

# Why Theologians are Interested in Literature: Theological-Literary Hermeneutics in the Works of Guardini, von Balthasar, Tillich and Kuschel

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What makes literature interesting for theologians and why does an academically-trained systematic theologian need poetry? This essay will suggest four answers and four positions from a German perspective in order to throw light on the relationship between 'theology' and 'literature'. The first answer to these questions is that the poetic word 'always serves to make an experience or a thing – or perhaps human destiny – more meaningful and more clear' (Guardini, *Elegies* 303). More specifically, particularly in a poem, a reader takes a new stance towards existence, 'deeper than an everyday stance and more alive than a philosopher's stance' because 'words which offer a deeper understanding of the world have more power than those of custom and are more original than the speech of an intellectual' (Guardini, *Sprache* 154).<sup>1</sup>

The writer of these lines, Romano Guardini (1885–1968), is considered to be one of the greatest theological interpreters of literature of the twentieth century. From the outset he combined his vocation as a theologian with his interest in and love of literature, the arts and philosophy. In his childhood he was an avid reader. If he could have chosen his career freely and independently of his family's wishes and the contemporary socio-political context, he would have 'probably studied philology and literature', as he says in his autobiographical writings (*Berichte*, 65).

What role, then, did poetry actually play in Guardini's life and thinking? What is the significance of Guardini's interpretations of literary works for theology or more specifically theology and literature? To start with, let us look at the situation that Guardini encountered when he first started thinking about the relationship between the two. How did contemporary theologians deal with poetry at that time? More precisely, was any hermeneutical significance granted to literature by theology? Obviously, theologians have always read fiction and poetry in their leisure time. But did they normally integrate these private literary experiences with their theological thinking and writing?<sup>2</sup>

## Theology and Literature in the Pre-modern Period

To talk about 'religion' on the one hand and 'literature' on the other as two distinct endeavours has not been the norm in European thought. Notwithstanding their differences, in the pre-modern period these two areas, it can be claimed, belonged together. The emancipation of the arts from Christianity only took place in the seventeenth century. It then quickly took hold. The idea that the arts in general and literature in particular were 'autonomous' prevailed and became widely accepted on the account of the secularisation of culture at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Their autonomy did not exclude connections between them. On the contrary, it was only after the coexistence between the Christian churches and the production of literature had been broken, that independent, creative and challenging literary works emerged and looked afresh and impartially at the Christian tradition. Prior to this separation, an important aspect of literature had been that of embellishing, illustrating and affirming religious doctrines. The tension between theology and literature today has been rewarding for both. Theology is able to reassess itself and develop by considering the reflections and provocations to be found in literature. Literature, on the other hand, can grow artistically through its continual involvement with traditional religions, religious experience and theological contemplation.

In German-speaking countries the first theological reflections on this new relationship between theology and literature occurred when the term 'Christian literature' was used in contrast to 'secular literature', a distinction which hitherto had not been invoked. The expression was first applied by the Romantic August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767–1845), who, together with his contemporaries Joseph Freiherr von Eichendorff, Clemens Brentano and Annette von Droste-Hülshoff, attempted to heal the breach between literature and religion. The expression 'Christian literature' was a direct response to secularisation. However, in the following decades the term and concept 'Christian literature' remained only loosely defined.

To this day, the best definition of the expression is that of Gisbert Kranz, the most influential advocate of 'Christian literature'. In 1961, in his *Christliche Literatur in der Gegenwart* ['Christian Literature Today'], he stated that he was merely presenting 'works of world literature' which 'display Christianity from a faithful Christian perspective' (7), without opposition or objections to this definition. In the years that followed, Kranz proposed a more precise understanding in his monumental *Lexikon der Christlichen Weltliteratur* ['Encyclopaedia of Christian World Literature']: 'Christian literature is a type of literature – no matter the genre or subject – which has been produced with a Christian understanding of God, human kind and the world around us. As a result, it cannot be adequately interpreted without such a Christian understanding' (4).

In the 1950s and 1960s attempts were made to reinvigorate the concept of 'Christian Literature'. But why were academics interested in this term? What motivation or interest in it can be discerned today? It is revealing that this debate concentrated mainly on contemporary writers who were part of the *renouveau catholique*, an international movement of writers which promoted a Catholic view of the world and tried to revive Catholic aesthetics. The word *re-nouveau* indicated the conservative nature of the movement. Though it is hazardous to generalize, given the wide range of authors, styles, intentions and literary texts that it included, the movement as a whole refused to come to terms with modernity. As a reaction to the crises of modernity and their repercussions, it promulgated a return to a safe, religious, Christian, denominational perception of the world as a closed reality.

