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Literature and Life

Karl Barth: A First Impression

Is it the Turning of the Tide?

*Ol' man River, dat ol' man River,
He must know sumpin', but don't
say nothin',
He just keeps rollin', He just keeps
on rollin' along!
He don't plant 'laters, He don't plant
cotton,
An' dem dat plants 'em is soon for-
gotten;
But ol' man River, He just keeps
rollin' along!*

Our friends, Messrs. Doubleday, Page and Co. (now Doubleday, Doran and Co.), the publishers of Edna Ferber's great novel, "The Show Boat," will, I am sure, permit me the use of this touching chorus from that book, when they realise the lofty purpose to which I am putting it!

I should like also to acknowledge the power and the art of the song as sung in the play with the same title (and based on the book), which is running meanwhile in London. I wonder if that large and gentle coloured man is aware of the depth to which that song of his moves us all! I wonder if he ever heard of Karl Barth, Professor at the University of Münster, Westphalia! I wonder if he could understand me were I to meet him on the street and express my gratitude to him for his song and were to proceed to tell him that what makes that song of his so moving (as to be, for hearers in a certain mood, overwhelming) is the very thing which makes the theology of Karl Barth like the breaking up of sultry weather, or the throwing open of a window, or—anything that signifies a blessed change!

For certainly that is the effect of him upon myself and upon all my broodings and anxieties and perplexities as to what was to become of us!

The danger, indeed, which I can clearly foresee, is that Barth's influence upon those who have wasted their substance in riotous living among the purlieus of subjectivity may be too tempestuous and intoxicating! It may seem to them like the return of God to the soul, to the mind and imagination—where, as we see now (rather unfairly) we had been making shift with one concern after another, with one watchword after another, in short with some ever-changing and always quite serious *pastime*, for the engagement

affects me; even as when I am out in a rowing boat the ocean with which I have to deal is—but no! I know too well how a metaphor may be wrested to the apparent confusion of the man who uses it, and to the utter destruction of the man who perceives the fallacy.

For myself then I will only say that when I came to the last page of the book, "The Word of God and the Word of Man," by Karl Barth, I closed it with a bang, whispered a "Nunc Dimittis," and, had I had the courage, I should have gone through some solemn dance, or tested the truth of the ancient promise that, at the touch of God, even a lame man may leap as an hart!

But perhaps I ought to defend what may seem the irrelevancy of the negro chorus with which I introduced these, so far, enthusiastic observations. I can do so: but I must keep clear of the abyss which yawns beneath all our words when we presume on a thorough-going discussion of the "subject-and-object" business.

Keeping firmly to indisputable things, then, I wanted to suggest that if Karl Barth has secured a hearing (and he has!), and if the reading of his book has moved me almost to tears, certainly to a lofty mirth in which years have seemed to roll off my spirit and the notion of eternal youth seemed not incredible—it can only be because Barth has said something for which people like myself, who have tried to accompany my times and to keep the faith, were on the watch, and were watching with an anxiety and desperation which they measure by the something like transport with which they hail his message and submit to his most stern rebuke.

To speak quite simply. What is it that moves us as we read that negro chorus of "Ol' Man River"? What is it that moves to tears all sorts of quite unlikely people night after night as they listen to a negro singing the refrain—

"But ol' man River, he just keeps rollin' along?"

in God, and in God "not mixed up with us," as the same Robert Browning somewhere very profoundly suggests.

I took the case of the man who wrote the Hundred-and-second Psalm.

Except for a hurried reference to God in the two opening verses, hurried and ungrateful in proportion to the leisureness and detail of the man's own description of himself and his feelings, the Psalmist proceeds to matters which seem to himself alone worth dwelling upon. The good man is quite obviously in a bad way; and yet he is able to describe his symptoms with a nice precision, and (as it seems to me) to be so comfortably detached from his own pain that he can select metaphors and illustrations of an extraordinary literary aptness, encouraging us to conclude that he was not really having such a bad time as he supposed!

Still, he *thinks* he is having a bad time, and *that* while it lasts is almost equal to having a bad time.

He tells us that his heart is smitten like grass. That he has gone off his food. He tells us that he is like a pelican. Later, that he is like an owl. Finally, achieving a masterpiece of desolation in words, he declares that he is like a sparrow, and not even one among many sparrows, but a solitary sparrow, "alone upon the housetop."

