

Creation and Interpretation. Hermeneutics and the Theology of Creation

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ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Artikel befasst sich mit der christlichen Schöpfungstheologie und ihrer Relevanz für die Hermeneutik. Auf den ersten Blick mag es so aussehen, als ob diese Bereiche nichts miteinander zu tun haben, doch sie haben erwiesenermaßen bedeutende Querverbindungen in Philosophie und Literartheorie. Dieser Artikel bezieht sich insbesondere auf den

Philosophen James K.A. Smith und den Theologen Colin Gunton und versucht, ein theologisches Verständnis zu gewinnen von dem Zustand menschlicher Interpretation als einem Schöpfungsaspekt. Ferner schlägt er gewisse Kernprinzipien einer christlichen Schöpfungstheologie als Rahmen für ein schlüssiges Modell der Hermeneutik vor, das sowohl die Möglichkeiten als auch die Begrenzungen menschlicher Sprache umfasst.

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RÉSUMÉ

Cet article traite de la théologie chrétienne de la création et de sa pertinence pour l’herméneutique. Ces deux champs d’étude peuvent sembler, à première vue, sans relation entre eux, mais l’auteur montre qu’ils ont des incidences sur la philosophie et la théorie littéraire. S’intéressant en particulier à la philosophie de James

K.A. Smith et à la théologie de Colin Gunton, l’auteur cherche à élaborer une vision théologique de la situation interprétative humaine vue comme un aspect de la création. Il avance que certains principes clé de la théologie chrétienne de la création peuvent fournir un cadre à l’élaboration d’un modèle herméneutique cohérent qui tienne compte à la fois des possibilités et des limitations du langage humain.

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SUMMARY

This article considers the Christian theology of creation and its relevance for hermeneutics. What might appear at first sight to be unrelated fields are shown to have significant connections in philosophy and literary theory. With special reference to the philosopher James K.A.

Smith and the theologian Colin Gunton, this article seeks to explore a theological understanding of the human interpretative situation as an aspect of creation. It proposes that certain core principles of the Christian theology of creation may provide a framework for a coherent model of hermeneutics that encompasses both the possibilities and limitations of human language.

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1. Introduction

Hermeneutics is a vital task for the Christian Church, which has traditionally confessed its belief in an authoritative written revelation. Indeed, the modern discipline of hermeneutics was born within a theological context.¹ This article considers the potential for an approach to hermeneutics that is rooted in Christian theology and, in particular, the theology of creation. It will suggest that

any theory of hermeneutics must necessarily owe much to our view of the world and our relationship with that world. From certain core principles of creation, it will explore the implications of this theology for hermeneutics.

Beginning with a recent proposal in this vein by the philosopher James K. A. Smith in *The Fall of Interpretation: Philosophical Foundations for a Creational Hermeneutic* (first published in 2000

and revised in 2012), it will consider several distinctive elements of biblical texts on creation and compare these against the cosmological and ontological foundations of the thought of two key figures in post-modern theory, Jacques Derrida and Friedrich Nietzsche. Drawing especially upon the reflections of the theologian Colin E. Gunton on creation, it will put forward some suggestions for a model of human language and hermeneutics that is derived from the theology of creation.

2. Creational hermeneutics: James K. A. Smith and *The Fall of Interpretation*

James K. A. Smith is professor of philosophy at Calvin College, holding a chair in Applied Reformed Theology and Worldview.² His theological influences are layered and diverse.³ By his own acknowledgement, the first edition of *The Fall of Interpretation* published in 2000 was something of a milestone in the course of a personal theological and specifically hermeneutical journey. This voyage began in the Christian Brethren and its stations en route included American Pentecostalism, Dutch Reformed theology and Continental philosophical hermeneutics.

Smith's central thesis in *The Fall of Interpretation* is a strong case for the innateness of hermeneutics as part of human existence. He suggests that hermeneutical theory has tended to fall into certain heuristic models: present immediacy, eschatological immediacy and violent mediation.⁴ In place of these, he develops his own proposal for a creational hermeneutic. Evangelicalism, he argues, has tended towards the first model, in which 'interpretation' is assumed to be a synonym for distortion in some circles.⁵ The desire for immediate unmediated access to meaning is not confined to evangelicalism, however, as Smith finds traces of this in Wolfhart Pannenberg, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Jürgen Habermas, Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida; even in philosophical schemes where the dream is supposed to have passed.⁶ In Pannenberg, Gadamer and Habermas, Smith finds forms of 'eschatological immediacy', a longing for a future in which the difficulties inherent in human interpretation are superseded by perfect communication.⁷ He critiques this view as a contradiction of creaturely finitude and an unduly 'monological' restriction of multiple potential narratives to a single voice.⁸

