

religion and literature in recent american scholarship

THE MODERN CONFESSIONAL NOVEL. By Peter M. Axthelm. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1967.

THE USE OF ANALOGY IN THE LETTERS OF PAUL. By Herbert M. Gale. Philadelphia: Westminster Press. 1964.

IRONY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT. By Edwin M. Good. Philadelphia: Westminster Press. 1965.

DESPERATE FAITH, A STUDY OF BELLOW, SALINGER, MAILER, BALDWIN, AND UPDIKE. By Howard M. Harper, Jr. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 1968.

BELIEF AND DISBELIEF IN AMERICAN LITERATURE. By Howard Mumford Jones. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press. 1967.

THE FABRIC OF PAUL TILLICH'S THEOLOGY. By David H. Kelsey. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1967.

THE SENSE OF AN ENDING. By Frank Kermode. New York: Oxford University Press. 1967.

THE CHRISTIAN IMAGE: STUDIES IN RELIGIOUS ART AND POETRY. By Justice George Lawler. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press. 1966.

THE FABULATORS. By Robert Scholes. New York: Oxford University Press. 1967.

LITERATURE AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE. By Sallie McFague TeSelle. New Haven: Yale University Press. 1966.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE GOSPEL. By Amos N. Wilder. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers. 1964.

Just a few years ago the relationship of religion and creative literature as an area of scholarly endeavor was scarcely considered respectable, and books on the subject were rare. Today published studies on many dimensions of that relationship are proliferating so rapidly that it is difficult to keep up with them. It is hard to account for this change of climate, especially since it is not that a new generation of literary artists has reintroduced a religious attitude but rather that some younger critics are taking religion much more seriously in the past two decades. In the Twenties and Thirties, for example, when Freudianism and Marxism began to exert a vogueish influence on American criticism, Eliot, Stevens, Hemingway, Steinbeck, Faulkner, among others, were choosing an occasional religious theme for their art and depending considerably on religious images and allusions. Religion—in the broadest sense, at least—never really was out of fashion for the American poet and novelist, only for the critic.

Curiously, the two forces that led the critics to ignore religion in those decades—psychology and political ideology—brought them to a new religious awareness after World War II. Freudianism prepared the way for Jungian theory, and in the resulting fascination with myth, ritual and archetype a religious context favorable to critical inquiry emerged. The disenchantment with Marxism in the late Thirties and the following decade, in turn, created a moral-spiritual vacuum that invited a reassessment of religion—Christianity, Judaism and Eastern mystical varieties—and an eventual establishment of religion as an important literary-cultural factor.

What we are experiencing now in this particular corner of American literary scholarship, I submit, is the normal categorizing and ramifying that accompany an intensified study of any previously neglected area. We have passed through the enthusiastic reception of religion as a new avenue into literary study during the Fifties and early Sixties and are at present settling into a much more careful description and evaluation of the literature-religion liaison.

I see three critical strategies forming in the wealth of studies currently being published. Most of these books and essays are written from a predominantly literary critical point of view and attempt to describe the religious significance of a particular author or work or literary movement as a means toward greater comprehension and appreciation. An increasing number are being composed from a genuine interdisciplinary perspective, largely through the influence of Nathan Scott's theology and literature department in the University of Chicago Divinity School and through the happy interaction of literary study and theology at Yale. A few are written from a theological point of view but with an accompanying working knowledge of literary critical techniques.

One of the better recent books from a literary perspective is Howard Mumford Jones's *Belief and Disbelief in American Literature*. Jones, a humanist rather than a Christian, discusses the "classical" American authors (among them, Irving, Cooper, Emerson, Whitman, Twain, Frost) in terms of their religious maturation and concludes that a most striking fact of our cultural history has been the "failure of religious orthodoxy in America to appeal to the serious literary imagination." Jones's book, however, is a cultural-historical treatment that, while it skillfully isolates the externals of a phenomenon, does little to explain what transpires within literature and religion that makes the two mutually significant.

Another study within the largely literary context that *could* have been good is Peter M. Axthelm's *The Modern Confessional Novel*. Axthelm employs a dichotomy of existential questions and dogmatic answers that he finds in Augustine's *Confessions* as a pattern for analyzing examples of modern fiction, particularly Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, but he does not convincingly support his thesis that the dichotomy actually did inform Augustine's thought. In fact, the book illustrates what too often goes awry in such studies: one tends to equate literary and theological thought patterns and images without realizing that theology often deals in subtleties beyond the scope and concern of much modern literary criticism. Unless our graduate schools begin turning out young Cole-ridges, we may find such oversimplification in literature-and-religion becoming more and more of a hindrance.

Howard M. Harper, Jr.'s book, *Desperate Faith, A Study of Bellow, Salinger, Mailer, Baldwin, and Updike*, shows something of the same problem. Harper studies the five novelists to discover their vision of *la condition humaine*. He is perceptive and does not pretend to theological sophistication, but because his book is neither intense formalist literary criticism nor professional theological commentary, his conclusions are only reaffirmations of what any conscientious reader of the novels discovers. Ten years ago this would have been a stimulating book; today it is already old-fashioned.

