1

A Trial Run: Parable, Poem, and Autobiographical Story

Sallie McFague's first book, Speaking in Parables (1976) introduces her early concern with exploring theological discourse and how that arises out of various literary forms. She notes at the outset of the book's introduction, "The purpose of theology is to make it possible for the gospel to be heard in our time" (1). Given that McFague rarely uses such "gospel" language in her later work, this statement sounds surprisingly traditional, even quaint, as does the noninclusive language for both God and humans that marks the book—a decided departure from what is yet to come. Using Sam Keen's story of the peach-seed monkey to represent autobiographical story is also unusual (she later prefers to highlight figures such as John Woolman and Dorothy Day), but it is interesting that she employs it here as a kind of negative example, demonstrating metaphorical failure. This first chapter of Speaking in Parables nevertheless provides a good précis of her initial concerns, many of which recur in her later works. For instance, Gerard Manley Hopkins's "God's Grandeur" makes repeated appearances over the years (including in chapter 18, below). Thus the exploration of metaphor found here remains vital and helpful for understanding her later theological development.

Source: 1976:10–25

A trial run is a worthwhile enterprise. Many books use the first five chapters to give historical background, then refute other views, and only in the final chapter (usually called "Prolegomena to Some Theological Directions") is there a clue given to what the author has been up to. I would rather attempt a trial run, which, full of holes and unsubstantiated assertions, nevertheless gives the reader some clue as to how the theory might shake down in practice. In this brief chapter we will do no more than look in some detail at a few examples of literary genres that have been used for religious reflection. The stress in this

chapter . . . is on detail, for the crucial point here is to persuade the reader with a few well-known examples from Christian letters that parabolic theology is not a theory to be *applied to*literary genres of the Christian tradition but a kind of reflection that arises *from* them. Such persuasion will be effective only if the details of a parable or a poem can be shown to substantiate, even to demand, such an approach.

Theological discourse, and especially "God-talk," during what has been called the "absence" or the "death" of God, is, as we all know, in trouble. Richard Rubenstein, the Jewish theologian, states the problem this way:

> Contemporary theology reveals less about God than it does about the kind of men we are. . . . Today's theologian, be he Jewish or Christian, has more in common with the poet and the creative artist than with the metaphysician and physical scientist. He communicates a very private subjectivity.[1]

And Sam Keen says that

> for the moment, at least, we must put all orthodox stories in brackets and suspend whatever remains of our belief-ful attitude. Our starting point must be individual biography and history. If I am to discover the holy, it must be in *my* biography and not in the history of Israel. If there is a principle which gives unity and meaning to history, it must be something I touch, feel, and experience.[2]

Several similar chords are struck in these two statements: the insistence that theology be existential, personal, sensuous; the wariness with which both Rubenstein and Keen approach talk *about God*; an intimation that a way out of the dilemma may be through the language and methods of the poet and storyteller. Their insistence on existential, sensuous, religious reflection that tells stories about *human life* and only by implication speaks of God is not as radical as it might at first blush seem, for it is an old and vibrant tradition in Western Christendom. We see it everywhere in the Old and New Testaments—in the history of Israel in its covenant with God and the many little stories that reflect that big one (Abraham and Isaac, the exodus from Egypt, Saul and David, and so on) and in the story of Jesus of Nazareth, which again is the central story reflected in many little stories, principally the parables. Worldly stories about human beings in their full personal, historical, bodily reality is also the "way" of Augustine's *Confessions*, of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, of John Donne's religious

sonnets, of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, of John Woolman's *Journal*, of George Herbert's sacramental poetry, of Kierkegaard's work as an author, of T. S. Eliot's "Wasteland," of Teilhard de Chardin's letters and writings from the trenches. There are many indications that the *kind*of theological discourse Rubenstein and Keen are groping for is not only appropriate to the Judaic-Christian heritage, but is *called for* by it.

In order to get a few more solid clues to the nature of such discourse, let us look at three examples of religious reflection all concerned with God-talk, a parable, a poem, and an autobiographical story: the parable of the Prodigal Son, Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem "God's Grandeur," and Sam Keen's story of the peach-seed monkey.

