The Love That Moves the Sun: Creative Writing and the Pursuit of Sacramental Vision

In this essay, **Randy Smith** *describes the creation of art as a search for sacramental vision—an apprehension of meaningful wholeness, of unity in the created order and in human experience, ultimately rooted in the Creator Himself.*

Sacramental Vision and the Modern Poet

When I began graduate school in 1990 at the University of South Carolina, I took a course on four "Modern American Primitive Poets": Robert Penn Warren, James Dickey, Theodore Roethke and William Carlos Williams. I noticed in my study of these poets that most of them pursued an all-encompassing vision as they moved toward the end of their writing careers and lives. In his last collection of poetry, *The Eagle's Mile*, James Dickey imagines what it would be like to ride with the eagle to the heights of heaven: This animal "know[s] the circular truth / Of the void"; he has been "all over it building / [His] height / receiving overlook."[1] In this poem, Dickey desires to possess the bird's ability to see All that is below and the way that each part of the All fits into a larger frame of reference.

In his book-length poem, *Paterson*, William Carlos Williams imagines life as a type of dance where each motion serves an overarching choreography or "measure": "We know nothing and can know nothing / but / the dance, to dance to a measure / contrapuntally, / Satyrically, the tragic foot."[2] In fact, Williams says in his *Autobiography* that the whole reason for writing *Paterson* (a collage-style epic written

between 1946 and 1958 and left uncompleted at Williams' death) was to find a metaphor that connected all the "isolated" elements of his life:

> The first idea centering upon the poem *Paterson* came alive early: to find an image large enough to embody the whole knowable world about me. The longer I lived in my place, among the details of my life, I realized that these isolated observations and experiences needed pulling together to gain "profundity."[3]

Williams hoped that the metaphorical connections he forged in his poem would give meaning and significance to the details of his life.

In his last collection of poems, *The Far Field*, Theodore Roethke imagines death as a journey over "long waters" and life after death as a distant meadow; furthermore, in the title poem, Roethke predicts that after death he will finally understand how "finite things reveal infinitude," how each mountain, odor and memory forms part of the "ripple widening from a single stone" or life.[4] In the last poem in the volume, "Once More the Round," Roethke, like Williams, pictures life as a unified, and unifying, dance: "And I dance with William Blake / For love, for Love's sake; / And everything comes to One, / As we dance on, dance on, dance on."[5]

The late-career works of these writers suggest that they seek comprehensive vision through art because this vision imparts a satisfying and profound apprehension of unity and wholeness in their particular lives and in human life in general. But writers and artists are not the only ones searching for "overlook," "profundity," and "oneness." In his popular explanation of modern science, *A Brief History of Time*, Stephen Hawking

says, "The eventual goal of science is to provide a single theory that describes the entire universe."[6] He goes on to write in the introduction:

> But ever since the dawn of civilization, people have not been content to see events as unconnected and inexplicable. They have craved an understanding of the underlying order in the world. Today we still yearn to know why we are here and where we came from. Humanity's deepest desire for knowledge is justification enough for our continuing quest. And our goal is nothing less than a complete description of the universe we live in.[7]

If we take Hawking's and Williams' statements together, we see that modern science and art possess a common goal but proceed by different routes. Hawking says that people are not content to "see events as unconnected and inexplicable"; Williams declares that his "isolated observations and experiences needed pulling together." Hawking says people "crave an understanding of the underlying order in the world" and that scientific theory can satisfy this craving; Williams seeks an artistic, metaphoric image large enough to "embody" the discrete elements of his life and give them "profundity."

Sacramental Vision: A Definition

We might define the goal of the above writers, and even of theoretical scientists like Hawking, as the pursuit of "sacramental vision." According to *Webster's*, "sacrament" means "something regarded as possessing a sacred character or mysterious significance."[8] The Protestant church associates the word "sacrament" with baptism and the Lord's Supper; in the Reformed tradition particularly, theologians define sacraments

as "holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace."[9] As signs, these Christian observances and their physical elements point to realities outside and beyond themselves. The administration of water, bread, and wine signifies the saving grace of Christ given to each believer through faith.[10] Thus, in their function as signs and symbols, sacraments bring physical and spiritual realities into meaningful—and metaphoric—relationship with one another. In fact, in the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, the Westminster divines say that a "sacramental union" exists "between the sign and the thing signified" such that "the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other."[11] For example, at the institution of the Lord's Supper, Jesus establishes a sacramental, symbolic union between wine and his own blood: "Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins" (Matthew 26: 27-28).[12] That which is not blood (wine) is spoken of as if it is and thereby takes on profound significance, pointing to a number of spiritual realities such as grace, forgiveness, redemption, sacrifice, judgment, and covenant. The Lord's Supper also points backwards and forwards, in and out of time, to represent experiential realities as well: the last supper with the apostles, the death of Christ, and the future "marriage supper of the Lamb" (Revelation 19:9) when Christ will host a great banquet for the redeemed.

