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Theology and Representation

Introduction

In Thomas Pynchon’s kaleidoscopic novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, the heroine, one Oedipa Mass, experiences (possibly) self-transcendence. Standing above the city of San Narciso, she stares down at the ordered streets which suggested ‘a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning ... an intent to communicate’. A revelation
trembled just past the threshold of her understanding. Smog hung all round the horizon, the sun on the bright beige countryside was painful; she and the Chevy seemed parked at the centre of an odd, religious instant. As if, on some other frequency, out of the eye of some whirlwind rotating too slow for her heated skin even to feel the centrifugal coolness of, words were being spoken.  

If theology is not to dissolve simply into psychology or, more generally, anthropology, it must have its origin in revelation. The interpretation of, or models for, revelation can differ. We understand the nature of revelation as punctuating the world with its violent intervention, or as ever-present in the world despite our blindness, or as some dialectical mediation between the poles of transcendence and immanence. The way we understand how God reveals Himself will have theological consequences – for the way we view creation and history, for example. Whatever the consequences the object of such an interpretation is revelation itself – what has been given to us and which, by faith, we receive as divine. But having made the distinction between revelation and its interpretation, and pointed to how the interpretation can have further consequences for our thinking, it is
necessary to say that the distinction is not so easily (if ever) available. For theology is an act of representing that revelation, examining it, relating it to other aspects of our lives and knowledge of the divine.

So, if the basis for the discipline of theology is revelation, its other, equally important basis, is language itself. There can be no theology without language. There may be religious experience in some microsecond when self-consciousness is silenced and the self dissolves into the transcendent; but theology arises with the return of reflection. Theology needs and employs concepts, names, ideas, metaphors, grammar – in short, rhetoric. It requires a discourse and all discourses are culturally embedded. For concepts, names, ideas and metaphors change within, disappear from and emerge into particular historical and social conditions. Theology arises, then, from both the recognition that we are being spoken to by that which is other and exterior to ourselves and the conscious appropriation of that event, or speech-act. The conscious appropriation is a response to what has been received or experienced in that ‘phase transition’; that moment of suspension when the mind is hushed and the whole being hears. Theology is, then, a peculiar form of discourse: for its single thread of thinking is composed of two voices – the other’s and our own, the word given and the word received.

We can see this clearly in the way two traditional theologians – Augustine and Anselm – approach the task of doing theology.

**Augustine and Anselm**

Towards the close of the fourth century, sitting isolated and defensive on the North African coast, having just been made a bishop by unorthodox and contentious means, St Augustine thrashes out the question of how we know God: ‘Grant me Lord to know and understand which comes first – to call upon you or to praise you, and whether knowing you precedes calling upon you. But who calls upon you when he does not know you? The questions multiply, chasing each other in the search for a definitive starting point – knowing God or responding to Him in prayer and praise. The questions multiply within a prayer itself.

The whole narrative of the way Augustine was formed into a Christian, in the context of God’s ongoing creativity in the world, beginning when out of nothing the world was created, is examined in *The Confessions*, through an extended prayer. However, as prayer, it is not a monologue. God too speaks throughout: bringing to mind things hidden in the recesses of Augustine’s memory; revealing His hand in