

FAITHFUL LEARNING

SERIES

LITERATURE

CLIFFORD W. FOREMAN



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CLIFFORD W. FOREMAN



P U B L I S H I N G

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Many years ago, when I was a new Christian in a fundamentalist church, a friend newly converted from the hippie life told me that he had decided not to read anything but the Bible. I had recently become an English major at a Christian liberal arts college, and I began to wonder how my friend was going to learn to read. He wasn't illiterate, but he had no sense of what I was beginning to learn—how to understand metaphor, symbolism, and literary tone, and how to tell the literal from the literary and the straightforward from the ironic. Not that a new Christian shouldn't spend a lot of time reading the Bible, but the Bible is significantly a literary work—poetry and stories, largely—and we can better understand literature (which itself is a part of nearly all cultures) if we read and study literature. God could have chosen to reveal himself to the human race in any sort of genre he wished—essays, arguments, or letters, for example—and he did use these forms. But he often chose to reveal himself to human beings in the nearly universal art forms of poetry and story because of these forms' ability to bring meaning and significance to human life in unique ways. Studying literature, like studying any part of human culture, brings us into contact with fallen human nature, but because the literary is so central to what makes us human beings created in the image of God, studying literature is also of critical value to Christians.

WORDS AND IMAGES

Language is the fundamental building block of human consciousness and culture. The God who created human beings in his image in Genesis 1 had just called the rest of creation into being with words and had expressed in words

his appreciation of the goodness of that creation, so if we ask what that divine image includes, language must be central to it. One of the first jobs assigned to Adam was to name the animals. As an analytical medium, words can organize our statements about reality and can clarify the significance of our perceptions and reactions. Visual images, such as paintings and photographs, can convey the sensory details of our experience more exactly than words can—they can show what things look like in detail. But images cannot convey abstract concepts very well; they cannot attach clear meanings to what they describe, and neither can they group a class of perceptions, ideas, objects, or actions together. When we want to do certain things, a word may be worth a thousand pictures.¹ So, when God wanted to reveal himself to human beings within the often confusing complexity of human experience, he used literary forms—narrative and poetry—to make that revelation clear.

The abstract and analytical power of language—the ability of words to convey a complex meaning through denotation and connotation—can define the meaning of an experience or mold events into a pleasing and significant order. Therefore, storytelling is one of the primary ways in which human beings communicate their sense of what

1. I don't intend to denigrate the power of film in these statements, but simply to contrast its power with that of written literature. The hackneyed criticism that film handicaps the imagination because it gives us concrete images ignores those powers of judgment and analysis that film calls us to employ. Film can convey ideas, often through specific cinematic techniques like montage and juxtaposition. And film contains language in its audio track. But the ambiguity of images is often a strength of realistic film. The meaning we derive from film must often be a product of our own analysis. Often our understanding of a film must be developed in dialog with others. The qualities of judgment we bring to film are like those we must bring to life itself. Language, on the other hand, conveys significance much more clearly. Both media have their strengths; comparing them in order to praise one over the other can be like comparing a Ferrari and a racing bicycle. The experience of using these machines is quite different, but both are amazing machines that demand our appreciation.

happens and what life is like. This principle holds both for fictional storytelling and for historical storytelling: the Greeks had a muse for history as well as a muse for epic poetry. What's important about a story is often more a matter of truth than of fact. Therefore, studying the mechanisms of storytelling, even of fictional storytelling, can help us to better understand the stories of Scripture—how they work and what they say.

Also, language, unlike realistic painting or photography, translates experience into a code that differs from what it communicates.² This allows for a second order of beauty, meaning, and creativity—the rhythm and sound of language, spoken or read. In poetry, this second-order code is accentuated and valued for its own sake—the sounds of words, along with their meanings, become significant in poetry. Style is a part of narrative as well. Linguistic subtlety and ingenuity are not merely an ornament of prose; they augment meaning, drawing connections between words and ideas. But in poetry, these secondary elements of language can become primary. The meanings of words explode; words become meaning-*full*. In literature, the beauty of language can be brought to the foreground. But rarely does language, even the language of poetry, escape totally from meaning. Even in an objectivist poem like William Carlos Williams's (1883–1963) “The Red Wheelbarrow,” a statement is being made—the importance of the object is being asserted. In biblical poetry the message is always primary, but often the beauty of the poetic statement is part of that message—it empowers the emotion conveyed in the language, or the linguistic intensity of the statement mirrors the beauty,

2. I don't mean to imply that there are no codes in painting or photography, but these codes do not involve a significantly different medium; photography employs what James Monaco calls “a short-circuit sign, in which signifier and signified are nearly the same” (*How to Read a Film*, 4th ed. [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009]: 176). Language and what it points to are vastly different things.

profundity, or even the horror of the statement being made. How could the Creator of wildflowers and woodlands not reveal himself in a beautiful way?

Words and The Word

The beauty of biblical literature is a product of the talents of great writers working within the literary traditions of their cultures. We shouldn't let our emphasis on the inspiration and infallibility of Scripture blind us to the human, literary character of God's revelation of himself. Because I had put the Bible in a separate category from the rest of literature, I defended the calling to become a writer of imaginative literature to Christian students for decades before I realized that the Bible is obviously a defense of literature and writing in itself. Wanting to reveal himself to the human race, God employed the talents of some of the greatest writers of prose and poetry in human history: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Luke, the authors of Job and Hebrews, Hannah, the Virgin Mary, David, and the other Psalmists, not to mention the writers of the historical narratives in Genesis, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles, whether those were individuals or generations of storytellers. God used the literary traditions of Hebrew culture as a vehicle for his revelation of himself to the human race. And while some of the particular techniques of Hebrew poetry and storytelling may differ from those of our own literature, the differences are not a difference in kind. Understanding the literature of our culture and other cultures can help us to understand the literature of Scripture, which we must understand in order to understand the message of God's revelation.

