LAMP

FALL 2009 ISSUE 2

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LAMP

FALL 2009 ISSUE 1

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Letter from the General Editor:

On a number of occasions, the notable American playwright Edward Albee has convincingly said that the distinguishing characteristics of man from all other creatures are his ability to create art and better understand himself through that created medium.

Though I greatly admire Albee and revere his dramatic oeuvre, I am not convinced that he is right on this matter. I argue that it is man's consciousness which distinguishes him from all creatures. Consciousness is what commissions man's creation of art, and it is also what paradoxically delights in and profits from the art created. Animals have little need for self-examination. Man, as Kierkegaard knew exceedingly well, is desperately in need of self-examination, and his consciousness of this is what turns him to the arts.

I present to you another collection of works by fine writers. May you develop through your examination of them and your subsequent self-examination. The fantastic thing about being human is that, when confronted with one's own weakness, one needs not millions of years but simply a firm resolution to change (or at least begin changing). Change, dear reader, and delight in the ability to be conscious of one's need to change.

On a much lighter note, you will notice that a new section of LAMP has been added: Off the Shelf. In this section, you will find discussions of recently-published books like novels, poetry collections, and non-fiction of all sorts (memoirs, religion, cultural studies, etc.). I hope you will consider reading the volumes discussed in LAMP to formulate your own opinion of the books discussed.

Ryan Knight
LAMP General Editor
October 2009

Untitled
Abagail Lauryn Apon
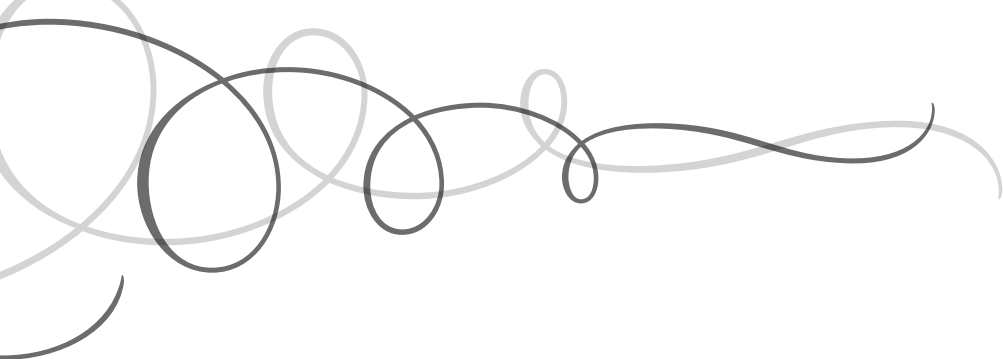
A Poetics of Fashion

Amber Lockard

We Americans love our clothes. From the runway to the driveway, we're obsessed what our clothes say about ourselves. Even our language – the fact that our dress "says" something about us – reveals our unconscious conviction that what we wear on our bodies is as telling as what we speak with our mouths. And this is not a secular philosophy: the inside of any mega-church is a parade of styles, while "emergent" is nearly synonymous with "hipster," right down to the scarves, beads, and skinny jeans. Such a surge of slick, smooth, and smartly-attired Christians provokes the question: should and to what extent should believers be concerned with how we dress?

To begin with a disclaimer: this is not an article discussing "fads" or the guidelines of appropriate or inappropriate dress. Our questions are more fundamental. Contrary to our stylish trends, our misguided consciences as "homeward bound" believers is a rather disapproving response to any inquiries on the value of the material or physical elements in our lives: give those extra shoes away, spend that time in the gym praying, and the money from that latte you buy every morning

could be going to an orphan. Superficially contrary to the consumer culture, we are inundated in churches with messages that things are bad and caring about them is evil. What we're told in Scripture, on the other hand, is subtly but significantly different. Our first encounter with dress is in Genesis. Right after Adam and Eve's act of defiance their very first revelation is their own *nakedness*: in that instant, they realize, among other things, that their physical nudity exposes them, body *and* soul, in a way in which their now sinful persons can no longer bear. Ashamed, they rush to hide themselves from God and from each other. Here, then, is our first proposition: nakedness makes us vulnerable, not only to the dangers of natural elements, but to the hazards of spiritual ones as well, making dress not only physically necessary but spiritually significant. Soon afterwards, God Himself clothes his two now vulnerable, exposed, and broken creatures, with skins from the very first bloodshed. In this simple act of physical "dressing," the text foreshadows the manner in which Christ would later appear to *clothe* His people with His own righteousness.

Again, the language and metaphors are key: when God gave us a sign of His coming salvation, He chose to do so though the most obvious element of clothes. And again, when Scripture speaks of the miraculous exchange of sin for righteousness, it does so in the language of dress. Clothes, like food, marriage, and so many of the most basic and profound elements of our earthly lives, are daily reminders of the mysteries of grace. And like our other gracious gifts, perhaps our most appropriate response to them is not disdain as merely "earthly" necessities, but deep and grateful delight at the present moment and joyful concession when no longer needed.

Fashion, then, can perhaps be understood as another declaration of that beautiful tension which so characterizes our existence: we are not what we were originally intended, but something better has been provided to take its place. It is then another proclamation of the "in between" in which we live.

