Our Grass-Stained Wings: 
An Essay on Poetry and Theology

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The great *kenosis* hymn in Philippians, with its account of the one who took on “the form of a slave” only then to be “highly exalted” by God (2:6–11), forms what we might call the mythopoetic center of the Christian imagination. In these words the first Christians said what they wanted to say about their God in the only way that they could say it: through a lyrical narration that told of things beyond human words, and saw things beyond human vision.

This account, though, did not remain in the realm of hymnody alone, but also came to form the center of Christian dogma. Augustine is still writing in a mythopoetic register, but now appealing to this *mythos* as one holding doctrinal authority, when he writes, “For us he became a road or way in time by his humility, while being for us an eternal abode by his divinity.”¹ If orators and theologians began shortening this story to the more formulaic “Jesus is divine, Jesus is human,” they never ceased to embed the drama within these formulae: Jesus is divine in that he descended in humility from his Father’s house and was subsequently glorified in that same house, human in that his humble journey culminated, radically, in an earthly manifestation.

Something of the poetic remains, then, in the depths of classical christological formulas, and in particular of the Nicene *homoousian to patri, homoousian he men*. If this claim is true, it suggests that Christian language is most poetic where it is most attuned to its dogmatic heritage. Theology, in that case, is a kind of poetry, and it is such because of the particular story that Christians are attempting to

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tell: a story that verbalizes what exceeds human language, and visualizes what exceeds human vision. Regardless of the form it takes, that is to say, theology will always be poetic in its content.

By contrast, if we conceive of theology and poetry in an opposition to one another we surrender the imperative on Christian language to grasp at these excessive limits. When asked whether theology was a kind of poetry, C. S. Lewis responded that he assumed the question was not “whether most theologians are masters of a ‘simple, sensuous, and passionate’ style,” but rather “‘does Theology offer us, at best, only that kind of truth which, according to some critics, poetry offers us?’”2 It does not, he says, offer only this kind of truth, and he begins to explain this answer by asking what else we might wish it to be—what theology could be if it were more than “mere poetry.” Assuming that the answer is “factual,” he then offers an exposition of “the Scientific Outlook,” which we might assume to be the disciplinary home of the factual. This description of reality, he says, in brief a naturalistic narrative of existence from nondescript void to entropic death, is ultimately a poetic drama in four acts, with *homo sapiens* at center stage in the role of the hero who must struggle against all odds. In other words, what we call fact has all the look of theater, or “mere poetry.”

Theology, Lewis says, understood as “the systematic series of statements about God and about man’s relation to Him which the believers of a religion make”4 does not make nearly such fine poetry. This is especially true as we work our way through the layers of the Old Testament toward the New, and the mythical, poetical, metaphorical, and legendary yields to the historical. “‘God became Man,’” Lewis explains, “should involve, from the point of view of human knowledge, the statement ‘Myth became Fact.’ The essential meaning of all things came down from the ‘heaven’ of myth to the ‘earth’ of history.”5 Thus theology is not poetry, but naturalistic science in fact is something very close to that.

Lewis’s response is, characteristically, brilliant in its simplicity. Three-quarters of a century later there remain plenty of unimaginative public figures—Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher

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Hitchens being the most prominent of recent years—who assume that the world can be divided between scientific facts on the one hand and a whole raft of pursuits on the other, from religious creeds to a child’s cartoons, that can be summed up under the heading “make believe.” Scientific constructs like the much pursued “theory of everything” ought to register to our ears in a way analogous to the ancient “explanations” of cosmic origins involving Titans and Olympians. In other words, we ought to hear this “scientific outlook” as a certain peculiarly modern dialect of mythopoesis.

The problem, though, is that the division here between theology and poetry, a variant of the classical struggle between philosophy and poetry, is one that Lewis leaves in place. The claim that theology is about fact rather than myth, about history rather than poetry, seems worth challenging, and for what it says about poetry as much as for what it says about theology.

There are, to be sure, plenty of reasons to insist with Lewis that theology is not poetry, not least of which is the frightening barrage of free-verse profundities that might start filling the pages of journals like this one if we all agree that it is. From its birth in epistles and monastic manuals to its entrance into the medieval and modern university, Christian theology has been a scholarly discipline that gives order and structure to the statements Christian worshipers make about God, and about the life of the world under God. True, it spawns poems and hymnody, and takes among its sources the verses, myths, and allegories of Scripture and liturgy. But the core of the discipline is reasoned argumentation within this language, so that one theologian can challenge another’s line of reasoning that there is no resurrection, for instance, with a classic if-then rebuttal: “If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised” (1 Cor. 15:13).

