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A review of Literature, the Arts, and Public Affairs

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Cover and above (detail): Doris Zakian (VU '80), American contemporary, *Jonah II,* 1985, lithograph, 12 x 16 inches.

This print is on exhibit this spring in the Valparaiso University Union as part of Doris Zakian's solo show there of paintings and prints on Biblical themes. RHWB

IN LUCE TUA

Comment on Contemporary Affairs by the Editor

Affirmative Discrimination

Someone has remarked that Americans are the only people in the world who would follow pragmatism right off the edge of a cliff. That comment comes inevitably to mind as one contemplates the Supreme Court's most recent decision on affirmative action and much of the early reaction to that decision. The Court has in effect ruled—and its defenders have praised it for so doing—that in pursuit of a desirable public policy it is permissible to ignore the clear meaning and intent of a major law and in the process to violate a fundamental principle that until recently has been at the very heart of what America as a society is all about.

In *Johnson v. Transportation Agency* the Court decided that the Transportation Agency of Santa Clara County, California, had the right to promote Diane Joyce to the position of road dispatcher over Paul Johnson, even though Johnson had been rated by a promotion board as more qualified. The Transportation Agency had initiated an affirmative action program to place women and minorities in positions in which they had been substantially underrepresented. No prior record of discrimination had been claimed against the agency. It simply promoted Joyce over Johnson because it wanted more women in particular jobs. In other words, Joyce received the promotion because she is a woman; Johnson did not because he is a (white) male. Had the two been of the same gender (and race), Johnson, not Joyce, would have got the job.

The Court has therefore decreed that employers can discriminate against white men in order to improve the employment situations of women and minorities, even in situations where women and minorities have not themselves been victims of discrimination. In pursuit of a work force "balanced" according to race and gender, the rights of individuals outside the groups targeted for preference can be ignored. From the perspective of American history and tradition—not to mention that of simple justice—this is an altogether extraordinary development.

In arriving at its decision, the Court had to get around the awkward presence of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which flatly prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of race and gender. About the intent of that statute there can be no legitimate dispute: faced with the charge that the law might lead to special preferences for women and minorities, its advocates unreservedly indicated that the words employed meant precisely what they said—*no* discrimination, either in favor of particular groups or against them.

Justice Antonin Scalia's eloquent dissent tells the simple truth: "The Court today completes the process of converting [the Civil Rights Act] from a guarantee that race or sex will not be the basis for employment determinations to a guarantee that it often will. We effectively replace the goal of a discrimination-free society with the quite incompatible goal of proportionate representation by race and by sex in the workplace." We have heard much in recent years of the rise of the imperial judiciary. That charge has regularly been dismissed as an exercise in hyperbole. In light of decisions like this, one wonders how.

Defenders of the Court have indicated a blithe disregard for the law in question and for the non-discrimination principle behind it. They have instead appealed to the "pragmatic" factors noted at the outset, the implicit point being that where a good cause is involved, neither law nor principle should unduly concern us. Here truly is pragmatism run amuck.

The practical considerations referred to by the Court and/or its defenders are several: a) the affirmative-action program in question was voluntary, and the courts should therefore keep their hands off; b) the difference in qualifications between the candidates was marginal, so the degree of discrimination involved was correspondingly insignificant; c) the Civil Rights Act was aimed at malign bias, while affirmative-action programs have benevolent ends; d) the policy in question was moderate and flexible and did not involve rigid quotas or permanent systems of preference; e) any consistent policy of race-and-gender blindness will make it impossible for employers to achieve the surely-desirable end of a more diversified work force; f) given the long history of blatant discrimination against women and blacks, it requires notably poor grace for white males to complain when the shoe is placed, especially in so mild and provisional a manner, on the other foot.

One hardly knows where to begin in reply. Perhaps the simplest way is to take the points in order.

Those who see the affirmative-action plan as "voluntary" should consult Mr. Johnson. He never agreed to

let the Transportation Agency take his rights away in this or any other manner. It is an essential role of the courts to protect the rights of individuals over against powerful groups, including private employers. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 precisely forbids the kind of discrimination that his employer "volunteered" on behalf of Paul Johnson.

It is true that the difference in qualifications between Mr. Johnson and Ms. Joyce was not great, but that is irrelevant to the principle under consideration. Imagine the situation in reverse. Would Ms. Joyce (or anyone else) agree that it's all right to discriminate in favor of men and whites against women and blacks so long as the degree of discrimination is relatively mild? Furthermore, there is nothing in this decision that would necessarily forbid very severe forms of discrimination. After all, if the end is to be desired . . .

It is not the purpose of the law to extract revenge for the injustices of yesterday; it is to establish justice today. The past is irretrievable.

The argument that affirmative-action discrimination can be justified because it has benign rather than nasty purposes is similarly irrelevant. The Congress in 1964 did not set out to create a diversified work force in America. It intended merely to end discrimination on the basis of race, sex, religion, or national origin. That's all. If today's Congress or court system wants to go beyond that, let Congress pass a law and the courts test its constitutionality. It is not for the courts to rewrite existing legislation in terms of ends that are beyond statute law but that the courts believe ought to be achieved. It is for the American people acting through their elected representatives to define the ends they want the laws to achieve (consistent with constitutional limitations). Usurpation by the courts for subjectively-determined benign ends remains usurpation.

The "moderate and flexible" argument is a diversionary dodge. The Congress intended that discrimination by race or gender should not be tolerated under the law. It did not qualify that judgment to allow for "moderate and flexible" exceptions. During the 1960s, Southerners came up with all sorts of moderate and flexible variations on their Jim Crow laws. The courts saw through those; they ought to see through these.

It is puzzling to imagine on what grounds defenders of affirmative-action privilege argue that without such privilege a more diversified work force cannot be achieved. If the laws forbidding discrimination against women and minorities are stringently enforced—as they most assuredly should be—why should whatever natural work-force balance that individual effort and the needs of the market decree not eventuate?

There is no way of knowing in advance what is the "proper" proportion of women or minorities in any given occupation. The way to find out is to guarantee by law a non-discriminatory field of opportunity and then let the normal forces of ambition, effort, and talent take their course. Diversity is to be desired, but what plausible common interest is served by defining its precise (or even general) pattern in advance and then securing conformity to that pattern by means of depriving particular individuals of their rights? Surely defenders of minority and women's rights do not mean to suggest that the people for whom they speak cannot, even when guaranteed equal protection of the laws, compete favorably with white males.

No one could reasonably deny that whatever discriminations are visited upon white men by affirmative-action programs today pale into insignificance compared with the outrages imposed upon women and minorities in the past. But it is not the purpose of the law to extract revenge for the injustices of yesterday; it is rather to establish justice today. The past is irretrievable. We can't offer restitution to those who suffered discrimination in years gone by, and justice is not served by offsetting a set of discriminatory practices against specific individuals in the past with a new set of discriminatory practices against different individuals in the present. Restitution is rightly owed only to specific victims of specific injustices; no individual, simply by virtue of being a member of a group whose ancestors endured evil yesterday, can legitimately make claim to special privileges today.

The matter at issue goes beyond a particular question of public policy. It goes to the very heart of what our society stands for. From the very beginning, the sense of American distinctiveness was rooted in the idea that here above all people were to be recognized and rewarded not according to prescriptive status but according to achieved merit. The American Dream promised that all individuals had access to the good things in life without regard to barriers or benefits of race, religion, ethnicity, or other arbitrary accidents of birth.

That creed was often violated, and only in relatively recent times has it come to take seriously into account matters of gender. Affirmative-action policies need not violate the creed if they act simply to make more inclusive than before the offer to the American people to participate on equal legal footing in the remarkable opportunities this society, for all its lingering faults, still holds open to them.

But if affirmative action comes to be defined in terms of group rights and obligations, then it will have turned itself into an alien intrusion in our national life. It is not what we are about, and it should not be allowed to become so. If it does, we will have become something other than what we have always been. That should not occur at all; it certainly should not occur in a fit of absence of mind. Let's this time resist the temptation to follow pragmatism over a cliff.

Crisis at Black Rock?

CBS News has long been noted for three things: its generally high level of competence, its mildly left-of-center bias, and its comfortable air of smugness about how well it does its job.

But now the network news division for which Edward R. Murrow is patron saint (he only displayed the first two of the prevailing characteristics) has come upon lean days. The budget for CBS News has been cut by some ten per cent (out of $300 million), and the outcry over the cuts—not least from within the network itself—would lead one to think that western civilization as we have known it is under immediate threat. The accountants and the barbarians, so we are told, are at the gates; a sacred public trust is at stake.

A bit of perspective may be in order. The budget for CBS News has grown some 250 per cent in less than a decade, a figure wildly in excess of the rate of inflation. After the projected cuts in staff have been imposed, CBS will retain roughly the same number of reporters and correspondents as ABC and NBC. Many of those within the organization concede the presence of fat within existing budgets; salaries and perks for network stars have reached extraordinary levels. Who really believes that the closing of news bureaus in Warsaw, Bangkok, and Seattle will endanger the quality and integrity of the news product?

And all that talk of news as a "public trust" should receive careful scrutiny. Things in the public trust have public accountability, and the critics of the cutbacks within CBS News who invoke such language might want to think twice about the implications of their rhetoric. After CBS announced its cuts, two Democratic members of the House subcommittee on telecommunications called for hearings on whether those reductions were in the public interest. One wonders if the dissidents within CBS News really want to pursue the implications that line of inquiry suggests.

We intend no exercise in populist network-baiting here. By and large, our national news organizations do a competent—sometimes even admirable—job. (Though they have a prevailing adversary stance to political authority that we think misplaced.) They deserve to receive the resources necessary to fulfill their tasks competently.

But there is no reason to believe that for the Dan Rathers of the world to be able to do their job properly we have to take them at their own often exaggerated estimation.

The Underestimation of Ronald Reagan

One would think that Ronald Reagan's critics would have learned by now. Throughout his political career, he has been singularly blessed by his opponents' apparently unalterable tendency to underestimate him. They cannot think of him as other than a lightweight, and the fact that he has so regularly confounded their contempt makes no discernible difference in their attitude towards him, or in their continuing certainty that this time, surely, he will reap the disaster his incompetence has decreed him. Reagan is no candidate for Mensa, but his political intelligence has in fact always far exceeded those for whom his enduring popularity remains an unfathomable mystery.

In 1980, the critics wondered how such an ill-informed candidate could possibly compete in direct engagement with such a master of detail as Jimmy Carter. In 1984, after Reagan stumbled in an early debate against Walter Mondale, they portrayed him as headed for disaster in the next encounter. In 1987, after the Iragua disclosures of a disengaged chief executive, they indicated their disbelief that a President so removed from the specifics of policy could withstand the give-and-take of an unstructured press conference.

Yet, in each of these cases, Reagan has by general consent emerged as a clear success. And each time, no small measure of that success has come from the extraordinarily low standards of expectation constructed for him by his critics. Predicted by those who disdain him as certain to make a fool of himself, Reagan has on each occasion earned easy victory simply by virtue of demonstrating that he is not the village idiot. With such enemies, he hardly needs friends.

The Iragua affair has not yet concluded, and there may yet emerge revelations that damage the President substantially. But those who confidently anticipate his political demise would do well to remind themselves that this is the most successful American President since Franklin Roosevelt, and that his success is by no means simply a matter of dumb luck. Only those blinded by ideological antipathy could imagine otherwise.

James Nuechterlein

EDMUND BURKE AND MORAL REALISM

An Introduction to *Reflections on the Revolution in France*

(Editor's Note: This essay was originally presented this February to the Freshman Program in Christ College, the Honors College at Valparaiso University.)

One of the questions college students ask—or ought to ask—when assigned a new author or a new text is, "Why should we study this stuff?" Professors, like parents with small children, are often tempted to respond, "Because I said so," or, if they are in a more tolerant (or more insidious) mood, "Because it's good for you." Collegians and small children alike probably deserve better answers.

In the case of Edmund Burke, it is easy to give good answers. Burke is a major figure in the intellectual history of the French Revolution, and that is important to us because modern ideological politics—the politics of Left and Right, of radical/liberal/conservative/reactionary—is generally considered to have originated in the Revolution and in reactions to it. It remains a commonplace that one's reaction to the French Revolution offers a good litmus test of one's ideological instincts and preferences.

Burke, who of course opposed the Revolution—more particularly, the spirit behind it—is generally acknowledged as the founder of modern conservatism, and the text you are currently considering, his *Reflections on the Revolution in France,* stands as a classic statement of conservative philosophy. Those who think of themselves as conservatives, or who simply wish to understand conservatism, have to come to terms with Burke in the same way that radicals or students of radicalism have to come to terms with Marx.

Coming to terms with Burke is not all that easy in an American context. In a society dominated as no other by the liberal tradition, Burke cannot be seen as other than alien. Even American conservatives (and there are currently lots of them around) appear more properly defined as old-fashioned liberals, i.e., champions of individual freedom, property rights, and limited government. As has often been noted, American politics seems best understood as a clash of differing forms of liberalism.