> [N]akedness makes us vulnerable, not only to the dangers of natural elements, but to the hazards of spiritual ones as well, making dress not only physically necessary but spiritually significant.

Furthermore, literary Christians are perhaps even better equipped to see and appreciate the benefits of acknowledging dress and what it does for us. As readers and critics, we know that a character's clothes are crucial in determining their nature. Flannery O'Connor, for example, an author well versed in both the fundamentals of literature and of grace, repeatedly employed the elements of fashion to expose her characters' spiritual states. A thorough reading of her characters' outfits in "A Good Man is Hard to Find," for example, will show their bestial, hypocritical, pathetic, or grace-
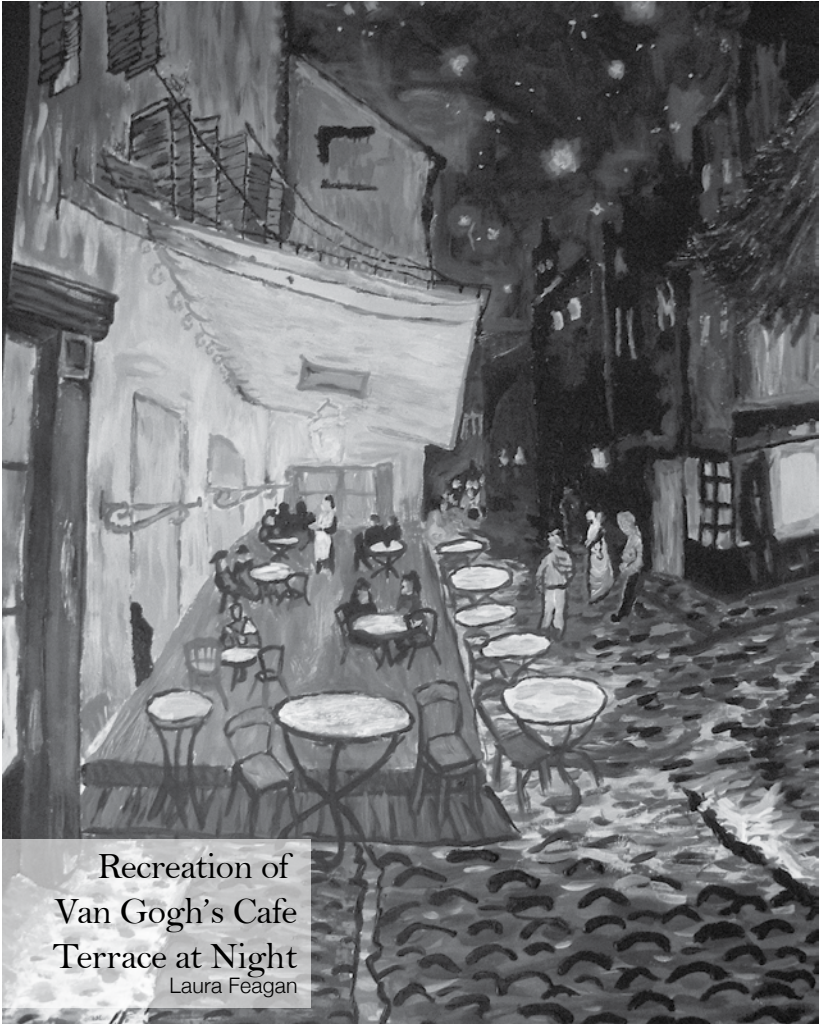
Recreation of
Van Gogh's Cafe
Terrace at Night
Laura Feagan

filled states at various moments throughout the text. The unredeemable characters betray their animalistic states of mind in their garish, hawaiian parrot-printed dress shirts and green head-kerchiefs tied like "rabbit's ears." O'Connor's grandmother, on the other hand, the figure of undeserved grace, dresses with "white cotton gloves" and "white organdy trimmed with lace" with "a purple spray of cloth violets," preparing herself so that "anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady"—a statement which later becomes profoundly ironic. With her prim dressing, the grandmother unwittingly discloses her pitiable attempts to produce her own goodness, her white gloves and lace clashing distastefully with her selfish and small-minded behavior; at the same time, however, her dress prepares her for the revelation and violent grace she is later to receive, the "purple spray" indicative of the violence of bloodshed. Her depiction is at once both admirable and pathetic, a complex portrayal of a character on a path to grace, in a description dominated primarily by dress. In various and specific portraits, we are provided with controversial and complex characters, all in descriptions dominated by dress.

More than just a revelation of character, a skillfully composed outfit can be a testament to the glory of a beautiful creation. In the highest of fashion circles, a well-cut dress is a near symphony of physical form, movement, and grace, all accented and accentuated by the powers of fabric and color. Aesthetics philosopher Remy Saisselin, in her article "Baudelaire to Christian Dior: The Poetics of Fashion," argues that "[a] dress may be at some moment of its existence, a poem of form, color and motion, and that at such a privileged instant the dress may transform the wearer into a poetic apparition." Again clothing can be a testament to another aspect of art: the power and necessity of form, an element which arguably cannot be separated from the element of content. If, as Marshall McLuhan argues, the medium is the message, then we of course ought to care what we wear, for the content or message of our person and our mission are never far separated from the form or medium of our dress.

