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POETRY AND ETHOS: TOWARD AN ONTIC UNDERSTANDING

1. THE ANALYTIC QUEST

This brief interpretative study endeavours to explicate and illustrate a normative method of poetic analysis. By means of this integrated structural system, the reader has an authoritative standard at his disposal. While the reader is completely free to apply these directives subjectively, the objective, religiously-founded philosophical basis keeps the danger of pure inspirational analysis at bay.

Each aspect of creational reality is considered in its own artistic right and the interrelation of the parts continually reassesses the significance of the individual segments. It is nevertheless the coherent unity of the text that remains central to the reading and understanding of the work of art.

This artistic wholeness is the interpretative expression of the authorial presence in the poem. The quest of this integrated approach is to analyse and evaluate such an aesthetic interpretation of reality, and only by unlocking the manifested expression of the artist, can the reader truly penetrate into the "heartbeat" of the aesthetic experience.

2. AESTHETIC ETHOS

As art, or any aesthetic experience, is always an interpretation, a particular view of reality, it is important to gain insight into such a portrayed vision. A system should therefore be devised by which to determine and evaluate the expression of the artist's insight, his feeling and his sense of beauty, his imagination and his subjectivity (Rookmaaker, 1975: 229) ; in short, the reflection of the spirit of man and spirit of the times.

It is this spirit permeating the experience, the human experience recreated as aesthetic expression, which, being concerned with feelings and attitudes, also reflects the "lived fullness of the world" (Brooks & Warren, 1976: 9).

And yet the spirit of a poem does not exist "an sich", but is only recognizable in the "Being" of the poem, the aesthetic expression. In other words, the

ethos can be detected "aus dem was es etwa aus dem Menschen macht, also aus dem Gestalthaften und Gestaltgewordenen" (Schneider, 1956: 8). Dooyeweerd and Scriverd agree that the eventual artistic activity of the artist is religiously determined and directed from the heart (Van der Berg, 1975: 166). If artistic expression is indeed grounded in the "supra-structural rootoneness" (Troost, 1970: 75), of the "I", then the ethos or man's "fairly constant foundational attitude" (Troost: 77) towards life, must be evinced in a recognizable and analysable expression.

Detection of the objectified ethos must, like any scientific experiment, be founded upon law-bound analysis in order to be normative. Christian philosophy and scripture can provide such a basis. I shall attempt to elucidate this point of departure briefly.

Both Christian philosophy and scriptural truth place the religious concentration of human existence in the heart of man or the "I" (Troost: 72). The confessional witness of man or poem finds its point of departure in the same root. This "I" is concretely expressed through human acts and their modal aspects, which are called into existence by human positization of norm-laws through acts. These acts always have their origin in the integrated centre of life, in the "I" which cannot be analysed except in the expression of the selfhood through the ethos.

Troost (1958: 372) sees the recognizable manifestation of the ethos in life and culture, as the expression of the internal intention, springing from the human "I". The ethos is thus a total reflection of the religious direction of man's life, of all interhuman and all other relationships and also of his cultural artefacts. This implies that the ethos of a poem can also be determined through the reverse approach; *from the poem to the ethos*.

3. THROUGH STYLE TO SPIRIT

For Scriverd the artistic expression is visible in the style of the literary work and significantly enough, it is the whole man, with his whole modal make-up, who is "subterraneously" involved (1977: 41).

It is the totality of the poem, the coherent integration of the parts that will be reflected through the style of the literary work. Although each aspect of reality has its own expressive importance and relevance, it is only the interrelatedness, coherence and dimensionality which will reveal the greatness of the poetic vision. It is this aesthetic vision which lends significance to the meaning of a poem, this "credal statement" (Rookmaaker, 1975: 114), integrated in the totality of the poem, which will be the seal of distinction, unique to every poem.

Only by reading and understanding art in this way can we share in another person's view of the universe. Our quest then is to reveal and understand the literary testimony of the hearted "I".

4. AN INTEGRATED METHODOLOGY*

The structural framework used in the analysis of the following poem, is based on the Dooyeweerdian Philosophy of the Cosmonomic Idea, adapted for the plastic or fine arts by Rookmaaker and for literature by Calvin Seerveld.

The fifteen aspects of modalities represent the full scale of reality. The order of the modalities has been adjusted and the positivations have been specifically devised with the purpose of attempting a practical, integrated analysis of poetry in particular.

A literary work of art, qualified by its aesthetic nuancefulness, foundationally exists through the word. It is the lingual base, aesthetically opened up and pistically envisioned, that unfolds the literary possibilities of poetry.

