Eating a Miracle
Why Is There Hunger in Atlanta?
Triumph of the Swill

The Cresset

A Review of Literature, the Arts, and Public Affairs
November, 1989
the
Cresset
Valparaiso University
Valparaiso, Indiana 46383

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Back Cover: Andy Warhol, American 1931-1987. Untitled (Campbell's Onion Soup), late-1960s, lithograph, 221/250, 35 by 23 inches. School of Law Collection. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Sanford Friedman

These art works are in collections of the Valparaiso University Museum of Art. Photographs are by Jack A. Hiller and Richard H. W. Brauer.
Thought for Food

We are moving into the time of year when university life is at its most schizophrenic, when the largest gaps appear between what we think and say we are about and what we are actually about. Our courses are moving toward their conclusions, and given the way most human beings think, we intend that meaning and weight will gather as we move to the end of the course. The long papers and the final exams, the projects and presentations that are meant to represent the summation of our achievements—we are beginning to plan these seriously now, and the deadlines for them get closer and closer on our calendars.

More than this, we begin to expect now the gradual coalescence of ideas in our students; we want them now to be thinking at the highest level of the semester. We’ve given them opportunities for gathering the data; now we’re expecting the syntheses, the constructs, the bringing together. We want them (and we ourselves as we help them write their papers and consider their projects and organize our final exams) to work carefully with abstractions and theory. Now is the time to get to the point, to bring it all together, to make the last few steps to the pinnacle. Yet these young people—drat them!—are obsessed with stuffed turkey and hot chocolate and Mom’s pumpkin pie. We want them up here on Olympus and they are down there, wishing for one more helping of gravy.

The trouble is, of course, that we too are at least partly occupied in the turkey and gravy business. As fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, friends and relations, we will, at this season, be part of festivities that mark what we are all learning pluralistically to call “the holidays.” But somehow or other we will persist in thinking of these activities as though they were not worth the kind of attention we give to our “work.” We may even enjoy the eating and drinking, but we think of these life details as distractions, escape, interruptions from our real lives. About the mechanics of making them happen—about the shopping and cooking and washing dishes and setting the table and filling the car with gas and picking up Aunt Helen at the airport—we have fairly blank minds.

As thoughtful people (and so of course all this applies to plenty of people who aren’t academics) we tend to rate different parts of our lives according to a scale of importance. It is more important to be doing our work (reading a scholarly article, selling a house, writing a policy, determining a market strategy) than to be driving home, or taking our clothes to the cleaners, or waiting in the garage for the car to be fixed. Doing volunteer work, or singing in the church choir is probably more important than these last, but not as important as the first. We know that time spent for our children is important time, so even though we wouldn’t rate watching a kindergarten pageant very high on a scale of importance, we do bump it up a notch or two when we are there for one of our own kids. But to most of our common actions we give little weight and very little thought. One of the most common of all our activities—eating—has scarcely any importance for many people today, except as a matter of nutritional calculation.

Yet few subjects, and few activities, bring us so immediately in touch with the very most important elements in human life. What else that we do three or four times a day gives us the chance to touch earth and spirit with each bite? To think about food is to think about all that makes us human. It is with our mother’s milk that we come to know the world as good; it is in sharing the cup of cold water that we know what it means to be with the other as brother or sister. It is in the lack of food that we see ourselves most vulnerable to the indifference of the natural world, or the callousness of the human world. Both Christians and Jews mark their moments of intimate spirituality with a meal, for Sabbath without light and bread is as unthinkable as Eucharist without its taste of wine sharp in the mouth.

Food is indeed a fashionable subject in the secular, non-academic world. In hundreds of ways we are semi-aware of it, but our sense of its place in our scale of important activities keeps us at a distance from it. This distance is described by the front and back covers of this month’s Cresset. On the front—basic, elemental—the onion. Calder treats it in silhouette, to accentuate its simplicity, to confront us with its irreducible, shapely self. The onions seem still to be growing and alive; they move on the surface of the pri-
mary colors in dancing patterns. They are representa-
tions of what Fr. Robert Capon refers to as the
"paradigm of life...one member of the vast living,
gravity-defying troop that, across the face of the earth,
moves light- and air-ward as long as the world lasts".
(With all his weaknesses, Capon in The Supper
of the Lamb writes more true words about the realities of eat-
ing and drinking than anyone else who has ever tried
to think theologically about the eating business.) On
the back cover, Warhol's image is the onion trans-
formed by a material, manufacturing culture. The
image is complicated, mechanical, and infinitely
repeatable. Like the contents, the can could be any-
where, or nowhere; it will always taste the same, a
generic, formularized onion-soup-like substance,
unlikely to interest or offend.

Though it is not on the level of environmental pol-
lution or catastrophic greed, our culture does have a
food problem. How can we redeem, or even sanctify
the image of the onion as Warhol has shown it? How
can we re-value what is nearly lost to us? If even food,
that fundamental element of reality, can become so
complex and abstract that we do not know what we do
when we eat, then how will we recognize any reality
when we see it?

About this Issue

It is in that spirit of thoughtfulness that this month's
issue takes shape around the subject of food. Professor
Lagerquist, a religious historian, moves laterally here
to address a subject which is, in fact, beginning to
interest more historians—the meaning of what people
eat. Mark Knoblauch lightens the tone somewhat as he
considers what's in for eating out. In the third of our
articles, Elizabeth Dede turns our attention of the
meaning of food in the social and political realm, a
piece based on several years spent with the hungry in a
major American city. In a turn to the metaphorical,
Travis DuPriest, whose name is familiar to Cresset read-
ers as a poet, writes about the inner nourishment of
reading. Even Jim Combs, our columnist on popular
culture, could not resist the chance to consider what
many people consider America's greatest contribution
to the world of food.

And just so that there is something to read when
you have had enough of the subject, Renu Juneja has
sent a letter from Costa Rica, Ed Byrne writes about a
controversy that has not yet occupied the US Congress,
and Paul Brietzke writes about one that should. Enjoy
the feast!

Peace,
GME

Poem That Started To Go Somewhere Else

I have never understood the actor, the dancer, the cook.
The hours on the stage, the graceless waiting, the book
of spoons and pinches, the cold, the hurt, the blazing
of the hope, losing the lines in the ragged air, raising
the lights again, again. Does one see, in some future
certain, the smiles, the curtain's call, the voices... You're
magnificent, I can't remember when I've seen, or hoped to hear,
or dreaming of tasting...Do we share the same wishing, the same fear?

I write on paper, and I've learnt
Poems are among the first things burnt.
My meals are costly, and my dance
Will only live by devilish chance.
But that is the rain upon the seeds,
That is the sun the study needs.

Daniel J. Langton
Do you remember as a small child learning about the early colonists in North America? Do you remember being told that someone (was it John Smith?) said, "Those who do not work, do not eat." It was a hard saying, for hard times. Hard because we know that those who do not eat, do not live. The legend about eating and living that we learned in grade school every year at this time, recounted the origins of our great national high feast day: Thanksgiving. The legend tells us that the colonists' work was added to the Native Americans' knowledge and that the climate cooperated to bring forth a good harvest, one promising food and eating-life-for more days. In response, our ancestors, by lines of citizenship if not of blood, gathered to celebrate and give thanks with a feast. If we believe the legend, they invited the Natives to share this feasting.

Revisionist historians have taught us, rightly, to be suspicious of pious accounts of this first Thanksgiving on several counts, not the least of which are the supposed good relations between inviters and invited. What strikes me as strange, however, is the very notion that people of the sort who staunchly questioned celebration of a holy-day such as Christmas would organize Thanksgiving, a rather primal holiday celebrating the fertility of the earth, even if they did attribute it to Almighty God. But is this really so odd? When faced with the real possibility of death by starvation, food from any source is a miracle, and throughout much of human history we have known that grateful acknowledgement of miracles with celebration is wise and appropriate.

A feast is a way to gratefully acknowledge miracles. And while the entire year is punctuated by feasts of various sorts, at this time of year, beginning with Thanksgiving, several come so hard upon one another that the good dishes might as well be kept down off the high shelf and ready for frequent use. Because this is a season of feasts, it is a salutary time to consider what our feasts reveal about us, about our living, and about our gratitude for miracles. To do so let us proceed to construct more deliberately an understanding of what a feast might be. For a feast is, of course, a sort of a meal often, but not always, connected with a festival. A meal, most simply, is a way of eating food. So we begin our reflection on feasts by first considering food itself.

Foods are those substances which keep us alive, without which we die. Food is a biological necessity, met in numerous ways from candy bars to raw vegetables to turkey stuffed and roasted. Recalling again our childhood lessons, we realize that we need certain types of food to grow properly and function well. There are people who fixate on this aspect of food, the partisans of what Ellen Goodman has called "Nouvelle Nutrition." The lovely crescent of a yellow banana suggests nothing to them about its shape, its color, the oddity that the fruit divides itself into three; the banana is a source of potassium. Eat because it is good for you.

The maxim may suggest but it does not make explicit the important role of culture in defining food. Many substances which are good for us, or at least ed-
ble, we do not eat because our cultural conditioning has taught that they are not food. Despite picnic jokes about extra protein, Americans generally do not regard insects as a food source. Or if a substance might be food, it is not food which our kind of people eat. Religious dietary laws are only one conspicuous example of this common perception. Ole Rolvaag’s astute description, in *Giants in the Earth*, of Beret’s horrified reaction to unknowingly eating badger-troll food—displays the depth to which cultural factors determine what is food and what is not. Boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are drawn not only by eating with some people and not with others, but also by what the members of a group eat and do not eat.

Another folk proverb is relevant to the relationship of food and identity: you are what you eat. Biologically and culturally this is true. People who eat fatty food, like Jack Sprat’s wife, become fat themselves. When athletes load carbohydrates before a sporting event, they expect those pancakes to make them perform better. That we eat food allows us to stay alive; the kind of food we eat influences the quality of our lives and reflects who we are as members of communities. An abundance of red meat in one’s diet has been a sign of wealth, an indication of personal fierceness, and more recently an ethical defect which endangers one’s good health. The requisite turkey on a Thursday in late November marks Americans as Americans as surely as a hamburger and fries. The food we eat also reveals something of our identity linked to personal preferences informed by culture most broadly defined as well as by quirks of individual taste. Some of us don’t put mustard on hot-dogs and each family is likely to have a preferred stuffing recipe for their Thanksgiving turkey. What we eat is who we are.

Most often we do not eat just bits of food now and then. Rather we group foods together and eat them in meals. I know of no biological reason for organizing our eating into meals; the practice appears to be a cultural construction, a human artifice. Many meals are eaten to assuage hunger and to fill the biological need for nourishment or out of habit because one eats lunch at noon. Brillat-Savarin noted that hunger is only the most immediate reason to eat. His *Physiology of Taste* celebrated the multiple sensual pleasures of eating which are more enjoyed when hunger does not intrude. And when considered carefully by an observer attuned to such matters, the profound messages carried by meals can be identified. Here the writing of anthropologist Mary Douglas is instructive. Using her own British household as the starting point for her observation, Douglas considers the structures of meals and their messages.

A suggestion that the family have “just soup” for a meal is the event which launches Douglas into her investigation of the elements which constitute a proper meal. “Just soup” does not. Why? Because a proper meal must contain three components. These might be compared to the elements of a code. One is stressed; two are not. Thus roast beef, potatoes and carrots do constitute a meal. Douglas also finds variations of this pattern, three items with one stressed, in all the weekly meals. Sunday dinner has the pattern more than once; a very important, meaningful meal on a holiday repeats the pattern several times with a stressed course composed of three elements followed by two unstressed courses also with three elements each. Douglas asserts that this specific pattern of triads is particularly British, marking the meal and its eaters as British rather than French. Further, the duplication of the basic pattern in more socially significant meals suggests that every meal is a reflection of every other meal. The most simple supper is a reflection of the most elaborate feast. This insight is, I suspect, more transferable to other settings than is the specific composition of elements which make up the meals.

