13 A Word Made Flesh: Incarnational Language and the Writer

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> The words of God, expressed in the words of men, are in every way like human language, just as the Word of the eternal Father, when he took on himself the flesh of human weakness, became like men.
> The Second Vatican Council, 'Dogmatic Constitution of Divine Revelation'[629]
>
> The substance, the means of art, is an incarnation: not reference but phenomena.
> Denise Levertov, 'Origins of a Poem'[630]

The incarnation contains within it a little joke on writers. For we discover that when we want to evoke religious experience, merely piling on the etherous superlatives—*holy, mysterious, wondrous, glorious*—does not work. In fact, it is decidedly counterproductive. Only when we are willing to get down to the nitty-gritty, returning to that manger stall, as it were, with its earthy smells, chill air, and a baby's cry, is it possible for our words to incarnate religious faith. Only then can our words invite the reader to discover, not ideas about the holy, but an experience of it.

I Writing Lessons

The primary maxim of the contemporary writing workshop—'Show, do not tell'—has its correlative in the incarnation itself. If

[629] A. Flannery (ed.), *The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975), 758.

[630] D. Levertov, 'Origins of a Poem', in D. Hall (ed.), *Claims for Poetry* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982), 260.

Mary had wanted to 'tell', she might have come forth with a treatise, or a book of theology. Instead, she had a baby, and that has made all the difference.

For the writer intent on writing incarnational literature—and by that I don't mean writing centred on the life of Christ or the theology of the church, but simply literature that 'shows' in such a way that it comes to life for the reader—one of the first lessons is that you must give up the illusion of control. Adjectives are dangerous, for example, and must be used with care, as they tend to tell the reader how to feel. A copy editor once caused me to rethink a phrase in which I had described something as a 'shocking lie', by commenting 'Don't you think you should let the reader decide that for herself?'

The poet W. H. Auden puts this into theological terms in his essay, 'Words and the Word', stating that the analogy of creation 'by the Word of God implies a belief that creation is an act of power, or authority, not of force or violence, one in which the role of the created is as essential as that of the creator'.[631] In a well-realized poem, the poet is invisible behind the words, but in more amateurish work the poet seeks to force the reader to adopt his or her point of view. In sentimental verse about the incarnation of Jesus Christ, for example, one might encounter a surfeit of statements replete with adjectives, the words 'wonderful', 'glorious', 'miraculous', used to emphasize that a momentous event has occurred. Christmas cards are often overloaded with such words, words that preach to the converted, in that they reassure believers who are already convinced of the miracle. But they are incapable of quickening the hearts of those who stand outside, who doubt, or who find words such as 'miraculous' devoid of meaning. And even for believers, in a culture laden with too much talk, religious words and images can rapidly turn dull, calcifying into jargon that has lost its power to surprise or move us.

Religious language seems especially vulnerable to being taken for granted and turned into mindless slogans, and yet Christian poets and pastors alike must employ the language and imagery of faith. The 'lamb of God', for example, is an image, a phrase with a rich history in the tradition, but today tends to remain submerged in the

[631] W. H. Auden, 'Words and the Word', in J. Greenhaigh and E. Russell (eds.), *If Christ Be Not Risen: Essays in Resurrection and Survival* (San Francisco: Collins Liturgical, 1988), 69.

Roman Catholic Mass. In that context it is heard in passing and quickly passed over, not much examined or discussed. But the poet Denise Levertov makes it come alive again in her 'Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus'. In the 'Agnus Dei' the poet wonders at a God who would appear as defenseless as a lamb, whose omnipotence has been ' . . . tossed away | reduced to a wisp of damp wool'. The poet asks if we must 'hold to our icy hearts | a shivering God'?, and concludes: 'Come, rag of pungent | quiverings, dim star. | Let's try | if something human still | can shield you, | spark | of remote light'.[632]

The adjectives Levertov employs tend to be those that speak directly to our senses: 'icy', 'shivering', 'pungent'. And yet she manages to evoke not only the wonder of the Bethlehem star, but the smells of the manger, and the incarnation of Jesus Christ that takes hold in the human heart. Her language might spark a renewed sense of awe in a Christian reader, and for an atheist or a reader of another faith, might well provide a better understanding of what the incarnation means for a Christian. Her poem has done the work of poetry, which is not argument, but revelation. Not reference, but incarnation.

