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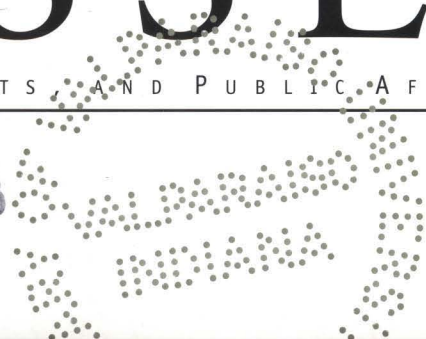
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THE CRESSET

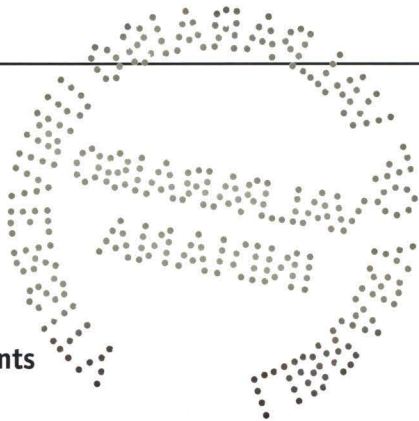
A REVIEW OF LITERATURE, ARTS, AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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THE CRESSET



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Contents

- 3 David Morgan / *in luce tua*: images and the age
6 John W. Dixon, Jr. / Donatello and the theology of linear perspective
14 Theodore L. Prescott / nature and nature's God in late twentieth-century American art
21 Simon Perchik / * (verse)
22 Daniel A. Siedell / a Christian approach to the history of modern art
29 Paul J. Contino / manifestation and proclamation in teaching O'Connor's "Parker's Back"
33 Frederick Barton / *film*: facing failure, finding faith
39 Thomas Bonner, Jr. / choices (verse)
40 Tom Willadsen / *letters from the front*: clothes make the man of cloth
42 Caroline J. Simon / "silence can, according to circumstances, speak." (verse)
43 Robert Benne / *the nation*: Clinton and the two kingdoms
45 book reviews / Schwain on Davis (*Landscape*), Buggeln on Williams (*Houses*), Rubel on Kazin (*God*) and Brown (*Of Fiction*)
50 notes on reviewers, covers

This issue of The Cresset has been guest edited by Professor David Morgan, of the VU Department of Art.

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back: *Christ Blessing*. Byzantine mosaic. Duomo, Cefalu, Italy.

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In Luce Tua

images and the age

Herewith an issue of *The Cresset* dedicated to images—a collection of essays assembled by the magazine's art editor. Why images? It's what you'd expect from an art historian, whose professional obligations allow him to rationalize a natural inclination to understand the world visually. But it's not just a case of self-indulgence. I am fond of pointing out (to anyone who will listen) that a substantial portion of the "wetware" strung between our ears—40% of the brain cells composing the neocortex—is dedicated to processing visual information. Clearly, in the neural economy, images matter.

The brain, in other words, craves images and this makes them not only important, but dangerous, for an organism that is inherently predisposed to think visually is especially susceptible to being fooled by images. In this light, the relentless injunctions in the Hebrew scriptures against idolatry take on a poignant significance. If there is much to gain by images, there is also much to lose by them. Educators, moralists, and advertisers have long recognized the potential of images for enhancing memory and shaping behavior. This accounts for the flood of illustrated textbooks, children's literature, and magazines in modern visual culture. It also explains why parents, boards of education, and governments are poised to shelter the young from films and illustrated materials that threaten to harm those of an "impressionable" age. According to the metaphor of impression, images imprint their form on the soft surface of the psyche and leave there a lasting trace. In other words, images are powerful because they have a way of becoming us. Since imitations are a primary means of learning about the world, and one in which we take great pleasure from our earliest days, images form not only a primary means of our interaction with the world, they serve as a very potent language or medium of thought. Thus, images, both harmful and inspiring, have a way of fixing themselves in the psyche, where they assume the shape of consciousness. Knower, known, and the medium of knowledge (the image) intermingle.

Put another way, images are a way of thinking, a form of cognition that works by constructing a relationship between the viewer and the viewed. Consider the icon, the postcard, and the advertisement. The first depicts a celestial person whom believers encounter through the interactive operation of looking through the image and being seen by someone on the other side. The postcard envisions a terrestrial place far off, sent to us by travelers as documents of what we are missing. And the advertisement offers us the image of what we could look like if only we purchased the illustrated product. In each case, the image constructs a relationship with something that is absent—a saint, a distant land, a possible you. Other images, such as family snapshots or works of art, document a moment that is past and preserve a relationship with that past.

As present as they seem to make things to us, images stand in the place of an absence, answering a loss or lack or want with a desire. Images, it would seem, are at war with the way things are since the present lasts no more than an instant. This is in the nature of time. Images often work

Thinking in images

poses

problems for a

word-centered

theology,

as well

as democratic

societies.

What does art

have to do with

embodying

belief?

otherwise. They slow time down, reverse it, shape it into the memories of whatever we prefer to recall. A portrait painting may pluck its subject out of time altogether; a snapshot may freeze a fleeting moment; a family photo album may chronicle the story of its subject over several generations. As the gifts we exchange on such ritualized occasions as birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, graduations, commemorations of all kinds, images help configure time as the course of a life. Understood in this way, the image is a human technology that negotiates temporal difference: the metamorphosis of the present into the past (what is no longer) or the separation of the present from the future (what is not, but might be). An image can infuse memories into itself and make a desired future less uncertain, more apparent. As the instrument of memory and desire, the image is an indispensable means of apprehending and making sense of the transience happening before us, inside of us.

As a device for dispelling discontent, an image can be a form of enchantment that lends itself to abuse. Whether as a way of selling products, selling candidates for public office, or selling the pleasure of seeing what we cannot otherwise possess, an image is a tantalizing sensation that often promises far more than it can deliver. This capacity of the image led culture critic and historian Daniel Boorstin to regard as a "pseudo-event" or "image" anything that inflates our expectations and conceals reality behind a bloated appearance. Americans, he concluded, expect too much, having intoxicated themselves on the half-truths of public relations, press conferences, advertisements, and the unmitigated hype of a culture fueled by the humbug of opportunism and self-promotion (*The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, 1961).

Although he often descends to the curmudgeonly, Boorstin manages something more interesting by invoking a venerable American rhetoric: the republican critique of luxury and vanity. Clinging to an originally Puritan vision of America as an exceptional nation, one set aside as a divine instrument, a light to the nations, Boorstin held to a notion of the republic that linked personal virtue to public well-being. In the moral economy of American exceptionalism, the sins of the individual translated into the illness of the entire country. The God of the republic rewarded virtue and punished vice on a national scale.

Presumptuous, self-serving, and moralistic as this ideal was, it offered nevertheless the vision of a country with a mission, which lent the nation a cohesive identity, one that was to be realized in every citizen's daily life. This communitarian ideal, coupling the individual to the whole, insisted on a practice of self-restraint, of service, which republicanism hailed as the great virtue in the face of the vice of self-promotion and individual indulgence.

I have in mind a recoding of American exceptionalism. Not simply a reinstatement of it, but the realization of a national sense of purpose and vocation that learns rudimentary lessons from the civil rights movement and the women's movement as well as others since Boorstin wrote his book. Such lessons teach us that our national identity must be conceived as elastic and forbearing, that it is properly tenuous and always in need of redefinition. But the virtue of self-restraint preached by nineteenth-century republicanism may still be very useful, indeed, essential. Self-restraint (what antebellum Americans called "self-denial") practices a wariness of images, a watchful looking, as it fosters belief in a common, national ideal.

But self-sacrifice needn't indulge in iconophobia. Indeed, it is the secret to keeping image and imaged in resemblance of one another. Afraid that Americans' self-indulgence and greed imperiled the virtue of a fragile American republic, Boorstin settled too easily for a Platonic conception of the image, that is, an assumption that images are, at root, lies—dissimulations or distorting copies of the truth they only dimly convey. In light of the need for a critical and nuanced study of the image, Plato's treatment of image as mimesis is much too broad—it swallows up everything from the duplicate to the icon to the ideal image hovering in an artist's mind. Alarmed by the image's sensuous appeal to that weaker constituent of human nature, the passions, Plato thought it expedient simply to ban the image maker from his iconoclastic utopia, the Republic. Images, like the passions, appeal to the mob, that is, to everyone with a body but no mind. Distrust of the image is often the flip side of discomfort with democracy.

What we need is a more robust understanding of the image, one that allows us to discern the dangers and affirm the virtues of images, one that asserts republican virtue without becoming anti-democratic. This matters precisely because we inhabit an intensely visual culture, a domain of visual

signs and icons in which astonishing and sometimes deeply contradictory claims are made about what is true and what is not. It also matters because images possess an enormous power to negotiate differences, to unify, to bring diverse members of a society together into a single commonweal. Such symbols as the American flag, the gray pavilions of Ellis Island, the Mall in Washington, D.C., public sculpture such as the Statue of Liberty, Mount Rushmore, and the Viet Nam Veterans' Memorial, or images such as the face of Martin Luther King or Rosa Parks or John F. Kennedy along with many others are all heroic icons, contested and conflicted, surely, but elements of a public culture in which all Americans are shaped and offered some basis for discerning a common, civil identity. It seems to me that what we need is a better understanding of the life of images and symbols in our national culture. Who is included in these symbols and who is left out? How do these images inspire and how do they mislead? Can they be part of a public or civil religion that conjoins Americans in all their differences in a national quest for justice and the delineation of the public good? The purpose of this enterprise will not be to fashion a kind of unitarian world view that cancels our real differences, but a public culture that allows us both to live together and, no less importantly, to fit our differences into a national experience that is fundamentally better than living in isolation.

The task begins with a careful, nuanced reflection on the power of images, particularly images that configure the complex relations of art and religion, two of the most authoritative producers of symbols that nurture public life. Each of the contributors to the lead articles in this issue is an educator of one sort or another. Artist, scholar, historian of art or literature, or museum curator, they have spent their careers teaching students or the public how to see, how to regard images, and how to test them. Their theological perspectives vary considerably, though all fall within the domain of contemporary Christianity—from Roman Catholic to liberal Protestant to Evangelical to militant Evangelical. I have made no attempt to assemble a theologically uniform collection of essays because theologies vary as wildly and as thornily as attitudes toward images and their study. And in the American republic, difference matters. The point has been to bring together several different attempts to think freshly about the importance of art either for or as religious thought and practice. The results range from historical and theological analysis (Dixon) to art criticism (Prescott) to pedagogical meditation (Contino) to polemic and manifesto (Siedell). Whatever their differences, however, all of the authors are fundamentally interested in the relationship between belief and art, which has led each of them to formulate something very clear about how images work and the truths they would, *pace* Plato, embody. And each of our writers is keenly aware of the idols our culture is bound to manufacture and to confuse with the visual epiphanies that suddenly befall us, claiming all 40% of our neocortex and more as we lunge for a glimpse (however slight or tendentious) of the truth.

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Donatello and the Theology of Linear Perspective:

an issue in Florentine theology

John W. Dixon, Jr.

Prologue: *Feast of Herod*

The situation reaches back into human memory, recorded in folk tales: the tyrant king, befuddled by the sensuality of a young woman, makes an extravagant promise, "Anything, up to half of my kingdom." Only this time the demand is not for material things but the head of the saint and martyr, a head lying in its austere and aged dignity on the platter offered to the king. The head is trapped in a criss-cross of passions and emotion, the fetid atmosphere of a tyrant's court, claustrophobic, sensual, violent. The critical event, the sacrificial death of the Forerunner, is caught in the network of violence and sensuality, marked by the aesthetic oblivion of the lute player and the available violence of the two bravos in the corridor behind. A cluster of male figures to the right is the framing for the sensual grace of Salome's dance. Their various attentions are lines of force compelling consciousness of the fatal scene on the left, itself a pattern of intersecting responses. Figures move out of the picture on both sides of the foreground; there is a larger world than the immediacy of the banquet. Within the picture there is a congestion of walls, a receding, intricate pattern of arches, leading into more congested, claustrophobic spaces.

As space is compressed and congested, so is time. Cause and effect reverberate across the front; it is in the nature of works of art that the represented moment is presented, suspended in time; in this work, the process of time is present in the juxtaposition of successive moments, in the suggestion of human lives (including indifference, obliviousness, curiosity) outside the event. The complex mystery of time interlocks with the complex mystery of space.

The scene is torn apart in the center, a powerful emptiness riven by the flow of emotions and responses across the gap.

A pattern of lines on the floor, the table, in the upper masonry, leads to the center of the picture in the fashion to be known as linear perspective. The lines come to a focus on—nothing, a blank wall space.

A multitude of events and emotions, held together only by the rational construction of perspective space.

The narrative cannot be understood except in terms of its action and passion, in the intensity of the interchange of its psychic and physical energies. Neither can it be understood except in terms of its constructed space and the role of this strange perspective in the interpretation of the action.

In what sense can a procedure such as perspective contribute to theology?

theology and linear perspective

A necessary definition: "In medieval Christianity, the meaning of *theologia* expands to include not only God but the entire corpus of doctrine about God's work—creation, redemption, sanctification—in the world."

The next sentence takes away what the first sentence (partially) granted: "In post-medieval Christianity the normative meaning of the term is the systematic study of Christian dogmas and doctrines or dogmatics." (Smith 1995: 1068)

Neither definition provides much room for the discussion of linear perspective as relevant to theological thinking since both emphasize doctrine, assuming the primacy of propositional statement. The first is slightly more generous since it permits the study of a wider range of works, if we can accept the possibility that truth can be shown as well as said. That possibility is also a necessity;

In the work discussed here (reproduced on the front cover of this issue) drama may trump dogma. Does perspective change our perspective?

otherwise the knowing of God will be restricted to those things accessible to words. To fall victim to that temptation is to presume to submit the omniscient and eternal God to the categories of language, which is blasphemy.

A more sophisticated (more skeptical) understanding of the limitations of verbal assertion either weakens the usefulness of theology as a discipline or (my present choice) makes necessary the extension of the word to include more than the verbal assertion of doctrine while retaining the requirement of systematic rationality in the study; there are more things than words to think with.

Therefore, I propose the following, without claiming theoretical rigor: theology is the construction, in some physical material, of an ordered work embodying the experience and understanding of the acts of God of a particular people within the necessities and the contingencies of their lives. Words, as things heard or seen, carry a distinctive, but not necessarily legislative, role in the total work of human orderings. They are known in their sounds, rhythms, reference, logic, and their distinctive effects (and affects) on human consciousness. Art, with less general applicability, orders various physical materials according to the structural requirements of a particular experience of the world in its embodying of the interaction of the human with the perceptual, emotional and logical world.

How, then, is linear perspective a mode of thinking theologically? Pictures can illustrate and exemplify doctrine and thus interpret it, but that is a derivative role. They cannot speak directly of the knowing of God (but neither can propositions, since "God" is beyond all categories). Pictures can recount the divine workings within creation and thus are theological.

The answer to the question requires more demonstration than formal definition but there are obstacles that need to be cleared away first. Within modes of cultural analysis that isolate one thing from another, linear perspective has been dealt with as though it is itself alone a prime cultural symbol. Both its use and its nature are thereby seriously distorted.

Take, for example, a statement from a very good book on perspective. Psychologist Michael Kubovy sums up one conclusion:

These effects achieve the goal of divorcing the viewer's felt point of view in relation to the scene represented in the painting from the viewer's felt position in relation to the room in which he or she is standing. We cannot do more, in our present state of knowledge, than to speculate on the effect of such discrepancies, which I believe induce a feeling of spirituality, perhaps one conducive to a religious experience: a separation of the mind's eye from the bodily eye. Such effects were very much in accord with the aims of the Renaissance painters, who wished to convey a religious experience through their art (Kubovy 159).

This statement contains several matters of interest. Perhaps the lesser ones are those that immediately strike the student of religion: the separation of something called "spirituality" from "religious experience" and the identification of religious experience with the detachment of the mind from the body. More to the present point is his unequivocal assertion that linear perspective, generally considered a mechanical constraint serving an objective view of the world, is itself an instrument of religious art and that the Renaissance artists, so often considered "secular," wanted to convey "a religious experience" in their art. His understanding of religion is inadequate but I agree with his understanding of the consequence of perspective, that it determines the position of the spectators to the room they are standing in and to the space represented by the perspective. Let us begin with his unequivocal assertion from his own discipline that perspective is a part of religion.

First, it is necessary to determine what perspective is and how it affects what we do. The problem is that perspective is widely misunderstood (often among art historians) and widely misused as a metaphor for matters not related to it. Take for example, Robert Hughes, an excellent journalist critic:

Essentially, perspective is a form of abstraction. It simplifies the relation between eye, brain, and object. It is an ideal view, imagined as being seen by a one-eyed, motionless person who clearly detached from what he sees. It makes a god of the spectator, who becomes the person on whom the whole world converges, the Unmoved Onlooker. Perspective gathers the visual facts and stabilizes them; it makes of them a unified field. The eye is clearly distinct from that field, as the brain is separate from the world it contemplates (Hughes 17).

Well, no. In part, this is accurate but why should he say it makes a god of the spectator? The relation between spectator and representation is central to my argument but there is no way it makes a “god” of the spectator. To assert this kind of separation of eye from field, of brain from world, is false. And why call perspective an abstraction? All art, as all thought, is an abstraction.

Yet another, again by a trained professional critic, Suzi Gablik:

The Renaissance paradigm derives from a single, closed logical system—perspective—which is repeated over and over again in every picture in much the same way, so that every picture is rigidly bound and dictated by the rules of the system. . . (Gablik 45). The belief that the universe is ordered and rationally explicable in terms of geometry was part of a deterministic world-picture which viewed nature as stable and unchanging, and considered that mastery of it could be achieved by universal mathematical principles. The spatial illusionism of one-point perspective reflected a world which was permanent and fixed in its ways, modeled on an absolute space and time unrelated to any outward circumstance (Gablik 70).

These are extravagant assertions but typical of things said about linear perspective.

Every one of Gablik’s assertions is wrong. Perspective does not separate the observer from an objectively seen world, nor establish rational control of the world. Perspective is a logical system but neither single nor closed. It is not repeated in every picture; some Renaissance pictures barely use it at all, nor is it repeated in the same way. There were no fixed rules that rigidly bound picture making but a wonderful variety. As Hughes rightly says, it is an abstraction, not a spatial illusion. One point perspective is not the only mode nor is it simple in itself nor can it be summarized as a deterministic world picture.

If we understand a little of how these assertions are wrong, we can get on with the job of understanding what Donatello accomplished that is of use to us.

From the beginning, perspective was not a system to be rigidly obeyed. It was an instrument, a tool, for making pictures. All true artists are entranced by their materials and their procedures, as Renaissance artists certainly were with perspective. They delighted in trying out all its possibilities, exploring its problems (which were many). Some pictures show perspective confusion or failure (e.g., Andrea Castagno’s Last Supper). One of the pleasures of Renaissance painting is seeing the many and varied uses of perspective.

