

Preface: A Metaphorical God

“My God, my God, thou art a direct God, may I not say a literal God, a God that wouldst be understood literally and according to the plain sense of all that thou sayest? but thou art also . . . a figurative, a metaphorical God too; a God in whose words there is such a height of figures, such voyages, such peregrinations to fetch remote and precious metaphors, such extensions, such spreadings, such curtains of allegories, such third heavens of hyperboles, so harmonious elocutions, so retired and so reserved expressions, so commanding persuasions, so persuading commandments, such sinews even in thy milk, and such things in thy words, as all profane authors seem of the seed of the serpent that creeps, thou art the Dove that flies.”

—JOHN DONNE, *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*

THE ESSAYS GATHERED IN this volume were originally published as editorial statements, each beginning an issue of the literary quarterly *Image*. They seek to explore the trinity of terms we’ve set forth in the journal’s subtitle, “art, faith, mystery.” Whether these words strike you as intriguing or pretentious may depend on your personal tastes, but anyone proposing them for consideration ought to have an explanation or two handy for the curious.

In the early days of *Image* the subtitle was the more prosaic and scholarly sounding “A Journal of the Arts and Religion.” It was serviceable enough, but for a literary quarterly featuring original creative work rather than scholarship, it gave the wrong impression. Not to mention that it lacked something in the way of connotative richness. And since art works its magic through that sort of suggestiveness, we felt the need to make a change. Then we noticed some publications using individual words, staccato fashion, as subtitles to suggest a whole realm of interrelated interests, and we pondered what words might work for *Image*.

“Art” was a given, and once again it needed to come first. For all its power—and no doubt *because* of its power—art through the centuries has often been harnessed to powerful interests, religious as well as political. The cornerstone of *Image’s* vision has been the conviction that art can explore religious experience in ways that are neither didactic nor moralistic. To paraphrase Walker Percy, we believe that art is cognitive—that it is a way of knowing and embodying, in dramatic form, an encounter with reality. Art is not beholden to some other language or discipline for its capacity to discover and convey meaning.

We chose “faith” instead of “religion” because it felt like a more active and immersive word—more existential, less like a philosophical category. However dogged by doubt one’s faith may be, it is ultimately a verb as much as a noun—an ongoing (if fraught and daunting) act rather than something static and settled. And to the extent that faith sounds like a verb, it reverberates, so to speak, with the word *art*, reminding us of the importance of art as making, an ongoing creative act.

As you might imagine, the third term proved the trickiest. After all, the first two words establish a trajectory, lines of convergence. What might the common endpoint be? It didn’t take us long to set aside “spirituality,” not only because it is a term so watered down and anodyne as to have become meaningless, but also because it denied art’s cognitive power and threatened to strap it back into the harness again, reducing art to therapy.

We settled on “mystery,” though we’re aware that to some ears it might sound like little more than mystification. But in the past half-century Flannery O’Connor and a number of leading modern philosophers and theologians rescued the concept of mystery from near oblivion, demonstrating that it has deep roots in nearly all of the world’s religious traditions.

What appealed to us was that mystery simultaneously conveys an adumbration of transcendence—Rudolph Otto’s *mysterium tremendum*—and a form of knowing. The Greek *mysterion* derives from a word meaning “to shut” or “to close,” but in most of the ancient religions one could undergo a series of rituals and practices that would, in time, nudge the door open just enough to allow in a little light.

Thus mystery lies in the borderland between the knowable and the unknowable. “For we know in part,” as Saint Paul put it. Through the glass, darkly.

It would be easy (and lazy) to simply say that mystery is suprarational and leave it at that. But that does a disservice to reason, which is

just another way of saying that we have an inbuilt desire for the world to make sense. Mystery thus lies at the intersection where reason, intuition, and imagination meet and only the both/and language of paradox seems capable of uniting everything that otherwise seems hopelessly either/or. We are body and soul, bound and free, fallen and godlike.

In *Real Presences* the critic George Steiner likened this place of mystery to Holy Saturday, another emblem of in-betweenness, after the crucifixion but before the resurrection:

But ours is a long day's journey of the Saturday. Between suffering, aloneness, unutterable waste on the one hand and the dream of liberation, of rebirth on the other. In the face of the torture of a child, of the death of love which is Friday, even the greatest art and poetry are almost helpless. In the Utopia of the Sunday, the aesthetic will, presumably, no longer have logic or necessity. The apprehensions and figurations in the play of metaphysical imagining, in the poem and the music, which tell of pain and of hope, of the flesh which is said to taste of ash and of the spirit which is said to have the savor of fire, are always Sabbatarian. They have risen out of an immensity of waiting which is that of man. Without them, how could we be patient?