In particular, the use of both the literary forms and the content of the pre-modern era, adherence to a rigid, pre-secular world view and the refusal to accept modern developments and changes, marked the first wave of academic discourse in the field of 'theology and literature' in Germany. This was exactly the way in which theology considered poetry and the climate that Guardini encountered when he published his interpretation of literature. So what did Guardini learn from his predecessors and what was novel about his contribution?

### **Poets as Prophets of our Time: Romano Guardini**

Awe and surprise are the natural reactions to the scale and scope of Guardini's interpretations. Apart from his shorter studies of Dante, Goethe, Shakespeare, Hopkins, Wilhelm Raabe and Mörike, he published three monographs on major literary figures: Dostoyevsky (1932), Hölderlin (1939) and Rilke (1953). Let us look more closely at what inspired his interest in literature, an interest that went far beyond common enthusiasm for poetry. As he writes in his introductory remarks to his interpretation of Wilhelm Raabe's 'Stopfkuchen', Guardini did not 'so much want to talk in general terms about the book as really to interpret it' (*Sprache* 87). What does he mean by 'really interpret it'? What does it mean for him as a theologian and philosopher? Why was he so fascinated by these three particular authors? How did he interpret the fictitious worlds of these writers to his readers?

Guardini's passionate involvement with literature was inspired by the philosopher Max Scheler (1874–1928). When Guardini was appointed to the chair of 'Philosophy of Religion and Catholic *Weltanschauung*' in Berlin, one that had been created especially for him, he did not know at the start exactly how to structure his programme of study. During

what was for Guardini a ‘very momentous talk’, Scheler, who was eleven years his senior, recommended, as he later noted, the following: ‘You have to make real the content of the word *Weltanschauung*: to contemplate the world, things, human kind and their works with the eyes – and here lies your personal expertise – of a responsible Christian. Then you have to talk about all the things you see in an academic form of discourse’. Scheler also gave him additional advice: ‘For example, examine Dostoyevsky’s texts. Then discuss them from your Christian perspective in order to shed light on the text and its contextual starting-point’ (*Stationen* 19–20). Guardini followed this advice and would always remember his colleague with gratitude.

Scheler’s recommendations were, of course, only an external cause of Guardini’s interest in the interpretation of literature. Two inner convictions defined his study of literature. In his momentous work *Das Ende der Neuzeit* [‘The End of the Modern World’], published in 1950, he formulated a fundamental critique of rational technological expediency in modernity on which he blamed the catastrophes of the world wars and the Nazi regime. All Guardini’s works emphasise the intellectual potential of Christianity to act as a true spiritual guideline in the post-war era. It was by referring to the great poetic-religious thinkers in history that he developed this spiritual concept. In this context, it is essential to know what kind of Christianity he wanted to strengthen as a spiritual counter-weight. It was neither the rigid system of pre-modern theology, which he linked to the concept of Neo-Scholasticism, nor the hierarchical, inflexible forms of the current regime in the Roman Catholic Church, with its fossilized liturgical routine. For Guardini, returning to pre-modern times was not an option. He was convinced that Christianity had to prove its worth and find a new form and conception of itself appropriate to modernity.

To manifest such a living spirituality, one that would push against current boundaries, and to demonstrate its profound impact, Guardini needed witnesses. For that reason he looked to the writings of the great authors, in both philosophy and literature. Guardini, who was both a theologian and a philosopher, had his own ‘private canon of poetry’ firmly rooted in the ‘tradition of the seers and the prophets’ (Kuschel, *Modernismuskrisis* 174). According to Karl-Josef Kuschel, the texts which Guardini interpreted stood as an ‘intellectual and spiritual counterbalance’ to, on the one hand, ‘the *Zeitgeist* of rational, technological expediency’ and ‘a narrow ecclesiastical understanding of revelation on the other’ (*Modernismuskrisis* 174).