II Incarnational Language

I use the term 'incarnational language' with poetic licence, as I generally mean it in a literary sense, rather than an exclusively theological one.[633] There is a great distinction between language that is incarnational, and that which is not, and it is usually easy for people to tell the difference, especially to hear the difference when listening to a speech, or a literary work read out loud.

Incarnational language engages our senses, but mere verbiage serves to dis-incarnate us, asking us to pretend that we live in a

[632] D. Levertov, 'Mass for the Day of St. Thomas Didymus', *Candles in Babylon* (New York: New Directions, 1982), 114–15.

[633] [The other chapters of this book persistently use 'incarnation' in its precise, theological sense. But that is not to belittle various 'extended', literary meanings: for example a writer may describe some character as 'affability incarnate' or 'the incarnation of affability'. Naturally David Brown's chapter on the incarnation in 20th-cent. art at times also introduces 'wider' religious impulses. The creative freedom of literature and art calls for such an 'extended' use of the language and symbols for the incarnation. Eds.]

world of abstractions. A brief passage from George Orwell's essay, 'Politics and the English Language', vividly illustrates this point. Orwell first cites Ecclesiastes 9: 11 (KJV): 'I saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to those of understanding, nor yet favour to those of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all.'[634]

This language reflects the world we know from our senses: we can smell the bread, and feel the sunlight on our faces as we see the racers running swiftly, with all their strength and skill. We can almost feel the whoosh of air on our skins as they pass by. Even the abstractions here—time and chance—have some incarnational weight, because they cause us to brood on our own mortality. Once 'time' and 'chance' enter the picture, we can be more realistic about both hope and failure, and the vulnerability to happenstance that is the common human lot.

Just as we are savouring the wisdom incarnated in the rich language of the seventeenth century, however, Orwell translates the passage into a twentieth-century tongue with which we are all too familiar: 'Objective considerations of contemporary phenomena compel the conclusion that success and failure in competitive activities exhibits no tendency to be commensurate with innate capacity, but that a considerable element of the unpredictable must invariably be taken into account.'[635]

The language of the King James Version speaks to us incarnationally, revealing a truth about human experience. Its words can engage anyone, literate or not, as participants in that experience. But Orwell's version talks at us in the jargon of the professions, and self-perpetuating bureaucracies. Its words are hot, dead air, engineered so as to make the person using it feel capable and important, while keeping the underlings being addressed in their place. It is an abuse of language that we know all too well, from the worlds of education, business, sociology, psychology, the military, and politics. In distancing itself from human experience, disincarnating it, if you will, such verbiage allows the speaker to disguise or otherwise manipulate the truth, and even to turn a truth into a lie.

George Orwell was a prophet of language, the inventer of the term 'double-speak', and we can hear, in the words of this spoof that he

[634] Quoted in George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', in *The Orwell Reader* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1956), 360.

[635] Ibid.

wrote in the 1920s, something we take for granted at the start of the twenty-first century, that a military operation in another country is not an 'invasion' but only an 'incursion', that an accident at a nuclear power plant is merely an 'event', that a company calling itself 'Natural Solutions' may be disposing of hazardous chemical waste in short-sighted and irresponsible ways. It is the language of dis-incarnation, which asks us to distrust the experience of our senses, that makes such manipulation possible. Its sole purpose is to conceal, or hoodwink, or offer palliatives. In an environment in which language has been so debased, I would like to suggest that the use of incarnational language is a theological imperative.

III Language for the Christian Church: Showing and Telling

The Jesus revealed in the Gospels speaks in the language of 'showing', the language of story. Most of his words are readily comprehensible to his listeners, not only the fishermen and labourers who became his disciples, but also the more educated religious authorities of his day. And even when Jesus employs the oblique and mysterious methods of parable, his metaphors tend to come from the natural world: yeast, a mustard seed, sandy or rocky ground, fertile soil.

The language of Christian theology has tended to be the language of 'telling', a philosophical language speaking from a presumed vantage point of objectivity and distance. The religion needs both the language of 'showing' and of 'telling', but since the earliest days of the religion Christians have experienced considerable tension between a dual heritage of Semitic storytelling, which tends to allow for a great diversity of voices and perspectives, and Greek philosophy, which opts for abstraction, categorizing, and paring down what is admitted into the tradition. This tension says to me that presence of God in the world—God's incarnation into our everyday life—is too multifarious to be contained by the precise terminology of theology, but must also be expressed in the language of poetry and story.

