking for the modalities of a Christian literature, or the rules of praxis. Christian poetics does not limit itself to Christian literature, any more than the Bible addresses itself exclusively to faith.

It is true that such research – necessarily passing through our experience

as readers yet orientated towards the otherness (altérité) of that which goes beyond us, attentive at the same time to the teaching of the Bible and to the givens of literature – in spite of everything still runs the Satanic risk of swallowing the real, of transforming it into some personal system, of reducing it to some solipsistic spectacle. Besides, and the lesson is hard to swallow, we only understand what it is given us to understand (since 'every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights'), and the approach of a Ben Jonson in his *Discoveries* seems the right one. It is to 'gently stirre the mould about the root of the Question' (#123). There, you might think, is a flagrant example of English empiricism, of the prudence of insular people, and it is certain that Jonson refused to 'make ... parties with the present', to join up to one or other fashionable theory, and that he was suspicious of 'fierce undertakers'. But if he disturbs the earth, that is where the root of the question lies, and I see with Jonson also the continental desire, if you like, to understand the problem in its profundity.

I might add in passing that a history of Christian poetics would be highly profitable, and it would doubtless be necessary to prepare for it by studying each successive example. It would reveal what we already know, that Christian poetics effectively has a long history, and in a country like England, for example, the history of literary theory, from Sidney to T.S. Eliot and beyond, very nearly merges with the search for a Christian poetics. *De poetica christiana:* the title doesn't figure in any ancient text that I know of, but the project crosses the centuries.

2

Where to start? Without doubt, at the beginning, since the most tenacious concept of the relationship between Christianity and literature, and even other art forms, sees in the artist – in the poet or he who *makes* – an analogy of God. Thus, man is capable of creating, thanks to his origin in a Creator God; a literary work is the creation of a man in the same way, more or less, that the universe is the creation of God. Yes, we're in the presence here of a commonplace, but the property of commonplaces is often to be profoundly true, either because they conform to the reality of things, or because they naively express our most hidden desire. I have come to believe that whoever dedicates his life to the study of commonplaces would have every chance of becoming wise, and even finding himself having really new ideas. One can see the interest of considering God Himself as an artist. The universe becomes a cosmos drawn out of chaos. What we would have formerly called Nature (and I shall continue to use that word) becomes itself a work of art, and it would seem that for God the natural and the artistic or the artificial are not distinct categories. As Augustine held, even the Son of God is *Ars Patris*, the Father's art.

We must make a great effort to imagine a world constituted thus, where everything that enters into human experience comes from art, where everything that man sees or touches, all that he makes, is penetrated with harmony and takes part in a universal consonance. It is the world hinted at in the narrative of Genesis, which moreover presents the first 'Adam' if not exactly as a creator,

at least as someone to whom the task is assigned of continuing or achieving the creation of God. He names the animals; he adds human language to the divine Word; he makes the earth habitable for his race.

The first human beings in the narrative did not engage themselves in art as we know it, but it is difficult for us to admit that an Eden, a perfect terrestrial garden, would be without poetry or music. This difficulty could very well come from our fallen nature, and signify no more than our desire to defend our possession. But it could also be that poetry and music are not incompatible with unfallen Nature, already artistic within itself, and that they have as their function, if not to enrich it, at least to express it. The art of the first human beings would resemble that of the citizens of heaven, those hymns of praise that do not cease, according to certain Bible passages, to resound through the world of highest reality. Perhaps it is even in that celestial music that a Christian poetics could begin, since it is certain that whatever the motive of the Father's art in engendering the Son and in making the universe, the motive of his creatures' art is to praise. Art would be in the first place, and in the first of all places, the art of praising; it repeats the world by its praise.

However, it is only too evident that of this unfallen happy world, which we can only painfully reconstruct in our imagination, we are profoundly ignorant. It is not humble wonder but Renaissance *hubris* which pervades the celebrated comment attributed to Tasso, 'Non merita nome di creatore, se non Iddio ed il Poeta'. For us, to bring the writer and God too close is first of all a danger, and if there is nevertheless a comparison to make, it is waiting beyond the satanic temptation to create a world which rivals the divine world, and would avoid any idea of a common measure – the fact is clear but it still needs constant remembering – between all human 'creatures', even the mightiest, and Him who thought the starry night.

