Is Modernism Dead? Fashions in Thought
The Wizard of Ozick and T.S. Eliot
Do We Need More Cells? Why?
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Above: Morris Graves, American b. 1910, Minnow #644, 1967, tempera, 7 1/2 by 7 inches. Sloan Fund purchase, 74.1


These three pictures are in the Sloan Collection of American Paintings, the Valparaiso University Museum of Art.
The Man with the Eggs

Over the past several weeks we have all heard, in different versions, statements about "seeing history being made on television." Most of these that I am aware of concerned Romania, the revolution that some people watched being broadcast, hour by hour, as it was happening. Is the government toppling? Was Ceausescu caught at the border? Has his helicopter been turned back? Don't touch that dial!

When the pictures of the dead man were broadcast, we were kept informed that this grim image was being promulgated very purposefully in the country he had so long dominated; it would show his supporters that there was no use in their continuing to fight on his behalf. The picture would convince them that they should lay down their arms; the revolution was over. Spokespersons for the Salvation Council said that the broadcasting of the picture was a benevolent action to prevent more bloodshed than was absolutely necessary, and shorten the time of upheaval and fighting. Perhaps indeed that is how it worked.

Seeing the pictures from here, though, provoked other responses, and raised more doubts about television as a conveyer of truth, or even meaning. Rather than think more about the picture of the dead Ceausescu (does anyone else remember when he was Nixon's favorite East European leader?), it would be as well to concentrate on a less provocative one, a very ordinary news picture, which manages in all its ordinariness to confound attempts to understand it, or to make it have meaning. On one of the mornings around Christmas, the Today Show, reporting on the events, contained a story about "conditions" in Romania. They were, the voice of Deborah Norville said, "harsh." Most people lived in difficult circumstances, "often without running water or electricity, and experienced frequent shortages of food, which was often rationed."

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Now, instead of looking at Deborah Norville, with a box above her shoulder containing a map of Romania and a flag, or a ballot box, or a machine gun, or some other graphic indicator of a country with explosive troubles involving its degree of democracy, we had a full-screen picture of some people standing in line in front of a building. It was quite a big group, maybe we could see fifty people, men and women, holding baskets and shopping bags. The women had purses over their arms, and some had kerchiefs over their hair. They were wearing overcoats, and hats, and scarves, and gloves, and they were talking to each other, and occasionally looking at the camera which was allowing us to look at them. It looked cold, but they didn't seem to be suffering from cold, just standing about in it, in a patient sort of way. They didn't look beaten down, though, or any more passive than any group of people standing in a line where everyone has agreed to stand. Nor did they look exuberant, or victorious, or relieved, or frightened. They were just standing in a line.

But the voice was telling us that their circumstances were harsh, and their access to food limited. As the voice said that food was often rationed, a man came out of the door that was the destination of the line. He was wearing a dark overcoat, and carrying what looked like a double pallet of eggs. When I thought about it later, and tried to remember exactly what it looked like, I would have said it looked like about eight dozen eggs in two layers. He was smiling, and he walked toward the camera for a few seconds, and then out of range, and suddenly we were looking at Deborah again, who was saying something about watching events closely during the coming days.

What struck me, and this is certainly not a new thing to say about television news, was how little I knew about what I had just seen. Just as a starting point, for how many people was the man getting eggs? for how long a period? Since it was more eggs than I have ever
carried on one occasion, I was curious to know this, since a man carrying a lot of eggs while a voice is telling you that food is scarce for this man presents a puzzle. But there was no way I could find out the answers to my questions. I was further curious about what the people who had taken the pictures and got them onto the broadcast thought I would understand about the picture. What information was I supposed to be getting? What was the meaning of what I had seen?

Given that I could trust that this actually was a picture of Romania, and not downtown Hammond (and with dramatizations, even that is a shaky given at the present time) what is accomplished by presenting a large population with information of this kind? It has told me almost nothing, but asks me to believe that I have been informed. Notice all the passives in that construction: nobody is doing the informing. Even I know that Deborah Norville, who may be a nice young woman, and even competent, since she can speak and listen to somebody talk into her ear at the same time, had little to do with putting together the pictures and the words she read. The more I thought about it, the more frustrated I became, and the more the man with the eggs bothered me.

We may indeed be living in a time when there is so much to know that most of us can hope to manage only a little of it. But somehow there must be ways that the medium of television can develop to tell us more about what we are seeing. If there had been a line across the bottom of the screen saying, "The average Romanian is allowed two eggs per week, but the new regime has determined that from now on, it is first come, first served with eggs," or "This man is director of an orphanage, and has come to collect the month's ration of eggs for twenty-seven children," I would have known how to see the image better.

Some people do not worry about this, I know. But some people are not driven by the desire to understand what they perceive. The mail this week brought a large packet from some churchly people who want television to conform more closely to their ideas of morality; they asked for product boycotts of those advertisers who continue to sponsor programs where sexual looseness and violence encourage a dangerously casual attitude toward human behavior. I didn't send in my dollars, but I admire the way these people demand something of the medium that plays such a big part in the way we all see the world. I wish there were an organization dedicated to pressuring the networks to help us understand what they put on the screen. They'd get a few dollars from me.

About this Issue

The coincidence of the exhibit "Modernism, Realism and Mysticism," the accompanying lecture by Theodore Wolff, with the appearance in the November 20th New Yorker of an important piece of literary and cultural reassessment by critic Cynthia Ozick was too good a coincidence to let pass unnoticed. The editor, excited by the article on T.S. Eliot, handed it round to colleagues, expecting concurring cries of pleasure. That is not what happened, as you will read in these pages. Ozick observes Eliot's anniversary with a number of emotions, but awe is not one of them, and her critics in this issue believe that her own tone borders on the priestly, if not the sententious. Bitter, some called it, though it had not struck me that way. The article describes or at least alludes to her sense of what it was to have been a young academic in the heyday of big fellowships and a certainty about the unassailable reality of high culture—bliss was it then to be alive, I believe someone has put it. If modernism was part of the package, it did not always seem to us to have been too high a price to pay for the exhilaration of wearing what Ozick refers to as a "golden cape." For young Christian scholars, Eliot was a sign that you could have it all—modern culture and orthodox religious belief. Now, it appears, modernism may have been a phase, and we can look at it with the amused looks that world-weary grownups reserve for observing children's games.

At any rate, how we look at modernism is a focus of this issue, and several paintings and prints from the University's collections help us to look. Mr. Wolff generously responded to written questions, and the article which accompanies the pictures, and refers to the subjects of his lecture, was compiled by the editor from his responses.

Peace,
GME
OBITUARIES OF MODERNISM

William R. Olmsted

Thinking about modernism as something hard to define except by way of contestable examples and imprecise dates, I asked myself a question that seems to be getting asked frequently these days: is modernism dead? And another question came along: does it matter? For the sake of argument let's admit that something called modernism, rather like the somethings called dragons, probably existed and is now probably dead. I choose the dragon analogy deliberately, because modernism may not have existed; or at least, modernism may not have been what we thought it was when it was still around. That is, if it was what it was when it was around, if it was around. But we will ignore the issues that call for facts. Setting aside the truth about modernism has many advantages. We can avoid the spiteful pastimes of literary scholars like Arthur Lovejoy, who discriminated seventeen (or was it seventy?) distinct meanings for the term "romanticism." We can also avoid the ostracizing strategies of cultural arbiters like O. B. Hardison, Jr., whose recent book attempts to distinguish a brief, irrational "modernism" in the early part of the century from an essential "modernity" that characterizes the boldest innovators and visionaries of our time. Our modernism, by contrast, will begin wherever we like and end just as we please. Our modernism will be a game or a dream or a playful construction whose existence needs no proving and excludes no other versions.

