

FEELING, FORM AND FULFILMENT: THE STEWARDSHIP OF THE CHRISTIAN POET

After having studied under Prof. Calvin Seerveld at the Institute for Christian Studies, Toronto, Canada, the Ph.D. degree was conferred on Miss Kuschke by the University of the Witwatersrand in June, 1981 with a thesis entitled *The representation of the Christian ethos in the poetry of Werner Bergengruen: an integrated approach.*

This article is an indication of her work procedure and thinking on Christian poetry. An adaptation of her thesis is at present in the press and will shortly appear at Pro Rege, Potchefstroom, under the title *Anatomy of Christian poetry* (price: R12,50).

An analysis of opinions concerning the mission-task of the poet may initially gain wort, while insight from the lexical consideration of the term 'task'. Derived from the old French 'tasque' and the Latin 'taxare' the word implies a piece of work undertaken or imposed as a duty; as fixed payment to a king or feudal superior. It is thus the connotation used for the exacting of tribute, which to my mind, stresses a certain duty-bound rigidity not appropriate for the creative commission of an artist. The German terms 'Sendung' (mission), 'Auftrag' (mandate, commission) and even 'Amt' (jurisdiction, ministering), as mainly used by German Christian poets, rather convey a function or a service. Such a person or body of people, is given authority and significantly enough, the authority is given by God... to fulfil the commission of proclaiming the Gospel.

The implication of stewardship in service of God and fellowman with regard to poetry, will be analysed and discussed on the textual basis of a number of poems by Reinhold Schneider; one poem dealing with the God-given gift of the word in greater detail, and others only where they specifically stress the subject of poetry and its 'purpose'.

'Du gabst das Wort'

1. Dú gábst das Wórt; wér mág es noch verwálten,
2. Mit Schwertesschärfe Licht von Trug zu trennen,
3. Und gleich den grossen Sprechern zu entbrennen,

4. Die éinst der Menschen Seelen rein gehalten?
5. Dóch wiſd der Geist nür duſch das Wórt gestálten,
6. Die Ordnung gründend, die es darf benennen,
7. Das Böse zeichnend, dass es alle kennen,
8. Und dié befriéden, die der Háss gespálten.
9. Es stifbt das Wórt, só wié der Wiſfel dorrt,
10. Da mächtig noch der Äste Wuchs gedeiht
11. Und krankes Mark ein üppig Leben birgt.
12. Es sterben, denen heilig war das Wort,
13. Am bittern Abend ungenützter Zeit.
14. Es stifbt das Vólk hin, das séín Wórt verwirkt.

The commission of the poet

This administering commission of the poet is very clearly stated in the title line: ‘Dú gábst das Wórt’. The double accentuation of the first pronoun ‘Du’, in conjunction with the past tense verb ‘gabst’, immediately lays unmistakable emphasis on the gift-like quality of the word, and the source from whence it springs. The time difference between the first statement ('Du gabst das Word') and the rest of the sonnet, places an additional responsibility on the role of man in the present and in the future. The frequent use of infinitives ('zu trennen': 'zu entbrennen') and participles ('gründend; zeichnend') in the octave, suggests the continual responsibility required. The commission to the Christian poet is the communication of the Word of Truth. Such proclamations distinctly imply an act of stewardship; the administration of a gift. This action of administering to others that for which one has received jurisdiction, is clearly conveyed in line 1' 'wér mág es noč verwálten'. Here the explanatory interrogative ('wer mag noch') has strong situational overtones of the Third Reich misuse of the ministering responsibility of the word.

By implication (from the creative qualities of the word in lines 5-8) the poet ('wer') is designated the task of clear judgement (line 2) and the renewal of the mind in the sense of Romans 12, 2 (lines 3 and 4).

