



In other words: Towards a poetic theology of the spoken Word of God

Jacob Rollison

*Mais le Fils de l'homme n'a pas où reposer sa tête
le monde des calculs ignore cette place
Inutile aux profits de la vaste conquête
qu'est un homme quand on organise l'Espace?¹*

I have heard it said that if prose is a window, poetry is stained glass: prose offers a view to what is beyond, while in poetry, the glass itself is presented. If we are to accept the thrust of this metaphor, what is at stake in the difference between poetry and prose is twofold: first, it is a question of the relation of form to content. Prose operates with an assumed separability between the two: one could say the same thing in different words. This very separability is its separation from poetry. Second, by the same characteristic, poetry raises the question of the relation of the word to a 'beyond', to some other thing, and to itself – which we might summarize (in oversimplifying, to be sure) as the question of *representation* versus *presence*. Prose, 'in other words', might be more or less beautiful, descriptive, or evocative of the content which it conveys; poetry, 'in other words', is no longer itself.

Christian theology is a discipline of the word which has special reasons for taking words seriously. The Judeo-Christian God is first and foremost the God who speaks, and whose speech creates. For the Christian, Jesus Christ is the Word of God, and this Word *is* God. The questions, then, which poetry poses to theology are: is Jesus Christ as the Word *prosaic* or *poetic*? Is the *content* of God's revelation separable from, or does it extend beyond, its form? Is theology a discourse of *representation*, or of *presence*?

To probe these questions, which I believe are not only relevant but central for theological reflection today, I will draw on the French

theologian, sociologist and (possibly the least-known occupation of this semi-obscure thinker) *poet* Jacques Ellul. I have the sense that the relevance of Ellul's work for theology is only beginning to be more widely explored and recognized.² Questions of the form and content of theological language and themes of presence were central to his entire oeuvre, making him an excellent dialogue partner in this respect. In using Ellul to probe poetic questions of theology, we find that the question of poetry is also the question of theology's relation to philosophy. Specifically, Ellul offered an early critical engagement with and response to the philosophical movements of post-structuralism and postmodernism in France in the 1960s–80s, which I believe remain central philosophical dialogue partners for Christian theology today: thus, the relevance of Ellul's reflections on poetry are worthy of consideration *today*.³



Ellul: poetry and presence

Poetry, for Ellul, is neither a simple style nor an embellishment, but exactly this inseparability between the form and content of communication. In his 1987 existential meditation on the book of Ecclesiastes, *Reason for Being*, Ellul describes Qohelet as a both a poet and an anti-philosopher. Viewing Qohelet as aware of and incorporating Greek philosophy to ironically subvert it, Ellul sees Qohelet's orientation to death, finitude, and God as mapping the coordinates for His poetic wisdom:

The poet, then, is not a person who thinks *and* has a nice style. He has the word of his thought, which cannot be expressed otherwise. [...] There is not a philosophical, skeptical, or pragmatic thought, and then a sort of heavy or baroque style... There is a spark of genius, overturning all norms, creating a language for itself at the same time that a rugged, harsh, and total questioning springs up, pitiless. This is a truly a *poiein* – a creation. [...] And this is why all of his translators have finally delivered a beautiful, harmonious text. They produce a poetic text because the original is poetic, and its language is beautiful, in spite of its laxity and grammar. The poetry comes

from the language's being forged directly by the difficulty of the question in view.⁴

In Ellul's 1975 treatment of the book of Revelation, *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation*, he likewise elaborates: 'It is an error of method in a book such as this to dissociate meaning and form: the latter is a servant, as in all poems, to explicate, illustrate, the meaning of the message.'⁵