One-point perspective, usually taken as normative for linear perspective, is the textbook example. Its geometric base is simple: parallel lines perpendicular to the picture plane appear to converge in the distance. In making pictures this principle is usable only in special cases: a city street, a courtyard, a room, each seen from a position at the center of the represented space. The lines actually do not meet, so the construction is far from simple and is quite artificial (abstract). To have all orthogonals meet at a single point already requires a complex geometric construction. In some cases artists were content to have the lines meet along a vertical line (the vanishing line rather than the vanishing point), or in a small area. Each decision makes a different picture, serving a different purpose.

Gablik, and most non-professional commentators on perspective, assume that perspective is a single thing, which is not true. Renaissance theoreticians considered perspective to be defined as two cones (or visual pyramids) with one apex at the eye of the spectator, the other at the vanishing point, their bases joined at the picture plane. Hughes, in his conventional interpretation, is quite wrong in making the spectator the place where the world converges. The eye of the spectator is one pole of a *relation* that extends to the vanishing point, fictively deep within the painting. Previous paintings had been objects among other objects in the seen world, quite independent of the spectator. Now the spectator was remorselessly drawn into a relation; perspective works only with the full participation of the spectator, whose consciousness can be reshaped by the relation. The mode of perspective construction, however, is not the only force at work. Perspective is a tool for the making of pictures and it is the whole of the picture that has to be taken into account.

Popular critics interpreting perspective assume a picture hung at the spectator’s eye level in a museum. That was by no means always the case originally and, even when it was, the relation is not simple. Is the view point of the spectator determined by the placement of the picture? Given a fixed location of the picture, should the picture be organized from that point of view as Hughes assumes, or from the internal needs of the picture? In one point perspective, the vanishing point is some-

where along the center of the picture. Should the principal action be placed at that center (as in many Crucifixions) or syncopated against it? The possibilities are numerous. To make it central, as Leonardo famously did in his Last Supper, is to focus attention in a particular way that is highly artificial. How many people come into the central door of a banquet hall, look down the room at the head table and concern themselves with deciding whether the orthogonals of the floor and ceiling meet at or above the guest of honor?

The narrative purpose of the picture might determine that the point of view *not* coincide with the perspective presentation, thus forcing an interpretation on the spectator (and most certainly not making spectators into gods).

Judging from the extent of their experimental work, Renaissance artists were well aware of the complexities of perception and the difficulties in matching representation and perception; to make one decision that is faithful to perceptual experience almost certainly means violating that experience in some other respect. The first essay in linear perspective, Brunelleschi's famous panels (Edgerton, Chapter X), clearly indicates that the artists knew that, to represent a scene in perspective, it was necessary to fix one eye at a particular point. We might assume they were aware that we do not even see, much less experience, the world that way. We see with two eyes, in constant motion. Things are clear in a small focal area, less and less so toward the periphery of our vision. To take in the scene as a whole, we shift our eyes, thus absorbing more information in the process of successive integrations that is perception. The whole experience of vision is not confined to the eye but involves a full placement in the world, depending on light, sound, the time of day, the weather, the state and weight of our own bodies, the emotional tenor of the situation, all the elements of an ordinary life in the world.

Virtually nothing of this can be represented in a painting. The orthodoxies of one point perspective are untrue to our experience. Even if we were able to find a street we could stand in the middle of, we don't see it the way a good perspective representation shows it; to see the things or buildings toward one side, we have to shift our angle of vision both horizontally and vertically. With the exception of the moment when we are looking straight ahead we experience the world by means of multiple points of view which would require multiple perspective systems. We can see the painting as a perspective construction of the world only because of its size and clear artificiality.

To think the Renaissance artists did not know this is to assume that some of history's most acute students of vision were intellectually deficient. In fact, from the beginning they were aware of the complex implications of perspective. Brunelleschi's first panel appears to have been an exercise in one-point perspective but his second showed the Piazza della Signoria from one corner, clearly requiring two-point perspective. Leon Battista Alberti wrote his book some years later, codifying Brunelleschi's workshop procedures; he clearly (but not simply!) sets down the complex procedures to establish both one-point and two-point perspective. Even so, two-point perspective is equally an abstraction since vision can never be accurately represented. Perspective is not an object to be treated as a single thing with an easily established symbolic reference or psychological function. It is a way of making a picture. Some of the pictures were primarily exemplifications of perspective because it was a device for making novel and very beautiful pictures. More often it was an instrument for the presentation of a subject, for making a certain kind of picture that interprets the subject. As such it was no less a symbolic force than the critics have indicated but so are all the other constructional elements of the work. It is certainly no less important to a symbolic revolution which has to be defined and introduced.

What, then, does perspective accomplish? Space, obviously, but space to serve a purpose: it gives room for figures to move, to act. The logical scheme, the system of perspective space, is not a means for dominance over nature. It makes it possible for the artist to place his figures in a fictive "natural" space if that is appropriate to his purpose and to establish the relations (topologically?) among persons and between persons and things.

In some pictures, the fictive space becomes increasingly a magical space, a space of absolute purity, resembling our ordinary space, but transforming it into a realm of clarity and stillness (Piero della Francesca). The eye (the single eye of perspective) is irrevocably linked to that space and the eye, as a part of the body, part of the mind, makes the person of the spectator part of the clarity and purity of the space. This in itself is theological, as an ordering of the world. When used, as it so often was, theologically, it is by placement of the sacred event within that space, requiring of the

spectators—the worshippers—an intensity of contemplation that transfigures the self. The event is not merely seen from without, as a sign, but experienced as a part of the ordinary life.

These are words, pointing toward something other than words; apprehension of the reality of the experience has to be bodily, not verbal. The words can affirm what is seen: linear perspective makes possible the profoundest realization of the principle (not the doctrine) of the Incarnation, that the divine dwells among us, full of grace and truth.

It is a means to a new kind of narrative, an essential means to a new understanding of the human, the human within the divine economy. It is this we need now to examine. To do so I have chosen a work of revolutionary import, Donatello's *Feast of Herod*. It is among the earliest examples of linear perspective, made around the middle of the 1420's.

Donatello's *Feast of Herod*

It was made for the baptismal font in the Baptistery of the Cathedral of Siena, one among six reliefs telling the story of John the Baptist. It was a major project; two of the panels are by Lorenzo Ghiberti, one by Jacopo della Quercia. Donatello did two of the figures of virtues and two putti that ornament the font. I will limit myself to the basic structural principles of Donatello's relief.

It is bronze, about a foot square, placed below the eye level of the spectator, even considering the placement of the font itself on a platform. The relief is fully gilded, which helps its visibility in a dark building. (It is now regularly illuminated by flood light, in the fashion of modern presentations that so alter artists' intentions.)

Let us return to the description, this time more systematically (and prosaically).

An impossibly shallow banquet hall; the technical problem of portraying depth in the shallowness of a relief carving is brilliantly handled by taking the thinnest possible surface layer of each figure or object and juxtaposing them. Floor tiles converge in the normal fashion to define the lines of perspective. The table is parallel to the picture plane and presented from a high point of view; knives on the table conveniently fall along perspective lines. The action is twofold with an astonishing gap in the center of the picture. To the right, the source of the story, Salome dancing, while staring at the grisly gift at the other end of the table. Several male figures, seated, standing, escaping from the scene, are setting for her as chief figure.

At the other end of the table, a soldier presents the platter with John's head. Herod draws back in horror, an astonishing exception to the more usual presentation of Herod. Two putti flee to the left in bemused shock. A prominent figure seems to be expostulating with Herod. Some authorities still identify the figure as Herodias although there is no indication that it is female, nor does she belong at the table according to the telling of the story.

A low wall cuts off the room closely behind the figures. The wall supports a small column and three pillars bearing arches. Strange beams with no discernable function project from the pillars as two odd openings in the wall go back into it, equally with no function. Beyond the arches, there is a narrow room or corridor with the busts of two men and a musician inclining his head over his lute, ignoring the action around him. Another wall, still another corridor, the servant bearing the platter with the head, three epicene young people.

The architecture makes very little sense. There is no possible way of drawing an intelligible floor plan of it. Strangest of all is the upper right hand corner. An entablature that is wholly inconsistent with the rest of the architecture seems to create a little space almost filled with a stairway that is far too small to be used by any human being.

So much for the setting. What about the narrative enacted in the setting?

To the right, the source of the action, Salome's dance. She appears to be immediately in front of a crowd of young men although there are only four of them. One is visible only by his turban-like headdress, one through part of his face. One is immediately behind Salome, his face obscured by her head so he does not much participate in the drama. He stands insouciantly, hand on hip, a large, fleshy presence that intensifies the sensuality of the group. Another is seen only by his (fleshy) leg and back as he leaves the scene. The group is compressed, earthy, sensual.

Donatello was a subtle narrator. The origin of the action in the story is the sensuality of the girl who seduces the judgment of the king. Yet Salome is not represented as so sensual as some of Donatello's later figures. She is caught in the middle of the dance, on one foot, gracefully turning in

a whirl of drapery, thoroughly feminine against the background of sensual maleness. Her profile is classicistic, her intelligence is fully involved in her fixed stare at the head, a line of psychic force across the gap.

The seated figure on the other side of the table provides a slightly comic note that is altogether human. A man shrinks away from the grisly scene, covering one eye while taking his fill of looking with the other eye; a general human experience is accurately portrayed. Unlike the intense concentration on the dramatic moment in Giotto and Masaccio, Donatello places the central action in a more varied psychic context.

The presentation scene at the other end of the table is more concentrated. Salome's turning movement is balanced by the kneeling soldier. His lower leg is parallel to the picture plane. His upper body turns toward Herod; the lifting of the platter continues the diagonal line that dramatizes the presentation. The strange, expostulating gesture of the guest establishes another diagonal line intersecting the first at the head, ending in the scramble of the putti moving out of the picture while staring back in.

The organizing principle emerging so far identifies an artist not only gifted at recounting the narrative but doing so within the complexity of human personality and character. Inner character, which can be explored intricately within the compass of a sonnet, is a matter of great difficulty for the visual arts. Italian Renaissance artists, building on ideas of Giovanni Pisano and Giotto as developed further by Donatello, did so by presenting an intense central action which the other participants reacted to in the varied ways required by their different personalities. Donatello's work is a particularly vivid presentation of this principle.

In part, we are dealing with "Renaissance individualism." It would be difficult to find an equivalent to this intense realization of full personalities in any other culture. Donatello's work, however, is considerably more intricate than that, for his vividly realized individuals are very much part of a whole, a dramatic and psychological whole that is inseparable from the setting.

The setting is, of necessity, physical but the physical setting interacts with and helps generate the psychological. The atmosphere, vividly established, is that of a tyrant's court. (The government of Florence at the time was oligarchical and certainly had no such atmosphere as this. Where did Donatello learn it?) The congested grace and sensuality of the right hand group is part of courtly life. The curious putti in the left corner with their infantile maturity, their display of sensual babyish flesh, are a strange accent to the scene. (Putti occupy a varied and complex role in Renaissance art. Inherited from Rome, they are babies in form, mature in sensibility. In Donatello's work, they normally indicate pure physical energy, often sexual, outside moral control, an idea carried to its limits by Michelangelo in the *ignudi* of the Sistine ceiling.)

The kneeling soldier, carrying out an habitual action with no concern for the grisly object he is offering at the banquet table, is very much a part of such a court, a necessary instrument. Immediately above him, at the second level, the bravos with their brutal virility, are a part of the same violence. Surrounded by this sensuality, violence and death, Herod is all the more incongruous in his fastidious recoil from the result of his own instruments acting under his order.

The lute player, bent in oblivious concentration over his instrument, wholly indifferent to the terrible event enacted before him, is a counterpoint to the violence of the bravos behind him. The youthful effeminates at the third level look in unfeeling discomfort at the head being carried past them.

The architecture is appropriate to this rank action. It has only a tentative relation to a rational structure. It is sufficiently "real" to give the appearance of a real building but incongruities and contradictions abound. The succession of spaces appears to hold people but the spaces are impossibly compressed and unidentifiable in terms of the organized spaces of a building. It cannot be experienced as a part of the real although it is, in its presentation, intensely real.

There are no windows and the only door is mysteriously unusable. The corridor-like rooms presuppose spaces to the sides; in the front section figures are moving out of the confines of the pictorial space, but any further space is surely as buried as these. There is no opening to the outside world, no escape from this claustrophobic, congested space, saturated with human emotion, criss-crossed with the energies of human action and intention.

The area in the right rear sums up Donatello's use of space for interpretive purposes. The architecture changes key abruptly and for no reason. It appears to be (may be) a small room but it is

impossible to be sure what it is. A short flight of steps leads up to a door. Neither the space in front of the door nor the door itself could accommodate figures of the size of those represented. This device, unique so far as I know to Donatello, serves only to add a final note of mystery to a work that oscillates between a convincing naturalism and a transcendence of the natural.

The title of this paper promises a treatment of perspective and so far, with this work, I have said nothing of the perspective. This is a rhetorical device to emphasize its placement.

It appears to be a consistent one-point perspective design. The presence of floor tiles is characteristic of perspective pictures since they mark the necessary receding lines that establish the sense of coherent space. This appearance is only partially accurate. It is not easy to trace the perspective design; art historians, armed with ruler and pencil, can do strange things with photographs and mine is no more accurate than others. The perspective lines cluster in an area, although there is something close to a vanishing point just beneath the elbow of the lute player. Other lines tend to cluster somewhat higher and further to the left. Our issue, however, is not so much the technicalities of the construction as the achieved effect on the primary narrative. The view point—the eye of the spectator—corresponds to the vanishing point and is, therefore, placed a little above the actual center of the panel. (The difference is small and may not be consequential.)

The high point of view shows the floor as sharply slanted upward, a characteristic device that enables the artist to draw the necessary receding lines on the floor. The point of view, then, corresponds roughly to the position of the spectator since the relief is placed low on the font. But the whole upper part of the panel is designed as though the spectator is looking up, seeing the underside of the arches and the ceiling. This contradicts the actual position of the spectator, requiring a mental adjustment of some consequence; linear perspective does not make spectators into gods but controls the act of vision, compelling a deep relation to and participation in the represented event.

The result is a paradoxical relation of the spectator to the space. Perspective creates a sense of a space beyond the picture plane occupied by convincingly three dimensional figures; the frame suggests the window principle, used as a metaphor for perspective. At the same time, Donatello works to contradict this depth of space. Much of the surface is given over to a network of lines by the emphatic drawing of the lines of the brickwork, which is the same in the background as in the foreground. The distance of the viewpoint is compromised by the way it forces spectators to look sharply downward and sharply upward as though they are parts of the actual scene; contradicting the asserted principle of the separation of spectators from the scene, Donatello forces the interpretive perception of the spectators into intimate relation with the scene, and, therefore, participation in the represented event.

The powerful control of the narrative by the perspective construction of the succession of spaces is matched by the intensity of interlocking actions. One of the boldest of all Donatello's inventions is the emptiness of the center. Normally, linear perspective focuses attention on something in the distance (as, for example, the door of Mary's enclosed garden) or something in the foreground (Christ in Leonardo's Last Supper). Donatello focuses it on nothing, dividing the action in two. Yet the gap accents rather than separates the complex of attention and action. Salome's action and fixed attention carries a force across the surface to the active kneeling of the soldier, then on to the fleeing putti whose turned attention contradicts the bodily action. Moving out of this line of force, the turning movement of the soldier moves the action to the next layer where act and emotion move chiasmatically back and forth to the right side of the panel, again both moving out of the frame and turning back into it. The two rear spaces have less complex planar movements from one side to the other.

This is Giotto's basic principle with an important development. Giotto concentrated with full intensity and single-mindedness on the sacred event for the discipline of the soul of the worshipper to the redemptive significance of the sacred narrative. Donatello places the event in the context of a world pulsating with a variety of emotions and purposes. Some of his characters are no more than their roles—the soldiers, the sensual young men behind Salome, the ephebes in the background. This is accurate to the human situation; many people are absorbed into their roles. The principal characters are capable of purpose, of emotional and moral response to a powerful situation. He seems to have made it a deliberate purpose to show a range of response to set out the complexities of the human situation.

Masaccio presents characters capable of complexities of feeling which they suppress for the

sake of their majestic presence to the central situation. His paintings are preternaturally still and quiet. Donatello moves in the other direction from Giotto's founding principle. As a far more "expressionistic" artist, he presents a tumultuous interplay of acts and emotions, with the most vivid possible sense of human range and possibility. At the same time, he achieves a sense of distance, of mystery, by such things as the strangely mature children (not really children but putti), the incongruous steps and doorway in the right rear corner, by the inconsistent consistencies of the architecture.

By his organization of the space, he locks the view of the spectator into the action of the event, which is the theological function of perspective. Seeing the work is not an external observation, *sub specie aeternitatis*, as conventional interpretations of perspective would have it, but a means of involvement, of participation. It is necessary to look more closely at the event.


The issue is that of evil. Instead of the pious sentimentality of so many presentations of martyrdom, John's martyrdom is a consequence of, and is inseparable from, the swirling currents of human evil, human self-centeredness and passions. It is not a complete theology; a presentation of Donatello's full theology would have to place this one chapter in the context of the whole work of a lifetime, the presentation of the heroes of the faith (apostles, prophets), the passion of Jesus, the Madonna. The appropriate spectator is forced by the perspective construction to be present to the event, to see the horror of it as an integral part of human experience.

The expressive movements of the articulated human body are held in unity by the geometric construction of the perspective space and the articulation of the architecture. Donatello presents a narrative for contemplation while compelling participation in an act conceived liturgically.

In this theology, faith is not proposition but act.

Linear perspective is a decisive stage in the development of the human interaction with the world, a transformation of consciousness in its relation to its environing world. It made possible that singular quality of distance and involvement that enables a genuinely human and fully Christian involvement in the world, being fully in it but not wholly of it, neither dominating nor subordinate but in reciprocal relation.

Donatello presents an image of the human as capable of both feeling and decisive response, of evil (good is presented in others of his works), as living and acting with the fullness of the body's ordered energies within the variety, the contingencies, of the human world. That world's space, in keeping with the presentation of evil, is both ordered and mysterious, under rational control and going outside the rational.

With linear perspective, the human enterprise moved closer to a time when it was more nearly possible to see life in something like wholeness, in its action and reception, in its good and its evil. In a possibility not yet achieved, theology was in a position to work with something like the wholeness of the human intelligence rather than the reasoning intellect alone. 

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Nature and Nature's God in Late Twentieth-Century American Art

Theodore L. Prescott

I assume that American school children still learn "America the Beautiful," as my classmates and I did in the 1950's. I can still hear our thin tremulous voices, and many of the words come rather easily, though I have not thought about them for many years.

