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Theological Reading

Discussion about the relation of theology to the creative imagination has blossomed in recent decades within English-speaking scholarship. Journals such as *Literature and Theology* in the United Kingdom and *Christianity and Literature*, the Notre Dame *Journal of Religion and Literature*, and *Image* (which includes the visual arts) in the United States have developed as platforms for serious and broadly ranging debate not only over religious themes in various kinds of imaginative work but also around the nature of the imaginative process itself. Research projects drawing together literary and intellectual history have welcomed the contribution of theologians and historians of theology; monographs on the religious hinterland of particular writers, monograph series on the interaction between the two realms, university departments, and chairs (from Chicago and Virginia and Baylor to Glasgow and London and Chester) concentrating on these frontiers all seem to be flourishing. Paradoxically, in a period when public religious affiliation is far from strong in Western Europe and not as strong as it used to be in North America, there is no shortage of interest in the ways in which religious categories appear as vehicles for serious imaginative exploration.

Apart from the high profile of religious – and specifically Christian – themes in the fiction of Marilynne Robinson or the poetry of Geoffrey Hill, several new plays produced in London since 2006 have very deliberately set out to reflect on religious faith and language. In what follows, I shall be looking at three examples. The first is David Edgar's *Written on the Heart*, a high-profile production in 2011 by the Royal Shakespeare Company that deals with the interactions of political power and spiritual integrity around the final revisions to the text of the Bible of 1611, contrasting the tormented conscience of the saintly but consumingly ambitious Lancelot Andrewes with the ghostly presence of William Tyndale, martyr and critic of the hierarchy. In 2006, Mick Gordon and A.C. Grayling collaborated on a play entitled simply *On Religion*, which looked at the tensions within a "secular" family set up by one character's conversion to Christianity,

priestly vocation, and untimely death. And in 2011, Alexi Kaye Campbell's *The Faith Machine* presented, within a complex network of relationships, questions both about capitalism and personal ethics and about the tension within the Church between principle and pragmatism.

These dramas all suggest some of the areas in which religious believing and belonging continue to attract, repel, challenge, and baffle a secular culture. In what follows, I shall be using these three texts to tease out further what it is that still allows religious tradition and, in the British context, the somewhat fuzzy residual image of the life of the church as institution and cultural furniture, to work as a creative datum for imaginative life. Understanding how this works is, I shall argue, central in any adequate thinking about how theological reflection might find its way back into public discourse more generally; the risk is always of a theological rhetoric that has no serious way to engage with what puzzles or torments people wrestling with meaning, compromise, loss, and ultimate honesty.

1.

Written on the Heart begins from the problems confronted by the translators of the 1611 Bible in rendering words from Greek and Hebrew whose conventional translations had come to carry heavy theological freight. Faced with the choice between "church" and "congregation," for example, or "heal" and "save," or "withdraw" and "separate yourselves," there is no innocent or objective version available. To claim that a word means simply what it meant in the original context, and so to strip it of the associations of historical use, is an inflammatory and political decision. And to look for renderings that minimize offence or allow of ambiguity is equally a political strategy, a way of saying "thus far and no further" to reform of the Church of England. These are not academic issues: "If we render elders 'priests', in fifteen years we may consign the godly to the fire," says one Puritan-inclined scholar.[1] But this very specific and political dilemma is, in the play, opened out into a wider anxiety about the nature of language as mediation.

Tyndale in his prison cell awaiting execution refuses to amend his version, protesting: "I must break the glass wherein we see God's face?" (31). The original text is transparent to God. Yet believing this requires us also to think of the text as *already* "written on the heart," ready to be awakened by the written text – whose meaning is thus clear to the self-aware heart. And this leaves us with a potentially painful quandary. The text itself is swallowed up in the heart's self-recognition; *difficulty* is dissolved by our transparency to ourselves. As Tyndale's doubting young Catholic interlocutor

(later to reappear as a Protestant archdeacon) puts it, it becomes possible for someone to look into the text and see only difficulty, and into the heart and find only emptiness, if there is no interpretative community to settle meanings. Tyndale brushes this objection aside, but the play returns to the question.

