is going on: inside?

who AM I

YOUR mind soul

PERSONALITY RECOGNITION ATTITUDE FRIENDS REGARD STATUS

who are you?
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Back Cover: George Strehlow. Helmet. 1991 contact print. "Graphic design offers me ways to express and communicate my thoughts and ideas in the form of a visual language that goes beyond linguistic barriers."

Geoffrey Strehlow, VU, 1992

Pages 15-18: Eric Brant (VU, 1987), Grad to Know You and Post-Grad Follies, 1993, India ink.

Page 20: Mark Curtiss, Annie and Iowa, 1992. Mark Curtiss is a graduate of Minneapolis School of Art and Design. He lives and works in Minneapolis.
Listening to Youth

I have never been more emotionally involved with an issue of The Cresset than I have been with this one. There. That puts it on the line. Never have I worked harder to pursue specific pieces, to hound writers and artists, to fix, pin down, stabilize and otherwise impale the gossamer wing of creativity. In the course of the last several weeks, I have sent and received more faxes, FedEx packages, phone mail messages, and computer disks of every sort than in any other month of editing. Everything that could go wrong with the process did—Peace Corps censors left Mongolia without clearing an article, people in terminal stages of degree programs caught the flu, the computer went into cardiac arrest twice, ink didn’t dry on drawings, and the Editor even broke an ankle, just to contribute to the general chaos. It’s now January 29, and the last piece arrived in the office on the 26th, by way of two personal messenger drops from Hyde Park.

These vicissitudes only emphasize some of the difficulties of working closely with young people, about whom I hesitate to make any generalization except that their sense of time is different from mine. (They think they have more of it than I do, and, in an ontological sense, they’re right, of course.) Many of the contributors have been my students, some are more closely related than that. I think I have been friend to some, and mentor maybe, though that would be for them to say. To work with them now that they qualify as adults is exasperating—and thrilling. Often they sound very young indeed, particularly when they display that touchingly comic quality of noticing something as though they were the first to see it. (“Mom! I just found the most beautiful sonnet in the world! Did you ever hear it? It starts out, ‘When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes...’”)

More often, though, I find their work compelling and fascinating because it does not recapitulate what I know, or simply re-inhabit spaces I have left behind. There is, in the most thoughtful and creative of young people, a new way of a new way of a new way of a new way of a new way of of a new way of perception which is somewhere between thinking and feeling that my generation never quite trusted or felt free to explore. Because we see the expression in the letters and words or shapes we recognize, we can often miss, I think, just how new their thoughts and feelings are, and how this distance from us must often strike them as frustrating. How dense and slow I must seem to them! How cold and timid and bothered by the important!

Such thoughts do not mean that I worship youth, or that I think today’s young people have it all right. In fact, I find a rather horrifying gap between at least two kinds of young people—the creative, thoughtful, talented, witty, intelligent ones represented by these contributors, and their body-obsessed, fun-oriented peers, for whom a shopping spree at the Gap, followed by Bennigan’s, followed by Drinking till Stupor represents the Good Life.

In his 1937 article on the purpose of The Cresset, O.P. Kretzmann wrote this: Most journals published within the Church have as their primary objective the orientation of the Christian in relation to his God and his Church. The Cresset will devote itself to the orientation of the Christian life in relation to the world of human thought and aspiration. . . . It will attempt to reach especially those who have become conscious of the deep pulsations that throb through our time and are disturbed over the relation of the Christian life to the cataclysmic changes of the world. It is natural, of course, that through the hands and voices of its readers The Cresset hopes to reach out also to those who have come to the conclusion that Christianity no longer has a clear-sounding trumpet.

It strikes me as important and meaningful that for many of these young people, “Christianity no longer has a clear-sounding trumpet.” Many of them I know to be Christian, several are devout and observant. Yet you will no doubt notice that their work seldom makes any explicit reference to Christianity, and even less to the Church. I doubt that any one of them will ever refer, as some of their grandfathers might have done, to “our beloved synod.” Yet each expresses a desire for meaning, for an assurance of significance. Listening to them with care, and with love, one cannot miss that quality of desire. Somehow or other, the Church, provider of meaning and significance for many of us, does not function like that for them.

Without fixing blame, those of us within the Church must find ways to listen to what we are hearing. Hard as it is to get them to speak, it is harder still for us to listen. In these pages, in words and images, they have expressed some of their joys, their bewilderment, their uncertainty, their hope. How do we speak the Gospel to these people unless we have heard their language?

Listen up!

Peace,

GME
Pompeii

Michelangelo’s David, that cold stone
Of human perfection
Looks nothing like us.
Nothing lives beneath that rock
The way the Pompeiians lived
As the liquid fire did its slow crawl
Down their throats.

Those ancients with upflung arms
Are humanity in unpostured nakedness,
Too slow in life to run from the smoking lava,
They gained nothing in death—
The blunt, graceless bodies
Misthrown vessels
Fired because of flaws.
The Pompeiians crouch and sprawl,
Paralyzed in their last stricken moment,
Their defenses as useless as David’s beauty.

Had he lived to see Vesuvius erupt,
He would have protected that angel’s-face
With elegant, sculpted arms,
But magma would have filled the blank eyes,
The fine nose, sealed the lips,
Erased all definition, all art, turning him
Into a human.

Becky Rodia

57th street

too garish tall
bud thrusts
against waist-high pinks
in yellows and reds
tenderly cared for
zinnia soon
flowering bursts mad
breaking the scheme
pull it!

when hot
August bees land black
on its petals
burying heads firmly
hunched down into
towering orange redeemed

Bradford Stull
THE RELEVANCE OF POETRY

René Steinke

Poetry, particularly contemporary poetry, which doesn't have the aura of classicism, embarrasses most Americans. Typically, it is seen as a sentimental, overly wrought way of talking about things that are either already obvious or better left unsaid—something akin to the passages inside greeting cards or decoupaged on plaques. Recently, certain poets and critics have worsened the situation, publishing essays that confirm what some have suspected all along—that contemporary poets are self-congratulating, pretentious aesthetes who don't care a whit for the real world. The problem, I think, for many readers, is that they feel they are supposed to be moved by a poem's emotion or insight, but they're not. Somehow, the poem stays flat on the page rather than drawing them into it.

One of the reasons for this might be the preponderance of the lyric in contemporary poetry. In broad terms, the lyric is a mode of responding to the world, which looks inward, to the speaker's perception of the world, rather than outward to the world itself. In poetry, it usually involves a musical or imagistic turn that takes the poem out of time, or out of the concrete situation, into a metaphysical or emotional or spiritual realm, often through a revelation or epiphany. One could argue that too many contemporary poets use the lyric mode without bothering to reach their audience, without including the rest of the world in their revelation, and thus, they escape into the lyric much too easily. As a result, too many poems seem hermetically sealed and "precious," pleasing only to the poet himself and his friends.

In this essay, I hope to dispel some of the popular misconceptions and complaints about contemporary poetry, not with polemics, but by introducing four recent books of poetry that deserve readers. Robert Hass, Amy Gerstler, Philip Levine, and Li-Young Lee are nationally known, prize-winning poets. Nonetheless, their work suggests that they are not unaware of the commonly held stereotypes of poetry. In different ways, each of them incorporates into their work the question of poetry's relevance to the world. They are careful to show how poetry is vital to their everyday lives, and by implication, to ours as well. One of the ways they accomplish this is by resisting a purely self-reflective, lyric form. They use epiphanic moments sparingly, and by allowing the contemporary world into their poems, the lyricism they do achieve is all the more resonant and accessible.

In Human Wishes, Robert Hass takes care to show those connections between poetry and his personal life. Like painters who leave their black sketch marks beneath the paint, Hass often allows the reader into the very process of writing:

A man thinks lilacs against white houses, having seen them in the farm country south of Tacoma in April, and can't find his way to a sentence, a brushstroke carrying the energy of brush and stroke.

("Spring Drawing")

By allowing us to see a raw process of his imagination (even if it is a constructed rawness), Hass deliberately democratizes the power of the poet, making it a part of everyday life, rather than an escape from it. The very process of language, a process of meaning making that includes us all, becomes the subject of "Spring Drawing,"

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Human Wishes, Robert Hass, Ecco Press, 1989

Bitter Angel, Amy Gerstler, North Point Press, 1990

What Work Is, Philip Levine, Alfred A. Knopf, 1992

The City in Which I Love You, Li-Young Lee

BOA Editions, Ltd., 1990

February 1993
and it asks the reader to examine the almost metaphysical nature of a small word, "if"

...then the interval created by if, to which mind and breath attend, nervous as the grazing animals the first brushes painted,

has become habitable space, lived in beyond wishing.

In his attention to language itself and his wide-ranging cultural allusions, Hass is unapologetically an intellectual's poet. But for all his erudition, he is an unpretentious one. And it is his lively, welcoming tone that makes his ideas alive and accessible.

Hass has the uncanny ability to unite abstractions with concrete and anecdotal observations that make everyday events suddenly pulse with meaning. He achieves this mostly through a series of surprising juxtapositions, such as in this passage from "Santa Barbara Road":

Luke comes running in the house excited to say that an Iceland poppy has "bloomed up.* His parents, who are not getting along especially well, exchange wry looks. They had both forgotten, since small children were supposed to love flowers, that they actually do. And there is the pathos of the metaphor or myth: irresistible flowering.

In that small domestic incident, Hass calls up artistic associations—myth and metaphor—in the pain and beauty of the family situation and invites us to consider what this has to do with poetry and language. Such connections are common in Hass's poetry—he resolutely brings poetry into domestic and private life.

Although Hass is a decidedly up-beat poet, who revels in the pleasure of language, he shows poetry's musicality and lyricism in conflict with a more prosaic, chaotic, and often malicious world. In other words, even as he practices the art of poetry with verve and distinction, he simultaneously explores the limits of the pleasure and consolation available in poetry. Hass confronts these problems in his characteristic digressive and meditative manner in “Spring Drawing 2,” which depicts the poet in the act of composing and questioning his very act:

Suppose before they said silver or moonlight or wet grass, each poet had to agree to be responsible for the innocence of all the suffering on earth,

because they learned in arithmetic, during the long school days, that if there was anything left over,

you had to carry it.

