

'8 Mile' and the Power of Logos

"In the beginning was the Word."

So begins John's Gospel. In the original Greek, "Word" is *logos*, a word meaning precise, reasoned speech that brings order out of chaos. Jordan Peterson calls it "[the articulated truth](#)." English poet Samuel Taylor [Coleridge calls it "communicative intelligence."](#)

According to Christianity, Jesus, who claimed not just to speak the truth but to *be* the Truth, is the full embodiment of divine *logos*. All humans, by virtue of having been made in God's image, also contain something of that spark of divinity.

The Judeo-Christian creation story differs from those of other ancient Middle Eastern civilizations in that the Judeo-Christian God speaks the world into existence. [The Babylonian god Marduk](#), on the other hand, must defeat a primordial chaos monster named Tiamat before crudely creating the world from the pieces of her corpse. Only the God of the Bible creates a world in which *logos*, not violence, underpins reality.

All this theology is crucial to understanding the movie "[8 Mile](#)" (2002), a favorite film of mine which stars Eminem in a fictionalized version of his own origin story as an aspiring rapper in poverty stricken Detroit.

The world of the film is one of profound disorder. Jobs are fleeting, violence is common, and the blessings of civilization are conspicuously absent. When Jimmy "B-Rabbit" Smith (Eminem) steps out of his world of sleazy clubs and decrepit trailer parks and into an office building with marble columns, the contrast could hardly be more striking. He looks like a barbarian tribesman from the sixth century who stumbled into Versailles.

Despite the fact that “8 Mile” takes place in 1995, the dysfunctional society that the film depicts seems to be reliving the Dark Ages (but without the benefit of the early medieval Church as an anchor point). With the fall of the Roman Empire in A.D. 476, Western Europe degenerated into a series of warring tribes and clans in which might made right.

Inner cities in late 20th century America degenerated in the same way. Violent street gangs like the Crips, Bloods, and MS-13 formed to protect their communities even as they terrorized them for profit, just like the barbarian tribes did over 1,000 years earlier. The disaffected minorities who made up these gangs felt that the social, legal, and economic structures of mainstream America would not protect them or provide them with opportunities for advancement, so they created their own parallel society based on loyalty and violence. Long is the way and hard that leads back to civilization.

According to “8 Mile,” rap music constitutes the first step along that road. As the opening credits flash across the screen, the first thing the viewer hears is the 1995 song [“Shook Ones, Part II” by rap duo Mobb Deep](#).

Mobb Deep raps about the society I’ve been describing in which gang loyalty is paramount and power and status must be maintained through violence.

But there’s a significant difference. Instead of actually murdering people, Mobb Deep uses rhyme, meter, assonance, and other poetical devices to elaborately *threaten* to murder people. This is real progress.

The plot of “8 Mile” revolves around rap battles, contests in which two rappers exchange improvised lyrical boasts, threats, taunts, and insults with the winner chosen by popular acclamation from the crowd. When a rapper announces his intention to “murder” his opponent, he plans to do so

lyrically; no one actually dies. At the rap battles, esteem is granted not to the master of violence, but to the master of *logos*, and this distinction marks the beginning of civilizational resurgence. It's the difference between the law court and the blood feud, between graduated income tax and plunder, between televised debates and single combat.

Other civilizations have followed the same progression. Beginning in the fifth century, Scandinavian, Gaelic, and Anglo-Saxon tribal groups all developed a tradition of "flyting," a poetic contest of threats and insults very similar to a rap battle. In fact, [one scholar has even suggested](#) that American slaves may have picked up the practice of flyting from their Scottish owners and that "the dozens" (an informal African-American insult contest often seen as a precursor of the rap battle) could represent a fusion of flyting with those slaves' own African musical traditions.

Rap battles and flyting both represent an important transitional stage in the development of civilization with its content stuck in the old world of violence and its form looking forward to new world of *logos*. In his final rap battle of the film, Jimmy Smith takes the next step toward *logos*. Instead of threatening his opponent, Pappa Doc, Smith turns on himself, calling himself a "bum" and defiantly listing all the humiliating circumstances of his life. Then he plays his trump card, revealing that Pappa Doc, who claims to be "a gangster," grew up in an affluent home and attended a private school.

By presenting the "articulated truth" about himself and exposing Pappa Doc as a liar, he attains victory without resorting to violence or even the threat of violence. Instead of using words to express the values of his tribalistic world, he looks forward to a better society, one in which authenticity, self-knowledge, and rhetorical skill take precedence over brute force, not only in form, but in content as well.

Finally, it is only through the *logos* that Jimmy Smith, the only white rapper in the competition, could win in spite of the entirely black crowd's innate racial bias against him. Where the *logos* is stifled, it is nearly impossible to engage in any kind of dialogue with someone of a different tribe or race, but [as the ancient Greek philosopher Heraclitus wrote](#), "The *logos* is common to all."

The *logos* is the spark of divinity that makes civilization possible, enabling us to bind ourselves with laws, contracts, and constitutions, to have elections instead of wars of succession and rap battles instead of brawls. Given our society's current inability to engage in rational discourse, a renewed appreciation for the *logos* as a shared commitment to seeking and articulating truth could be our only hope.

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