Fashion in its highest forms is analogous to poetry, a concept which has both positive and negative connotations, depending not on the whims of fashion designers, as one would suppose, but rather on the practice of the artist. While dress has always possessed spiritual connotations, only recently have they obtained artistic ones. Dior, according to Saisselin, was the first designer to make the leap from the merely functional fashion to the artistic. Before Dior, designers were concerned primarily with the mere detail of their designs; changes to fashion were, for the most part, superficial. Dior, on the other hand, saw fashion design in "a sort of poem of curves, lines, and volumes," a "feast for the intellect"—in other words, in terms of artistic *form*.

Since Dior, the leap from "fashion designer" to "artist" has been quick. Clothing now serves not only a functional purpose but an artistic one as well. And while this transition from functionality and design to art and form has been delightful for those of us who enjoy both fashion *and* art, the former unfortunately has begun to reflect the deficiencies of the latter. First, fashion designers, like designers of other sorts, suffer an identity crisis. Many of our modern artists have become concerned not with creating beautiful art, but rather with being radically political, social, post-colonial, and a host of other controversial positions—anything but a dreary, difficult, and hard-wrung *artist*. There are, of course, exceptions to this generalization; but, arguably, the "politicalization" of much of modern art is a trend few can ignore, and its effects are widespread. Admittedly, art cannot avoid being political, social, or any of these other things; but these are its results, not its aims. Likewise, our contemporary fashion designing has become about making some statement other than a merely fashionable one: political, racial, ethnic, and so on. Fashion is no longer about creating beautiful lines for actual women; it is about something else, a myriad of things which may *result* from fashion, but are not fashion itself.

> More than just a revelation of character, a skillfully composed outfit can be a testament to the glory of a beautiful creation.

Fashion does not only reflect the identity confusion of other artistic forms; it suffers from a similar sense of alienation. Saisselin notes that fashion, like all other artistic pursuits, has lost its "common value," the universal denominator that unifies its content. The absence of this common value significantly decreases the value of its content, focusing the art disproportionally on form. The result is an increased obsession with the "radicalization" of form and a subsequent "dehumanization" of its contents – thus the idea of the woman as a "poetic apparition" may not be as alluring as it seems. And one hardly needs argue the evidence of this "dehumanization" in fashion: the pursuit of the "perfect" form has resulted in designs that can be worn by . . . well, no one. Our ideas of fashion and their subsequent effects on our ideas of beauty have been shaped by images not even found in on the street, figures computerized, airbrushed, and photoshopped right out of reality. The loss of the common value, the unifying concepts that give our art humanity even as it allows us supernatural beauty, has resulted in a dehumanizing of those forms which, ironically, ought to *reinforce* our humanity.

So what is our corrective response to the devaluing of the material on one hand and the dehumanization of figures on the other? Rather than cry "foul!" at either, which we in religious communities are so apt to do, perhaps our most appropriate

response might be a balanced affirmation of the value of both the material and the human. As the "mediums" for our messages, the forms of our contents, what we wear matters; but the content, the humanity of those who inhabit the forms, matters more. We ought to admire a beautifully cut gown as we would admire a beautifully crafted poem while simultaneously celebrating those (rare) moments in which actual bodies occupy those poetic gowns. 🛋

Seeking
Kelly Reece

A Very Dodgy Poem

Andrew Walker

Dedens mon Livre de Pensee,
J'ay trouvé escripvant mon cueur . . .

— Charles d'Orleans*

I am not the man for love poems,
not the man for fantastic fables
or fabliaux. Search my journals;
you will find no French Faust,
no exotic love stories
of lower class girls.

There you will find a poem,
a dodgy string of lines, pressing
for memories, a poem
that has been brushed with fingers,
prodded for images,

its smudged lines and phantasmic images
reveal none of its former sentiment.
You will find no connections,
no metaphors; it is like
a shuttered house, abandoned,
filled with cobwebs and no longer fit
for living, just for travelers and the curious,
its hollow walls and forsaken frames
begging our departure.

* "In my book of thoughts,
I found my heart writing."

Eldarien Arimistus

Shannon Thomas

Eldarien was running as fast as he could, but it probably would not be fast enough. No matter how far he managed to push himself beyond his physical limits, they would still catch up to him. His breath came in sharp, rhythmic gasps as he raced on, daring only once to glance behind at the pursuing patrol knights. The knights looked formidable, running after him at top speed in the characteristic light-weight leather armor that covered their muscular bodies. Although well-toned and athletically built, Eldarien looked like a scrawny child fleeing before them. Sure, he could easily take down five, ten, maybe fifteen when in top condition, but taking on twenty-seven knights alone would be suicide.

He had brought this upon himself; one small, painful mistake in judgment had caused Esper to discover him in Phyra. The fact that he had been able to successfully gain audience with Phyra's Minister of Internal Affairs to discuss the broken peace treaty between Phyra and Ithyr no longer mattered; the patrol knights answered to Esper, not the Minister, and Esper had been trying to dispose of Eldarien for ages.

