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# THE GOLD BEHIND THE PAPER CURRENCY: Literature and the Christian College

*Wilfred Martens*

“Watch your words — and every once in a while pick up a novel or read a poem and see what others are doing with words and with people.”<sup>1</sup>

—William Carlos Williams

Like the Roman god Janus who faced in two directions, the Mennonite colleges have presented more than one face to their various constituencies. To the churchly constituencies the colleges have generally proclaimed the centrality of biblical studies, while to the accrediting agencies and academic communities they have emphasized the importance of the arts and sciences. Such tensions have regularly raised questions concerning the role of the arts in Anabaptist educational institutions. Of what significance are the arts in a Christian liberal arts curriculum? Why include imaginative literature such as poetry, drama, fiction? Some practical-minded constituents might prefer to see the colleges focus more on “soul matters” or on career preparation. Why spend precious time and human resources with poetry while the world marches on toward hell?

While a professor of literature at Oxford when World War II began, C. S. Lewis felt the pressures of the public to reshape the university in order to respond more directly to the needs of a people caught in a war. In his essay, “Learning

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*Wilfred Martens is a professor in English  
Literature, and Chair of Humanities at Fresno  
Pacific College, Fresno, California.*

in War-Time,” he states:

A University is a society for the pursuit of learning. . . . At first sight this seems to be an odd thing to do during a great war. What is the use of beginning a task which we have so little chance of finishing? . . . Is it not like fiddling while Rome burns? . . . Every Christian who comes to a university must at all times face a question compared with which the questions raised by the war are relatively unimportant. He must ask himself how it is right, or even psychologically possible, for creatures who are every moment advancing either to heaven or to hell, to spend any fraction of the little time allowed them in this world on such comparative trivialities as literature or art, mathematics or biology.<sup>2</sup>

So, why should we include literature in a Christian liberal arts education?

Christian readers through the centuries have proclaimed that God’s reality is not limited to history, theology, or philosophy, but is found in the arts as well. In fact, the Bible itself is a work of art, a body of literature. Numerous literary forms can be identified in the Bible: anthem, dirge, drama, folk songs, elegy, epic, hymn, idyl, lyric, narrative, ode, oration, prophecy, parable, riddle, satire, song, sonnet, and others as well.<sup>3</sup> Such variety of form requires that we take seriously the literary aspect of Scripture in addition to its content.

## The Significance of Beauty

The first reason I would suggest for integrating the arts into our educational experience is that we are reminded by Scripture of the significance of beauty in our lives and in our world. The arts are expressions, interpretations, and definitions of beauty (I will not attempt to join the numerous critics, philosophers, and poets who have worked at defining Beauty over the millennia. However, I am not limiting the term to that which is lovely, pleasant, attractive, and charming. Beauty can evoke pleasure through conflict, tension, pain, and disorder, as well as through “the beautiful.” For example, Shakespeare’s *King Lear* expresses a beauty in its immense dramatic structure as it reminds us of the terror and awful consequences of selfish love, and Wilfred Owen’s poem of the consequences of war, “*Dulce Et Decorum Est*,” has a kind of beauty in its incisive power). Leland Ryken, professor of English at Wheaton College, emphasizes the importance of integrating aspects of beauty in our educational experience. “Biblical doctrine also leads to the conclusion that there is an inescapable connection between man’s ability to enjoy beauty and the truth of God’s revelation. Scripture teaches that beauty is an attribute of God and that he is the source of beauty, just as he is the source of truth.”<sup>4</sup>

Throughout the Old and New Testament we note the significance of beauty. David desired that he might “behold the beauty of the Lord” (Ps.

27: 4).<sup>5</sup> The Psalmist proclaims that “strength and beauty are in his sanctuary” (Ps. 96: 6). The prophet Ezekiel reminded the people that God had given them the gift of beauty, a perfect gift until they desecrated it: “And your renown went forth among the nations because of your beauty, for it was perfect through the splendor which I had bestowed upon you, says the Lord God” (Ezek. 16: 14).