America has never been a fertile ground for those of conservative temperament, and conservatism has never been the mainstream of the American political tradition.

From the perspective of modern democratic liberalism, Burke in 1789 took the losing side. Certainly many of Burke's particular causes at the time would be uncongenial to Americans today, even to American conservatives. Only whimsical eccentrics would care to defend institutions of the monarchy, an established church, or a hereditary aristocracy established politically in a House of Lords. In addition to those institutional attachments, who in America would be eager to uphold Burkean principles of hierarchy, skepticism toward rapid social mobility, organicism, or the sanctity of tradition?

And beyond either institutions or values, there is the question of mood. Whether in the *Reflections* or in the tradition in general, conservatism is perhaps most broadly defined in its skeptical attitude toward change, yet Americans, as has often been remarked, not only welcome change but rush out to embrace it. Because of their basic trust that human nature is, if not benign, at least infinitely malleable and that social problems are readily soluble by applications of rationality and good will, Americans typically affirm that most fundamental of liberal assumptions: change is good.

America has never been a fertile ground for those of conservative temperament, and conservatism has

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never been the mainstream of the American political tradition. George Santayana said it all when he expressed pity for any conservative unlucky enough to have been born an American. The abiding irony of American conservatism consists in this: conservatives appeal to tradition, and in America the tradition to be conserved is liberal.

Yet perhaps some of that irony dissolves in the perspective of recent American history. Many Americans labeled today as conservatives or neo-conservatives see themselves as defenders of the classical American liberal tradition against the perversions of the collectivist liberalism of the contemporary era, and in preserving that tradition they may be seen as exercising an essential conservative function.

Conservatives in any society ought to be about the preserving of the best of their own tradition, and the traditions to be preserved will not everywhere be the same. What is best for one society is not necessarily so for another.

Burke understood that there is no one body of conservative thought, that political ideas, institutions, and values vary according to time and circumstances. His own conservatism was always pragmatic and adaptable, based on certain general and universal moral principles but not on a specific body of doctrine. Conservatives in any society ought to be about the preserving of the best of their own tradition, and the traditions to be preserved will not everywhere be the same. What is best for one society is not necessarily so for another. Thus the idea of a conservative defense of a liberal tradition is not such an oddity as it might at first seem.

It is also useful, in this context, to look at the American condition from an international perspective. In many ways, America is today a conservative, status quo power. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the U.S. was widely perceived as a revolutionary society; our principles of liberal democracy were *the* revolutionary principles of the era. America in its early days seemed the hope, even the embodiment, of the Left.

All that has changed in the course of the twentieth century. Marxian socialism is the revolution of this century, and our system of bourgeois democracy is the *ancien régime* against which that revolution is directed. Our values of democratic capitalism are now commonly seen as conservative on the world scene; America is today portrayed as *the* enemy by the international Left.

In that perspective, Burke takes on a new relevance. Much of the spirit—not the specific politics but the spirit—of his opposition to the radicalism of the French revolutionaries can easily be adapted to America's current ideological conflict with revolutionary socialism. Burke once said that his whole politics was centered in anti-Jacobinism: opposition to the radical ideology behind the French Revolution. One can plausibly make the case that behind the radicalisms of both the eighteenth and twentieth centuries stand what Burke would have understood as common utopian fantasies, shared pernicious illusions concerning human and political possibilities that have resulted in the terrible excesses of both revolutionary movements.

Historians have long noted that the origins of the totalitarian imagination of our time can be located in certain tendencies of the French revolutionary spirit. One finds in their and in our revolutionaries a common denial of that most central of conservative values, a sense of humility before God and history. It may well be, therefore, that Burke's counter-revolutionary spirit has significant impulses to contribute to America's current anti-revolutionary situation.

But if we are to talk reasonably about Burke's relevance, we need rather more specificity. We need at least a basic outline of what it is that constitutes Burkean conservatism.*

II

Burke was not a systematic political philosopher. He was rather a political actor whose major political writings—the *Reflections* included—were responses to particular events and situations. It is significant to note that Burke could not be categorized as a conservative during most of his political career; he belonged to the Whig faction in British politics, not the Tory. He became noted as a defender of the American cause in the colonists' quarrels with England during the 1760s and '70s, and his urging in Parliament of conciliation and of granting of wide autonomy to the colonies made him a hero in America, at least until the publication of the *Reflections* in 1790.

*The discussion in Section II of this essay relies substantially on the excellent chapter on Burke in William T. Bluhm, *Theories of the Political System* (1st ed., 1965). I also wish to note here that my sense of Burke's relevance for our time was first awakened by Alexander M. Bickel's perceptive essay on Burke in the *New Republic* (March 17, 1973). Finally, I have benefited from quarreling with Conor Cruise O'Brien's stimulating but, in my view, often wrong-headed introduction to the Penguin edition of the *Reflections* (1969).

Burke's ties to conservatism developed late in his career from his reaction to the events in France in 1789 and afterward, particularly to the radical utopian theories that he saw behind the Revolution. From the beginning, Burke's primary concern was not France but England. The widespread approval given the Revolution in certain circles of English society aroused in him great fear of the spread of revolutionary principles across the Channel. He wanted desperately to quarantine the revolutionary virus. When the Whig leader Charles James Fox praised the Revolution in Parliament, Burke publicly broke with him and the party and was banished to the political wilderness. He retired from Parliament in 1794.

One can't approach politics, Burke insisted, as an exercise in applied moral imperatives. Given the variety of social goods to be pursued, politics involves the weaving together of these goods and the values behind them in particular cases.

The *Reflections,* as noted, is not a work of formal political theory. Indeed, Burke throughout his career exhibited a deep distrust of abstract political theory, and that distrust is reflected throughout the pages of the *Reflections.* Yet if Burke never worked out a comprehensive political philosophy, it is possible to draw out certain general and fundamental ideas from the *Reflections* that do together constitute a coherent, if highly generalized, set of political principles.

When Burke castigated "men of theory" for their taste for "metaphysical abstraction," he had in mind the dominant deductive political theory of his time. The rationalistic political thought of the French *philosophes* and men like them elsewhere struck Burke as arid and detached from reality. In Aristotelian terms, he preferred that political thought free itself from the abstractions of the speculative reason and focus instead on the specificities of the practical reason. For Burke, insistence on and deduction from abstract principles in politics—as in insistence on the "rights of man"—tended to be misleading and dangerous. There were certain fundamental and absolute constants of human existence that had to be recognized and attended to, but these had more to do with personal moral behavior than with political policy.

The real world of politics always involved infinite modifications and endless possible combinations. A system of political thought preoccupied with logical connections between general principles failed for Burke because it characteristically ignored the particular empirical circumstances that give politics its true center.

> I cannot stand forward, and give praise or blame to any thing which relates to human actions and human concerns on a simple view of the object, as it stands stripped of every relation, in all the nakedness and solitude of metaphysical abstraction. Circumstances (which with some gentlemen pass for nothing) give in reality to every political principle its distinguishing color and discriminating effect. The circumstances are what render every civil and political scheme beneficial or noxious to mankind.

Burke objected in particular to the contemporary emphasis on individual freedom as the great central good of politics. Too much of the constitutional system-building of the time, he thought, focused on that (undeniable) virtue to the virtual exclusion of other political goods. Politics rightly conceived has to do with the general good, and the complex and variegated nature of society therefore decrees that the general good must necessarily be complex and variegated as well.

One can't approach politics, Burke insisted, as an exercise in applied moral imperatives. Given the variety of social goods to be pursued, politics involves the weaving together of these goods and the values behind them in particular cases, attempting always to arrive at specific optimal combinations. This synthesizing process is an art, not a precise science. The political rights of man, Burke insisted, exist not in a pure abstract form, but in a sort of middle ground, "incapable of [precise] definition, but not impossible to be discerned." Political reason, Burke says in perhaps his most crucial passage, "is a computing principle: adding, subtracting, multiplying, and dividing, morally and not metaphysically or mathematically, true moral denominations."

Politics consists in compromises between good and evil, between evil and evil, and between "differences of good." The point is not simply that we can often hope to achieve only the relatively better or the lesser evil; the more profound insight is that politics involves trade-offs between competing goods.

Here Burke suggests the key doctrine of moral incommensurability in political life. The plural political ends we seek exist in genuine tension with each other. We pursue but cannot fully realize at once authority *and* liberty, freedom *and* equality, individualism *and* community. A Rousseau, as in his idea of the General Will, wants to maximize all good things all at once. Burke knows that it cannot be so. He knows further that the statesman has available to him only the intimations of prudence in working his synthesizing art;

he can rely on no abstract rule of reason to guide him.

Even if there were such a rule, Burke suggests, any given individual would run up against the limits of any one person being able to apprehend it or act comprehensively upon it. Each of us exhibits the limits and weaknesses of reason; reason is only a part of our nature, and is not necessarily predominant. Our activities of comprehending and acting depend fully as much on feeling and will as on reason.

Burke is no reactionary, implacably wedded to the past and opposed to all change. He explicitly recognizes the inevitability and necessity of change: "A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation."

We have, Burke argues, natural affections, affinities, and loyalties that transcend pure reason. As Conor Cruise O'Brien has suggested, Burke reveals "a strong distrust of all reasoning not inspired by affection for what is near and dear." There is for Burke a kind of natural pluralism to human society. We have many levels of association and sympathy short of the political, and the larger the sphere of activity, the less closely are we bound to it.

We feel the bonds of affection and obligation most deeply at primary levels—family, neighborhood, and church. These are the "little platoons" that help prepare us for attachments at higher social levels; they are in effect a training ground for them. Burke found it unnatural that so much of the political thought of his time leaped in its concerns all the way from the isolated individual to the comprehensive community. He insisted in any case that whatever the level of our attachments, they cannot adequately be accounted for or justified by pure reason.

If Burke's faith in individual reason is limited, his trust in what might be called communal reason is more encompassing. Individuals, Burke tells us, can be foolish, as can political majorities at any given time, but the species humankind is wise. The individual may find wisdom if he defers to the guidance of the society in which he lives, as that guidance has been developed over time. Political wisdom, in other words, is to be found most surely in history. Communal reason resides in the long-held values and institutions of a given society, which express and embody that society's basic beliefs, unselfconscious and habitual.

Thus Burke's notorious defense of "prejudice," by which he means not the sense of malign bias that we customarily attach to it, but rather the latent wisdom of our accumulated moral beliefs. Our prejudices, for Burke, are our moral commonplaces, our "untaught feelings," the ethical affirmations we absorb insensibly in the process of acculturation. They constitute the sifted moral wisdom of any society; indeed, he says, "the moral sentiments [are] so nearly connected with early prejudice as to be almost one and the same thing."

Here one encounters in Burke the bedrock of his conservatism, the deep dependence on tradition. Yet he is no reactionary, implacably wedded to the past and opposed to change. He explicitly recognizes the inevitability and necessity of change: "A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation." But beneficial change will always be moderate and gradual, organically related to the past, not in arrogant disregard of it. Reform and evolution are to be embraced, innovation and revolution presumptively to be rejected. As the modern Burkean Michael Oakeshott has put it, it is the duty of the statesman continously to draw out the intimations of a tradition.

Burke harbored no doubts that traditional England must be a more stable and contented society than revolutionary France, and he located British superiority in an organicism consistent with the order of nature.

> Our political system is placed in a just correspondence and symmetry with the order of the world, and with the mode of existence decreed to a permanent body composed of transitory parts; wherein, by the disposition of a stupendous wisdom, molding together the great mysterious incorporation of the human race, the whole, at one time, is never old, or middle-aged, or young, but, in a condition of unchangeable constancy, moves on through the varied tenor of perpetual decay, fall, renovation, and progression. Thus, by preserving the method of nature in the conduct of the state, in what we improve we are never wholly new; in what we retain we are never wholly obsolete.

One might, at this point, begin to suspect Burke of a kind of political mysticism. His emphasis on prescription and prejudice can seem to imply the impossibility of any coherent political theory at all and to suggest instead that individuals give in to political irrationalism and to a blind faith in an organic past intuitively—and certainly uncritically—accepted.

But Burke is no irrationalist, and he does not suppose that support of tradition is a sufficient political philosophy. Politics involves choices, and we need rational principles to guide those choices. The past can direct our preservation but not our innovation.

Burke locates his principles of rational order in clas-

sical and Christian conceptions of natural law (which he sharply distinguished from the contemporary doctrine of natural rights of which he was so skeptical). There is for Burke a divine transcendent law that provides the general moral principles by which all politics must be guided.

What is the natural law and how is it to be known? Burke provides the same answer as did St. Thomas Aquinas: the natural law is the law of morality implanted in our hearts by God and accessible both by reason and by inclination. It is this natural law that moves our prejudices beyond superstition and irrationalism; our moral instincts, it turns out, provide the foundation of our knowledge of the law of nature. Thus we have, Burke is sure, natural inclinations to justice, equity, religious belief, family affection, and hatred of injustice and cruelty.