In the second part of the book, Smith analyses the rejection of the possibility of immediacy

in Heidegger and Derrida, whether present or future.⁹ This prepares the ground for his own 'baptised' development of deconstruction and subtle insights into what are often difficult philosophical texts. Smith departs from Heidegger and Derrida in his discernment of their sense of the eternal fallenness of the world, experienced in the frustration and conflict of the human hermeneutical situation. A fall from the beginning ultimately leads to distaste for creatureliness and the limitations of finitude. Smith rightly discerns this is Heidegger's choice of myth, his own story of human origins.¹⁰

Smith does admit that there is much in Derrida's later works, in particular, that can be criticised from a Christian perspective.¹¹ At the same time, Derrida has been misrepresented. Derrida does not believe it is impossible to communicate; instead that it is possible to not communicate.¹² If this distinction is not consistently clear, it may be due to overstatement.¹³ Derrida points to the absence of the author from their work, which is intrinsic to writing as a form of communication. For language to function, it must have 'iterability'. It must be possible for words to be used by different persons, of different signified objects, with different intentions. Derrida's famous maxim 'il n'y a pas de hors-texte' or 'there is no outside-text' does not mean there is no external reality beyond the text. Rather, there is nothing external to context. At the same time, context cannot be wholly determined because of the absence of full presence; writers are not present with their readers and writers are not fully present, or aware, of themselves.¹⁴ This absence of presence does not make all interpretations equally valid. While contexts cannot be determined naturally or innately, they are decided by communities that produce rules for good and bad readings.¹⁵ Contrary to a received critical tradition, Derrida does not entirely reject the concept of authorial intention. The intention of the author is never completely present but neither is it wholly absent. The question of intention is no longer the controlling factor.¹⁶

This examination of Derrida is highly nuanced but, arguably, less investigative of the foundational layers of Derridean thought than Smith's study of Heidegger. He finds in Derrida a correct discernment of 'some of the structural features of language [which] grants us an insight into the "grain of the universe" and the structure of creation'.¹⁷ His principal disagreement is on the question of the goodness, or otherwise, of creation. For Derrida, writing and interpretation involve an

intersubjective violence, an original or ‘arche-violence’.¹⁸ If this violence characterises the situation of human creaturely finitude in Derrida’s thought, it runs counter to the biblical proclamation that creation (and therefore the human finitude that requires hermeneutics) is good and not inherently bad.¹⁹

Smith sets out his understanding of the goodness of creation from a deconstructive reading of Augustine (or the Augustinian tradition) to filter out what he considers to be latent Neoplatonism that regards finitude and hermeneutics as products of the Fall.²⁰ While Augustine suggested human language originated post-Eden, he simultaneously emphasised the goodness of all creation. Finite matter is not inherently sinful but may be used sinfully.²¹

From this point of departure, Smith develops his proposal for a creational model of hermeneutics. Humans have to interpret by their nature as finite created beings. The result is indeterminate and multiple readings but this situation is positive rather than negative, as created finitude is declared to be good in Genesis 1. In the absence of immediacy in the past, present or future, creation affirms the goodness of ‘multiplicitous’ rather than ‘mono-logical’ hermeneutics.²²

A question for Smith’s creational hermeneutics, however, is whether his model is *sufficiently* theological and investigational of the presuppositions of post-modern hermeneutics. A difficulty of *The Fall of Interpretation* is an ambiguity in the definition of ‘creation’. Smith claims in the introduction that his creation is not

an ontological theory of origins. ... It is creation as a metaphor for what phenomenology describes as the given or the gift ... a way of construing the state of affairs that is described in phenomenology as ‘world,’ and as a construal, its status is undecidable but also on a par with every other construal.²³

This definition of creation, in phenomenological terms, seems at odds with the comment in the introduction to the second edition that his proposal is founded on a ‘specifically Christian theology of creation’.²⁴ Is this the creation of Christian theology, in all its theological depth, or merely the present and individual world of experience of phenomenology? As Terence Fretheim notes, bare existence, world or nature are not equivalent terms to creation as a theological concept: ‘To speak of creation is to state that the cosmos does not simply

exist; it was created by God.’²⁵ Smith denies that his creation is ontological; yet, at the same time, his discussion of the goodness of creation (against Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida) raises ontological issues and is not sourced from phenomenology but from Christian doctrine. Smith has to admit that the goodness of creation is a matter of belief ‘at the level of fundamental construals, a very religious realm ... of incommensurable worldviews’.²⁶ Apart from his two main concerns with creaturely finitude and the goodness of creation, *The Fall of Interpretation* includes relatively little discussion of the theology of creation. This may in part be a self-imposed limitation of a primarily philosophical work. Smith has commented more recently on the need for a Christian ‘counter-ontology’ and the significance of knowledge of the Creator.²⁷