In the course of her observation Douglas also notes that in addition to meals in her household there is a second type of eating event—drinks. Among the factors which distinguish drinks from meals is the sort of people who are invited to share the events. Stated in most extreme form, meals are for family; drinks are for strangers. The degree of intimacy accorded to friends can be seen by the occasions upon which they are invited to eat with the family. A guest who comes only for drinks is not at all close. One who is included for a cold buffet is a bit closer. The friend who shares a hot meal is almost family.
Again, the specifics of the scheme may vary in other social and cultural settings. When discussing this in class a student observed that the opposite is the case on a college campus, since he ate with anyone who sat by him in the cafeteria but only shared drinks with someone he invited. Nonetheless, the general implications stand. A meal is a social occasion. A lone person eating out of a refrigerator container while standing in the kitchen knows the truth of this all too well. Sharing a meal is a form of intimacy. When and what we eat with others conveys our relationships and indicates the value we place on them. A carefully prepared and attractively presented meal tells guests that we are willing to spend time, effort, and money to share food, a meal, even life with them.

If the meal is "unusually abundant and delicious," if it has as its occasion rejoicing, especially if it marks an anniversary of some sort, we call the meal a feast. The food served will appease hunger and identify the eaters with their communities. The meal itself will signify the distinction of the occasion by its structure, by the dishes that are served, and by the presence of the people who share it. A feast magnifies the characteristics of an ordinary meal. Those gathered around the table are connected to each other by their act of feasting together. By the same act they also are connected to people in other times and places who have eaten a similar feast or are even now eating it. Thanksgiving as we celebrate it is an American feast. Although the sentiment it expresses is widespread, the date is common only to the United States and it is one day-off nearly everyone receives. With some regional and family variations the prescribed menu is served across the country. Its place at the beginning of the cycle of winter holidays merges with its role as the day before the busiest shopping day of the year. Even the tragic irony that on reservations and elsewhere Native Americans in the white American history. The feast of Thanksgiving connects us not only to the diners at our own tables, but also to all those who have eaten Thanksgiving feasts and those who will.

A meal that is particularly intense in meaning we may also call a feast. The life-sustaining property of food expands in this sort of a meal, and its abundance comes less from the quantity or even the quality of the food and more from the significance attributed to the act of eating the meal. In this way we refer to raspberries and cream eaten from a favorite bowl at early morning on a sun-washed deck as a feast. Using the conventions of culture or violating them, a feast transforms life. A feast is gratitude for many miracles: there is food, the food is pleasant to eat, when we eat it we live, there are people with whom to share the food and the life, God has given us these gifts.

Such feasts are imagined and remembered and recounted. Among the most remarkable feast so recorded is Babette's. If you have not read Isak Dinesen's story or seen the film based upon it, do so. Babette prepares a "real French dinner" for a group of aged Norwegian sectarians determined not to notice it. When they have eaten they recall nothing—not the wines or the place settings or anything from the turtle soup to the grapes, peaches and fresh figs. Nonetheless, by a French meal on the centennial of their founder's birth, "[t]hey had been given one hour of the millennium." Babette's feast transformed the lives of the Sisters and Brothers who ate it despite their resolute inattention to its delights. It gave General Loewenhielm, who did appreciate the food, understanding and insight. Yet a third miracle was for Babette, who prepared the meal for her own sake. In cooking this meal she was the artist she was meant to be; she too dwelt for a few hours in Paradise.

A feast gives us opportunity to remember, or to discover, who we are. Planning and preparing the meal is an expression of our creative capacities which are in the image of God. The feast allows us to use all our senses: to smell the aroma of turkey roasting, to hear the voices of friends, to see the colors of green beans and red cranberries, to feel the warmth of full coffee cups, to taste the flavors of pumpkin and apple and pecan, to remember those people who are not present, to anticipate the days to come. We may feast at a sumptuous banquet, at an altar rail, or as one of my students did, eating alone from a blue tote bag on a train in Germany. Because a feast transcends the biological character of food and perhaps even the social conventions of a meal, we who eat it transcend the ordinariness of our lives. A feast is a taste of paradise. When we taste paradise, that is a miracle which transforms our lives and it is cause for rejoicing and giving thanks.

November, 1989
Works of Interest on this Subject


I am grateful to the two groups of students who have been part of seminars on "Food, Feasting, and Fasting." Their comments and questions helped to shape what I think about this topic and the way I speak about it. Mike Swope and Cathy Eberhart will recognize the specific contributions that their essays on memorable meals made.
In Dreams of Seasons

I

We lived in dreams of seasons
when winds pushed the clouds
over the farm and we ran through
the wet grass and watched the water
rise over the creek and flood
the pasture taking the old barn
and the garden, passing around the house
where we waited at the windows,
our faces pressed against the glass,
our eyes wide in wonder

II

The sun always found our backs then,
as we walked the bean rows, bent
to find the weeds
or listened to the dry rustling
of the corn beside the barn
as we rode the big gate,
more asleep than awake, gripping
the hot wood with our bare
arms and legs.

III

In those long days we climbed
the tall trees and watched the farm
spread out beneath us as we clung
tightly there in the notch of the tree;
but it was some other farm then,
some distant place we imagined
somewhere beneath the tall trees
where we held our breath and time stopped
as we reached our hands and touched,
one at a time, the sky-blue eggs.

IV

But at night we released everything
and gave ourselves up to stories
and the warmth of our grandmother in
that cold bed, hearing her voice
in the darkness, wondering if we would
wake to the same bright farm we saw
appear and disappear in the last light
of evening as we sat on the wide-board porch
and watched heat lightning flicker over
Turley's Woods. But there was no way
of knowing we would come back to it,
that the farm slept in purple light
of winter coming. Only dreams of seasons
deep inside of us, as foxes do, deep in
their dens, their eyes wide in their
timeless sleep. And I knew my grandmother
watched me in the dark as I listened
to the night sounds, until the sound
of the first snow whisking over the cellar door
and her voice were one sound, until I could
not hold on to the farm anymore.

J.T. Ledbetter

November, 1989
Critics have identified the collapse of the American nuclear family as a cause of a host of social ills ranging from declining church attendance to violent crime. Quoted in a recent issue of Publishers Weekly, Susan Friedland of the publishing house of Harper & Row cites the country's high divorce rate as the driving force behind the American dining public's current infatuation with "homeyness" in the foods they consume. It sounds logical enough: ex-spouses depressed by a marriage's failure seek tummy-warming solace in pot roast and mashed potatoes, foods that hark back to a less tumultuous and an apparently more morally certain era.

Whether or not the social scientist finds serious cause and effect in this linkage of family breakup with the return of simple cooking, culinary evidence gathered from today's leading restaurants in Europe and America points decidedly to a new fascination with and appreciation for simple, peasant-style food. For the affluent who frequent the world's great restaurants this plunge into simplicity doesn't mean a return to cheap meatloaf and mere bread and butter. The meatloaf of choice comes from the kitchen of a master who has trained under all the great starred chefs, and this meatloaf is made solely from hand-chopped tenderloin of milk-fed veal organically raised, the loaf itself garnished with shavings of the finest Piedmonstese truffles and sauced with concasse of plum tomatoes and Maui onions steeped in extra-virgin olive oil.

Carried to less outrageous extremes, simple cooking of fresh, locally raised foods can be a revelation. Larry Forgione has taken the New York scene by storm with his use of wholly American products. Berkeley's Alice Waters through her Chez Panisse restaurant has almost singlehandedly turned formerly-despised California truck farmers into socially sought-after media darlings by her adulation of freshness of ingredients above all other culinary virtues. Chicago's Prairie has put together a Midwestern menu to match its Frank Lloyd Wright-inspired dining room. Terczak's, a recently-opened Chicago restaurant, overflows nightly with cheering crowds of both food professionals and real people who feast on magnificently executed versions of pot roast, ham with raisin sauce, corn relish, lake perch, pigs-in-blankets, peach cobbler, and bread pudding.

Midwesterners, educated to be vaguely embarrassed over their unsophisticated native cuisine, scarcely know what to make of this phenomenon—their cuisine trendy? Yes, but only if one qualifies that assertion. In serious neo-Midwestern restaurants the food has to be fresh, and everything must be best-of-breed, but not merely expensive for its own sake. Pot roast is fine, but only when made with carefully braised, well-trimmed corn-fed beef, expertly carved turnips and carrots, and a professionally prepared classic brown sauce, not just some canned gravy. Bean salad appears as lightly steamed, deep green and crunchy beans tossed with bright red tomatoes, the purple onions in light raspberry vinegar and virgin olive oil dressing. Bread pudding, more custard than crumb, lies in a limpid pool of caramel so creamily unctuous that eating it helps one define and integrate the sensuousness of taste with all the other physical pleasures that life offers.

Ingredients in these dishes all have a Midwestern provenance except for the olive oil and the caramel's sugar and vanilla, and all three of these are shelf staples. But despite the readiness of their ingredients and their run-of-the-mill names, the kinds of Midwestern "home" foods now so popular in restaurants aren't easily or conveniently made at home. Pedestrian though their titles may be, only a master chef can so consistently command such perfection in produce and have the training to turn the raw ingredients for them into high art.

Even normally self-confident French restaurants have leaped into the fascination with American

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Midwestern foods. An American tourist-gastronome, feeding his way through France, stops for dinner at an elegant hostelry perched among cliffs high above the banks of the Moselle. Michelin-rated, heir to a tradition of fine Lorraine cooking, the restaurant breathes Gallic luxury. The maître d' approaches the table, enthusiastic over the evening's menu's delights, particularly its exquisite, exotic, unlisted special vegetable. Curiosity piqued, but too unsure of his French to inquire further, the gastronome orders this mystery. Two courses into the meal, the waiter presents — Voilà! — a dish of corn. Is this some new hybrid grain, the mystified diner wonders, that has these reserved French so excited? The waiters stand grinning, sure that they've utterly astounded their charge with something entirely novel. One bite tells all: common field corn, tough and starchy, recognized by any Midwestern-bred American as fit only for the cattle. Despite the rest of the meal's brilliance and lush Alsatian wines, the gastronome has but one desire: to feed these people some Indiana sweet corn, picked as the water on the stove has come to the boil, so that they might recognize the futility of their efforts to emulate Midwestern cooking.

Beyond Europe's misguided fascination with what they perceive to be Midwestern sweet corn there lies a somewhat darker side to the world's infatuation with American cooking. The opening of McDonald's in Moscow, Kentucky Fried Chicken in Beijing, and the assault by all the franchise operations on Japan has led to a gastronomic version of Gresham's Law: "Bad food drives out good." As youth around the world become hooked on McDonald's and Burger King through ubiquity and hypereffective advertising campaigns, will there be any room left for zakuski, siu mai, and sushi?

If these national treasures do survive, they may find their most determined preservationists in the American Heartland. Just as the British saved the Parthenon's frieze while creating the implements of a new industrial world that destroyed so many ancient monuments, Midwesterners revel in their ethnic restaurants while blanketing the world in the global landscape, but they don't always succeed in fully converting their hosts' tastes. Italian restaurants in America, for all their claims to Tuscan or Roman authenticity, never have gotten Americans to understand that pasta is not a main course. Chinese restaurants can't persuade Americans to the Oriental custom that dictates soup at meal's end instead of its beginning.

In restaurants as well as couture, fashion and fad go hand in hand to influence consumers' choices. Today's yen for simple home cooking and comfort foods will give way to new trends as people tire of old foods, chefs invent new dishes, and diners pursue as yet undiscovered nutritional hypotheses. But what ultimately counts is the food one recalls from one's youth. It rarely gets any better, and those who grew up in America's Midwestern heartland may now rest confident and proud that the gastronomic powers have acknowledged, at least for the time being, their home cooking's validity. So when the foodies have moved on to future novelties, Midwesterners will have to find excuses other than its au courantness to return home to their native cuisine's tangible assurances of identity and tokens of remembered love.

November, 1989
Back in June I was arrested with five other people for a protest action at the opening of Underground Atlanta—a center for entertainment, tourism, and shopping in downtown Atlanta. The city is fast-growing and successful, sees itself as the business capital of the South, was the proud host of the last Democratic National Convention, and now has high hopes to be the location of the 1996 Summer Olympics. All of this success comes with a high price tag, and somebody has to pay the cost. From what I've seen of Atlanta, it is the poor—an astounding 32 percent of the city's population—who bear the burden of Atlanta's success. So in preparation for our protest we posted notices, passed out flyers, and mailed announcements that simply asked "Why is there hunger in Atlanta?" and starkly stated, "Underground Atlanta opens on June 15."