So I will suppose that modernism is dead, provisionally and fantastically dead, at least as dead as "the penultimate," in the phrase that Mallarmé kept repeating obsessively, "is dead." But Mallarmé is too French, too obscure to serve as an epigraphical anchor for my excursion into the corpse of modernity. Under the circumstances, a German-language author is preferable. Thus Kafka comes to mind and, specifically, his meditation on the difficulties of communication between beings separated in time, space, status and existence. The Emperor of the Sun has, on his deathbed, committed to his most powerful and tireless messenger a message for you and you alone. Yet the messenger's efforts are blocked by the crowds filling the many courtyards and chambers of the imperial palace; it would take him thousands of years to penetrate the throng. And were that possible, Kafka concludes, the messenger would still have the capital city before him, the center of the world, overflowing with the dregs of humanity. No one can force a way through that, least of all with a message from a dead man.—But you sit by your window and dream it all true, when evening falls.

Religion, history, politics, language, psychology all find themselves caught on the dilemma so concisely figured by Kafka: the message from unimpeachable authority no longer reaches us, but we remain obsessed by the fantasy that the word is still on its way. If only "the dregs of humanity" could be forced aside!

The Germanic moderns especially seem to have conceived their situation as a power struggle between the higher and the lower, the parental and the infantile, the civilized and the barbarous. Nietzsche's contempt for the all-too-human, Freud's insufficiently careful comparison of neurotics and children to preliterate peoples, Heidegger's wishful opposition of "the inner truth and greatness" of National Socialism to the "dreary technological frenzy" of Russia and America (see An Introduction to Metaphysics, 31, 37, 166) reflect a

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shared concern over the dangers posed by the undifferentiated masses, the chaotic forces of the id, the sudden "pre-eminence of the mediocre." If it is the Germanic thinkers who gave the most compelling versions of the crisis-scenario so indispensable to modernism, other nationalities made similar contributions. Ortega y Gasset, Paul Valéry, Gabriele D'Annunzio, Knut Hamsun, Kipling and Eliot—in accents now imperialistic, racist, classist, militaristic, populist and/or antidemocratic—all warned their readers of the incipient doom of the West. What a peculiar irony, given the negativism of so much of early modernism, to find Suzi Gablik introducing her recent study Has Modernism Failed? in this way:

The loss of art's moral authority—that authority which, in a more enclosed social framework than ours, normally achieves legitimacy through its roots in tradition—is ultimately the true subject of all these essays.

As my list of exemplary pessimists should suggest, the loss of some kind of authority was perhaps the most widely disseminated theme of modernism's founding intellects. Gablik wrongly assumes that modernism is somehow responsible for the deracination of "tradition" and "legitimacy" and "moral authority." On the contrary, modernism begins with the courageous recognition that these losses are its inheritance, its true legacy from the recent past. In order to anticipate the consequences of modernism's death, we need to understand just what has died.

That this is no easy task becomes apparent after reading Cynthia Ozick's essay on the situation of Eliot at 101. Ozick, although writing for the centrist New Yorker magazine (20 November 89) instead of a conservative journal like The New Criterion in which much of Gablik's book first appeared, aired kindred ideas while discussing the demise of T. S. Eliot as literary icon (or literary dictator, as Delmore Schwartz once characterized him.) Ozick notes the boredom that accompanied the celebrations of the centenary of Eliot's birth, comments on the recent biographical indications of the true sources of the early poetry (domestic squabbles with his first wife), points out the antisemitism and religious intolerance of "Tom" and concludes:

High art is dead. The passion for inheritance is dead. Tradition is equated with obscurantism. The wall that divided serious high culture from the popular arts is breached; anything can count as "text"...a poem like "The Waste Land," mourning the loss of an integral tradition, is for us inconceivable.

Ozick here commits the common error of regarding "The Waste Land" as a poetic variant of Eliot's stodgier pronouncements on the value of tradition. Ozick is so busy making Eliot into a representative of reactionary nostalgia and snobbery that she ignores the real achievement of the poem in its time.

No other poem established with greater force and clarity the truths which Ozick finds just now disclosed by Eliot's current unpopularity. High art is dead, traditions are obscured, the vulgar music of the phonograph is confused with Handel, the absent "texts" of urban litter are invoked ("The river bears no empty bottles, sandwich papers,") and the loss of that neoconservative phantasm, the "integral tradition," is accepted as the precondition for individual heroism:

My friend, blood shaking my heart
The awful daring of a moment's surrender
Which an age of prudence can never retract
By this, and this only, have we existed...

But Eliot was a bad man, unfair to friends and lovers, bigoted, silly, arrogant and with the extraordinary misfortune of having been worshipped idolatrously by a generation of American academicians. Ozick accepts the current puritanism which, in politics as well as culture, demands that our heroes and heroines be monogamous, heterosexual, drug-free people who never laughed when their dog ate peanut butter. She also advances the notion that the discrediting of Eliot is equivalent to the dismissal of the high art he aspired to incarnate. "It is now our unsparing obligation," Ozick intones, "to disclaim the reactionary Eliot. What we will go on missing forever is that golden cape of our youth, the power and prestige of high art." I'd like to think that if Ozick had seen Cats when it was playing in New York she might have realized Eliot was never quite the priest of high art or wearer of golden capes that she (and Eliot's academic allies) supposed him to be.

The note of nostalgia that slips into current talk about modernism, even when this talk (like Ozick's) dismisses modernism for its nostalgia, makes it hard to think about the present situation with clarity. But by one of those happy coincidences, as I restlessly paged through The New Yorker after finishing Ozick's piece, I discovered an essay by the magazine's fashion writer, Holly Brubach. Most of Brubach's piece, teasingly titled "Modernism Outmoded," reported events and conversations from the fall show in Milan of the spring 1990 Italian ready-to-wear collections. Alternating between irritation and amusement, Brubach takes to task the fifty or sixty companies who staged elaborate productions for off-the-rack clothes.

The Cresset
What the Milan trade show made evident was the increasing tension between clothes conceived as “just clothes” and “free-floating nostalgia for the golden days of haute couture, when fashion had no doubts about its own importance and women changed clothes five times a day.” Brubach notes the return of fashion in the nineties, emerging after more than a decade “from behind the racks of navy-blue blazers and khaki trenchcoats.” In her review she sharply contrasts the style introduced in the late seventies by Saint Laurent, “the swaggering, hard-edged, broad-shouldered, smart-tailored, slim-hipped woman,” with the new style inspired by the designs of Romeo Gigli, “the narrow, sloping shoulders, the body swathed in fabric, the pear-shaped silhouette that echoes the images of madonnas in fifteenth-century Florentine paintings.” What makes Brubach’s opposition of pragmatic, rational clothing to orientalist, movement-impeding throwbacks so interesting is her analogy between the fate of modernism in clothing to that of modernism in the arts and architecture.

Like the postmodernist eclecticism and camp
celebrated by Charles Jencks, the impractical arbitrariness of the Gigli style bespeaks the exhaustion or degeneration of modernism's originally liberating energies. Brubach remarks how the modernist abolition of the extraneous, in fashion as well as in painting, led to minimalism (a thesis I will discuss below) and finally to "sheer decoration, with people selecting, say, a Kenneth Noland painting because its colors looked good with the living-room rug" while "clothes degenerated into uniforms, functional and generic—with men, women, and children living, day in and day out, in bluejeans." Clearly it is time for buildings, paintings, clothing (and literature) to be fun, even though it remains unthinkable to abandon functionalism. Noting the perennial distinction between people enthused about fashion and people who could not care less about it, Brubach concludes that:

thirty years ago, when most women made some sort of effort to conform to a certain standard, it was harder to tell the two groups apart, and the women who weren't interested nevertheless played along. Since then, some of these women have discovered that they don't need fashion at all, that in fact they've never needed it. Fashion has lost them—perhaps not for good but for the time being. They're content to wear jogging suits to the grocery store, oblivious of the spring collections, and invest their money in real estate rather than satin jodhpurs. Fashion has become specialized, with a tradition of its own, to be followed the way one follows the theatre or the opera, and Gigli and the designers under his influence are preaching to the converted.