A scene in an Elizabethan parish dramatises this with a spirited quarrel about the breaking of painted windows: reformation means doing away with the faces that intrude between the heart and the face of God, so that instead of images decorating the parish church there will be *texts*. Such texts – as Tyndale insists in a scene where his ghost returns to confront Lancelot Andrewes, spokesman of conciliation and political balance – must not be muffled by "majesty" of diction and phrasing;[2] their force is in their intelligibility to all. But, although Andrewes is prompted to ask the anguished question of whether he is himself without a genuine spiritual witness in his heart, the play evokes poignantly the sense of danger that attends unmediated vision. Andrewes finally backs away from his aspiration to succeed the Archbishop of Canterbury because he does not want to spend his "remaining days at breaking bones" (97) – ironically echoing the words of the Puritan parish clerk whom he has visited in prison much earlier in the play, and who says that he does not want to spend his life "breaking windows" for the sake of the Reformation (56). "I will stay here," says Andrewes, "in this place, beneath these windows, with the beauty of these words, which John tells us were from the beginning. For I would see darkly" (97).

Wanting to "see darkly" means, for Andrewes, not wanting to see the future, the fate of the culture he cares about; but it also means that he fears to see God "face to face." The last exchange in the play brings back Tyndale, as Andrewes meditates on the translation of the creation narrative in Genesis. Tyndale prompts him to revisit Coverdale's phrasing: "'And darkness was upon the face of the deep, and the spirit of God moved,' again, 'upon the face of the waters'. [*Pause*] The sea a glass in which we see God's face." Tyndale ripostes, "God's face a glass in which man sees himself." The simple reader of Scripture reads and sees, knowing as he is known. Andrewes admits, "I would not so see him," but Tyndale replies enigmatically, in the play's closing words, with his hand on the folios of translation, "Yet – I am still here" (98). It is a tantalizing conclusion. At one level: Tyndale's dangerous insistence on the text's transparency and its efficacy in making us know ourselves still survives the attempt to soften the impact of scripture through the majesty and musicality that Andrewes longs to hear (and longs to hide in). At another level: the claim to see clearly (God or oneself) is, as Andrewes knows, the root of breaking bones as well as windows. The fragile work of

language moulded so as to contain rather than intensify contradiction may be all we have between us and violence, as Andrewes has earlier warned the young William Laud, who is already thinking about what force beyond language may be needed to enforce conformity.[3]

David Edgar, in his own notes on the play, observes that language – unlike visual imagery – requires the hearer or reader to *work*, to join in what the words are doing. We have to collaborate in imagination, and it is just this active dimension to a culture of the word that helps to generate a modernity of questioning and intellectual expansion. Yet the play itself dramatizes some of the ways in which the very activism of linguistic performance and involvement can generate a distinctively modern kind of violence – the violence that comes from claims to unmediated knowledge of self or of the world. A text that is received as the unmediated word of God is both almost unimaginably liberating – because in it, as Tyndale says, we can at last see our own faces – and alarmingly volatile in its effects. And rather than offering a direct and unqualified apologia for a culture of the word, the play seems to probe more deeply. Tyndale is "still here" in the heavily mediated, politically and ecclesiastically nuanced solutions that Andrewes and others have crafted: there is within these words the unsettling possibility that perhaps we *can* be honest, perhaps we can see God face to face and ourselves likewise. But Andrewes' questions are weighty enough also to be "still here," questions about the dangers of imagining that there can be a language valid beyond the changes of a temporal existence, a "heavenly perfection here on Earth," a free and complete consensus of perception and understanding within a community that has passed beyond the possibility of conflict (96).

So this is a play that uses the very idea of a holy and transparent text to ask about language and mediation. The seriousness of Tyndale's presence and challenge in the play is to do with his passionate desire that everyone should have access to God – and so to themselves: hieratic speech, which accompanies hierarchical authority and distracting visual imagery, denies the powerless person that most basic of powers, the capacity to see and articulate who they are. The holy text is the unanswerable proclamation that all can have this power. The notion of an inspired book that awakens what is latent in all is a crucial moment – culturally as well as theologically speaking – in the evolution of the modern mind. In effect, it offers meaning independently of authority: the pivotal point of Enlightenment universalism. But that universalism is capable of becoming a new and even more troubling tyranny. It can create an absolutism of those who believe there is nothing to *learn* in the negotiations of actual history; the rejection of an authoritative past, a tradition, a process of distilling insight, leads to the claim here and now of unchallengeable rationality and the consequent exclusion from the

human conversation of those who do not share the sense of a wholly transparent present knowledge or perception.

