

Renewing the Christian Imagination through Literature

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Every year I travel to Rimini to address a vast audience of several thousand mainly young Italian lay Catholics, members of C and L. Communion and Liberation was founded by the Luigi Giussani whom I quoted in my first lecture, and his book *The Religious Sense*. He taught literature in a Milan high school and began meetings after school of his pupils for friendship and the sharing of experience. These meetings were not quite like anything we know as encounter groups or therapeutic meetings. They were more phenomenological, in that they involved the reading of texts and responding to them in terms of one's own experience of reality – physical, sensory experience. In his book, *The Religious Sense*, as we saw, Giussani believes that the impact with the real in any form of experience of the world, provokes a question that leads us farther.

Poetry and other literary writing is central to his book, and to The Movement, as it tends to be called in Italy, though it is now world-wide. When I attend the Rimini Meeting for Friendship among peoples every August, I am astounded by the numbers of young people, in their thousands, who will attend talks by politicians, cardinals, artists and philosophers and who throng my talks on Flannery O'Connor or Cormac McCarthy. Dante has a whole society to himself, the Cento Canti, in which members adopt a single chapter or canto of his great poem, *The Divine Comedy*, as their own. At the Tolkien lecture they were like a football crowd in their enthusiasm. Obviously Catholic authors are central but the movement can find value in work of all kinds, with the poetry of Raymond Carver, an alcoholic atheist attracting large numbers as well, because they read him as disclosing the reality of the world to them. One Franciscan friar at the meeting uses *Lord of the Rings* for confirmation and young people's Christian formation, taking them camping; they practically mug one young literature lecturer from Florence like a film star!

What is so impressive about their appreciation is that they see the literature as affecting how they live and their reception of the world. They are not, like some of my weaker students in religion and literature modules, playing Hunt-the-Christ-figure to show that a text has religious value, but using these texts to love the world, to be challenged by the real. It is quite common to see them sitting on the floor around the vast conference complex reading away or else singing folk songs, broadly interpreted, which is another feature of their culture:

immersion in one's local traditions and practices. Like the Methodist class meeting, the small local groups are related to parish and to university.

One thing I have learnt from the approach of the Rimini Meeting is how literature can be a way of moving people on from the great public events, which we tend to hold at cathedrals to deeper engagement. Many of these people are not ready for an alpha course type of direct presentation of the gospel. That is where a group meeting to watch a film or read a novel can be of value, a place of relating culture to faith. For example, how do we nourish the (sometimes dormant!) faith of our choir parents? They often form a significant sector of our evensong congregation, perhaps out of solidarity with their offspring. But often they are people searching and that is why they go to the lengths of making it possible for their child to be a chorister. My home cathedral has no boarding house but uses the local church comprehensive. Parents travel distances to fetch children home after evensong. If I am allowed, I plan to try to both offer them hospitality and develop faith with a book group.

My own understanding of how literature may be a way of doing theology is closely akin to that of Communion and Liberation, which is why I have found a home with them. In a sense, my work provides for them a kind of theological rationale. For me, a novel, for example, does its theological work through its stylistics – its narrative techniques, its images – as much as by its content. It does so at a meta-level through its use of genre. If you pick up a James Bond story you have certain expectations about its plot structure, its view of reality, its characterisation. No story, apart from the most basic Mills and Boon quite stays within its generic markers but plays with them as a way of importing meaning. Films work in the same way and the Coen brothers use the western as a way of saying something about the world as they see it. We have probably all used genre to interpret biblical texts for our congregations.

One genre that works particularly well for Christian formation is the detective story. It is a biblical, or at least a deuterocanonical genre, and Daniel the first detective. Poor Susannah, accused of adultery by the elders who spied on her bathing, because she repulsed their sexual advances, is saved by Daniel's interrogation techniques, which show confusion about where the act actually happened. They each claim it was under a different tree. In *Bel and the Dragon*, Daniel solves an early 'locked room' mystery. He shows that a god who seems to eat sacrifices left for him is actually an idol by scattering ashes around. The next day footprints in the ash show the priests have been going through a secret door to take the food away. These are wisdom stories like that of Solomon and the baby, about finding truth underlying the world we inhabit. The detective story in contemporary mystery stories is equally engaged in a search for a meaning and an order to experience: it is a moral

quest. In a wonderful essay, 'The Guilty Vicarage' W. H. Auden claimed that it was Kierkegaardian in theology. Everyone is in a state of original innocence, or so it seems, in an ordered, ideal world, and then the murder renders everyone potentially guilty.