Brubach seems to me to have exposed a profound problem connected with the death of modernism, namely, the dissociation of the middle class—the people who "weren't interested" in modernism but "nevertheless played along"—from the current activities in the art world. Probably it is incorrect of Brubach to assume that women who wear jogging suits to the grocery store are lost to fashion in an absolute sense, since these same women are liable to be gripping a Vuitton bag. But Brubach is on the right track in her analysis. Vuitton's vinylized bags are expensive (and thus emblematic of suburban status) and practical (indestructible and large, somewhat like a $20,000 van) but not at all fashionable in the sense that a bag to match a Gigli outfit would be fashionable. Perhaps the women in question would "play along" if they could, if they had the knowledge and the time (someone else to do the grocery shopping) and the cash.

The obstacles to "playing along" in the era after modernism are nowhere better indicated than in Diana Crane's recent sociological study, The Transformation of the Avant-Garde: The New York Art World, 1940-1985.

Crane's book contains such a wealth of important information that I can only supply some of her conclusions and the data supporting them. As a word of warning, however, it should be noted that Crane is an historical sociologist rather than an art historian, critic or theorist. Although she is scrupulous in reporting the variety of opinions concerning the New York art world, her own judgments about art are sometimes dogmatic and inept. "While the art of the Abstract Expressionists exemplified their withdrawal from social concerns, the art of the Minimalists was an act of negation toward both aesthetic and social values" (52).

Crane's moralistic spanking of artists for their absorption in their art and her tendency to use as synonymous the terms pluralism, fragmentation and anarchy (142-43) locates her solidly within the neoconservative camp. And she is uncritical in her lumping of artists within particular categories. How can Jack Beal and Raphael Soyer both be classified as Traditional Figurative painters? What does it mean to identify as Photorealists both the Brobdingnagian grossness of Chuck Close and the elegant filigrees of Joseph Raphael? That said, her book provides the best evidence I have seen to date for the argument that the rebels, innovators, iconoclasts and "geniuses" of abstract expressionism and action painting have been replaced by a moyenn garde of leisure specialists, entertainers and college-trained professionals whose values harmonize with those of the new major patrons of the arts—government agencies and business corporations.

In 1950 only 525 Master of Fine Arts degrees were awarded by American universities and arts schools, whereas this number had increased to 8,708 awarded in 1980. Of the Abstract Expressionists, 75 percent held no college degree, whereas about 51 percent of the pattern painters, e.g. Natkin, Samaras, Stella, attained the MFA. Crane's research further indicates that there has occurred a very sharp division between artists as businessmen and artistes whose work is increasingly negligible and marginalized. She quotes with approval Linda Nochlin's observation that American representational artists (which would include the categories of Pop, Figurative, and Photorealist painting) generally avoid "images of work, of social justice, of the poor, of oppressed classes and individuals" (96) but later concedes the existence of "democratic artists" who tended to confine their works to the creation of wall murals in urban areas. But this politically and humanistically oriented art, observes Crane, lacks institutional support structures (140-41). You can't sell a
mural on the walls of an underpass, and this very
estrangement from a tradition in which artworks are
perceived as commodities makes it unlikely that the
"democratic artists," the would-be Orozcos and Riveras
of Chicago, will gain a footing in the art market.

Crane’s findings lend powerful support to the
suspicion that what is replacing modernism is a new
academicism, one not so much inspired by any histori­
cal interpretation of art as by large-scale social
pressures in the direction of lowering “the barriers
between high culture and popular culture” (142). At
the moment, the only obstacle to total institutionaliza­
tion of American art is the New York dealer as
personified by such autocratic public relations experts
as Ivan Karp (promoter of the Photorealists) and Mary
Boone (promoter of Neo-Expressionists like Julian
Schnabel, David Salle, Jean-Michael Basquiat). Such
dealers exercise a gatekeeping function, controlling
and limiting the kind and number of artists whose
work gets the media attention requisite to success.

Yet it isn’t difficult to imagine a time when
these latter-day Berensons and impresarios will be
superseded by trained marketing experts. Paintings-R­
Us? Art-Mart? Nothing so vulgar will occur, I think;
but there is no reason, other than the tradition of mod­
ernism itself, to believe that New York’s galleries will
continue to monopolize the standards of taste. When
the moment of decentralization finally arrives, as it
must, we may realize that what we have lost with mod­
ernism’s death is the individual artist, that often
apolitical, institutionally marginal person who found
the path to understanding the world to lie through the
labyrinths of the self. If modernism has a vital legacy
to transmit to the next century, it’s not going to be
found in New York.

Insofar as original, individually distinctive art
can arise in our time, the place to look for it will be in
the alternate spaces and cooperatives like Chicago’s
Artemisia and N.A.M.E. galleries, where artists are still
trying to come to terms with their identities and the
problems of our society that, not unlike modernism
itself, just won’t go away: poverty, racism, sexism and
violence.

The Flowers

Mind like a flower
Unperturbed on the body's stem
And petalled row upon row--
So caught are we
Within its heady scent
As we move along the sidewalk
That we don't hear voices
Or don't notice
The shiny rocks in the grass,
The splendid awning,
And the child watching the mime
Make a room out of air.

And yet there are moments
When the blooms, white at the root,
Go their way to color;
Then everything ripens--
Sky, ground, light.
I don't know how else
To give a name to what happens
When the roses, the roses,
The marigold suns,
And the ridged tulips with their exposed hearts
Show us what we come to--
Mind on a stick, on a stem,
Fragrantly balanced
In the air of those we love
And offering ourselves to the wind,
To the sun, but especially to the rain,
Its sudden forgiveness a reminder
Of our most human hours.

Kim Bridgford

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For me one of the most memorable scenes in the movie version of Frank Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* takes place very near the end of the film, when Dorothy and her friends return to present the broomstick of the Wicked Witch of the North to the Wizard, who had made that the condition for his granting their requests. While they stand in a huge chamber and the great Oz begins to speak, Dorothy's dog Toto goes over to a side wall and pulls open a curtain, revealing a little man in a closet frantically pulling switches and shouting into a tube, as across the room the huge, pallid, disembodied face of the Great Oz roars at Dorothy and her friends not to pay any attention to the little man behind the curtain. However, the damage is done: the Wizard, with all his smoke and thunder, with his huge voice and looming, ghoulish face, is revealed to be nothing but hot air and special effects, or as Dorothy says, "humbug."

Recently when I saw this scene I was reminded of an article that appeared this past November in *The New Yorker* by Cynthia Ozick on T.S. Eliot ("A Critic at Large: T.S. Eliot"). The article serves as a provocative postscript to the centennial of Eliot's birth, which was marked in 1988 with the publication of a new biography and a new collection of Eliot's letters. Though Eliot's centennial was celebrated with festivities both in London and New York, according to Ozick, the events "had the quality of a slightly tedious reunion of aging alumni, mostly spiritless by now but spurred to animation by exultation recollected in tranquility." Ozick reports that the "only really fresh excitement took place in London, where representatives of the usually docile community of British Jews, including at least one prominent publisher, condemned Eliot for anti-Semitism and protested the public fuss" (119).

Ozick leaves it an open question which is the more incredible, Eliot's sudden rise to a position of unprecedented pre-eminence during the first half of this century, so that "he seemed pure zenith, a colossus, nothing less than a permanent luminary, fixed in the firmament like the sun and the moon" (119), or his free-fall into virtual irrelevance and disrepute, which began some time in the 60s. Ozick observes that Eliot is now meagerly anthologized and rarely taught, which is mind-boggling when one considers that some forty years ago Eliot once addressed a football stadium filled with 14,000 people eager to hear him speak on "The Frontiers of Criticism," that at one time students knew passages of his poems by heart the way students today know certain lyrics by their favorite rock stars, that once his plays were critically acclaimed box-office hits that dominated both the New York and the London stage (120).