Ellul's reading of Qohelet as an ironic anti-philosopher is heavily influenced by his reading of Kierkegaard. The same book contains many appropriations of Kierkegaardian themes. Ellul draws on Kierkegaard's idea of Christianity as an 'existence-communication', suggesting that the poetic inseparability of form and content in divine revelation means that it is a serious mutation to translate the historical event of Jesus Christ's life on earth into philosophical categories; to change its form from an historical event would be to treat it prosaically, 'in other words'. This implies a need for great care in the formal movement from an event to a doctrine. At minimum, the theologian should recognize the shift in grammar which takes place in this movement; at most, the theologian must ask if this move is possible without *betraying* its content. Thus, while Ellul was also heavily influenced by Karl Barth, he ultimately had trouble with Barth's grand systematic project in the *Church Dogmatics*, privileging Kierkegaard instead.⁶ The same epistemological problems apply to attempts at systematic theological construction: either we are describing the world which we inhabit, in which case we cannot impose a principle of non-contradiction (the 'systematizing' move) without taking the place of God – 'Existence itself is a system – for God'⁷ – or we are able to do so, but we have situated ourselves outside of the world we are describing, in which case it is no longer the world we inhabit.⁸ This is not, therefore, an obscure and impractical debate: the treatment of the world hinges on the question of poetic or prosaic grammar in theology.

However, Ellul also inverts this direction, reading Kierkegaard via Qohelet. A central theme in Kierkegaard's edifying discourses is the need for the believer to become 'contemporary with Christ.' I argue

that Ellul finds the roots of his focus on *presence* in Kierkegaard's *contemporaneity*, and that Ellul's presence includes three components which were decisive in Kierkegaard. First, both thinkers emphasize the need of the theologian to think within the limits of time and space; this is to accept her status as a creature. Second, both emphasize that the believer is addressed in this present dialogue with God, and is called to respond freely; over time, this is a process of existential becoming. And third, both thinkers emphasize the aspect of the presence of God, God's presence in the work which He effects by His Word. Reading Kierkegaard *via Qohelet* leads Ellul to two major departures from Kierkegaard's thought: first, Ellul's work lacks Kierkegaard's rhetoric, his Socratic, pseudonymic irony (though it retains a more serious irony of its own). Most powerfully in his 1981 *The Humiliation of the Word*, Ellul views the word as inseparable from the life of the one who speaks it – only this connection to life gives the human word its force and meaning. Ellul thus does not take up the 'aesthetic' pseudonymous style of Kierkegaard, which would allow him to take an ironic distance from portions of his work.⁹ And second, Kierkegaard's protest against Hegelian abstraction notwithstanding, Ellul's work lacks precisely the dimension of fixity and abstraction which made Kierkegaard's work fodder for the creation of existentialism as a *philosophy*.¹⁰

Thus, to the question of the poetic or the prosaic word, Ellul's answer, informed by his unique reading of Kierkegaard and Qohelet on presence, affirms the inseparability of form and content in theology and thus affirms the presence of God in His revelation. Or, more precisely: Ellul acknowledges the freedom of the theologian to make this separation if they so choose:

[...] I take for granted that it is indeed possible to restate the revelation without losing it. I assume that one can find images and concepts which fit the situation of modern man, and that the latter stands in need of these, none of which is obvious.

Prosaic separation is possible, perhaps even necessary; Ellul does this in his *The Ethics of Freedom* by trying to express sin in terms of Marxist alienation. But the prosaic separation is seriously limited:

Here we come upon a limit to hermeneutics. It can restate the truth spoken by God in terms accessible to modern man. It can neither render that truth more genuine and so make it easier to win a man over, nor make it capable of producing tangible results in a person's life. [...] the operation balances out with a deficit of faith.¹¹

Thus, we are free to take theology prosaically, but must admit that the poetry of *faith* is compromised. Ellul's poetic focus thus takes the content *and* form of words seriously, emphasizing their freedom to live in the temporal present, and leaving space for the faith of the listener. The implications of this answer mark clearly Ellul's differences with the philosophical movements of his age, and are visible in the relation between speech, creation, prayer, and history.



