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This oil was Wendy Brusick’s masterwork as a student at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Such a monumental history painting is rarely attempted by most artists and is a very moving achievement. Wendy very generously gave VU all her preparatory drawings, sketches and photographs and so has given current VU students and us all the chance to see some wonderful drawings and something of the planning needed to create this oil. Next month The Cresset will reproduce what seems to be a sequel, her watercolor Resurrection Crown.

RHWB

The Cresset
Ask Not What Your Country Can Do For You

Such is the level of partisanship to which all of us have sunk that the response to President Clinton's budget plan was depressingly predictable. From Representative Michel’s post-speech campaign message to any number of person-on-the-street sound bites, people who voted for Clinton liked it; people who didn’t vote for him hated it. I don’t pretend to understand the math, because anything more complicated than my checkbook tends to nudge me in another direction. People who sound knowledgeable tell me that our country has spent too much money, and now has to spend a great deal of income to service debt—a concept I do understand. What to do?

I thought that the Administration’s plan did set forward a way to improve the situation, and as a way of doing this it proposed that we would have to, for a while, spend less on “things we want” and more on “paying larger installments on the debt.” I understand that; we had to do it with our Visa bill. Perhaps it really is mistaken to compare the situations, but it is natural to make analogies to get hold of unfamiliar material.

Just two days ago, though, I heard somebody with another slant on it. During a report on an annual conservative shindig held last week in Washington, I heard Senator Phil Gramm put things differently. He said that some of us were pulling the wagon, but there were too many people riding in it. Ever since then, I’ve been trying to figure out the ramifications of his metaphor.

Maybe it’s a Texas thang. Is he talking about a little red wagon, being pulled down the sidewalk by the neighborhood kids? or a Conestoga wagon—the haggard mother, babe at the breast, squinting into the sunset from the seat, while the stalwart husband, rifle on shoulder, strides alongside? I’ve been imagining myself pulling this wagon, and wondering who I’m pulling. S&L directors? Lobbyists for the NRA? Kuwaiti arms buyers? Welfare cheats? Pharmaceutical companies? College loan defaulters? Army Corps of Engineers bulldozers? Slum lords? Corrupt urban developers?

All of the above, I guess. It’s my country, and all of them are a piece of it. Who should get out of the wagon? As I see it at the moment, there are too many people struggling along outside it who badly need a lift. Homeless families, children without daycare, men without work, old people without hot food, young people without skills. When we let people talk to us about getting some people out of the wagon, let’s give some thought to who should be in it. I worry that in Senator Gramm’s vision, cutting spending by percentages means eliminating the only chance some people have to get their breath before they can get out and help pull again.

I was twenty when I heard the formulation that heads this column. Insofar as I paid attention to politics, I thought Eisenhower had been a pretty good president, and Kennedy had a pretty good speechwriter. Now, with all my heart, I want to do something for my country. Could it be that all it would take is a few hundred dollars more in taxes?

About This Issue

Editors seem to think big about coming years, and announce grand plans for future issues. Reality strikes, and we then have to tone down our hopes of doing the definitive job on topics we are committed to. But sometimes, the reality exceeds our hopes. Last year, I said I wanted to do something that would talk about women and the church. I didn’t get exactly what I had imagined, but I think I have something better. This issue has a lot of material by women, most of them in churches. Not only articles, but poems, reviews and Wendy Brusick’s wonderful Lenten meditation in the cover painting. (Next month, we will add to the power of this painting by reproducing, in color, its Easter sequel.) The issue speaks for itself about these women’s passions, their seriousness, their intelligence and their faith. Would you reveal this much about yourself and your deepest convictions to an audience of around 5,000 readers—for a mere $25.00 honorarium? (Yes, folks, that’s what writing in The Cresset is worth—in today’s dollars, as they say.) I’m always grateful to the people who write for this magazine, and I’m especially grateful this month. You’ll know why when you’ve read it.

Peace,

GME
UNOPENED GIFTS: WOMEN AND THE CALL TO PUBLIC MINISTRY IN THE LUTHERAN CHURCH-MISSOURI SYNOD

Mary Todd

The nineteenth and last Christmas of my marriage fairly convinced me that I was fighting a losing battle. In this case it was my choice of gifts for my husband which told me that if I hadn't gotten it right after all those years, I probably never would. As usual, I had exhausted the list of unusual gifts for men, knowing his reaction would be predictably negative, and settled instead on several useful items of clothing, among them a pullover sweater by Calvin Klein. The quarter-inch CK initials were so tastefully stitched in the same color as the sweater as to be hardly noticeable. Yet, after unwrapping the package, he looked at me and said, "You know I don't wear anything with somebody's label on it." He never even took it out of the box.

Women have been struggling against their own label for most of history. Despite the complexity of reasons for the discrimination, prejudice and oppression women have endured, the difficult truth is that much of it is based on no more than the label—woman. Gender difference alone has been sufficient to preclude education, admission to professions, political office, hiring, and justice for women. Incredibly, very often no further justification has been required; the label itself stood as reason enough—no need to look past it into a woman's background or ability; no need to take her out of the box.

Fortunately, the two feminist waves of the twentieth century have successfully fought sexual oppression on a variety of fronts, most prominently that of discrimination based on gender. The consciousness of American society was raised sufficiently to cause many social institutions to re-examine their restrictions preventing women from education, service and employment. Churches were no exception—by a simple change in the wording of their constitutions, both The American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America approved the ordination of women to the ministry in 1970. The third major Lutheran church body, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, did not even entertain that possibility, though it had been involved in a joint study of the issue of women's ordination with the other two synods in the late 1960s. Missouri has continued to insist, as it did in 1969, that women are expressly prohibited from the pastoral office by scripture.

The 1970s began to reap the changes seeded by the liberation movements of the late sixties. The number of women enrolled in professional schools increased dramatically as young women challenged institutional teachings about sex roles and spheres. Women and men in the Missouri Synod raised similar questions, but the church continued to reject repeated requests to consider the actions taken by the other major Lutheran church bodies to ordain women. Meanwhile, women within Missouri began to recognize and acknowledge the call to pastoral ministry. But with that, a new question arose: how are women who believe they are called to public ministry to understand the prohibition of their church against it?

When she is prevented from exercising an option to which she feels she should be entitled, whether by tradition or by the laws of an institution or organization, a woman is faced with a choice. She may choose to continue to participate in that society or association, believing she might serve as a change agent, or she may choose to leave the community or group for one that allows her to participate as she desires. When that community is her church, either choice is not only difficult but requires both risk and personal cost. Yet, faced with the tension of being called to ministry in a church that prohibits their service in the pastoral office, women in the Missouri Synod have made both choices.

This is the story of nine women, all raised in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. They are Everywoman—they are single, married, divorced, have children, stepchildren, no children. They are singular women—pastor, professor, librarian, chaplain, graduate student, social worker, corporate vice-president. Yet each has had to make a choice about her church. Four remain members of churches in the synod, five have left for con-

Mary Todd, who received a BA degree from VU in 1969, is currently a PhD candidate in history at the University of Illinois in Chicago, where she teaches women's studies. This is her first appearance in The Cresset.
ggregations of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Four of those who have left have subsequently studied for the ministry; of these two are ordained clergy and two are seminary graduates certified for ordination. The fifth is a laywoman whose pastor is a woman. Of those who have stayed in Missouri, one is a professional church worker, one a former Lutheran teacher, and two are laywomen.

Three of the four feel called to public ministry and have redirected that call until such time as the church might change its policy; the fourth is an active layperson in her congregation who offers her perspective from the pew. That voice—the voice in italics—is my own. The women's stories were gathered from interviews that took place in November 1991 and are shared here with their consent.

All of the subjects share considerable common background. Almost exclusively lifetime Lutherans, though not all baptized in the Lutheran church, all the women recalled the church as being an important part of their lives from childhood on. Several interchanged memories of church and family in remembering the place each played in her own faith development. Excellent students—there were frequent references to skipped grades and scholarships—they learned their church's teachings well, whether in parochial or public school, and several decided early on to pursue careers in church work. It would be a disservice to them as individuals to attempt to draw these women into a composite, for each has her unique story to share. But within those stories are significant experiences that serve as keys to a pattern of call and response that marks each of these women's lives.

Like children in any denominational tradition, children in Lutheran day schools and Sunday schools learn Lutheran doctrine along with Bible stories and church history. They also learn by observing the adults around them. Important to several of the participants was the modeling of women who served their home churches as parochial school teachers, deaconesses or lay ministers—all appropriate and acceptable professional ministries for women in the Missouri Synod. One remembers her grandmother's lifelong unhappiness that she had not become a deaconess. Positive role models of godly women, then, played a part in helping shape the early stirrings of a call to church work, which some of the women felt clearly while still in the elementary grades.

Early memories pointed to future paths, but not necessarily to emergent feminist activism. Gayle Meskimen vividly recalls discovering at age seven that women could not be pastors in her church and at the same time realizing that she wanted to be a Lutheran teacher. She frames this integration in terms of parallel—rather than an "if not this, then that"—understanding. By the time she was in eighth grade, she felt "so called" to teaching that she prayed nightly for the means to go to Lutheran high school for preparatory education. Norma Everist speaks of an acute memory at age six in which she acknowledged, "I don't really want to be a leader, but I think I will have to be." Diane Ott-Hager questioned her pastor during a sixth-grade confirmation class about the church's teachings, which seemed to her to be inconsistent with its practices, and she was encouraged to continue asking hard questions. Heidi Michelsen's pastor expressed hope that the church might change its practice in time. But others were stopped in their formative tracks. Kate Hallock, the oldest daughter of a Missouri Synod pastor, fully expected that she would become a pastor as her father, the oldest in his family, had done. She was almost twelve when a family conversation made it clear to her that that would not be the case. Disappointed, she believes she sublimated recognition of her call until her mid-twenties.

Central to Christian understanding of the ministry of all believers is the belief that God has gifted each person with spiritual gifts. Baptism is the beginning of the Christian journey of ministry. One's gifts are identified and affirmed within one's community of faith. Affirmation can come from any of a variety of sources—family, friends, congregation, classmates, or colleagues. For young women, however, the most critical approval is sought from one's family. The support of their parents has been important to these women, and most families helped their daughters pursue a Lutheran education so long as they were also pursuing a ministry acceptable for women. Both Heidi and Diane chose pastoral ministry as their intended careers for high school career day projects. In the process, Diane wrote to Concordia Seminary in St. Louis for information about studying for the ministry, and received the seminary's enrollment packet addressed to "Duane." Heidi's school counselor sent her and a friend to nearby Fuller Seminary in California to spend a day with female seminarians. After the visit, the girls felt comfortable to share their dreams with their pastor, who gave them limited support, but Heidi was not yet able to tell her parents of her wish: "It was too scary to say that." Four years later, on a Christmas break from college, Heidi finally told her parents that she wanted to study theology and become a pastor. Her earlier fears were realized in a dramatic encounter she describes simply as "not pretty," when her father threatened to find another church if his ever got a "lady pastor," and her mother told her, "It will be so hard. No one will accept you." Devastated by her parents' reaction, but not deterred, Heidi needed to go outside her family for assurance that "I wasn't crazy, that there were other people who do this." She returned to the deaconess community at Valparaiso, who not only affirmed her calling but provided role models of women in ministry for her.

Nancy Eaton relates an early memory of family arguments, always on the way home from church, when she and her sisters would challenge their parents over "the conflict
of what the church is supposed to be about versus the actual experiences.” Now an ELCA pastor, Nancy is amused that her parents, members of a Missouri Synod congregation, “still don’t know what to do with me.”

The congregation can also serve as a source of affirmation. Norma’s congregation became family to her after she moved with her mother and sister following her father’s death when she was only eleven. Encouraged by both the pastor and his wife to use her gifts in teaching and music, her experience was a positive one that she claims led her to seek her vocation in church work. But she never imagined herself becoming a pastor. After all, she had heard in confirmation class that because women became mothers they could not become pastors: “I never challenged the idea. I was a dutiful girl. I was very responsible. I excelled by responsibility the way girls often do. It never occurred to me that women might be pastors.” But Liz Yates’ experience was hardly affirming. After repeated offers to serve her congregation as minister of music were rejected, she turned her attention to adult education instead.

For others, the affirmation of their call came from unexpected sources. Liz recalls dating a young man in high school who perceived a calling in her and told her he thought she should become “a nun or something.” (There are probably many young women throughout history who have heard the same line, but not in the same context Liz did.) As a freshman in high school, Gayle engaged an evangelist named Sonny Fleming in debate for several hours after a local revival at which he spoke. As she left, only after her father came to find her when she missed dinner, the revival preacher encouraged her never to give up her questioning about faith issues.