How did Eliot become a "cultural dictator"? Very interesting question. According to Ozick, talent alone can't explain Eliot's "rocketlike climb." Nor can Eliot's erudition, though it was considerable. If Eliot had powerful friends eager to help him along, so did other young writers. If Eliot had a keen sense of how to advance his career with his pen, a knack for "essayistic empire-building," certainly he was not the only young man in London willing and able to do so. Ozick suggests that the key to Eliot's meteoric rise to power "may lie hidden in one of Eliot's well-appointed impersonations: the voice he employed as essayist" (138). When Eliot pronounced upon the problem of *Hamlet*, upon the damage John Milton did to English poetry, or upon the various shortcomings of the Romantics, it sounds like the voice Moses heard coming out of the burning bush, or, to descend to a less cosmic level, it's as if "the great Oz" had spoken. For me, what Ozick does best in her article is point out to what a degree Eliot's spell, both in his poetry and in his prose, was largely produced by certain qualities of voice. Below I reprint how Ozick characterizes the voice we hear in Eliot's poetry, and its strangely hypnotic power:

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Eliot's voice, with its sepulchral cadences, came spiraling out of student phonographs—"breeding /Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/ Memory and desire." That tony British accent—flat, precise, steady, unemotive, surprisingly high-pitched, bleakly passive—coiled through awed English departments and worshipful dormitories. ..The voice was, like the poet himself, nearly sacrosanct; it was impersonal, winding and winding across the country's campuses like a spool of blank robotic woe. (119)

Though Eliot might sound "bleakly," if eloquently "passive" in his poetry—"tony" if just a bit "tinny"—in his prose the voice is commanding, magisterial. Here again, I think Ozick's characterization is right on the mark. And as she describes Eliot's prose, notice what capacities she displays in her own:

That charm of intimacy and easy giving of secrets which we like to associate with essayists—Montaigne, Lamb, Hazlitt, George Orwell, and Virginia Woolf when the mood struck her—was not Eliot's. As in what is called the "familiar essay," Eliot frequently said "I," but it was an "I" set in ice cut from the celestial vault: uninsistent yet incontestable, supremely sovereign. It seemed to take its power from erudition, and in part it did. But really this power derived from some proud inner figuration or incarnation—as if Literature itself had been summoned to speak in its own voice. (138)

Ozick cannot adequately explain why these voices worked on us as they did—in effect, turning hordes of us into adoring Munchkins—and she shouldn't be expected to, given the limitations of time and space, and the complexity of the situation. My hope is that more study will reveal what it was that Eliot seemed to offer his readers that they seemed so eager to have, or at least to hear. Surely, the response to the voice is as interesting, and probably more important as a phenomenon of cultural history than the voice itself.

Ozick says it's too soon, and the changes in the culture too great, to explain except in a very broad way how and why these voices ultimately lost their power for us. However, according to Ozick, we are now more able than ever before to look at the man behind those voices, because recently biographers have pulled back the curtain on the little man who was our Wizard. Ozick claims it is a curtain Eliot very carefully constructed in his critical prose, particularly with his idea of the Objective Correlative. According to Ozick, Eliot's poetic of impersonality, wherein he insists upon the separation of "the man who suffers from the mind which creates," was nothing but a "hedge" or smoke-screen, or as Ozick puts it, "a way to describe the wound without suffering the embarrassment of divulging who had held the knife" (126). Thus, the Objective Correlative becomes the Dripping Knife theory of modern poetics. In fact, Ozick herself holds a knife, and wields it with great confidence, as she sets out to demonstrate how now "these inseparables, sullied long ago by Eliot himself, can now be surgically united" (127).

Clearly, it's not a pretty sight we are treated to when she describes what time and Eliot's biographers have revealed. I reprint the passage below not only for what it purports to reveal about Eliot, but also for what it discloses about Ozick's mode of dissection:

It may be embarrassing for us now to look back at that nearly autocratic, inhibited, depressed, rather narrow-minded, and considerably bigoted fake Englishman—especially if we are old enough (as I surely am) to have been part of the wave of adoration. In his person, if not in his poetry, Eliot was, after all, false coinage. Born in St. Louis, he became indistinguishable (though not to shrewd native English eyes); in his dress, his manners, his loyalties, from a proper British Tory. Scion of undogmatic, rationalist New England Unitarianism... he was possessed by guilty notions of sinfulness and martyrdom and the monkish discipline of an asceticism, which he pursued in the unlikely embrace of the established English church. No doubt Eliot's extreme self-alterations should not be dismissed as ordinary humbug—particularly on the religious side. There is a difference between impersonation and conversion. (121)

This is Eliot, finally fixed "in a formulated phrase," formulated and "sprawling on a pin" (Eliot, Collected Poems, 5). When I first read the passage above, I was struck by the harshness of its tone; it seemed to me excessive, rancorous, and without a shred of generosity or tolerance. Clearly there is no margin for error, no hint of self-doubt. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed to me oddly Eliotic, both in its omniscience, and in its meanness. One of the reasons I came to dislike Eliot years ago, without knowing very much at all about his biography, was the way he would occasionally use Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde as his whipping boys, at a time when he was very much in the ascendance, and they had fallen into disrepute (see particularly Eliot's essay entitled "Arnold and Pater," in Selected Essays). And I have often been put off by the alternation of sniveling and sneering in the poems. However, now that it seems to be Eliot's turn to be disinterred from his cozy spot in Poet's Corner so that he can be abused as he abused others, I don't at all consider it poetic justice. Seems more to me like some sort of revenge.

Ozick's summary of Eliot's life and career is
based upon gleanings from recent biographies by Peter Ackroyd (T.S. Eliot: A Life, 1984) and Lyndall Gordon (Eliot's New Life, 1988) and from a new collection of his letters edited by his second wife Valerie (The Letters of T.S. Eliot, Volume I: 1898-1922). Though Ozick's treatment of Eliot's biography and career is multifaceted, and though her re-creation of the "spell" he cast for so many years is quite superb, when she comes to drawing up her conclusions, the complexities seem to get swept away to make the life and work all add up to a neat, small sum. She designates Eliot's first wife Vivien, from whom he coldly separated in 1932 after seventeen years of "accelerating misery," as his "raging muse and purifying savior." She is the Witch to whom we and our deposed Wizard owe "The Wasteland." Ozick claims she was also "the motive for exorcism, confession, penitence." According to Ozick, "She gave him 'Ash Wednesday,' a poem of supplication. She gave him 'Four Quartets,' a subdued lyric of near forgiveness..." (144). Ozick is most self-assured and sovereign in her pronouncement that the "knowledge of the life interprets—the poems, exactly what Eliot's theory of the objective correlative was designed to prevent." Just like that, "an austere principle of poetics is suddenly decipherable as no more that a device to shield the poet from the raw shame of confession" (126). It is in such statements that I start to think I am reading the script for a television mini-series.

I am not qualified to say if Ozick's post-mortem reattachment of the corpus and the corpse creates or recreates a monster. I will need to read those biographies and re-read the work before I can make that determination. Cynthia Ozick gives one good reason to make the effort. For this reader, she has provided new reasons not to let Eliot disappear into oblivion, where he seemed rapidly headed. I have never liked his work, for personal, perhaps temperamental reasons. The poetry often sounded to me like sniveling, and I could never understand how he got away with saying some of the things he said in the prose. And he was a bully. However, without having any real evidence to support my position, I resist Ozick's reconstruction of the Objective Correlative, as that barrier meant to shield the man who inflicted suffering from the mind that created and destroyed itself and others. It seems too easy, and Ozick's reading of Eliot's work as displaced autobiography seems too neat, too much an open and shut case. Maybe it is only my own perversity that makes me want to resist Ozick's conclusion that the Wizard was just "humbug." Reading Eliot never gave this cowardly lion much courage; never helped me to discover I truly had a heart. If I'd only had a brain, perhaps I wouldn't have all these hesitations. However, Eliot's work did have tremendous power for several generations of readers, and I am pleased that Cynthia Ozick invites us to think about how and why that very strange thing happened.

