Studies on Themes and Motifs in Literature

Transformation of Language and Religion in Rainer Maria Rilke

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Introduction

> Poets and priests were one in the beginning; only later times have separated them. But the true poet is always priest, just as the true priest has always remained a poet. And should the future not be able to bring about the old circumstances?[1]
>
> —Novalis

Throughout the history of Western culture, the marriage between religion and art has been a difficult one. In recent centuries, the two have been on the verge of splitting up; uncharitable observers may be tempted to conclude that art is remaining in this relationship only for the sake of inheriting religion's numerous belongings.

Max Weber's analysis of the secularization process that permeates modern world history provides useful tools to gain insight into the relationship between religious and aesthetic discourse. Two aspects of his thought are of special interest in here: first, his thesis that Western societies are on a trajectory of increasing rationalization—what he famously referred to as "the disenchantment of the world" (350)—and second, the assumption of an evolving opposition between religion and art:

> Magical religiosity stands in a most intimate relation to the esthetic sphere. Since its beginnings, religion has been an inexhaustible fountain of opportunities for artistic creation, on the one hand, and of stylizing through traditionalization, on the other.[…]
>
> The relationship between a religious ethic and art will remain harmonious as far as art is concerned for so long as the creative artist experiences his work as resulting either from charisma of "ability" (originally magic) or from spontaneous play.
>
> The development of intellectualism and the rationalization of life change this situation. For under these conditions, art becomes a cosmos of more and more consciously grasped independent values which exist in their own right. Art takes over the function of a this–worldly salvation, no matter how this may be interpreted. It provides a *salvation* from the routines of everyday life, and especially from the increasing pressures of theoretical and practical rationalism. (341–42; emphasis in the original)

Weber asserts the rationalization process inherent in the development of religious traditions coincides with the emergence of the aesthetic realm as an independent source of human value. As religion becomes less magical and

more rational, art inherits the original role of religion and stakes a claim to "this-worldly salvation."

One task of criticism interested in the connections between literature and religion lies in evaluating and refining Weber's sweeping assertions for the case of concrete epochs and authors. My study addresses this task by focusing on the oeuvre of Rainer Maria Rilke (1875-1926), a representative figure of European Modernism.[2] In the following chapters, I am concerned with practical textual analysis. Yet in order to indicate the specific historical preconditions of early twentieth-century literature, I would like, in the first part of this introduction, to move back in time and take a brief look at the relation between religion and literature in the context of (German) Romanticism.[3] This epoch is particularly suited to serve as reference point for my concerns because it displays the most extensive post-Enlightenment attempt to incorporate and transform religious topoi in the artistic sphere. Romanticism sets out to solve the following problem: how is it possible to soften the rationalist outlook of the Enlightenment while at the same time preserving its critique of religion?[4]

M. H. Abrams, in *Natural Supernaturalism*, argues that the Romantic project, in its aim to salvage religious discourse, re-writes Judeo-Christian narratives in terms of a this-worldly involvement which he calls "a secularized form of devotional experience" (65). In her recent study, *Topographies of the Sacred*, Kate Rigby calls for a re-evaluation of Abrams' claim. Invoking Weber, she asserts Romanticism was more interested in a "reenchantment than [a] secularization" (12) of the world.

I want to follow up on Rigby's interpretation by exploring Romanticism's central theological formula, that is, pantheism.[5] This notion was supposed to bring to fruition the project of reenchantment: it offered a way of expressing a sense of the divine without falling back into pre-Enlightenment versions of monotheism. Pantheism avoided the notion of a transcendent god, essential to the Judeo-Christian tradition, and provided a conceptual framework for the nature mysticism pervading the Romantic experience.

The impact and difficulties of this paradigm shift are illustrated by two key texts of the German tradition, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774) and Friedrich Hölderlin's *Hyperion* (1797-99). Both writers appropriate Spinoza's monistic philosophy.[6] His formula *deus sive natura* ("God or nature"), shorthand for the identity of the divine and natural world, became a rallying call for those who sought to find the divine in this world instead of beyond it.

The *Werther* novel portrays the fragility of the pantheistic project. In the famous letter of May 10, Werther describes his feeling of being fully embraced by nature: lying in the grass besides a brook, observing the spears of grass and the various insects, he feels "the presence of the Almighty" (7). But the moments in which he experiences a mystical union with nature endanger his artistic abilities:

> I am so happy, my best friend, am so completely immersed in the awareness of plain existence, that my art is suffering. I would not be able to draw one line, and have never been a greater painter than in these moments. (7)

Werther distances himself from a form of draftsmanship which allegedly does not capture the essence of his experiences; instead, he stipulates the paradoxical idea that his mystical experience in itself amounts to painting of the highest quality. But his notion of being a painter (and not merely a pedantic draftsman) by virtue of *not* producing any paintings betrays his failure as an artist. At the end of the letter, he despairs over his inability to express his vision of the divine; the feeling of being overwhelmed by natural phenomena is fused with the experience of artistic inadequacy:

> I often feel such a yearning and think: oh, if you could just express this again, if you could breathe onto paper what lives so full and warm within you, so that it would become the mirror of your soul, just as your soul is the mirror of the infinite God.—My friend—but I am overwhelmed by it; I am crushed by the vividness of these appearances. (7)