Once Eldarien had managed to escape Phyra, Esper had left the responsibility of his capture to the knights, who would pursue their quarry until either it or they perished. Eldarien did not find this a particular reason to fear any single patrol knight, but the idea of taking on twenty-seven all at once made him uneasy; uneven odds had never appealed to him. Thus Eldarien Arimistus, high knight of Ithyr and son of King Arion, raced northward toward Ithyr.

Eldarien led his pursuers into Phyra Great Woods, where he had made camp the previous night. As they entered the thicker portions of the forest, Eldarien raised his left arm and held it protectively in front of his face, more willing to bear the pain to his forearm than to risk any injury to his eyes. The branches tore mercilessly at the exposed skin, but he struggled onward, running the remaining distance almost entirely in instinct alone. Eldarien's breathing became less regulated, coming in short gasps as he strove to somehow keep himself one step ahead of the knights and death itself.

Soon Eldarien could see the end of the forest. He glanced back, checking the speed and progress of the patrol knights who were now swiftly closing the distance. One of them raised a crossbow as they half-loped, half-hurdled through the tangle of roots that seemed to grab at their feet. The knight, however, had been paying more attention to preparing his crossbow than to his surroundings; no sooner had he prepared to shoot than he was soundly greeted with a smack to the head by a low-hanging branch. The knight grunted and fell backward, knocking into the line of knights behind him. The sound of the knight's helmet clanging against the wood mixed with the many complaints from his comrades that followed momentarily distracted Eldarien, causing him to lift his lips in a satisfied smirk. *That should slow them down, if only for a little while.*

Suddenly, Eldarien felt himself falter as he tripped over a tree root: the result of his lack of attention. He stumbled once, and again, then broke his fall by grabbing onto another low hanging branch. Using the momentum from the fall, Eldarien shot forward and up, keeping his legs close to his body. Once his body was clear of the ground, he extended his legs and used them to decelerate until his body was vertical with the branch and he had stopped completely. As the knights further argued and yelled at each other in their attempts to reassemble, he pushed away from the branch a little and released his grip, twisting his body around during the descent. Eldarien allowed himself to land in a crouching position, ensuring that he remained uninjured.

The two front-most runners charged ahead of their recovering group toward Eldarien, not caring about the distance between themselves and their disassembled

comrades. Eldarien rose to his feet lithely and took a fighting stance as he closed his fingers around the sword that rested on his left hip. The two ran toward him furiously, pumping their arms as they ran so as to help decrease the distance between them more quickly. An irritated growl escaped through Eldarien's parted lips. It was one thing to come at a well-trained warrior with a weapon at the ready; it was another thing entirely to wait until the last minute to draw your sword. Eldarien sighed and let his left arm rest at his side, exchanging his battle-ready demeanor for a simple stance, his right hand still in his sword hilt. When the distance between him and the two knights was estimably as long as his sword blade, Eldarien lunged forward and firmly elbowed the front-most knight in the chest, slamming the unprepared knight into the tree behind him. Losing almost no momentum, he turned around to greet the second knight with a left hook, then brought his right leg around and swept the knight's feet off the ground. As Eldarien took a step back and prepared to turn, he heard a familiar sound overhead and averted his attention just long enough for the first knight to catch him off-guard. Eldarien recovered just in time to see his enemy lunge at him, sword in hand. He feinted a little to the right, and winced as the knight's short, single-edged blade cut its way partly into his left triceps, staining the surface with his blood. Angered at his second lapse in judgment, Eldarien punched the knight in the face and followed the counterattack with a kick to the stomach that sent the knight backward into another tree. The second knight then took this opportunity to attempt to sweep Eldarien's legs out from under him and thrust upward with his own sword. Eldarien barely shifted his weight in time to dodge the leg-sweep and blocked the upward thrust with a sideways sweep of his sword, ending that battle with a powerful downward punch into the knight's stomach. This time the knight yelled in pain with what wind was left in him.

Eldarien stepped a safe distance away from the scene and paused for a moment to catch his breath, assessing his injuries as he watched the remaining twenty-four knights restore order amongst themselves. His left forearm was riddled with long, swollen scratches and gashes from the tree branches, and streaks of fresh blood coursed its way to the tip of his elbow. He took a deep breath, then turned away from the patrol and resumed his previous pace. Shortly afterward he risked a glance behind to confirm that the knights had also recovered, yelling and jeering as the distance between themselves and their prey slowly decreased. Undaunted, Eldarien pushed himself until he reached the border of the forest, breaking into the treeless expanse beyond just moments before the patrol. However, he was not safe yet; the distance between himself and his enemies was growing smaller and smaller by the minute, and he was running out of time.

A few meters outside of the forest, Eldarien realized that the only sight he had to welcome him was the expanse of the highest cliff in all of Ithyr… perfect! He had to think fast, though, in order to execute his plan. Moments passed by in what seemed like ages as he glanced from left to right, assessing the terrain for things he could use to his advantage. Moments before reaching the cliff's edge, Eldarien lifted his lips into an exhausted smile as the path to his escape revealed itself to him. The patrol behind him suddenly hesitated and stopped as Eldarien launched himself beyond their reach over the edge.

