

Dimensional understanding of poetry

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ABSTRACT

Integrated literary analysis departs from the poetic text. And yet this by no means implies the isolation of the poem, excluding all external references like time and belief.

It is only by means of a structural approach in which form, content and contextual relevance cohere, that the valencial potential of a text is unfolded.

In this article one particular poem 'Der Engel. Advent' by Reinhold Schneider has been utilized to show how the analytic consideration of the aspects of time and beliefs, reveals the total richness, the depth and dimension in the poem.

The spirit of an age and the soul of a time are to be detected through the literature of that age and time (Zylstra, 1965:5). In other words the artist who carries the stamp of the time transmits his situational and universal vision into literary expression.

These aspects of time and beliefs in a work of art, need to be unlocked in order to reveal the poem in the full richness of its dimensionality. To illustrate this, a single poem: 'Der Engel. Advent' by Reinhold Schneider will be analysed and quoted.

Der Engel. Advent (1954:121)

- | | | |
|---|---|--|
| 1 | 1 | Wann wird ein Engel kühn durch Wolken dringen, |
| | 2 | Die auf die Erde todesträchtig hangen |
| | 3 | Und wird den Dämon, dessen Frist vergangen, |
| | 4 | Vor dem gestürzten Throne niederzwingen? |
| 2 | 5 | Denn nur ein Engel wird das Reich erringen, |
| | 6 | Den Abgrund schliessen und das Recht erlangen. |
| | 7 | Er wird die neue Herrlichkeit empfangen |
| | 8 | Und sie bewachen mit erglühten Schwingen. |

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- 3 9 Wann sind die Herzen rein? Wann wird das Feuer,
10 In dem das Kreuz des Siegers strahlend steht,
11 Die Gier verbrennen, die verwirkte Macht?
- 4 12 Der Himmel wogt und neigt sich ungeheuer,
13 Ob sich ein Volk verwandle im Gebet
14 Und ihm zum Zeichen werde in der Nacht.

In this sonnet the ecclesiastic season of Advent, which precedes the festival of the Nativity, places the text into a general temporal time-relevance. Superimposed upon the temporal-universal time implication of the poem, is the particular situation of the war years of 1945 in Germany.

The angel occupies a central position in both the title and in the sonnet itself, conveying multi-dimensional significance. In conjunction with the season of Advent, the angel frequently appears in the capacity of the carrier of good tidings (Matthew 1, 20 and Luke 2, 9). But in this sonnet the angel is emphasized as the disposer of evil and particularly the situational evil of the Third Reich. The verbs 'dringen, niederzwingen, errigen' stress this capacity and line 8 analogically suggests the flaming sword of Genesis 3:24.

Although the situational reference here attains special import, it remains biblically affirmed in Hebrews 1:14 and the ministering side of angels in helping and protecting people and nations, finds poetic expression in stanza 2.

While the speaker *does* address himself to Hitler and National-Socialist power, he also has an emphatic message to the German people at large ('ein Volk': line 13). He stresses the necessity of a transformation through prayer. Only *then* will his people be able to be the images of the Creator and bring light into the darkness of night (line 14). By implication 'the night' will then be transformed into the Christmas night which the title anticipates.

Here the situational overthrow of the Third Reich is poetically synthesized with the Coming of the New Kingdom of God ('Das Reich des Herrn': Matthew 3:2). Human and divine justice will be done, the abyss will be closed (line 5) and chaos and darkness will be vanquished, assuring harmony as well as a universal triumph over situational and world-wide evil.

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THE TEXT 'ABSOLUTE'

It should immediately be emphasized that the text 'per se' always serves as the point of departure and as the essential work-imminent method of approach in the integrated analysis of poetry.

The text must be allowed to reveal itself and the 'autonomy' of the poem must be respected. The poem is, after all, the positivized literary expression of the 'centripetal' (Frye, 1951:94) position of the artist and should be read in its own allusive right.

Stanza 2 of Schneider's sonnet may serve as an example of such text-imminent analysis:

Denn nur ein Engel wird das Reich erringen,
Den Abgrund schliessen und das Reich erlangen.
Er wird die neue Herrlichkeit empfangen
Und sie bewachen mit erglühten Schwingen.

This stanza proclaims reconciliation. The horizontal line between the angel and the abyss underscores the concept of invisible forces ascending and descending between heaven and the world (John 1:51), closing the abyss mentioned in line 6.