Works Cited


Five P.M.

It's strange, you know. . .
before five p.m. there's this to do. . .
or people parading their public dreams. . .
then at night the curtain is closed against
the mind as we settle among our lists
and the evening news.

But just there, in the afternoons, I lower
my wretched book and see you move through
that amber sunstream that draws across
the rosy dresden of my desk-away from me
through a door I hadn't thought was there,
as light leaves by the window letting early
shadows spill like wine across the floor.

I watch. And wonder. I never speak your
name or raise a hand in that spectral light
where golden motes of color seem to move through
you as you turn. There is nothing to say. Things
have long since been settled. Still, as the last
bells echo in the sycamores outside this room, I
think there might be one word, a gesture, that
would bring you back, or cause you to turn, so,
your body leaned into the early evening,
in that contrapposto way I have seen you each
afternoon in my mind's eye.

In the park the carillon will strike the hour
and here and there figures will move over the old
bridge, shadowy sounds over the water, moving
toward some lighted room, toward some history
they have chosen. And before the next bells
the park will have grown dark, and I will
listen to the night sounds awhile before
turning on the light.

J.T. Ledbetter
SEEING MODERNISM TODAY

An Interview with Theodore F. Wolff

GME: When so many re-assessments of great figures of the recent past are being offered today, how can we keep some perspective on the giants of modernism?

TFW: It's only natural that the reputations of a period's major figures should fade, just as those of major political figures do. After all, they no longer dominate the scene. It takes time to re-evaluate them, but the real giants come back, as a rule, though often in different relationship to one another. Picasso's, Miro's, Matisse's and Pollock's reputations have in some sense faded—though distanced may be a better word—but only because the reputations of others have replaced them. Modernism certainly is not over, but what we might call its classical period is. All those artists belonged to that period, they defined it and exemplified it, so to some extent, they remain a part of its history. Good or bad, they are part of what happened, part of the record of the time, just as Roosevelt and Stalin were a part of the mid-20th century political scene. Roosevelt has "faded," but he is deeply embedded in 20th century history, and the same is true of Picasso, Matisse, Klee and many others. Their place in the popular perception of art may change, but their place in art history is assured.

It seems to me that those artists whose reputations diminish are those who are recognized within a short time as making contributions that were inauthentic, or irrelevant, or just trivial. But on the contrary, those who, like Edvard Munch in his painting The Cry, give voice to the soul of the time—their work is essential and will continue, even in spite of fashion, to resist these ups and downs in reputation.

GME: Why has it been that, in its enthusiasm for modernism, art criticism in America has so often scorned realism?

TFW: The art establishment has always been strongly prejudiced in favor of the notion of "creative progress," and has had a sort of manic emphasis on the new. Thus, a part of modernism's success has been because it was the newest thing to appear, and thus, by definition, it was superior. This attitude is changing, at least the exclusivity of interest in the new seems to be less pronounced now. But you must also not forget the important distinction made in American art, especially in this century, between the categories of urban and rural. The critics, curators, dealers, and museum


The Cresset
directors are, or have become, militarily urban in their orientation. Urban values, not rural ones, are in. And they have been in except for a brief period in the 30s. For a few years, when American regionalism had something of an upper hand, Benton, Curry, and Wood celebrated the land and the people who lived on it, and worked with it. But then, with the end of the war, things changed dramatically. Abstract expressionism is thoroughly urban, and Pop Art was not only urban, it was industrially urbanized. It is not possible to imagine a rural Pop Art, is it? Paintings were executed with the same degree of sensitivity you'd expect to see in cars spray-painted on the Detroit assembly-line. In fact, you can see just by the way those terms don't match up--assembly-line and degree of sensitivity--that post-war painting has ruled out the rural experience, and certainly the rural content.

Take Andrew Wyeth for example. His greatest sin, from the standpoint of the art establishment, is not that he's a bad artist—he's not. What's "wrong" with him is that he represents a basically rural point of view, a rural sensibility, and there's very

little room for that in the circles of art appreciation today. When we look at American Western art, too, we see versions of the same thing. Remington was not a bad painter; he was quite a good painter. What the art establishment has trouble with is that he put the actions of cowboys and Indians ahead of purely formal values. And formalism, an urban concept, is central to what is called the "significant" art of this century.

The irony is, of course, that Cezanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin, the artists from whom modernism evolved, were both urban and rural. Until we can get those two aspects back together again, we will have two antithetical attitudes in art. And that is stupid, since the conflict is artificial and destructive. It makes no sense to rule out of critical attention a lot of good work because it comes from what might be called the "right."

Often, of course, the best artists simply are from the "left," or the modernist side. I have championed Wyeth up, down and sideways, but he's not the artist Klee is, or even Pollock. What I object to so strenuously is the either/or approach to judgment that says "All the people over here are artists, and all the ones over there are just non-artists who produce works that people buy." And both sides, modernist and non-modernists, are equally guilty of this blind prejudice and categorical method of judging art.

GME: Could you talk some more about the relationship between modernism and mysticism?

TFW: Modernism and mysticism complement each other. Both require an act of faith, for when you think about it carefully, you will recognize that there is nothing empirical about modernism. Both exist on the extreme frontiers of knowledge. Many of modernism's leading figures—Mondrian, Kandinsky, Klee—were inclined toward mysticism. There are times when I have changed my...
assessment of where an artist fits in these categories, though some artists reluctantly remain where they are. There is no way one can make a mystic out of Courbet, and no way that Pollock can be viewed as a pragmatist.

I have always thought of the work of Morris Graves, for instance, as representing mysticism. A few of his paintings (most particularly his more recent things) have been more obviously "secular" the longer I study them, and less "mystical." But then, when I asked him about that, he only partly agreed. In his view, the Great Unknown, the Other on which the mystic is so thoroughly fixed, is only the other side of the material, the physical, the here and now. In a way, that is a thoroughly mystical answer to the question of the categories, though.

GME: Do you have some favorites from the Sloan Collection?

TFW: Choosing on the basis of slides, I think I'd say that Burchfield's *Luminous Tree* is my favorite. Others that strike me as being particularly fine are O'Keeffe's *Rust, Red Hills,* Church's *Sunset,* West Rock, New Haven, Burchfield's Northwoods Mood, Ushenko's *Age of Iron,* Marin's *Maine Series, 1931,* Johnson's *Farm by the Sea,* Lanyon's *Avocet Inkwell,* Geisert's *Noah's Ark,* and Bellows' *Introducing Georges Carpentier.*

That really is a tentative list, however. I really couldn't choose accurately until I get to the campus and see the collection, which I am eager to do.

GME: I'd be interested to hear your comments about the place of art collections on college campuses. Do they have a valuable part to play in the educational enterprise? We sometimes hear that having our own collection is unnecessary, since we are close enough to some fine museums in Chicago which students can easily visit.

TFW: The ideal situation, of course, is to have a collection of original works of art, and to have students make trips to big cities to see Big Works, as well as the traveling exhibitions that come to cities. Many colleges and universities do seem to manage both. Going to major art centers to see major exhibitions always carries a circus atmosphere with it, and one tends to see only the highlights, the Biggest of the Big works, and the most dramatic ones. In the excitement of the event, and the shortness of the time, one fails to see the subtleties, the nuances, which, for some art at least, is what is most important.