Furthermore, a case for the weaving of post-structuralist hermeneutics into ‘the very fabric of created finitude’ needs to demonstrate this incorporation, which demands a fuller discussion of the Christian theology of creation.²⁸ Contrary to *The Fall of Interpretation*, the present article suggests that Derrida does not offer the middle way between Cartesianism and Pyrrhonic scepticism that it proposes.²⁹

3. The theology of creation: foundations and implications

It is more than a simple truth that the Tenach and the Christian Bible begin with Genesis.³⁰ Until the 1970s, however, the significance of creation was generally overlooked in biblical studies and theology.³¹ Creation received relatively marginal treatment in many prominent studies of the Old Testament. In the theology of Gerhard von Rad, Brevard Childs, Horst Preuss and Erhard Gerstenberger creation is something of a secondary doctrine, certainly in comparison with soteriology and covenant theology.³² There are probably multiple reasons for this neglect, including an emphasis on salvation history that sometimes reduced the created world to a mere stage for the former.³³ The decline of natural theology, the rise in the prominence of science as the investigator of creation and the anthropocentric influence of existentialism in philosophy may have all played some role.³⁴

The change of direction in Old Testament studies is often considered to have been prompted by the critical 1967 essay ‘The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis’ in the journal *Science* by the American historian Lynn White on the role

of Christian theology in relation to the exploitation of the natural world.³⁵ This essay led to fresh study and a re-evaluation of the significance of creation, as scholars looked to respond to White's accusations. More recent works, such as Walter Brueggemann's *Theology of the Old Testament* and John Goldingay's *Theology of the Old Testament* afford greater prominence to Genesis 1-2 and other creation texts.³⁶ This renewed interest has underlined the importance of creation as a foundational doctrine. As Rolf Knierim writes, '[C]reation does not depend on history or existence, but history and existence depend on and are measured against creation.'³⁷ Inasmuch as theology or any discipline has a bearing upon or relates in some way to human existence, it will connect with and necessarily be a discourse within the boundaries of our view of the world: its origins, structure and meaning. H.H. Schmid comments: 'All theology is creation theology, even when it does not expressly speak of creation ... if it does so in relation to the world.'³⁸ On this view, all of human being (including human language) is inescapably an aspect of creation. Creation forms an *a priori* foundation for understanding, a presupposition that releases us to talk meaningfully about questions of human existence, activity and language.

To reconstruct a comprehensive systematic model of Old Testament cosmology is not a simple task but certain key components can perhaps be identified. Creation is multifaceted and complex and various words are used for the act of creation, such as to create, make, form, stretch out and bring forth.³⁹ At the same time, there is no abstract word for 'the Creation'. Hebrew expressions tend to employ concrete phrases such as 'the heavens and the earth' or 'the earth ... and all that is in it'.⁴⁰ While the Hebrew word *bara'* for the act of creation seems reserved for the creative power of God (e.g. in Genesis 1:1 and Psalm 148:5), the more frequent word *asah*, to make, is used for both divine and human activity. This might suggest a corresponding and derived ability for acts of creativity. This re-making can have inter-relational consequences; human creative activity may have a positive or negative effect. An aspect of this inter-relational creative activity would be communication and, more specifically, human language.

A major tenet of Israelite faith, in distinction to pantheistic religious traditions, is the central differentiation between God and creation. The world was created by God: all that is not God was created by God and is distinct from God. The Bible begins

with a declaration in Genesis 1:1 (NIV): 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth.' The first chapter of the Gospel of John resonates with the imagery of Genesis, stating of the role of Jesus in creation in verse 3 (NRSV): 'All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.' A consequent and secondary distinction in this model is between humanity and the rest of creation. Humanity is distinguished by its creation in the image of God and the granting of 'dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth' (Gen 1:26 NRSV). This distinction should not detract, however, from the essential unity of creation within Genesis 1. Humanity, the seas, plants and other living creatures are all alike part of the 'everything that He had made' that is judged by God to be very good.⁴¹ This quality of unity, not only between humanity and the world but also within the secondary distinction, is an important conceptual point.