The second stanza, as in fact the whole poem, reveals an upward rhythmic tendency, anticipating the Coming of Christ as the Saviour of the world as well as the judge at the Second Coming (lines 6 & 7).

The verbs particularly relate to the angel as the protector of mankind (5 & 6) and the carrier of divine grace and message (6 & 7). While stanza 1 portrays the angel forcing his way through the death and destruction of the world to take up combat with the forces of evil, stanza 2 reveals equalization and synthesis. Such possibilities of reconciliation between heaven and earth (6) also hold the only means of renewal (7).

While the adjectives are predominantly visual or associatively visual:

'Herrlichkeit ... neue
Schwingen ... erglüht'

the verbs reflect struggle and possible transformation ('erringen, erlangen, bewachen' and 'schliessen, empfangen').

The emphasis is on the time of Advent which announces the annual Coming of Christ that bridges the darkness and heralds a new dawn. But the poem

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also extends beyond the single and particular event of Christmas and the message of renewal, to the eschatological expectation of the New Jerusalem guarded by the angels of the Lord.

Thus the text can and should be allowed to unfold itself.

And yet, this text-imminent approach is no new idea. 'Autonomous' literary criticism has gone hand in hand with autonomous poetry since the turn of the 19th century with the 'art' development. In the 20th century the New Critics embraced textual criticism to the exclusion of biographical and ideological contexts. Both Tate and Cleanth Brooks initially placed great emphasis on the autonomy of the poem and the predominant importance of textual reading. This over-emphasis of the text can be partly understood and explained. The apparent fear that aesthetic and literary qualities could be neglected in favour of religious and philosophical abstractions probably gave rise to the claim of the superiority of language and the negation of values and beliefs. Brooks (1963:5) expressed a similar concern when he emphasized that committed Christian writers should be judged by their art and not their preaching. This accusation of second-rate Christian literature has unfortunately long been true for a large section of Protestant art.

The New Critics' dislike of propaganda and trend literature, whether religious or political, is also understandable, especially in the aftermath of the slanted propaganda campaigns of World War II.

In addition, the 20th century poet speaks to audiences strongly desensitized by the age of technology and therefore audiences for whom the supernatural has become demythologized and who do not trust, but rather fear their intuitive reactions. The poet thus does not communicate with a body of readers in a homogeneous Christian society, but speaks to a public largely at a distance from Christianity, or completely indifferent to the Christian tradition.

In this sense the importance of the time and belief relevance also recedes and the literary text, as such, is spotlighted.

But on the other hand the text-absolute approach, if rigidly applied, is shortsighted and analytically impoverishing. Firstly it is questionable whether literary analysis is possible on an absolutely objective and distanced text-imminent basis and secondly, even if it were, whether the result would not be artistically disappointing.

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An artist is inextricably part of the world and the time in which he lives. He is formed and influenced by it. He is sensitively receptive to his closest and most personal sphere of influence and can therefore not create in complete isolation. His home life, family ties, state of happiness and contentment, his health and even hereditary factors like depression, will colour his attitudes and state of mind. From this initial stance he sees the ever-widening world around him and develops a world and life view. He is thus, to a greater or lesser extent, influenced by the country in which he lives, its politics, problems and struggles. Artistic work cannot be surveyed and judged outside the context of these spirals of influence.

It is with this antennae-receptivity that the artist explores and uncovers human situations in their 'at-the-frontier' element and brings increased awareness of the world and of human experiences.

Therefore the answer to a truly integrated poetry does not lie in separating one quality from another, eliminating beliefs, time-relevance and revelatory contextual sources but rather in a synthesis of language, time and vision. It is only in the full coherence of all aspects of creational 'givens' that a work of art can reveal a complete understanding of the particular and universal relationships which contribute to the enriching dimensionality of the poem.

Without the knowledge of and the insight into the time-relevance, situational engagement and visionary quality of the text, the full revelatory potential of the poem will remain untapped.

CONSCIOUS AND UNCONSCIOUS CHRISTIAN POETRY

Recent interest in implicit and explicit literature seems to confirm the importance of an integrated approach to poetry.