For this reason, it is hardly surprising that Guardini did not turn to explicitly Christian thinkers who did no more than reemphasize traditional beliefs. Instead he grouped his chosen authors into a category called ‘seers’. For him, they all have the gift of acting as visionary prophets. This is the essential trait which made his authors religious witnesses: the ability to see and express truth more clear-sightedly, profoundly and sharply. Guardini’s way of introducing Hölderlin will serve as an example. In contrast with other poets’ work, Hölderlin’s does not spring from ‘the strength of an author which can be determined by authenticity of experience, a clarity of the eye, a power of style or exactness’. Instead, for Guardini the distinctive feature of Hölderlin was ‘his vision and restlessness as a seer’. The origin of his works ‘lies in a more inward and higher order’, with the result that it is ‘in the service of a calling’ that cannot be ignored without ‘resisting a power which transcends the being and desire of the individual’ (Guardini, *Hölderlin* 11–12). Consequently, in Hölderlin the reader not only encountered ‘the voice of a brilliant human being’ but also experienced the divine voice.

### **As Much Contact as Possible with the Actual Texts**

Guardini’s comments on Hölderlin’s style are typical of the authors and texts that he chose to interpret. Dostoyevsky’s novels capture his interest because they offer the possibility of demonstrating the religious sentiments of outstanding characters in literature. These

characters were ‘exposed to their fate and to divine powers in a particular way’ (Guardini, *Der Mensch* 11). Writers’ visionary powers help to pave the way to a deeper understanding of the human soul. Guardini was interested in seekers, disturbed and disturbing visionaries, or people torn between divergent ideals and styles of life. To him they were kindred spirits standing as witnesses to ‘the end of the modern era’. It was in relation to these authors and their texts that a new spirituality, a new firmly grounded view of the world, had to prove its worth.

This was why Guardini focused on Rilke, who, in his words, was ‘the most sensitive and subtle German poet of modern times’ (*Elegies* 9). With no other poet’s work did Guardini struggle so much as with Rilke’s; no other poet both fascinated and repulsed him as much. For him, Rilke – like Hölderlin – had ‘a mediating disposition’ (*Elegies* 9) because he saw himself ‘in the situation of a seer’ and was ‘convinced that he was the bearer of a message which had been “dictated” to him from a source which could only be described as “religious”’ (*Elegies* 13). According to Guardini, Rilke saw himself as ‘a prophet – an inspired vessel filled with the divine voice which spoke through him. Rilke himself had to listen to his own words and “penetrate” them gradually’ (Guardini, *Elegies* 14). His impulse to provoke led him to present these religious elements in ways that were ‘in deliberate contrast’ to the Christian worldview (Guardini, *Elegies* 14).

Romano Guardini was in contact with numerous writers of his time. He was friends with many, often inviting them to his lectures, and exchanged letters and read their works. Remarkably, however, at no point did he offer public interpretations of works published in his own day. This was a significant and probably deliberate policy. Literary criticism entailed analysing the complete oeuvre of an author. Nor did he want to taint his interpretations with personal acquaintance or with ties of friendship. It was not writers as witnesses to the present but a theological conception of literary texts and their spiritual-intellectual worlds that absorbed him.

Guardini’s emphasis on a personal appropriation and spiritual interpretation of literary texts is evident in the way that he approached them. He describes his technique in the preface to his book on Hölderlin: ‘I tried to get into close contact with the texts themselves’ (*Hölderlin* 17). Generally, he did not focus on an academic analysis of a literary work but deliberately preferred an individual style of reading guided by ‘philosophical intentions’ (*Hölderlin* 23). He said, almost jokingly, that he did not read secondary sources, not even important ones. ‘I intentionally abstained from the expertise of each different discipline...I rather preferred to follow my instincts’ (*Berichte* 47). He deliberately limited the secondary literature he read in advance ‘to a minimum which was essential in order to be informed about the main facts’ (*Hölderlin* 17). In his autobiographical notes he claims to have developed a method by which he could ‘gain an understanding – on the basis of an exact interpretation of the text – of the whole thoughts and personality’ and thereby ‘extract the Christian content from all the dilutions and blendings’ brought on by ‘modern relativism’ (*Berichte* 46).

Guardini’s method of a close reading of original texts and his struggle with message, meaning and truth are intriguing but they came at a cost. Though still worth reading, his interpretations lack academic respectability. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that his interpretations are important milestones on the road of the theological reception of literature in that he incorporated literature within a theological-spiritual framework. Guardini said in retrospect that he had aimed to focus on ‘an encounter’, ‘a look from one discipline to another’, an approach which ultimately ‘wants to be neither literary studies nor theology’ (*Stationen* 299–300). In this he underestimated how much of a theologian he remained when interpreting literature. Calling poets ‘seers’ and regarding works of poetry as witnesses in the

service of a divine calling or even as a form of revelation resulted in a radically theological interpretation of literature.