A further feature is the quality of establishment, the Hebrew word *kuwn*. Establishment is often associated with the universal rule and wisdom of God. Psalm 96:10 (NRSV), for example, states: 'Say among the nations, 'The LORD is king! The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.' Jeremiah 10:12 (NRSV) states: 'It is he who made the earth by his power, who established the world by his wisdom, and by his understanding stretched out the heavens.' The unity and establishment of creation are also a matter of the grace and trustworthiness of God. The ordering of creation is offered as a parallel or guarantee of his covenant love and faithfulness. For example, Jeremiah 31:35-36 (NRSV) states:

Thus says the LORD,
 who gives the sun for light by day
 and the fixed order of the moon and the stars
 for light by night,
 who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar –
 the LORD of hosts is his name:
 If this fixed order were ever to cease
 from my presence, says the LORD,
 then also the offspring of Israel would cease
 to be a nation before me forever.⁴²

These words contrast sharply with other ancient cosmologies. In pantheistic models of creation, the independent personality of the world produces a situation that is ultimately arbitrary and as

unpredictable as human behaviour. In the influential cosmology attributed to the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, the world regulates itself but exists in a state of constant impermanence, change or flux:

The ordering, the same for all, no god nor man has made, but it ever was and is and will be: fire everliving, kindled in measures and in measures going out.⁴³

In contrast to pantheistic and Heraclitian world-views, Israel understood the world to be shaped by the creative power of God; a world of which it was possible to speak of beginning and end, a world still imbued (though wounded) with purpose and meaning. Knierim reflects on this sense of unity and establishment within the Scriptures with a significant insight:

The Old Testament traditions do not merely affirm that the world was created by God; they affirm specifically that in its creation the world was ordered as structured space... Israel perceived creation as a structured unity because of Yahweh the creator, and not apart from or in spite of him. It saw Yahweh and the structure of the world as being related in an ultimate way in which the unity of creation was just as important for the creator as the oneness of the creator was for the creation.⁴⁴

This recognition of structure should not be misunderstood as an expectation that the world should be entirely predictable or understandable.⁴⁵ The Book of Ecclesiastes warns against such thoughts:

When I applied my mind to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how one's eyes see sleep neither day nor night, then I saw all the work of God, that no one can find out what is happening under the sun.⁴⁶

In particular, sin has disordered the world, breaking down the original harmony of creation, filling the earth with violence (Gen 6:11), with noetic consequences.⁴⁷ There is, moreover, a third sense of creation in the Scriptures, in which the world is heading towards an eschatological future of continuity and discontinuity with what came before.⁴⁸

These cautionary comments, however, should not detract from the general principles of the biblical model and its ramifications. Creation is a defining feature of the faith of Israel, as Jonah 1:9 expresses: 'I am a Hebrew ... I worship the LORD, the God of heaven, who made the sea and the dry land.'⁴⁹ This belief includes an understanding of

unity and establishment; the arrangement of the world as structured space that has been given form and meaning as God's creative work.

4. Creation and post-modernism: creation in Nietzsche and Derrida

The consequences of our understanding of the origin and character of the world are far-reaching. If we fail to articulate and rely on a particular view of creation, we may in effect prioritise a rival conception, an alternative cosmology and ontology which grow from different roots. As Smith notes, philosophy is not value-neutral. At the level of presuppositions, we often find, in effect, unacknowledged theology.⁵⁰

Post-structuralist hermeneutics arose, in part, in response to structuralism and the teaching of the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure on the conventional nature of language. Saussure emphasised that words do not have a natural meaning; they are not inherent to the things they reference. Instead, words and languages develop by social convention. For Saussure, language was a system of significations comprised by signs that derived meaning from their differences.⁵¹

Structuralist linguistics was not, however, the sole origin of post-structuralist hermeneutics. Indeed, more recently, some linguists have cast doubt on the reading and use of Saussure offered by Derrida.⁵² The recognition of the arbitrary nature of signs was not original or unique to Saussure. His new contribution concerned the theory of 'linguistic value', in which meaning is determined by reference to other meanings.⁵³ In itself, this might not present a significant problem for the intelligibility of language. Computers, for example, function perfectly well executing programmes on the principle of linguistic value, where signifiers in a programming code are effective because they are distinguishable by difference. The most significant step taken in the development of post-structuralism was, arguably, the fusion of structuralism with the philosophical legacy of Nietzsche.⁵⁴

Derrida's primary target is the 'logocentric metaphysics of presence'.⁵⁵ Without an external point of reference, meaning cannot be fixed to a singular or univocal possibility:

This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of center or origin, everything became discourse – provided we can agree on

this word – that is to say, a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely.⁵⁶

What remains for Derrida is the play of signification. Language without centre has nothing to halt this ‘play of substitutions’.⁵⁷ The absence of centre and origin and the language of play in post-structuralism owe, of course, much to Nietzsche:

Where and how does this decentering, this thinking the structurality of structure occur? It would be somewhat naïve to refer to an event, a doctrine, or an author in order to designate this occurrence. It is no doubt part of the totality of an era, our own, but still it has always already begun to proclaim itself and begun to work. Nevertheless, if we wished to choose several ‘names,’ as indications only, and to recall those authors in whose discourse this occurrence has kept most closely to its most radical formulation, we doubtless would have to cite the Nietzschean critique of metaphysics ...⁵⁸