A totally artistic nature also astounds us. To envisage, now, the 'gran teatro del mundo', we feel anguish more than happiness. Characters in a divine work, we nevertheless want to become ourselves dramatists, architects, painters, musicians. Doesn't God's creation suffice? Why then do we set ourselves to distinguish art and nature, if not because nature does not satisfy, even as a work of art, and that art exists, for us, precisely as a response to the insufficiency of nature, as the possibility of another nature or even, when our disarray touches the bottom, of a sort of anti-nature? That's why it is difficult for us to imagine an art that would exist in Eden, and the difficulty says a lot about our condition. We don't see there an art founded on the imagination, if it is true that to imagine always presupposes a gap, an absence. In the fullness of being, in perfect presence, there is no need to imagine anything. We would not expect to listen to narratives, to enter into a world parallel to the real one (a term I employ as an economy of expression), to become aware of the birth within ourselves of a new being.

Hence the importance of Adam and Eve's morning prayer in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, where

> neither various style
> Nor holy rapture wanted they to praise

> Their Maker, in fit strains pronounced, or sung
> Unmeditated (Book V, 146-149).

We can suppose with Milton – we feel it in every syllable – a huge nostalgia, the aching aspiration of the writer, mortal and exiled, for this 'style', for these 'just harmonies', in prose, in poetry or in music, which come without effort, for this 'eloquence' of an art that flows naturally. For these first humans of Milton, like the Genesis Adam who names creation, if they are acquainted with art, do not produce it like artists. Man effaces himself behind his laudatory eloquence; poetry and song disappear in what they effect. We see neither Adam nor angels desirous of elaborating some personal work, of exploring their own *Weltanschauung*.

But it certainly is *our* desire. And it is sufficient to meditate on the ultimately incomprehensible account of Eden to understand that it is impossible to regain the beginning, and that this exclusion from origin – whether it's a matter of a real origin in time or of any other origin that we are capable of imagining – is what separates a celestial or paradisal poetic, in the most unfortunate way, from a poetic such as we are obliged to envisage on a fallen earth. Our beginning is neither at the creation of the world, which could make of us God's continuers, nor in Eden, where our art would be the Word of the universe, the voice of creation responding to its Creator, but rather in the Fall of man, whether that also be an event in history or simply a manifest fact of the human condition. For us, it is the cherubim with flaming swords that have invented art.

So where are we, in effect? In a world, to use another commonplace, of 'greatness and misery' (Pascal), where the universe only appears as *cosmos* in brief moments, in almost furtive glimpses, always distressing in the long run, and sometimes intolerable. The work of God itself is defective, and we don't have to accuse ourselves of irreverence (or congratulate ourselves) in thinking it, since St. Paul also declares this, in speaking of the 'vanity' and 'corruption' of creation (Romans 8:20-21). It is God himself who 'submitted' his work to this temporary imperfection at the moment of the Fall. So it is true that God is the Artist *par excellence* and the model for all artistic activity; it is also true that He does not let us penetrate the fullness of his work. Under a dying sun and on a planet in part hostile to us, we also verify the interdiction in trying to imagine human life, such as we lead individually or in society, as a work ruled by harmony and justice. Or, by any other quality which we are pleased to associate with artistic perfection, because we *do not know* what art is. We search, and everyone has a different view. Not only do we not have access to this 'goodness' that God saw, day after day, in creation, but even its significance is hidden from us.

It hardly needs to be added that our art is also flawed, and in the full depth of that word. It is enough that a writer begins to write to feel again the 'pain' inflicted on Adam and to understand a little of the reason. The Christian writer immediately measures the distance which separates his language from Edenic speech. The study of foreign languages is also precious, convincing us of the punishment of Babel – but equally, of the benediction which goes with it, and which makes of a foreign language an otherness at once closed

yet brimming with possibility. Foreign literatures reveal in themselves the generous multiplicity which accompanies the loss of the *one*, at the same time as making especially evident the irremediable misery of an art founded on words, incomprehensible from one place to another, or even from one epoch to another in the same place. And if we absolutely insist on comparing ourselves, as creators, to the Creator God, it is good to reflect upon another dimension of His creative activity, which we can see since the coming of the Messiah, namely that if He created the world by his Word, then He has created it through the Crucified. At the very heart of God's creativity, it would seem – yet even to speak of this in our state of ignorance and distance is doubtless a sort of transgression, of stupidity – there is a love which goes right to death. The divine art is a sacrifice. It is to be feared that we have never yet written a 'good' poem, and that our motivation is quite other.