Such a person, vested with administrative power, is the representative of a superior who entrusts a certain command to him. At the same time, such a position of trust entails a duty... usually in the form of ministering service to others. Schneider sees this as an ad-ministering one ('verwalten') which also calls for the normative judgement of distinguishing between truth and deception (line 2); and similar to the disciples of old, the kindling of the heart of man in spiritual worship (lines 3 and 4). Very specifically, the poet ministers to others as a servant of God. In this, he is delegated by God to

ministering guardianship ... pointing out evil so that everyone might recognize it in its many guises ('Das Böse zeichnend, dass alle es kennen') and more individually, bringing shalom to those divided and disillusioned by hate ('Und die befrieden, die der Hass gespalten'). These lines are also a subtle reference to the reign of evil and hate during the 12 Third Reich years, but more particularly, at the outbreak of the war in 1938, when the sonnet was written.

Man's stewardship

According to the Scriptures, man's stewardship is threefold. Man is the servant of God, summoned to representative service *for* God. This role of authorized office-bearer and its high responsibility, finds expression in the despairing question of concern: '*wer mag es noch verwalten*'. Man is called to obedience but also to account for the administration of his duties; and should man disobey the call and misuse or neglect his authority by acting irresponsibly, he does not mirror his creator and such disobedience results in:

'Es stirbt das Wort, ...
.....

Es sterben, denen war das Wort,
Am bittern Abend ungenützter Zeit.

Es stirbt das Volk hin, das sein Work verwirkt'.

The third leg of man's triadic stewardship is based on Psalm 115, 16:

'The highest heaven belongs to the Lord,
but the earth he has given to man'.

This 'givenness' is an investment of trust to exercise dominion over the whole world 'subdue' it, make the world serviceable, turn all creation into a footstool that doubles its native praise of the Lord' (Seerveld, 1980:27). The twofold metrical variation of the second stanza (line 1): 'Dóch wird der Geist nür durch das Wórt gestálten', gives a conclusive answer to the rhetorical question of stanza I. This strongly accented 'Doch' at the beginning of the line emphatically asserts the single ('nur') importance of the word, and in conjunction with the adverbial use of 'nur', convincingly emphasizes the formative role of the creative word (literally: created in a particular form; to bring into existence; to articulate).

The formational role of the word

Thus the word is stressed as 'form-ational' of the consciousness of man and in a wider connotation, of sense, meaning and content. The word also lays the foundation ('gründend') of order; thus organizes everything how and where

it is intended to be. Specifically, the role of naming creation ('die Ordnung gründend, ... benennen') as the poet's commission, is underlined in the auxiliary verb 'darf benennen'. This baptizing role of the word is extended to the lingual description of evil, by which the demonic dimension will be distinguishable to mankind. Additionally, this opening-up recognition of evil will assist man in the attainment of peace and wholeness.

The positive mission of the word is repeated in an eight-fold predicate ('verwalten; trennen; Seelen rein halten; Geist gestalten; Ordnung gründend; benennen; das Böse zeichnen; befrieden'). It is significant that stanza one accentuates the 'Light' of the word that heightens the ability of true judgement (line 2), keeps the soul pure, but also is able to inspire man to passionate enthusiasm ('entbrennen'). Stanza two on the other hand, expresses the analytic quality of the conscious mind, by which things are named, evil is signified and order is founded.

Being a sonnet, the structure of the poem ideally underpins the ordering, creative function ('gründen') of the word. The octave, which presents the God-given word and its responsibilities and power, is divided into two quartets; the first of which explicates the role of the administrator of the Word and the second stresses the responsibility of the word as such. The octave thus formulates the positive contribution of poetic art and the sextet structurally portrays the negative results of disobedience to, and neglect of the lingual word as a reflection of the Word of God. Such disregard of a poetic commission will result in a threefold symbolic death... of the word, the nation and the poet, expressed in a climatic repetition of the verb 'sterben': 'Es stirbt ... Es sterben ... Es stirbt *hin*'. The verbs too, maintain this positive-negative design in that the octave only makes use of positive word-concepts: 'verwalten, Licht von Trug zu trennen, Wort gestalten, Ordnung gründend, darf benennen, das Böse zeichnend, die befrieden...', while the verbs in the sextet reflect the death and decay locked up in a disregarded commission: 'Es stirbt das Wort; der Wipfel dorrt; es sterben, denen heilig war das Wort; es stirbt das Volk hin, das sein Wort verwirkt'.