Speaking the world

The long quotation from *Reason for Being* given on pages 64–65 draws out the connection between poetry and creation. When God speaks, the world lives and moves; God's spoken Word is understandable as the form of which the world is the content. In thus combining speech, creation, and movement, Ellul views all of creation as 'structured' by the *speech* of God. I put 'structured' in quotations because of Ellul's hesitance to use this word, and his opposition to its dominance in late twentieth-century French thought, from Lévi-Strauss to Lacan, in post-structuralism and postmodernism in the 1960s–80s, and in the rise of hermeneutics as a discipline. In his 1972 *Hope in Time of Abandonment*, Ellul writes: 'The obsession with communication blots out the substance of the message to be conveyed. We are indeed children of this age and of this world, dominated by a greater concern for form, medium, structure, and speech than for the thing said and for its content.'¹²

For Ellul, in addition to its inherent problematizing of the dimension of meaning, the problem with the language of 'structure' is that it is far too fixed: in other words, God speaks *the world*, which changes and becomes: to reduce speech to structure is to kill this movement.¹³ Or, more simply: unlike the post-structuralists, the world is God's *speech*

for Ellul, and not a *text*, which has consequences for their respective views of presence and interpretation.

If the world is speech and not text, then poetic theology cannot be a metaphysical derivation: this would strip speech of its freedom. It is here that the presence/representation difference begins to operate in force: Christ is Immanuel, ‘God with us’, and not a mere representative. Christ is God’s Word, but the whole point being made is that God’s free will is expressed in the very Word He chooses; Christ is thus not reducible to metaphor.¹⁴ Even ontology becomes problematic because it would arrest the movement of life inherent in speech: Ellul specifies in *The Humiliation of the Word* that speech is inherently temporal, non-spatial, which means that ontology is too static a category to properly attend to speech as a phenomenon. ‘Phenomenology should not only cause things to *appear* as they are, but make them *sound* as they are! [...] The philosopher who refuses to listen also refuses both truth and reality. He lives within one set of categories and thinks with others.’¹⁵ Ellul’s poetic theology of *speech*, a theology where the form attends to the content, is thus to be distinguished from philosophy by its lack of fixity: poetry must be *spoken*.¹⁶

In context, this must be heard as an informed critique of post-structuralism and postmodernism. Thinkers associated with these descriptions often criticize the Western philosophical tradition as early as Plato for privileging the word, for logocentrism. Jean-François Lyotard emphasized that in text, there are both ‘discursive’ and ‘figural’ elements – in other words, text is speech made visible – and that the ‘figural’ was in the process of overtaking the discursive, which had formerly been the dominant element.¹⁷ Similarly, in his 1966 *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault discussed speech in *spatial* terms, using words like ‘field’, ‘territory’, ‘horizon’. In doing so, he was changing the nature of spoken discourse in order to view it as an expression of a structure of power. Ellul agreed with Lyotard about this process of the figural overtaking the discursive, but cast it in more sociological terms, linking it to the rise of propaganda, the dominance of advertising and images, and the prevalence of audiovisual media, specifically from the late 1950s onwards.¹⁸ Ellul’s response to these philosophical movements, developed from the late 1960s and finding its culmination in *The Humiliation of the Word*, is that philosophy has

never fully attended to speech as speech *at all*; it has always already inscribed in space, whether metaphysical or textual. In other words, it has applied to the word exactly the principle of non-contradiction problematized above and ignored the inherently temporal and personal character of speech. Ellul's theology thus aims to attend to the Word of God as *poetic speech*.¹⁹