In the next lines, the speaker tries to incorporate suffering into his earlier image of the rose and floribunda. He aestheticizes suffering, makes it beautiful, which is one solution that poetry has traditionally offered:

...The wild rose looks weightless, the floribunda are heavy with the richness and sadness of Europe as they imitate the dying, petal by petal, of the people who bred them.

Then the poet checks himself. He doesn’t allow himself to escape reality so easily:

You hear pain singing in the nerves of things; it is not a song.

The last line then, is a bleak statement of misery, what is "carried over":

The gazelle's head turned; three jackals are eating his entrails and he is watching.

Hass does not always come to this conclusion about the relationship between suffering and art. But even in his most celebratory poems, he reveals his reluctance to let go of the world, and all of its unruly elements that will not easily be constrained into form. This is especially striking in the poem, "January," which lunges between short-lined, musical sections dense with images and sections of prose that move from anecdotal observation to memory to thought.

In Hass’s rigorous questioning of language and the limits of the imagination, there are echoes of William Carlos Williams and Wallace Stevens. But the comparisons are not immediately obvious, because Hass has created his own forms—his placing what we think of as poetry next to sections of prose ultimately asks us to see the formality of ordinary language and the way images and rhythms of our lives come together in a shape, that it’s only a matter of our recognizing it.

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In "Santa Lucia II," which takes the persona of a woman doing work in art history, we get this description, which might also describe the central force in Hass’s work:

...You notice rhythms washing over you, opening and closing, they are the world, inside you, and you work.

In Amy Gerstler’s Bitter Angel, the lyric and meditative poems have a core of irony. She seems bent on undercutting the lofty and humorless stereotype of the poet. Her work includes elements from television, pop music, and movies, as easily as it uses images from opera, literature, and philosophy. The combinations of these allusions from low and high culture often serve to help her maintain a mixed tone—and that is what gives her poems their emotional strength; they are most often serious and
ironic. One always has the sense of emotion held back, or nudging against the words.

One of the most unusual poems in this collection, "Della's Modesty," takes a collage form to examine the concept of "modesty" in women. It works like a Cornell box, bringing together various sources in a pattern around a central theme. The poem revolves around Della Street, Perry Mason's secretary. Gerstler portrays her as an exaggeratedly efficient, neat, and pert woman, who seems to take pleasure in the very act of restraining herself. Interspersed with the fragmented narration concerning Della Street, are various thoughts about modesty. We see, for example, Montaigne's "There are certain things which are hidden in order to be shown"; Flaubert's "Modesty. Woman's greatest jewel"; Baelz's "A woman may be naked and yet behave like a lady," and others. The irony of these various quotes bumping against one another is obvious, and they demonstrate the various ways men have used ideas of femininity to control women. But this is not merely a feminist barb, although it is that. The poem sees behind the melodrama of gender relating in order to analyze how the phenomenon of modesty has not only affected men's perception of women, but also women's perceptions of themselves. The poem demonstrates, through Della Street, how "modesty itself is a temptation," how the refusal of sex can itself become a form of sexual excess. Gerstler's wide reading and the wit with which she presents these thoughts shows how carefully she avoids cliched critique, using humor in order to explore the complex relationships between the sexes.

In almost all of the poems, Gerstler employs ironic statement or indirection to explore emotion. Often, she uses imagistic associations from inanimate objects to convey a thought. Again, one is reminded of the strategy of collage:

> A potenti. A conspiracy of papers. Solidarity among knickknacks. Inert, smug, undulating. Their reticence vibrates. What does such mute profundity disclose? Speak to me, one of you. The objects' fettered language, in the throes of erosion, sfits beyond my hearing. Under duress, or torture, "they only break, never name names." ("The Malice of Objects")

Gerstler's wide-ranging store of images gives her work a freshness and openness not always available in poetry.

Often Gerstler's poems seem obviously constructed from a sensibility formed, as most of ours are, at least partly from television. This is suggested from her ironic combinations of things, which recalls the way commercials are interspersed in television dramas, or the way television newscasters mention Hollywood gossip and horrifying murders in an announcement of headlines connected only by "and." Gerstler's poems, and her use of irony, try to make sense of this chaos of information, find some form for it. In the dream-like, disturbing prose poem, "Lucky You," which depicts the dread and remorse of delivering news of a family member's death, this is particularly evident:

> You're afraid this person you're telling this grim tale to will also begin to laugh, louder and louder, till his voice completely fills the room, and you can practically see the huge black HAHAAA's scrawled in the air, vibrating like violin strings, just as in cartoons.

Gerstler also uses the sense of unreality and warped time that often comes with visual media:

> She says, "what's wrong?" Then centuries go by... Leaves color, shrivel, and plummet to the ground. Branches bud, and the flowers gape and drop off...over and over. All in the space of the eight seconds it takes you to answer your mother. This is why it's said that tragedy ages you prematurely. It causes the little movie of your life to run through the projector at fast forward till you can get the right words out of your mouth and stop the runaway film.

Gerstler's attention to the way our attitudes towards language and thought have changed—through pop culture—and her willingness to tackle traditional themes from a contemporary perspective gives her work an unusual immediacy and power.

Like most of his poetry, What Work Is, Philip Levine's latest collection, contradicts the notion that poetry ignores the grubby, mundane everyday events of most people's lives. Levine writes from his experience of living in Detroit and working a series of industrial jobs before he began teaching. Time-clocks, highways, salami sandwiches, beer bottles, and the filth and smoke of factories show up in his poems. Although he is capable of great feeling for the people he writes about, Levine does not idealize anyone. His language is stark and intense, the rigor of his thought arguing against any easy stereotype of a working-class sensibility. In Levine's poems there is always a tension between the well-read poet and the factory worker, and it is never glibly resolved.

Levine clings fiercely to the details of the work he describes in these poems. You can't dismiss it, or skip over it, looking for a metaphor. You have to notice the details. In "Fear and Fame," he describes the identity one has to assume as a worker who plates plumbing fixtures:

> Half an hour to dress, wide rubber hip boots gauntlets to the elbow, a plastic helmet like a knight's but with a little glass window that kept steaming over, and a respirator to save my smoke-stained lungs.

There is a particular "recipe" of acids that only the speaker knows, and though his description of the work has an
element of mystery and heroism, that is undercut by what happens when he comes up "from the kingdom of fire" into the plumbing factory.

...Oddly enough
no one welcomed me back, and I'd stand
fully armored as the downpour of cold water
rained down on me and the smoking traces puddled
at my feet like so much milk and melting snow.

The speaker resumes his personal identity only after he puts on his street clothes, wedding ring, and reassumes his nickname. He takes his lunch and his three cigarettes in shaky hands. Then he goes down into "the other world" of work again. The poem portrays in a harsh, unflinching light, what it’s like to have your life cut exactly in half by work—how a job can give you this arbitrary, surreal identity that has little to do with your private life.

In “Coming Close,” Levine takes on the theme of dehumanization through work more directly:

Take this quiet woman, she has been
standing before a polishing wheel
for over three hours, and she lacks
twenty minutes before she can take
a lunch break. Is she a woman?

The poem goes on to depict the woman in the objective detail of a photograph, the lines of her muscles, the down on her upper lip, so that the reader looks closely at her. But Levine doesn’t allow his audience to identify with the woman’s experience only from this picture; to understand her, one would have to do the work:

...You must come closer
to find out, you must hang your tie
and jacket in one of the lockers
in favor of a black smock, you must
be prepared to spend shift after shift
hauling off the metal trays of stock...

Levine invites the reader into the poem, but in a confrontational challenging manner, and in an unusual and shocking gesture, we actually play a part in the poem’s resolution, as the woman, “places the five/tapering fingers of her filthy hand/on the arm of your white shirt to mark/you for your own, now and forever.”

The title poem, “What Work Is,” also confronts its implied middle-class reader. From the beginning, Levine lets the reader know that he’s talking about real experience, not metaphorical speculation:

We stood in the rain in a long line
waiting at Ford Highland Park. For work.
You know what work is—if you’re
old enough to read this you know what
work is, although you may not do it.
Forget you. This is about waiting...

The poem allows you entrance only if you’re willing to think about the validity of work, and the different kinds of work, including emotional and artistic work. The speaker’s brother works the night shift at “Cadillac,” gets up in the morning to study his German, so that he can sing Wagner’s operas. While waiting in line, the speaker is overcome with a desire to express his love for his brother, although this is a kind of work of which he, as well as the reader of the poem, is incapable. Establishing a human connection is an impossible, shared job, all because of what work is.

What distinguishes Levine from other poets who take on working class subjects is his refusal to use nostalgia or pastoralism to portray this world in a way that would soften it, make it easily beautiful, and consoling to those who contemplate it.

This integrity towards his subject matter often prevents Levine from settling on easy, and traditionally “poetic” solutions. Such a challenge to poetry itself is seen most vividly in a lament for those whose imaginative capacity has been blunted. “Every Blessed Day” is about a young man going to work at a factory early in the morning and thinking about “places he/has never seen but heard/about.” It might have been a conventionally lyric poem, in which this young man escapes his daily grind through his imagination. Much of the poem, after all, describes the unearthly presence of dawn and the young man’s imagined pictures of other places. We learn, “though his life was then/a prison he had come to live/for these suspended moments.” But the young man, and the poem’s readers, are not allowed to dwell in that dreamspace. Instead, the reader follows the young man on to the bus:

Even before he looks he knows
the faces on the bus, some
going to work and some coming back,
but each sealed in its hunger
for a different life, a lost life.
Where he’s going or who he is
he doesn’t ask himself, he
doesn’t know and doesn’t know
it matters.

The young man gets off the bus, punches in his time card at Chevy Gear & Axle and joins the workers, who are now, “thousands of miles/from their forgotten homes,” where they might be allowed to preserve an imaginative view of the world. Levine examines the deadening force of mechanical work, insisting all the while on the complexity of the workers’ inner lives.

Like Levine, Li-Young Lee fuses the personal and the political in his book, The City in Which I Love You. Lee, a Chinese-American poet who lives in Chicago, is the child of political refugees, and this history of exile and fear filters
into his poems. They are solemn and elegantly constructed, many using the rhythms and rhetoric of Biblical verse. Almost all of the poems are structured around the movements of memory, and they take on themes of the refugee—even the love poems and eulogies insist on the presence of the political. As in memory, things blend together more easily than they remain apart, and Lee constantly searches out poetry’s connections to memory.

