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yet in my flesh shall I see God

In the circles I frequent, nothing is hotter right now than the body. If you read conference paper titles, or dissertation abstracts, studies of body get top billing. I forbear to quote any of these titles here, because such an activity is usually done for the risible character of academic work when abstracted from the passionate attentions and descriptions given by the person engaged in it. Though it is easy to poke fun at some of the excesses to which the attention to the meaning of body has run, the subject is genuinely fascinating. Each of us, for instance, has one. That fact in itself makes us alike, or at least describes an arena we have in common. Yet the very fact of body makes us each separate, irrevocably and fundamentally unable to be anything other than the being of our own body. We cannot, for example, really know another’s pain, for sharing across bodies is a contradiction of the terms on which we have bodies at all.

Yet our religious life as Christians is deeply involved with body language. Though the season of the Incarnation might be thought to have the most to do with body, we may be even more aware of it during Lent, and then certainly at Easter. All of our Lenten devotion, with its heavy concentration of Jesus, centers on the humiliation, suffering, deprivation, and wounding inflicted on that body. We see it in paintings, and reenact it in Passion Plays, and hear it in Bach’s Passions, and recount it in our hymns. (In fact, the absence of body-talk from so-called contemporary worship songs may be that genre’s most significant failure, though that’s another column.) Without the body, Christian religion would fade into something very unlike itself. It would lose the scandal of its located insistence on physical reality and become an emotional mindgame in which a series of feelings and propositions would constitute the mark of the ‘believer.’ In any number of ways it would be easier to sell this un-bodied Christianity, for the embarrassing earthiness and absurdities of Lent and Easter would disappear.

For Easter, lest we forget it, is absurd in the most wonderful way. This is what we say: The eternal, having taken on the finite, experiences life as though it were one of us. The breath then leaves that very Being of the spirit of life; going into and through death, that Being takes up breathing again, and becomes fully bodily once more. We who are Christians say that we become part of that breathing Body. Further, that when our body’s breathing stops, our sharing in that Body will bring us into breathing life again. Not into some state of unknowable and unthinkable ‘existence,’ but life in our bodies. This hand, this face, will be mine into eternity; these are the eyes that will see God. Breath-taking!

Not that such a claim in particularly understandable. With our instrumental attitude toward the world, we (or some of us) would like to know just “how” this assertion could possibly take shape in the world we know. But if the “how” remains stubbornly mysterious and opaque, the givenness of the world develops now into its glorious, transparent reality. Springtime, with all its urgent and insistent life, plunges us into knowing reality in thoroughly sensuous ways. Dirt, water, green stuff shout to our sleepy, winter-slowed ears that God is about life, and this is it. The Resurrection, far from negating or invalidating body, makes it transcendent. More of what it is, of what it was meant to be. When spring winds come—crashing branches and kicking up the dust—we Christians feel and hear the breath that is the Breath, and know it for what it is. ♦
about this issue

A good deal of the above makes an appearance in the pages of this Easter issue. I have enjoyed the perhaps-somewhat-playful juxtaposition of Michael Sexson’s essay on Hell in *Macbeth* with Gene Startzman’s contemplation of gardens, one in particular. No light without darkness, we are aware, no gardens without snakes. Then too, April is the month in which all good literary souls commemorate Shakespeare’s dust, and even Professor Wright, champion of the contending DeVere will, we hope, allow us to remember the Bard. Mary Mortimore Dossin gives us the personal as paradigm in the reflection of the Easter message in her mother’s final illness and death.

Vandersee and Sponberg, both experienced practitioners of the literature teacher’s trade, give us columns this month on matters concerning their guild. Can the life of a college professor include enthusiasm for both the moderately arcane (the Modern Language Association) and the decidedly popular (the National Collegiate Athletics Association)? Of course it can, and does, as both these writers make us aware. No subject too exalted or too mundane for the insightful mind to contemplate.

We can hardly be authentic dialogue partners with other religious traditions unless we are faithful about our own, and certainly about its fundamental assumptions. Judith Berling’s lecture to undergraduates last year comes out of her deep experience and scholarship concerning Chinese religions, but she operates with her characteristic clarity and honesty in a corresponding awareness of Christianity’s orthodoxies. We are grateful that she has concurred in our editorial decision to publish this version of her lecture in two parts, the second in the Trinity/June issue.

*The Cresset* is always fortunate in attracting fine poetry, and this issue again demonstrates that it is possible to write poetry which is religious without stiff dogmatism or soppy individualism. It was a particular pleasure to attend this year’s Literature and Faith conference at Calvin College in the company of Poetry Editor John Ruff, who could speak from experience in advising poets about publishing in *The Cresset*. Though his remarks in the roundtable on getting published were no doubt more elaborate, they only needed to say, “Look at our pages to see the best.”

Art Editor David Morgan got, he confessed, “carried away” in writing up what was asked for on the covers—“just a paragraph, David.” Nevertheless, he said, “I hope you are able to find space for it.” We have, and his words on these paintings do what *The Cresset* has always claimed as its task: to give its readers a richer, fuller view of the creation in its reality.

This is our Father’s world: garden, snake, well-field, cedar, yellow ball, word, song. God’s Body, risen and offered up for us. Would you have more?

Peace,

GME
When I was ten years old, my family moved from the Milwaukee area to the boot heel of Missouri in the deep South. The year was 1955, the year of Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka. At the turbulent beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, we were Yankees in the South. I was just old enough to experience this as a severe culture shock.

After a year in Missouri, my family moved to Dubuque, Iowa. As Presbyterians in Roman Catholic Dubuque (75% Catholic and known as “little Rome”), we were members of a religious minority. In Dubuque, church and church-related activities mattered. Pre-Vatican II Dubuque was still fighting the Reformation. Everyone in town could identify “Protestant” and “Catholic” properties and businesses, and there were street fights between Catholic and Protestant youth. If you were a Dubuque Protestant, you knew the doctrinal and liturgical reasons why. I was deeply involved in church activities, concerned to locate myself in this world of religious competition, so that I could maintain “my heritage,” which I, of course, was convinced was the right one.

I majored in religion at Carleton College, in Northfield, Minnesota. For two years, I belonged to a student team ministry which served as the collective (unordained) pastor of a tiny United Church of Christ parish in Zumbrota, Minnesota. I was headed for Union Theological Seminary in New York, and ordination. However, two experiences transformed my tidy world. First, one Sunday in 1966, I took a close college friend with me to the church in Zumbrota. My friend was Japanese. Takashi was an articulate, gentle Christian, and I was completely unprepared for how we would be received in Zumbrota.

I brought him to the church to meet the parishioners and to share something of his faith journey and his cultural background. The parishioners, however, were stiff and uncomfortable with him, and one began a question with, “Why do you Japs...?” To my shock and chagrin, these good Christian folk unabashedly laid on him their angry stereotypes of Asians. I had become increasingly aware of racism as a cancer in our society, but it had never shoved its face so forcefully into mine; this experience taught me profoundly about our culture’s fear and ignorance of Asians.

Shortly thereafter, a course on Chinese religions dramatically opened up my world, putting me literally in awe of the depth and richness of this culture so little known and understood in the West. Here was an entire stream of cultural and spiritual heritage of which I had no inkling; my former vision of what it meant to be well learned and “cosmopolitan” was stretched until it burst.
like a bubble. It was not as though “Asia” was not part of cultural parlance in the Sixties; at times it seemed that “Asia” was everywhere. There were at least three contending views of Asia in the American culture of the sixties, not one of them remotely accurate—not the stereotypes of Asians in the context of the Vietnam War; not the denunciations of experimentation with Eastern religions as “a loss of values;” and not the claims of pop culture to be “into” Eastern religions.

Perhaps because of my Dubuque experience, with its emphasis on religious identity and tradition as defining the boundaries of the “right” and “the normal,” I became convinced that Americans needed a broader cultural and religious horizon in order to negotiate an increasingly diverse world. I was no longer comfortable in the worlds of Dubuque or Zumbrota. Because in Dubuque and Zumbrota “Asia” was not really part of “the world,” it followed all too readily that Asians were not fully human, and Asian religions were construed either as exoticized rebellion or dangerous heresy. My experience of mid-America was that it was far from ready for what some now speak of as the “Pacific century,” but even in the mid-60s the Pacific was on the horizon, either as a promise or as a threat.

In that semester, in that course, my deepening sense of the injustice and ignorance of racism was dramatically juxtaposed to the broadening of my cultural and spiritual horizons in the course on China. I had discovered a “vocation,” a significant lifetime undertaking. It became clear to me that through learning and teaching about China I could seek to perform a ministry which would work at eroding the foundations of racism and building the foundations of cross-cultural understanding.

As a junior, I dropped my plans for seminary and opted instead to study Chinese language, culture, and religion in a doctoral program at Columbia University in New York. I wanted to learn the language, immerse myself in the literature and history, live among the people, visit temples and experience the worship, in order to understand more fully the richness of the heritage and then interpret what I had learned for those who had not had such experiences firsthand. I sought to become a cultural bridge, one who could “translate” and “interpret” Chinese cultural values and beliefs in ways that would help others see their value and appreciate their contributions to the global heritage. Carter Heyward has in her writings linked the notion of a bridge to the ideal of transcendence. She writes, “To transcend means, literally, to cross over. To bridge. To make connections. To burst free of particular locations” (245). By becoming a “bridge,” I hoped to transcend and help others to transcend limited horizons, thereby advancing the cause of multicultural understanding, since mutual ignorance and suspicion seemed to be at the root of so much of the world’s pain and injustice.

My sojourn into the depth and richness of Chinese culture did not uproot me from Western culture, but it put Western culture and its achievements into a fuller, more global context. It taught me at a deep level that the story of the West is not the font of human achievement, but is rather one story and source of human achievement. Seen in a global perspective, not only could the great achievements of Western culture be celebrated as not inevitable and therefore remarkable, but also the failures or inadequacies of Western cultural history could be also seen as not inevitable, and therefore as examples of human fallibility from which humankind might learn.

pilgrimage to Lion’s Head Mountain

In December of 1971, I had been living in Taipei for three months, honing my spoken Chinese, studying calligraphy, visiting temples, observing traditional rituals, and collecting books on Chinese religion and culture. Just before Christmas, I asked a friend to join me on a visit to Lion’s Head Mountain (Shih T’ou Shan), a Buddhist pilgrimage site in central Taiwan. What started as a pleasant outing turned into an extraordinary adventure, a pilgrimage which provided a frame of meaning for my studies in Chinese culture.

Taipei in the 70s was brimming with traditional Chinese religious practices, but these were tucked into the corners and back alleys of a rapidly modernizing city. The journey to Shih T’ou Shan was, symbolically, a journey back to a much more traditional China. As we started up the mountain,
vestiges of the modern world faded, save for the watches and cameras of the pilgrims. The only paths were footpaths, and supplies were delivered by the traditional Chinese mode of slinging items from a long pole balanced across the shoulders. As the modern world receded, the world of traditional Buddhism and Chinese religions appeared before us. The mountain displayed a comprehensive vision of Chinese religious life, with multiple levels of faith, many streams of practice. As the pilgrims climbed, we advanced through layers of religious imagination, spiritual discipline, and symbolism. These layers represented folk religions, Taoist practices, Confucian virtues, and many many layers of Buddhism. After devoting five years to the study of Chinese religions, I finally came to understand on this mountain that, for the Chinese, the many forms of religious expression were all aspects of a single Way.

After a rigorous climb to a spot near the peak of the mountain, the few remaining pilgrims reached an active monastery where pilgrims could stay, for a modest offering, as long as we observed the monastic schedule of the monks during the visit. My friend and I gladly accepted their hospitality. During meals we had opportunity to talk with the monks and the abbot about Buddhist teachings and life. The abbot was a delightful host who emanated great joy and peace; his warmth and gentle instruction made us wish for a longer visit.

I was thrilled when, as I made ready to depart, the abbot offered me a parting gift of Buddhist scriptures hand-copied by the monks. His gift not only honored my willingness to learn about his faith, but also made me a real Buddhist pilgrim. In historical times, the Chinese emperors commissioned famous monks to undertake pilgrimages to India to collect and bring back to China Buddhist scriptures. More than a thousand years after the first pilgrims, this abbot offered me hand-copied Buddhist scriptures as a token of my pilgrimage, assimilating me into a long line of pilgrims who had sought truth in faraway Buddhist monasteries.

This journey helped me understand Chinese religious life; such was the major purpose of my stay in Taiwan. Yet for many years after that visit to Lion’s Head Mountain, my thoughts returned to the days on that mountain with a persistent question: What had been the meaning of my pilgrimage? Why did I take it? Why, in fact, had I undertaken the study of Chinese religions? The journey to Shih T’ou Shan brought home to me that I was in Chinese culture as a pilgrim. What was I seeking there? What did I hope to bring back?

to be a pilgrim

This pilgrimage was first and foremost an intellectual sojourn, for I had devoted myself to the study of Chinese religions and cultures. I was in Taiwan to write my dissertation (based on library research), but also to experience and observe first-hand everything I could of Chinese religious life and practice.

The pilgrimage was also, in a somewhat larger sense, a broadening of my cultural horizons, an extension of my experience and vision of the richness of the human heritage. My nearly three years in Asia during the research and writing of my dissertation offered an opportunity to steep myself in its art, literature, food, social patterns, and religions. The experience of living in Taiwan stretched me in many ways. After some difficult adjustments, I began to feel comfortable—almost at home—in many aspects of East Asian culture. The pilgrimage to Lion’s Head Mountain was an important piece of opening myself to the horizons of Chinese culture; never before had I immersed myself so completely in a traditional Chinese context. There were, for example, no modern amenities nor any English speakers, except my friend and myself, on Lion’s Head Mountain. For this period, I entered fully into a traditional Chinese setting. Thus my assimilation into the traditional pattern of the Buddhist pilgrim through the gift of the scriptures from the abbot was a kind of fruit of this crossing of boundaries.