The two and three syllabic verbs ('verwalten, entbrennen, trennen, gestalten'), all situated at the end of the octave lines, all have feminine endings with a refrain-like -en musicality and suggest the living continuity of the process of creativity. The sextet on the other hand, always ends on a stressed and mainly single-syllabic word ('dorrt, birgt, Zeit, verwirkt') reminiscent of stunted growth and the finality of death. Thus the sonnet *form* is a concretization of the principle of order and creativeness (expressed in the verbs) inherent in the word commission poetically positized in the poem.

Concretization of the entire man

Because of the analytical aspect in man's structure and therefore his logical power of distinction, man *can* be held responsible for his actions and decisions. It is from the analytical aspect that the law of God carries a normative character (Troost, 1970:35) and produces in man the 'how' reaction to normative situations and judgements. This 'how' seems to me, the ability to respond to a calling; it is the subject's answer to the law of the cosmos (Troost, 1970:36). This answer given through the way man lives existentially, Schrotenboer (1976:8) calls 'imaging his Maker'. He points out that man, made in the image of God, is thus an office-bearer as well as an image of God. In both does he represent God. It is only in the whole man, in his many-faceted life-expression, that he is a true reflection.

In this sonnet the first two stanzas enclose the whole man. The word speaks to body, soul and mind and thus the created word is the imaging result of the Word of God. In this sense, man experiences the image of the Truth in creational symbols, absorbs them into life and re-directs them again through the objectification of the lingual word:

'Die Wahrheit will sich uns im Widerschein
Geformter Bilder streitend offenbaren;
Dringt ihr ein Leben nach in schweren Jahren,
So werden auch des Lebens Bilder rein' (1954:56).

It is only when the poet 'lives' his integrated life, in which word and faith existentially cohere, that he has power to proclaim the Truth which takes hold of man and makes him a new creature:

'So breitet sich die Macht gesandten Lichtes
In Bildern : us; das Wort wird sie ergreifen,
Wenn Wort und Weisheit tief im Leben gründen' (1954:56).

Only when life and actions have become re-vitalized by 'meaning' through a personal 'Hereinbrechen des Unbedingten in die Bedingtheit, in die Zeit' (Schneider, 1956:21) can he be instrumental in showing others the way of faith in daily life and threshold situations.

For Schneider this personal experience of Christ in all exigencies and joys of life is essential before the poetic word will reach out to others with conviction:

'Die Wahrheit nur wird an die Herzen dringen,
Und wirken wird das Wort nur, das gelebt' (1954:57),

and in the sonnet ‘Mit Mächtigen dieser Erde’ (1954:54) he specifies the following of ‘reinerm Drange

Zu Dichtern, ...’

as diaconate service:

‘Der Menschen Not mit eignen Leiden heilen’ (1954:54).

Poetic engagement

It is as if the poet is co-responsible for, and concerned in discovering the meaning of life. Wrapped up in this question of identity is the assessment of man’s place and his mission in his time and situation:

‘Es streiten Gott und Satan in den Seelen
Und in den Völkern, die von Unlust schäumen,
Wenn sie ihr Dämon in die Weiche stösst.
Doch müssen einige sich Gott befehlen
Und einsam wandern zu den hellern Räumen,
Bis sie erlöst sind und ihr Volk erlöst’ (1954:67).

Christianity is a religion of consolation and solace and yet it is seldom an instant comfort and solution. Thus Christian poetry will point out ‘Man’s smarting wounds in this life’ (A.v.d. Lee, 1960:48), will criticise and protest where necessary, try to re-direct errant man and substantiate in his work ‘the apocalyptic spirit of the age’ (v.d. Lee, 1960:48). And as there is no division of life and work for the Christian conscience, its undeniable mission claims visible concretization to the whole world; whatever the cost. This, Schneider knew and bitterly experienced in a nationwide rejection after the end of World War II. In ‘Allein dn Betern’ (1954:86) Schneider warns:

‘Denn Täter werden nie den Himmel zwingen:
Was sie vereinen, wird sich wieder spalten,
Was sie erneuern, über Nacht veralten,
Und was sie stiften, Not und Unheil bringen.
Jetzt ist die Zeit, da sich das Heil verbirgt,
Und Menschenhochmut auf dem Markte feiert’.

