Faith and Fiction: Literature as Revelation

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It has become commonplace that narratives and metaphors provide central resources—perhaps *the* central resources—for authentic discourse about our encounters with the sacred. Sallie McFague's influential texts, *Metaphorical Theology* and *Models of God,* argue strongly that all discourse about God is necessarily metaphorical because it struggles to name the ineffable. [1] Stanley Hauerwas and L. Gregory Jones have put together an anthology, *Why Narrative: Readings* in *Narrative Theology,* that traces a diverse and growing theological interest going back at least to H. Richard Niebuhr in 1941. [2] As a poet and storyteller, as a literary critic and a literary theorist, I find such developments intriguing and sometimes baffling. Texts centrally shaped by metaphor or by narrative? That sounds like literature to me: poetry, fiction, drama.

From one perspective, these theologians offer a stunning reversal of powerful western tradition. From Plato onwards, poets and storytellers have been denounced as frivolous at best or, at worst, threats to both morality and social order. It was one thing for poets to be excluded from an ideal or theoretical republic because we could not be trusted to use our acknowledged powers to "proper" ends. It was something else again—especially during the reign of Christendom—to be denounced as a threat to others' salvation. The medieval Catholic church was among the major wealthy patrons of the arts, of course, and there have always been poets, artists and composers among the ranks of believers. But artists have primarily been regarded as illustrators—verbal or visual or aural—rather than as autonomous and significant theologians. Later, Protestant reforms involved a hostility to the arts as part of a general Enlightenment suspicion of all things passionate and sensual. In the nineteenth century, the honorable claim that literature is *"dulce et utile"* came down to demands for stories that edify and entertain. The literary culture is now generally as hostile toward religion as churches have been leery of serious and

undomesticated art: exceptions on all sides do not change the tradition. Denying the heritage is akin to denying the heritage of misogyny: we don't transcend what we do not have the courage and the common sense to admit.

Has "post-modernism" forced a reversal of this venerable tradition? Does talk about metaphorical theology and narrative theology herald a real change? If so, there is a way to go yet. Major recent anthologies of "Christian thought" or "Christian mysticism" or "spirituality" fail to note even such major writers as Milton, Blake, Wordsworth, or Dickinson.[3] Anglicans once in a while take passing note of great lines from Donne or Herbert or Eliot, but only these three and only in passing. Popular accounts of spirituality commonly leap in a single bound from the twelfth-century mystics to Carl Jung, as if there are no powerful accounts of spiritual experience available from the intervening centuries.

Having taught literature, not only in classrooms and in church parlors but also from the pulpit, I can attest on the contrary to how powerfully literature both articulates and engages the spiritual hungers of our times. We live in a time of spiritual famine: the people are eating grass while both literary critics and academic theologians stand around debating esoteric doctrines in epistemology and ontology. These debates are crucial—at times, fascinating—but so is the need for heartier fare than the glossy hybrid of pantheism and narcissism called "New Age" spirituality. I see an ongoing need to clear the common ground between priests and poets, and this essay will offer sonic help in that task. Poetry—classically defined, *poiesis,* the literary-as-such, regardless of genre—has much to offer religion that religion fails to understand and to accept.

One must understand the character of literary power, I argue, if one is to understand both the literary power of Scripture and the moral importance or ongoing revelatory power of literature in our own lives. But it is crucial from the outset to recognize that the status of Scripture is deeply implicated in any account of the character of literature. Once the Bible was simply true. In retreat from that untenable claim, both literary theorists and theologians began in the seventeenth century to defend the truth of Scripture as poetic truth rather than scientific or historical truth. With the advent of interest in the sublime, especially

Boileau's translation of Longinus into French in 1674, Scripture was widely regarded as the premier instance of the poetic sublime. As Stephen Prickett documents in great detail, the modern engagement between the literary and the biblical has been both dense and reciprocal at least since the Enlightenment. He also argues, quite
astutely, for the influence upon both biblical and literary studies of changes in university structure and differing national literary traditions. [4] I would argue further that distinctive differences in theology among French, German, and English Christians also reflect at least in part the substantial differences in national literary traditions. [5]

In the seventeenth century, the high formalism of French neoclassicism dictated authoritarian "rules" for art that, to English tastes, prized sterile and artificial conformity over the genuine life and power of true art. The French, in turn, regarded English "irregularity" with the same disdain that cardinals might have felt for the immediate religious experience of peasants. At one level, the conflict is a matter of taste: both highly stylized and highly realistic art are perfectly valid. But at another level, the differences in theory reflect national differences in literary experience. French literature has been more formalized or strict in its use of highly regular forms—the villanelle, for instance, or French neoclassic drama. Neoclassicism was as brilliant an era for France as the Renaissance was for England. English literature has been more realistic or less stylized in form partly because of the paucity of English rhyme but partly also because of the influence of early masters such as Chaucer and Shakespeare. English traditions in realism are commonly cited as explaining why opera has never enjoyed the popularity in England that it has on the continent.

In our own day, we have Jacques Derrida and others who are extending a major and brilliant French tradition when they argue that all language, especially literary language, is endless self-referential play. Any highly stylized or non-mimetic aesthetic form enjoys major elements of self-referential play, after all: watch yourself listen to non-programmatic instrumental music. Note, however, that French theory has strongly defined evaluative criteria for literary practice,

claiming an authority over art itself that is transparently akin to authority claimed by the Roman Catholic hierarchy. Such an authority is never claimed by English literary critics, not even at their most dogmatic and demanding. It is not pushing the matter too far also to argue that sacramental religious practices are, in the matter of religion, akin to stylized forms in art.

In the eighteenth century, German romantic literary theorists tended to agree—broadly speaking—that art is whatever sort of work was produced by persons of the appropriate and appropriately rare imaginative sensibility. This has always impressed me as a literary equivalent of divine election. These literary "elect" are beyond the judgment, and indeed beyond the understanding, of lesser mortals. The poet becomes a secular Christ figure, doomed to know the truth that might redeem his society and to die for his allegiance to that truth, to die isolated and misunderstood, offering a redemption that the culture is too crass to accept. The poet's only hope for resurrection is literary immortality, the approbation of poets in subsequent generations. This has become a general western idea of the poet, of course; but its origins are in German romanticism.