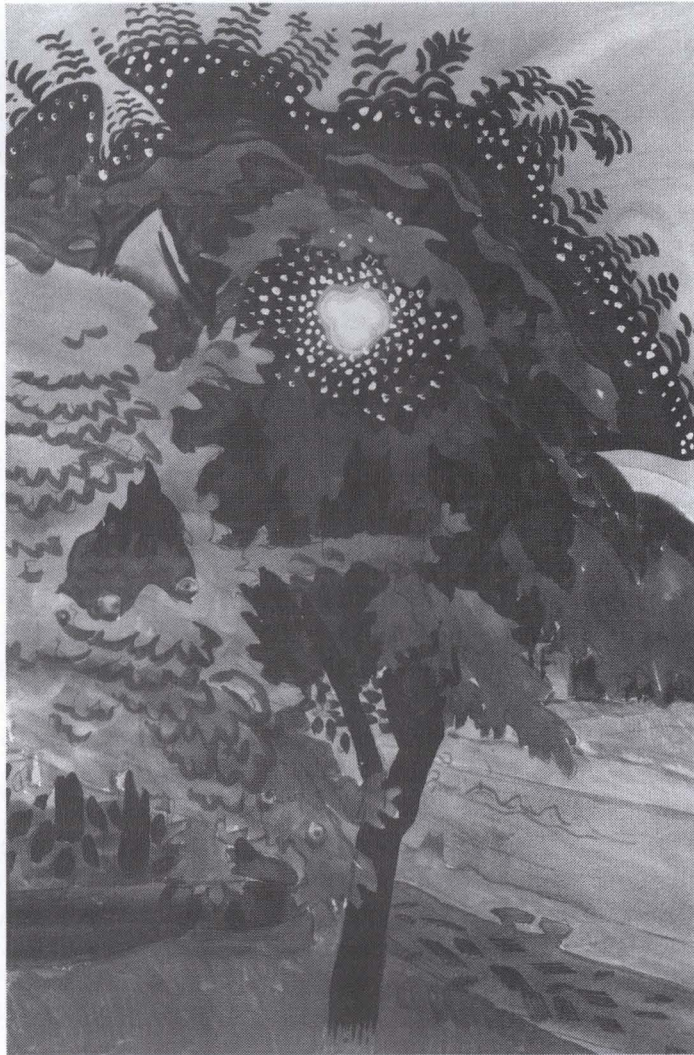
O beautiful for spacious skies,
For amber waves of grain.
For purple mountains' majesty
Above the fruited plain.
America, America,
God shed his grace on Thee,
And crown thy good,
With brotherhood,
From sea to shining sea.

I was moved by the nature images. They resonated with my family's love of the outdoors and wilderness. It confirmed that America was a special place, characterized by its landscape as much as by its people. It spoke of a land providentially touched by God. His fingerprints and presence are evident to those with eyes to see.

Children don't think critically about songs, or examine the affections they encourage. In childhood such things are a natural part of the rhythms of family, school, church, sports, and civic functions. But of course now I hear the song differently, and recognize it as one popular manifestation of the kind of art that invests the American landscape with religious meaning. Written in 1893, "America the Beautiful" was a comparative late-comer to a crowded field of artistically and theologically diverse images that already included the works of Hudson River school painters like Thomas Cole, and photographers like Carleton Watkin, as well as the transcendentalist writers Emerson and Thoreau. The identification of the American landscape with a Creator's presence stretches back to the beginnings of the Republic, and is one of the foundational narratives of our country.

Nineteenth century Americans were hardly unique in seeing the natural world as God-breathed and God-infused. In one sense how could it be otherwise? The visible world is the material at hand for fashioning our imagery. If you look for evidence of God, or want to give form to belief, the natural world is the obvious place to start. The Jewish and Christian scriptures that are at the heart of western religious thought are full of images like, "As a hart longs for flowing streams, so longs my soul for thee, O God." It would be futile to try to separate religious knowledge from language's dependence on the human experience of nature. The two are simply too closely linked.

But in another sense, the sense that modernity made, it has been neither natural nor necessary to see nature and nature imagery from a religious perspective. Several related modern cultural trends helped to seriously erode—or in some instances completely sever—the public connections between nature and Creator. For instance within the sciences, both the positivistic understanding of the scientific method and the evolutionary explanation of origins successfully challenged the pre-modern idea of special creation. In the arts, the ascendant movements in modernity valued subjects,



Charles Burchfield. *Luminous Tree*, 1917. Watercolor on paper, 19-7/8" x 14". Courtesy of the Brauer Museum of Art, VU.

theories, and interpretative viewpoints that either ignored religious and spiritual subjects, or relocated them to abstract, symbolic, and essentially personal idioms.

These trends have shaped our habits of perception. So in the twentieth century when modern thought dominated public speech, it was assumed that nature's terrors, complexities, and mysteries would be vanquished and domesticated by a triumphant science. There is more than a little truth in the idea. But it led to a particular kind of hubris about our relationship to nature, as well as making us see nature only instrumentally—as a thing we do something to in order to gain a particular end. And the silence about religion, at least in the public square, was almost audible.

I have in front of me an advertisement from a 1943 LIFE magazine. It was written by Dr. Karl Compton, then President of M.I.T., and announces boldly, "Science. . .the common man's best friend." The text, written in wartime, acknowledges perverted uses of science, but goes on to say that "the aim of science is to free men from drudgery by putting Nature to work." (LIFE, June 7, 1943, following page 59) The ad describes many of the wonderful things science will be able to produce once victory is achieved. But it is, at its core, a mechanical view of nature, which did not consider limitations to its beneficence, nor conceive of a realm beyond its grasp. So while Compton could see many developments on the distant horizon, like frequent, cheap, and dependable air travel, he was unable to see the human and environmental costs embedded in his view of nature.

There is no direct correlation between the ideas expressed in the advertisement and twentieth century landscapes. Movements in art partake in the dynamics of broad cultural forces, but also have narrower, more immediate goals. American landscapes created within the twentieth century are diversely influenced by ideas about the structure and meaning of visual art, by spontaneous and expressive passions, and by the careful spirit of factual scrutiny. To the degree that nineteenth century spiritual and religious impulses live on in the landscapes of artists like O'Keeffe, Hartley, or Burchfield, they are sublimated through a vocabulary of abstracted natural forms. In this light it makes sense that the earlier American public's appetite for the sublime vistas of a painter like Frederic Church has today been replaced by the enormous popularity of Monet—or the American landscape painter Fairfield Porter. The critic Robert Hughes has dubbed such landscapes, with their domesticated gardens, sunny bathing beaches, and charming picnics, “the landscape of pleasure.”

Since we are now witnessing the sunset of America's modernist cultural consensus, it is not surprising that connections are again being made between religion and nature. Some are sensational, like the tabloid paganism that enlivens our waits at the checkout counter with reports of druids and witches conducting supposedly ancient rituals in moonlit forests. Others draw on religious viewpoints that originate outside of western thought, such as the belief that we and our environment are part of one living, pulsing, cosmic organism. Still others, often motivated by a desire to relate responsibility to the environment, turn to strands of Native American spirituality that emphasize respect for the rhythms and harmonies of nature.

Clearly these are manifestations of an urge to unite religion and nature, and to find a sacred presence in nature, or make nature itself sacred. The Catholic philosopher Thomas Molnar calls this *The Pagan Temptation*, which is the title of a book he published in 1987. He argues that the contemporary urge to resacralize nature in this way is the result of a progressive cultural dislocation from the natural order of cycles, seasons, and cosmic forces that traditionally gave people a sense of their place in the universe. Molnar says Christianity is partly responsible for this because it demythologized nature and set the forces in motion that led to the scientific enterprise, which in turn helped foster a totalizing rationalism. The “Christian flaw” he says, “consists in bypassing the universe of nature in the direct linkage of human beings in a relationship with God” (Molnar 90). Molnar thinks this flaw is more likely among Protestants than Catholics, who until recently have maintained rituals and feasts that celebrate the sacred within the rhythms of liturgical and solar calendars.

I would go a step further, and point out that the Catholic understanding of the relationship between spirit and matter is fundamentally different from the Protestant tradition. We can see this in two areas where the Reformers criticized Catholic teaching. One is in the nature of the Eucharist, where Catholic doctrine proclaims Christ's “real presence” in the bread and wine. The other is in the relics—those bits of bone, hair, teeth, or clothing—that are prominently displayed in so many European Cathedrals.

My point is not to reignite old controversies. Nor is Molnar particularly concerned with Protestant thought. Most of his criticisms are directed at recent Catholic theologians like Hans Küng. But Molnar's point that the absence of a Christian understanding of the relationship between the sacred and the natural helps foster an emerging neo-paganism has merit. And in our time, the Catholic tradition may have resources for understanding the material world's relation to a sacred order that are not so available to those working in the Protestant tradition.

One can find support for Molnar's observations in the visual arts today. It is relatively easy to cite examples of artists who draw upon some pagan or occult practices in their work, and whose goals are to nurture experiences of healing, awe, ecstasy, or wholeness through a connection with the forces of nature. The critic Suzi Gablik's book *The Reenchantment of Art*, published in 1991, discusses several artists who work in this vein. For Gablik, reenchantment means “stepping beyond the modern traditions of mechanism, positivism, empiricism, rationalism, materialism, secularism, and scientism—the whole objectifying consciousness of the Enlightenment—in a way that allows for the return of soul” (Gablik 11). Gablik champions a diverse mix of socially and spiritually committed artists in her book—but the “return of soul” is found in a therapeutic ecological mysticism.

To cite one example, Gablik describes the artist Dominique Mazeaud's ritual cleansing of the Rio Grande river. Mazeaud periodically hauls bags of garbage and refuse out of the river. This socially commendable activity is not unlike what a Sunday school class or boy scout troop might un-

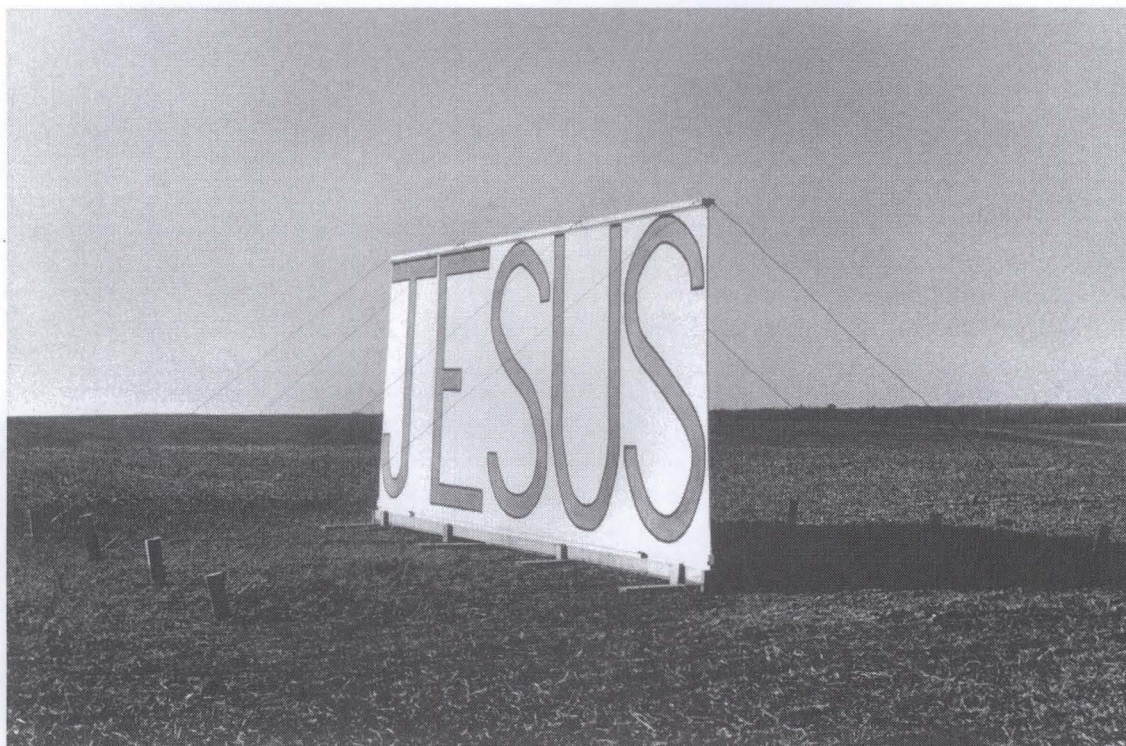
dertake. But for Mazeaud it is a religious ritual and a communion with the river. She began to relate to the river as a living being, and believes that the river “has something to say . . . the river is as true of an artist as I am” (Gablik 122).

As interesting as it might be to examine artists like these, my goals are different. I want to look at imagery that is rooted in the Christian tradition, and suggest relations between religion and nature already at work in the American tradition before modernity sent religious nature imagery into exile. For this reason the examples I’ve chosen are atypical of the dominant ideas about landscape or nature in art today. While none of the artists is unknown, their work has not been discussed extensively, and to my knowledge no one has explored the relationship between landscape and religion in their work. The fact that the artists have some relationship to the Christian faith does *not* reflect a larger pattern in the art world.

The relationship between American Protestantism and artistic imagery is complex, and not easily pigeonholed, yet there is a persistent aniconic strain within American church history. This distrust of images is not uniquely American—it stretches back to the beginnings of the faith. As scholars of Protestant architecture have long noted, Protestant worship spaces since the seventeenth century have often been organized around the spoken word. So the primacy of the word—spoken, written, or sung—distinguishes the Protestant ethos. This emphasis on the word means that physical presence of Protestantism has often tended to be plain, because the essence of the faith transcends any material embodiment—or more simply, what’s important is the words, not the forms.

One can see this documented in the work of Sam Fentress, a photographer from St. Louis, Missouri. Fentress has had an interest in landscape for a number of years, and used to make large format pictures of industrial and commercial landscapes. While he was teaching at the University of Arkansas, one of his students brought in a photo of a barn covered with hand-painted Bible verses. Soon Fentress began to look for and photograph roadside religious signs as he traveled throughout the rural south.

Fentress’ training as an artist was grounded in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s high art for-



Sam Fentress. *Vergennes, Illinois*. 1982. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

malism. But he found the religion of art lacking, and over a number of years was drawn to Catholicism. Thus his picture taking and his own religious journey converged, and he began to feel a call to document roadside and urban religious expression throughout the United States.

Some of the signs Fentress photographs are Catholic in origin, like the “pray to St. Jude” billboard he photographed in Kansas City, or the “become a Catholic” scrawled under a vibrant painting of a pot of flowers on a wall in Harlem. But most are not, and in this insistent verbal address, which is often juxtaposed in amusing or strangely compelling ways to their larger context, the messages have a decidedly Protestant flavor.

Philosophers and theologians have developed two categories—transcendence and immanence—to help grasp the relationships between nature and the supernatural. Fentress’s photograph of a billboard-sized sign anchored in the flat midwestern earth near Vergennes, Illinois, and which starkly declares “JESUS,” is an example of the transcendent tradition.

There is no image, just the name lightly touching the ground. The minimalist composition of the photograph contains simple planes of land, sky and word. The darker horizontal values of the land and sky contrast with the white verticality of the sign, and one feels an essential *difference* between the landscape and the word. The land is there to support the divine name, but its own character is not used to speak of Christ, who is apparently above and beyond nature. The photograph documents the problem Molnar describes—writ large.

There are some striking similarities between Fentress’s photograph of the sign and a 1987 painting by the Oklahoma born artist Joe Andoe. Andoe, who lives and exhibits in New York, grew up on the plains, and much of his imagery fuses artistic minimalism with the minimalism of the midwest, where earth and sky are the essential visual realities. Andoe’s paintings have a brushy hand. In this they resemble an earlier plains artist, the nineteenth century painter George Catlin. There is a kind of homemade quality to his work, that echoes the earnest craft of the Jesus sign in Fentress’s photograph.

In Andoe’s painting, which is untitled, the word “Christ” hovers in the pale light of the sky, slightly over the horizon. A few strokes indicate trees and vegetation. Even in its sparseness, the nat-



Joe Andoe. *Untitled* (Christ landscape) 1987. Oil on linen. 20" x 24" Courtesy of the artist and Joseph Helman Gallery.

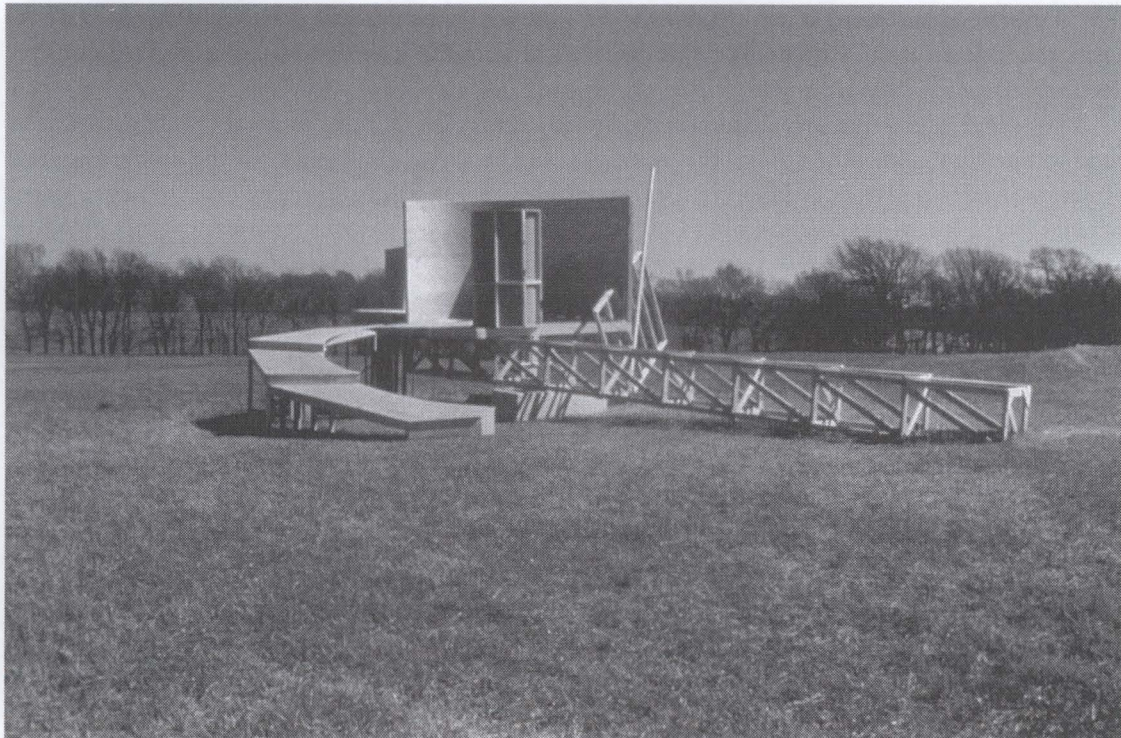
ural environment has a kind of primal lushness to it. It is, like so much nineteenth century American landscape, almost Edenic. There is something both matter of fact and mysterious about the handwritten word Christ, and the light of the sky suggests a kind of revelation. But the revelation is focused by the word.

Both pictures—one “found,” one made—share an essential Protestant sensibility in the way the religious content is primarily oriented to the word. The presence of a word conditions and qualifies the image of the natural world. The word can inflect the land with religious meaning, which doesn’t come from *within* the land itself, but another, transcendent reality.