The advantage of a collection of originals, even if they are of modest importance, lies in the fact that students can see them on a more regular basis, can study them, can learn to appreciate their physicality, their various formal qualities. This sort of sustained familiarity can only happen, it seems to me, in the calmer and more thoughtful environment that characterizes the experience of art in the every day. If you tried to study art at Valparaiso University, and never visited the Art Institute, you'd not be educated. But if you never got close enough to a good picture to see it day after day, to look at it in the context of other works, to appreciate its size and texture—your knowledge of art would be limited, even though you could list off the important titles you'd seen in the city.

GME: Let's get back to those subtleties and nuances, particularly in works you'd call "mystical."
TFW: Mysticism in art will always be with us. More and more, art is being perceived as a human activity rather than a thing-related one, or a purely conceptual one. Mystical experience lies at the heart of certain kinds of art, and will be desired and found meaningful by those art lovers who are also mystically inclined.

Art is gradually moving from a dogmatic or political base to a widening pluralistic one, and I think it will, before long, be seen in universalist terms. By that I mean that art is gradually becoming all things to all people, and that it will soon be as broad and as multifaceted as human nature itself. Entering the 90s, one extraordinary thing seems to be coming into focus: mankind is too rich and diverse, too profound and independent, to be ruthlessly packaged, either politically or artistically. When you look at the opening up in Eastern Europe, or scan the vast variety of kinds of art that people have produced in this century, you can see this same largeness and inclusiveness beginning to characterize the scene.

The whole issue of what art is becomes more open. The more that is so, the more we will find that the full range of human experience can become its subject and its style. And where the full range is expressed, one will surely find the mystical, since mysticism touches on the intimations of what we do not yet know, but can just sense in our experience. ❖

Whose Education Debate?

Arvid F. Sponberg

Many of us who actually teach students feel bemused these days. The education debate looks like it's going nowhere. Foundation directors, public officials, corporation CEOs, presidents, provosts, and deans have paradiddled the drums of criticism for six years. Even the odd fellow teacher has tapped out an occasional rata-macue. But it's all getting pretty attenuated and tedious and depressing.

A recent example of the kind of thing getting me down is a column Michael Novak wrote in a recent issue of Forbes (November 13, p. 96). I wish I could quote the entire piece. It's the mold and form of every brick lobbed through academe's windows since the Carnegie Report came out in 1983. He begins concisely: "Unlike other American elites, the academic elite seems unable to decide what its enterprise is about."

Then he loads the column with phrases purporting to illustrate disarray in the curricula of schools and universities. Novak lacks a little in originality here and, like an animal trainer in a third-rate carnival, trots out some mangy items: (A) the usual bizarre assortment of wrong answers on tests: "36% thought phrases from the Soviet Constitution (the right to work, the right to health protection, and the right to housing) were in the U.S. Constitution" and (B) titles of courses which, he assures us, lack "content," are "easy," and "exceedingly narrow."

Now, Novak may have a point about that wrong answer. It's pretty stupid for an American to think that citizenship confers a right to decent housing. We can be darn sure Silent Sam Pierce would not have missed that question, unless, of course, it was part of an oral examination.

But how can he judge those courses from their titles? He objects, for example, to University of Virginia undergraduates fulfilling a writing requirement by writing essays in courses about Japanese Buddhism or The German World After 1918. Well, maybe he has a point here, too. There's not much to learn from those guys. We whipped them pretty good in '45 and they haven't amounted to much since.

Still, the heart of Novak's column troubles me. He gives this advice to Forbes readers:

"Businessmen had better start doing something about this. For the future progress of the American system, more than any other, depends upon ideas. Ours is a content-laden experiment. "We hold these truths" Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence. Pull out these truths, and the guidance system of the experiment goes kerplunk. Businessmen should investigate what their alma maters actually require of their students."

Now this is where I get bemused. Some of these businessmen are the same guys who used to cut my required sophomore lit class to cram for their mid-terms in finance, or to go on a marketing field trip. Is Novak implying that all the while these guys were cramming and field-tripping, they...
were really thirsting for literature, hungering for history, foaming at the mouth for philosophy? And Novak wants these guys to "investigate"—a four syllable word meaning "Write a term paper"—what their alma maters require of their students? Mike, Mike, Mike.

One of the most discouraging effects of this recriminatory barrage by Novak and others is the growing conviction of lots of us who actually go into classrooms every day that the guidance system has already gone kerplunk. The evidence for this lies in a simple fact of human nature: When you know a problem is real, you find real solutions. When you can't, or won't, find real solutions, then maybe the "problem" you are talking about isn't the real problem. I think this syndrome has emerged in the public discussion about education. It is most obviously associated with two kinds of statements by educational critics:

One: "It's not the money, it's the principal of the thing." (Pun intended.) That is, the critics define the problems in a way that doesn't require them to advocate a rise in taxes. These critics are whistling past the graveyard. A large number of the real problems with American education will not be resolved until taxes are raised and more money is spent. The money need not even be spent on higher salaries, either, though that would help. It should be spent, first, on hiring more teachers and building better facilities. The surest and simplest way to improve learning, from kindergarten through the Ph.D., is to reduce the student-to-teacher ratio and then to equip the teachers properly. Anyone with an ounce of sense about education knows this is most certainly true.

Leaders with courage and imagination would be recommending: (A) a Teaching Force Augmentation Act, to help school districts rapidly increase the number of teachers; and (B) a National Minimum Standards for Educational Facilities Act, to help every school district provide properly equipped classrooms, libraries, labs, workshops, studios, auditoria, and gymnasia. The distance that critics put between themselves and taxes measures the breadth of the wishful thinking behind most of their proposals. Worse, their cowardice stirs suspicions that the education debate has covert purposes.

Two: "It's the curriculums." Arguments about what children should be taught, and when, and how, began after the conception of Cain and will continue until the Apocalypse. Recent rumblings on the educational seismograph should be interpreted not as signs of awakening but as signs of panic. The leaders whom Novak urges to investigate university requirements thought little about the aims of education when there was a trillion dollars sloshing around for trash like the Stealth bomber and Star Wars. Now, when money is tight, they affect to perceive a connection between education and national competitiveness. They wish to restore America to her position of undisputed leader of the "free world" by waving a wand over school and university curricula. They refuse to admit, or, worse, cannot see, the gross disparity between their goal and their method of attaining it.

This confusion, ironically, affords insight into the gravest fault of American society during the last thirty years: its failure to produce leaders who face realities and make plans to deal with them. It is good, I suppose, to criticize children for not knowing the names of state capitals. But what good is it for a leader to know that Moscow is the capital of the USSR if he lacks the wit to understand the changes happening there and the resolve to seize the opportunities they provide? What is wrong with this country is not the fault of what happens (or doesn't happen) in the classroom. It is the fault of what happens to people after they enter the economic and political arenas.

The curricula of American schools are about the same now as they were when George Bush was a student. We teach kids the state capitals and the Declaration of Independence. They learn to read, write, and compute. They study geography, world history, and literature. If you don't believe me, ask some teachers to see their lesson plans. If people discover, in later years, that knowing who wrote MacBeth and 50 cents will get them a cup of coffee, that is not the schools' fault. That is the fault of the market place.

The people who gave us Vietnam, Watergate, the Nixon pardon, Gramm-Rudman, Iran-Contra, HUD, and the Savings and Loan scandal tell us that the fault is in our curricula; that if little Ollie North had only remembered who wrote Tess of the D'Urbervilles, then the Ayatollah never would have got those big, bad missiles. But Admiral Poindexter, Sam Pierce, and Charles Keating did not learn in school to lie, bribe, and collude. Nor was it a teacher who convinced George Bush that "reform legislation" means "cut the capital gains tax."