English literary criticism from the Renaissance through the nineteenth century has a balance that closely resembles the characteristic balances of Anglican theology. This literary criticism balances the immediate, intuitive, informed aesthetic response of the reader (reason) against an attentive evaluative engagement of the formal features of the text itself (Scripture) and both of these against a flexible relationship to prior literary and critical tradition. No one measure is sufficient.

In this British tradition, the various features of texts are defined and discussed at length and in a detail not so consistently characteristic of continental criticism: the character of meter; the definition and development of character; the shape of plot; the function of rhyme or stanza; etc. (The so-called "new" criticism among American academics after World War II took this textual tendency to a bizarre extreme.) What is impressive, especially in contrast with either French formalism or Germanic systematic philosophy, is how general or nonsystematic are the terms of approbation or critique. There is no thorough-going and

systematic set of standards. In comparison to continental practice, this English pragmatism can look impressionistic, aphoristic, and far too dependent upon the brilliant individual sensibility of particularly talented readers.

Second, the British critical tradition turns quite inventively to the history of literature, sometimes specifically the national tradition but just as often western literature generally, seeking models and precedents and practices that can illuminate some current issue. For instance, Stephen Prickett argues that Lowth's translation of Isaiah and his analysis of Hebrew poetic structure profoundly influenced the development of English poetic diction away from high neoclassicism and toward the simple directness so characteristic of Wordsworth and Coleridge, especially the revolution announced by Wordsworth's *Lyrical Ballads*.[6] Prickett is absolutely right, as a prosodically sensitive reading of the KJV verse might reveal to any solid Wordsworthian.

But an interesting question is how much those KJV translations depended in turn upon Anglo-Saxon ballad stanzas that were also a key influence upon Wordsworth and whose direct simplicity—quite popular at the time of Lowth—might in turn have influenced Lowth's sensibilities as a reader of Hebrew poetry. Furthermore, in the free interplay of anapests and iambs in the KJV verse one can also hear both Chaucer's iambic pentameter, especially as it would have sounded at the time of that translation, and the brilliant freedom of Shakespeare's blank verse: biblical poetry is translated by the KJV into something loosely intermediate between Anglo-Saxon accentual verse and the Renaissance/pre-restoration varieties of accentual-syllabic verse. The central point here is that such catholicity is quite English in how flexibly and inventively it uses resources from the remoter past to solve immediate problems. The British literary sensibility in this regard reflects not only theological position but political sensibility as well—the great unwritten "constitution" of common law and practice.

Finally, English literary theory places major but not exclusive emphasis upon the intuitive sensibilities of both poets and critics. What Hooker calls "Reason" the literary community has always understood not as "logic" but as something more like immediate intuitive apprehension based upon broad, sensitive, and

intelligent experience. I was astounded to discover the term reduced to mere logic in popular accounts of Episcopal tradition—as if one might intelligibly engage either tradition or texts *without* using logic. In literary tradition, the critic no less than the poet—or the individual Anglican believer—is understood as engaging in an imaginative and creative process. That is why English literary history includes an extraordinary tradition in which poets themselves write both practical criticism and literary theory, all of which are quite highly regarded.

This individual critical sensibility, however, is not the radically isolated unblinking believer toe-to-toe with the Almighty. The proper or adequate literary critical sensibility is located quite firmly within both a historical community of practice and a loosely but clearly-enough defined set of analytical methods for engaging the objective reality of the text. If what is lost in the process is the formal tidiness of rigorously logical abstract system, well, the English do without. It is the intellectual equivalent of their notorious social tolerance of the mildly eccentric. especially if the eccentric in question be visibly intelligent.

This pragmatism still serves those of us who might feel trapped between dogmatic French linguistics and ponderous, grim, Germanic nihilism, the nihilism of both Hegel and positivist historicism gone sour. What then can be said from within this British tradition about literature as theology? How might literature be understood, or how might its truth be appreciated and appropriated, so that art can play its proper role in the life of faith? To answer such questions systematically and formally is, I propose, quite impossible. If we have no agreed-upon or demonstrable knowledge of the "real world," we can certainly have no equally certain knowledge of the relationship between "fact" and "fiction," between the *"*real*"* and the "literary"— much less any understanding of the relationship between faith and fiction or between God and art. Fortunately, that need not stop me: neither faith nor fiction depends upon access to a formally demonstrable ontology.

It is commonly argued in our day that the Bible is essentially metaphor and narrative that are meant to have a rhetorical effect on the reader rather than an "objective" reference to the "real world." That is, the Bible in our day is viewed

through the lenses provided by literary theory, just as it was in the eighteenth century when Scripture was taken as the premier instance of the sublime. What shapes Christian belief and believers and communities, as the argument goes, is this heritage of stories about God and imagery in which to imagine "him." I see four interlocked problems with this strategy. First, the traditional truth-claims of poetry have now been thoroughly deconstructed by literary theorists who have chased classical western epistemology into the last dark corner of the last dark alley that intellect alone can supply. No discourse is anything other than the endless, meaningless play of signifiers. Texts *may* be daring in their witty play or courageous in their nihilism, but they never "mean" anything. One reads not to learn but to engage in the game. Casually or uncritically to ally Christian community with Christian stories is to affirm the social and psychological implications of this absolutely closed and futile hermeneutic circle.

Second, casually to ally Scripture with literature at this point, intellectually, is to risk asserting that the very real difficulties of the Bible are "intentional" recognitions or embodiments of the meaninglessness of all discourse. Deconstruction as a critical position credits no criteria of literary "merit," but the fact remains that literary critics tend to read traditionally literary texts rather than, for instance, assembly instructions printed on cardboard boxes. Texts "worth" deconstructing tend to be those wherein the deceit or artifice of "meaning" is most wittily dis/engaged. Especially to those ignorant of its particular literary conventions, the Bible offers engaging scope for such methods—methods that are among the common tools of anyone who has earned a B.A. in the last fifteen or twenty years. It does not demand much pedagogical nor literary experience to imagine the consequences if such a person sauntered into a "pick a pericope and project upon it" Bible study group.

Third, when theologians talk about narrative theology, they do not usually or rigorously mean stories—successful aesthetic wholes with beginnings, middles, ends, plot structures, settings, character exposition and development, etc. They mean chronologically sequenced exposition, something that functions for theology much as the "methods" section of a scientific research report: I know I

can't tell you what I know or what I understand except by explaining to you, step by step, how I acquired this knowledge or understanding. To play a bit with current jargon, an argument or an idea cannot be "proved" but merely "displayed," and the "display" is often fundamentally a chronological exposition of one sort or another.