We are on the outside; we come after. Our literature is engaged in the disparity between our reality and that which we are obliged to consider another reality, perhaps heaven, the dwelling place of God, the invisible world at the same time hidden and yet revealed by the visible world. Our relationship with that world is no longer either simple or direct, as is suggested by one of the unfathomable figures which wait for us in the writings of St. Paul. 'Now we see by means of a mirror, in a manner obscured.' One recognises the famous and certainly controversial passage of the first letter to the Corinthians (13:12). It is necessary to ponder this enigma at length: it seems to propose that reflection, in a fallen world, effectively begins by *reflection* – that we speculate by looking at a darkened image of reality which, without in any way distorting it and even less rendering it absent, re-presents it as it is but curiously inverted, and as if sustained by a new day.

It is true that the Genesis narrative gives us to understand, by one of those well-known expressions to which we must constantly return, that for its author, the first human beings already found themselves in a 'figurative' relationship with God, since He had created them in his own image, according to his likeness (1:26). We should be, even in the beginning, rhetorical representations of God, and it is to be supposed that we are still able, banished as we are, to be conscious of this comparison. Other Biblical passages even prompt us to think that all our reality is crossed by a sort of divine rhetoric. The light we see is the figure of the 'true' Light, which is Jesus; the wind which we feel, the air we breathe, is that of the Breath; the poor words we utter, that of the Word. What is literal for us is figurative for God. But we must also believe that in an original world, humans in their fullness would rejoice in this dependence, whilst for us the real is lacking. We grasp what escapes us; we perceive at best the figurative and search for the real.

It is the Fall which decides literature and is foundational for poetry. Literature does not begin in misery but in what remains of the Edenic experience, in this wonder, this desire to call and call to the world, this need to praise the innumerable riches of our condition, which lie at the origin of so many works. It begins in the praise of language itself. But it soon meets a fallen language and a fallen world, and problematic and unfortunate relationships

among words, beings and things. It intervenes in a reality which is insufficient, mortal and unachieved.

The Fall is a determinant, and not just for literature. It is important to take it seriously in every domain, in every discipline of thought. One temptation that recurs constantly in Christian thought is to suppose that all is well, really, since the world is governed by God, to say 'Peace, peace' when there is no peace. A tragedy which opens up on disorder; a literature of the absurd, a system of thought which denies causality, which changes truth into a 'mobile army of metaphors', which reduces history to a narrative, which imprisons us in the *episteme* of our age, which pounces on logocentrism: all this can seem the negation of a world whose reality, coherence and justice are guaranteed by a God of love, who created us capable moreover of understanding his universe and of imagining it. However, in the perspective of the Fall, the most desperate discourse, the most destructive, only plumbs our misery and what is more, falls well short of Biblical discourse. The recent history of philosophy, or of a certain sort of philosophy, from Hume to Derrida, is the history of successive perceptions of what we have lost. It is true that the force of such discourses is to be found in the Christianity which they most often deny, and that there is a danger, as Pascal said, of knowing our misery without recognising our greatness – of seeing the effects of the Fall without understanding them in the inability to see the Fall itself.

3

And one realises that a Christian poetic will not stop at the Fall, any more than literature itself will content itself with deploring the fallen world or wallowing in it. Another figure of St. Paul, which is to be found further on in his letter to the Corinthians, allows us to advance. At the moment of burial, he says, the body is sown 'a natural body' (15:44), and so far the only odd thing is the metaphor – of sowing. It is resurrected, however, as a 'spiritual body'. Not only is this an astonishing oxymoron (we would expect in our laziness the term 'spirit'), but in re-uniting categories which for us are incompatible, it marks the distance which separates us from another reality, speaking of the possibility that we ourselves and our world shall be transformed in order to attain it, and it places this possibility in the future. For the relationship between the world of exile and the world of salvation is far from fixed. Reality is not double, once for all; there is a providence of God who works this world, created and destroyed in the light of its re-creation. It is to this forward movement, it seems to me, that literature and all the arts respond. It is the promise of a transfiguration of the world which constitutes the *raison d'être* and also the hope of all artistic endeavour, even though it may be indifferent or hostile to Christianity.