The wind beat against Eldarien's face and body. He watched through glassy vision as the ground below slowly grew closer to him, the lush landscapes below a blur of varying shades of green as he continued plummeting for a few hundred more meters. It wasn't long before he could see a familiar sight out of the corner of his eye. It descended below him and opened its wings, carefully regulating the rate of its descent and Eldarien's until there remained only an arm's length between it and Eldarien. He seized the saddle and worked quickly to pull himself through the remaining distance and strap his legs in. He felt his left arm burn with exertion and weaken as he fumbled with the straps, his fingers slippery with his own blood. Eldarien muttered something to himself about always having to protect his sword arm and gave up on using his left arm for the moment, resting it in his lap as he nimbly finished the job with his right. As soon as the last strap tightened, the gryphon unfurled its wings completely, coming to a complete stand-still in midair and slamming Eldarien uncomfortably into the gryphon's back.

"Seraphis! How many times–" Eldarien said grumbling as he pushed himself back upright. "You can *kill* me pulling stunts like that, you know. I'm not made of the same stuff you are."

The gryphon shook its lion-like body lightly, clacked his beak and beat his wings once, accelerating them through the nearly cloudless skies.

"By your silence you excuse your actions because you came to my rescue?" Eldarien said, with his eyebrow arched. Seraphis looked back at his passenger and partner, fixing one liquid-gold eye on his for a moment. Eldarien ran his fingers through his hair and rolled his eyes.

"I know you're angry with me for going off by myself like that, but I had a task to fulfill. It is hard to drag a gryphon into a fortified city and remain undiscovered, you know… but stay mad at me if you want." Eldarien said and crossed his arms. The gryphon only continued to pump his wings rhythmically, making a gentle crooning sound barely audible in Eldarien's ears.
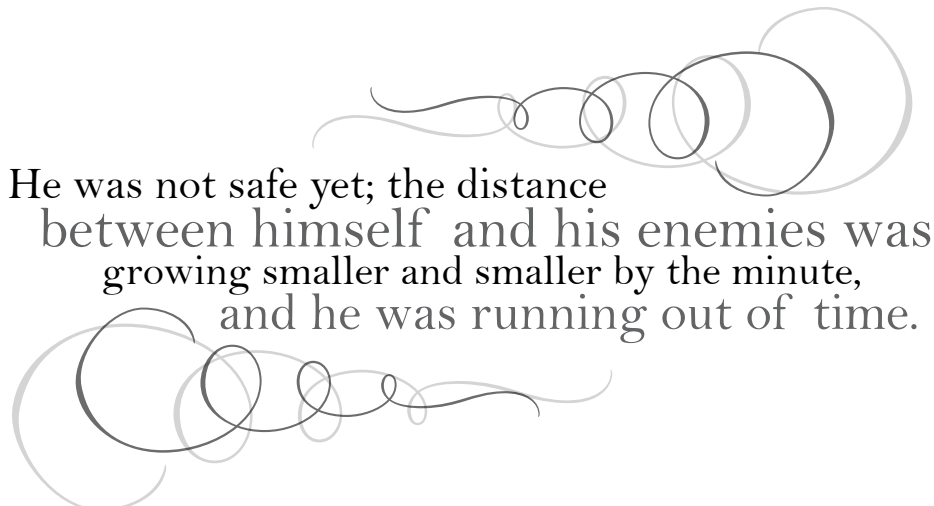
"I really scared you back there, didn't I?" Eldarien's voice had softened. He rubbed his left arm, feeling a little guilty. It had not occurred to him that he could possibly hurt a gryphon's feelings.

Eldarien looked down at the ground far beneath them, a patchwork of greens and blues interrupted by the occasional white cloud slowly drifting by. Seraphis craned his head back and gently bumped Eldarien's chest with his beak. In reply, Eldarien rubbed his companion's feathery head, placing one hand just above the eyes and his other along the jaw line behind the beak.

"Let's return to Ithyr." He said after a long pause and released Seraphis' head. "There is not much I can do in Phyra currently with my arm like this anyway."

The gryphon gave a sharp nod, changed thermals, and glided slowly northward to Ithyr.

He was not safe yet; the distance between himself and his enemies was growing smaller and smaller by the minute, and he was running out of time.

Typographic Chess
Rachel Kaz

" I do believe; help my unbelief"

Rory Tyer

The house where I live sits in the middle of a deciduous forest. My housemates and I have a computer room that overlooks half of the backyard; there is gently sloping grass and a volleyball net, and the evening sunlight is pouring through the upper reaches of the trees, through the generous windows across from me and falling all around my laptop. The windows are dusty, and the sun would probably be bothering my eyes but for the tree limbs. It is getting close to what photographers call the "golden hour," which is my favorite part of the day, second only to that deep black-silhouette-rendering twilight that happens at the beginning of a clear night. There is a sense of wholeness and peace about all of this.

There was a long time when those two words – "wholeness" and "peace" – didn't describe my life as a follower of Jesus. I wasn't ever shown, for instance, how to actually *change*. I accepted the nametag, so to speak, but everybody knows you can wear it just as well doing wrong as doing right, and for many years that's what I did. I knew what I was morally obligated to do in various situations, but this knowledge, even coupled with knowledge of my salvation, did not enable me to live rightly on a consistent basis.

It is incredibly burdensome to live out each day mentally assenting to things you're unable to consistently carry out in practice. But this is not the life Jesus offers.