In such an integrated approach to art, the following levels of analysis can be distinguished: the constituent lingua-formative aspects, the adherent aesthetic qualities and the pistic qualities of a work of art.

4.1 The lingua-formative basis

The surface level of analysis, founded on the lingual aspect, incorporates the first nine adapted modalities (from the numerical to the lingual). This first phase of the first-level analysis (close reading) will begin with the positivization of the numerical aspect and progress towards the lingual foundation. These lingua-formative aspects are simply defined from the text without interpretative deductions.

4.1.1 The interpretative level of the lingua-formative analysis is opened up by the aesthetic qualifying function and thus requires an aesthetic reassessment of the sub-layer (1—9) and its latent secondary possibilities.

4.2 Under the guidance of the qualifying function of the aesthetic, the higher aspects of a work of art are unfolded and revealed in their many-faceted potentialities. The artistic quality of the literary work of art is to be determined in direct correlation with the manner in which symbolical originality has been expressed. It is here that the allusive multi-dimensionality of the higher modalities will emerge (*naturally only if they are present*).

*A diagrammatic representation of the literary positivization of the Dooyeweerdian modalities has been added as Addendum I.

4.3 The confessional stance of the artist will become evident in the expression of the ethos of the artistic manifestation. This is the crux of this literary analysis.

By means of the leading function of the confessional aspect in the whole unfolding process of analysis, the various parts and their appropriate balance will be unlocked and evaluated.

By means of these various segments, man's deepest convictions may be implicitly or explicitly discovered and interpreted. This then is the moment when the message of the aesthetic meaning attains its uniqueness; the

5. STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

Because of limitations of space only one poem will be analysed according to the integrated methodology explicated. Only three of the fifteen aspects will be analysed but they will already give a clear indication of the dimensionality revealed by this method as well as the confessional witness pervading the poem as a whole.

The poem *Kreuzigung* by Rainer Maria Rilke* is not purely fictitious but relies on an historical reality recorded in the Gospels. What the poet makes of the event and how it is expressed, is the concern of this analysis.

We shall consider the fourth, fifth and tenth aspects; thus, the physical, biotic and the aesthetic modalities positivized in the poem.

5.1 The physical aspect

The positivizations for this modality are: sound, rhyme, tension and aesthetic balance.

5.1.1 On the surface level of the first level reading, which does not attempt any interpretation yet, a predominance of the heavier, long a, ā, ū and o vowels is to be detected. Three consonantal sound patterns can be distinguished: the fricative "L", guttural "G" and the sibilant "sch". They do not only reflect a euphonious verse but, anticipatorily add to the force of expression of the following aspect, the biotic and thus sound is fused to the other dimensions of expression. The rhyme scheme shows a correlation of the first, last and second and third stanzas. The fourth stanza has a significant fifth line added.

* The poetic text, and free translation of *Kreuzigung* by R.M. Rilke, which is analysed and discussed in this paper, has been included as Addendum 2.

5.1.2 THE INTERPRETATIVE LEVEL OF THE SURFACE READING.

Of the three sound patterns, the strongly represented fricative “L” reflects a narrative continuity (underlined by the repetitive use of “und” at the beginning of 5 verses): “Kahlen Galgenplatze/Gesinde/liessen/Alle voller Lust/hielten, verfalle/Essiggalle” and also conveys a certain sense of bewildered unreality (“irgend ein Gesinde/und es war ihm selber, er hätte ihn den Elia rufen hören/sie hofften noch ein ganzes Spiel und vielleicht den kommenden Elia”), an atmosphere of insensibility in the monotony of the repetitive labials, which suggests a passive surrender to circumstance, a pawn-like quality. Even the diction hints at a certain automaticity of action:

Längst geübt ... ein Gesinde hinzudrängen
liessen sich ... hängen
dann und wann ... kehrend
liessen sich ... schlenkern
Bis der eine ... sagte.

In contrast to the lulling continuity of the labial sounds, the harsh guttural “G” and the related “ng” sound introduce a tensile element of stress. The deceptive calm of the visual and auditory scenario strives to portray the enactment of just another spectacle, distanced as a play on a stage.

The polarized interplay between the soothing “L” and the grating “G” sounds seems like an onomatopoeic undercurrent, straining uncertainly to and fro; very much like the onlooker’s eye (discussed under the biotic aspect) surveying the scene.