To look at this a little further, I would like to compare some diverse poetics in a preliminary manner and doubtless too rapidly, in order to place in relationship certain ways of conceptualising the *place* of literary activity. These poetics correspond, if not completely to different theologies, then at least to different ways of showing the relation of our short life on a mortal earth to

the eternal life of God. Medieval poetics begins with the vertical relationship between the human world and the divine. It presupposes a stable reality, where we strive upwards. Art, which includes the 'useful' arts of the hunt or navigation as well as the 'pleasant' art of the theatre, is, in the thinking of Hugh of Saint-Victor or Bonaventura, illuminated by an inferior light which is nevertheless capable of raising us, though only by analogy, towards the light of God. Renaissance poetics puts art into relationship with time, but only time past. In Sidney's *Defence of Poetry*, for example, poetry rises above a nature of bronze in order to deliver us another nature, this one golden which suggests, in its ideal of perfection, lost Eden. A modern poetics – but I hasten to recognise the 'romantic' nature of such a concept, and therefore the possibility, if not the quasi-certainty that it belongs to its own age and suffers the age's inadequacies – would put again art in relationship to time, but not time past. It is to the future that art directs itself, and if it is not too arrogant to suggest it, such an orientation seems to me to conform more to Biblical theology. Essentially poetry does not place us in the hierarchy of lights of Pseudo-Dionysius. No more does it lead us towards Eden, to the beginning, to Creation. It leads us forward towards the Re-creation, towards the end which is also a new beginning, towards Paradise. It dreams of a 'new heaven and of a new earth' (2 Peter 3:13).

Is it really necessary to understand poetics in the perspective of a new creation? Perhaps not, nor do I wish myself to become a 'fierce undertaker'. I simply notice that in turning towards the future, it would seem to align with the expectation of a Messianic return which governed the hope of the first Christians but which often fades under the influence of scepticism, whilst a poetic based on ideal forms would, on the contrary, betray a vision of history where the Second Coming is quietly set among inactive dogmas. It is also a matter of according, or not, an eternal value to the perishable, and what is at stake is after all our earth and our destiny. To believe in 'heaven' and the immortality of the soul is to accept that the rest will be destroyed. To believe in the resurrection of the body and the creation of a new earth and new heaven is to dare to hope that the earth on which we are, it is true, only strangers and pilgrims will not be abolished but renewed. If Christians are right to criticise the view according to which life on earth is the sole reality, then in an inverse sense they themselves could be deceived into disdaining the earth. This can be seen, moreover, in quite small things: in the idea, for example, that man is a puny being from the fact that Adam was created from the dust. Since the Fall, yes: our humility depends on the origin of man in the soil. Our end, though provisional, is to return there. But before the Fall the earth participated, as did all of simple matter, in a creation that God declared good. Excluded from Eden, we do not know the nature of this goodness. We don't know, either, the manner of the new earth and heavens where it will have its place. All that we know, according to Paul, is that the new world will surpass this one just as much as a blade of wheat surpasses a grain.

What we now call literature would thus be situated, as we and our universe are, between the Fall and the new creation. It contradicts what is, it seeks order in what has been disordered, it aspires to unity beyond dispersion. All art,

moreover, seeks to re-assemble things and to adjust them according to the root *ar*, which I cite not as an etymological proof, which would never be adequate, but simply as a given which is rich in its suggestiveness. The art of a literary work runs from the skill with which we bring together those elements which go well together, as in agriculture or medicine, to the perhaps even visionary power which allows us to apprehend affinities, to bring into oneness the debris of the garden. Literature is above all the search for a new world. It does not describe it, it writes it. It does not efface it, either, but transforms it, repeating it by granting it the word. Without itself being grace and without in any way participating in the creative and re-creative power of God, it tries, not to produce an entirely different universe but – always on condition of embracing the discipline of the real – to open up the only universe we know to its own possibility. Poetry, in the fullest sense of the word, is the art of the possible.