The magic formula is an innocence which is discovered to contain guilt; then a suspicion of being the guilty one; and finally a real innocence from which the guilty other has been expelled, a cure effected, not by me or my neighbors, but by the miraculous intervention of a genius from outside who removes guilt by giving knowledge of guilt.

The scapegoat of the murderer expelled, the state of harmony is restored through a catharsis akin to the terror and pity which is provoked and then purged for the audience of a Greek tragedy. The detective is a kind of priest who absolves the guilt produced by the community.

The book of Job is such a search for order in the world as the detective story. Job wants to know why the innocent suffer – that is the mystery - and he gets no real reply, just a display from God of the marvels of creation, showing the impossibility of understanding the world itself, let alone its Creator. G. K. Chesterton's fantasy novel, *The Man Who Was Thursday* is based on the book of Job. It has a figure representing the world escaping on the back of an elephant from his detective pursuers and throwing down 'clues' to them, all of which are nonsensical in the manner of God asking if one can put Leviathan on reins in Job. Chesterton indeed believed that 'All science, even the divine science, is a sublime detective story. Only it is not set to detect why a man is dead; but the darker secret of why he is alive'. You can move from examining actual detective stories to the gospel. Marks's narrative can fruitfully be explored as a sort of detective story, with its constant question of who Jesus is, and its abrupt ending asking for us to complete the story and solve the mystery of the empty tomb. Using the genre approach here focuses the reader's interest on the theological questions: who is Jesus? Why does he suffer? Where is he now? What is the role of the disciple? It is to read according to the story's own style of mysterious immediacy, bizarre calls for secrecy, and gnomonic utterances.

It is not only genre but stylistics that does theological work. One example is the trope of estrangement, a term coined by the Russian formalist critic, Viktor Shklovsky, which is sometimes translated as defamiliarization. What he thinks we normally do is regard language as purely instrumental, a transparent medium for communicating. He writes, 'We are like the violinist who has ceased to feel the bow and strings, we have ceased to be artists in everyday life, we do not love our houses and clothes, and easily part from a life of

which we are not aware. Only the creation of new forms of art can restore to man sensation of the world, can resurrect things and kill pessimism.'

In literary language, however, words become more opaque: they draw attention to themselves, and stop you using them as mere windows. It is like those children's puzzles in which a familiar object, like a tea-strainer or cheese grater, is viewed in close-up, or magnified to be unrecognisable. It is a technique used as much in poetry as prose and Coleridge himself defined something like it in his *Biographia Literaria* in 1818: '*To carry on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood; to combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the appearances which every day for perhaps forty years had rendered familiar [. . .] this is the character and privilege of genius.*'

In my book on Chesterton and Tolkien I make this a defining feature of the theological method of both writers but particularly Chesterton. This is how he describes an early event in his own autobiography:

The very first thing I can ever remember seeing with my own eyes was a young man walking across a bridge. He had a curly moustache and an attitude of confidence verging on swagger. He carried in his hand a disproportionately large key of shining yellow metal and wore a large golden or gilded crown. The bridge he was crossing sprang on one side from the edge of a highly perilous mountain chasm, the peaks of the range rising fantastically in the distance; and at the other end it joined the upper part of a tower of an almost excessively castellated castle. In the castle tower there was one window, out of which a young lady was looking. I cannot remember in the least what she looked like; but I will do battle with anyone who denies her superlative good looks.

To those who may object that such a scene is rare in the home life of house-agents living immediately to the north of Kensington High Street, in the later seventies of the last century, I shall be compelled to admit, not that the scene was unreal, but that I saw it through a window more wonderful than the window in the tower; through the proscenium of a toy theatre constructed by my father; and that...the young man in the crown was about six inches high and proved on investigation to be made of cardboard.¹

¹ G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* (Thirsk: House of Stratus, 2001), p. 15.