Building on the above ideas, we can construct a definition of "sacramental vision": a vision of the interconnectedness of all discrete elements of human experience and physical reality such that the world appears as one vast and coherent whole; a satisfying vision of the mysterious and meaningful significances attached to all facets of life, even the mundane and ordinary. In many ways, the search for "sacramental vision" is a search for "sacramental union" between the "this-and-that's"of reality. This

definition pushes past Hawking's call for mere "*description* of the universe" (even if "complete") and more toward the poet's desire for "profundity." In the remainder of this essay, I will discuss the ways in which art in general, and creative writing in particular, are fueled by the desire for sacramental vision and achieve this vision in a limited but typical fashion. First, however, I will examine a classic literary text in which sacramental vision plays an important thematic role.

Sacramental Vision and The Divine Comedy

At the end of *The Divine Comedy*, after Dante has journeyed through the circles of the Inferno, the terraces of Mount Purgatory and the various spheres of Paradise, he arrives at the highest point in the universe, the Empyrean, where he sees the Trinity. In Catholic theology, this direct apprehension of God is called the "beatific vision":

> The immediate knowledge of God which the angelic spirits and the souls of the just enjoy in Heaven. It is called "vision" to distinguish it from the mediate knowledge of God which the human mind may attain in the present life. And since in beholding God face to face the created intelligence finds perfect happiness, the vision is termed "beatific."[13]

In Canto XXXIII of the *Paradiso*, Dante "raise[s] his vision higher still / to penetrate the final blessedness" (lines 26-27) and sees the "Light Supreme" (line 67) which contains "three circles / in three clear colors bound in one same space" (lines 116-117)—Father, Son and Holy Spirit.[14]

However, in addition to this face-to-face knowledge (or beatific vision) of the perfections of the Divine, Dante also achieves an intuitive understanding (or sacramental vision) of the unity and wholeness of the mundane:

> O grace abounding and allowing me to dare
> to fix my gaze on the Eternal Light,
> so deep my vision was consumed in It!
> I saw how it contains within its depths
> all things bound in a single book by love
> of which creation is the scattered leaves:
> how substance, accident, and their relation
> were fused in such a way that what I now
> describe is but a glimmer of that Light.
> I know I saw the universal form,
> the fusion of all things, for I can feel,
> while speaking now, my heart leap up in joy. (lines 82-93)

As Dante indicates, sacramental vision allows him to see how all "scattered" things are "bound in a single book," how all things (substances), attributes of things (accidents) and relationships between things (relations) are "fused" together. Similar to the beatific vision, this vision leads to great happiness and satisfaction: "[Dante's] heart [leaps] up in joy."[15]

A Biblical Perspective on Sacramental Vision

If we return to the first few chapters of Genesis, we see that human language always has involved a sacramental dimension. In Genesis 1:28, God gave the "cultural mandate" (the command to rule creation and to create culture) to Adam and Eve and their posterity: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion . . . over every living thing that moves on the earth." As demonstrated in Genesis 2, the first and primary way that humans began to subdue creation was through practical and creative language. When Adam "gave names to all livestock and to the birds of the heavens and to every beast of the field" (Genesis 2:20), he did more than assign random linguistic markers to animals. We can be assured that his naming work was not a Seussian exercise resulting in generic appellations like "Thing One" and "Thing Two" (an observation not meant to cast aspersions on the genius of Dr. Seuss). Based on the command to rule and subdue, Adam's naming most likely involved the attempt to distinguish and classify animals. In other words, through practical language, Adam sought to understand the unity and order in God's garden creation, to see how all the various parts fit together to form a whole—which, by our working definition above, is a sacramental goal.