The Prodigal Son

> 11 And he said, "There was a man who had two sons; 12 and the younger of them said to his father, 'Father, give me the share of my property that falls to me.' And he divided his living between them. 13 Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took his journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in loose living. 14And when he had spent everything, a great famine arose in that country, and he began to be in want. 15 So he went and joined himself to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed swine. 16 And he would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate; and no one gave him anything. 17 But when he came to himself he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, but I perish here with hunger! 18 I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; 19 I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me as one of your hired servants. 20 And he arose and came to his father. But while he was yet at a distance, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. 21 And the son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.' 22 But the father said to his servants, 'Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him; and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. 23

> And bring the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and make merry; [24] for this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.' And they began to make merry.
>
> [25] "Now his elder son was in the fields; and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. [26] And he called one of the servants and asked what this meant. [27]And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fatted calf, because he has received him safe and sound.' [28] But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, [29] but he answered his father, 'Lo, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command; yet you never gave me a kid, that I might make merry with my friends. [30] But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your living with harlots, you killed for him the fatted calf!' [31] And he said to him, 'Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. [32] It was fitting to make merry and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.'" (Luke 15:11-32)

A parable is an extended metaphor. A parable is not an allegory, where the meaning is extrinsic to the story, nor is it an example story where, as in the story of the Good Samaritan, the total meaning is within the story. Rather, as an extended metaphor, the meaning is found only within the story itself although it is not exhausted *by*that story. At the same time that a parable is an aesthetic whole and hence demands rapt attention on itself and its configurations, it is open-ended, expanding ordinary meaning so that from a careful analysis of the parable we learn a new thing, are shocked into a new awareness. *How* the new insight occurs is, of course, the heart of the matter; it is enough to say at this point that the two dimensions—the ordinary and the extraordinary—are related intricately *within* the confines of the parable so that such "God-talk" as we have in the Prodigal Son is an existential, worldly, sensuous story of *human life.*

The shock, surprise, or revelatory aspect—the insight into fatherly love—is carried in the parable of the Prodigal Son by the *radicalness* of the imagery and action. This parable, like many others, is economical, tense, riven with radical comparisons and disjunctions. The comparisons are extreme; what is contrasted, however, is not this world versus another world, but the radicalness of love, faith, and hope *within* this world. The setting is worldly but the orientation or "frame" of the story is radical. The radical dimension provides the context,

which disrupts the ordinary dimension and allows us to see it anew as reformed by God's extraordinary love. What is "seen," however, is not something "spiritual" (God's love "in itself," whatever that would be), but the homely and familiar in a new context—ordinary life lived in a new context, the context of radical, unmerited love. That love—and God himself—are nowhere directly mentioned in the story; the perception of divine love is achieved through stretching the surface of the story with an extreme imagery of hunger and feasting, rejection and acceptance, lost and found, death and life.

The pattern of extreme contrasts runs throughout the entire parable, from the father's willingness to divide his property without question and the son's decision to take "*all* he had" and go into a "*far* country" where he "*squandered* his property in *loose*living" to the extraordinary developments upon the son's return. The imagery of life and death dominates the parable at its beginning, middle, and end: the most radical dichotomy sets the tone for the other extreme images. At the outset of the parable the son treats the father as if he were dead, for, as Gunther Bornkamm mentions, a son has the right of disposal of property only after a father's death.[3] The extremism is also evident in such phrases as "he had spent *everything*," "a *great* famine arose," "no one gave him *anything*." His job, feeding swine, is of course the worst possible one since it brought him into direct contact with unclean animals; he, however, was so close to starvation he would gladly have eaten the swine's food. Verse 17 is the turning point of the parable, and, characteristically, it is an absolute about-face ("but he came to himself"); his repentance countenances no rationalizations. The surrealistic or "absurd" part of the story, what makes verse 20, with the undignified and poignant image of the father spying the boy from a distance (how many times, we wonder, had he watched that road during those long months?) and running to embrace him (older Near Easterners did *not*run).[4] The "compassion" of the father is expressed in the distinctive New Testament usage of a word that means, "love from the bowels." When the boy starts to give his repentance speech exactly as rehearsed, the father cuts him short and changes the unspoken words to their opposite—the son is not to be considered a servant but an honored guest. The extraordinary love and graciousness of the father for the boy is entirely without grounding in anything the boy has done or said—even his repentance speech is cut short. Then in breathless succession more unmerited gifts are heaped upon the prodigal: the best robe (the ceremonial robe which in the East is a mark of high distinction), a ring (a signet ring is a sign of authority), shoes (a luxury worn only by free men, not slaves), a fatted calf (in a land where meat is rarely eaten). All of this happens because, and here the main imagery of the parable emerges again, the lost is

found, the dead is alive. The latter part of the parable—the refusal and rejection by the elder son—is dealt with in the same way, through lavish, extraordinary, "absurd" generosity.

