

God Loves Stories: A Theological Rationale for the Literary Art

by James J. Londis

Whenever we meet after long separations, we tend to tell stories: stories about our marriages, our athletic boys and hyperactive girls, what we have touched and been touched by. We talk about our work and how our dreams have fared. It is most unlikely that we talk in some abstract, philosophical fashion about the ideas and values we have embraced. Rather, I suspect that our concerns and intellectual pursuits would be hidden in our stories, there to be unearthed by anyone willing to make the effort to find them.

Story as a genre for humanistic expression has always received attention from literary critics, but today it is the subject of a considerable amount of theological discussion as well. The Scriptures tell us that “without a parable [story] spake he not unto them.” Increasing numbers of thinkers are impressed with the fact that Jesus was a superb storyteller who used stories not only to articulate the nature of the kingdom of God but also to answer theological questions that contained an implied criticism. Instead of debating the question of “Who is my neighbor?” with the religious intellectual, Jesus told the story of the good Samaritan using contrasts, radical imagery, action and tension to produce the shocking and surprising revelation of man’s religious and ethical responsibilities for others. Jesus never engaged in any discourse remotely resembling that of Aquinas or Barth; that is why we have no systematic theology in the gospels or, for that matter, in the Bible as a

whole. What we have are stories, poems, letters, narratives of all kinds.

One of the theologians immersed in the “story and theology” motif is Robert MacAfee Brown, who related this personal incident at the 1974 meeting of the American Academy of Religion:

At the beginning of a recent leave of absence, I had set myself the rather pretentious task of beginning a Systematic Theology for Our Times. Not only did I soon decide that the time was not ripe for system-building at least (if not especially) by me, I also decided that the time would never be ripe until we *got behind the systems* to whatever it was that had led to their development in the first place. And my growing intuition of what did lie behind them was confirmed most of all by a growing friendship during the Vietnam years with Rabbi Abraham Heschel. I began to notice that every time I asked him a theological question (which I was doing with considerable frequency during those confusing times) he would reply, “My Friend, let me tell you a story. . . .”¹

Cynical religious leaders have quipped that “story and theology” is the latest fad in the never-ending procession of fads to appear on the religious stage and it, too, will make its exit. Such critics are mistaken, I believe; this is not a fad but a major new direction for theology away from an exclusive interest in systematic and analytical questions and toward the more experiential bases of our reflections. What some theologians and philosophers are arguing is that the fundamental structures of thought are metaphorical and practical, not analytical. Our

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“stories” are not detours around precision of thought but the road signs by which we must judge the reliability of our theorizing. Poets have always sensed this. In his essay “Education by Poetry,” Robert Frost suggests that “by studying poetry the student enters into the world of metaphor and, through metaphor, learns what it is to think. . . .”² The metaphor, or parable as an extended metaphor, is what Sallie TeSelle calls *embodied language*.

The human organism is a body that thinks, and in all thinking the mind unites with a figure-language—of its own devising: “A body that thinks”: this description of human life would satisfy Rubenstein and Keen, it is the assumption of all metaphorical language, and it is also basically and radically Christian. The modern post-Cartesian split of mind and body is radically anti-Christian; meaning and truth for human beings are embodied, hence *embodied language*, metaphorical language, is the most appropriate way—perhaps the only way—to suggest this meaning and truth.³

Such a language cannot and should not strive for the precision of “direct propositions,” for its power resides in its indirectness, in “what Philip Wheelwright calls ‘soft focus’ or ‘assertorial lightness.’ This is the case because, as Wheelwright says, ‘the plain fact is that not all facts are plain.’”⁴

Furthermore, while in the Christian tradition God’s being is analogous in many ways to our own, His ontological uniqueness makes precision of language impossible; one must ultimately fall back on metaphor. This means that metaphors have both emotional and *cognitive* value. As TeSelle argues: “Although metaphor is uncertain and risky, it is not expendable; one must live with the open-endedness since there is no way to get at the principal subject directly.”⁵ One unveils a new meaning via the fresh metaphor and the two are so intertwined that the new meaning cannot exist without the metaphor!