Likewise, in Chapter 2 of Genesis, Adam composes a poem about Eve, the pinnacle of creation:

> This at last is bone of my bones
>
> and flesh of my flesh;
>
> she shall be called Woman,
>
> because she was taken out of Man. (Genesis 2:23)

Through the medium of creative language, Adam attempts to perceive order, meaning and unity in various facets of his experiential reality: marriage, attraction, romance, sex, gender, similarity, difference, covenants, promises, aloneness, relationship, oneness, love, respect, authority, submission, etc. Thus, both practical and creative language acts provide Adam with a sacramental understanding of how part relates to whole, how "all things" are "fused" in a "universal form."

The above examples underscore the primacy and importance of language as a tool for understanding physical creation and human experience and for apprehending the connections that these have with spiritual reality. I often tell students in fiction, poetry and nonfiction workshops that writing is an excavation tool, a shovel we use to unearth meaning from the past and present. We do not use pens and computers merely to record on paper what we already know; we come to know what we know, and what can be known, through writing itself. As Adam named animals, the rich complexities of biological diversity unfolded before him; as he praised Eve with metaphor and image, his intimate relationship with her grew deeper and more fulfilling. Humans are distinguished from all other creatures in that they speak, write, create and ask the ultimately human question, "Why?" Naming was our first real task in tending the garden and subduing the world; poetry is our oldest art form (e.g., Adam's poem in Genesis 2)—both of which testify to our inherent and distinctive ability to use language.

As writers, the creation of poems and stories teaches us about the world and life, but the lessons do not stop there. We also learn about the Author of history's grand narrative, about the first Metaphor-Maker who likens the creation of "light" to the human act of speaking. According to the doctrine of natural revelation, the created order testifies

to God's existence and His character: "[God's] attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made" (Romans 1:20). Consequently, as we subdue creation with language and pursue a sacramental understanding of its order, we do (or should) apprehend something more about the One who is the great Order-/Story-/Metaphor-Maker. In his *Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes*, G. I. Williamson describes Adam's relationship to nature and to God, and his sacramental work in the garden before the fall:

> Before [Adam] the whole creation . . . was an unclouded mirror in which God could be seen with clear vision. . . . It was the task of man to become conscious of all the meaning deposited by God in the universe. Man began this task. . . . He used God-given powers of investigation to discover the true (that is, God-imprinted) meaning of nature. When Adam named something in the world of nature, he was simply reading the name (meaning) put there by God.[16]

Now, in the post-fall era, the mirror of nature is cloudy because human minds and hearts are darkened by sin, but the work of the writer (and the work of artists in general) can still be redemptive as the writer or artist seeks to illumine what can be seen about the Made, and about the Maker, through the now-dim mirror of the Made.

As the consummate Metaphor-Maker, God even discloses Himself in terms of language metaphors. At least three theological "Word" metaphors exist in scripture: the Spoken Word, the Written Word and the Living Word. As mentioned above, the Genesis account pictures creation as the Spoken Word of God—each day of creation begins with

the phrase, "And God said. . . ." (Genesis 1), followed by the appearance *ex nihilo* of what God "says." In Proverbs, Solomon personifies the "Wisdom" of God (that which is contained in God's Written Word) as a woman who calls out in the streets and markets, "Wisdom cries aloud in the street, in the markets she raises her voice" (Proverbs 1:20). Finally, in the strikingly poetic prologue to the gospel of John, the disciple "whom Jesus loved" portrays his Master as the Living Word: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

In fact, in his narrative, John appropriates a term (*logos*, or "word") from the Greek Stoics and gives it new meaning in order to describe Christ. According to the Stoics, *logos* is the ordering principle of the whole universe:

> The term was used technically in the Greek philosophy of this period, particularly by the Stoics, to denote the controlling Reason of the universe, the all-pervasive Mind which ruled and gave meaning to all things. LOGOS was one of the purest and most general concepts of that ultimate Intelligence, Reason, or Will that is called God.[17]

Of course, John says much more than this about Christ: (1) While Christ is the "controlling Reason of the universe" and the "all-pervasive Mind which rule[s] and [gives] meaning to all things," He is not mere principle; rather, He is a personal, knowable being; (2) Christ is both the creator of the universe and the Redeemer who brings "light" and "life" to human beings (John 1:4); and (3) Christ existed before the world began, became incarnate and walked among us: "He was in the world, and the world was made through Him" (John 1:10).