A literary work, it seems to me, always anticipates the future, not in seeing in advance really what is going to happen, but in proposing a world at the same time itself and yet other, and which constitutes, at least for the Christian, the sign, and the sign only, of the new earth. And of this new earth, I am convinced that we also see signs in everyday life, in beings and things even before they are subsumed by art. We enter here the always difficult domain of personal experience, but I find it necessary to speak nevertheless of these glimpses, which are also perhaps of graces, in order to be able to reinforce the idea of a recreation of the earth, and also in order to derive the least natural element of art – its power of difference, its tendency towards otherness – from nature itself. It is nature which accords us these supranatural visions, and instead of citing a poem, which could have been T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*, where certain passages are employed, in a deliberately prosaic way, it is true, to draw up lists of hints, I prefer to quote, almost at random, this phrase from the journal of Dorothy Wordsworth, sister of the poet: 'As I lay down on the grass, I observed the glittering silver line on the ridges of the Backs of the sheep, owing to their situation respecting the sun – which made them look beautiful but with something of strangeness, like animals of another kind – as if belonging to a more splendid world' (29 April, 1802). Every moment of life, I believe, is open to this invasion of the *other*, to this wounding of the possible, on an earth where, each night and each day and in the commonest fashion, the moon which is memory reminds us, in the shadows, of the loss of origin, and the sun which is new world comes over and again without ever truly coming, so as to speak, in this strange repetition and this obligation to wait, of a final Coming.

It is good also to return to an Aristotelian poetics, and even to those aspects of it which are most well known, in order to recapture its modesty. Aristotle's great usefulness for those of us who are seeking to understand literature from a Christian perspective – where intoxicating ideas of transformation, of the supernatural, of heaven, not to mention calling or inspiration, must necessarily intervene, but greatly risk inflating us with a perfectly comic pride – is to have begun in a thought attentive to what is and eager not to dig an abyss between the arts of mankind and what could be called, without abusing the term too much, the art of nature. He remarks in his *Physics* that art, whatever its ulterior

ambition, begins, banality of banalities, by 'imitating nature' (194a/21). Having thus recognised that the world exists before we ever deign to think about it and that it already has procedures by which to teach us, he is able to propose in his *Politics* that art remedies the defects of nature (1337a1-2), and in the *Poetics* itself, that poetry, always under the sign of mimesis, is superior to 'history, since it describes not what has been, but what could be' (145lb). Thus it reaches into the world of universals, and for a poetics more aware of the gap between poetry and nature, this passage into the hypothetical, this crossing towards the possible, also opens poetry to its vocation of re-thinking the world, of venturing beyond what is.

This idea of the gap, when well weighed, is essential for a poetics which holds nature fallen. Art imitates nature in various ways which will always be worthwhile to re-examine, but art is also and already something else. A poem transforms the world in words. It transforms language itself, in remodelling its syntax, in enhancing its rhythms, in making audible its sonorities. Many things are at play in this difference which is also a *différance,* to use this fashionable term which speaks, nevertheless, of the pain of our waiting in a world which is both no longer and not yet. We have to be aware of the imitation, of the presence, however difficult, of 'nature' in art, but we must also sense the absence of this nature and the possibility which is offered. Thus we grasp the Fall, in this inaccessible fullness, in this consonance with which we are not acquainted, and that is our misfortune, in our life day by day. Sometimes it takes just the beginning of a verse line, a few bars of music, a glimpse of one corner of a picture in another room for us to feel ourselves in exile and for us to be conscious of what we have lost. But we also grasp the promise of renewal. This same picture, this same piece of music, this same verse can speak to us of a possible, of a brand new state of the *I* and its world, of a whole universe become other. Poetry is always, as Sidney wished it to be and even outside Christianity, 'the divine consideration of what may be'.