In that sense, theology functions more like its cousin -ologies in the arts and sciences than like poetry. It would be odd to hear Auden challenge Eliot on the grounds that if one generally uses the same coffee spoon many times, then they are in fact no use at all in measuring out one’s life. Like the biologist, the art historian, or the Milton scholar, the theologian encounters a flood of artifacts that, without an

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organizing logos, will become a nondescript mass. “Life” could simply be all that is, from what makes a thing move to what moving things observe; biology creates classifications, definitions, and so brings various foci to the term. Milton himself simply wrote down words, presumably one after the other, without spending much time worrying over what it meant to be Milton; it is up to literary scholars to take cracks at that question, using trusted theories of interpretation to read and organize his texts linguistically and thematically. The theologian likewise encounters a dizzying array of words, images, bodily movements, and communal events that together say what it is that Christians want to say about God; her task is to make distinctions, to see relations. To develop the kind of palate that will allow her to sort out the ingredients in the soup.

The poet attunes herself to another task entirely. If theology is about giving order to the sublime, poetry illuminates the sublime edges of what is orderly. The poet manifests, according to Wordsworth, a desire “for something loftier, more adorned, / Than is the common aspect, daily garb / Of human life.”8 If we take this “daily garb” to be language itself, then the poet is the one who is always smithing words to make them show their uncommon aspects, to reveal a transcendence through the very proximity of the mundane. So Kay Ryan writes in “No Names,”

There are high places
that don’t invite us,
sharp shapes, glacier-scraped faces, whole
ranges whose given names
slip off. Any such relation
as we try to make
refuses to take. Some
high lakes are not for us,
some slick escarpments.
I’m giddy with thinking
where thinking can’t stick.9

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The poem refuses even to try naming these high places, but names instead the desire to name, that which moves us to think “where thinking can’t stick.” Analogies, relations, and other linguistic footholds fall away, and language admits a failure to say, to reference, to mean.

Still, the poet’s “giddy” urge to scale these heights refuses to let her rest, and so she must make use of Wordsworth’s “daily garb” of language all the same. The desire of the final sentence thus betrays the refusal of the first: do these high places really not invite us? Or is distance and inaccessibility its own kind of invitation, the way that we call a tropical beach “inviting” even though we have never received an invitation from anyone there to come visit? The “sharp shapes” and “high lakes” are what we see, as far as words will describe it, lurking in the upper echelons of our earth-bound language, and the great poets are the ones who summon us to inhabit these inaccessible regions. This is what imbues poetry with what George Steiner calls “answerability”: the moral sense that I have been addressed, and a response is now demanded of me.10 “Oh, do not ask ‘What is it?’/ Let us go and make our visit.”11

Poetry is therefore not history or science, and not “true” in the way that these disciplines attempt to be. It does not scull the waters of verifiability and demonstration. Does this mean that it is “merely poetry” though? Is there not perhaps a less accessible sort of “truth” constructed within the rhythms and movements of verse? If Ryan is right about the slick escarpments, is she not then telling a truth about cliff walls that a geologist never could?

There is a deep truth-gesture at work in poetry, a reasoning that is strict and inviolable even where its edges are most difficult to work out. “Poetry,” said Coleridge, “even that of the loftiest and, seemingly, that of the wildest odes, [has] a logic of its own, as severe as that of science; and more difficult, because more subtle, more complex, and dependent on more, and more fugitive causes.”12 Poetic logic, the logos of the gesture, is a craft of mediation. It shuttles between our mundane language and the fugitive causes that evade it. Indeed,

10 George Steiner, Real Presences (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 8–9, 47–50.
this is how we know when a poem is good. The well-crafted turns of phrase issue in perfect timing, allowing us to hear along with the poet something that has not quite been said, yet could not have been said otherwise. This is why we often feel as if we discovered this truth just as the poet herself was discovering it, as if we were crafting the language that summons us, even as we are responding to this very summons.