I know a little bit about hunger in Atlanta since I live and work in a Christian community that serves the homeless of that city. From that experience of daily feeding 400 people or more, I know, too, that hunger has nothing to do with a shortage of food. We have more than enough and daily throw away plenty of food to satisfy the needs of the hungry. Every year during Holy Week, the Open Door Community, where I live, holds a vigil in solidarity with our friends who live on the streets. Small groups of us spend 24 hours on the streets, trying to sleep in the bus station before the security guard kicks us out; finding a place to pee in a city that has no public toilets; sitting in a labor pool, endlessly waiting to be called out for a job; lining up for a ticket for lunch at the big soup kitchen downtown; staying awake through a session at Municipal Court where the judge sentences one of our friends to five days in jail for sleeping on a park bench.

Last year I participated in my fourth Holy Week vigil. All that week the weather was terrible. It rained and poured; the wind blew; temperatures dropped; and the sun never came out until Easter Sunday. The night is always the hardest time for me. I can't sleep, and the time seems so long. So I decided to beg for money to get me a cup of coffee inside, safe from the cold and wet. A street evangelist who worked for Eastern Airlines by day met us in the park and talked through the pouring rain about Jesus—the personal savior of our souls. Frankly, I was not much interested in my soul because my body was already shivering with the cold, but I waited quietly and politely until he had finished his earnest sermon. As he was parting from us, leaving us with his blessing, I asked him for a quarter. "I never carry money," he said. But he gave me a gift certificate for a cup of coffee at McDonald's.

In the meantime others from my group had got tired of the evangelizing and had gone off to scrounge some food. At a nearby hotel a party was over, and the caterer gave us the left-overs. We had a beautiful feast of strawberries, pineapple, cheese, turkey, ham, and crackers. Some other scavengers went to the Kentucky Fried Chicken to check out their garbage. Inside, the employees were sweeping and mopping the floor. Appalled that somebody would pick through their garbage for a meal, they came out with a tray full of left-over chicken. Back in the park we enjoyed this lav-
ish banquet, but I was anxious to get inside, away from
the wet and cold, so I promised that I would ask for
more food after I’d had a cup of coffee.

Close to the closing time of McDonald’s, I went
up to the counter and explained that there were ten
of us who were hungry and cold but we had no money.
“Could you give us your left-overs?” I asked. “It’s
against McDonald’s policy,” replied the young man
behind the counter. “Well, where is your dumpster?” I
responded. “We’d be happy to take from what you
have to throw away.” Again, the man was astounded
that people would be hungry enough to eat from a
dumpster. “How many of you are there?” he ques­
tioned. “There are ten,” I said. “O.K., I’ll give you
these hamburgers and fries.” Soon we were enjoying a
generous meal from McDonald’s bounty — food that
would otherwise have landed in the dumpster.

When McDonald’s closed we had to go back into
the rain, and I suggested that we try to seek shelter in
the Greyhound bus station. As we walked to the sta­
tion, a Domino’s Pizza delivery car drove up. “Hey!”
the driver shouted. “Are you hungry? I’ve got two piz­
zas that I can’t deliver, and I’ll give ‘em to you.” Really,
I couldn’t eat another bite, but we took the pizzas and
passed them out to other homeless folk whom we met
in the station. From that experience of one night as a
person without a home and without an income on the
streets of Atlanta, I know that there is no shortage of
food in Atlanta.

Why is there hunger in Atlanta? I believe the
answer to that question is simple: we just do not have
the will to end hunger. When I moved to Atlanta, I was
an idealistic dreamer, and I believed that I would work
hard and bring an end to homelessness and hunger.
Our dining room is small and seats only forty-two
people. Four years ago seventy-five people would come to
eat lunch with us. Now we serve 150. Our breakfast at
a downtown church has seen an even more dramatic
increase. The fellowship hall seats seventy-five, and
that was adequate space four years ago. Now we serve
250 people every morning. Obviously, I am not strong­
willed enough to end hunger.

Even among the good-hearted who voluntarily feed
the hungry, I can tell stories of weak wills. On holidays
the Open Door has been the only soup kitchen to
remain open, and this has often posed a hardship for
us, for our neighborhood, and for the hungry folk who
must wait for such a long time to eat. But on Memorial
Day last year we finally got to the end of our ability to
cope with the crowds of hungry people. Over 600 peo­
ple lined up for a place at one of our forty-two seats.
We had to serve from 10 am until 4 pm, and most of
the folk, having no place else to be, stayed in our tiny
yard throughout the day. We determined that this
would never happen again and called a meeting of all
the other soup kitchen directors. Two of them agreed
to share the responsibility of keeping another soup
kitchen open on holidays, and for the 4th of July and
Labor Day we served only 300 people, who did not
have a miserable long wait in line. So the hungry are
fed because we will that it will be so.

Of course the root causes of hunger run much
deeper than a lack of strong-willed people to feed the
hungry. Why is there hunger in Atlanta? In a wonder­
fully pithy statement Dorothy Day, the founder of the
Catholic Worker, gives us the answer: “Our problems
stem from this filthy, rotten system.” Hunger is a direct
result of a greed-driven economy.

Underground Atlanta is proof of that statement.
Atlanta is one of the fastest growing centers for busi­
ness in the United States. It has also the second high­
est rate of poverty. Nevertheless, we just finished
spending 142 million dollars to develop Underground
Atlanta. At least eight million of those dollars were
misappropriated funds. In Community Development
Block Grants the Federal Government had given the
city of Atlanta eight million dollars which was to be
used for low income housing, unemployment insur­
ance, and other needs of the poor in our city. Instead,
the money was unabashedly, perhaps illegally, at least
underhandedly, used to develop an entertainment cen­
ter for those who have homes, more than enough food,
and plenty of money to spend on the $2 ice cream
cones sold there. So a group of us protested the open­
ing of Underground Atlanta.

In response to our action, the developers and
city planners told us that Underground Atlanta would
end poverty and hunger in Atlanta because it would
bring money to the city and provide jobs for many
unskilled laborers. Of course, somehow these develop­
ers have conveniently forgotten that for the next ten
years, or so, the city will have to subsidize, with an addi­
tional 20-30 million dollars, the operation of Under­
ground if it is to remain solvent. In addition, the $3.35
minimum wage that the jobs at Underground Atlanta
provide to unskilled laborers is not a living wage: you
cannot eat, rent a room, and wear clothes on $3.35 an
hour. After we had interrupted Mayor Andrew Young’s
speech at the opening of Underground, he claimed
that Atlanta does more for the homeless than any oth­
er city in the nation, and “we scrape together every lit­
tale nickle and dime for the homeless," he said. One hundred and forty-two million dollars for the rich; nickles and dimes for the poor: the system itself perpetuates poverty and hunger.

The system is more interested in profits than it is in solving the problems of our society. In fact, if we put effort and money into solving problems then our profits are reduced. To illustrate I am reminded of the pastor of a prominent church in downtown Atlanta. In an interview about the opening of Underground Atlanta he called his church the neighbor of Underground and talked about how pleased he was that Underground would bring money and people to downtown, and he saw himself as the self-proclaimed "Chaplain to Underground." His church was one that closed its doors to the hungry and homeless on holidays. Somehow the idea of more money in the area made him blind to the fact that Underground Atlanta had pushed the poor and hungry and homeless out of downtown Atlanta. For years this pastor had been surrounded by people who needed him and were his neighbors, but the thought of greater profits made him forget their presence.

Even more serious than my charges brought against a well-meaning, but misguided, pastor, is the truth that our present form of capitalism even depends on some people being poor. Those of us who struggle to bring an end to homelessness and hunger know that one place to begin is with legislation for a dramatic raise of the minimum wage. Some 40 percent of the men and women living in Atlanta's shelters for the homeless are employed. But they earn the minimum wage and cannot afford a place to live and food to eat. What if McDonald's were to begin to pay a $10 minimum wage? Their laborers would live more comfortable lives. But given our system, two other things would happen: First, McDonald's management would go through a major change of heart and claim that they no longer care about profits but are more concerned for the welfare of their employees and are altruistic enough to desire that the hungry be fed. Second, McDonald's would shortly give in to the competition because Wendy's and Burger King would reap much larger profits, increase the advertising campaigns, and draw customers away from McDonald's. Large profits depend on things like low minimum wage and few benefits to employees. Therefore the poor suffer so that the system can survive.

In addition to the profit motive, competition in a free market is another intrinsic tenet of capitalism. Ideally, I suppose, a little competition is good for all of us since it keeps us striving to be and to do better. However, what I have seen of our capitalist system is cut-throat competition that bleeds the life out of some, while others prosper at a disproportionate rate. Inherent in our understanding of competition, and consequently of capitalism, is a winner and a loser. In the U.S., the winners often own two homes, several cars, computers, televisions, and stereos. Frequently, they suffer from heart disease and high blood pressure because their diets consist of too much unhealthy, cholesterol-rich foods. They step on the poor as they climb the mountain of success in our society, which means the acquisition of more and more things.

In the community where I live, we are opposed to television, so it is a rare day when I am assaulted by the ads. But recently, while I was on vacation, I was amazed to see an ad from Sears for a $2,000 television. And I didn't see this ad only once. In one two-hour stretch as I watched a movie, that ad ran five times. If keeping up with the Joneses means buying a $2,000 television, then we can be certain that the Wilsons will be on welfare. The competition is too stiff, and many people will go under. Two thousand dollars is more money than most of my friends who live on the streets of Atlanta can hope to earn in six months. Yet they are daily assaulted by the consumerism of a system which tells them that the good life consists of owning a $2,000 television.

Perhaps my analysis of capitalism and hunger in Atlanta has gone on long enough here. Frequently the Open Door is chastised for naming and analyzing the problems of our society without providing a course of action to bring change. People will ask, for instance, "But what are we to do to end hunger in Atlanta?" I am always happy to outline a course of action, but it requires radical change because it comes from a radical Christian perspective.

First, we must stop measuring our lives in terms of material success. We simply are not following Jesus' teachings when we are so concerned with things. Luke records that Jesus taught his followers: "Happy are you poor; the kingdom of God is yours! Happy are you who are hungry now; you will be filled!" Even before Jesus was born his mother Mary sang about the greatness of God: "You have filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty." If we are Christians, we are supposed to be seeking God's kingdom. Yet most of us are not poor or hungry, and many of us have no active involvement with the poor and the hungry. If our lives are filled with material goods we should be concerned, I think, because God is going to send us away empty. In fact, we probably already are
empty because our shallow lives have missed the depths of God's love for the hungry and the poor. The $2,000 television will break or be obsolete within a few years. Then where will we be? The poorer we are, the closer we are to God.

Second, we must begin to act in ways that recognize Jesus' presence in our lives now. I guess many Christians believe that faith in his death and resurrection is enough, and the Lutheran in me has confessed that often enough. Nevertheless, I also believe that that faith calls us to action, and for me the focus of faith in action lies in Matthew 25. There the faithful who are blessed by God are those who fed the hungry, and in other ways helped those who were considered least important. Jesus identifies himself with the least, so if we are to see Jesus we must look among the poor and needy, and if we want to be with Jesus, then we must be with the poor.

Finally, I believe we should model our lives on the early believers who were closer to Jesus than we are. An economic life based on greed is everywhere condemned in the Bible. The second chapter of Acts gives a beautiful description of life among the believers:

Many miracles and wonders were being done through the apostles, and everyone was filled with awe. All the believers continued together in close fellowship and shared their belongings with one another. They would sell their property and possessions, and distribute the money among all, according to what each one needed. Day after day they met as a group in the Temple, and they had their meals together in their homes, eating with glad and humble hearts, praising God, and enjoying the good will of all the people. And every day the Lord added to their group those who were being saved.