As Smith notes, Derrida is ‘a comprehensive hermeneuticist who asserts the ubiquity of interpretation: all our experience is always already an interpretation’.⁵⁹ However, Derrida goes further to draw the conclusion that in this world of signs, truth and origin have no real meaning. The best response is the affirmation of Nietzschean play. Derrida comments in *Spurs: Nietzsche’s Styles*:

And in *Ecce Homo (Why I Write Such Good Books)*, in two succeeding paragraphs (IV and V), Nietzsche follows his declaration that he is ‘capable of many kinds of style,’ or else that there is no such thing as ‘style in itself,’ ... The hermeneutical project which postulates a true sense of the text is disqualified under this regime. Reading is freed from the horizon of the meaning or truth of being.⁶⁰

Turning to Nietzsche, it may be helpful to begin with his critique of representational views of language. In his analysis, the problem lay in the inadequacy of metaphor to truly convey facts. Metaphor is the calling of things that are not identical the same.⁶¹ Nietzsche objects to the ‘freely inventive intermediate sphere and mediating force’ that forms metaphors.⁶² He protests that the ‘thing in itself’ can never be comprehended by the maker of language and is instead known by some

inadequate metaphor for human convenience.⁶³ These metaphors do not tell us about the things themselves and ‘correspond in no way to the original entities’.⁶⁴ There is consequently nothing in such language that is true or valid apart from the human as observer.⁶⁵

This orientation around the human observer extends to all perception and thought. There is nothing inherently ordered or understandable in the world; rather, as in the case of metaphors, humanity creates and imposes frameworks on the world:

One should not understand this compulsion to construct concepts, species, forms, purposes, laws (‘a world of identical cases’) as if they enabled us to fix the real world ... The world seems logical to us because we have made it logical.⁶⁶

In this model of the world, while its reality may be encountered, it cannot be known in terms of assured facts. Interpretation produces manufactured perspectives rather than descriptions of reality:

Against positivism, which halts at phenomena – ‘There are only facts’ – I would say: No, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact ‘in itself’: perhaps it is folly to want to do such a thing... In so far as the word ‘knowledge’ has any meaning, the world is knowable; but it is interpretative otherwise, it has no meaning behind it, but countless meanings. – ‘Perspectivism’.⁶⁷

Interpretation, like the mediating metaphor of language, does not allow us to encounter reality but instead produces a multiplicity of undecidable artificial outcomes or ‘countless meanings’. Any concepts that suggest some form of order or unity within the world are simply illusory: ‘There exists neither “spirit,” nor reason, nor thinking, nor consciousness, nor soul, nor will, nor truth: all are fictions that are of no use.’⁶⁸ Yet for Nietzsche, truth is not entirely useless. It is functionally necessary for human survival, as humanity needs to believe and be motivated by a concept of truth. Truth is therefore useful insofar as it has value for life.⁶⁹ Nietzsche identifies the act of interpretation and creation of truths as an exercise of his idea of the ‘will to power’.⁷⁰

It is important to note that Nietzsche does not propose here merely another version of the Cartesian Enlightenment thesis that sets out from a presumption of the existence of the mind and then addresses the puzzle of the world. Nietzsche

lays out a model of epistemology that is, on analysis, based on a particular view of the world. For him, human finitude does not just limit perception and make truth difficult to establish; there is no truth to be established in the first instance. This situation derives from a meaninglessness that is inherent to the world. Any perceived structures, facts or meaning are human notions imposed by the viewer. In a world without a Creator, humans are the only creators, who manufacture anthropocentric concepts to sustain their sense of mastery. Nietzsche seems aware that his conclusion comes from a different presupposition to the biblical idea of creation. He expressly, if briefly, considers and dismisses creation as a concept:

We need not worry for a moment about the hypothesis of a created world. The concept 'create' is today completely indefinable [this word is illegible], unrealizable; merely a word, a rudimentary survival from the ages of superstition; one can explain nothing with a mere word. The last attempt to conceive a world that had beginning has lately been made several times with the aid of logical procedures – generally, as one may divine, with an ulterior theological motive.⁷¹

The Nietzschean world has no beginning or external shaping that might provide it with a meaning outside of itself:

And do you know what 'the world' is to me? ... my Dionysian world of the eternally self-creating, the eternally self-destroying, this mystery world of the twofold voluptuous delight, my 'beyond good and evil,' without goal, unless the joy of the circle is itself a goal... This world is the will to power – and nothing besides!⁷²

There is an ironic assurance of the neutrality of his concept of the world against the alleged bias of the idea of creation. This 'self-creating' and 'self-destroying' world 'without goal' (the eternal recurrence) echoes the cosmology of Heraclitus. Yet Nietzsche does not offer any detailed justification for his preference, as it were, of Heraclitus over Genesis. As Smith comments on the pessimism of Heidegger and Derrida, we seem to be in the territory of 'fundamental construals, a very religious realm'.⁷³