A related Hebrew term (*dābār*) occurs in the Old Testament to describe the "word of the Lord" (an utterance from God):

> As *dābār*, God's word is the virtual concrete expression of his personality. God is what he says. . . . As the expression of his being and character, the word of the Lord is the supreme means by which God makes himself known to his creatures. By such a word the world was brought into existence and history set in motion.[18]

Clearly, the *logos* of the New Testament and the *dābār* of the Old Testament are one and the same: The incarnate Christ is the "concrete expression of [God's] personality" and the "Word" that "brought the world into existence and set history in motion" (cf. John 1). As discussed, God uses his Word (Spoken, Written and Living) to "make himself known." In comparison—because we are made in God's image—humans use language to "make themselves known" (the expressive function of writing and speaking); however, we also use language to "know ourselves, the world, and the Creator" (the excavation function mentioned previously)—and this is where our writing assumes sacramental dimensions. Because God is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent, He condescends to "make Himself known" through language but has no need to "know Himself, humans, or the world"—He already does.

Finally, we have come full circle to the goal of sacramental vision. To know Christ, the Living Word (*logos*, *dābār*), is to know the One through whom all exists, by whom all is sustained, and in whom all will be consummated. Many passages in the New Testament speak of Christ as the agent who unifies all creation and imparts meaning to human life: "He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together" (Colossians

1:17); the Father has "[made] known to us the mystery of His will . . . which He set forth in Christ . . . to unite all things in Him, things in heaven and things on earth" (Ephesians 1:9-10); "[the Son] is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Hebrews 1:3); and finally, Christ's own words at the conclusion of the Book of Revelation, "I am the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end" (22:13).

Conclusion

If we return to the example in Dante's *Paradiso*, we see that the writer's sacramental vision preceded his beatific vision, and this is as it must be. Sacramental vision is always a penultimate vision in terms of importance; ultimately, we must apprehend the One who cements all together in profound relationship. Modern writers, such as those mentioned at the beginning of this essay, seem determined to pursue sacramental vision without acknowledging a grand Unifier, often believing that art or language can be that Unifier. Oddly enough, Hawking, the scientist, is the one who recognizes (at the end of *A Brief History of Time*) that science eventually leads to theology: "If we find the answer to [the question of why it is that we and the universe exist], it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason—for then we would know the mind of God."[19] Science and art can give us some answers—many answers—because both are God-ordained tools for tending and subduing the creation; language especially, as discussed, can be a powerful tool. If we are diligent in our creative works, we may catch heavenly glimpses that serve as types of the "face-to-face" vision to come. At the end of the *Paradiso*, "power failed [Dante's] high fantasy"; however, "like a wheel in

perfect balance turning, / [He] felt [his] will and [his] desire impelled / by the Love that moves the sun and the other stars" (lines 142-45). This "Love" is what we hope to glimpse now—and see then.

Dr. Randy Smith is associate professor of English at Belhaven College in Jackson, MS, where he directs the creative writing program. He can be contacted at rsmith@belhaven.edu or at 601-968-8996.

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Notes

[1] James Dickey, *The Whole Motion: Collected Poems, 1945-1992* (Hanover: Wesleyan UP, 1992), 431.
[2] William Carlos Williams, *Paterson* (New York: New Directions, 1958), 239.
[3] Williams, iii
[4] Theodore Roethke, *Roethke: Collected Poems* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1966), 201.
[5] Roethke, 251.
[6] Stephen W. Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam, 1988), 10.
[7] Hawking, 13.
[8] *Random House Webster's College Dictionary* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1991).
[9] G.I. Williamson, *The Westminster Confession of Faith for Study Classes* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2004), 259.
[10] Williamson, 260.
[11] Williamson, 262.
[12] All Scripture quotations are from *The Reformation Study Bible*, English Standard Version, ed. R. C. Sproul et al. (Orlando: Ligonier Ministries, 2005).
[13] "Beatific Vision," *Catholic Encyclopedia Online* (www.newadvent.org).
[14] Dante Alighieri, "The Divine Comedy: Paradiso," *The Norton Anthology of Western Literature*, 8th ed., Vol. 1 (New York: Norton, 2006), 1597.
[15] According to the entry on "heaven" in the *Catholic Encyclopedia Online* (www.newadvent.org), the "beatific vision" itself possesses a "sacramental" element called the "secondary object of the beatific vision": "But in fact, there is always connected with the beatific vision a knowledge of various things external to God, of the

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possible as well as of the actual. All these things, taken collectively, constitute the secondary object of the beatific vision."

[16] Williamson, 2-3.

[17] Merrill C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 62.

[18] Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 1185-86.

[19] Hawking, 175.