There is often something a bit slippery or muddled about the transition from what is predicated about the role of such chronological exposition in theology or ethics to arguments about the real literary stories included as one of the subgenres of the Bible—as if these authentic literary stories are the "display" of our faith. But if they are regarded as "display" then they are not being regarded as literary and aesthetic wholes whose "meaning" is intimately determined by a wide array of artistic strategies. Various odd things have been predicated of the Bible over the centuries, of course, but not much seems more heartbreakingly inadequate than reducing that masterpiece to chronologically sequenced expository display. Literary storytelling—in prose or in verse—is far far more complex than chronologically-sequential exposition. Narrative theology may not in fact solve the problems it wants to solve without engaging contemporary forms of the older theories and methods that regarded literature as visionary truth and sought to understand and to articulate the various means whereby literature achieves what it achieves.

Finally, when theologians talk about metaphorical theology, they usually seem to mean paradigms, not poetry. Paradigms are of course quite powerful. Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions,* not incidentally, centers itself in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries when the literary and scriptural arguments I have been tracing are at their peak. "God said, Let Newton Be, and all was light," quips Alexander Pope: the importance of metaphor, the changes in the way literature uses metaphor, and the relationships among metaphor, mathematics, and linguistics in this era are all intimate to the argument I am trying to make. The massive influence of such formulations as "God the Father Almighty" cannot be denied. Nonetheless, another and equally generative power of metaphor can be located in the specifically poetic strategies whereby biblical

writers in prose and in verse force one metaphor to play off of another in order to think and to feel and to say what cannot otherwise be thought or felt or said.

A small example is King Solomon and the prostitutes. Folklore, mutter the commentaries. Undoubtedly. But the two whores are also quite transparently metaphors for the two kingdoms. They offer spectacular metaphoric foreshadowing at many different levels of what is to come both for Solomon and for the nation. Seeing this much, one sees other questions. Who then is the child? What becomes of him? Why does the king not reprove their promiscuity? Are they religious prostitutes? Perhaps that explains the position of the episode immediately after the dream-vision in which Solomon asks for wisdom and shortly before he begins building the Temple.

I hear thunderous irony in the narrator's comment that the whores "stood in awe of the king, because they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him, to render justice." One would think that the wisdom of God— just affirmed by the dream-vision—would have done a better job of discerning the real problem evident in adultery and promiscuity, or that the narrator might have found someone better qualified to affirm Solomon's gifts. The fact that the story is folklore does not diminish its literary purposes in the text as it is. Amidst the celebratory tone of early I Kings, it strikes a dark and terrifying note. One does not hear that note, nor begin to understand it, without understanding what it is to think in metaphors. What does it matter, what does it portend, that Israelites are now as numerous as sand if the wisdom of Solomon is manifest in keeping order among whores?

And this is prose. As metaphoric thinking goes, it is very very simple. Robert Alter's work sketches the complexity of insight and nuance of meaning that the Bible offers to one who has mastered both its literary conventions and its massively theological focus. [7] Theological recourse to narrative and to metaphor will not solve the centuries-old problems it seeks to solve unless it engages narrative and metaphor in the literary manner that Alter demonstrates.

In the meanwhile, in the face of the despair and the nihilism so pervasive within western culture, it may be that poets and priests are again, at last, on a

common ground we have not shared since early antiquity. But the space is bare ruins unless we begin at the beginning to reconstruct ways of understanding and naming to one another the values that we share. Poets and priests together may constitute something like a saving remnant, sharing a common responsibility to teach and to preserve the sources of meaning in the face of violence, social disorder, and manic consumerism.

And in that task, we can draw upon the pragmatism of both Anglican tradition and British literary tradition. There can be no thorough-going, elegant, systematic resolutions. There can only be bread enough for today, fish and cup to share, something to go on that will feed us well enough that we can feed those who listen to us. That's not much. But it may be everything.

Central to the task is the work of Samuel Taylor Coleridge: a poet, a literary theorist without compare, and an influential Anglican theologian whose major theological text presents itself as a formation exercise for seminarians. In *Biographia Literaria,* Coleridge argues that the imaginative qualities necessary to appreciate a literary work are in real but smaller measure the same imaginative qualities necessary to produce that work in the first place. [8] Technical command of the art *per se* is another matter. Furthermore, what qualifies a work as "poetry" is that it elicit and sustain genuine imaginative activity on the part of the reader. The characteristic linguistic features of poems—prosody, for instance, or figurative language— are not, strictly speaking, required. They exist only because they have proven, over time, successful in eliciting and sustaining imaginative engagement and response from readers.

Coleridge's apparent dismissal of poetic form has startled many readers and enraged some, but it is an ancient position. Rhyme and rhythm alone do not make a text a poem. Witness, for instance, mnemonic ditties like "Thirty days hath September." Or better yet, read around in medieval encyclopedias written in verse. Or greeting cards. Similarly, an imaginative writer at the peak of his or her power elicits an imaginative response, despite particular decisions or choices about genre. Novelists and, later, film-makers have proven this point. Sir Philip Sidney adeptly formulates the essential claim: "There have been many most

excellent poets that never versified, and now swarm many versifiers that need never answer to the name of poets. . . . It is not rhyming and versing that maketh a poet—no more than a long gown maketh an advocate, who though he pleaded in armor should be an advocate and no soldier." [9] Coleridge's particular argument is that both reading well and writing well arise from the imagination.

Coleridge makes that point as part of his larger, lifelong argument that imagination replicates and echoes within human consciousness the essentially trinitarian character of God, synthesizing or reconciling our abstract ideas and moral intuitions with our passionate feelings and immediate, sensuous encounters with particular realities. For centuries Christians murdered one another in arguments about whether faith is an act of will or an act of knowledge. Coleridge speaks for an enormous literary tradition when he says it is neither, when he argues that faith is a creative act, the act of imagination; when he asserts that art and the encounter with God share a common origin in the human spirit. [10] The knowledge of God is not propositional but visionary, and consequently art is the human activity that most finely records the human encounter with the holy. As a result, the powerfully imaginative discourse called "poetry" constitutes a massive resource for the life of faith or for the sustenance of believers. Coleridge was convinced that William Wordsworth was uniquely situated, historically and personally, to write the poem that would reveal or enact, once and for all, how it is that imagination leads through art to God.