The significance of this anti-creational model for Nietzschean perspectivism and post-structuralism, as its philosophical descendant, should not be underestimated. Nietzsche insists that the world has the appearance of order because humanity has

imposed this upon it. An uncreated world has no inherent meaning or truth to be discovered. There is nothing beyond the world itself that might provide meaning and truth. What we speak of as truth is the human creation of perspectives or 'countless meanings'.⁷⁴ Derrida comments, 'a true sense of the text is disqualified under this regime'.⁷⁵ In a world that itself lacks meaning and truth, we should not expect a better outcome for the task of interpretation. As Nietzschean perspectivism is applied in a literary context, the reader is similarly the maker of countless meanings. In the absence of a beginning and a master builder, as George Steiner observes, deconstruction becomes an example of the 'un-building' of meaning.⁷⁶

The best response for Nietzsche and Derrida to this situation is play: 'I know of no other manner of dealing with great tasks, than as play: this, as a sign of greatness, is an essential prerequisite.'⁷⁷ This idea has a sense of unrestricted activity that is not towards any particular aim: 'the ideal of a spirit who plays ingenuously ... with everything that, hitherto, has been called holy, good, inviolable, and divine'.⁷⁸ So for Derrida, reading, and in particular deconstruction, also becomes a form of Nietzschean play, as we have seen above.⁷⁹

5. Creation and language: the theology of Colin Gunton

In contrast to the model proposed by Nietzsche and inherited by Derrida, of a world without inherent meaning and truth, the Christian theology of creation can provide an alternative starting point for hermeneutics.

Alongside his notable work on the Trinity, Colin Gunton pursued an important theme in his work on the nature and significance of the Christian belief in creation.⁸⁰ This assessment analysed rival cosmologies and the weaknesses of philosophical traditions (especially of the Enlightenment) that proceed from a different origin. Gunton emphasises certain specific propositions within the theology of creation. Foremost, creation is the work of the Trinity.⁸¹ The Fatherhood of God allows us to see that humans are creatures in the world but also creatures with a simultaneous transcendent relationship with the Father, being made in the image of God. The possibility of knowing the world in a special manner is perhaps part of this aspect of our creation, in that we have a special relationship with creation and the ability to view it in a somewhat transcendent way. As the world was cre-

ated through the mediation of the Son, the world itself (and humanity) is distinct from and not part of God even though it was created by God. The world, therefore, is gifted with its own existence and can be studied as a thing in itself with mind, sense, reason and imagination. At the same time, there are limits to human knowledge, given our finitude rather than omniscience: ‘... our knowledge is necessarily partial ... its limitedness is not a defect’.⁸² This finitude and these limitations may be overcome to some degree by the work of the Holy Spirit within the world.

Gunton also highlights the significance of the intentional beginning of the world within the model of creation. As noted above, apart from the Creator, other things are created and have beginning. This beginning was not accidental but the result of an intentional act by the Creator. Consequently, it is imbued with purpose by the Creator in this act of creation. The world is not an ambivalent or regrettable emanation from a god nor is it a self-created entity with ultimately no transcendent meaning. The world was created intentionally, not being itself God, and it was declared to be good. It was therefore ‘given value as a realm of being in its own right’.⁸³

There are subtly nuanced relationships between God and creation and within creation itself which derive from the primary and continuing creative activity of the Trinity. Important consequences flow from these relationships:

[T]he Christological and pneumatological structuring of the doctrine [of creation] provide a ground for the knowledge of both creator and creation, as they are both in themselves and in relation to one another.⁸⁴

Consequently, humanity exists in something of unique position. It is neither omniscient (the implied desire, perhaps, of Enlightenment rationalism) nor confronted by an alien world that is completely incomprehensible (as certain existentialist and post-modernist philosophies might suggest). Instead,

we can know the world, though not infallibly, nor with an aim at a kind of omniscience, because we are *both* part of it *and* able to transcend it through our personal powers of perception, imagination and reason.⁸⁵

As humanity is both part of creation and gifted with particular abilities to interact with that creation, it has a capacity to explore and share within the world and within itself. This is ultimately

derived from the being and character of the creator God and his connection with – but also distinction from – the world: ‘...the triune God is the one who, as creator and sustainer of a real world of which we are a part, makes it possible for us to know our world’.⁸⁶