This tensile quality of breathless expectation and fatalistic unbelief is particularly noticeable in the second half of the poem. The monosyllabic question “Welcher?”, draws the attention to the single main figure and the expectation of a spectacular miracle (lines 12 & 13). The crowd literally hold their breath but the onlooking-speaker, who seems to have been drawn into this suspense-filled moment, abruptly appears to alter the trend of narration and reports:

“Alle
hielten (*den Atem*: my italics)
gierig ihm die Essigalle (dass
er nicht verfalle)”

In line 18, expectation still runs high in “sie hofften noch ein ganzes Spiel”, which is then finally forced to a conclusive collapse of all hope by the use of

the past tense word “verfiel”. This vacillation between the unspoken question “Will He or won’t He?”, is a personal authorial struggle reflected throughout the poem.

The presence of the word “God”, which is never explicitly mentioned, is implied in the cumulative use of the “G” sound. Scripturally this also coincides with Jesus’ cry: “Mein Gott, mein Gott, warum hast du mich verlassen?” (Mark 15:34) and the poetic representation in “die hielten ... gierig ihm die Essiggalle”.

The significance of the inserted fifth line in the fourth stanza: “und sie hielten, dass er nicht verfalle”, which rhymes with “Essiggalle” in the next line, is concluded in the finality of the past tense “verfiel”, the last word of the poem. These rhyming words already indicate an important disclosure concerning the sentiments of the crowd and of the implied author (the hope of survival and the concrete collapse). Everything disintegrates with the death of Christ, the unnamed central figure. The additional line sums up the desperate effort and hope of the masses to prevent Christ from really dying like any other person; and the conditional verb “verfalle” (which convincingly emphasizes this hopeful expectation), indicates more than the mere dying of the body.

5.2 The biotic aspect

Here the positivation of this modality includes: intensity, climaxing development, force of expression and vitality.

5.2.1 THE SURFACE LEVEL OF ANALYSIS

If a work of art has vitality, Wolterstorff (1978: 314) considers it to possess aesthetic intensity. In this poem the narrative quality attains a developmental vitality in its stressed initial rhyme. The interrelatedness of the various modalities, which is continually revealed by means of the integrated method of analysis, is evident in the retrociprocity correlation of progressive vitality and the vacillating sound quality of the previous physical aspect.

The stressed initial rhyme emphasizes the aspect of time and place in the poem:

‘Längst’ : time

‘dann und wann’ : time

‘Aber oben’ : place

‘Bis’ : implying extension in time and space

'und/und/und' : narrative continuity
 'Denn' : conjunctive dependence on time and situation
 'Aber hinten' : place
 'und' : continuity in time

For all its surface air of disengagement and unconcern, the poem is stretched tight with inner struggle, all the more intense for the desperate attempt at disinterestedness. Man's experience and the expression thereof are placed in a spatial dimension and a particular time-relevance. The time distance of the beginning, experienced as if from memory, as well as the spatial distance of the conclusion, simultaneously express a psychic distance from the event. Time seems to have lost its relevance because this event took place "hinten ferne", beyond any concern for time.

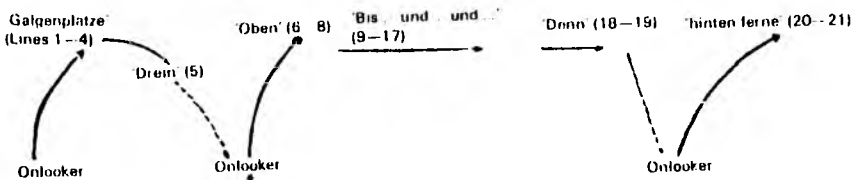
Climactic movement

The event of the crucifixion is narrated from the vantage point of the onlooker and his particular confessional stance; thus *from* the onlooker *to* the event.

On the surface there are no obvious climaxes. In word, thought and action there seem to be only disinterested narration and observation. The cry of Mary creates a faint flickering of interest just to collapse into the ash that the final "verfiel" symbolizes.

5.2.2 INTERPRETATIVE LEVEL

The narration is one of climactic sweeps of the eye from the onlooker to the event which is at the place of the skull.



In lines 1—4 the movement is from the onlooker to the scenic background of

the poetic “play”; line 5 brings the eye to concentrate on *one* aspect within the mass scene. While stanza two directs the reader’s vision to the happening in the distance once more (“Aber oben”), the third stanza turns the visual focus from the generalization of the mass impression to a detailed close-up between two individuals (a dialogue between the centurion and a soldier). The verb “sagte” portrays close proximity while the bracketed description (“fleckig wie ein Seleher”) is a visual enlargement. The demonstrative pronoun “dieser hat geschrien” conveys the impression of spatial nearness.