George Steiner's *Real Presences* is, formally and among other qualities, a witty and deeply imaginative "retelling" of *Biographia Literaria.* His opening paragraphs distill Coleridge's position while yet rendering it far more tentative:

> This essay proposes that any coherent understanding of what language is and how language performs, that any coherent account of the capacity of human speech to communicate meaning and feeling is, in the final analysis, underwritten by the assumption of God's presence…. The experience of aesthetic meaning in particular … infers the necessary possibility of this "real presence…. The wager on the meaning of meaning, on the potential of

> insight and response when one human voice addresses another, when we come face to face with the text and work of art of which, which is to say when we encounter the other in its condition of freedom, is a wager on transcendence. [11]

Coleridge would not have called it a wager, but an act of faith and an acceptance of grace. As Coleridge puts the matter, faith in God "could not be intellectually more evident without becoming morally less effective; without counteracting its own end by sacrificing the *life* of faith to the cold mechanism of a worthless because compulsory assent." [12]

The public or "objective" evidence for God that matters most for Coleridge—as for Steiner—is the evidence provided by art and by his own passionate, imaginative response to art. But Steiner contends that "on the secular level, on that of pragmatic psychology or general consensus, the claims of nothingness cannot adequately be answered." [13] According to Steiner, great art has asked and continues to ask "the one question ineradicable in man: Is there or is there not God? Is there or is there not meaning to being?" [14] Nonetheless, we feel what he calls a "radical flinching" from and "embarrassment" about assent to the reality of the transcendent. [15]

Coleridge did not flinch. He was not embarrassed. He was entirely, passionately convinced that God is real, that God's reality in our lives is most powerfully, most centrally evident within the works of imagination, and that both poets and critics were called to make that evidence widely accessible to less talented readers. (He called at one point for those blessed with literary imagination to be assigned to every parish in the nation, the better to pursue this ministry: see *Biographia Literaria,* chapter eleven.) I am not describing here the common tendency of intellectuals to see art and not God as the centrally redemptive reality—the kinds of positions, derived from German romanticism, that one sees for instance in Iris Murdoch. I mean something else altogether. Art not only asks, "Is there or is there not God?" Great art sometimes answers in the affirmative. God then constitutes not only the warrant of meaning as an event

between reader and writer, but also the meaning itself. As poet, I in my freedom address you as reader in your freedom, testifying to a truth "that could not be intellectually more evident without being morally less effective" and eliciting in you, through my command of aesthetic form, the imaginative activity of consciousness whereby human and sacred find contact.

In *The Revelatory Text: Reading the New Testament as Sacred Scripture,* Sandra Schneiders explores and defines that contact; it is an elegant and persuasive book that draws widely upon both Scripture scholarship and literary theory. [16] She argues that a text (literary or Scriptural) can function as revelation, as a genuine locus of encounter with the sacred, by the ways in which it creates and draws us into a possible alternative reality. Genuinely to enter such a world, she argues. "is to be changed, to 'come back different,' which is a way of saying that one does not come 'back' at all but moves forward into a newness of being. From the genuine encounter with the true in the beautiful, one cannot go home again." [17] Needless to say, "true" here does not mean "good" or "moral" but something more like "riveting": the alternative reality conjured by art can be powerfully transforming in her sense and even attractive without providing access to the sacred. Much wonderful literature is quite secular. Furthermore, I suspect that evil can also characterize the fictive reality without much compromise of artistic quality as such. The good, the true, and the beautiful can form a single potent reality, but I suspect that aesthetic power as such does not finally or logically depend upon their union.

This is as true of Scripture as it is of literature generally: consider the evil that can be justified by appeal to the genocide in Canaan or the Levirite random slaughter of kin and neighbor after the golden calf episode. Those are swashbuckling tales, brilliantly successful by almost any literary measure. But taken on their own they are as appalling as anything "secular" literature has to offer. Fortunately, we are not to take them simply on their own: they are episodes in a complex and densely self-critical, self-referential larger story.

The transforming, revelatory power potentially exercised by literature rests in part upon its ability persuasively to recreate the human encounter with the holy or

to invite us into what Schneiders—building upon Ricoeur— calls an "alternative reality." In this alternative reality, God's power and God's grace are less equivocal and easier to see than they are within the drudgery and pain of our own ordinary lives. Doctrine founders upon paradoxes that literature can represent clearly and persuasively without reducing genuine spiritual mystery into unconvincing explanation. Systematic theology, like literary theory, is a good and necessary discipline. But the life of faith is far better served by "truth carried alive into the heart by passion."

Another small example: Garrison Keillor offers stunning accounts of grace and of the interplay among grace, free will, forgiveness, and repentance. His collection *Leaving Home* sustains a reflection on exodus and exile, on the promised land and the realized Kingdom, that is more subtle and more comprehensive and more deeply moving than anything ostensibly "religious" that I have ever read or heard taught or preached on these topics. [18] Garrison Keillor is probably not in the same class as Milton or Dante or Wordsworth, but then again we recognize his allusions without footnotes. We need no introduction to his "worldview," no details on the French Revolution or the Guelphs and the Ghibelines. In a wonderful little piece on the Episcopal church, he describes his audience as "my radio congregation." [19] That self-characterization seems to me entirely apt. He is an extraordinary apologist and, I argue, a first-rate theologian.

I think it would be marvelous fun to lead a weekend parish retreat on Garrison Keillor. I'm sure that will strike many as an innovative and creative suggestion. But Keillor has been extremely popular for years now: this proposal would be old hat if the common ground between literature and religion were better understood. And as good and as useful as Keillor is, Emily Dickinson is just as accessible, undoubtedly richer, and arguably almost as popular at least with the college-educated.

Keillor is a theologian and Dickinson is a theologian if literature be theology, if art be revelation—not universally, not necessarily, for grace is not a spigot we can turn by any verbal technique, but *potentially.* There is probably no literary theorist more determined than Coleridge to map the connection between

literature and revelation, and even he concluded that the literary connection between beauty and truth is empirical not necessary. The most fully achieved literary forms will offer insight not because the form itself guarantees it, but because the creativity necessary to command such form arises from the divine in the human. They are “independent variables,” so to speak, but they commonly vary together.

How then might churches begin to collect from these fields ripe for harvest? We must begin by recognizing that the nihilism of postmodernism is not a position in which we are directly invested. Superb contemporary critiques of positivist constructions of knowledge are for us merely cautionary or propaedeutic disciplines for our intellectual lives and discourses as thoughtful Christians. Such critiques do not call into question our personal, passionate, immediate experience as members of the mystical body of the risen Christ. The God we worship cannot be deconstructed, even if or even when we find that words fail us in trying to explain who this God is and how we have come to know and worship. As Steiner argues, the problem of meaninglessness or of radically indeterminate meaning are predicated upon the absence of God. But our lives and not just our writings are predicated on God’s vital and vivid presence.