The experiences of their formative years spoke strongly to these young women. Those who desired to pursue careers in professional church work chose to follow paths leading to what they knew as acceptable models of ministry for women. Later experiences would confirm their early sense of calling. Interestingly, none indicated a desire to become involved in church work vicariously—no one looked to becoming a pastor’s wife as a means of answering the call, even though several had positive role models in their own pastor’s wife, who in two cases were also their own mothers!

It would be early encounters in parishes following their graduation from college that next spoke to the women. After Kate had learned she could not be a pastor, she knew one thing she definitely did not want to do, and that was teach. But soon after relocating to a new state, she was asked to be lay catechist for the seventh-grade confirmation class at the church she had joined. Because she takes volunteer work seriously—as “a gift from my heart”—she agreed. She found her experience very satisfying and realized not only that she enjoyed sharing her faith with others, but that she was good at it. As the person who asked Kate to teach that class, I can say that I sensed in her a deep spirituality and a commitment to serve. It is only subsequently that I have learned her story.

These are not shy women. They are bold in their faith. Norma speaks of a pattern in her life with which others concur: “If a door was open, even if it was open only a crack, I would open it further and walk through, leaving it open behind me.” The doors she opened were often at divinity schools where she pursued graduate work. While working as a deaconess in St. Louis, she took advantage of an opportunity to obtain a masters’ degree in religion from Concordia Seminary, which had opened its program to teachers. Later, while living in New Haven, Connecticut, another door opened:

Those were the days when Burton [her husband] took care of the children for two hours a week while I went out to do the shopping. I remember it was a January day and I decided the stores looked kind of blah after Christmas, and so instead of going shopping I went to Yale Divinity School and enrolled.

Yale was there, the door was open, I walked through.

Some doors had been closed to her, however. According to the rules of the Lutheran Deaconess Association, she was involuntarily retired as a deaconess when she became a mother. (She has since taken a lead in revising those rules.) And Concordia Seminary will not include her on their alumni list. Why? Because she is a woman.

Any discrimination a woman experiences is painful, but the pain is manifestly compounded when it comes from one’s church. Heidi learned upon arrival at the church where she was to serve a deaconess internship that women were not allowed in the chancel. Thus, her experiences as a worship leader in her training program would not be welcomed there. Nancy, who serves in team ministry, recalls the day a male parishioner called the church office wanting to speak to “the real pastor.” Diane recognized after only a year as a lay minister in a congregation that some members had an issue with a young single woman in ministry. And Pam Sieving recounts a conversation with a male friend who told her he had a problem receiving communion from a woman. In his congregation women served as worship assistants. One of the servers was his wife.

Increasingly, as they shared the stories of their spiritual journeys, the women spoke not of discrimination and oppression, but of affirmation. It was often a male observer who had seen their leadership who suggested that they go to seminary. Nancy was doing a clinical pastoral (chaplaincy) residency at a hospital in Houston when her supervisor, a Presbyterian, mentioned it to her. She thought he was speaking a different language: “It was easy for him but one of the most difficult questions I think I’ve ever had to
look at." After her first year at the seminary, Liz had a field work supervisor who assigned her to preach twice over the course of a summer. "The greatest identity crisis I've ever had was to preach the first time," she recalled, because she had been "indocrinated all my life that women didn't, shouldn't, won't, whatever . . . ." The congregation in which she gave those first sermons continues to support her ministry and regularly raises the issue of women in ministry to its church body, the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

From listening to their various stories, it becomes clear that none of these women have had a so-called "Damascus road experience." They do not conceive of their call as any sort of "lightning bolt," as Kate referred to it, but rather as a steady realization or perception throughout one's life. Their understanding of the call, then, is that it is experiential. Not one of them went off to college planning to go on to the seminary. But, as Judith Weidman indicates in her study of women in ministry, enrolling in a seminary does not commit one to seek ordination. (3) Those who have left Missouri and so enrolled speak of a developmental course, and they have sought guidance in making the decision. Norma had reached the end of her studies for the Master of Divinity degree at Yale when she realized she had to face the ordination question. She consulted her professor, Letty Russell, who frankly told her that it wouldn't be easy, but added, "we need some people inside the club to change the club." On September 18, 1977, Norma Cook Everist became the first deaconess to be ordained a Lutheran pastor in the United States. She did so after seeking and receiving the blessing of her deaconess community, and "to help change the church, so that all men would not have to be ordained as well as so that women could be ordained." Liz had not gone to seminary with any other commitment than to adult education, but was convinced through the affirmation of her classmates that she should seek ordination. She recalls them frequently asking, "What's the matter with your church that they won't use your gifts?"

Nancy and Heidi, deaconesses who had been trained in the department of theology at Valparaiso University, both saw going to seminary and seeking ordination the inevitable "next step" as their stories unfolded, but they found their seminary studies repetitive and anti-climactic. In addition, their parish experience was often not counted as a valid internship and they had to repeat internship requirements. Still they went through what they considered ritual "jumping through hoops" in order to be certified for ordination.

The women who remain in Missouri have redirected their calls in hope that the church might change its policy, in which case they believe they would seek ordination. Leaving the synod is an option they do not choose to exercise at this time. Diane continues her graduate work with hopes of achieving a level of credibility (by a Doctor of Ministry degree) at which she can engage Missouri's clergymen in a re-evaluation of the church's position. All of these daughters of Missouri, whether still members or not, feel deeply about the ties to the church in which they were nurtured and taught. They want to hold their church to the teachings they learned as children. When asked by a classmate why she didn't just go to another church body if she wanted to be a pastor, Gayle's response was to ask a question of her own: My church is home and family to me. Why should a woman have to leave home to serve? (Preus 45-54) Also not ready to shift communities and loyalties, Kate says she would find her own family tradition of allegiance to Missouri—her father a pastor, her grandfather a seminary professor—difficult to give up. Curiously, as they consider the possibility of the Missouri Synod changing its position on women's ordination, they express differing opinions. Some voices in Missouri believe the church will be forced to abolish its prohibition against women clergy for the most practical of reasons, that it will run out of men to fill the pulpits, a fear often heard in Roman Catholic discussions on the same topic. While Diane believes it important that the church change its policy for appropriate reasons, meaning adjusting its theology, Kate argues that "sometimes the wrong reasons will bring about the right results."

Meanwhile, the official position of the synod has been repeatedly reinforced since the other Lutheran church bodies approved the ordination of women in 1970. Missouri clearly believes that women may not be pastors. So, when Missouri women made the decision to attend seminary, or to leave Missouri for another Lutheran church, they learned what invisibility feels like. "Like a shade was pulled down in front of me and I didn't exist anymore," said Liz, who remained a member of her Missouri congregation for two and a half years while attending seminary. Nancy felt like a nonentity with her home pastor, recalling that in her experience, "all Missouri ever did was cut things off." Invisibility is how Missouri chooses to deal with women who challenge the church, says Norma: "That's how you get rid of women—pretend they're not there." She remembers walking down a corridor at Yale thinking: "There is not a thing I'm doing that Missouri Synod approves of . . . I felt Missouri had left me, this very church that had nurtured me, been family to me when my father died, had left me. It was with great pain that I came to that conclusion." Although they chose to leave the church, they felt the church had already left them, at least the church that they had known.

There is a real sadness in this admission that Missouri is not what it was, the church they grew up with. Historically, that is true. The 1970s are known as a time of the "great Lutheran civil war," to borrow the term used by James Adams of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, when the
church split over issues of power and politics and the inerrancy of the Bible. Those who advocated a more progressive position, particularly toward fellowship with other Lutherans and toward women's ordination, eventually left Missouri to form the Association of Evangelical Lutheran Churches, which merged with The American Lutheran Church and the Lutheran Church in America in 1988 to become the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The church that retained the banner of the Missouri Synod was at once more conservative and more dogmatic than the church the women had known. It is a church that continues to have no recognized female theological voice. And it is a church that claims to embrace an "unmoving theology" (Meyer 366) and therefore does not evaluate its theology as other mainline Protestant churches are doing.

An informal survey taken one Sunday morning in a suburban Chicago Missouri Synod congregation revealed that 68 per cent of the parishioners questioned understood their church's prohibition against the ordination of women to be synodically mandated. Another 28 per cent believed that the prohibition was based on the synod's stating that women may not be pastors because the Bible says so. These numbers support the 1986 findings of the synod's President's Commission on Women, which found that a significant majority of members not only believed that limitations on women's service were imposed by the church body but were uncertain about the meaning of the scriptural injunctions cited. In perhaps its most candid critique, the Commission went on to say that "There is a concern that the inconsistencies and uncertainties of what women can do is resulting in a church that is on a collision course with itself." (57)

While officially the issue of women's ordination is still a non-issue for the church, those who are worried are making an issue of it. Ralph Bohlmann, immediate past president of the synod, in a report to the churches in the summer of 1991, stated: "Contrary to what you may hear elsewhere, there is no clamar for the ordination of women to the pastoral office ... or for any other diminution of our confessional stance" (25). But headlines from the voice of the opposition, the ultraconservative Christian News, continue to insist that ordination is the agenda of certain feminists in the synod. It is true that since 1990, women and men have begun to ask the synod to open dialogue on the question, particularly to study the scriptural passages used to support the church's position prohibiting the ordination of women. But any change is still a long way off. The gifts remain unopened. In the meantime, Heidi and other women are saddened that Missouri is losing talented women who are making the choice she did, to leave their church in order to answer the call to public ministry. If given a chance, she would like to say to the synod: "This isn't really as big a deal as you're making it. It's not as frightening as you think it is."

It is likely the rest of the participants in this research would agree. Even the women who have left Missouri continue to hold out hope that the church will reverse its position on women in ministry. "My faith informs that hope," says Nancy, and "hope is the reason the church exists." Liz understands the situation as a matter of freedom of the gospel:

"I cannot imagine that God gives people gifts that he wants them not to use... . In my experience, God has given me both gifts and opportunities that over and over again people have said, "No, you cannot use that gift," and to me that's like saying, "God, the gift you gave us isn't the right one. You made a mistake."

Gayle asks bluntly:

How dare someone tell me that based on the body I happened to be born in—though you tell me it's a gift of God, you tell me it's the temple of the Holy Spirit—it's not permitted to serve the Lord that way?

These are women who are calling their church back to its roots. They are believers—their faith in God is dramatically self-evident, but they also believe what their church has taught them about their gifts, their baptism, their ministry. They merely want their church to practice what it preaches:

"There are questions still to be answered. The call comes from God—one cannot call herself to ministry—yet the call must be affirmed and extended by God's people, the church. For a woman to acknowledge the call means she must claim her gifts as authentic gifts of God. The arbitrary prohibition of a church body that prevents her from using those gifts not only limits the full expression of the New Testament theology of the church as the body of Christ, but fails to model any sort of mutuality to the woman in the pew—often the only place she may safely be. Exclusivity models hierarchy, not community. The continued absence of women from the pastoral office will only delay any movement toward wholeness in the church."

In the end, the women's stories center on the question of faithfulness. Women who have been well taught in their faith are asking their church to be faithful to them. Sensing early on a gap between their church's praxis and its preachings, these women also recognized that they would have to make a choice on how best to be faithful themselves. Pam, a laywoman, ponders what she sees as their choices—one either pushes one's church from within to reconsider its position, or one denies the man-made structure of the resistant church but not her call and goes to a church body that affirms women in public ministry. She sees both choices as ways for women to stay faithful. Norma speaks about her own decision:

"This was a way that I could be most faithful to the church that had nurtured me in the first place. I was doing what they had liberated me and taught me to do—and that was to serve and
use my gifts... The fact that women and men can be in public ministry on the basis of gifts, not on the basis of gender, liberates all of us.

Constance Parvey, one of the first women ordained by the Lutheran Church in America, agrees: "Having women in the ministry will mean that the ministry which God has in mind for the people of God will be enhanced" (Preus 157). Liz believes the witness of women in ministry will speak for itself, as does Diane:

As women experience the Lord in their unique spirituality, and that can only be mediated through each individual woman's experience, realizing that women are more conversational, more relational, are more apt to touch... I think women can bring a heightened spirituality and conscientize the entire church to new attitudes about expression of faith, theology in daily life... And if you are about the business of living life, you're about the business of theology.

In the long debate over whether religion has been a repressive or a liberating force in women's lives, these voices have declared it to be liberating. To do so has required risk and loss. Whichever choice was made, it has been her choice—in order to be faithful, all have become what Beverly Wildung Harrison calls "uncompromising agents of transformation of the church, in the church" (231).

