



The Sin of Literalism

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for Arthur Zajonc

Based on talks given originally as part of the inauguration of The Barfield School in Spring Valley, NY, on January 7, 2006, and then later that same year in Ann Arbor, MI.

Surely one of the greatest paradoxes of our enlightened age is the irrational tenacity of religious fundamentalism. The case against literalism is so strong and so straightforward that one is tempted to call for a summary judgment. The Bible offers conflicting accounts of the creation of the world, the creation of Adam and Eve, and the genealogy of Jesus, and they are sometimes internally inconsistent as well: for example, Genesis claims that God performed certain actions on three “days” that preceded the creation of the Sun and the Moon – bodies that are clearly integral to any literal sense of the word “day.” In the Gospel of St. John, Christ declares Himself to be among many other things a vine, a road, a door for sheep, and a “beautiful shepherd,” none of which was literally true. Only a psychotic could say such things and mean them literally, and only a militant atheist could countenance such a conclusion. The Bible may be true, but it cannot be literally true. Case closed!

If only it were so easy.

The fundamentalists have powerful allies. Literalism may seem today to be the province of the unsophisticated, but in the past, even the most sophisticated interpreters of the Bible, such as Augustine and Aquinas, insisted that the Bible is *literally true*. Moreover, literal interpretation is buttressed by the widely held assumption that literal, “lexical” meaning is primary, while figurative meaning in all its forms (metaphor, irony, parable, etc.) is at best secondary, derived ultimately from the literal meaning. Here also the fundamentalists have powerful allies: many modern philosophers and literary theorists have criticized figurative language as mistaken, unstable, unreliable, nonsensical, and even “diseased.” These prominent philosophers and literary theorists may have no use for fundamentalists, but such arguments play right into their hands.

Fortunately, help is available. Readers who are well-

versed in the writings of Owen Barfield will recognize my title as an allusion to a chapter in one of his last works.¹ Here as elsewhere, it is Barfield, following Rudolf Steiner, who gives us profound answers to our dilemmas. The first arrives in Ch. XIII of *Saving the Appearances*, where he argues that, since the Middle Ages, human consciousness itself has changed fundamentally, and with it the meaning of “literal.” Barfield’s star witness is Thomas Aquinas, who begins his *Summa Theologica* by distinguishing four different levels of biblical interpretation, three of which he terms “spiritual:” the *allegorical* or *typological* (e.g., episodes in the Old Testament prefiguring counterparts in the New Testament); the *tropological* or *moral* (every passage is a moral lesson for us); and, from Greek words meaning “upward leading,” the *anagogical* (the text has the power to transform and lift up our souls). But underlying these three spiritual senses is the *literal sense* or *sensus parabolicus*. The bare term is already puzzling for us: parables are prime examples not of literal but of figurative language. But then Aquinas’ example is doubly puzzling:

The parabolical sense is contained in the literal, for by words things are signified properly [literally] and figuratively. Nor is the figure itself, but that which is figured, the literal sense. When Scripture speaks of God’s arm, the literal sense is not that God has such a member, but only what is signified by this member, namely, operative power. Hence it is plain that nothing false can ever underlie the literal sense of Holy Writ.²

For Aquinas, the “literal” sense is not the lexical meanings of the unmodified *tenor* and *vehicle*³ (here, “God”

1 “The Sin of Literalness,” in Owen Barfield, *History, Guilt, and Habit* (Wesleyan, 1981). The change from “-ness” to “-ism” was meant to catch some of the reverberations of contemporary political debates, but my strategy worked too well: the otherwise handsome poster advertising my talk in Spring Valley came back from the printer with the title: “The Sin of Liberalism”!

2 *Summa Theol.*, First Part, Q1, Article 10.

3 *Editor*: Regarding “vehicle” and “tenor”: I.A. Richards introduced new expressions for the parts of a metaphor (*The Philosophy of Rhetoric*, 1936): The *tenor* (whose Latin meaning is “holder”) anchors the metaphor, while the *vehicle* takes our understanding of *tenor* somewhere new. For “King Richard was a lion on the battlefield,” Richard is the *tenor*, lion is the *vehicle*.

and “arm”), but rather the new, expanded meaning that results from the interaction between the tenor and the vehicle (God’s “operative power”)—i.e., just what we usually mean by “metaphorical”!

Barfield goes on to argue that Medieval consciousness is fundamentally figurative as such, and he concludes that “*Our* ‘symbolical’ therefore is an approximation to, or a variant of, *their* ‘literal’” (87). Which is to say, when Augustine and Aquinas wrote “literal,” they *meant* what we call “figurative.”⁴ Our modern literal-minded experience of language and thought is *simply unknown to them*.

Barfield addresses the second dilemma succinctly in his essay “The Meaning of Literal,” a fuller version of the argument is offered in *Poetic Diction*.⁵ Language is born poetic. If one traces the history of language backwards in time, it becomes ever more poetic, but one finds no trace of “literalness” in our modern sense. There is no such thing as “born literalness.” *Our* “literal” (as opposed to Aquinas’ and the Evangelists’) is *not* primary, but rather derivative, and the derivative cannot be fundamental.

An archetypal example of “born poetry” would be John 3:8, “The wind bloweth where it listeth... So is every one that is born of the Spirit.” “Wind” and “Spirit” are both translations of the same Greek word, *pneuma*. But over time this innately poetic word lost its tenor and degenerated into the literal English term “pneumatic”; Spirit gave way to air pressure. Its Latin counterpart, *spiritus*, died as a metaphor by losing its vehicle. The living metaphors *pneuma* and *spiritus* have split into separate, literal components, and it turns out that these words are not at all exceptional: it is true of language generally that meaning is born metaphorical, but the metaphors eventually die into prose, which Emerson has aptly termed “fossil poetry.” The literal meaning is not primary, but rather the end-product of a semantic death-process – the antithesis of spirit. But we knew that: St. Paul already warned that “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life” (2 Corinthians 3:6). The dead letter is neither fundamental nor spiri-

tual. So much for the authority of the literal.

Alas, further difficulties remain. When one asks how it is that figurative language signifies, the answer is enigmatic. Consider Isaiah 40:6, “All flesh is grass.” “Flesh” and “grass” here cannot refer to empirical flesh and empirical grass. Hence the “is” of this short sentence clearly cannot be the logical copula, as in “Red is a color.” Somehow, flesh both is and is not grass. What this simple sentence is really saying is something like: “Flesh [isn’t really but in some sense that I can’t express in words might be like] grass.” “Is” cannot mean “is” in this sentence, and yet it signifies to us. Isn’t all this just patently illogical?

Indeed, great philosophers have tried for centuries to wrap logic around metaphor, without success. Hence it comes as no surprise when analytic philosophers of the twentieth century (Barfield’s *bêtes noires*) declare figurative language to be instances of “deviant denomination” or “deviant predication.” For them, metaphor is a tumor that spreads within the healthy body of lexical meaning, a “disease of language” that only their logical surgery can cure. Any sense of meaning we might have is entirely illusory.

Barfield spent his life countering this baleful conclusion, and he was not alone. An equally important contribution was made by the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, especially in his magnificent essay, “The Metaphorical Process as Cognition, Imagination, and Feeling.”⁶ Ricoeur describes the metaphorical process as a suspension of ordinary referentiality leading to a semantic collapse, a cognitive ruin out of which a new “semantic pertinence” – a new meaning – is miraculously resurrected. Metaphor brings together two images, but they never coincide, or even touch. (Tellingly, in the Hebrew original of Isaiah 40:6, the word “is” – isn’t. There is no verb, just the juxtaposed images: “All the flesh the grass.”) We step into the mental space between the two icons, close our eyes, and something jumps the gap. We hear an “unspoken word,” which delivers the new meaning *via the juxtaposition of the images*. New meaning is not created from the bottom up, by rearranging the counters of the *lexis*; nobody makes metaphors by randomly juxtaposing images until something interesting happens. Rather, an otherwise ineffable meaning seeks a way of expressing itself, finds, and then brings together appropriate images. The new meaning is *always already formed and always already in movement*. Metaphors are little threshold experiences.

4 Steiner’s paradoxical claim in his first cycle of lectures on the Gospels (GA 103, the Hamburg cycle on *John* of 1908) that they are “literally and profoundly true” likewise turns on a different experience of the “literal” as already figurative, for he immediately adds that one must first learn the alphabet – i.e., learn how to read language of Imagination imaginatively. In this key cycle Steiner also asserts that all the events in the Bible are simultaneously historical and symbolic. Only when this statement stops feeling like a paradox have we begun to read the Bible aright.

5 Owen Barfield, “The Meaning of ‘Literal,’” in *The Rediscovery of Meaning and Other Essays* (Wesleyan, 1977), pp. 32-43; *Poetic Diction: A Study in Meaning*, 3rd edn. (Wesleyan, 1984).

6 Sheldon Sacks, ed., *On Metaphor* (Chicago, 1979), pp. 141-157.

The making of meaning, the semantic resurrection, happens on the other side of the threshold, and we pull it back into normal consciousness.

Experienced students of anthroposophy will have begun to notice a striking parallel between this process and the meditative path described by Rudolf Steiner, leading from Imagination to Inspiration: juxtapose images (e.g., the Rose Cross) that do not refer to the sense-world, then meditate on them until they come alive. Once Imagination has been achieved, practice until one can erase these living images at will and enter into that gap. We experience emptiness; the ground is pulled out from under our feet; we hover over a void until Inspiration arrives as the unspoken words, the toneless music, of higher beings.

Steiner repeatedly stresses that this experience of Inspiration requires courage, and the same is true of its little brother, the search for meaning within the semantic void of true metaphor. If not the same degree, figurative language nevertheless requires the same kind of courage at the threshold as higher stages on the path of initiation. We have reached a moment of radical freedom – but at the cost of dangling over an abyss. Metaphor demands a trip through the eye of the needle, and that eye is, from the perspective of everyday referential consciousness, *utter meaninglessness*. No wonder so many balk.

The ground beneath our feet has given way, and we feel ourselves falling. Do we ever hit bedrock? The uncomfortable truth is: never. It won't do to say, for example, I am (figuratively) "born again" because Jesus is (literally) the Son of God. And it may be that when the Episcopal Bishop John Shelby Spong calls on us to free the Bible from "the Babylonian Captivity of the fundamentalists," we cheer.⁷ (I do.) But, once free, where do we take it? For the Bishop the only alternative is *total relativism*.

Spong poses the *Gretchenfrage*⁸ of the liberal theologian: "Is the Bible true?" And his startling answer is: "No." Spong quotes approvingly Edward Schillebeeckx' admonition that there are "no ghosts or gods wandering around in our human history" (143), and he insists that "We mortals live with our subjective truth in the constant anxiety of relativity. That is all we can do" (169). He doesn't come right out and say it, but implicitly, in every line of his book, Spong *denies the supernatural as such*. If

this is true, then the Bible has no authority whatsoever. The Bible only confirms – or fails to confirm – convictions already formed in other ways. For example, the Bible condones slavery, but we know that slavery is wrong, therefore the Bible is wrong. Spong does this repeatedly – indeed, it is the main argument of his book.

Over and over, Spong seems to be saying: if only Christianity could be freed from Scripture! It speaks volumes about the abyss of literalism into which we have fallen that, of all people, a Protestant bishop could even entertain such a sentiment! In his discussion of the seven "I am"s in *John*, Spong rightly asserts that "Truth is so much deeper than literal truth" (206), but then he proceeds to argue that the historical Jesus cannot have spoken these "I am"s, because they are not in the synoptic Gospels! He sees in the Bible only the dead letter of a lost spirit. The only way to save Scripture from the fundamentalists is to destroy it.

We seem to be caught between the Scylla of subjectivity and the Charybdis of literalism, but it is a false dichotomy. Both horns of this dilemma result from a failure to understand not only the workings, but also (if you will) the mission of figurative language. Figurative language is unmoored from the sense-world, but that is why it can lead to a *higher objectivity*; it can become a *path* to supersensible reality. Barfield, Ricoeur, and especially Rudolf Steiner were great pioneers, pointing the way, which is to take metaphors, *especially* the metaphors of the Bible, as meditations. I firmly believe that this is how they were intended.

