



## READING ROOM

# An Extraordinary Logic: God in Literature

Nino Kebabdze

*“Let the light of Your countenance shine on us, that in it we may behold the ineffable light.”*

*—Prayer at the First Hour*

God in literature is probably something one encounters in the act of reading more often than one considers it as an idea apart, so when asked to write on the topic, I catch myself wanting to describe instead what I find: a glimpse into the ineffable. “There is only one name by which the divine nature can be expressed: the wonder which seizes the soul when it thinks of God.”<sup>1</sup> Literature registers this wonder, the wonderer, and the source of wonder to which they speak; a mystery that resists definition but elicits expression, an expression that is itself always only an approximation.

What follows is not an attempt to classify particular representations of God in literature, but rather to account for some of the ways literature lends itself to such representation, loosely in-

spired by my interest in the work of the twentieth-century Spanish novelist Rosa Chacel. Perhaps the most salient consists in literature’s freedom to transcend the limitations of rational exposition, to serve as a space of disclosure for all manner of experiences, including the experience of the divine. It is in this unique sense of encompassing reality beyond expression that literature can at once reproduce and shed light on life as lived.

### God and Literature

The relationship between God and literature is one of love and creation. Made in the image and likeness of God, the creator—who is love—we, his creation, are also given to experience love as generative. *Eros genésico* is how Cha-

<sup>1</sup> Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1976), 33–4.

cel refers to this quality of love, designating by “eros” love tinged with longing for completeness.<sup>2</sup> On this account, a creative act is an expression of love’s movement to fruition and fullness in time. Hence the invitation to consider literature as a place of the unveiling of this movement, of longing for and experience of the divine; as a language that gives rise to what lies beyond expression itself, transcending familiar logic (if this, then that); as a realm of the ineffable made visible at either—or both—narrative and interpretative levels; as a contact, an inkling, a recognition, a beat the heart skips in assent.

### Literature and Experience

This approach to literature is premised on our capacity to perceive things beyond our comprehension, by the fact that we are not limited to seeing only what we know, even though our knowledge shapes what we see (that is, what we are more or less inclined, willing, and able to understand and to accept). This capacity to perceive the unknown and to experience the unfathomable is not contingent on being religious or of a particular faith; rather, faith, in this case faith steeped in Christianity, becomes a lens through which acts of perceiving and interpreting are filtered. Reading is such an act. The dimension of reality we glean without comprehending may be nothing other than the affirmation of “a reality which the created intelligence cannot contain,” a form of knowing that is recognition, harkening back to our provenance in and relationship with God; the knowing that entails the unknown.<sup>3</sup> Literature in this sense becomes a way of coming to terms with, pondering, and testifying to the experience of such reality, a reality that the perceiving mind cannot apprehend, but can seek, long for, come into contact with. How can one look for the unknown, asks



Spanish novelist  
Rosa Chacel.

the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset, since search presupposes prior knowledge? In answer, he suggests that this knowledge need not be conceptual but could take the form of the anticipation that arises in and out of a dynamic.<sup>4</sup> “God condescends towards us in the ‘energies’ in which He is manifested; we mount towards Him in the ‘unions’ in which He remains incomprehensible by nature.”<sup>5</sup>

### Experience and Expression: Language

My first introduction to literature with explicit references to God was by way of the Spanish mystics Saint Teresa of Avila and Saint John of the Cross. There is a word in Spanish that I had shelved away until I could make sense of it: *pudor*. Out of curiosity, I stop to look it up and come upon the English word “pudor,” meaning “a proper sense of shame” and used rarely.<sup>6</sup> Following my thoughts backward, I am reminded of a story where a man, a Spanish exile, loses everything in the war, but instead of speaking of his loss, he speaks of a lion in a cage that he and

<sup>2</sup> See Rosa Chacel, *Saturnal* (Barcelona: Seix Barral, 1972).

<sup>3</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 46.

<sup>4</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, “Estética en el tranvía” (1916), in *Obras completas*, vol. 2 (Madrid: Taurus, 2004), 176–82.

<sup>5</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 39.

<sup>6</sup> *Collins English Dictionary*, 13th ed., s.v. “pudor,” <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/pudor>.

his son once saw paraded through the streets of Madrid.<sup>7</sup> The lion is freedom itself, captured and displayed as a sign of victory. Out of pudor, the narrator rejects the role of a spectator, bearing witness; his telling becomes silence, our reading an attestation. Out of pudor, the poetry of Saint Teresa and Saint John turns to paradox and allegory, making it possible for our gaze to be directed toward the object and cause of their yearning. If there is a single train of thought connecting this seldom used word with the well-known poems and the relatively unknown story, it is in the measure that we gain of ourselves when we come into contact with something sacred. The expression of this measure is “a proper sense of shame,” understood not as a heightened sense of self-awareness or a diminished sense of self-worth, but as humility born out of such an encounter, humility made manifest in turning the language by which the self ordinarily expresses its care outwards, to the mystery beheld. This relationship between language and humility, language born out of humility, may be explored as an integral chapter in the discussion of “God in literature.”