These articulate women have much in common with the women about whom a recent study entitled Women of Influence, Women of Vision was written. Helen S. Astin and Carol Leland studied women educators who have been in the forefront of social change throughout the second wave of feminism. The profile drawn by the authors was one of a woman with strong roots in family and early experience, positive role models, educational opportunity, a concern for justice, and slow development of a feminist consciousness. A risk-taker (door-opener), she leads by example and empowerment. The name Astin and Leland give these women is instigator, which they define as a visible change agent, a woman of influence, a woman of vision. The participants in this project fit that mold remarkably well and share the bond of faith in addition.

To speak of women in the metaphor of unopened gifts is, in a sense, a challenge to the church to be visionary for a change, to step out in faith and learn what women have to offer rather than assuming they have nothing to offer because they carry the label "woman." Historically, the church has refused to take the gift out of the box and try it on. Instead of exercising good stewardship of God's gifts, its message has been one of anachronistic prejudice: open only the boxes marked male, it says.

Through the telling of their individual stories, these women have shared what is likely not a unique experience, but rather a representative one. How many more women have left the church of their heritage because it was not interested in their service? How many women still in Missouri's pews feel cut off from their church by its message of exclusivity? What is so telling about the question of the ordination of women in the Missouri Synod is the silence. Until now, the church has not heard the voices of women who have felt the tension between hearing God's call and being a part of a church body that says they may not answer it. In one sense, it could be said that the women we have heard from here are simply part of a long tradition of women in service to the church. In another sense, however, they are prophets, calling the church to be faithful to the vision of its mission. By rejecting the conformity required by the label, each has insisted on defining herself. And in so doing, she has let herself out of the box.

In my role as elder in the congregation, I was serving communion one Sunday morning during a service in which the Sunday school children had sung: Usually the pastors bless the children, but because one was absent that day, and since there would be so many children coming forward at once, my male colleague and I had agreed to share the "blessing duties." Suddenly the line stopped in front of me and a little girl named Heather stood there, pointing to the top of her head. We had missed her, and she wanted a blessing, too. I bent down and placed my hand on her head and spoke to her briefly. She replied with a big grin and then went back to her seat. I've thought about Heather a lot since then. That young woman had stopped the church in its tracks and demanded its blessing before the service could go on. I'm beginning to think that's what it might take before the church called Missouri can move along as well.

Works Cited


WHO I AM AND WHAT I DO

"... one could be seduced by objectivity into complete betrayal of one's own side of the matter." Joanna Field in On Not Being Able to Paint

After a year's leave from teaching I have been preparing assignments for an introductory liberal arts course in religion. Having read James Baldwin's Go Tell It On the Mountain, students are asked to write an essay describing one character's religious experience and comparing it to their own. As I write out the instructions, I recall previous students' essays written for this assignment; more specifically, in my effort to give instructions that will be helpful, I recall the difficulties students had answering this assignment. Many come to this class with good high school preparation, but of a sort that does not serve them well for this task. They have been taught to remove themselves from their prose, or to conceal themselves behind a nearly-fictitious third person: the reader, the author, one. Their teachers have initiated them into the conventions of objectivity and in the process cut them off from their own experience.

I, like many of my teaching colleagues, want my students to use their own experience as a basis for learning more, for expanding their ideas, for becoming educated. They are encouraged to use the first person: to say, "I," taking responsibility for their own reading and response. This "I" is not merely the vehicle for an emotional reaction or a private opinion. One of the goals for the assignment on Baldwin is awareness of the communities involved in the characters' religious experience and a similar awareness of the students' own involvement in communities. This awareness of their connection to a plural 'we' comes to some students with as much difficulty as using the first person singular.

In this context I also recall the advice I was given by one of my college teachers. In the midst of our study of the history of Christianity he told us that we should study what we are. I did not set out particularly to follow his direction, nonetheless reflection in recent years has shown me that I did just that. In large degree the orbit of my scholarly activity is an ellipse around foci defined by two elements of who I am. I am an active member of a Christian church; I study Christianity, of late, Lutherans. I am a lay woman; I study women, especially Christian women, most of them lay. I am a denominational historian and I am a feminist historian.

L. DeAne Lagerquist, a Lutheran woman historian teaches in the Department of Religion at St. Olaf College. Her first book, From Our Mothers' Arms, a study of the history of women's organizations in the American Lutheran Church, grew out of her doctoral work on Norwegian immigrant women of the upper Midwest. She has since published extensively on denominational history and feminist concerns. Her last essay in The Cresset, on Holden Village and the image of God, appeared in April of 1992.
The purpose of this essay is to explore the similarities between the disciplinary manifestations of two parts of who I am: a woman and a Lutheran. I do not expect to arrive safely home with the treasure of a fully developed theory or the precious stone of clear, complete understanding. This is not the first time I have set myself to the task. It continues a decade-long conversation begun in graduate school. Last spring, not long after my son was born, my classmate and friend Carol Anderson asked me to take part in a session at the American Academy of Religion national meeting to be called, “Missing Subjects: Public Discourse and Private Stories in the Making of Scholarship.” The affirmation of my intellect just when demands on my body were so great was alluring; I agreed to write; the first weeks my son was in day care were devoted to the project; but my effort yielded no paper. An invitation from The Cresset editor has set me to the task again, just as I return to teaching. Now an essay emerges, a few more remarks in a conversation of long duration and expanding membership.

As I understand the history of religions, a sort of science of the comparative study of religions, it emerged in an effort to stand in a neutral place with regard to the truth claims of any particular religion. Taking the experience of practitioners of religion seriously, the history of religions approach has not been much interested in the experience of the scholar nor of the audience/reader/student—assumed to be other scholars. Indeed, the assumption has been, as far as I can see, that both scholar and audience are solely observers and analysts whose own personal religion, or lack of it, is private and therefore irrelevant. They have been rather like artists who celebrate the idea of a folk tradition, whose work is admired for the authenticity of its form, but who are not themselves keenly interested in becoming affiliated with the folks from whose community the form arose as a vehicle of meaning.

In recent years a value-free, neutral approach to the study of almost any—and everything has been challenged by feminist scholars who reject the claims that scholarship should be objective. Rather they assert that the experience and identity of the scholar and of the audience are vitally important to what is studied and how it is studied. Since Valerie Saving opened her 1960 essay with the bold statement, “I am a student of theology. I am also a woman,” feminist scholars of religion have asserted the importance of who one is for what one does. The passion of their scholarship has been evidence of its real and immediate significance for them, for their own spiritual quests. Anderson has noted, nonetheless, that feminist historians of religion have continued to separate their personal religious experience from their investigations of other people’s religious experiences. The tradition of the discipline is strong. Denominational historians have a different tradition, however, one that at its heart may be more congenial to feminist concerns with regard to the relationship of scholar, topic, and audience.

For the scholarly arena the early feminist slogan, “The personal is political,” can be rephrased “The personal is public.” Behind this assertion is my assumption that the scholarly life, even pursued in the solitude of one’s study, is a public activity. This is implied in the end product of scholarship: making one’s work public through publication—in print, orally by giving a paper, or even in one’s teaching. A room of one’s own may be a prerequisite for study and writing, but it is not enough. The scholar requires a public: at least an audience, and even better, also a community of inquiry. Both are necessarily composed of other people. When the scholarly activity is historical, the topic often involves people who themselves become a segment of the scholar’s public.

Fine, scholarship is public, but what is this personal facet and how does it enter into public? The scholar/author/teacher’s own identity, experiences, and commitments—who she is, what happens to her, and what she regards as important—are a major component of the personal. These influence her selection of topics and her approach to them. What she knows about the identity, experiences, and commitments of her audience are also significant in determining which elements of the personal enter into the public arena, how they enter, and to what purpose.

A scholar’s interest in particular topics may be sparked by connection between a topic and herself. Women, particularly women who themselves regard their femaleness as central to their identity, are more likely to select topics about women for their inquiry than most men have been. Some have suggested that women are also more likely to study family life, for example. This might, of course, be attributed to women’s long relegation to the domestic sphere where they have had more experience with family life and thus are more able to identity its importance.

The scholar/author/teacher’s approach to her topic may also be shaped by personal elements of her life. Having rejected the ideals of value-free, or objective, scholarship, a feminist scholar cannot be neutral toward her topic; connection with the topic may engender sympathy. Not only does the personal shape the scholar’s attitude toward her topic, it also shapes the methods she uses to study it. The sources employed to investigate women’s history have included those used for other topics as well as materials previously less considered. Oral history, intimate personal papers, fiction, and material culture have all become significant sources for feminist historians.

The particular audience that is the scholar’s public and her relationship to it also influences the way that the personal enters into public. This is obvious in the difference between a lecture prepared for an introductory course and a paper to be presented at a meeting of the
scholar's academic association. The degree to which the public audience shares the scholar's identity, experiences, and commitments is critical. The more these are shared, the safer it is to allow them into public either in the selection of a topic, or by the scholar's approach to it, or in the assumptions that remain unspoken but understood. The laughter that erupts when a woman speaks to a female audience, but not when she addresses a sexually mixed one, is indicative of this dynamic. Among other women she may be more willing to bring intimate details of her life, or of her subjects' lives, to joint consciousness than she is before men. And the women listening to her may have the experiences necessary to "get" what is funny about those details.

The relationship between the scholar, her audience, and their topic also determines the legitimate purposes of the joint effort. This is why even in the arena of the academy the personal is not only public, but is also political. When the scholar and her audience have in common significant elements of their identities, experiences and commitments, the scholar's investigation of a topic is not merely "academic;" rather it is toward a common goal, even so humble a goal as to give family life the serious consideration it deserves. The goal may be for the direct benefit of the audience or the scholar as when they gain courage or self-esteem from the publication of their common heritage.

Feminist scholars who deliberately bring the personal into public have discussed their activity in various ways. Interest in autobiography, the genre in which the topic is the author's personal life, is one point of entry into this discussion. Nancy Miller, in her essays about what she calls personal criticism, responds to other authors' introduction of personal elements into their writing. She moves between being audience and being scholar in a conversation about questions such as this: Which details of the author's personal life are relevant to her exploration of her subject's? That she needs to go to the bathroom? That her feet are cold? That she is a woman for whom the secondariness of maternity is a form of cultural resistance?

Starting from their interest in epistemology and education, the authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing* have suggested that women learn in a connected fashion. The points of contact between their personal lives and the public arena of education are important to their education. If scholarship is more or less a continuation of the student's learning process, then do women scholars also have a connected way of going about their work? If so, then the entry of the personal into public might be thought of as a distinctly women's way of scholarship.

Feminist historians have been self-conscious about the dynamics of connection between scholar, topic, and audience. Adrienne Rich explores the pedagogical implications. In "Resisting Amnesia: History and Personal Life," she asserts that feminist history is distinguished from women's history by being "full of meaning." It is saturated with meaning for its scholars and for its audience whose relationship with one another and the topic is, in my words, "I" and "we" rather than "us/me" and "them."

Other feminist scholars are committed to identity politics in which personal identity, composed of multiple, tangled axes, is the basis of political activity. Not all axes have the same urgency in a woman's life. Those that are definitive of her self-conscious sense of self may shift over time. Thus a woman for whom sexual identity and the possibility of childbearing are central might use her energies and resources to expand and safeguard reproductive rights. Another woman might devote herself to opposing violence and war. Yet another might elect to align herself most closely with the fight for racial justice.

Perhaps last is closest to what I have described above—the interaction of the scholar's identity, experience and dynamics of connection between scholar, topic, and audience, to inform her selection of a topic, her approach to the topic, how she interprets it, and to what end. This I would call identity scholarship. It allows, even calls for, the scholar's "I" to appear in her work. It also recognizes the "we" composed of scholar, audience, and topic and it values the role this "we" plays in scholarship. This is a point of affinity between denominational and feminist historians: membership in an identifiable group has become the basis for that group to become the topic of scholarly attention.

Denominational historians' work is also, to use Rich's term, full of meaning for themselves and their audience whose connected relationship to one another and the topic could also be described as "I" and "we." Unlike feminist historians, however, denominational historians have not been self-conscious about these dynamics in their work. This has been a weakness. Some denominational history has been triumphalistic or philioptistic. Audiences who do not share the identity, experiences, and commitments of the scholars and their topic may well regard it as naive or narrow.

Unlike historians of religion, denominational historians have not been seduced by objectivity. The personal, if narrowly circumscribed, has nonetheless been significant for their public project. This has been the cause of some historians' disdain for denominational history, a general sense that it is too personal and not of general interest. It has been an insider's enterprise in which many of the scholars have been clergy and the audience has been composed largely of members of the denomination. When this observation is leveled as a charge against denominational history, it sounds surprisingly like the charge that feminist history is an insider's enterprise—the study of women, by women, and for women; too personal and not of general interest or universal significance.