Turning to the fifth stanza and the crucial final act, one notices that spatial distance has again been created in “hinten ferne”. Intra-modal analogy is revealed between the tensile element of the physical aspect and the intensity of the suspense-filled test that the implied author puts to Christ. Neither the onlooker nor the avid crowd evinces any real belief in the miraculous restoration of the dying third man on the cross; and yet they hope against hope to be proved wrong (lines 15 and 18). The tensile-intensity of an expectation held with bated breath reaches a shocked climax in the collapse of their hopes. The miracle does not take place and God does not prove himself to be God; instead, Mary cries out in the distance and the man howls and disintegrates:

“Aber hinten ferne *schrie* Maria
und er selber *brüllte* und *verfiel*”.

It is revelatory that the fluctuating distance of time and place is further extended in the psychic aspect of the poem. Although feeling is the irreducible characteristic of the psychic modality, this poem is strangely insensitive (“nach dem Fertigsein/liessen sich die freien Männer schlenkern; Längst geübt ... irgend ein Gesindel hinzudrängen”) in its conscious distancing from personal engagement. The emotive quality is therefore one of calculated non-involvement. The narrator remains strangely aloof and seems to lack feeling or imagination to experience the event sensitively.

Spatial and time distance are thus anticipatorily complemented by psychic distance.

5.3 The aesthetic aspect

Allusiveness, imaginativity and symbolical originality are positivations of the aesthetic dimension in literature. Under the title “Crucifixion”, the diction falls into two polarities: acknowledged earthly power (of Rome) and unrecognized heavenly power (in Christ). Enveloping both are historic time and place and the human element.

Line 1 with its naked place of the skull sets the scene. The place of the *skull* is derived from the Aramaic term “Golgotha”. In Latin “Calvaria” also signifies skull, and is related to “Calvus”, meaning bald. In German it coincides with “kahl” hence, “Calva” is scalp without hair (Hendriksen, 1973: 425).

The word-group “kahlen Galgenplatze” is thus a twofold expression of the same idea, emphasizing the denuded barrenness of the hill and implying at the same time the transitoriness of life. On the other hand, “skull” symbolizes indestructibility and that which survives death. For the Christian believer Golgotha is synonymous with life but the sceptic’s interpretation is probably diametrically opposite, twice ascribing emptiness and nothingness to this particular hill.

In this poem the past tense verb “verfiel” does not express the idea of voluntary sacrifice, but is specifically selected to portray visible decline and collapse, like burnt ashes disintegrating or a house of cards falling apart. This is significant, as the scriptural reports all use the word “verschied” which means that He gave up his Spirit. This indicates a voluntary laying down of his Life which no one took away.

Although the poem is entitled *crucifixion*, the symbol of the cross is never mentioned; only “das schlechte Henkern”, which semantically implies execution by hanging. The cross which is a symbol of life through the sacrifice of crucifixion and which is thus the concrete crux of the whole event, is not only completely omitted but also reinterpreted (here the cross ends in death).

As the aesthetic aspect is concerned with suggestion-rich allusiveness (Seerveld, 1977: 106); it is as natural as essential that the authorial confessional stand will here be revealed more convincingly and more clearly than perhaps in other aspects.