These highly generalized moral instincts provide only the beginning of virtue; they need to be educated and developed into habitual practices of right behavior. This is the function that our particular social and political institutions serve: they carry and mediate the natural law to us, translating its general principles into specific rubrics. This applies both in morality and in politics. Burke abhorred the French Revolution because it relied on the pernicious abstractions of the rights of man; he sympathized with the American colonists because they appealed quite specifically to the rights of Englishmen.

Thus Burke returns, as always, to circumstance. Knowledge of moral principles is itself insufficient to statesmen. As Aquinas noted, the general precepts of the natural law are of but limited use for public policy. They always have to be applied or translated into human law, and that process is characteristically uncertain and inexact, dependent on specific conditions. Those responsible for the laws can't lose sight of principles, but they must be guided by circumstances.

For Burke, then, political morality always involves an intimate relation of the universal and the particular. The former only takes on meaning as it makes contact with the latter. He who would morally prescribe for political situations without intimate acquaintance with the particular conditions of the case is for Burke "not erroneous but stark mad . . . he is metaphysically mad."

III

There is much more that could be said concerning the basic framework of Burke's thought, but in the limited time still available, I want to focus on what I take to be his most enduring legacy to us, that is, his sense of moral realism.

That realism consists, in the first instance, in Burke's affirmation of the anti-utopian imperative: the insistence that we cannot remake human nature and human society from scratch and simply according to will or to a set of rational principles. Thus he quotes with astonishment the innocent arrogance of the president of the new French national assembly: "All the establishments of France crown the misery of the people: to make them happy, it is necessary to renew them, change their ideas, change their laws, change their manners . . . change men, change things, change words . . . destroy everything; yes, destroy everything, since everything is to be recreated." This is the "metaphysical madness" that Burke identifies as the motive power of revolutionary ideology.

Burke's realism consists, in the first instance, in his affirmation of the anti-utopian imperative: the insistence that we cannot remake human nature and human society from scratch and simply according to will or to a set of rational principles.

For Burke, the limits of politics originate in the limits of man, both intellectual and moral. People have no "rights" to that which is not reasonable; in proclaiming men's rights, he reminds us, we must not forget their natures.

Yet Burke's realism never descends to moral cynicism nor even to a pragmatic utilitarianism. It is here that one encounters the importance of transcendent religious principles for Burke. Religion to him provides the foundation of the moral order and of civil society. He insisted on an establishment of religion because such establishment seemed to him essential to preservation of the virtue of rulers and ruled alike. Man is a naturally religious creature, and religious faith is essential to his moral behavior.

At the same time, however, religion must not be confused with politics; therein lies a great potential danger. Since man is naturally religious, in religion's absence—an absence encouraged, Burke felt, by the atheism and infidelity of the French revolutionaries—the resulting void will be filled by some "uncouth, pernicious, and degrading supersition." The absence or weakness of transcendent religious faith, in other words, leaves the door open to moral and political fanaticism. (One is reminded in this context of G.K. Chesterton's remark that when a man loses his faith, he will not then believe nothing, he will believe any-

thing.)

Throughout the *Reflections,* Burke indicates his disdain and fear of "political theologians and theological politicians," those who mix religious principles and political doctrines, who confuse eternal with temporal things. (Burke observed witheringly of the politicized divines of his time that "they have nothing of politics but the passions they excite.") Religion *is* the basis of the natural law, but it does not typically offer specific prescriptions for politics. An acceptable politics must not violate the principles of the natural order, but there is only on rare occasions a direct translation from natural to human law. Burke traced the radical destructiveness of revolutionary ideologues to their assumption that moral/religious ideals ought directly to be embodied in political practice, and their resulting bitterness when, as must inevitably be the case, the realities of politics do not measure up to their revolutionary dreams. Of frustrated idealists are alienated misanthropes made: "hating vice too much, they come to love men too little."

Thus moral realism requires of us that we not separate our moral values from our politics, but that we at the same time be careful not to assume automatic or direct connections between them. There are limits, Burke insists, to our moral knowledge and performance, especially as they are related to politics. This perception comes through brilliantly in a quotation near the end of the *Reflections,* where Burke, praising the caution, circumspection, and moral humility of the founders of the British Constitution, compares their behavior favorably with the arrogance of the French revolutionaries.

> Not being illuminated with the light of which the gentlemen of France tell us they have got so abundant a share, they acted under a strong impression of the ignorance and fallibility of mankind. He that had made them thus fallible, rewarded them for having in their conduct attended to their nature. Let us imitate their caution, if we wish to deserve their fortune, or to retain their bequests.

For Burke, then, we are endlessly driven back in politics to the computing principle, but always with the qualification that our computing has to do with "true moral denominations."

Burke in 1791 urged Parliament to "fly from the French Revolution," by which he meant that all sober Englishmen should fly from the Revolution's spirit of moral unboundedness and political utopianism back to the safer realms of moral realism and political prudence. That warning, I think, is as relevant today as it was in 1791, and it makes Burke truly and forever our contemporary.

Apples

Looking out her window,
She doesn't see the pine
With its staggering,
Blue-tipped branches, the pocked snow,
Or the sun causing the ice to stir.
She sees a scale against a black background,
One side swinging crazily
Because of the apples
Falling, for no apparent reason,
On the other side.

She's adding things up—
Her husband's death,
Her life as flat and cold
As snow held narrow by squinting.
Her child sits alone in his room,
Unseeing, riveted
To a circle inside himself;
And he will not speak.

And for happiness? That side?
Days, she finds, caught up
With the commonplace.
A small curved lamp
And her husband alive.
Evening purple around the edges
And she standing in her garden,
The smell of the earth rising
In a rough coolness.

But on the other side
She sees a crowd of people
Whose faces she cannot see.
They are hungry.
They are moving, shifting
Their hunched positions
With a gravity and weariness
She cannot watch.

An apple falls,
And the other side jerks down.

Kim Bridgford

Megan Wolfe

THE SEDUCTION OF SILENCE

Or, the Deafy's Progress

Utopia means "Nowhere." By definition, locating a utopia in time and space is a difficult task. The difficulty remains even when the utopia proposed is a specialized one, focused on a single issue. A good example is Mark Medoff's *Children of a Lesser God,* a work fumbling towards the idea of a utopia for deaf people: the deaf and the hearing, Medoff argues, can meet as equals only in "another place, not in silence or in sound but somewhere else."

These two states of being clash with the romance of a woman, Sarah Norman, deaf since birth, and her would-be speech therapist, James Leeds, who wants her to speak and thus to function as a hearing person would. When he discovers that she is determined never to speak or lipread, he has to realize that she is not rejecting him. Likewise, the deaf woman has to realize that she loses a great deal either way: in a life with her hearing beloved or in a retreat to her own intensely private state of being. When the story concludes, the two of them are promising to look for their utopia. Unless they plan to start mindreading, such a place would have to incorporate elements of both speech and sign, a synthesis where communication uses two distinct forms of language simultaneously.

Both the stage and film versions of *Children of a Lesser God* propose this utopia without really getting there. True, Leeds interprets all the signing of all the deaf characters. This speaking and signing at the same time is called "total communication," a technique promoted recently by educators of the deaf and most often used by speech therapists.

However, *Children* does not use total communication with an eye to a deaf audience as well as a hearing one. Oral translation of signing is not complemented by sign translation of speech. Though there have been a few signed and captioned performances of *Children,* the work makes no intrinsic effort to embody the form of communication which it proposes, finally, as its ideal. It remains a hearing person's movie—or is saved from this limitation only by one unpredictable factor, the performance and personality of the actress who plays Sarah Norman.

Marlee Matlin has swept most of the major acting awards for women this year. More than one male friend of mine calls Matlin "a hot number." Her hearing impairment seems so fully assimilated into her alert, sensual, and intelligent presence that deafness becomes a much smaller issue than its severity would suggest. Of course, that's an actress for you. No doubt she has off-days like the rest of us.

Much more than the stage *Children,* the film emphasizes romance, eliminating an early-Seventies social-consciousness subplot in favor of a slicked-up sexual tension between Matlin's character and William Hurt's speech therapist. Some critics look down on the film for this reason. Quite a few others weren't troubled, appreciating Matlin's contribution in particular: she brings to life for a hearing audience the intensity of anger and sensuality that can suffuse the whole existence of the deaf.

A glance at Matlin's personal background, culled from a variety of newspaper and magazine interviews: she lost her hearing at the age of eighteen months from a bout with roseola; she went to public schools, wears hearing aids, and speaks. She credits her parents with strong support. She performed with the Children's Theatre of the Deaf, and, once out of high school, played a supporting role in the stage version of *Children* in Chicago. From there she landed the role of Sarah in the movie version. She now has an on-again, off-again romance with Hurt, and has been signed to make another movie. She does not use the telephone and must lipread.

Through all of the interviews and features, one detail stands out: although she can speak English—and evidently Italian!—she does not do so in public. She is no less adamantly silent than Sarah Norman. She re-

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sponds to interviews not in total communication, but strictly in sign language (which then must be interpreted for hearing reporters); her acceptance speech at the Globe ceremony was also signed. Not only does she get away with this kind of maneuver, she uses it to her advantage. It seems to increase her charisma rather than to expose her as the village idiot. Here is a Quasimodo who has become Esmeralda, a glamorous metamorphosis.

My initial reaction to Matlin's success was suspicion. Though I am hearing-impaired myself, I speak and have long been proud of never needing to sign. I've governed my life toward trying to fit in the hearing world, calculating that I was only as deaf as I allowed myself to be. What does Matlin think she is doing, to pretend an inarticulateness her accomplishments and ability to speak do not support? Is there a reason other than the vanity of the actress for her to remain in character to this extent? What does this public signing contribute toward utopia? We have a stake in this, you and I. For most people, whether hearing or deaf, the very idea of a deaf actress, a deaf professional communicator, challenges the basis of human communication as it is generally understood.

My suspicion and potential contempt for Matlin's signing could be seen as the preference of one deaf woman to take the "harder" route by speaking in every circumstance over another's choice to take the "easier" route by never speaking in public any more than many people never wear their glasses in public. But that was only my initial reaction, from the habit of being a hard-of-hearing woman who grew up in a strictly hearing environment. Quieter reflection and a closer look made the situation more complex. For one thing, not only is it a bit of a strain to listen to a deaf person speak, it's more natural for the deaf communicator to express feeling and nuance by movement, facial expression, etc., than by voice. For another thing, I came by this knowledge the hard way, since for the last twelve years I've been not hard-of-hearing but profoundly deaf.

I started out at a very young age with a borderline moderate/severe loss, learned to speak, and grew up with nothing worse than a 75dB loss. There are plenty of books available in public libraries which outline the four categories of hearing loss, mild, moderate, severe, and profound. A person with a profound loss, 90dB or worse, is considered deaf rather than hard of hearing, because although many with a profound loss are able to hear a little with hearing aids, the sound is so greatly distorted that speech discrimination is greatly hampered.

Most people who use sign language have very severe or profound losses. Even then, many of them can and do speak. Hearing loss and the efficacy of hearing aids and speech differ from person to person, established by age of onset of loss, degree of loss, kind of loss, environmental factors such as parental support and schools, pain thresholds, distortion thresholds, economic and intelligence factors, and, most daunting and elusive of all—personal preference.

Though I am hearing-impaired myself, I speak and have long been proud of never needing to use sign language. I've governed my life toward trying to fit in the hearing world, calculating that I was only as deaf as I allowed myself to be.

My own profound hearing loss happened very suddenly, in the middle of college: professors developed strange accents, family members became short-tempered with me, the phone company sloughed off on quality control, and stairs and corners started moving of their own free will. Sound was still coming in, but once in, became tangled up. This is what it was like to go directly from a 75dB to a 97dB loss. But since I could already speak, lipread, and had a crazy amount of energy, I continued as a hard-of-hearing person, having only to give up the telephone . . . a few friends . . . a couple dozen job opportunities. . . . Thus began my "deafy's progress."

At first, there was no reason to feel particularly hampered, except for the same technology which brought about hearing aids: modern society's demigod, the telephone. Once out of the protective collegiate environment, the deaf would-be professional finds that life is closing in. It is sometimes easier in a big city with many deaf organizations, or if one is lucky enough to have the right connections.

Most deaf professionals in one survey I read got their jobs through a relative who had some kind of clout in a corporation, or in schools for the deaf; these people were able to convince managers that telephone use was not the be-all and end-all of employability. Such opportunities are rare, however. Likewise friendships and social opportunities diminish rapidly for the deaf person who becomes, in essence, permanently unlisted.

Two other problems caught up with me a little later. One was mainly physical, the other, well, social and emotional. The physical problem was speaking. As the memory of clear human speech faded away, speaking itself became more and more difficult. My facial and

neck muscles tightened so much I would get blinding headaches; therapy brought this under control, making speaking easier insofar as it was less obstructed, but the clarity was obviously diminishing. Increasingly, as I went about doing homeowner things like ordering lumber, applying for loans, getting a credit card, license plates, etc., people misunderstood me.