Prayer, history, freedom: the *poetica*

Questioning the *personal* character of speech, of the full presence of the speaker, was central to Jacques Derrida's critiques of an 'onto-theology of presence'; in attenuating the presence of the speaker, he emphasized the interpretative possibilities of the *text* of given communication. For Ellul, too, speech is presence; but unlike Derrida's critiques of an 'onto-theology of presence', the grammar of Ellul's presence is that of an *existential wager*, and neither a metaphysics nor an ontology. To restore the Kierkegaardian language behind Ellul's thought, God's presence is only available via a leap of faith; it is not a given, nor deducible from the state of the world. This is so first, because God's freedom means that He cannot be reduced to a given *a priori* or a principle (necessitating, at least, great care in constructing a doctrine of God); and second, because God's restricting Himself to His Word is His way of allowing for and respecting human freedom. This existential relation with God is the key to the meaning of prayer. In Ellul's 1970 work *Prayer and Modern Man*, prayer is understandable as a dialogic relation with God only on the grounds of obedience to God's command to pray; this command is to be taken by faith as God's guarantee to accept the prayer as communication. In other words, prayer is the poetic *form* of Christian life, lived in faith in the presence of God, out of which the spoken discourse of human prayer can become meaningful. Thus, prayer marks the presence of God in the temporal present: 'What would prayer be if it did not claim to make present, at this moment [...] this meeting of God with man brought to pass in Jesus Christ?'²⁰

The new crux of our poetry/prose question could be summarized as follows: if theology is not to accept philosophical frameworks for interpreting divine revelation, how should it proceed? In other words,

it is exactly the discernment of the eternal *in the temporal* which is at issue. We recall that Ellul rejects Kierkegaard's 'eternal' as either too fixed or too abstract; if he is to refuse abstraction and try to think within the limits of time and space, how can he talk about the eternal God without positing a metaphysical or abstract eternity?

It is only via Ellul's *poetic* reading (in the sense this essay has focused on: the inseparability of form and content) of the *Apocalypse* that he can say that the presence of Jesus Christ, accessible in prayer, allows human history to escape the play of determinisms which would otherwise enslave it. Ellul takes John's Apocalypse as a highly complex and intentional communication by means of symbolism, trying exactly to express that which cannot be directly communicated:

We cannot seize upon these visions and symbols as if they were part of our present universe [...] directly comprehensible and readable. We remain in the time between the times [...] in the universe, where only the word conveys to us something on the part of God. [...] In other words, we cannot comprehend vision as and symbols in themselves, by a direct reading.²¹

Ellul notes that it is in the interplay between 'movement and structure' that 'the meaning is situated'.²² We do not have space here to recount Ellul's view of this interplay; the decisive element is that the poetic nature of this communication is the *only* possible means to express what cannot be expressed by prosaic discourse. Ellul reads the book as 'an allegory of God and His work, nothing more!';²³ one which reveals Jesus Christ as the *recapitulation* (Ellul insists on this word) of human history. If Christ is God's poetic *presence* in history, rather than a key to a metahistorical system, then the Apocalypse becomes not the 'prophetic' prediction of future events, but the key to understanding the present as a relation with God, *now*, opening space for a future unfolding out of this God-human dialogue. The point is not the prediction of the future, but the redemption of time and the emancipation of the present.

Recalling again Kierkegaard's 'existence-communication', the specific form of the Apocalypse allows the comprehension of its content: '[...] if [John's Apocalypse] employs language that is

mythical, or mystical, or full of imagery, it is to express something infinitely shifting, unknowable by a logical, rational discourse – something that cannot be known except in living it.²⁴ And Ellul’s attempt to describe this knowledge, naturally, ends in poetry. The two books of poetry which Ellul pens both refer to the Apocalypse. First, his 1994 book *Silences*, whose title is understandable via *Apocalypse*, where he explicates the triple meaning of *silence* as ‘crisis/end of time/presence of [the] all-powerful’; and second, more directly, in *Oratorio: The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*.²⁵ In other words, for Ellul, only the *poetry of the present God* can enable theology to depart from representing an ideal and abstract truth, to find the Word of God as the truth, not solely intellectually or as a principle, but as it is revealed *now*, today, in the *hic et nunc* which we inhabit.



Recapitulation

The implications of the question of poetry for theology are thus significant. If theology is not to be the analysis of a text, but a poetic listening and responding to the speech of God, how are we to proceed? Ellul’s response enacts a move which he views as both Kierkegaardian and Qoholeitian – he attempts to restore theology to a discourse with its own contours, separate from (if still in dialogue with) philosophical thought. By reading revelation as poetry, Ellul can emphasize God’s presence with us, in our time and place. If one accepts this reading, it is not that metaphysical, ontological, or structural readings of revelation are wrong, *per se* – the theologian is still free. Rather, the fixity they offer can be heard as a prosaic stifling of the poetic dialogue of faith; it seems to me more correct to say they are forms which hinder rather than aid the communication of theological content.