III

This affinity is particularly vivid to me as one who identifies herself both as a feminist and as a Lutheran.
Perhaps brief attention to ways the personal enters into public in my work will serve to illuminate them. I have consistently chosen to study women, particularly women who are closely associated with organized Christianity. In my history of women in the American Lutheran Church, commissioned by American Lutheran Church Women, the interaction of scholar, audience, and topic was near the surface. It required revision of some portions of the book in order that those women who were its topic and one of its audiences could agree that they were truly represented.

Despite what I learn from these women, they do not provide me or my students with a past that is easily appropriated. As Judith Plaskow has said, not all the past is usable. Some feminist historians might therefore decide to turn their attention elsewhere. In part because we are family, I stay with them. I have also worked with Dorothy Day, Vida Scudder, and Pauli Murray: all religious American women, neither Scandinavian nor Lutheran. Experience and commitments have contributed powerfully to my attraction to them as topics for study. These women stayed with organized religion without accepting it as given; the paradigm of pilgrimage they offer me, my students, and other feminist Christian women is more directly accessible.

I am eager to turn to a cadre of Lutheran lay women, born around the turn of the century, church professionals in social ministry and education. Having spent some hours with their photographs, oral history transcripts, and mimeographed resumes, I thought of these women as I read of Nancy Miller's realization that her early interest in French female autobiography had included an unarticulated commonality: she and they bracketed maternity as a secondary consideration. The "we" that "I" am with these women who await my study rests not only on sex and church, it rests also upon being a particular sort of participant in that church: lay professional women. They seem like elder sisters to the Lutheran women in theological study who gather before our professional organizations meet each year.

I came to Lutheran denominational history through my study of women, so my approach to Lutherans is shaped by feminist historical commitments as well as by my birth into a family of lay leaders. I look at congregational life as crucial to understanding Lutheranism and place the larger institutional story in the background. More conventional denominational history has focused upon institutions, doctrine, and clerical leaders, overlooking women in much the same way that secular history, preoccupied with war and government, has neglected women. My concern for local church life and for lay people highlights women's participation and experience.

How Lutheran theological commitments and my generally positive experience of Lutheran Christianity have shaped my approach is more difficult to parse out. I suspect that my deep appreciation of the notion that people are both sinners and forgiven saints has informed the way I portray human behavior. This has not been intentional, however a colleague reading my work on abolitionist women commented on the absence of anger in it. Others have made similar remarks. That I have been more healed than wounded by my church may contribute to this as well. It certainly has made me less suspicious of religion than are some other feminists.

Feminists and Lutherans are two of my audiences. That the overlap between the two groups is small renders my membership in both a bit odd, if not incomprehensible, to the majority. It also highlights the reality that "I" is never equal to "we." This lesson feminists learned only after having spoken loudly of The Female experience. Now we are more careful to specify the dangers of falseness in speaking for a "we" that is composed of more than just "I." So too we are more cautious of speaking as a woman as if "I" were representative of the "we," all women. Even if I have indeed taken my teacher's advice and studied what I am, not all that I study is me in precisely the same way. Knowing that only a part of my audience or my topic shares my identity or my experience or my commitments, I need to speak with them drawing upon the commonness that allows us to speak in order that we may better respond to the differences.

Variegated patterns of sameness and difference compose every human relationship both within and between groups. If we come to them only as neutral observers, or only as individuals, we may not see the richness of the patterns. The "I" has perspective; the "we" requires accountability. The "I" discovers that the scholar has her own side of the matter; the "we" learns that it is not the whole of the matter. These connections between who I am and what I do are a way that the personal enters into public.

In my own case, what I do, feminist and denominational history, is a response to who I am, a woman and a Lutheran Christian, and to the groups to which I belong, women and the Church. Behind, under, and around this entry of the personal into public and my exploration of it lurks the theological concept of vocation which is far more than a profession or a discipline. That what I do is a manifestation of vocation makes me responsible in my work not only to myself and to others like me, but also to the neighbors who are different from me in some way and to the God who has called me.

Throughout this essay I have maintained that there is a basic affinity between we denominational and we feminist historians with regard to the relationship each has with topic and audience which allows the personal to become public in ways not common in many other fields. I have also hinted that we denominational historians might profit from being more self-conscious about the dynamics of these relationships as we feminists have. Finally I submit that we feminists have something to learn from we denominationalists about understanding our work as vocation. This may be the next step in the exploration. ☛
Aubade for Tamar

"Be quiet for now, my sister; he is your brother; do not take this to heart." 2 Samuel 13:20

She wakes
to the rasps
and husks of her own breathing,
a small child escaping
dark dreams—
his heavy hands.
Once, she thought him
handsome, her older brother,
David's first born
and favorite son. She couldn't imagine

insistent fingers elongated
like claws, eyes shrunk
to dim pinpricks, weight pressing
her down as if trapped
beneath the thick trunk
of a felled cypress.
She could not have guessed
Jonadab's plan, so obediently,
quietly, she entered

Amnon's chambers, ready
to do his bidding.
At his command, she cooked
flat loaves of bread, fed
him by hand at bedside, reasoned
when he demanded, "Come lie
with me, my sister," his grip
pinching her thin wrists,
pulling her resistant body
to the floor. When finished,
Amnon ordered
her to leave, suddenly repulsed
by the sight of her once-loved face—
a man, careless, quick to blow
broken butterfly wings
from mutilated specimens
into the strong wind.

White rays of sunlight shoot
under the half-raised paper shade,
winking eyes caught downswing.
Shadows dance
on the sheet wrapped
around her like a shroud;
she watches lumps of animals
and spirit-shapes lope
across her stomach
as she rocks side
to side. She knows
Absalom will sweat
to make Amnon pay,
but it is not enough.
she cannot know the silence
he will ask her to keep
will hurt more
than the loss
of what the Fathers call
her virtue. So she sits,
cradled by bruised arms,
hands, smelling of the hard cakes
she baked him, dig
into the skin below
narrow shoulder blades, rocking
in the hush
of morning's warm breeze.

Marjorie Thomas
A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO VICKI HEARNE

Vicki Hearne is a poet, philosopher, and animal trainer. Practised together, these trades have brought her trouble. A recent article in Lingua Franca, that National Enquirer of academe, evoked, if it did not precisely detail or document, visions of her stalking through the Yale English Department (where she taught for a few years) forcing her colleagues to their knees with the aid of pit bulls in heat. This sort of picture is amusing, arguably it is profoundly satisfying, but doesn’t get us very far; introducing Hearne, I am inclined to pass by her prose works: the merciless critique of the animal rights movement (“What’s Wrong with Animal Rights,” Harper’s Magazine, September 1991), the adjoining critique of the international pit bull scare (Bandit, 1991), the analysis of experimental psychology and its discontents, and even the most spacious of her essayistic projects, her 1982 study of relations between animals and humans, Adam’s Task: Calling Animals by Name. The prose has been widely disseminated, not to say marketed, and will, in any case, draw interest enough on its own. Let me, then, confine myself to a few words about her poetry—which Hearne will be reading at Valparaiso University on the evening of March 31st, 1993.

Hearne’s poetry has a history—an autobiography—a bit of it suggested in a memorable lyric about her father. During the forties and fifties, he was an Air Force pilot, working out of various southern locales. In the course of “My Father Rode Great, Silver Birds,” the reader is told how he (a) breaks his leg boarding a plane during a 1943 weather-reconnaissance mission; (b) builds his daughter “an aviary, nesting cages,” in which “We came to have 150 Parakeets;” (c) refuses to take up a plane in which he smells a gas leak (“Civil Disobedience?” Taken up by another pilot, the plane explodes); (d) builds an organ for “St. Clement’s” and drives five hundred miles to deliver it; explains to his daughter “Why . . . the silver birds/Have such big bellies,” where the silver birds in question are evidently B52s. Looking back, one could extrapolate much of Hearne’s poetic career from this portrait. The fascination with finely-balanced mechanisms, both dangerous and beautiful—and approximating, though never completely, the energy and purposive form of animals; the identification of the practical with the philosophical or perhaps the aesthetic (a set of partial identifications: the parakeets sing; the planes don’t—not in this poem, anyway—but musical ability has been displaced to the organ, that most machine-like of instruments); the balance between the controlled violence of state authority and the challenge to such authority, both curiously enacted by the same individual; the implied social background not only of military life in the south but also of an eccentric and obsessive family with highly specific interests (her father is said to subscribe to “Diapason, Printing Impressions, The Bulletin of the American Budgerigar Society, Bulletin of the American Orchid Society”), and of a high-church milieu somewhat detached from dogma: these themes, or situations, or starting-points, do much to shape Hearne’s crucial poems—most, though not all, of them about horses and dogs and their relation to human beings. “My Father Rode Great, Silver Birds” both stands outside this line of poems—for the planes are not, after all, birds: controlling them is a significantly different matter from training sentient, organic beings—and, by a strategy of contrast, helps define it.

Hearne went to college in Riverside, California (where her family had moved), attended on campus by a Saint Bernard named Molly and a canine of less determinate species who answered enthusiastically to

Richard Maxwell

Richard Maxwell is Professor of English at VU and a frequent contributor to The Cresset on a variety of topics. His book Mysteries of Paris and London, about Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, cities, and fiction was published recently by University of Virginia Press.

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Before the War

We ask aloud, knocking on God: Our last words—
will they be in a familiar language, one
that knows us as a sheepdog
knows her sheep, or at least like a dog with the flock and
against wolves¹, and just with it too, like Job
with his shepherds?

But that was all before the war
became so huge it overspilled Jerusalem,
all we could say about her and all
Job said too, beseiged by men whose fathers
he would have “disdained
to set among the dogs of my flock!” and our friendship

Was all in what we said about the war
in those days, even before
it broke out, my dear, as though the war
were the wide world sweetened
with goat paths. One day

The deficiencies of speech grated
oh intolerable and the next day
or so the war swelled even further. We retreated
from our words, which was the way
life went on. Why there is no truth

In the throat of the mob, in the chorus, is
not clear, but your goats are quiet this morning, there
is not to be found truth
in the mob’s throat. Here is truth:

Mark the keen grace of seagulls
staggered by swift gusts, how
only in that best of graces cold
is beaten back, mocked
as if by the purposeful slant
away of temporal wings. Power
Explodes thus and the eyes
flame with rapture; here is the hook
of justice, even in a flock, but there is falsehood
in the mob, the woman casualty
her body protesting with the chorus
just before it tumbled over the bridge, no
truth in the mob; this is a refutation

Of the excluded middleman. Truthless bodies, casual, not up to the world and tumbling.
Stay home and listen
for the telephone on which you will hear
some truth, conference call or no, and when
time proves more interesting
than your heart seek philosophy
apart from the mob because Truth

with nothing to say for herself
hums along with the mob now like a voice
inventing variations

And the gods—oh Socrates!
the gods
are unkind to each other and happiness
is the war ethic
that tried me and found me
wanting, as did pity. Hence: A rubble of broken fossils
trips travelers on their way home, sweepings
of what, withering in the valley, we failed to say, windy threads
that brought the mountains down. It is enough
to trip a goat, insouciant in the gayest season. Afterward

poetry is our only kindness
and all our joy when we are ready
to be named again, mistaken again
for the lion rampant with benevolence
at the stern gate.3

Vicki Hearne

1. The sheepdog of line 3 is a herding dog; Job’s dogs were almost without doubt a flock-guarding breed.
2. In Book II of the Republic, Socrates says that an eye must be kept on the poets, for some of them have it that the gods are unkind to each other.
3. When the Israelis took over the Old City in 1967, they entered at the place (gate) called The Lion’s Gate.
Listening Post

A brave man, sir. In 1968
He walked through a mine field.

You’re not listening. I am
So listening. No,

You’re not. This train
Goes through to Berlin and here

We are. Our horses will come later,
When there’s time for that and they may
Carry us again on their buoyant backs. We will live,
Here on our side of the Berlin wall, for horses
Have no interest in skeletons including
Those in the White House, look, Aristotle
Had a reason for writing the way he did, there are
Always the horses at stake. Someone
Must worry about the children’s pony, that tough
Hearted little creature whose feet flame and kill him
At the drop of a can of grain. So that’s
The job we keep not doing, and how many times
Do you think a pony can die and rise again? But
Don’t forget to excuse yourself when you leave
The table to negotiate the long flight of stone stairs
Cut into the hillside. I am trying to say everything
At once because poetry is a hero, poetry
Is a war hero, you’re not listening. I am
So listening. No, you’re not. Yes I am, those
Stairs, you’re talking about the ones you have to climb
Down in order to get to the barn where the hay
Is stored, and you’re warning me about not twisting my ankle
On my way to feed the horses, right? And you already told me
All about the manure ring, too slippery in the rain but:
Yes. When you put horses in such an area, tend them
Under an honest sun and they walk
About for years, sometimes galloping, sometimes even prancing
To our touch, the ground becomes flammable.