Finally, two years ago, after an embarrassing afternoon of telling clerks my name was "Terry" and having them write or call me "Karen"—three different times in one afternoon—I swore that I would never give the name I couldn't pronounce again. Expand this to more and more words, and speaking became a harrowing ordeal. I felt awful, the clerks felt awful, and occasionally, when they didn't feel awful, they made me feel worse—incompetent. To a certain extent they were right. I was a semi-competent spokesperson for my own welfare.

The social and emotional problem is one common to many people, deaf or otherwise: disillusionment with the world in general. The hearing world I strove to be a part of wasn't all that interesting. People not only said the same old stuff to me, they said it to each other. What people got out of this activity, I discovered, was the reassuring noise of another's sympathetic voice.

It's what's implied, shared, chuckled over that makes for good company. I can make the words, but I can't make the noises. I don't hear them so they don't reassure me. I can't make them, so I can't reassure others. In order not to cut myself off entirely from society, I smile, I nod. It's a performance: lipreading, making words, deducing context, laughing in all the right places at jokes I can't hear. But the play never stops.

Matlin isn't offstage, either, when she's signing to an interviewer. Yet imagine the difference: with a carefully selected interpreter, she has the ease to take in her interviewer's body language while other nuances are supplied to her through signs. She's not straining; she conveys no more tension than anyone else would in such a situation. She answers the question, face alert, never struggling to make sounds which to her are only abstract notions, but signing with feeling and grace.

The listener/viewer, meanwhile, can relax, too, hearing the right words in a natural, reassuring way, while feasting his eyes on an expressive, relaxed face and a pair of quick, elegant arms. Everyone is doing what he or she does best. Perhaps they spend half the interview going over banalities, but a goodly amount of simpatico is established, and no one has to feel stupid or exasperated. In this I recognize more dignity and normality than I could ever achieve in all but the most private of situations with my closest friends and relations.

In spring, 1981, I took a course in Signing Exact English.* I learned quickly, and enjoyed it, but since there was no one else around to sign with, it faded from memory. Furthermore, even though I was deaf, I knew precious little about *being* deaf. Most of my ideas on the subject were vague notions, a natural outcome of having no one with whom to share my experiences.

Since I didn't know anyone else who was deaf, a little research was in order. I wanted to answer some questions. Is the deaf world—the signing world—a ghetto? I'd long understood through others that my having gone to public school and my relatively good speech were incredibly good luck. But sign language has its attraction too. So, then, what is the social potential of signing as a language? Would there be any point in trying to use it in Valparaiso, Indiana, where I lived for fourteen years without ever running into another deaf person—and where nobody was going to provide me with an interpreter?

Two years ago, after an embarrassing afternoon of telling clerks my name was "Terry" and having them write or call me "Karen"—three different times in one afternoon—I swore that I would never give the name I couldn't pronounce again.

The first thing I learned about was the centuries-old struggle between the manualists and the oralists. Most schools for the deaf in this country are predominantly oral; the two best-known colleges, Gallaudet and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, are sign schools. The differences are significant. Oralists consider signing to be a cop-out. If signing is available, they argue, the deaf person will not work so hard to speak and lipread. I can vouch for that.

I can also vouch for how hard it is continously to speak and lipread whenever I need to communicate, leaving less and less energy for plain old thinking. Books on the psychology of the deaf and interviews with accomplished deaf people indicate that the deaf are almost always more comfortable alone or with each other than in hearing society. Many experiments have

*SEE is comprised of signs which represent English words. American Sign Language (ASL) is comprised of signs which represent utterances; the grammar is consequently different from standard English: among other details, tense is established first, and there are no verbs of being.

shown that signing is something which arises spontaneously in deaf children, even if they are not taught. Other examinations have declared ASL to be a full-fledged language in its own right and not a mere pidgin.

There are communities where there is a higher proportion of deaf to hearing, mostly on the East and West coasts; interpreters are easily available, employment levels are comparable with hearing workers'. Children who go to oralist state schools seem to have the worst time of it, with most achieving only a fifth-grade reading level after some fourteen or fifteen years of schooling. As of 1974, 10 per cent of the college-age deaf population went to college (about half of the eligible hearing population attends); of that 10 per cent, only 2 per cent achieved professional-level employment, although figures since then likely have improved, especially on the West coast.

Speaking and lipreading achievement among the deaf population as a whole seemed to be arbitrary, highly dependent on talent; some of the most highly motivated were not necessarily among the highest achievers in their hearing loss and educational levels. Those who can speak, do so; those who can't don't worry about it. All in all, it is a rather mixed picture.

I read so many praises of signing and its negation of inarticulateness, of signing even under the threat of severe punishment (in oralist schools), that the deaf world began to seem a ghetto—in both a positive and a negative sense. Ease of communication is imperative for the development of self-esteem and a sense of belonging to some kind of community. The "arrogance" of the deaf community, as in the student body at Gallaudet, is commonly noted even by friendly observers. When allowed to do what they do best—kibbitz in sign—the deaf develop a self-esteem which does not allow for a pathological definition of their condition.

The hearing world almost inevitably sees deafness as an unqualified misfortune. Given the right to convene, to reaffirm their experience of the world, the deaf do not. Their consequent "arrogance" comes from belonging to a minority whose approach toward life is different from the hearing world's. Deaf people mock the hearing world's dependence on the telephone. They also deplore the hearing world's sorrow for them: poor deafies not hear bird sing. To adapt an old philosophical conundrum: if a tree falls in a forest, and no one hears it, does it make a sound? Failing to hear the birdies tweet is hardly a great tragedy for those who have been deaf most of their lives; as Sarah Norman says, her deafness is a silence full of sound. It is not deafness which produces anger but the misunderstanding of the possibilities in deafness.

One possibility which hearing people could easily share is sign language. However, bilingualism of any kind has always been an uneasy issue in this country, where the population is made up of immigrants and their descendants. The sense of nationhood, of status quo, is expressed by a shared language. People who earned the right to citizenship and jobs in our country are outraged when another ethnic group has a potentially easier ride to the same citizenship and jobs—at their expense, and without the new group's contribution toward a sense of nationhood by sharing in the language of the majority.

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At the same time, no language is totally translatable into another, and what is lost in translation is heritage, an approach to the world and life which makes possible "detente," "yo' mamma," and "me-deafy." I've seen how frequent films and television programs featuring jive resulted in midwestern farmers using jive phrases in their lighter moments—not that they showed any flair for jive but they certainly appreciated the feel of the phrases and were certain that jive expressed something straight English could not.

It's possible to sell anything in America if you can package it the right way. Marlee Matlin is one great package. A few more like her in mainstream entertainment and deafness—perhaps even signing—will lose its pathological connotations. Knowing a few basic signs won't make you want to be deaf any more than knowing a couple of jive phrases makes white farmers want to be black inner-city men. But you might come to understand that the blacks and the deaf are sufficiently comfortable with who/what they are, so that they do not wish they were you.

Thus instilled with a newfound sense of Deaf Pride, I dusted off my old Signing Exact English manuals and practiced; within a few days most of the vocabulary I had before was mine again. A library copy of an ASL guide provided a pleasant surprise: many of the signs were the same as in SEE. I tried out signing, both with and without simultaneously speaking, on my husband, my friends, my son, and while running errands. Reception was positive; everybody wanted to learn more, and encouraged me to locate a good

teacher.

Reception in the world at large was particularly interesting: by signing, I made others aware that I was deaf; they took a little more care in their speaking, used many more gestures, and I must admit that instead of making me feel stupid it greatly eased my nervousness about having continually to guess at everything. At the same time people were undeniably relieved that I could speak to them. Books are full of methods for "mainstreaming" the deaf, from oralism to vocational training. Trying out signs on perfect strangers, I discovered that it's not the deaf who need to be mainstreamed, but language itself.

The following week featured the National Theatre of the Deaf, performing *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter* in the Great Hall of the Valparaiso University Union. The play was not the only show. The Union was packed with people more than an hour before the production, clumps of the deaf signing rapidly to one another, more slowly to their hearing friends, as if haggling over politics and prices in a Turkish bazaar. I had never seen anything like it.

It was wonderful, not only because here was a hitherto unimagined roomful of people more or less like me, but also because, for the first time in memory, I could follow nearly any conversation I chose. Long ago, I groaned learning Latin declensions and French phrases; with only a beginner's vocabulary I was able to converse both in Exact English and ASL. An hour passed quickly. There were two lines, and signs up everywhere announcing that the deaf had preferential seating. Walking to the deaf line, I felt as if I were making the most significant decision of my life. Turning to look at the hearing line, I saw several VU friends: "Oh, yeah!" they yelled, "we forgot about you!"

Once the doors were opened and people could sit down, I realized that many of the deaf were having the same banal, trite conversations that I had deplored in hearing people. The difference was mainly in the visual orientation: nuance and communal spirit were conveyed by how signs were made rather than by how words were spoken. This time it had the desired impact: we were able to break our social solitude, the most mundane of things taking on character because we were unhampered in our expression and reception of them.

Not everyone was forthcoming, or even pleasant—one peppery little deaf woman came to my row intending to sit down, only to discover I had saved seats for my own guests. She said insulting things to me in rapid-fire sign, declared me a hearing person who was cheating, and strutted away, sign-muttering to herself. People nearby looked at me expectantly. I signed something rude to her back; we all laughed. Retorts are not something the deaf often get to make in a hearing situation.

When the play began, the signing was slow and measured, accompanied by vocal interpretation. It speeded up as the play progressed; I found, in my inexperience, that I could not follow the fingerspelling. Some of the actors spoke and signed at the same time, or spoke interpretations while others signed. Some of the actors signed only. Some spoke while others signed in interpretation. Despite the complexities of this shared effort, it was always clear which character was in the limelight, no matter which method he or she chose to convey lines.

Once I started to sign, people took a little more care in their speaking, used many more gestures. I must admit that instead of making me feel stupid, it greatly eased my nervousness about having continually to guess at everything.

I sat in the front row, to the right of center, which turned out to be the best seat in the house, nearly nose-to-nose with the heroine Mick Kelly, played by Elena Blue. While Blue's was not the only outstanding performance, it was the nearest to Matlin's: she never spoke, and from my vantage point she seemed larger-than-life, like Matlin on the screen. Here I could see—without the manipulation of a camera's viewpoint—the potency of the deaf actress.

Blue is a superb mime artist. She does not merely sign, but silently recreates the sensations of dramatic experience, performing convincing depictions of swimming, falling in love, composing music in her head. The swift, hormonal mood changes of her character could be followed without any doubt. And her performance is designed to work powerfully within the strong framework of ensemble acting.

The sensation of understanding more than one kind of communication at once is revealing: utterances are given confirmation, reinforcement, and aura; the signing and speaking become each other's halo, while the miming gives them the authority of a particular interpretation. Mick Kelly's daydream of jumping into the water and swimming is no abstract notion, subject to the listener's experience or lack of it; we are given a very particular sensation through Blue's miming, down to the glub-glub and awkwardness of underwater movement. This is an irreplaceable clarity, one of many such moments invented by NTD.

The NTD provides us with a place where sound and silence meet. Can this meeting be anything more than an aesthetic triumph? *Heart* reminds us that what happens in the real world is not necessarily like what happens in a play. We are never allowed to forget a governing irony: the deaf characters, Mr. Singer and his backward friend, are played by the only actors who never sign. Although kindhearted Mr. Singer remains uninstitutionalized, he is denied, both in the script and in the production, any language save writing. Once he is deprived of his simple but expressive sidekick, his isolation seems complete. In this *aesthetic* utopia created by a theatrical production, the suicide of the deaf man with the little pad of paper takes on a significance beyond particulars of plot.

Getting utopia off the stage and into the world would require a further effort, though what kind of effort is not immediately clear. Schoolchildren are usually eager to learn some version of sign (note *Sesame Street's* efforts in this direction). ASL's status as a second-language equivalent in many places also helps. At the same time, the deaf who can speak and lipread might well want to take their signing out into the world. By using total communication, they will make signing more familiar in places without large deaf communities, and thus pave the way for the deaf who cannot speak or lipread.

History suggests that alteration of linguistic custom cannot, by its nature, be legislated or decreed (despite the illusions of politicans on both sides of the bilingualism controversy). Can we hope for a change of heart, then? Only if signing is seen as an enrichment of the language will elements of it pass into general use. Marlee Matlin's compelling stubbornness and the National Theatre of the Deaf's wonderful production are both pointers, but no more than pointers, in this utopian direction. The mainstreaming of language itself is yet to be accomplished—so in this sense the deafy's progress continues.

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Sensation of Flight

They told me this was an airplane.
They said we would go to Chicago.
They lied.
If they had said it was a seaplane,
I would never have embarked.