Subsequent initiatives promoting dialogue between literature and theology criticised his approach and asked whether Guardini had neglected the autonomy of aesthetic objects with respect to theology. Theodore Ziolkowski – to take only one example – praised Guardini’s literary interpretations because of their ‘sensible combination of careful textual analysis and Christian hermeneutics’ (115), but proved, through an interpretation of Mörike, that Guardini forced ‘his own belief and his own expectations at a key position in the text’ (119) and that he found religious elements where he wanted. Today this criticism seems justified.

Let us now compare Guardini’s ways of interpreting literature to those of another great Catholic twentieth-century interpreter of literature, the Swiss theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988), who as a student attended a series of lectures on Kierkegaard given by Guardini in Berlin. ‘There was only one man in his right mind’, he wrote about his ‘horrid’ time in Berlin, ‘Romano Guardini’ (quoted in Lochbrunner, *Hans Urs von Balthasar* 277). In 1970 von Balthasar published the first comprehensive monograph, written with great respect, on his teacher Guardini who was twenty years his senior).

### **Withdrawal into the Unity of Pre-modernity: Hans Urs von Balthasar.**

During his lifetime, von Balthasar would call himself ‘a scholar of German literature by training’ (*Geist und Feuer* 73). Before entering the Society of Jesus in 1929 and completing a degree in theology, he had completed a PhD in philology. In 1937–39 he published a three-volume work, *Die Apokalypse der deutschen Seele*, [‘The Apocalypse of the German Soul’], a wide-ranging history of modern German intellectual life, which included the main findings of his PhD thesis. While Guardini’s biographical-intellectual path had led him from theology to literature, von Balthasar’s path was the reverse, ‘from literature to theology’ (Lochbrunner, ‘Romano Guardini’ 169).

Like Guardini, von Balthasar was aware of the intellectual changes taking place in his time and sought a new synthesis in the history of ideas. Long before most of his contemporaries, he had seen clearly the renewals and awakenings and the abysses of modernity. In contrast to later proponents of the collective ‘Christian movement’, von Balthasar faced contemporary challenges with equanimity. First, he did not view the theology of his time as a promising starting-point that led to the resolution of contemporary issues. On the contrary, the discipline bored him. In search of inspiration, he stumbled upon the much broader field of literature and this would become the starting point for his confrontation with modernity. In his book about Bernanos, published in 1954, von Balthasar openly admits: ‘In the great Catholic literary figures we find more originality and vibrancy of thought – an intellectual life thriving superbly in a free and open landscape – than we do in the somewhat broken-winded theology of our time’ (*Bernanos*, 17).

Von Balthasar turned to modernity because he was looking for an ‘intellectual life’, but, surprisingly, he became taken up almost exclusively with *Christian* literature. In contrast to Guardini, he drew mainly upon contemporary literature, though not to the exclusion of Goethe, Rilke and Dostoyevsky. He published monographs on Paul Claudel, Charles Péguy, Georges Bernanos and Gerard Manley Hopkins. In his roles as translator, editor and interpreter, he continued to serve as an important guide to the *renouveau catholique* for the German-speaking world today (Kapp 397–412). In the field of literature, he became particularly interested in one author, Reinhold Schneider.

Von Balthasar’s initial trajectory was similar to that of Guardini. Even though he was familiar with the various forms of literary criticism, he interpreted Schneider’s work exclusively by examining its content and its historical-intellectual context. In contrast to most

interpretations of 'Christian literature', he openly stated that he was leaving aside 'biographical or aesthetic evaluation' (*Reinhold Schneider* 11). Literature was to be 'used to examine historical problems without any special regard for its aesthetic qualities' (*Geschichte des eschatologischen Problems* 9). Since he focused narrowly on presenting a standardised picture of a life and contemporary world-view of 'Christian existence', he did not need to engage in either biographical or philological-aesthetic discussion. Spirituality, testimony, recurring images and figures, and typology were the important elements. He remained unconcerned with literary form, the author or his or her background.

The German scholar Sabine Haupt accurately called this method a variant of a 'metaphysically radical form of text-interpretation based on the history of ideas' (41). She recognised von Balthasar's hermeneutics as a 'general de-historicisation and de-rationalisation of the history of ideas' worked out with a 'decidedly projective technique' ["**grundsätzliche Enthistorisierung und Entrationalisierung der Geistesgeschichte" mithilfe eines "dezidiert projektiven Verfahrens"**] (52). Von Balthasar repeatedly practised a 'decontextualisation' (Haupt 55) of quotations to blur the original meanings and to align them with his own ideas.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, he generally 'flattens and distorts' the 'poetic potential' of the text because he ignored the text's intrinsic aesthetic values (Haupt 57).