Obviously, the early church was not concerned with the capitalist notion of private ownership, but I am especially interested in their meal times, when they ate together with glad and humble hearts. Meals ought to be a time of great joy, but a frozen dinner cooked in two minutes in a microwave and eaten in front of Dan Rather and the evening news on television brings no joy. And there is precious little happiness at the St. Luke's soup kitchen in downtown Atlanta where 500 people line up everyday to eat a lonely meal of soup and sandwiches. Imagine the joyous feasts that would take place in Atlanta if the lonely developers of Underground were to share their evening dinners with the hungry and homeless of Atlanta. I cannot think of a more wonderful sight, except perhaps for the great banquet we will enjoy when Jesus comes again.
"READ, MARK, LEARN AND INWARDLY DIGEST": METAPHORS FOR READING

From the very beginning of our lives we have the opportunity to nourish and follow parallel pathways and pilgrimages of life—the inner and the outer. The newborn baby is stimulated externally by color, shape, touch and movement but also internally by emotional coos whispered lovingly in the ear. Later the mobile is replaced by balls and blocks; the Eskimo kisses and coos, by stories and pictures.

As time moves on, however, the external takes over, at least for most of us. We pay attention, detailed attention, to the externals of life: clothing, cars, and the like. The attention many in our culture give to stories, even film and good television, is filed away quickly in the category of "only entertainment." This attitude is by no means confined to a popular audience. At a recent conference on the teaching of Western Civilization, one speaker called for the return to history-as-story; another speaker decried the thought that history might degenerate again to "merely one of the literary arts."

With the understanding that the literary arts are for "mere" entertainment—though I personally would place entertainment and authentic play high on my list of what comprises civilization—comes the belittlement of story, and with the belittlement of story comes the decline of the inner life. What the third-century Jewish commentator said of scripture is true of all literature: "We consist of the stories we tell."

In one of his many perceptive commentaries on children, "The Importance of Play" in the March, 1987 Atlantic Monthly, Bruno Beltelheim says, "A lack of sufficient leisure to develop a rich inner life is a large part of the reason why a child will pressure his parents to entertain him or will turn on the television set. It is not that the bad of such mass-produced entertainment drives out the good of inner richness. It is that, in a vicious circle, the lack of a chance to spend much of his energies on his inner life causes the child to turn to readily available stimuli for filling an inner void, and these stimuli then constitute another obstacle to the child's development of his inner life."

We all know the story. It's an old one, a familiar one in perhaps our own past, or in the present of our own children: "I don't have anything to do," "I'm bored," "There's nothing to do around here," or as even a priest once said to me about retreats, 'The silence drives me mad."

The answers from the communication specialists and psychologists are, of course, correct: "There is no boring topic or subject or place or person, only bored minds"; "Silence does not drive you mad, the silence allows you to confront yourself, your inner life; your own self drives you mad." True as these responses may be, however, they are prudish, schoolmarmish retorts rather than helpful and generative ones.

The point here for us to consider is this: What is the role of teachers of literature and the humanities once we've acknowledged the thinness of interior reflectiveness in our students? Does our noticing of this paucity have anything to do with us as teachers of literature? Does such an observation have anything to do with a Christian perspective on literature or teaching?

I think it does.

In fact, I would say that one of our primary roles as teachers of literature—not because we may be Christian, but because we are underpinned with a strong tradition of interiority—is to call our students' attention to the inner way, to the interior pilgrimage at
every stage of the reading-responding-analytical-reflective - engagement with literature. It happens quite naturally all the time: students often begin a discussion with such a comment as, “what this poem means to me is...” or “what I get out of this novel is...” As teachers, during a discussion we sometimes ask, “Now does this story ring true for you, in your life?” or “Did anyone find this poem particularly meaningful in a personal way?” These are good starts, yet I think we can go further or deeper and become even more intentional in pointing out what I’d like to call “the parallel journey,” the inner roadway, as it were, that runs alongside the outer pathway of literature.

Naturally, journey literature works best because students can grasp the literal journey of Odysseus and Telemachus or Aeneas or Abraham or Jesus of Nazareth or even Augustine of Hippo or Sir Gawain, or the Canterbury pilgrims, or Hythloday, or Don Quixote, or Gulliver, or Tom Jones, or Child Roland, or J. Alfred Prufrock, or Holden Caulfield, or Phoenix Jackson, or Gilbert, the hero of Judith Martin (Miss Manner’s) charming novel, or countless other travellers in western—or for that matter—world literature.

With the physical boat trip, horseback trip, or walk, the reader sees the movement from one place to another, and it is but a short leap (of imagination, or faith, or perception for those who have eyes to see, ears to hear) to the interior journey of the mind and the heart which parallels the journeyer on the inside of his or her consciousness—to see that Odysseus is trying to reach home — both the rocky shores of Ithaca and the jagged cliffs of his own mind. What, after all, keeps him from returning home for ten years? The gods, the fates, the sorceress Circe, the beauty queen Calypso, or his own volition? Volition may be conditioned externally, but in several instances, the Calypso and the Polyphemus episode for example, it is an internal commitment of will.

Likewise, Aeneas, striking out into the unknown, looking for a new home or the Canterbury pilgrims heading toward a holy shrine. Both journeys have a sense of new discovery and a sense of return to a “true home” at one and the same time. Or Phoenix Jackson from “The Worn Path” by Eudora Welty retracing the same steps of the same journey again and again, year by year, out of a sense of sacrificial service and ennobling charity.

At every turn, the literal journey becomes a metaphor for the character’s inner journey toward self identity, toward societal identification or tribal valorization, toward personal value or goal, toward fulfillment of obligation or duty or longed-for spiritual experience. We all, I suspect try, when possible, to move our students toward these and other outer and inner connections.

Even when the journey is not epic in length or importance, as in Elizabeth Madox Robert’s “On the Mountainside,” we have the chance to explore the notion of liminality, or threshold, of having one foot out of the door, another still in. Newt in that particular short story has left his mountaintop home but has not yet made it to the settlements below. His memory is flooded with images of home, as well as thoughts and suppositions about the city of the future. His “not yet” is the essence of his journey, as it is the essence of being a student.

A short story such as Edgar Allan Poe’s “William Wilson” with its short journey from room to room or a short novel such as Thomas Mann’s Death in Venice with its roaming around the canals of Venice, or Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” with Robin’s wandering through the dark streets of Boston, all issue invitations to think of the house or the town as a metaphor of the mind, of the human brain with its many avenues of thoughts, its “intersections of ideas,” its “doorways,” “windows,” “closets,” “hallways,” all metaphors of pilgrimage. Flannery O’Connor perhaps engraves her invitation in such a story as “The Artificial Nigger” by naming her main character Mr. Head.

Usually, with not too much prodding and without being accused of oversymbolizing or exaggerating (“without seeing a phalic symbol in every telephone pole”), we can get students to entertain the interior level of the journey narrative, though I grant you that the literalists will fight us to the end.

A bit different, though not impossible, is the reading of a more static piece, such as Waiting for Godot, in which Gogo and Pozzo wait patiently and impatiently, stupidly yet bravely, for Godot—the complex, absent, longed-for companion-molestor of humanity, Godot would, presumably, bring purpose and meaning, worthwhileness, to life, were he to show up. Actually, the interior parallels suggest themselves perhaps even more readily in such a static plot than in the journey or travel story.

There are ballads with their stories and journeys—Robin Hood comes to mind—there are shorter, more complex pieces, but nonetheless with their journeys, such as “Sailing to Byzantium” or even the word-puzzle imagist poem by e. e. cummings, “lonel in es a leaf fal Is.” These too are ways of thinking metaphorically that most of us try to push for in some form or another.

What I’m after, though, is yet a third step in the process—a third dimension of the pilgrimage of reading, if you will, and that is the internalization of the journey, literal and metaphorical, on the part of the reader. I would like for students to be aware that the story or
poem they have just read, responded to, or discussed has indeed become a part of their own inner life. I don't mean simply that it has "made an impact" or "challenged them," but that as Coleridge put it, the story or poem has gone into the deep well of their imagination. Gone down, maybe to be forgotten until dreamed about or until encountered again through analogue in another story or poem or called up out of the well by an image or association from what Jung calls the "collective unconscious" of myth and art.

As Rudolph Arnheim asserts in Visual Thinking, we all benefit from becoming aware of the non-verbal relationship we have with symbols and images. But students benefit as well from knowing that story and image now rest on their interior lives in what the Anglican Book of Common Prayer calls "inwardly digesting." We put many of our professional eggs into the baskets of "reading, and marking," but we tend to overlook or to forget the "inwardly digesting" of literature as the Prayer Book asks the faithful to do with holy scripture.

Now I'm not suggesting that we tell our students exactly how to do this. And we certainly ought not to tell our students exactly what to believe or think or meditate on. What we can do, though, is show them that just as literature comes from the inner vision and imagination of a writer, so too does it enter and parallel the inner life of the reader. At the very least what I really mean is perhaps the greatest service we teachers of literature can provide: to remind our students that they have an inner life, that they are on an interior journey. We can, through the study of story and poem, get them to turn inward. Anthony de Mello writes this telling parable:

"Where do these mountains...come from?" asked the novice.

"Where does your question come from?" asked the master.

If as Sir Philip Sidney asserts—based on Aristotle and Horace and a host of ancient moral philosophers—the purpose, the joy of literature, is to teach by delighting and thereby move to virtuous action (itself, a pilgrimage), certainly the fundamental way of understanding "virtuous action" is that of knowing oneself. The knowledge of the self is, of course, central and crucial to all western sacred traditions, classical and Christian. Gnosti teipsum. "Know thyself" was inscribed on the temple of Apollo at Delphi; Christ reiterates the dictum in the summary of the law. "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy mind, with all thy strength. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, love thy neighbor as thyself," which Fr. Hopko, the erudite Orthodox priest, understands not as love thy neighbor like you would love thyself, but love thy neighbor as though she were you.

A twelfth century monk said, "To know God, look inside yourself." Indeed one of medieval Christianity's greatest theologians, Bernard of Clairvaux, in his book, On the Love of God, sets forth the love of self (properly understood) as the highest form of contemplative love. Step one on Bernard's ladder is the love of self for the sake of self; step two, the love of God for the sake of what God does for us; step three, the love of God because God is God; step four, the love of self for the sake of God. Very few, if any, says Bernard reach stage four; stage three itself requires a lifetime of contemplative work. Most of us, if we reflect spiritually in this way are locked at step two, a sort of "thank you, God because..."

I have three practical suggestions. First, encourage students to turn inward and to become aware that at every level of existence there is an inner journey paralleling—sometimes reacting to, sometimes influencing—the outer journey. Guide them insofar as possible to see that the two journeys are inextricably bound, are indeed one journey and that as one writer has put it, "Nothing happens on the outside that has not already taken place on the inside. I sometimes introduce such a concept through the use of some sort of personality type tool. In a brilliant essay on Montaigne in his book Every Force Evolves a Form, Guy Davenport has this to say:

We all lead a moral inner life of the spirit, on which religion, philosophy, and tacit opinion have many claims. To reflect on this inner life rationally is a skill no longer taught, though successful introspection, if it can make us at peace with ourselves, is sanity itself.

(p. 41)

and then

The arts are a way of internalizing experience allowing us to look with wonder at a past that is not ours, but enough of ours so that all stories are, as Joyce says, always "the same anew." (p.83).

Two, acquaint students with benefits, I would say spiritual benefits, of absence and silence. Often a poem depends more or as much on what is not there as on what is there. The space in e. e. cumming's poem. A poem they have just read, responded to, or discussed has indeed become a part of their own inner life. I don't mean simply that it has "made an impact" or "challenged them," but that as Coleridge put it, the story or poem has gone into the deep well of their imagination. Gone down, maybe to be forgotten until dreamed about or until encountered again through analogue in another story or poem or called up out of the well by an image or association from what Jung calls the "collective unconscious" of myth and art.

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(p. 41)
as perhaps it is for reading and reflecting on what is read. This is not to belittle conversation and the creation of sense through discussion, only to say that silences in the classroom can serve as a reminder that awe and meditation are often the proper response to a work of art prior to, along with, and following analytical interpretation. Also, I might add that silence slows down the pace, and slowness is a necessary balance to the quick-fix, drive-in-back mentality so persuasive in our society. "The good news travels slow" says The Tortoise Times of Yale Divinity School.

Third, help students locate and develop associative mechanisms, triggers which relate the outer to the inner, the inner to the outer, so that an awareness of the inner and outer journeys of life is keen, sensitive and natural. Use word lists of associations from images to show the fertility of the human mind.