They say we are taking off—
I feel us going down.
Flight attendants should not be mermaids;
Airplanes should not have periscopes;
They lied.

And now I am deep down under;
The captain says 20,000 feet . . .
Or was it "leagues"?

No one else notices.
They are fooled.
Or maybe they are just too scared
To realize.

I check this out with a stewardess.
She is amazed.
With the wisdom of Salome she asks
How things are at home.
And I tell her about you,
About us.

Her reaction is swift:
She thinks this the reason
That this plane has sunk
Deep down inside me.

She calls me Jonah.
She thinks my lighter a terrorist bomb.
She orders me to abandon my thoughts
Or they will have to abandon me.

Will she leave me a life jacket?

William Bein

Alan Graebner

CATALOGING OUR TIMES

An Archival Report on How We Live Now

For the past seventeen years I have lived in the same place. My children have lived all their lives in the same house. To understand why I find that remarkable, you must know that I can remember calling "home" fourteen different places in six states. My experience in both mobility and stability produces dogmatism on several topics. I *know* how to pack boxes and U-Haul trucks. I am also intimately acquainted with the effect of moving (or not moving) on levels of accumulation.

Every time I moved, I faced decisions about saving or pitching. The bias was toward pitching. But when I stopped moving, nothing forced choices. Stability in residence reinforced boyhood lessons, when saving and recycling was next to the cleanliness proximate to sainthood.

Sooner or later, of course, the detritus of contemporary existence exceeds the space available. When, as in our household, an amateur carpenter and an erstwhile seamstress are resident, capacity is exceeded sooner rather than later. Both carpenters and seamstresses generate and need odd-parts piles. But the result has not been conducive to marital harmony because a carpenter's and a seamstress's definitions of good stuff and useless scrap are radically different. The chaotic overcrowding in my space is compared pejoratively to the snug, lean order in my spouse's space. And vice versa.

Our domestic tranquility is threatened still more because I am a historian. Historians are packrats, of course, but we attach professional privilege to our predilection. The sanctity of saving is to the historian what the confidentiality of the confessional is to the clergy. The result is even dignified by a name. Historians maintain archives. There is a clear line between an archive and what should have been thrown out a long time ago. What I save is my archive. What you save is your junk.

The sanctity of saving is to the historian what the confidentiality of the confessional is to the clergy. The result is even dignified by a name. Historians maintain archives.

To the dismay of others in my household, I have taken my professional obligations seriously. My incoming and outgoing files are complete enough that the curious researcher centuries hence will get quite a good idea of the letters received and written by a run-of-the-mill, middle-aged college professor in the American Middle West during the later twentieth century.

There are, however, some regrettable lacunae. I do not save shopping lists, church bulletins, or directions scribbled for the children to follow before I get home. The decision against saving those was made some years ago, forced by a more peripatetic life then. I have stood by those decisions despite misgivings from time to time. I hope the consequent omissions will not mislead the future.

Recently, however, I became aware of a larger gap. I have not been saving mail order catalogs. It did not occur to me twenty-five years ago to begin saving catalogs because all we had then was the Sears wishbook.

Times have changed. We live in a catalog age. An awesome stream flows through our mailbox. There are freshets and slack water in that stream, but it flows ever on. We are inundated, our name spelled a half-dozen ways or occasionally reduced to some character

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called Resident. Most of the catalogs simply appear in our mailbox; I never heard of the firms before and never order from them.

But that makes no difference. We always get more. I would have been dumbfounded as a boy at what my children take for granted. They peruse pages that feature in full color all manner of camping gear, sound equipment, electronic gadgets, outdoor clothing, provocative negligees, boating supplies, and cooking exotica—only an 800 number, a plastic card, and UPS away.

To document the texture of our lives, mail order catalogs clearly ought to be saved. But when historians are called to account in the final reckoning, I shall have to be among the old goats who use Adam's gambit. The fault lies with my mate.

This is serious. To document the texture of our lives these catalogs clearly ought to be saved. But when historians are called to account in the final reckoning, I shall have to be among the old goats who use Adam's gambit. The fault lies with my mate. Our interpersonal relationship would be difficult to sustain successfully were I to preserve catalogs. She'd move out. Actually I would have to move too. There would not be room for us.

Musing on my dilemma some months ago, I concluded a half-way measure was better than none. Instead of hustling unsolicited catalogs directly into the kitchen trash can under the sink, I decided to tear off and save the covers. Even as I did that, however, I discovered certain choices had to be made. I elected not to dignify flyers received from department stores and credit card outfits, nor from local establishments announcing their current specials. I would tear the covers only from substantial catalogs offering merchandise on a continuing basis.

I conscientiously followed my plan. After tossing those covers onto a pile in the study for three months, I am now prepared to make a report. In the past quarter we have received catalogs from the following (I list in order received, eliminating duplicate titles): AMT Power Tools Plus, Adam York, Sailors Bookshelf, Markline, Work Shops, Winter Silks, Leichtung, Sierra Club, Deerskin, Exeters, Mystic Seaport Museum, Allen Harbor, Barclay Collection, Swiss Colony, Coach Leatherwear, DAK Industries, Sharper Image, Campmoor, Vermont Country Store, Early Winters, Casual Living, Impact 2000, Lillian Vernon, Brigade Quartermasters, Library of Congress, Unicorn Gallery, Rittenhouse Grandfather Clock, Sync, Cuddledown of Maine, National Trust, Nature Company, French Creek Sheep and Wool, Jos. A. Bank, Childcraft, Damart, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Night 'n Day Intimates, Museum of Fine Arts (Boston), Orvis, Sunnyland Farms, Hartmarx, Ramer 86, Miles Kimball, and Nieman Marcus.

In addition to these, I should also mention the catalogs whose covers I did not tear off, i.e., the catalogs that went as a whole onto our catalog shelf for future study and possible ordering. The contents of that shelf are as follows (my listing is from top to bottom; I exclude out-of-date catalogs, but include the publication whose cover I tore off by mistake and had to tape back on): Highsmith Office, Lands' End, Shaker Workshops, Nordisco, Woodcraft, West Marine, L. L. Bean, REI, Company Store, Wood-

The Death Index

The yellow grass was dying, matted
fifty feet back from the last war
memorial anyone might fund. I stood
where something might survive
this summer, saw little of the letters,
and walked forward until they arranged
themselves into an index of death.
I thought of names I knew, one by one,
faces fifteen years younger than mine.
I figured eleven was enough, but when
I cupped my camera in one hand,
self-conscious tics broke out on me,
blurring the snapshot of names.

I tried to call up captions
for each Asian death; I traced ten
columns and stopped since those I knew
turned breathless there; I was going
to tell someone to fence off the grass,
keep everything from going to mud
by August; I was going to slide sideways,
read the unlucky name listed last
on my right, like starting a fool's glossary,
reference for things undone.

Gary Fincke

worker's Supply, The Mind's Eye, NEBS, Wireless, Renovator's Supply, Eddie Bauer, Williams-Sonoma, International Mountain Equipment, Early's, Chouinard Equipment, Talbot's, Klockit, Goldberg's Marine, Van Bourgondien Bros, Crutchfield, Thos. Moser, Crate and Barrel, Macomber, Spring Hill, White Flower Farm, Patagonia, Smith & Hawken, David Kay, Wear Guard, Fidelity, Trendlines, Saffran, and Brookstone.

No doubt the people in consumer demographics could examine my catalogs and tell me I am a married male between 45 and 50, with grey hair parted on the left, who has 1.83 children and mows my own lawn in a pattern from house to street.

No doubt the people in consumer demographics could examine those lists and tell me I am a married male between 45 and 50, with grey hair parted on the left, who has 1.83 children and mows my own lawn in a pattern from house to street. A real expert, knowing which firm buys what list, might even be able to do a geneological chart on these catalogs: REI begat International Mountain Sport, who begat Patagonia, who begat West Marine, who begat . . ., and so on. The lists may prove that I am a catalog junkie in the terminal stages of addiction. Or, for all I know, I have documented a catalog drought that has befallen the Upper Midwest. I leave interpretation to others. Mine is simply an archival function.

Having set the record straight regarding the catalogs we received in ninety days, I discarded the pile of covers with a clear conscience. I have done what I can to help future generations understand how we live.

Lately, however, I have noticed that practically every day the letter carrier drops into our box two or three or four letters imploring us to send contributions to some worthy cause. I have not been saving those letters. Years ago I concluded not to save mass mailings, but that was when we received perhaps one importunate letter a fortnight. Now charitable and educational institutions seem only a step behind the catalog merchandisers.

There is no time to open and read that mail. I only study the envelopes to compare: the inventive teaser on the face of one, the demands that I open immediately printed on another, the coy anonymity of a third. We take this mail as much for granted as death and taxes. Indeed, given the decline of private letter-writing that has resulted from direct distance dialing, without catalogs and these fund-raising letters, our mailbox would most days be a curious artifact of an earlier age, our equivalent of the hitching block or the full-service gasoline station.

These soliciting letters are a significant part of American life. Might we explain the growing impersonalization of American society by the thick skins one must develop to sort efficiently through each day's mail? The future historian could not even hazard a guess without reading this mail. And yet I have not been saving any of it. There is so much.

Perhaps if I just tore off return addresses and threw them in a drawer for a time?

Levels

We watch the last train
clicking past, dragging a sound
long after the lights are gone,
no other echoes but jets

high in a black sky,
people we'll never see
rising and strolling the rows
over our farm. A stewardess

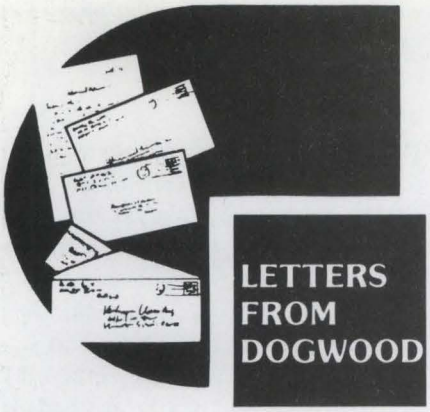
may glance out at the dark
while she waits handing vodka
to a man reaching his card
to someone by the window.

Between them, a child
crossing a continent to visit daddy
thinks of her mother
back at the airport

waving goodby.
The pilot points at another jet's
contrails crossing above them,
but passengers sipping drinks

flip pages with lagoons
they'll never see,
or if they do glance up,
all they see are lights.

Walter McDonald



Moebie on Malls

Charles Vandersee

Dear Editor:

Moebie upon returning from one of her silent mountains was herself quiet for a long time when we went walking. I was in no hurry to hear what opinions if any she had come down with. There are old paths in this area of Virginia, old chimneys hidden among the trees on the slopes above the lake, where old settlers spent weeks, probably, getting stones arranged into what each hoped would be part of a home, or at least a warm contentment of some kind.

When she threw down a strand of some weed she had been chewing, and picked up her pace, I suspected Moebie was through with silence. What she said, as she picked her way along a damp place in the shade, where the walk got steeper, was that she was reconciling herself to shopping malls.

"I'm not the only one," she said. "There is a new book on the subject by a professor who has a summer home on Montauk Point. Out there on Long Island, where you have nothing except salt air and sea grass, you're vulnerable to desire. What you desire, for one thing, is enclosed, roofed acres. The same is true up on the mountain."

I had thought this was a common idea, this craving of the absent contrast, this inverse romanticism, this upside-down atavism, and that something of a better epiphany would have descended.

"A mall, unfortunately, is commerce," I said. "Possibly the enclosure you want is an airplane hanger. The large Boeing facility in Seattle, one of the obvious and . . ."

She cut me off decisively, and leaned on a none-too-sturdy ash, arms crossed. "A mall *is* commerce," she said, "precisely." "Commerce, when you think of it, is precisely the most human of all activities. Without commerce there would be very little human in the mall at all. The people are not human, the decor is that of an upper-middle-class mausoleum (not a gangster mausoleum, which is purple and tufted), and the goods themselves are arranged on glass stands as if in a museum." Moebie sometimes sees significance in places where significances should be seen but have been rendered absent, from scholars at least, in order to dawn on people like David Letterman.

The place we were walking is called Mint Springs, a county park with only one access road. If several hundred people came to swim at one time, and at one time decided to leave, this one small road would, except for the dust, remind an observer of the ramp-like concrete lanes coming out of most American malls. People sitting in lines behind small walls of tinted glass, waiting for the air conditioning to get going. Temporarily 95 degrees on the way to 75.

"I don't see why commerce is the most human of activities," I said. "Nobody thinks that, and nobody is going to think that. It is one of the empty ideas of the world, such as the idea that the Pope will be a woman. Poland, yes, or Ayers Rock conceivably, but not a woman."

"Commerce is a metaphor," she responded calmly. "What we call human is a transaction between two and only two people, for mutual benefit. As one person, you can be beside yourself or be your own worst enemy, and so forth and so on, but you cannot sell yourself a bill of goods. At the other extreme, with three persons or more, attention is fractioned. Commerce in a mall is the most human of activities because two people exchange something worthless to each, but bring to the exchange a pitch of desire that has been in the making literally millennia. It has taken a long time for us to imagine we want little ceramic frogs or ski boots with battery-powered clasps."