Our language of *construction* in theological discourse is significant in this respect: we are *building thought structures, systems, architectures*. If philosophy has always been a discourse of the city, then the proximity of theology to philosophy is measurable by the size of its towers. A prosaic, representative theology attempts to put God and the world into a model. But by aiming for theology as poetic, an existence communication, we want to build with *living stones*, not a fixed structure, but an *architecture in movement*.²⁶ To take these

metaphors in their scriptural and Ellulian contexts means that the world and human history are contained in God's poetic speech, and God's poetry is thus not a text but a world; theology-as-poetry opens onto a world of poetic *existence*, and not just poetic ideas. The task of poetic theology, then, is not that of the architect or builder, the construction of a relation of propositions or ideas, but to facilitate a lived dialogue with the God who speaks the world, allowing one's life to become one brick in a living architecture. As with G. K. Chesterton, theology-as-poetry means a trusting release of its drive to systematize, to model and order, to take up a free exploration in dialogue with a creator: 'The poet only desires [...] a world to stretch himself in. The poet only asks to get his head into the heavens. It is the logician who seeks to get the heavens into his head. And it is his head that splits.'²⁷

The refusal of the form/content divide means that God is present in His poetry: Jesus Christ is both God's Word and, thus, God. There is no separation or division between God's love and God's communication of His love in Jesus. Thus, to talk of 'poetic' theology means that we refuse to talk about God as if He were absent. It means reconciliation and not an abstract separation between God and the world He made. As offensive as it may seem in an era where the serious theologian drafts systematic metres of shelf-space and breaks her head over abstractions, the challenge poetry offers to theology is to put down its philosophical building blocks, to go outside and play, to become again the little children of God; and all the while, to retain the audacious knowledge that this outside which is not yet is already at the very interior of a truly eternal city of God.

*Suspendez vos regards, arrêtez vos cithares,
souffle nouveau du temps qui parcourt l'éternel.*²⁸

Notes

- ¹ 'But the Son of man has nowhere to rest his head / the world of calculations ignores this place / Useless to the profits of the vast conquest / what is a man when we organize space?' Jacques

- Ellul, *Oratorio: Les quatre cavaliers de l'Apocalypse* (Bordeaux: Opales, 1997), 59 [my translation].
- 2 Of particular relevance to theology in Scotland, readers may be interested to know that while Ellul completed all of the coursework necessary for a PhD in theology except for the final thesis, the University of Aberdeen awarded Ellul an honorary doctorate in theology in 1980.
 - 3 This short essay cannot treat these themes with the detail they deserve. I am currently writing my doctoral thesis on presence in Ellul's work, with a special focus on his engagement with post-structuralist and postmodern thinkers such as Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, and others. I am arguing that despite surface similarities between Ellul and these traditions, Ellul's 'presence' offers a unique theological treatment of many of the issues defining the epoch of these thinkers (and our own time), one which can be deeply instructive for us today.
 - 4 Jacques Ellul, *Reason for Being: A Meditation on Ecclesiastes* (trans. Joyce Main Hanks; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1990), 24. I have modified Hanks' translation with particular attention to the poetic form of the original, which can be found in Jacques Ellul, *La raison d'être: Méditation sur l'Ecclesiaste* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1987), 34f. The second ellipsis is Ellul's.
 - 5 Jacques Ellul, *Apocalypse: The Book of Revelation* (trans. George W. Schreiner; New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 259.
 - 6 '[...] it is to the extent that he finds the collective and systematic dimension in Christian thought that Barth departs from Kierkegaard. But does he stay attentive enough to his intention, to his project?' Jacques Ellul, *Préface*, in Nelly Viallaneix, *Écoute, Kierkegaard: Essai sur la communication de la Parole* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1979), ix [my translation].
 - 7 Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, in *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (ed. Robert Bretall; New York: The Modern Library, 1946), 201.
 - 8 This does not by any means *disqualify* systematics as a practice, insofar as systematics is taken in the sense of recognizing and tracing connections within theological and ethical thinking; but it does imply, at minimum, that the intellectual closure of