In this age of the ratio and the text-absolute, it must appear paradoxical that 'unconscious' literature has evoked so much discussion, even amongst the New Critics. When T.S. Eliot (1975:23) pleads for unconscious Christian literature rather than deliberate Christian poetics, Bethell (1975:16) maintains that unconsciously held attitudes are more important than explicitly articulated ones and Brooks (1963:97) agrees to the necessity of presenting the Christian myth indirectly, they are all basically arguing the same point: the intention or motivation *behind* the work of art.

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Symbolism and imagery are, for instance, seen as one way of expressing that which is beyond knowledge and which *can* endeavour to get at the 'embodied soul' of man (Brooks 1963:97). This preference for implicit rather than explicit ideas points to an underlying need for and acknowledgement of the importance of 'een bepaalde culturele context' (Lotman 1977:107). What else are attitudes, values and beliefs other than the manifestation of the cultural context or the soul of man?

When Bethell suggests that attitudes and values will be located in the details of the style rather than in obvious preaching, he is already hinting at what Seerveld (1977:41) and Rookmaaker (1946:151) specifically formulate as the visible manifestation of the whole man.

It thus seems as if the text-imminent protagonists have finally also come to the consensus of an integrated option in which the vision of the artist is reflected through the poem itself.

The vision then, is part of the wholeness of the poem, expressed through the style. It is here — in the style — that the lingual aspect is indivisibly part of the dimension of values and beliefs.

MANIFESTATION THROUGH STYLE

This inter-relationship, this interdependence of aspects, implies the inclusion of external facets which have become flesh and blood of the artist.

In the sonnet *Der Engel. Advent* the theme of reconciliation, which is reflected in the time-relevance and the envisioned perspective, permeates the text in the coherence of the context and the style.

The reconciliatory process can be stanzaically divided into the progressive stages of: struggle (stanza 1), reconciliation (stanza 2), purification (stanza 3) and witness (stanza 4). Stanzas 1 and 2 constitute the expositional unity of the octave expressing the very definite conviction of conciliation and a New Earth in the conjunctive 'Denn'-statement of the second quatrain.

The sestet develops from a contemporary-universal time connection to a specific concern and responsibility for the German nation within the particular Third Reich situation.

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This linking of the time context and that of the eschaton, opens up a comparison between Lucifer and Hitler who are comparable in their overweening pride (in an effort to overthrow the throne of God). The angel will enter this contemporary situation against the powers of physical and moral corruption (lines 1, 3 and 4). While every stanza is an entity in itself, octave and sestet also form a unified totality and the whole sonnet is enclosed in the over-arching correlation of lines 1 and 14 ('Wann, Wann, Ob'), completing the theme of advent and reconciliation.

This sonnet is the literary objectification of a life and time portrayed through the eyes of faith. This positivized belief is only an echo of the Word of God (Schneider 1956:18) and reflective of the responsibility which the literary artist carries in being a witness of the Truth at a particular time in history.

THE STAMP OF TIME

While art carries the stamp of time, it also *reflects* its time.

It is not simply the literary artist who is receptive to the influence of the time and age but he, in his turn, radiates a time context into his communication fields.

Poetry must therefore be time-bound and up to date; but it must also be existential. It must be aware of the situation, must participate in the life of the times, must sharpen man's perception of the world and bring consciousness of eternal values. 'Weil das Wort Gottes nie zeitlos-abstrakt, sondern geschichtlich-konkret ergicht' (Marti 1976:57) therefore beliefs cannot effectively stand in a vacuum but must function within the relevance of time. Attitudes and beliefs wish to speak to contemporary audiences, finding a situational basis as well as superimposed universal insight.

But in order to adequately read a text, the reader needs to understand the symbolified 'soul' of the poet as well as various historical and other external factors (Rookmaaker 1965:19). More insight, deeper understanding and more extensive knowledge can only assist the reader in unlocking the text in its coherent richness.

Thus it is revelatory to know that Schneider sacrificed his writing of long historical novels in favour of poetry and short religious articles during the 12 years of the Third Reich, because of the National-Socialist campaign

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against Christianity and Christians. As the printing of Bibles and Christians literature was forced to a halt, Schneider realized the need for sustaining words of Truth and Hope, to combat the planned process of de-Christianization.

Schneider's thematic preoccupation with the problems of Might and Right (*Der Engel. Advent*, line 6) is also explained by the constant violation and misinterpretation of the law and human rights at that time.