Such a poem as George Herbert's "The Altar," serves well here because it is a poem which, while rich and complex, yields a meaning fairly bluntly and announces the inner life as a major theme. George Herbert was keenly aware that the prayer of consecration from the Book of Common Prayer makes clear the dual nature of the eucharistic sacrifice: on the one hand "We thy humble servants do celebrate and make here before thy Divine Majesty with these thy holy gifts which we now offer unto thee" and on the other hand "here we offer and present unto thee, O Lord, ourselves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice unto thee." Combining the oblation of bread and wine and of self, Herbert makes the same connective pilgrimage in "The Altar": Altar triggers heart, heart triggers altar. These associative bridges can only serve to broaden the service of literature and enlighten the human mind.

As corollaries to these three suggestions, I like to connect when possible an introduction to the inner tradition of Christianity itself to Christian spirituality and mysticism, perhaps beginning with the Pauline mystery in the sentence "Our life is hid with Christ in God." I would follow through the interiority of St. Augustine, Bernard, Julian of Norwich, Margary Kempe, the anonymous author of The Cloud of Unknowing, George Herbert, down to Thomas Merton, Madeleine L'Engle, and Anthony de Mello in our own century.

In some cases, one could explore the inner spirit of biblical literature itself: the Proverbs, the Psalms, the parables and narratives of the New Testament. The development of a rich inner life is one of the greatest gifts we in the humanities can give our students. Far from dogmatic indoctrination and far from a narrow and perhaps precious use of literature, it is an opening to the fullness of both the literary and Christian tradition. It is the inner place of retreat that Abbot Benedict Reid says allows everyone a cell in which he or she can sort out the complexities of modern life, to live creatively in the chaos. It was just this sort of life that allowed Thomas More to reconcile the via activa and via contemplativa and to live an integrated and peaceful life through times of vicissitude and degradation. It is this sort of life that can help human beings cultivate the spirit of virtuous action for the pilgrimage that can transform the human heart, the community, and in God's time, the world.

Notes


Our van stops at the park ranger's hut in the Carara Biological Reserve. Our guide steps out, runs his fingers through his thick, curly hair, and shouts in the direction of the hut. Three young men appear, lithe, tanned, with delightfully unkempt appearances, and now smiling with delight at our guide. Our guide, who has been somewhat formal and businesslike during the long drive, is suddenly a different man—chattering with his friends, hugging them, smiling at us. His friends are park rangers he tells us. Except for the two summer months when he is a tour guide for the wildlife reserves, this is where he lives and works. He is home. He is himself, and noticeably Latin.

I am relieved to see him come alive. I had begun to wonder if I had made a mistake in choosing to come to a biological reserve with a trained biologist as a tour guide instead of going off on the more conventional but more colorful tours. Some of my colleagues from the conference at San Jose had taken off on a boat tour around the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica tempted by the promise of swimming and snorkeling on pristine island beaches and sumptuous cocktails at a beach resort. Others had gone sightseeing up the volcanic mountains or down into the picturesque Orisi valley. This, after all, is the land of eternal spring where the temperature varies only between 65 and 80 degrees, a land of lush landscapes of immense variety. In this tourist's paradise, I had chosen to come to the rain forest. Up north on my midwestern campus, the rain forest has begun to impinge upon our consciousness. Ecological issues associated with the destruction of the rain forest have sparked the concern of my otherwise phlegmatic students. In my composition classes, students argue with genuine commitment and force about the need to preserve the rain forest. They seem as knowledgeable about the greenhouse effect as they are about new wave music. My own concerns thus whetted and aided, I wanted to see what it was we were so thoughtlessly destroying.

Rudolfo, or Rudy as friends called him, had told us on the way to Carara that little Costa Rica has three types of rain forests. Straddling the Central American isthmus, Costa Rica is a bridge between the ecosystems of the dryer north and the more humid south. Carara is the transitional zone between the dry and the wet rain forests of Costa Rica. Rudy had also impressed us with a wealth of statistics to prove the amazing richness of plant and animal life in Costa Rica: twice as many species of trees as are found in the continental United States; 12,000 varieties of plants, 237 species of mammals, 848 kinds of birds; and 361 different amphibians. And now we were in Carara trying to glimpse these riches.

That afternoon the trail led us through several miles of the forest. And peering into trees towering a hundred feet or more above us in search of birds and monkeys or looking down on the wet ground where the forest decayed and renewed itself, we saw much and, lacking trained eyes, surely missed much. What I remember most from that afternoon, however, is not what I saw but what I felt: Rudy's passion for the forest, for what it contained. Whether it was the thorny porcupine tree or the strange symbiosis between fire ants, a particular bird and a particular tree—Rudy wondered, admired, and made us share his enchantment. When he had spotted something, he would set his binoculars down and gather us around him. He would murmur soft endearments at whatever he had seen as he trained his glass for us: "I just love this bird. Stay there my lovely; don't go away yet. Just look at his blue throat." Familiarity had not jaded Rudy. When we saw our first group of macaws, Rudy was in raptures. His eyes danced, his voice danced. Once the excitement of seeing the macaws and sharing them with us subsided, Rudy grew subdued. We could all sense his anger and pain. He told us about the near extinction of the birds because of illegal poachers who were tempted by the handsome price fetched by macaws abroad, particularly in North America. According to him, most died quickly in captivity, despite a normal lifespan of 120 years. Macaws are splendidly loyal and monoga-
mous, he told us—they mate for
life and seldom survive the death
of their mate. Then, looking at
the birds feeding on dates high
above on a palm, Rudy recovered
his ebullience and discarded pas­
sionately once again on the
delicate and necessary balance of
nature: The dates pecked at by the
birds fall on the ground to pro­
vide food for many ground
creatures.

There was nothing simu­
lated about Rudy’s emotions.
Unlike an act put on by some
professional tour guide, Rudy’s joy
was clearly deep and fresh. I asked
him on the way home if other
rangers were as passionate about
ecology and wild life. He smiled:
“I cannot speak for all Costa
Ricans, but I know that as a nation
Costa Rica is extremely conscious
of the need to conserve the envi­
ronment. We are proud of the
special features of our land and
don’t want to destroy them.” This
little country the size of West Vir­
ginia has twenty nine national
parks and reserves occupying
twelve percent of the land, and
another eight percent of the land
is a legally demarcated “sylvan
area.” A portion of the money
earned from tourism is allocated
to conservation.

This sense of pride articulat­
ed by Rudy had become familiar
in my five days here. The Costa
Ricans are visibly proud of their
country and eager to talk about it
to visitors. There is no arrogance
here, just simple self-confidence and a desire to be well liked. From
the elevator attendants in the
hotel to street vendors to people
eating lunch with you in some
local, family-run food stall, Costa
Ricans smile and talk to you, tak­
ing harmless delight in your
broken Spanish and equal plea­
sure in their own efforts to speak
English. And they always want to
know if you like their country. Any
guide book will tell you about Cos­
ta Rica’s special achievements. In
that volatile region, sharing bor­
ders with Panama and Nicaragua,
Costa Rica is rare enough in enjoy­
ing political stability and a fully
democratic government. It has
carefully secured the mechanisms
to ensure free and open elections.
The country’s Supreme Court of
Elections, an independent body,
supervises elections, and during
the electoral period this Supreme
Court has the police force under
its authority, thus ensuring clean
elections. But what is most
remarkable about Costa Rica is
that the 1948 constitution of the
country abolished the army. The
Nobel Peace Prize given to Presi­
dent Oscar Arias Sanchez caps a
long tradition of peace advocacy
by this nation.

Beyond the symbolic reso­
nance of the gesture, Costa Rica
has surely freed resources for
social services by so doing away
with the army. Again, Costa Ricans
are very proud of their social ser­
dices which include a highly
successful scheme of socialized
medicine, free education which
has helped achieve a literacy rate
of ninety three percent, and subsi­
dized housing for the poor. The
living standard may be modest by
our standards, but almost all Costa
Ricans seem to enjoy a very decent
minimum. In their deft combina­
tion of free market economy and
welfare goals, Costa Ricans seem
to enjoy the best of capitalism and
socialism. For instance, what are
regarded as necessities (staple
foods, etc.) are subsidized by the
government but what are deemed
luxuries (imported video equip­
ment and other paraphernalia of
a consumer society) are taxed
heavily. And in having done away
with the army, Costa Ricans have
also freed themselves from the
plague of military coups that rav­
age the Third World. One can
reasonably assume that Costa Rica
will never have a General Noriega.
Nor will it decimate itself in civil
strife between Sandinistas and
Contras. As I write this, I remem­
ber Paul Theroux’s warning to
travel writers. Theroux quotes
Nabakov from Laughter in the Dark
to suggest the kind of writing a
good travel writer must practice. A
character in Nobokov’s novel
remarks:

A writer for instance talks
about India which I have seen, and
gushes about dancing girls, tiger
hunts, fakirs, betel nuts, serpents: the
Glamour of the Mysterious East. But
what does it amount to? Nothing.
Instead of visualizing India, I merely
get a toothache from all these Eastern
delights. Now there’s the other way,
as for instance, the fellow who writes:
‘Before turning in I put out my wet
boots to dry and in the morning I
found that a thick blue forest had
grown on them...’ and at once India
becomes alive for me.

Perhaps, I have deserved frowns
from Mr. Theroux for this paean
to Costa Rica. Perhaps, to find out
what kind of growth the morning
will bring one must visit longer
than my five days and studiously
avoid the well-trod tourist ways.
For my version of the fungi I can
only offer what seemed like a curi­
ous officiousness of the staff at the
hotel pool, an attitude mildly
familiar from traveling in other
parts of the world where rules and
hierarchies count for more than
in the U.S. The hotel’s staff would
rather that I (and a few others)
did not swim in the pool if this
interfered with what they regard­
ed as more important activities.
Or perhaps there was too dedicat­
ed an effort to conserve the
beauty of this indoor pool set in a
lovely atrium. One day I could
not swim because a commercial
was going to be shot in the area.
Another day I could not swim because I would splash water on the floor and inconvenience those having a buffet lunch on tables around the pool. I may have discovered Costa Rica’s dark side if I had stayed longer but I don’t think so. It is hard not to admire a country which has no use for the army. Columbus named the place Costa Rica—the rich coast—because he assumed that there was mineral wealth here. The wealth of Costa Rica is a wealth of land, but very different from what the European empires lusted after. I bring home a memory of Rudy’s love for this land. And from now on, the rain forest will no longer be a mere concept, an intellectual abstraction. It is now a vivid reality, more vivid for having been seen and felt through Rudy’s eyes and soul. Indeed, I find that my new vision has been transferred even to the land in my backyard. Since coming back I have looked at the blue jay in the feeder and the splendid oak in the front with profounder wonder and respect. And as I see the dying aspen in the back, dying because in building our house we disturbed the delicate balance of its ecosystem, I am filled with a new sense of responsibility and caution about this land we humans inhabit together with other living things.

The Fear Is

The fear is, you’ll forget the words themselves. Syllables Will fall away like skin; you’ll forget the shape and texture of a word The way your mouth moves around it; the way a word feels.

Love, you try hard to forget, but the ache, It starts in your hands. In that air where he should be, Trace absence with one finger. Then practice forgetting.

Outside, the wind mispronounces your name. You wonder, Does he remember? Does he dream the shape your body made As you stood at the window in half-light to wait for morning,

Those days when time was a friend? Does he sleep In the memory of your arms? It’s cold out. The wind Has nothing new to tell you. Blow on the glass. Write his name

In your breath; let the air lift it from you. Swear that this will be The last time you take his letters from a drawer To run your fingers over the shape his voice made on the page.

Begin again. Let the vowels hum in your blood. Whisper The dark consonants of winter. You have come home. Ice on the river, the aspens trembling with snow. If the wind calls, pretend you don’t hear.