One *could* paraphrase this parable in the theological assertion "God's love knows no bounds," but to do that would be to miss what the parable can do for our insight into such love. For what *counts*here is not extricating an abstract concept but precisely the opposite, delving into the details of the story itself, letting the metaphor do its job of revealing the new setting for ordinary life. It is the play of the radical images that does the job. If we want to talk about what this parable has to say about God, we must do so in terms that do not extrapolate from that moment when the father, waiting these many months, finally sees his son, and we must do so in terms that dig into the details *of* that moment. Thus the radical contrasts and the concrete images are not embellishments but are the meaning, for there is no way to the meaning except through them.

Dan Via talks about the "in-meaning" and the "throughmeaning" of metaphors: meanings that are united inseparably as form and content, body and awareness. "The human organism is a body that thinks, and in all thinking the mind unites with a figure—language—of its own devising."[5] "A body that thinks": this description of human life would satisfy Rubenstein and Keen, it is the assumption of all metaphorical language, and it is also basically and radically Christian. The modern post-Cartesian split of mind and body is radically anti-Christian; meaning and truth for human beings are embodied, hence *embodied language,*metaphorical language, is the most appropriate way—perhaps the only way—to suggest this meaning and truth. The multiplication table, and, we might add, the conceptual clarity of doctrinal creeds or theological propositions, are not *more* true for human beings than are the myth of the fall or the parable of the Prodigal Son. Metaphorical language is a mirror of our own constitution: the unity of body and soul, outer and inner, familiar and unfamiliar, known and unknown. Metaphorical language conveys meaning through the body of the world. It makes connections, sees resemblances, uniting body and soul—earthly, temporal, ordinary experience with its meaning. But the "meaning" is not there to be read off conceptually; we only get at the meaning through the metaphor.

Metaphorical or imagistic language has the peculiar quality of both expressing and communicating at the same time. *Glossolalia*, speaking in strange tongues, expresses but does not communicate; logical or highly conceptual language communicates precisely but is not highly expressive. Only metaphorical language, because it sets the familiar in a new context, does both—it can express more than the familiar and yet at the same time communicate, since it uses terms known to us. The kingdom (the unfamiliar)

is a coin, which a woman lost and found; it is a valuable pearl. *New* meaning is generated by making words mean more than they ordinarily do: this, in fact, is the definition of metaphor. But at the same time it is an entirely indirect mode. There are no explicit statements about God; everything is refracted through the earthly metaphor or story. Metaphor is, I believe, the heart of the parabolic tradition of religious reflection as contrasted with the more propositionally oriented tradition of regular or systematic theology.

The insistence on embodied language, on the indirection of metaphor, on the intimate relations of the ordinary and the extraordinary *within* the parable does not mean that "nothing is said about God" in a parable and in theological reflection based on parables. But it does mean that we must be precise when we speak of *how* assertions are made about God in parables. They are made not in direct propositions but with what Philip Wheelwright calls "soft focus" or "assertorial lightness." This is the case because, as Wheelwright says, "the plain fact is that not all facts are plain."

> "The Lord whose oracle is at Delphi," said Heraclitus referring to Apollo the god and symbol of wisdom, "neither speaks nor conceals but gives signs." . . . There are meanings of high, sometimes of very high importance, which cannot be stated in terms strictly defined. . . . Plain speech may sometimes have conceptual exactitude, but it will be inaccurate with respect to the new thing that one wants to say, the freshly imagined experience that one wants to describe and communicate.[6]

Such "assertions" can *only* be made lightly or in soft focus. Thus parables are not only, as I have maintained, a deformation of ordinary life by placing that life in the context of the new and extraordinary, but they also tell us, though indirectly, something about the new and extraordinary context. The parables make ontological as well as existential "assertions"—they tell us something about God as well as something about our life—but the assertions about God are made lightly, indirectly, and cannot be extricated finally and completely from the story which expresses or, better, "images" them.

God's Grandeur

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
it gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil

Crushed. Why do men then now not reck his rod?
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! Bright wings.[7]

At first glance this poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins seems miles removed from the parable of the Prodigal Son: it appears to be "about" God, or at least about nature, rather than about human life. But note that it speaks of God *only*in his grandeur, that is, it speaks of him only sacramentally through his effects—the world is charged with the grandeur *of* God—and it speaks of nature and human beings inextricably involved with each other, ecologically, symbiotically united—nature wears our smudge and shares our smell. The theme of the poem is the renewal of the world, a renewal that is not merely natural but is from the providential, life-giving hand of God. As with the Prodigal Son we discover this theme only *through*the metaphors of the poem, only through its *own* intrinsic details.

