Religion as Prose and Poetry

The poet Joseph Brodsky, in a perceptive article called “How to Read a Book,” suggests that if you want to improve your literary taste, the thing to do is spend some time reading poetry. The reasons he offers for undertaking this adventure are interesting. It is not that poetry “uplifts the spirit” or says in an eloquent way what prose says more directly and realistically. On the contrary, Brodsky suggests poetry is concise, economical in its use of words, and a “good disciplinarian” to prose in that it reduces large ideas and feelings to their bare essentials. Furthermore, poetry is older than prose and thus has covered a greater range and distance of human experience.

Humanity’s earliest surviving writings are in most cases poems. The oldest words in the Old Testament, for example, are in the book of Judges. They are a triumphal war song of Deborah and Barak, two early legendary heroes, as they celebrate their victory over one of the kings of Canaan in a bloody conflict in which no mercy was given or received. The song concludes: “So let all thine enemies perish, O Lord, but let them that love the Lord be as the sun when he goes forth in his might.” Nor are the biblical sources alone in their poetic concern with war and violence. The Homeric epics are, with all their lyrical moments, tales of violence and war. The scandal is not that they are violent but that the addiction to violence and war still continues. The early epics of Babylon and Sumer date back into the period 3000 years B.C. The literary foundations of Hinduism are to be found in the collection of poems known as the Hymns of the Rig-Veda. The Upanishads, the Norse epics, the pre-Columbian fragments, the Egyptian hymns from the Book of the Dead, and the small pieces of primitive writing that have survived all tend toward poetic form. It seems that before human beings wrote or made laws or thought of history, they sang and pointed out to one another the wonders and terrors of life, the beauties and mysteries of nature, love, and death, and the small details of everyday living in poetic forms. These forms survived because they were brief, full of meaning, and easily memorized, hence capable of being passed on by word of mouth from one generation to the next.

This swift and vivid form of communication is the essence of poetry. It is an effort to tell not what an experience is but, rather, how an experience feels. “A poem,” wrote Archibald MacLeish, “should not mean, but be.” We do not have to know everything there is in full detail to understand what something is. We need to be able to accept it, recognize it, and feel its impact. Science
and prose can later on give us exact descriptions of things, defining their components, their appearance, their interrelationships, and their places in the system of knowledge. Poetry tells us what it is like to see something with eyes and mind wide open to the act of seeing and the impact on the one who sees. Hence, the sharp insights of poetry, its images, its compact syntax, its capacity to get at the root of something, leaving aside superficial details and descriptions, are what give it power and durability. Poetry is not the same as thought, but it inspires and stimulates thought. "Poetry," said Wordsworth, "is emotion recollected in tranquility."

The relation of religion to poetry is ancient and traditional, but also highly practical. Most of what we know and can express about religion is carried in a few brief sayings, insights, moments of experience which have broken through the outer crust of consciousness and made their way into our brains and memories. Once, when we were very young, we took part in one of those Sunday school extravaganzas in which children step forward one by one and whisper, lisp, shout, or otherwise repeat an important biblical verse that has been committed to memory. Our verse was the statement of the two great commandments on which all else depends: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and soul and mind and strength and thy neighbor as thyself." We started up the steps to the platform, missed the top step in our haste to get going, whirled around, and fell flat. But we made a recovery, rose to our feet, shouted our lines at top speed, and in our haste to retire leaped off the platform without bothering about the steps. It was a traumatic moment and not exactly an ecstatic one, but it fixed those lines forever in our memory. Was this a triumph or a disaster? It was no doubt a bit of both, but it had a vividness that does not pass away. It belongs and remains in our personal anthology of poetic experience.

On a more scientific level, we may consider a comment of the psychologist Eric Fromm about the "creative attitude."

If we are fully aware of a tree at which we look... then we have the kind of experience which is the premise for painting the tree. . . . In conceptual knowledge the tree we see has no individuality; it stands there only as an example of the genus "tree"; it is only the representative of an abstraction. In full awareness there is no abstraction; the tree retains its full concreteness, and that means also its uniqueness. There is only one tree in the world, and to this tree I relate myself, I see it, I respond to it. The tree becomes my own creation.

Here is a major difference between poetry and prose. The artist or poet sees a tree in its individuality, and it becomes part of his perception and his experience, his very own tree. A good example is Robert Frost's poem "Window Tree":

Tree at my window, window tree,
My sash is lowered when night comes on;