Lori Ambacher
The Triumph of the Swill
Jim Combs

One of the enduring myths of American nostalgics is the family dinner. In some halcyon time, the prototypical bourgeois family was brought together by the ritual of breaking bread at the same dinner hour daily, whereby authority was reasserted, morality taught, and family, nation and fried chicken blessed. The fundamental fabric of American society was held together by the gastro-intestinal bonds of familial bellies full of pot roast, mashed potatoes, and of course apple pie. Once the imperatives of the dinner table were broken, the crucial social unit of the family was dispersed, and our current moral and imperial decline well under way. In this view, our current fallen state stems not from the advent of rock’n’roll, the invention of the birth control pill, or the publication of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, but rather from the successful marketing of the TV dinner. It was indeed thirty-five years ago (in 1954) that Swanson introduced the “just heat and serve” dinners in a package that resembled a contemporary television set. Swanson ran TV ads showing women telling their teenage kids how easy it was to heat and eat, and then splitting from the horrors of the kitchen for some Eisenhower-prosperity shopping. Norman Rockwell’s familial-binding dinner was soon as dead as the flavor of the Quick Frozen Beef dinner or the Hungry Man Fried Chicken Dinner, and the trail of social destruction led to groups of guys watching TV sports and gulping down thoroughly deceased turkey and mashed potatoes embalmed in brown glue gravy, accompanied by hot cranberry mush. Frozen dinners have been given even more impetus to work their evil ways since the invention of the microwave oven, with sales in 1988 of over 2.6 billion dollars. The greatest danger to the family is not drugs or divorce, but rather the frozen chicken pot pie.

There is a related myth that is a persistent and popular gastronomic theory of culture. This is the notion that national greatness is related to diet. America, the argument goes, was a country built by people fueled on meat and potatoes, sausages and country ham and bourbon whiskey, venison and coffee, fried catfish and beans flavored with fatback. Once breakfast consisted of oat bran cereal and banana rather than steak and eggs, then our decline in national energy was foreordained. This theory suggests a high correlation between cholesterol and power, that a nation of executives who have abandoned the three-martini-power lunch for sushi and Perrier are letting the fires of greed run precariously low. (There is a glimmer of hope for those who adhere to this theory: Pepsi Cola recently announced that it will begin marketing “Pepsi A.M.,” a high-caffeine soft drink one can have with breakfast, and kids can get an energy-enhancing start with “Breakfast with Barbie,” a high-sugar cereal made in the shapes of pink and lavender stars, hearts, cars and B’s, firing them with the zeal to outdo their Japanese counterparts in world competition.)

One may find this theory of gastronomic empire wanting, however. Vegetarians used to argue that meat-eating cultures were made aggressive by their consumption of red meat, but
anthropologists generally remain skeptical. Japan, for example, has become a major force in the world on what most of us would consider a rather spartan diet.

It can just as easily be argued that the Japanese diet was such that there was no incentive to linger over dinner and get loggy with second helpings, freeing them up for more time at work. Perhaps the British Empire came into being for no other reason than the desire of British men for a decent meal, so they conquered India for its curries and invaded China for its stir-fries. If the British had tried to bring their native cuisine with them to inflict upon the colonized, they probably would have met much more resistance to their rule. French cuisine, by contrast, was much more welcome in the lands of their empire, and there is still great French cooking in Casablanca, Tahiti, and Hanoi.

American food is characteristically eclectic, and even though Europeans may look with disdain and even horror on our consumption of native staples such as corn on the cob, pit barbeque, and liver mush, there is much local food and drink worth tasting, from fried catfish and hushpuppies on the delta to the Tex-Mex delights of the border. But those who charge that Americans will eat anything have a point. Far too many of our countrymen and women seem willing to grant edible status to food and drink that is either indifferent or downright ghastly. We all may have had the experience of being in a restaurant in which the food (not to mention the service) was terrible, but we said nothing because no one else complained. And one doesn't have to confine this criticism to greasy spoons or the plastic “well-lighted places” of interstate fame. No doubt many readers can recall dining in an expensive restaurant in which the food was lousy, and your appetite spoiled by the price you paid for sitting among lots of plants, candles, and surly waiters expecting a fat tip. The trendy places haunted by upscale Eighties Yuppies might serve you up phyllo triangles filled with shrimp in a banana leaf resting on a twig tray garnished with dendrobium orchids, but leave you feeling that you were being had, and silently wishing for a bacon-cheeseburger with fries. Perhaps a fundamental class division in contemporary American life is that the rich will pay a great deal to eat next to nothing, and the rest of us will pay a much smaller sum to eat virtually anything.

And virtually anything brings us naturally, or perhaps unnaturally, to our willingness to eat junk food. Now it is true that defining exactly what constitutes junk food is difficult, since one man’s meat is another man’s poison. Some of us still feel great affection for the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches that sustained our youth, and a trek to a baseball game is incomplete without a hot dog and flat beer. But it is one thing to pig out occasionally on something you know isn’t particularly good for you (e.g. President Bush’s public declaration of a taste for pork rinds), and another to make such food a staple of your diet. The aforementioned after-school peanut butter and jelly sandwich is being replaced by microwaved prepackaged pizza puffs, chicken nuggets, and miniature cheeseburgers, much higher in fats, chemicals, and sodium. Despite the cautions of parents, school authorities, and dieticians, young people in America consume an astonishing variety of bad food, most of it in snacks; teenagers get about one-quarter of their caloric count from snacking. Such voracious eating can be controlled somewhat at home, but not away, so it is common to witness after-school teens in groups inhaling Whoppers and Whalers, onion rings and fries, Blizzards and shakes, Twinkies and Milk Duds, caramel corn and chili dogs—the list is endless. Although most outgrow such chow, others do not, retaining the habit of junk-feeding into adulthood. The child is father of the adult junk-food junkie, since the bulk of such grub is consumed by grown-ups, who then eventually must face the physical consequences of persistent bad diet.

Why then do people eat so much junk food? For kids, it may be a more tasty alternative to institutional food, which has the universal reputation (from school, camp, and military) of being nutritious but dreadful. How many kids have acquired a lifelong aversion to certain foods because of school lunch—spinach killed and then drowned in vinegar, navy and pinto beans turned into mush, hamburgers devoid of juice? I am told that the military still serves—no doubt as a gesture to sentimental tradition—the legendary “S.O.S.” (creamed chipped beef on toast) in the mess halls, sustaining the many restaurants that encircle bases everywhere. Junk food, universally available, becomes a way of releasing tension, rewarding oneself, fueling for the evening.
But I suspect there is something else going on with our taste for junk food in its many varieties. In the last decade, an entire industry has arisen peopled by experts who will accept pay to cure us of our addictions. The addiction industry is now a multi-billion dollar national addiction itself, with millions of smokers, drinkers, druggers, eaters, the ill-shapen and overweight, the phobic, depressed, or those with any other psychic malady all putting themselves under the care of various therapists who will rid them of their afflliction. The President may use the language of warfare in attacking the wretches on the bottom of society who sell and take drugs, but the more upscale are drawn to the language of therapy. Perhaps we are witnessing what Phillip Rieff called “the triumph of the therapeutic,” the belief that we can be redeemed and purified through the help of proper therapy. Thus there is an urge toward purification; we are told that salvation comes through the right diet, abstaining from intoxicants, losing weight and shaping up, quitting smoking, and so on. By lowering our cholesterol count, remaining sober, becoming thin and muscular, or freeing ourselves from our dark moods and fears, we achieve a state of personal grace. There is even, one fears, a social agenda that would drive bad habits out of the therapeutic Eden—no more happy hours, smoking in airplanes, steak on the menu, toleration for smoking joints. There are sophisticated folks around who have a high degree of tolerance for divorce, adultery, and sexual diversity, not to mention financial or legal chicanery, whose moral outrage and righteous indignation becomes feverish if someone lights up a cigar in a restaurant or bookstore.

For the professionals in the therapy industry, junk food becomes yet another addiction to be cured, part of the rather expansive notion the industry holds as to what constitutes addiction. Now it is true that legitimate and useful help for the truly addicted goes on in the therapy industry, and that drug addiction is a major social problem, but it does no good to expand the definition of addiction to include the fellow who has two martinis before dinner, the person who likes real mayonnaise, or the woman who smokes. Agendas of purification tend to stigmatize those who indulge in life’s familiar vices, making the martini-sipper indistinguishable from the alcoholic, moving the therapeutic perspective away from helping those who need help and toward attempts at social prohibition. Such people have been called the “new Puritans”: perhaps in the future we will be ruled by therapeutic saints, committed to “helping” us by driving the devils from our bodies and minds.

If it is the case that we are becoming a world ruled by the ideology of therapy, then eating junk food becomes a little act of rebellion against what officialdom deems good for us. Every gyro sandwich, chocolate milkshake, or smuggled Snickers bar becomes an antisocial act; for that matter, every bourbon and water before lunch becomes a blow struck for liberty, and every cigarette sneaked in the bathroom a gesture for personal choice. In a society obsessed with the denial of death, gulping a slice of deep dish pizza or a salted margarita is an act of existential defiance. If the therapeutic industry is the latest threat to freedom, then those who are bold enough to profess in public that they like sour cream and onion potato chips, bock beer, cigarettes—or even the despised Moon Pie—are upholding the highest traditions in the defense of civil liberties. Societies in the twenty-first century may be judged free according to the possibility of ordering bacon with your Denver omelet. The lower our cholesterol count, the more freedom we will have given up. The symbol chalked on walls by future underground liberation movements may well be the martini glass.

Meanwhile, we do live in a world characterized, as someone has put it, by the triumph of the will. The quality of what we eat corresponds to the quality of our political rhetoric and moral fiber. Perhaps there is an important sense in which we are what we eat, and real meaning in the phrase “they’ll swallow anything.” We don’t call them “junk bonds” for nothing.

For that reason perhaps those nostalgic for the family dinner are correct. Maybe what we need is a culinary event in our day given over to the cultivation of taste, in which we fight the junking of our lives by learning to savor, to live with care for what we do. Making every person a gourmet won’t guarantee better taste in politics or social relations, but if the body gets the idea that there is a difference between good and bad, maybe the mind will too. The movie Babette’s Feast reminds us that how we treat our stomachs affects our minds and hearts, and we probably need this reminder, and also some sort of feasts, to keep us whole. So Mom was right: you’ll feel better after a nice meal. Eat slowly, and chew your food well.

November, 1989

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When there are forty, or sixty, or eighty million cassette machines in use, a revolution will take place in the way Hollywood makes movies, and the kinds of movies it makes.

—Roger Ebert (1987)

There is more to film studies than the study of the moving image. Nevertheless, the merge is on.

—Bruce Kawin (1989)

Recently, a controversy has arisen at universities across the country concerning the ways in which students are taught about classic cinema in film studies programs. The conflict concerns a contention between two camps of scholars, disagreeing over the use of video in film courses. Given the growth of inventory, the popularity of the form, and the easy (as well as affordable) access to videotape copies of classic films throughout the last decade, just such a schism between preferred teaching methods within film studies departments for years has appeared inevitable and could have been anticipated.

At first, one’s initial instinct is to smile benignly and turn away as one often needs to do in the spirit of collegiality, treating this split between academic factions as merely another of the many tedious pedagogical squabbles or the numerous petty exercises by scholars which seem to characterize academic disciplines in any given school year. However, the nature of the discussion and the details about the contemporary state of filmmaking and movie viewership which serve as its context reveal a great deal about some of the more important forces now determining the form, style, and content of present and future films.

In fact, conversations by scholars concerned with the use of videos to teach film courses may not really be valuable in determining the apparent issue of film versus video, since the use of video in the near future by all but the very wealthy university film studies programs, for every practical and even some aesthetic reasons, seems all but a foregone conclusion to this debate. For most members of film studies, communications, or English departments, the continued use of film, whether it be a 35mm print or a 16mm acetate print, rather than video as a teaching tool is a lost cause. In the 1990s, any university which does not contain a video library as large or comprehensive as the local Blockbuster Video store will be doing its students a disservice, and any classroom which does not hold a television monitor and videocassette recorder will be as naked as one which does not have a mounted blackboard with chalk on its ledge. Under ideal circumstances our institutes of higher learning will start to understand what corporate America has already discovered: video is an under-utilized advanced educational aid. Just as many executives now insist on videocassette recorders as standard office equipment, so too will faculty members of the future.

