

A Pilgrim's Progress to the Heavenly City: A Biblical and Theological Foundation for Creative Writing

From ancient times, human beings have used both practical and poetic language. Randy Smith examines the theological foundations of these ways of ordering different facets of human life.

When I get to the poetry section of English 102—where sunsets look like “etherized patients” and subway riders resemble “petals on a wet, black bough”—freshman composition students often ask me why poets cannot just “say what they mean” instead of using the roundabout language of poetry. Implied in this question is the belief that creative language, because of its indirection, says so much less—and, therefore, is worth so much less—than straightforward, practical language. But nothing could be further from the truth.

In fact, in the first two chapters of Genesis, we find an endorsement of man's use of both practical and poetic language—each important as a way of ordering some facet of human life. Man's first recorded task in the Garden of Eden is the naming of “all cattle ... the birds of the air, and ... every beast of the field” (Gen. 2:20). Through the practical act of naming, Adam brings order to his external world, much as we use language today to categorize, define, explain, and argue in fields as diverse as business, science, education, and journalism.

In addition, Adam uses language in “impractical” ways before the fall. After his deep sleep, during which time God made Eve, Adam awakes and speaks man's first recorded words—a poem in praise of woman:

This is now bone of my bones
And flesh of my flesh;
She shall be called Woman,
Because she was taken out of Man (Gen. 2:23).

Of course, this statement is literally true in a way (Eve was made from one of Adam's own bones), but mostly the utterance is figuratively true (a statement of how Eve seems to Adam). Implied in Adam's bodily metaphors are the following ideas: Eve feels like a part of Adam, like the

deepest part of him; Adam feels intimately connected to Eve; Eve fits Adam like his own bones and body; Adam loves Eve and desires to care for her like his own body; Eve nurtures and supports Adam like the blood made in the marrow of his own bones; losing Eve would be like losing a part of Adam's own body. If Adam had substituted any of these straightforward statements for his love poem to Eve, he would have said so much less—not so much more, as my freshman students often believe—than he said with his poem. Through naming (using factual language), Adam brought order to his external world by categorizing the varieties of animal life around him. Through making (using imaginative, metaphorical language), Adam brought order to his experiential world by suggesting and unveiling the meaning in his discovery of a bride.

Besides teaching composition and literature courses at Belhaven, I also direct the creative writing program and teach students in creative writing workshops each semester. While these students need less convincing than freshman composition students about the importance of creative language found in fiction, poetry, drama, and personal essays, they still (like many of us) are not likely to have thought through the philosophical and theological foundations for human involvement in creative writing. I believe we can find this foundation in three theological events—the Creation, the Incarnation, and the Ascension—each a way that God the Son intervened in human life.

In the creation account at the beginning of Genesis, we learn that “God created man in his own image” (Gen. 1:27). Besides being personal, relational, rational, moral, and spiritual, humans also reflect the “image of God” by being creative. In fact, as Leland Ryken points out in *The Liberated Imagination* (his book on “thinking Christianly about the arts”): “The one thing that we know about God [in Genesis 1] is that he created the world. In its immediate narrative context, then, the doctrine of the image of God in people emphasizes that people are, like God, creators.”

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As discussed above, one of the primary ways that man reproduces at his own creaturely level the holy creativity of God is through language. Just as God made—“then God said, ‘Let there be light’” (Gen. 1:3)—and named—“God called the light Day” (Gen 1:5)—so man names and makes. However, while God speaks his world into existence *ex nihilo* (from nothing), man

speaks his ideas into existence *ex omnibus* (from all things), using images from God's world as symbols to give flesh and bones to his thoughts.

As we find out in John 1, it is the second person of the Trinity, the divine Word—the Logos, the divine “reason” that brings order or harmony to the universe—who accomplishes the physical act of creation, who brings order and variety to the formless void.² In the same way, man uses words of both reason and imagination to bring order to his physical and experiential worlds. In part, man obeys the cultural mandate of Genesis 1:28 through language, using words to “subdue” the world, to both order and understand.

