

*This is a revised version of a piece that appeared in the Winter 2003 issue of the Imago newsletter.*

**T**he idea of narrative has in recent years found its way into contemporary conversations whether in the classroom or around the dinner table. We are always on the lookout for what will help us to order our lives. In our western culture reason has played this role for some time. The ability of reason to link things together such as events, ideas or cause and effect, is a valuable exercise to be sure. What is more difficult to get at however is underlying meaning. It is here that narrative comes to the rescue as it becomes a resource for meaning. Narrative does not replace reason, but serves as a compliment to it. Narrative is more organic, reason more mechanical.

Story is a central component of the writing arts such as plays, novels and scripts for film. But the 20th century saw some effort to challenge the dominant role of narrative. Some feared that story could serve as a social soporific where society would doze off and become unaware of the reality that surrounded them. Authors like Bertolt

Brecht wished to destroy the power of fictional narrative and were concerned to encourage *thinking* about the story rather than *entering into* the story.

Despite the nay-sayers current attention to narrative is to be

welcomed – but not without qualification. Those of us within a faith tradition readily recognize the importance of story for communicating our tradition. Nonetheless from

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## James Paterson Revised Common Lectionary Bulletin Project

The Revised Common Lectionary is a commonly agreed upon series of scripture readings for each Sunday to be used during corporate worship throughout the liturgical year. The readings include an Old Testament passage, a Psalm; one from the Book of Acts, the Epistles or the Book of Revelation, and concludes with a passage from one of the gospels. The readings run in three-year cycles starting on the first Sunday of Advent and concluding on the Reign of Christ Sunday.

The purpose of the artwork that accompanies each gospel reading is to invite people into a deeper experience of God's presence in their lives and the life of the world by shedding light on one aspect of the day's scripture reading.

Artist James Paterson (b. 1957) was born in Saskatchewan and grew up in the Kensington Market area of Toronto. He received a BFA from the University of Waterloo and taught art at the elementary and high school levels before leaving to pursue art full time.



Advent 1



Advent 4

Among his best-known works are folk art pieces featuring Canadian icons such as stylized Mounties, hockey players, loons and Canada geese. Underlying his whimsical treatment of Canadian themes is the notion of the Canadian predisposition for order and position. Paterson probes beyond the shell of order and normalcy to suggest a deeper, inner life in which mundane, repressed, everyday personalities emerge from the shadows to show their true colors, their truer selves.

In addition to Canadian icons, much of Paterson's work contains biblical imagery. His aim is that all of his art

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## Wired religion

The November issue of *Wired* magazine carried a cover story under the title *The New Atheism: No Heaven. No Hell. Just Science*. Columnist Gary Wolf begins his article with these words ... "My friends, I must ask you an important question today: Where do you stand on God? It is a question you may prefer not to be asked, but I'm afraid I have no choice. We find ourselves this very autumn, three and a half centuries after the intellectual martyrdom of Galileo, caught up in a struggle of ultimate importance ... it is time to declare our position." The authors discussed are Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, and Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*. These authors advocate not only that religion is wrong in its beliefs but that it is evil and should be eliminated from the cultural landscape. It could be argued that these writers who have provided us with thoughtful engaging writing in the past have become embittered. The strident and exclusive character of these books put one in mind of the very fundamentalisms that upset them. One wonders what these authors would have to say about the arts. Are they too incompatible with science?



### Donate On Line

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## James Paterson *continued from page 1*

would be redemptive – an allegory on ordinary life that reveals the reality of God in the world. His art probes the decisions individuals face about how we live our lives, how we fit into the system and questions about individuality.

Like the media he uses, his style is also varied: sometimes primitive, naïve or whimsical; other times more realistic or representational.

The two works here are part of his series of fifty-four paintings, commissioned by the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Canada, James illuminates the Gospel reading for each week of the Revised Common Lectionary cycle B. His hope is that those who see these paintings will experience the gospel stories and the life of Jesus in a fresh way and be able to bring Him into the context of their own lives.