A valuable study on the fringes of this category is Robert Scholes' *The Fabulators*. Although Scholes is interested in a redefinition of narrative rather than in the religious implications of literature, he manages

to say more theologically relevant things about romance, black humor and allegory in recent American fiction than most critics who address themselves directly to the religious aspects of such subjects. The theological comments seem to grow naturally out of Scholes' concentration on literary form, and his success leads me to wonder if some of the best literary-religious criticism might not still be done by indirection.

Of the authentic interdisciplinary studies, Justice George Lawler's *The Christian Image: Studies in Religious Art and Poetry* deserves a special mention. This is a very witty commentary that (to paraphrase Lawler) attempts to create a climate of revelatory metaphor around the art object. Lawler's aesthetic attitude may be too mystical, but the approach is a valuable way of challenging the tendency to overclassify theology-literature relationships. Sallie McFague TeSelle's *Literature and the Christian Life* is just as worth while. The author (editor of the new *Soundings* magazine that often deals with aspects of theology and the arts) shows how a phenomenological inquiry into the two disciplines is a necessary step toward a reasoned understanding of their importance for each other. Frank Kermode's *The Sense of an Ending* is the consummate interdisciplinary work to date. Although Kermode is best known as a literary critic, he displays here a theological awareness that appears to best advantage in the central discussion of the apocalypse as a major theme in creative literature. *The Sense of an Ending* exemplifies an innovative use of myth criticism that does not merely classify and psychologize but transcends its own method to arrive at a convergence of imagination and belief.

It is not as easy to find good examples of the third category. Amos N. Wilder's *The Language of the Gospel* is a somewhat older book that examines early Christian rhetoric and pleads for a new appreciation of the imagination within the formal theological framework. Herbert M. Gale in *The Use of Analogy in the Letters of Paul* gives a unique contribution to New Testament interpretation through an analysis of the Pauline metaphors and anecdotes. It is a book that deserves more attention than it has received. Edwin M. Good's *Irony in the Old Testament* utilizes a literary critical method to provide surprisingly facile clarifications of some troublesome Old Testament problems.

A more recent book in this category that I wish to review in detail is David Kelsey's *The Fabric of Paul Tillich's Theology*. Professor Kelsey studies Tillich's systematic theology in terms of the doctrine of the *analogia imaginis*, the theory that Scripture must be interpreted through an aesthetic model and has theological relevance only as it reveals the *picture* of Jesus the Christ as a "verbal icon." Since this picture is the creation of the imagination rather than of rational argumentation, the symbols that constitute it must be conceptualized, explicated and criticized but not translated or reduced to something else. If this sounds like the New Criticism applied to theology—it is. Tillich's bold innovation, Kelsey says, is in his daring to carry through the doctrine and thus free theology from the task of historically proving the Christ event. But it is also Tillich's failing, for he gets caught in an aesthetic-theological dilemma: he insists on the one hand that form should not be separated from content, yet he says on the other that the Christ picture is meaningful only as it becomes transparent to the extrinsic power of the New Being. Although he wishes to present the Christological symbols as intrinsically illuminating, as self-fulfilling, he finds it necessary to explain

their significance finally on the basis of audience reaction—the response of the believer—and that is no longer formalist analysis.

Kelsey might have added that the dilemma has not been solved in literary criticism itself, quite apart from its relation to questions of religious faith, and I suspect that the root of the problem—Tillich's and Kelsey's—is in the literary critical hiatus. Formalist criticism has been found lacking; even if form and content are identical, no criticism as yet has managed to elucidate the mystery of the creative process and response that renders one work compelling and another mediocre. Theologically speaking, then, does one argue that the power of Christ resides in the mystery of a superb literary creation—which the Gospels are *not* generally considered to be—or that it points to a numinous something beyond the literary work? I am not so sure that Tillich was all that innocent of the nature of metaphor. It seems to me that what Kelsey describes as Tillich's dilemma (the conflict of formalist and extrinsic criticism) could just as well be understood as his effort to resolve, consciously, that dilemma through the concept of Christ as, say, the supreme metaphor. In this sense Christ would be both the form and content of kerygma, the preacher of the word and the Word incarnate. Christ as metaphor both points to himself and beyond himself.

As soon as we say that, we are, of course, again in the context of faith and the imagination, but do not religion and creative literature always lead us back there? I do not mean that we must retreat into fideism or romanticism, only that somewhere along the line we must confront the unconditional in our existence and respond to it unconditionally, with the totality of our being. Certainly the wealth of studies of religion and literature that I have mentioned witnesses to an awareness of this need for total response. Form and content are the same only if we comprehend ourselves within that form, which means that aesthetics leads to ontology, and ontology demands personal commitment. For the literary critic, that dictates a strong sense of humility in the face of the infinite possibilities of the imagination, for he must take a stand on the risky basis of his tastes and intuitions. For the theologian, it impels the realization that the object of his concern is always checked by the immeasurability of its subject.