A central point should be noted, namely, that von Balthasar's hermeneutics serve a particular agenda in terms of his general concept of theology. Although he recognised the changes introduced by modernity more clear-sightedly than many, in his confrontations with modernity, he insisted on the cohesion of content and an aesthetics that belong to a pre-modern age. This perspective continues to be von Balthasar's great appeal today: the creation of an impressive theological-aesthetic system of thought which explores comprehensively the tradition of the history of ideas, but which leads back to the cohesiveness of a pre-modern worldview. In particular, the transcendental-aesthetic works *Herrlichkeit (The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics)* of 1961–69 and *Theodramatik (Theo-Drama)* – a corpus of twelve volumes – are nothing less than a new conception of systematic theology from an aesthetic-philosophical perspective.

Von Balthasar used a great number of primary sources and secondary literature yet he created a closed oeuvre with a pre-determined system of theological thought. In this he did not need literature except as an inspiration in terms of form and an affirmation of ideas that had already been part of his theological worldview from the start. His approach has elicited various reactions. Manfred Lochbrunner, an admirer of von Balthasar, emphasised that this works 'sent out a very strong message to contemporary theology' [**ein Werk, "von dem die stärksten Impulse in die zeitgenössische Theologie" ausgegangen seien, um eine "Neustrukturierung der Theologie unter dem Prinzip des Dramatischen"**] that it should be 'restructured' following 'the principle of the dramatic' (*Hans Urs von Balthasar* 292–3). The Swiss scholar Stefan Bodo Würffel, on the other hand, came to the conclusion that von Balthasar practised an 'interpretation of literature with *a priori* assumptions in mind' and did not focus on 'texts or literature' (73). From the outset he forced predetermined meanings onto poetry, irrespective of the actual content of the texts. Hence the catholic theologian Peter Hofmann, in an exemplary study of Goethe's reception, concluded that 'this gives the impression that von Balthasar, when talking ... about Goethe, ultimately seems to be talking about von Balthasar himself' (95). Further, as Karl-Josef Kuschel noted, 'von Balthasar's theology is not dialogical in the sense of finding truth in solidarity with non-theological and non-Christian witnesses'. 'The aesthetic gives von Balthasar's theology shape and form, but the faith of the Church alone provides the substance' (*Theologen* 112–3).

Another perspective corroborates this evaluation. Lochbrunner included 'theological literary criticism' among von Balthasar's idea of 'layers of interpretation' (*Romano Guardini*, 174–5). Genuine dialogue, however, requires that a 'literary criticism of theology' should

also necessarily be part of it. However, this was emphatically not the role that poetry played in von Balthasar's interpretation of the relationship between theology and literature. In the last count, von Balthasar was mainly interested in a wide-ranging affirmation through literature of his own convictions or in stimulating a rhetorically very creative but, content-wise, repetitive reformulation of a pre-modern, closed theological worldview.

### **Guardini and von Balthasar: Similarities and Differences in the Reception of Literature**

What did Hans Urs von Balthasar's and Romano Guardini's theological interpretations of literature have in common?

1. In contrast to the ways of handling 'Christian texts' prevailing in their day, both were concerned with original literary texts and less interested in biographies or the authors themselves. They integrated their understanding of texts into a worldview dominated by theology. This approach led them to draw only incidentally on biographical, cultural-contextual or philological secondary literature.
2. Both theologians, independently of each other, interpreted in great detail the work of four writers: Goethe, Rilke, Dostoyevsky and Hopkins.
3. Through literature, both theologians developed a language, authenticity and contemporary relevance not found in the publications of other theologians of the time. Both individuated a 'prophetic' power in their four great authors, without implying that that this power was of the same kind as prophecy as described in the Bible.
4. Both were keenly aware of the cultural changes taking place in their times. They felt that they were witnesses to a process in which a religiously defined pre-modernity was increasingly becoming ousted by a modernity defined by new philosophical, economic, political and social contours. They proposed their theological reading of literature to meet these challenges.

So much for the similarities. There are also important differences.