We start by taking what he writes at face value but at some point we are lost – for me it is the chasm. Then we think we are in a fairy tale before he restores us to the cardboard toy theatre. There is indeed defamiliarisation at work in this passage, as the reader moves from the apprehension of an actual young man, through a comic viewpoint to an uncomprehending problematisation of perspective as he or she tries to imagine how the child Londoner came to see mountain chasms, which is finally resolved by an understanding of the scene as theatrical and thus cardboard and tinsel. But the cheap materials have gained a new realism. The toy theatre is the creative work of Chesterton's own father. Hence the Chestertonian reader moves from incomprehension to delight in artifice, just as the young man Chesterton moved from scepticism and agnosticism to embrace Christian belief and the goodness of creation. So the child Gilbert was not deceived by the man with the golden key's artifice but liked it 'and indeed the things that now shine most in my memory were many of them technical accessories'.² In contrast to Romantic writers, who see children as more imaginative and prone to belief in fairies etc than adults, Chesterton sees children as realists. He claims that they make believe as a form of art. But he does also argue that for children, ordinary life is really exciting: it has not been rendered stale and in need of making strange before we can appreciate it.

For the child Chesterton, it is as if the perception of the puppets as constructed in the toy theatre becomes an image of the world itself as created: a made thing. We are first taken away from our understanding of the world as easily making sense, so that it can be released from our possession and restored to us as gift – from a giver. Chesterton says that his first instinct towards religion was as a result of wanting someone to say thank you to. It is his equivalent of Giussani's going 'farther' or 'ana'.

Chesterton's celebrated Father Brown stories work in the same way. We begin in a comfortable early-twentieth century world of tea-shops and seedy funfairs, then something happens which renders that world strange and seems often, indeed, like an incursion of the supernatural. His most famous story, which you may know, is called 'The Invisible Man'. Smythe, an inventor of automata to do household chores, is receiving threatening letters delivered by an invisible enemy and so has his block of flats watched by the police. Despite this surveillance, Smythe disappears from his flat, leaving only a pool of blood behind. The discoverer of this scene has 'suddenly the horrid fancy that poor Smythe's own iron child had struck him down. Matter had rebelled, and these machines had killed their master.' (p. 108 innoc) Chesterton delights in rendering uncanny effects like this and they always prey on the

² Chesterton, *Autobiography*, p. 27.

rationalist characters. *'It's the first effect of not believing in God that you lose your common sense and can't see things as they are'* opines Father Brown in the tale *'The Oracle of the Dog'*. *'Anything that anyone talks about, and says there's a good deal in it, extends itself indefinitely like a vista in a nightmare.'* (p. 70-1 INcred). Here it seems as if an invisible man has also rendered Smythe the inventor similarly and supernaturally invisible, for not only is there blood on the floor of his room but a track of footsteps stretches towards and away from the mansion block. Yet the policeman and a chestnut seller alike swear that no one has gone in or come out of Himalaya Mansions. Only Father Brown, the dumpy and prosaic little Catholic priest from Essex has the answer to the mystery of the invisible man: *'he is dressed rather handsomely in red, blue and gold... and in this striking and even showy costume he entered Himalaya Mansions under eight human eyes; he killed Smythe in cold blood, and came down into the street again carrying the dead body in his arms'* (p.111). Stated like that, his auditors boggle, but he is only describing the uniform and sack of a postman.

This story plays out, it seems, the Enlightenment plot of liberation from superstition, of disenchantment, but it does so only to re-enchant the ordinary. The postman, a figure we see every day and hardly notice, is first defamiliarized, rendered strange and bizarre, and then restored to the natural world but with a new meaning, a deeper understanding. *'Father Brown walked those snow-covered hills under the stars for many hours with a murderer and what they said to each other will never be known'* (p. 111). What this story and all the other Father Brown stories do is to remove the certainties of positivist accounts of reality and then restore the real and physical world to us, but with a religious depth, in which objects are more vivid, people more mysterious, and the aura of the religious plays around them.. Not only that, but often a narrative of judgement, repentance and reconciliation is actually enacted, as in the very first tale, *'The Blue Cross'*, in which the criminal Flambeau, encounters his nemesis, Father Brown, while impersonating a priest. He is unmasked, primarily, says Father Brown, because he attacked reason. *'It's bad theology'*. In these stories imagination and reason work together to take the reader deeply into the real,

If you look for it, many stories and poems gain their effect from these same techniques, and often carry the same theological charge, whereby the world we know is taken out our grasp, to be restored to us in all its beauty and freedom – as creation. Charles Dickens does it all the time, and Tolkien himself does it through races like the hobbits, who are quite like Nottinghamshire people in their love of gardens, fish and chips and gossip but unlike us in being only two to three feet high and having very big feet covered with hair. J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter novels deliberately defamiliarize our world by recasting it as the Muggles domain, and by offering a parallel wizarding universe in which school subjects like chemistry become 'potions' and nature study involves dragonets.

