

Protagonist Corner

Words and the Word

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From the moment I awake, I begin to look forward to my rest at the end of the day. Regardless of the exertions and stresses that the day will bring, I can anticipate a moment of leisure before I sleep. The little sabbatical for which I long is when I read in bed. At last I can escape from the vulgarity of cell phone chatter, the crossfire of ideological sparring, and the solipsism of the celluloid world of television where celebrities talk about celebrities. The mind seeks satisfaction of its appetite for a realm where, as Keats wrote,

Beauty is truth, truth beauty—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.¹

In my reading I shun most popular fiction not because of aesthetic snobbery but simply because it cannot satisfy the mind. There is a place for fiction that aims to provide mere entertainment. Sometimes an overworked mind just needs a respite. Probably that is why Karl Barth concluded his days of study reading mysteries. I might enjoy a John Grisham novel in an airport, but I would rather read Willa Cather during my daily sabbatical in bed. I choose to read some poems and then a passage from a novel. If I am in the mood for nonfiction, I am usually reading nature writing or essays. My nightly sabbatical is a retreat into a world of words. This world is a garden of language where words grow into trees of knowledge and flowers of delight. The sensuousness of this place is appreciated the most when words are read aloud so that they are felt in the body as well as perceived by the mind. The poet Pablo Neruda opened a dictionary that rose up before him as

a tree,
a natural,
bountiful
apple blossom,
apple orchard, apple tree,
and words glittered in its infinite branches,
opaque or sonorous,
fertile in the fronds of language,
charged with truth and sound.²

Regrettably the world of words is a garden that many rarely enter.

I find it hard to comprehend the surveys of pastors' habits of reading and learn that most of us do not read very much except books of church administration or popular essays on religious topics. It is distressing to think that most pastors are not engaged in serious theological study. It is also disheartening to realize that most pastors are not reading literature.

Perhaps there is no vocational incentive to read literature anymore. The late George Buttrick used to enrich his sermons with lyrics from the best poems of the English language to the delight of his mid-twentieth century New York congregation. But the pastor of the mega-church in the Land-of-Lakes gated community thinks that if he is going to reach his audience he would do better to show on the screen a scene from a movie or tell about an episode from a situation comedy.

I agree that padding a sermon with literary allusions would more likely distract rather than delight most congregations today. Popular culture reigns, and it is popular culture because it is...popular. Nevertheless, there is still some incentive for pastors to read. Reading informs our vocabulary and cultivates our imagination. A pastor who reads may only rarely make a literary allusion, but she will learn how to use her own words to tell a story or describe a scene or express an idea.

I would appeal for a practice of manuscript preaching even if the manuscript stays on the pastor's desk rather than on the pastor's pulpit. Writing a manuscript requires the pastor to choose words and sentences intentionally in order to communicate powerfully to the hearers' minds. It is still true that

A word fitly spoken
is like apples of gold in a
setting of silver. (Proverbs 25:11)

Even in the midst of the banality of popular culture, a community of the Word will care about its words.

Lest I be misunderstood, I hasten to say that my entreaty to pastors to read is not primarily because of vocational advantages, but because of our souls' needs. I do not read to search for sermon illustrations but for my own spiritual nourishment. Frankly, my nightly sabbatical is part of the spiritual rule of my life. To admit that reading literature is nothing less than part of our spiritual nourishment must arouse suspicion in the Protestant mind. My own spiritual father, John Wesley, proclaimed himself to be *homo unius libri*, a man of one book, the Bible. Even though his claim is belied by the numerous allusions in his journal to his reading of classical poets, history, and natural science, it expresses a Protestant orthodoxy that the Bible and the spiritual writings of the saints provide the only reading fit for the soul. Is there room in our spiritual lives for the reading of literature? Is it appropriate for Christians to read literature not only for aesthetic delight but also for spiritual nourishment?

Art and religion are closer to one another than any other realms of human endeavor and experience. The artist thinks of himself as "inspired" as much as a saint and self-consciously aspires to enable the reader to apprehend the truth or even to learn how to live. The literary critic Northrop Frye said, "mythology and literature occupy the same verbal space." Mythology, he asserted, is "the matrix of literature." Surely artists operate out of different mythologies. As Frye observed, "A poet who accepts a mythology as valid for belief, as Dante and Milton accepted Christianity, will naturally use it; poets outside such a tradition turn to other mythologies as suggestive or symbolic of what might be believed, as in the adaptations of Classical or occult mythological systems made by Goethe, Victor Hugo, Shelley, or Yeats."³ The theological and spiritual presuppositions of the artist—what Frye calls the "mythology"—means that the artist intends to illumine as well as to entertain.

