LONERGAN AND POETRY 1

JOSEPH FITZPATRICK

In one of the exchanges between Fergus Kerr and William Mathews on Lonergan, Kerr describes Lonergan's treatment of literary language in *Method in Theology* as 'jejune and unsatisfactory', as lacking in 'delicacy and inwardness'; a 'lacuna' in his sytematic exposition (*New Blackfriars,* February 1976, p. 60). This may seem a little harsh given that Lonergan's overarching concern in that book is not literature but a viable method for contemporary theology. But even as a convinced Lonerganian, I believe Fergus Kerr, in reporting somewhat uncritically the findings of what is, overall, a bad book (*Looking at Lonergan's Method*), has picked out a weakness or blind spot in Lonergan's philosophical awareness. There can be no doubting the somewhat wooden and—the word is inescapable—*external* character of Lonergan's pronouncements on literary language and, I would add, on art generally. William Mathews tends to agree, though he adds a tantalizing qualification: 'I agree with Fergus Kerr that *Method* is seriously deficient in its treatment of the poetic but unlike the *Republic,* I believe that poets and dramatists will be welcomed in Lonergan's theological democracy' (*New Blackfriars,* August 1977, p. 367). Mathews lets the matter rest there, but I should like to take up and elaborate his suggestion (or what I take to be his suggestion) that Lonergan's basic cognitional theory, or transcendental method, can be shown capable of integration with the nature and function of literary language, for it is surely a sound test of any account of how language functions that it can explain how and why poetry affects us as it does. This, so far as I know, has never been done, and certainly in his brief comments on art and aesthetics in both *Insight* and *Method* there is no attempt by Lonergan to explain or analyse from the basic perspective of his cognitional theory the inner workings of poetry or literature or the structure of a reader's response to a poem or work of art. I should be grateful for the opportunity of attempting—not without considerable misgivings—to do this in the pages of *New Blackfriars* and I believe the very attempt will reveal a serious deficiency in Lonergan's theory of art. Some piquancy and clarity might be gained if I begin with a couple of contrasts.

I have no idea how a Wittgensteinian would even attempt to *justify* the poetic use of language. If, indeed, it is the task of the Wittgensteinian philosopher to sort out confusion caused by the 'bewitchment' of language, to outlaw a-typical or deviant uses by bringing words back to how they are normally used,[1] poets would seem to be the principal enemy. For poets are continually using language in deviant and a-typical ways; they are forever making language afresh, forcing words into new and startling combinations that appear to defy all logic, forever deserting the well-worn paths of grammar and syntax most of us plod along in 'ordinary discourse'. They even declare it their object to 'delight' and this is surely not far removed from bewitchment. The point is that Wittgenstein laid it down as a methodological principle that the central meanings of words should be grasped in what we might call their normal surroundings. But poets delight in wresting words from their normal surroundings and putting them to new uses in strange and unexpected places. It may well be that some Wittgensteinian philospher-king would feel obliged to banish the poet from his Republic.

The empiricist philospher-king might not be so drastic, but the poet could surely hope to occupy but a humble position in *his* Republic. For the empiricist is all for something called 'literal meaning' and those metaphors not reducible to literal equivalents are necessarily regarded as nonsense. The reduction of poetry to its literal sense is all that Ayer can hold out as a means of crediting it with meaning in *Language, Truth and Logic.* The compensation offered poetry not so reducible is rather meagre: 'If the author writes nonsense, it is because he considers it most suitable for bringing about the effects for which his writing is designed' (Ibid. pp. 44-45). These effects, it should be noted, could have no cognitive but only emotive value. In an intriguing article entitled *Professor Tillich's Confusions (Mind,* 1965), another empiricist philosopher, Paul Edwards, takes the famous theologian to task for his use of metaphor in his theological writings. Again, it is not metaphor as such that is condemned but only what Edwards terms 'irreducible metaphor', that is metaphor for which no literal equivalent can be found. It is for his use of such irreducible metaphor that Tillich is censured, and the many poets who would surely deny that their metaphors and images are capable of restatement in some literal sense must be equally condemned on empiricist grounds. It strikes me that in speaking of reducing metaphor to its literal equivalent both Ayer and Edwards are involved in a *petitio*

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[1] Not all Wittgensteinians operate in this way but certainly a considerable number does. See, for example, Professor R. W. Hepburn, *Christianity and Paradox,* p. 5.

principii, since such a reduction would seem to imply that the meaning of any metaphor be grasped before it could be rephrased in so-called literal language. In other words, the metaphor is an adequate vehicle of meaning *as it stands.* But it is easy to see that the empiricist's preference for literal language stems from his assumption that language gets its meaning from what it is about. The basic terms or propositions of our language, to which all other uses of language can be reduced, are those which point to facts in the world or can be translated into language about sense data. Such so-called literal language, the empiricist believes, is necessarily prior to metaphorical language which, when used validly, is only a more roundabout or 'flowery' way of saying what can be expressed more simply in literal terms. The poet, therefore, who is notorious for dealing in metaphor and image, is, at best, an ornamenter merely; at worst, he writes nonsense.