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See his Revised Common Lectionary paintings at  
[www.churchbulletins.ca](http://www.churchbulletins.ca) ■

## The quarrel

In a little essay titled, *Creative Mind*, Dorothy L. Sayers observed "The quarrel between the sciences and the humanities" (including religion and the arts) "is chiefly a quarrel of words. And when I say that, I do not mean to suggest that it is a quarrel about nothing. Both parties are setting out to explore reality, each by its own method. But they have only one set of tools between them. And because they use these tools very differently – because they cannot agree about the nature and purpose of the tools – the account which they present to the world as a result ... are apt to appear mutually unintelligible and violently antagonistic." – *Christian Letters to a Post-Christian World*

## Babel goes mainstream

The recent film *Babel* serves as a stark reminder of the divides that characterize our globalized world and our personal lives. Our communication is somehow blocked and in our failure to understand divisions deepen. Art cannot solve this problem, but perhaps like this film, it can get us to attend more carefully and see a little more clearly.



Fra Angelico *Annunciation* c.1450

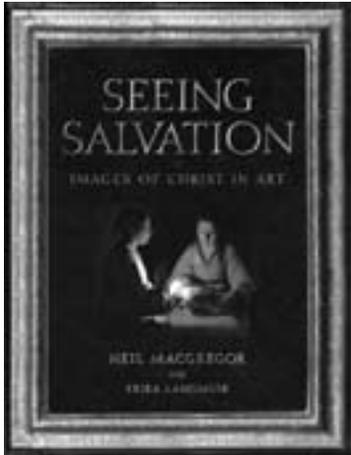
The Imago website has a new look – please visit us at [www.imago-arts.on.ca](http://www.imago-arts.on.ca)

## Recent trends in exhibiting religious art

“Although the fundamental issue of resistance to presenting overtly religious art to a general public continues to exist, recently there have been significant changes. The trend seems to have turned somewhat. ... the last decade (has been characterized as) a golden age of exhibitions devoted to religious art. An unprecedented number of exhibitions with overt religious themes and symbolism have received critical acclaim and attracted record numbers of visitors. The exhibition *The Image of Christ*, organized by the National Gallery in London in 2000 marked a milestone, since prior to that date few museums of the National Gallery’s

stature had presented Christain subject matter with an emphasis on the religious. What started as an exhibition project that encountered resistance even from some of the museum’s own

staff turned out to be the most attended exhibition in the United Kingdom in the year 2000 attracting over 350,000 people in a ten week run. It’s immense popularity attested to the fact that there is a real market for exhibitions that analyze works of art as vessels of belief and seriously consider their religious significance and symbolism. The year 2000 also saw an analysis of the history of representations of Christ in art ... in



the exhibition *Anno Domini: Jesus through the Centuries*. Organized by the Provincial Museum of Alberta,” (Curated by David Goa) “the exhibition explored visually the history sketched by Jaroslav Pelikan in his seminal study on Jesus. The exhibition was extraordinarily successful and the catalog sold out in record time.

Other more subtle changes are occurring. A colleague who has been on the board for reviewing submissions for the Cleveland Museum of Art regional show ... reported that twenty years ago very few works submitted would have had any religious dimension. Today ... many do – including quite a few with overt religious and specifically biblical symbolism.” – *Religion on a Pedestal: Exhibiting Sacred Art*, Ena Giurescu Heller, in *Reluctant Partners: Art and Religion in Dialogue* ■

### Art

“To think of art as self-expression is the last-ditch stand of a feeble mind that is unwilling to take any serious thought and needs to find a way of justifying a similarly feeble-minded heap of rubbish produced in the name of art. It won’t do and it never did. How can one describe the paintings of Vermeer as self-expression? Or Hamlet? Or *Bleak House*? ... the word that best describes what they are doing is not ‘expression’ but ‘exploration’.” – Nigel Forde, *The Lantern and the Looking-glass*



At a time when truth has become a causality of efficiency and personal gain – Alan Jacobs offers an insightful cultural critique in *Shaming the Devil: Essays in Truth-telling*. He draws on a number of literary figures as a way into the key themes in the matter of truth telling. W. H. Auden, A. Camus and Iris Murdoch are among those whose ideas he discusses. One chapter that is particularly compelling is *The Judgement of Grace*. Here he

cites *Pass Over* a poem by Linda Gregerson exploring the links between judgement and grace. The treadmill of production and consumption is a journey that leads nowhere. He draws on the film *Magnolia* as instructive in this regard. And to artists of faith he says; “The Christian arts community, ... should never think of art in terms of production and consumption, but rather in terms of exchange, of the giving and receiving of gifts. The artist gives from what is already given ...”.

