

Spirituality of Creative Processes in Art

How do we create art? Or more precisely: what kind of creative process leads to a new artefact? We are asking these questions in a theological context. We need to take a closer look at the whole sequence from initiation, when eternity in a heart meets with symbols of eternity in the beauty of the creation to final realization. There are three elements in whole sequence.

Initiation comes from message written in the depth of our experience of reality. There are inklings of meaning, content and glory. That experience initiates us into the process. It comes to us in a spontaneous and authentic way. Therefore the first move starts from outside. We have to live life, in order to have material, from which we can create the art. So in the beginning there is the message coded in the universe we live in.

Inspiration comes through our ability to perceive, to contemplate, to decode message written inside our experience with reality. Through inspiration what is outside comes inside. We open ourselves to the stream of meaning and fascination flowing to us from the outward Logos; it awakens the deepest desires in us.

Realization represents creative coding of the decoded message to a new concentrated form, an artefact. Through realization we speak out what we have discovered when eternity in our hearts met with the symbols of eternity in the beauty of creation.

I. Initiation: Whispers of Logos

According to classical Christian theology, we have *general revelation* in nature and in our souls, a *special revelation* in the written tradition of the Scripture and at the top of all revelations we have *incarnation*. We need to place cultures somewhere in the picture, as something between general and special revelation. Culture is a heritage of cumulative knowledge, the semiotic system of symbols,

myths and signs, habits, behavioural patterns. All types of revelation have the character of a complex semiotic structure, a complex language. Incarnation is the key to all revelations in nature, in the Scripture and in culture. Its nature is the paradox. If we turn to the language of the Apostle John, we can speak of Logos, in the book of creation, in the Scripture and culture, and incarnated in Jesus Christ.

1. Logos in Creation: Logos in God, All Things in Logos

God communicates with us by nonverbal communication. God did not write a book of letters. He wrote a book in the sign language of all created forms. Logos in the creation is composed of the grammar of things, happenings, relations, structures, colours, shapes, sounds, fragrances, touches and stories. Psalm 19 is describing the whole scale of created existence as a never-ending talk without speech, a never-ending message coming out from all things. So God is continuously speaking to us without interruption.

God did not write a book of theology or philosophy or natural science; God rather, as a means of communication, chose a huge and complex artefact, the universe. And God lets us write books of theology, philosophy or natural science by reading God's artefact. God creates the universe by the Logos, out of nothing. John describes the line of processing the Logos in this way:

Everything around us exists *in* and *from* the Logos, God. We do not need to travel in time in order to see the moment of creation. Creation is with us at each and every moment. Every moment is composed of the dance of quarks in empty spaces, of the dance of electrons and neutrons in empty spaces and of the dance of atoms in empty spaces. The whole dance is governed by the principle of uncertainty. Our minds cannot grasp the mechanics and logic of the dance. *Logos* is the *Lord of Dance*. Art is a special reflection on the perpetual presence of creation in our human creativity.

If we were to travel through different layers of existence, we would have to start at the level of the "dead or inorganic matter". But dead matter is not dead at all: all shapes of matter are held in their existence by the dance of quarks. If the dance stopped even for a second, everything would fall into nothingness. Then, as we travel to other levels of existence and the matter becomes more complex, we



see a new phenomenon: *vegetative life* with a new quality of *growth*. On still another level we find *biological life* with a new quality of *movement*. Then the very complex *life of conscious beings* with new qualities of *sensation, feelings* and *will*.

At the top of all created visible life forms we find the *human life*: a *bio-spiritual life* with the quality of *consciousness and conscience*. *Life becomes the light of humans*. The light of knowing that *I am*, being aware of right and wrong, the light of knowing good and bad. We are created as an image of God. God creates the universe by Word: we are reflecting his image by creating words. Adam is giving name to the animals. The basic act of human creation is giving names to the unknown parts of reality. By giving proper names we establish the relationship of intelligent perception. What was outside us becomes part of us. By giving names we recognise Logos in the created beings and translate it into the language of our own consciousness.

