

A CONTINUAL ALLEGORY: SOME THOUGHTS ON LITERALMINDEDNESS

Marianne Moore urged writers to become “literalists of the imagination,” but it’s the literalists without imagination who fascinate and frustrate me. I once read a letter to a newspaper editor from a woman who argued that the Bible is without error and often anticipates the findings of science. The prophet Amos, she said, predicted the discovery of the seventh star in the Pleiades. However, modern astronomers think that Amos may have seen a seventh star in that tiny constellation because in the eighth century B.C. the Pleiades briefly contained a supernova. In fact, astronomers now number close to five hundred stars in that cluster, a number that Amos clearly did not predict. Furthermore, Isaiah, the letter writer opined, anticipated the discovery that the earth is a sphere when he spoke of the “circle of the earth.” But, in truth, neither the King James’ “circle” nor the Revised Standard Version’s “vault” necessarily implies that our planet is an oblate spheroid, which it is, or even a sphere. Isaiah, like Homer, may have been thinking of a round, flat disk like a hockey puck floating in space covered by a “sky dome.” At any rate, I sent my objections to the editor of the newspaper who had printed the woman’s letter, and he wrote to inform me that there was “no space.”

But if writers as accomplished as Charles Dickens and F. Scott Fitzgerald with “real toads in their imaginary gardens,” as Miss Moore desired, misuse *literally*, perhaps there is no help for any of us. Dickens, for example, has a character “literally feasting his eyes...,” and Fitzgerald creates someone who “literally glowed....” Of course it is a far cry from being literal-minded to misusing *literally*, especially when *Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage* lamely argues that *literally* may be used as a simple intensifier like *really* or *actually*. Webster’s good name notwithstanding, this acceptance strikes me as paradoxical and contrary to the ethic of prose clarity. I prefer to reserve, for example, “literally glowed” for those who swallow an isotope of radium, and I wish to save “figuratively glowed” for those proud folk who *seem* to have swallowed the isotope. I propose that we save “literally climbed the walls” and “literally died” for those who climb and die respectively, not those who feel like it. Vladimir Nabokov has a character in *Invitation to a Beheading* whose “eyes literally scoured the corners of the cell.” My presumptuous advice to this master prose stylist is to drop the word *literally* to make the metaphor subtly more effective and economical.

The word *literal*, incidentally, comes from the Latin *litteralis* meaning “by the letter” and “suggests the influence of the letter as a measure of strictness and rightness,” according to the *Oxford Companion to the English Language*. As a poet myself whose legal tender is the figure of speech, I recognize that the phrase “fishers of men,” for example, can only be understood figuratively, that the phrase “pearls before swine” may be literal or figurative, and that the phrase “God and Mammon” must be figurative unless the reader is polytheistic. When the Bible uses contradictory figures as in the two births of Eve (first, created “in our image,” says Jehovah, and a chapter later created from Adam’s rib), some literalists say that the problem would be resolved if we had the ur-text of Genesis, but that is like wishing for a video tape of *Australopithecus*!

Perhaps because as a teacher my livelihood depends upon an endless supply of *tabula rasas*, I find it much easier to forgive a student’s literal-mindedness than a graduate’s. One of my college sophomores once told me and his class that he would not be celebrating Easter because his church (part of a small Baptist sect in the Carolinas) recognized that Jesus did not rise from the dead in “three days and three nights.”

"But didn't he?" I asked. "He was crucified on Friday and was seen alive on Sunday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday—three days!"

"On the contrary, professor," he said. "A day is twenty-four hours, the creation took 144 hours, and Christ was dead only about forty hours, not seventy-two as he promised. Easter, therefore, is a fraud!"

"You, sir, drive a hard bargain," I said figuratively.

As I recall, this young man did pass the course, but he had a difficult time with poetry, and he thought that Shirley Jackson's famed short story "The Lottery" was about the annual Puritan practice of stoning a person to death to help the corn grow. He argued out of class, I was told, that Superman could not fly "faster than a speeding bullet" because given his size and weight he'd spawn a tornado every time he launched himself out of the window of the Daily Planet. It occurs to me that this young man, a product of a "segregation academy" incidentally, might be one of the stunted victims that I privately predicted in 1983 when the Bob Jones University Press published the *Christian Student Dictionary*. The premise underlying this work is that if you deny the existence of labels like *cigarette*, *abortion*, *atheism*, *puberty*, and *Santa Claus* maybe the packages themselves will go away. None of these words is contained in the *CSD*. But on second thought, literalists must have a word to start with; it's what lies beyond the word that escapes them. Perhaps the thinking is that if you deny children a word, when they finally locate it, they'll be satisfied with it alone and look no further. When one Bob Jones student, according to a story circulating in these parts, transferred to a state university to take some engineering courses, he received an invitation to a new-student mixer. At the bottom of his invitation were the following abbreviations, "RSVP BYOB." On the prescribed evening having made his prospects of attending known to his mysterious host, he showed up at a bacchic blowout complete with a mosh pit clutching a Bible instead of a bottle. Such are the pitfalls of knowing French but not that a letter is multifaceted.