But if my pilgrimage had yielded intellectual understanding, and expansion of my cultural horizons, it also had deeper implications. It was a pilgrimage which broadened my spiritual as well as cultural horizons. It was a journey of the spirit, a “wandering beyond the bounds,” a quest for a
broader vision of my specific place in the spiritual landscape.

I sought in Chinese culture a remedy to my own former narrow cultural and religious vision, expiation for the sins of Western cultural and religious chauvinism and the attendant distrust and hatred of the other. Seeking this remedy entailed the spiritual discipline of becoming an outsider, another as I had been in the South in 1955, both in order to learn from Chinese culture as a guest but also to learn an appropriate global humility, recognizing that my natal culture is not the norm of the entire world. Broadened cultural horizons required recognizing many centers in the human community, and broadened religious horizons required the recognition of many vital religious faiths.

Along the way, I was touched by many forms of religious life, which enriched me or gave me new perspectives on my Christian heritage. The embrace of many levels of Chinese religion in the single path up Lion's Head Mountain presented a strikingly new approach to the many paths and practices of religion. I was inspired to learn from the Chinese an alternative way of understanding religious neighbors.

The history of Chinese religions, a long and rich saga of three major traditions and a multitude of lesser ones, captured my fancy and passion some thirty years ago because of one striking characteristic: the Chinese assumption in this multi-religious history of religious inclusivity rather than religious exclusivity. That is to say, in traditional China, the normal expectation was that people would participate in a variety of religious communities and traditions throughout their lives, and moreover, that it was part of one's civic responsibility to participate in the religious festivals of all religious groups in one's community.

This assumption of religious inclusivity is the polar opposite of the "Western" assumption of Christianity (and Judaism and Islam) of religious exclusivity, in which a jealous God demands that we choose the one, true faith and abandon all others. Because the cultural/religious heritage of European and North American Christianity has been based on exclusivistic assumptions for two millennia, it is hard for us to grasp how any alternative to that assumption might operate with religious integrity.

My book, A Pilgrim in Chinese Culture: Negotiating Religious Diversity, (Orbis, 1997), explores in detail how such an assumption functioned in the religious system of China. In this essay, I will briefly describe the primary cultural model which underlay the Chinese inclusive religious system, offering a very brief overview of how this served as a foundation for the system.

the story of religious pluralism in China

From the earliest traces of human civilization, the territory which came to be China yielded a wealth of religious beliefs and practices. There were always religious tensions in China: genuine philosophical differences, rival rituals and pantheons, jockeying for patronage of the wealthy and powerful, attempts by local and national officials to domesticate the religious impulse. Yet despite these very real tensions and rivalries, the dominant story of religious pluralism in China was one of tolerance of all teachings in the realm under Heaven. Like modern-day Japanese whose religious affiliations in the 1983 census added up to nearly twice the total population, virtually all Chinese participated in more than one religion in the course of their lifetimes, sometimes sequentially and sometimes simultaneously (Kiing and Ching, 274).

The Chinese state affirmed the multiplicity of religious groups and practices. Chinese imperial governments, like European monarchies, reserved to themselves the right to establish orthodoxy and to declare any book or practice illegal on the grounds that it threatened morals or state security. Although the state had a strong bias for establishmentarian religious beliefs and practices, it primarily sought to control religious life by bringing it under the patronage, sponsorship, and support of local and national officials. The Chinese state did not adopt a single "official" religious teaching, but rather cast itself as the patron and protector of all "legitimate" forms of religion.

In an attempt to impose some order in the Chinese religious world, the labels "Confucian," "Buddhist," and "Taoist" were adopted by Han dynasty historians (at roughly the time of Christ) as
classifications for writings, biographies, and temples or shrines. Leaders of religious movements came to use these labels polemically as each sought to differentiate his movement from key rivals. Government authorities used the labels to classify religious movements for the purposes of patronage and control.

There were many markets of distinct religious movements or schools in China: lineages of religious texts, lineages of masters or teachers, esoteric ritual practices, and schools of textual interpretation. These divisions, while significant, also evolved over time, and as they did religious boundaries were redrawn and traditions re-configured. The boundaries among groups were by no means absolute, and—most significantly—their devotees, patrons, and even occasionally their religious professionals overlapped and crossed boundaries. As C. K. Yang has noted,

In popular religious life it was the moral and magical functions of the cults, and not the delineation of the boundary of religious faiths, that dominated people’s consciousness. Even priests in some country temples were unable to reveal the identity of the religion to which they belonged. Centuries of mixing gods from different faiths into a common pantheon had produced a functionally oriented religious view that relegated the question of religious identity to a secondary place. (25)

Local and popular traditions did not neatly fall under any of the three designations: Confucian, Buddhist, or Taoist. A vast portion of Chinese religious life was centered around local deities or practices; the labels “Confucian,” “Buddhist,” or “Taoist” are simply not helpful in these cases.

**An alternative model for conceptualizing Chinese religious life**

For these reasons, it is inadequate to think of Chinese religious life and practice as comprised of three separate, distinct, and competing religions called “Confucianism,” “Buddhism”, and “Taoism.” We need to take into account that religious communities had overlapping constituencies, and competed with each other, drawing from a common pool of religious images, texts, symbols, and practices.

My book employs the notion of “Chinese religious field” as a heuristic device to convey the inter-activity and permeability of Chinese religious practices and communities. The concept of religious field helps convey the realities of Chinese religious pluralism in a number of ways.

First, it reminds us of the common pool of religious elements from which religious communities were free to draw. The Chinese religious field can be depicted in a number of ways; one is in terms of the idealized system of the “well-field” (ching-t’ien), described in the ancient *Classic of Rites*, and invoked by Chinese reformers over the centuries as a remedy against the evils of excessive government centralization and taxation. The idea is based on the structure of the character *ching*, meaning “well,” shaped roughly like a tic-tac-toe grid.

Mencius describes the well system this way:

Each well-field unit is one li square and contains nine hundred mu of land. The center lot is the public field. The eight households each own a hundred-mu farm and collaborate on cultivating the public field. When the public field has been properly attended, then they may attend to their own work.

The well-field system, although it may never have been implemented in China, was invoked as an ideal because a) it gave each family a plot land for their support, and b) it provided a localized system of mutual assistance from the common well field in lieu of central government taxation. It represented a utopian society where everyone had sufficient land and strong central government was superfluous.

I invoke this notion of “field” for the Chinese religious system because it metaphorically equalizes the various religious groups which surround the “public field” or common pool. At the center of the religious field, in my use of the metaphor, is a common pool of religious elements from which local institutions draw and to which they contribute.

At a second level, the metaphor of religious field can be depicted as a grid in which each local religious temple or shrine finds its appropriate niche. Chinese temples and deities in any given locale tended to sort themselves into complementary functions and specializations, each developing
a particular niche in the religious field. Local residents learned the powers and specializations of each shrine and approached them accordingly.

If the notion of Chinese religious field embraces the “well-field” or common pool of religious elements and of field as a grid in which each religious group finds its appropriate niche, the Chinese religious field must also have a dynamic or active aspect, for it is a field of religious interaction and competition. The Chinese religious field is a field of action, a playing field.

Since the Chinese have no tradition of competitive games on playing fields (unless one counts mahjong or chess), the dynamic aspect of the “Chinese religious field” is best visualized as a path on a mountain. Most local religious fields had a pilgrimage site (a mountain where available), and so this visualization builds on a solid Chinese tradition of pilgrimage sites or major temples representing their own comprehensive vision of the religious field.

Such an illustration would suggest a path up a “mountain” representing the local religious field. The path is long, wending its way through the variety of traditions represented in the local field. The narrow “bridges” between paths are ritual or meditative “short-cuts” advocated by some particular leader or group. These bridges can speed one along the Way.

What complicates the visualization of the “religious field” is that in many locales, where more than one religious group competed for dominance, these strong groups each had their own picture of the shape of the whole, or the place of each shrine on the path and the location of effective short-cuts. What they shared was a notion that the “religious field” embraced the entire religious diversity of the community.

**a non-transferable model?**

The model of the Chinese religious field provided a framework within which the people of traditional China could negotiate religious diversity within their communities. The “well-field” image suggested that all religious communities and traditions contribute to and borrow from a common pool of symbols, practices, deities, and behaviors as needed, adapting them to their own circumstances. The image of a path on a sacred mountain wove all of the shrines and temples of a community into a religious field on which the faithful could seek boons and enlightenment.

The issue for us is to what extent is the Chinese model transferable/applicable to our situation? Perhaps not at all, for the richness and effectiveness of the Chinese model was that it was rooted in larger cultural patterns and values. When we move to a different cultural context, problems immediately arise.

The first problem is that the Chinese “religious field” as a playing field (the path on the mountain) does not look like a “playing field” as we understand it. Our notion of a playing field (football field, soccer field, basketball court) entails a turf war: two teams defend goals set at opposite ends of the field, fighting to penetrate and capture “the goal.” (The major exception is perhaps a baseball diamond, but I have long since learned that I am not a baseball sage; I defer to the experts in baseball metaphysics as to whether the diamond has any potential for our present purpose.) Yet the concept of “playing field” is important, since it captures the dynamic aspect of negotiating religious life. The only genuine parallel I have identified is a treasure hunt, particularly computerized treasure hunt, (or mystery quests) where the player has to negotiate a series of landscapes/scenes. Yet this is not a dominant cultural paradigm for a “field of play.”

The second difficulty in transferring the notion of “religious field” to our culture is the lack of anything remotely resembling the “well field.” In our culture, land (cultivated land) is owned; it is someone’s territory or turf (except perhaps in the case of a community garden). We have a well-developed sense of charity and philanthropy in our culture, but it has been largely abstracted from the land: it has to do with the generosity of persons, either with their cash or with their material goods. A tithe might be our cultural equivalent of the Chinese “well-field” (where one-ninth of the crops goes for public need), but it does not provide any model or image for a common pool of shared elements, only a broad notion of generosity.
The only possibility I have yet uncovered of a cultural parallel is our important tradition of parks: public land set aside for usage by “all the people.” The park system is an important image for us to reflect on in an era when we are fervently seeking “common ground,” for parks are precisely and exactly that.

However, neither the “treasure hunt” nor the “park” image are particularly rich as models for religious life; they are, at least for our times, too embedded in secular aspects of our culture. We need to look to our religious heritage for a more promising model.

Part two of Professor Berling’s essay, suggesting and exploring this promising model, will appear in the Trinity/June issue.

works cited
Mencius 3A:3; translated in Sources of Chinese Tradition, I: 95.

His Duchess, New-Dated

His family’s sterling flatware, willed to him
As the eldest son, and so to me
As his wife, establishes with its crested
And scrolled initial: who eats, and hosts,
At his table. The same initial embellishing
The brass doorknocker, greets newcomers: it is he,
The bearer of the name beginning with that initial,
Who gives the house and its inhabitants
Their identity. The children, like flatware,
Bear the stamp of his features as well
As the initial, imprinted as household
Properties. Long ago, with laughter
And ceremony, I too received the gift
Of the initial and the name ennobling me.
I wear the fineries he furnishes—initialed
Jewelry—when I assume the dignities
Of the foot of the table where he presides.
From here, I do not stop my smiling at him,
Keeping my life, and what it hides.

Nancy Westerfield
BEGINNING THE YEAR OF GRACE 1998

for Mark

Your poems found me
still turning pages
of last year's guilt. Am I just getting older
or has the alienation I embrace
finally done its work?
Still the heart of the only
economics I've ever known, poems
don't grow on trees. No lunch
is free where fathers begrudge sons
wasted trips to the mall
or stink bombs hidden in a drawer.
Not even the shiver of this handbuzzer
can shock me toward honesty:
You spent phiff-teeen dollars on that?
My acid tongue and authoritarian repartee
mask a wall joining Andrew, Dad, and me.
Mark, the chalk-stained fingers of your poems
hold a high golden cue.
Let billiard balls fly
chasing a hundred corner pockets!
Our own misspent youth:
the only thing
still built to last.

John Welle
Condemned Into Everlasting Redemption:
implying the end of imagination in Macbeth

Michael Sexson

Macbeth is Shakespeare's Inferno, his vision of Hell. Everything in the play follows from and corroborates this observation. Hell for Shakespeare is first and foremost an image, a picture as palpably horrific as Bosch's depiction of Hell in the last third of his famous triptych. We are introduced immediately to thunder and lightning as well as the "fog and filthy air" (I.i.11) which provides a backdrop to the prophecies of the three witches. What follows is a single obsessive vision woven of repeated images of blood, death, darkness, fear, and terror. There is no exit from this zone of the damned thick with the atmosphere of murder, murkiness, fever, despair, and horror. That Shakespeare considered the scene of action to be quite literally Hell is clear not only from Lady Macbeth's narcotized admission in the fifth act that "Hell is murky" (V.i.35) but from the night porter's frank comparison of himself to the "porter of hell gate" (II.iii.2).

Since Hell is the center of the play, all things, natural and contrived, are sucked into its vortex. Here owls do not hoot but "scream," crickets do not chirp but "cry" (II.iii.16). An old man tells Ross that he saw a falcon killed by a hawk and Ross replies that King Duncan's horses, after his murder, turned wild and began to eat one another (II.iv.18). No light enters this unholy precinct. The old man says that even though it is daylight by the clock, "yet dark night strangles the traveling lamp" (II.iv.7). When light is described at all, it is coagulate and "thick." Night is Macbeth's chosen time since it hides his bloody deeds. He calls upon it to "scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day" (III.ii.50).

Every speech in Macbeth contributes to this compulsive picture making of Hell. So pervasive is the dark and ghoulish atmosphere that King Duncan's cheerful description of Macbeth's home as possessing air that "sweetly recommends itself / To our gentle senses"(I.vi.2) seems absurd. The absurdity vanishes when we realize that Duncan's eyes do not see the same world that Macbeth, and we, perceive—the castle of soul loss and lost souls.