Postmodern thinkers hold the opinion that human consciousness is created and established by our language. If God, as Absolute consciousness, is Logos, then human beings as a reflective consciousness are quite understandably bound to a linguistic reality. We are placed in the context of an overwhelming sentence of the cosmos. Logos is all around us, but Logos is also within us. We do not know the inside world of created things. We do not know what it is like to be a stone or a tree, or a horse; we do, however, know what it is like to be a human being. In a special case we see the world not only from outside, but also from within. The initiation of Logos in creation comes to us from outside as well as from inside.

2. Logos in the Scripture

As Christians we also talk about Logos in the sacred scriptures of the Bible. Most of the greatest works of art were inspired by the Logos of the Scripture. Does God write a book? Yes and no. God's people write books, led by God's spirit of inspiration. But they write it in the limited and relative language of their own cultures. They translated their experiences with spiritual realities into different types of literature with different linguistic strategies. Then yet other people came, and by God's inspiration, chose some of them as a special measure of spiritual truth: the canon. Finally, we have in our hands the "library" we refer to as the Bible.

When we use the canon, we exercise relationship with two kinds of cultural heritage. With one in which the books of the Scripture were conceived and nurtured and with the one in which they were chosen as the canon. We need to understand these cultures in order to decode messages coded in the books of the Bible, and we need to understand our own cultures in order to translate the spiritual content into our own context. There is, by necessity, a correspondence between the Logos in the Scripture and the Logos in cultures. Languages of the Scripture contain different strategies, from descriptions of historical facts, philosophical reflections, poetical metaphors to mystical language of symbols and myths.

When the Bible speaks about God, it always uses a symbolic language: the Lamb of God, Dove, Tongues of Fire, Lord or the King of Kings. These are all words borrowed from our earthly experience

-serving as verbal pictures of the invisible realities of God. Even God's name *I am who I am* or in short *I am* contains a symbolical quality in relation to God by necessity. Our inner experience of self-consciousness comes from the experience with the limited human reflective consciousness. The human awareness *I am* is serving here as a symbol of God's absolute awareness *I am Who I am*.

The notion that God is Spirit is also of a symbolic quality. The Hebrew word for spirit (*ruah*) means "wind" or "breathing". Wind and breathing serve as symbols of the invisible quality of God's substance. The substance of our language contains only material derived from our experience of our earthly, created life, from the world of time and space. But, when we speak of God, we speak of the One Who exists in the realm without limits, out of time and space in eternity.

The apostle Paul teaches us to look in the Scripture not for the letters, but for the spirit. In order to perceive the spirit in the letters we need to develop an ability to decode the meaning of symbols. And symbol is a basic feature of the artistic type of communication. To speak about God we need tools of artistic expression. We are coming to a conclusion that the Logos in the Scripture has analogical position to the Logos in nature. In nature, Logos is hidden in the complex body of natural phenomena; in the Scripture, Logos is hidden in the complex body of languages of different cultures and literary styles. In both cases we search for the spirit which animates the bodies.

3. Logos and Languages

Logos as God's communication to us has a holistic quality, whereas our languages have a fragmentary quality. In order to decode the message hidden in the created world we as humans must use many parallel, complementary languages from science, philosophy, theology, psychology, sociology and economics to poetry, music, dramatic and visual arts. What is in human consciousness divided into different languages is in Logos united in one body. Everything from logic and technicalities to symbols is materialized in nature. Logos contains reason and logic as well as poetry and chains of analogies, metaphors, associations and symbols, elements of mathematics as well as elements of music, economy and philosophy.