- understanding as a *system* (in the sense of ‘complete unto itself’) would exclude or misconstrue its relation to the world, and should thus be approached cautiously.
- ⁹ See Jacques Ellul, *The Humiliation of the Word* (trans. Joyce Main Hanks; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1985). Within the secondary literature, there is a range of views on interpreting Kierkegaard in this respect; in short, they can be characterized by the position one takes on Kierkegaard’s *The Point of View of My Work as an Author*.
- ¹⁰ Of course, one could equally attempt to make a philosophy out of Ellul’s works; David Lovekin has done so in an excellent volume, but he acknowledges that he has explicitly decided to treat Ellul’s theology as philosophy. See David Lovekin, *Technique, Discourse, and Consciousness: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Jacques Ellul* (London: Associated University Presses, 1991).
- ¹¹ These two quotations come from Jacques Ellul, *Prayer and Modern Man* (trans. C. Edward Hopkin; New York: Seabury Press, 1970), 51. See also Jacques Ellul, *The Ethics of Freedom* (trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1976).
- ¹² Jacques Ellul, *Hope in Time of Abandonment* (trans. C. Edward Hopkin; New York: Seabury Press, 1977), 302.
- ¹³ Ellul thus repeats some of Kierkegaard’s critique of a characteristically Hegelian move. ‘The fundamental operation of *Aufhebung* is reduction: the sublated thing survives, but in an “abridged” edition, as it were, torn out of its life-world context, stripped down to its essential features, all the movement and wealth of its life reduced to a fixed mark. [...] There is nothing more foreign to Hegel than a lamentation for the richness of reality that gets lost when we proceed to its conceptual grasp.’ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 2008), xiiif.
- ¹⁴ After his recent presentation at the University of Aberdeen, I posed a question to Prof Paul Fiddes on exactly this difference between speech and text as dominant mode of understanding; his response was essentially that we can choose between a range of *metaphors* for describing revelation. My insistence on the difference between

- speech and text here aims to specify why I consider this response problematic. Paul S. Fiddes, “Observation and Participation: Wisdom, the World, and the Triune God” (paper presented at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, April 18, 2016).
- ¹⁵ Ellul, *Humiliation*, 38.
- ¹⁶ Here I refer to the French edition: Jacques Ellul, *La parole humiliée* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 2014), 25.
- ¹⁷ See Lyotard’s dissertation: Jean-François Lyotard, *Discourse, Figure* (trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon; Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2011). He glories in the possibilities created by this transition in his later *Libidinal Economy*. See Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy* (trans. Iain Hamilton Grant; London: Athlone Press, 1993).
- ¹⁸ Most concisely, see Ellul, *Humiliation*. See also Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men’s Attitudes* (trans. Konrad Kellen and Jean Lerner; New York: Vintage Books, 1973).
- ¹⁹ To be clear, this is my description of what I think Ellul is doing, not his.
- ²⁰ Ellul, *Prayer and Modern Man*, 132.
- ²¹ Ellul, *Apocalypse*, 34.
- ²² *Ibid.*, 18.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 32.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 70. See Jacques Ellul, *Silences: Poèmes* (Bordeaux: Opales, 1995) and *Oratorio: Les quatre cavaliers de l’Apocalypse*.
- ²⁶ This is the subtitle to the original French edition of Ellul’s *Apocalypse*. See Jacques Ellul, *L’Apocalypse: Architecture en mouvement* (Paris: Desclée, 1975).
- ²⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (Milwaukee: Cavalier Books, 2015), 18.
- ²⁸ ‘Suspend your gaze, stop your zithers / breathe anew of the time which traverses the eternal.’ Ellul, *Oratorio*, 9 [my translation].