Yes. Yes. Yes, I am trying to say that the ground
Has become flammable.

   Excuse me I have to go
Feed the horses. Don’t forget the liniment
For Snowbound’s bowed tendons, he’s the one
Who will do it, from whose back the children
Will catch the brass ring, and they will do this
Whatever we do, but take care of Snowbound’s legs
And take care of the children’s pony.

In the play, it is an evil policeman in Prague
Who praises the hero. Someone must praise the hero.

Vicki Hearne

Notes

1. There are at least two people arguing in this poem.

2. The first two lines echo a moment in Stoppard’s play Professional Foul, when a policeman in Prague tells a terrified and confused philosopher from Oxford that his former student is a brave man. The policeman is there to frame the former student with planted evidence.

3. When I talk about Aristotle, I mean The Nichomachean Ethics

4. About the ground becoming flammable—this is literally true in some parts of the world, including Southern California.

5. William Steinkraus won the gold medal at Mexico City in the 1968 Olympics, riding Snowbound. He really did have two bowed tendons, both front, hence the name Snowbound. “He might as well be snowbound for all the jumping he’s going to do,” someone said.

6. If you have any other questions, my name is Vicki Hearne and I live in Riverside, California. Or contact me through my publisher; I’ll be glad to answer any questions you have.

7. When I talk about the pony’s feet flaming, I am talking literally about the group of diseases that come under the general heading founder. And when I say pony I mean pony and not small horse.

8. This is science. Every word in it is literally true. At 9304 Cleveland Avenue in Riverside, California, 92502, there is a house on a hill, and there are stone steps cut into the hill, and you have to be careful on those steps, they are treacherous, especially going down, and at the bottom of the hill are a barn, a riding ring, some pastures, and the ground there is flammable. Mel Opotowski, the guy who owns it, called it King’s Stables because there used to be a Shetland Pony there named King. It was his job to take care of the children, teach them to ride. King died a couple of years back, and the sign with his name on it has fallen down, and Joelle, Mel’s daughter, is off to college now. But the ground there is flammable. That’s where I keep my lame jumper, Peppey, and also a donkey, Jeremy. Peppey is of international quality, and Mel climbs the steps at least twice a day to tend his horses and mine, and I am usually late paying my board bill. Charles Olsen was onto something.

9. Now. Now you are ready. Go back and read the poem again, for the first time.

Vicki Hearne

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“Stevie.” She fought with campus authorities about where she could take her dog—a warning of much to come. She opposed the Vietnam War. She wore bell-bottoms (several pairs from that period are still a part of her wardrobe) and edited the literary magazine. She smoked too much and lived on grilled-cheese sandwiches. After her graduation, around 1970, she stayed in Riverside, training horses and teaching classes in poetry writing. She worked with a brilliant dog trainer named Dick Koehler. She co-authored Horsebreaking: The Obedience Method. A fellowship took her to Stanford, where her advisor/tutor was the English poet Donald Davie, a presence in some of her later writings. Through correspondence, she also struck up a friendship with Yale scholar and poet John Hollander, who remains a mentor for Hearne. Her initial collection (Nervous Horses, 1980) seems at first glance a book rather narrowly obsessed with a single subject, identified in the title. Then one looks more closely and finds a wider range of matter; there are the two poems circling about the subject of her parents, several compelling experiments in ekphrasis (i.e., the verbal description of works of art), a series of myth poems (focused on Midas and Daedalus). Too much High Art? An overdose of Wallace Stevens? Perhaps surprisingly, the book turns out to work convincingly as a whole, with the same issues at stake in the animal poems as in the others. It is clear that Hearne is prepared to treat the matter of animals and training as the appropriate center of a body of poetic explorations. There is a process of mutual transformation going on, among at least three genres: the essay in ordinary-language philosophy, the technical training manual, the lyric poem. To put this point differently: the study of philosophy seems to have opened up the genre of the manual, or to have shown affinities that it always had with the lyric, had anyone known how to explore them.

Hearne’s next collection (In the Absence of Horses, 1983) confirms this combination: Christopher Benfey’s essay on Absence (The Threepenny Review, spring 1985), perhaps the fullest critical treatment of Hearne’s work, begins with the surprised observation that Hearne (or her poems) are “thinking.” I would add that the thinking in question is metaphysical and practical, technical and anecdotal, lyrical and scientific, simultaneously—and that it charts, in a manner separate from both liberal and conservative orthodoxies, the nature of knowledge and authority—especially as embodied in the everyday, hands-on, world of animal training.

A recent Cresset article by René Steinke suggests that educated people have no excuse for remaining ignorant of contemporary poetry. Hearne’s longer poems strike me as her best; the interested reader can have a look at two of them, hitherto unpublished, by turning back the page. These pieces have been chosen for certain instructive similarities: the experiment with notes (which allow an accessible allusiveness and also communicate a respect for facts, for the literal, far more sophisticated and powerful than that run-of-the-mill positivism which often passes as “science”); the distinctive work with line breaks (used to articulate, intensify, and slow a sort of hectoring monologue, to catch that monologue at the moment when it turns from a nag, or a curse, or a bit of intrusive and unwanted advice, into a rather exhilarating lyric flight: silver bird with big belly); the circling, dodging concentration on a body of lore (actually, on two quite different bodies of lore: Jerusalem is Hearne’s subject almost as much as are horses and dogs). I recently spoke with Hearne about the first of these poems, “Listening Post.” She wanted to comment on two of the notes, to explain just why it is that the ground becomes flammable in Southern California (“the ring surface should be soft and springy . . . in inland California you use manure . . . the manure dries out, it leaves only cellulose, which can catch on fire”) and to confirm that, when reading the poem aloud, she follows the advice given by note nine: she reads the poem twice, a hint to the silent reader as well. She also brought me up to date on some training adventures—on how she finally conveyed to students in a dog-training class the importance of “straight sits.” “I was reading about the Kabbalah, about this rabbi—I think Rabbi Meir—who asks a young man, ‘What do you do?’ The reply is, ‘I’m a scribe of the Torah,’ [whereupon the rabbi comments], ‘Be very careful. If you put in a single letter too many or leave one out, you will cause the world to end. The good news is, if you get your act together [here, I suspect Hearne to be paraphrasing], you will add a thousand years to the life of the world.’” I think it is crucial to Hearne’s work as a poet that this playful seriousness or serious playfulness should have underlain her best pieces for many years. Her prose has these qualities too—some of it, arguably, establishes the same perilous equilibrium as her poems—but in the last analysis the poems are worth more . . . even in a culture where the reading of lyrics is taken to be a purely decorative or, worse, an “enriching” activity. On the contrary: every letter counts.
The Qummon Scrolls

Bruce Berner

A version of this article was delivered as an after-dinner speech to the Valparaiso University Institute for Law & Pastoral Ministry, 1 February 1993. Persons who are likely to think it not entirely serious enough should save it for 1 April.

—The Editor

The publication of this material at this delicate time risks my professional life and threatens to trigger a debate within the archaeological community of unparalleled viciousness and scope. Nevertheless, I am impelled to these disclosures by an unremitting commitment to Truth, an undying belief in the marketplace of ideas, and a firm note from the Cresset editor about a Wednesday deadline. For the past several summers, I have been privileged to work with two of the greatest archaeologists alive today, Dr. Heinz Scholl and Dr. Harlan Pepper. Eschewing the all-too-easy and timeworn approach of looking for biblical-era relics in the Middle East, Dr. Scholl and Dr. Pepper have been concentrating on digs just southeast of Sandusky, Ohio. This past August, they hit paydirt (as Harlan likes to say) in a little unincorporated area known as Qummon, OHIO. Unlike the Qumran scrolls, fragments and remnants which must be fitted painstakingly to fit a still-incomplete mosaic, the Qummon Scrolls were found completely intact, an integrated whole, unblemished except for a slight rip in the dust jacket. This is, in short, the discovery of our Age.

Just some brief background on these magnificent scientist/scholars. Dr. Heinz Scholl this academic year is a full-time Professor of Archaeology at the University of Chicago, UCLA, University of Wisconsin at Whitewater, Baldwin-Wallace, Texas Tech, and Pomona Community College. Dr. Pepper is Director of the New Jersey State Home for the Theologically Bewildered.

To be sure, malcontents upset at having been outmaneuvered by these resourceful professionals will challenge the authenticity of this marvelous manuscript. A few so-called experts, given a sneak-preview, are already rehearsing the predictably ungracious, myopic criticism. O.K., so the manuscript seems to have been originally formatted as ASCII text. Big deal. Just as tellingly in the other direction, the scrolls clearly bear the typewritten date “Thursday, March 16, 1288 B.C.” Take that, critics! One especially picky sourgraper is trying to build an argument for inauthenticity around the musical markings of the Psalms which alternate between Selah! and Da-doo-ron-ronn! Small minds tear down. Big minds find Scrolls.

Alas, all the pressure of this criticism has precipitated something of a falling out between Drs. Scholl and Pepper. This schism was perhaps inevitable anyway due to the fact that Dr. Scholl began by converting the scrolls on a Mac whereas Dr. Pepper converted them first to WordPerfect 5.1 through a DOS environment. These were fateful choices. For example, in a short Chapter called Daniel, three persons with the unlikely names Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego, emerge incredibly from a fiery furnace unhurt. (Some of the stories in this manuscript require a lot of faith to believe.) Dr. Scholl’s translation of the utterance of King Nebuchadnezzar who saw them emerge is: “Blessed be the God of Shadrach, Meschach, and Abednego, who delivers his believers, lo, from all manner of death, even death by fire.” Dr. Pepper, on the other hand, renders the same text: “Hey, dudes, it’s Miller Time!” And the discrepancies in a Chapter called Job (the Drs. are, by the way, quarreling bitterly over how to pronounce this name) are proving something of a thicket. In the Scholl account, the title
character keeps his faith through
deaths, locusts, famine, etc.; in
Pepper's account Job finally goes over
to the devil's side when his cable
coverage fails during the fourth
quarter of the Super Bowl.

A few critics, jealous of the
success of Drs. Scholl and Pepper,
claim that although the text of the
Chapter called Song of Solomon may
be authentic, the accompanying
photographs are (a) in very bad taste
and (b) proven inauthentic by the
word FUJI stamped on the reverse. It
is sad that serious scholars must
endure these petty assaults. (It is also
sad that Dr. Pepper's announced need
to study these pictures "with
scrupulous scholarly care" set the
project back several months.)

But why ask the reader to judge
authenticity through secondary
criticism when portions of the
manuscript can be released for all to
evaluate? I take great pride in
bringing you the first published
extract from the Qummon Scrolls, this
selection from the 20th part of the
second Chapter which Dr. Scholl,
always the European formalist,
translates as "EXODUS." Dr. Pepper,
whose graduate training was at Cal-
Berkeley, has it as "BLOWING
TOWN."

***

After Moses had gone up the
mountain, God gave these words to
Moses on two tablets: "I am the Lord
your God. Thou shall have no other
Gods before me. Thou shall not make
wrongful use of the name of the Lord
your God. Remember the Sabbath
day and keep it holy. Honor your father
and your mother. Thou shalt not kill.
Thou shalt not commit adultery. Thou
shalt not steal. Thou shalt not
bear false witness against your
neighbor. Thou shalt not covet your
neighbor's house or your neighbor's
spouse or slave, or ox, or donkey, or
anything that belongs to your
neighbor." Then God said, "This is
the law of the Lord. Take these Ten
Commandments to the people; then
return with your brother Aaron."

After several moments, Moses
returned with Aaron and his sister
Miriam. "Here are my brother and my
sister, Lord!" said Moses. "You should
know that the three of us just
completed law school." And God said,
"How could you so defile yourselves?"
And Moses said, "The economy has
not been good. Manna is nice, but,
c'mon, how about a little variety?
Plus, all this wandering. We were
bored. We went to law school. Sue
us." Aaron interjected, "The people
have hired us to represent them. And
on what you have written and told our
brother, Moses, our clients have, it
turns out, many questions and
concerns."

Miriam continued: "Indeed, my
clients have deep worries about these
Ten Commandments as you call them.
Some matters we are simply not clear
on and others we'd like to negotiate
a bit on." And God screamed,
"Negotiate? You want to negotiate?
With the Creator of the Universe? Are
you serious? These are not Ten
Suggestions or Ten Guidelines or Ten
Goals or even Ten Strategic-Planning
Action Steps, these are the Ten
Commandments. Do you not know
that I make the wind to blow, the sun
to shine, the oceans to rage?"