The education debate is not about education at all. Nor will it alleviate one jot the hard
work that goes on in our class-
rooms every day of the school
year. It was never intended to. The
debate is about education in the
same way metaphysics is about
physics. The education debate is
about everything that happens to
you in this country after you grad-
uate.

My suspicion is that many
of our leaders do not like very
much the kind of people they
have become in order to have
power. That this is so was dramati-
cally emphasized by the rare sight
of a senator apologizing for lean-
ing on federal regulators to take it
easy on Charles Keating so he
could rob the depositors and
shareholders of Lincoln Savings
and Loan. American leaders have
become great deny-ers. In the last
twenty years, our most-often-
repeated political phrase has
been: "We've got to get (Vietnam,
Iran-Contra, etc.) behind us,"
which is just another way of saying,
in the words of the social philoso-
phers, Simon and Garfunkel,
"... most of all we've got to hide
it from the kids."

Unable to face what they have
come, our leaders have turned
against the education system.
They have done so as a way of dis-
tracting attention from their own
failures of imagination, ethics, and
courage, and of pleading with
their old teachers to do some-
thing so that their children and grand-
children will not turn out like
them. To them those old teachers
should say, "The problem is not
what we teach your children. The
problem is that you have forgotten
what we taught you." ☐

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**Lynn, Outdoors**

I set my long long book in the old grass,
glance at the trees, fenced despite themselves,
cast the glance like a fisherman's fine net
across the rotting wood that frames the pool
and find a woman sitting on a chair.

Her eyes are down, her breasts are in the sun,
shadowed by gray leaves as though the Monarchs,
pumping for Mexico, had stopped to look
and fluttered in one place against the sky.

I am that quiet even I can get
until my elbows ache and I sit straight,
turn back to Leibnitz, knowing how she looks
will be a bookmark that will last a life.

Daniel J. Langton
Two summers ago, finding myself near Pittsburgh for a meeting, I drove a little farther west, to Ann Arbor, Michigan. There I put Aunt Mildred into the car, and drove down to James Dean’s hometown, Fairmount, Indiana. There we began a round of visits that took us to aunts and uncles and cousins of mine in Marion, Greenwood (southside Indianapolis), and Lafayette, Axl Rose’s hometown and my mother’s. I drove Aunt Mildred back to Ann Arbor, then stopped in South Bend for dinner downtown on the river with Aunt Jane. It was the day George Bush produced Dan Quayle—much to chew on in Indiana!

The next day I drove west to my father’s hometown, where I too had grown up, schizophrenically, the rural Republican county seat of a county known for steel, refineries, and Democrats. There I discovered a new county history under way. Short articles of all kinds were wanted, on area families and businesses, and I slowly promised to write one. This was not volition in pure form; exhortation came from my father’s closest friend, who pressed on me a filial obligation.

We were both a trifle skeptical, he as a local historian, head of the committee that saved the old courthouse, and I as an academic involved with the historian Henry Adams. This well-meaning book was going to be another of those amateurish volumes which soon languish unread in small-town attics. They contain, at best, random information and, at worst, rampant piety and self-serving illusion.

Still, they have their interest. I remembered being astonished years ago, a student at Valparaiso University, finding in the old library, which rather resembled an attic, a rambling five-volume history of Indiana which had a story about my grandfather and his family. The very people (some of my mother’s ten sisters and one brother) I had just now been seeing. As a student I had been glad to have it, since I was doing a family history paper for Willis Boyd.

It had been a reasonably prosperous 200 acres, the farm south of Lafayette, but it took this library book to tell me that Andy Bauer, my grandfather, was one of the local farmers who took cues from Purdue. When the agricultural scientists, that is, had produced some new seeds, or a lethal new fertilizer, they went to farmers they had signed up, and said, in effect, “Here, try this.” Later, reading Willa Cather’s O Pioneers! I discovered that Alexandra Bergson had succeeded that way in Nebraska. The fellows at the university told her the prairie soil yearned for wheat instead of corn. My asthmatic grandfather had actually been an “experimental farmer”!

So, to move ahead a bit, this last summer I spent two hours in a windowless room in the town library, which has bound volumes and microfilm of the local weekly newspaper. The deadline for submitting articles was near, and even when writing Will Boyd’s paper I had not gone to the Lake County Star for the simplest of materials: obituaries of family members.

As I write this, Will, I recall why. The library then was in its old Carnegie building, with no microfilm. The bound volumes of the Star would have been in the tiny, cluttered Star office. Just an
overgrown kid, guarded and impatient, I would not have braved the small-town hassle: “So what do you want to look up?” “Think you’ll be able to find it?” “Did you get what you were looking for?” (Oh, blessed libraries! Just leave me alone!)

In last summer’s investigation, I did not expect to be surprised, and in a large sense I was not. Nostalgia did not arrive, and sentiment kept its distance. I worked fast and efficiently, bound for Chicago to meet yet another cousin. However, certain details did surprise me, yielding subsequent reflection. I perceived, perhaps invented, some unsuspected complications of a small town in the American Midwest.

Hadn’t I realized the main complications, living there until going to college—still knowing by memory the census figure for 1940 (4,643 people)? Hadn’t I read about Winesburg, Ohio (population says Sherwood Anderson, 1,800)? Not as small as Winesburg, mine was still your classic small town, with literal storefront awnings, local bus to the big city, and no toy store. But knowing the facts and having the life there, and knowing also a couple of towns in fiction, is not all there is to knowing.

HINTING THAT I HAD MISSED certain elusive flavors was the obituary of my father’s older brother Leslie, who died of pneumonia in 1920 at age 17. The story was on the front page; it ran five paragraphs, and it had arresting details: the month of his first illness, the exact date he was taken to Wesley Memorial Hospital in Chicago, and the names of his physicians there, “Drs. Kanavel and Coke.”

This seemed to me excessive, even for the times and the size of the town (3,232 in 1920). An outsider looking at this story would draw certain conclusions: A Victorian passion for detail was still rampant. This newspaper needed more stuff to write up in quiet January than the town was able to provide. The pathos of early death was somehow gratifying to the general reader.

Mark Twain had already in the 1880s satirized that pathos in Huckleberry Finn, but evidently it was not yet obsolete—in this year, 1920, of F. Scott Fitzgerald’s This Side of Paradise, that curious Princeton fusion of sophisticated scorn and unabashed sentiment.

If the details seemed excessive, the third paragraph was egregious: “Local friends who have had the opportunity to confer with those who attended him during his stay in the hospital say that the attending surgeons and hospital staff never ceased to speak of, and praise the fortitude and patience of the young lad, which drew their sympathy to him as well as their endeavor to restore him to health.”

Then there was his grandmother, the great-grandmother I never knew. Her 1932 obituary called her one of the town’s “beloved and respected ladies,” this woman born in Germany, who (said the paper) lived nearly 50 of her 86 years in our town. Her husband, a railroad worker, had in 1928 been called one of the town’s “pioneer residents,” and the death notice had mentioned his German birth.

Passing through my mind, reading these notices, was a conversation with my father some years ago. Growing up barely on the right side of the tracks, in the largely German end of town, he had not been taught American aspiration, he explained. For him, for example, college was financially out of the question, and professions were pursued only by other kinds of people in town.

If in the 1920s and 1930s there were at least two parts to this town, then what did newspaper death language signify? Was the better part of town making a ritualistic nod to egalitarianism? Were these kindly epithets for my father’s grandparents merely formulaic, with possibly even a frisson of condensation? Was my father’s sense of his place in his own town slightly wrong? Had I misinterpreted him?

Simpler and more urgent for the historian, what kind of language was to be uncovered in the notices I didn’t read? Was everybody in that era—native and immigrant, old resident and new—given a sugary sendoff? Lost to the historian: Who had written these notices, and who supplied the information and impressions?