He told his first group of followers that he could give them life in its fullest, most real sense (John 10:10), and that they would do greater things than those they'd seen him doing (John 14:12), and that he would, in fact, continue to do powerful things for them as they lived out the course of their normal lives. When is the last time you've heard Jesus presented in that kind of straightforward, meaningful way? Jesus not as the key to getting somewhere else when I die, but Jesus as the giver of *eternal life*, which throughout the gospel of John is more *qualitative* than quantitative?

I hope you've heard it put this way. But if not, let me be the first: Jesus does not offer a life of stunted, guilt-driven effort directed towards fulfilling what everybody knows are impossible ideals. *That is not the gospel.* This is the fundamental question: How does God's power actually intersect my real, normal, everyday life and transform it? What sorts of things must I do to actually live a righteous, full, joyful, beautiful life as a disciple – a student-imitator – of Jesus? Human transformation is possible and available from Jesus, but this truth is often obscured at various times and for various reasons. Allow me, if you will, to attempt to clear away some of the debris and let in a bit of evening sunlight.

The nature of belief

Let's begin with the word "belief," a word that has been badly misunderstood and misapplied. To most of us it is a synonym for the word "think," such that to say "I believe so-and-so" and "I think so-and-so" are the same thing. It is thus confined primarily to the mental sphere.

The trouble with this is that the Bible – especially the gospel of John, in which this word plays a crucial role – admits no such strictly or even predominately mental understanding of belief. Consider Dallas Willard's definition in *Knowing Christ Today*: "In its basic nature belief is a matter of *tendencies to act*. It has a feeling tone to it in some cases, but to believe something involves a readiness to act, in appropriate circumstances, *as if* what is believed were so."

Compare this with John 3:16-21. John writes that those who "believe" in Jesus will have eternal life (v. 16); he then goes on to contrast those who believe and those who do not believe, characterizing the first group as those who "practice the truth" and the second as those whose "deeds were evil." Thus belief is intimately connected with actually doing right things more consistently than wrong things, at least such that you could be categorized as one who practices the truth. It's uncomfortable for us to link belief and action so closely because we very often find ourselves acting in ways that contradict what we say we believe or truly want to believe.

The nature of our actions

If beliefs are indeed tendencies toward action, it is also true that our actions very often *reveal what we believe at our deepest levels.* This idea is, if possible, even more uncomfortable than the preceding point, for this means that I may not fully believe some things I claim to believe, or some things I want to believe, or some things I know I am "supposed" to believe because I self-identify as a Christian.

To prove to yourself that this is true, think of some small, inconsequential belief you hold that causes you to act a certain way on a consistent basis. For instance, I never have any reason to believe that the water I'm about to release from my shower head will be anything but good, clean tap water. I never even have any reason to believe I should check before I turn it on. This is a deep-seated, subconscious belief – "When I turn these knobs, clean tap water will flow out, and I do not have to check to make sure it is poisoned" – and its presence in my mind determines the way I act on a consistent basis.

Now, suppose you memorized all of the biblical statements about God, all of the stories describing his actions in human history and all of the propositional or experiential statements concerning his nature from a human point of view. Suppose that your life was permeated with this knowledge and you took it for granted in everything you did. In other words, suppose you were always prepared to act as though those things were as true as your own body. Would anything be different about your life? Would you be more conscious of your love for others, or less worried, or more apt to ask God for wisdom, help, or power? More joyful?

I certainly would. But the lack of most of these things in my life at one time or another has convinced me that my attitude should be that of the demon-possessed boy's father in Mark 9:24, who, in a moment of surprisingly profound clarity, exclaimed to Jesus, "I believe; help my unbelief!" Faced with such a situation, the relevant question then becomes: How? How can one's beliefs be formed and changed for good purposes?

The necessity of belief formation through indirect action

Beliefs are tendencies toward action. When we act in ways contrary to what we claim or want to believe, this reveals unbelief – a wrong belief, a lack of right belief, or some degree of both. This brings us to the most important point of this essay: *Conversion (that is, a salvation experience) does not automatically guarantee correct beliefs.* In other words, "being saved" does not necessarily mean that God automatically "switches off" our wrong beliefs and fills us with right beliefs. For

Reedit
Lee Anne Zipagan

every alcoholic whose alcoholism disappears instantly upon conversion, there are ten more who spend considerable amounts of time and effort working through twelve-step programs.

The discovery of this truth was so powerful in my own life that I no longer think it is appropriate to say, "I believe in Jesus." Now, please hear me. I do believe it is appropriate to say things such as "I am justified," "I am saved," "I have been forgiven," and "I follow Jesus." But keep in mind what I have established about the active nature of that very specific word *belief.* I can no longer simply say, "I believe in Jesus," because then I am using the word "belief" in an incorrect way. Rather, I can say with confidence that I am *learning to believe* in Jesus. I am learning how to act as though whom he is and what he teaches me are really real and true.

Because many of our beliefs are subconsciously held, they are often outside of our direct control. This is why *consistent, indirect action* is necessary for shaping our beliefs and growing in discipleship to Christ. Many wise people have found that practicing spiritual disciplines (such as prayer, fasting, service, silence and solitude, secrecy, celebration, Sabbath, and frugality) as an overall lifestyle provides just such indirect action.