The choice is clear for most universities offering film courses:
rather than spend $400 for each 16mm print of a film, which itself is inferior in quality to a theatre release, universities can use the same funds to buy up to 20 films on video and begin to develop a collection which would offer diversity and depth for the students. In addition, one can hardly dispute the fact that videocassettes allow easier reviewing of scenes both in the classroom and as part of homework assignments. Some film scholars contend that a film must be seen only on a full-sized theatre screen “as originally intended by its makers”—and one would not debate a preference for such an ideal situation; however, when watching film shorts originally intended for kinescopes, these same scholars do not insist on shrinking the image shown their students to that of a peep-show window accommodating only individual viewing. Soon, with the advent of High Definition Television (HDTV) and large-screen picture tubes, screen proportions will more accurately reflect the proportions of theatre releases, even eliminating the need for pan-and-scan copying of wide-screen feature films, and picture quality will, in a number of cases, be enhanced.

Instead of continuing debate over the use of film or video versions of movies, discussions concerning the advantages or disadvantages of film and video may be more important in allowing all to investigate the steady infiltration by video technology into the film industry and the audience acceptance of video as a more popular form for movie viewing. Nearly everyone would agree with remarks made recently by critics as varied as Roger Ebert, Vincent Canby, or Bruce Kawin, and echoed in a comment once spoken by Jack Valenti in his role as president of the Motion Picture Association of America:

“The life of the movie begins in a theater. No superior alternative has been found. In a comfortable theater, with its vast screen, with its sensual stereo sound, with unknown companions of a single night sitting together under a darkened canopy, the laughter comes more readily, tears flow with less restraint, suspense is more grasping and romance more yielding. The theater is more than a place to watch a movie. It is a social gathering, a conclave of people who resist being umbilically connected every night to a box in their living room or den.

Nevertheless, Jack Valenti apparently does not watch many films in a typical theatre found in most American communities. If he were to visit one of the multiplex theatres so prevalent today, he might find that, far from being comfortable, the theatres are packed with small seats which afford little leg-room, and whatever leg-room exists is covered with some glue-like substance that sticks to the bottom of one’s shoes; that the screen is no longer vast, but compressed to make room for other adjoining screening rooms whose soundtracks often penetrate the walls and interfere with the film in the next-door theatre; that those “unknown companions” to whom he so fondly refers are, in many cases, better off left unknown, and, unfortunately, in some cases too noisy to remain so.

Ironically, in his description of the theatre experience, and in his argument against the viewing of home videos as an alternative, Valenti, like those who express preference for film rather than video in the classroom (although one knows the experience in the classroom is often not much better than that at the local theatre, and due to the use of old 16mm prints sometimes worse), has described even more clearly a romantic, nostalgic memory of movie theatres as they once were for most Americans, a memory the loss of which is lamented and cited by most owners of videocassette recorders as one of the primary reasons for watching films at home.

At first, the Hollywood studios did not know what to make of the popularity of the videocassette recorder in the 1980s. The initial reaction by the members of the film industry was similar to that expressed when cable television was introduced to the American public. This recent innovation was viewed in the same light as network television of the 1950s was seen: a competitor which could spell the doom for movie-making in general and the film theatres in particular. But gradually most filmmakers today have accepted the presence of the videocassette, and some even recognize the domineering position home-viewing has assumed. Director John Sayles (Return of the Secaucus Seven, Baby, It’s You, Matewan, and Eight Men Out) has stated that perhaps “it’s better to view a film in a theater; that’s what it’s shot for. But to reach people, it’s good the VCR is out there. I see first-run theaters as becoming the ‘loss leaders’ for the VCR, like hard-cover books for the paperback industry or a tuna special for a grocery store.” Paul Schrader, the director of American Gigolo, Mishima, Blue Collar, Hardcore, Cat People, and the writer of Taxi Driver among others, goes even further in declaring “The times they are a changin’. We should ride the technical and social evolution and speak to the medium most preferred. If the dinosaurs don’t like it, too bad for them.”

Hollywood, which for a long time lobbied against the videocas-
sette recorders on the assumption that they would signal the demise of the film industry, has now begun to realize that, like cable television, against which the Motion Picture Association of America originally lobbied as well, videocassettes have proven not to be a threat, but a blessing. In 1980, studio receipts for theatre ticket sales and movie videocassettes totalled $1.3 billion; however, videocassettes accounted for less than $200 million. By 1984, the industry's revenues had climbed to 2.4 billion, with videocassettes responsible for $800 million. In 1985, the U.S. income for film studios reached $3 billion, and cassette sales represented half, or $1.5 billion. Ever since 1986, the film industry has made more money from videocassettes than from movie theatre ticket sales. As this article is being prepared, word has arrived indicating that the pre-release sales figures reflected by orders for the Who Framed Roger Rabbit? videocassette have already surpassed its box-office receipts, thus making it the first contemporary blockbuster hit to do so.

Harold Vogel, a Merrill Lynch analyst, has reported that "without the cassette, it would be bankruptcy time for some studios." And when one includes the income generated from contracts with television stations, it is not hard to understand that the rise or fall of the film industry no longer lies on the big, but continually shrinking, silver screens at the neighborhood theatres; instead, the future of the film industry, as well as the future direction of films, is being shaped by the small, though ever-enlarging, black screens in the living rooms of America.

The most convincing signal that American film studios have accepted the videocassette as an integral element in the future of film is the proposal by some Hollywood executives that the studios move toward establishing their own chains of videocassette rental franchises. Cox Cable Communications, a subsidiary of Cox Enterprises which owns eight television stations, has already bought up a significant share of Blockbuster Entertainment, which now boasts nearly 1,000 stores in its chain. Additionally, it is not surprising to discover the financial connections between the commercial networks or cable stations and movie studios. Already, ABC, WOR, WTBS, TNT, HBO, Cinemax, Showtime, The Movie Channel, and Metromedia have all merged with major film studios. Of course, this has led some critics to comment that the film industry is in danger of becoming nothing more than a glamorized, higher-priced version of commercial American television. In fact, television and videocassettes have often been targeted by critics as causes for a perceived decline of quality Hollywood filmmaking.

Pulitzer Prize-winner Ron Powers has referred to this decline as "the aesthetic corruption of the American movie." Powers has pointed to a number of factors which contribute to this apparent decline. Among these factors he has included the influence of television, especially the influence of MTV, which has caused a number of non-narrative film structures. Powers proposes that this state of American filmmaking is "the most compelling concern to film critics." And, indeed, Ron Powers is not alone in this opinion. Many of our finest film critics, including David Denby, Tom Shales, and Kenneth Turan, have concurred with the evaluation of the film industry as put forth by Powers. They have all expressed in various impassioned essays an anxiety over the so-called "defilement of American movies." However, the truth is that American filmmaking is in a stronger position than ever before, and the sources of its strength can be discovered in a few of the most unexpected places, including the incorporation of video and television techniques into the film industry.

A major cause for the increased output of independent films in recent years is the explosion of the videocassette market in America. As the 1990s begin, it is believed, nearly every household with a television set soon will also have a videocassette recorder. Some journals have already labelled the 1980s as the decade of the VCR revolution. Explanation for this movement toward home-viewing of films is not difficult. Acceptance of this trend toward video has been slow in the film industry and even slower in the teaching community. Consequences for the art of film-making and the health of the film industry are debatable, but indications of positive directions have begun to appear.

The most obvious effect demonstrated by statistics and surveys is that there is now a larger audience for feature films. Those people who are unable to attend films at theatres (96 percent of nursing homes in the U.S. show movies on large screen televisions) or who have schedules which conflict with normal movie timetables are now watching more films. Those who find theatres uncomfortable, and might even have stopped visiting movie theatres, are now viewing films at home. Also, because of the economical aspect of video rentals, more viewers are willing to take a chance on an unknown entity and rent films which they would be more reluc-
tant to pay $5-$7 per ticket to see a theatre. Many American families also find it more economical to rent a videocassette than to attend a movie theatre. The average evening’s expense for a family of four at a movie theatre (including tickets, popcorn, and refreshments) is $30-$40. The same family could rent a cassette for as little as 99 cents, or get one free at the local library, and in addition get fresher popcorn from their own microwave.

Certainly a part of the crowd at the rental counter includes those whose preference is for films other than those which dominate the neighborhood theatres. Likewise, people who live outside of the urban areas of America are now being exposed to mature domestic and foreign films which have seldom in the past circulated beyond the boundaries of the larger cities. Therefore, the availability of videocassettes is creating a more educated audience for film. Exposure to more, and more diverse, films has made the average movie viewer more able to tell the good from the bad, to distinguish between mindless entertainment and social analysis; although, admittedly, as with all other art forms, we still have far to go before we can say that the majority will always opt for substance over surface. Nevertheless, the popularity of the various “at the movies” film-review shows (one of which has recently turned its concentration away from current theatre fare and toward discussion of new video releases) appearing on television each week seems to be evidence of a desire by the public to make critical judgments, even if these shows, for the most part, do offer somewhat superficial statements about filmmaking. Also, the demography of those who watch videos is different from that of the average moviegoers. In most areas of the country, the home audience tends to be older, more sophisticated, more knowledgeable. Consequently, a demand has been created for more serious, character-study films and films which make social or political statements.

Because of the greater guarantee of returns from video sales and cable television fees in addition to theatre receipts, producers are taking more risks and backing films which do not fit any of the commercial formulas formerly followed by studios. Most importantly, the number of feature films released has increased dramatically since videocassettes have gained stature. In the last few years the number of feature films released in the United States has nearly doubled. Independent filmmakers, many bringing non-traditional perspectives to the screen, like David Mamet, Jim Jarmusch, Jamie Uys, John Sayles, Euzhan Palcy, Spike Lee, and Steven Soderbergh, are able to get their films made more easily because of the increased demand. Films such as Soderbergh’s Sex, Lies, and Videotape, the surprise winner of the Palme d’or at this year’s Cannes Film Festival and Errol Morris’s The Thin Blue Line, last year’s cause celebre, offer evidence of the positive effects of this movement. In fact, by pre-selling VCR, cable, and foreign rights, some moviemakers are competing against the entire production budgets without having to turn to anyone else. Even established actors and actresses like Martin Sheen, Gene Hackman, Glenn Close, Faye Dunaway, Jeremy Irons, William Hurt, James Woods, and others are willing to take greater risks. Marlon Brando’s appearance without pay in Palcy’s A Dry White Season, his first role on the screen in nearly ten years, is the most explicit example of this film year.

Vintage films, such as the Hitchcock classics or Bogart movies, are being released as well, and sold at prices which, along with the prices of other films on videocassette (some of which are now available for as little as $9.95), have plummeted and show signs of dropping even further. Therefore, no longer are films seen as temporary forms of entertainment to be viewed a second time only when and if they appear as a late-night filler on television. Film libraries are cropping up all across the nation (nearly 70 percent of U.S. public libraries contain video collections and more are being added every day), and film is more readily regarded as a timeless art form to be taken seriously as well as one which might now be a rival for another mainstay of our local libraries which had a difficult time gaining acceptance when first introduced, the novel. The National Film Registry, created by Congress in 1988 to promote film preservation, has recently declared its first list of 25 classic films as “an enduring part of our national cultural heritage.” Ironically, though, most viewers will encounter these historic films, such as Gone with the Wind, The Grapes of Wrath, Casablanca, On the Waterfront, Singin’ in the Rain, and Mr. Smith Goes to Washington, through video viewing. This is a fact many film scholars apparently refuse to acknowledge or accommodate.

Many viewers appreciate the newly discovered controls offered by videocassette recorders: the ability to watch any film, regardless of its date of release or popularity, at any time of day or night, to pause or replay whenever desired, to regulate children’s

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Likewise, film directors are starting to experience the advantages of video. Directors use video monitors for framing and blocking scenes, and some directors already freely admit that movies in the future, like most contemporary documentaries, will eventually be produced directly on videotape. These filmmakers are also often creating films more suitable for video viewing, realizing most of their audience will be encountering the works, especially those which appeal to the more mature viewers, in that form. In addition, although the thought bothers some film scholars, many of the younger, promising filmmakers are rising from the ranks of television, even from the world of MTV where experimentation with video presents a positive portent for the future of filmmaking and where quite a few of Hollywood's better directors have turned occasionally for creative renewal. One might even suggest that MTV should be credited for popularizing various techniques, such as the continual experimentation with quick-cutting, the exaggerated use of color filters, and the effective employment of contemporary soundtracks, associated with the changing styles of film in the last decade. MTV has also contributed to the evolution and renewed popularity of the musical, albeit far removed from the traditional sense of musical established early in the 1950s, in such 1980s films as Footloose, Flashdance, and Dirty Dancing. Another constructive side-effect of MTV may eventually be a renewed interest among younger audiences in the black-and-white format: a recent viewing of the top 100 videos on MTV reveals that nearly half are either completely or partially black-and-white productions.