_Poeisis_, after all, means “making,” and the poet’s task is to make a truth that is no less true for not having existed a moment earlier. After Mary Oliver’s “Summer Day” all grasshoppers now address me with an upending question: “What is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?” She has thus made / discovered a truth about grasshoppers that no entomologist ever told us. After Coleridge’s “Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner” a drought on the ocean is not only a metaphor for our inability to receive the grace that is all around us, but is in a certain sense a literal manifestation of this dilemma.

Working with words to evoke the unsayable, the poet can often manage gestures that the theologian cannot. In the same poem, Oliver says, “I don’t know exactly what a prayer is. / I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down / into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass, / how to be idle and blessed. . . .” The theologian might grab his copy of John of Damascus and read out “prayer is the raising up of the mind to God” —which, incidentally, seems to me a lovely definition of prayer. The poet, though, refuses to entertain these words, and instead of ascending in the mind, descends with her body to the grass.

This is not to say of course that poetry is about bodies and gravity rather than the weightless passage of minds or souls. Oliver’s narrator still _knows_ how to kneel, which is evidence of mental activity, and the startling question in the final line is itself an ascent of the mind, abstracting in the Scholastic theologians’ sense of the term from the encounter with the insect in order to pose a question which addresses the entirety of one’s life. Further, her fall comes immediately after the grasshopper “snaps her wings open, and floats away,” and so the poet is in some sense imitating this flight when she throws herself onto the

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14 Mary Oliver, _New and Selected Poems, Volume One_ (Boston, Mass.: Beacon Press, 1992), 94.
ground. Grasping for grass thus becomes here a way of praying, and falling a way of flying.

George Herbert accomplished something similar with his first “Affliction” poem. In essence a testament to his own inconstancy, Herbert confesses here that “When first Thou didst entice to thee my heart, / I thought the service brave.” As the years go by and as his own losses increase, he finds himself looking here and there, to pleasures or books or academic praise, for his comforts. The penultimate stanza turns to the optative, “I wish I were a tree— / For sure then I should grow / To fruit or shade; at least some bird would trust / Her household to me, and I should be just.” As Rowan Williams has argued, these lines place the poem in the context of early Protestant sermons on the Pauline doctrine of justification, according to which we are justified by faith and not by works. What Herbert is seeking here, though, is something other than doctrinal reassurance; in fact the poet has a mass of evidence against his own just-being, and the final lines wage a stunning critique of an “easy theology” of justification: “Ah my dear God! though I am clean forgot, / Let me not love thee, if I love thee not.” The poet prays not to be counted just—counted as a lover of God’s righteousness—if in fact he is not. There is a deep irony, though, in this final address: “Ah my dear God!” is the language of a lover, and thus the poet loves God too much to be counted as one who loves if he loves not. Herbert’s justified lover, like Ryan’s high lake, is the evasive destiny which one can neither reach nor stop reaching toward.

At its best, then, poetry can challenge static definitions and formulae, whether theological or otherwise, serving as what we might call an interrogative destabilization. I say “at its best” because poets, like theologians, have often found themselves clinging safely to literary dogmatisms and lyrical constructions that insulate their work from any real possibility of encountering the transcendent. The lasting gift of Modernists like Pound and the early Eliot remains their suspicion of overly lyricized stanzas which lull the reader into shallow pleasures, thereby disallowing any real questioning of the depths of human

existence.\(^{18}\) The broken lines and the turnabouts of twentieth-century poetry present the reader and even the poem itself with a kind of internal interrogation.\(^{19}\) When Eliot later allows this self-interrogation into the poetry that follows his conversion to Anglican Christianity, the fragmentations and rhythmic fluctuation begin to imply a profound theological notion: the reader of the *Four Quartets* or *Choruses from “The Rock”* comes away with, among other impressions, the sense that no one ever encountered the transcendent God while hiding behind easily digestible lyrics.\(^{20}\) The theologian says “we are justified by faith”; the poet asks whether we know, actually, what it is either to be just or to have faith. The theologian defines prayer; the poet wonders what it means to pray, and if we can ever truly describe the tensions in the body and the dryness of the mouth as we grasp for the infinite, or the weight on our chests as we find ourselves wondering whether it is we who have abandoned God, or God us.

So even if poetry runs by a different logic than theology, as soon as we define that logic as a gesture toward the unsayable through the materiality of the said, we find it mimicking the theological. Poetry often (always?) includes this theological or religious impulse, and this alone allows it to serve as a challenge or corrective to the self-assured formality of propositional theology. The poet is not the same creature as the theologian, but she does share some of the same nesting grounds.