The Incarnation and Ascension provide models and symbols for two opposite movements in the creative use of language. In the Incarnation of Christ, we find an example of the spirit becoming flesh and, thus, a model for how human thoughts may become concrete expressions, for how ideas become poems and stories. As Ryken says about art in general: “The Incarnation of Christ provides a superb model for what a work of art is. Art, too, is a little incarnation—an embodiment of meaning in the concrete form of images, sounds, and stories.”³ Ryken even points out that Jesus practiced an incarnational aesthetic during his earthly life by telling parables—embodying heavenly truths in real-world stories about good Samaritans, diligent shepherds, and unforgiving servants.⁴

In one of my favorite poems on the philosophy of poetry, “Ars Poetica” by Archibald MacLeish, the poet says: “For all the history of grief / An empty doorway and a maple leaf.”⁵ What MacLeish seems to mean in this rather fragmented statement is that he could symbolize much about the entire history of human grief with the single image of an empty doorway and a fallen leaf—the doorway suggesting loneliness and absence, the leaf implying death and decay. This is an incarnational aesthetic in practice, employing the symbolism inherent in God's creation to express human experience in meaningful ways.

The second movement in the use of creative language is modeled on the Ascension of Christ—the movement from the world of flesh to the world of spirit, from image to insight, from reality to revelation. In this way, every kind of artwork—every poem, story, painting, photograph, musical composition, and dance—has the potential to become a type of “pilgrim's progress,”

moving the reader or audience from man's reality to God's reality, from earth to the heavenly city where Christ has ascended.

We might take a poem by Elizabeth Bishop entitled "Filling Station" as an example of a work that ascends towards redemptive insight. Although not specifically Christian in any way, the poem moves from a description of the "oil-soaked, oil-permeated" world of a little family-owned filling station to a cosmic glimpse of a loving "Somebody" who watches over us all (stanzas 1, 4, 5, and 6 quoted below):

Oh, but it is dirty!
 —this little filling station,
 oil-soaked, oil-permeated
 to a disturbing, over-all
 black translucency.
 Be careful with that match!

...

Some comic books provide
 the only note of color—
 of certain color. They lie
 upon a big dim doily
 draping a taboret
 (part of the set), beside
 a big hirsute begonia.

Why the extraneous plant?
 Why the taboret?
 Why, oh why, the doily?
 (Embroidered in daisy stitch
 with marguerites, I think,
 and heavy with gray crochet.)

Somebody embroidered the doily.
 Somebody waters the plant,
 or oils it, maybe. Somebody
 arranges the rows of cans
 so that they softly say:
 ESSO—SO—SO—SO
 to high-strung automobiles.
 Somebody loves us all. ⁶

In the last stanza, Bishop describes the signs of care and order in the otherwise dirty and disordered station. The fact that "somebody" cares enough to make a doily, water the plant, and arrange the cans in an insignificant gas station suggests that "Somebody" (with a capital "S") is

watching out for us all. Overall, the poem moves from “dirt” to design, from the inanimate, to the human, to the divine.⁷

In summary, these are the theological foundations for the work of creative writers: (1) God created us in His image with the ability to subdue the world through language, to bring order to our experiences by unveiling the meaning in them through words; (2) God took a human body on Himself and modeled for us the way that human thought can find concrete expression in the images and symbols of this world; (3) Christ, once his earthly work was complete, ascended back to the heavenly places, showing us that we must write with an awareness of the redemptive moments that penetrate our lives and of the heavenly hosts that witness our journey. We begin with Pilgrim in the lower region of “sorrow, sickness, affliction, and death” but hope to end with him where we “shall see the tree of life, and eat of the never-fading fruits thereof.”⁸

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 Leland Ryken, *The Liberated Imagination: Thinking Christianly About the Arts* (Colorado Springs: Shaw, 1989), 66.

² *New Geneva Study Bible*, ed. R.C. Sproul, et al. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1995), 1658.

³ Ryken, 17.

⁴ Ryken, 135.

⁵ Archibald MacLeish, "Arts Poetica," in *Poems on Poetry: The Mirror's Garland*, ed. Robert Wallace and James G. Taaffe (New York: Dutton, 1965), 311.

⁶ Elizabeth Bishop, *The Complete Poems: 1927-1979* (New York: Noonday P, 1997), 127-28.

⁷ Some of the ideas in this section were suggested by an article by Robert Klein Engler entitled "Confessions of a Poetry Editor" in *The Christian Imagination*, ed. Leland Ryken (Colorado Springs: Shaw, 2002), 262-75. In this essay, Engler discusses the need for Christian poets to "strike the right balance between the body and the spirit" (262). To achieve this balance, poets must ground their writing in "this world of time and place" while seeking to transcend the temporal and find a higher, spiritual "order" (268).

⁸ John Bunyan, *The Pilgrim's Progress* (Grand Rapids: Revell, n.d.), 150.