"God's Grandeur" is of course a sonnet, with the first eight lines laying out the situation and the sestet giving the resolution, and as with most sonnets the last two lines hold a special revelatory surprise. It is a highly intricate poem and we can do no more than suggest a few of the intricacies, but it is important to indicate some of them, for my thesis is that the *details* are the meaning of the poem.

l.1 "Charged" suggests the modern image of electricity (and more generally of potency) but the word also has overtones of responsibility as in "charged with a responsibility"; therefore the image is both impersonal and personal.

l.2 "Flame out" picks up the electricity image from 1.1 and also implies movement outward, the enveloping power of flame consume all. In his notes on the poem, Hopkins writes of "shook foil": "I mean foil in the sense of leaf or tinsel . . . Shaken gold-foil gives off broad glares like sheet lightning and

also, and *this is true of nothing else*, owing to its zigzag dents and creasings and network of small many cornered facets, a sort of fork lightning too."[8] The image of shook foil is one of glory, brilliance, light, and power: God's grandeur in nature is unmistakable, *obvious.*

l.3 The outward shining movement is now contracted, it "gathers to a greatness" like the "ooze of oil," and a shift of tone is implied in the ambiguous sound of the "o's" here.

l.4 Crushed: golden spurts of oil spatter out. The grandeur of God is so obvious it could hit you in the eye. So why do men not see it, why do they not "reck his rod"—a phrase that recalls the "charged" of 1.1. The responsibility of nature to show forth God's grandeur is mirrored in man's responsibility to *see* the grandeur in nature.

ll.5-8 The topic changes to men and what they have done to nature and the new subject is carried by the mechanical image of the treadmill ("have trod, have trod, have trod") and the nasty "s" sounds—seared, smeared, smudge, shares, smell, soil, shod. Here are some nice ecological and anti-pollution overtones in 1877: man cannot *feel* the earth or, by implication, perceive God in nature, since he wears shoes.

l.9 The sestet opens with the renewal of nature. The power for renewal appears to be within nature—the instress or pressure of God comes immanently, not as a *deus ex machina* but from the incredible resources of renewal with which God has endowed the world.

l.11 "Last lights off the black West" envisions a total catastrophe, a Hiroshima of civilization, the setting of the sun for the last time.

l.12 The reversal begins: a new day, a gradual lessening of "black" to "brown," a new morning "springs"—a lively physical movement, and also a new spring following the winter (a suggestion of the cycle of fertility-nature cults).

ll.13-14 All the foregoing happens *because*of the Holy Ghost (it is not a fertility cult or an entirely immanent occurrence). Here in the image of the dove, as solicitous as a mother bird with her warm breast, recalling Genesis 1 in "broods," the Holy Ghost manifests the power of a second creation carried by the exclamation, "with ah! Bright wings." It is not just the warmth of the nest of creation but the glory and unexpected possibilities implied in the image of

the bird's wings rising radiantly against the rising sun. These images of radiance recall, of course, the opening images of the poem and bring us back to the grandeur of God shining in the world.

It is useful to recall that Hopkins was a follower of Duns Scotus, with his skepticism about the range of theological reason. Nowhere in this poem does Hopkins talk directly *about God:*the language is imagistic and metaphorical at all times—electricity, flame, tinfoil, oil, morning, dove, and wings. There is no way to the "theology," if you will, except through the poetry, and this is not, I believe, just precious aestheticism. For, just to take that last metaphor of the bird and plumb its intrinsic meanings—creation, rebirth, nest, comfort, care for the *bent* world, and finally *bright* wings—is a lesson in the appropriateness of metaphorical theological language for a human being—"a body that thinks." Hopkins's poem is an existential, sensuous story of human beings in relation to God, a panoramic story of the violations of God's world by them and God's renewal of it. What one "gets" from this story, this poem, is not new information that can be catalogued but *new insight* into what we might call the gracious power of God in the world or better, his powerful graciousness. A deep probing of the metaphors of the poem puts us in touch with the graciousness of God's power as it impinges on and renews our familiar world; we feel we understand somewhat better, in terms that matter to us—personal, worldly, concrete terms—what such a notion might mean.