Once students leave the portals of academe whether their literal-mindedness is deliberate or inadvertent, they are expected to apply what they have learned in the laboratory. Some are evidently not paying attention. One high school graduate went to his doctor complaining of pain in his right ear. The doctor, who later wrote up this case in the *American Medical News*, issued the patient a prescription for ear-drops which, it must be stated, was filled a bit carelessly. The druggist wrote that the patient should apply three drops to his "rear" instead of his "r. ear." For three days the patient whose ear was still aching took the ear-dropper and dutifully followed the letter of the absurd directions as faithfully as the Nazi subaltern who gassed himself when he located a Jew in the fallen leaves of his family tree. What kind of person was the patient or the subaltern? Howard Nemerov answered that question in the following poem:

Just so you shouldn't have to ask again,
He was the kind of guy that if you said
Something and you were the kind of guy that said,
"You can say that again," he'd say it again.

The Nazi, I must confess, is a fiction, but it wouldn't surprise me if he weren't, for the insane are often revealed by their literal-mindedness. One mentally-ill man used what was evidently his last shred of sanity to request mental-health care. When his request was denied, he walked into an industrial-arts woodshop and coolly ran his right hand through

a power saw. After the hand was successfully reattached over his objections, he explained that as an adolescent he had tattooed “666” on the knuckles of his right hand to show his allegiance to Satan. Later when his tattoo offended him, he took the Bible’s injunction literally and cut off his hand. Like a child, this disturbed individual could only understand “cut off thy hand” in concrete terms. It probably never occurred to him that a confession, penance, and a ruby-laser treatment might have erased the offense and spared his hand. Shakespeare reminds us in *The Merchant of Venice* that literalists can have their pound of flesh, but woe betide them who shed a drop of blood!

Autistic individuals have similar problems with figurative language. Dr. Temple Grandin, a professor of animal science at Colorado State University despite her autism, admits in her autobiography that symbolism, irony, and metaphor are often lost on her. For this reason and her empathy with animals, she chose a career in science where the language usually is literal, and cattle being led to slaughter, her specialty, do not kid around. When she hears a proverb as common as “a rolling stone gathers no moss,” for instance, she has to “run a video of the rock rolling and getting that moss off” before she understands. But even with her mental video, she gets the maxim wrong, for the rolling stone is not shedding moss; it never acquires any in the first place—it crushes those moss spores before they can attach themselves and germinate.

With the perils of literal-mindedness in mind, the founders of many of the world’s religions have taken pains to warn the faithful. Paul in the Christian Bible warns that “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.” Likewise Allah states that the Koran “was sent to earth in seven dialects, and in every one of its sentences there is an outer and inner meaning.” Similarly, the Hindu Gita urges readers to “study the words ... but look behind them to the thought they indicate, and having found it, throw the words away as chaff when you have sifted out the grain.” Each of these three warnings is, of course, daringly couched in figurative language.

Countless faithful commentators, furthermore, have reiterated the admonitions of the gods they worship. Martin Luther, for example, whose followers were smashing “graven images” in Northern Europe regardless of their artistic value, told his anti-Catholic following that Jehovah’s second commandment notwithstanding, it is not necessary “to swallow the Holy Ghost feathers and all.” A thousand years before Luther, St. Augustine had cautioned, “We must be on guard against giving interpretations of Scripture that are farfetched or opposed to science and so exposing the word of God to the ridicule of unbelievers.” Yet when Galileo offered to let his inquisitors see for themselves the moons of Jupiter, one cardinal, who subscribed to the doctrine of correspondences, is reported to have said, “There are seven days in a week, seven orifices in the body; therefore, there are seven heavenly planets. I don’t need to look.”

This failure to look and to accept something on the basis of a few words and a casual observation (Aren’t pores orifices? Are ears?) has had and continues to have dire results. After all, 38% of Americans think that the Bible is literally true. Because Eve sinned, for example, women still cannot enter the Roman Catholic clergy. Because the Old Testament gives the diameter of a bronze tub as 10 cubits and the circumference as 30 cubits, some fundamentalists assign a value of 3.0 to pi. Because Mark says that the faithful “shall take up serpents ... and drink any deadly thing,” some believers sip strychnine and fondle live rattlesnakes in their worship ceremonies. Because Jehovah divided the light from the dark in the first chapter of Genesis, Bob Jones Jr. once argued for racial segregation. Because God divided the land from the sea, Jones also felt that space and undersea exploration were sacrileges.

Because Jesus told Peter that he would build his church upon “this rock,” the basilica of St. Peter’s is built over Peter’s stony tomb. (Jesus was joking, for heaven’s sake! Peter’s name means “the rock.”) Because Luke says, “blessed are the barren,” the male members of the Skoptzies, a Russian Orthodox sect, cut off their testicles, and the women cut off their breasts. Because Paul writes in Acts that the faithful should “abstain ... from blood,” Jehovah’s Witnesses will to this day refuse a blood transfusion. (Modern translators now render this passage as “eat not blood” or “rare meat.”) Because St. John the Divine describes an angel standing at each of earth’s four corners, some fundamentalists believe the earth is flat and square. And finally because an angel in Revelations says “take the book and eat it up,” King Menelik II of Ethiopia attempted to eat the First and Second Book of Kings. The toxic dyes were more than his stomach and colon could tolerate, for he died in the twenty-fifth chapter.