And so we can let the philosophers—literary or theological—go about their business just as physicists do. We can acknowledge that both matter and texts are not as solid as they *seem,* nor is the earth still beneath our feet. None of those facts challenges a faith that knows its own ground in immediate experience. After all, I can explain relativity and give a fair account of particle physics. In a very amateur way, I am deeply interested in the history of physics. But nonetheless I back the car down the driveway very carefully. Maybe the corner of the house is not solid but rather seething and indeterminate. It will leave quite a dent nonetheless.

The life of faith is not unlike backing that car down the drive. As a poet and as a believer, I orient myself to practical, day-to-day reality in immediately passionate, sensuous ways that these disciplines can enlighten but not essentially discredit. No theory in any discipline can soften a brick wall or explain

away the power of great art. Nor do they claim to do so. David Hume observed that his devastating critique of causality should stop no sensible man from enjoying his breakfast. Radical deconstructionists publish exquisitely constructed arguments.

If the activity or the community called “church” is legitimately an effort to share the experience of God and to find our ways together through the woods of daily life, then literature as such is inevitably and necessarily a part of the whole endeavor: there are numerous literary works that speak eloquently and accessibly about the experience of God. The power and the importance of these works can be denied only by making illegitimate claims that the heritage of doctrine and Scripture together or separately constitute absolute and exclusive knowledge for which institutional religion is the sole appointed broker. Fortunately, that is not a claim that can be made within the Anglican tradition.

I want to conclude with some thoughts about the intimate connection between literary form and poetic truth. It seems to me that the central difference between the reading habits of poets and priests centers on what literary types call the “integrity” of the text. Especially since Coleridge, and especially in the English-speaking tradition, concern for the integral relation of parts to whole has been a central literary-critical methodological presupposition, a method or habit of reading that is presumed at the level of “common sense.” But of course it is not “common sense.” It is an interpretive and theoretical stance with deep historical roots. It is diametrically opposed to the methods and presumptions of (essentially Germanic) biblical scholarship. Furthermore, asserting “the immunity of the text” will, if taken too rigorously or in continental fashion, raise very serious ontological difficulties. I’ll get back to those in a minute.

First, however, some examples. However useful the Elohist vs. Yahwist distinction is for certain purposes, sorting Genesis verse-by-verse into one or the other camp simply destroys the integrity of the story as immediately or consecutively read. From this more directly and more British literary perspective, it is utter nonsense to talk about “two” creation accounts. There is one. We see the same events at first from a more distant perspective and then more closely, a

more intimate look at our place in the world and at the very same and singular God. They are prose versions of the doublets in Hebrew verse.

I am intrigued that the final redactors assimilated both Elohist and Yahwist traditions, but for me that is akin to saying that Wordsworth uses both Milton and Augustine in writing *The Prelude.* I am delighted to have scholarly editions and commentaries identifying the lines that closely echo each source, but Wordsworth is not just redacting two sources on the question of what it means to be a human soul on a spiritual journey. He is forging a new and distinctive whole that says something more and something different than any of his sources. Shakespeare uses Holinshed and he uses other sources as well; Shakespeare's achievements, however, remain both distinctive and distinctively valuable. Wordsworth or Shakespeare submerged or reformed their sources "more" than the artist finally responsible for Genesis. But we are talking about differences of degree, not kind—I would contend—and such differences are also closely governed by local literary convention. "I have no right to tamper with your flute," observed Henry James, "and then criticize your music." [20] Nor can I disassemble the instrument altogether and expect a powerful performance from it.

Let me clarify further by pushing the issue a little harder. The Priestly interpolations into the Exodus story are undeniably startling to a late European-language reader. But the story as we have it, the text in its final, redacted, aesthetic integrity, raises the intriguing spectre of apparently unconditional rescue from Pharaoh's oppression being followed immediately by massive regulations and violently enforced strictures that are at times visibly resisted by this "stiff-necked" people. Where others hear interpolations to be dis-interpolated by critical reading, I hear a marvelous dramatic tension to be played out for hundreds of pages.

Later still, one can divide the text into pro-monarchy and anti-monarchy snippets. But I hear, in the tension between these two voices, a stunning and subtle argument that perhaps "the promised land" is not real estate after all, that perhaps the covenant is a far more complex and subtle matter than the promise of vineyards and glory that at first it seemed. Does Isaiah's promise of a

covenant writ in the heart inform this earlier argument? Or not? Do the parts of a text inform the whole and inform each other with this kind of pressure? Or are the parts essentially separable, especially in a text whose immediate or original composition is the work of many hands, redacted by perhaps at least as many editors? Is the Bible a quirky collection of disparate texts? Or is it—or has it become—a single work whose complex and fundamental unity we are only beginning to appreciate as our own art moves beyond traditional European-language habits of "realist" narration and densely positivist versions of aesthetic unity? As twentieth-century writers have demonstrated, those are not the only successful forms of aesthetic unity. In questions like this, as in so many other areas of life, one finds what one's theories or presumptions suggest is there to be found. That is why becoming conscious of one's theoretical presuppositions is so important.

Furthermore, the matter of aesthetic unity or literary form is crucial not only for Scripture but also for assimilating literature as a vital resource for Christian community. Literature offers an experience of unity and coherence that is not evident or at least not usually available within ordinary life and ordinary consciousness. When I am in a funk, usually I just muddle around in my funk. Shakespeare's sonnet, "When in disgrace with fortune and men's eyes," is about a rather ordinary experience of one such episode. But it is not the muddle that we all know from our own inner lives. His sonnet both elicits the experience into present consciousness and then gets us somewhere on the issue. Wordsworth's sonnet "The world is too much with us" laments the spiritual aridity of a crassly material culture. One hears such complaints at almost any gathering, but usually not with such clarity and poignancy and insight. Narratives—stories, novels, dramas, films—can capture not just a movement of individual consciousness but all the actions and interactions and conflicts of social reality. And our engagements with literary representations of those movements or those social realities can teach us something both about ourselves and about the world in which we ordinarily live.