It is only prayer and a holy life that can wrest man from judgement:

‘Allein den Betern kann es noch gelingen,
Das Schwert ob unsfern Häuptern aufzuhalten
Und diese Welt den richtenden Gewalten
Durch ein geheiligt Leben abzuringen’ (1954:86).

On the other hand, Christian poetry has a ministering service, a ‘diaconate wisdom’ (Seerveld, 1975:17) which will not just condemn and point out evil and sin, but give the individual courage, help him to see the hand of God

behind the incomprehensible and assist him in fighting through to undivided oneness and a mastering of this dismembered world.

And it is here that love needs to play such a decisive and reconciling role. Poetically Schneider expresses this evergreen quality of love in a sonnet with a similar title:

‘Doch grünt die Liebe unverändert, fort,
....
Oft war mein Herz so einsam wie mein Wort;
....
Doch eigne Not und aller Schmerz der Zeiten,
Sie sollen nicht die Liebe übertönen
Und nie des Lebens unversieglich Glück;
Mag nur ein Herz in Treue sich bereiten,
So kehrt ihm einst, sein Elend auszusöhnen,
Verklärt der Liebe Morgenglut zurück’ (1954:65).

And elsewhere, Schneider succinctly summarizes the importance of love thus: ‘Wo Liebe nicht mehr spürbar ist, kann von christlicher Dichtung nicht mehr gesprochen werden...’ (1956:16).

Christian poetry cannot save man as Mathew Arnold suggests but it *can* console, *can* stir man’s conscience, *can* make man aware of his need to return to the Lord, *can* show the way to Shalom and above all, *can* witness the renewal in Christ in every aspect of his Being (Rookmaker, 1975:229). In a sonnet with the very apt title ‘Heimkehr’ Schneider expresses just such a newness of life in the consolation of the church and the Word of God:

‘Früh sinkt ein Bild in unsre Seele nieder,
Nach dem w'r trachten, bis wir's neu gefunden,
Und in die Fremde glänzt ein neuer Stern;

So suche ich die dunkeln Berge wieder
Und nach der Arbeit ungezählten Stunden
Den Trost der Glocken und das Wort des Herrn’ (1954:43).

Aesthetic responsibility

The Christian mandate also has an aesthetic dimension. Van der Lee (1960:48) maintains that our time is determined by the form and shape we give to the power entrusted to us. This being so, the Christian poet has a tremendous responsibility to use this weapon of truth to the glory of God and in service of mankind:

'Du gabst das Wort; wer mag es noch verwalten,
Mit Schwertesschärfe Licht von Trug zu trennen,
Und gleich den grossen Sprechern zu entbrennen,
Die einst der Menschen Seelen rein gehalten?" (1954:50).

The deadly earnestness of the administration of the word is to be found in John 12, 48. It is a 'must' (Schneider, 1956:44) for those endowed with the gift of poetic expression and thus inescapable:

'Es ist ein Wort; du kannst ihm nicht entrinnen:
Du musst es tun, ...' (1954:55).

Whether enduring inspiration will and must result from the work of a Christian artist, is a matter to be contended. Man is called to a cultivating task and should use his special gifts, and whether poet or statesman, he has the responsibility to be a good servant of the Kingdom of God and do what his time, place and situation require of him:

'Dies ist mein Schicksal, dass von deinem Ende
Mein Mund die leidzerstörten Worte spricht,
Dass mir die Seele bebt vom Untergang' (1954:129).

And in another sonnet 'Der Prophet. VII' Schneider stresses the poetic commission of being a voice of God:

'Ich war nur Stimme, und ich muss verwehn,
Der ich im Abgrund deiner Schwersten Tage
Dies arme Wort erlitt, das mir geboten' (1954:131).

The artist need not be concerned about the operative influence of his poetic witness: 'der Christ weiss nicht, wohin er geht und braucht das nicht zu wissen;' (Schneider, 1956:21). All he needs do is obey and act in faith, because:

'Du bist ein Bote, und du sollst vertrauen
Und das Geschick nicht fragen, das dir droht;
Dein Herz ist müde, und dein Wort ist tot,
Und doch sollst du das Siegeszeichen schauen' (1954:169).