And Aaron said, "Posturing is no
answer. Lighten up, for your own
sake! With all due respect, God, how
does creating the universe immunize
you from listening to our concerns?
As a matter of brute fact, creating the
universe strictly entails listening to us.
And terminology is not critical. We
have no objection to whatever you wish
to call them. If 'Commandments'
pleases you, fine. We simply wish to
deal with a few issues by toning down
some of the more categorical verbiage.
Surely these ideas aren't written in
stone."

And Moses took Aaron aside and
whispered something to him. And
Aaron turned back to God and said,
"Oh, sorry. What I meant was, can't
these words be changed? Uh, surely
you can get more tablets?"

And Miriam interjected: "Before
we get back to the content of these
laws, my clients have great difficulties
with the process used here. Where was
our input? There is no consensus
building going on here. Where was
the public discussion, the give and
take?"

To govern wisely, don't you know
you must have the consent of the
governed? How will the people ever
take ownership of these principles if
they feel they have been imposed on
them? It's like you're operating with
some kind of divine right. This all
seems to have been decided at a secret,
executive session in violation of the
Sunshine Laws. How undemocratic
this all is. There was no vote."

And suddenly the mountain
shook, 10,000 trumpets blasted, birds
stopped stockstill midair in their
flights, rivers froze to their banks, the
Earth stopped spinning on its axis,
Lutherans stopped bickering, and God
said in a powerful voice "I VOTED! . . .
THE COMMANDMENTS PASSED! . . .
2 to 1!"

And Aaron continued: "Much of
our problem with these commands is
that they are in conflict with our most deeply-held
beliefs, which we call The Ten
Assumptions. For example, your very
first one, 'Thou shalt have no other
Gods before me.' That's pretty wide
open, don't you think? I mean,
somebody might some day interpret
that to mean not just Baal or The
Golden Idol, as we're sure you mean,
but money or power or fame. Can't
we pin that down?"

And God replied: "It means to
include all those things. It means that
if you put anyone or anything before
me, you will have pain."

And Miriam said: "Now, that's
just what my brother was talking about.
Assumption #1 of our Ten
Assumptions is 'We have an absolute
right to a pain-free life.' And now this
Commandment will cause pain. Why
are you sending us on this guilt trip?"
And God said: "Guilt comes from
within. I do not threaten guilt. I
threaten condemnation! Pain inheres
in wrong human choices. Sin brings
pain. Do you not suppose that your
sins will weigh on you?"

And Miriam said, "No. We
suppose Assumption 2: 'All pain is

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someone else's fault.' That is why, as night follows day, a lawsuit follows pain. Look, let's get down to the basics here. Exactly who are you to issue laws?"

And a great stillness descended upon the mountain, so great that the three could not breathe. And then God replied in a voice so loud it shattered the very rock the mountain was made of, "I ... AM ... WHAT ... I ... AM."

The three siblings were frozen for what seemed to them, as lawyers, an eternity. Ten seconds later, Aaron replied, "I AM WHAT I AM? That's responsive? I AM WHAT I AM? That begs the question by simply restating the major premise as the conclusion. In Latin, that is Petitio Principii. A college freshman could see the logical flaw in that. Care to try again?"

And God said, "Yes. How about this one? YOU ARE, BUT YOU WON'T BE!"

And God continued. "Look! Why not stop worrying about all the technicalities and just trust me, follow me, leave the legal work to me?"

And Moses said, "Well, we've discussed that. But both our psychological counsellors and daytime TV hosts assure us that such would be the beginning of a dangerous relationship of dependency. We need to become self-reliant and independent and stay out of all relationships which might cause us to trust others or them us. Our Third Assumption is 'You can't trust anybody.' Our philosophy on dependency is set forth in many books with titles like 'I'm O.K., You're O.K.'"

And God said, "I've read that book. I'm writing a reply. Well, actually, I'm not writing it. I'm inspiring it. My book will be called many things by many people. But, in any event, I like to think of its subtitle as 'I'M O.K.! YOU'RE OUT OF LINE!'"

Moses said, "God, while we've got you here, could you answer a few final questions we have? We each have one question. And we may not see you again soon as you are not locked in time." And God replied, "Yes, and when confronted by three lawyers, that is some blessing! There are times when omnipresence is a drag."

And Moses asked his question: "Will my people walk in the promised land?"

And God said, "Yes, Moses, but not in your lifetime."

And Miriam asked, "Will there be a day when members of my gender can be Missouri Synod ministers?"

And God said, "Miriam, there are some questions which, for political reasons, even I do not like to have a position on. But, at any rate, Miriam, not in your lifetime."

And Aaron asked, "God, will final interpretation of the Ten Commandments ever be turned over to members of our profession, the legal profession?" And God said, "Maybe, Aaron, but not in my lifetime." □

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March 1993
The Storyteller and Wim Wenders’ Wings of Desire

Michael Sexson

Wim Wenders’ 1987 film Wings of Desire opens in black and white with a pen inscribing the words “Als das Kind Kind war” into a notebook. The line, “When the child was a child,” echoing I Corinthians 13, is spoken in a child-like sing-song by a male voice which we later learn belongs to an angel. The phrase acts as a refrain throughout the film to preface poetic evocations of the innocence and harmony of childhood. “When the child was a child it walked with its arms swinging. It wanted the stream to be a river, the river a torrent, and this puddle to be the sea.”

Following the credits is a shot of a gigantic eye, then an aerial scene of post-war Berlin. Atop a crumbling church tower stands a winged angel wearing an overcoat. In the street below a little girl stops to look and is jostled by passersby. Two other children in a bus stare upwards at the spectacle.

The angel is Damiel, condemned to observe the city and eavesdrop on its citizens. The camera becomes the angel’s point of view tracking through the streets and into the houses, visiting everyday people experiencing ordinary pleasures and pains. Parents worry about their children; a man frets over the death of his mother who never threw anything away, people sit and stare vacantly at the television. The angel hears their interior thoughts. They are distressed, reflective, amused, bored, concerned. Their lives seem fragmented and disconnected, untouched by the integrating powers of imagination embodied by poets and storytellers. Damiel appears on an airplane carrying the actor Peter Falk to work on a film project in Berlin. Falk is worrying about the character he is to play in a film about the Third Reich.

Later, Damiel is joined by his companion angel Cassiel and they compare the odd miscellany they’ve been writing in their notebooks. They speak of an old man reading the Odyssey to a child, a woman folding her umbrella in the rain and getting drenched, and a man looking over his shoulder into space. Through the course of their conversation, the viewer discovers that these angels have been around since the beginning of time and are now here in Berlin to, “observe, collect, testify and preserve.” They are guardian angels without the power to intervene in the affairs of humans. They put their weightless hands on the shoulders of suffering people and share their pain but are impotent to help. Their presence is sensed by certain children, by people in emotional distress, by readers in libraries, and in one of the film’s most remarkable sequences, by the victim of a motorcycle accident. As the dying man sits and thinks of his female companion, Damiel comes to him and cradles his head in his hands, and gradually the man begins to speak the same words as the angel, a curious, incantatory, hypnotic poetry of timeless images and places and knowledge of all mysteries.

Eloquence and universal knowledge, however, in Wenders’ anti-Platonic view, leads to static perfection, which Damiel begins to question. While he admits that “it’s great to live by the spirit,” he yearns to feel some weight to him, to be able to say “now” rather than “forever.” He wants to be able to have a fever, to display fingers blackened by newspaper, to be excited by a meal or the curve of a neck. He wants to feel his skeleton inside his body, to be enthused over evil, to lie through his teeth, and like Philip Marlowe, to come home and feed the cat. He wants to be able to take off his shoes and stretch his bare-foot toes. He wants to be able to be alone, to let things happen.

He gets his wish. Attracted to a circus, he sees a woman, Marion, wearing a shabby set of wings rehearsing for her trapeze act. As he gazes at her, the screen momentarily turns to color, indicating the penetration into the angelic world of the vital and sensual elements of the temporal realm. Damiel falls for the woman. He follows her into a trailer where he eavesdrops on her fragmented thoughts: I know so little. How should I live? How should I think? The viewer watches him observing the curve of her neck and staring as she undresses. Again, a moment of color. She desires to love and later dreams of a winged man wearing bronze armor. It is Damiel.

Damiel’s mind is made up. He will descend into the mortal world and like Odysseus, forsake immortality for the fleeting but more piercing experience of the earth and flesh. Damiel and a piece of his angelic armor falls with a thud just beside the Berlin wall. Now, the film shifts almost exclusively to color and to more conventional cinematic narrative techniques.

Damiel discovers that his sharp angelic armor has cut his head, but delights in the taste and texture of his own blood. He says, “I’m beginning to understand.” He asks a passerby if the blood is red and inquires about the other colors in the graffiti on the wall. This is not a world of corrupt and entrapping matter but a world of liberating sights and sensations. He sells his angel’s armor and buys a loud coat and rakish hat. Damiel is encouraged

Michael Sexson teaches literature and related subjects at Montana State University. As the century comes to a close, he is writing extensively about apocalypse and the end of time, but attending to movies fairly steadily.
in his exuberant enjoyment of the sights and smells and tastes of the world by the actor playing the Peter Falk character who, it turns out, is also a fallen angel now enjoying playing the fictional character Columbo on American television. "I want to know everything," Damiel tells Falk. But human knowledge, unlike angelic knowledge, is incomplete, fragmented, and ambiguous. "You have to find it out yourself," the Falk character tells the fallen angel, "that's the fun of it."

Damiel makes his way toward Marion as resolutely as Odysseus made his way home to Penelope. "She'll teach me everything," he says, "entirely different wings will replace my usual ones, wings that will at last amaze me."

He trails her to a crowded music hall and sits at the bar. She silently makes her way toward him and he listens as she tells him that "it's time to get serious." The scene fades and opens again on Damiel as Marion's assistant, holding the rope as she twirls high above on her "chicken feather" wings. "Something has happened," he thinks. "It is binding...she took me home and I found my home...I now know what no angel knows."

The simplest reading of Wings of Desire is to see it as an existentialist rejection of conventional notions of Platonic philosophy, an inverted gnostic fable, or as a repudiation of the famous dark mirror section of Corinthians 13. Indeed, Wenders seems to turn Plato upside down. In the Phaedrus, the soul's wings begin to sprout as a consequence of gazing upon the beautiful, but the soul's education is away from the contingent, the temporal, and the sensual. The light, winged and holy beings in Plato's thought who exult in the bliss of perfect knowledge have left completely the world and its imperfections. By contrast, Wenders affirms the earthly wings Marion uses in her trapeze act as the true wings. They are annoying "chicken feathers" to Marion, and clearly her flying is a poor imitation of the flight of genuine angels, but Wenders wants us to see Marion as the proper angel, and Damiel as the pretend angel. As Marion descends from her trapeze and walks away sporting her fake wings, one of her co-workers yells, "An angel just passed by." Damiel, who is invisibly present in the scene is stunned, thinking that the remark referred to him. He then realizes the man meant Marion, not him. He comes to see, as does the viewing audience, that the offhand remark was strictly true, for the angel that passes is what Wallace Stevens elegantly referred to as the "necessary angel" of the earth "in whose sight we see the earth again." ("Angel Surrounded by Paysans," Stevens 496). This is Plato's education of the soul in reverse. Instead of ascending the ladder toward transcendence under the tutelage of the angel who understands all mysteries, Marion, whose thoughts are confused and her way hidden, instructs the angel how to descend into the world of fictive flights and frayed feathers. The "entirely different wings" that Damiel desires are the source of a sensation he was unable to experience as an angel: amazement.

In gnostic mythologies, the soul, having fallen into the world of time and matter, is seduced by temporal and fleshly pleasures and forgets that its home is elsewhere. This is the theme of a film by one of Wenders' worthy rivals, Nicholas Roeg. In The Man Who Fell to Earth, an extraterrestrial descends to earth in order to use his superior intelligence to create a corporation which will supply his barren home planet with life-giving water. Once on earth, however, he falls victim to seductions of the flesh and of the eye. He becomes a fornicator, an alcoholic, and an inveterate television watcher. He forgets earlier memories of his suffering family patiently waiting his return home.

By contrast, Wenders' fable shows a spirit who is given substance, purpose and meaning through his descent into matter. When he falls to earth, it is winter; there is snow on the ground, and he experiences cold for the first time. He enjoys rubbing his hands together to create warmth. He buys a cup of coffee and realizes something close to ecstasy as he holds his cold hands around the hot cup and tastes the bitter liquid. As an angel he would often pick up an object, a pencil from the library or a stone from Marion's dresser, but as he would touch it would become transparent and weightless. Released from eternal observation, testifying and collecting, he is now able to do what no angel can do—interpret. Instead of observing events, he can read them, that is, discover the story they tell, understand reality as poem rather than bloodless event.