The difference between this model and the uncreated recurrent world of Nietzsche and Derrida, with its accompanying absence of purpose or meaning beyond itself, should be clear. While Gunton admits his proposals could be seen as an argument from faith to understanding, he suggests creation is the best available explanation of the often paradoxical nature of our human situation.⁸⁷ According to this view, the world itself has inherent meaning and order that are in a genuine sense understandable, at least partially if not wholly, due to the creative intention and ordering of God and our existence as part of creation. If this is so, then it follows that human language and interpretation form part of this same structure. Although Gunton’s views on hermeneutics have not received much critical attention, his theology proposes precisely such a connection. For Gunton, the loss of the idea of creation in the Enlightenment resulted in undue emphasis on the mind as an ordering power, in relation to the world and in relation to language:

The Enlightenment alienated the meaning of words from the meaning of the world. Because the world was denied an inherent meaningfulness, the locus of meaning came to be found in the human mind. That it was which created or imposed meaning, and ordered the words in which meaning was expressed. By contrast, a theological account of meaning must say something at least of how the meaning of words may be conceived to inhere in and derive from the meaning of reality as a whole... it can be claimed that our words are enabled to ‘fit’ the real world – though not in a simple or unproblematic way – simply because that world is the product of a creator who confers rationality upon it. As we have seen, that rationality is not discerned without a struggle. *But that is not to deny that it is there.*⁸⁸

Language itself is an aspect of the world, a means by which we can offer descriptions of that world and communicate with other linguistic beings. This does not mean that language operates flawlessly but it does entail that the crisis of meaning found by Nietzsche and post-structuralism in the

limitations of human perception and language to describe the world might be reducible to a difference over the question of whether meaning and truth are inherent to the world. To start from the assumption that the world is a structured space results in a different outcome to commencing with the assumption that it is not structured, even if the same limitations of human language are proposed in the equation. It may be that the first scenario tends towards a position of optimism whereas the second tends towards pessimism on the intelligibility of language and the possibility of communication. Gunton comments:

Because there is continuity between us, our bodies and the world we indwell, there is no need to see our reason as discontinuous with reality. Our words are not then detached tools which we handle as we will. They are, of course, partly our creation, as differences of language and culture demonstrate. We can distort and misuse them, make mistakes and tell lies. But their rationality, their capacity to tell the truth, derives from our indwelling of reality.⁸⁹

This does not result in a simplistic correspondence theory or a return to a natural theory of language but instead a proposal that hermeneutics does not consist merely of endless meanings, that there are good foundational reasons for believing that meaning (or meanings) can be truly communicated by human language. The discovery of meaning may not be straightforward and the complexities and subtleties of language must be allowed for, but this does not make the task impossible: ‘if the meaning of the text’s words derived, however stumblingly, from the meaningfulness of the world, we should be able to approach them in the expectation of *finding* something’.⁹⁰

A possible objection here is that the doctrine of creation is itself a linguistic construct. How might any such construct provide a foundation for its own building blocks of language? This ‘apparent circle’⁹¹ is by no means a problem unique to creation and hermeneutics. For example, on revelation and creation, Gunton notes: ‘The doctrine of revelation ... depends upon the doctrine of creation... Yet the doctrine of creation is itself the product of revelation ... Is the circle a vicious one?’⁹² He suggests its resolution through a distinction of categories, between material and second order doctrines. Creation is a material doctrine upon which the second order doctrine of revelation depends.⁹³ To develop this point, it seems possible to say that it is

precisely because creation is *prior* (chronologically and methodically in terms of thought) to human experience (which includes human language and other diverse facets of being) that this apparent circle arises. Creation must necessarily be humanly experienced and discussed *within itself*, within its own fabric – as where else can the conversation take place? It may be helpful to borrow an illustration used by Hegel to caricature the scholastic theologians as men who refused to enter the water until they had learned to swim.⁹⁴ While swimming is best learnt in the water (or, for our purposes, creation must be humanly learnt and discussed within itself) the existence of the water and the principles of buoyancy are not secondary or dependent upon the swimmer. Human language is part of creation; there is a necessary (but not vicious) circle of reliance of the former on the latter and a correspondingly necessary interaction with the former through the latter.

Historically, the connection between theology and language has perhaps not been helped by the scepticism of Augustine about the efficacy of human language. Augustine was dubious about the possibility of expressing truth adequately through speech. He suggested instead that it was necessary to turn from ordinary language to the direct inspiration of Christ and the Holy Spirit as the Inner Teacher to understand spiritual truths.⁹⁵ While this coheres with the vital importance of the Holy Spirit as the illuminator and overcomer of human limitations that Gunton notes, it seems to unduly denigrate the gift of human language, in which no less an important revelation than the Scriptures has been given. There is perhaps an element of Platonic influence here, particularly of the Cratylus dialogue.⁹⁶ As Smith and Gunton both suggest, there is sometimes a need to deplatonise Augustine.⁹⁷