Beauty, then, is an attribute and a gift of God. It can be used to God’s glory or misused for evil purposes. “Now what does this biblical view of beauty have to do with reading literature?” asks Ryken. “Primarily, it validates enjoyment of the imaginative beauty of literary form as a Christian activity. . . . When we enjoy the beauty of a sonnet or the magnificent artistry of an epic or the fictional inventiveness of a novel, we are not only contemplating a quality of which God is the ultimate source but also performing an act analogous to God’s enjoyment of the beauty of created things.”<sup>6</sup>

The pleasure which we derive from poetry is the result of both its form and its content. In its compressed form it offers more with less. Perhaps that is one reason why poetry and parables are included in the biblical canon. Their form and structure delight us. They tease us — and often jolt us — into profound truths. Psalm 100 and the parable of the Prodigal Son keep working in our souls, over and over again. Their carefully crafted forms give us pleasure, and their content moves us. There is a haunting beauty in a tiny eight-line poem by Emily Dickinson; it is a kind of pleasure which teases the imagination, over and over again.

I never saw a Moor —  
I never saw the Sea —  
Yet know I how the Heather looks  
And what a Billow be.

I never spoke with God —  
Nor visited in Heaven —  
Yet certain am I of the spot  
As if the Checks were given.

## Literature for Wholeness

A second reason for inclusion of the arts in education is that the arts are healthful; they contribute to our quest for wholeness. A basic aspect of human nature is the search for balance, harmony, order. This passion for wholeness of life is described by Thoreau in *Walden*:

I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. . . . I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout

all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.<sup>7</sup>

The Apostle Paul in Romans reminds us of the need to seek wholeness by having our minds renewed and our natures transformed. Such changes occur as we submit our entire being to Christ — body, mind, soul, imagination, emotions. Literature, then, plays a role in renewing our mind and transforming our nature. How many of us have experienced the renewal that comes at the end of an arduous day as we listen to a Mozart concerto or read a good novel. In his book *Anatomy of an Illness*, Norman Cousins describes how noted musician Pablo Casals, past ninety, his hands crippled with arthritis, would rise each morning and begin to play his cello or the piano. His stiff twisted fingers would slowly and progressively become limber as the music progressed, his life energized by the music.<sup>8</sup>

Literature can be part of the process of development which contributes to a life of wholeness. Life can be enhanced by reading poetry, studying a painting, listening to music. In his work on information theory, *Grammatical Man*, Jeremy Campbell suggests that information and knowledge help to bring order from disorder, clarity from confusion, and sense from complexity. The arts are part of our information system and thus are expressions of renewal in a world driven by dissipative and entropic forces.<sup>9</sup>

As we read literature we encounter other points of view — generational, cultural, political, spiritual, gender; such encounters with good art develop our minds and enrich our lives. “Good art moves beyond mere confrontation with new ideas. It forces us to clarify, develop, and sometimes change our views, or to shape and connect previously vague or unconnected ideas and feelings. Abstractions can become concrete; general interest can lead to disciplined reflection.”<sup>10</sup>

As readers encounter a good story it is like confronting ourselves in a mirror. Story is a powerful medium which encourages reflection, examination, and change, both inward and outward. In Bernard Pomerance’s play *The Elephant Man*, Dr Frederick Treves, a surgeon, works at reclaiming and salvaging the human side-show monstrosity known as The Elephant Man. Treves comes to know John Merrick as a friend. No two persons could be so different, yet after Merrick’s death the physician reflects, “Yet he makes all of us think he is deeply like ourselves.”<sup>11</sup>

Intergenerational family relationships with their love, pain, abuse, jealousy, violence, traditions, joys and pleasures force readers to assess the value of their relationships after reading such novels as Laura Esquivel’s *Like Water for Chocolate*, and Jane Smiley’s *A Thousand Acres*. The

former is the story of the De La Garza family on a small farm in Mexico; the latter, a tale of a midwest farm family in Iowa with overtones of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. In two such culturally different stories one can note a number of similar themes dealing with human nature — deep and moving themes which transcend cultures and ethnic differences.

Stories contribute to our quest for wholeness by helping us to cross cultural boundaries. As we read we become informed of the unique histories, traditions, values, and contributions of other peoples. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* provides us with an African perspective of western influence and the missionary movement in Nigeria. What reader is not moved by the story of the Ibo tribesman Okonkwo as he first encounters colonialism and Christianity at the turn of this century. Mario Vargas Llosa's novel *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta* provides us with an insider's perspective of the revolution and political violence in contemporary Peru. It can be a challenge for an altruistic Mennonite reader to try to understand a Marxist radical in a repressive military culture.