"Furious Versions," a poem of several sections, examines the significance of the poet’s past in its relevance to his present and his art. The first section draws attention to the confusion of memory, how in reconstructing the memory, the speaker, in a sense, has to become both his father and himself:

And did I stand
on the train from Chicago to Pittsburgh
so my fevered son could sleep?
Or did I
open my eyes
and see my father’s closed face
rocking above me
Memory revises me.

Memory constantly changing and reweaving itself is a persistent theme throughout this book. There is the figure of the father: a political refugee, scholar, and Christian; the figure of the young boy protected and guided by him; and the figure of the poet, attempting through language and memory to sort out their different lives, to understand what it means to be a refugee and the son of a refugee.

The tension in these poems is often between the need to remember and the need to forget. But for Lee, the process of forgetting—becoming part of the present world—always winds its way towards remembering. In "Furious Versions," after alluding to details of the horrors his family endured before they escaped Indonesia, Lee asks:

How then, may I
speak of flowers
here, where
a world of form convulses.
Here, amidst drafts—yet
these are not drafts
toward a future form, but
furious versions
of the here and now...

This, like many of these poems, asks the unanswerable question again: Is poetry enough? Is finding form for memory enough? These tensions are most clear in "The Interrogations," a dialogue between two unnamed speakers. This is perhaps Lee’s most experimental piece—the rhythm is looser than most of his poems, more like a chant, or a liturgy.

Through it all there was no song,
and weeping came many years later.

I’m through
with memory.

Sometimes a song,
even when there was weeping

I’m through with memory.

Can you still smell the smoke on my body?

That last line vividly suggests the almost physical pull of memory for Lee, and his need to make it pertinent and immediate in his poetry, despite his impulse to have done with it.

The title poem, "The City in Which I Love You," is an ambitious, contemporary and personalized version of the Song of Songs, inspired apparently by the passage it takes as its epigraph: "I will arise now and go about the city in the streets, and in the broad ways I will seek...whom my soul loveth" (Song of Songs 3:2). As in the original work, the speaker uses images of landscape to praise his beloved, only the landscape is an urban one, and the poem moves by contrasts, because the loved one is absent:

And when, in the city in which I love you,
even my most excellent song goes unanswered,
and I mount the scabbed streets,
the long shouts of avenues,
the tunnel sunken night in search of you...

The urban images in which he looks for his beloved are stark, violent, and lonely, and they eventually remind the speaker of "that other city," where he saw a soldier shoot a man in the head, watched a woman bend over the corpse. In this love poem, Lee continues to insist on the injustices and tortures and murders going on in "cities all over the world." The figure of the beloved begins as sexual and becomes transcendent:

And your otherness is perfect as my death...
Your otherness exhausts me,
like looking suddenly up from here
to impossible stars fading...

The poet goes on to question the nature of his seeking, the nature of his song:

Is, prayer, then the proper attitude
for the mind that longs to be freely blown,
but which gets snagged on the barb
called world, that
toothache, the actual?...
Where are you
in the cities in which I love you,
the cities daily risen to work and to money,  
to the magnificent miles and the gold coasts.

Ultimately, the city, a mix of memory, language, and dreams, becomes itself the poet’s consolation for the beloved’s absence. Lee’s ability to maneuver the formality and cadence of Biblical verse without seeming arch or clever is remarkable—it is clear, as the poem builds, and from the other poems in which the Song of Songs appears, that this is a text to which Lee has a profound connection. This mix of candor and formality exists in all of his poems; even in his most intimate self-reflective poems, there is an awareness of his own history and tradition, and of the larger world.

I am disturbed when intelligent, well-educated people say to me that they don’t know how to read poetry, as if it were a secret code. The basic skills of listening and imagining are there—you don’t have to go to poetry school to be able to take pleasure in a poem. You don’t have to fully understand it either. One of the pleasures of poetry, in fact, is that the best poems can never be fully understood. But one does have to be open to the non-utilitarian possibilities of words, to the idea that language does not only exist to communicate data. Because poetry is a pleasure that requires one’s concentration—unlike so many other pleasures—its rewards are consistent with one’s willingness to pay attention, one’s willingness to consider language itself in its artful and weighty sense. What this often means is examining the way words are used everyday, in ordinary conversation, at home, on television, at work, in political propaganda, and scripture. But to read these poets—Hass, Gerstler, Levine and Lee—is well worth the effort.

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Speechless

Stifling even at four a.m., the air at our arrival prefigured our days in Chad, the heat relentless as the bare-footed children we tried to keep at bay. The children themselves solid and razor sharp symbols of loss: their empty stomachs smooth and round, eyes locked in a constant daze of hunger or drugs; bones meeting with clicks, no soft connective tissue between them. Meeting, in fact, as we did that morning—abruptly, each blank-faced at the problem: communication just then beginning

between worlds whose link is ambiguous and tenuous and fragile, between us.

Celeste Duder
COPING WITH POP-MUSIC MIDDLE AGE IN '92: THREE RELATIVELY SUCCESSFUL ATTEMPTS

Patrick Burnette

By Drums and Wires, Partridge's songwriting style was coming into focus. Partridge typically includes a few well-crafted love ballads on a given record, but he devotes the rest of his attention to politics—fear of unemployment and/or experience of economic oppression, issues of censorship, nationalism, gender and race—and philosophical expressions which tend to oscillate between nihilism (Drums and Wires' 'Complicated Game,' Black Sea's bluntly titled 'Travels in Nihilon') and, on the band's later work, injunctions to appreciate the beauty of everyday life (Skylarking's '1000 Umbrellas').

XTC tackles these favorite themes, when they're at their best, with more wit, energy and subtlety than my somewhat schematic summary might suggest. Partridge copes with both his love ballads and his more abstruse material in a literally conceited fashion. He picks a central simile or metaphor for a given song and (often quite dexterously) runs it through its paces. When the method works, he's able to combine wit and feeling like a good Renaissance sonneteer. When it fails, the comparison follows through: the songs sound like failed verbal exercises and little more. To make matters worse, Partridge's clumsiest lyrics are consistently accompanied by his most forgettable melodies and mannered performances. A good XTC album features as few of these temporary breakdowns as possible, and the immediate followups to Drums and Wires, although they hit higher peaks, remain decidedly mixed efforts precisely because Partridge let his self-control slip away a few times too often.

Although Partridge suffers from debilitating stage fright, his most fearful nightmare must surely be metaphorical exhaustion. Once you have compared a man in love to a rocket, a snowman, a giant, and a yacht, you certainly deserve to sleep the sleep of the just. Still, XTC soldiers on, and they're still able to chalk up a victory when needed. Nonsuch is the band's best album since Skylarking, and their second-best since 1982's English Settlement. Its success is especially heartening since it doesn't depend on Skylarking's 'concept album' approach, or Todd

Pat Burnette, a 1988 VU grad, is working on a Ph.D. in literature at the University of Chicago. He would probably get on faster if he weren't interested in so many other things. This is his first appearance in The Cresset. And probably The Cresset's first serious look at current rock music.

February 1993
Rundgren’s production. The album provides several good examples of Partridge’s love of word-play. Take ‘Dear Madam Barnum,’ which turns the story of soured love affair into a circus side show. ‘I put on a fake smile/And start the evening show/The public is laughing/I guess by now they know,’ is a fine evocation of masculine paranoia, and Andy makes sure we never get out of the tent: ‘You tread the high wire/Between truth and lies/...Dear Madam Barnum/I resign as clown.’ In other songs, Partridge fleshes out a common metaphor, picturing jealousy as a real live ‘Crocodile.’ The emotion becomes a monster, first ‘scratching gently to be fed,’ but ultimately threatening the singer with its jaws spread wide. A silly conceit, perhaps, but it’s backed with both wit and goofy rock energy. ‘Omnibus’ deploys a magical, mysterious form of mass transit as a symbol of mutual tolerance (‘Omnibus take all of us’ is the refrain). Even better than the CTA ‘love bus,’ this vehicle comes equipped with an eroticized plentitude of white-, black-, gold-, and green-skinned girls. Finally, and heck, in the good old days that was a full album’s level of publicity and sales of REM’s Partridge get those lines to scan? XTC, and I remember how the underground dropped pushed the band’s profile to uncomfortable prominence (a

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Nonesuch doesn’t succeed all the time—‘That Wave’ remains indecipherable and unhummable, ‘Books are Burning’ can’t work up any heat about its topic, and Colin Moulding’s ‘Bungalow’ is simply inexplicable—but the CD provides at least forty-five minutes of memorable music, and heck, in the good old days that was a full album’s worth. It also reminds the listener how adding just the white-, black-, gold-, and green-skinned girls. Finally, and heck, in the good old days that was a full album’s level of publicity and sales of REM’s Partridge get those lines to scan?

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Partridge and company won’t find themselves in the bread lines anytime soon, but when I talk about Nonesuch’s success I do so on aesthetic rather than economic grounds. Certainly the album hasn’t enjoyed the level of publicity and sales of REM’s Automatic for the People. REM is, indeed, a much better known set of initials than XTC, and I remember how the underground dropped them in disgust when 1985’s Tales of the Reconstruction pushed the band’s profile to uncomfortable prominence (a

period, naturally enough, when people like me first became fans). Since then, REM has moved from plateau to plateau, finally reaching that pinnacle of alternative-band success where the wind whistles through Bono’s raven locks and little else.

The ascent could hardly be termed a sell-out. REM has continued to experiment with their musical conceptions and lyrical concerns, and they’re a long way from simply cranking out product for the masses. Still, there have been some rough spots. The most recent trouble came after the band’s extremely strong Document 5, when they left IRS for the better-distributed Warner Brothers label. Green and Out of Time both had fine moments (especially the more consistent Green) but also indicated that the band was in danger of hitting a creative impasse.

There were two reasons for this: one simple, one complicated. The simple one had to do with the three-quarters of REM that plays instruments. Mike Mills’ bass and Bill Berry’s drums anchor the band, and they’ve proved to be a very serviceable rhythm section over the years (although they’re far from inspired players; check out the extraordinarily limp Hindu Love Gods where they back Warren Zevon). Peter Buck, on the other hand, has to be one of the more limited guitarist in a major pop band. Limited in technique, sure, but this is no problem in pop. Limited in texture, limited in rhythm, limited in conception—these are problems when you’re leading a three-piece ensemble through dozens of songs.