For Lonergan, by contrast, the primary reference of language is not 'out there' to 'facts in the world' but rather inwards to acts of understanding, acts of judgment, and acts of valuing and choosing. Speaking and writing are instrumental acts of meaning; they express or mediate the primary acts of meaning which consist of understanding, judging and deciding. And so there is continuity and discontinuity between understanding, for example, and language. There is continuity in so far as the language I speak expresses my understanding; there is discontinuity in so far as the hearer who understands my meaning can express it in the same or in quite different words. (For an extremely useful commentary on Lonergan's view on language, see Joseph Flanagan's contribution to *Language, Truth and Meaning,* ed. Philip McShane). The distinction between primary and instrumental acts of meaning allows for meaning to be expressed in non-linguistic modes, such as music, sculpture, painting, gesture, dance and mime. Therein lies a problem for those philosophies which would equate understanding with language or see language as the sole repository of meaning: the meaning of the non-linguistic arts may possibly be described in language but it can hardly without special pleading be regarded as purely linguistic in nature. But our concern here is with literary art and clearly there are profound implications here for the metaphors, images and various mimetic devices employed by the literary artist to convey his meaning. So long as they are grounded on acts of understanding, judging or valuing, then all of these, on Lonergan's terms, are valid carriers of meaning. There can be no question of an enforced reduction to so-called literal equivalents for cognitive meaning to be safeguarded. The poet is free to claim that he has at his disposal a range of means for the expression of certain meanings with a precision outside the scope of ordinary language. Indeed, Lonergan would seem to side with those linguistic scholars who consider metaphor to be prior to literal language, poetry prior to prose. In *Method* he writes, 'With Giambattista Vico, then, we hold for the priority of poetry. Literal meaning literally expressed is a later ideal and only with enormous effort and care can it be realised, as the tireless labours of linguistic analysts seem to show' (Ibid. p.73). This is supported by Vygotsky who says of primitive language: 'The primary word is not a straightforward symbol for a concept but rather an image, a picture, a mental sketch of a concept, a short tale about it—indeed, a small work of art' (*Thought and Language*, p. 75). It is only with the passage of time, Vygotsky notes, that 'the image that gave birth to the name', and the feelings originally tied to it, lose out and conceptual meaning becomes uppermost. Susanne K. Langer is in agreement claiming, with some caustic force, that with time 'speech becomes increasingly discursive, practical, prosaic, until human beings can actually believe it was invented as a utility, and was later embellished with metaphors for the sake of a cultural product called poetry' (*Philosophy in a New Key,* p. 126). Contrary to empiricist assumptions, then, metaphor appears to operate at the growing end of language so that a novel conception requires the employment of metaphor to pin it down and body forth the new meaning. Indeed, so pervasive is metaphor that philosophy—even empiricist philosophy—is full of the residue of past metaphor: just think for a moment of the source-meaning of such words as 'matter', 'form', 'ostensive definition', 'concept', 'intention', 'phenomenon' and so forth.

I have been at some pains to defend the cognitive value of metaphor against the strictures of empiricism, and to prevent possible distortion I should immediately add that the empiricist is right in recognising the emotive power of images and metaphors. After the manner of primitive words the images and metaphors of poetry release, discharge and distil in us feelings of all kinds—anger, sorrow, joy, fear, anxiety, nostalgia, absurdity and so forth. And the manner in which they do this is by the poet reversing, as it were, the process described by Vygotsky by which conceptual meaning becomes uppermost—by restoring the original *physical* properties of words. An image, after all, is directly related to our senses, whereas an idea or concept is directly related to our understanding (and it is to our sensory imagination by means of his images and the movement of his words that the poet primarily appeals). Lonergan's distinction between experience and understanding begins to throw light on how poetry works and how it differs from more prosaic or practical language. But before developing that point it is necessary to say something about Lonergan's hierarchical ordering of consciousness.