II. Inspiration: God's Coding and Human Decoding

There are lots of initiative stimuli around us: some come from nature, some from our psyche, some from our culture with the whole body of knowledge, habits and artefacts and some from sacred scriptures. Something has to happen in order that these outward powers would move us to an existential state of creation. By *inspiration* we mean an inner process in which these outward powers reveal to us their spirit. Spirit comes in from the outside: in-spiration. The process of inspiration can be described as *concentration*, *contemplation* and *adoration*.

1. Concentration

In order to absorb an outside impulse, we need to exercise the discipline of concentration. We are surrounded by amazing colours, shapes, sounds, stories and dramas, but often we do not perceive them clearly enough. Our senses are unfocused. We need to learn the special habits of concentration. We need inner silence. Concentration is the virtue of perception. Without a clear perception there cannot be an inspiration. We have to learn how to empty ourselves, how to become poor in spirit in order that the Logos of the Kingdom around us would reveal His glory.

2. Contemplation

We also need to learn how to perceive what our senses tell us in an intelligent and thoughtful way. Contemplation is about our mind. It is the way in which we connect our perceptions with our intelligence. What stacks our senses must stack our minds. In contemplation we use our intelligence in an associative, metaphoric and symbolic way. We make discoveries through symbolic connections. Similarities reveal meanings. We connect a tear with a raindrop and a raindrop with a star and a star with an angel an angel with a bird and a bird with persons with tears in their eyes, and in these connections we cumulate special, otherwise unspeakable meanings. The Greek deity, HERMES, is the patron of artists, an archetypal figure for associative thinking. Associative thinking is the basic way how we connect our perceptions with our mind in an artistic way. Through contemplation we give order to otherwise unordered perceptions.

3. Adoration

If our ideas did not dress themselves up in emotional clothing we would have no symbols, we would work just with abstract notions and technical illustrations. The initiation from the Logos has to enter the state of adoration through a clear perception and an intelligent reflection. Adoration touches the deepest heart of our will, where the desire for eternity rests. Adoration is a state of awe, a state of overwhelming wonder. Symbols of eternity in the *beauty* of creation meet there with a *desire for eternity* in our hearts. The state of adoration is a religious state by definition.

Here we are in an area where spirituality and artistic creativity overlap. The words *concentration*, *contemplation* and *adoration* are all representing certain spiritual disciplines. Every inspiration has its religious quality. Maybe we should not object to the romantic idea that inspiration comes to us always in a spontaneous way. But even though inspiration many times has an uncontrolled and spontaneous character we can tune ourselves for it, cultivate ourselves to become more and more perceptive of such spontaneous happenings. We need to care for our sail if we want to cage the wind. Our spirituality and creativity spring from a similar if not the same fountain. Let me quote here great modern poet T.S. Eliot: *The artistic sensitivity is impoverished by its divorce from the religious sensitivity, the religious by its separation from the artistic.*

If we are here to cultivate our spiritual life, even when art is not our vocation, we need to develop a kind of artistic perception. Theology without art cannot lead to real mystical life. It leads only to dead sets of presuppositions. We need artistic perceptions if we are to think deeply and intelligently about God and to experience God in the deepest possible way: in *creative adoration* or *artistic devotion*. But also all the artists with the ambition to create artefacts with a universal and lasting value need to learn the same spiritual disciplines of concentration, contemplation and adoration.

III. Realization: The Fundamental Qualities of Artistic Language

There are many different kinds of arts, from music, drama, literature to visual arts. There are plenty of different techniques and media in every different kinds of art, and there are even many different multimedia forms of art, so there are multiple ways of realization. We have to describe the basic qualities which an object must possess in order to become an artefact. Every artefact necessarily carries in itself the quality of a *symbol* or a *myth*. Musicians and composers can object to this proposition by asking the question: what kind of symbol or myth could we find in instrumental music or in abstract painting. By a symbol we understand a situation in which something takes the place of something else in representation. The pink Valentine heart does not depict an exact human heart, but it represents an invisible quality - love. We use symbols if we need to represent some invisible qualities of our life: love, truth or freedom.