1. While Guardini employed close reading when interpreting texts, von Balthasar focused on formulating an intellectual profile, one that included a stylized version of the poet's personality or the 'poet's soul'.
2. Guardini based his conclusions on a reading of the complete oeuvre of an author's works, a procedure that could only be applied to authors who were no longer living. Von Balthasar, on the other hand, offered interpretations of contemporary and emerging literary projects. Von Balthasar thus ran the risk that his interpretations became awkward or untenable when authors changed their literary style or the focus of their work. An example was Reinhold Schneider (Langenhorst, 'Reinhold Schneide' 1–30). The 'intellectual profiles' created by von Balthasar were norms which, as he implied, were normative even for the authors themselves.
3. In the eyes of von Balthasar, Christianity was well oriented and focused when it concentrated on an established and proven system of beliefs. This system, it was true, needed to be reformulated but not substantially changed. Guardini was more adventurous. While he did not engage in a true dialogue with literature or countenance that literature was in a position to criticise or question theology, he admitted that Christianity in modernity had to create new paradigms and have the courage to redefine itself. Ultimately, von Balthasar's theology remained pre-modern; Guardini's dared to step into the unfamiliar to find an answer.
4. Their different approaches led them to study different works of literature. Von Balthasar analysed works which, in his view, confirmed the main tenets of Christianity. He

concentrated mainly on works of the *renouveau catholique*. On the other hand, he consulted dramatic texts because he was looking for alternative literary forms that might help re-express the meanings of Christianity. Guardini, on the other hand, explored literary works that went beyond the boundaries of Christianity, addressing the challenges of his time. His Christian interpretations of literature struggled with these texts in terms of both form and content in search of new solutions.

Guardini's and von Balthasar's concepts of 'theology and literature' were independent systems of thought steeped in Catholicism and closely linked to their intellectual systems of thought. Neither was concerned about creating a new hermeneutics or establishing his own 'school'. To date, their approaches have not stimulated productive debates, ones that might encourage the further exploration of their concepts and ideas.<sup>4</sup> The few academic attempts to interpret their ideas systematically have not inspired original theological-literary concepts.

### **Paul Tillich: Correlation**

From today's perspective, Guardini's and von Balthasar's interpretations of literature mark the moment when the dialogue between theology and literature assumed the status of a discipline, 'theology and literature'. Both thinkers examined works that were not overtly Christian. Neither, however, had a long-lasting influence on development of the discipline. Instead, the developments that did take place were shaped by Paul Tillich's 'theology of culture' and his method of 'correlation'. It was Tillich's work, not that of Guardini and von Balthasar, that gave rise to later independent hermeneutical approaches – theses, anthologies, articles and essays – which continue today.

Through his method of correlation, Tillich discovered a new understanding of the relationship between culture and religion, one that sought to relate, rather than harmonize or integrate, the two. He defined 'correlation' as follows: 'The method of correlation explains the content of Christian faith through existential questions and theological answers in mutual interdependence' (60). For theologians, this method has two consequences: 'Theology formulates the questions implied in human existence', and at the same time it 'formulates the answers implied in divine self-manifestation under the guidance of the questions implied in human existence' (Tillich 61). This poses the following problem: how do we arrive at a formulation of these 'questions implied in human existence'? It was obvious for Tillich that 'pictures, poems and music' (13) could be the objects of investigation for theology. 'The analysis of the human situation employs materials made available by man's creative self-interpretation in all realms of culture. Philosophy makes a contribution' and – as he explicitly mentions – 'so do poetry, drama, the novel' (63). For that reason, literature is 'primarily ... [a part of man's] creative self-interpretation' (13–14). As such it is an object for theological analysis, because it helps to illuminate the human situation in its existential dimensions by asking important questions to which the Christian message can give reliable answers.

In the years that followed, Tillich's students developed this approach. Even today it is still perceived as the productive way of thinking about the relationship between 'theology' and 'literature'. Although Tillich himself never undertook a systematic interpretation of contemporary literature (Kucharz 292-332), his approach provided the basis for later theological-literary analyses, which developed largely independently from each other in Germany, England and the USA. Here are some examples.

- Hans Jürgen Baden, Friedrich Hahn, Dorothee Sölle, Henning Schröer and other Protestant theologians created various theological-literary systems of interpretation along the lines laid down by Tillich.

- Amos Niven Wilder, Nathan Scott and Robert Detweiler, who established the study of theology and literature in the USA from the 1950s onwards, took Tillich's work as their starting point.
- David Jasper and Terry Wright, probably the most important figures in the foundation of the academic discipline of theology and literature in Great Britain, based their diverging concepts of the discipline on Tillich's approach.