When Christian language is weighted too much toward the abstract philosophical and theological terminology of the academy and the seminary, more incarnational language is often drowned

out. It can leave Christians wondering, as Emily Dickinson did after one church service in her Amherst congregation, 'What confusion would cover the innocent Jesus | to meet so enabled a Man!'[636] In the twentieth century, theology, like sociology and psychology, seems driven to prove itself as science, a discipline, a genuine profession. Unfortunately, in terms of language, the result has been what the poet Czeslaw Milosz describes in his recent book, *Road-side Dog,* in a prose poem entitled 'Theology, Poetry': 'What is deepest and most deeply felt in life, the transitoriness of human beings, illness, death, the vanity of opinions and convictions, cannot be expressed in the language of theology, which for centuries has responded by turning out perfectly rounded balls, easy to roll but impenetrable.'[637]

Incarnational language is not only impenetrable, it permeates. It evokes a reality that is far more than the sum of the mere words that are its parts.

IV Theology, Poetry, Worship

Ideally, worship is the ground on which the two great traditions of theology and story might come together on good terms, with hymns, prayers, and preaching solidly grounded in the theology of the creeds, but also reflecting the experience of a lived and living faith. Unfortunately, the dead jargon of the professions all too often creeps into contemporary worship, along with therapeutic language that reduces the deep wisdom of religion into the superficial slogans of pop psychology. Hence, a banner above the altar reading, 'You can fly, but that cocoon has to go.'

The liturgical scholar Gail Ramshaw makes a useful distinction between the vernacular, which the church needs if its worship is to remain in a living tongue, and the colloquial, which is too flimsy to sustain the experience of worship. I make a habit of collecting prayers that fail to take this crucial distinction into account. A communal prayer of confession reads: 'God of active love, we confess

[636] E. Dickinson, 'He preached upon "Breadth" till it argued him narrow—', Poem no. 1207 in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson,* ed. T. H. Johnson (Boston: Little Brown, 1960), 533.

[637] C. Milosz, *Road-side Dog,* trans, by the author and Robert Hass (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1998), 21.

our tendency to pay lip-service to your Gospel. Sow in us a deep discontent with a rhetorical faith that is all talk and no action.' Another that confesses: 'Our communication with Jesus tends to be too infrequent to experience the transformation in our lives You want us to have."[638]

This is not a prayer so much as a memo from one professional to another. And perhaps that is the point. At religious conferences I have attended, 'worship facilitators' hand out booklets entitled 'worship resources' that include our hymns, scripture passages, and prayers. The effect of all this is to reassure everyone that we are not merely praying here, but are engaged in something more substantial, useful, and professional. All too often, the experience of worship in such settings feels oddly dis-incarnational. It becomes as heady and passive as watching several videos in a row in the motel room because you cannot sleep.

People come to church to be reminded of God's presence, to have the hope they know in Jesus Christ reincarnated in their lives. They come seeking peace in a world of violence. They come seeking healing in a world of hurt. They come seeking consolation in a world of despair. And they come seeking language in a world of verbiage, language that will make them more fully present to God, and to each other. And that is a real trick in today's talk culture. The monk Thomas Merton, like Orwell a prophet of language, summed up the preacher's predicament way back in 1968 by saying: 'People don't want to hear any more words. In our mechanical age, all words have become alike. These days, to say "God is love" is like saying "Eat Wheaties".'[639]

But it is not comfortable to be fully present to others, and preachers have many ways to avoid it. One can choose to become just another talking head, putting up a wall of excess verbiage, as in an offertory prayer I recently experienced that ended, 'Let the love behind every gift find expression in deeds of mercy and kindness before all people towards the end that suffering might be alleviated and your name be praised.' 'Love', 'gift', 'mercy', 'kindness', 'suffering', 'praise', and the name of God

[638] These are not quotations but my paraphrase of a central theme in several of Ramshaw's books on liturgy, notably *Searching for Language* (Washington, DC: Pastoral Press, 1988).

[639] T. Merton, *New Springs of Contemplation* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1992), 9.

remain abstractions here, and worship becomes as dis-incarnate an experience as watching TV. Eat Wheaties.