THE PLEASURES OF THE TEXT

Therefore, if we want to understand God's revelation fully, we Christians need to understand the literary forms

that it comes in. But these reasons for studying literature aren't sufficient. Literature would be, according to these arguments, merely a secular means to a spiritual end; it would be an interesting elective course for Bible majors. We would put up with studying literature in order to get to what is really profitable—the study of Scripture; we would mine literature for examples of literary techniques that would illuminate what the Bible is doing or would turn to literature when we were stumped about the Psalms or Lamentations. But literature is a joy in its own right as well. If that were not so, why would people throughout human history have dedicated so much of their time to reading and writing it? One of the reasons that God revealed himself in poetry and stories is that he wanted us to enjoy his revelation.

Of course, though, not all joys are a benefit to us. I'll refrain from listing here the myriad “joyous” activities that beckon to us in our contemporary world and would lead us into sin and misery. I suspect that my friend who had decided to read nothing but the Bible was fearful of giving himself over to one of these sorts of sinful joys. Many people see literature this way; they fear being drawn emotionally into sympathizing with a sinful character or being seduced by the dramatic logic of a pernicious author. This is, of course, a real danger. The literary talent of the sorts of writers who have made it into the canons of college English departments makes the force of their writing even more dangerous for young readers. But I have always argued that the biblical solution to this difficulty is not withdrawing from culture, but rather learning how to read wisely and perceptively. The apostle Paul argues in Ephesians that sin itself can be a bearer of the light if it is clearly exposed.

Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness,
but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention

what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light. (Eph. 5:11–14).

When we, as Christians, learn to analyze literary works, we may be freed from being manipulated by powerful writers. When we shine the light of our Christian understanding on what we read, it illuminates the nature of the work and the purpose of its author. This sort of analytical skill can benefit us in every area of life, especially in our involvement with other art forms like film and music. Christians need to grow up and get involved, and at the same time need to go from being mindless consumers to being thoughtful analysts and critics.

Flannery O'Connor (1925–1964) was a card-carrying member of the guild of modern fiction writers and, at the same time, a devout Catholic. She understood the sorts of demands that modern fiction placed upon its readers. Responding to a controversy over what was being taught in the high school curriculum of the state of Georgia in 1963, she wrote this:

The high school English teacher will be fulfilling his responsibility if he furnishes the student a guided opportunity through the best writing of the past, to come, in time, to an understanding of the best writing of the present. . . .

And if the student finds that this is not to his taste? Well, that is regrettable. His taste should not be consulted; it is being formed.³

O'Connor acknowledged the moral danger in the sort of fiction that she herself wrote—modern fiction that involves the reader in the sinful actions and feelings of characters—

3. "Fiction Is a Subject with a History—It Should Be Taught That Way," in *Collected Works* (New York: Library of America, 1988), 852.

but the antidote she recommended is the development of taste and critical ability through a chronological study of English and American literature.

So it is important that we develop a sort of split personality in our reading. We need, on the one hand, to be open to the text—to allow it to do to us what the writer intended and to stir our feelings, emotions, and imagination. We need to consider the experiences and ideas being presented to us. But, on the other hand, we need to develop our ability to hover above our own reading selves, watching, judging, and critiquing. It is certainly right for us to enter into “the pleasures of the text.” Language is a gift of God, as is the skill of those who can use it well. On the other hand, all human products have been tainted by the fall, and part of learning to live as Christians in this world is to develop an ability to sort through our experiences and to judge them. Certainly, we can also become so enamored with art that we neglect our duty to live in reality, and that sort of addiction needs to be avoided. But these aren’t good reasons to avoid literature entirely any more than fear of gluttony is a justification for anorexia.

In studying literature we explore another part of God’s creation, and deepening our understanding of God’s natural and human creation deepens our sense of wonder and appreciation before the Creator of its order, beauty, and significance. God created a beautiful world, and he gave us the ability to intuit, understand, imitate, appreciate, and enjoy that beauty.⁴ So human beings have always delighted in fashioning beautiful things out of the raw material that God created. Language is one of these raw materials we have always delighted in using.

4. When I speak of beauty I don’t mean to limit art to the portrayal of pleasant, attractive things. I am referring to the skillful or pleasing form or mode of expression that is used in creating a work of art.

“My own eyes are not enough for me, I will see through those of others. . . . In reading great literature, I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. . . . Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.”

—C. S. LEWIS, *An Experiment in Criticism*

FAITHFUL LEARNING IN LITERATURE

Do you like to read? If you find books irresistible, feel the allure of losing yourself in another world, or have a taste for mystery, romance, or adventure, you might sometimes wonder if you're wrong to get lost in books other than the Bible. But a Christian student can read—and even study—*The Screwtape Letters*, *The Great Gatsby*, and other novels, poems, and short stories with confidence!

Clifford Foreman provides a sneak peek into the joy of studying literature, giving you every reason to further refine your appetite for great prose and poetry. Find out how literary forms communicate ideas, artfully use language, and draw us to the greatest Storyteller of all.

The Faithful Learning series invites Christian students to dive deeper into a modern academic discipline. The authors, scholars in their fields, believe that academic disciplines are good gifts from God that, when understood rightly, will give students the potential to cultivate a deeper love for God and neighbor.

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