There is an extended essay at the end of the book on the impact of computer technology in our lives and on our understandings of truth. This is an engaging collection of literary essays that will stimulate the mind and move the heart. Jacobs puts his particular artistry of creative writing to work by taking on a number of the prevailing ideas of contemporary culture and offering a trenchant critique clearly indebted to the biblical story. ■

once in a while in the long night I ponder mortal life and how it is ruined.  
not from bad judgment  
do people go wrong – many are quite reasonable – no look, it’s this:  
we know what is right, we understand it, but we do not carry it out.  
either from laziness, or we value something else, some pleasure.

From *Grief Lessons: Four Plays By Euripides* by Anne Carson

## The idea of narrative

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a faith perspective there are two ways in which the current interest in narrative may come up short. First is the tendency to let our own constructions serve as reality. Here we are likely to forget the past and to live under the illusion that we alone shape the world. (i.e. our community or culture)

The second risk is that under the downpour of stories found in media, politics, and the excesses of a consumer culture, the faith story gets washed away, or at the very least watered down.

One of the values of following the Christian calendar is the ongoing reminder of the story in which we are called to situate ourselves. In that story we soon discern the importance of acknowledging the divine initiative. Humanity is on the receiving end. We do not determine our own destiny nor are we architects of our own salvation. This is not to say we have no influence in the time-bound matters of life, but only that whatever we may do is finally only part of a much larger story.

Advent and Christmas centre on a story of divine initiative. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us". This is not a story conjured up by human ingenuity, it is a record of the divine

breaking into history with a narrative that will provide clues to the underlying meaning of the bits and pieces of history and of our lives. It is a narrative of a vulnerable God – who has come to humanity as human and in all of the frailty of an infant in order to invite us into a story bigger than anything we can construct for ourselves.

The second risk is that we would lose the story which we call the evangel. Many a myth is there for the taking, as they cross the silver screen, visit us in our living room, seduce us through the media or are

found on the shelves of our libraries and bookstores. (By myth I mean truth bearing stories by which we are guided.) Moreover the biblical story can be morphed into entertainment or be swamped by personal experiences or the rhetoric of the end times. We can easily exchange the radical evangel for a more comfortable domesticated version which suits the world we live in – or is it – the world we have constructed.

There is something here for the artist as well. Artistry that is exercised in the context of faith is never to be simply – self expression. It always involves a gesture toward a



Rembrandt *Nunc Dimittis (Simeon Holding the Christ Child)* c.1669

bigger narrative than one's personal story. Art is always indebted to what is given – to what is already present – to the divine initiative. The artist draws upon what is given in the world both for inspiration and for the means of carrying out the artistry. Art plays off gift and is to a degree shaped by that gift. And what about preserving the story? What can the artist do about that?

I have no wish to advocate for the necessity of explicit faith content in the work of artists for whom religious faith is important. However it does seem right to say that all work done by such artists will have within

it some thread of that bigger narrative which is to be the light in which all of life is viewed. I would also like to think that the arts bring to us not only the wonders of the natural order, the splendor of ordinary life, and the truth of human glory and wretchedness, but will in important ways offer a prophetic voice amidst the chorus of options common in our culture.

If we take the biblical narrative seriously we must grant that making over the world is not ultimately in our hands. That babe of Bethlehem is also the One who followed a path of vulnerability and by what appeared to be weakness overcame the powers and now promises to make all things new. Advent is a brief time in which we live in expectation. But this mood of expectation is not to be a passing disposition but a permanent feature of Christian living. Our's is a faith pregnant with the promise of newness – we are new creations looking in anticipation for the day when all things will be made new.

As we come to the final days of another year memory does its work. It has been another good year for Imago. Links with artists have extended the growing network of Christians in the arts across this country. Public events, one on one meetings with artists, and the planning and preparation for initiatives ahead have made it a busy year. As some projects have come to completion new projects have taken their place. The energy evident among artists and those who favour the arts in Canada holds good promise for the future. It also makes clear that Imago is engaged in important work and is having a growing influence in Canada.

To carry out our mandate we need the support of those who believe in what we are doing. If you have not given to Imago this past year we would ask you to consider a gift to help us at this year end and that you consider joining with others to help us in 2007. For all who have supported us this year we are very grateful for your generosity. We look forward to the promise of the year ahead.

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