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The Religious Quest in Robert P. Tristram Coffin's Poetry

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"If you're looking for a poem, search your memory, not your imagination," is one of the precepts which Robert Coffin urged upon his literary composition classes. And in his own best work he built upon personal experience. As a result, Coffin's religious quest, as it appears in his poetry, is always personal rather than theological: he searches not the Scriptures, but his own life. The farms, woodlands, ledges, and ocean which he knew from boyhood are the framework within which Coffin expresses his search for "salvation": for holiness, security, and permanence. In his preface to the Collected Poems he makes it clear that he believes he has found something worthwhile:

I think there is still the possibility of a poet's being a reaffirmer of life and a believer in certain compact and lasting fundamental patterns that it is the salvation of mankind to believe in.

Coffin begins this affirmation, not with an all-illumining spiritual revelation, nor with a clear-cut body of theological doctrine, but with a profound sense of human need. His poetry belongs to no denomination; in fact, it is not exclusively Christian poetry, although it is very strongly colored by Coffin's Bible reading, especially the Old Testament. Coffin is not the representative of a church, nor does he fancy himself as God's representative. Quite to the contrary, he is the representative of a man seeking God. His is the open-eyed wonder of a newly-created man placed without explanation upon earth. Eagerly he sees, hears, feels, smells, and tastes everything that comes to his notice. He is intensely moved by the beauty, the clarity, and the brilliance of everything that he beholds, but he is as intensely moved by the cruelty and sorrow, mortality and waste. Because he is a man, he feels the human needs for fellowship with the world, for gratitude and worship, and for some comprehensible order in the universe. Bound to the earth, and

1 Class lecture, fall of 1946, at Bowdoin College.
bounded by human experience, he seeks in all directions for a fundamental law which can reduce the chaos of his observation and experience to some explicable pattern. His quest has led him through theology, science, and folklore; but always he has returned to his own experience for a measuring-rod.

Coffin's poetry is a monument of his faith that there is a fundamental order in the universe, and that it includes for man a sense of holiness, security, and permanence. It is however, more a record of his search, than a summary of findings; it is a chronicle of questions rather than a catalog of answers. That the vastness of the universe, the complexity of man's intellect and emotions, should be the result of the accidental combination of atoms, seems to him incomprehensible. Therefore he must seek for some conscious and intelligent Cause. Because he has no other basis for his investigation than his own sense-experience, he tries to comprehend and evaluate this sense-evidence, and on this basis to induce the Creator. "The Boy in the House" illustrates this approach. Just as toys are an infallible clue that a boy is nearby, so also His cosmic plaything, the universe, proves God's existence:

If I find spread out upon a chair
Broken toys the dearer for their wear,
   Lead soldiers, lacking feet, tops without bloom,
   I know a small boy sleeps in the next room.

And I have found the sad-eyed trilobite
That stared a million years ago on night
   Turned into rock, the rapt calligraphy
   Of fossil shells a thousand miles from sea.

I know the boy who holds these playthings dear
Is sleeping in the room beyond us here.8

This kind of induction underlies much of Coffin's poetry.

In his early poetry Coffin emphasizes pain, hunger, and brevity as primary realities: whereas in much of his later work, although he still sees the agony in the universe, he emphasizes joy, beauty, and continuity. Among the early poems of pain

and hunger "Rura Cano," "The Spider," and "The Maker" consider specifically the question of God's relation to the cruelty in creation and state a definite conclusion:

Death's maker with his own death burns again
And tastes the fiercest joy he has of all
Of making things so fragile they must fall,
Break, die exquisitely, and so once more
Lie lovelier for having at their core
The everlasting passion of a flaw.  

His teeth are in the hounds that tear the hare,
He lays the bones of things he loves most bare.  

That God both causes and experiences the anguish of mortality is an idea which occurs again in *V. I. P.*, his unpublished epic, for the god Becomor suffers with Prometheus even while He inflicts punishment.

Knowing that, if creation is to suffer and still worship, God must give some compensation for pain, Coffin finds compensation for the cruelty of the universe in beauty and passion.

There is a fierce beauty in the hawk descending on its prey:

I have seen beauty in a hawk
Run forth like flame across the land,

The cruel beauty of whet steel
In his upcurling wings.

Beautiful pain that cuts across
The tangled meshes of rank weal,
Swords and bullets, lovely hawk
Swift to strike and heal!  

On the human level, this beauty and divinity of pain dominates "There Yet Survived a God," where cruelty is proof of a god.