## Literature Expands and Connects

A third rationale for incorporating literature in education is its "connectedness." As individuals in a pluralistic society we see through a glass darkly; we see pieces and fragments instead of the whole. As we grope to find meaning and direction we need the voices of others to connect us with the world. The more we experience the arts, the more we gain a sense of the whole. Good literature helps us to identify and face moral and spiritual issues. Sometimes its purpose is to ask the right questions rather than resolve problems or provide solutions. Facing the right questions can sometimes be more important than discovering the right answer. Who can forget the question which Sophie, a Polish Catholic mother, faces as she stands with her two children in line with other Polish people, most of whom are Jews. A guard randomly and callously decides who will be returned home to safety or board the train for a journey to an infamous Nazi death camp. He cruelly insists that she can safely go, but with only one child. The other must board the train. She must choose. Which child will it be? William Styron's novel, *Sophie's Choice*, poses the question. It is a moral dilemma from which we cannot escape. The question is not only Sophie's; it is ours as well.

The question faced by a young Israeli freedom fighter in Elie Wiesel's novel *Dawn* is an unforgettable one. Elisha is ordered to kill a captured British officer in British-controlled Palestine at dawn. He must terminate a person for whom he feels no anger, vengeance, or ill will. Can he murder an unarmed prisoner in cold blood because the movement to which he is dedicated expects him to? Will he kill for the cause — a personal act in

behalf of an ideal? As the officer, who is aware of his fate, and the Israeli freedom fighter both wait through the night, the question faces us as readers. It is a profound question which provides insight into the moral structure of the new Israel in particular and into human nature in general.

Good literature not only raises questions, it can also point us in the direction of moral choices. Oscar Shindler in Thomas Keneally's *Shindler's List* raises a profound question: How do I personally respond to gross injustice? In attempting to answer this question he risks his own life to save the lives of thousands of Jewish people. He conspires to beat the Nazi system by hiding and employing Jewish workers in his factory. Although some might question his personal ethics as he bribes, drinks and parties with Nazi officials and officers, the people of Israel regard him as a national hero. Oscar Shindler's response suggests a moral direction. It inspires the reader to act.

In Dostoevski's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan, whose suffering has made him an atheist, poses a moral question for his brother Alyosha, a simple believer: "Imagine that you are creating a fabric of human destiny with the object of making men happy in the end, giving them peace and rest at last, but that it was essential and inevitable to torture to death only one tiny child. . . would you consent to be the architect on these conditions?" Alyosha, the Christian, is forced to examine his faith and his motives. The question is one with which the reader must also struggle. It is a profound question which forces the reader to confront a real moral issue.

At the same time as literature connects the reader with the world, it encourages the reader to act. Good literature not only poses significant questions, and it not only presents profound moral choices, it also motivates the reader toward appropriate action. It moves us from entertainment to reflection to engagement.

Terry Eagleton, Oxford fellow and Marxist critic, insists that the arts must connect with the marketplace. "Men and women do not live by culture alone; the vast majority of them throughout history have been deprived of the chance of living by it at all, and those few who are fortunate enough to live by it now are able to do so because of the labour of those who do not. Any cultural or critical theory which does not begin from this single most important fact, and hold it steadily in mind in its activities, is in my view unlikely to be worth very much."<sup>12</sup> He is critical of educational theories, systems, and institutions which do not reach out to connect with social structures. In his critique of current literary trends which insulate literature from the workaday world, he concludes, "If the study of such writers could become as charged with energy, urgency and enthusiasm as the activities I have just reviewed, the literary institution ought to rejoice rather than complain. But it is doubtful that this will happen when such texts are hermetically sealed from history, subjected to a sterile critical

formalism, piously swaddled with eternal verities and used to confirm prejudices which any moderately enlightened student can perceive to be objectionable. The liberation of Shakespeare and Proust from such controls may well entail the death of literature, but it may also be their redemption."<sup>13</sup>

Robert Coles, pediatrician and child psychiatrist, teaches literature classes at Harvard University. He does so in order to remind the medical students that the persons whom they will serve are more than abstractions, concepts, and theories. Their patients are concrete human beings who dream dreams, suffer pain, love another, eat an apple, drive a car, walk, sit, sleep, laugh, confront, argue — all the stuff of literature. An undergraduate course which he teaches is entitled "A Literature of Social Reflection." He also insists on the interrelatedness of arts and life.