Edgar's drama takes the theological confrontation between tradition and reformation as a starting point for reflecting on the workings of "modern" language: when meaning is liberated from hierarchical control, what is the price paid in violence? The Bible of 1611, Edgar suggests, is a sort of icon of this unresolved and unresolvable dilemma, making its claim to be the transparent "glass" in which we see God and ourselves, yet hedging this round with the awareness of the risks that lie within any rejection of historical mediations of meaning. Edgar does not quote it, but Miles Smith's famous preface to the King James Bible, written on behalf of the translators, has some pertinent thoughts on why there can be no final translation of a text and how a good translation, alerting readers to the ambiguities of its own rendering, may prompt a further stage of hermeneutical development.[4] The sacred text both affirms that meaning is accessible to all and denies that it can be crystallized in one reading or one reader's reading. So long as language remains, the glass is in some degree darkened, and this may be a necessary defence against the violence of apocalyptic clarity.

2.

Apocalyptic clarity is certainly one of the themes of *The Faith Machine*. Sophie, the moral lodestone of the action, is the daughter of an Anglican bishop, Edward, who has resigned his office in protest at the homophobic attitudes and disciplines of his church. She separates acrimoniously from her partner, Tom, when he takes on an advertising contract with a pharmaceutical company that has been conducting lethally dangerous tests of their products in Africa. She becomes a journalist, making high-risk trips to war zones in Asia, where she is eventually killed. The opening scene, depicting the quarrel between Sophie and Tom and set (with a touch of symbolic overdetermination echoed elsewhere in the play) on September 11, 2001, makes it plain that her moral intensity is a channelling of her father's ethical passion. Later in the play (though this is set chronologically earlier), we see him defending his resignation from office to an African colleague: "the covert fascist in everyone appreciates clearly defined categories, not those murky shades in between," he says, excoriating the Church's obsession with fixing and morally assessing sexual identities and behaviours.[5] His Kenyan friend, bridling at the charge of fascism, turns the argument around, accusing Edward of imposing a new colonialism, whose main effect will be the destruction of the Church in the African context and of colluding with an uncritical culture of entitlement (45). It is Edward who is the one who cannot

manage diversity and the actual – unsteady – pace of historical change. Apocalyptic clarity, it seems, is the enemy of the world as it is; but it is Tom's appeal to "the world as it is," in a later confrontation with Sophie, that alerts us to the corruption that may be hidden in any appeal to "natural" processes of compromise or delay. Tom accuses Sophie of "not having lived her life at all" because of her obsession with being and doing right: none of us has made the world the way it is, and we have to take the slender chances of happiness that we are offered through human love, accepting that the rest is "fucking atoms, fucking things, animals fucking animals in the fucking dark, eating each other, . . . fucking appetite that's all, ruthless and indiscriminate" (95).

What is most interesting for our present concerns is that Sophie's renewed challenge to Tom – nine years after their earlier break-up – is prompted by a bit of literary criticism. She has reread the novel that Tom wrote years before and realized that, callow as it is, it was written for a reason, and realized also that whatever reason there once was has eroded. Tom's absorption into the world of advertising has "had something to do with words losing their definitions, their intrinsic meanings . . . words like *success* and *happiness* and *aspiration, believe in better*, and that once the words went, then everything else did too and that things lost their shape and you weren't able to distinguish what was true from what wasn't and . . . everything became not about what you were but about the way you were perceived, not about what connected you to others but about what *separated* you" (93–94). In this world, decisions are "weightless"; there is nothing to talk about, no word or act truly connects either with other speakers or with the world itself.

The moral crisis of rampant capitalism, as Sophie sees it, is a crisis of language. When everything is reduced to its exchange value, its price, words lose substance. The common world in which we share perception in language and *offer* perception for possible language we might share, the sense of a common agenda in a world we can understand only in relation and collaboration – all this is what is lost in Tom's "world the way it is," the world of animals eating each other. It's no use thinking of human love as the one worthwhile (nonexchangeable) thing in this dystopian environment, because that cannot of itself (as the play makes clear) survive without a soil to grow on in common perception, and that soil needs to be a language that struggles with a givenness quite unlike what Tom thinks are the "givens" of the world.

Sophie is not a person of religious faith, but in the last scene, after her death, someone recalls her saying that she is a "faith machine": whatever a Darwinian vision of nature red in tooth and claw might suggest, some people inherited in their machinery something that made them need to believe.