Yet there was something holy, too,
In their fine art of giving pain;

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1 *Golden Falcon* (New York, 1929), 42.
5 *Ibid.*, 64.
It was as if there yet survived
A god to offer poisoned wine. 7

This recognition of pain and beauty as components of mortal existence leads to the rejection of the conventional Heaven and Hell of theology. The beauty and pain of this universe make a hereafter seem superfluous and even anti-climactic:

There is no need to build a town of thunder
And hang an everlasting furnace under,
There is no call to dream of angels locking
With others till the universe is rocking
With their endless warfare; for the dream
Is but a shadow of the wars which steam
Along a sunbeam or within a seed. 8

Yet this compensation of beauty is small consolation to the man whose children die in agony or to the deer pursued by death on four paws. Even though the God of Coffin’s poems finds beauty in the symmetry of a world balanced between pain and weal, the sufferers must be compensated by something more than the beauty of their death throes. For the beast, Coffin finds compensation in the lack of foresight. An animal suffers only briefly when he is afraid of imminent danger or when he actually experiences death; to him also is given the blind enjoyment of the fierce beauty of sex. Coffin treats the theme of sexual desire most bluntly in “The Cock”:

Desire in feathers, flame on toes
Passion ruddier than the rose.

Beauty that hates all that is dead
Beauty of strong wings outspread
Loveliness of wrath and heat
Ardor arching scornful feet
Gale of will that tears and rends
And sows life to the sky’s far ends. 9

Man, on the other hand, pays for his ability to perceive and enjoy beauty by his ability to foresee and pre-suffer pain. The first stanza of “I Shall Be in Other Places” expresses this foreboding:

7 Ibid., 103.
8 Ibid., 117.
9 Golden Falcon, 26.
The death-watch ticking in my wall
Tells me that my house will fall.
One day there will come the wind
To the place where I sinned,
Prayed and dreamed and little done,
And find but grass blades in the sun.\(^{10}\)

In an early poem, “Dew and Bronze,” Coffin asks man’s vital question:

Is it worth the dancing,
This mayfly trance of life,
Dreaming, hoeing, yearning,
Taking one a wife?

And in answer to his question, he cites the beauties of Art, Nature, Home, and Literature:

Athens in white marble
    Says it’s worth the pains
And white daisies marching
    Down the country lanes,
Candles and brief babies,
    The brittle wares of home.\(^{11}\)

Coffin’s ballads give us frequent stories of people who have succeeded in enjoying life in this perilous world. A man may gain a sense of security and holiness through hard work.

There where one horse plows the land
Men have much to do by hand,
And working with the hands is start
Of music, poetry, and art.
No machinery ever can
Make a Bible;\(^{12}\)

Through vigorous living Coffin’s men learn that pain gives the strength to endure pain, that sorrow exercises man’s strength and courage, and so increases it. Thus pain and sorrow take their place beside hard work, as sources of the beauty which is strength. This stoic strength-building leads Coffin to praise Maine’s rigorous climate and rocky soil because they provide hardships enough for training heroes.

\(^{10}\) Collected Poems, 39.
\(^{11}\) Ibid., 4.
\(^{12}\) One Horse Farm (New York, 1949), 2.
The salvation which is the North is sadness. Sadness learned from the elements of elegy in our twilights, our storms, our Autumns, our annual Winter extinctions of life in the dark half of the circle of our year. Melancholy, for our English poets, has been their best strength. We have learned from our sorrowful days to grow tender and courageous, in the face of ruin.  

Sadness is also important as a background for joy. For Coffin the joys which are briefest and hardest won from sorrow are the most intense, even as beauty in the midst of ugliness is the most beautiful. This beauty he sees in New England, that a brief summer is snatched from the cold, that brief joy is wrested from sorrow, that a brief flower blooms among the rocks:

Rare, sparse blossoms that are like the sparing New England emotions themselves, mayflowers keep the green of the green carpet an evergreen under the snow. . . . They stand for the North, the greenest corner of our planet's green carpet because it is not always green, but for six of our months must be gray and sere.  

In “Such Knowledge Goes Deep” Coffin expresses the universal longing for a sense of security in this world:

The dog turns round three times
To make sure he will fit
When he rests. It seems by now
He should be sure of it.

I like to know when I
Sleep in a strange bed
Whether I have the Northern Star
Or South Pole at my head.

Such knowledge is not whim,
Fancy, or mere hap,
We earthy children like to fit
In our mother's lap.  

Holiness and security Coffin finds most easily on a farm. A man can learn worship from the animals who adore him, and he can learn trust. The farm gives Coffin a sense of rightness, of belonging, of harmony between man and the fundamental holy

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13 On the Green Carpet (New York, 1951), 64.
14 Ibid., 54-55.
15 Collected Poems, 400.
plan of Nature. It is this sense which finds expression in poems like “Revelation”:

Suddenly he knew himself
A part of a tremendous plan
Built for the tendrils of the vine
And the fingers of a man. 16

This sense of fitting into an eternal plan permeates most of Coffin’s farm poetry. Look, for instance at “Advice to a Young Farmer,” 17 which counsels him to make his house, his spring, his bedroom, fields, and marriage a part of Nature in harmony with the law. When a man fits well into the deepest harmony of nature, he attains not only present harmony but also a kind of immortality. In “New Boy in the Old House” he states explicitly that, through his reproductive harmony with nature, man may gain immortality through sons.