Landscapes have traditionally been the province of painters. The possibility of sculpted representations of views and vistas are radically limited by problems of scale, material, and multiple points of view. However, since the 1960’s, sculptors have begun to work consciously in the land. The impetus for this development, which is one of the most significant artistic changes within the twentieth century, varies. Motives include a desire to create an alternative to the gallery and museum setting, a growing concern and awareness about the environment, and a reinvigoration of some nineteenth-century Romantic sensibilities concerning nature. It is important to note that these artists are not simply setting objects in the outdoors, with nature used as a backdrop, the way a fountain or statue might be seen. Rather the natural environment plays a significant and active role in the design and perceptions of the art. It is part of the art.

Roger Feldman is a sculptor from southern California who has made a number of works that are situated in nature. They depend upon natural phenomena to fulfill his intentions. Anyone familiar with Biblical literature will understand that his intentions have a spiritual direction, because the titles are often fragments of Scripture. *Ears to Hear, Eyes to See* is an installation that he made for a nature reserve near Dallas, Texas. It is a participatory structure, which is meant to be walked through.

One ascends a sloped wooden ramp, which rests on top of a casket. The ramp leads to a partially walled “blind,” which obscures the sight of the land, but amplifies its sounds. The partici-



Roger Feldman. *Ears to Hear, Eyes to See*. 1991. Wood and concrete. 43' x 34' x 12'

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pant then passes from the blind across a gap—a slight leap of faith—to a podium where they pause both to see and hear the natural phenomena they are in.

Thus the path acts as a kind of metaphor for the Christian journey to faith. The progression of elements and experiences function symbolically: crossing over the casket; the blind where one only hears (faith comes by hearing); the gap; and finally the reunification of sight and sound. But what is interesting is that it is *natural phenomena* that participants attend to. And while the work is metaphorical, it uses the kinetic and sensory experiences of the participant in an environment. It suggests that one might come to religious faith, if they attended carefully enough to their natural environment, and in this way sees God speaking *in nature*.

A work like this is completely different in its means than images created by paint on cloth. But it does have intriguing correspondences to some aspects of nineteenth-century painting. Thomas Cole, for example, who was America's first great landscape painter, sought to fuse the Romantic tradition of the grand and sublime landscape with his religious and moral vision, which was Christian. He believed that the contemplation of America's wilderness might lead one to associate its power and beauty with the hand of God. But since Cole specifically had the Christian God in mind, plain images of the land weren't quite enough. He made this clear by sometimes painting Biblical narratives set in fantastic American panoramas, or incorporated discernibly Christian symbols in his vistas, such as the late unfinished painting *The Cross at Sunset*. This painting, which was intended to be part of a series entitled *The Cross and the World*, depicts a Celtic stone cross in the foreground of a panorama. The cross and the landscape are bathed in the light of the setting sun.

Like Cole, Feldman qualifies the perception of nature with symbolic elements and words. The references are veiled, and it is possible to experience the natural elements without connecting them to a specific religious content, just as it is possible to enjoy the sunset in Cole's cross painting. But it is in the interaction between natural phenomena and religious content that the work takes on its full meaning. And like many of Cole's paintings, Feldman's piece has a possible moral or didactic component.

I know several Christians painters whose interests and subjects are in landscape. Some have successful careers and are represented in major collections. Their work can be loosely characterized as naturalistic, in that they create painterly evocations of the myriad delights for the eye found in nature and natural phenomena. There is little in these works that provokes religious reflection, except in the broad and general way that all good things honor the Creator. This is not meant as a criticism, but a description. Christians certainly aren't required to use their vocations for religious reflection.

However, given that associations between religious belief and the landscape were natural and common in the nineteenth century, this condition can be seen as one legacy of the modernist view of nature. And if it is true, as I believe it is, that there is a bias against things Christian in the visual arts, it is hard for works like the ones I've described to be viewed sympathetically. Thus it will be difficult for our culture to build on its own tradition. The Christian strand within that tradition, which sees creation as "God's second book," will continue to be largely dormant. But fortunately, the visual arts have another legacy, which is that artists of conviction are not deterred by prevailing opinion. 

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Even this bench: a go-between
hunted down the way the mad
stare dead center

—she must sense the hole
clings to its planks and emptiness
—a trace from some park

bolted to the central ward
that reaches out, blooms
with one dry twig

not sure if she's crying
or the voice she hears
is her own asking for water

and under her brain the flames
and under some stream
that came to see her once

offering back her fingertips
—something she would write
if she could reach the wall.

You've been here—everything
is raft, terrible storms and sitting
and the loneliness that has no sound

except your hand in the water
caressing the world
—you feel its pain

its turning away, deeper and deeper
barely into evening.

Simon Perchik

A Christian Approach to the History of Modern Art

Daniel A. Siedell

My starting point is a pair of insightful observations on the visual arts by two Christian scholars. In 1980 the philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff asserted that “there are serious defects in our contemporary way of thinking about the arts, so that *reconsideration* rather than theological *interpretation* is first of all required” (Wolterstorff 1980; 1987). And in 1993 the literary historian Roger Lundin wrote that

American Christians have often found it difficult to articulate a consistent and convincing theory of the arts. Whether they are practitioners or critics, evangelical Christians especially seem to grope for appropriate arguments to justify their involvement in artistic activity and to reconcile it with their religious commitments. They frequently press their case for the arts with little awareness of the history of reflection on aesthetics and with scant understanding of the theological doctrines at stake in their own arguments. (225)

Both Wolterstorff’s and Lundin’s observations, made thirteen years apart, reveal that despite the tremendous increase in Christian scholarship in the humanities and social sciences over this period, little progress has been made in the articulation of systematic philosophical and historical reflection on the visual arts. And moreover, as Lundin points out, there has been little in the way of self-reflection by the evangelical community on the traditions which have accounted for the various so-called “evangelical responses” to the visual arts. The remarks by Wolterstorff and Lundin point to the fact that much Christian scholarly work remains to be done in the history of art. This does not mean, however, that there is not significant scholarship in the history of art where Christianity functions as an object of historical inquiry, as demonstrated in the work of John Walford at Wheaton College, Sally Promey at the University of Maryland, and David Morgan at Valparaiso University. But both Wolterstorff and Lundin are calling for something different than researching Christianity’s influence on the visual arts, an influence which, to be sure, has been marginalized by the secular academy. They point to the need for Christian art historians to develop and then to mobilize a conceptual framework for studying the visual arts, and especially twentieth-century art, art which has proven quite troublesome for evangelical scholars as well as the evangelical lay public. And an important aspect of this project should consist of engaging critically with the history of Christian reflection on the visual arts throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

But I will not add to the substantial evangelical literature that, following Francis Schaeffer or Hans Rookmaaker, decries the decadence of modern art and offers as an antidote a “Christian” visual arts based on a return to the biblical account of God’s instructions for the construction of the Tabernacle. Nor will it address directly the prevailing Neo-Calvinist assumption in Reformed arts communities that “creativity” in the arts is a manifestation of God’s “common grace” to both regenerate and unregenerate humanity (Best). Rather, I attempt to sketch out a perspective that offers a *descriptive*, not a *prescriptive* analysis of modern art—a perspective with which a Christian scholar is uniquely equipped and poised to offer to the historical study of modern art.

My thesis is this. As it has been understood in the twentieth century by everyone from art critics to school teachers to liberal arts undergraduates, the idea of “art,” rooted in the nineteenth-century tradition of the avant-garde, conflicts in important ways with a Christian world-view. Un-

Showing the
avant-garde
to its place
in the rear
of the
march of history,
Professor Seidell
proposes a thesis
about
varieties of
art history.

fortunately, this discourse of the avant-garde is usually the only vocabulary available for Christians as they reflect seriously on the visual arts. For example, an art department program statement for one of this country's finest Reformed colleges announces that "visual art is a language which transcends words, but a language nonetheless capable of expressing the emotions of the heart and the mind and the spirit" (Website; Zuidervaart and Luttikhuisen). The belief that the visual arts "transcend" words is derived in large measure from the avant-garde tradition, a tradition that has informed most popular and professional views of the arts, from both secular and Christian perspectives. Art history from a Christian point of view must be able to find an alternative model for historical reflection on the visual arts.

I am convinced that the study of modern art and the avant-garde tradition that sustains it offers an opportunity for Christian scholars interested in the visual arts to serve not only the needs of the Christian scholarly community but to contribute in significant ways to a much-needed revisionist art historical scholarship in the larger academy. The Christian art historian is poised to offer to a field of study currently awash in relativism and intellectual incoherence an analysis of modern art illuminated by a rigorous epistemological reflection that achieves what postmodern approaches have failed to do: to get out from underneath the myths of modernism. My optimism is reinforced by the impact of "Reformed epistemology" with its compelling critique of classical foundationalism in the larger professional philosophical community and the impact of "intelligent design" on the scientific community within the context of the origins debate (Westphal). But also, the Christian art historian finds herself in a productive intellectual position from which to contribute to public and popular discourse on the visual arts, such as the relationship between art and pornography, the role of federal funding for the arts, and the limits of "artistic freedom."

Modern art was born in the intoxicating atmosphere of European utopian socialist thought in the period between the aftermath of the French Revolution and the revolutions of 1830 and 1848, which together were assumed to form a radical break between the cultural, political, and social values of the "modern" present and the "traditional" values of the Old Regime. Therefore, modern art cannot be sufficiently differentiated from "pre-modern," or "classical-academic-Renaissance" art simply on account of style. It must be analyzed and studied on the basis of how modern art is intended by its practitioners and perceived by its audiences to function in society. Moreover, it is tied to and derivative of specific ideas about the origin and structure of society as well as how "art" could be utilized in cultural politics or the politics of culture. "That position," argues art historian Stephen C. Foster, "is the shared conviction that art and literature are capable of reshaping, altering, or even revolutionizing individual human behavior, social consciousness or cultural institutions; in a word, 'utopianism.'" Foster continues:

The historical breakdown of twentieth century modernism into movements and 'isms,' while often mistakenly attributed to formal evolution, rests primarily on the different contexts out of which perspectives taken to utopian approaches are formulated. (313)

An analysis of what makes modern art "modern" must first consider the influence of Enlightenment ideas regarding the trajectory of society and how the visual arts were believed to function in it, beliefs that were derived from what Roger Lundin calls the "perspectivism" and "subjectivism" of Romanticism (49-75).

Not long before his death in 1825, the idiosyncratic utopian socialist Henri de Saint-Simon appropriated the military term "avant-garde" to refer to the new elite community which he proposed would be given the responsibility of carrying out his social revolution. "It is we, artists," he asserted, "who will serve you as avant-garde: the power of the arts is in fact most immediate and most rapid: when we wish to spread new ideas among men, we inscribe them on marble or on canvas." Furthermore,

when literature and the fine arts have put themselves at the head of the movement, and have finally filled society with passion for its own well-being. . . . [w]hat most beautiful destiny for the arts, that of exercising over society a positive power, a true priestly function, and of marching forcefully in the

van [avant-garde] of all the intellectual faculties, in the epoch of their greatest development! This is the duty of artists, this is their mission. (Egbert 121-22; my emphasis)

Crystallizing and summarizing the theories of art advanced by Romantic poets such as Shelley and the aesthetic theory of Kant, Saint-Simon effectively cobbled together a seductive world-view that privileged artists, intellectuals, critics, etc. as a new spiritual elite and gave them the responsibility not to preserve the truth as the Apostle Paul exhorted Timothy (2 Tim. 1: 13-14), but to find new, more relevant truths that would serve the material needs of the social organism. Saint-Simon and his followers believed that modern society had evolved beyond the doctrinal particularities of orthodox Christianity and they envisioned an important role in the new order for the visual arts.

This vision of the artist has, over time, provided the ideological rationale for the visual arts to disengage themselves from both the church and the state and evolve their own values as an autonomous institution charged with the responsibility to “spread new ideas among men” and serve as “the sensitive antennae of Society,” as the founding director of the Museum of Modern Art, Alfred H. Barr, Jr., claimed in 1943 (3). Lest anyone remain skeptical of the impact of such a theory on the history of modern art, the historian Donald Drew Egbert writes, it was Saint-Simon who

placed artists at the head of an administrative elite trinity consisting of artists, scientists, and industrial artisans. In so doing, he gave rise to the conceptions both of an artistic avant-garde and of a social vanguard—conceptions with enormous importance for the history of art and of social radicalism alike. (121-22)

Another key feature of avant-gardism in the visual arts is the radical change in what and how the artwork communicated—and to whom. The avant-garde artwork was not intended merely for contemplation and devotion to a well-defined audience for whom the work was commissioned. Rather, it was believed to communicate and express its meaning in an almost supernaturally direct and transforming way to all of society, whether it appreciated it or not. And, moreover, that social revolution—the ushering in of the utopian millennium—would be facilitated in part through the aesthetic power of the visual arts. The barely veiled religiosity of avant-gardism is further intensified with the development of the role of the artist who comes to be regarded as a “prophet” who consequently suffers persecution for condemning the sins of society through his art. And despite the ebb and flow of political involvement of artists engaged in the project of modernism since the nineteenth century, the avant-garde tradition provided the artist (and critic) with powerful cultural roles that continue to be compelling for artworld participants well into the twentieth century. Robert Motherwell, one of the leading voices of postwar American avant-gardism, relies upon these myths of the artist as spiritual leader but social outcast:

But the crisis is the modern artist's rejection, almost *in toto*, of the values of the bourgeois world. In this world modern artists form a kind of *spiritual underground*. . . . The argument of this lecture is that the materialism of the middle class and the inertness of the working class leave the modern artist without any vital connection to society, save that of the opposition; and that the modern artists have had, from the broadest point, to replace other social values with the strictly aesthetic. (Terenzio 29, 34)

Although they do not manifest that kind of explicit political perspective that marked the activities of Courbet, the Futurists, or the Dadaists, Motherwell's comments suggest a particularly aggressive form of cultural politics that relies heavily on the role of the artist produced by the avant-garde tradition.

And to complicate matters even more, I suggest that art history as an autonomous discipline developed not only out of modernism, but as an attempt to affirm many of the myths of avant-gardism. For generations, then, art historians, no less than the artists, have usually operated either as orthodox believers or as sympathetic collaborators in the perpetuation of avant-gardism. And those who have bemoaned the radical relativism and ideological hijacking of art history, but believe

it to be a recent product of postmodernism, have failed to recognize the avant-gardist ideological agenda inherent in twentieth-century art historiography, especially in this country, where art history has functioned as a subspecies of an aesthetic hagiography and not of critical historical reconstruction.

The result has been an all-out assault by art history on the integrity and legitimacy of historical reconstruction because it undermines the avant-garde's belief in the visual arts' supernatural ability to communicate their aesthetic meaning trans-culturally and trans-historically. (I suggest that one of Francis Schaeffer's major weaknesses in his reflections on the visual arts is that he too believes in the avant-garde's claim for the supernatural ability of the visual arts to communicate trans-culturally and trans-historically. In reflecting on the danger of secular humanism and atheism manifest in abstract modern art, Schaeffer concedes the truth claims of avant-gardism's interpretation of the visual arts. As a result, his emphasis on nurturing an authentic "Christian art" leaves the myths of avant-gardism firmly intact. But perhaps even more problematic, he gives them a new life within the evangelical intellectual community by "Christianizing" avant-gardism.)

The assumptions of avant-gardism are illusory, although they have functioned as reality to most who have attended seriously to the arts, both inside and outside Christian intellectual circles. Christian scholars ought to articulate and exploit the fact that modern art could *never* communicate aesthetically with the directness, power, and authority that its avant-gardist apologists claimed for it. Works of art, in spite of avant-gardism's Romantic and quasi-religious rhetoric, demanded other interpretive aids (artist's statements, manifestos, sympathetic critics, theory, "history") in order to make the art *appear* to accomplish avant-gardism's exalted goals. It is an interesting aspect of the history of modernism that, beginning with Courbet's "Realist Manifesto" in 1861, the "manifesto" itself becomes extremely important for avant-garde communities.

Consequently, in a highly relativistic "postmodernist" society, where Richard Rorty's liberalized pragmatism has achieved the status of "common sense," it falls to the Christian scholar, as Mark Noll argued persuasively some time ago, to mount a convincing defense of the integrity of disciplined historical thinking (Noll 1990). Radical historical relativism, the "aestheticization" of history as simply one's own subjective experience, has given rise to what Roger Lundin has called the "cult" and "culture" of interpretation, due in part to the influence of avant-gardism. A Christian art historian *must* participate in reviving and redeeming the integrity of disciplined historical thinking, rather than be content to "reclaim" the visual for theological education, as some have urged (Dillenberger 253). Only scholarship developed within an epistemological perspective that can resist the temptation to worship at the altar of the visual arts will be able to initiate serious historical reflection on modern art and reveal it to be a heroic but ultimately flawed manifestation of a world-view deprived of the Lordship of Christ, which gives all activities authentic meaning and significance.

The tragedy is that avant-gardism attempts to imbue the work of art with the characteristics of the Word of God, the only work that speaks and transforms trans-culturally and trans-historically (Isaiah 55:11). I am convinced that the religious language used by artists, critics, and other artworld apologists to describe the visual arts is evidence of this tragic state of affairs—that avant-gardism is, at its very core, an attempt by western intellectuals to hew for themselves their own cisterns. It is the task of the Christian art historian to demonstrate that these cisterns are, in fact, broken, and can hold no water (Jer. 2: 13) and, to quote the Apostle Paul, "professing to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man" (Rom 1: 22-23). But at the same time, Christian historians of art, in seeking to demonstrate the exaggerated significance of the visual arts in the avant-garde world-view, will retain and reassert the integrity of the humanity of the artists, critics, and other artworld participants whose individuality is often ignored in traditional art historical narratives for the sake of glorifying the "power" of the art object itself (as well as emphasizing "the eye" of the interpreter). Such art historical scholarship has tended to dehumanize the historical actors by relying on rather crude and hastily-drawn sketches of the "typical artist" or the "typical critic."

Christian art historians must recover the integrity and individuality of the historical actors and further, to reveal the artist, critic, museum curator, gallery director, and even the art historian to be, as the historian Arthur Link writes, “fallen, corrupted, confused, rebellious, yet worthy of respect, love, and honor because he remains God’s creature even in his fallenness.” As Link also contends, Christian historical scholarship “is the only view that takes man seriously in history” (387). The study of modern art from an evangelical Christian perspective should do the same.

Although I have been critical of the excessive idealization of the visual arts which has taken place in both secular and Christian intellectual communities, modern art is not to be smirked, snorted, or sneered at as some kind of crude joke foisted upon common-sense folk, but interpreted historically as a manifestation of modern society’s attempt to fill the void left after jettisoning the Creator and Lord. A history of modern art derived from a Christian epistemological framework that fails to bring out these characteristics risks representing a distorted view of the visual arts, even while it might succeed in “educating” or “expanding” the Christian community’s aesthetic taste. But one must ask: what is gained for the Kingdom or for the Christian mind by increasing the number of believers who frequent art museums and who can speak intelligently of the latest retrospective at the Art Institute of Chicago or the Museum of Modern Art, if what they speak of is derived from a tradition that is antithetical to a Christian world-view?