A similar limitation becomes evident in Werther's personal life. In parallel to the deterioration of the relationship with his beloved Lotte, he loses the ability to enter into a mystical union with nature:

> [G]lorious nature stands so rigidly in front of me like a glazed picture and all its splendor can no longer pump a drop of bliss from my heart into my brain, and the whole person stands before God like a dried-up well. (100)

Alongside the faltering of the pantheistic solution, traditional Christian motifs are inscribed into the text. This move does not come as a complete surprise, given that the novel is very much influenced by the literary epoch of *Empfindsamkeit* (sentimentalism), which in turn is a secular offshoot of Pietism. The appropriation of Christian discourse culminates in the description of Werther's final hours. The text takes up elements of the Passion story and reconfigures them in order to stylize Werther as a Christ figure, specifically by calling up and transforming the Gethsemane narrative, which depicts Jesus's—or Werther's—submission to his fate:

> Here, Lotte! I do not tremble to grasp the cold horrific cup out of which I shall drink the frenzy of death! You gave it to me and I do not waver. (145)

This passage can be read as a secular transformation of the words in the Gospel of John:[7] "Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?" (John 18: 15). Lotte replaces God as purveyor of absolute meaning. In Goethe's novel, pantheism and romantic-erotic love function, albeit ultimately unsuccessfully, as placeholders for the divine realm.

Hölderlin's *Hyperion* also begins with an explicit affirmation of pantheism:

> My whole being becomes silent and listens when the tender wave of air plays around my breast. Lost in the wide blue, I often glance up to the ether and into the holy ocean, and it seems as if a kindred soul opens my arms, as if the pain of loneliness dissolves itself into the life of the deity.
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> To be one with all, that is the life of the deity, is the heaven of man.
>
> To be one with all that lives, to return in blessed self-forgetfulness to the cosmos of nature, that is the peak of all thoughts and pleasures, that is the holy mountain top, the place of eternal peace. (10)

As in *Werther*, the fleeting quality of this state of being cannot be denied. In a self-reflective gesture, Hyperion realizes the transient quality of a unity with nature:

> I often stand on this height, my Bellarmin! But just a moment of contemplation hurls me down. I reflect, and find myself as I was before, alone, with all the pain of mortality, and my heart's asylum, the world in its eternal unity, is lost; nature closes her arms, and I stand as a stranger before her and do not understand her. (11)

Despite the fleetingness of his ecstatic experiences, Hyperion attempts to find an enduring connection with nature. While the novel does not draw upon Christian imagery, Hyperion appropriates traditional expressions of devotion: the novel ends in an extended hymn to nature, which here replaces God as the recipient of prayer and praise (152f.). In contrast to *Werther*, Hölderlin's novel upholds pantheism, combining it with common modes of worship. The novel's final assertion of pantheism ensures the survival of its hero. Whereas Werther commits suicide, Hyperion finds his vocation as a poet.

Pantheism is not easily available to the Modernist mind. Rapid technological advances and the urbanization of European life did not lend themselves to a mystical merging with nature. Modernism is faced with the problem of finding a new relation to the divine. The problem is aggravated

by the crisis of representation that pervades this epoch. In contrast to the Romantic ideal of organicism—a notion which applies both to the perception of nature and the work of art—Modernism experiences a loss of trust in conventional perceptions of the world and of art. The work of art can no longer present an organic unity authentically; representing the world truthfully means for the Modernist mind the recognition, and adequate aesthetic expression, of the essential fragmentation of contemporary reality.

In the literary realm, the crisis of representation manifests itself as a crisis of language. Richard Sheppard argues that Modernism's linguistic skepticism—prevalent in authors such as Hofmannsthal, Rilke, Yeats, and Eliot—goes beyond the linguistic impasse that is a common ingredient of the creative process in general. At the root of Modernism's crisis lies a wider socio-cultural phenomenon, "the belief that, variously, the industrial order, or mass democracy, or concepts of efficiency, have destroyed the still point within the spirit and that order has been sacrificed to formless and entropic anarchy" (326).

The aim of the following study is to explore the crisis of language and religion by looking at a distinctive voice of literary Modernism. Rilke is especially conducive to such a project because he is still deeply involved in a (discarded) Christian heritage but equally implicated in the Modernist crisis of language. His work offers a paradigmatic example for exploring the interconnectedness of religious and linguistic concerns. I argue that Rilke's search for a renewed understanding of the divine parallels the search for a renewal of language.[8] My detailed readings of works drawn from all phases of Rilke's creative life will attempt to concretize this intimate connection between religion and language.

Previous scholarship has dealt extensively with Rilke's relation to Christianity. The most detailed study is the work by Kurt Leese. He unearths several causes of Rilke's rejection of Christianity. As a result of the poet's preference for an "original myth" (127) that ensures an indissoluble connection between humans and God, Rilke does not accept the Christian notion of a human falling away from God, or sin, and the consequent need for a mediator—Christ—to re-establish this link. Corresponding to Rilke's rejection of sin is his critique of Christianity's uneasy relationship to sexuality. Leese's response to Rilke's critique is twofold. On the one hand, he points out that Rilke's understanding of Christianity is quite incomplete. Specifically, it does not acknowledge the various facets of the figure of Christ. Rilke does not take into account the different nuances among the presentation of the synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John, Paul's interpretation, and further developments of Christian theology. On the other