As many readers will be aware, coming to know for Lonergan is a structured activity consisting of experiencing, understanding that experience and judging on the truth or falsity, probability or improbability of that understanding.[2] Experience and experiential are words I shall be using rather a lot and so a brief explanation of what Lonergan means by them in the context of his cognitional theory might prove useful. Experience has many meanings. It can mean 'long and accustomed practice' as when we speak of 'the man of experience', and I shall use the word in that sense later. But when Lonergan speaks of experience in relation to understanding and judgment he uses it in a more primitive sense, referring to the deliverances of sense and the deliverances of consciousness. Since my theme is art I shall concentrate on the deliverances of sense by which Lonergan means simply the contents of acts of seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting. Lonergan's distinction between sense experience and understanding contradicts the notion entertained by Hume that there are atoms of meaning already constituted 'out there' which the human mind receives passively through the senses. The data of sense for Lonergan are not-yet-meaningful. They give rise to inquiry—what is that? how does it work? how often does it happen? why does he do that? etc;—and inquiry, if successful, yields understanding and it is by the act of understanding that meaning—interpretation or explanation—is discovered. The data of sense are concrete and particular whereas the meanings that are found in them are general and universal: in saying that I am simply drawing attention to a basic feature distinguishing sensation from understanding. Experience, then, is what I interrogate in order to generate the theory that will account for it, and it is to experience also that appeal is made at the third step in the triad of knowledge when I attempt to verify my theory by testing how well it fits the data. What I wish to draw attention to here is that when I speak later of experience and the 'experiential mode' in reference to how art works I am referring to a mode of operation that appeals primarily to our senses or sensory imagination.

Experience, understanding and judgment are the first three stages or levels of consciousness. But there is a further, fourth, stage of consciousness in which judgments of value and decisions to act are made. In the normative pattern of coming to know and coming to value each stage is passed through in sequence, though it is true to say that the later stages also hold sway over the former: thus, for example, principles of value frequently direct inquiry and suggest in advance what lines of investigation are to be followed up. Clearly Lonergan's hierarchical ordering of human consciousness—or the operations which this ordering objectifies—is more flexible and intricate than it is possible to indicate here, but certain features of it are central to my purposes in this article. At each stage there is a heightening of consciousness: at judgment, for instance, one is done with hesitation and takes a stand on what is so or is not so. With value judgments one not merely takes a stand but decides what one stands for. As the existentialists are aware, it is by our value judgments, choices, decisions and actions that we constitute our habitual responses, build our characters, make ourselves. That is why Lonergan speaks of the subject at the fourth stage moving from consciousness to self-consciousness: it is not just some state of affairs that has to be affirmed or denied but the subject's very personality is at stake. The transition from one stage of consciousness to another is brought about by the subject asking questions in a manner that most of us will recognize as spontaneous and irresistible. Questions for intelligence (what is that?) promote us from the experiential to the intellectual level, questions for reflection (is that so?) from the intellectual level to the level of rational judgment, and questions for deliberation (is that a morally right state of affairs? what is to be done about that?) promote us from the level of rational judgment to the existential level of value judgment and moral choice. The *criterion* of what is true or good is self-transcendence: in other words, in acts of rational judgment I submit to the evidence irrespective of my own preferences, and in judgments of value I subordinate my own interests to pursue the value that promotes what is good or right in the particular situation. In both knowing and valuing, then, the meaning is independent of the subject but the criterion of what is known to be true or judged to be good is not some external norm but resides in the subject's personality, in his capacity for self-transcendence.

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[2] I hope this makes it sufficiently clear that I am in no way suggesting in what follows that 'aesthetic knowledge' or whatever can be assigned to any *one* level of Lonergan's hierarchy of human consciousness. Knowledge of any kind for Lonergan consists of the three stages mentioned. I wish to stress this point in view of Mary Hesse's gross misinterpretation of Lonergan in her contribution to *Looking at Lonergan's Method* where common sense knowledge is assigned to the first level, intellectual knowledge to the second etc. That quite frankly is a travesty. The gulf separating Miss Hesse from a correct understanding of Lonergan is indicated when she can write, "the reconstruction of facts from data which is required at the third level" (op. cit. p. 63) – to speak of constructing facts from data in the context of Lonergan's epistemology is to reveal empiricist tendencies that are perhaps ineradicable. Lonergan's talk of intellectual conversion, which Miss Hesse contests, could hardly be better vindicated.