Since churches today are, in some sense, heterotopic, as I argued in my first talk, we have an opportunity to use this difference to evoke the religious sense by techniques of defamiliarization too. The converse to taking the worship and art out, which is so important, is staging an encounter which disarranges the visitor and our own congregations too. I and my children have never forgotten a visit to a museum in which, in imitation of C. S. Lewis's *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, visitors had to open a cupboard and step inside, even pushing aside coats, to enter the next room. The entries to these parallel worlds are themselves modes of defamiliarization, whether it is the picture in *The Dawn Treader*, which shows up the stilted emptiness of intellectual Cambridge atheism, or Platform 93/4 at King's Cross Station in Harry Potter. How many parents have, like me, had to restrain their children from trying to see if they can get through the bare brick wall to join the Hogwarts Express?

We are often quite chary in the Church about using imaginative fiction in education, and Christian formation, especially when it comes in fantastic form. In the States, where I used to live for some years, Christian parents were very wary of it, not even allowing their children to read works by J. K. Rowling. Lewis's Narnia stories were fine because of their evident allegorical qualities - but nothing else. This is beginning to change in America with evangelical adult romances, and even Gothic fantasies, such as *Twilight*, written deliberately with a moral intention to help girls negotiate the threatening world of male sexuality. These attempts are mostly truly awful. But I do believe that we need stories to fire the imagination of our children and young people, and give them patterns of maturation: what the Germans call 'bildungsroman', stories of growing up. For example: Alan Garner, Susan Cooper, George MacDonald, '*The Light Princess*'?

There is a point in a young person's reading development when they move from children's to adult literature but are not quite ready for 'literary' novels. Boys like my own son often go for science fiction and fantasy, or other forms of genre fiction, and also films. The generic patterns in these modes make them easy to read and the centrality of plot helps those only beginning to get a grip on adult characterization. They are also highly ethical, and allow young people to explore moral problems, and view a world as an ethical struggle – which it is for them as for us. Perhaps they sometimes see this more clearly than us. As far as I can tell, the Church has practically given up offering moral guidance of any sort apart from a bit about fair trade and debt relief. And yet, year after year, more students do philosophy and ethics at A level, attracted precisely by big questions about the nature of reality, God and ethics. (example of science fiction – as Cath Filmer has argued, you can't invent a new world without importing a metaphysics – the philosophical rules by which it works. It becomes a creation.)

Stories can help us by embedding ethical dilemmas in concrete form, as can soap-operas, which is why young teenagers are so drawn to them. Teenage fiction that has grown up is highly moral in a Guardian-reading style too. But one of the most popular sorts of reading and watching teenagers enjoy is horror and gothic – my own major research interest at the moment. Very many teenagers do Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* for GCSE, which is a novel all about the separation of science from morality and religion, about knowledge separated from beauty and goodness, about our responsibilities to other creatures, about playing God. It is a Christian work at base, and one that actually provokes the religious sense. It would make a perfect text for discussion for young people's Christian formation and for opening moral issues with those who are outside our congregations.

Why do young people like to read about vampires and monsters? This would be an excellent topic to discuss with them in the context of a religion that is something of a horror story too. For hundreds of years the shock and trauma of the crucifixion meant that though it was preached, it was not represented, so great was the shame associated with the image. Eastern Christianity still does not represent it. For the Goth young people I met in the States, Christianity appealed precisely because it spoke to the darkness and terror of existence. Most critics claim that Gothic literature is produced by the repressions of a culture. In the case of Goth culture in the US they see the conformism and optimism of American culture as something to resist. By provoking the sacred in a dark, even Satanic, form, they break through the banality of secular capitalism, using images that gain in power from their inversion. There is, of course, a regular Goth Eucharist at St Edwards in Cambridge. I am not sure what I think about this. It seems appropriate to use darkness and the dark night of the soul in Lent or Advent, on ember days, but the Eucharist takes the dark things and transforms them.

What horror fiction does do, paradoxically, is push the physical to an extreme that renders it 'ana'. Eighteenth century Gothic Fiction used terror a great deal – the pursuit down long corridors, the fear of ghostly visitants – a divine fear at root, a fear of the abyss, of infinity, perhaps the result of deist theology in which God was very distant. He set the world going and disappeared. Modern Gothic is more about horror: the moment the monster claw reaches out, the blood spurts at the vampiric bite. Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* even turns the Eucharistic host in to a horror when it burns the forehead of Mina Harker because of her possession by Dracula. It is almost as if they have to bring in the most sacred of physical objects in order to make the events mean something -as if the physical world has lost its physicality and it has to be provoked. Television dramas like *Silent Witness* are part of the same provocation of the material – how can it mean? Without a belief in the supernatural, people still seek the religious sense, the 'ana' but it will not work.