The thrust of the course is toward the question of conduct: how ought I live this life? The novelists who take a close look at the world usually have an idea or two about its rights and wrongs, and their way of seeing things morally can be a helpful antidote to the rhetorical ortheanalytic approaches — the preaching of the clergy (not to mention various secular scolds) or the abstract pronouncements of philosophical theorists. Stories address and evoke concrete experience, and can inspire in the reader a mimetic, an empathic response: the psychological and moral imagination awakened.<sup>14</sup>

To ensure that his students experience the connection between the theory of class and the life of the street Coles encourages them to be involved in volunteer activities such as tutoring children, working with the elderly and homeless, assisting the sick and disabled. In support of such interlinks of education and society he states, "We hope that the combination of active involvement in the world outside the university and the vigorous self-scrutiny to which some of our best story-tellers submit themselves and their readers will, perhaps, make an actual difference in ongoing lives."<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

As Christian colleges continue to work at reshaping the nature of the liberal arts, they must renew their commitments to the arts which liberate. Literature is a powerful and compelling art form which, like biblical studies and theology, must also be at the heart of our educational experience. Literature reminds us of the gift of beauty, a gift and an attribute of God. Literature poses important questions and nudges us to respond with our Christian values to a world in need of Christ. Literature has healing qualities and can help the reader in the quest to understand self. As C. S. Lewis states,

Literary experience heals the wound, without undermining the privilege, of individuality. There are mass emotions which heal the wound; but they destroy the privilege. In them our separate selves are pooled and we sink back into sub-individuality. But in reading great literature I become a thousand men and yet remain myself. Like the night sky in the Greek poem, I see with a myriad eyes, but it is still I who see. Here, as in worship, in love, in moral action, and in knowing, I transcend myself; and am never more myself than when I do.<sup>16</sup>

Literature moves us from word to deed, from printed page to the world stage. Stories have the power to transform us from spectators to actors, persons who have experienced beauty and who are willing to undertake the daunting task — no, the privilege and opportunity — of restoring the world and its people to beauty. “The gold behind the paper currency is to be found, almost exclusively, in literature.”<sup>17</sup>

### ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Coles, Robert, *That Red Wheelbarrow*, University of Iowa Press, Iowa City, 1988, p. xii.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis, C. S., “Learning in Wartime”, *The Weight of Glory*. MacMillan Publishing Co., New York, 1980, pp. 20-21.

<sup>3</sup> Moulton, Richard G., *The Literary Study of the Bible*, D. C. Heath & Co., Boston, 1989.

<sup>4</sup> Ryken, Leland, “A Christian Approach to Literature”, *Christianity Today*. December 5, 1969, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> Scriptural references from Revised Standard Version.

<sup>6</sup> Ryken, Leland, “A Christian Approach to Literature”, *Christianity Today*. December 5, 1969, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Thoreau, Henry D., *Walden*, Harper & Brothers Publishers, New York, 1950, p. 118.

<sup>8</sup> Williams, J. McDonald, “Art and the Spiritual Quest”, *Mission Journal*. August, 1984, p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell, Jeremy, *Grammatical Man*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1982.

<sup>10</sup> Williams, J. McDonald, “Art and the Spiritual Quest”, *Mission Journal*. August, 1984, p. 5.

<sup>11</sup> Pomerance, Bernard, *The Elephant Man*, Grove Weidenfeld, New York, 1979. p. 64.

<sup>12</sup> Eagleton, Terry, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota, 1983, p. 214.

<sup>13</sup> Eagleton, Terry, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, University of Minnesota Press, Minnesota, 1983, p. 216-217.

<sup>14</sup> Coles, Robert, “Reflections on the Sacred and Secular”, *Harvard Diary*. Crossroad, New York, 1988, p. 201.

<sup>15</sup> Coles, Robert, “Reflections on the Sacred and Secular”, *Harvard Diary*. Crossroad, New York, 1988, p. 202.

<sup>16</sup> Lewis, C. S., *An Experiment in Criticism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1961, p. 140-141.

<sup>17</sup> Martindale, W., & J. Root, ed., *The Quotable Lewis*, Tyndale House Publishers, Wheaton, Ill., 1989.