<sup>7</sup> Ramón J. Sender, “Despedida en Bourg Madame,” in Ramón J. Sender, *Relatos fronterizos* (Barcelona: Destino, 1970), 113–34.

<sup>8</sup> Georges Florovsky, “On the Substantiation of Logical Relativism,” in *Philosophy: Philosophical Problems and Movements*, vol. 12 in *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1989), 160.

<sup>9</sup> Lossky, *Mystical Theology*, 45. See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Cosmic Liturgy: The Universe According to Maximus the Confessor* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 72–3.

speak of the need to articulate it, be it for the sake of coming to grips with such mysteries or for wanting to attest to them.<sup>9</sup>

By preserving the ambivalence, uncertainty, and irresolution that characterize living, literature makes palpable the immediacy of experience, laying bare meanings emergent in it before they pass over to the reflective clarity of thought that entails distance. Such distance or objectification may guarantee the transmission of these meanings, but often fails to transmit their signifying context. The fact that literature allows for telling (that is, a life, an event) in the form of showing (life as living, event as happening) makes it possible for meaning to be disclosed experientially, through a vicarious form of participation, rather than conceptually, through the work of intellect (though such oppositions between experiential and conceptual understanding are never pure). And if we are talking about the need for understanding by way of articulation—confronting the inadequacies of conventional and common-sense expressions embedded in our everyday use of language—then lightness of conceptual lucidity can be positively transporting; but any concept runs the risk of becoming lifeless. On the other hand, likeness to life can easily cloud the essential grasped in the concept. In the end, it is not so much a matter of pitting one form of understanding against the other, as highlighting ways of making God present that are unique to literature.

### Experience and Expression: Understanding

“‘Experience’ is not knowledge. . . . But the whole cognitive issue is possible only because something is ‘given’ [in it].”<sup>8</sup> The fact that the range of our experiences may well exceed our linguistic means of expression is true not only of religious experience. Our desire to relate or to recount the experience of the divine—our desire to fathom the unfathomable, and to make an indwelling for it—puts this insight in stark evidence. And although “our language, indeed our thought, is poor and deficient before the primordial mystery of revelation,” saints, too,

### Logic of Experience: Literature and the Extraordinary

Free from the constraints of theory (that is, a closed system of thought) and unrestricted by the familiar rules of logic (identifying causal connec-



tions, evidential and explanatory reasoning), literature has the luxury of presenting “coinciding of contradictions,”<sup>10</sup> and in its lifelikeness remaining open to other “type[s] of rationality.”<sup>11</sup> “The descent of grace to the human soul is a free act of divine love. And there are no limits to how far it may extend. Which particular means it chooses for effecting itself [...] whether and how and when it is also active in places where our eyes perceive no effects.”<sup>12</sup> Literature is a realm where we may behold these effects and where we are free to perceive how, by dint of joyous corroboration, something within us is lifted up in correspondence.

You are neither here nor there,  
A hurry through which known  
and strange things pass . . .  
And catch the heart off guard and  
blow it open.<sup>13</sup>

In a way, literature is, as Brodsky suggested, a “compendium of meanings” tied to lived experiences, givens that, when not always visible, may easily be covered up, and that literature has the power to re-create in all their lived-in-ness.<sup>14</sup>

I have seen the sun break through  
to illuminate a small field  
for a while, and gone my way  
and forgotten it. . . .<sup>15</sup>

In this sense, literature also makes present again a glimpse or a trace, an experience of the extraordinary, removing the antithesis between reason and unreason “not so much ‘theoretically’ as existentially.”<sup>16</sup>

And this is another of literature’s vantage points: mediating our relationship to the extraordinary. For if, as Christos Yannaras maintains, our needs have a way of deploying reason for their own

ends—to tame the unknown—then any lived experience that challenges our rational faculty to explain it is both threatening and in danger of becoming invisible or being dismissed as irrational.<sup>17</sup> Willingness to contemplate an experience that points to mystery and gestures towards the unknown—thereby defying our reason, our ability to place it within a familiar paradigm—can find encouragement in the distance between planes of experience, real versus fictional. This distance paradoxically facilitates a form of participation where there may have been none. Hence this other particularity of literary space, which both guarantees distance by differentiation between planes of experience and allows for proximity through emotional, intellectual, and even somatic identification. Similarly, the distance separating us from the fictional universe places us in a position of relative freedom vis-à-vis the needs and fears that bind our vision and understanding. In this sense, literature represents the space that allows us to see and draw near to disclosures of the unknown.