"But not fine Belgian chocolates," I quickly rejoined. "Or a cashmere sweater, or the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Most of what we buy is not in fact worthless, and our desire is not a false desire but a real desire. Already in third grade I wanted a red dictionary; it was the *Thorndike Century Junior Dictionary*."

"I don't see why commerce is the most human of activities," I said. "Nobody thinks that, and nobody is going to think that. It is one of the empty ideas of the world."

Moebie has a distinctive withering gaze, even standing in the shade. One could almost smell the ashes on the long-vanished hearths of the decayed cabins in the woods, testified to by the remains of the stone chimneys which we knew were near though invisible.

"You have a habit of bringing in cases," she said. "I don't know if you've ever noticed," she said, "but your mind inclines to cases, falls to instances, conjures up things that could conceivably exist."

Charles Vandersee, *of the University of Virginia, talked about Henry Adams, his intertextuality and his medievalism, at the Modern Language Association in New York recently.*

"Ceramic frogs are yours," I said, feeling I had her.

"A time symbol, not an object at all," she said. "Representative of this end of the time spectrum, the other end being primeval chaos. Anyone actually buying a ceramic frog could have any number of motives—irony, benefaction, control of kleptomania. The kind of transaction I am talking about is a pure transaction for a pure discernible motive. A ceramic frog has no possible destiny except a shelf, and nothing bought for a shelf can be an element in a true transaction."

"A book," I said. "A book lands on a shelf."

"I thought we were having a serious conversation," she said, almost despairingly, coming away from the ash tree and trying to restore something of its perpendicularity. "A book may land on a shelf, but it is not bought for a shelf. It is bought for the part of the mind that wishes a certain turbulence. Whenever you have entropy . . ."

This time it was I who interrupted, since she was evidently right. I returned to the point lacking clarification. "Again," I said, "I understand you to say that desire is the most human of qualities, and that in commerce we see desire at its most pure."

She looked at me as if I were not the serious person that I am, and I could see in her eyes, those semiotic registries that at once admit nothing but say almost everything pertinent to the moment, that she was asking herself: "Shall I give him the benefit of the doubt?"

She did this, and continued. "Eve would have paid for it. She got it free, but she would have paid for it. Then, later, she would have paid more to have returned to the beginning of the day, to have the day to live over. Are you really interested in preparing yourself to argue that desire is *not* fundamental to us, and that the mall is not the distinctive place where the descendants of modern man show forth without dissimulation or embarrassment that their fundamental humanity has survived?"

This was a lot, but I immediately thought of quite other places where humans behave like humans, such as a new-car dealership, where one can do some sincere and passionate buying, and also the sort of large, family-run greenhouse, where the byproduct of your desire is the strange and pathetic happiness of the small proprietor who looks in the face of every customer hoping to find the grace and piety worthy of a Queen Tammy Rose.

"The clerk in the mall," she said, "from the moment of going to work is aroused by a new desire, unique I think, in the history of consciousness."

"I don't think the situation is at all the same," she said, when I mentioned such places. Her mildness disarmed me. "I assert the need for enclosed places. You present instead an alfalfa field lately paved over and glass-walled for automobiles. And you present a greenhouse, where the sun shines through, sometimes inspiring dark songs. But there is something about the complete enclosure of a mall that intensifies desire."

"When you are outdoors inside a new car, looking through the windshield down the highway, you see an Arby's sign and wish you were inside eating, looking outside at the highway," I said ruminatively. "Instead of thinking tachometer and its surcharge, you are thinking about eating, which is a strong desire."

"But eating is enclosing a thing rather than being enclosed," she said dismissively. "To be the container for, say, a Sacher torte. A different and irrelevant thing."

She had picked up another strand of some green thing and signaled her readiness to return by the path we had taken, instead of going on uphill a few more yards, where the path, horseshoe in shape, would turn downward to the former pasture, now a park, entering at a point only a hundred yards or so from where we would be coming out. A person below would think there were two paths, but they are one path. I have thought of commissioning and planting rustic signs at the start of each path, with different names. Old Bear Trail. Woody Ridge Trail. Like the meaningless names of things in malls.

"The meaningless names of things in malls!" I said, at the same time she said, "We are talking about a very simple thing."

"Desire, though, this human thing," I said, still confused, "is in the customer, not in the cash-register clerk. How is there a distinctly human transaction when desire is only on the one side?" Again she looked at me as if the force of my remark, in its unwitting but brutal ignorance, had set her imagining that some serious beings fundamentally await irradiation by plain sense.

"The clerk in the mall," she said, "from the moment of going to work is aroused by a new desire, unique I think, in the history of consciousness." "Unless," she added, thoughtfully, "the old kings in hermetic castle-fortresses had it, or fuehrers in bunkers, and beowulfs in mead halls, and children in windowless attics." "The desire," she said, "of eliciting from each new human contact the smallest, remotest signal that although metaphorical prisoners together

there is some hope of escape. Not escape together and triumph, and not individual escape and reunion, but simply escape. Escape first from the setting itself and then (or together) escape from desire."

"Not children," I said. "They love warm hiding places. Fuehrers too." She said nothing, evidently struck by the collocation. Desire to escape, desire to possess the shiver of desire in eyes meeting, but two different desires, like two instruments making noise, a canvas bagpipe and an early tuba.

"It may come later," she said. "You may be right. After childhood." "A child's imagination," she said, "is so well supplied with windows. An attic is a window into the past, a wardrobe is a passage into a snowy country. No wonder children always know that they have what they want, even though they act out their role as children by saying they want things."

"You seem to be saying that only the adult clerk and the adult customer are conscious of living for a stretch of time in an enclosure of goods, and that both the enclosure and the goods act symbiotically to confer . . ."

". . . an intensity of desire, double desire—desire for escape and for gratification—not experienced elsewhere," she completed, decisively.

"But a bit melodramatic," I said. "People do leave malls at any time. It is not a question of 'escape.' "

"It is," she said. "Willing suspension of belief. People in malls lose much of what is human—lose a sense of time and space, lose their belief that they can leave the place. They leave only when by accident their walking brings them in sight of a glass door, and the cars beyond."

She stopped there, and I wondered if her mind was returning to its most recent place, the fertile mountains, or forward to food. We

Still There

"the horse barn is still there . . ."

the only sentence in the letter
that stayed with me all these years
there's something in that, I suppose,
something to wonder over . . .
but nothing about the times in the warm kitchen
where Gram sat talking about Stokes and how she
would kill him and then fire him when she caught
up with him
nothing about the creek getting out and carrying off
the end house with Uncle Lute sitting astride it
cussing and waving his arms,
shouting "Out of the way . . ."
nothing—nothing of the way the lights seemed to dim
on Christmas Eve when we gathered
in the big front room to wait for Claus!
where new cigars were choked on
and where euchre was played for blood . . .
until the rush of wind and knocking at the door
when we knew we were all lost and that Claus
was coming in, his eyes blazing,
the corn knife pointing at us as we ran
our little cars under the Dresden table
Tray sent back from Germany,
the same table Aunt Eff said she wanted buried with her . . .
just "the horse barn is still there . . ."
not a monument to anything or a sign of something
we had then, some symbol of maybe who we were—
you couldn't have told it by that.
the long winter nights when we lay awake
in Grannie's bed and listened for the snuffle and howl
of wolves in the ravines might have told it
or the movement of the cows in their stancheons in the barn
or Autumn with ducks flying into the pale Illinois moon
but that's gone now—those farms and trees
the secret places we knew as boys,
save in this season of rain,
this time when trees brush against the house
and I stare at my face staring back in the half-light
of dusk I see or hear or smell it: the hay,
the warm breath of horses moving in the dark barn
hearing their hooves far away,
their heavy legs dipping in and out
of the long grasses

J. T. Ledbetter

had planned a waffle. Walking downward, we could hear the cars on gravel as the sky widened through the trees, and we could hear the sounds of children in the lake, excited in the water about coming up out of it constantly rather than being pulled down.

"What would it be like to escape from being human, from the prison of desire?" she asked. "And to escape from anything that looked like a wall." "Even the sky," she said, "looks like a wall."

"But trees do not," I said. "The spaces between them, where there are enough of them to block out the sky, seem very much like signs of freedom," I observed, perhaps wistfully, perhaps sounding like a Boone or a Finn.

"The people you see in malls are like moving trees," she said. "You are always looking between them, for freedom." "But all you see," she said, "are walls and goods."

"The people you see in malls are like moving trees," she said. "You are always looking between them, for freedom. But all you see are walls and goods."

As I wiped the sun out of my eyes, not quite successfully, I glanced to the side and thought I saw her taking a quick look back. It did not seem to me as if she had much reconciled herself to these strange enclosures we had been talking about, or to the people within them, or their missions, or their prospects. But we would have to go on from here by car, and Moebie likes cars, likes sitting in a driven car.

From Dogwood, faithfully yours,

C.V.

National Holidays

Gail McGrew Eifrig

Things we are used to always strike us as immutable, perhaps because we live so close to a carefully limited, twenty-four-hour kind of time. We forget that there was time before this little slot we're concerned with momentarily—tomorrow's appointments, this month's assignment, this year's contract. So only a very short amount of time has to pass for us to think "oh, we've always done that," or "we've never done that." Our memory about our habitual or customary actions is surprisingly short.

When I was young, of course, I never wondered about where holidays came from; they were just there. Of course. Christmas, then Lincoln's Birthday, then Valentine's, then Washington's Birthday, and then Easter, sooner or later. Memorial Day, then summer vacation, then Labor Day, then Columbus Day, Armistice Day, Thanksgiving, and finally, Christmas again. There were also family birthdays, private holidays, in fact almost secret holidays, since it was bad manners to tell people when your birthday was, though I can still remember what a surprise it was to me to realize that not everybody celebrated the day in May that certainly sounds to me like a holiday.

Holidays had different kinds of observances—sometimes you went to church (Christmas and Easter), and sometimes you went to school and not to church (Valentine's). Sometimes you went to school and to church (Ash Wednesday), and sometimes you didn't go to school or to church but to the fair (Washington's Birthday).

True, you midwesterners never heard of a county fair in February, but then you didn't have the Indio Fairgrounds, built in pink stucco to look like an Arabian Nights' palace, surrounded by palm trees, and displaying prize grapefruits and dates in the Exhibition Halls. I knew from an early age who President Washington was, because every classroom in the school had his picture on the wall, but I never really associated Washington's Birthday with that grim old man. To me it meant a day off school to go to the fair—cotton candy, a horse show, camel races, and the Scheherezade Pageant in the evening.

True, you midwesterners never heard of a county fair in February, but then you didn't have the Indio Fairgrounds.

One point to be drawn from this personal digression is that most holidays, certainly national ones, are fluid rather than static. They respond to the times, they meet personal and regional needs in different ways, they shift and change to reflect a shifting and changing public. They function as reminders, but they are reminders of different things to different people.

Even Thanksgiving—one would think a fairly uncomplicated na-

Gail McGrew Eifrig *is Associate Professor of English at Valparaiso University and a regular contributor to* The Cresset *on public affairs.*

tional observance with a universally acceptable meaning—surely means something to Native Americans that it doesn't mean to the Cabots and Lodges. And, since probably nobody under forty understands that reference, we could perceive that even the most apparently universal meaning can be lost in a short time in a pluralistic, relativistic society like ours.

The proposal to add Martin Luther King, Jr.'s birthday to the list of national holidays provoked a great many arguments of all kinds, some of them about King himself, others about the bottom line costs of having a holiday, others about the devices of a deviously separatist minority. When the Congress debated the issue, we read the most spectacular of these arguments, and then the vote was taken, and the nation had settled on a new occasion. Its meaning is not entirely settled; in fact, like many other of our holidays, it means different things to different people.

It doesn't seem to me that this is all bad, so long as we will keep talking about it with each other. We don't have to agree about King, or about his birthday as a holiday, but we do have to agree that the principle of discussion about our differences is the most important of national treasures.

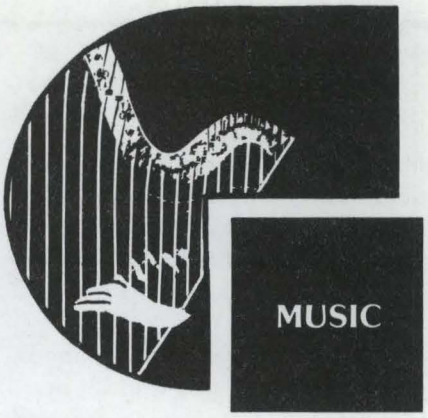
I wish to mark this birthday because it places in such strong light the amazing paradox of God choosing human beings to do His work. Though I would prefer a god who worked according to my principles and refused to dirty his hands with politics and with ordinary human beings, a god who sent as his messengers creatures with superior strength, high moral standards, and a tremendous wingspan, I am persuaded that He has chosen otherwise. It is possible to be a human being and a Christian, a worker for justice and mercy in the world that is here around us. In Washington, in Memphis, in Porter County.