Four distinctive features of theological-literary approaches in the tradition of Tillich may be noted. First, modernity is accepted unreservedly as a fact. Within the framework of this new cultural paradigm, theology needed to be reexpressed. Second, the method of correlation provided the means. Cultural artefacts, including literature, were to be set in a relationship of tension with works of theology. Literature posed questions; theology addressed them. Third, the works of 'Christian literature' were to be ignored because they usually did no more than reaffirm an already familiar way of thinking. Looking at works of art that were ideologically and aesthetically independent would provoke fruitful debate. Fourth, since Tillich's approach was mainly about challenge, inspiration and dialogue, a content rather than style must be the focus. The following questions were fundamental: which modern literary texts identify issues that could also be found, *mutatis mutandis*, in the Christian tradition? In what ways should Christian theology be reshaped or its worldview adapted in order to face these challenges productively?

### **Theology and Literature in the Name of Dialogue: Karl-Josef Kuschel**

The fact that 'autonomous' literary texts can have their own value for theology and the Church was affirmed publicly for the first time by the Roman Catholic Church at the Second Vatican Council. The Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* stated in Chapter 62, under the subtitle 'Proper harmony between Culture and Christian Formation':

In their own way literature and art are very important in the life of the Church. They seek to give expression to man's nature, his problems and his experience in an effort to discover and perfect man himself and the world in which he lives; they try to discover his place in history and in the universe, to throw light on his suffering and his joy, his needs and his potentialities, and to outline a happy destiny in store for him. Hence they can elevate human life, which they express under many forms according to various times and places (Flannery 966–7).

Here literature is said to have the following roles: to explore human nature; to consider humankind's problems and experience; to improve humankind and the world in which humans live; to shed light on humanity's place in history and in the universe (notably not 'creation' in this context); and to focus on human suffering and joy, human needs and potentialities.

This was an exceptional and comprehensive affirmation of the value of literature for theology. Without narrowing the focus to overtly Christian literature, it announced a new appreciation of something that had not previously been expressed with such clarity. For the first time, a truly dialogical understanding was under way.

During the same period, independent academic reflection on theology and literature established itself in German-speaking countries. Karl-Josef Kuschel (born 1948) entered the field in 1978 with his well-received dissertation *Jesus in der deutschsprachigen Gegenwartsliteratur* ('Jesus in Contemporary German-speaking Literature'). He emphasized the dialogical character of his approach from the beginning. The focus of this work was that 'it deals with literary studies and theology at the same time' (Kuschel, *Jesus* 3). Several

central themes in Kuschel's oeuvre, which continues to provoke debate to this day, are already evident in this monograph.

Essentially, Kuschel is interested in 'a mutual challenge' (*Jesus* 4). But how could this new dialogical paradigm of mutual challenge be defined with regard to content? The answer was that both areas could act as a 'critical corrective' to each other. Literature could become a critical corrective 'for a theological language which often disguises human reality with empty language that claims truth and invariability, instead of illuminating it' (Kuschel, *Jesus* 4). And theology could be a corrective because it challenged literature to 'keep the quest open, the quest for genuine humanity, the quest for reality as it is, the quest for hope' (Kuschel, *Jesus* 5). Kuschel notes that Tillich's model had begun to tackle the problems addressed by modernity but that in his model the dialogue between literature remained one-sided; literature posed the question, theology answered it. He developed his own approach further in the 1980s, emphasising the importance of dialogue by concentrating on mutual questioning and challenging.

The following features characterise Kuschel's interpretation of how literature and theology might fruitfully interact, one that remains an accepted model in German-speaking countries. First, modernity is recognised as a reality with which theology must come to terms in the tradition of the Second Vatican Council. Second, three guiding principles inform the relationship of theology and literature: the acceptance of literary works as autonomous works of art, the recognition that literary works challenged theological thinking and the construction of a dialogue between literature and theology. Third, the interpretation of texts is paramount, meaning in practice that an interpreter should analyse primary texts in conjunction with secondary literature. Fourth, studies focused on theological subject-matter, themes, characters and other literary motifs should aim to or contribute to the findings of systematic theology. In addition, such studies should concentrate on the work of authors whose oeuvre is characterised by the incorporation of religious elements. These interpretations should eschew idealised stylisation or standardisation of the kind of literary work worthy of study. Fifth, emphasis should be placed on interpreting literature, whether contemporary or canonical, that speaks of the advent, the crisis and the transformations of modernity rather than explicitly Christian literature. Works of German-Jewish literature offer particularly important texts in this respect. Sixth, theoretical reflection of a purely academic kind concerning literature is of secondary relevance. Seventh, in contrast to approaches that focus exclusively on the text, all methods that contribute to the understanding of a text are valid, examples being the methods of literary criticism, the analysis of socio-historical contexts, biography, comparative thematic studies and the history of ideas.

