

2005

Word Incarnate

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Recommended Citation

Wallace, Josh (2005) "Word Incarnate," *Cedarville Review*. Vol. 8, Article 7.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cedarville.edu/cedarvillereview/vol8/iss1/7>

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Keywords

Nonfiction

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Word Incarnate

by Josh Wallace

1. Εν ἀρχῇ ἦ ὁ λόγος

This is where I begin; I have a story to tell. I have been living with it a long time—it shares my breakfast and on occasion claims my favourite coffee mug before me. I can taste it on my toothbrush and feel it against my skin while I shower. I kiss it goodnight as I crawl into bed, but it continues to occupy my last thoughts as my consciousness descends below dreams.

My story carries pieces of dark sky pierced by pinpoint, flame-prick stars. The flickering of candles and aftertaste of Earl Grey also reside within its borders. Bagpipes, breakbeats, battle cries, Chopin, Mendelssohn, and Grieg—it vibrates in the air around my skin (also reggae, cellos and Metallica). Smoke against autumn leaves, blood against gray sage, steam against snow, stage lighting against a three hundred lighters swaying back and forth. My story against words.

The tree in my backyard had a knotted rope hanging from a treefort my dad built when I was ten. While a ladder leaned against the opposite side of the ancient willow, I would only ascend by the rope—a feat I have still to complete. My pencil-thin arms would struggle against gravity and my dead weight until the first branch. I would always pause at the branch for rest but find myself too tired to go further up and unable to get down. Too tired to seek shelter against the sky and too scared to set my feet against the ground.

I tire of metaphors. I tire of seeking words to fill the cracks, to strengthen the weak joints, to plow the roads straight. I tire too quickly; I have a story. A mind weak as my biceps will not

pull up out of me the pieces of dark sky or unchanging conifers amid an autumn. And not even sound is heard in a void. The ladder ended at the top of the tree just as much as the rope.

So I begin in words—imperfect, inexact, symbolic words. And this is fitting—in the beginning was the Word. While words may never approach the reality of even an impression, no one sings notes unwritten (who remembers Caedmon?). Presence is better than absence, no? But what if there are words that are better—that convey the object itself—that stem from the essence of the subject? Words like the Word in the beginning. What if the rope really does lead somewhere better than the ladder?

2. כִּי לֹא מִחֲשָׁבוֹתַי מִחֲשָׁבוֹתֵיכֶם וְלֹא דְרָכֵיכֶם דְּרָכֵי
נָאֵם יְהוָה

A house against the sky: ten thousand years ago today the sons of gods and daughters of men covenanted to cover man's ancestral bloodshed (Cain will always be marked). The foundations of peace rested upon the rocky floor of the valley at the union of two great rivers—the Tigris and the Euphrates. Under the shadow of Ararat, man cut from the stone in the wilderness, floated the slabs upon the water, and built an obelisk to shelter him from the heavens. But upon the placing of the pinnacle, the celebrants could not remember the significance of their monument. They attempted to explain, but found the words stolen from their mouths. Even engineers and architects could not bring forth the meaning of this lone finger thrust up against the sky. So each dispersed to his own home, and the story was borne into the all the languages of the world.

I still find myself trying to tell this story, but I never get it right. My language refuses to disclose the sordid details of her mother tongue suddenly turning harlot, leaving bastard babies to the children of soil. Still, even without her speaking, I know her mother began much better than this—I've heard the rumors. They say she ran with Angels and Forms and even on

occasion knew the advances of God Himself. I have never heard explanation of her sudden surrender of purity, only intimations of a jealous lover.

My teeth, lips, and tongue have known many of her daughters—I played with a dark-haired Hispanic in high school, lived with two beautiful Mediterranean women in college, and now have fallen for the angular features of a German emigrant. I float from one love to the next, each affair serving its purpose, allowing me to view my self and my context differently. I become innately agrarian or earthy, colored by red dust blowing off distant cliffs. I am beat and turned by the voices of the cosmopolis. I stink of the fires of academic barbarians, burning texts that infringe their borders. But in all these woman I feel the gaze of their mother.

Underneath the trash heap of my discarded language—words unable to symbolise my inexpressible existence—a deep ancient discourse waits. She has held out since Babel, whored out but redeemed by her greatest love, sustained by ravens in her solitude. I sift through all my refuse, digging beneath advertisements and lies, searching for her to speak “I love you” to my father, “I am scared” to my wife.

A prophet from a scripture tells another story. Ten thousand years from tomorrow the God of heaven will reach under the last glowing embers of what we have wrought upon this planet. He will pull from the ground his waiting bride. And at the celebration, he will retire with her, pull her close to himself, and utter the word unheard since the beginning. And she will conceive his thoughts, and once again light will be born into the darkness.

3. Καὶ ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν, καὶ ἐθεασάμεθα τὴν δόξαν αὐτοῦ, δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός, πλήρης χάριτος καὶ ἀληθείας.

The end of all words is incarnation. We endeavour in symbols to give substance to the realities of the spirit. Language is the flesh

embodying the active soul of our intentions. We speak, hoping grander, more basic elements will give life to the dead signs we release into the atmosphere—hoping that in some sense we ourselves are being born into the void that was the silence.

In the beginning was the Word—I sometimes believe each person possesses a secret word. The word comes to us in dreams or crawls up from the recesses of our subconscious. We both know and do not this word. It is foreign to us but expresses us in our very essence. Some fear it. Some wield it as talisman. But never has this word been expressed, never can it leave our lips. To do so would be blasphemy of a sort—for we are of unclean lips amid a people of unclean lips. This is the final word. The pure word. It is the symbol that contains within itself its own meaning. It has no referent but itself. To speak it would be to call the kosmos to account, to give the lie. And in that moment of cosmic dissonance—the realization that all that claims reality is just an empty attempt to picture something greater than itself—the universe would collapse in upon itself, snuffing out the flame of its shadowed-life. This is the Word that was in the beginning.

And the Word became flesh—In a former era, the office of poet and priest were held in equal reverence. The priest represented God to the people by granting them salvation through the sacraments; the poet, by granting them intimacy through the words of God. To represent God is a weighty thing. The Ancients knew this. If a Priest or Poet misrepresented God, God would defend his name (Eli still mourns his sons). Moses met God's retribution east of the Jordan. David knew God's wave to wash over him, to draw his bastard son back into the deep. Both the Fish and the Worm found Jonah.

Words do not easily contain God. The symbol often detracts from the substance. Jesus knew this upon the cross. The flesh that translates also corrupts, so it must be transfigured by suffering into a better language. So in the cross we find the glory of God revealed. As the thorns and scourge and spear peel back Christ's skin, the Word, the final word and the first word,

becomes visible to our seeing but not perceiving eyes (for even still we see in a mirror darkly).

But in death we see the true nature of the Word. The Word does not only call to account; it is not only the final word. The Word revealed upon the cross is also the Word revealed in Resurrection—He is also the Word of the Beginning. The Word in the Beginning is the Word of the End is the Word, again, of the Beginning. So He calls all things back into existence, transfigured by suffering—his suffering—into a better language—the language of Himself, of the True Word, a language not only symbol but of reality.

ὅσαι γὰρ ἐπαγγελίαι θεοῦ, ἐν αὐτῷ τὸ Ναί· διὸ καὶ δι'
αὐτοῦ τὸ Ἀμήν τῷ θεῷ πρὸς δόξαν δι' ἡμῶν.