A critic, when asked what a metaphor “means” is finally reduced to repeating the line of poetry or even the entire poem, for there is no other way of saying what is being said except in the words that were chosen to say it. Poetic metaphor is used not as an embellishment of what can be said some other way, but precisely because what is being said is new and cannot be said any other way.⁶

This is especially true when one is probing qualities like God’s mercy and graciousness. One must “feel” the power of God’s graciousness and care, the weight of His concern. Whitehead once remarked that “in the real world it is more important that a proposition be interesting than that it be true. The importance of truth is, that it adds to interest.”⁷ Information, as such, is, therefore, not the genius of literature. In the stories of Dostoevsky, Wiesel and Solzhenitsyn, for example, we do not learn facts about suffering or how to solve its mystery vis-a-vis God’s love, but to feel the crush of its agony when

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God seems to be silent. Idinopulos says it well: “More than educating us, the artist transforms us by what he says and makes us feel.”⁸ He goes on to point out that Dostoevsky’s facts in Ivan’s “story of horror came from the Russian newspaper [children murdered by soldiers before their mother’s eyes, an incorrigible boy thrown to savage dogs for punishment]. What Dostoevsky perceived in this destruction of children is man’s capacity for ultimate evil. For the crime against the child, unlike any other, is man’s crime against his own very being.”⁹ Such atrocities cannot be explained, Ivan argues, by either man’s freedom or God’s atonement.

Elie Wiesel haunts us with the same profound pathos. In his *Night*, Wiesel tells his own story of being taken from the little Hasidic community he knew in the mountains of Transylvania and shipped by train to Auschwitz. What he depicts is not a series of horror stories but the *feeling* of losing his faith in the Creator-Father of his childhood. In one tale, a boy is suspected of sabotage and is hanged alongside two adults. Wiesel writes:

The SS seemed more preoccupied, more disturbed than usual. To hang a young boy in front of thousands of spectators was no light matter. The head of the camp read the verdict. All eyes were on the child. He was lividly pale, almost calm, biting his lips. The gallows threw its shadow over him. . . .

The three victims mounted together onto the chairs.

The three necks were placed at the same moment within the nooses.

“Long live liberty!” cried the two adults.

But the child was silent.

“Where is God? Where is He?” Someone behind me asked.

At a sign from the head of the camp, the three chairs tipped over.

Total silence throughout the camp. On the horizon the sun was setting.

“Bare your heads!” yelled the head of the camp. His voice was raucous. We were weeping.

“Cover your heads!”

Then the march past began. The two adults were no longer alive. Their tongues hung swollen, blue-tinged. But the third rope was still moving; being so light, the child was still alive. . . .

For more than half an hour he stayed there, struggling between life and death, dying in slow agony under our eyes. And we had to look him full in the face. He was still alive when I passed in front of him. His tongue was still red, his eyes not yet glazed.

Behind me, I heard the same man asking: “Where is God now?”

And I heard a voice within me answer him:

“Where is He? Here He is—He is hanging here on this gallows. . . .”¹⁰

As Idinopolous puts it:

The art [of such writer] does for us what the disciplines of theology, psychology and journalism cannot do: It gives us a personal relationship to what we cannot otherwise grasp intellectually. The stories of these authors make us perceive with our senses and our emotions the impenetrable darkness of another’s pain. ¹¹

In other words, the horror that cannot be conceptualized can perhaps be exposed through the story of Wiesel’s life. That is why “a Chris-

tian autobiography ought to be a metaphor of God’s action, and even Paul’s ‘boasting’ is for precisely that purpose.”¹² Our own lives have a narrative quality and structure, so much so that as Alasdair MacIntyre has suggested, when there is a radical break in the continuity of that narrative, people are tempted to commit suicide. Conversely, when we encounter the reality of God, the ordinary takes on an extraordinary, new significance, making daily transactions the scene for God’s redemptive activity. According to this view, God’s self-revelations are not limited to radical *intrusions* into the ordinary, but extend to the most routine events of our lives.