Turning to the other side of the question, we must ask if the line blurs from theology’s camp as well: if much (all?) good poetry includes a theological gesture, does much (all?) good theology incorporate the poetic? When Lewis writes that Christianity is about how “Myth became history,” thus juxtaposing mythopoetic invention with factual accounting, he in effect takes the poetic impulse out of theology altogether. Is he right to do so?

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“The Christian story is about a historical personage, whose execution can be dated pretty accurately, under a named Roman magistrate, and with whom the society that He founded is in a continuous relation down to the present day.”\(^{21}\) I do not wish to dispute Lewis on any of these points. Mid-twentieth-century theologians were increasingly hesitant about the factuality of various aspects of the gospel, and while many responded by cutting a clear line between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith, Lewis is surely right to insist that a religion centered on incarnation cannot surrender its historicity: Christians have *faith* that God encountered earthly life in the midst of human *history*.

The Christian story then is indeed about these events. However, the events themselves are about much more than their own claims to historicity. The *fact* that Jesus suffered “under Pontius Pilate” is hardly the most interesting or significant aspect of the story, and certainly not the aspect that establishes the continuous relationship of the church to that story: I have no deep emotional or biographical kinship with Pilate, or any of the people, places, and social relations of his time. Christians do not reenact the Passion every year because it happened in that time; rather, that time is important because of what it is that happened, and what we continue to make of what happened.

But continuing to “make” something of those events is a matter of *poeisis*. The real burning christological question is not “did Jesus live?” but “How are we addressed, summoned, judged by his life?” So Rowan Williams says, “It is not ‘the Incarnation’ that is the basis of dogma,” if “the Incarnation” is understood to represent an isolatable cipher for Christian truth. The simple term “Incarnation” is itself a linguistic icon for a mythopoetic narrative of an origin and destination that exceed human vision, and the central character in this *mythos* provides a foundation for a believing community only in a rather unsettling way, which is to say through a series of life-summoning, transformative encounters. So “the basis of dogma” is not that frozen term itself, but rather the poetry of origin and encounter that it condenses: “judgement and conversion worked out through encounter with the telling of Jesus’ story.”\(^{22}\) If in one sense the logic of Christian faith is more or less stable, as a time-honored “systematic series of statements about God and about man’s


relation to Him which the believers of a religion make,” in another sense it is entirely unstable, in that each encounter with Jesus’ Father occurs differently—each conversion is a brand new event in history. In this way Christian truth doubly exceeds historical accounting: first, in terms of the always unfinished character of the human encounter with this truth, an encounter which, for Christian theology, is itself an irreplaceable focus of dogmatic reflection (and so topics like conversion and deification are as intrinsic to theological language as Christology and Trinity). Second, the entire theological discipline is an attempt to bear witness to the Logos’s descent from beyond human experience. Thus Augustine argued that the real risk that God took in the Incarnation was in giving himself over to a historical enfleshment that might be seen as a reduction of eternity to this very appearance. Witnesses, that is, might see the “factual,” and miss the mytho-kenotic journey that the Logos took in order to become “fact.” In this way the historical event is indeed the center of our faith, but only because it carries us into the part of the story that will always transcend history.23

If this is true, then theology ought to begin to look like poetry, even as it continues to follow its own systematic logic. Indeed, at its best, theology has done just this. There is plenty of poetry lurking in St. Augustine, and even in Thomas Aquinas, with his reliance on metaphor and analogy to bend the rules of orthodox Aristotelian argumentation. There is something about the Damascene’s definition of prayer, with its ascent toward an unnamed place, that has us recalling Wordsworth’s “something loftier.” All of this carefully crafted theology succeeds only and to the extent that it attends to these heights.

To say that the theologian ought to become like the poet is not to suggest that she must surrender her quest for logic and precision; still, the poetic theologian will allow the edges of her claims to transcend her own syllogisms, like high lakes beyond slippery cliff walls. Good theology will always find a way to acknowledge the unsayable in its saying, and show itself to be a voiced mediation of the God who resists immediate disclosure. Theology, then, like Oliver and her grasshopper, can do nothing more or less than fly to heaven by descending to earth. For only an earthy creature with wings can ever teach us what it means to speak of God.

23 Saint Augustine, The Trinity, Book XIV.