Literary form can offer or generate an image or a recreation of the "real

world," and yet it is a "real world" that has a clarity of meaning and a certainty of conviction that our own empirical experience very seldom supplies. [21] Life is never as unequivocal as art, except when life's mystery and paradox have been denied in a way that art never denies them. Literature convinces us of its own reality despite its capacity utterly to transcend all that is not just "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" but also ambiguous, uncertain, and despairing. And in that capacity to transcend all the chaos of real experience, literature can reveal a transcendent God who is also blazingly, potently immanent.

I contend that the visionary reality offered by the artwork—Scriptural or secular—depends upon the reader's consecutive experience of its formal or aesthetic or "organic" synthesis of all its own details or elements or parts. Of course this synthesis is relative and not absolute: the artwork does not occupy an ontological plane all by itself. The presupposition of unity, carried too far, forces the hermeneutic circle to collapse inward on itself or else raises the spectre of a tyrannous hegemony of whole over parts. Furthermore, it is in various ways illusory and in various ways dependent upon our willingness to engage its specific conventions of representation: any one who looks can see that art is art and not life. Finally, no artwork is perfect. Even Homer nods.

The fact remains, I argue, that we need not push the presumption as far as it can go. This is one critical presumption or one strategy among other critical presumptions and strategies. The proper application and interpretation of these critical elements are themselves creative acts and not mechanical or arithmetic or even philosophic procedures. Literary criticism is in most regards an art; it is never a positivist social science. It offers no "results." I presume a certain pragmatic common sense both in understanding and in applying my claim (and it is not "mine" at all) that the full aesthetic experience of literary meaning, of engagement with the text, depends methodologically upon a willingness to attend in so far as possible to the cooperative function of all of its parts. My presumption in this regard is distinctively British—even more distinctively American, perhaps—and from continental perspectives (even in America) it will look a bit impressionistic, vague, and potentially naive. But surely the issue makes an

enormous difference if we settle clown to particular instances such as those I proposed from Scripture.

It rained last night, hard and abruptly, distracting me from my work on this paper. So what? I have no answer. But if this were a story about my writing a paper, that question should have an answer. In reading literature appropriately, I argue, one reads with the presupposition that nothing "just happens." Solomon's prostitutes show up when they do because they contribute something. The young man who runs off naked when Jesus is arrested contributes something. Maybe that young man was "real" and maybe he was "not real." Maybe that event "happened" and maybe it "did not happen." As a critic I do not particularly care whether it happened, because as a critic and above all as a poet myself I know that even my most literal or "historical" stories are such a radical re-vision and re-selection of experience that nothing remains without earning its place—even if it is a typically academic excess to suppose that we can rigorously account for each little detail.

Nonetheless, a talented reader can account for quite a bit. As a poet, I know how much that might seem incidental is most carefully wrought. The particular calling or ability of the poet (including the final redactors of Scripture) is to take all the muddled disruptive incoherence of real fact and actual memory—whether communal or personal—and then select and arrange, reform and recast them into a coherent aesthetic whole that tells a visionary truth that facts alone cannot reveal. If you splinter the text into parts, that visionary truth will be lost. And it will be a crucial loss.

The relation between art and reality, then, is much like what we understand to be the relation between what Jesus called "the Kingdom of God" and ordinary experience. The Kingdom of God is not a reality dreamt of in our philosophy, which is partly why contemporary literary theory does not provide terms and methods that can account for literature's moral value within Christian community. To recur to Coleridge, faith is the work of imagination, synthesizing and subordinating both knowledge and will to imagination's own capacity to generate "A new earth and new heaven,/Undreamt of by the sensual and the proud." [22] To

find that Kingdom translucent within literature—secular or Scriptural—we must first of all read properly, which is to say attentively, to details regarded not as historical facts but as poetic choices. One who reads in such a way is powerfully engaged by the text, and the psychological and ethical power of that engagement with "illusion" has long been feared by those who would maintain social control. Art, like the Kingdom, is inherently subversive in its visionary certainty. Jesus taught in parables.

The ethical potential of our engagement with stories is hilariously illustrates by Woody Allen's story, "The Kugelmass Episode." [23] Allen traces the adventures of a middle-aged humanities professor who by means of magic transports himself into *Madame Bovary—lectio divina* come alive. Of course Kugelmass merely recapitulates the problems that shape his life to begin with: when he brings Madame Bovary out to New York, their relationship is soon beset by all the same woes as his marriages. Literature has not offered him the escape he has fantasized that it would: the hermeneutic circle traps him. But Allen pushes the point a step further:

> "I can't get my mind around this," a Stanford professor said. "First a strange character named Kugelmass, and now she's gone from the book. Well, I guess the mark of a classic is that you can read it a thousand times and always find something new." [24]

We do not expect to find ourselves in stories, as Kugelmass does; and we certainly do not expect to find our contemporaries, as the professor does. *But we do.* As Coleridge explains, as Schneiders explains, as Martin Smith explains, each in slightly different ways, that endlessly repeated rediscovery underlies the permanence of art. [25] But it depends—utterly and profoundly—upon our correlative willingness to respect and to engage the full aesthetic subordination of parts to wholes and not to history or to orthodoxy or to conventional propriety and our own individual psychological self-preoccupations. Here as elsewhere, of course, consistent virtue will elude us. All we can do is try.

From this perspective, John Dominic Crossan's account of the allusive structure of the passion narratives renders the spiritual reality of the resurrection far more vivid and convincing for me even while discrediting revivification and an empty (or literally nonexistent) tomb. [26] Accounting for "the facts" of the accounts poetically not historically transforms them into a story that is richer and denser with meanings than mere journalism could ever provide. Freed of journalistic duty to mere facts, the passion narratives become a visionary reality that transcends and transforms ordinary experience. Kugelmass's magic box could not exist, any more than bodies can be revivified (or if either could be literally real in some other time and place, whether Jerusalem or New York, such magic would not have much moral meaning in my own nonmagical middlewestern existence). But Kugelmass's particular ability to create and to sustain the problems afflicting his life is a quandary that exists for all of us. The facts of redemption and resurrection are also daily facts in the life of a believer.

The moral power of the passion narratives, like the lesser but real moral power of this little short story, lies in its ability to transport us, however briefly, to what Coleridge calls "the willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith. [27] We go along, neither crediting nor doubting but rather engaging all the elements of the story on all of their own terms. And thereby does grace find access, thereby can our vision be changed, thereby do we find an order and meaning and moral clarity that ordinary experience cannot provide. The death and resurrection of Jesus become not merely a fact of history but a meaning in our lives. "I never told a story that wasn't true," said an Irishman, "whether or not it happened just exactly as I tell it."