Contemporary theologians like TeSelle who see the parable as an “extended metaphor” argue that it is no accident that Jesus’ teachings were parabolic in nature, or that He in His person is a parable of God’s grace. Parables must be read and interpreted as metaphors. They must be read with literary insight until the story penetrates us, “rather than look around for possible interpretations of it.”¹³ This will lead to “de-forming our usual apprehensions in such a way that we see reality in a new way.”¹⁴ This gives “parable” a confrontive quality that demands a decision involving radical changes in our values. As Funk puts it:

. . . the word of God, like a great work of art, is not on trial. The work of art exists in its own right, to be viewed and contemplated, received or dismissed, but not reconstructed. The text, too, although shaped by human hands, stands there to be read and pondered, but not manipulated.¹⁵

As important as it is, theoretical, analytical discourse lacks confrontive power. Often boring and almost always tedious, it cannot create the drama necessary to invite ordinary men to take it seriously.

It is entirely natural or inevitable, then, that the realism of the parables is of a special sort, that it provides again and again “that certain shock to the imagination” which Amos Wilder mentions. The way this shock is conveyed initially is the assumption of the parables that important things happen and are decided at the everyday level. The parables again and again indicate that it is in the

seemingly insignificant events of being invited to a party and refusing to go, being jealous of a younger brother who seems to have it all his way, resenting other workers who get the same pay for less work, that the ultimate questions of life are decided.¹⁶

In our individual Christian lives and our communal life as a church is a story unique, powerful, arresting; it is full of passions, ideas and the record of the experiences that brought us to belief. Tournier has said that it is much more fascinating to know one person well than a hundred people superficially. And that, perhaps, is why Wiesel says: "God created men because He loves stories." And when we share our stories with each other we are changed.

My story—the story of me as an individual—is a blend of Greek and English parentage, the boardwalk of Coney Island and the streets of Brooklyn; white, poor, divorced parents and conversion at age 14 to Jesus Christ through the ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church. When I was converted, the story of Jesus became my normative story, the story that made the rest of my story and the story of all mankind intelligible.

What I did not realize until much later was *how* white and city-oriented my story was. In recent years, my black brothers and sisters have taught me that my Christian story has been tainted by my white story. Third-world people have shown me that I have assumed the American story and the Christian story were almost identical; and my female colleagues have showed me that *my* story, even as a Christian, has been a very masculine version indeed. Sharing our stories keeps us from having limited and distorted stories.

In the time of King David, God sent a story to David via Nathan the prophet because David's story had become corrupt. Only when he heard the story of the ewe lamb stolen by one whose flocks were full did David see his sin. No philosophical treatise on the immorality of adultery and murder would have struck the King with the full force of his sin. Only a story enabled David to see reality as it was meant to be seen, and not merely as his passions wished to see it.

In Russia today, the nation's ignorance of its story has driven Alexander Solzhenitsyn to tell

through his writing what he believes is Russia's true story. He does this, as does Wiesel, in the hope that his people will be reborn in justice, freedom and humaneness. These writers—along with the biblical writers—are sensitive to the ugliness and suffering of a world in which evil grows strong on lies and falsehoods. They know that only the truth—the true story—will unmask the deception of evil. In his Nobel lecture, Solzhenitsyn said:

Our twentieth century has proved to be more cruel than preceding centuries, and the first fifty years have not erased all of its horrors. Our world is rent asunder by those same old cave-age emotions of greed, envy, lack of control, mutual hostility which have picked up in passing respectable pseudonyms like class struggle, racial conflict, struggle of the masses, trade-union disputes. The primeval refusal to accept a compromise has been turned into a theoretical principle and is considered the virtue of orthodoxy. It demands millions of sacrifices in ceaseless civil wars, it drums into our souls that there is no such thing as unchanging, universal concepts of goodness and justice, that they are all fluctuating and inconstant.

At its birth violence acts openly and even with pride. But no sooner does it become strong, firmly established, than it senses the rarefaction of the air around it and it cannot continue to exist without descending into a fog of lies, clothing them in sweet talk. It does not always, not necessarily, openly throttle the throat, more often it demands from its subjects only an oath of allegiance to falsehood, only complicity in falsehood.

Proverbs about truth are well loved in Russia. They give steady and sometimes striking expression to the not inconsiderable harsh national experience: ONE WORD OF TRUTH SHALL OUTWEIGH THE WHOLE WORLD.