This dirge he continues to the end of verse 11, where he repeats the refrain that he is "withered like grass."

And now, observe what happens; for just here, when things are at their own acknowledged worst, if anywhere, we may come upon the final secret of all revivals and recoveries!

We are not told how the thing that did happen came about; therefore we are at liberty to *imagine* how it came about.

Having searched in his self-analysis that last promontory of subjective things beyond which lie chaos and old night, the man put down his pen. Nothing more being possible in the way of "downward-looking," he looked up!

Whereupon, I take it, he blushed! He blushed for shame! For suddenly he realised that for the time being he had actually forgotten all about God!

He had been mourning and sighing as though there were no God! And so, I further take it, he snatched up his pen or stylus. Perhaps he offered to God a short, breathless petition that He might spare him for five minutes in order to wipe out or to annihilate

Here I pause for the time being. I bundle up my notes, quotations, comments, and the like, which I had made on Karl Barth. I have used not a single one of them. But, if we live, we shall reopen the scroll.

Meanwhile some of my friends may like to hear the end of the story about that happy day in Aberdeen. In that city and abode of thoughtful people there were those of that very class who found it possible to be present. Amongst these, Professor Selbie, of the Chair of Hebrew in our own college. It was he who next day gave me the information which follows:—

That 102nd Psalm seems to a famous scholar, Duhm, to be so "inharmonious," so divided within itself, so abandoned to misery in the earlier portion, and so abandoned to faith from mid-way to its close, that he suggests, nay he is confident, that the Psalm is not one, and is not the work of one man, or the transcript and recollection of one mood. No one man could at one sitting, he suggests, chitter on a house-top like a lonely sparrow, and spread his wings like an eagle towards the sun!

In the historical words of a Fife farmer, in answer to a long argument on a matter on which the farmer had no arguments at all but only a profound conviction, I would reply to Professor Duhm: "I'll not be positive, but I think you're wrong."

Not only did one man write the psalm: it is the only way in which a psalm of such lyrical passion was ever conceived! And, besides, I know the man!

Professor Duhm's own words, which Professor Selbie kindly extracted for me, and which I hold in *retentis* (as our Presbytery clerk would have put it, stimulating our self-respect) are as follows:—

"Wer Ps. 102: 1-12 und v. 13 ff. für ein Gedicht ansieht, muss gegen Stil, Sinn und Inhalt vollkommen gleichgiltig sein, oder den Verfasser für geistesgestört halten."

Which being translated means: "To suppose that these verses (1 to 11) and the rest of the Psalm form a unity, is possible to one who is perfectly indifferent to style, meaning and contents or to one who regards the author as suffering from mental derangement."

My answer to which is the above-quoted ejaculation of my friend, the Fife farmer!

John A. Shuster

The danger, indeed, which I can clearly foresee, is that Barth's influence upon those who have wasted their substance in riotous living among the purlieus of subjectivity may be too tempestuous and intoxicating! It may seem to them like the return of God to the soul, to the mind and imagination—where, as we see now (rather unfairly) we had been making shift with one concern after another, with one watchword after another, in short with some ever-changing and always quite serious *pastime*, for the engagement of faculties and necessities, towering heights and yawning depths, which all the while are crying out for faith, that is, for God!

I suppose that there are all sorts of dialectical criticisms which will be able to maintain themselves against Barth's entire position. I am sure that there are any number of extremely able people who will find chinks in his armour and will disable him here and there. And I am altogether sure that there are lots of us "lewd fellows of the baser sort," who will be only too glad to hear of any criticism which breaks the challenge of this man's stupendous utterances!

Already I have read quite a number of correct and thoughtful qualifications, the very kind of qualifications which were I to bribe my conscience I could myself proceed to make of certain propositions concerning God and life and destiny which men like Jeremiah and Saul of Tarsus made themselves responsible for in their several days.