The paradox of this is massive: "The Kugelmass Episode" never happened: no experience of any sort is as lucid and coherent as a well-built little story (and with the right techniques, of course, the unity of stories can also be exploded); if we are enchanted, then, we are enchanted by lies and by illusion. No wonder poets are banished and prophets are killed and aggressive French theorists demonstrate that "meaning" itself is fundamentally political oppression. That, or else meaning is the central creative act, the Word made flesh among us.

Steiner eloquently summarizes the ways in which the artist's ability to conjure up a convincing and utterly engaging alternative reality has traditionally been understood as a rivalry with God. [28] This "seductive" power of art is in fact acknowledged by the various historical attempts to restrain or at least ignore artists (or to "protect" believers) behind tall fences of orthodoxy and doctrine. But if we take the Trinity seriously, if we genuinely believe that our God is incarnate, then art is (potentially) part of God's ongoing act of Incarnation. True spiritual discernment is still necessary, here as everywhere else in life; but orthodox doctrine and above all domesticated conventional habits of expression and belief will not take automatic priority over the arts themselves. The church may have something new and serious to learn about crucifixion from Emily Dickinson or about immanence and spiritual growth from William Wordsworth or about sin and repentance from Dante Alighieri.

Sidney's defense of poetic "illusion" still sets a standard for eloquence after all these centuries:

> Now for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth …. The poet never maketh any circles about your imagination, to conjure you to believe for true what he writes. He citeth not authorities of other histories, but even for his entry calleth the sweet Muses to inspire into him a good invention; in truth, not laboring to tell you what is, or is not, but what should or should not be. [29]

"What should or should not be" is not to be construed as petty moralizing but as full poetic vision of the Kingdom that both should be and is, the coherence and the meaning of what we "half-create/and what perceive" by the forceful, poetic, imaginative re-vision of our own lives and experience. [30]

The power of "good invention" depends upon its thorough-going control over all its own parts, I have argued; but it must be admitted that no one has ever quite explained how that control works either in the text or within the reader. That is part of why the claim remains a controversial one: the coherence of a literary

work and the interplay of its parts can be experienced but not formally demonstrated. Alexander Pope's famous lines remain definitive. The great poet, he argues, does not work by "rules" (which is what he means here by "art"). Instead, the poet can

> … snatch a grace beyond the reach of art,
> Which, without passing through the judgment, gains
> The heart, and all its end at once attains. [31]

We can dismiss our initial or primary experience as readers, calling it naive illusion. Or we can conclude that grace is real, that Pope chose the right word: art and the reception of art are both works of grace and not merely achievements of human intellect and will, As Marcus Borg says, if you have no immediate experience of God, you will have a much harder time understanding and defending any of this. [32]

The word "grace" refers simultaneously to effortless beauty and to sanctification. We have a word for it. We have a word for many realities that theorists cannot explain. That is why we have poets and not just philosophers. "The imagination may be compared to Adam's dream," said Keats, "—he awoke and found it truth." [33] Put down the book; get up from the dust where you sat listening to a parable; startle and reach for the prayerbook because the sermon is over and we must get on with the liturgy. Any way you do it, if you have heard a story told skillfully then it is an awakening.

But we awaken changed. mysteriously changed. We awaken in a world that has been changed, a world whose potentiality has been abruptly and mysteriously revised. As Schneiders argues, as many traditions worldwide have argued for millennia, there is no going back once one's vision has been broadened and deepened. As Stanley Hauerwas argues in so many different ways and places, Christian communities must above all be interpretive communities or discourse communities where the transforming power of poetry is known and taught and sustained as a vital social reality. It is the poetry of

Scripture and above all the artistry of worship that distinguish churches from PACs and from social service agencies. And, I have argued, poetry itself, literature-as-such ought to be more widely recognized and engaged as a vital and valuable resource for the forming and transforming activity of Christian community. Historically, aesthetically, morally, literature *per se* is an inseparable element of the Kingdom.

Furthermore, literature-as-such embodies a crucial aspect of God's continued creative presence among us. It is not just that the Bible has been a massively fruitful resource for western poets, important though that fact may be. Rather, the continued vitality of our common or shared perception "of the sacred depends upon the incessantly revised and revisioned vitality of art. Anglican theology insists and literature demonstrates that we keep seeing God in new ways, in ways that may build upon tradition but that also constitute a serious and autonomous revelation. Poets are as crucial to that enterprise in our day as they were for the ancient Jews and the first Christians.

Oscar Wilde's trenchant critique of nineteenth-century realism, "The Decay of Lying," offers a quite accurate account of art's visionary power in a community:

> For what is nature? Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing. One does not see anything until one sees its beauty. Then, and only then, does it come into existence. At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. Now, it must be admitted, fogs are carried to excess. They have become the mere mannerism of a clique, and the exaggerated realism of their method gives dull people bronchitis. . . . Yesterday evening Mrs. Arundel insisted on my going to the window, and

> looking at the glorious sky, as she called it. . . . And what was it? It was simply a very second-rate Turner, a Turner of a bad period, with all the painter's worst faults exaggerated and overemphasized. [34]

"What we see, and how we see it, depends upon the arts that have influenced us. . . . One does not see anything until one sees its beauty." I have watched a train pull into a train station every weekday morning for years, but I knew I had never really seen the train on a cold winter day until I read *Anna Karenina.* Furthermore, while riding on a train one afternoon I watched a buck with a huge rack of antlers bounding away across the Indiana dunes through chest-high golden sedge. It looked like the most clichéd of drawings atop cheap calendars, and I felt myself cheated out of my own life by my exposure to bad art. The experience of God is no less powerfully evoked by, and perhaps not much less vulnerable to, the powers of art. God is there as the fog is there or the sunset, but without aesthetically powerful witness to God's transforming presence, the lonely soul at a window or on a train may see only through the haze and streaks that nihilism smears across New Age banalities.

God is there as the mountains are there. But most of life goes on in the woods where, like Dante, we can easily find ourselves lost and beset by the powers of evil both within and among us. It is wise, then, to welcome and to heed whatever visionary guides grace offers, even if in the guise of pagan poets.