Generally speaking, however, we must admit that the definitive books on religion-and-literature have not yet been written and that they may be a long time in coming, for we are now up against the most perplexing problems. We need, for one, a careful comparative history of theological and literary criticism in the twentieth century to provide a contextual format for more speculative efforts—but at this stage no one has even established whether or not legitimate points of historical comparison exist. For another, we need more studies of the caliber of Kermode's and Scholes' books, studies that progress in a tension between the dynamics of literary form and consciousness of spiritual conditions, but it takes a rare combination of knowledge and experience to produce such works. Finally, we need expressly theological analyses that recognize the close kinship of religious faith and the literary imagination without confusing the two. *The Fabric of Paul Tillich's Theology* is a step in the right direction.

Bibliographical note: The best bibliography of scholarly studies in American religion and literature is found in Volume IV of the massive *Religion in American Life*, edited by Nelson R. Burr in collaboration with James Ward Smith and A. Leland Jamison and published by Princeton University Press in 1961. But this bibliography is already a good eight years out

of date. The only journal, to my knowledge, that includes a regular and comprehensive bibliography on religion and literature is the quarterly *Newsletter of the Conference on Christianity and Literature*, subscriptions c/o David O. Dickerson, Department of English, Greenville College, Greenville, Illinois 62246.

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history and politics

RUFUS KING: American Federalist. By Robert Ernst. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg. 1968.

King's long career in national politics, from the Confederation Congress to his second appointment as minister to Great Britain in 1825, embraced active participation in the Constitutional Convention and in the Massachusetts ratifying convention, two periods of service as a member from New York in the Senate (1789-1796, 1813-1825), and a successful tenure under three Presidents as minister to Great Britain (1796-1803). As a leading supporter of Hamilton and a major defender of the Jay Treaty, King emerged in the 1790s, the author suggests, as the leading Hamiltonian Federalist, with the possible exception of Jay, but he remained a moderate who avoided the extremism of most Hamiltonians. Though potentially the most promising heir to Federalist leadership after his return from England in 1803, King lacked the cast of a successful party leader and withdrew from active politics. In the twilight of Federalism, the party's dwindling vote was directed to him in the presidential election of 1816, but the times had passed him by. A well-written, carefully documented biography based on exhaustive research, this study is an important addition to the growing literature on Federalist leaders.

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Noble E. Cunningham, Jr.

TWELVE AGAINST EMPIRE: The Anti-Imperialists, 1898-1900. By Robert L. Beisner. New York: McGraw-Hill. 1968.

This Nevins History Prize-winning monograph centers on the opposition to Philippine annexation of six Mugwumps and an equal number of dissident Republicans, including Carl Schurz, E. L. Godkin, Charles Francis Adams and Andrew Carnegie. Arbitrarily excluded are anti-annexationist Democrats, labor leaders and the emerging progressives. Through the author's focus on the social, political and economic arguments of the "anti-imperialists" many subsidiary themes emerge to produce a full bodied taste of the prevailing *fin de siècle* American value system, with its pervasive racism, xenophobia, messianism and jingoism. While the "anti-imperialists" shared these values, they nonetheless united in opposition to the creation of an American colony in the Philippines. This opposition nearly managed to defeat the Treaty of Paris in February of 1899. Engagingly written as the twelve mini-biographies are, the book does suffer from the author's inability to define the meaning of "American imperialism." Hence, several of his "anti-imperialists" favored United States hegemony in the Caribbean, a vigorous pursuit of the Open Door in Asia, Hawaiian annexation and the Cuban protectorate. Thus this traditional use of the evocative term "anti-imperialist" seems much too grandiose for the subjects of a nonetheless arresting study which convincingly concludes that the United States is not fitted either by its democratic principles or by its enduring racism to shape the Asian future.

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THE NATURE OF HISTORICAL THINKING. By Robert Stover. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press. 1967.

Mr. Stover is primarily concerned with how historians make particular happenings intelligible, with what they actually do. Admittedly that process is not simple because what historians do today differs substantially from what they did even a few years ago; moreover historian A differs from historian B. In other words the author posits a pluralistic conception of historical thinking. He develops this position by exploring such problems as determinism, explanation, evaluation and parallels between history and science. Though writing as a philosopher he neither condescends to the "mere" historian nor underestimates the difficulty of the historian's task. On the whole the work has the value of making the historian's problems intelligible to himself.

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Charles F. Mullett

EXPECTATIONS WESTWARD: The Mormons and the Emigration of their British Converts in the Nineteenth Century. By P. A. M. Taylor. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 1966.

Mormon leaders have claimed that the Atlantic migration of the Saints occurred with a degree of orderliness and cooperation unmatched by other emigrant groups.