The Peach-Seed Monkey

> Once upon a time when there were still Indians, Gypsies, bears, and bad men in the woods of Tennessee where I played and, more important still, there was no death, a promise was made to me. One endless summer afternoon my father sat in the eternal shade of a peach tree, carving on a seed he had picked up. With increasing excitement and covetousness I watched while, using a skill common to all omnipotent creators, he fashioned a small monkey out of the seed. All of my vagrant wishes and desires disciplined themselves and came to focus on that peach-seed monkey. If only I could have it, I would possess a treasure which could not be matched in the whole cosmopolitan town of Maryville! What status, what identity, I would achieve by owning such a curio! Finally I marshaled my nerve and asked if I might have the monkey when it was finished (on the sixth

day of creation). My father replied, "This one is for your mother, but I will carve you one some day."

Days passed, then weeks and, finally, years, and the someday on which I was to receive the monkey did not arrive. In truth, I forgot all about the peach-seed monkey. Life in ambience of my father was exciting, secure, and colorful. He did all of those things for his children a father can do, not the least of which was merely delighting in their existence. One of the lasting tokens I retained of the measure of his dignity and courage was the manner in which, with emphysema sapping his energy and eroding his future, he continued to wonder, to struggle, and to grow.

In the pure air and dry heat of an Arizona afternoon on the summer before the death of God, my father and sat under a juniper tree. I listened as he wrestled with the task of taking the measure of his success and failure in life. There came a moment of silence that cried out of testimony. Suddenly I remembered the peach-seed monkey, and I heard the right words coming from myself to fill the silence: "In all that is important you have never failed me. With one exception, you kept the promises you made to me—you never carved me that peach seed monkey."

Not long after this conversation I received a small package in the mail. In it was a peach-seed monkey and a note which said·: "Here is the monkey I promised you. You will notice that I broke one leg and had to repair it with glue. I am sorry I didn't have time to carve a perfect one." Two weeks later my father died. He died only at the end of his life.[9]

When we move from Hopkins's poem to Sam Keen's story of a peach-seed monkey, we seem to be in another world again. There is no grandeur of God crackling and flaming here, but an atmosphere, which is described, as *post-Christian* and *death of God*.Keen sees no possibility of using the metaphors and stories and myths of the tradition: he must start with his own story and see if from that "there is anything in my experience which gives it unity, depth, density, dignity, meaning, and value—which makes graceful freedom possible."[10]This is his central question and I do not think it wrong or inappropriate when dealing with Keen's radically personal and subjective, anti-traditionalist, anti-God-talk story of the peach-seed monkey to keep in mind the compassion of the father for the son in the parable of the Prodigal Son and the warmth and bright wings of the dove brooding over the bent world in

Hopkins's poem. In all three cases, I believe, we are concerned with human confidence in the foundations of being *as told in the human story.*

Keen has himself analyzed his story of the peach-seed monkey. He says that for him the peach-seed monkey is a symbol for "all the promises, which were made to me and the energy and care which nourished and created me as a human being."[11] It became for him translucent to another reality—"my sense of the basic trustworthiness of the world and my consequent freedom to commit myself to action."[12] He can become through the story a receiver and a maker of promises; this gives a unity of past, present, and future for him and hence gives him a "story," identity. Keen does not believe the peach-seed monkey is only history; one like it lies in each person's biography and, as he says, "in the depth of each man's biography lies the story of all men."[13] In the depths of this story of the peach-seed monkey lies Keen's sense of the holy and the sacred: the basic solicitude of life, which makes graceful freedom possible. Keen would not call this God-talk, nor shall we; but whatever it is, it is certainly in the same tradition as the Prodigal Son and "God's Grandeur." Keen's story is not of the same caliber as the others. The fact that he added an "explanation" is the giveaway: the peach-seed monkey is really a symbol, not a metaphor—that is, it "stands for" something (and he tells us what that something is). The correlation in a symbol is much tighter than in a metaphor—one thing stands for another thing—and it loses the multilayered, rich, and always partly ambiguous or "soft" focus of a metaphor. The fact that Keen sees his life as a story and events in it within a context of graciousness reveals his sensitivity to the necessity of dealing with religious insight indirectly, but his straight talk *about* the meaning of the story of the peach-seed monkey suggests a failure of nerve and a wish to take shortcuts. His analysis makes the story little more than an illustration of what he obviously can say more directly in discursive language. But the desire is there in Keen and in many others for a secular, indirect, low-key way of dealing with the graciousness experienced in ordinary life.