NOTES

1. *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982); *Models of God* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987).
2. *Why Narrative: Readings in Narrative Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1989).
3. See, for instance, the following substantial anthologies: Hugh T. Kerr, ed. *Readings in*
Christian Thought, 2nd ed (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990); Louis Dupré and

James A.
Wiseman, O.S.B., eds., *Light from Light: An Anthology of Christian Mysticism* (New York:
Paulist Press, 1988); Cheslyn Jones. Geoffrey Wainwright and Edward Yarnold, S.J. eds., *The*
Study of *Spirituality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), Lavinia Byrne, ed, *The*
Hidden Tradition Women's Spiritual Writings Rediscovered, An Anthology (New York: Crossroad, 1991). Jones et al. does include an entry on Dante.
4. Stephen Prickett, *Words and* The Word: *Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
5. The following brief synopsis could easily be an eight-hundred page scholarly tome. But it seems to me that the world has enough such tomes, and not enough plain poetic confidence that the forest can in fact be distinguished from the trees. What I trace are general outlines perfectly visible to an informed Christian reading of any of the graduate-level anthologies of literary criticism and critical theory. My favorite criticism anthology is Hazard Adams, ed., *Critical Theory Since Plato* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971); for the reader's convenience, I will cite to this single volume wherever possible. Other useful volumes include W. J. Bate, ed., *Criticism: The Major Texts,* enlarged ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1952); Dan Latimer, ed., *Contemporary Critical Theory* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989); and Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle, eds., *Critical Theory Since 1965* (Tallahassee: University Presses of Florida 1956) For help with contemporary jargon, one can turn to Irena R. Makaryk, general editor, *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1993).
6. Prickett, *Words and* The Word, pp. 104ff.
7. Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books div. HarperCollins, 1981); and *The Art of Biblical Poetry*, (New York: Basic Books div. Harper Collins, 1985).

8. I trace the relationship between Coleridge's theology and his literaly theory in *The Design of Biographia Literaria* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982).
9. "An Apology for Poetry," rpt. in Adams, ed., *Critical Theory Since Plato*, p. 159.
10. I work this out in detail in my essay, "Coleridge's Theory of Language," *Philological Quarterly* 59 (1980): 338-352.
11. George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 3-4.
12. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, ed. J. Shawcross (London: Oxford University Press, 1907), vol. 1, pp. 135-136.
13. Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 199.
14. Ibid., p. 220.
15. Ibid., p. 178; p. 200.
16. Sandra Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991).
17. Ibid., pp. 167-168.
18. Garrison Keillor, Leaving Home (New York: Viking Penguin, 1987).
19. Garrison Keillor, "Episcopal," in We Are Still Married (New York: Viking Penguin,
1990), p. 206. He locates his first Episcopal parish in a narrative landscape in which one sees, first, the museum of Danish Resistance, then an enormous statue of a woman from Danish mythology who turned her four brothers into oxen and with them carved out the land of Denmark. Behind this huge statue is a much smaller one of a little mermaid, "a small damp sad person in the midst of a personality crisis." And behind the mermaid is the church.
20. Henry James, "The Art of Fiction," rpt. in Abrams, ed. Critical Theory Since Plato, p.
667.
21. From the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries, one sees dramatic changes in the metaphors used to represent the relationship between literature and the "real world." The central analysis of these changes is M. H. Abrams, The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition (London: Oxford

University Press, 1953). “Mirror” and “lamp” or “light” are, of course, metaphors with important biblical echoes, but Abrams makes only passing references to Scripture. It is in fact difficult even to begin to think and to talk about the character or role of literature in western culture without being haunted by imagery ultimately linked to the Bible and especially to the Prologue to the Gospel of John. We have, after all, a God who creates not “ex nihilo but by speaking, by using words that make real what they name. What else do poets do, imaginatively or psychologically, to their readers?

22. Samuel Taylor Coleridge. “Dejection, an Ode,” lines 69-70.

23. Woody Allen, “The Kugelmass Episode” from Side Effects (New York: Random House,
1977).

24. Ibid.

25. Martin Smith, The Word is Very Near You (Boston: Cowley Press, 1989); see also Schneiders, The Revelatory Text: “. . . the classic text is classic precisely because it does not merely convey information but affects existentially the life of its readers In other words, interpretation of the classic is engagement with its truth claims, which remain relevant to succeeding generations of readers. The classic must be not only deciphered, that is, translated and exegeted, not only ‘replayed,’ that is, criticized: it must also be recontextualized in the present situation and appropriated” (p. 151; cf p. 156).

26. John Dominic Crossan, Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), chapters six and seven, especially pp. 143—152.

27. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Biographia Literaria, ed. J. Shawcross, volume 2, p. 6; cf volume 2, p. 107.

28. George Steiner, Real Presences, pp. 200-216, He acknowledges that his account is
deeply androcentric in its emphasis on rivalry, jealousy, and rage. Perhaps a woman’s direct and powerful biological experience of participation in the actual generation of human life can mean that all forms of creativity are for us more secure and more freely mutual with the God who (epistemologically) assures

their intelligibility and meaning, In light of how biology privileges the feminine experience of biological reproduction, Steiner too lightly disregards the sociological obstacles facing a woman who is an artist. Having biological command of creation as we do, we are all the more threatening to the male as Steiner depicts it if we command aesthetic creation as well. German romanticism aside, artists always need an audience—and that usually means brokered access to audience—that androcentnc cultures will be unconsciously reluctant to provide.

29. Sir Philip Sidney, “An Apology for Poetry,” rpt. in Adams, ed., Critical Theory Since Plato
p. 168.

30. William Wordsworth, “Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey,” lines 107-
108.

31. Alexander Pope, “An Essay on Criticism”, lines 155-157; rpt. in Adams, ed,, Critical
Theory Since Plato, pp. 278-286.

32. Marcus Borg, Meeting Jesus Again For the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith, (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1994), pp. 14-15, 33-35, 86-88, 95n56. He nicely explains a common wisdom among believers: it can be difficult or even impossible to explain religious experience or even theology to someone whose metaphysics excludes the transcendent. If we take the reality of God as a given—not as something we have either established ourselves or that needs somehow to be discursively established for our conclusions to be valid—our tasks as writers are suddenly far simpler and so is the formal structure of our discourse.

33. John Keats, letter to Benjamin Bailey 22 November 1817; rpt. in Adams, ed., Critical Theory Since Plato, p. 473.

34. Oscar Wilde, “The Decay of Lying,” rpt. in Adams, ed., *Critical Theory Since Plato,* p. 683.