Another poem by Wallace Stevens resonates so closely with these aspects of the film that one is led to suspect either that Director Wenders had read the poem before filming or perhaps more likely, that the poet, who died in 1955, had seen, as angelic presence, Wenders' film long before it was made. It's called "Large Red Man Reading."

There were ghosts that returned to earth to hear his phrases, As he sat there reading, aloud, the great blue tabulae. They were those from the wilderness of stars that had expected more. There were those that returned to hear him read from the poem of life. Of the pans above the stove, the pots on the table, the tulips among them. They were those that would have wept to step barefoot into reality, That would have wept and been happy, have shivered in the frost And cried out to feel it again, have run fingers over leaves And against the most coiled thorn, have seized on what was ugly And laughed, as he sat there reading, from out of the purple tabulae, The outlines of being and its expressings, the syllables of its law: Poesis, poesis, the literal characters, the vatic lines, Which in those ears and in those thin, those spented hearts, Took on color, took on shape and the size of things as they are And spoke the feeling for them, which was what they had lacked. In the gnostic version it is the earthling who lacks perfect spiritual knowledge; in Wenders' tale, it is the spiritual being who lacks the imperfect and incomplete knowledge of the earth, knowledge which creates the
desire not to watch, but to create, to make, to beget, in a word, to love. To make (in Greek "poiesis") and to love are moving toward synthesis in Wenders' fable.

While agreeing with the claims of I Corinthians 15:11 that faith and eloquence and knowledge are nothing without love, Wenders reverses the contentions of the famous last verses of chapter thirteen: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I reasoned like a child; When I became a man, I gave up childish ways. For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully." In Wenders' film, love is only possible when we see in a mirror dimly, that is, when we possess that partial knowledge which Creates desire to forge stories out of experience. And, most clearly in terms of the film, we do not outgrow childhood but achieve it. We now know that the look in the eyes of the children as they gaze on the angels in the film is not the look of yearning but of acceptance or amazement; it is the angels who look at children with yearning, the yearning to become as a child, when "everything was full of life, and all life was one."

To see the film solely as an existentialist rejection of transcendence and a celebration of immanent reality is an oversimplification of Wenders' aims. First, his angels are not merely desiccated spirits. They are rich and complex beings, whose felt presence is salutary. Like the children who can sense them better than adults, they are radiantly innocent. Yet, like Rilke's Angels in the Duino Elegies, in their perfection they are seen by mortals as terrible. Second, Wenders himself is more a Platonist than an existentialist. He is haunted by the idea of transcendence, but to him, transcendence is inseparable from the desire of and for the earth and flesh, desires that are more Homeric than Platonic. If only, he seems to suggest in this film, a Homeric sensibility could be grafted, without the rending pain of contradiction, onto a Platonic temperament. In Wings of Desire, Wenders' wishes to blend the sensual and secular Homeric tale of Odysseus' return home to Penelope with that of the transcendent quest of lovers told by Plato, not in the Phaedrus, but through the comic/ironic voice of Aristophanes in The Symposium. Love, in Aristophanes' famous myth, is the desire we feel for a person whose soul mate we were before we fell into the world of hidden ways and dim mirrors. In Wenders' film the quest is Platonic in its reference to ideal beginnings and supersensible ends, but Homeric in its emphasis on the sensual details of lovers who, out of partial knowledge and imperfect memories, search through the sights and sounds and smells of a perishing earth for that which will give a sense of wholeness and meaning to their experience.

At the movie's end, when Damiel and Marion meet at the bar, they look at one another. He attempts to embrace her but like her Homeric counterpart Penelope she must delay until she is certain the man is worthy not only of her but of the remarkable story he's involved in. She pushes him away. Throughout this whole scene, Damiel is speechless. It is Marion who now speaks in the curious poetry Wenders and Scriptwriter Peter Handke have given the angels. "It's time to get serious," she says, "Look at me or don't. Give me your hand or don't. No. Don't give me your hand and look the other way." Indeed, she is teaching Damiel what he needs to know. Here the child's puddle is becoming the sea. These two are no longer Berliners but rather the Adam and Eve of a new consciousness, a new way of seeing and knowing. "Now WE are the times," Marion says, "not only the whole city but the whole world is taking part in our decision. We two are more than just two. We personify something. We are sitting in the people's plaza. We are deciding everyone's game. I am ready. Now it's your truth. Now or never. You need me. There is no greater story than ours. That of man and woman. Look my eyes. They are the picture of necessity. I dreamt of a man."

They kiss.

Aristophanes' transcendent lovers have met Homer's Odysseus and Penelope.

The important question for Wenders is that of who arranged this rendezvous of Man and Woman. Who brought the palpable world of Homer to the rarified one of Plato? It is of course the magician, the artist, the Storyteller.

Early in the film, the two angelic protagonists visit a library where they meet and exchange benevolent glances with other angels who hover above readers immersed in books. The readers are totally absorbed, as if feeding on a life-giving substance. Unlike the aimless and distracted citizens of Berlin seen earlier, these people are giving themselves up to the power of words to give shape and depth, in a phrase, to make poetic sense of their lives. What draws the angels to the library and its rapt readers is the integrating powers of language. Often associated in many mythologies with the bearing of messages, angels are in a sense themselves texts, but disembodied, or perhaps disembooked texts. They hang around libraries in order to sense something of the magical transformation of text into life through reading, but they are unable to do more than observe and take notes. Damiel picks up a pencil, and at once it becomes a substanceless facsimile of a pencil. He twirls the weightless pencil in his hands, closes his eyes, and throws his arms out in a posture of crucifixion, indicating his despair over his inability to experience the rapture of the readers.

Into this scene comes a sick old man puffing up the stairs and sinking exhausted into a chair. "Tell me Muse," the angels hear him think "of the storyteller who was thrust to the edge of the world, child-like, ancient, and through him reveal everyman." The old man recalls that his listeners used to sit in circles enjoying his stories; then, they took to reading books, sitting apart from one another and now he is in danger of losing his voice altogether. "And once mankind loses its storyteller, it will have lost its childhood."

The angel Cassiel follows the old
man through the gray landscape of divided Berlin as he looks for a place that used to be but is no more. As he plays on a tiny organ grinder, the old man thinks, “Name me Muse, the immortal singer who, abandoned by his mortal listeners, lost his voice.” The old man is named in the credits as “Homer.”

And it is “Homer’s” words that conclude the film. After Damiel and Marion have succeeded in finding one another, the old man is seen trudging through off into the dreary landscape of Berlin, muttering “Name the Men, Women and Children who will look for me, their story teller, their spiritual guide, more than anything in the world. We have embarked.”

The old man Homer is the director himself. Wings of Desire is Wim Wender’s invocation to the Muse to inspire him to become the angel of storytelling for our time. The obstacles facing this “spiritual guide” are enormous and perhaps insurmountable. Storytelling isn’t what it used to be. The oral poet is gone and the angel of books has been “thrust to the edge of the world,” which is to say, into the libraries. Storytelling now, for better or worse, has become the business of the cinematic artist, the angel of moving images. It is this angel who must give us back our lost childhood and create a coherent identity appropriate to a new millennium.

The task is made even more difficult in light of the fact that the filmmaker must confront his own medium’s failure to invent a satisfactory narrative for this time. The old epic of war, the old valorization of the male hero on his journey to either purge or purchase the object of his desire, which is to say, a woman, is, in terms of Wings of Desire, obsolete. The traditional film director seeking to manipulate, arrange and control what the viewer sees with the assistance of the camera’s voyeuristic, patriarchal eye, must learn to “let things happen.” The result may be disorienting and unpleasant to the viewer, but if an alternative to conventional ways of seeing and knowing is to come about, cinema must, according to Laura Mulvey, “break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to create a new language of desire” (432).

Compounding the difficulty, to “let things happen,” as Wenders knows from his early notion that one could point the camera at something and simply let it go, also runs the risk of being voyeuristic and patriarchal. The artist becomes the watchmaker god who watches but does not interfere with events. Such experimentalism may produce profound, even obsessively compelling images, but, unshaped by the ordering powers of story, the images become destructively addictive. In his latest film titled Until the End of the World, Wenders imagines that in 1999, technological advances have produced a mechanical device which can record one’s dreams and memories. Although made for the noble purpose of allowing blind people the opportunity to see again, the invention turns malevolent. People become addicted to their own psychic pictures. They wander about with portable viewing screens fixated on the moving images. Like rats compulsively pushing the lever that activates pleasure producing chemicals in the brain while forgetting to eat, sleep or have sex, these people do nothing but watch. The watchers do sleep but when they do they dream about their dreams. For one watcher (Solvieg Dommartin, Marion from Wings of Desire), when the message appears on her screen that her batteries are dead, she screams that she doesn’t want to live anymore. Her writer husband imprisons her and observes withdrawal symptoms in every way as harrowing as those associated with the most addictive drug. Tapping on his typewriter in the Australian desert he thinks, “I didn’t know the cure for the disease of images. But I believe in the magic and the healing power of words and stories.”

Stories heal not because they involve us in events but because they keep us from falling into them. The storyteller pushes us away and says “It’s time to get serious,” meaning that we must step back and behold the various ways in which images are held together, the larger narrative in which we act and have our being, or as Marion puts it, “everyone’s game.”

Wenders laments the fact that movies are coming to look more and more like television in their framing, their rhythm, and their lighting. When television devours the cinema, when we all become addicted to this peculiar strain of the disease of images, a chaos of fragmented pictures generated by commercial interests devoted solely to the transformation of everything into products, then perhaps the genuine voice of the storyteller will have been stilled completely.

The last and perhaps greatest challenge for the angel of storytelling in our time is the artist’s own distrust of the power of story to heal. In his book titled The Logic of Images Wenders says that stories “bring out lies...and the biggest lie is that they show coherence where there is none. Then again, our need for these lies is so consuming that it’s completely pointless to fight them...Stories are impossible, but it’s impossible to live without them.” (59)

And yet, despite such skepticism, and despite all the obstacles, Wenders believes that the true storyteller’s voice can never be totally suppressed. If we listen carefully, we can still make out the diminished sound of the organ grinder, can still hear the storytelling angel’s voice, grown small, but still strong: “Sing in me Muse,” it says, “And through me tell the story...” And the story, though told more and more in the language of moving images, may still be the larger narrative of man and woman, as old as the tale of Odysseus and Penelope, and as new as the story of Damiel and Marion. It is the story of love, which, after Wings of Desire, we may discover to be indistinguishable from the love of story.

Works Cited


Historical Narration as Theological Business


If Christians worship a God who refuses to rescue them from history, then writing history can be serious theological business. Mark Noll’s beautiful book never shies away from that vocation. He embraces it with a vigor and grace that makes his bold narrative of Christianity in the two North American societies at once catholic in scope and specific in focus. The book covers traditions, institutions, theologies, pieties, persons of faith, and cultural practices originating among Christians. Noll explores these phenomena to measure costs and legacies for any version of the faith that achieves public influence.

Noll manages to sustain a theological voice in the midst of this historical expedition without producing a morality tale—a quite remarkable achievement. He is after all telling the story of Christianity’s planting and varied growth and its return in the twentieth century to wilderness conditions. To pursue and find the often contradictory truths, Noll treats the social and Christian pluralism of North America as a frame of reference rather than an end in itself. He traces Christianity from colonial times to the present, whether as subculture or dominant culture, and then presses the contrasts between the past and future, the intended and the ironic, the Protestant and Catholic, the Canadian and the U.S., the African American and European or British American, and between Christianity in the public square and Christianity for the worshipping assembly.

A sampling of his judgments illustrates the magisterial quality of this volume and poses challenges that force the reader to consider the meaning of history. Thus, while noting the parallels between Christianity in Canada and the United States in the 19th century, he also sums up their differences: “Christianity in Canada was less fragmented, more culturally conservative, more closely tied to Europe, more respectful of tradition, more ecumenical and less prone to separate evangelical theology from social outreach” (284). On regional differences in the United States he writes that East of the Mississippi “the weight of history suggests that white Protestants were ‘normal’ and practitioners of other religions were ‘exceptions.’ In the West... ‘exceptions’ were the norm” (326). Of our Civil War past and the future: “By making such strong commitments to the righteousness of their own side and by regarding the enemy in such deeply religious terms, believers set the stage for other consuming national interests to exert a similar shaping influence on the churches” (335). On black and white Christianity: because, as in the 19th century South, the blinders of respectability and ethnocentricism could rob white Evangelicals of a sense of the cross and therefore of liberation, “the history of African-American Christian faith may be for North America the fundamental story” (545).