But one bit of sheer good sense in the region and level of ultimate things God has endowed me withal. It is this. When a thing, a poem, a drama, a sermon, a philosophy, a personality moves me, and moves me in a precise way—namely, morally; when it has the effect of rebuking me, even of upsetting me, of disturbing within me a state of equilibrium and complacency which I have wit enough to know is, in that region, simply *death*; (when that happens), I forbid my own critical faculty to raise its voice even so much as to whisper—for a season. I do not attempt to see what I can make of such a poem, drama, sermon, philosophy, personality; I ask myself rather what this poem, drama, sermon, philosophy, personality makes of *me*! The whole thing may be defective, unbalanced, disproportionate, and, in the absolute sense, wrong or *not so*. But what do I know of Absolutes? The Relative is the Absolute as it

thing like transport with which they hail his message and submit to his most stern rebuke.

To speak quite simply. What is it that moves us as we read that negro chorus of "Ol' Man River"? What is it that moves to tears all sorts of quite unlikely people night after night as they listen to a negro singing the refrain—

"But ol' man River, he just keeps rollin' along?"

It is, I believe, the dawning upon us all there and then of a *truth* to which we all know that we are paying far too little attention in our daily life, pre-occupied, degraded, minimised as that daily life is in the case of so many of us, crushed and insulted and forbidden as it is in the case, it may even be, of the vast majority of contemporary people! That coloured man, standing there singing, humming rather, soliloquising about *something* in life which goes on and on, *as though it had a mind of its own*, something which we once knew and then forgot and now remember! For what if that *something* is—God!

Barth would never have startled so many and would never have moved me as I have not been moved since a generation ago I read "Pippa Passes" and "Saul" and "A Death in the Desert," and "Pompilia" and "Giuseppe Caponsacchi" and the incomparable "Pope," had it not been that we were sick almost unto death for the want of the very thing, the point of view, the message, to which he has aroused us.

Now, what is that thing, that point of view, that message, which, coming upon me in these wintry days, has awakened the voice of the turtle in the world of my mind?

Let me take my own way of identifying it. I can think of no better way, in the sense of, no way which might be less personal or less obtrusive of oneself.

Some years ago, lecturing in Aberdeen under the Warrack Trust on "Preaching," I wandered into an aside which may have been more fruitful than anything in my text. Certainly it established itself in my own mind, though it was first aroused by that friendly occasion.

I must have been dealing with what Robert Browning meant when he ejaculated, "How a smile of God lights up the world!" The difference, in fact, which it makes to believe

looked up!

Whereupon, I take it, he blushed! He blushed for shame! For suddenly he realised that for the time being he had actually forgotten all about God!

He had been mourning and sighing as though there were no God!—and so, I further take it, he snatched up his pen or stylus. Perhaps he offered to God a short, breathless petition that He might spare him for five minutes in order to wipe out or to annihilate the force of that earlier lugubriousness and ingratitude and unbelief! And the first word he wrote was that blessed word "But!"

A man is all right who can still say "But" to the dismal insinuations of life! And the race is all right so long as it has the tenderness to stand aghast at the same terrible omission of God!

"But!" he wrote, and swift upon that word he wrote "Thou!" "But Thou!" he wrote; and the rest followed, as it will always follow, with the very inevitableness with which day follows night: which stable ordinance God Himself by the word of Isaiah gave as a pledge of His fidelity to the race! The rest of the Psalm is a song—full, as St. Paul says, "of indignation and revenge!"

"But Thou, O Lord, shalt endure for ever!"

What really does it matter how I feel, or you or the other?

And so we come within sight of St. Paul's "Let God be true and every man a liar!" and all the other objective, solid, mirth-provoking, adoration-provoking propositions about God which men make who believe in Him.

"Thou shalt arise and have mercy upon Zion:

For the time to favour her, yea, the set time is come."

All of which, sung in the metrical version to the tune "Wareham" or "Warrington," and sung with what Barth would call "*desperatio fiducialis*"—a desperate confidence—must rouse a Christian man or a Christian congregation from the dead: or all is lost.

I hold that that is pure and essential Barthism. As it is pure and essential Paulism! And as it is the red core of Apostolic Christianity! For the early Church went almost mad with joy—so that steady-going people supposed the first disciples were coming home from a wedding—not on any "know thyself," not, that is to say, on any new discovery of "what man is." The Church of the first days leapt and sang at a report or demonstration or disclosure of God which Christ had given them, and which, in some terrible hours of darkness and lucidity as the midnight moved into the grey of the morning, suddenly became for them the Truth!

ment." My answer to which is the above-quoted ejaculation of my friend, the Fife farmer!

John A. Skilton