When the REM first appeared on the scene, several critics noticed their characteristic ‘jangle’ sound and its debt to the Byrds. Buck put that sound across wonderfully, and in the mid-eighties Buck, Berry and Mills seemed to lack the tools to keep expanding REM’s musical vision. Sure they came up with interesting chord changes for the avant pop songs on Green, but the arrangements were occasionally marred by crude comping (‘Untitled’) or bizarre auxiliary percussion (‘Orange Crush,’ ‘World Leader Pretend’). It just got uglier on Out of Time songs like ‘Country Feedback,’ which sounded like a college bar band’s first demo, and ‘Endgame,’ which came on like the Carpenters.

The more complicated reason for the band’s impasse (aesthetic impasse, only—Green and Out of Time sold like arms to Iraq) was vocalist’s Michael Stipe’s incessant experimentation with his image and attitude. If in the early years Buck was in charge of the jangling, Stipe provided the mumbling. The band’s first releases featured atmospheric, evocative, often unintelligible lyrics. Like Buck, Stipe found the early REM approach limited, and enunciation began playing a larger part in his life on Document. Perhaps not coincidentally, it was about this time that Stipe’s lyrical talents began flagging.

Stipe, like Partridge, has a distinct way with words. His lyrics tend to be oblique and evocative where Partridge’s are explicit, but he is extremely adept at word-
play when he wants to be. The word ‘play’ is especially appropriate. Live takes, and the out-takes on Dead Letter Office, demonstrate Stipe’s ability to improvise nonsense lyrics to old REM material and other peoples’ songs; he can channel a stream of subconscious flotsam into a song’s rhythmical scheme with amusing facility. When Stipe gets into one of these improvisatory moods, I’m sure Derrida would love him: the signifiers positively frolic. But what amounts to an amusing parlor trick doesn’t necessarily make for a song you want to hear repeatedly, and at times in the late eighties Stipe seemed to be bringing this free-wheeling methodology into the studio with him. It’s a fine line between lyrics that don’t ‘make sense’ but still convey meaning and emotion, and pure self-indulgence (remember when David Byrne crossed it, and you stopped buying his records?)

The impulse to cross that line is a tricky one to master because it comes at you from both sides. If you take yourself too seriously, you risk dipping into the great Bathetic and ending up like, say, Tanita Tikaram. If you don’t take yourself, or your audience, seriously enough, you just might end up like Michael Stipe singing ‘Shiny Happy People’ with your tongue in cheek, and evidently feeling so guilty about it that you’re tempted into the ‘brutal honesty’ of the honestly crappy ‘Country Feedback’ or the hopeless pudding of ‘Belong.’ Heck, you might even let Mike Mills write a song that would stick out like a broken G string on a better album.

Stipe’s vocal diddling must, in part, have been symptomatic of a crisis of faith regarding his audience. Green and Out of Time, as a friend of mine once noted, feature lots of songs that worry over Stipe’s relationship with the great unwashed. ‘Turn You Inside Out,’ ‘Hairshirt’ and ‘Pop Song ’89’ off Green, ‘Losing My Religion,’ and, obliquely, ‘Shiny Happy People’ on Out of Time: on each of these songs, Stipe questions just how seriously he should take REM’s countless fans, and just how seriously he should regard his own status as rock star. No satisfactory answer results: Stipe oscillates between delusions of grandeur and a giddy irony that smells suspiciously like cheap cynicism.

Automatic for the People satisfies because it shows that Stipe and his band can cope with the problems outlined above. The band has conquered their instrumental impasse by using an acoustic sound more varied and detailed than on their early albums, and by employing ex-Zeppliner John Paul Jones’ canny string arrangements. Stipe hasn’t eliminated his tendency to lyrical self-indulgence (he wouldn’t be Stipe if he did) but he’s harnessed it. His impressionistic forays still don’t make logical sense, but they’re once again communicative. Automatic proves that REM’s lead singer has learned a simple lesson: reach out to your audience, instead of talking down to it, and the rest will take care of itself.

Automatic has a much darker tone than the REM’s last two albums, and for some reason this works to the band’s advantage. In the opener, ‘Drive,’ Stipe addresses his audience yet once again: ‘Hey kids, Rock and Roll/No one tells you where to go/Do they?’ This time, however, Stipe lets the pain behind his irony show through, treating his fans’ vulnerability and political naiveté as a serious issue rather than a joke. Much of the rest of this album shares this sober tone. ‘Try Not to Breathe’ features a monologue by a stoic speaker willing his or her own death, while ‘Sweetness Follows’ offers comfort to a bereaved listener in a voice both compassionate and detached. Stipe does not completely conceal his sense of humor. ‘Man on the Moon’ offers in-jokes and pop culture references in a tribute to Andy Kaufman, and Stipe’s burbling Elvis impersonation in the chorus sells the song on its own. Still, on the majority of the album Stipe is more emotionally transparent than he’s ever been before. He sings ‘Everybody Hurts,’ a relatively straight-forward song discouraging suicide, with an intensity he’s rarely equaled. ‘Nightswimming’ is only barely more oblique in its presentation and it seems even more personal, talking about Stipe’s fascination with water, memory and privacy. Even on a less impressive song like ‘Ignoreland,’ one senses that Stipe is reaching out to his audience in a new way as he runs through one of his patented lists of political complaints about the Reagan/Bush era. Most of the lyrics are a collage of observations and protests (not always successful), but at the song’s climax Stipe breaks out into real live sentences: ‘If it wasn’t there we would have created them/Maybe it’s true/But I’m resentful just the same/Someone has to take the blame/I know that this is vitriol/No solution/Still I feel better having screamed on you.’ Not quite English, but probably Stipe’s most mature political statement so far.

Stipe’s triumph is the most impressive part of this album—he simply sings better here than he ever has before, with a larger range of expression and an increased mastery of nuance—but the band’s sound is worth noting as well. The production is crystal clear, and again we are allowed to savor wonderful details. ‘Ignoreland’ offers a riff on the chorus that blends electric guitar, harmonica and bass effectively and memorably, ‘Find the River’ includes more killer harmonica hooks, ‘Try Not to Breathe’ features uplifting pick-work and REM’s now patented typewriter-rhythm-section. Nearly every song boasts a memorable melody and mood. ‘Star Me Kitten’ is especially nice, since its cyclical, lilting melody line makes it compelling listening despite its snail’s-pace tempo (the band’s attempted songs this slow before, most recently on Out of Time’s ‘Low,’ with much less success). The only let-down is ‘New Orleans Instrumental No. 1,’ which sounds like a coarse-grained attempt at an Eno-esque mood piece; even it is relatively painless.

Whatever REM does next, it probably won’t sound like this album. They may come out with the batch of aggressive rock and roll they originally promised to produce after Out of Time; they may feature bagpipes. In any case, Automatic for the People indicates that it just might be worth buying their next release, even if you have to
jostle some pimply youth out of the way to get a copy.

Someday, when the story of the Roches is finally written, it will surely be titled *Always the Backup, Never the Bride*. The Roches have appeared on all sorts of folk's albums: Paul Simon, Philip Glass, The Indigo Girls, the list goes on. But despite a career that stretches back to 1975 and includes at least four excellent albums, they've never hit the big time, while younger folkies with only a fraction of their talent (the Indigo Girls and Tracy Chapman spring to mind) have.

The Roches made three great albums in four attempts and then hit hard times. *Seductive Reasoning* (1975—it features only Terre and Maggie: Suzzy joined up on the next release), *The Roches* ('79) and *Keep on Doin'* ('82) are all classics of their type—but nobody knew what type it was. The latter two albums (they were separated by the spotty but lovable *Nurds*) were produced by guitarist Robert Fripp, a British eccentric whom God seems to have designed specifically for producing Roches albums. He was smart enough to record them in audio verité, with minimal instrumentation besides their acoustic guitars and his own brilliant solo contributions. Their voices come through bright, clear, and unfiltered, and even though the sisters favor bizarre harmonies, occasionally miss notes, and obviously come from New Jersey, the experience is truly enlightening. Harmony singing provides a special thrill when the singers involved have discernible personalities. The Roches have personality and intelligence to spare, and their vocals are alternately caressing, mocking, disturbing. All of the albums I've listed above are well worth a try (*Keep on Doin'* is the most accessible), although they're not suggested listening for those with either perfect pitch or a hang-over.

After *Keep on Doin*', the Roches attempted to forge a more pop-oriented sound on *Another World* ('85), which their new, non-Fripp producer decided should involve cheap synthesizers, a cheaper rhythm section, and electronic prettiness of their wonderfully idiosyncratic voices. Naturally, this 'commercial' approach didn't produce a single number offering half the sonic pleasure of, say, *Keep on Doin*.'s 'Losing True.' The Roches' compositions weren't up to their usual standards, either, and the album had the air of a compromise that failed.

The sisters (or Warner Brothers) must have sensed this, and they stayed out of sight for a while, releasing only one forgettable e.p. before 1989's *Speak* was released on a new label. *Speak* was much stronger than *Another World*: here the Roches came closer to finding a pop style that didn't forgo either their folk or their avant garde roots. Still, the quality of the arrangements remained uneven, and the album had an unnecessary amount of filler.

*A Dove* is an altogether leaner production, offering 11 consistently good tracks as opposed to *Speak*'s 14 uneven ones. It also proves that the Roches are flexible enough to make real live pop music, with full-scale production, memorable hooks, and beautiful harmonies (despite the inevitable electronic tampering). They haven't returned to Fripp's pristine vision, but at least they're compromising intelligently this time.

*A Dove*'s arrangements tend to feature one sister singing lead while the others harmonize, with few of the group-workouts of earlier albums. Maggie (she's the one with the keep-me-away-from-all-sharp-instruments look on the album cover) has been the group's most prolific songwriter, but she contributes only two numbers to this effort. She sings in a fragile, earnest alto that's somehow so affecting you forgive every fudged pitch. Her lyrics on the album's title track start with a bit of sardonic humor (a dove/settled on my sill...and I called my cat) and then move over a landscape of gently expressed rage. 'You're the One,' begins as a melancholy love letter ('you're the love of my life') and then suddenly collapses in on itself ('I can understand, though/If you don't remember...this is just a dream that I've been/holding onto God I don't know').