And this is why we can trust Jesus when he says that he offers abundant life. He never expected his followers to simply choose to do the things he showed them through strength of will alone. He is a master of the human personality – after all, he created it – and he understood that our beliefs must be shaped and formed over long periods of time. That's why he calls his students to adopt a different overall way of life, found first through initial salvation and then continuing to be found in joyous cooperation with the kingdom of God.

In such a life we are freed from imagining that we earn either God's favor by our success or his anger by our failure, and we are instead empowered to participate in the slow and gratifying process of Holy Spirit-led transformation, which of course enables us to make such transformation joyously available to others as the circumstances arise.

Considerations such as these have led me to a place where I can confidently say that the joy and wholeness of a quiet evening functions as a good analogy for the life Jesus still offers to all who seek him, in hurried times and slow, in times of need and times of plenty.

The Origin of Candy Hearts

Gregory Orr, *How Beautiful the Beloved*
Copper Canyon Press, 2009
Reviewed by Ryan Knight

Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet* isn't nearly as discussed as it was in the 1960s when it was, as Joan Acocella labels it, "the Bible of that decade." This doesn't mean that it has aged poorly (*The Prophet* was entering its forties in the 1960s); I would argue that it has aged as a fine wine which matures in time. Time has enriched the truths found within Gibran's seminal volume. *The Prophet* recurrently came to mind when I read—or, worded better, *experienced*—Gregory Orr's most recent collection of poems, *How Beautiful the Beloved.* I am confident this volume will age nearly as well, and I dearly hope it is given proper attention, even in this culture which sadly tends to avoid poetry.

One wonders who or what the beloved is when one begins experiencing Orr's collection. The word "Yes" seems to be the beloved at first. Then the beloved has the ability to materialize into a person—and *then* it's identified as "whom we thought we lost" ("Not many of them, it's true"). One must restrain the Western urge to paste an identity to a single entity and simply understand the beloved to be *what is.* The concept may be tied to Hindu sects' belief in an individual's soul, atman, merging with the universal Brahman, which may be understood as the unified and ever-unifying composite of interconnected reality.

What on earth is "the unified and ever-unifying composite of interconnected reality" supposed to mean? Orr's description of candy hearts given at Valentine's Day helps here. Recollecting from his years in grade school, the speaker speculates that those blurrily-lettered candy hearts seem to arrive from nowhere:

> They didn't seem to come
>
> From any one person
>
> But from the universe.
>
> ("Those pastel, candy hearts")

So those candy hearts have come from *what is*: the playful tenderness of youth, the sugary ways Americans celebrate St. Valentine's Day (Necco's candy hearts are no recent phenomenon; the candy company has manufactured them since 1902), and so

forth. And what is, as the concision of Orr's lines show, is brief; the beloved needs only a few words and short phrases to serve it, for it is miraculously able to pack reality into the words on the page so tightly that reality springs out jubilantly when readers experience each page. Anyone in agreement with William Wordsworth's belief that poetry "is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings" will find a case in point in Orr's collection. The sincerity with which Orr presents these poems refutes any accusation of excessive sentimental writing.

The beloved—those who are and that which is, for us, the beloved—assure us of the immense value of life, however confounding the human condition. In an interview with National Public Radio, Orr said, "I believe in poetry as a way of surviving the emotional chaos, spiritual confusions and traumatic events that come with being alive." Hence lines like these in *How Beautiful the Beloved*:

> The Book said we were mortal;
>
> It didn't say we had to be morbid.
>
> . . . .
>
> The Book said: Everything perishes.
>
> The Book said: That's why we sing.
>
> ("The book said we were mortal")

Orr also explained in the same interview that "even the saddest poem I write is proof that I want to survive. And therefore it represents an affirmation of life in all its complexities and contradictions." Hence lines like *these*:

> How we embraced the beloved
>
> So tightly that fate itself
>
> Was changed into destiny.
>
> . . . .
>
> Held in our arms, holding us
>
> Even as she vanished,
>
> Even as he turned into song.
>
> ("How we embraced the beloved")

In his sermon on love, the prophet concludes his list of necessary human desires as follows: "[S]leep with a prayer for the beloved in your heart and a song of praise upon your lips." And how do those prayers for and those praises of the beloved go?

> If to say it once
>
> And once only, then still
>
> To say: Yes.
>
> ("If to say it once") 🕯

Putting the Pieces Together:
A Holistic Approach to Language

Nathan Valle

"By and large, language is a tool for concealing the truth." These words, spoken by the comedian George Carlin, are a humorous commentary on the truthful nature of language, yet they offer a perception that should be extremely discomforting to the modern Christian. Though Carlin's words may reflect modern society's belief in the obscure nature of language, the humorous tone of his statement betrays a belief that language can potentially mask the truth that one presents to an audience. This should not be the case. Within American Christianity, language, a tool that should illuminate the truthfulness of Christ, has been relegated to a position of relative insignificance. Showmanship, the prominence of style over substance, and isolated experiences of truth have instead become staples of modern presentations of Christianity; this shift has wrongfully reduced the true role of language as the foundation of its message.