Admittedly, it is a natural desire to see the results of his labour, but they are, and should be considered the fruits of the spirit (Rookmaaker, 1978:34) and beyond the concern and scope of the artist. To require the poet to be 'waardeskeppend' (Van der Leek, 1931:173) is thus holding the poet responsible for the reception and the efficacy of his poetry. It is the transmission of knowledge and information that is of primary importance; it is the ethos that matters and this Christian-spiritedness is only evident in the 'Gestalthaften und Gestaltgewordenen' (Schneider 1956:8). Yet poetry is not only service to God and man but also the care for, and the cultivation of *this* Reality that is God's creation. One way of doing this is by renewing

art, through a newly-revived Gospel in a newly invigorated Reality by means of, amongst others, a newly meaningful language. Kurt Marti, 1964:558) calls it ‘neu, den alten geheimnisvollen Namen Gottes anrufen’.

This unfolding and praising of creation must proclaim the grace and glory of God’s command:

‘Doch ist die Schöpfung makellos entfaltet
Und herrlich alles, und es soll mein Wort
In letzter Stunde des Geschaffne feiern’ (1954:123).

Christian poetic witness is the ‘outward face and appearance’ (Rookmaaker, 1978:22) of Christianity and therefore it is so important to articulate this Word of Christ with a new freshness and power so that it will become a piece of life infused with the Spirit of Christ. It will be an expression of temporal and historical existence in the light of the Kingdom of God (Schneider, 1956:47).

‘Sing to (the Lord) a new song’ (Psalm 33,3) is the summons to Christian poetry, a newness which will neutralize the old, often harmlessly anaemic religious verse, and vivify creation, life and the experience of every age and every situation into a new distillation of the scriptural message. For Rookmaaker (1975:250) ‘God has called us to bear witness to Him at a critical point in history. It is not only exciting and interesting to be a Christian now, it is a great privilege and responsibility. It is vital’, and for Schneider, the poetic proclamation of the Word enkindles the darkness of a time and a situation:

‘Nur heute, Herr, lass mich Dein Wort verkünden,
Für diese Stunde hast Du mich bewahrt,
Und was ein dunkles Leben offenbart.
Das hat auch Macht, die dunkle Zeit zu zünden’ (1954:81).

Christian communication must therefore reach out in aesthetic sensitivity to respond to God’s calling playfully and stylefully (Seerveld, 1977:42 and 45) to all the world, but always in the conscious realization of being responsible instruments whose vocation it is ‘Hinzuweisen auf den verborgenen Gott, den Gott des Zornes und der Liebe halte ich für einen Beruf der Kunst in dieser Stunde’ (Schneider, 1956:42).

‘So nimm mein Leben, Herr, und lass das Deine
In mir, eh diese Zeit verweht, beginnen,
Dass unverlöschbar mir ein Licht von innen
Den Weg erhellt mit heiligem Widerscheine’ (1954:69).

In the sonnet 'Du einzig Licht' Schneider expresses the imaging character of the Christian poet:

'Lass mit dem Wort, das schaudernd Dich verkündet,
Und mit den Bildern, die Dich widerscheinen,
In Dich mein Leben sinken, Du mein Leben' (1954:185).

Poetry, a paean of praise

This then is the all-overarching mission ... to praise God and serve Him through his creation. It is worship *away* from the subject, directed *at* and *towards* the Lord of all creation:

'Mir geht die Stimme wie mein Selbst verloren.
Als stillster Beter will ich aufwärts dringen
Und unter Stummen meinen Schöpfer preisen' (1954:51).

As each person is God's messenger to others, it is imperative that the message should remain biblically sound. It is a constant reference to God's Word and creation through which the poet is led, trying to discover God's will and obeying it. 'Alles Schreiben ist Antwort auf Gottes dringliche Anrede...' Klepper. 1956:27).

Thus, for the Christian poet, the work of art is a 'must', an expression of love, a verification of the Truth: a manifestation in life and work.

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