Maggie's sisters are, comparatively speaking, sunny and stable. Terre (the blond) likes to feature her soaring soprano and iron diaphragm, and does so to good effect on several tunes. Her 'Ing' is irresistibly catchy folk-pop, and 'Expecting Your Love' is a respectable gospel work-out featuring the aforesaid muscle. Her standout contributions are 'You're the Two' (co-written with Maggie) and 'Maid of the Sea.' 'Sea' features a jazzy chord progression, lyrics that present the singer fantasizing about seducing a man at his wife's funeral ('help yourself she said/Make my husband to bed'), and some great vocal pyrotechnics in the out-chorus. 'You're the Two' is a Dixieland-flavored stomp about a very happy polygamist. 'I've got one to push/and the other one to pull,' Terre confides, and who'd want to argue with that?

Suzzy was the Roches' least distinctive vocalist, at least until this album. On *Speak* she tried talking her way through passages in an annoying pseudo-childlike voice, and she continues to have trouble controlling her emotional tone. On *A Dove*, however, she turns in some very canny productions that feature her alternatively sardonic and starry-eyed attitude to good advantage. Both 'Troubled Love' and 'Somebody's Gonna Have to Be Me' have unforgettable hooks in the chorus that carry her thin voice perfectly; 'Answered Prayers' offers an eastern tonality and subtle, potentially scary lyrics. 'Beautiful Love of God' verges on the bathetic, but finally seems a genuine attempt to cope with urban isolation and violence (as is Terre's hilarious 'Rawhide' re-write, 'Too Tough Hide').

As a whole, the album is at least the sum of its parts, and despite its invisible commercial profile is a very worthwhile purchase. The Roches aren't getting any younger, and the next pseudo-profound, humor-free, personality-impaired folkster that steals the spotlight from them may just be the one to break my heart. Try one of their records. Or two. Misery loves company.
**Grad to Know You**

Wow, hard to believe... one more semester, then graduation!

Yeah, I know. It's like a dream come true.

Right, awkward; immature; not ready for anything!

... we had absolutely no concept about the outside world! University life has been like a face full of cold water! Sink or swim, baby!

But what if everything we've learned and experienced isn't enough?

Aw! Get a grip! Our education's enriched us! We're culturally sound, politically correct, and socially minded! We're in tune with the world. We'll have no problems adjusting once we're out there!

Just, think... three and a half years ago, we were a bunch of pie-eyed freshmen...

But I'm scared!

You don't think they'd send us out if we weren't ready?
"Art is a way for me to communicate my passions and feelings to the masses. I live through my paintings, so if I never make a dime, that's okay."

"English majors bear a love for our written word. The poetry of the language conveyed in the turn of a single phrase, is unlike anything! My voice is heard through my writing."
"Philosophy/psychology gives me the opportunity to talk in a didactic forum with educated, socially conscious, people such as myself. I want to hit the open road after graduation."

"I went into nursing because I wanted to help the suffering and aid the sick... you know, like an angel of mercy to the needy..."
Cain't have ya comin' back wit no eddication, idgit

Some day... And this is gonna be yer, son!

Oh, honey, you made your father and I so proud when you decided... Go to this fine university. But most of...

All we especially love the sticker for the car's back window.

... They aren't really your parents! They're aliens who sent you through college and put your father's and my minds in the bodies of these ducks. As part of their hideous plot to take over the... Shh... quack!

Welcome home, dear. Destroy intruder!
Butterfly Effect

Your finger nervous, twitching wore a hole
the size of money in your pants pocket.
Through the hole, your dime dropped, bounced off
your shoe,
landed under the nose of a fox terrier
who sniffed it and, finding it inedible, howled.
The sound of its howl sparked the craziness
of a crazy woman who mourned her dead daughter.
For her dead daughter, she walked to the corner.
At the corner she bought roses to remember
her dead daughter and to soften the howling dog's
pain.
She knew nothing of your dime. On her way home,
one of the crazy woman's daughter's roses fell.
Howling wind pushed the rose to rest against
the street's white dividing line. A boy saw the rose.
The boy chased the rose, unaware of a crying
crazy woman calling after him, unaware
of a thousand dimes rolling everywhere,
unaware of alleys packed with the howls
of dogs until the chaos of it all
was crushed under the wheels of a bus running,
up to this point, exactly on schedule.

Should you blame yourself?

A butterfly beats one beat of its wings
in California. Years and years later
there will be a typhoon that hits Japan.

Brian Jung

Abacus

I am counting a sparrow's feathers.

One, two...

The feathers must be counted and the numbers must be
recorded by sliding a stick through a box of sand.
The sand must not be disturbed.
It must not be disturbed after the feathers are counted.
The solar system has nine planets.
I counted those already.
I recorded the number by throwing rocks in a river.
Tomorrow I will count the rocks in the river but I will
have to subtract nine, nine for the nine rocks that
counted the nine planets.
I should not have recorded the number of planets by
throwing
rocks in the river.
It was an oversight, a mistake, it will have to be
corrected.
Counting the rivers will be difficult without disturbing the
trees.
Counting the trees will be difficult without disturbing the
sparrows.
The sparrows will, inevitably, disturb the planets.
I must face facts. The sand will never be counted.

Brian Jung
Miscegenation

One summer our youth group did work down south. The more we worked in mud and sun, the darker I got. After a week my back was the flat brown of stained wood. Another six days of Mississippi swelter, and it was clear to everyone but me our old family lies concealed skeletons buried deep in my blood.

I was twelve and wouldn't read Faulkner for years.

Our youth group had a black boy, and I was told the reason white churches wouldn't have us for Sunday dinner, was that commands to love one's neighbor, at least for Mississippi Christians, didn't include Bobby Taylor.

I wouldn't know for years our offense was not tolerating Bobby's obvious black skin, but ignoring the sins of my great-grandmother which all summer long blossomed on me like flowers over the grave of one long dead.

Michael Caldwell

Sonnet: Henry Adams to Elizabeth Cameron, March 1894

Camping at the top of Gran Piedra, King and I crowned this glorious day with rum and oranges as we watched night fall. Such colors! Not even Venice comes close to Cuba's riot of hue: purples, blues, and greens conspired to make our summit seem the center of some vast symphony played by God on the face of the waters. If only La Farge were here to paint it! After dark a thin drizzle chased us down to shelter in tents pitched in the rock's cleft. Yet more rum helped us forget the ruined cafetal which was to house us, and soon, our talk seemed the last good left in the world...

Michael Caldwell
July 1

summer-long frustration of right angle-only heightens my magnificent canyons intersecting at a favorite attempts to offer a reader anything experiencing sublimity and finding my which, though obvious given the surrounding beauty so futile. I sit in the high reaches of the steeply sloping, shorter canyon, on a rock ledge forty feet above Palisade Creek (a name which, though obvious given the towering cliffs above the canyon floor, nonetheless references a quality of the site itself, unlike the many Sierra place names honoring some human feat, as if the land is exalted in identifying it with so high a mortal as its "discoverer.")

I would much prefer to share this evening than to describe it, and wish a bare-footed friend would scramble up the cool roughness of this granite ledge and sit beside me, gazing with me down the seven-mile path (the reverse of my afternoon saunter) of the mighty glaciers which "flowed" down this canyon several times over the past million years. Like the glacier, my sight is stopped and held by the 4000 foot wall of granite ("The Citadel") at canyon's end which rises from the meadow at the floor of Le Conte Canyon, at the point of intersection between these two sharp valleys.

The colors of the east-facing Citadel, the grays and tans of rock, greens and browns of vegetation, and the white of still-clinging snow patches, blur together, the last sun sliver (thin as a dime) just now slipping below the wall, like the last of a snake slithering beyond view, with the darkening ridge forming a brilliant, jagged silhouette against the golden light behind. Ethereal puffs of cumulus float above the wall, their gray middles outlined in yellow and white.

The light passing over or around the Citadel, diminished with the sun's setting, gilds the spires of the southwest-facing wall farther up this canyon, behind me. The light will keep the rock's features distinct long after ceasing to provide a reader or writer with enough of itself to gauge progress on the page at hand. At that soon-arriving hour, or during the night of a bright moon, the grandeur of a monolith such as this behind me appears even more striking, more majestic than while bathed in midday sunlight.

To stand in the crisp air and vastness of a clear night, before a glacial sculpture as this one as it reflects the minimal light of stars or moon, is as profound as humbling and immensely exhilarating. Quieted like the pious before the altar, I also itch with excitement, with "I'm Alive!"—enthusiasm. Indeed, this is the Range of Light, as John Muir proclaimed after his first walks here in the 1870's.

This thin mountain air does not hold its heat well, and so the temperature has diverged with the sun's departure. I will fall into my death sleep soon enough, but now will put on my wool cap and greet the partial moon as it drifts over that sawtoothed ridge up the canyon.

July 23

Through fear is freedom. These last two days I have gained much of the latter with my confronting of my fears—petty all, but nonetheless most real and therefore determining—of cutting myself off from the umbilical chord of a developed foot trail. I sucked my anxiety in under my resolve and headed out of East Lake, nodding to a pipe-smoking gentleman sitting cross-legged next to his backpack on a log, and into the northern tip of the Great Western Divide, a secondary crest, comparable in size to the Teton Range in Wyoming, paralleling the main Sierra crest for thirty miles in Sequoia National Park.

Yesterday afternoon, midway up a large, uneven cirque (which at that elevation was comprised almost exclusively of rocks and snow), elated by the possibility that I had found a ridge between the two creeks of the bowl which would lead to a pass over the vertical drift above me, I came to a sloping plateau, before me rising the main brunt of the ridges forming this basin. Budding hope dashed, I realized I was climbing 13,570 foot Mt. Brewer—not my plan, but any other route to the west seeming near-impossible (lower than Brewer but too steep), I transformed myself from a wimpy pass-seeker into a mountaineer.