Furthermore, if the reader knew that Schneider's apparently heavy and admonishing Christianity, his preoccupation with the problem of conscience and his thankless call to repentance, had to be seen against the background of a youth torn between a Protestant father and a Catholic mother, chronic depression, attempted suicide and the constant presence of exhausting physical pain, his poetry would reveal greater dimensionality and enhance its personal and universal value. This meeting of beliefs, time, speaker and audience then is the intersecting line so crucial for the dimensional understanding of poetry.

COMMUNICATION

Such interaction between the artist and the reader is the moment of rapport which reaches across the work of art achieving communication. To Christian poetry especially, this is of primary importance but also greatly dependent on a receptive audience. Because of the process of estrangement between people and between men and religion, the already existing gap between artist and public has become even more unbridgable. The egotism of art for art's sake has worsened the situation and for some time now, the literary artist has had to contend with a communication gap between himself and the reader. This is due, not only to the widely-held opinion that art is an élite luxury, but also a result of demythologized Christianity.

It may thus happen that ignorance, lack of understanding or simply disinterest in the Christian tradition and faith will result in reduced consciousness of personal, universal and eternal values. In such case, the actuality of a situation and the awareness of the time relevance will become less meaningful. Poetry will have lost valuable means of communication.

Here lies the responsibility for the here and the now ... a renewed relation between belief and the context of time which will reflect the existential situation. This means *participation, interest, involvement* and engagement¹; in

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other words communication *in* and *for* the present, expressed with a new vitality.

The analysed sonnet *Der Engel. Advent* is revelatory of Schneider's view that Christian poetry needs to mirror "... das Zeitliche in der Beziehung auf das Unverrückbare" (1963:182). Here the theme of reconciliation is closely interrelated with the poetic mission within a time relevance. His duty to admonish and summon was a call to both individual man and the nation, to penitence, purification and prayer.

Closely affiliated to the situational 'engagement' of the time, is the appeal to self-confrontation in a re-awakening of man's conscience and a renewed spirit of humility through prayer.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF THE LINGUAL WORD

This communication with renewed vigour and actuality is within the scope of lingual creativity. But for the Christian poet this responsibility is a commissioned one, entrusted by the Word of God and thus not lightly executed. On the contrary, the earnestness of their duty towards the word has been the concern of men through the ages. Luther, for instance, more than anything else, feared pleasing man instead of God through his words; four centuries later Jochen Klepper² considered the source of artistic authority to be the power of God and for Reinhold Schneider the actualization of the Truth lay in the power of the Word, in the art of the word (1956:24).

The Christian artist is therefore called to 'do the Truth' (Rookmaaker 1965:20). For Rookmaaker this 'doing' of the Truth meant a responsibility towards artistic quality and neighbourly love³. This does not necessarily mean static reflection or neutral agreement in all matters, but often rather entails a challenge in pointing out wrongs, awakening consciences and bringing awareness of the needs of the time. It is then that the poet should warn, admonish, prophetically point towards the future, remind of the past and be prepared to react against the spirit of the time, if necessary.

In Schneider's sonnet his threefold warning-call to conversion,
'Wårn wird ein Engel kühn durch Wolken dringen' (line 1)
Wårn sind die Herzen rein? Wårn wird das Feuer,
.....
Die Gier verbrennen, die verwirkte Macht?' (lines 9 & 11).

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does indeed include the redemptive conciliation of the Cross, but also the possibility of inexorable judgement. His poetry never lightly consoles or superficially strafes the results of man's arrogant presumption and disobedience. The volume of his poetic concretization thus fulfils the personally defined commission of art as: "... die Wahrheit im Bilde zu fassen und die Gewissen zu erwecken, den Menschen zu erneuern; sie soll die Zeit deuten ... den Menschen helfen die Zeit zu bestehen" (1946:43).

It is indeed one thing for art to guide and serve as spiritual direction for the moment, but quite another to outlive the cultural phase and time of its origin. To do that the artistic quality of form which is culturally determined, must transcend the own cultural context and thus modify and break through it (Popma 1971:202).

UNIVERSAL VALUE

In order to transcend its origin, to break through its age and retain some value for other generations, it should, according to Rookmaaker (1979:50), be good at two levels: that of quality and of outlook expressed. The quality of the work includes, for instance, the technique, symbolism, form, expressivity and the harmonious integrality of all aspects. The outlook encompasses a closeness to life, awareness of human needs, emotions and feelings, relevance to that time and a depth of vision which involves a certain timelessness that is not static but alive and adaptable to each age. Naturally every age will read the original poem differently according to its frame of reference; but the kernel will remain.