Yet a Christian perspective on the history of modern art is not one that merely uses the Bible to construct a theory of the visual arts. This practice, typical of those who have followed Francis Schaeffer’s lead, demonstrates the accuracy of those who have argued that evangelical Fundamentalists, in reading all endeavors uncritically through the Bible as a means to disengage themselves from secular humanism, often end up co-opting the very methods and tools of secular humanism in order to make the Bible speak clearly and unambiguously about their situation or subject (Noll 1994; Marsden 1991; Hatch).

If Christian scholars are to find a biblical analog to modern art, perhaps they should not try to bend to their service such things as God’s instructions for the adornment of the Tabernacle, but look instead to the role of the “aesthetic” and the “visual” in Israel’s fabrication of the Golden Calf. The product of the Israelites’ desire to worship their own creations, to make God into their own manageable image, and the desire to experience aesthetically the object of their worship, even while they claimed, as Aaron did, that they were still worshipping “God,” the Golden Calf stands as the paradigmatic idol.


To concede to the visual arts the extraordinary ability to communicate aesthetically, whether it is a Christian or anti-Christian message, is to mute or dull the extraordinary character and uniqueness of God’s Word. It becomes just one more work of art, one more “work” that communicates and demands to be engaged “creatively,” “intuitively,” and “aesthetically.” And even more problematic, it becomes *less* powerful because its message is not communicated through the aesthetic, or the visual, which only serves to codify an anti-intellectualism that has infected the evangelical church, where “hearing” God’s Word is insufficient next to “seeing” or aesthetically “experiencing” the “spiritual.”

The task of Christian scholars, in all that they do, is to demonstrate the uniqueness of Christ and the revelation of Him in the Scriptures. A Christian approach to the history of modern art cannot be content simply to condemn modern art for failing to fulfill some idealistic expectation about what the visual arts should be doing in society. In fact, this perspective simply retains the Saint-Simonian avant-garde notion of the artist as the spiritual leader of the body politic, as if society would experience an authentic spiritual renewal if only these artists were evangelical Christians.

A Christian approach must study, analyze, interpret, and reveal modern art for what it is, and what it has been since the late eighteenth century: a fascinating manifestation of creative activity that nevertheless often resulted in misplaced faith in the ability of human aesthetic creations to bring about transformation that only the Cross can accomplish. Any approach to modern art that concedes the claims that its apologists have made for it risks marginalizing the Gospel. And it is my

contention that a Christian approach to the history of modern art must, in the course of its analysis, reveal or at least be able to accommodate the uniqueness of the Gospel message. C. T. McIntire explains that a "Christian historiography"

involves self-conscious reflection on foundational things in order that the vocation of Christian historians may more readily be transformed by the motivation of the gospel and that the product of their labors may carry implicitly the marks of the gospel. (54)

Christian historiography demonstrates that the avant-garde vision is tragically misplaced because it believes that the modern artist is a secularized clergy in a society stripped of its proper sacredness. The only work that performs what is ascribed to modern art is the Word of God. In this way, Christian scholars may join the Apostle Paul in declaring that "we are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God" (2 Cor. 10: 5). The practice of Christian art history will demonstrate how the "aesthetic" has often been raised up against the knowledge of God. This, however, does not mean that the aesthetic is either dismissed or worshipped, but understood in its various and multiple historical contexts. 

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Potential contributors are invited to make contact with the Editor concerning the subjects and deadlines for the thematic issues in 1998-99.

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Manifestation and Proclamation in Teaching O'Connor's "Parker's Back"

Paul J. Contino

"Look at it! Don't just say that! Look at it!"
— Obidiah Elihue Parker to his wife, Sarah Ruth

In the third week of a course called "Word and Image," soon after we have discussed Plato's banishment of the poets from his philosophical Republic, we spend time looking at icons, with their powerful synthesis of a Platonic eternal realm and a Christian, incarnational figuring of the flesh. In the icon we behold the flesh transfigured: in images of the saints, but, most powerfully, in the image of the One to whose will the saints conform, Christ. I begin class by projecting an image of one of the earliest icons of Christ that we have, a sixth century encaustic from the monastery of St. Catherine at the foot of Mt. Sinai, and ask students to write down their dominant impressions. All agree that the icon images both Christ's divinity and humanity. But clear differences soon emerge: some see a face of love, compassion, accessibility; these students tend to focus on the right side of Jesus' face. Others see a harsh countenance of judgment and inaccessibility; these tend to focus on the left. The first group stresses the immanence of Christ, his open hand raised in blessing; the second emphasizes his transcendence, his hand enclosed around his Word, suggesting his own identity as the transcendent Logos.

Both types of student response represent vital paradigms in the Christian theological responses to the gracious event of Christ. In *The Analogical Imagination*, David Tracy identifies two such "cultural and ecclesiastical traditions" (371). On the one hand, "the route of manifestation," which emphasizes the myriad ways in which grace is mediated in the world, "disclosed everywhere, in each particular" (382). On the other hand lies "the route of proclamation," in which "God comes as eschatological event, as unexpected and decisive Word addressing each and all," and which stresses that "only if God comes to disclose our true godforsakenness and our possible liberation can we be healed" (386). The eighth century patristic, St. John of Damascus, presents a telling example of the route of manifestation. Defending the icons, "the divine images" that Emperor Leo III of Constantinople had set out to destroy, John insisted that paint, wax, wood, and gold were fitting materials with which to image the Divine, above all because God "took up His abode in matter, and accomplish[ed] my salvation in matter. 'And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us'" (61). The event of the Incarnation means that matter matters, that it is sacramental in its capacity to mediate divine grace. John employed analogy and saw God as a flame: "just as a red-hot iron is called fiery, not by its nature but because it participates in the action of the fire" (84), so too do flesh and blood saints, and the icons. In their participation, both are worthy of veneration.

The next step in our course takes us eight centuries later, when another John, the Reformer Calvin, vehemently disagreed, and took the route of proclamation. Calvin rejected any image of the divine, including one that attempts to represent his transcendence, as does perhaps the left side of our sixth-century icon. Like the earlier John, he grounded his objection in that which Christ holds in his left hand, the Word, although he does not consider John's insistence upon the transformative event of the Word become flesh. Calvin returns to Moses and Exodus: "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image. . . . (20:4)" and proclaims that "the majesty of God is defiled by an absurd and indecorous fiction, when he who is incorporeal is assimilated to corporeal matter" (91). Furthermore, the fallenness of the human will corrupts any effort to image the divine, and all such attempts must remain anathema. Calvin's stance did not imply that all religious art is forbidden. In fact, artistic representatives can be located along both routes. For example, in *Religious*

The astute reader will examine the back of this issue, where an image similar to the one in O'Connor's story makes a dramatic appearance.

Aesthetics, Frank Burch Brown points to “the worldly corporeal religiosity of Rubens” (125) and Hopkins’ sense of the “world . . . charged with glory of God” (129) as examples of art that images “immanent transcendence.” Brown’s artistic counterpart of the “route of proclamation” is found in artworks, especially those of the Calvinist, Reformed tradition that point toward “radical transcendence” in which one is “most often confronted by a God of Unlikeness before whom one stands struck, if not by awe, then by a sense of the incapacity of anything finite to bear or contain the infinite” (120). The primary form of artistic expression emerges here as music, “the physical medium of which conveniently self-destructs rather than remaining as a potential distraction and temptation” (121). (In fact, the course I’ve been discussing has just changed its name to “Word, Image, Tone” in part to incorporate this tradition of religious art.)

The students in the course take both the route of manifestation—they read John of Damascus’ defense of icons—and the route of proclamation—they read John Calvin’s condemnation. They get a clear sense of these two vital strands in the Christian tradition, and their deep division on the matter of images. And the students wonder if the twain can ever meet—as they often enough do in their own lives, in which the routes of proclamation and manifestation are more messily intertwined, in which they experience both God’s immanence and utter transcendence. In the complexities of lived faith, theological difference does not necessarily stand with such abstract starkness. Lives have the feel of stories, and stories, as Martha Nussbaum demonstrates in *Love’s Knowledge*, offer a form that can embody the complexities of particular, felt, lived human experience and thus complement abstract thought in necessary ways. In their differing ways, thinkers such as Hans Frei and Paul Ricoeur have also insisted on the importance of narrative in theological reflection. And in the fourth week of the course we indeed discover the importance of narrative: we read a story in which the trajectories of manifestation and proclamation are imaged as conflicting, yet interdependent. We read a story about a man who has a Byzantine icon of Christ tattooed on his back, and is beaten by his wife for doing so.

Flannery O’Connor completed “Parker’s Back” on her deathbed in the summer of 1964. The story, which is one of those that makes you laugh out loud, is also like a poem in its richness of image. To summarize is to commit the heresy of paraphrase, but necessary to understand the significance of its ending. Obidaiah Elihue Parker—who cannot abide his name, much less hearing anyone utter it, and so goes by O.E.—visits a fair at the age of fourteen and, to his utter wonder, sees a man whose body is covered with tattoos. The moment is epiphanic: though he goes on to join the navy, sell fruit, drive a tractor as a farmhand, Parker discerns his true vocation at fourteen: to cover *his* body with tattoos. But though he does just that in the years ahead—applying an eagle, a cobra, a tiger, the faces of Elizabeth II and Philip—“[t]he effect was not one intricate arabesque of colors” as he had seen in the man at the fair “but of something haphazard and botched. A huge dissatisfaction would come over him,” he would get some more tattoos, but “[a]s the space on the front of him for tattoos decreased, his dissatisfaction grew and became general” (514). Perhaps Parker has not yet found his calling. Indeed, his dissatisfaction only deepens after he marries Sarah Ruth Cates, a severely pious woman, the daughter of “a Straight Gospel preacher” (517), “forever sniffing up sin” (510), who judges Parker’s tattoos to be “a heap of vanity” (515). But Parker’s dissatisfaction proves so deep “that there was no containing it outside of a tattoo. It had to be his back” and it had to be “a religious subject,” an image that would, finally, please Sarah Ruth (519). One day, he crashes his tractor into “an enormous old tree,” and sets both tractor and tree ablaze. Parker, unlikely prophet, stands before the burning bush—and then drives fifty miles to the city tattoo artist, rifles through a book of pictures of Jesus until he hears, “as if silence were a language itself, GO BACK,” a call from one of the images: “a flat stern Byzantine Christ with all-demanding eyes” (522). Parker demands that *this* iconic mosaic be tattooed upon his back. The procedure takes two painful days and, after a barroom brawl out of which he is thrown as “Jonah had been cast from the sea” (527), he arrives home in the early morning to show his final tattoo to Sarah Ruth. She’s locked him out of the house. He pounds on the door. When she finally lets him in—after he utters his full name—he takes the shirt off his back and pleads with her to “Look at it!”:

‘I done looked,’ she said.

‘Don’t you know who it is?’ he cried in anguish.

‘No, who is it?’ Sarah Ruth said. ‘It ain’t anybody I know.’

'It's him,' Parker said.

'Him who?'

'God!' Parker cried.

'God? God don't look like that!'

'What do you know how he looks?' Parker moaned. 'You ain't seen him.'

'He don't *look*,' Sarah Ruth said. 'He's a spirit. No man shall see his face.'

'Aw listen,' Parker groaned, 'this is just a picture of him.'

'Idolatry!' Sarah Ruth screamed. 'Idolatry! Enflaming yourself with idols under every green tree! I can put up with lies and vanity but I don't want no idolator in this house!' and she grabbed up the broom and began to thrash him across the shoulders with it.

Parker was too stunned to resist. He sat there and let her beat him until she had nearly knocked him senseless and large welts had formed on the face of the tattooed Christ. Then he staggered up and made for the door.

She stamped the broom two or three times on the floor and went to the window and shook it out to get the taint of him off it. Still gripping it, she looked toward the pecan tree and her eyes hardened still more. There he was—who called himself Obidiah Elihue—leaning against the tree, crying like a baby. (529-30)

Sarah Ruth, vehemently iconoclastic, condemns any imaging of the divine as idolatrous. She could be quoting Calvin himself; her route is that of broom-armed proclamation. Parker, on the other hand, is the iconophile who has covered the remaining part of his body with Christ's image. Indeed, Parker himself becomes, unexpectedly, an image of Christ. When he submits to his wife's beating, he embodies *kenosis*: he empties himself of the will to resist and defend himself. The "large welts that form on the face of the tattooed Christ," form, of course, on his own flesh, and thus suggest his participation in the sacrifice of Christ, as does his later leaning and weeping against the "single tall pecan tree on a high embankment" (510), itself an image of the cross.

We read (or enact) the ending aloud in class and I ask my students: is the story iconophilic or iconoclastic? Some years ago, the students would surprise me by their divided interpretations. The answer seemed easy: surely the author described by Larry Cunningham as "the most articulate exponent of [a] sacramental view of the world in our century" (141) will give the iconophile the upper hand. If Parker emerges as a mediating image of Christ, isn't Sarah Ruth's iconoclasm wrong-headed or worse? At first consideration, this seems to be O'Connor's intent. Nine days before her death she wrote to one of her closest friends and explained what another friend had meant when she said that O'Connor "had succeeded in dramatizing a heresy" (593) in her story: "No Caroline didn't mean the tattoos were the heresy. Sarah Ruth was the heretic—the notion that you can worship in pure spirit" (594). In fact, however, O'Connor's avowed intention was not to dramatize a heresy: "Well not in those terms did I set out but only thinking that the spirit moveth where it listeth" (593).

Indeed. For as with any classic story, "Parker's Back" suggests complexity, neither univocally iconophilic or iconoclastic, but, paradoxically, both. It affirms both the routes of manifestation and proclamation. To see how, we must return to O.E. Parker banging on the door, demanding to be let into his home:

'It's me, old O.E., I'm back. You ain't afraid of me.'

'Who's there?' the same unfeeling voice said.

Parker turned his head as if he expected someone behind him to give him the answer. The sky had lightened slightly and there were two or three streaks of yellow floating above the horizon. Then as he stood there, a tree of light burst over the skyline.

Parker fell back against the door as if he had been pinned there by a lance.

'Who's there?' the voice from inside said and there was a quality about it now that seemed final. The knob rattled and the voice said peremptorily, 'Who's there, I ast you?'


Parker bent down and put his mouth near the stuffed keyhole. 'Obidiah,' he whispered and all at once he felt the light pouring through him, turning his spider web soul into a perfect arabesque of colors, a garden of trees and birds and beasts.

'Obidiah Elihue!' he whispered.

The door opened and he stumbled in. (528)

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Sarah Ruth, suspicious of images, insists that her husband proclaim the words of his name: "Obidiah," the minor prophet whose book is the shortest in the Hebrew Bible, and "Elihue," who speaks to Job about the meaning of suffering, whose "speeches serve to prepare dramatically, psychologically, and even theologically for the intervention of the Lord" (NRSV, Job, n. 32.1-37.24), and who proclaims of God: "He delivers the afflicted by their affliction, and opens their ear by adversity" (36:15). By accepting and uttering the prophetically resonant words of his name, Parker is finally—graciously, surprisingly—granted his restless heart's desire: spiritual integration, harmony of personhood, "a perfect arabesque." The route of proclamation becomes, itself, a route of manifestation. And the epiphanic, sacramental moment of wholeness prepares Parker, "dramatically, psychologically, even theologically" for the Christ-like passion he is about to suffer.

Thus the spirit of O'Connor's story moves us to reject any too-neat division between the two Johns. Her narrative weaves disparate doctrines into "a perfect arabesque." Or better: she unites both routes, with their horizontal and vertical lines, into the cross. Crucial to Parker's prosaic pilgrimage are both the route of manifestation and the route of proclamation. Both prove vital in his lived experience of burgeoning faith. So too in ours. 

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facing failure, finding faith

Fredrick Barton

I remember vividly the elation of one of my oldest female friends when Bill Clinton was elected president in 1992. She liked Bill, and she was an even bigger fan of Hillary. She liked the modern nature of their marriage, that both husband and wife worked but still managed to be such obviously committed parents to their daughter. And my friend really liked that the Clintons considered Bill's political career a partnership. Most of all, my friend liked the fact that people of our generation, people who had come of age in the late 1960s and early 1970s, had now risen to the highest level of national leadership. My friend was a little more taken with the Clintons personally than was I, but I largely shared her optimism. Bill and Hillary had indeed been forged in the same fires of civil rights and Vietnam, had made their marriage in the midst of an emerging women's movement. They had mourned the deaths of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, and they had worked for George McGovern, just like I had. These were people with whom I had things in common, people for the most part I presumed I could count on to approach issues as I and so many members of my generation would. Today, however, more than five years into Bill Clinton's presidency, I am less confident about sharing attitudes central to his nature. And this has little to do with what I have learned about the infamous nature of his alleged sexual habits. Rather, it has to do with what I have learned about myself.

Twenty years ago now I discovered my capacity for naivete. I was raised the son of a Southern Baptist minister. Ours was a teetotaling family and a teetotaling religion. My parents did not teach me that the consumption of alcohol was a sin. They laughed at the old Baptist canard that the wine Jesus drank was actually grape juice, explaining instead that the lack of refrig-

eration in Biblical times required the consumption of wine because grape juice would spoil. They advocated abstinence from alcoholic beverages, they assured me, because it was a sound health practice. And since they were my parents, I believed them. Moreover, I believed that the families of all the Baptist boys and girls with whom I went to Sunday School were teetotalers just like we were. And I believed that fact until I was thirty years old, long after my Lutheran classmates at Valparaiso had introduced me to the pleasures of a cold beer. In the late 1970s, however, while in graduate school at UCLA, I became friends with a fellow student from Alabama. He too was raised a Southern Baptist, and just like me, with his family he attended worship services twice on Sunday and once on Wednesday night. He shared these details with me as we were drinking margaritas at El Cholo, our favorite place in Los Angeles. I laughed that two Southern teetotalers like ourselves had developed such a fondness for tequila and lime juice. But he responded that his family had never practiced the Baptist prohibition on alcohol consumption, nor had any of the other families with whom he went to church. He presumed that genuine abstinence was practiced only by the clergy, and so his family had an emergency hiding place for their liquor where it could be quickly put out of sight should the preacher come to call.

I thought all my naivete had been exposed that night. But it hadn't, not by a longshot. Far more was exposed in the months after my father's death last year when my mother revealed that all through my childhood he regularly drank at social gatherings with his other friends in the Baptist ministry. But none of these men (with the exception of that mighty iconoclast Will Campbell, who never ratted them out) ever admitted publically even to their own children

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that they liked a glass of wine or beer. Mine certainly didn't, anyway. And as I talked with my mother about my lost father, I felt a profound sense of being the village idiot, the only one who believed that people meant what they professed to mean. But my conversations with my mother were far more unsettling than that. For she also revealed my father's long record of sexual indiscretion, dating back to the early days of their marriage. Yes, I was shocked. But I had been shocked before, to learn of the dalliances of Bill Clinton's hero, John Kennedy, or those of mine, Martin Luther King. Now, the list of unfaithful husbands included my own father. And my sense of shock was dwarfed by my sense of foolishness for believing that people adhere to the principles they espouse.

I had experienced this sense of foolishness previously. When I was a student at Valparaiso, I underwent a fairly common crisis of faith and personal identity. By the time I was graduating from college, the non-violent idealism of Martin Luther King had given way to the militarism of the black power movement and the armed revolutionary rhetoric of the Black Panthers. The natural patriotism of my Southern rearing had been eroded by the disastrous politics of an illegal war drowned in the blood of atrocities like those at Mai Lai. But then, as I joined the throng of young Americans in anti-war activism, I found myself confronted with people who advocated violence in the name of peace. This inconsistency did not transform me from dove into hawk, but it did give birth to a disillusionment that I'm not sure I've ever overcome. I reflect on these things, my foolishness and my disillusionment, as I reflect on two prominent films that have arrived on movie screens this spring.

fighting the power

I was a senior at Valparaiso when America's disastrous intervention in Vietnam reached its crisis point. Richard Nixon ran for the presidency in 1968 as a peace candidate with a secret plan to bring the war to a speedy conclusion, but in May of 1970 he ordered U.S. troops into Cambodia. The war was widening, not winding down. Our nation's campuses, hotbeds of anti-war activism for a half decade, exploded. The rallying cry of young people across the country became, "No more business as usual. Shut down everything." But instead of the general strike we wanted as a tool to end the war, we got soldiers on campus. And shortly, demonstrating students were being gunned

down at Kent State and Jackson State. Student leaders at Valparaiso asked for a moratorium on classes, to match the moratoria that had been called at campuses from Princeton to Stanford. When school officials resisted, privately citing concerns about the reaction of our conservative alumni, we called a rally and talked openly of organizing a sit-in demonstration to occupy the administration building.

And then for many of us the world changed. While we talked, someone set Kinsey Hall on fire, and the conflagration spread to Bogart Hall next door, burning both to useless shells. Musical instruments, works of art, several personal libraries and at least one copy of a doctoral dissertation-in-progress were among the many casualties. A nightwatchman who was inside the building barely escaped with his life. I had been among the speakers at the rally who urged all our actions to be non-violent, even non-violent against property. But because I had been a speaker at the rally, I had the police at my door the next morning. I was innocent of any crime, but I was threatened with charges of arson, inciting to riot and conspiracy. I have never been so scared. And I have never forgotten the grilling I endured that day. This week I recall that episode with particular vividness because I have just seen Bruno Barreto's somber and insightful *Four Days in September*.

Set in Rio de Janeiro in 1969 and based on real events, *Four Days in September* is the story of a student leader who is harassed for making speeches against his totalitarian government. An aspiring young journalist, Fernando (Pedro Cardoso) lives in a far worse world than the one I lived in during the same years. Brazil's military junta has suspended civil rights and abolished freedom of the press. When police begin to arrest the leaders of student street demonstrations, Fernando and his friend Cesar (Selton Mello), a seminarian, decide to join an underground revolutionary group, the MR-8, dedicated to the restoration of democracy. Almost immediately, however, these two young idealists come to recognize the danger and the impotence of their situation. MR-8's first action is to rob a bank (think Symbionese Liberation Army and Patty "Tanya" Hearst). Cesar is wounded, captured and tortured. And because the junta controls the media, the country doesn't even know that MR-8 exists. In frustration, Fernando proposes a far more daring operation: the kidnapping of Charles Burke Elbrick (Alan Arkin), the American ambassador.

To execute this plan, the MR-8 are joined by two seasoned revolutionaries from Sao Paulo, Toledo (Nelson Dantas), a veteran of the Spanish Civil War, and Jonas (Matheus Nachtgaele), a young firebrand who instantly declares himself commander of the unit and threatens to kill anyone who refuses to obey his every order. Just as we saw in Ken Loach's *Land and Freedom* and Warren Beatty's *Reds*, the revolutionary cell quickly embraces the notion that the goal of democracy cannot be pursued via democratic means. Under Jonas' leadership the ambassador is kidnapped, and the revolutionaries warn the government that they will kill him if a group of political prisoners, including Cesar, are not released within 48 hours. And so we see the swiftness of Fernando's descent from fervent spokesman for freedom to bankrobber and prospective murderer. The especial insanity of the MR-8's plan is revealed when Ambassador Elbrick turns out to be a man of profound decency, a liberal who opposes the war in Vietnam and believes that the American government should withdraw recognition from all countries that have overthrown democracy. As the clock ticks toward the 48-hour deadline, Fernando knows all too well that he has summoned a circumstance by which he must murder an innocent man who is actually his ideological ally. Meanwhile, Elbrick tries to conduct himself in a way that sustains his dignity even as his life hangs in the balance on a scale weighing forces completely beyond his control.

It would seem, then, that all our sympathies would lie with those opposed to the MR-8, namely the state security forces trying to locate the revolutionaries' hideout. But those very security forces are the men conducting a campaign of torture against opponents of the junta, opponents that include Fernando's friend, Cesar. In this way Barreto achieves the magnificent effect of making us feel two ways at once. We don't want the security forces to capture Fernando and the other members of the MR-8 whom we understand to be merely misguided. But we certainly don't want the violent and pitiless Jonas to force (as he's pledged) Fernando to kill Elbrick. Where's the way out?

I can nitpick at a handful of details in this film. The whole structure of the MR-8 remains frustratingly unclear. It seems to exist prior to Fernando's involvement, but no superstructure is ever made manifest. Toledo and Jonas make their sudden appearance, but sent by whom we never learn, and they make clear from the outset

that they are *not* members of something so amateurish as MR-8. Later, the sequence in which Fernando's lovely, sad-eyed comrade, Renee (Claudia Abreu), seduces the head of Elbrick's security unit doesn't really wash. That she could actually get him into bed as detailed seems unlikely enough; that she could get him to reveal useful information seems purely preposterous. Near the conclusion, once the location of the ambassador has been ascertained by police, the actions of both the revolutionaries and state security officials seem inauthentic, too calm by the former, too casual by the latter.

But on the whole, this is a film I admire a great deal. Throughout, it displays a tremendous humanity. It disapproves of the methods of the MR-8 without ever condemning its young membership. Comparably, it condemns the tactics of the state police without losing sight of the humanity of its officers. In a particularly insightful moment, the picture allows a security official to explain why torture is unavoidable. His explanation is all the more chilling because of the sense it makes within the context of his objectives. Thus, he can feel bad about what he does, even as he defends it as necessary.

Elsewhere, *Four Days in September* demonstrates how careful we must be not to let our ideals cannibalize themselves. In America, some who started out as non-violent opponents of the war in Vietnam drifted into the Weathermen who staged the notorious "Days of Rage" or joined other organizations that blew up research facilities or burned two buildings on the Valparaiso campus. In Brazil, as elsewhere, it led people to countenance murder as a political tool. *Four Days in September* also illustrates how personal agendas inevitably influence the actions of organizations, even those organizations ostensibly committed to something as noble as overthrowing an illegal, oppressive government. There's nothing ideological about Jonas' dislike of Fernando; it's purely personal. And as Trotsky learned in the aftermath of Stalin's ascent, it's dangerous to become the enemy of a man who has already convinced himself that killing is acceptable.

In the end, this picture has the good sense to realize that it is wrestling with problems to which there are no easy answers. We may come to care about the individual members of the MR-8, but they are no heroes. Still, the ruthless government they oppose is most certainly villainous. The path taken by the MR-8 is the wrong one. It targets innocent people. And such

terrorism simply does not work. What was achieved by blowing up the Pan American jet over Scotland? Or holding Americans hostage in Iran? What has been accomplished by the countless bombs of the IRA? Barreto makes the ultimate pointlessness of such violence absolutely clear, even as he sympathizes with the ultimate objectives of the MR-8. In the end, as has been repeated by myriad revolutionary organizations elsewhere since, the MR-8 is reduced to trying to gain freedom for their own incarcerated membership, members captured in earlier terrorist operations, some, of course, staged expressly in hopes of freeing still other captives. It's a vicious cycle leading exactly nowhere. Barreto doesn't make clear why the junta finally falls. But two decades later it does, just as the Soviet Union fell, along with its iron-curtain allies in eastern Europe. And terrorism plays no part whatsoever. Those whose frustration has ever led them to contemplate violence ought ponder the desperate admission of Maria (Fernanda Torres), the MR-8's original leader, that she would prefer to live in jail rather than die for her revolutionary cause. For those of us blessed to reside in a country with a more entrenched commitment to civil liberty, those who have been falsely accused and those who haven't, it is imperative that we recognize how fragile our institutions and freedoms can prove. Our best protection against terrorism is an unwavering commitment to justice.

feeling the pain

The issue of ends and means is raised in a different way in Mike Nichols' *Primary Colors*, the story of a presidential candidate fighting scandals on his march to the Oval Office. Based on Joe Klein's novel (officially authored by "Anonymous"), *Primary Colors* tracks the efforts of a relatively obscure Southern governor named Jack Stanton (John Travolta) to capture the 1992 Democratic presidential nomination. The story is told through the eyes of a young black political strategist named Henry Burton (Adrian Lester) who surprises even himself when he agrees to join the Stanton campaign. Burton is a seasoned political professional, but he aches to believe in something the way his famed civil-rights-leader grandfather did, and he decides to place his faith in Jack Stanton and Stanton's attractive, no-nonsense wife Susan (Emma Thompson). Stanton is a man unafraid of his own emotions. He cares about the plight of the common American, the factory laborer who has

lost his job, the single mother struggling to make ends meet on a small salary, the fast food worker trying to scrape by on minimum wage, the black barbecue cook trying to raise a decent family in the trailer behind his shack, the functional illiterate owning up to his disability and attending adult reading classes. And Burton is moved by Stanton's obvious and genuine caring.

Unfortunately, Stanton's gifts do not include that of self-control. He is brilliant and charismatic, a hard man not to like. But in many ways he's like a precocious junior high school student, smart but still childish. Stanton whines when he can't get cable TV and smashes things when he can't get his way. Most of all, he's like a horny teenager. His record of extramarital liaisons is so vast, his longtime political associate Libby Holden (Kathy Bates) has been driven to the point of despair. Now, just as Stanton begins to rise in the polls, Susan's former hairdresser Cashmere McLeod (Gia Carides) comes forward to claim that she had a long-term affair with Stanton and has taped conversations to document their relationship. Later on, damaging rumors begin to circulate that Stanton has fathered a child by an unwed black teenager.

Burton is disappointed to learn that Stanton is such a faithless husband (who seems to love his longsuffering wife even as he routinely cheats on her), but Burton's real crisis about working for Stanton doesn't come until he sees what Stanton will do when he's backed into a corner, how for all his protestations about running a positive campaign, he's willing to go negative when necessary. Worse, perhaps, Burton is forced to witness how quickly Susan and Jack both can fashion intellectual defenses. They don't invoke the phrase, but they both argue that the ends justify the means.

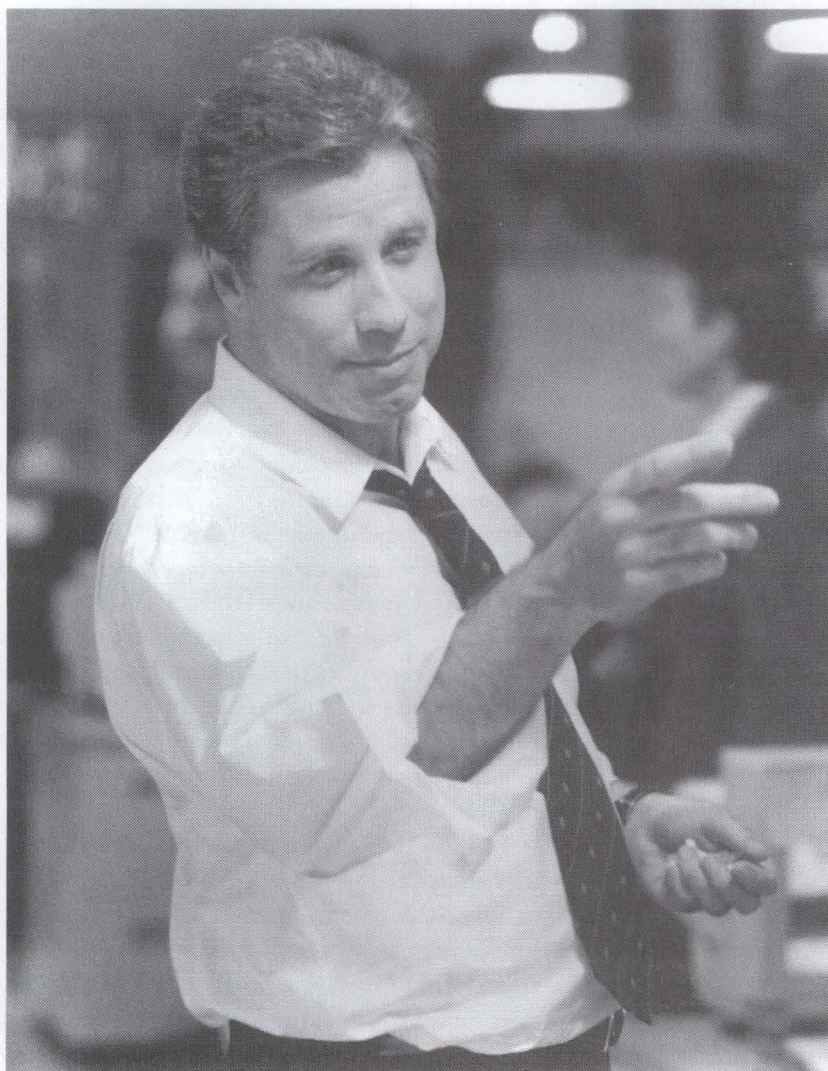
It's unfortunate that Jack and Susan Stanton are so obviously based on Bill and Hillary Clinton, that Billy Bob Thornton's Richard Jemmons is James Carville, that Cashmere McLeod is Gennifer Flowers and so forth, for these connections to a real President still besieged with sex scandals (even in the aftermath of a federal judge's dismissal of the Paula Jones lawsuit) distract us from the more probing things this picture wants to contemplate about the American political process. The film obviously condemns the smear tactics that are now commonplace in campaigns from dog catcher to president. It raises serious questions about a political ethic that places victory above all else, above such seemingly higher priorities as hon-

esty and fairness. And the picture worries about the health of a political system that has become so ruthless as to intimidate those without a white-hot ego-need to be in the spotlight, a political system that by its very operation may drive away those far better able to lead than those from among whom we finally have to choose.

Primary Colors is successful purely as entertainment. Elaine May's script is often howlingly funny. Some scenes are mostly throw-aways, like the one in which Stanton makes a guest appearance on a Florida talk show called *Schmooze with Jews* or another in which an attempt to talk seriously with Susan about Jack's womanizing breaks down into ridiculous confusion over a metaphor about being charged by a wild boar while out hunting doves. Other moments of comedy are more revealing, such as the scene where Stanton, Jemmons and other aides sit around drunkenly discussing their mothers

while an impervious Susan tries to fashion strategy with Burton. When Burton wants to incorporate Stanton into the policy session, Susan observes that "Jack will be in that mommation for the rest of the night." We laugh, but all the while we see both Jack's astonishing capacity for empathy and Susan's relentless political focus and clear-headed grasp of her husband's nature.

And, of course, it's fun to think how much we're seeing inside the Clintons' relationship. Travolta's performance is practically an impersonation of our current president. It's a very savvy impersonation because it manages to personalize what we think we know about the public figure, a man so many of us find immensely likable and infuriatingly irresponsible. Thompson's work isn't quite so closely modeled on the public Hillary. The two don't look or sound the same. But Thompson does most certainly render Hillary's reputation for political



John Travolta as Jack Stanton in Mike Nichols' film *Primary Colors*, a Universal Pictures and Mutual Film Company presentation. Photo© Universal Studios, Inc. Photo by Francois Duhamel

toughness and capacity for recovering from her husband's endless series (alleged anyway) of infidelities.

The standout performance is given here, though, by Kathy Bates. Her Libby Holden is the film's quirky but ferocious conscience. Sexual license may be disgusting, but it's not a fatal flaw in Libby's eyes. Libby stands ready to forgive almost anything save trampling on the ideals of human decency that she presumes to have shared with the Stantons since their youthful work together in the 1972 McGovern campaign. It is Libby who recognizes how Jack's indiscretions have caused a lesion on Susan's soul, how Jack's ambition has clouded his view of why he went into politics in the first place, and how together they have come to see victory as the only way of justifying themselves, victory that must be obtained at whatever cost. Libby is coarse, foul-mouthed, hard-nosed and willing to play rough. But as the film goes along we come to see that she stands for something whereas, she concludes, the Stantons finally stand only for themselves. In this regard the film seems to veer abruptly away from its own implications. Just as Libby seems to suggest that the Stantons have lost their way (a premise with which the book ends), May's script reintroduces the plausibility of Jack's argument that politics requires compromise and that great accomplishments require the power to act. Thus the film closes with an exertion of Jack Stanton's compelling personality, the concession by Henry Burton that his boss may be right, and a concerted attitude of hope. The Clintons will be pleased by this at least.

Well produced and enjoyable as this picture is, its end leaves me profoundly uncomfortable, not because I'm Clinton hater—I'm not at all—but because it finally seems to accept the Stantons' arguments that in today's climate of dirty politics you have to be willing to get down in the mud if you seriously want to win, and that to pursue worthwhile objectives you must first win. The end of winning, therefore, justifies the means of dirty tactics. Mike Nichols no doubt sees such an attitude as realistic. And I well remember that Jimmy Carter (a man I admire rather more than Bill Clinton) told friends when he ran for governor of Georgia, "Watch what I do when I'm elected, not what I say to get elected."

Until late in the 20th century, Americans were in the habit of idealizing the men they elected President. George Washington was the "father

of our country," a man who "could not tell a lie." Thomas Jefferson believed in "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Abraham Lincoln was "the great emancipator." And so on. The press was a conscious collaborator in the establishment and maintenance of presidential myth. They willfully kept from the nation that Franklin Roosevelt was confined to a wheelchair and that John Kennedy brought call girls into the White House. Historians long knew the foibles of the men who led the nation, that Virginians Washington and Jefferson never escaped the taint of slaveholding, that Lincoln suffered frightful bouts of depression, that Woodrow Wilson continued to hold office after becoming almost completely incapacitated, that Roosevelt and Kennedy were womanizers. But until the age of CNN, the average man remained ignorant of the baser natures of his presidential heroes. Today we are limited in what we know about our Presidents only by the revelations that the media will make tomorrow.

In *All the King's Men*, Robert Penn Warren says "There is one thing man cannot know. He can't know whether knowledge will save him or kill him." I have long been fascinated with that observation. Would we be better off not knowing of our heroes' sins? Does the knowledge of their failed example weaken the resolve of the rest of us to strive for virtue? I have certainly thought I might be better off not knowing the extent to which my father was unfaithful to the rules he proclaimed from the pulpit and by which he taught me to live. But just as I am about to embrace the blessedness of ignorance, I slam up against that other of Penn Warren's observations: "The end of man is to know." The knowledge we have already cannot be erased. Our heroes stand before us naked in their evident hypocrisy. And we will not go back to a time when the reporters of CNN don't tell us more than we want to know about those who would be president. So does that mean Jack and Susan Stanton are right: Nasty as it is, the ends do justify the means?

I find my answer in another favorite text, in the answer Joseph Heller provides at the end of *Catch-22* when Yossarian faces the logic that he can only save himself from the evil machinations of Colonels Cathcart and Korn by endorsing the machinations of Cathcart and Korn. "It's a way to save yourself," Yossarian's friend Major Danby proposes. "It's a way to lose myself," Yossarian responds. Yossarian seems faced with two unacceptable choices. So he refuses to

choose. He invents a third way. He changes the rules. He acts not realistically but religiously. He strikes out on a course paved purely by faith.

I have already confessed my naivete. And now I embrace it. If I were *realistic* I would know what is true and concede to it. But I would rather have *faith* in what ought to be true. And so instead of recognizing that there's dirty laundry in everybody's closet, I *believe* that a candidate of virtue and principle exists and that America would relish, for instance, electing such a person

President. We can know the past. But we can make the future. And in the future I would make, we would hold our public officials and the processes by which they come office to the highest standard. It's a slippery slope if we don't. For once we have conceded that the ends justify the means, we will find those willing to employ means we think that we would not. And the nature of the mud we have to wallow in will grow filthier still.

And that's when we're lost indeed. ♣

CHOICES

What is better?

A cobbler or a pie?

A state trooper speaks for cobbler
to a traveler whom he has stopped
for speeding, "This is cobbler country."

The driver claims to be a pie seeker
now in Oklahoma, but a few days ago
eating a pecan pie in Kentucky.

The female voice remembers
a lemon pie in Pennsylvania
with bits of rind and pulp
from Lemons picked in New Orleans,
a gift. The ticket, he says,
is a warning—an oven bell.

She drives over the hill
wondering about a pie
without crust on its bottom.

What is better?

Thomas Bonner, Jr.

Letters from the Front

clothes make the man of cloth

Tom C. Willadsen

*Tom Willadsen tends
a flock in
suburban
Baltimore, where
he is
the image of
a man of the cloth.
He regularly
writes this column
for The Cresset.*

Pentecost—that holiday celebrating the gathering of the first fruits. The day when the Church celebrates its birthday. The day when we look back to Peter’s giving the first Christian sermon in history with the immortal words: “These guys aren’t drunk! It’s only nine in the morning!” (Tom’s Modern Paraphrase) We rejoice at the gift of the Holy Spirit coming in tongues of fire on different people that day in Jerusalem when the Church was born. This year on Pentecost my congregation will receive 11 Confirmation students into full membership. Pentecost is a great day in the life of the Church and my congregation, but all I can think about is, “I get to wear my red stole!”

Seven years ago when I was ordained *the* gift to give young Presbyterian ministers was a stole from Guatemala. I received two, one red and the other purple. I also received a black Geneva robe and a white alb. I didn’t know anything about the traditions surrounding robes, albs and stoles. My seminary didn’t cover anything as mundane and practical as what to wear and when to wear it. Even though I didn’t know what they signified, I couldn’t wait to wear them. I knew my congregation would ooh and ah over the bright colors and interesting patterns. But, alas, I was ordained in June, so I couldn’t wear one of my stoles until Advent, when the liturgical color would be purple. I soon learned that I could wear my red stole only on Pentecost, though it was also appropriate for ordinations and installations. In a good year I get to wear my red stole twice.

My limited wardrobe was a problem when I performed weddings. Since neither purple nor red is an appropriate color for a minister to wear at a wedding I would borrow a green stole from

my colleague who was almost a foot taller than I. The color was right, but I felt like I was playing dress up. I nearly tripped over that stole several times. Within a few months a friend heard of my plight and bought me a new stole for a wedding, a nice blue Guatemalan stole. Then a woman from my church went on a Presbytery mission trip to Guatemala and brought back (you’re way ahead of me!) a green Guatemalan stole! I now have all the major seasons in the church year covered colorfully, but with very little variety.

One thing about Guatemalan stoles is they have a Chi-Rho symbol up near the shoulder. The symbol looks like a capital P with a crossbar toward the bottom. One Sunday I put the stole on backwards, and it drove at least one person in my congregation crazy. Immediately after the service she charged up to me and said, “I can’t stand this, your P has been backwards all morning!” “I can’t figure that out Dena,” I said. “I checked it in the bathroom mirror right before the service.” After that I’ve always asked someone, “Is my P straight?” My question is usually greeted by nervous giggles or suggestions that I see a urologist.

I thought it would be interesting to do a small survey of ministers to find out what they wear and why. I hasten to say that I do not have a representative sample. I sent surveys to ministers who I could count on to reply. I found that what we wear to lead worship is something most of us do not think about much. And it is certainly pretty far down on most ministers’ list of worries, as this comment from The Reverend Amy Miracle of Denver, CO indicates, “I did a wedding where everything went horribly wrong but I don’t remember fashion having any particular role that day. The flower girl threw up on the

carpet, not my robe.”

After reviewing the responses to my survey, I reached three conclusions: clothing choices are fairly uniform across denominational lines; women and men have very different concerns regarding what to wear; and there is deep division regarding the wearing of clerical collars.

Most ministers reported that they wear robes and stoles when leading worship. The Reverend Michael Mayor, an Episcopal priest from Towson, MD says, “When worship is non-eucharistic I wear a cassock, surplice, tippet and academic hood. When it is a celebration of the Holy Eucharist I wear alb and stole.” Father Dale Ehrman, O.S.C. of Shoreview, MN says, “Leading worship on Sunday is always alb, stole and chasuble. This is the prescribed attire.” The Reverend Carl Washington, Sr., a Baptist minister from Baltimore, MD says, “I wear a clerical collar and robe each Sunday. Since I have several clerical robes of various colors, I have no problem deciding what to wear.” Fellow Presbyterian Tom Speers, a pastor in Dickeyville, MD writes, “I wear a black cassock with tabs and a stole. I’ve also got a colorful cassock made of cloth from Jerusalem that I only wear a couple of times a year.” The Reverend Al Thompson, a pastor in the United Church of Christ in Mankato, MN reports, “For worship, I wear a white cassock alb, with rope cincture, pectoral cross, and stole in appropriate color for the liturgical season.”

Personally, I wear a black robe every Sunday except Easter, when I wear a white alb. Once in a while, when the furnace isn’t working I wear my alb because it keeps me a little warmer. On those mornings I get to make one of my favorite pulpit announcements: Many are cold, but few are frozen.

The women who responded to the survey revealed a set of problems that men simply do not face. The Reverend Amy Schacht of Glen Burnie, MD said her Sunday morning begins this way, “Regardless, I always hope (pray?) that somewhere in my dresser I can find a pair of run free hose.” After that ordeal, she faces another question. “I always have a debate over shoes: comfortable and flat (thereby rendering me shorter at the pulpit and harder to see) or heels, which make me taller, but less stable when I preach.” Amy Miracle faces still another

problem: “In the summer time we do not wear robes because of the heat. I have a very limited number of outfits I can wear because of the wireless microphone we use—clearly designed for a male wardrobe.”

The most divisive issue my survey revealed was over clerical collars. The wearing of clerical collars goes back to medieval times, when everyone wore a cassock. Clergy began wearing a two-inch band of linen, folded in half, as a collar. This band made clergy stand out from other professions; it is “the cloth.” Perhaps the clergy’s choice of this kind of collar was reminiscent of Biblical times when Roman slaves wore similar collars. A minister wore this collar to symbolize that he was “a slave for Christ.”

Al Thompson wears “a black or white tab-collar shirt for all worship services, and for hospital and nursing home visits, and other public gatherings when identification as a clergy person facilitates the purpose of the gathering (i.e. public demonstrations).” The Reverend Steve Minnema, my former colleague in Mankato, MN writes, “I recently wore a clerical collar for the first time in my life as an aid for getting \$11,500 worth of locks past customs in Haiti. It worked too since, in the middle of an argument between two gatekeepers about whether I should be admitted to a secure area, I heard one say to another, “Can’t you see he’s a clergyman?”

The down side of wearing a clerical collar was described by Tom Speers: “Wear a round collar and there is no telling who will corner you!” The summer I worked as a hospital chaplain I borrowed a clerical shirt a few days for my rounds, just to see what would happen. Strangers smiled at me warmly. I realized that I had developed a nervous habit of straightening my tie between my thumb and forefinger—a habit that made no sense without a tie! And I heard two comments only on the days when I wore the clerical shirt: “Black is *your* color,” and “You’re so young!” neither of which made me eager to ever wear a clerical collar again. The Reverend Jim Hawkins, a United Methodist pastor in Smyrna, DE reports, “I purposely do *not* own a clergy shirt. When I am in public, I want people to realize that Christians are regular people, who wear regular clothes, who have regular joys and struggles. What I wear is a

proclamation, however subtle, that Christians (even pastors) are ordinary people who have accepted God's extraordinary love."

I do not expect clergy ever to reach a consensus on wearing clerical collars. On the one hand, a collar can open doors for minister. On the other, they do set us apart from the rest of society in a way that may not be good for the Church. The only occasion I could see that would warrant my wearing a clerical collar is to persuade the Orioles to come through with my clergy pass to their games as they have for the past two seasons. The door to Camden Yards is one I wouldn't mind opening.

As I write this Easter approaches. I will

wear my white alb, struggle not to constrict myself with the cincture and endure the "Pastor's wearing his jammies" comments. I'm looking forward to wearing a new stole. Its colors are almost shockingly bright; its pattern is geometric; and it comes from. . .Ghana! Last summer it was my pleasure to perform the wedding of two new members to my church, both of whom grew up in Ghana. The deal was I'd do the wedding if they got me a colorful stole. Thelma and Kwamena really came through for me! Still, I wonder if the congregation will recognize me without a Guatemalan stole. We clergy can get stuck pretty easily in fashion ruts, you know. ✦

"SILENCE CAN, ACCORDING TO CIRCUMSTANCES, SPEAK."

Hallmark. Racks, plaques. Know I should have written.
Write soon. Sorry I hurt you. Second-hand darns on
tattered friendships. Silence: read, I don't mean
it; read, please be patient; read, you just wait.

On the porch, facing the sun's slow setting.
Last rays fan out, bud, bloom, ripen, contract.
Together strolling; eyes spy a new-dewed
web. You see? Silence, companionate, eloquent.

Side by side, silence speaks of communion,
resonance, of kindred minds. Can distant
silence be composed. . .content. . .unhurried. . .
secure, expectant, though the world won't shrink?

Silence grown in lucid stillness does not
insist on its own way. Holding our peace
we hark to the Still Point beyond the world;
no longer bound to speak we hush our hearts.

Caroline J. Simon

The Nation

Clinton and the two kingdoms

Robert Benne

Luther was reputed to have said: "I would rather be ruled by a wise Turk than a stupid Christian." (It is difficult to cite this statement precisely because it is probably apocryphal.) Could we paraphrase his assertion today thusly: "It is better to be served politically by a skilled but roguish Clinton than by an inept but upright predecessor or successor"? But a serious question is now being put to us: at what point would his roguishness become egregious enough to replace him with another President? Is his private life in any serious way relevant to his public responsibilities?

The Lutheran tradition tends to be unsentimental about political life. It has a hard-edged appreciation for competence in every calling, but especially the political calling, because such high stakes depend on that competence. As Luther's adage also indicates, Lutherans distinguish between virtues applicable to the private life and those to the public. The "wise Turk" no doubt refers to the political virtues of good judgment, decisiveness, courage and prudence. . . the strengths of leadership. The "stupid Christian" most likely refers to a person of high religious and moral character—faithful, compassionate, observant of religious and moral duties—but who lacks the political virtues.

Further, Lutherans have been realistic, if at times cynical, in their assessment of political life. Humans are sinful creatures who can be expected to exercise that sin in all walks of human life. They are opportunistic and self-serving. As persons and groups gather more power to themselves, they as sinners often abuse it. Then, too, politics is about coercion since humans are recalcitrant in their sin. God uses the coercive power of even sinful leaders to maintain order and justice in a fallen world.

These insights are relevant to the great struggles of the Clinton presidency. There is

little doubt about the President's political skills. He is persuasive, articulate, flexible, resilient, shrewd and successful. He has twice gotten elected to the highest office in the land by moving the Democratic Party to the center and by co-opting the Republicans' programs. Further, he has presided over a lengthy economic expansion and avoided major foreign policy disasters. His approval ratings reflect his prowess. While not admired for the depth or strength of his commitment to principle, he is respected for his unerring sense of "what will fly." So Clinton resembles the "wise Turk" in many ways.

But rather than being able to enjoy his success, Clinton is beleaguered by charges concerning the conduct of his private life. While the more public charges surrounding Whitewater and electioneering infractions should not be underestimated, they do not seem to have the explosive power or the media allure of those having to do with sex. The latter have the capacity to end or dramatically wound his presidency.

Though this is being written before Special Counsel Starr makes public his findings, it seems clear that President Clinton had more than an avuncular relation to intern Lewinsky, and that he has enacted a pattern of sexual approaches to a number of women. Some of these approaches seem more consensual than others, but many feminists have argued that it is wrong to term any sexual relation consensual when there are such imbalances of power. Certainly many clergy, academics and businessmen have found that the consensual argument does not get very far. Where there are imbalances of power, so some feminists say, there is no such thing as consensual sex. It is inconsistent that they are not willing to apply that principle to the President, even though he supports their political agenda. (I find such feminist ideology strained; there is

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lust and sex between those of different status and power and seduction is not always carried out by the more powerful. Seduction can be a means to power. Moreover, intense sexual attraction between men and women can occur no matter what status or power they possess.)

In light of all this, would Lutheran social ethics tend to overlook the alleged indiscretions of his private life? Would the two-kingdoms approach split private from public and encourage us to ignore or downplay the sexual sins of an important and successful public figure?

I don't think so, for several reasons. First, it is clear that for Christians the two-kingdoms are related. They can be distinguished but not separated. What's more, for serious Christians the two-kingdoms are conjoined in the calling of each Christian. What is intensely private—the reception of the Gospel and the moral obligations that go with it—ought to be lived out publicly in one's calling. One's Christian calling cannot be separated into the private and the public; that is a heresy that fed into the outrages of Hitler's Germany.

While Clinton is not a Lutheran, he does claim seriously to be a Christian. So the private dimensions of his life have to be accountable to Christian morality as well as the public. If he didn't portray himself as a Christian—with his Sunday morning worship at a nearby Methodist Church—it would be easier to accept the gross violation of his marriage vows and the attendant humiliation of his wife that goes along with his sexual roving.

Further, his private transgressions have become public in several important ways. It is no secret that the media have in recent decades pried relentlessly into the private lives of public figures. While that may be lamentable, it is certainly a reality. Ironically, the "personal has become political" in ways that 60s radicals never anticipated. And since any alert person knows that that is the case, it is reckless and foolish to go on with private vices when it is quite probable that they will become public. Such recklessness doomed the political career of Gary Hart, who more or less invited the press to catch him in the act. . . which they did. Clinton has been courting the same kind of public exposure, which endangers his Presidency even as it tarnishes the role modeling the Presidency inevitably involves.

When Clinton publicly acknowledged his faults in the famous TV interviews in the early stages of his first presidential campaign, most Americans took that to mean that he was repentant and would desist from further indiscretions. It seems that he took that to mean that he could finesse as many affairs as he wished, an attitude which reveals in him not only recklessness but faulty judgment. And these two defects, recklessness and faulty judgment, have public, political implications. They can negatively affect important public decisions.

There is another very important way that his private peccadillos have become publicly relevant. Clinton has used the full resources of his White House staff, as well as other public and private agents, to mount counterattacks against the accusations focused on his private life. While other Presidents have had affairs, none of them resorted to the use of the full panoply of his support staff to mount massive counterattacks and, more ethically ambiguous, to defame the persons who have brought accusations against him.

Alexander Hamilton evidently was publicly exposed as an adulterer. But rather than use all the force of his staff to resist, he admitted to his indiscretions, pleaded that the public give him time and space to reconcile with his wife and then continued his public service. If he is guilty, why did not Clinton do such a courageous thing? With his performance ratings, he could have easily survived politically. Rather, he seems to be acting more like Richard Nixon all the time. Instead of confessing a relatively small private offense and getting through it with some damage, he is engaging in all-out counter-attacks which may involve criminal obstructions of justice. On the other hand, if he is innocent, it would have taken little courage but much common sense to have immediately made protestations of innocence.

Even given the realistic distinctions between public and private inherent in the two-kingdoms doctrine, our President seems to have separated them too sharply in his own attempt at the Christian life, has been too reckless in persisting with private indiscretions long after he should have desisted, and then reacted to the public exposure of these private failures with public resources and actions that may involve him in serious criminal offenses.✠

Books

John Davis. *The Landscape of Belief: Encountering the Holy Land in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1996. 264 pp.

Throughout the nineteenth century, missionaries, pilgrims, scientists, travel writers, and artists journeyed to the Holy Land to visit biblical sites and engage its geography, history, and scriptural heritage. While there, they created visual representations of their experience that saturated the American scene. In *The Landscape of Belief: Encountering the Holy Land in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture*, John Davis explores the production and reception of this visual record. He examines how the landscape of the Holy Land functioned as a site through which nineteenth-century Americans justified American nationalism and imperialism; asserted specific religious and ethnic identities; and reconciled religious belief with evolutionary theory and modern biblical criticism.

Beginning with John Winthrop and the Puritan colonists, Americans cultivated a typological relationship between the Holy Land and the American continent; they read American history as the fulfillment of scriptural events. The landscape of Palestine authenticated and naturalized this union of

the American present and biblical past. In Davis' magnificent exploration of its widespread, cultural implications, he treats visual representations of Palestine as "landscape[s] of the psyche" that map American attitudes and debates (5). He analyzes travel volumes, sermons, and novels (among a host of primary source materials) to trace the elasticity of the Holy Land metaphor in American art, culture, and politics throughout the nineteenth century.

In the first part of *The Landscape of Belief*, Davis documents the development of "Holy Land consciousness" in pre-twentieth century American culture. Believing that nature contained the truth of history, Americans considered the Holy Land capable of explicating biblical passages and revealing religious truths. Panoramas, dioramas, and models of the Holy Land sought to simulate the perceptual and physical experience of the landscape. By recreating the immediate experience of "being there" and providing the conceptual tools necessary to interpret the landscape, artists constructed tangible proof of religious belief. Later, photographs provided "the all-important sense of documentary verisimilitude, the unmediated 'truth' demanded by a public yearning to be persuaded" (73). Robert E. M. Bain's *Early Footsteps*

of the Man of Galilee, for example, provided the viewer with a visual tour of Christ's life, which placed the gospels within a geographical context and proved the Bible's inerrancy.

However, America's identification with the Holy Land meant that visual and textual representations of the landscape did far more than attempt to authenticate religious belief. Concurrently, Davis argues, they worked to construct national and colonial discourses. For example, William McClure Thompson's *The Land and the Book* highlighted the rural landscape of Palestine, rather than urban sites revered in the Orthodox and Catholic traditions. By underscoring his Presbyterian confidence in personal experience and stressing Christianity's status as an "open-air" religion, he subsumed Christian diversity under the controlling themes of American nationalism and Protestant hegemony (47). Bain's disdain for the actual inhabitants of the Holy Land indicated the degree to which they threatened America's potential colonization of Palestine. His photographs "purified" the landscape by ignoring the Turks, Jews, and Arab inhabitants, or denigrating their "inherent sensuality," thereby preparing and sacralizing the Holy Land for American habitation. Far from providing authentic images of

the land, therefore, visual representations promoted particular Christian, national, and colonial agendas.

Fine artists engaged the same "complex cultural topography of religious faith, scientific doubt, colonial desire, and contemporary aesthetics" in their depictions of the Holy Land (97). In Part Two of *The Landscape of Belief*, Davis examines the work of four artists who journeyed to Palestine and painted its landscape: Miner Kellogg, Edward Troye, James Fairman, and Frederic Church. In these case studies, he investigates how theological beliefs shaped modes of perception, and how different Christian sects employed the landscape spiritually and pedagogically. For example, Kellogg's Swedenborgian faith provided him with a rational approach to scripture and an intimate relationship between God, humanity, and the natural world. His paintings reconciled faith and science by visualizing a system of "correspondences," in which material objects symbolized internal, spiritual principles. One way to interpret his paintings, therefore, was to translate topographical elements through relevant, Swedenborgian "significations."

Davis' chapter on Church's Holy Land paintings exhibits the complex interaction of science, faith, aesthetics, and fame that motivated many of these artists. Following the Civil War, Church's successful landscape formula no longer guaranteed popular acclaim, and his constituency no longer shared his conservative search national and religious origins (169). Like Kellogg, his major works sought to reconcile science and faith. However, his synthesis was predicated not on a system of correspondences but on a study of "sacred geography," "the

rational study of the holy landscape with the aim of revealing the conformity of the physical and scriptural accounts" (185). Davis writes that Church's work, *Jerusalem from the Mount of Olives*, situates the viewer on the Mount of Olives, facing "Old Jerusalem." Church controls the scene, providing a panoptic perspective of the landscape and an interpretative key to the city's important sites. The radiance of the sun upon the ancient city indicates the scene is one of revelation, engaging the viewer in spiritual communion with the sacred land. Although Church's belief in the "earth [as the] ultimate agent of enlightenment" continues in *El Khasne, Petra*, this painting also indicates that revelation is never complete, that the view is always partially concealed (197). In the end, Davis suggests that Church was unable to integrate faith and science in his representations of the Holy Land, and Church's focus on ruins in his late landscapes highlights his sense of loss and resignation.

A particular American iconography of the Holy Land unites Davis' study of the popular and fine art representations of Palestine. His extensive historical research, theological and cultural specificity, and attention to the visual medium and its influence on visual perception, result in a thoughtful and comprehensive study of the complex relationship between art and religion, America and the Holy Land. *The Landscape of Belief* is a vital addition to American art scholarship that treats the visual history of American religions as a key ingredient to understanding American culture, and the landscape as a medium that engages questions about American nation identity. Davis accentuates the importance of the Holy Land as a reli-

gious and cultural symbol that helped nineteenth-century Americans negotiate dramatic changes in American life.

Kristin Schwain

Peter W. Williams. *Houses of God: Region, Religion, and Architecture in the United States*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press. 1997. 344 pp.

Peter Williams is well known for the tours of local religious architecture which he offers at annual academic meetings. *Houses of God: Region, Religion, and Architecture* reads like a continent-wide version of one of those tours. It is intelligent, well-written, and delightfully personal, and will provide a fine introduction to the subject of American religious architecture for the general reader. Historians of architecture or religion will appreciate the way Williams is able to discuss buildings knowledgeably while paying close attention to social and cultural context. The book includes discussions of the religious landscape in nearly all of the fifty states, representing the wide variety of religious experience in America past and present.

A primary contribution of the book is Williams' use of the idea of *region* to investigate architecture and religion. The seven regions Williams considers are: New England, Mid-Atlantic States, South, Old Northwest, Great Plains and Mountains, Spanish Borderlands, and the Pacific Rim. This use of region is natural for places that have a strong, distinct religious identity, such the South. It also works well, Williams shows, in places that we don't immediately think of as "religious." The "pluralistic and innov-

ative" Pacific Rim culture, for example, owes much to the blend of Evangelical, Eastern and Eastern-influenced religion that thrives there (269). And, in Southern California, Robert Schuller's Crystal Cathedral (Garden Grove, California, 1980), Forest Lawn Cemetery in Glendale, and Disneyland all share elements of modern Protestantism, therapeutic religion, and consumer culture.

Surprisingly few studies of religious architecture go beyond standard architectural history to ask questions about *why* the buildings look the way they do. This book is satisfying for its interdisciplinary qualities; one has the sense that religion is not apart from, but a part of the broader texture of American community life. Williams is as interested in clergy and parishioners as he is in architects—perhaps even more so. Such a broad approach to "religious landscape" allows Williams to include aspects of the built environment not usually considered in discussions of religious architecture: Quaker schools, nineteenth-century camp meetings, Jim Bakker's Heritage U.S.A. religious theme park, or Rosicrucian Park in San Jose, California, dedicated to the preservation of ancient Egyptian culture.

It is this broader approach to religious culture which ultimately allows Williams to use architecture to demonstrate regional identity. Consider, for example, the 1892 Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, Tennessee. At one time the largest building in the South, this red brick Gothic building has served as the Union Gospel Tabernacle (host to revivalists such as D.L. Moody and Billy Sunday), as a setting for cultural and civic events (past lecturers include William Jennings Bryan and Booker T. Washington), home for

the Grand Ole Opry from 1941 until 1974, and, since its recent restoration, as an occasional setting for Garrison Keillor's storytelling and musical revues. The history of the Ryman, argues Williams, illustrates "a distinctively regional culture, in which religious and secular motifs are hard to disentangle" (124).

One of Williams' strongest chapters is titled "The Old Northwest." Williams' discussion of the German imprint on Ohio and Indiana is especially new and enlightening (163-67). He takes the reader on "a drive from Cincinnati in the southwestern corner of Ohio to Fremont," a northcentral Ohio small agricultural center. Who *did* build all those towering, red brick, Gothic-Renaissance-Romanesque religious buildings? German Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, intent on making their presence known as they prospered in the American heartland. Midwestern patriots will enjoy reading in this chapter about familiar religious monuments so often overlooked by eastern architectural historians: the phenomenal modern religious buildings in Columbus, Indiana, for example, or the historical center of Reform Judaism in America, the extraordinary Plum Street Temple in Cincinnati (1865).

Because the book is unapologetically a synthesis of other work, it is of course strongest where the secondary work is also strong. For example, Williams' treatment of colonial Anglican Virginia or Quaker Pennsylvania reflects the excellent work of previous scholars; this scholarship is duly noted in a tremendously thorough bibliography following each chapter. Williams tends to concentrate on either second period architecture (the buildings built once set-

tlement was established) or modern buildings. He also spends most of his time on "distinctive or noteworthy" sites (as would a good tour guide) and not on the quotidian. Although Williams does at times describe prototypical, ordinary regional buildings, these are usually not illustrated; this may prove a difficulty for the reader lacking an already thorough mental encyclopedia of American churches.

Williams' timely book is a summary of what we know about the American religious landscape and a new way of looking at it. It makes the reader want to get behind the wheel of a car and roam the landscape, looking at these wonderful buildings. It is also a blueprint for the work that needs to be done on this topic. *Houses of God* is a friendly, useful, and important book to place on a shelf that is as yet far too empty.

Gretchen Buggeln

Alfred Kazin. *God and the American Writer*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1997.

W. Dale Brown. *Of Fiction and Faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B.Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997.

blessed perversities

The strange and brilliant American cultural critic, John Jay Chapman, once claimed that a college student learned more about Shakespeare's imaginative power from "aroint thee, witch," and that without knowing the source of the phrase, than from a semester course on the playwright. For Chapman, when passion and intellect marry in

words, then we have great literature. When passion and intellect come together in literary criticism, as they do in Alfred Kazin's *God and the American Writer*, then we find topmost delight. And when Kazin dares, as the best of our Jewish intellectual critics have dared—writers like the late Lionel Trilling and Irving Howe—to offer an inclusive grasp of literature and culture that takes up problematic social and moral issues in our American past and present, then our reading may prove invigorating indeed, leading us from the criticism to the textual sources and back to our own reflection.

Working mostly with the majors of our American canon from the nineteenth through the first half of the twentieth century, Kazin focuses on some twelve writers, from Hawthorne and Melville, through Whitman to Mark Twain and William Faulkner, attending to delicate but strong tensions between the imagination and religion. Kazin quickly lets us know that he is “interested not in the artist’s profession of belief but in the imagination he brings to his tale of human affairs.” Only later does he offer a more extended description of religion in discussing Faulkner: “I think of religion as the most intimate expression of the human heart, as the most secret of personal confessions, where we admit to ourselves alone our fears and our losses, our sense of holy dread and our awe before the unflagging power of the universe that regards us indeed as of ‘no account.’” Kazin’s loadstone for making his and our way through these poles of literary and religious concern is Emily Dickinson, “The most penetrating intelligence honored in this book.” Kazin continues, “God was not a convenient presence for her

to write about,” but “a property of the human mind inquiring into the infinity of relationships.” Lest the reader begin to think that Kazin severs the ties between the infinite and finite, he grounds his commentary on the poets and writers in the problems of slavery and accompanying issues of race, class, anti-Semitism and in the struggles of the emerging self for some kind of center, some ground for belief.

Especially do we find Kazin’s care in considering Harriet Beecher Stowe and the Abolitionist cause, in his representation of Abraham Lincoln’s anguished steering of the nation, under God, through the Civil War, and in the problem and belief and the fight against despair in William James, whose desire for inclusiveness and flexibility and honesty and possible affirmation mirrors Kazin’s own largeness of mind. Kazin takes us through each moving facet of his inquiry, offering us increasing provocation to consider and reconsider his authors. If I were asked, for example, for the best synoptic entry into Robert Frost’s poetry, I could think of no better chapter than Kazin’s. Although he may have claimed earlier not to be interested in the artist and his personal beliefs, because he knew Frost and his beliefs and the full range of Frost’s poetry, the chapter has a special efficacy. It is as if Kazin maintained a perpetual disinterested care for the person and his poetry, acknowledging Frost’s frightening egocentricity, his contentiousness and the pain it caused himself and others around him, his powerful insights into marriage, and his caustic struggles with belief among a people who, so to speak, hover along the shores of human experience, neither looking out far nor in deep.

What Kazin’s journey dis-

closes is the blessed perversity of these American writers. In a cultural setting where, according to Kazin, “religion is so publicly vehement, politicized, and censorious,” they kept their faith as writers.

Not that the work is flawless. Probably every specialist in any single author Kazin takes up will have reservations and counterarguments to offer on interpretation. Kazin treats T.S. Eliot through *Four Quartets*, but doesn’t touch on his drama or later criticism. For Kazin, William Faulkner’s imaginative contributions fall off sharply after *Absalom, Absalom!* And Kazin, whose criticism has helped shape the course of much of our American literature since his *On Native Grounds* (1942), finds much contemporary American writing devoid of serious belief. Thus Kazin ends his work by alluding to the Polish poet Czeslaw Milosz and to the poet’s drawing on the long European heritage of a common worship and to the poet’s own belief that a “shining point exists where all points intersect.” For Kazin, looking backwards and around, no such common American heritage exists. But perhaps there may be another part to the story.

W. Dale Brown, Professor of English at Calvin College, focuses on twelve important authors whose names, except for Frederick Buechner and Garrison Kellior, may not be known to many of us. These twelve writers, treated alphabetically in a series of interviews, from Doris Betts to Walter Wangerin, speak about their personal vision and their work. And because these writers live their lives and do their work on the softer edges between institutional Christian persuasion and their own sense of vocation as committed artists, their insights and commentary help us

understand their struggles between imagination and belief in contemporary and recent American literature. Brown covers a period from 1989 to 1996, providing each segment with an introductory photograph and listings of the author's works, patiently and thoughtfully introducing us to writers we should know more about and read as we make our ways through the nooks and crannies of ordinary life.

In his introduction to Peggy Payne, Brown summarizes what these authors have done, writing "seriously about religious matters without sounding religious." Because Brown is both transparent to his authors and interested in the sometimes complicated relationships between religion or Christianity and the arts, there is an accumulative effect on the reader. We listen attentively to Doris Betts, elder, Sunday School teacher, part-time organist in the Presbyterian church, highly productive novelist and short-story writer, and Alumni Distinguished Professor of English at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. In response to Brown's suggesting that he finds optimism in her works, she replies: "It is a kind of optimism. It's what I mean by hope. I mean not only do we survive after this life, which to me is not crucial, but it would be nice, so I have hope. But there is a hope in Christianity that comes through suffering. That does seem to me to be the message of the gospels, that on the other side of it all, in fact overarching at every moment, there is optimism, there is love, there is hope. That's the good news after all. You don't get that, or I don't get that when I listen to the

TV Evangelists, and I don't want to get it when I listen to the guy in the glass cathedral saying God Loves You. I shrink and wince: I don't want a little brass harp to hang around my wrist."

Or we hear Robert Olen Butler, winner of a Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1993 and profoundly influenced by the King James version of the Bible, describe his own writing in terms of spiritual longing: "One yearns to believe in something beyond one's self. . . We all must claim faith in something. Even those who order the world in a way that excludes faith ultimately end up having faith in that. . . Faith is a kind of premise that each of us carries around." Elizabeth Dewberry, married to Butler, speaks and writes not of her loss of faith in God but of her loss of faith in forms of the institutional church. And Clyde Edgerton rescues the writer from the stereotype of personal detachment when he speaks of his regard for the elderly in his home church: "I am struck that some of those people have read all my books and may have philosophical reasons to shun me. But they chose not to. It seems to me that the strength of those kind of people is that the concrete person stands to them solid and full of value, and whatever ideas or abstract thinking that person may be doing or may have done seems refreshingly unimportant."

In addition to the writers already mentioned, contributors include Will Campbell; Denise Giardina, at the time of the interview working on a novel about Dietrich Bonhoeffer; Robert Goldsborough, continuator of Nero Wolfe and the

detective story and an elder in a church in Chicago; John Hassler, who brings a cheerful Roman Catholic perspective to his work and who is fairly well-known in the upper Midwest. All merit the sensitive introductions Brown offers us. I have not touched on the informing visions of either Frederick Buechner or Walter Wangerin, both of whom *Cresset* readers know. And I assume that few readers or radio listeners are not familiar with Garrison Keillor, whom some refer to as the Mark Twain of the last half of the century.

What makes *Of Fiction and Faith* highly commendable is Brown's bringing to our attention the depth and breadth of resources available to readers who look for writers whose works have too often fallen between the cracks. A common theme running through these interviews is that these writers, because they may be considered "religious," are not marketed seriously by the larger secular publishing conglomerates. Because these writers are honest and enervating and superb story tellers, including in their imaginative worlds darker themes, sometimes explicit sexuality, and strong language, they cannot find a place in so-called Christian bookstores. Although each of these writers may agree with Walter Wangerin's summary comment about his writing "because the pleasure is in the doing it, not in what will happen thereafter," these writers deserve larger audiences than the dedicated ones they already have.

Warren Rubel

on poets—

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teaches philosophy at Hope College. Last spring Eerdmanns published her book, *The Disciplined Heart: Love, Destiny and Imagination*.

on reviewers—

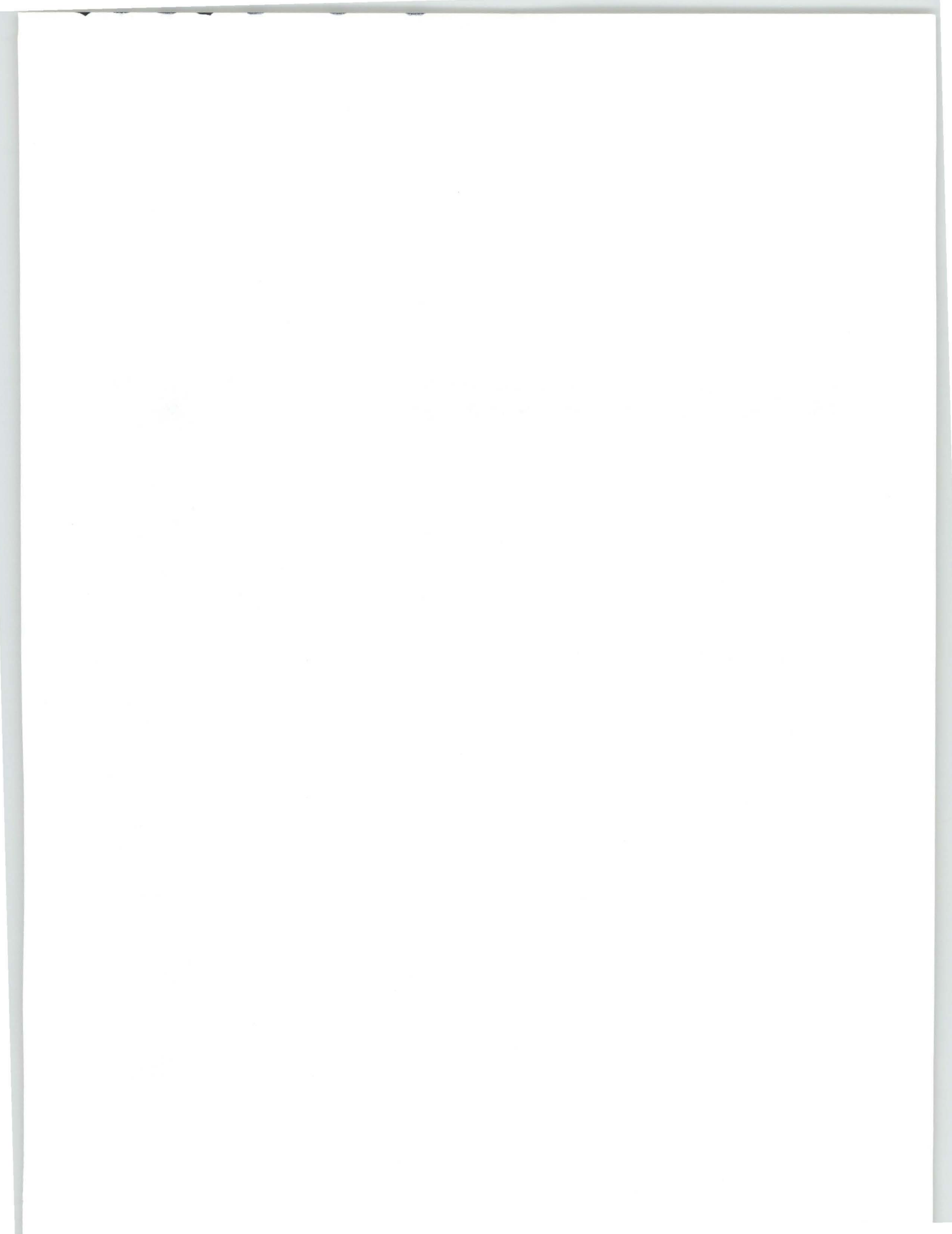
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