Hell, for Shakespeare, is the loss of soul, the progressive failure of imagination, the deterioration of the ability to see, speak, and act within the precinct of both the significant and the sacred. Shakespeare is haunted, particularly in his late romances, by the myth of Demeter and its rich symbolism of death and rebirth. The Eleusinian Mysteries of the ancient world celebrated the story of Demeter and her daughter Persephone in rituals which culminated in a dark enclosed space presided over by a high priest who did something, said something, and showed something, the effect of which was to utterly transform the existence of the initiates. While there is lack of agreement as to what actually was said, done and shown, it is clear that the Eleusinian pilgrims felt that they were in the vicinity of a temenos, a designated space so charged with the grandeur of god that whatever was said became significant, whatever was shown was holy, and whatever was done was sacred. For Shakespeare, the notion of the temenos is central not only in Macbeth but in the entire corpus. Within this holy space language is hieroglyphic, sight is ecstatic seeing, and action is the movement of infinity in and through the temporal. Shakespeare's works explore in painstaking detail the consequences of drifting away from the holy center. Macbeth is the depiction of a journey to the outermost limits where speech has become the inarticulate howling of idiots, where sight has been clouded by murkiness and darkness, and where all action has become tedious and insignificant.

Like the fallen souls in gnostic mythologies, Macbeth, attracted by the things of the world, for-
gets the true space of the temenos. Indeed, when we first meet him, he is well on the way to that frigid world which is, as the Porter says, colder than Hell itself. And yet Macbeth is no Edmund or Richard III, who flamboyantly embrace their villainy. Like the colorless male protagonists of film noir who exist to be duped by clever women, Macbeth initially arouses our sympathy. He seems a decent husband and a valiant warrior. He has a powerful imagination capable of producing vivid hallucinations. He recoils from dark thoughts and like everyone else is given to fear and guilt. The “horrid image” of what must be done to advance his career, he says, “doth unfix my hair/And make my seated heart knock at my ribs...” (I.iii.136-137). Far from being an exemplary Aristotelian tragic hero, Macbeth begins as merely one of us and eventually loses even that lowly distinction as he dwindles into a state where “There's nothing serious in mortality” (II.iii.95); Macbeth, alone of Shakespeare’s tragic protagonists, reaches the remotest outpost where “All is but toys; renown, and grace, is dead” (II.iii.96).

As Macbeth drifts further and further away from sacred speech, action, and sight, even his sense of time changes. Within the temenos, time is experienced as an eternal now. The past and the future radiate in upon the moment generating the sense that everything is fully and richly present. As one moves away from the holy center, time fragments into past and future, of what has been, and what might be. Indeed, Macbeth begins with time out of joint as the witches gather to announce their next communion: “When shall we three meet again.” Macbeth and his wife are not interested in the present, but in the future, of what might be gained, what may be acquired, of what will take place. Macbeth’s famous soliloquy in scene seven of the first act is, among other things, a frenzied collection of thoughts about the future, concerning not only the as yet uncommitted murder of Duncan, but also of the consequences of that act. He shifts wildly from the subjunctive future to the future indicative, from the realm of possibilities to future facts: “If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well/It were done quickly” (I.vi.1-2). The “here” is not an instant to embrace, as it is within the sacred precinct, but a “shoal of time” on which one attempts to freeze-frame the future, to put an end to the elusive stuff of speculation. So powerfully driven by the future are the warrior and his wife that eventually no acquisition is ever enough, no rank satisfactory or final, for these events only generate ever more perplexing possibilities. Finally, Macbeth comes to see time as the exact opposite of how it is experienced within the temenos. There, the rule of carpe diem prevails, where awareness of the brevity of life and the passing of time force a passionate involvement in the moment. Here, however, at the end of the imagination, time lengthens, the days creep ever more slowly, and life becomes an interminable repetition of endless yesterdays. Macbeth is the exact opposite of Cleopatra and Falstaff. These characters embody the act of living fully—and theatrically—in the present. They discover the presence of eternity in every moment. By contrast, Macbeth comes to find every moment an unendurable eternity.

Macbeth at first possesses a powerfully visual imagination. He can produce out of thin air daggers and ghosts with gory locks. After the murder, he speaks poetically of Duncan’s “silver skin” “laced with golden blood” (II.iii.114). Eventually, however, he becomes more and more like Lady Macbeth, a rationalist in a long line of Shakespearean skeptics who scoff at the wild imaginations of lunatics, lovers and poets. He learns, with his wife, that it is “the eye of childhood /That fears a painted devil” (II.ii.58-59). By the end of the play, Macbeth sees no ghosts and beholds no fatal visions. His hair no longer stands on end and he fears no one and nothing:

I have almost forgot the taste of fears.  
The time has been my senses would have cooked  
To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair  
Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir  
As life were in 't. I have supped full with horrors;  
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,  
Cannot once start me. (V.9-15)
The candle has gone out, the imagination is extinguished. Macbeth is numb and impervious to fear and pain, guilt, even surprise. When he is informed that his wife is dead, he simply says dully, “She should have died hereafter” (V.i.17). His language, which had once been filled with nervous vitality and dreadful energy is now flat and thick. The business and bustle of the world, seen by a deteriorating imagination, a failure of the power to recast mute experience into rich symbolic form, becomes pointless and insignificant movement, or, as the witches put it, “a deed without a name” (IV.i.49). It is life feeding on life, killing breeding more killing. “It will have blood, they say,” Macbeth mutters tonelessly, “blood will have blood” (III.iv.12). It is at this point in Macbeth that Shakespeare reaches the silent core of the tragic vision. It is not Aristotle’s fall from grace of a noble yet flawed creature; nor is it the aloneness of the solitary individual cut loose from all civilized standards. Rather, it is the terrifying vision of Euripides where human flesh is ripped and torn, and not just the flesh of adults, but of children. When Aristotle cited Euripides as the most tragic of all the poets, he may have had in mind the scene in The Trojan Women where Hecuba is presented by the conquering Greeks with the dead body of her grandson Astyanax and told to cleanse the corpse on his father’s shield. Hecuba weeps as she washes the tiny body of its wounds and wonders why it is that in this world the old bury the young rather than the other way around.

Only in Macbeth, of all Shakespeare’s plays, is the slaughter of the innocents so central. The play is filled with references to violence done to children. Macbeth imagines Pity as a “naked newborn babe/Striding the blast” (I.vii.21). One of the apparitions that appears to Macbeth in his final visit to the witches is that of a bloody child. Macduff’s son is violently put to the sword on orders from Macbeth. And, in lines that broach the unspeakable, Lady Macbeth insists that she is bold and resolute enough to pluck the smiling infant’s boneless gums from her nipple and dash its brains out (I.vii.58-59). Like Euripides and Shakespeare, Dostoevsky understood that at the dead center of the tragic vision lies the wanton slaughter of children. In a scene remarkably reminiscent of Lady Macbeth’s picturing of herself murdering her infant, Ivan Karamazov in The Brothers Karamazov tells his younger brother about how Turkish soldiers would surround captured women holding their babies. They would smile in order to make the babies smile and once they had succeeded, they would point their pistols at the babies’ heads and blow their brains out.

Here at the farthest remove from sacred sight, speech, and action, where innocent children are slaughtered, imagination collapses. At his frigid outpost, there can be no redemption. When Macbeth says at the very end, “Come, put mine armor on,” (Viii.50) we do not see him redeeming his life by theatrically fashioning his own death, as is precisely the case at the end of Antony and Cleopatra when the doomed queen calls for her robe and her gown and announces that she has “immortal longings.” Cleopatra before she dies is the rage to life personified. Just before Macbeth calls for his armor he confesses: “I have lived long enough. My way of life/Is fall’n into the sere, the yellow leaf . . . ” (Viii.22-23). Even when Macbeth decides to fight Macduff we behold not redemption but reversion to the bloody and unreflective role of a warrior, capable of “unseaming” an enemy from “the nave to the chops” (I.ii.22). It is still a world of blood begetting blood. There is no redemption for Macbeth. The best that can be said about him is the almost humorous remark made about the traitorous Thane of Cawdor in Act One: “Nothing in his life/Became him like the leaving it” (I.iv.7-8).

In Shakespeare’s vision, redemption is intimately tied to imagination. The further away from the temenos, where the imagination is fully operative, giving to action, speech and sight a sacred quality, the less likely the possibility of redemption. Redemption in Shakespeare, however, seems to have little to do with conventional criteria for salvation. Those who come closest to redemption in the world he created are not necessarily sainted souls like Cordelia or noble and honorable people like King Duncan. Rather, they are clowns and fools, dandies and simpletons, vain women, braggarts, and villains who have a peculiarly theatrical sense of their villainy. The roll call of the redeemed must even include Richard III who, like Macbeth, took us to the mute heart of the tragic vision where children are massacred, but who, unlike Macbeth, embraced his villainy, flaunted it as flam-
boyantly as the cartoon villain draws his cape across his face. It must include Nick Bottom from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, who, alone of the *dramatis personae* in that play, is permitted entrance to the bower of bliss, the sacred precinct, the *temenos*, where he is, as stage manager Peter Quince says, both “translated” and “blessed” (III.i.1134-114). It also must include Parolles, the little discussed fop from *All's Well That Ends Well*. Parolles is a military braggart and dandy who is tricked by his own comrades into divulging traitorous information about them. Parolles, in order to save his own skin, not only confesses his companion’s sins, but elaborates upon them, making them far worse than they are. One of the lords who interrogates Parolles, says, in an aside, “I begin to love him for this,” (IV.iii.263) and, later, “He hath out-villained villainy so far that the rarity redeems him” (IV.iii.225-226). Parolles, like Nick Bottom, is translated into a state of blessedness. He has persisted so far in his folly that he has become wise. “Being fooled,” he remarks, “by foolery thrive” (IV.iii.340).

The two prime examples of the redeemed in Shakespeare’s universe are Falstaff and Cleopatra. By the standards of the world and its theologies, they are great sinners. They fail every standard of honorability. They are inconstant, contradictory, grossly self-centered, absurdly theatrical, overwrought, overbearing, arrogant, insolent, haughty. They will have none of the honor of Hotspur or the seriousness of Caesar. Their imaginations run wild; Falstaff multiplies the enemies who beset him with each telling of the tale of Gad’s hill and Cleopatra fully believes that she has been able to make this human world rival that of the gods. Supreme, they embody what is there to a lesser degree in the others who move toward the sphere of the blessed. Self-invented, they come to fully occupy the *temenos* where language becomes hieroglyphic, where sight is blazingly visionary, where all action is choreographed, and each earthly movement has its corresponding gesture in eternity.

This is where Macbeth is not.

In the end of course, none of these people experience redemption, for they are not people at all, but fictions. They exist because they have been written down. Redemption then becomes less a matter of this or that character’s thought or behavior, but of the presence of an immense imagination capable not only of imagining such characters and situations, but also capable of imagining its own extinction. This imagination clearly is Shakespeare’s, and *Macbeth* is his imagining the end of imagination. When that absence is fully imagined, then redemption becomes not only possible, but inevitable.

The inevitability of redemption through imagining all things brings to mind the constable Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*. Like Bottom wishing to play all the parts in the play he is to perform, Dogberry wishes to take note of everything, indeed, to write it all down. In this sense, Dogberry is Shakespeare’s *doppleganger*, the parodic double of the master magician himself compulsively noting and writing down all that he sees and hears and translating it into drama.

For Dogberry, getting things in writing is not simply the means whereby events acquire binding legal status; it is to confer upon them ontological significance. Long before Jacques Derrida, Constable Dogberry understood that “To be a well-favored man is the gift of fortune, but to write and read comes by nature” (III.iii.15-16). When the villain Conrade, exasperated by Dogberry’s consummate stupidity, shouts at him “You are an ass!” (IV.ii.73) Dogberry laments that the Sexton is not there to write down that he is an ass, and insists that even though it is not written, it should be remembered that he is an ass.

On one level of course, Dogberry is a mere fool, like Elbow in *Measure for Measure*, given to committing what Escalus in that play calls “misplacings,” (II.i.88) saying “piety” for “impiety,” “tolerable” for “intolerable,” and so on. On this level, his malapropisms and his infatuation with the notion that language creates realities makes for low comedy. On another level, however, Dogberry is a holy fool, like Nick Bottom, translated into an ass and become one of the blessed who have seen, spoken and acted within the precinct of the holy. On this level, Dogberry's “misplacings” open through to Shakespeare’s supreme vision, the one which insists that redemption, like writing and reading, comes by nature, is inescapable. When Dogberry has heard the worst of the slanders committed by the villains in the play, he proclaims, “Thou wilt be condemned into everlasting
redemption for this” (IV.ii.56-57). Dogberry means to say, as almost all footnotes to the text tell us, “perdition” or “damnation.” On the anagogic level, however, the level reached by Prospero in The Tempest, what Dogberry says is exactly the truth—that when the imagination is fully operative, when Macbeth becomes Macbeth, when art has done its job of enchantment, then none shall be denied entry into the holy of holies.

ALONE IN THE TUNDRA

Marmots flop in the sun and scratch, face-down on lichen plastered to rocks. Tundra is a jungle of blooms and vines thin as an eyelash. Here, the heart skips, breath too cold for rattlers coiled like tribal gods under boulders.

Snowplows cleared the road last week, winding past cliffs a thousand feet straight down. Curves meet themselves uphill, mountains falling away for miles. Here's where we'd live, if they'd let us, west of Estes Park. Before Bunker Hill, these flowers sprouted in topsoil thin as skin. Tundra grows under snow, releasing oxygen, one molecule a month. But it’s April, all pastel and bees—not bumblebees with heavy chests, lazy in meadows miles below, but bees the size of gnats that float and fumble the tundra's' pollen, turning bantam blossoms into seeds. Buck-toothed marmots look up, no lack of weeds to feed on. Now we're alone, out of breath in the tundra, oddly giddy, our children grown.

We kneel like Gulliver to bring exotic worlds to us, mauve and olive forests no taller than our thumbs. We breathe this aroma of ferns, fighting an impulse to pick these weeds and vines stuck together like velcro, to taste the buds, red dots of blooms so small we need a microscope to see.