5.4 The all-pervading ethos

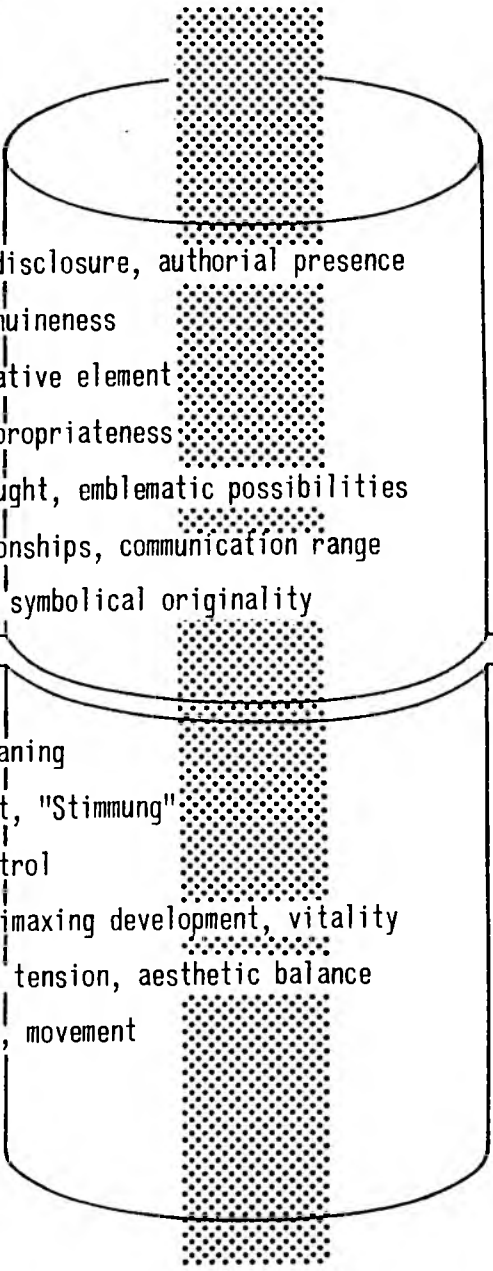
In conclusion one final example to illustrate this pervasive ethos, must be mentioned. “Aber hinten ferne schrie Maria”. Here, the conjunctive “Aber” is an expression of the disillusionment following on the expectation shortly before (“Denn sie hofften noch ein ganzes Spiel”), hoping for a game and entertainment or for concrete proof that this man is God. When instead, “er selber brüllte und verfiel” in a muffled but violent animal-like cry which equated Him with man, and then collapsed, He lost his validity and is disposed of in the minds of the speaker and most of the crowd. This collapse is not only the decay of the physical body but, more significantly, a disintegration of the crowd’s possible belief in Him and above all, a final

negation on the part of the implied author's opinion of the non-existence of Christ, a non-acknowledgement of the mediator, Christ.

In this poem there is a biblical theme, often biblical diction, fairly accurate historical narration and yet, the spirit is one of unbelief, neutralizing this crux of Christianity to just another incident, signifying nothing.

The analysis of only three aspects of the possible fifteen has indicated and illustrated, I hope conclusively, the pervading presence of the vision of the poem.

Thus, if poetic communication wishes to be more than an impersonal artist speaking to an equally faceless reader; if communication desires to become what Martin Buber (1958: 57) calls "encounter", in which the one is sensitized and correlative to the ontic level of feelings, attitudes and needs of the other, then the spirit of the art work, the "I" reflected in the ethos, becomes the life-giving pulse of such an encounter.



Confessional disclosure, authorial presence
 Sublimity, genuineness
 Density, iterative element
 Relevance, appropriateness
 Aesthetic thought, emblematic possibilities
 Social relationships, communication range
 Allusiveness, symbolical originality

Clarity of meaning
 Emotive effect, "Stimmung"
 Technical control
 Intensity, climaxing development, vitality
 Sound, rhyme, tension, aesthetic balance
 Metre, rhythm, movement
 Composition
 Scale

KREUZIGUNG

RAINER MARIA RILKE, *Sämtliche Werke*, Vol. I, Frankfurt/Main, Insel-Verlag, 1962 p.581/2

Längst geübt, zum kahlen Galgenplatze
irgend ein Gesindel hinzudrängen,
liessen sich die schweren Knechte hängen,
dann und wann nur eine grosse Fratze

kehrend nach den abgetanen Drein.
Aber oben war das schlechte Henkern
rasch getan; und nach dem Fertigsein
liessen sich die freien Männer schlenkern.

Bis der eine (fleckig wie ein Selcher)
sagte: Hauptmann, dieser hat geschrien.
Und der Hauptmann sah vom Pferde: Welcher?
und es war ihm selbst, er hätte ihn

den Elia rufen hören. Alle
waren zuzuschauen voller Lust,
und sie hielten, dass er nicht verfalle,
gierig ihm die ganze Essiggalle
an sein schwindendes Gehust.

Dem sie hofften noch ein ganzes Spiel
und vielleicht den kommenden Elia.
Aber hinten ferne schrie Maria,
und er selber brüllte und verfiel.

CRUCIFIXION

Long since practised to force
any kind of rabble to the place of the gallows
the heavy servants let themselves be hanged
now and then only a grimace

directed to the disposed-of three.
But above, the poor execution
was quickly done; and after the conclusion
the free men shambled around swinging their arms

Until the one (spotted like a butcher)
said: Captain, this one shouted
and the centurion, looking from his horse: Which one?
and it seemed to him that even he

had heard Elijah calling.
Everybody was watching with pure pleasure
and greedily held the vinegar
that he might not collapse
to his dwindling cough

Because they still hoped for a full show
and perhaps the coming Elijah.
But behind, far off, Mary screamed
and he himself howled and collapsed.

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