Though American Christianity expresses a desire for cultural relevancy, this desire has led to a gospel of showmanship. While this desire for relevancy is in itself

tremendously good, oftentimes the expression of the desire falls short of holistically presenting the truth because of its emphasis on pleasing, not teaching, the audience. This audience, largely influenced by a moral relativism that determines the worth of a message strictly through its external appeal, then judges the worth of Christianity by how entertained they are rather than by the truth within the message. Thus, the emotional reaction that a message garners from its audience is not only as important as the truthfulness of the message, but, wrongfully, the determiner of its truthfulness. The showmanship of language, and not the truth within the language, now dictates the church's methods of presenting the gospel. This approach to truth creates a problem as the church must regularly utilize humorous or shallow language to appease an audience conditioned to respond to entertainment. Undoubtedly, the Christian's vision in reaching the world must be deeply affected by the presence of the audience. Yet this audience must not completely control the presentation of Christianity. Christians must not shy away from presenting the unadulterated beauty of Christ in language that matches the splendor of His beauty; the language we use must equally convey splendor and truth, regardless of its entertainment value. The Apostle Paul, in his letter to the church at Ephesus, establishes the way the Christian might avoid a dichotomy of language and splendor by commanding that the Christian

"know the surpassing knowledge and love of Christ, that you may be filled to all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:19). If Christians know the love of Christ, then the fullness of God, of which language is a prime part, will instruct them in their efforts to avoid further separation of language and splendor within the presentation of the gospel.

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Though there is a time and place for a grand presentation of Christianity, the existing Christian culture has created a generation of Christ-followers who fail to understand that the simple truth of the gospel does not require us to always over-ornamentalize it. The showmanship mentality that permeates Christian culture has relegated truth to a point where a simple approach rooted in language is considered inferior to a spectacle that appeals to the physical senses. This mindset twists the purpose of simplicity. A "simple" approach to the gospel, one based within language, draws attention to the truthfulness of the message. In the emotionally charged spectacle, truthful language must strive to be heard above the din; if unheard, the spectacle then creates a disconnected theology with emotional reactions as

its foundation. In her posthumously-collected essays titled *Mystery and Manners*, Flannery O'Connor gives a synopsis of the difficulty the Christian will face while creating a meaningful presentation of truth:

> The Christian writer will feel in the greatest depth of vision, moral judgment will be implicit, and that when we are invited to represent the country according to survey, what we are asked to do is to separate mystery from manners and judgment from vision, in order to produce something a little more palatable to the modern temper.

O'Connor understood her responsibility as a Christian writer to present truth in an uncompromising form; her example should be noticed by the modern generation of Christians who promote style over substance in their presentations of the gospel. Any seemingly simple presentation of the gospel with simple elements must not immediately be associated with poor preparation or weak theology; rather, the language of the presentation, grandiose or simple, must alone determine the truthfulness of the message. If the worth is not determined by language, then the spectacle runs the risk of undermining the sense of truth that should exist in the Christian church. This same undermining can possibly occur in the personal life of the believer.

Without language as the ultimate determiner of truth, the physical expressions of faith lose both meaning and purpose, resulting in a believer whose experiences isolate him. Christianity demands the physical expression of a redeemed life through action, yet this is only part of a holistic approach to truth. Much of what has been presented as salvation in the modern church seeks to reform external behavior, not an internal change of the heart or mind. Instead of an embracement of Christ's love and salvation, a change of lifestyle has been elevated to the single and most important characteristic of Christian faith. Christ demonstrated miracles to thousands of people as an embodiment of physical truth, yet, in his conversation with Nicodemus, he utilized the intellect as a means to present spiritual truth to a man whose mind would not be completely swayed by physical evidence. As Christ explains the rebirth that occurs within salvation, Nicodemus asks the simplest of questions in response: "How can these things be?" (John 3:9). Though Nicodemus recognized the physical signs of Christ as proof of his unique nature, no amount of physical proof would have sufficed as an answer to his question that night. Instead, Christ presented Nicodemus with a logical explanation of truth. This must be our example of how to unite both actions and language in a holistic approach to truth. External actions and spectacles must only be a part of truth; we must be prepared

to defend and explain our faith to those who deem physical action proof of good morals or character, not of truth.

Contrary to George Carlin's belief, our language should not conceal the truth of our faith, but rather serve as the main vehicle through which all of our actions are interpreted. As R.A. Markus, author of *Christ in the Fine Arts*, writes,

> Our internal teacher [must be] the Word, Christ, who teaches by revealing reality to our minds, while at the same time providing us with the language we need to codify and understand that reality. This makes a valuable instrument available to mankind, for language helps us to understand again and again what we know."

It is through the internalization, upholding, and employing of language that we, as well those who observe our spectacles, can find meaning in our faith. 🔥

We must be prepared to defend and explain our faith

Untitled
Sara Hoffmann

" In other words, 'being saved' does not necessarily mean that God automatically 'switches off' our wrong beliefs and fills us with right beliefs. For every alcoholic whose alcoholism disappears instantly upon conversion, there are ten more who spend considerable amounts of time and effort working through twelve-step programs. "

–Rory Tyer
from "I do believe; help my unbelief"

Contact: