

10-27-1996

Faith and Fiction - 1996

Ron Hansen

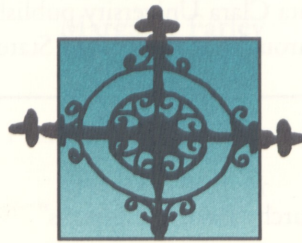
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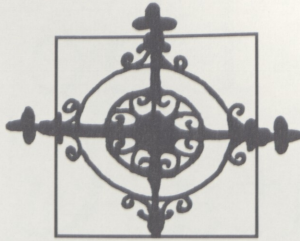
“Faith and Fiction”

Ron Hansen

Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J.
Professor of the Arts and Humanities
Santa Clara University

Public Lecture
Santa Clara University
October 27, 1996

Vol. 3 No. 1



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Faith and Fiction

by Ron Hansen

Kindergarten. Omaha. 1952. After morning recess, our Dominican teacher, Sister Martha, assembled the kindergartners in our dank basement classroom in Holy Angels Grade School and told us we'd be putting on a Christmas pageant for our parents. She then scanned our faces while reading from a sheet of paper that named whom we'd portray. Cynthia Bash, the prettiest girl, got to play Mary, and John Kocarnik, the tallest boy, got to play Joseph, choices I probably would have made if asked. But then three boys I found, at best, annoying were assigned the roles of Magi, whom I knew got to wear the fanciest costumes, and a handful of girls were joined into choirs of angels, and finally my twin brother, Rob, and some troublemakers and oafs were handed the no-line jobs of shepherds. And that was it. My name had not been mentioned. Of all the kindergartners at Holy Angels Grade School—and there were plenty in that age of baby boom—I was the only one without a role in the Christmas play. I felt ashamed that I'd offended God in such a way that he was forbidding me a part. And I was afraid that I'd flunked kindergarten as I'd seen some whiny and incontinent children do. Wanting to know for sure just how bad my situation was, I got the gumption to walk up to Sister Martha at playtime and while fighting off tears told her she'd left me out. To my astonishment, she was not irritated at me. She seemed, instead, embarrassed that she'd given a role to one of the Hansen twins and not the other. She probably had intended to be the one to recite the story of the nativity from the gospel according to Luke, but on seeing my worried face she was inspired by pity to say, "Well, we'll need a narrator. You can be Saint Luke."

The last shall be first indeed. Classmates looked at me with jealousy when I confided to them about it, and even my folks seemed impressed and surprised that Sister had honored me with such a halloved role. My kindergarten friends were each given little scraps of paper on which their lines had been printed out in order to practice them aloud with an older child or parent, but I handed over to my mother a full page of an Indian-head tablet that was filled with handwriting I couldn't yet read.

We'd sit at the dining room table at night and she'd read a sentence from chapter two of Luke until I could repeat it, and then she'd go on to another sentence. I have a sense of the great language acqui-

sition gifts of children when I recall how little we actually practiced those lines before I had them fast in my head. Meanwhile my father was proudly predicting that I'd perhaps be a great public speaker or politician one day. Dwight Eisenhower had just been elected president and one of his speeches was featured on television. My father pointed to Ike and said, "Maybe that'll be Ronnie when he grows up." All I could think of was that he meant I'd someday be horribly dull and bald.

On the night of the Christmas pageant, as a hundred people found their seats on folding chairs, I stood off to the side in a turban made from one of my sister's pink towels and in my own striped bathrobe from home, but unfortunately without the filthy charcoal mustache and beard that my friends who were shepherds wore, so my pleasure was incomplete. While the kindergarten girls sang "O Little Star of Bethlehem," I saw my folks grinning hopefully at their twin sons while my eleven-year-old sister Gini frowned at me in her *Don't screw this up, I have friends here* way. And then with the song finished, and sister nodding me forward, I walked to the front of the audience and in the high scream of a four-year-old projecting his voice, I announced, "At that time, there went forth a decree from Caesar Augustus that a census of the whole world should be taken!" On and on I went, reciting sentences I didn't fully understand. "And it came to pass while they were there, that the days for her to be delivered were fulfilled. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn." When I finished I felt Sister Martha's sigh of relief that I hadn't forgotten anything, and I watched as my friends completed their histrionic pantomime of stargazing, childbirth, and adoration. The Magi sang, "We Three Kings of the Orient Are" and we all joined together on "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing," and then it was over and the families applauded their own.

Others might tell a child's play story like that to say why they'd become a performer or schoolteacher or talk show host, but I was all too aware as a kindergartner that those hundred grown-ups and older children weren't listening to me but to those fascinating and archaic words: "Caesar Augustus," "betrothed," "swaddling," "manger." I felt the power that majestic language had for an audience, that they'd been held rapt not just because of what Luke and I reported, but because of the way we said it.

I frequently have been asked when it was that I first had the impulse

to be a fiction writer, and I find myself often thinking of that kindergarten play when I was blessed with the opportunity to speak Luke's beautifully crafted prose and have a firsthand acquaintance with the huge epic of Luke and Acts that is his theological and literary masterpiece.

Luke is the most writerly of the Evangelists. Embellishing, adapting, and harmonizing, he does what fiction writers do to hook and hold his audience and get his message across. Mary's glorious "Magnificat" when she visits Elizabeth in Judah is a finer, more poetic version of Hannah's prayer in the first book of Samuel. (1 Sam 2:1-10) Zechariah's prayer of "Benedictus" in the temple after the naming of John is paralleled by Simeon's "Nunc Dimittis" at the presentation of Jesus and foreshadows the final lines of Luke's gospel after Christ has blessed and commissioned his apostles and been taken up into heaven. "And they returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God." (Lk 24:52-53)

Even his impatience with other accounts of Christ's life is the sign of a genius whose own faith has found too little affirmation in the accounts of varying worth being offered at the time, for Luke begins his gospel with: "Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things which have been accomplished among us, just as they were delivered to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you"

When I say that Luke skillfully applied the tools of storytelling as he knew them, I have no intention of implying that he was a fiction writer. The first paragraph of Luke's narrative makes it clear that it is a fusion of faith and history handed down to him by the followers of Jesus and those fervent heralds of the good news whom he calls "ministers of the word." Luke saw it as his vocation to be one of them, to examine what was being said, to "follow all things closely," and to put order and the hard eye of probability on what was possibly for him a frustrating hodgepodge of reminiscences, miracle stories, sayings of Jesus, a passion narrative, and theological interpretations, as well as hearsay, misunderstandings, and heretical fabrications.

Elaborating on the gospel of Mark, Luke put far greater effort into the establishment of setting and mood than did his predecessor, as in this vivid and gently-paced passage from chapter four, wherein Luke

introduces his primary theme, that Christ's compassion goes out to all who are needy:

When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."*

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Lk 4:16-20)

We hear a stunned silence as Jesus reverently, even theatrically, rolls up the parchment scroll before handing it to the attendant and sitting, and the silence becomes more pervasive in the collecting phrase, "The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him." While standing, Jesus was just a public reader, but when sitting, according to Jewish custom, he became a teacher, from which position it would have been even more surprising for the carpenter's son who grew up among them to proclaim to his fellow Nazareans that he is prophet and the fulfillment of God's plan of redemption.

A huge amount of information is given to us in those six lines of scripture. Each word counts. Even when we read that it was Jesus's custom to go to the synagogue, and that a scroll was handed to him when he stood, we are meant to infer that Jesus had been preaching there for quite a while, and may have even achieved primacy among the rabbis in Nazareth.

And yet so much is left unsaid. A few lines after those quoted, Christ's teaching is angrily rejected and in a fleeting, but affecting and frightening scene, "They got up, drove him out of the town, and led him to the brow of the hill on which their town was built, so that they might hurl him off the cliff. But he passed through the midst of them and went on his way." (Lk 4:29-30)

We wonder how they drove him out of the town. Was he hit with sticks and flailing hands? Was the town truly situated on the brow of

a hill, or is the geography meant to foreshadow the hill of the skull, which the Hebrews called Golgotha? And how was it that Christ was able to pass through the midst of them? Was it by means of wrangling, argument, a miracle, or by force of personality?

With their economy the gospels tell us to pause and reflect. With their brevity the gospels permit us to elaborate. We are obliged to wonder, to imagine, to fill in the blanks. And in doing so we try to fit ourselves into the Mediterranean world and history just as Christ is wholly present to us here and now.

The great historians of the first century—Tacitus, Suetonius, and Josephus—write quite differently, holding us off at a distance, offering us panoramas rather than close-ups, hardly mentioning the humdrum life of the populace as they pursue the record of grand events, sexual excess, and the rise and fall of empires. With the Evangelists, however, we find a fiction writer's focus on how ordinary life was lived in the farms and villages of Palestine. Even seemingly insignificant moments are given weight, as in this passage from the gospel of John, just after John the Baptist first introduces Jesus to his followers beside the Jordan River:

The next day John again was standing with two of his disciples, and as he watched Jesus walk by, he exclaimed, "Look, here is the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him say this, and they followed Jesus. When Jesus turned and saw them following, he said to them, "What are you looking for?" They said to him, "Rabbi" (which translated means Teacher), "where are you staying?" He said to them, "Come and see." They came and saw where he was staying, and they remained with him that day. It was about four o'clock in the afternoon. (Jn 1:35-39)

I have prayed over those five lines of scripture more than a few times and have not yet exhausted its theological and practical implications.

On the one hand it is flatfooted, terse, and uneventful. We guess at so much. We take it that Andrew and the other unnamed disciple are young enough to be rash, highly inquisitive, and sheepish when confronted—how else to explain the self-conscious illogic of hastily skulking after a holy man, but then hiding their religious quest by saying they merely wanted to know where he lived? We can only imagine a knowing smile from Jesus when he says, "Come and see." And then the mystery is never solved. We are not told where Jesus was staying, what his house or room or shaded plot of earth is like. We gather that

Andrew and his friend filled a few hours in good conversation with Jesus and that he won them over, to say the least, for when Andrew sees his older brother, Simon, again his childish excitement is unmistakable when he blurts out, "We have found the Messiah!" A simple if highly personal encounter has produced the change of affinities and direction that is what we call conversion.

Looked at in another way, we see foreshadowed in the first chapter of John the Easter event of his twentieth, and next-to-last, chapter when Mary Magdalene weeps at the empty tomb. She thinks it is a gardener who asks her, "Whom are you looking for?" And she tells him that she fears her Lord has been taken away. The gardener says, "Mary," and though she has already turned to talk to him, she turns again—a sign of conversion—and addresses him as Andrew did, "'Rabbouni!' (which means Teacher)." (Jn 20:11-17)

A high order of craft and planning and mastery of the storyteller's art is plainly evident throughout the gospels, and yet though they are, like fictions, things made or formed (the Latin *factio* means shaped or feigned), they have their foundation in a Christ whom their authors were willing to die for.

Christ is not a character, he is the Word made flesh; and the facts of his life are not plot points, they are the instrument, the process, and the model by which we achieve atonement, reconciliation, and salvation. Yet one need not have faith in Christ to be influenced by his story, for we have seen many nineteenth and twentieth century novels with no religious pretensions whatsoever whose trajectories imitate that of the life of Jesus of Nazareth.

We generally find in them an initiating incident or graced event that incites the protagonist to a quest for a higher goal. With the rising action of the plot, he or she often gathers friends who share in the quest, and ever greater successes are achieved, obstacles are overcome, enemies are sundered, until a final triumph seems assured. But there is a forbidding crisis in which the protagonist is offered the choice to go ahead in spite of the dangers, or to follow another path, and in that high noon of the soul, the protagonist faces the future abandoned and alone. And then, when all seems lost, by dint of the hero's force of will, a greater victory than seemed attainable is finally won.

Christ's story is so primary to our literature that the eyes of faith can find it in a thousand variations. Look at Charles Dickens's *Great*

Expectations, William Faulkner's *A Fable*, Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, John Irving's *A Prayer for Owen Meany*, and Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*; or, in film, *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, *Cool Hand Luke*, and *Shane*. Entertainments and stories of adventure often follow the form of Christ's life quite closely, while fiction dealing with social problems and continuing injustice may turn it on its head, highlighting a falling action that gives way to a culminating moment of abjection and failure. I shall not mention all the books and films and plays that have a character filling in for the Savior, often, as in *The Red Badge of Courage*, even bearing the initials J. C. And as for fictional images of crucifixions, healings, unjust condemnations, and agonies over an offered choice, well, I'll only quote John to say, "if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." (Jn 21:25)

We look to fiction for self-understanding, for analogies of encounter, discovery, and decision that will help us contemplate and change our lives. And so it was for Jesus himself as he formulated his parables. Each of them is Christ's symbolic way of telling us what has been revealed to him in prayer about the Mystery we call God, about Christ's ministry in the world, and of the Father's will for us all.

When we chance upon a metaphor or simile in our reading, we may not notice that we are first halted by the obvious falsity of the statement—the heavyweight boxer Muhammad Ali did not truly "float like a butterfly, sting like a bee"—and then are forced to find connections and similarities we may not have noticed. And because there is no real equivalence, no meshing of objects, our interpretation is never finished, only abandoned. And so it is with parables.

Early in the gospel according to Mark, Jesus tells the crowd the parable of the sower whose seed often fell where it could not thrive, but finally did put down roots in good soil and yielded a hundredfold. The scene continues,

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them, "To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven." (Mk 4:10-12)

Those final lines, in slightly different form, are featured in Isaiah (6:9-10) when the Lord first commissions him to be a prophet. Then, and seven centuries later in the time of Christ, and for us, too, now, humanity's judgments are hasty, its opinions are settled, its own merits are felt to be pretty sure, and the emotions of awe and reverence are held in check.

Whenever necessary throughout the gospels, Jesus offers the faithful proverbs and ways of praying and rules of right conduct and signs of his healing power. But his favorite method of teaching seems to have been in parables because stories so well convey the immediacy and transcendence that are the two primary qualities of religious experience.

Often in Christ's familiar and very concrete parables there is an upsetting element—a harvest like no other or a series of murders in a vineyard—that skews quotidian reality to such an extent that we are obliged to undertake a new way of thinking, to find in our paltry circumstances occasions for surprise, revelation, and self-transcendence.

Even at his last supper, in the gospel of John, Jesus teaches his friends wholly through metaphors and cryptic turns of phrase. We find no institution of the Eucharist there, but in his washing of the feet we have a sign of the humility, generosity, and service that our sharing in the body and blood of Christ ought to make us perfect in ourselves. We hear him say he'll be betrayed, but when asked who it is, Jesus names him only by handing Judas a piece of bread, offering him through that Eucharistic symbol a further opportunity for repentance and change of heart.

Everything is obliquely stated; it is theology through conundrum. We can practically feel his disciples squirming in uneasiness and wonder. "Where I am going, you cannot follow me now; but you will follow me afterward." "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit." "A little while, and you will no longer see me, and again a little while, and you will see me." And finally, "I have said these things in figures of speech. The hour is coming when I will no longer speak to you in figures, but will tell you plainly of the Father."

Jesus was, in Max Weber's terminology, both an ethical prophet—one who outlines rules of conduct for his followers—and an exemplary prophet—one who presents his own life as an example to his followers.

And he is never so exemplary as in his Passion. The hour comes when Christ says he will tell us plainly of the Father, but instead he offers us the mysteries of his crucifixion and resurrection. We are told plainly that he cannot hit the nail on the head, that the Word is inexpressible, that it is a burgeoning, a florescence, an opening out into further interpretation. Were the gospels more biographical, our thinking about Christ would have been more confined, conservative, and hopelessly bound up in human predilections and prejudices.

In the ninth of his "Eleven Addresses to the Lord," the poet John Berryman says of the Holy Being, "an old theologian / asserts that even to say You exist is misleading." Our fragile human language, attenuated by imprecision, overuse, and false associations is not up to the hard task of talking about the infinite. Anthony DeMello has even adduced that any image we have of God is more *unlike* him than like him. We seem to be far better off if we try to determine who the Creator is by considering creation, by finding parables of holiness and grace in the world around us.

Saint Ignatius of Loyola was doing just that when, in his "Contemplation to Attain the Love of God" in the *Spiritual Exercises*, he urged retreatants to consider "how God dwells in creatures: in the elements giving them existence, in the plants giving them life, in the animals conferring upon them sensation, in man bestowing understanding. So He dwells in me and gives me being, life, sensation, intelligence; and makes a temple of me, since I am created in the likeness and image of the Divine Majesty."

The "Contemplation to Attain the Love of God" is at the heart of much of the poetry of Gerard Manley Hopkins, "God's Grandeur" for instance, and "Pied Beauty," but I find especially telling the final lines of the poem "As kingfishers catch fire." There he writes that we each feel within us the need to proclaim our hidden selves, our spirit, our uniqueness, and often that's accomplished through our actions. We hear the inner being "Crying *What I do is me: for that I came.*" Hopkins continues:

*I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God's eye what in God's eye he is—
Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces.*

The religious sensibility knows that human beings were made for self-sacrifice to God, and through that means to find salvation. Wanting to do that is a grace, and to continue glorifying God, to be both officially just *and* to mete out justice, further grace is needed. Each kind of grace comes to us through the Christ who redeemed the world and is still present in it "in ten thousand places" and in the features of the people we encounter.

The post-resurrection appearances of Christ to his friends are often characterized by them mistaking who he is: a gardener near the sepulchre, a vagabond on the road to Emmaus, a guy on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias offering the fishermen free advice about where they should cast their nets. Christ seems to be teaching his friends that he will be with them always, as he promised, but in the world at large and in the faces of strangers. A faith-inspired fiction has a fondness for humanity and finds cause for celebration in the beauties of the natural world.

A faith-inspired fiction is ever aware that we are on holy ground. And at the same time that fiction shares in the communion expressed in the famous lines of Reverend John Donne, that "any mans *death* / diminishes *me*, because I am involved in *Mankind*; And / therefore never send to know for whom the *bell* tolls; / It tolls for *thee*."

In the finest of our fictions, whether it be Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* or Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*, we have a sense of humanity functioning as it generally does, but at a higher and inspired level where harmonies are revealed, order is discovered, the questions that lie hidden in our hearts are given their just due. We think, if we are Christians, that this is what it is to live fully in the presence of grace. We glimpse, if only through a glass darkly, the present and still-to-come kingdom of God.

Look at Isak Dinesen's wonderful story "Babette's Feast." Babette is a famous French chef who has been forced to flee the politics of her homeland and winds up within a radically puritanical sect in a desolate settlement by a fjord in Norway. Working as a humble cook and housekeeper to two sweet and pious sisters, she's expected to prepare only broiled codfish and ale-bread soup, but when she wins ten thousand francs in a lottery, she chooses to spend it all on a magnificent feast that will celebrate the hundredth anniversary of their late father's birthday. Seeing the huge amount of foods and wines grandly arriving from Paris in wheelbarrows, one sister goes out to their congregation,

urging them to take no notice of this high cuisine for fear of offending God. One old man promises her, “ We will cleanse our tongues of all taste and purify them of all delight or disgust of the senses, keeping and preserving them for the higher things of praise and thanksgiving.”

But an epicurean Army general who once was in love with one of the sisters has also been invited to the feast, and is bewildered to see his fellow diners consuming the finest Amontillado and turtle soup and Blinis Demidoff “without any sign of either surprise or approval, as if they had been doing so every day for thirty years.”

Elated by Babette’s artistry, the general offers a toast that he first heard from the Dean whose hundredth anniversary they are celebrating, and which he finally understands. “Mercy and truth, my friends, have met together,” the general says. “Righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another.” “Babette’s Feast” merges incongruities, reconciles the irreconcilable. The general who chose the way of hedonism, finds in the miracle of Babette’s culinary talents both ecstatic pleasure and the spirituality he long ago rejected. The congregation of puritans who chose a bookkeeping spirituality for themselves, find in the feast the religious ecstasy they have sought and the bodily pleasure they have shunned. And Babette is satisfied because, as she says, she is “a great artist” and this is what she does, whether or not there are those who can fully savor it.

I haven’t done justice to the intricate subplots and subordinate themes in “Babette’s Feast” that are so characteristic of Isak Dinesen’s fascinating tales. I hope, though, that I have sketched in enough of the tale to show that “Babette’s Feast” can be looked at in a purely secular way as a glorious testimony to artistic passion and the intoxicating effect that the fine arts can have on those who have learned to pay attention. But it is also, of course, a highly metaphorical representation of liturgy, of the Christian recognition of God’s graciousness for which thanksgiving is offered in our Eucharistic celebrations.

Religious faith enriches “Babette’s Feast,” but is not necessary for its esteem. Isak Dinesen’s gothic tales are a fiction of awareness, of seeing into the middle of things. It functions like Christ’s parables in that we experience it and are impressed by it long before we fully comprehend it. So-called “Christian fiction” is often in fact allegory, as in Joseph Girzone’s *Joshua*, or is a reduction into formula, providing pat solutions to oversimplified problems, sometimes yielding to a Manichean dualism

wherein good and evil are plainly at war, or offering as Christianity conservative politics.

A faith-inspired fiction is harder to pin down. Such writing is instinctive rather than conformist, intuitive rather than calculated; it features vital characters rather than stale types, offers freedom and anomaly rather than foregone conclusions, invites thoughtfulness not through rational argument, but through asking the right questions. A faith-inspired fiction is, as Anthony DeMello has said, the shortest distance between human understanding and truth.

While it may be hard to believe now, in the late nineteenth century Cardinal John Henry Newman was forced to defend having literature courses at all in a Catholic university. His argument was “if Literature is to be made a study of human nature, you cannot have a Christian Literature. It is a contradiction in terms to attempt a sinless Literature of sinful man. You may gather together something very great and high, something higher than Literature ever was; and when you have done so, you will find that it is not Literature at all.”

Writing with faith is a form of praying. Evelyn Waugh maintained prayer ought to consist of adoration, contrition, thanksgiving, and supplication. And so it is in the writing of fiction, in which authors can adore God through their alertness to creation and to the Spirit that dwells in their talent; confess their own faults by faithfully recording the sins, failings, and tendencies of their characters; offer thanksgiving through the beauty of form, language, and thought in their creations; and beseech by obeying the rule of Saint Benedict, which states: “Whatever good work you begin to do, beg of God with most earnest prayer to perfect it.”