An artistic symbol aims higher: it not only represents something invisible, it mediates its presence. It not only tells us that we are speaking about love, it moves us to experience this love by a form of expression. Even music as a structure of rhythms and sounds points to something else behind itself. Music from all kinds of art creates situations where a symbol is closest to the reality it represents. It symbolizes the mystery of eternal realm to us in a way, where we can for a while experience it as an exact reality. By a symbol we understand a visual or sonic image or a picture of symbolic value. By myth we understand a whole story composed of symbolic images where the whole line of story has a symbolic quality.

1. Functions of Symbols and Myths

If I speak about symbol as the basic quality of artistic language I am not proposing symbolism as the only good and possible way for art. All artefacts are in some sense symbolical. The sunflowers of VAN GOGH represent and mediate an inner passion and excitement which moves the artist to paint them. In the picture we see what happened to the painter when the beauty of sunflowers meets the desire for eternity in the painter's heart. And in this sense the sunflowers are symbols.

Symbols unite knowledge with experience. One basic quality of a symbol or a myth is that it enables us to experience what can be otherwise known only as an abstract principle. Symbols help us to form the whole picture of reality out of our partial knowledge. Our knowledge of reality is helplessly partial and fragmentary. At the time of the Communist regime we learnt at school what was then called the scientific world view. But there never was and never will be a scientific world view. Natural sciences work only with fragmented facts. Science has only facts and theories about potential facts. Every world view is by necessity mythological. We have evolution as a scientific theory. But evolution as a universal key to everything is well-established modern myth.

We can compare our human condition of knowledge to the fragments of a fresco discovered in an ancient sanctuary. In one corner we discover a part of a leg, in another a head of a horse, in the middle a hand with a sword. If we want to have an idea of what was originally painted on the wall, we need the brush of a myth, someone with the powers of imagination to give us the vision of the whole picture. And we cannot live without a whole picture. In order to find the way how to live, in order to find some understanding of the meaning of our life we need to place ourselves into the context of the whole reality. In order to understand our little stories, we need to place them into the grand narrative, to imagine its beginning and to envision its end.

This visionary and prophetic function is the calling of an artist. An artist uses symbols and myths to connect our fragmentary knowledge of reality with a holistic perspective. All good novels are myths, through them we come to understand our situation in life and in the best situation they even help us to find a direction.

2. Three Elements of Symbol and Myth

So let me finally describe three qualities which compose art, symbol and myth. I am not suggesting here that all of them must be present in every work of art. But I am convinced that every work of art has by necessity some of them.

Imagination

There cannot be a symbol without imagination. Imagination is needed if one is to create an object of symbolic value. One needs imagination to connect that object to the reality it represents. Our consciousness possesses not only reflective but also creative powers. These creative powers lie in our faculty of imagination. Everything we call civilization has been created with the help of imagination. We are created in the image of the Creator. We are co-creators. We are reflecting that Image by exercise of mental powers which enable us to create new images.

From the material we receive from our perceptions we can create images that are not visible to our eyes, we can even create images that don't exist in outside reality. We can create a horse with wings, red rivers and white grass. By the power of imagination we can relate things and happenings we observe, or experience a new structure of connections and by doing so we can discover in them new hidden meanings.

Oscar WILDE in his novel *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* created a powerful symbol by connecting the painted portrait of Dorian Gray to his inner life. By that he created a living symbol for our divided, ill self. By an unreal connection he brings to us a deeper reality of our existential struggles with our sinful nature. We can identify with Dorian, and by reading the novel, we can experience our own inner divisions and our desire for wholeness.

Worthwhile examples are also the paintings of Francis BACON. He connected in one of his paintings by power of imagination meat from a butcher's shop with a human body and human body in a bedroom with an iron cage. By this he created a powerful symbol of human existence as it is viewed by atheistic materialism: a human person as a piece of meat cut off by the bars of the iron cage of determinism, thrown into the empty universe.