In some ways, *mystery* is perhaps the boldest term, the one most out of touch with our times. It is true that secular artists and writers regularly speak of navigating the uncertainties and ambiguities in the world. But in their embrace of post-Enlightenment thought, they tacitly accept various determinisms that attempt to explain reality with reference to biology, psychology, sociology, or any of the modernist replacements for ultimate reality. Most secular writers and artists simply live with the contradiction and avoid dealing with it. Though there occasionally arise writers like David Foster Wallace who are more open and anguished about these conflicts, a tendency toward evasion and complacency remains the norm.

At the same time it is no exaggeration to say that much of the contemporary hostility toward mystery comes from those who enthusiastically embrace religion. The relentless literalism and pragmatism of the fundamentalist stem from a fear of mystery, of the ambiguity of living on Holy Saturday. In the decades since *Image* was founded there have been salutary changes among believers who have awakened to the severe limitations of politics and polemics and embraced the need to make culture, not war. But there is still a long, long way to go.

In the preface to my first collection of *Image* essays, *Intruding upon the Timeless*, I focused largely on one aspect of the journal's mission: the ambition to prove that the encounter between art and faith was far from extinct, that it continued in our own time and all over the globe. That desire to find a place at the table in the larger cultural conversation was, indeed, central to the founding of the journal. The goal was not to engage secularism and fundamentalism in a new culture war, but to demonstrate that an ancient and still vital alternative tradition remains worthy of engagement.

More than a quarter century into the experiment, I think it's fair to say that we're only just beginning that conversation.

But it's also fair to say that those of us who started the journal sensed in a dim and inchoate way that we were after something larger than a place at the table. At some level we realized that placing art and faith in dialogue would produce powerful resonances.

It's turned out to be one hell of a tuning fork. Each of those resonances is really an analogy—a comparison that, while acknowledging differences, still finds illuminating resemblances. For example, what might the literary device known as ambiguity have to say about the life of faith? Is tragedy compatible with the ways that Western religions imagine the deity? How might reading Scripture influence the way we read novels, or paintings for that matter?

Art and faith use narrative, language, image, and symbol like probes sent out to take readings and return with reports of meaning. They share a need to initiate acts of making and discovery that, far from knowing in advance what they will encounter, must proceed in fear and trembling.

Analogy is a complex subject. In the *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas considers whether poetic analogy can tell us anything true about God, given the utter disparity between human and divine minds:

The science of poetry is about things which because of their deficiency of truth cannot be laid hold of by reason. Hence reason has to be drawn off to the side by means of certain similitudes. But then, theology is also about things which lie beyond reason. Thus the symbolic method is common to both, since neither is accommodated [to human reason].

The specific question that Aquinas grapples with is the way in which Scripture employs metaphors—which are, after all, analogies. He concludes that:

the beam of divine revelation is not extinguished by the sense imagery that veils it; its truth does not flicker out; because the minds

of those to whom the revelation is given are not allowed to remain arrested by the images but are lifted up to their meaning.

I take these quotations from Denis Donoghue's dense but rewarding book *Metaphor*. There he considers the famous definition of metaphor by I. A. Richards as something divided into "tenor" and "vehicle." For example, in Shakespeare's phrase "all the world's a stage," *world* is the tenor and *stage* is the vehicle. The best metaphors, Donoghue suggests, set up a tension of likeness and unlikeness between tenor and vehicle: "Metaphor is the mutual relation of tenor and vehicle, a relation achieved by holding the two simultaneously in one's mind."

Donoghue notes that in the Christian tradition some thinkers seemed to believe that the vehicle takes over and extinguishes the tenor, as in those theologians who argued that the New Testament made the Old Testament obsolete and irrelevant. But he goes on to show that the deepest and widest tradition in the church rejected this form of reductionism, cherishing both terms equally. He cites Erich Auerbach, who points out in *Mimesis* that Tertullian spoke for the majority of theologians:

He [Tertullian] was definitely hostile to spiritualism and refused to consider the Old Testament as mere allegory; according to him, it had real, literal meaning throughout, and even where there was figural prophecy, the figure had just as much historical reality as what it prophesied. The prophetic figure, he believed, is a concrete historical fact, and it is fulfilled by concrete historical facts.

For Auerbach, figurative language "establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfills the first." In the poet Dante, Auerbach found the literary culmination of this way of thinking:

It is precisely the figural interpretation of reality which, though in constant conflict with purely spiritualist and Neoplatonic tendencies, was the dominant view in the European Middle Ages: the idea that earthly life is thoroughly real, with the reality of the flesh into which the Logos entered, but that with all its reality it is only umbra and figura of the authentic, future, ultimate truth, the real reality that will unveil and preserve the figura.

It is in this spirit, if on a thoroughly pedestrian level, that I have attempted to pursue the analogies between art and faith in search of mystery.

THE OPERATION OF GRACE

This time around I've attempted to group the essays into thematic sections in hope of making the book more approachable. Of course the placement of many of these essays remains somewhat arbitrary. The piece I've chosen to begin the collection is one that goes back to ancient cave art, where the analogies begin.

Orcas Island, July 11, 2015
Feast of Saint Benedict

SAMPLE