Kuschel's general hermeneutical approach was set out in the volume *Vielleicht hält Gott sich einige Dichter* ['Perhaps God Cares for some Poets'], published in 1991. In this monograph he develops ten 'literary-theological portraits', which he then sums up and comments on in a detailed and programmatic final chapter entitled 'Towards a Theo-Poetics'. Kuschel begins by presenting two models that had previously been used to describe the relationship between 'theology' and 'literature'. The 'confrontational model' assumes an 'antithetical position of a theology of revelation' which is of necessity 'different from the religiousness of the authors and their products' (Kuschel, *Vielleicht* 380–81). This model can be found in theological approaches that consider culture as something essentially bad. In the second model, the 'model of correlation' in the tradition of Paul Tillich and the Second Vatican Council, literature is taken seriously 'as an expression of authentic, contemporary human experience'. In this perspective, 'the vision of a different religiousness' is not felt as a threat but as an enrichment 'which may lead to a self-critical questioning of one's own Christian heritage' and to an interest in opening up 'a dialogue'. But this type of dialogue still leads to the conclusion that literature merely bears a hint, a trace and the beginnings of an

understanding of a deeper truth, ‘which can of course only be fully understood by a correctly practised Christian theology’ (Kuschel, *Vielleicht* 382–3).

Kuschel’s main aim is to sketch out an original approach which he calls ‘the method of structural analogy’. By that he means a double perspective of ‘correspondences and contradictions’. He writes: ‘Looking for correspondences’ does not serve to instrumentalise literature. ‘Thinking in structural analogies means to perceive correspondences between one’s own thinking and that of someone else’ (Kuschel, *Vielleicht* 385). This also applies in reverse: ‘Contradictions of Christian explanations of reality’ in literature must be clearly recognised and named because ‘only in this way does the relationship between theology and literature turn into a relationship of tension, dialogue and struggle for truth’ (Kuschel, *Vielleicht* 385). What, then, is the special, new, quality of this model that would inspire dialogue? If Christian theology takes literary works seriously, it can definitely no longer claim to be the ‘answer to every existential question’ (Kuschel, *Vielleicht* 385). ‘The aim is a theology with a different style’ (Kuschel, *Vielleicht* 386). Kuschel’s statement here summarizes the obligation that theology would face when confronted with a challenging – in a positive sense – body of literature.

In this context it is interesting to see that Kuschel, in contrast with most parts of the English-language discourse on this topic, remains firmly within the paradigm of modernity with all its hermeneutical prerequisites. He continues to have a steadfast belief in meaning and in meaningful interpretation leading to knowledge, in the existence of an objective value system, in a literary canon that includes important and enduringly significant works of literature, and in the possibility of a dialogical theology which accepts the challenges of modernity and supplies convincing answers. All of these assumptions are part of the approach, rooted deeply in the history of ideas, that has been adopted by the majority of theses in the academic discipline of theology and literature written in German over the last thirty years.

In theological discussions of literature today, the task of demonstrating a full appreciation of literature’s autonomy is seen to be so necessary and can take up so much space that a convincing theological response tends to remain undeveloped. Beyond Guardini and von Balthasar, no fully developed concept of a theology supported and inspired by literature has come to the fore. Other concepts barely progress beyond the first steps of, for example, formulating questions for or challenges to contemporary theological thinking and writing. I suggest, therefore, that one of the most thought-provoking lines of thought in Guardini’s and von Balthasar’s interpretation of literature might well provide us with the key question for post-modernity. The question is this: How can theology, on the one hand, take literature seriously and appreciate its autonomous content, and, on the other hand, create an independent Christian interpretation of being by using these same texts in an effort, both appreciative and challenging, that paves the way for future discourse?

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> All the following direct quotations which are not available in English have been translated by Georg Langenhorst.

<sup>2</sup> (For more information on this see Langenhorst, *Theologie*; [www.theologie-und-literatur.de](http://www.theologie-und-literatur.de)).

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<sup>3</sup> Stefan Bodo Würffel even identifies ‘manipulated citations’; see ‘Endzeit-Philologie: Hans Urs von Balthasars germanistische Anfänge’. Ed Barbara Hallensleben and Guido Vergauwen. *Letzte Haltungen* 63–82.

<sup>4</sup> In Latin America especially we find attempts to practise ‘literary theology’ in the spirit of Hans Urs von Balthasar (see, for example, de Palumbo).

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