What I have been suggesting here is that we should be freer in our use of novels and stories, and filmic stories too, to open discussion, to explore fears and desires for something beyond. You may feel I have far too modest an aim, but I do believe that unless we can provoke the religious sense to begin with, we cannot begin to teach the gospel.

How though, can we use literature to move from an apprehension of mystery to engagement? (Suggest ideas with poetry to join parts of building like a jigsaw) One way is to use drama. As you no doubt are aware, medieval drama developed out of the liturgy, especially the Easter vespers and other occasions that involved a mimetic acting of the events described. At Salisbury and other cathedrals, the deacon or monk would be dressed in a white tunic to represent the angel, while the three Maries, in the form of three priests, swinging incense, would come indirectly, looking for the tomb. Medieval churches had Easter Sepulchres adorned with clothes and soldier figures by which the angel sat. He then had a dialogue with the women about where Christ was, ending with the news that he was risen.

Many of us no doubt host mystery plays to this day, put on by amateur or semi-professional groups, enacting the Bible stories in realism and humour. But we have nothing today like the revival of Christian Drama that was begun in 1930's by George Bell when Dean of Canterbury (and later at Chichester). Dramatists of the stature of T. S. Eliot, *Murder in the Cathedral*, Christopher Fry, Dorothy Sayers and Charles Williams wrote new plays for Canterbury, which were very popular and, in some cases, transferred to the West End. It would be wonderful to revive that tradition – and I know that Frankie Ward has plans at St Edmundsbury - but more, we need to involve especially young people in acting religious stories. Cathedrals do a lot of dressing children up as monks and choirs, even bishops, but in a very dressing-up way that is not usually dramatic. Why not act out the story of Etheldreda, with children improvising the script? Why not do sketches that allow children or adults to internalise the experience of someone fleeing from the Danes or stealing a birthright, or watching the crucifixion?

For drama engages us body and heart, and it puts us in relation: we move from spectator to participant. I do a young people's acted stations of the cross at Southwell, in which they write meditations to speak in character, and have to do everything themselves, from carrying the cross to burying the body. They become part of the action (and so did many tourists during our last week of rehearsals). This is the theology that Hans Urs von Balthasar develops in his *Theodramatica*, and which Rowan Williams discusses in *On Christian Theology*, in which we participate in the gospel story by performing it – we are part of a great cosmic drama, and have to find/improvise our true role in the action. The Faith and Life Group of mentally

disabled young people in Southwell are always wonderful at doing these performative activities, and it is their mode of learning, by action. (Ask if anyone does *Open the Book?* - wonderful way of doing Bible story assemblies by drama and participation)

As a child one of my foundational experiences was taking part in a children's lent course on Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. The curates had enormous fun enacting the story for us with battles with Apollyon, a terrifying Giant Despair and so on. I think they improvised it. We children also took part to a limited extent as the crowd at Vanity Fair and so on. Because we are so worried about military language, we neglect presenting the struggle with evil as a battle but so it is, and we would be more convincing if we showed this sometimes, and especially for boys and men. (Everyman medieval mystery play – struggle IN the self as a battle)

This talk has ranged far and wide to give you a sense of what I see as the possibilities of using all sorts of literary texts as part of our work of Christian formation. In each case, I have tried to show how a novel or story or drama can engage us in evoking the religious sense, and show a mode of knowledge and learning that is participatory, for as Thomas Aquinas pointed out long ago we can participate analogically in God's wisdom: to know in this way is to be related, not to know something in an abstract way. It is to know through the body. As Louis Marie Chauvet writes, *faith cannot be lived in any way, including what is most spiritual in it, than in the mediation of the body*. He does not just mean the physical body here but also 'in a tradition, a history, an institution.' To be of service to the Church's mission, cathedrals and churches in their own way must take seriously their role as mediations of tradition: traditions of learning, art and music in which to engage people not just in culture and the aesthetic – but in the religious sense which draws them into an 'ana' a search, in which questions open to more questions, and we are soaked in the reality of God.