The roster of television actors and writers who have moved over to direct films increases regularly. It now includes former television writers Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner, Woody Allen, James L. Brooks, and Gary David Goldberg, as well as television actors Clint Eastwood, Leonard Nimoy, Penny Marshall, Danny DeVito, Eddie Murphy, Rob Reiner, and Ron Howard. In fact, two of this summer's most popular films, When Harry Met Sally (directed by Rob Reiner) and Parenthood (directed by Ron Howard), clearly exemplify the amalgamation of elements from television and film. Having learned their craft while television actors, these directors, like those other emigres from television to film (most notably Woody Allen, Mel Brooks, and James L. Brooks), present their stories in episodic form and rely, perhaps too heavily yet, on the assumption that complex matters can be quickly simplified for a more general audience while providing, in most cases, a happy ending. Indeed, it is not surprising to see that both of these films owe a great debt to the influential films of Woody Allen, obviously a model for those aspiring to make the transition from television to film. When Harry Met Sally clearly is a reinterpretation of the sort of romantic relationships explored in Allen's Manhattan and Annie Hall. In fact, a number of the episodes in Reiner's film, to put it kindly, eerily echo sections of Allen's films. Also, the family structure and the organization of plot in Parenthood plainly resemble those in Allen's Hannah and Her Sisters.

The production of these films, the overwhelmingly warm response from audiences, and the pleasant reception from most film critics are all indications of the extent to which television infiltration into feature films is now accepted as commonplace. A movement toward a reconsideration of the connections between forms of the moving image is occurring, as evidenced by the recent dedication of the American Museum of the Moving Image in New York City. Perhaps, as Bruce Kawin has suggested, "the merge is on": film and video are beginning to be viewed not as totally separate entities. Although Kawin and other academic film scholars are disturbed that "the distinction between film and video could become historical rather than so disconcertingly ontological," the reality of the matter is that for nearly all films, including classic features, the historical distinction will eventually be the overriding one. As the boundaries between cinema and television, all lines between film and video, fade away, and fresh alliances are established, a new era which might accurately be labelled "cinevision" is beginning to approach. ❑
James Madison deserves much of the credit for designing America's distinctive contribution to the practice of governing: an institutionalized federalism and separation of powers. Specialization among branches and layers of government enhances the rivalry of interests that often keeps governments, and some other organizations, too weak to abuse rights. Less ideological than, say, Alexander Hamilton or Thomas Jefferson, Madison sought to answer the basic question of liberal political theory: How can governmental neutrality in pursuit of the public interest be maintained, in the face of conflicting private claims? How, in other words, could government be kept at arm's length from both Hamilton's special interests of business and the threats to property posed by Jeffersonian Democrats?

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would work by spawning effective challengers on both sides of a public issue. He could not foresee the organizational and technological imperatives that would operate to favor corporations and other organizations over the unorganized and unorganizable segments of the public. Enhancing power and profit through a hierarchical organization, many corporations and their non-corporate imitators came to dominate American politics over the years. Such groups have a mercurial power to influence and even veto particular public policies: animal rights groups versus corporations using animals to test products, for example. Madison's worst fears, of John C. Calhoun's government by concurrent majorities or of what we would now call the corporate state or fascism, have not been realized. But our political system cannot operate unless it purchases, through "pork barrel" allocations of subsidies and other privileges, the acquiescence of each interest group capable of vetoing a program.

Needless to say, such groups have no right to pork from "our" pork barrel, since their powers have not been explicitly surrendered by the broader public. These groups thus cannot be held directly accountable through the "regular vote" Federalist No. 10 proposed as the main remedy for abuse; we can get at the Tobacco Institute only by working against the reelection of Jesse Helms. Tobacco farmers thus receive record subsidies, even as the Surgeon General enjoins us to quit smoking. Probably because he tried to leave an open framework for future politics, Madison did not define what amounts to an abuse and who gets to declare and punish particular abuses. This amounted to storing up trouble for the future, since these issues provoke much of the controversy in contemporary statutes, court decisions, and assertions of executive branch authority.

Madison also failed to discover how special interests could be kept in check by a government that in no small measure derives its power from their support. Some groups were given a check on government power, but government was given few relative checks on group power. As a result, government power is fragmented, difficult to mobilize, slow to act, inefficient and even corrupt. Madison's scheme was thus regularly set aside during the twentieth century, to deal with crises like wars and recessions and to entrench a policymaking process that often joins legislative committees, administrative agencies, and organized clienteles in symbiotic relationships. This process sets a cynical tone for our politics, and it spawns vague, unimaginative, unsupported, and unsupportable policies.

It seems that the time has come to reinvigorate the Madisonian ideal, the brilliant scheme that staggers under the weight of a long history of opportunistic behavior. The easiest remedy in theory may be the most difficult in practice: political leadership. Effective leaders like F.D.R. are able to forge a consensus over the heads of the special interests, but presidents are not masters of their own souls these days. Compare F.D.R. with George Bush. Political mercenaries now package candidates and officials so as to appeal to as many interest groups as possible. Potential leaders (the Lutheran Paul Simon, for example) are distrustful; by actually standing for some things and against others, a leader may alienate some potential veto group.

The calculatedly bland "personality" that gets chosen—Bush or Dukakis, take your pick as, unfortunately, you recently had to do—is a poor substitute for concrete policies which pursue the public interest. Bush's latest waffling over chemical weapons is an example of a leader unable or unwilling to lead, but eager to make a series of sound bite statements in the least politically damaging cause.

So long as we are willing to vote for mere personalities, we are unlikely to get leaders. This cult of personality has weakened political parties, which used to refine or ignore special interest goals while offering up a more serious menu of policy options and mobilizing (rather than tranquillizing) public opinion. Parties are a mixed blessing, of course, but they did serve as buffers between politicians and special interests and they did offer a modest electoral accountability. Many in the media have played along with the political mercenaries by lapsing into a People magazine coverage of politics. If effective checks and balances are to be found, they apparently must be found within government, although investigative journalists may uncover some of the more bizarre machinations by special interests.

In the twentieth century, federalism as a check on the special interests has rather consistently given way to the imperative of centralization: the thorough and uniform implementation of a wise or stupid policy by the federal government. The much-touted New Federalisms of Nixon, Reagan, and the Supreme Court under Chief Justice Burger have clearly failed to reorganize governmental functions in a more financially and administratively
rational way. The economist George Stigler has long recommended a useful precept: each policy task should be assigned to the lowest level and branch of government capable of doing a competent job. Government units competing for public evaluations of their competence would presumably be more immune to the blandishments of special interests. An ad hoc citizens' coalition can often swing a few votes and defeat a special interest which spreads itself too thin at the local level. But at the national level, the finances and organizational skills of some special interests make them nearly invincible on their chosen turf. Special interests occasionally engage each other in epic national battles but, as pro-choice versus right-to-life struggles demonstrate, public policy and uncommitted citizens are frequently not enlightened by the outcomes.

Congress has had its crises of competence, most notably over Vietnam and Watergate, and these have prompted modest efforts at reform. Many such reforms were attempts to compete more effectively with the executive branch. In particular, Congress seeks to control "experts" in the executive branch who form their own special interest groups to give us nuclear power, weapons systems which do not work, GIA frolics, and other expensive disasters. But some other congressional reforms seemed to aim at reducing the power of a wider variety of special interests. Unfortunately, these reforms were gutted by the Supreme Court.

In theory at least, courts are bulwarks against the special interests. Providing a measure of representation to the underrepresented, courts can give special interest blandishments a more penetrating scrutiny under procedures which emphasize citizen rights. These rights frequently get lost elsewhere in the governmental shuffle. Unfortunately, the Supreme Court now seems to be moving away from its balance of power functions among special interest groups, moving in ways which go beyond the scope of this article. In any event, it is often difficult to distinguish special interest from public interest behavior in the various branches and layers of government. Special interests will spend up to $99.99 for each $100 worth of governmental largesse received. Such expenditures frequently take the form of "public relations" portrayals of the group's zealous public service. In states where they are well organized, optometrists protect your eyes through statutes requiring an optometrist's prescription before glasses can be fitted.

The Supreme Court made a good beginning in Baker v. Carr (1962). This case held that state legislatures could not draw their electoral districts in ways that "debased" the votes of residents of the more populous districts. Many thought that the "one person, one vote" ethos of Baker could be expanded into a careful handicapping of interest group horseraces, so that each group's influence more closely approximates its real stake in the broader public interest. But these hopes were dashed by Buckley v. Valeo (1976). After Watergate, Congress had amended the Campaign Finance Act to curb some abuses, most notably the influence special interest contributors exert on politicians. In Buckley, the Supreme Court upheld the Act's restrictions on campaign contributions, but its restrictions on expenditures by or on behalf of a candidate were deemed unconstitutional infringements of the right of free speech.

It scarcely needs saying that contributions versus expenditures is a distinction without a difference, and the courts have struggled with it ever since Buckley. In a 1982 case, the Supreme Court observed that governments have a legitimate interest in preventing the "substantial aggregations of wealth amassed by the special advantages which go with the corporate form of organization," from being converted into "political war chests" which could be used to incur political debts from legislators who are aided by the contributions." Despite this apparent enlightenment, from (then) Justice Rehnquist no less, the Court in 1985 struck down a $1,000 statutory limit on political action committee (PAC) contributions to presidential campaigns.

President Bush has chosen to take up the cudgel of election finance reform and, by the time you read this article, Congress may be considering the legislation he proposes. He reportedly seeks the elimination of 90 percent of PACs, those supported by corporations, trade associations, and unions. This step is of dubious constitutionality, and these PACs would likely reorganize as the ideological or single-issue PAGs that would continue to exist. The contribution (but probably not the expenditure) limit on the latter PACs would be reduced from $5,000 to $2,500 per candidate, and political parties would presumably be revitalized by a doubling of their campaign expenditure limits. Critics immediately labelled Bush's proposals partisan attempts to weaken the power of the largely Democratic incumbents, and to help largely Republican challengers who, historically, have
been able to command more non-PAC contributions from special interests.

Any such attempt to control opportunistic behavior will, of course, both embody and provoke precisely the kind of behavior it seeks to control. This is where self-love, fallible reason, an unequal distribution of property, and Madison's attempts to control these facts of life, inevitably lead. Loosely translated, the motto of the Florentine Medici was: "Get the wealth to acquire power and use the power to protect the wealth." This is what the special interests do; aided by the organizational and computer revolutions, many of them act like Medici in their own little satrapies. (PACs maintain computerized lists and grind out personalized letters which elicit a great deal of money from ideological bedfellows.) Unless something is done, the rest of us will be left to organize, join Common Cause, or perish politically.

To be true to their Madisonian heritage, courts and other branches of government must come to see that the right to organize is not the right to see your self-interest prevail over the public interest. The Constitution does not guarantee that free speech and political association can be made effective through an organizationally-enhanced power. As Madison assumed, the means and ends of organizations can be freely regulated within broad limits since, unlike individuals, organizations are creatures of the State and its laws. Incorporation, for example, confers immense benefits on the incorporators, who are free to choose other means of conducting business if they do not like the attendant regulations. If citizens do not insist on effective regulation of the special interests, they will come to deserve their voicelessness.

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The frogs have got no reason to be proud,
And still they are proud.
Though swampy-green and speckled, flecked and muddy,
They are unashamed and loud.

The frogs have every reason to be sorry.
What a raucous caucus.
How little they have done.
But you never see them worry.

Their pond keeps to the mist,
But they do not doubt their place.
They stare unfazed at dawn.
They do not hide their faces.

It's one way to be strong:
To make a joyful din,
To live upon a mirror
And never once look in.

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