Decline and re-creation also serve to elucidate, it seems to me, certain fundamental elements of poetics which never cease to defy our intelligence. The imagination, for example. It's not a question here of psychology, nor do I claim to know whether or not the imagination is a faculty of the mind. I simply speak of its operations, and I notice this: if we need to imagine, it's because the world is not sufficient, not because of the greatness of our soul nor the depth of our being nor the passion of our aspirations which would burn up a reality inferior to ourselves as in romantic scenarios, but because of this thought which comes to us sometimes, that we are not at home and our universe is not our home either, so to speak. Without the Fall, or some other explanation which we must suppose for our unhappiness, we would not continuously have this desire to re-invent the earth, to invent times and places, narratives, events, characters, other than those of life outside literature, to prize the difference writing makes between the world and the book. Melancholy would not await us at the threshold of a poem; death would not accompany us inside. Far from living in the real and imagining the unreal, as I have already begun to say, we live in the figured, the less-than-real, and the real is what we are pushed to imagine.

Without the promise of a new creation, we couldn't imagine forward, or at least our imaginations would be sterile. Thanks to it, the imagination, which is the search for the true world and the true self, is in some sort established.

And beauty? Here I feel particularly naked, since I see that this is a subject which I had never tackled before reflecting on Wordsworth's 'Living presence' and it needed many long years before I became conscious of this absence. Is this because the context in which we are usually encouraged to study beauty presupposes a world elevated above ours like the ideal above the imperfect, following a dualistic and dangerous line of thinking? But what could be objected to Sidney, for example, who sees in the poetry of the Psalms David's love of 'heavenly poesy, wherein almost he showeth himself a passionate lover of that unspeakable and everlasting beauty, to be seen by the eyes of the mind, only cleared by faith'? Or to Newman in 'Poetry', who declares in commenting on Aristotle – though it could have been Plato – that 'the poetic spirit is filled with eternal forms of beauty and perfection'? Only that to stop there, in the conviction that beauty raises us towards an absolute, we run the risk again that I indicated, of neglecting what lies around us. Neoplatonism is tenacious (Newman said of Pope that an internal principle of poetry furnished him with 'the archetypes of beauty and radiance'), and never ceases to enchant Christian thought. It would be regrettable if the beauty of art persuaded us to disdain what is on an earth disfigured but yet from the hand of God.

Nevertheless it is perhaps with the idea of the One, while saluting Plotinus himself, that we must try to renew our thinking. Forms certainly exist within nature, and the form of a poem, a novel is not *other* from the mere fact of being a form. Art imitates nature not only when the sculpture of a tree, for example, counterfeits the aspect of the tree – looks like a tree – but when the work of art learns from the natural work the existence of form and how to achieve it. Art imitates the formal project of nature. (I add, and I suppose it is obvious, that this will not lead us into an 'organic' theory of art.) But if we feel that the forms of nature, beauty which does not depend on us, are really superior to the forms of which we are capable, that the painter of landscapes, among others, can never rival a landscape – and it seems to me that our health intellectual, moral and spiritual is at stake here – we can equally well be persuaded to the contrary. We are not jumping into paradox or contradiction here, although paradox and contradiction stand at the heart of poetics just as of the human condition, since the very particular superiority of art lies in the evident unity of its forms taken individually and in its capacity, as soon as we are inside a poem, a building, a quartet, to make manifest, as long as the spell lasts, the coherence of a world and the unity of the whole. The humblest objects which fall under the senses can give us access to this vision, or better, to this intimate conviction of the reign of the One – I am thinking of Yves Bonnefoy's salamander – but I do not know whether we would be as sensitive to this kind of revelation without the practice of art, which seems to have for its role just this ability to multiply such moments in our life.

In the measure in which it attains unity, a work of art does not put us in real contact with the unity of things, but it allows us to understand that such a

unity, somewhere, does exist. This idea is far from being exclusively Christian (Shelley wanted to believe, according to his *Defence of Poetry,* that the poet 'participates in the eternal, in the infinite, in the one') but is it absolutely out of the question that the unity of a work – that this very desire for unity – may be in agreement with monotheism, and that despite the existence of polytheistic and atheistic works of art, this belief in the *one* may be a feeble shadow of a faith in a unique God, whose Being alone can guarantee, after all, the unity of a multiple universe?