If a sacred text must be interpreted by man or a priesthood of believers before it can be understood, literalists argue that this gives too much glory to man and detracts from the sovereignty of the deity, who speaks boldly without equivocation. I suspect, however, that some Christian bibliolaters have been misled by the famous opening lines of John’s gospel, “In the beginning was the word,” and, as a result, they have begun to worship the word rather than the creator. However, if one reads John’s entire first chapter, it is clear that John intends for “the word” to represent Jesus who was present with God and the Holy Spirit from the creation. Too many literalists, it seems, read “the word” or *logos* as the fourth member of the Trinity, and in doing so, they have created a radical worship. They have selected a few verses and carved these in stone in order, I suspect, to further a narrow agenda or to seize some power and distinction in a world they feel alienated from.

One would think that Jesus’ habit of making a moral point via the parable would be sufficient to make readers of the Bible wary of too literal an interpretation, but the 38% figure cited earlier shows the folly of that observation. In addition to the parables scattered throughout the Bible, there are passages such as, “You are the salt ... [and] I am the vine,” which demand a figurative reading. In Genesis, for example, Jehovah warns Adam that he will “die the same day” in the King James translation if he eats of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Later, of course, Adam does sample the forbidden fruit, but Genesis reports that he died, not that day but centuries later at the age of 930! And in Luke, to cite a New Testament example, Jesus calls Herod Antipas “that fox.” Herod is one of the few people mentioned in the Bible whose existence can be verified by objective historians, and while he was a shrewd king, he was not a carnivorous mammal with a pointed snout and a bushy tail.

As I’ve suggested, literalists often insist on eating their cake and having it whole as well. The old argument that if Jesus made and drank wine it must be acceptable for mere mortals is often countered with the “grape-juice argument.” The apostle John didn’t mean wine, so this argument goes; he meant grape juice because there was not sufficient time for the wine to ferment. But if Superman can fly, why can’t he have x-ray vision? (Incidentally in the Inuit Bible, Jesus turns water into blubber.)

The arch-Biblical literalist Josh McDowell has a similar problem with the rediscovery of Tyre even though the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel predicted that the city would be destroyed and “never found again.” Indeed, Tyre was destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar, but its ruins have never been lost, for there has been some sort of human habitation there on that Mediterranean island/peninsula for close to five thousand years. McDowell acknowledges the “rediscovery” of the city, but he adds that “a better interpretation” of “never

found again” is, “Tyre will never be found again in such wealth and splendor as it originally enjoyed.” To this selective literalist, the prediction in Ezekiel is a Rorschach meaning anything that doesn’t contradict the facts. But McDowell places words in the prophet’s mouth that we have no way of knowing if he intended.



When the film *E.T.* was all the rage, I took our children to see it. In the scene when Elliot and his extraterrestrial friend launch their bicycle from a hilltop and fly gloriously across the face of a full moon, a woman seated a few rows in front of us suddenly stood up. Securing a child with one hand and her purse with the other, she looked up at the screen, snorted “I’m sure!” and stormed out of the theater.

Like many literalists, this woman has been short-changed. The education that she received limited her as surely as an innocent person sent to prison. But what seems odd to me is that freeing these people from Blake’s “mind-forged manacles” is so rare when the Bible itself shows how change is possible.

Leviticus, for example, sets the stage. The author states unequivocally that the occasional slaughter of live animals on a consecrated altar is a righteous duty of the faithful. We know that for thousands of years such slaughter was so routine that Abraham without question or hesitation was prepared to kill his own son when Jehovah ordered it. A millennium later, Paul writing to the Hebrews essentially said, “Enough! Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice on the cross. Any further shedding of blood in God’s name demeans the son’s gift.” Remarkably the ancient tradition ended though the “God-breathed words” of Leviticus are still printed between the same covers as Paul’s letter to the Hebrews.

The heart of “Biblical inerrancy” lies in II Timothy 3:16: “All scripture is given by inspiration of God....” However, there is a huge difference between God’s word and the author, just as there’s a difference between inspiring a book and writing it. People should not hold God responsible for what God-inspired authors and His translators write. As I have shown, God and His son use figurative language throughout the Bible; why should man created in God’s image do any less?

John Keats argued that “a man’s life of any worth is a continual allegory,” for indeed every life regardless of how base or brief has something to teach the rest of us. The literalist often chooses to study a single life and neglects billions of others. Certainly such simplicity is appealing, but like a self-restricted diet, the perils are real. In a poem of my own, I have a hidebound Scotch Presbyterian say:

“Eat a potato?
That is a libel.
No where is that word
in my Bible.”

To which I reply:
You’ve searched the Word
for a wink from Jesus,
but you have a friend
in exegesis.