The language of a people is their sense of reality; we can only within the confines of our language. If that language is one-dimensional, as Herbert Marcuse puts it, if it is jargon, the jargon of technocracy, of Madison Avenue, of politics—or of theology—then we lead one-dimensional lives, meaningless lives, lives within language that has ceased to express our depths for it is not capable of expressing anything but the limits of what we *already* know and feel. It is no longer open to or suggestive of any reality beyond itself, and hence we have no means of renewing ordinary life and language, of seeing it in new contexts. Our ability to express the deeper dimensions of human existence is determined by the metaphorical aliveness of our language, and that language in

turn is controlled by the vision of reality we hold. The teller of the parable of the Prodigal Son, Hopkins, and, to some extent, Keen beheld a vision of reality that demanded a breakthrough beyond one-dimensional, univocal language—it demanded metaphor, for such is always the route out of established meaning to new meaning; and metaphor in turn became the proper vehicle for the expression and communication of what they beheld—it is the language for "a body that thinks."

For many of us the language of the Christian tradition is no longer authoritative; no longer revelatory; no longer metaphorical; no longer meaningful. Much of it has become tired cliches, one-dimensional, univocal language. When this happens, it means that theological reflection is faced with an enormous task—the task of embodying it anew. This will not happen, I believe, through systematic theology, for systematic theology is secondlevel language, language which orders, arranges, explicates, makes precise the first-order revelatory, metaphorical language. How the renovation of basic Christian language will take place will not, I suspect, be unlike the "way" we see in the tradition of religious reflection we have been analyzing. It will be through the search for new metaphors—poems, stories, even lives—will "image" to us, in our total existential unity, the compassion of the father, the bright wings of the bird, the trustworthiness of a world in which parents keep promises to their children.

Contemporary poems, novels, and autobiographies can serve as imaginative re-creations, "deformations," of the old, allowing us to see the old in a new setting and thus to see it anew. What is at stake here is not simply the renewal of Christian symbols and traditional language—it is not the problem of translating what old symbols "say" into contemporary language—but the more basic hermeneutical task of understanding the creative imagination as that which uniquely allows us to see and say the conceptually imperceivable and inexpressible. . . . what we could call in other words the relationship between parable and theology—the word of address and words oriented toward serving the hearing of that address. Although the way from parable to theology, Robert Funk says, is "circuitous and tortuous,"[14] still the language of the imagination was at our beginning, and in spite of the rocky path, it will be always an ingredient in all our theology or we will abdicate our task—the service of helping God's word to be heard.

> It appears that history has brought theological language full circle: having begun with the poetry of parable, metaphor, simile, and aphorism, it seems that theology is being thrust back upon the language of its infancy. The reason may be that just as faith could

> not be presupposed then, it cannot be presupposed now. In such a context the redeeming word must lay its own foundation: by its power as word it must be able to bring that world into being in which faith is possible, indeed necessary. Only then is it possible for theology to extrapolate conceptually from faith's experience of the world as redeemed. If, in the intervening centuries, theology has grown less and less solicitous of its ownmost origin, it is now being forced to renew itself at its source—or perish.[15]

Notes

1. Richard L. Rubenstein, *After Auschwitz: Radical Theology and Contemporary Judaism*(New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), x.

2. Sam Keen,*To a Dancing God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 99.

3. Gunther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth,* trans. Irene and Fraser McLuskey with James M. Robinson (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1960), 126–27.

4. Dan O. Via Jr., *The Parables: Their Literary and Existential Dimension* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1967), 172.

5. Ibid., 83.

6. Philip Wheelwright, *The Burning Fountain: A Study in the Language of Symbolism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), 86.

7. *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins* (London: Penguin, 1953), 27.

8. Ibid., 219.

9. Keen, *To a Dancing God,* 100–101.

10. Ibid., 99.

11. Ibid., 101.

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid., 103.

14. Robert W. Funk, "The Parables: A Fragmentary Agenda," in *Jesus and Man's Hope,* II, ed. Donald G. Miller and Dikran Y. Hadidian (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 1971), 300.

15. Robert W. Funk, "Myth and The Literal Non-Literal," in *Parable, Myth and Language,* ed. Tony Stoneburner (Cambridge, Mass.: The Church Society for College Work, 1968), 63.