### Literature and Remembrance

“And it was then I decided to write down what had happened. In this jumble of events, I seemed to discern an extraordinary logic.” With these words ends the tale of Isak Borg, the protagonist of Ingmar Bergman’s film *Wild Strawberries* (1957). Earlier in the film, Borg, a scientist nearing the end of his life, recalls a poem by Johan Olof Wallin that begins: “Where is that friend, whom everywhere I seek?” The friend leaves a trace of which Borg’s story is a remembering. The trace is at once of the vision that defies ordinary logic and a proof of its existence.

After watching this film, a young Spanish poet, Clara Janés, rushed home to

<sup>10</sup> Florovsky, “On the Substantiation of Logical Relativism,” 168.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Catharine Baseheart, “Forward,” in Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraus Stein (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1989), x.

<sup>12</sup> Edith Stein quoted in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope “That All Men be Saved”?* trans. David Kipp and Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 177.

<sup>13</sup> Seamus Heaney, “Postscript,” in *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), 70.

<sup>14</sup> Joseph Brodsky, “The Condition We Call ‘Exile,’” *Culture, Theory and Critique* 34.1 (1991): 7.

<sup>15</sup> R. S. Thomas, “The Bright Field,” in *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2004), 114.

<sup>16</sup> Josef Pieper quoted in Von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope*, 157.

<sup>17</sup> Christos Yannaras, *Against Religion: The Alienation of the Ecclesial Event*, trans. Norman Russell (Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2013).

reread her friend Chacel's story "Sobre el piélagos" and to write her a letter full of amazement at the resemblance she found between them.<sup>18</sup> The resemblance Janés pointed to is not so much in the characters or the events as in what animates them: a desire to make visible and thereby to preserve the experience of the "extraordinary logic" at work. In the case of Bergman's film, this experience is unleashed by a dream; in the story, by a vision experienced in the open sea. In both narratives, the main characters come face to face with an image of themselves that transcends the realm of the ordinary. Coming into contact with that uncanny image is quietly transforming. It is a transformation to which each character is his own witness, for which neither can account, but of which both retain a trace.

Literature, then, may function as a kind of repository, given the elusive nature of such experience, one that does not easily find corroboration in everyday language and conventions of thought. God in literature becomes a way of remembering. And this remembering is, in part, what Chacel calls the *sinrazón*—not the un-reason or absence of reason, but the coupling of reason with reasons and understanding that lie beyond it—for the trace, always on the verge of fading, points to something—is of something—far more expansive than the memory that yearns to retain it. According to Chacel, the *sinrazón* is also a plight of reason that, once graced with a vision of how much more there

is to see, must contend with its own limitations.

"Between a novelistic embodiment of human experience and an essayistic distillation of thought" lies a suggestion of experience that transcends thought.<sup>19</sup> And because of this, thought, reluctant or not knowing how to assimilate experience, relegates it to memory, which, enfeebled by thought's withdrawal, must rely on other forms of corroboration. Reading God in literature is a way for thought to reenter experience, not in order to assimilate the unknown, but to retain it as such. Reading God in literature becomes a way of bringing together "the directly known" and "reflectively apprehended" as a "complementary pairing of elements within each of us."<sup>20</sup>

If reflective apprehension relies on objectification (of self, of experience), direct knowing relies on participation. In reading we are positioned to do both: through our identification with the character or narrated events, we partake of their experience to some degree; and through the distance that remains, we are able to take in and contemplate that very experience, the divine logic, the "rule of grace" made manifest. In this sense, the limits of reason as well as experience "are extended to all which is outside the world and which came before it, to the original conditionlessness of Divine Existence."<sup>21</sup> Literature becomes an opening, an attestation, a remembering, a making visible of our belonging to this realm of the extraordinary. ✱

<sup>18</sup> Chacel archives, 6/001, Archivo Fundación Jorge Guillén, Valladolid.

<sup>19</sup> Claire Messud, "At the Border of the Novel," *New York Review of Books*, March 21, 2019, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/03/21/valeria-luiselli-border-novel/>.

<sup>20</sup> Malcolm Guite, *The Word in the Wilderness* (London: Canterbury Press Norwich, 2014), 42–3.

<sup>21</sup> Florovsky, "Substantiation," 169.



*Nino Kbadze* is an associate professor in the Department of Latin American and Iberian Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston. She was born in Tblisi, Georgia, completed her doctoral studies at the University of Kentucky, and currently lives in Boston.