Walt McDonald
The Passover Seder our church celebrates on Maundy Thursday is a family meal: the stories sustain us as much as the food. The tastes of the unleavened bread, the fruit spice sauce, the lamb, the wine, and the bitter herbs punctuate "God stories" about the deliverance out of Egypt and the Last Supper. We remember the ways God "kept us in love, sustained us."

Just so, the thread of memory wound through my mother's final three years, spent in a nursing home debilitated by strokes. Like the seder stories and countless family stories in the past, Mom's were often woven in a tapestry of family meals. As we gathered at the round corner table in her favorite restaurant, or around the family table for holiday meals, or for a picnic meal in the family room of the nursing home, we laughed together over old, oft-told family stories: my childhood fear of the bogeyman in our basement, Dad taking an entire role of vacation film with the cap over the camera lens, Mom grabbing out of my husband's hand the birth announcements for our first son and tossing them in the mailbox without stamps or return addresses.

Like the God stories at the seder, the message is, I was with you then. I am part of your story, and you are part of mine. Gather, scatter, gather again for food and story to sustain us in our separate lives: a dance that lasts as long as life.

After the seder, we go upstairs to the nave for the Eucharist: another family meal, another foretaste of the feast to come. At the end the altar is stripped as we read the sorrowful words of Psalm 22: "My God, my God, Why have you forsaken me.... Be not far from me, for trouble is near, And there is none to help." A mystery. Fresh from proclaiming God's faithful care for us, we confront the terror of Christ's seeming abandonment by God. Death, whom Walter Wangerin calls the "unseen guest at every party," at the Last Supper, and forevermore—until that everlasting feast in heaven. What stories did Christ and the disciples tell that night? Stories that eventually became the Gospels. We leave the church in silence.

Mom's final weeks contained the same foreboding: emergency room visits, hospital stays, increasingly dreadful prognoses. Eventually, one leg was amputated. The horror of her suffering and mutilation stunned us. Our brief euphoria at the hope that she might be stable for awhile ended the day after her return to the nursing home. Her other leg was showing the same signs of incipient gangrene and would have to be amputated soon.

Christ's prayers in Gethsemane were no more fervent than ours during that final week of Mom's dying. Sitting by her bed, prowling the halls of the nursing home during the interludes when they cared for her, we prayed that the cup of suffering would be taken from her, that she would die peacefully before the second amputation had to be done.

On Good Friday, the ministers enter the barren church in silence, and the story of the Passion according to St. John is read. For the disciples, the abrupt change from feasting and, surely, laughter, to having their Lord led away and put to death.

Those hours by Mom's bedside were silent ones also. Like the women watching by Christ's cross, all we could offer was our presence. A friend whose father had died several months earlier told me, "Don't be afraid to be there" (as the disciples were). Unlike our Lord, Mom died with a human touch, my sister Ann and I each holding a hand.

The Good Friday service continues with the Bidding Prayer for all sorts and conditions of people, followed by the Tenebrae, where the telling of stories takes a nasty turn. In the Reproaches we hear about God's many saving acts for us and the disobedience with which we repaid him, the
times he was fully present with us and we ignored him. Each ends with the words, “My people, what have I done or in what have I offended you? Testify against me.” At each response, “Lord, have mercy on us,” another candle on the altar is extinguished until only the central candle is burning. As that is carried out of the sanctuary, the darkness is complete: the darkness of absence.

This is what it’s like without Christ’s human presence in the world. This is what Christ suffered in our place, the terrifying darkness of God’s absence.

In the dark, we sing the Agnus Dei, and the central candle is carried back to the altar. Then the Strepitus, that always shocking slamming shut of a heavy book, sounds. Christ’s work is done.

We pray the affirmation that Christ “carried our sins in your own body on the tree that we might have life... now and in the world to come.” We don’t know why, but we know who, and that’s enough.

We scattered Mom’s ashes in my snow-filled garden on Christmas Day as Karl, pastor and friend, read the Committal. (After my son Toby covered them with a shovel, they lay sandwiched in snow throughout the winter.) Retreating from the cold and the gray of ashes to the glowing warmth of the kitchen, we toasted Mom with cups of hot glogg, the Swedish Christmas drink I make every year according to her recipe. We told ‘Mom stories’ with love and laughter.

For the Easter Vigil also, we emerge from the dark coldness of the undercroft and creep upstairs to the narthex, where the faint scent of unseen flowers perfumes the air. There, new fire is struck and the Paschal candle is lighted to the words, “The light of Christ, who rises gloriously, drive out the darkness of our hearts and minds.” Bending to it, we light our own smaller candles and process into the nave.

It’s time for stories again. We listen in the flame-dotted shadows to accounts of the creation of the earth, of light, and of humanity; of Noah and his family saved through the flood; of Israel’s deliverance through the Red Sea; of the restoration to life of the dead bones in Ezekiel; of the rescue of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego from the fiery furnace.

These stories are followed by our own deliverance story: our baptism. Sometimes a baptism takes place at this point, and even if it does not, the renewal of baptismal promises follows. We are reminded of Paul’s teaching that “We are buried with Christ in Holy Baptism so that, as Christ was raised from the dead, we too should walk in newness of life.”

As the organ, silent for the past few days, trumpets the beginning of the Hymn of Praise, we shout, “This is the feast of victory for our God, Alleluia.” The lights blaze, and we ring the bells we have brought. The recently barren altar shines in gold and white paraments, surrounded by multitudes of flowering plants. After singing, “The Strife is O’er, the Battle Done,” we greet one another joyfully with “The Lord is risen!” “He is risen indeed!” Christ is present with us again as we celebrate Holy Communion. Our joy continues the following day, Easter Sunday, in sound, sight, and fragrance. The organ and the hymns exult, a trumpet blares triumphantly, bells are rung. The nave, sunlit now, blooms with bright clothing and banners. The scent of flowers mingle with delicious smells from the kitchen below us. Sausage, pancakes, coffee: we are preparing to feast again.

One of the plants near the altar—a nodding daffodil given in memory of Mom (yellow was her favorite color)—reminds me of other bright tokens of her scattered in the world. A pink afghan knitted by a loving cousin now warms the great-granddaughter she longed for but didn’t live to see. The yellow ball Mom had used in her stroke-recovery exercises is being tossed and batted around Ann’s fourth-grade classroom. The colorful, soft clothing Ann and I bought for her has been distributed by the Salvation Army. The abundance of notepaper and greeting cards I inherited I send out liberally, a habit I learned from her. The bright lights of her table-top Christmas tree continue to adorn her nursing home room, now on the dresser of her roommate, Millie, alone in the world, befriended by Mom. Her engagement diamond sparkles on my daughter-in-law’s sturdy hand. A sunny coreopsis blooms in the garden at the spot where her ashes are now part of the soil.

Explosions of color from the darkness of death. The Lord is risen. He is risen, indeed! And so shall she. And so shall we. ✝️
ANASTASIS/ RESURRECTION

In translation, they say,
Something is always lost:
The work of bearing
Meaning across the abyss
Of different voices is vain.

The gulf between, say,
The ancient Greek of merchants
Or Asian synagogues and
The lingua franca of the
Cyber world—or even
Between that same common Greek
And provincial Aramaic—
Will not be fully bridged.

That is to say, as we stand
On our side of language and
History and culture,
We hear across the void
Those wholly past and holy other voices
Only as faint and partial
Scratchings in stellar variants,
Sibylline echoes dispersing, dropping
Like millstones to the quiet floor
Of the sea.
It must be said
That the chasm deepens
Whenever we claim
To traverse it, to understand;
If we do find meaning
We tend to find our own—
Isolated, discrete,
Fragmented and contested
Like saints' remains
(In speaking of saints,
One says that their relics,
Their very bones, are translated
From one place to another).

Say what you will,
The losses are great.
We lack more than we possess:
Traces of pronouncements,
Letters and hymns,
Curses and stories,
Each phrase diminished,
Each fragile word,
Like each of us,
Partial,
Broken.

But there is something to be said
For this: if one
Word
Were borne through the abyss,
No longer encrypted—
We might yet speak of,
We might yet hold to,
The possibility
Of a faithful translation.

Tim Gustafson
If a garden’s beauty
is its own excuse
for being,
what of the
lurking anti-beauty
that makes
a home there?

My wife is a gardener, an ardent, passionate grower of flowers. No lettuce, carrots, corn, or peas here. We do have one tomato plant flourishing in a pot on our deck; otherwise, she has taken our half acre of city backyard and transformed it into what one of my friends calls “the closest approximation to Eden on earth.” Even I, who do not fully appreciate Nature, given the propensity of most things “natural” to feed on me whenever I venture outdoors, who rather loathes the activity of gardening (I read)—even I can understand and appreciate the magnificent, luxurious backyard garden that my wife in her God-like way has imagined and brought into being.

Ancient Greek and medieval people had an idea of “plenitude”: the earth in its varieties of life is as full and rich and varied as it could possibly be. Every niche in creation, from the inanimate through the vegetable and animal, through man at the center, through the angels in nine fully-defined ranks, Spenser’s “trinal triplicities,” was for them full of wondrous life which reflected the glory of God its creator. It is, I think, no exaggeration to say that our backyard is a microcosm of that idea of the universe in its richness and diversity. Our backyard is ordered, complex, varied, and full of beauty that reflects the idea of beauty in my wife’s mind and imagination. Our backyard is almost perfect.

There are, for example, structures of various kinds and purposes related to flowers and one’s enjoyment of flowers. There is an old cedar arbor just inside the gate on the south side of the house, originally made for Concord grapes that chose not to flourish; now the arbor is lush with clematis of varying shades and shapes. Beyond the arbor and under the white pines that mark the boundary of the yard, there is an attractive toolhouse, designed by my wife and built of cedar to her specifications; beside the toolhouse (east) is a small garden of various low-flying, leafy shade plants skimming silently above the pine needle floor. There are resting places in various areas around the yard, with benches hand-made from cedar by a local craftsman. There are arbors and arches—my wife has learned from the craftsman how to work with cedar—so that we have, new last summer, a walkway with tall cedar arches for climbing roses that someday will make a lovely, shaded, colorful walk. There is a fence running across the middle of the backyard. “Why do we need a fence in the middle of our yard?” I naively asked once. “Why, to separate the lower yard from the upper yard, of course.” Of course.

Once, beyond the fence that ran across the yard from north to south, which now has an opening at its center with a huge wooden arbor full of roses and clematis with benches on either side and a brick floor under the green, thorny canopy (it’s almost a grotto), she had a very professional gate built in the middle of the remaining backyard. Just a gate. In the middle of the yard beyond the fence. I always made it a point to walk around the gate. Now, five years later, as we sit on the deck and look toward the back of the yard (that is west) through the arbor/grotto we see a stone walk that leads to a sundial surrounded by a circular bed of red flowers which in turn is surrounded by the stone walk that meets behind the bed and leads back to the gate which I can no longer walk around. For the gate has an intricate cedar trellis on either side and arching over it (the local craftsman), and spreading out on each side of the gate are shrubs that have now filled out and remain green the year round. And the gate opens to an area with small flower beds that frame a
rustic open area that contains a low wooden table, two wooden benches and a wooden chair. People gather there to sit and talk. People, in fact, come from all over town to walk in her garden, to sit and visit, to enjoy the beauty of the flowers and the peace and order of nature here.

Sometimes I think that her backyard is to her like an elaborate chess game played against the forces of Chaos and Disorder where she sees a series of moves down the years that will produce pattern and meaning and triumphant beauty. If she meets a setback in one section, if certain plants don't flourish, she hauls them out, by the roots, of course, and tries something else. She plants gates in the middle of nowhere and suddenly it is a somewhere that makes delightful sense.

And her flowers ("not my flowers," she says) bloom from spring to fall. To the right of our deck (north) beyond the dogwood tree which is full of bird feeders and suet holders, there is a small (well, 24' x 24') fenced-in English rose garden. (I was incredulous when she announced this project, but I have learned to keep quiet, mostly, and wait.) Three years ago the English rose garden didn't exist. There was grass and there were two long daylily beds. Now there is a gate, green and blue, a wooden fence, also green and blue, and all around the inside of this garden numerous English roses, dark red roses with names like "Chianti," "Fisherman's Friend," "The Prince," "The Dark Lady," and "L.D. Braithwaite"; pink roses with lively names like "Constance Spry," "Gertrude Jekyll," "Brother Cadfael," "Heritage," "Perdita," "St. Cecilia," and "Sharifa Asma." There are apricot-colored roses like "Evelyn" and "Leander," and there is a wonderful yellow rose aptly named "Golden Celebration," and a lovely white rose called "Fair Bianca." And there are more. In the center of this English rose garden are two daylily beds (the original beds she reduced in size and moved to parallel the east-west sides of the surrounding fence). The daylilies are vibrant yellows and oranges and maroons that shade into unnameable exotic colors. There are flowers planted between the roses, "companion plants," I believe: Shasta daisies, larkspur, single hollyhocks that are such a deep dark purple that they look black, a small bed of lavender, and bursts of baby's breath (gypsophila paniculata!), the prolific, delicate white background flower, that Ezra Hazzard in his Perennials for the Lower Midwest somewhat preciously describes as "like a white cloud come to earth to share with us an ethereal mist of beauty." (I told you I read!)

Outside the enclosed English rose garden and lining the two sides of the fence visible from the deck (that would be the east and south sides) is a continuing bed of more daylilies (the displaced daylilies, of course), one with such wine-dark rich red petals and a yellow center—throat—that its beauty makes me ache, makes me want to write an ode, or something of my own approaching beauty. My favorite flower there is a stretch of what my wife says is astilbe, wonderful fuzzy pink flowers shaped like miniature Christmas trees on top of long green stalks. The purple-black hollyhocks are growing behind them on the other side of the fence.