As such examples reveal, many of these assessments do not originate with Noll, but by weaving them into a single narrative, he has created a context for learning that reminds me of another highly teachable narrative, Winthrop Hudson’s *Religion in America* (c.1965). Noll’s is also an eminently attractive volume. If his economy of words occasionally frustrates, his choices of hymns or poems introduce the yearnings of past eras. Prints and pictures are generously interspersed and create their own commentary. Moreover, the lay-out provides enough white space to mark sections well. References at the end of chapters and of the book supply a judicious selection of both the standards and the latest research. In short, the book is for learners in all stages.

I especially liked his final and most challenging section, “Wilderness Once Again?” in which he draws upon the diversity and uncertainty in Christianity since the 1920s to put together a collage of impressions. After a brief overview by decade, he considers both broad trends and then the experience of such diverse communities as European ethnic enclaves of Dutch Protestants and Lutherans,
the Southern Baptist Convention and Hispanic and African-Americans. Next he treats several persons who have publicly stretched the influence of Christianity: Bishop Fulton Sheen, Martin Luther King, Jr., Billy Graham, Aimee Semple McPherson, Dorothy Day, Mahalia Jackson, Flannery O'Connor and Catherine Marshall. Groupings of "theological personalities" also have their day, but he gives extra space to Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, noting their influence, contrasting their views and reminding readers about "the contribution of immigrant Christian perspectives to the ongoing task of theological reflection."

He ends with an assessment of missions, ecumenism and a remarkable argument that the history also implicit in these pages, namely of Christianity, in North America (and not simply a history of North American Christianity) requires the application of standards internal to the gospel: "where were the moments when faith offered something unexpected to a person, a problem, a situation, or a region." Such "signs of contradiction" are more than ironies, representing that against all odds, the message of salvation in history changed its course for people. If America is returning to the wilderness, then Christians have the hope that the prophet's call is best heard in the wilderness whose God makes the rough places plain.

The strength of the book lies in its ambition. Noll will be faulted for providing relatively brief accounts of intellectual history, including academic theology and its current feminist offerings. Yet, from the academy he has made judgment about the folks that reflect the concerns of and beyond the academy. His evaluation includes women's experience as a given and therefore avoids compensatory history. And his final reflections on the theology of the cross would suggest to Lutherans the gifts their tradition has to offer in North American Christianity.

Christa Ressmeyer Klein


Individual volumes:
Friedrich Schleiermacher: Pioneer of Modern Theology ed. Keith Clements
Rudolf Bultmann: Interpreting Faith for the Modern Era, ed. Roger A. Johnson
Paul Tillich: Theologian of the Boundaries, ed. Mark Kline Taylor
Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ, ed. John de Gruchy
Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom, ed. Clifford Green
Adolf von Harnack: Liberal Theology at Its Height, ed. Martin Rumscheidt
Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life, ed. Larry Rasmussen

Introductory books on prominent theologians abound. A student of theology who wishes, for instance, to become acquainted with important theologians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has the impressive volume by Karl Barth on nineteenth century theology or the volumes by Claude Welch on the creative century on which so much theology pivots. But the Fortress Press series highlighting central figures in nineteenth and twentieth century theology is by no means a redundant contribution to existing surveys. These seven books are singular in their format and their contribution. They are organized by the editors with an introductory essay intended to present the theologian and his key contributions. These essays provide the reader with a brief biography and description of the cultural, political and personal context of the theologian and his work. Then follows a collection of writings or excerpts of the theologian under study. Thus, the student or interested reader has the benefit both of a skilled guide to the theologian in the editor's introduction as well as significant primary source material in the rest of the book.

An initial question emerges on the choice of these seven theologians in the Fortress Press series. The general editor, John de Gruchy, gives no explanation of his choices. Although other foundational names of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries come to mind - one thinks, for example, of Ritschl or Troeltsch in the nineteenth, and a wide range of twentieth century voices including feminist theologians, libertarian theologians, and the emerging post-modern theologies - the importance of these seven is beyond dispute. A student of theology today, sensitized to politically correct issues, shudders somewhat at the "canon" of influential theologians of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; the fact that the series represents only white men from America and Europe sits like a burr under the saddle of today's diversity-directed student. Rightly so. But the purpose of the Fortress Press series is not so much to list the seven most important theologians of the past two centuries as it is to give an account of the "making of modern theology," as the title of the series indicates. Thus, an understanding of the seven men and their works gives background and contour to more

- Christa Ressmeyer Klein is a church historian in York, Pennsylvania and member of the Board of Directors of VU.
- Leanne Van Dyk is a recent PhD in historical theology from Princeton Theological Seminary, and Assistant Professor of Theology at San Francisco Theological Seminary.
- Charles Partee teaches at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.
recent theologies of diversity and particularity. The editors are not suggesting, even, that this is the best theology of the past two hundred years. It is theology worth knowing and studying in and of itself and for its illuminating power of more current theological endeavors. This review will survey two representative volumes, those on Harnack and Schleiermacher, as a sample of the riches of this series. It will also offer brief comments on several of the other volumes.

Martin Rumscheidt, in his volume on Adolf von Harnack, Adolf von Harnack: Liberal Theology at its Height, reports his long fascination with Harnack. He is deeply impressed with the prodigious output of Harnack in an illustrious career and continues to be instructed by some of Harnack's contributions to historical theological method. Although less persuaded by Harnack's theological liberalism, Rumscheidt nonetheless finds enduring value in the study of this great nineteenth century liberal and admires his commitment to the pressing social concerns of his time.

The biographical sketch in the introduction to this volume traces the sources of Harnack's commitment to some of the major themes of his life's work. His university teacher, Engelhardt, impressed on him the importance of rigorous textual criticism and the search for the best original sources, a theme clearly evident in his massive work, History of Dogma. His early acquaintance with Albrecht Ritschel convinced him that liberal theology was the future of Christianity's place in the modern world, a position for which he was severely criticized from both orthodox and more liberal thinkers. To Harnack's pain, one of his critics was his own father who wrote in a letter to his son that he no longer considered Harnack a Christian theologian. Harnack certainly considered himself a Christian theologian in that he attempted to relate the Christian faith with culture, science, and the academy. The divide between the elder and the younger Harnack lay in two different conceptions of Christianity. For Adolf Harnack, the Christian faith is an expression of what is a basic human trait, namely religion. For his father and many other orthodox thinkers, the Christian faith is a response to the particular revelation of God in the Scriptures and in Jesus Christ.

Rumscheidt's introduction to the Harnack volume also gives a succinct and helpful exposition of the contours of liberal theology. Characteristics of liberalism, for Harnack, included a strong emphasis on freedom, a confidence in the powers of human thought and action, and the reasonableness of religious concepts and language. When confronted with the dialectic theology of Barth late in his life, Harnack expressed amazement and bewilderment over a theology he perceived as incompatible with his own goals of clarity, rationality, and an affinity with the academy.

The texts which Rumscheidt selected are arranged under five important emphases of Harnack's writings, such as "History as a Science in the Service of Theology" and "The Religious-Social Imperative in the Gospel and Church." Each text is introduced with a brief explanation concerning its origin and significance. The volume also has a bibliography of Harnack's writings, in German and English translation, as well as a short index of names and subjects.

Schleiermacher is the earliest of the theologians in this series and surely one with the greatest impact for the rest of the nineteenth century. Keith W. Clements' introduction and selection of texts in Friedrich Schleiermacher: Pioneer of Modern Theology provides excellent background to Schleiermacher studies. Clements begins with an account of the Enlightenment, Pietism, and Romanticism, notes the tremendous impact of the French Revolution on late eighteenth century European consciousness and then recognizes both Schleiermacher's debt and contribution to this complex context. The biographical sketch integrates well the events of his life, national events in Prussia, and his scholarly work. A study of Schleiermacher illustrates well that a theologian's work is not understood until the whole nexus of contextual factors is considered.

Clements' outline of major themes in Schleiermacher's work is particularly good. The eight themes include "Religion as Feeling and Relationship," "The Distinctiveness of Christianity," "Theology as Reflection and Communication," "Hermeneutics: Conversation with History," "God and the World," "The Person and Work of Christ," "Nation, Church and State," and "Christianity and the Religions." Throughout, Clements demonstrates both Schleiermacher's debt to the Enlightenment background and his break from that tradition. He exhibits Schleiermacher's theological innovation, intellectual honesty and courage, and pastoral heart for the Church.

Although clearly impressed with this "Father of Modern Theology," Clements does acknowledge a variety of critical assessment. He notes the famous critique of Barth against Schleiermacher, namely of Schleiermacher's confinement within the "anthropological horizon." Clements only says that "the student will have to pursue his or her judgment on the issue between Schleiermacher and Barth after first-hand reading of both theologians, and some informed discussion of them." He does, however, offer the advice that "any judgment made upon Schleiermacher must take into account the particular context in which he lived and thought, and what, to him, were the main parameters within which a doctrine of God had to be plotted."

The remaining five volumes in the Fortress Press series give equally deft and proficient accounts of Bultmann, Tillich, Bonhoeffer, Barth, and Niebuhr. Clarity and accessibility are the marks of each of the introductory sections. For this reason, the volumes would make a fine class text, either for a seminary or college level. Some knowledge of basic theological issues is assumed in these introductions but the pedagogical tone is directed primarily to the non-expert. Roger Johnson's introduction to his
Bultmann volume, for instance, helpfully expounds the concept of "modernity" for Bultmann and why it is that Bultmann perceived faith and modernity to be at odds. Johnson is also dexterous in his exposition of key concepts in Bultmann, such as demythologizing. He explains how this frequently misunderstood concept is a function of an existentialist approach to the New Testament text. These complex issues in Bultmann, which often receive a reductionist handling, are treated by Johnson with enough clarity to be understood and enough space to retain their full shape.

So many volumes have been produced on Karl Barth that one approaches Clifford Green's volume Karl Barth: Theologian of Freedom wondering what more could possibly be said. Green's forty page introduction is a succinct, complete, compelling, and supportive treatment of Barth. It is excellent fare. Furthermore, Green selected excerpts from the wide corpus of Barth's works, including the massive Church Dogmatics, in such a way as to illustrate the themes of Barth's theology in his own words. From the early days of the Romans commentary to the pivotal study on Anselm, to the Dogmatics to the reflections on political crises to the charming and revealing essay on Mozart, Green surveys the whole sweep of Barth's life and work in a way that will make this often-intimidating theologian more accessible to students today.

I was happy to see that the volume Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Witness to Jesus Christ, by John de Gruchy, contains large selections from the Letters and Papers from Prison. Bonhoeffer's letters reveal a vivid and painful human drama as well as front-line theological thinking done in sturdy honesty and excruciating relevance. An introduction to Bonhoeffer could not do better than to include large portions of that text. The other volumes, Reinhold Niebuhr: Theologian of Public Life by Larry Rasmussen and Paul Tillich: Theologian of the Boundaries by Mark Kline Taylor continue the excellent format and features of this very fine series. Indices and bibliographies are helpful and usable; all the volumes include a short bibliography of recommended secondary literature in English.

One can only hope that Fortress Press would expand this series to include volumes on other important voices in theology as well. It would be most welcome to see more volumes edited by women and ethnic theologians.

Leanne Van Dyk


Intertwining a physical and psychological journey is a time-honored and experience-enriched narrative tradition. The Odyssey from Purgatory to Canterbury to Paradise Lost and Regained belongs to this genre joined now by Corbin's Rubber Yacht.

The lake upon which the action and reflection takes place does not hold the terror and fascination of the measureless ocean, but lakes have their own dangers and attractions. Indeed a circumscribed setting is the proper location for this account since the struggle portrayed is more internal than external in contrast to The Old Man and the Sea.

Not an old man, the main character—Corbin—appears to be in the middle years. Thus in his life, as the story opens, he has experienced great love and great loss and is facing post-forty options rather than final choices—Corbin's are still passage questions rather than destination questions. In order to deal with these questions Farley obviously studied navigation with the same concentration that Dorothy Sayers studied campanology for her Nine Tailors.

Accurately described as author, professor, and all-around nice guy, Ben Farley retains a wide awareness never possessed by, or beaten out of, many academics. With delightful descriptions of birds and bees, the author is also remarkably sensitive to colors. Especially effective and imaginative is on-scene presentation of the Vietnam war death of Corbin's son through the literary device of a tape recording.

This reviewer would have liked more details on the secondary characters—about the relationship between Corbin and his son and of the friendship with Aiken. In addition, while the dark and essential theme of Oren Medford's hatred for Corbin is dramatically presented, its basis could be more usefully developed.

Charles Partee

Notes on Poets—

Marjorie Thomas is a 1992 VU graduate with a major in English. She is presently on the West Coast, between engagements. This poem was originally read at VU's first 'Take Back the Night,' March 1992, a demonstration in support of women's security from violence.

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