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## "A Theopoetic"

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# "A Theopoetic"

Throughout the history of the last two thousand years, theology has been trying to make religious affections compatible with the rest of human experience. The theologian has tried many techniques to fit the experience of God into the lives of the religiously concerned. All of these techniques have employed a language created by the intellectual demands of the time. The result of these efforts has been the separation of knowing from creative experience, and the collapse of religious discourse from the weight of intellectual baggage. This essay introduces something new to the religious dimension, something which can breathe life into the staleness of contemporary faith - the "theopoetic."

Amos Wilder, in his book *Theopoetic*, wrote: the vitality of a faith is inseparable from the vitality in its vehicles of expression (47). "Theopoetic" can briefly be described as a framework for communicating faith in a manner sensitive to the creative ethos of a particular time and space. For a theopoetic to be a valid enterprise it must exhibit a vitality in relation to the cultural spirit of the time -- in our case, it must communicate to those who live in the contemporary world. This essay is about a potential form for theopoetic in this context; it is about a rediscovery of a particular creative ethos -- an ethos formed by the confluence of ecological awareness and poetic expression.

The framework through which I perceive the world has become sensitive to the immanence of creative vitality in the natural world. The ancient Hebrews called this vitality "rush" (the divine breath or wind) and considered its energy to be the basis of life. The study of old and powerful words such as "rush" suggests that there is a connection between Biblical faith and awareness of natural vitality. This discovery is congruent with what the very word religion suggests (from the Latin *re-ligio* -- to connect again). By linking an environmental concern with Biblical faith I was led to a reawakening of the imagination, and an appreciation of the divine activity which allows the reconnection. "Rush" is a word that exemplifies this activity: what element could be more appropriate than the wind to symbolize the interconnection within ourselves and throughout the surrounding environment?

This summer I had the pleasure to spend my time on the Outerbanks of North Carolina. The Outerbanks are a narrow strip of dune-formed islands just off the mainland. The land exists in a fragile balance between the water which shapes the coastline and the wind which shapes the dunes. The wind is the dominant force on these islands; it creates the character of the region. From the Wright Brothers to the windsurfers, men and women have come to the Outerbanks to harness the power of the

wind. Human beings have often wanted to use and control what they have found in the environment, but one does not have to spend much time on the Outerbanks to realize how futile our attempts to control nature are.

Many beach cottages on the Outerbanks have been lost as the relentless action of the waves (driven by the ever-present wind) has consumed the shoreline. The vitality of rush is both undeniable and uncontrollable; those who live on the Outerbanks are confronted with their own finitude as they watch the sand disappear. Many of us will awaken to the same sense of finitude as we watch our own backwards disappear, drinking water become contaminated, and breathable air exhausted. But the awareness which comes from environmental sensitivity must not stop with our own neighborhood. The necessary extension is to translate this awareness into the religious dimension which encompasses the whole earth rather than the suburb. To do this, the vehicle for a religious faith must be a potent one.

R.P. Warren and Cleanth Brooks discussed what I think is a potential vehicle for faith in their book *Understanding Poetry*. They wrote that poetry is "massive communication" which springs from a basic human impulse. We can push this concept farther by linking it with Wilder's idea that "any fresh renewal of language or rebirth of images arises from within and beyond our control" (6) What is seen as a basic human impulse, such as the desire to fly, is dependent on a power beyond our control. How far could Wilbur and Orville have flown without the wind? The same kind of question can be put to the poet -- "How massive is your communication without the vitality which breathes through all language?" If the poet could open up to the kind of power which can drive the waves it would be very massive indeed. Poetry works through language, and language lives in relation to the religious.

Language itself is the *lingua franca* for any theopoetic; and within the theopoetic, language and religious imagination merge. In considering the efficacy of faith Wilder understood that "when imagination fails doctrines become ossified" (2). Ossification can be experienced in many forums: the political, where candidates throw dead names around such as "liberal" and "conservative"; the intellectual, when those who teach can no longer respond to the lives of those who wish to learn; and the religious, where fundamentalists project Biblical verses, without interpretation, on those who live two thousand years after the text was written. In my own life it was a renewed appreciation of the natural world through the insight of poetic imagination which broke through the ossification in a modern context that excludes the possibility of a religious consciousness. I was able to make the "leap of sympathetic imagination" which Warren and Brooks considered to be the key to authentic poetry.

My own imagination -- conditioned by a love for the natural environment -- found a sympathetic voice in the language of poetry including the Bible itself. I was, as Brooks and Warren so eloquently wrote, "put back in the freshness of things" (77). Freshness and vitality are all around us, ready to be appreciated and waiting for us to open up to. The poet speaks to this situation. To give an example of this I return to the Outerbanks in a poem by Conrad Aiken that describes the principle cape of the islands.

"Speak, Hatteras, your language of the sea: scour with kelp and spindrift the stale street: that man in terror may learn once more to be child of that hour when rock and ocean meet." -- from *Hatteras Calling*: 1931

Newness is discovered in the action of the sea which cleanses the stale street and strikes terror in our hearts. Hatteras "speaks" to man just as the power of rush challenges our life. We are the ones who need to open to the calling so that, in our meekness, we may understand what it means to live in relation to something more than us. In this poem our finitude is beautifully expressed in relation to the power of nature. The language of the poet has reawakened the religious dimension.

Language, in poetic form, was the key to my own reconnection, but any language must take into account the cultural spirit of the time if it is to communicate with the secular ethos dominant in the modern context. This problem is not a new one. Erich Auerbach explained in *Mimesis* that the Christian view of reality has always involved the antagonism between sensory appearance and meaning. Consider the dogmatic nature of Biblical doctrine where "the Old Testament presents itself as complete truth with a claim to sole authority, on the other hand that very claim forces it to a constant interpretative change in its own content" (Auerbach 16). Wilder wrote about this problem also: "The meaning of such older stories as those involving the fall, redemption, judgment and new creation is deeply buried and obscured behind older layers of language and thought forms" (89). How can we breathe life into the vehicle of faith if its content is hidden and its meaning is changed by the attachments of previous dogma? An answer may be present in our interaction with nature.

My rediscovery of faith was a personal one, but it was also an experience shared by an ethos that is becoming more predominant as the world awakens to the planetary nature of ecological problems such as the greenhouse effect and deforestation. The metaphors of ecology, nature and wilderness are possible means to the insight necessary for a more nearly total vision based on Biblical faith. Who can deny the ecological

meaning of such stories as the Creation where the Hebrew word for Adam (adamah) means "earth," and where the very force through which God creates life is our old friend "rush," the wind?

In the present era the call for a creative theopoetic may find answers in the resurgent interest in planetary ecology. The pressures of a shrinking world will make evident the fundamental interconnection of which we are a part; it is then only a small step to link this imaginative construct of interconnection with the creative energy of religious faith. The gap between imagination and faith will be bridged by language; if it is to be effective, this language will be poetic. It is the poet who is best suited to make the appeal to our imagination and open us up to the store of human experience expressed in the mystery of faith. We find rootedness in the power of poetry to connect with basic human impulses and direction in the ability of poetry to point to something beyond our control -- in this case the divine activity in nature. Poetry conditioned by environmental awareness will be a new creative ethos, and the basis for religious awareness which breaks through the theological ossification of the present context. The environmental theopoetic can bring us back into the vitality and freshness which is at the root of all creation.

*Robert Marshall*