Hours later, a four-limbed climb pulled me up a final chute to the zenith of that blessed rock pile. Three hundred sixty degrees around me and miles in all directions, ridge upon brown ridge, dotted with blue and

Letters from High Ground

Mark Geistlinger

Rick Gove

From the High Sierra, California

That this place tonight offers a particularly exquisite example of a favorite Sierra view—two deep, magnificent canyons intersecting at a right angle—only heightens my summer-long frustration of experiencing sublimity and finding my attempts to offer a reader anything more than a paltry sense of the surrounding beauty so futile. I sit in the high reaches of the steeply sloping, shorter canyon, on a rock ledge forty feet above Palisade Creek (a name which, though obvious given the towering cliffs above the canyon floor, nonetheless references a quality of the
green tarns, snow patches, and the green of trees, stretched to every horizon. The view, and the accomplishment it exemplified, affirmed me in my decision to walk for the summer, reminding me of a response offered a few weeks ago by a lanky man on his way to Canada, when I asked why he walked; he smiled and sketched a view from his night before in southern Yosemite.

I came to Mt. Brewer and the Sierra in part because I was not doing well in the city. The lament from a merry-tuned song was also mine: "...my work is like eating cold oatmeal, yesterday's oatmeal, day after day." I quit my job, laced up my heavy boots and set out eastward, allowing myself the extended time in the Sierra Nevada I have craved since my summer backpacking trips in Sequoia National Park as a teenager.

Next to the dried nectarines in my pack I placed some of the writings of John Muir, the nineteenth century naturalist/mountaineer/free spirit/defender of the Sierra. As with so many walkers and climbers, for me Muir has long been a spiritual mentor; he teaches us how to be in the mountains.

Of course, not many of us wholly follow Muir's example of "going light" (not his words, but Gary Snyder's: "stay together/learn the flowers/go light.") Muir's freedom of spirit and ebullient love of the Sierra wilderness brought him to the mountains unchained to (and, almost everyone else would say, unprotected by) all the literal and symbolic guides with which we moderns clutter our alpine experience: trip leaders, "how to" backpacking books, maps, trails, handrails, and—smile—all that glorious gear. Ultimately, the aides prevent the contact with wild nature which can help lead the initiate out of the vast, comfortable middle, toward death or profound spiritual growth.

These "guides" are but a small part of deep-seated tensions in our beliefs about nature and our relationship to it. Many of these (small lawn chairs and devices for warming water for a backcountry shower come to mind) are but silly gimmicks, yet many others, such as the outhouses and bear-proof boxes for food storage found in popular backcountry areas, have some worth in the role they play in limiting the human impact in the trampled Sierra.

The poplularity of the Sierra which has led to the cluttering of the backcountry with these impact-reducing devices is a direct descendant of that which was crucial to Muir and others in their heroic efforts to save the Sierra's most spectacular monuments—the Yosemite, the Giant Sequoias, the Kings River Canyons—from the sheepherders, miners, and lumbermen who had already torn up much of the mountains by the time Muir arrived in 1869. Appealing to tourists and nature lovers, many of them in the eastern US, Muir popularized the concept of "preserving" much of the Sierra as National Parks. However, in saving these and subsequent portions of the Sierra, we have compromised them; now they are not a wilderness but highly managed park lands in which human activity is strictly regulated.

Though severely compromised, the Sierra Nevada still affords us precious contact with wilderness, be it the icy blue underworld of a glacier's crevasse, or the chance meeting with a ferocious beast (the wilderness writer and activist Dave Foreman has stated that a place is "only wild if there is something in there bigger and meaner than you are"). Provided we are not foolhardy, the less clutter we bring to that contact with wilderness the better able we will be to understand the non-human world, and the richer will be our reward from the experience.

I do not wish to affirm those who come to the mountains as if to a workout gym, to prove their mental and physical toughness by the harshness they endure with minimal gear. Our gear and "guides" are only part of what can potentially burden a mountain walk. My own interaction with these wild places this summer has been encumbered less by the bulk on my back than by the host of doubts and concerns, lists of items "To Do" upon my return to the city, and petty frustrations which continually scurry about the nest they have made of my head. These trivialities collect into an unease which often keeps me out of the present, on the run chasing tasks. My desire, for example, to skip off the foot trail and into the undeveloped beauty on either side, is buried like alpine flowers beneath a June snowfall.

Muir would pity me, weighted by unease and hesitancy, the full depths of my desire unrealized. Muir's pure, inexhaustible love for the Sierra left no space or time for burdens in his early life (and can make it difficult to swallow all at once some of the more enthusiastic passages from his first Sierra writings: "I tremble with excitement in the dawn of these glorious mountain sublimities, but can only gaze and wonder, and, like a child, gather here and there a lily, hoping I may be able to study and learn in years to come").

Thus, I hoped to leave off my cares, as a Quaking Aspen gives up its golden spades to a stiff November wind, but too often have found myself this summer walking on the same treadmill I attempted to step off. Surely some of this pull (away from greater freedom and pure delight) comes under the strain of expecting too much from this summer walk. Desiring to take up a few of the letters, questions, and books left too long on back burners, I also hear Thoreau's own self-critique: "...it is of no use to direct our steps to the woods, if they do not carry us thither...what business have I in the woods if I am thinking of something out of the woods?"

Perhaps this difficulty is not so personal? Perhaps I am not a moper (after all!) but a modern who remains in the runner's blocks, afraid to act or love, having seen and learned of too much of the pillaging, bulldozing, and compromising (of the sort that soon became a leech upon Muir) that has laid so much of our continent to waste?

Yet, wild country still remains in these mountains (and elsewhere), and neither disquietude or despair is a good disposition for a walk into that
grandeur. A proper mountain spirit begins only with curiosity, willingness, and humility. I came to believe that freeing my desire from this collective unease required skipping off that foot trail, which had become a track for me, leading me through places rather than into them. It led me to glance too easily at my maps, to calculate mileage gained and remaining. A trail assures its follower of safety, relative comfort, and daily contact.

All of these trail attributes have their worth and place, but I needed to take leave of them if I were to open more space in myself for (mimicking Muir) Nature’s Blessings. And there, atop Mt. Brewer, the warmed afternoon air, rushing up the slope freeing my desire from this collective and humility. I came to believe that comfort, and daily contact assures its follower of safety, relative mileage gained and remaining. A trail assures its follower of safety, relative comfort, and daily contact.

August 11

This morning I am a snake, and my sleeping bag a wet dog. We both need to be bathed and then stretched out to dry in the full sun.

With the vitality of winter molasses, I slithered away from my companion and unto this large rock to rejuvenate before today’s seemingly more confident sun. Blood is beginning to pump, my body warming and becoming less stiff. I will contemplate the bath.

Often I have expressed a fondness for rainy days and a passion for almighty blow-out thunderstorms. These past three days the Good Lord, that master weather brewer, is testing my attractions. I cannot remember the last day when the sun did not, by mid-afternoon, relinquish its throne to the cumulus masses. Last week, the clouds daily gathered, though new arrivals continually sauntering in, but the rowdies only loitered, their occasional thunder clap eventually seeming cheap.

In truth, I have thoroughly enjoyed this “occupation,” even after the clouds burst during the night of the August 8, as I slept in my goose down cocoon beneath a white fir by Deer Creek. The rain, mist, lightning, thunder, and clouds of the storms filled the canyons through which I rambled, blurring any distinction between heaven and earth.

And now this grassy, rolling land, an open lodgepole and white pine forest bordered by the snowy aretes of the Ritter Range, is utterly soggy. Even after the earth and its thirsty pine and fir giants drank their fill, after every snow-melt channel was activated to carry away the torrent, the brooks becoming creeks and the streams exalted temporarily to river status, still every flatter area has been rendered a swamp or pond, reservoirs to contain the deluge.

Last evening the cloud cover broke up, and well after sundown a curtain of cloud drifted to one side, revealing a virtually full moon. Clouds and moon departed by morning, though several cotton puffs have now formed during my hour on the rock.

If my sleeping bag and socks are not yet dry, I at least am. The sun has kneaded out some of the stiffness which settled in my joints and muscles with these recent chilly rains, and I am ready to accept the day’s invitation for a walk.

August 18

Evening into night, another day passes, this one ending as few have this summer: my eyes squinting to gather in blue ink on paper yellowed by the dancing light of a rare campfire. With the fire’s heat I also feel the warmth of being given a gift. True, I gathered up this gift of wood, but in its abundance in this place, with the deaths of three mighty, much-branched lodgepole pines, wasn’t it offered?

This fire, when there is no biting cold which I need it to ward off, or water pot to boil, is pure luxury, decadence. The many colors of the fire, the crackles of shooting sparks, the heat, and mosquito-deflecting (as well as eye-burning) smoke are all the release of the sun, slowly gathered by the millions of green couplets of these lodgepole pines and then stored in the solid limbs and trunks, even after their deaths and thunderous falls to forest floor.

The fire needs no sacrificial animal; its flaming pile of fine wood, decades in the making, sent not back to earth to nourish a new generation of lodgepole pines, but into the cold night air, is offering in itself.

Immersed in the present, with the glow and warmth it offers, I’ve no idea where all my concerns and fears have run off to. Accepting the gift of this fire, I am blessed again with sentiments increasingly familiar this summer: delight and solemnity, joy and reverence. A thanksgiving is in order, perhaps best offered and celebrated by a midnight dance around these flames.

From Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia...

In the last eighteen months I’ve taught English, learned Mongolian language, travelled to the Gobi Desert and the birthland of Chinghis Khan, lived in two different cities—Ulaabaatar and Bulgan—and met many Mongolians. And I’ve spent many hours contemplating how culture and people and language and place interact to create meaning—how these disparate elements serve to define Mongolia and myself.

Before arriving in Mongolia my

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The Cresset
consideration of other lands and other peoples was largely confined to reference books and media. These sources never satisfied my curiosity completely, but I thought somehow they sufficed. Now I recognize the shortcomings of these sources and even the dangers implicit in a reliance on them. Squarely among the people of Mongolia, I sense that I will never be able to return solely to reference sources and media for definitions of other places, because these sources often overlook the simple fact that people inhabit other places.