"Against all empirical evidence," some, like her, "continue to believe in the human being" (110). Earlier in the play, we have seen her friends sorting through her library, occasionally picking out quotations from books. At one point, the Ukrainian housekeeper reads from Tolstoy: "Become, at the fearful price of abnegation, what you could be," and asks, significantly, what "abnegation" means (104–105). A little later, Agatha (a young African student) picks up a King James Bible and quotes to Tom, "What good shall it profit a man shall he gain the whole world?" (112). Sophie's "abnegation" is difficult, almost incomprehensible to those around, but these words and phrases are presented as fragments shored against ruin, the remains of a culture in which it made sense to speak of sacrifice. At the very end, when Agatha asks Tom who he is, *He thinks long and hard* and eventually replies, "The missing man. Let's call me the missing man" (113). The loss of Sophie's language is the loss of a particular kind of human face, we could say; Tom can recognize that he is "missing" but has no obvious resource for recovering himself.

The theme of fractured language has already been flagged in the descent into dementia of Sophie's father. He proclaims "I AM LIFE," comes out with scattered biblical phrases, and tells Sophie and Tom that he is writing a book and leaving notes for it "Everywhere. Under the bed. In the hole" (82). But when Tom inadvertently comes across one such piece of paper, it is blank. The play's imagery pushes steadily towards the concluding picture of a last fragile residue of meaningful language, embodied in Sophie's story and legacy. The rather artificial scene where her friends go through her books is a way of indicating what has formed her own speech and sense. They will go to Agatha, it seems, who, formed in a Bible-reading family in Uganda, at least knows how to *read* – or perhaps we could say, knows how to *be read*. She has not yet lost the sense that there can be a text that shows you yourself, the kind of text that David Edgar's Tyndale wants to put into the hands of every ploughboy. But the culture inhabited by Tom, "the world as it is," is confronted only by fragments, blank paper or stray words from a demented man. As in Edgar's play, we are presented with a profoundly uncomfortable map of our language: the moral certainties of Edward and Sophie, their apocalyptic clarity, are unsettling and certainly not without shadow, yet the fracturing or dissolution of their world, their speech, leaves us with a "missing man." Sacred text, here understood less specifically than in Edgar's play, understood as the general moral and imaginative canon represented by Sophie's books (Tolstoy, Kierkegaard, Plato, Neruda, Forster, Shakespeare . . .), is a glass in which we see if not God's face then at least a human face, a Blakean "Human Form Divine," a face that could be ours. Yet that clarity is not without cost: not simply the obvious cost of

"abnegation" but some kind of cost in terms of a patience with the contingent and untidy. Sophie's self-description as a faith machine is telling: it is as though faith is indeed a genetic determination, setting some people apart from others, with mutual incomprehension as a result.

3.

On Religion is a drama about mutual incomprehension. Tom, a young lawyer, has converted to Christianity and is exploring a vocation to the priesthood, to the horror and dismay of his mother, Grace, a prominent scientist and antireligious polemicist. His Jewish father and agnostic girlfriend look on in some bemusement as the conflict becomes increasingly bitter – at least on Grace's side. Tom's death in a terrorist incident provokes the worst conflict of all, when Grace furiously resists the idea of a requiem mass for her son and alienates Ruth, Tom's partner. Ruth remembers her own atheist father's funeral where "we didn't say a word because it wasn't right. Because he would have hated it. So we said nothing. And it wasn't enough. It really wasn't. Not nearly."[6] She wants at least to have Philip Larkin's "Churchgoing" read; Grace refuses, and at the funeral Ruth reads instead "This be the verse" ("They fuck you up, your mum and dad . . ."). Much later, at Tom's grave, there is a kind of reconciliation, as Ruth presses Grace to speak honestly to her dead son. Grace finally pours out her confusion: she has sensed in Tom's birth the center of her being radically moved towards another and her own self-loathing healed, yet she has also deliberately withdrawn from him so that he will learn that "we're on our own," a message she says she was never taught. She – painfully – acknowledges the "splinter in the mind" which believes that Tom "got what you deserved. You got the poem you were looking for" (83). He has died because of violent and murderous religion, despite his passion to overcome bad religion with good; he has earned this horribly ironic fate. Grace's intense shame at this "splinter" is at the root of her rejection of pity or love from those around her. But it is also her own acknowledgement of the inadequacy of her "reasonable" vocabulary in the face of the nightmares of actual human experience.