And the beauty of unity in art differs from the beauty of unity in the world before art. A beautiful dog is *one.* A beautiful apple is plenitude. But a still life has another plenitude; even the photograph of a dog has *another* unity. The fine portrait of a woman is not a woman, and it is thanks to this difference that instead of speaking only of the world which we already know or think we know, art can open up for us another world where form, beauty, unity are the effects of another intelligence than nature's. The significance of this world for anyone who sees it will depend on the idea he holds about human life and its finality. As a vision of Eden in the perfection of a work, beauty is a sudden sentiment of loss. As a vision of Paradise to come beauty is a sudden sentiment of renewal, a glimpse of the possible. And what is more, this other, artistic beauty, which goes beyond what is in order to conjure up what may be or even what will be, does not remove us definitively from our here-and-now, since it allows us to see this same otherness in the beauty of nature. The beauty of a tree, seen in a certain light, speaks to us of a lost tree and of a possible tree. Natural beauty too opens at the same time onto a presence and an absence, at the moment when this structure of lines, these colours which seem to be trying to find each other, this object, this scrap of matter sustained, magnetised, by a sort of grace, themselves come to resemble a work of art. The property of art is to make us see nature.

It is true that any idea of the One cannot recommend itself a great deal to current philosophies, and coherence itself has been often presented for some time as some sort of metaphysical or bourgeois mystification. The fundamental incoherence of great works tends to appear, and for many is, their true worth. Doubtless there would be a lot to say on the subject of a certain complacency before the incoherent which would be as much an effect of pride as its opposite: the pleasure that we can take in reducing everything to a system of which we are ourselves the master. Incoherence, like coherence, has, however, its place in a Christian poetics. Before a work of art just as before the work of God, we are faced with beauty, but also with the flaw in beauty, with its shadow. To admire the order in a work only to discover afterwards the intrinsic disorder in it, only to surprise even, if you will, the way in which the work deconstructs itself, is to perceive that art, that the world, do not suffice, are only promises, and that we are always waiting on an unfinished earth.

4

I have traced a ternary vision of things, which I believe is to be uncovered in the Bible, and which sees everything, moreover – cosmology, history, anthropology,

and even theology as discourse on God – as forming across time and within the experience of God himself, if it is possible to think that, a series of triads. Christian cosmology runs from creation to the Fall and then to the new creation. Earthly history from Eden on to a 'cursed' earth and on to Paradise, passing by other sequences founded on the same model: Israel, the dispersion of Israel, Church; the temple of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, the formation of the Church as a new temple. The history of our race passes from man as innocent to sinner and then man redeemed and glorified; from Adam to Adam cast down to the new Adam. God Himself draws near to us as Creator, as Judge and as Redeemer. Everything is based on a process of life, death and new birth. Everything is centred on the centre itself, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

I note that the process is dialectical, since a limitless conflict sets its first term against a second and this second term against a third. Our *grandeur* is in perpetual struggle with our *misère*. Sin combats grace, the 'old man' always resists the 'new man'. The end supposes the beginning, even entirely transcends the origin. Unlike the first human beings, Christians are invited to participate in the very body of Christ, to become participants (I write this without understanding it) in the divine nature. Adam's *felix culpa*, if it be true that we are authorised to speak like this, permits us to know the depth of the love of God in the death of the Son. I note also that this configuration of everything is not an interesting form to contemplate but a dynamic to live, and that for us it remains incomplete. Epic heroes in our own way, which is quite modest, we have been thrown, we too, *in medias res*.

This descending and ascending destiny of the earth, of its inhabitants and of the diverse reality where it bathes seems to me essential for Christian reflection on literature. Moreover, literature itself, or whatever sort of art, can be at the origin of such a vision. I remember a first intuition came to me in conversations on Greek tragedy (with a university friend whose contribution outstripped mine by far), and that I saw all this for the first time with clarity whilst listening to, or rather in remembering, Beethoven's Sixth Symphony. I would like to believe that if I speak of this dialectic in Christian terms, which are certainly the only ones capable, for me, of getting to the bottom of the question and of explaining it, the dialectic is nevertheless pertinent in a general way, by the simple fact of being true. It is susceptible of being re-interpreted and expressed differently in an atheistic poetics, or any other which would look at the same reality under its own light. It makes it possible for the Christian reader to move beyond Christian literature.