In the side garden there is also ajuga, a marvellous ground cover with small purple flowers; ajuga, whose name repeated rhythmically—"uh 'jooga, uh 'jooga, uh 'jooga, 'jooga, 'jooga!"—sounds like a triumphant war cry which my friends (both of them) and I sometimes chant, while lifting a few after-work libations, to celebrate gardens and cheer on my wife, of course, as we sit on the deck at the first sign of spring and watch her weed flower beds.

To every good thing, however, there always seems to be a dark side, and so there is in this backyard paradise. A garden this large is bound to contain wildlife. My wife encourages that. When she sees a box turtle trying to cross a road in town or country, she immediately endangers everyone's life by stopping the car, grabbing the turtle, taking it home and setting it loose in the backyard. One box turtle laid eggs last year in a hole near a six foot tree stump (there's a bird house on top of the stump, in case you were wondering; nothing is wasted). She immediately put up a sign reading "turtle nursery" with an arrow pointing to the ground. Though we never saw the ground disturbed where the turtle buried the eggs, we do seem to have more small box turtles in the yard this year.

We had baby possums once whose mother had been hit by a car. We bottle fed them, and three are now running loose in the neighbor's garbage or wherever it is that possums go when they grow up and can get around fences. In the yard on the other side of our garden (north) there was a mother
fox (vixen!) with three cubs or kits or whatever. There may have been a father too, but who could tell? We've seen a groundhog one small orchard down the street of our subdivision and once an early morning deer.

In the backyard there are numerous bird feeders and bird houses, and we have become knowledgeable bird watchers over the years: blue jays and cardinals, of course; goldfinches, purple finches, tufted titmice, black capped chickadees, a brown thrasher family, a wood thrush, a downy woodpecker who eats the suet and seems untroubled by human presence.

The socially evil, parentally-challenged flocks of cowbirds, predominantly male, come in the spring and summer, and blackbirds or grackles, all part of the darker side, come in the spring to roost in the white pines that line the sides and back of our property and to take over the feeders all summer as long as I will let them. (I do serve a sort of function there that doesn't require too much exposure to the outdoors: “Shoo, nasty birds!”) There are mourning doves year round, too stupid to figure out how to get somewhere else in life, I guess. Their nests look like ecological disasters, and two can't ever seem to eat together at even a large feeder without one snapping her (or his, of course) wing at the other. Twenty or so years ago there were just two mourning doves and only one feeder and not much to sit on except the electric, telephone, and TV cable wires that run across the backyard property line (south to north). In a flash of insight unusual to me I named them Sarah and Abraham. That name turned out to be prophetic, for today they are indeed a nation, numerous as the stars in the night sky.

There are robins with well-made nests in the maple trees around the front of the house and elsewhere throughout the yard; we are just far enough south that they stay during the winter, though they have refused our best efforts to feed them bits of fruit as the books suggest, but somehow they manage to live off the crab apples that the waxwings miss, as well as other things which are probably best not pried into. We have white-throated sparrows and slate grey juncos in the fall and winter. There is the astonishing rufous-sided towhee with its bright patches of reddish brown and black and white; there are red-breasted grosbeaks; there are blue birds once in awhile, and once in a while a flock of indigo buntings. There are wrens, regular house wrens, and the more exotic Carolina wrens.

And as with the original garden there is a serpent, many serpents, actually, the truly darker side of the garden from my wife’s point of view. Once we saw a ball of five or six garter snakes beside our deck (north) that terrified my normally courageous wife and that stayed around for several weeks, as I remember, in numbers. My wife finds the small striped garter snakes throughout the summer as she bends over to pull a weed or cut a flower for the table, but generally they keep out of her way and she keeps out of theirs. Until this summer.

This summer we had snakes in the trees. Brownish, grayish snakes marked with darker diamond patterns that matched one’s idea of how terrifying pit vipers are supposed to look. In the garden. In the trees. Well, one tree really. It was night. I was sitting at my desk in my office downstairs, reading, of course, when I heard this hysterical screaming outside my room and coming closer. Grandpa is having a heart attack, I thought (the in-laws were visiting and he is 84 or more). Though the phone hadn't rung, I thought about motorcycle accidents (our eldest son). Maybe one of the dogs is choking or dead, I thought (we have three!). I rushed out of the room, slowly though, since my feet and legs don't work too well any more. “There are snakes in the dogwood tree. They’re after the baby wrens!” she screamed. Oh, great, I thought, since snake chasing is a sort of function that I also perform from time to time (“Shoo, nasty snakes!”). At least they weren’t in the apple tree.

I made my way upstairs and out into the dark backyard, accompanied by my wife and my somewhat militant Mexican mother-in-law (“Matalo!” “Kill them all!”), each armed with a flashlight. In the dogwood tree, just above head height, was the wren house with a snake’s tail hanging out of the opening, twitching. On the branch next to the wren house (south) another large (well, all snakes look large at night), long snake was winding through the tree toward the wren house. The snake sticking out of the house I grabbed by the tail (like Moses) and pulled it out of the house and tossed it across the yard. (There are copperheads in this area, and I hadn't seen this snake's head! My wife said later that the snake sailed over her head, but I don't think so since I saw where it hit the ground!) In any case the first snake disappeared into a flower bed, not that I was chasing it. In fact, once I had seen the first
snake hit the ground, I turned and caught the second snake behind its head and pulled it along with a dead branch out of the tree. Once I got the snake untangled from the dead branch (no one helped me here!), it coiled itself around my arm and kept testing the night air with its dark tongue. I carried it out of the yard and down the street to the small creek that runs, sometimes, after hard spring rains, through our subdivision. There I uncoiled the snake and turned it loose across the creek in the tall grass—all right, my neighbor’s tall grass—where it quickly disappeared.

Well, this dark drama repeated itself two more nights, for the wrens had three chicks, it seems, and each night a snake weaved its way up the dogwood and ate one; each night (too late, of course) I was summoned and caught the snake and carried it away. By the third night even my wife had turned militant and was calling for the death of the serpent, but I have my principles, one of which is to kill no snake but poisonous ones (I have never seen a poisonous one outside a zoo). Besides, they were really rather nice snakes, coiling themselves comfortably about my arm, resting their heads on my thumb, quite willing, apparently, to be hauled away to the creek and my neighbor’s yard, especially, I suppose, since numbers two and three were each bulging with recently consumed wren. Nevertheless, for us, paradise lost, once again; once again the serpent won. Or, maybe not.

My wife and my father-in-law put the vulnerable wren house on a wire that stretches between trees in the backyard. The wrens immediately moved to the empty house and began building another nest. They still sing endlessly during the daylight hours (telling every snake in the neighborhood where they are at all times, I suppose; yet, they sing). My wife’s garden is still magnificent, brilliant, suffused with grandeur and glory. But the grandeur and magnificence have an edge to them now. The rich beauty is still there, and real, and more necessary and fulfilling than the missing vegetables could ever be, but the presence of the snakes and the deaths of the baby wrens remind us that real beauty, while present before our eyes, is also truly beyond us, and a garden such as my wife’s awakens a nostalgia for past beauty lost in our lives (the image of Eden) and a longing, an ardent longing for some real beauty that may yet be in our lives.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
   There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
   Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
   World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

"God’s Grandeur," Gerard Manley Hopkins
SPRING SUNSET: UPON LEARNING ABOUT THE DEATH OF A FRIEND

June, 1997

I

This morning when my wife and I were still planting spring flowers among others yet wet with tears of dew glistening like jewels strewn in the sunshine, we remembered drought and death a decade ago that had marred the year of our marriage.

II

Moving into the heart of noon heat, a lone crow rose above the patios and mown lawns of neighbors' homes. It flew low over our yard and broke the silence, calling in a repetitive pattern like rote memory with its coarse and mournful caw.

III

As late afternoon edges toward evening and that golden halo of sunset starts to fold itself into some distant hills, black bands of shade have begun to show, imposing shadows lengthening over everything, displacing that greater brilliance of daylight.
A blur of blue dusk, its vague veil rising like smoke, eventually replaces that glare of earlier hours with a rough smudge of darkness until even this familiar landscape around us suddenly becomes unrecognizable and vanishes into an absence.

Despite the night, while we sleep, I know those new blooms will reappear under moonlight as if candlelit—flashing the way windblown flames from a minor fire might flare or blazing like little lanterns left behind as gifts to illuminate all in the garden around them.
Dear Editor:

On the MLA dues notice was a conspicuous figure, 36, which the computer claims is the number of years I’ve belonged. MLA stands for Modern Language Association, which is a professional organization. Its 30,000 members are professors of English and modern foreign languages, and graduate students. It issues a scholarly journal, PMLA, and other publications, and holds a big annual meeting (9,000 attenders) in late December. Its delegate assembly occasionally passes resolutions, which perhaps are more or less inconsequential than I take them to be.

Membership is not obligatory. Of the English faculty at the university here in Dogwood, 35 of the 60 tenured and tenure-track people belong, according to a quick tally in the directory issue of PMLA. Some of these may be members only in the current year; you have to join to give a paper at its meeting, so you might join for one year only. I’ve unabashedly done this myself with the Society of Architectural Historians and the American Comparative Literature Association.

At the university in Dogwood the MLA is of little apparent importance. Department chairs and colleagues do not urge that we join, to be good citizens of the profession. Conversely, individuals do sometimes disdain the organization and the annual meeting, in a token anti-establishment spirit. When the chair of the department here was elected president of MLA a couple of years ago, this recognition evoked little public emotion one way or the other in the department, though the university news office took note. “National visibility” is attractive for public relations.

The MLA is a subversive and nihilistic organization, committed to destroying the study of worthy literary texts and replacing that study with politics, arcane theory, deconstruction, and trivia. Most of its members individually press the same diabolic agenda in teaching and writing. Together, members and the organization itself exert immense weight, that of a juggernaut crushing all that’s worthy in American culture.

That is the message transmitted these last few years by writers on the dismal Right, committed to their own kind of deconstruction. “Deconstruction” refers to the likelihood that texts contain internal contradictions. Texts, in other words, are more interesting than we used to think; they are not necessarily polished and unified wholes. The MLA on the Web blandly claims to be a “not-for-profit membership organization that promotes the study and teaching of language and literature.” To the Right, this text conceals a conspiratorial agenda: strenuous efforts to discredit the Western heritage and to block students from experiencing the traditional pleasure and instruction inherent in great novels, poems, plays, and essays. A recent indictment by Philip Gerard, in The World & I, January 1998, is typical: “The MLA is the chief sponsor of race-gender-class criticism, bitterly steeped in militant feminism and the culture of victimhood—a handy tactic to avoid criticism about lack of intellectual rigor.”

Maligners are apt to focus on the more provocative titles of papers given at the annual MLA meeting, and on turgid sentences lifted from PMLA articles. This thinness of strategy is to some extent understandable, owing to our commodified society. Hotel meeting spaces have to be paid for, so the MLA charges a substantial registration fee ($100) to attend the meeting. You have to show your badge at the
morning, to have joined the crowd at the entrance to most meeting rooms. If you’re a journalist in haste, or a tightwad antagonist, you might not be willing to join the organization and pay your conference fee. So you attend only the public sessions and you glance at PMLA in a university library. These cursory tactics, perhaps enhanced by zealous imagination, do not yield adequate reportage.

To report adequately, you set aside two full days and parts of two others, the duration of the meeting. You mark in your program the sessions that interest you, and you attend those. Also, you attend sessions where people you know are on the program. This is what members do, unless they’re stuck upstairs interviewing job candidates. You also try, of course, to identify provocative sessions, in order not to miss fireworks, but mainly you’re interested in learning. Thus in Toronto last December I started off with an session on “computers” to corporatizing the university,” and “resistance to corporatizing the university,” and “computers and theory.”

Not all were great choices. The computers session was so-so, and while I dallied there, Robert Frost was proceeding without me. Giving a paper in a session on travel letters, I had to miss a roundtable on “the role of publishing in the shaping of American literature,” a topic of interest, since what we assign in classes is to some degree shaped by the paperback editions and anthologies available. The big session with the promising title “Credo,” with three distinguished scholars (including the querulous mandarin Stanley Fish), emitted more evasions and platitudes than I cared for at 7:15 in the evening. I longed instead for “The Theory Market” (like the Dow Jones, is theory climbing to unheard-of heights, or is it due for correction?).

I was happy with “Culture of the Profession: An Investigation of Academic Tribes,” at 8:30 the next morning. Gloom from the panelists regarding rampant “corporatizing” of the university resonated with my own take on the future. But it meant missing a session on the poetry of Rita Dove, a colleague here in Dogwood. Also a session on “Thoreau’s ecological fables,” offering a paper on the Walden chapter concerning Irish immigrant John Field, important to me in teaching.

I was really glad, at 10:15 that Monday morning, to have joined the crowd at “I Couldn’t Put It Down: The Best Book of 1997.” Here were four diverse people, vigorous and witty, talking about the best new novels of the year. Panelists included Lisa Jardine from London, who’s been on the inside of some major national book awards in Britain. Did you know, she asked, that certain prominent novelists in Britain have it written into their contracts that their book will automatically be submitted by their publisher to all the literary contests? No wonder literary scholarship gets interested in politics sometimes—a truly worthy new novel, destined perhaps for canonical status, may not get the attention guaranteed by prize nomination, much less any prize, because a publisher can nominate only four books, and the novelists with clout are pre-empting those spaces. While imbibing all this I missed a session on Henry James.

The session at 12:00 noon I attended sandwich and coffee in hand (the MLA day runs straight through from 8:30 a.m. to 10:15 p.m., except for party time at 5:30). This panel was on the American historian Henry Adams, whose work has occupied me for years, and the participants all happened to be young scholars met at previous meetings. One was from a fine conference last summer, on “Futures of American Studies,” but while hearing the Adams people I had to sacrifice the session on globalization of American studies, where the respondent was the organizer of that “Futures” conference.