And it is here, on an imaginary fantasy, a breach of the principle of the conservation of mass and energy, that I base both my own activity and my appeal to the writers of the whole world.¹⁷

Is there any need to argue for the importance of knowing history, literature and the arts after reading Solzhenitsyn's statement? Can one who loves the truth revealed in Jesus Christ really

deny the centrality of the humanities to Christian education? It is not alone the body and mind that need educating; it is the feelings, the imagination, the senses. Can we who claim to be telling "the story" in its unique form during the eschaton minimize the importance of being imaginative in the way we tell the story, of knowing how to aid others in *feeling* the significance of our message and our age?

Most writers observing contemporary man's story are cynical about a happy ending to the nightmare we call human history. They have not given up hope that God will yet speak, but his silence mystifies them. Seventh-day Adventists can impart that hope. According to Robert MacAfee Brown, contemporary theologians have been afraid of eschatology, partly because they have been overwhelmed by the reality of evil in the world and partly because the vision of John the revelator is too wildly improbable to be believed. It is just a fairy story, they think, but it is our task to let the world know that joy can be affirmed in the end without minimizing evil along the way. Earth's story, our individual stories, can all have a happy ending in spite of Auschwitz and the Gulag. No one in our denominational history believed this more intensely than Ellen White whose last chapters in *The Great Controversy* are an inspired vision that the story's end will not disappoint us. She saw clearly that the symbol on which our Seventh-day Adventist story rides is the cross as mirrored in the holiness of the Sabbath. It is the promise of the present and eschatological Sabbath rest that Jesus died to give us, the rest from the burdens of sin and death, the rest from our attempts to save ourselves from our unbearable guilt.

As I have already mentioned, such stories, unlike exhortations and moralizations, force us to decision. Their power to illuminate our condition prevents us from remaining neutral. Through these stories the Holy Spirit convicts the conscience and calls for repentance. When Simon rebuked Jesus for encouraging the attentions of a fallen woman who washed his feet, Jesus told him the story of a king who forgave two debtors; one owed a great sum and one a small. "Who should love him most?" Jesus asked. The answer choked the indignant Pharisee. And it will do so today if we make these

stories *our* stories, incorporate them into our lives and then tell them with the conviction and competence God grants us.

Is it any wonder, then, that Yahweh commanded the Jewish people to tell their stories to their children, to allow the stories to work their magic on the young? (Even today the story is central to much of the life and thought of the Jewish people.) By the same token, we should not be surprised when Ellen White urges us to study our past history, to know the stories of the pioneers and to relive their experiences. Their lives were parables and stories telling the story of God's graciousness to man.

It is no different for us. We must *be* the parables we would tell, but we must tell them

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sensitively and powerfully. Perhaps our greatest need (after *being* what we proclaim) is for writers, artists and preachers who can tell their stories about Jesus Christ in a Seventh-day Adventist setting so creatively that moderns will be confronted with the importance of making a decision. This implies some fundamental changes in our definition of "evangelism," allowing more room for innovative programs and ministries that are centered in the arts, especially storytelling. It also implies the need for criteria that help us decide what is and is not "Christian" in the arts so that some kind of consensus operates when evangelism is done in this way.

If it is true that "God loves stories," then we should not disappoint Him.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. Sallie TeSelle, *Speaking in Parables* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), p. 15. My indebtedness to TeSelle's work is obvious in this essay.

4. TeSelle, p. 16.

5. TeSelle, p. 45.

6. TeSelle, p. 45. See TeSelle's discussion of Gerard Manley Hopkins' "God's Grandeur" as an example of the unique power of metaphor, p. 17ff.

7. A. N. Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: MacMillan Free Press Paperback Edition, 1969), p. 303. Quoted by Charles E. Winquist, "The Act of Storytelling and the Self's Homecoming," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, March, 1974, pp. 104-105. Hereafter cited as *JAAR*.

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9. Idinopulos, p. 54.

10. Elie Wiesel, *Night* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), pp. 70, 71.

11. Idinopulos, p. 60.

12. TeSelle, p. 69

13. TeSelle, p. 70.

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