I have experienced many moments of illumination in reading literature. For example, consider the scene in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* when Lily Briscoe returns to the summerhouse beside the water facing the lighthouse and grieves the death of her friend, Mrs. Ramsey. Lily thinks,

What is the meaning of life? That was all—a simple question; one that tended to close in on one with years. The great revelation had never come. The great revelation perhaps never did come. Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark; here was one. This, that, and the other; herself and Charles Tansley and the breaking wave; Mrs. Ramsey bringing them together; Mrs. Ramsey saying, “Life stand still here”; Mrs. Ramsey making of the moment something permanent—this was of the nature of a revelation. In the midst of chaos there was shape; this eternal passing and flowing (she looked at the clouds going and the leaves shaking) was struck into stability. Life stand still here, Mrs. Ramsey said. “Mrs. Ramsey! Mrs. Ramsey!” she repeated. She owed it all to her.⁴

Here the artist declares what the theologian might call the Eternal Now. In her own way Virginia Woolf is expressing the same truth as Hans Urs von Balthasar, who wrote,

The sun that is shining right now will set and never rise again; the water that is gushing from the spring right now will flow away and never return. The moment of being is transitory, so transitory that it can never be brought back. It is only with this transitoriness that the moment becomes fully, irreplaceably precious: its value is so great that literally nothing can make up for it. The moment is not just a singular event, but the very singularity of all events, the qualitative specification of every last fragment of being. This relation of the present to the past, indeed, this intrinsic precariousness of the present, which itself contains the seed of its own passing, is precisely what gives every moment of existence in this world its infinite, eternal weight.

For von Balthasar this awareness is a moment of truth that requires a spiritual decision: “In the situation, the truth comes to a head in an emphatic presence: you have to grasp it *here*—or nowhere.”⁵ To von Balthasar such an awareness is a sign that our existence can be described only by contrast with essence which signifies the mystery of God's eternal presence in time.

Reading literature is a means of entering into a world of words that enables us to see and to live with a new awareness of the goodness of life in its pleasure and pathos. Thus reading may be a contemplative act and justifiably a part of one's spiritual rule. When I read the words of the artists, often I am awakened by their insights or illuminations. There are moments when it seems to me that their muse is the Spirit of God. However, we who are Christians pray, “In your light we see light” (Psalm 36:9). All illuminations of the artist are viewed with discernment as refractions or distortions of the light of the Holy Spirit. Because the Spirit dwells in mutuality with the Word

and the Father, we measure our discernment by the revealed Word of the Father who is either the affirmation or correction of the words of artists.

A Christian remembers that all *logoi*—all words—must be read in the context of the *Logos*—the Word. That Word is Jesus Christ, the one whom the apostles saw with their own eyes and touched with their own hands and whom they declared to be “the word of life” that had been “revealed” to them (I John 1:1-3). This Word who came into the world is “the true light, which enlightens everyone” (John 1:9). Only in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the incarnate Word of God do we receive the definitive enlightenment of our hearts by faith that restores us to a right relationship to our Creator and transforms us into the image and likeness of God. All other good words can only be illuminations of that one enlightenment. These illuminations will be incomplete or ambiguous and must be tested by the enlightenment of the Word of God. Measuring our discernment of the illuminations of an artist’s words by the incarnate Word is especially necessary if it is true, as Harold Bloom asserts, that Gnosticism is “*the religion of literature*.”⁶ This is why any spiritual rule that includes literature must be grounded in a rule of searching the Scriptures and receiving the sacraments.

The relationship between words and the Word is not merely one-sided with the Word serving as the measure of truth of all other words. Our hearing of the Word can be enlivened by our listening to other words as well. For example, consider Thomas Merton’s journal on January 17, 1960. After noting, “What is wrong is a confused flight into secular consolations, without discernment,” Merton then demonstrated the opposite truth—how secular reading with discernment can give us a new appreciation of the gospel. He told of the shattering effect of reading Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*. He viewed Prometheus as the “archetypal representation of the suffering Christ,” and observed, “Prometheus startles us by being more fully Christ than the Lord of our clichés—I mean, he is free from all the falsifications and limitations of our hackneyed vision which has slowly emptied itself of reality.”⁷

Christians who regularly practice a rule of worshiping in the church and searching the Scriptures and who also read plays, novels, and poems may experience how a dramatic scene, characterization, or lyric that captures our imagination can help us hear the Word with fresh understanding. Perhaps reading other words opens the windows to let light shine upon the Word in a way that enables us to see its revelation in our own lives. The words of literature may be understood to be what Karl Barth called “parables of the kingdom in the secular sphere.” Human words that agree with the Word in their own context can serve as secular parables of the truth. Barth wrote,

Has it not always been true that the community has always had cause and opportunity to hear in the nearer or more distant world around it words which are at least worth testing whether or not they are perhaps true words, and in which it will sooner or later recognize with joy something of its own most proper message, or perhaps be forced to recognize this with shame, because by them it is shown and made to realize the omissions and truncations of its own message?⁸

I shall continue to practice my little sabbatical of reading in bed. I will not despise

the words of the artist, but I will accept them for the sake of the Word who dwelt among us to make our world—and our words—holy by the illumination of the Spirit.

Notes

1. "Ode on a Grecian Urn," *Selected Poetry* (New York: New American Library, 1966), 253.
2. "Ode to the Dictionary," *Selected Odes of Pablo Neruda*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 197.
3. "Myth, Fiction, and Displacement," *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: A Harbinger Book, 1963), 33.
4. *To the Lighthouse* (San Diego: A Harvest/HBJ Book, 1955), 240-241.
5. *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory*, Volume I (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 197-198.
6. *Genius* (New York: Warner Books, 2002), xviii.
7. *A Search For Solitude* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 370.
8. *Church Dogmatics*, Volume IV, Part Three, First Half (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1961), 124.