What else missed? Well, both sessions on T. S. Eliot, one convened by a former Dogwood graduate student, who later reported astonishment at the huge turnout. An Eliot resanctification under way? Who would have prophesied that? I missed the awards ceremony, for best PMLA article and best scholarly books of the year, but picked up the pamphlet printing the tributes. A Dogwood colleague was honored for best article: “In tracing the odyssey of wounds through Omeros, through [Derek] Walcott’s career, and through the interpenetration of Caribbean writers with European classics, [Jahan] Ramazani’s essay demonstrates both the pain and the promise of interlaced identities of colonizing, colonized, and emancipated peoples. The reader comes to understand how this poem can be at once a history, an epic, an allegory, and a lyric to the power of the human spirit.”
The foregoing chronicle is not offered as defense of the MLA or as rebuttal to its critics. No large organization will please everybody, and ample defense is evident in the thousands of people who attend the meeting year after year, with noticeable vigor and enthusiasm. Some of that vigor arises, of course, from being away from home, in a big city, seeing buildings taller than trees. I myself don’t go to MLA every year, but when I do, I try to arrive a day early, to explore. A few years ago it was cheaper to make the meeting city, New Orleans, a stopover on a round-trip flight from Dogwood to Tampa. Once in Tampa, after the meeting, I rented a car for running up to St. Augustine and down to Miami—a specialist in American studies exploring Florida for the first time.

So all this is the Big Picture—the story behind the story, the contextualizing of an issue that polemists keep revisiting glibly and bitterly. They claim that the monolithic and totalitarian MLA is giving the nation cultural food poisoning. But here is a nutrient-rich banquet, consisting mainly of author sessions. Another organization, the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, was formed a few years ago by scholars determined to do traditional literary criticism hermetically free from the language of trendy, politicization, and trivia. But let’s see. If the MLA were not reasonably “trendy,” the bashers would attack it for inanition—why don’t literary scholars, with their yellowed lecture notes, ever have anything new to say? If there weren’t sessions on “political” issues—talk of corporatizing, of commercial forces on canon-formation, even of unionizing—the meeting would be scorned as an “ivory-tower” gathering of people out of touch with their own real lives. If the meeting were smaller and blockbuster-oriented (there are 30-some concurrent sessions in any one time slot), slandermongers would complain that a small canon was being enforced by tyranny and that young bright scholars weren’t given a chance to show merit in what was thought trivial.

Thus one has to wonder: Is the petulant Right, despite protesting much, disdainful of culture per se? Are attacks on the MLA just rigorless flailing by resolute materialists? It’s acknowledged within the academy and outside that most scholar/teachers in the humanities are of liberal persuasion. The Right reads this as a “takeover” by “tenured radicals,” but calm reasoning points to a lapse in family values. Since moms and dads on the Right did not model their lives as appreciative of reading and humanistic scholarship, Generation X imagines no calling other than market analyst, consultant, lawyer, developer, or entrepreneur.

What else do we need to notice, to put glibness to flight? Large as it is, the MLA is still too small. This curious fact prompted, a few years ago, the formation of a new organization, the American Literature Association, on the ground that MLA had too few American sessions. The ALA meets every year in June, alternating between San Diego and Baltimore, the program consisting mainly of author sessions. Another organization, the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics, was formed a few years ago by scholars determined to do traditional literary criticism hermetically free from the language and insights of the trendy. I’ve attended only one meeting of the ALA, on Mission Bay, and found it thriving, but have not examined ALSC—in 1997 it met in November, and it’s hard to get away when school is in session.

Finally, the MLA is importantly an umbrella organization. At its annual meeting some smaller “allied and affiliated organizations” also offer sessions, and the count of these is included in the total of 800 MLA sessions. There are more groups than you’d think, some 80, including the Association for Documentary Editing, the Dante Society of America, Feministas Unidas, the International Courtly Literature Society, the Marxist Literary Group, the North American Catalan Society, the Harold Pinter Society, the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature, and the Conference on Christianity and Literature (I heard historian/theologian Martin Marty, stimulating as always, at Toronto).

Am I some sort of closet enthusiast, then, behind all this bland reporting, or just a compulsive scribe, or a shill or a patsy? I plead ignoble glorious detachment. During 36 years of dues-
paying I've managed not to be involved, except for once serving as referee on a submission to *PMLA*, and giving the occasional paper in explorable cities, careful in chilly December to avoid Chicago. For most of those years I did not attend meetings at all, instead spending the days after Christmas with parents in the Midwest. My only contact was browsing *PMLA*, where, as with most journals, one often celebrates more the education that writers have gained for themselves and their students, with their research, than the news they transmit.

So I'm woefully a bad citizen, not driven to promote the MLA but suspecting how impoverished we would be, as English and language professors, if the organization would disappear, or change radically. Would we be the one profession in the world uncheered and unspurred by an annual academy/festival/reunion? Without us, the dismal Right would have to expend its mechanical energy attacking some group more susceptible to demoralization.

It sounds both stodgy and romantic, but despite welcome trendiness, stimulating theorizing, and proper political vigilance, English professors do still take most of their pleasure from pursuits such as those encapsulated in the citation for Jahan Ramazani: the study of genres, of literary careers, of intersections between Western classics and new writing, and finally the pains and promises and powers involved in understanding what for want of a trendier expression the MLA still calls the “human spirit.”

From Dogwood, faithfully yours,

C.V.
Sources of Uncertainty (Episode Two)

Arvid Sponberg

The Paradox of Effort in Writing

If we suspect our students have not worked hard on their papers, we tend to lower their grades. But we do not raise their grades just because they claim that they have worked hard on their papers. Fact: quality in writing has a fugitive connection to effort, as anyone knows who has despair of finding the right word or the true shape of a sentence, and rejoiced when it emerged later, like a prodigal, through the woes of other thinking. Words and sentences usually fall into place without our giving them deep thought, and some seem unfit no matter how much we plumb them. Most people find this uncertainty intolerable and avoid writing whenever possible. A few who find it fascinating may become writers.

Among the many who don’t become writers, a few become painters, as did Georgia O’Keeffe (I found this quote on a website and have lost the address): “I am often amazed at the spoken and written word telling me what I have painted . . . The meaning of a word to me is not as exact as the meaning of a color. Colors and shapes make more definite statements than words.”

An example illustrating the foregoing: Last fall the Brauer Museum of Art presented an exhibition of paintings by Old Masters drawn from the collections of the national museum of Romania. For many viewers Tintoretto’s The Annunciation proved a highlight. Students in my literary studies class had to try their hand at the craft of reviewing and several described paintings in the exhibit and their responses to them. One student, very enthusiastic about the exhibit, tripped momentarily in an effort to find the right word exactly capturing the quality of Tintoretto’s illumination: “Everything in the house is portrayed with dark colors except for the urethral [sic] light around the angel and Mary.”

Al Trost, the dean of our college of arts and sciences, was telling this one on himself a few weeks ago: On a Saturday morning (deans put in a lot of Saturday time, you know), Al welcomed a large group of middle-school students to campus for a mathematics workshop. Later, at lunch, he joined a table of these math whizzes, and as he sat down, one of them said, “Hey, guys, we get to eat with the big lacuna.” Al thinks the student was groping for “kahuna,” an Hawaiian word originally meaning “priest” or “shaman” and, through popular usage, a chief, leader, or big-shot. However, you can never be certain about these things. As a teacher of political theory and a historian of the social sciences, Al knows well that sometimes mistakes lead us to truth. Now he’s bothered by the thought that the student may have stumbled into an insight about deans.

A Question for Our Times

Do you think that our students are “over-mothered and over-fathered”? A senior colleague reported these words, with approval, as coming from the mouth of a consultant heard at a national conference. Now at first, these words sound exactly like what a lot of us teachers say to each other as five times a day we gather for prayer at the Ark of the Coffeemaker. Of course our students are “over-mothered” and “over-fathered.” We know what that means: They’re “spoiled,” they act “helpless,” they “haven’t got a clue,” they’re “lazy,” they expect to be “entertained,” they “don’t want to try anything new” unless there are points or a grade attached. (Strange, what we say about our students sounds like what some people say about faculty,
with necessary changes such as “released time” and “money” for “points” and “grades.”

But wait a minute. Let’s be good interpreters and look a little more closely at what the phrase “over-mothered and over-fathered” could mean?

Q. Could it mean that students have spent too much time at home and not enough time getting “experience” in the “real world”?

A. That would be an odd criticism to make of 18-22 year-old college students who have been counseled their entire lives that their futures and the future of their society depend upon their getting “good educations.” Are we angry at them now because they took the advice of their parents, pastors, and principals and stayed in school? What did we really want them to do—drop out and join the army? Run away with the circus? Move out of the house at age 14, apprentice themselves to morticians, preparing themselves to care for their parents’ final needs?

We go into the “real world” because it’s necessary to do so; we have no choice. But much that happens in the “real world” is shallow, boring, phoney, and trivial, even when it is not also crooked, dangerous, sick, and evil. If it is true that the academy is not part of the “real world”—as is often charged—then God bless it for being at least partly out of it. Indiana University-Bloomington has been running an ad on television in which the president of the university compares the cost of an education at IU to the cost of a new Mercedes (the Mercedes is more expensive, in case you were wondering) and then asks, “Which one will take you farther?” My students know the right answer to that question so I don’t think getting “real world” experience is the issue. They’ve got 40-50 years of “real world” ahead of them after they get their degrees.

Q. Could it mean that parents are too involved in their children’s lives, too eager to intervene on their behalf, too ready to shield them from the consequences of their own decisions, and that when they become our students these children fall back too willingly on mom and dad for assistance?

A. Again, if true, this seems to be a strange criticism arising in a society that worries continuously about the “decline” of “family values.” What are families for if not to help when needed? Are we angry with ourselves as parents now because we did not give our children stones when they asked for bread? The criticism rings hollow at this university in particular because we have garnered enormous notoriety in recent weeks because of one of our families.

I’ve just returned from a rally welcoming home Bryce Drew and his teammates from the first two rounds of the NCAA basketball tourney. He’s a young man who’s been over-fathered and over-mothered, if anyone has been. The New York Times described the circumstances leading up to Bryce’s decision to attend VU in these words:

“. . .the college recruiters had noticed. They came from Stanford and Notre Dame, Purdue and Syracuse—all eager to land the 6-foot-3-inch guard with the feathery shooting touch. Janet [Drew, Bryce’s mother] didn’t want it to be a given that Bryce would stay home and play for his father. She posed this question to Homer: ‘Why should he play for you?’ . . .Maybe, she thought, Bryce should. . .find his way far from the shadow of his father. Janet knew Homer could coach. . .[b]ut Janet didn’t want those charms turned on her son. So a deal was struck: Homer would act only as a father and other coaches would get the job of convincing her that Valpo was the place for their child. Homer Drew took it to heart. One day, he good-naturedly rang the doorbell of his own home and asked if Coach Drew could woo his recruit’s mother. Just as pleasantly, Janet wouldn’t let him in. . .While Homer wasn’t so sure that Bryce would go to Valpo, Scott [Bryce’s older brother] was convinced he would. [He] was part of the cadre of Valparaiso assistants who were allowed to give an official and persuasive recruiting presentation to Bryce. ‘We’re a very close family,’ a confident Scott Drew told the school’s sports information director, Bill Rogers, at one point.” (Joe Drape, “Keeping It All in the Family Is the Key for Valparaiso,” 3/15/98, y33) Is this over-fathering, over-mothering, and over-brothering, or is this a family that has preserved and strengthened the essential “familyness” which so many yearn for?

Characterizing my students in negative terms bothers me because it can drain the energy that I
carry into the classroom. I am no Parker Palmer, but I know this about classroom teaching: I can't make a living at it if I cultivate the belief that my students are “over-mothered” and “over-fathered.” I have to leave that kind of language to consultants, and much good may it do them and those who listen to them. Sure, sometimes my students will scramble “ethereal,” but far more often they get it right, and occasionally they get it more right than the “experts.” Consider, for example, The Theory of a Liberal Arts Education in a few honest, if not elegant, words from another student's review of the Old Masters’ exhibit: “After viewing these paintings, I realized they made me think of ideas that I never thought before. For example, an entire story, including the plot and also emotions, can be told through one work of art. I now have a great desire to discover more paintings. Therefore I will be able to discover more new points about myself.”

Expressed in these words, what we do together as teachers and students seems simple, beautiful, and wonderful. When I listen to students, I encounter thoughts like this every week. Consultants may copy this quote from an “over-mothered and over-fathered” undergraduate for use at national conferences.
Anonymity and pseudonymity, as almost all readers are aware, are authorial commonplaces when one examines the history and myriad relationships of writers to their texts. The suggestion, however, that—like the pseudonyms of Mark Twain, George Eliot, Molière, Voltaire, and scores of others—Shakespeare also may have been the *nom de plume* of a writer who sought (or was constrained) to bury his identity beneath a cover, remains a proposition scoffed at and ridiculed by many individuals. Such disdainful and opinionated but oft-untutored critics frequently, however, have not seriously examined those theses and conclusions which have provoked so many readers of English Renaissance literature to investigate and then challenge orthodoxy’s attribution of the Shakespeare canon to the simple butcher’s apprentice from Stratford—this, despite the signal quality of the almost transparently fictive character of the Shakespeare pseudonym—one which, especially in its hyphenated form (Shakespeare), hints at the appropriation of a cloaked identity by a poet-dramatist who selected it (or was compelled to adopt it) as a shield against discovery.

Whalen’s book catalogs many of the arguments that vitiate against the likelihood of Will Shakespeare, the glove-maker’s son from Stratford, as the author of the poems and plays that now bear the name of William Shakespeare. His survey of the evidence that excludes the Stratford man from reasonable consideration as the author of these incomparable plays and poems is vast, if not exhaustive, but the book is extensively referenced and generously annotated, allowing the reader to pursue his or her own investigation and reading of those sources alluded to or condensed by Whalen’s summary study.