Feelings are related to both knowing and valuing in the sense that they accompany these activities, indeed constitute the driving force behind them. There are the feelings of pleasure and displeasure, of comfort and discomfort by which I respond to my experience; and there are all sorts of feelings associated with what I understand and judge. Feelings are also powerfully associated with values in the sense that the valuations we place on certain objects, actions, people arouse in us feelings of joy and sadness, pity, awe, fear and so forth. But not only do values arouse feelings in us but feelings, for their part, are often so immediate and deeply felt as to propel us spontaneously towards certain value judgments.

In the normative pattern described by Lonergan judgments of value arise as a *fourth* stage after the process of coming to know is completed. But feelings can cause the normative pattern—as we all know—to be short-circuited: they possess us and catapult us into value-judgments, or they lean us so strongly in a particular direction that value judgments emerge without hesitation (sometimes rashly). But feelings can also be deep-seated and permanent, the fruit of long and patient cultivation, making me a moral agent in some permanent sense and not the plaything of every passing emotion. Of this kind are the feelings that incline me to the habitual self-transcendence of the virtuous man and it is in no small measure the task of education to cultivate such feelings (*Method,* p. 32). For in the last analysis it is the judgment of the man of cultivated feeling and long experience and not some putative external criterion that will decide what is right or wrong, good or bad in any field where value judgments are made (See *Method,* p. 40-41). The need for maturation not only holds true at the level of value judgments but also at the level of understanding and interpretation, as Lonergan's derogatory remarks on the Principle of the Empty Head make clear (Ibid, pp. 157 and 159). This is hardly surprising in view of the link that exists between the fourth level of consciousness and the previous three. Lonergan's transcendental method runs counter not only to empiricist assumptions of basic facts 'out there' before which one should 'sit like a little child' (the maxim of T. H. Huxley), but it also, as I hope the foregoing analysis makes clear, overcomes the empiricist is/ought poser, since there is no question of deriving a value judgment from an empirical proposition or of simply sticking on, in Humean fashion, approval or disapproval to what is otherwise a statement of fact. The fourth level of consciousness presupposes the first three but remains distinct from them as they remain distinct from each other: just as understanding presupposes experience but cannot be reduced to a construct out of sense data, so valuing and acting presuppose judgments of fact but are at the same time of a different, and in terms of personality, of a more interior order. That explains why the facts established at the third level (judgment) are also the *particular criteria* by which an evaluation is formed at the fourth: the shift from 'facts' to 'criteria' takes place because a different kind of question, namely a value question, is now being asked. But let me turn back for the moment from the fourth level of consciousness to the first.

As I said previously, the fundamental experiential component of knowledge begins to throw light on how poetic language affects us and how it differs in this respect from more prosaic language. For it is largely through the sensuous features of language that poetry 'works'. When Seamus Heaney writes,

> The cold smell of potato mould, the squelch and slap

Of soggy peat, the curt cuts of an edge . . .

we are not merely *informed of an activity*, as we would be in more prosaic language, but actually *participate* in it by imaginatively seeing, smelling and hearing it. A slightly more complex example is provided by Donne.

On a huge hill,
Cragged and steep, Truth stands, and he that will
Reach her, about must, and about must go;
And what the hills suddenness resists, win so,
Yet strive so, that before age, deaths twilight,
The soule rest, for none can work in that night.

Here the harshness and ruggedness of the verse, the brokenness of rhythm and syntactical complexity, impart the feeling of hard muscular effort that seems to enact the meaning. The stops/starts, fast/slow tempo, line stops and enjambments, rhymes, cadences and sound effects of poetry are the poet's devices for re-creating in the reader the actual *experience* being described. The mathematician, the scientist and the philosopher (normally) are not concerned that their readers re-enact an experience but only that they re-enact their understanding. The words they deliberately choose are those words whose sensuous root and associated feelings have long since withered and whose conceptual meaning is uppermost. The poet will give you meaning and sensuous stimulation at once; he will give you the sensuous, experiential basis upon which the burden of meaning rests. It is this fusion of the sensuous and intellectual that is so distinctive of literary art, what Eliot commended in the Metaphysical Poets as 'a direct sensuous apprehension of thought' (*Selected Essays*, p. 286). In the more comprehensive art-forms such as drama a huge number of devices are available to effect this: set, music, verse, movement, voice modulation, the juxtaposition of scenes etc. The principle is the same: it is first to our *sensory* imagination that the literary artist appeals. Lonergan's insistence on the experiential basis of knowledge integrates admirably with the way the artist works; we might say that the experiential basis is the artist's special domain, since it is his art to structure by means of artifice a response in the reader by forcing him to enact imaginatively an experience.