Acknowledging the conventional, arbitrary, nature of human language still permits the communication of meaning and truth. If our language is part of creation and an aspect of human creativity, we should not expect it to be wholly transcendent or perfect. But this limitation should not lead to a position of despair; rather, in the same way that we may engage with the world by learning its inherent structure and order, we may also engage the world and one another through the gift of language. Understood in this way, it does not seem wrong to speak of univocal meaning if this term is understood to include the possibility of intended or even unintended multiple meanings. At the same time,

it seems difficult to envision how the multiplicity of meanings that Smith praises as a recognition of creaturely finitude does not in effect diminish the possibility of genuine communication between writer and reader or speaker and hearer. To make the reader the primary creator of meaning seems, if anything, to hint of the long shadow of the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on the ordering power of the human mind. While a multiplicity of meanings seems to offer liberty to the reader, the price of this freedom is the alienation of the writer from the reader. This alienation is not dissimilar from the alienation of humanity from the world and within itself that Gunton powerfully critiques as a consequence of the Enlightenment: ‘... we have lost the capacity to see the form that is there; and in that lies not liberation but alienation, the cutting of ourselves off from things as they really are’.⁹⁸

Human creativity and imagination are important in this scheme and there is much that could be developed from Gunton’s interest in the literary theory of the poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge in this respect.⁹⁹ Coleridge doubted models of perception that cast human perception as a passive actor and preferred to think of the imagination as an active power. By the exercise of imagination, we are able to understand creation as a type of repetition of God’s creative action.¹⁰⁰ Human language is an element of human creativity, a gift in which we reflect the creativity of God as bearers of his image. As a person can paint or sculpt, so they can form words and sentences as means of expression and communication. Since the first edition of *The Fall of Interpretation*, Smith has also commented upon the importance of the imagination for Christian epistemology, although in the sense of contrasting the potentially cognitive orientated term ‘world-view’ with a more affective sense of imagination.¹⁰¹

It may be imagination that allows us to both construct and understand language in a not totally dissimilar way to our making and viewing of a painting. While meaning is inherent to the world in this creation model, the task of hermeneutics still involves an imaginative interaction with language that occupies both the writer and the reader. This is not to suggest that the reader can enter omnisciently into the mind of the writer but rather that the writer and the reader have been created with abilities that enable authentic communication and shared understanding via human language. That this possibility of expression, interpretation and communication exists and that human language

can make any sense at all within the world is a feature of creation, a gift of the Creator.¹⁰²

Our view of creation has important ramifications, therefore, for our hermeneutics. An inherent flaw in the hermeneutics of modernism was its search for epistemological confidence within the self apart from creation. After this ship had sailed so far, it was perhaps no surprise that Nietzsche and others proclaimed there was no land.¹⁰³ My proposal of a model of creational hermeneutics is for a coherent grounding of interpretation that is at odds with both modernism and post-modernism. When we relocate writer and reader within creation (not merely in phenomenological but in theological terms) the interpreter is no longer the omniscient Enlightenment self or the primary creator of meaning. The Christian theology of creation asserts the prior gift of meaning within the world and all that derives from this provision. Within human language, the existence of meaning is not quite as Kevin Vanhoozer proposes ‘prior to and independent of the process of interpretation’, inasmuch as meaning arises in the imaginative interaction of persons and will always involve some feedback function of self-interpretation on the part of the writer in conveying their own thoughts.¹⁰⁴ Creational hermeneutics does not entail naïveté about the task of interpretation, the subtleties of language and the potential for multiple meanings within one text, for example in the prophetic and apocalyptic genres of the Bible. It does, however, suggest a basis for assurance of the potential for meaningful engagement and communication via human language. Hermeneutics becomes a shared craft that may still be distorted by exercises of power and which will be finite in description but which retains the prospect of meaningful communication. The outcome is not guaranteed but the potential remains for a message, something transferred from writer to reader through words that ‘inhere in and derive from the meaning of reality as a whole’.¹⁰⁵

Hermeneutics within this framework requires careful reading and a willingness to pursue and develop our understanding each time the text is opened. It may not be correct to say that meaning is ‘in the text’, if that would, in effect, credit human language with inherent transcendent power apart from creation. Rather, the meaning of our language derives from the prior reality of the ‘structured space’ of creation that we inhabit.¹⁰⁶ Creational hermeneutics encourages a pursuit of understanding in the assurance of its very possi-

bility and, however faltering, considers that even proximity, the shallows around a destination, is better than the open sea. Any satisfactory theory of hermeneutics must do justice to the simultaneous potential and limitations of human language for understanding and misunderstanding. As a theoretical framework, the theology of creation provides an explanation of both possibilities within the scope of our particular present existence in the world. That world, of which we are part and which we inhabit, has been created and imbued with meaning and it is within this gift that we find our words.

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Endnotes

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