People come to church to hear potent, truth-telling language, in a world full of talk that manipulates, trivializes, and generally evades the truth. They come to have the Word of God wash over them in a way that makes them whole. I was certainly in need of that when I returned to church after a hiatus of twenty years, and was dismayed to find that I often experienced worship as a kind of assault, a bombardment of heavy-duty words. I was not surprised to hear recently a pastor with forty years in the ministry say that when he had retired after being diagnosed with cancer, he had a very hard time finding a church service that spoke to him, that offered any meaningful words of consolation and hope. Perhaps he was less than moved by vague talk of 'enriching the whole person', or prayers in which we 'offer ourselves as facilitators of a unity in which we all know each other through Christ'.

That pastor might have been better served by simple language, simple truth. There's a story in a recent *New Yorker*—in an article about the exceptionally dull orations of the current American Presidential campaign—in which the Revd Jesse Jackson recalls a childhood experience, the visit of a singing group to his church in South Carolina. 'Before they sang that day,' Jackson said, their tenor, 'Archie Brownlee, said "This is my last tour through the South. And I hope you'll forgive me if there's a little liquor on my breath"—now this was in a church, and so there was some rustling in the pews—"but I'm not using it for pleasure. I have the cancer, and I need it to ease the pain. . . . But don't worry about me, because I'm going across the river. I hear there's a man on the other side who cures cancer, and can make the blind to see.' " 'Well,' Jackson said, 'the place just went crazy. The power of a simple truth.'[640] Simple. And profound, because it is an incarnation, a person engaged in the pastoral endeavour of rendering his life as a story to benefit other suffering people.

[640] J. Klein, 'Where's the Music?', *New Yorker,* 27 Sept., 1999, 38.

V A Word That Breathes

> A Word that breathes distinctly has not the power to die[641]

Poets and novelists are usually far from pastoral in how they conceive of their work. The poet begins a poem with only the pleasure of word-play in mind. Donald Hall, in an essay on poetry, asserts that 'poems are pleasure first: bodily pleasure, a deliciousness of the senses'. He sees the 'body [as] poetry's door', finding the origin of poetic metre in the rhythms of human walking.[642]

If a poem begins for the poet in the body, it quickly takes on a life of its own, incarnating itself in the bodies, minds, and experiences of others in ways that the poet could not have imagined. This incarnational quality may constitute literature's greatest gift to us, in a time when we are over-saturated with both ideology and information. For when a well-realized poem or story does its work as literature, it has the power to nudge people past the ideologies that polarize them. In a 1998 essay in the *Atlantic Monthly* the writer Cynthia Ozick stated:

> An essay is a thing of the imagination. If there is information in an essay, it is by-the-by, and if there is an opinion, one need not trust it for the long run. A genuine essay rarely has an educational, polemical, or sociopolitical use; it is the movement of a free mind at play. Though it is written in prose, it is closer in kind to poetry than to any other form. Like a poem, a genuine essay is made of language and character and mood and temperament and pluck and chance.[643]

The poem or story succeeds by sounding like a real person speaking; by breathing. And insofar as it provides a real experience for the reader, something that could not have taken place without the encounter with the poem, the words do become flesh. They offer what cannot be offered or received in any other way, not in a 'meaning' that can be separated from the words themselves, but in these very words. For both poet and reader, as the poet William Stafford has said, the poem 'will always be a wild animal . . . there is

[641] E. Dickinson, 'A Word Made Flesh', Poem no. 1651 in *Complete Poems,* 675.

[642] D. Hall, *The Unsayable Said* (Port Townsend, Wash.: Copper Canyon Press, 1993), 1.

[643] C. Ozick, 'She: Portrait of the Essay as a Warm Body', *Atlantic Monthly,* 282: 3 (Sept. 1998), 114.

something about it that won't yield to ordinary learning. When a poem catches you, it overwhelms, it surprises, it shakes you up. And often you can't provide any usual explanation for its power.'[644]

The job of the poet is to draw up out of the unconscious an awareness of something that is greater than anything that can be expressed in words. It might even be called a revealing of God's presence, or God's incarnating in a particular way to this particular poet, whose task it is to articulate the experience and pass it on. To surprise you. To shake you up. To renew your sense of wonder at your being, and God's being, and the mystery of creation.

[644] W. Stafford, 'You Must Revise Your Life', in *You Must Revise Your Life,* Poets on Poetry Series (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1986), 99–100.