I remember arriving at the train station in Ulaanbaatar—the capital—on July 3, 1991, at about ten in the evening. The trip from Beijing had lasted about 36 hours, taking us from rice paddies, past the Great Wall, through the Gobi desert and onto the steppes of central Mongolia. I stuck my head out of the open, grimy window and eagerly considered the images around me. The sun still shone brightly on the large, imposing grey train station. Large blocks of apartment buildings occupied the view beyond the station. Amidst the scrambling of people getting on and off the train, a group stood holding a sign welcoming us to Mongolia. Several in the welcome group were definitely Americans, but the others were different.

They weren't Asians of China or Vietnam or Japan, and they weren't Europeans of Russian, Ukraine or the Baltics. Their bone structure was strong and sturdy, their cheekbones high and pronounced, their hair black and their almond-shaped eyes brown. They spoke an odd language, but not a tonal language like I had heard in Beijing. I crowed off the East German train and onto the Russian bus with the others and all our luggage. Several Mongolian men sat near me in the back, eager to help. Smiles and sparkling eyes marked their faces. I had finally arrived at my Peace Corps post along with 24 other Peace Corps trainees. We were the first Peace Corps group ever to set foot in Mongolia, and my first impression was that, for all its strangeness, this place was not as unfamiliar as I had expected.

Eighteen months ago language seemed more an entity to conquer than an entity to comprehend and understand. I considered language an entity unto itself; I thought language could stand alone and apart from other cultural considerations. Now I realize that language is an extension of culture—a system representing beliefs and values and thoughts and traditions as well as simple communication. Now I realize that living in another country and learning another language consumes not only time and energy but also the soul and the mind. And when the consideration of language surfaces at the craziest moments, you realize that language is indeed consuming you.

I spent a month in Hentii Aimag (an aimag is a province)—the birthplace of Chinghis Khan—teaching an intensive English course last summer. One evening a student took me to his friend's house. They presented me a horse to ride to the river, and thus we started off, I on horseback, they on foot. Upon arriving at the river we stripped to our underwear and splashed for a bit in the shallow water. Returning to the friend's house, I concentrated on my horse. I had ridden horses before, but suddenly I wondered what language his particular horse spoke. What if it took off at a gallop despite my cries to stop, not halting until miles later? If I spoke Mongolian, would it understand me? Does language matter to a horse? Generally, Mongolians do not name their animals, so even that recourse was cut off for me. Several minutes later I dismounted without incident, but I couldn't stop wondering how best to communicate with the horse.

Tsetsigay studies in my adult class in the evenings. She and her husband, Sheergal, recently opened a private bakery in Bulgan. They studied together in Odessa in Ukraine; she studied culinary engineering, he studied mechanics. Tsetsigay makes perhaps the best baked good in Mongolia, and that is no small feat. Flour is rationed, but she has plenty of flour. Butter is rationed and usually unavailable, but Tsetsigay has plenty of butter. Sugar is rationed, but she has plenty of sugar. I'm not sure exactly how Tsetsigay and Sheergal obtain their materials, but the answer certainly lies in connections. Tsetsigay's brother perhaps works in food store number two; Sheergal's sister's husband's uncle perhaps works for the provincial government. Whatever the source, their optimism and determination despite the conditions is inspiring and convincing.

This past September I spent a week in the countryside of Bulgan Aimag with my friend's parents. They are traditional herders of horses, cows, sheep and goats. Rensen and I arrived at the herding site via Russian jeep. His mother, Tsind, ushered us into the largest ger and offered us traditional Mongolian milk products: suutey tsai, airag, aruhl, and beaslag—milk tea, fermented mare's milk, curds, and cheese, respectively. The ger was medium-sized. White felt covered the circular wooden frame and the cone-shaped ceiling on the outside. At the top of the cone a chimney protruded, emitting smoke from the wood-burning stove. Inside, the stove stood in the center. In a circular pattern from left to right around the ger stood a large leather container for making airag, a steel-framed bed, a brightly-colored wooden dresser, a shrine to Buddha and the Dalai Lama, another brightly-colored wooden dresser, another steel-framed bed, and wooden shelves filled with cooking material and utensils. Next to the stove was a small table and stools. The floor was in part covered with carpets, in part exposed earth. There was no electricity—only candles and a lantern. The wooden frame was painted in yellows, reds, greens, blues and whites on the inside. Apart from one other ger and two other herding families, Rensen's family and their animals lived
isolated amongst hills and snow-capped mountains and trees and lakes and fenceless expanse.

In the morning and in the evening they milked the cows. Six times a day they milked the mares. They tended the sheep and goats and fetched water and mended their saddles and cut wood. During the day they ate light snacks of milk products. After the last milking of the day they played dembay and horoo—games played with airag—or cards. Visitors came by horse, motorcycle and car. Some visitors they knew; some they had never met. But such a distinction didn’t matter—in Mongolia a ger’s door is open to all traveler’s for rest, food, airag and conversation. Finally they went to bed—six people spread about on the two beds and the ground. They lived life in the simplest form I have ever encountered.

I have penned many letters during my year-and-a-half in Mongolia—many at desks. I remember the desk in the Khangai Hotel in Ulaanbaatar during Peace Corps training which faced a window and a view of the Mongolian Circus, a small park, Soviet-style block apartment buildings, a busy street, and the massive Russian Embassy. I remember the desk in my Soviet-style, foreigner-only view of more apartment buildings, bustling sidewalks, the State Department Store, and the massive Russian Embassy. And now I write at a desk in another Soviet-style apartment building in Bulgan—a small city northwest of Ulaanbaatar—which faces a wall and a view of some fifty photographs of family and friends against a backdrop of Soviet-made blue and white print wallpaper.

These letters have all been written attempts to define this experience for others and for myself. I used to think definitions were simply precise descriptions. Perhaps this definition of definition is useful, but the dictionaries and textbooks and encyclopedias and media have provided me disappointing descriptions. These sources generally led me to believe that countries and cultures were the sum of their historical incidents, economic activity, geographical data and political infrastructure. These sources cultivate a we versus them mentality which defines people by political ideology.

These sources, particularly media, led me to believe that other countries and their successes and difficulties were as large or small as the coverage given to them.

But underneath these data and beyond such coverage are people. Generally, people live in Mongolia for their entire lives. They didn’t begin their way of life when I arrived, and they won’t abandon it when I leave. Of course, politics and economic activity and geography affect the Mongolian people. Mongolians are piecing together their own set of definitions now that the former Socialist regime has been overturned. But as I meet Mongolians—such as those who greeted me at the train station, and Tsetigay and Sheergal, and Rensen and his family—and they meet me, we are learning that the definitions we have grown up with concerning each other were vastly inadequate and often wrong. And I am discovering that definitions of culture and people and place cannot necessarily be put precisely, but that discovering definitions definitely begins precisely among the people.
the ants

"...but we just discovered a swarm of ultra-mundane beings which possess as much reality and efficacy of other beings, but which enclose within themselves non-being"

-Jean-Paul Sartre

tick-tocktick-tock

I am not sure why I want toast
but I am sure I didn't like the noise
when the toaster was slammed down

(premonition)

or when the toast screeched up half done
with hints of cinnamon already on it
touching the toast feel the dying heat
the avalanche of ants cascading on formica
crawling in the bread on my hands in the sink
walls, ham-blood, street soil trees
things are falling apart, man a dead fly
or the smashed spider in the shower

this is angst, dread, and anguish rolling
on exoskeletal feet
this is where the right angles meet,
this is the wet spot on the ceiling
the cracks in the walls
crayfish arms on the dock
remains
I'm dying and it's not true
at all- I'll hold the soil still
feel the wet squirms
fall between my fingers
and pretend
nothing is a metaphor

Todd Wardrope
Cicadas

For Adrienne Rich

In their violence tonight the cicadas abandoned their shells. What a sight to leave us with, lanterns lit by the moon then forgotten.

Before dusk, I watched one tear itself apart. A seam broke first. The body churned like sweet, white chocolate. Anger came, land pushed up through its own sky. How quiet the old was, the new still hanging there in its body.

I envy them, that flight away promising everything is left behind. And nothing to return to. Their voices are fragments they tuck inside the unfamiliar bodies. The rest is discarded.

Tonight you were there with them. It was a dream in which the shells were words to toss behind. You moved on because the air is crisper somewhere else, because you knew you could.

You say you are the lucky one. But the moon fills what remains of your body, a skin like the rest cluttering this tree. The shape only holds because you left it that way.

Christine Rueter

Hearts and Souls


The black musical aesthetic, as Portia Maultsby has established it in her essay “Africanisms in African-American Music,” is a core of conceptual approaches, West African in origin, underlying the creative process. As Maultsby has demonstrated in a survey of African-American musical developments spanning four centuries, the vast array of black genres (from field calls and folk spirituals of the 17th century to contemporary gospel, technofunk, house music, and jazz fusion of the late 20th century), are stylistically distinct but share a fundamentally African approach to music-making. United by a common conceptual origin, it has been an inevitable fact of history that these idioms influence and inform one another. One outcome of these interactions is what Michael W. Harris calls “gospel blues.”

In *The Rise of Gospel Blues*, Harris uses this designation to describe the musical result when, in the 1920s and 1930s, Thomas Dorsey infused Southern blues with a sacred impulse. The first five chapters of this well-documented study are primarily biographical in nature and detail Dorsey’s early musical experiences in rural Georgia and Atlanta, and his flowering as a blues pianist and composer in Chicago. Harris underscores the relationship between Dorsey’s artistic development and his spiritual contemplation and accounts for his oscillation between secular and sacred orientations during these early years. The last five chapters deal with the circumstances surrounding Dorsey’s ultimate commitment to sacred music. Chapters Six through Eight characterize the reception and establishment of the gospel blues in the black church community; the final two chapters discuss the circumstances surrounding the composition of his most famous works and his eventual attainment of national recognition as a gospel bluesman. The 324-page book includes photos, musical examples, an extensive bibliography, and a general index.