*Shakespeare: Who Was He?* does not just dispose of the fictions that have sanctioned the traditional ascription of that body of work which we now know as “Shakespeare” to the man from Stratford-upon-Avon—the provincial merchant of little learning and even less experience who bore a name similar to that name of a theretofore-unheard-of dramatist which began to appear on a body of theatrical work first published with authorial attribution in 1598. Fully half of Whalen’s work is dedicated to advancing—in similar, summary form—the candidacy of the author who likely was the individual who wrote behind the pseudonym of Shakespeare: Edward de Vere, the seventeenth Earl of Oxford and Lord Great Chamberlain of England during the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I.

For decades, many scholars have followed the developments of this often immensely complex controversy regarding the disputed Shakespeare authorship and have published or presented their work (featuring, for example, sometimes almost impenetrable studies in philology and stylometrics) in journals or forums devoted principally to readership or attendance by other specialists, but much to his credit and the general reading public’s benefit, Richard Whalen’s newest book neatly summarizes and colloquially renders many of the often otherwise rather abstruse arguments which have been advanced in recent years. Whalen’s book, therefore, is one of this decade’s most important contributions in extending awareness of the Shakespeare Authorship Question to a larger audience. Indeed, since the recent release of Whalen’s book, the evidence for and scholarship directed toward the demonstration of the seventeenth Earl of Oxford’s authorship of the Shakespeare canon has everywhere increased, as a plethora of new books, academic conferences, professional journals, and cyberspace forums devoted to the study and discussion of the issue of the disputed authorship of Elizabethan/Jacobean England’s greatest plays and poems have emerged and multiplied.

Ambassador Paul Nitze, who provides the Foreword to Whalen’s book, accounts *Shakespeare: Who Was He?* a “brisk summary,” and Whalen himself acknowledges that the principal focus of his book foregoes some important considerations necessary for a thorough exploration of the authorship issue to concentrate on the challenges presented by the respective biographies of the two principal contenders for the authorship. Whalen’s work is brief in scope without being deficient in content;
it reads easily and evokes interest. Indeed, in its capable and succinct assembly of material, the author of this 183-page digest of the Shakespeare authorship controversy cogently presents much of the traditional and newly-assembled evidence and argumentation for consumption by scholarly and non-scholarly readers alike. Whalen's study, therefore, for all its brevity, is an important contribution to Shakespeare studies and commends itself as an especially well-crafted introduction for the beginning student and general reader to some of the important questions surrounding the authorship controversy—questions which, unhappily enough, do not get addressed that much in higher education's classrooms today—which neglect is all the more unfortunate because at this end of this century, few would dispute that, in literary studies, we've substantially repudiated the tired old dictum of the irrelevance of the author in literary studies anymore. Such a promising environment invites, therefore, new inquiries by academicians and lay researchers into Shakespeare, as few questions of the Bard's significance can be as important as those related to the continuing quest to discover who, in fact, he was.

Daniel Wright


In the 1995 film *Apollo 13*, Jim Lovell (Tom Hanks) declares the world changed once Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. "It's not a miracle," Lovell insists, "we just decided to do it." Later, when Lovell finds himself imperiled between earth and moon in the failed 1970 mission, he gazes out of the spacecraft, now a damaged bit of metal floating in an abyss. So far as the film indicates, God does not occur to the astronauts in their predicament. Meanwhile, back on earth, a newsreel announces that the U.S. Congress issued a joint resolution asking Americans to pray for the astronauts. After anxious hours of engineering by Houston's Mission Control, the spacecraft splashes safely into the South Pacific. A cheer goes up in the control room: one small setback for mankind, but another victory for the rocket scientists.

*Apollo 13* captures very nicely the curious cultural tension James Gilbert examines in *Redeeming Culture*. Gilbert rejects simple secularization narratives. He finds that even though science has dominated life in the twentieth century, religion has persisted, intent on adding its perspective to scientific questions. Neither science nor religion won their ongoing argument, but their interaction helped shape American culture, Gilbert argues. An interesting story, Gilbert's book is only limited by its periodization and its rather narrow conception of religion in the postwar era.

The book covers selected religion-science episodes from the Scopes trial in 1925 to Seattle's 1962 World's Fair. Among religious groups, the book focuses primarily on Protestants, both evangelical and mainline, though Catholic and Jewish figures enter the story too. To Gilbert, the chief project of these men and women was to reconcile science with religion, for they could not afford to sacrifice their role in the public sphere—in this period, the realm of science—if they wished faith to remain viable in its private expressions. In contrast, some scientists remained open to dialogue with religion, but many were uninterested in reconciling their disciplines with religious belief.

Gilbert explores both academic and popular culture. He covers academic conferences where scholars, scientists, and clergy mulled over questions of religion and science. Beyond these scholarly arenas, Gilbert makes forays into film, evangelistic sermons, and science fiction. He describes the Moody Bible Institute's efforts to convey the Gospel through science films used to train Air Force recruits, and Catholic producer Frank Capra's nature-praising movies that seemed to speak with "the voice of God himself," as one viewer put it. In a fascinating chapter, Gilbert investigates UFO watchers who presumed aliens had come from the heavens to bring news of divine judgment.

The interplay of science and religion is an immense topic, and Gilbert specifies that his particular subjects were chosen to be suggestive, not comprehensive. Still, the book's ending in 1962 seems abrupt, especially when American space exploration lay so close in the future. Even in his brief mention of the Apollo missions, Gilbert picks up the tension between Americans, conquest of the final frontier and their pious awe before the heavens. One wishes the author had lavished more time on the rich irony between the 1968 Christmas eve broadcast from Apollo 8, when astronauts greeted Americans with a message from Genesis—"'In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth'"—and Neil Arm-
strong's proclamation, the following year that his moonwalk represented “one giant leap for mankind.”

Part of Gilbert's motivation for excluding events like the moon landing and focusing on less well-known episodes stems from his assumptions about democracy and American culture. Gilbert argues that in the Scopes trial, William Jennings Bryan asserted the voice of “commonsense science,” against which Darwinism transgressed not only by doubting God's creation, but also by upholding an unverifiable hypothesis. Bryan lost the fight, but distrust of theoretical science remained strong in American culture. Though scientists enjoyed a moment of high esteem after World War II, Gilbert notes that they always had to work within the constraints of democratic culture. Democracy, in Gilbert's view, made possible the healthy interaction between religion and science by leaving room for both.

Gilbert admits that his case studies are limited, but the religious figures he analyzes are only a small segment of American Christianity in the period. Even when he treats Protestants—among whom, he asserts, “the most dramatic encounters” between science and religion occurred—we mostly see a group preoccupied with the question of human origins.

While Gilbert reports some surprising successes, religious figures seem to be on the defensive in his story. Evangelicals remained in the religion-science debate, but were not setting the agenda. If evangelicals employed laboratories and nature films to try to beat scientists at their own game, liberal Protestants here were more content to join the scientists. Gilbert looks at the Institution on Religion in an Age of Science, a combination of Protestants who embraced modern cosmology and scientists who hoped to found a new, rational faith. Crafting a new religion meant putting away old Christian doctrine, for as astronomer Harlow Shapley put it, the “anthropomorphic one-planet Deity” no longer made for satisfying spirituality.

Clearly, traditional supports to belief were challenged by evolution and space exploration. Nevertheless, in many ways the early postwar years were strong ones for religion. In American churches through the late 1950s, attendance and membership rates rose dramatically. In the further reaches of fundamentalism, prophecy-watchers borrowed the language of science not to argue for creation, but to warn Americans of Christ's return.

Few among these Christians provided intellectual counterweight to the cultural sway of science, but other Protestant theologians did develop insightful responses to the ambiguities of modern culture. Gilbert briefly mentions Reinhold Niebuhr and notes religious responses to the atomic bomb. Unfortunately, he does not consider how neo-orthodox theologians engaged with many important issues of postwar society. Facing the cold war and atomic terror after two world wars, these thinkers were more interested in God's relation to human's present plight than in defending creationism. One of the important roles of religious thinkers in this century has, in fact, been in discerning the human and social costs of scientific progress. Religion had plenty to say to modern society beyond simply protesting that God did, indeed, exist.

With the episodes he selects, Gilbert seems to reduce Christianity to belief in creation and God's existence. To be sure, Christians have a stake in defending these points, but their thought in an “age of science” was not limited simply to creation apologetics. Even without the efforts of religion's champions in this period, Christianity's long cultural influence supplied a rich store of inspiration even to those who had abandoned its doctrine. As Gilbert worthily notes, when the designers of the 1962 Seattle Exposition, “America's Space Age World's Fair,”
sought architectural expression of glory, strength, and grace, they chose to imitate a medieval cathedral, celebrating science with a style dubbed “space gothic.”

Agnes Howard


Following yet another interminable faculty meeting held in the aftermath of the first Harvard war of 1969 historian Ernest May got off what must have been the best line uttered during Cambridge’s version of a Prague spring. “On this campus,” May confided to a colleague, “the men of conscience out-number the men of honor.”

In the retrospective category the best line belongs to the recipient of May’s wisdom. When asked for his reflections on the events of that Cambridge spring, political scientist James Q. Wilson, then of Harvard and now of UCLA, was “happy to report” that he had “successfully repressed all recollections ... My last memory of the sixties was of the Red Sox playing in the World Series of 1967; my next recollection is of George McGovern losing to Richard Nixon in 1972. In between, all is lost. Ah, merciful oblivion.” OK, it’s more than a line, but it does bear repeating—and not merely to make the point that its solicitor hasn’t been able to consign to “merciful oblivion” much of anything that happened to Harvard or him in the spring of 1969.

Roger Rosenblatt, then of Harvard’s Dunster House and now of The News Hour with Jim Lehrer, is no slouch himself when it comes to word smithing, so perhaps he’d be offended to learn that his best lines have been consigned to the, shall we say, “also-slouched” category. Then again, perhaps not, given his tendency to see himself as mostly slouching through Harvard Yard and its environs before, if not immediately after, April 9, 1969, and the student occupation of the administrative offices of University Hall.

At the then still trustworthy age of twenty-eight, Roger Rosenblatt thoroughly understood the importance of parading as a man of conscience in 1969. But as he approached the abyss of thirty-something he found himself (much to his own amazement) at least trying to behave as a fully adult man of honor in the aftermath of this student exercise in tyranny. He really had no choice once he became a major player in the wars that followed that initial Harvard war. This wasn’t a role he asked to play. Rather, it was a role he was thrust into precisely because all too many of the faculty’s best and brightest were either pretending to be or actually thought they were “men of conscience.”

At the time, an increasingly detached Roger Rosenblatt was too disdainful of these “men of conscience” to count himself among them. In retrospect, he is too honest when it comes to judging a much younger Roger Rosenblatt to think that he deserves to be included among the unalloyed “men of honor.”

Yes, there are knaves in his story—and fools (not to mention a few Harvard heavyweights who were both at once). Rosenblatt does not portray himself as either one. Nor is he out to tell the truth about what happened at Harvard in the spring of 1969. He is not so arrogant as all that. What he is out to do is to tell a truth about the consequences of arrogance on the part of others.

Arrogance is seldom in short supply at Harvard. But arrogance is seldom as consequential as it was in the spring of 1969. Among Rosenblatt’s usual suspects were those students who did the occupying (of administrative offices) and evicting (of deans) on April 9 and the much larger number of Harvard undergraduates who were so “irritatingly cocksure of themselves” before, during, and after that troubling event. But Rosenblatt’s list also includes then President Nathan Pusey, who dispatched the police to evict the occupiers and who harbored no second thoughts about the bloody consequences of his decision to pit working class cops and their truncheons against upper class students and their smart mouths, and innumerable conscience-stricken professors (Rosenblatt’s “real culprits”) who let their opposition to the war in Vietnam trump virtually everything else. In the end, the Puseys of Harvard’s world were caught in the middle of a “strange conspiracy between those who wanted power and those who readily ceded it to them” (which is Rosenblatt’s best line in a book with more than a few good ones).

It was not just the students’ drive for power, but the very cocksureness which accompanied it, that so upsets Rosenblatt. At the same time, Rosenblatt has little time for those faculty members whose cocksureness about the war in Vietnam governed their thinking when it came time to consider punishing the occupiers. Of at least that much Rosenblatt is cocksure. But in the end he is less sure about what happened at Harvard in the spring of 1969 than he is close to cocksure about what happened to Harvard as a result. Hence the reference to
“wars” in a subtitle which should have concluded “1969—and after.”

This is a Harvard that Rosenblatt slouched into as a graduate student and out of not too many years after the events of 1969. Those events were partially, but not entirely, responsible for the second slouch. Throughout this memoir is a tone of detachment, not bitter detachment, not even ironic detachment, and certainly not Olympian detachment, but detachment nonetheless. To be sure, detachment can be evidence of arrogance, but such is not the case in this case. Rather, it’s a case of Roger Rosenblatt gradually coming to terms with the growing realization that he never really belonged there in the first place.

One guesses that life in general was pretty much a breeze for the pre-1969 Roger Rosenblatt. At the very least he suggests that academic life had gone that way. Things, meaning what he presumed at the time to be good things, just kept happening to him—and not because such things inevitably happen to those who wait, but also not because Rosenblatt was consumed with ambition to succeed in the world of academia.

Willing to play the academy’s game just well enough to take advantage of its version of the good life, Rosenblatt probably knew well before the spring of 1969 that this was a game he was not meant to play for good—or for keeps. As a result, this memoir contains more than a dose of detachment and more than a trace of evidence that Harvard had on its hands something other than your standard-issue academic climber before and after April 9, 1969.

Exhibit A in the mystery of what diverted Roger Rosenblatt from the established path to tenure is an informal course he began to offer to his Dunster House students in the fall of 1968. The subject was black literature. The request that Rosenblatt teach it came from the few black students of Dunster House. That he was approached had far less to do with his admitted minimal knowledge of the topic than his reputation as a campus “bleeding heart” and his participation in pickup basketball games. That he accepted had nothing to do with his own professional advancement and everything to do with his empathy for those Dunster students who were “rightly discouraged and frustrated” that the Harvard English department did not offer a single course that contained the work of so much as a single black writer. That would soon change.