The Evangelists tell us that Christ intentionally spoke to the people only in parables. Many were puzzled, and it is no accident, I think, that the crude literalism of the audience is foregrounded in the Gospels. When Christ tells the Samaritan woman he would give her "living water," she answers: "thou hast nothing to draw with, and the well is deep: from whence then hast thou that living water?" (John 4). When Christ tells Nicodemus he must be "born again" to "see the kingdom of God," Nicodemus responds, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter the second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" (John 3). Even the Apostles fall prey to literalism: after Christ tells them, "I have meat to eat that ye know not of," they turn to each other and ask: "Hath any man brought him ought to eat?" (John 4).

All three of the synoptic Gospels recount the Parable of the Sower, but Mark 4 differs in one revealing detail. When the Apostles ask Christ what it means, He re-

7 *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (HarperCollins 1992).

8 Editor: "The Gretchen question"; something which cuts to the heart of the matter. In Goethe's *Faust*, Gretchen asks Faust, who now has the Devil for his companion, "Do you believe in God?" Faust's long and evasive reply begins, "My darling, who can say, 'I believe in God?'"

sponds impatiently: “Know ye not this parable? And how then will ye know all parables?” Indeed, it is a metaparable, a parable about parables and how they signify. Christ explains it, and then, in Matthew, conducts what can only be described as a graduate seminar on figurative language, telling in quick succession seven additional parables for them to interpret. Surprisingly, the Apostles fail the exam not once but twice: they misunderstand “the blind leaders of the blind” (“Are ye also yet without understanding?”), and then again at Matthew 16:6, after Christ warns them about “the leaven of the Pharisees,” the Apostles argue among themselves over having forgotten to bring food. Christ derides them as “of little faith,” explaining impatiently: “How is it that ye do not understand that I spake it not to you concerning bread . . . but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees[?]”

Who *does* pass the test? The “woman of Canaan” (Matthew 15), who beseeches Christ to heal her daughter. It is a difficult passage, one of the many “hard sayings” that are so troubling if taken literally, and one that should give fundamentalists pause. Christ refuses to answer her at first; the Apostles try to send her away; Christ rejects her a second time. But she persists; she comes again and “worships” Him, and now He responds harshly: “It is not meet to take the children’s bread, and cast it to dogs.” She responds with fifteen words, whereupon Christ immediately proclaims, “O woman, great is thy faith.” If her persistence and her worship were not sufficient signs of faith, what fifteen words could possibly occasion such a total reversal? The woman of Canaan says, “Truth, Lord: yet the dogs eat of the crumbs which fall from their masters’ table.” Her “great faith” is her ability not only to understand the import of Christ’s metaphor, but to respond in kind. For one moment, she crosses the threshold and becomes a poet, and that is the needful virtue. Her daughter is instantly healed.

Why did Christ speak only in parables? *Precisely because figurative language cannot possibly be understood literally.* It is another way of saying “*Metanoete*” – not “repent,” but “turn your minds around.” Don’t just consume the bread of the old revelation: become yourself a revealer of Spirit. This will be the new meaning of faith: not belief, but imaginative insight. The key question is not whether the Bible is inspired, but whether *we* are inspired by the Spirit or cleave to the letter when reading it.

Why is literalism a sin? *Because it is a refusal of the path,* a refusal to transform our thinking. Upon reaching the threshold, the fundamentalist turns his back on the

spiritual world, shuns the labor of imagination, and looks back instead into the comforting world of sensation and mental habits. Metaphor is a threshold experience, a trial that becomes a door. In the gap between the literally incongruous images of a true metaphor, there is nothing, no *thing*, not a thing but a living being, speaking.

The first words of Steiner’s last words on the Fifth Gospel are: everything that really exists is a state of consciousness, all else is *maya*.⁹ Figurative language is the pearl of great price: sell the world to buy it. Because the Word became flesh, we can understand how all flesh is grass, and how all flesh is the Word. The Word is the undying metaphor.

9 GA 148, *The Fifth Gospel* (RSP, 1995), lecture of 18 December 1913 at Cologne.

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