Although Harris provides all of the penetrating detail of an in-depth musicological study, the book has several weaknesses. Harris generally

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- **Walter Wangerin, Jr.** is the Emil and Elfrieda Jochum Professor of the University at VU, and widely published author and poet.
presents historical data in a clear and picturesque manner; in several instances, however, his musical descriptions are clouded in jargon bound to deter all but those trained in music theory. The following passage, in which Harris analyzes Dorsey's improvisatory treatment of harmony, is an example of one such instance:

His alteration of the sub-dominant (IV) to a diminished chord by raising its root . . . provides a leading tone to the dominant seventh chord (V7) and thereby an authentic cadence to the tonic . . . (35)

Harris seems to assume that his readership is not only trained in music theory, but also familiar with the subtleties of black religious folk worship. He references certain of these worship practices—particularly shouting and testimonial service—without providing explanations for his readers, the majority of whom might find these concepts foreign to their own religious backgrounds. (Shouting, for example, is the practice of expressing religious ecstasy through dance. Testimonial Service is a time designated during church services in which worshippers affirm their faith by sharing personal experiences with the rest of the congregation. More information on black worship practices may be found in Portia Maultsby's article, "Africanisms in African-American Music" in Africanisms in American Culture, ed. Joseph E. Holloway, published by Indiana University Press in 1990, and Mellonee Burnim's The Black Gospel Music Tradition: A Complex of Ideology, Aesthetic, and Behavior," in More than Dancing, Irene V. Jackson, ed., published by Greenwood Press in 1985.)

Harris relies heavily upon notated musical examples, and in some cases, includes graphic analyses with these examples. In citing the spontaneous and improvisatory nature of the music, however, Harris himself acknowledges the limited value of these illustrations: "Even Dorsey's written gospel blues cannot be relied on as a conventional documentary source. None of his 400-plus published songs contains the ornamentation that is added during performance practice. . . ." (xxi). Harris's examples are also limited in that they do not convey the emotional and physical nuances that often accompany the delivery of this improvised music. It seems odd, therefore, that Harris fails to supplement his notated examples with a discography of suggested recordings.

The main value of this book lies in its treatment of black musical as well as social and religious developments early in the twentieth century. Because Harris provides a carefully documented historical context for the composer's life and music, the reader will find The Rise of Gospel Blues a useful resource on early twentieth-century Black-American urban history.

Teresa Shelton


Given today's rather tenuous connections between formal religion and the larger intellectual culture, the appearance of a theologian on the cover of Time would seem unlikely. Even in 1960, the decision by Henry Luce to place a portrait of his friend, American Jesuit John Courtney Murray, on the cover of the magazine raised ecclesiastical eyebrows. Murray's writings were hardly popular fare: his corpus consisted of We Hold These Truths, a diffuse and complex 1960 collection of essays, and a long string of articles dating from the early 1940's and buried within the nooks and crannies of the Catholic periodical world. To be sure, the central question of the recently concluded election campaign had been whether candidate John F. Kennedy's Catholicism would allow him to serve both American voters and Roman authorities. Kennedy's refusal to acknowledge any tension between religious and civic obligations quieted that particular concern; even more, the patriotic ethos of the increasingly middle-class (and native born) American Catholic community overshadowed lingering fears.

Time's focus on Murray was nonetheless prescient. Despite intermittent Roman hostility—including a ban on publishing any of his writing for several years during the 1950's—Murray by 1960 had painstakingly articulated a Catholic philosophy that viewed the American pluralist experiment (especially in regard to religious freedom) as genuinely beneficial and not merely a stopgap until a prospective Catholic union of church and state. Five years later, as an advisor to the American bishops as the Vatican Council, Murray helped author the Declaration on Religious Liberty that placed concern for religion at the center of contemporary Catholic understandings of religion and society.

Murray's bold opening to We Hold These Truths — "The question is sometimes raised, whether Catholicism is compatible with American democracy. The question is invalid as well as impertinent. . . . It must, of course, be turned around to read, whether American democracy is compatible with Catholicism" — suggests the scope of his investigations. Murray set himself the task of defining an American public philosophy; John Courtney Murray and the American Civil Conversation is an exploration and extension of this effort. One of its primary virtues is to recover the many dimensions of Murray's thought, and to include generous quotations from obscure but routinely brilliant essays and polemical pieces. The largest section of the book is a series of essays speculating on the reaction of Murray to contemporary issues; also included are Catholic and Jewish appraisals of Murray's work and several essays outlining Murray's vision of a public philosophy. Inevitably, some essays
(particularly those by David Novak, Gerard Bradley, and Robert Hunt) are more persuasive than others. Richard John Neuhaus's sketch is thoughtful; George Weigel's summary of the Murray "project" is a useful index to what neoconservatives see as the primary goals of Murray scholarship.

The authors work from remarkably similar premises. The contributors generally endorse Murray's warning against the barbarians who, in Murray's words, attempt "to undermine rational standards of judgment, to corrupt the inherited intuitive wisdom by which the people have always lived, and to do this not by spreading new beliefs but by creating a climate of doubt and bewilderment in which clarity about the larger aims of life is dimmed and the self-confidence of the people is destroyed." As early as the 1940's, Murray emphasized that the contest for the American soul was not between Catholic and Protestant or Gentile and Jew; the greater need was to combat indifferentism and relativism (especially within the academy). Murray answered relativist claims with a fierce defense of Catholic natural law traditions and an appeal for civil dialogue based upon the truths held by the American founders. Acceptance of these truths, as Murray saw it, was crucial to the existence of genuine dialogue and not merely disagreement resulting from different principles.

Before Murray's death in 1967, he directed most of his rhetorical fire toward either positivists dependent upon the scientific method or pragmatists willing to accept whatever "works." The contributions to this volume suggest that Murray's most avid disciples are more concerned about two other adversaries: those "rights" based philosophers (particularly Ronald Dworkin and John Rawls) who consistently privilege individual rights over communal concerns, and theologians unappreciative of the unique virtues of the American experiment. The criticism of the first group is generally persuasive. Richard Neuhaus, Robert Hunt, and William Luckey rightly emphasize the impossibility of a perfectly "neutral" public stance toward religion; or at least a neutrality that fails to establish the religion of relativity as an unofficial orthodoxy. Unfortunately, the criticism is occasionally ill-tempered. Is Richard Rorty nothing more than a "nihilist"? Can one measure a decline in "moral standards" through the prevalence of insider trading or the existence of AIDS?

Questions raised by theologians critical of the American experiment itself are answered less successfully. Surely Richard Neuhaus is correct in asserting that the wholesale rejection by the 1960's Catholic left of Murray's cool, reasoned approach to theological matters was ill-advised. Indeed, this collection demonstrated the fruitfulness and importance of his thought to American Catholics and religious people generally. The origins of the move away from Murray, however, stemmed from a healthy concern for justice, as opposed to civil conversation, that also emerged during the period. The civil rights movement, for example, began a "rights" revolution that may have led to troubling consequences in other aspects of American life, but it also prodded Americans to ask just what historical traditions were worth celebrating. As John Cort points out, Murray's emphasis on the Christian foundation of American democratic forms occasionally obscured the maldistribution of wealth, legal segregation, and foreign adventurism so disturbing a story in so objective a form does not, as you might expect, remove the reader from its power and implication; rather, it makes the tale seem elemental in the universe, unquestionably a part of this existence. We must all, sometime, in some form, confess and face it.

Stafford writes a novel with particular and patient care, constructing his narrative spare, piece by piece, fitted like Shaker furniture. Nothing's wasted. Nothing lacks its geometric relationship to the whole — and nothing, therefore, (a) strikes the reader as false or (b) outages past sense. All builds together with reason and inevitability.

This is the quality of his craft: though the story he has to tell is outrageous at the heart of it, as terrible and primal as the crime of Cain, it comes with an Olympian calm. To relate so disturbing a story in so objective a form does not, as you might expect, remove the reader from its power and implication; rather, it makes the tale seem elemental in the universe, unquestionably a part of this existence. We must all, sometime, in some form, confess and face it.


Frank Hager has lived a life generally content with two sons, a daughter, and a wife. His eldest son, Robbie, is mentally handicapped, though educable enough to attend high school and to drive. Hager has loved Robbie with so a consuming a love that his second son, Stephen, handsome and able, suffers in shadows. Even Hager's wife considers her husband's attentions to Robbie hurtful for the family whole. Much forgotten (even throughout the novel) is the youngest child, Elizabeth.

The story opens with the
discovery that Robbie and four friends are missing. Their car is found in the snowy mountains above Fresno, California, abandoned. Hager restlessly involves himself in the police search, unable to leave things to others. Soon a boy is discovered downhill from the car, bent forward in the snow, wearing Robbie’s coat—but it is not Robbie, and Hager feels exultant.

Nonetheless, the boy was murdered.

Thus begins Stafford’s mystery, for this is a mystery: who would cause the deaths of four “retarded” boys? Why?

But thus, too, begins Stafford’s deeper concerns, an unflinching examination of Hager’s own spirit throughout the unfolding of this mystery and his close examination, likewise, of family relationships. Directly we watch husband and wife deal differently (she wishes he’d leave it alone; but as each of the boys is found dead—yet not Robbie—Hager participates more and more). Directly we watch the terribly tangled relationship between father and second son (Stephen so grimly resistant; Stephen having just gotten a girl pregnant; Stephen, months after Robbie’s disappearance, blooming as capable and kind on a long youth-hike through the mountains; Stephen making Hager proud by helping weaker boys through dangerous straights on that hike, then Stephen suddenly turning murderous the instant his brother’s body, Hager’s son’s body, Robbie’s body, is found). Indirectly we discover the real, grave relationship that developed between Robbie and Stephen in secret, neither mother nor father knowing how deadly it had become.

When, therefore, we with Hager solve the crime and uncover the criminal, the mystery must continue. All the facts are learned, certainly; the novel as novel is well concluded. But the deeper roots in human community of the first causes of any single crime are left exactly as common and complex as they truly are. Ultimate responsibilities are never simple. And Stafford’s accurate attention to relationship throughout the book does here, at the end, stand in quiet, Olympian, incontrovertible witness to that. No, we are none of us, when one of us sins, exempt.

Notes on Poets...

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Brian Jung is a 1990 graduate of VU and currently is enrolled in the Creative Writing Program at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. His poems are forthcoming in Onthebus and Dreams and Secrets: An Anthology of Milwaukee Writers.

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Christine Rueter, a 1992 graduate of VU, lives and works in Valparaiso, Indiana. As an undergraduate, Chris won the Anna Zink Springsteen Prize for Poetry and the Academy of American Poets Prize. “Cicadas” is a response to a reading by Adrienne Rich.

Todd Wardrope is a student at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

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