Throughout the play, Tom's inarticulate but deeply felt and quirkily expressed commitment is verbally contrasted with Grace's carefully phrased and inexorable argumentation. Tom wants to be "an enlightenment person" and also religious, while Grace insists that this is a contradiction and a self-indulgent contradiction: *any* form of religious language "provides cover" for fanatics. Tom argues that "in the real world where religion is present everywhere," there is no chance of persuading people to abandon faith; it

is as ubiquitous as sex and aggression. The best we can hope is to refuse the zero-sum game between "pure enlightenment thinking and bad religion" (49–53). And faith is still worth holding to because it, like human love, is more than "the list of things": as a commitment to another person is not just another conclusion from a bundle of evidence, so God is not a thing among other things (57–59, 75–76). For Tom, Christianity is the language he speaks: like any language it can say and show things that others can't. So it is possible to hold that this is the "best" language without refusing truth or validity to the others. "If you see them as languages, Christianity doesn't contradict Islam just as English doesn't contradict French" (68). The problem comes with a language that quantifies everything, that sees the "lists" as the essence of what is to be talked about; Grace is the true fundamentalist in such a framework (53).

The question posed by the debates in this play is to do with whether any attempt to formalize a language for what is not said at Ruth's father's funeral is incipiently or implicitly a "cover" for apocalyptic certainty. Something is missing, but supplying words for that something starts off the whole murderous business of dogmatism and rivalry. Like the other dramas we have examined, *On Religion* does not offer any resolution; the shocking (melodramatic?) death of Tom at the hands of religious fanatics may be too facile an irony, although it allows Grace a powerful monologue, as if it were acknowledging the excessiveness of that irony. She comes close to admitting her own apocalyptic clarity, while at the same time recognizing the excess at the center of her personal response both to gift (the birth of her son and its decentring effect on her) and to loss. There is very palpable strain in her attempt to speak to her dead son, but she becomes increasingly direct as she becomes increasingly agitated. Ruth asks her with affectionate mockery, "Who are you talking to you mad woman?" (83). It is as though madness is the only language possible for the excess of feeling Grace finally recognizes: addressing her absent son in the context of consecrated ground – "A serious place for serious people," as Grace says, in ironic homage to Larkin. The implication is perhaps that, if religious language is ever to find a place as something other than a potentially dangerous ideology, it must be in this register, the unreasonable and counterfactual address to what is absent rather than anything that has a descriptive claim. We are (very properly) left unclear as to whether this is the language for which Tom has been willing to sacrifice career and even family, whether (if it isn't) it amounts to the same as the language of the fundamentalists who kill him, and whether it can count as the sort of commitment that is briefly evoked again at the very end of the play, when Tom's father Tony gives Ruth the paper napkin on which Tom once

wrote reasons for and against marrying Ruth – the process he had described to Ruth so as to show why "that list could never add up to what I was about to do." (58).

4.

At the surface level, all three dramas show a kind of secular nostalgia: religious language allows a dimension of human identity and, importantly, human accountability to be articulated, and its loss as a cultural presence is a loss of something real. None of the plays is written from the point of view of faith; none is simply hostile to it, although the nexus of religion and violence is consistently invoked. But what is intriguing is the way in which the cultural memory of religion – the immediate memory of a religious upbringing in *The Faith Machine* – functions as a vehicle for anxieties about how to do justice in human speech to certain elements in our humanity.

Very roughly, the plays prompt the question of whether there is a language which allows us a measure of self-transparency that will liberate us from the self-images that are variously imposed on us. If human speech cannot ever do this, are we left with "the world as it is," the "weightlessness" of Tom in *The Faith Machine*, or the ultimately oppressive (self-oppressive) rational individualism of Grace, conscientiously burying her intuition that in giving birth her ego has been recentered and deliberately inducting her child into a world where "we're on our own"? The secular nostalgia is for a world in which there is somewhere, somehow, a "text" which speaks truthfully about who we are and can be recognized by us as such, as "written on the heart." But these are also dramas that carefully warn about the risks of committing to any particular claimant to such a status: what is lost by commitment, it is implied, is some kind of appropriate irony, some sort of humility, even; a proper caution about final clarity, a valuing of space for irresolution or at least a resolution less than final.

Critical reception of all these dramas was uneven: a good deal of respect in some quarters for the substantiality of the questions raised, a good deal of exasperation in others at the excessive didacticism and (especially in *The Faith Machine*) what was seen as "priggishness" in some characters. The deaths of Sophie in *The Faith Machine* and Tom in *On Religion* are, as I have hinted, open to the accusation of melodrama, and the postmortem trawl through Sophie's books is an excuse for a sentimental review of one kind of ethical/literary canon, a Great Books summary for the wistful humanist. All three make high demands on the audience in their cross-cutting of time sequences, confusing and not obviously necessary to the advance of the action. But the more unsympathetic critics were overlooking