And King's birthday reminds me of that, uniting me with others who also find this meaning powerful. But even if my reasons are not yours, let us agree that we will talk about it. The truth about America must be that we have decided not to meet on battlefields as we go on struggling to find out what it means to be conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all people are created equal. Where we do meet, let us continue in good faith to make those noble words into reality.

Crossing the Highway

In the hour before dawn,
enough gray to walk by,
the farm dogs asleep
until the first porch footfalls—
in five minutes, in ten—
and in one of those moments
I saw, far down the shoulder,
a small boy who would cross
the highway before
I reached him, following
the brief path of his game.
Hey! I thought and said nothing,
and silent watched for lights.
The hour was with him;
he entered a driveway
and left me remembering
the boy, last winter, who
froze in his back yard and lived,
brought back like an alien
in ice. The next car swept
darkened through the curve;
the first barking began,
that dog sensing a change,
how things had altered
in the shadowy child
who was climbing the stairs.

Gary Fincke



Not Quite at Home in Indiana

Linda Ferguson

For those of us who occasionally worry about provincialism—which includes most midwesterners devoted to arts and letters—the life and work of American composer John J. Becker (1886-1961) holds a special fascination. Becker's centennial was observed last November in special anniversary concerts in San Francisco and New York, all of which met with favorable reviews, and which generated commentary on the hard lot of the American composer in general and the regional composer in particular.

Robert Commanday of the *San Francisco Chronicle* (November 8, 1986) began his review of the Becker Birthday Bash at Dominican College with the phrase "the hardly-remembered John Becker . . ." and noted that "his obscurity is usually attributed to the fact that he remained in the Midwest, as a teacher and administrator at Catholic colleges." In *The Village Voice* (December 16, 1986), Kyle Gann praised the all-Becker program of-

Linda Ferguson, *who currently teaches in the Department of Music at Valparaiso University, became interested in the career of John Becker while teaching at the University of Notre Dame.*

fered by the Alliance for American Song and commended the New York concert "establishment" for its tribute to this midwesterner who remains unacclaimed in his own territory.

Although Becker worked almost exclusively in the midwest, his manuscripts and memorabilia are now held by the Library of the Performing Arts in New York's Lincoln Center. His life and work have been the subject of extensive research by Donald Gillespie, now on the editorial staff of C. F. Peters, a music publishing company which has brought out editions of several important Becker pieces. Gillespie's doctoral dissertation ("John Becker, Midwestern Musical Crusader," University of North Carolina, 1977) and his brief article in the *New Groves* describe Becker's career, which culminated in his acceptance into the avant-garde (as close friend to Charles Ives and Henry Cowell and long-time correspondent to Ezra Pound), followed by his eventual decline into a pathetic and isolated figure, his work largely ignored by the end of his own life.

Becker, along with Ives, Carl Ruggles, Cowell, and Wallingford Riegger, comprised a so-called "American Five" of innovative American music in the 1930s. The aesthetic stance of the "Five" rejected the overt Americanisms found in more accessible works of composers such as Aaron Copland in favor of a harsher and more intellectual approach to dissonance, tone color, and texture; their philosophy, more classic than romantic, treated music as creation of object rather than as imitation of idea.

Clearly, Becker's name has not received the degree of recognition accorded his four associates, nor has his music achieved the "standard repertoire" status of the others. Still, Gillespie's findings reveal that Becker, his music, and his philosophy were held in high esteem by his more prestigious colleagues.

Becker's direct personal and musical contact with the American mainstream began in 1927, while he was a professor of music at the University of Notre Dame. A correspondence with Henry Cowell, initiated by Becker in a sort of fan letter, led to a genuine and lasting friendship and provided the professionally isolated Becker with entree into circles of musical activity far more sophisticated, exciting, and rewarding than he could experience in Indiana.

Becker's direct personal and musical contact with the American mainstream began while he taught at Notre Dame.

Becker's subsequent contributions included large scale compositions, a few of which have been programmed and recorded by leading orchestras. Leonard Bernstein conducted a New York Philharmonic performance of the 1929 *Symphonia Brevis* in 1958, and both that work and *The Abongo* are available in recordings by the Louisville Orchestra.

Becker's contributions to the development and dissemination of a consciously empirical, modern, and expressly American approach to composition were not limited to his own compositions, for he served as commentator, interpreter, and missionary of "difficult" modern music to the general listening public. As Gillespie has indicated, Becker's role as a militant "crusader" has been of lasting value in public acceptance and recognition of the other members of the "American Five": "In the longer view, he undoubtedly laid the ground for the later acceptance in the Midwest of his kind of music."

"His kind of music" is still difficult music. Ives and Cowell, the best known members of Becker's group, are associated with polytonality, tone clusters, dissonant counterpoint, and violent percussive effects. Prior to Becker's associations with these experimental composers, his work tended to a conservative late-romantic style, derived from Germanic practice, while his philosophy of music aspired to a more personal and innovative expression. Once he found his identity as an "ultra-modernist," his fierce beliefs could be expressed musically. His radical and somewhat quirky musical views, conjoined with his devout religious beliefs, his profound sense of social responsibility, and his liberal political sympathies make him a colorful figure in the history of American music and in the history of culture in the midwest.

The issue is not that Becker's music "sounds" American, for it does not. Rather, the experiences which shaped his history as a composer could only have occurred in America. This self-styled cultural innovator was born in 1886 in Henderson, Kentucky, to German immigrant parents, and moved with his family at an early age across the Ohio River to Evansville, Indiana. The Beckers, devout Roman Catholics, placed a high value on traditional learning. They arranged for piano lessons for young John, beginning in his eleventh year and continuing through his graduation from Evansville High School in 1903.

The family's emphasis on reading, conjoined with young Becker's natural instincts toward music and personal expression, resulted in some ambitious compositional projects, all short-lived (and humorously recalled by Becker many

years later). He read a biography of Mozart, was thrilled and saddened by its tragic finish, and set out to compose a Requiem Mass; he read a biography of Beethoven and commenced a series of string quartets. It was the stories of these composers' experiences which inspired him—not their music, for he had not heard it.

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As a piano student he did hear Chopin Nocturnes, for he played them, and they inspired a binge of original nocturnes; more significantly, his study of J. S. Bach's Preludes and Fugues from *The Well-Tempered Clavier* resulted in a resolution to compose 48 Preludes and Fugues. He did not fulfill this resolution, but the contrapuntal writing of his mature years, undertaken after disciplined and systematic study, brought to fruition this early inclination.

Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe, and Schiller were represented in the Becker family library, but young Becker's musical environment was less classical. Evansville offered a choral society and occasional operettas, but the prevalent musical culture, as in other midwestern river towns, was that of the minstrel show, the circus, and the tavern. When John Becker left Evansville in 1903 to attend the Cincinnati Krueger Conservatory (on a piano scholarship), he had never heard a symphony orchestra, and his experience with concert repertoire was virtually limited to what he could perform himself.

Becker flourished at the Cincinnati Conservatory, where he studied with the director, George Krueger, a European-trained pianist. When Krueger was appointed director of the fashionable Kidd-Key Conservatory for Women in Sherman, Texas, he recruited Becker to join that faculty as a piano instructor. From 1906-1914, Becker held an appointment at Kidd-Key, where the primary purpose was to bring European high culture to the daughters and future wives of powerful American businessmen. Not surprisingly, most of the faculty was imported. Becker, native-born and schooled in America, was relegated to secondary status, never assigned the better students, never secure in professional or social circles. He is recalled, however, as a good teacher and as a pleasant, witty, and handsome young man.

Since the process of "deprovincializing" wealthy young women was not especially compatible with Becker's musical aspirations, he sought other challenges in addition to his teaching. He took up conducting and secured his first jobs as church musician, later taking over the directorship of the local choral society as well. Gillespie notes that, as with most of his undertakings, he took "an unconventional, empirical approach to choral directing."

In the summer interims, Becker travelled back to Chicago, where he worked as a clerk at Lyon and Healey's music store in order to pay for advanced lessons in organ, piano, conducting, and composition. His most influential teacher from this period was the distinguished German composer Alexander von Fielitz, whose songs and piano pieces were widely known at the time, and who had been director of the Leipzig Royal Opera.

Unlike many other "imported" music teachers of the time, Von Fielitz denied that European training was the path to musical salvation. He urged Becker not to travel to Europe for study, but to remain in America and to seek other inspiration. Von Fielitz' views that European culture had declined—aesthetically and morally—from its nineteenth-century grandeur influenced young Becker to reflect more systematically on the conflicts he had already experienced between European high culture and American provincialism.

In 1914, when a new European director arrived at Kidd-Key Conservatory with the aim at improving

the piano department by recruiting and promoting pianists trained in the Leschetizky method, Becker resigned. His natural rebelliousness, more attuned to the spirit of the American southwest than to the European high culture he ostensibly promoted, seems to have translated itself into stubbornness and the beginnings of the bitterness which characterized his later years.

He returned to Evansville in 1915, where he married and immersed himself in a variety of civic and charitable causes. He co-founded the first St. Vincent De Paul Society in the State of Indiana, and he received a citation of honor for his work for the Indiana Red Cross. He organized touring programs and entertainments for civic groups and the military. One of the circuits led to South Bend, where he came to the attention of Father John Cavanaugh, President of the University of Notre Dame, and Father Matthew Schumacher, Director of Studies there.

In 1917 Becker was appointed Professor of Music at Notre Dame, and was given a special charge to develop and administer a summer program in the arts. The summer programs, which began in 1918, were the first co-educational opportunities at the University, which did not admit women as regular students until 1972. Becker arranged for prominent composers and performers to appear on the campus in South Bend, and he also invited younger, less well known musicians to appear, including Otto Luening, who was later to become a landmark figure in the history of electronic music. His aim was always to educate and broaden the tastes of his South Bend clientele, while resisting slavish imitation of the European model of culture.

Eventually Becker reshaped and enlarged the entire Notre Dame curriculum in music. When he became director of the music department in 1918, the faculty consisted of three members. The program of study offered training only in piano, violin, and Gregorian chant, along with the extra-curricular activities of the glee club and marching band. By 1925 he was directing a faculty of fourteen, offering more than forty courses in music, with studies in voice and orchestra as well as piano, and with majors in both performance and composition. Enrollments in music burgeoned and a small graduate-level program was instigated. Students under his tutelage composed operas and chamber music in traditional nineteenth-century forms, but employing modern—and dissonant—harmonic vocabulary.

It is not known how—or if—Becker had actually heard music by the new composers whose virtues he broadly extolled.

As an educator, Becker was intensely concerned with aesthetic education and the philosophy of music as it relates to liberal education in a conservative academic setting. His presence in the Notre Dame/South Bend communities must have been striking. His own lectures in music history and aesthetics (apparently delivered as "theatrical" displays) attempted to connect music with art, philosophy, literature, history, and life experience.

Becker's mission as educator extended beyond the campus boundaries to the South Bend community, where he was an active member of civic organizations, a regular performer and speaker, and author of more than forty articles on musical topics for the local press. These essays, on an astonishing array of current musical topics, most of which he had only the remotest knowledge of, reveal a paradoxical mixture of provincialism, contradictory claims about musical styles, provocative thoughts about the role of the composer in society, and some promising insights about composers unknown to his readers, such as George Antheil, Ernst Krenek, and Kurt Weill. It is not known how—or if—Becker had actually heard music by the innovative composers whose virtues he extolled to his South Bend readers.

Becker left Notre Dame in 1928 to take an appointment at St. Mary's of the Springs in Columbus, Ohio. This move coincided with the maturation of his compositional style, or rather the point at which his compositional practices caught up with his modernist rhetoric. Although much acclaimed at St. Mary's, he stayed only until the next year, when he moved to St. Paul, Minnesota, to assume a position at St. Thomas College.

The Minnesota period, which lasted for fourteen years, has been chronicled in detail by Gillespie, and represents the most fruitful and effective period of Becker's life, both as a composer and as a "crusader" for modern music. During these years he established sufficient contacts in New York to arrange for performances of his works and appearances there as a speaker and minor celebrity.

Despite favorable reviews, he met with mixed responses from the New York establishment. He was perceived as "preachy" and uncompromising, and probably, as at Kidd-Key years before, lacking in social polish. He was not inclined to curry favor with patrons, and he made it a practice to rebuke all critics, even when they praised his work.

In late 1935, with Becker's appointment as Minnesota director of the WPA Federal Music Project, his efforts were redirected again to-

ward social and civic causes, and his activities on behalf of "ultra-modernism" began to wane. He had not lost faith in its principles, but he recognized that the experimental movement he championed had lost to the still-prevailing European models. He moved to the Chicago area in 1943 to teach at Barat College in Lake Forest, and he later taught at Chicago Musical College from 1949 to 1953. Eventually, his health declined and he slipped into oblivion.