In the quoted sonnet, three levels of time run concurrently: (i) the universal ecclesiastic season of Advent preceding the annual celebration of the birth of Christ, (ii) the present season of Advent against the contemporary Third Reich scene, (iii) and the finality of the Coming of the Eschaton. Although the threefold time-context certainly lends dimensionality to the theme of reconciliation and the actuality of the Third Reich situation with its supportive symbolism (of a new Empire after Hitler as well as the eschatological Kingdom of God; Satan and National-Socialism which have overthrown God's throne) and the imminence of the time context (in the present tense verb for instance: 'dringen, hangen, niederzwingen') enhance the impact of the main message, giving it a density of expression and added richness of meaning to the total poem, the possible fading and eventual extinction of the Third Reich time-level will mainly rob the poem of its particular intensity and urgency because of its situational time context.

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For the rest, the *truth* in the work of art will determine the impact, the direction in which it leads our thoughts and emotions and the way it moves us. The criterion, according to Rookmaaker, is whether it 'did' the Truth⁴. And this 'doing' of the truth will be detectable from the structural analysis and will be manifested in the envisioned style of the poem.

In Schneider's sonnet, the threads of thought, heralded in the title, are continually emphasized and supported by the stylistic composition, forming and integrated totality of all parts.

Central to the poem and conjunctive of these three Advents, is the redemptive Cross symbol expressed here as 'das Kreuz des Siegers' (line 10), which conciliates and closes the chasm (line 6).

Correlative with this dual 'Coming' is the two-fold sonnet structure, of which the octave explicates a faith in the divine conquest of evil ('ein Engel ... wird den Dämon... Vor dem gestürzten Throne niederzwingen') and the sestet portrays man's guilt and the possibility of purification and prayer ('Wann wird das Feuer ... Die Gier verbrennen'; 'Obsieh ein Volk verwandle im Gebet'). Thus in both segments of the sonnet, the concept of conciliation is inherently present.

This many-faceted conciliation finds its coherent supportive substructure in the design of the sonnet, which portrays a predominantly vertical tendency in which the angel and the demon (stanza 1), angel and abyss (stanza 2) and heaven and nation (stanza 4) relationships emphasize the basic concept of reconciliation.

The doubly stressed adverbial interrogative which introduces both octave and sestet of the sonnet, underline the weighted importance of the time element, but also unites the two extended themes of conciliation:

'Wann wird ein Engel kühn durch Wolken dringen...?' (line 1)

'Wann sind die Herzen rein? Wann wird das Feuer ...?' (line 9).

In verbal sound pattern with its light, challenging vowels ('dringen, zwingen, erringen') underscores the conciliatory role of the angel, compared to the weighted vowel sounds depicting the doomed world of the demon (line 3). The theme of conciliation is therefore not only represented in the content quality of the thought pattern of the poem but revealed in the integration of substructure and superstructure of style and content. The totality reflects the authorial perspective concerning a Christian spirited vision.

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CONCLUSION

Analysis has shown that the text has gained additional and enriching valences by the integration of the time-belief-relevance. The poem has broadened and deepened. It has been unfolded in

- (i) the specific and contemporary time connection;
- (ii) in its relation to the biblical and eschatological time dimension; and
- (iii) in its quality of timelessness.

The poem has been enriched by a validity beyond its own situational time context. Thus, sensitive integrated analysis will unlock and do justice to the full potential of the poem and so contribute to dimensional understanding.

VERWYSINGS

1. Engagement does not necessarily mean the exaggerated stress on Christian involvement in the present social situation as propagated by Christian-Marxists who maintain 'kein authentisches christliches Zeugnis ohne Engagement unserer Tage' (Biesel, 1972:5). This present perversion and its sociological, political and economic relevance have locked out the eschatological future, supplanting it by their own interpretation.
2. 'Immer wieder sche ich, dass ich mit aller dichterischer Autorität, die sich nicht von der kirchlichen Verkündigung herleitet, nichts beginnen kann' (1956:28).
3. "'Waarheid doen' is direct verbonden met streven naar optimale artistieke kwaliteit uit liefde tot de naaste ... waar weer onmiddellijk verantwoordelijkheid mee saamhangt" (Rookmaaker 1965:20).
3. John 3:21: "But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God".

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