Here in the white old house he sits
A young new blond boy, yet he fits
Into four handsome men who wore
This head of hair of his before.

He is all there is beneath the skies
Of his great-grandfather’s sea-bright eyes,

How can a boy not grow up sound
With such men to become around? 18

In “I Shall Be in Other Places” Coffin expresses another concept of immortality. Here, using the ideas expressed in the theory of evolution, Coffin concludes that his immortality lies also in the evolutionary forces which produced him and could again evolve him:

For my house may fall to grass
And the blundering mole may pass
Through the nave my ribs have groined,
Yet the light and dark that joined
To create the man-thing me
Are spawners ranker than the sea. 19

In V. I. P. he considers this problem of immortality in a new light. In addition to summarizing the concepts of immortality through family, through evolutionary force, and through mem-

16 Strange Holiness, 45.
17 Ibid., 30.
18 People Behave Like Ballads (New York, 1946), 24.
19 Collected Poems, 39.
ory, V. I. P. adds the possibility that the expanding universe may be a source of immortality for man. When the poet-hero Tristram’s wife returns to him from the dead, she assures him that there is always space in a constantly expanding universe for the preservation and even expansion of the best moments of every man’s life: therefore, the more vigorous a man’s life is, and the more significant moments it includes, the more space in this expanding universe it will fill. As in his earlier poetry Coffin uses the theory of evolution, so here he uses the latest concepts of physical science and applies them to his philosophical and religious problems.

Closely related to this quest for personal immortality is the search for those things outside the individual which are permanent. Here, as in the search for immortality, Coffin searches experience for the opportunity to say, “These things will remain.” And in such poems as “There Will Be Bread and Love” and “Sea Will Remain” Coffin finds that the sea, the harvest, the love of men, poetry, and parenthood will all outlast the individual and form a stable world for his descendants.

Maybe the shapes of houses, cities, classes, Vehicles, and laws will somewhat change, But tools will not, and mothers leaning to babies, Giving the breast to them, will never seem strange.

Always there will be some shapes like plows Opening up furrows, sons got, hay in mows.

Growth too is a part of the eternal picture, and in V. I. P. Coffin sees man’s ability to be conscious of his growth as a characteristic which he shares with God, for growth is the salvation, not only of man, but of God:

I guess that God is a great deal like my father, I think he is like you. I think he grows. He wouldn’t like to stay in Heaven, he’d rather Plow up muck and feel it in his toes.

The acorn grows, and small boys grow up men, The blossoms fall, but apples fill the tree. How could God be good, and not grow, then? I know he’d rather be a boy like me.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{20}} \text{Ibid., 363-4.}\]
\[\text{\textsuperscript{21}} \text{V. I. P. (Unpublished manuscript), 19.}\]
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And these speculations by the boy Tristram describe the God of *V. I. P.*, whose name is Becomor. Later in the poem Becomor traces his own growth from His primitive manifestations in the old fertility gods to his present "operation crossroads." Through suffering on the cross as man, Becomor is learning from man to be a better God.

Thus through Becomor, Coffin states his final conclusion that man's culminating glory is his partnership with God in the evolution of a new universe. Through pain man and Becomor grow and in growth not stasis lie security and permanence for the best in human experience. Becomor's brother gods Beor and Unbeor claim in succession all mortality, but man's and Becomor's true identity, or soul, is realized in the salvation which is forever becoming.

THE BRIEF FICTION OF SEAN O'FAOLAIN

By GEORGE BRANDON SAUL

SEAN O'FAOLAIN (*John Whelan; 1900-*) , a Dublin-born member of the Cork group of authors particularly notable in the Yeatsian era, is the sort of man chauvinistic Irish must find uncomfortable. A Roman Catholic "intellectual" of demonstrated patriotism, in his youth one of the "hounds of Banba," he has nevertheless not been silent about the absurdities of Irish politics and moralism. Further, he has even asserted that "The greatest curse of Ireland has not been English invasions or English misgovernment; it has been the exaggeration of Irish virtues . . . to that point where every human quality can become a vice instead of a virtue." Nor has he attempted to condone the effects of priestly interference in all sorts of things, from personal conduct to politics: indeed, he has confessed of his church that "whenever power emerges it will follow after—to bargain with it." An admirable translator of the traditional Irish lyric (*v. The Silver Branch, 1938*), he has nevertheless remained clear-eyed and free of Sigersonian extravagance in his estimate of the material translated. In ad-