In a letter to Riegger, Becker wrote, "I am not too pleased with my complete isolation in a desert of musical stupidity, disloyalty, and expediency." Although this statement dates from 1957, it could have come from almost any period of his life. Becker always resisted the popular "Bohemian" notion of the artist, but he clearly believed the composer to be expressively and intellectually set apart from society.

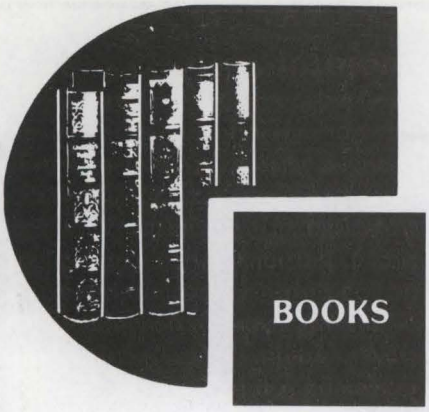
In an article of 1927 he proposed that manipulating sounds "into logical and intelligible form demands a labor and a sacrifice of one's vitality that is impossible to describe," and in another essay of the same year he attacked the supposition that music is "a feminine art created for the amusement of the crowd." He spent most of his life attempting to educate and improve "the crowd," and to elevate his art and craft beyond simple amusement. His mature modernist style, in which dissonance is the norm and consonance the exception, is abstract and distinctly unamusing. In his music, if not in his life, he transcended his own provincialism.

The New York reviews of the recent concerts indicate that it is no longer necessary to consider Becker merely a regional artist, but rather one of national stature. Perhaps it is now acceptable for midwesterners to take pride in his work.

The People in the Next Room

The people in the next room
sit as if their bones
would break at a glance, fragile
as the teacups they balance
in the amber light of late afternoon
that falls past the heavy dotted-swiss curtains.
They do not move or speak
as I go out and in on my rounds.
I have not spoken to them. I have many
things to do. I do them daily, moving
easily about the town.
But they are always there
in their parlor, in all weathers,
watching or waiting, as the sunstream
draws across the rosy dresden.
I mean to speak to them but do not
interrupt what seems to be a portrait
in progress.
I do not think they think of me.
They have something Americans
aren't supposed to have,
according to a Fitzgerald novel.
I will watch them
and maybe pray for them.
What shall I pray?
They ask for nothing.
They ask me for nothing.
They are like bells.
They move in quiet lines past
the cold hearth
where God waits in the ashes
yet they do not speak.
They sit in repose
as if they had found something.
In and out I go
on my rounds.
I imagine a sad song—
perhaps the Ave Maria floating
out from their closed room,
following me through the old streets.
But there is no song. No sounds,
save my shoes on the pavement,
and the sudden arc of pigeons
blurring the image of stone deities
guarding the entrance to a hushed and darkened place.

J. T. Ledbetter



Review Essay

A New Voice From Ireland

Jill Baumgaertner

The Killeen

By Mary Leland. New York: Atheneum. $12.95.

In Ireland a killeen is a small graveyard, usually at a crossroads, but at any rate outside the walls of the churchyard. It is reserved for unbaptized infants.

In this first novel by Mary Leland, the killeen with its pitiful collection of collapsed graves and white stones does not appear until the final chapters. Early in this story about revolution and its victims and survivors, however, one realizes that the killeen most in the author's mind is metaphorical—the Ireland of the revolutionary 1930s. The book is not narrowly political: it does not possess an ideological agenda. It is, however, political in the broadest sense of the word; it is concerned with individuals and their allegiances and neutralities, their insights and blindnesses, and the political/religious realm's simultaneous exaltation and victimization of those who acquiesce in it.

The Killeen possesses biases on neither side of the Irish question, although it does reveal a sensitive Catholic orientation. Mary Leland also shows how every action of every individual is both profoundly religious and profoundly political—even when these actions are attempts by the individual to extricate him or herself from religion or politics.

The book is divided into three sections—each concentrating on one of three characters whose lives are inextricably entwined. The first is Margaret, a naive and pretty girl fresh from the country and newly hired to work in a convent. Seduced in the convent gardens by Earnan, a Republican in hiding, she conceives and bears a son whom she gives up to the care of others when Earnan escapes to America.

Margaret is innocent of politics, and somewhat neutral about religion, although she does insist that her child be baptized immediately after he is born. What she feels most profoundly is a connection with the land she has left. One afternoon, reading aloud to Sister Thomas Aquinas, she pauses a moment to reflect on her earlier country life.

> "I could stand up there, sometimes I went up there just to be on my own, and from the rocks there I could see all the fields, all lumpy, falling down away from me, and all the little houses, not so little perhaps, but they looked small because I was up so high. 'The little wind-swept hamlet.' That makes me think of it, the hill."
>
> Sr. Thomas turned to look at her as she was speaking. "Good girl," she said softly. "Your eyes are open. Let them be always open, sometimes we can listen better with our eyes than with our ears, Margaret. In this book, for instance, Corkery . . . is showing us the landscape we can recognize, often because it is our own, and he is asking us to listen to what it says. . . ."

Margaret's world is lush with gardens and growing things. As she polishes the windows, "all her senses flared and through the heat shone a smell of sustained geraniums, the smell of the greenhouse before the summer's tomatoes covered everything with their aromatic dust." This is the legacy she wishes to give her child, Thomas—the connection with the land—but her attempts to ensure his future as a true country man (the ideal of the Republicans) do not work.

This book does not possess an ideological agenda; it is, however, political in the broadest sense of the word.

Margaret's story is juxtaposed and intertwined with Julia's, the Paris-educated, aristocratic young widow of another revolutionary who, on a hunger strike, starved to death in a Dublin prison. Julia, too, is innocent of political involvement and only with her husband did her life achieve any sense of purpose. His ambitions were Ireland's, however, and after his death she resolves to leave Ireland with her son—to keep him from following the inevitable path to martyrdom his father had embraced.

Of course, in so doing, she will also be cutting the boy off from his Irish roots—from the Irish language, from "Irish hymns at the Latin Mass." But that is the price to be paid for life, she believes, after having watched her husband die—voluntarily—in a prison cell.

Before she leaves, she encourages Margaret to accept the offer of marriage from a young man

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about to move to England, and helps her to see her son, Thomas, for one last time. It is at this point that Margaret arranges for her brother, Michael, to take Thomas back to her home in the country.

Julia thinks of her own escape from Ireland as a kind of exchange. She will whisk her own son away from his roots and their inevitable consequences, but she will leave Margaret's child, Thomas, to wrestle with his, to pay the price of his inheritance.

So Margaret abandons Ireland, as do Julia and her son. Left behind are Michael and Thomas—and the final chapters of the book are about what happens to the child at the hands of Margaret's demented mother. Michael realizes he must become father-protector to the child, carrying him to the fields with him and caring for him when he is ill, but the child weakens and eventually dies.

The most moving and beautiful chapters of the book describe Michael's vigil over the small coffin in the garden shed, his burial of the child in the killeen (he has no baptismal certificate to prove that the child was ever baptized and so the priest will not allow the child to be buried inside the walls of the churchyard), and his quest for the proper stone to mark the site of the grave. Michael decides that in spite of the land which he works and loves, his family, his church, and his country have left him with nothing. He turns to face the sea he has always turned his back on before and soon he, too, leaves for America.

So what is left? The pitiful mother and a helpless sister (pointedly named Mary) back home. The killeen. The land itself. The energy and the promise have faded—emigrating to other lands with their own dreams, or decaying quietly outside the walls of the church, which has unwittingly cut itself off from its own resurrection.

What is left the reader is a remarkable series of images—fragments that startle and define, that act as poems to draw us into the dream of the novel. When Sister Thomas collapses for the final time on the stairs of the convent, "all [Margaret] could see were the skirts lifting slightly as the sisters bent toward Sr. Thomas, the black-stockinged ankles, the polished shoes with their square, inch-high heels, all the clutter of sisterhood."

Later, as Margaret washes dishes at Julia's house, "the goblets shone in her hand, their tracery of fronds like frost trapped in the crystal. Mrs. Bourke sat at the long deal table, the brown pottery tea-pot in front of her and tea, as dark as a bog pool, in her cup."

Michael returns to the grave with his stone. "With his hand, [he] hollowed out the hump of grassy soil and then, kneeling so that the grave was like a bed between his legs, he pressed the block of stone onto it and pressed the earth back against the edges of the stone."

Such images do not fade. They are so strong they become a part of the reader's own memory and history. This is the mark of great writing. Mary Leland's prose is rich and lyrical, and she understands the ambiguities inherent in human action—particularly when political and religious ideals become inseparable.

The White Cell Count Fear

At the base of our hill,
vandal lights shower the school.
My son walks his pneumonia
down the hall and stands
white in the window.

I watch him thin where
we have no drapes, say
"he's improving" to myself,
a peasant who has to trust
the syringe of strangers.

And I get ready to test
for fever, listen as his breath
of rasps inflates
the white cell count fear.
Right now, I think, he's going

to turn and call his question,
ask me by name nothing
like the reason for surveillance,
and I will stand to walk
my answer toward the light.

Gary Fincke

THE LAST WORD

"Near-Poorness"

Dot Nuechterlein

"You, D. Nuechterlein," screamed the bold type on the front of the envelope, "have won TEN MILLION DOLLARS!!"

Right, I thought, casually tossing it on the growing heap of junk mail. You, dear reader, know that I wasn't particularly excited by that message, because you also receive more of those come-ons each month than can be kept track of. We have all seen the small print on the inside that says the money is ours "if your entry includes the winning number." Sure.

It seems that everyone is into the sweepstakes and giveaway business, which makes me think it must be pretty good business for somebody. Medical plans and auto clubs must also be rather lucrative, since those are two more items that continually fill up the mailbox and the trash can.

Want to buy a magazine subscription? A dozen companies regularly tell of their "lowest rates anywhere," accompanied by promises of cash and prizes if the order is received by such-and-such a date. Cheese, flowers, cars, greeting cards, clothing, jewelry, office supplies, and charitable donations are some of the others that use pitches like this.

No purchase is necessary, naturally, but still the odds of winning anything are not favorable; someone has said that a person is nearly as likely to be hit by a meteorite as to win the Publisher's Clearinghouse big bonanza. So I seldom succumb to the temptation to waste postage in this way. And I never buy lottery tickets or indulge in other like forms of roulette.

It isn't that I wouldn't like to win a few million bucks—even a couple thou would be appreciated. As a lifelong penny pincher with no savings and a formidable list of creditors I think it would be a nice change to pay off my debts and try another style of life for a while. People—no doubt *jealous* people—say that big-time winners aren't really happy, but I could be persuaded to give it a try just to see if they might not be proved wrong.

Of course I know exactly what would happen. Before I even had the chance to spread the news around, my phone would ring and Don or Max or another friend in the Development office would be suggesting ways to help me make the most of this beautiful opportunity. Right after that I would throw the biggest party anyone has ever seen, inviting everyone I have ever known; it would last for days and everybody would remark on what a fun time he had.

I have rarely made what others would consider a wise fiscal decision.

Then I would divvy up some of the largesse with my kids and my parents and probably half of the people with sad tales who called saying they needed a helping hand. And probably immediately after that I would learn that whatever was left had already been conscripted by the IRS, leaving me with my debts intact and my bank account still flimsy, with nothing to show for it all but memories of the great social highlight of a lifetime.

I know that would happen, because I have rarely made what others would consider a wise fiscal decision, and chances are I would repeat the lifelong pattern of giving away some of my resources and having a good time with the rest of it. I believe poverty is a terrible social ill, one that we should collectively try to solve, but living in what might be called "near poorness" is not so bad, once you get used to it. And I am quite used to it.

Now don't take me wrong; I am not complaining. We all make some choices about how we wish to live our lives and I am quite content with mine. It's just that monetary considerations do not rank all that high in my scheme of values, and it is fortunate I married someone who doesn't have many more financial anxieties than I do, or we would have had big trouble long ago.

Also it helps not to have been blessed with good taste. I mean, people with exquisite judgment cannot possibly live in "near poorness" without going a bit crazy, because they must constantly notice the discrepancy between what they would like and what they can afford. (I have a couple of children like this.) But we tasteless ones tend to value our possessions in a more or less functional way; to be honest we don't even notice when someone is especially well dressed, or has shelled out a bundle for some object or accessory.

The theory is that if you pay a lot for what you wear, for example, it will last a long time and you can get good use out of it forever. But we "near poorness" people spend as little as possible for clothes; we buy several pieces for less than what others pay for one, so we have some variety; and we wear our things forever anyway. Plus when we get sick of cheapy stuff it can be junked with a relatively guilt-free conscience.

So I daydream like everyone else about what I would do if I won some fantastic prize someday, but it will never happen, and then if it did things wouldn't change much. There's a bit of comfort in there, somewhere.