Dramatization: Catharsis

An artistic symbol contains also a certain dramatic quality, a conflict, a contrast or a disharmony, which opens up the paradoxical nature of reality. Drama is aiming at strongly concentrated and con-

flicting emotions, at existential states of the human psyche in order to make us experience what the Greeks referred to as *catharsis* – a moment of awakening, cleansing of our senses, minds and emotions from all unimportant and secondary things. Most of our life we spend in a very mediocre way untouched by existential realities of birth and death, love and despair. Symbol in visual art, in drama, in literature or in music is a kind of a concentrate. It concentrates existential material spread throughout our life to one vivid emotionally active point, where we in one moment experienced what was important to us through all our life.

J. R. R. TOLKIEN called this event *eucatastrophy*. He means by it a catastrophe which leads us to joy. Eucatastrophe is paradoxical in its nature and in final analysis points towards the eucatastrophe of Christ's cross. Catharsis is life coming out of dying, Resurrection out of crucifixion.

Let us mention in this context also the fairytale of H. Ch. ANDERSEN, the *Little Mermaid*. The little mermaid desires to become human in order to have an immortal soul. But she can gain eternal life only if there is a man who will fall in love with her and marry her. She sacrifices her beautiful voice in order to become human. She becomes dumb.

The little mermaid saves at a certain point the life of a beautiful prince. As things develop she happens to live in the prince's palace. She has no tongue to explain to him who she is. So the prince finally marries another girl. As a result the little mermaid has to die. Everything is lost for her now. But before she dies her sisters brings her a knife. If she kills the wife of the prince, she will live and become again a little mermaid.

Here is the climax of drama. She refuses the temptation. She throws the knife into the sea and throws herself into it. She dies. But in her death she is transformed into the spirit of the air. She is now on her way to immortality - a beautiful example of catharsis, or as TOLKIEN calls it, eucatastrophe.

In Hollywood ANDERSEN's story was turned into a film. The film ends with a happy-end. Just before the wedding, a miracle happens and the mermaid can speak again. Everything is explained and she

becomes the wife of the prince. What a sad marriage – it takes away all the symbolic power of the story.

Let us mention in our considerations also the place assigned to humour. Humour is the light side of the drama. Humour is another way of pointing to the same paradoxical nature of our birth, growth, life and death. Humour is the celestial brother of drama. Good humour leads us through a different corridor to the same place where catharsis does.

Glory: Music

The third quality of an art symbol is glory, or if you like music. To me personally the glory of things and the music of things is the same phenomenon. Glory resides on the top of a hill. It is present only in the best of all artefacts. Glory starts where catharsis ends. Catharsis opens up our deepest self. Glory is calling us out of ourselves to something overwhelmingly bigger than us. Glory is horrifying, because it reveals to us how unimportant we are and that there is something limitlessly bigger than our personality. To let that music, that glory enter us is like letting in death. We are thrown into the endless sea of eternal magnificence, which is not ours, for which our existence is secondary or irrelevant.

Glory which is revealing itself to us as music: this unspeakable untouchable quality translatable in the best way to the structures of sounds or proportions of abstract shapes and colours. Glory is an inkling of eternity reflected in the object of an artefact. It is in my opinion the highest ambition of every art to catch glimpses of that glory in the material of an art-symbol. If the artist succeeds in capturing it his artefact becomes an icon, a window to the hidden heavens of eternity.

Daniel PASTIRČÁK (1959) is a poet, prose-writer and essayist. He graduated in Protestant theology in Bratislava, Slovakia. He works as a preacher of the Free Evangelical church (Bratská cirkev). His book "Damian's river" (1993) was listed on the List of Honour of International Board of Books for Youth. His other books are "Tehillim" and "Cintet"; the latter was honoured as the best Slovak book for youth of the year. He is also engaged in art and exhibited in galleries in Slovakia and abroad.