I am not saying that art is not concerned with the other levels of consciousness such as understanding, judging, valuing. Indeed, art would seem to be particularly concerned with values and with the feelings that are associated with values in the manner described above. But as Leavis says, 'works of art *enact* their moral valuations' (*The Common Pursuit*, p. 110), and this enactment, I would add, is highly concrete and particular, in a word 'experiential'. Lonergan's intimate linking of experience–understanding–judging–valuing helps us to understand, I am suggesting, how something that is primarily experiential and concrete can also be said to enact moral judgments and to be at once sensuous and intellectual, particular and universal. Unlike other kinds of language, literary language is concrete and particular because the literary artist is concerned to communicate the raw material of experience and its attendant feelings from which insights, judgments and valuations will spring. It is, in fact, the mark of the inferior writer that he cannot deliver the experiential 'goods', but simply *tells* us what his characters are like and how they relate to each other. It was this apparent failure in the novels of C. P. Snow that drew the famous condemnation from Leavis that he did not understand what a novel was. But we do not stick at the level of experience, at the concrete and particular. The Lonerganian distinction between experience and the other stages of consciousness helps to explain how the artist works by co-opting the creative powers of his readers: the bare artistic presentment of scene or episode has the effect of forcing the reader to engage with the text and enter into the process of creation; the emotional engagement and the insights and judgments the bare artistic presentment evokes are his; he has to work from the basic experiential data to realise its meaning. But it would be misleading to stress overmuch the distinction between experience and the other levels of consciousness as if they were not also intimately related. In art many things are happening at once and to insist overmuch that we simply move from one level of consciousness to another, after the manner of some neat pattern, would be to distort by oversimplifying. Where Lonergan's cognitional theory can help us is by suggesting how in art the later levels of consciousness are not simply based on experience (this is true of all first-hand knowledge), but seem to be *collapsed into* experience. Art presents its judgments and values in the experiential mode: in George Herbert's 'Easter Wings', to take an obvious example, despair and faith, sin and resurrection are bodied forth in the form of the poem; in the novels of Graham Greene we can 'smell' the spiritual condition of certain characters, and so forth. Much of the thrill of any art form derives from this element of discipline: that within the limitations imposed by the medium so much feeling and meaning can be effectively communicated. At the same time, the experiential mode of art gives it its power to convince: the artist does not simply tell us that two people are in love, for example; he shows us. Defective art is frequently a failure to provide an adequate experiential basis for the quality and volume of the emotional reaction manifested by the author or sought from the reader. The actuality of experience acts as a check on exaggerated emotionalism or empty posturizing. What I have called art's experiential mode helps explain that other feature of artistic appreciation, what Coleridge referred to as 'that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment, which constitutes poetic faith'. No doubt a certain suspension of disbelief is required in other disciplines, such as philosophy: we must understand before we can criticise. But because the literary artist is primarily concerned to organise (or re-organise) our experience and allows us to realise his meaning for him, or with him, the suspension of disbelief in art is of a much more thorough-going character than the kind of engagement required in other disciplines.

The second part of this article will appear next month.

JESUS AND THE LEAVEN OF SALVATION

FRANK McCOMBIE

That there has recently been an eruption of opinion on the nature of myth in the New Testament is scarcely a matter of surprise. For too long we have been content to use words in one context as if they had no significance in any other. The significations of "myth" are legion, and current debate about myth in the New Testment must remain quite pallid until definitions are agreed: which is not something anyone familiar with the history of myth could possibly think imminent. But if "myth" is certainly the most notorious of lightly-used and little-comprehended terms, "symbol" and "metaphor" are no more respectable. Both are related to myth, which speaks typically through received symbols of one kind or another, and which rests upon the imagery of metaphor. Giambattista Vico defined metaphor long ago as "a fable in brief", and certainly the notion that myth grows out of metaphor, and the related notion that metaphor summarises myth, are both familiar enough to students of literature. And the notion that the literal reading of metaphor in the Bible is the source of much of the mythologising that some now wish to see reversed is familiar enough to students of the New Testament. The difficulties that might be involved in that reversal, however, must give us pause. It is in illumination of some of these difficulties, rather than in any attempt to solve them, that this paper is offered.

It is a commonplace of current thinking that language is essentially metaphoric in nature, but like many another commonplace, the thought seems somehow to have anaesthetised the situation which gave rise to it. The largely unaccommodated fact remains that in all verbal communication (to push the argument further) we are involved in metaphor very much more deeply than we are generally aware; so that our statements very often commit us in