By the next fall Rosenblatt was teaching Black Fiction in America as a regular course within the Harvard English department. What might have been initiated by his bleeding heart would soon be sustained by his engaged intellect. So far so good—for Rosenblatt and his students, both black and white. That would soon change as well.

In the aftermath of the events of April 9 Harvard decided that it was beyond high time to have much more than a single course on black fiction. On April 22 the Harvard faculty voted to establish a black studies department. So far not so good. This time sheer cowardice (rather than bleeding heartedness) would be the chief motivator. And this time Rosenblatt would be driven by neither emotion. Having refused to patronize any of his black students in the classroom, he would not cave in to threats of violence, comical or serious, from some black students on the black studies issue.

Many years after Rosenblatt left Harvard, a former Dunster House student came to him “distraught that he had been turned down for a partnership in his law firm.” The student was black. His anger was palpable: “They told me I couldn’t write well enough, but nobody except you told me that at Harvard.” Rosenblatt, the academician, knew that “telling a student that he had something to learn ... was a way of saying that he was capable of learning it,” that to “lie to a student, any student, about his capabilities was to pave the way to his failure later.” This was an inevitably corrupting academic game that Roger Rosenblatt was never willing to play. Little did the novice teacher of black fiction know that far more wicked academic games would play themselves out in the spring of 1969.

At stake on April 22 was not just the future of black studies at Harvard. At stake when the faculty gathered to vote on this issue was nothing less than the moral integrity of the institution. Greeted by a lone black student wielding a meat cleaver (was it just a harmless play on the name Eldridge Cleaver?), the faculty proceeded to act out of what Rosenblatt calls “moral carelessness” (why not “cowardice?”).

Its decision was not simply to create a black studies department, but to give students a significant voice on matters of tenure and curriculum. On this “most shameful day in Harvard history (in the words of Rosenblatt’s mentor, John V. Kelleher, Professor of Irish history and literature), the faculty decided to permit black studies “to murder itself” (in the words of Roger Rosenblatt). In sum, the “real culprits” on the faculty were willing to “throw black studies into chaos.
because the subject did not affect them.” The result, in short order, was the academic equivalent of a “slum” under the leadership (?) of a professional labor leader by the name of Ewart Guinier (father of Lani), who was chosen when it was obvious that no “self-respecting scholar” was interested in pretending to run a department that would actually be run by students.

It is both interesting and revealing that memoirist Rosenblatt saves his harshest words for the faculty’s role in the black studies issue. Perhaps that’s because it was then that junior faculty member Rosenblatt finally realized that he “wanted no part of university life.” At that “dispiriting” moment Rosenblatt understood “how quickly and casually the civility of an institution could be tossed aside by those who comprised it.”

Rosenblatt would slouch through a few more years before he would complete his “slow, evolving exit” from Harvard in 1973. But before he could even begin that path he had to spend a few intense weeks in a position which guaranteed that slouching was a physical impossibility. As a member of something called the Committee of Fifteen, Rosenblatt found himself at the very stormy center of things for the charge of this committee was to determine disciplinary measures against the student occupiers. When it was all over someone who once had had the luxury of thinking that he was everyone’s “fair-haired boy” could no longer pretend that he was anyone’s “fair-haired boy.”

Rosenblatt, man of conscience, meet Rosenblatt, man of honor.

To be sure, the second Rosenblatt was not alone. In truth, he was not even the most courageous. After all, he had already decided that this was not the life for him. Part, but as we shall see only part, of the problem was that Harvard was populated with too many professors for whom tenure meant a “distorting sense of self interest.” They might talk about “community,” but they didn’t believe in it, especially not when the integrity of what passed for the Harvard community was on the line. Then they revealed, whether “by their meanness or by their silence,” that they were “out for themselves.”

His students were little better. Suddenly Rosenblatt realized that he simply didn’t like them as much as he had “pretended to.” Too many of them were governed by too much false concern for too many individual causes. For Rosenblatt, “all that was fine as far as it went, but that was as far as it went.” When all was said and undone, he could never begin to “give the protesting youth as much credit as they [gave] themselves.”

What must also be said is that Roger Rosenblatt, circa 1969, didn’t much like himself. Or at least he didn’t much like himself as a teacher. It wasn’t that he had come to dislike his bleeding heart self. That affection he had surmounted with surprising ease. It was that he didn’t think he was much of a teacher. It wasn’t that he didn’t know enough about whatever it was he was supposed to be teaching, but that he didn’t really care all that much that he didn’t know enough.

Having come to the conclusion that he could no longer pretend to be a bleeding heart, he now realized that he could no longer pretend to be either a teacher or a scholar. When it came to the classroom, Rosenblatt saw himself as an actor, rather than a worrier, as someone able to strike a pose, but not as someone willing to think through a body of material. The best teaching, at least according to this soon-to-be-ex-teacher, involved “being overheard as one worries aloud about a subject.” That described his mentor John Kelleher, but not Roger Rosenblatt, who managed to liberate himself from Harvard by concluding that he had “neither the skills nor the temperament to be a scholar.”

It is ironic, not to mention sad, that it was left to this budding non-scholar to worry about the future of Harvard following April 9, 1969. If “tenured radicals” are a problem today, what might be termed tenured indifference was a problem for Roger Rosenblatt in 1969. Of course, there were a few exceptions, Ernest May, James Q. Wilson, and John Kelleher, scholars all and worriers all, prominent among them. And Roger Rosenblatt? Though he has long since left Harvard, teaching, and scholarship, he is still worrying. And with good reason.

In the short term, this “vaguely radical” man of conscience worried the false worry that he would be revealed as an imposter, that his students would come to see him as the enemy that he feared he might well be. As a member of the Committee of Fifteen, this now “vaguely conservative” man of honor soon ceased to care whether he was anybody’s “fair-haired boy.” It was time to engage larger worries, real worries, the least of which was to mete out those punishments.

It was also time to own up to one more truth: “...from the moment I had learned that deans were hauled out of their offices and shoved downstairs, I wanted those kids punished—even if I did not know that I knew it at the time.” More than that, Rosenblatt discov-
ered that he was even in favor of keeping ROTC on campus. And more than that, he was willing to vote with the majority to expel sixteen (of 135 identifiable occupiers), thereby subjecting them to, of all things, the draft.

Yes, Roger Rosenblatt was the enemy. And he didn’t care who knew it, because if he didn’t care about being tenured by Harvard, he did care about what was happening—and continues to happen—at Harvard. And he still does.

At the Harvard commencement of 1969 Rosenblatt briefly tried to convince himself that the Cambridge spring really was over. But he knew better. In the end, that ceremony was “merely a moment’s quiet, a brief bow to tradition. What had occurred in the prior two months was never going to be over.” Or as a noted American philosopher once put it: “It ain’t over ‘til it’s over.”

Will it ever be over? Not any time soon, and probably not even if Harvard were to tenure both Roger Rosenblatt and Yogi Berra in a vain attempt to address its ongoing imbalance between men of conscience and men of honor.

John C. Chalberg


Easter is a good season for Cresset readers to take note of these two recent books on the Christian life. Although neither is a scholarly work, both are honest, winsome, and often moving descriptions of Christian faith and life.

Clark, a professor of philosophy, argues that doubt is frequent and not necessarily an unwelcome companion for reflective Christians. While moments of light in which we readily perceive God’s goodness and grace abound in our lives, so too do moments of darkness when we stand speechless before the apparent absence of God and the all too obvious presence of evil. Faith is a gift that while not eliminating our worries or resolving the puzzles of our lives nevertheless enables us to limp along through a good, albeit scarred, world. Faith’s challenges and benefits are nicely explored with Kierkegaard (sometimes refracted through the lenses of Ernest Becker) as guide. Clark’s book ranges widely as he employs numerous articulations of his themes in poetry and fiction. This book is a particularly apt study for a mature high school student or a college student.

Oddly enough, there is little about prayer in Clark’s book. Odd because some of our greatest honesty before God comes in our moments of doubt. Odd, also, because prayer so influences our perception of the world. Walt Wangerin’s Whole Prayer is a marvelous gem on the spiritual life. It is a simple text—prayer is conversation with God. We speak, God listens. God speaks, we listen. Whole Prayer lacks the density common to some of the best books on prayer, those, say, of Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, but there is no less wisdom and humanity to be found in Wangerin’s reflections. This is not a theology of prayer but spiritual direction. Wangerin’s creativity lies in his clear presentation of the Christian act of prayer, his rich and insightful use of the biblical and liturgical tradition, and the stories he tells of Christian pray-ers. I cannot think of another book on the life of prayer I would so highly recommend.

Thomas D. Kennedy

We apologize to Professor Steven Bouma-Prediger of the Hope College Department of Religion whose review of Larry Rasmussen’s Earth Community, Earth Ethics in the Christmas/Epiphany 1997-98 issue was incorrectly attributed to Steve Bouman.
on poets—

Edward Byrne

  teaches in the Department of English at VU. His latest volume of poems, *East of Omaha*, published by Pecan Grove Press, has just appeared. This poem responds to the death last summer of our long-time colleague and friend, Professor Dean Kohlhoff of the Department of History, VU.

Tim Gustafson

  lives in Minneapolis and teaches writing at the University of Minnesota.

Walt McDonald

  directs the program of creative writing at Texas Tech University. He was an Air Force pilot and has published sixteen collections of poetry and fiction, most recently a book of poems, *Blessings the Body Gave*, forthcoming from Ohio State Press. He has published in *The American Scholar, The Atlantic, First Things, The Kenyon Review*, and *Poetry*.

John Welle

  has translated poetry by the contemporary Italian poet Andrea Zanzotto. His book, *Peasants' Wake for Fellini's Casanova and Other Poems* was published in 1997 by the University of Illinois Press.

Nancy G. Westerfield

  regularly contributes to the Kearney Daily *Hub* and has published three articles in *The Living Church*. She has had verses in *Thema, The Christian Century*, and *Theology Today*.

on reviewers—

John C. Chalberg

  teaches American history at Normandale Community College in Bloomington, Minnesota.

Agnes Howard

  is completing her Ph.D. in American History at the University of Virginia and has taught writing at VU.

Daniel Wright

  teaches at Concordia University in Portland, Oregon, where he is Professor of English and Chair of the Department of English and Humanities. He is the author of *The Anglican Shakespeare* (1993) and is the Director of the Edward de Vere Studies Conference.
The front and back covers reproduce either side of a single panel five and one-half feet wide, attributed to Lambert Lombard (1505 - 1566), a Flemish painter, architect, and humanist who enthusiastically combined the art of classical antiquity and the Italian Renaissance with his Northern training.

The monochromatic Scenes of the Passion (back cover) renders the final hours in the life of Jesus in the muted tones of memory, distancing the sting and anguish of a God led to death as a lamb to helpless slaughter. Housed in the fanciful angular forms of antique architecture, a kind of surreal Athenian Jerusalem, the drama begins in the past and proceeds toward the viewer before winding to the right, enroute to Golgotha. The Resurrection (front), by contrast, glows in rich and vibrant color, and displaying the proud icon of the Risen Lord in what appears to be a Northern European landscape. The image recasts the somber degradation of the savior plodding to execution as the monumental statuary of imperial Rome (which the artist drew during a visit in 1537).

The individual scenes of the Passion recede into the dark shapes of memory when we look at the panel's brilliant verso. The herculean Christ of the resurrection displaces the former buildings with the columnar architecture of his transfigured body, the triumphant Body of the Church, the New Covenant, the perfected, spiritual inheritance hailed by Paul. The resurrected Christ assumes the heroic proportions of those soldiers who had taunted him in the Passion panel, neatly inverting the power relations by flattening the soldiery in the Resurrection with a gesture of victory. Whereas the Christ in the Passion was a withdrawn and suffering figure, clothed, fainting, jeered at, defeated, in the Resurrection he is precisely the opposite: he speaks, preaches, gestures, proclaims. He does not subside into the crowd, but stands forth, commanding and scintillating. Visualizing the transformation within a single arrangement of panels is unusual, but not unprecedented. Grünewald's justly renowned Isenheim Altar (1510-15) opens from an outer crucifixion scene, in which a tormented Christ has died in gloom, to an interior panel of the resurrection, in which the savior's luminous body floats above the grave, rays of light streaming from his wounds.

In contrast to Grünewald's transfigured Christ, who hovers with a late medieval sway and glows with the light of cloistered mystics, Lombard's resurrected Christ displays the brawn of Hellenic gods. This is an image of vindication, the exact inversion of power. With such a polar configuration of opposites, the double panel was surely used to celebrate the move from the humiliation of Good Friday to the joyous celebration of Easter morning. Because the worshipping community would see only one side at a time, each shown on the appropriate occasion, simply flipping the image underscored the dramatic reversal of Christ's—and the church's—fate.

Painted in 1541, the panel employs the by then very old-fashioned device of conflation—clustering episodes of the narrative along a continuous path moving toward the viewer, each group of figures growing in size as the narrative developed toward its dramatic climax in the foreground of the Passion. The intent, presumably, was for a close narrative reading, a labored recounting of Christ's trek into devastation, told in the subdued tones of brown and gray.

But the narrative direction is reversed in the Resurrection, beginning rather than ending in the foreground, where the risen Christ stands, freshly delivered from the tomb. Next, beginning to the left, Christ appears to Mary and John, then across the panel, on the right side, he shows himself to Mary Magdalene, ordering her not to touch his glorified body. In the distance, two subsequent moments: Christ's appearance to the three holy women and his walk incognito on the road to Emmaus. Read in this manner, the narrative structure of the image locates the viewer at the pivotal point between Christ's torment and his resurrection: the crucifixion. Although it remains undepicted, the crucifixion takes place in what we might call the picture's narrative present: the space about the panel that is situated on the altar on which is celebrated the Eucharist, whose performance re-enacts the sacrifice of Jesus before the eyes of the viewer. This double-panel inserts the viewer into the narrative, approaching from the dim past of Christ's passion and then vanishing into the iridescent future beyond the tomb. It is the trajectory that persists in the life of belief.

David Morgan