For it permits us to go everywhere in literature – always with discretion, because it's not a matter of invasion. It opens up another way to study tragedy and comedy, which represent in Western literature the two most rigorous and obstinate attempts to disclose and incarnate the dialectic form of the human condition. It illuminates narrative, or rather this search, in every genre, for fiction, which seems to come from the propensity of literature to resist a world of exile and death, and to make a new one out of it. It illuminates writing itself, and the manner, especially visible in poetry in which writing exalts the real, refuses it, and seeks to change it, to put in place the progressive

transformation of things, to open world and words to their potential. It incites one to re-examine translation, from the perspective of Babel and Pentecost, and language itself, in its dialectical progress from the language of Adam, skilled in naming the animals, to the sceptical, ambiguous and contradictory language of the serpent, and then to the 'other tongues' of the Spirit (Acts 2:4). That God Himself is – or has begotten – the Word *(Parole*), that He is, in one way or the other, Himself an author of writings, pushes the source and secret of poetics a great distance away from us, by an astonishing and rather redoubtable ascent for the Christian writer, but it also means that the search for a Christian poetics cannot avoid sounding out the Logos.

This sort of dialectic spirituality or spiritual materialism also invites us to study everything with which literature engages, all those vast ranges of existence on earth which are present in the minutest act of writing. It illuminates the self, history, and time, as much in themselves and in their relationship with the general movement of things as in their relationship with writing. The unfinished character of dialectics, the fact of finding ourselves in a world where '*it is finished*' (John 19:30) but where the finishing is *also* to come, illuminates equally the unfinished nature of writing and of reading, too. We will never be able to stop reading, since the sense of books is not given once for all. Hermeneutics slides into the clearest of texts. According to the writer of the Fall narrative it even intervened between Eve's understanding and God's words, at least, after the serpent had invented it. We will never be able to stop writing, because the sense of the world is not given. 'Of writing many books,' says Ecclesiastes, 'there is no end,' (12:12), nor of their re-writing, either. It is true that to underline the sadly provisional nature of our writings, the fact that every success is a failure and that the writer is the very one who knows he does not know how to write, can also open – by the change of sign we meet everywhere whenever we make up our minds, like Dante forcing himself towards the centre of the earth, not to stop before having reached the bottom – on the possibility of books, on the joy of multiplicity, on the mercy which accompanies punishment and which makes each generation, born from the failure of the last, bring with it new ways of seeing, other modes of being.

The unfinished nature of the world can also make the unfinished nature of writings precious, and even the fragmentary nature of many. I see that the two works, of St. Paul and of Pascal, which have without any doubt most influenced me, are letters and bundles of notes. Certainly one envies those fortunate writers capable, it would seem, of mastering at one fell swoop both their language and their thought, but one also understands the advantage there is in hesitating, the truth which only allows itself to be glimpsed in the act of seeking, of 'toiling' as Adam, of always drawing near to the goal like the old world turning in its seasons. And the unfinished teaches us what is most important to think concerning literature, namely that it cannot in itself effect our salvation, that it is impotent in itself to re-create the world. Between imagination and grace, between the power of poetry, which is to renew our consciousness of the world, and the power of the only Master of the new, there lies the difference between our will and God's will. Art leaves us in the world of the in-between time, where other and more efficacious energies are waiting to orientate us and fulfil

us. But it throws its own light on to this world, it makes us feel the surprise of the in-between place where our destiny plays itself out. Hence the importance of the famous words of the Abbé Suger in the church of Saint-Denis: 'videor videre me quasi sub aliqua extranea orbis terrarum plaga, quae nec tota sit in terrarum faece nec tota in coeli puritate, demorari' – 'I seem to see myself living, as it were, in some strange region of the universe, which is neither completely in the silt of the earth nor completely in the purity of heaven' (*De Administratione,* 33). They marvellously describe the happiness of art, the impression of not being situated any longer on a mortal earth, where pain, sickness, mourning, reign, without however being able to fully reach a true transcendent. This, it seems to me, is the limit of art, the last word of poetics.

MEMORY´S DANCE

Major intensive events
occur sporadically,
happening only after
much thought
and preparation

Graduation days,
university,
getting married,
or the passage
of lifelong career.

In hindsight, memory
trivializes our recollections;
collective
in presentment,

Fifty, sixty, seventy years
of nostalgia
reduced to seconds.
Once hosts, we become
mere guests.

Paul Truttman

From *Pilgrimages: An Anthology of Christian Verse*, ed. Walter Nash, sponsored and published by Feather Books, 2006. Quoted with permission.