It seemed to me that a historian coming to any small-town newspaper in the country, trying to draw conclusions about social relations and “class structure,” would have formidable obstacles—would find what appeared to be little clues pointing everywhere and nowhere. I realized this partly because of Great-Uncle Pete.

Ernest (“Pete”) Henning was the most conspicuous member of my father’s side of the family: a major league baseball player with therefore an entry in the Baseball Encyclopedia. That volume in the town library took me right to his obituary, since his gravestone in Maplewood Cemetery has only his year. Pete was killed, with garish American irony, on the “ideal stretch” of the Lincoln Highway (U.S. 30) near Dyer, having stopped to push a stalled car. He was hit by another car.

That information I had known. The year was 1939; family legend had him stopping to help a
lady in distress. It was Saturday at 3 a.m., said the two-column story on page one. He was 51 years old, unmarried, working as a telephone serviceman, the days long past when he was first a regional baseball hero and then briefly a pitcher with Kansas City of the old Federal League.

I began to suspect that the whole family had long basked in his light. The anonymous "Gossip of the Legionnaires" column in the same issue depicted him as a legend:

Comrade Henning had already established his reputation as a pitcher before the war, and as we look back upon his pitching, he must have been a pitcher from childhood, for one of our earliest recollections as a boy is that of slipping down to the oldtime ball games and squeezing under the fence to watch "Pete" pitch. His reputation among the kids was solidly established: they believed him to be about the best in the world. . . .

This was obviously a signal for further investigation. Microfilms of the Chicago Tribune in the university library here in Dogwood quickly provided stories of his prowess when Kansas City played Chicago. Guiding me to such articles was one of them reprinted on the Star front page, in 1914.

It appeared therefore that in the era 1910 to 1940 anyone in my father's family was going to be seen, in this small town, as someone a bit special—they were connected with Pete, and Pete had triumphed in the most American of sports. On top of that, he had gone to France in the triumphant Great War. The pallbearers of this German-American were all Legionnaires.

Then, back in Dogwood, I read my father's recollections. These few casual pages he had written down late in life, as a paternal obligation pressed upon him by me. He hated school (and never finished high school) and thought his teachers "a very poor lot." "The one exception was Miss Wheeler, the Latin teacher. She had control of her class at all times. She was my favorite teacher. She respected her pupils and they responded in kind."

Now Miss Wheeler, I knew, was also the daughter of the man who in 1920 edited and published the Star. She later gave up teaching and for a long time (beginning in the late 1950s) was the editor herself, her husband its publisher. I thought it likely that Miss Wheeler, the editor's daughter, had had the doomed Leslie as a pupil, as well as his younger brother. I knew also that Pete Henning continued to play ball locally after the War, and it seemed to me that when Pete came up in the conversation of this small town may have been piquant interest in the fact of his young nephew slowly dying. All this seemed explanation for Leslie's front-page prominence.

Then, as to the complimentary remarks about my father's grandmother and grandfather, a fact occurred to me. This father of mine, who could not bear school, became in a modest way an American success story. Never rich, or even well-off, he did become, about the year 1930, production manager for the big farm equipment factory in town—it made the "letz mill" which appears in Flannery O'Connor's story "The Displaced Person." In 1928, he wrote, he had been offered a job as assistant to the manager, whose departure two years later left him in charge.

So it seemed not surpris-
A Meaner, More Punitive Nation

Bruce Berner

President Bush's much burlesqued yearning for a "kinder, gentler nation" deserves more serious attention. It proceeds from an assumption that, collectively, we are currently mean and punitive. But are we? What gauges exist to measure our meanness-gentleness quotient? There are many symptoms, such as the creeping disappearance of simple courtesy, but I agree with the opinion of deTocqueville that one of the clearest indicators of a society's civility is the way it treats its criminals. This piece scans the recent American criminal punishment landscape and concludes that the President's wish may be granted. We may become kinder and gentler because that is about the only direction left open. We have, I argue, hit near-bottom in mindless, punitive reaction to crime. To demonstrate this, I discuss a series of recent cases and statutes.

Before the young Republicans assail this piece as the latest bleeding-heart entry in the war-on-crime debate, let me suggest that such charge would be misdirected. The issue herein is not the means for fighting crime. The events which are chronicled here are outside any sensible debate on law enforcement or penology.

Among the justifications ordinarily offered for punishment for crime are deterrence, prevention, rehabilitation, education, restraint, disapprobation, and reinforcement of norms. We can argue about these and redesign punishment as we learn more about them. We may choose to commit more or fewer resources to the crime problem as political tides ebb and flow. And, of course, we do. Such is the war-on-crime debate. How many years in jail will most effectively prevent robbery? Should we throw more or fewer dollars into the effort to rehabilitate offenders? Should we spend more energy on crime, drug, and alcohol education? Does the death penalty deter? Can people ever really change?

One final introductory observation. Punishment for crime is relatively high in the United States. Length of prison terms actually served for comparable offenses is nowhere else so high. The percentage of population in prison is higher only in the Soviet Union and South Africa. The death penalty is abandoned in virtually every other Western industrialized country. But even accepting typical American punishment as a baseline, the following events seem to suggest a current American retributive impulse amazing in magnitude.

Cameron Kocher. Nine-year-old Cameron Kocher took his father's high-powered rifle and killed a seven-year-old girl as she whizzed by on a snowmobile. It may have been an accident; it may have been intentional. A jury will soon sort that out; since the State of Pennsylvania is trying Cameron for murder.

Ray and Faye Copeland. This couple is accused of three murders. The State of Missouri seeks the death penalty. He is 75; she is 68.

Juvenile death penalty. Many states are imposing capital punishment on persons aged 16 and 17. Some had been sentencing persons 15, 14, or younger to death until the Supreme Court
ruled the practice unconstitutional as "cruel and unusual." Whether or not it is cruel, it was not all that unusual.

Abolition of the insanity defense. A large number of states (including Indiana) have virtually abolished the defense of insanity.

Before sorting through this, I concede that these actions have been taken through judgments of a few people or bodies not always completely responsive to the constituencies they are supposed to represent. But there are so many recent instances like these and so little negative reaction to them that they can be fairly employed to portray the culture from which they spring.

None of the listed events can be fully explained by invoking deterrent, rehabilitative, or educative purposes. The idea of deterring Cameron or other "similarly motivated" nine-year-old boys by convicting him of murder is pretty bizarre. (For one thing, to tell a nine-year old that if he kills on purpose, he is a murderer, is to imply to him that such actions are within the realm of his choice. There are some nine-year olds best left ignorant on that point.) I wouldn't want to have to argue that putting Cameron in jail will make him better. The experience up to now seems to have been lost on him. At pretrial conferences, he communicates (when he is awake) solely by tugging on his lawyer's sleeve to ask when he can go home. He seems also to have missed a few of the more subtle moral issues of his conduct and upcoming trial by telling all who seem upset by this killing, "If you don't think about it, you won't be sad."

None of this suggests Cameron need not be dealt with. He needs help of all kinds and, if the killing was intentional, has needed it for a while. Family, church, school, counselling, the juvenile-justice system all may be appropriate. But to bring to bear on him the criminal justice system, that awesome apparatus designed to channel and express the moral condemnation of the community, is to seek revenge without thought. I have talked about this case with a number of child psychiatrists, grade-school principals, and fourth-grade teachers, all people who deal with the behavior and mentality of nine-year-olds regularly. Not one could see any sense in this prosecution other than an unreasoned manifestation of fear and retaliation. Cameron's case is not quite the fulfillment of the worst-case scenario, for Pennsylvania, as well as several other states, could bring the same charge against a child as young as seven. (Read my lips, "s-e-v-e-n.")

Indiana law patiently waits until the child reaches ten.

Annually in the United States, about 250 children under twelve gain access to a gun and kill someone. It is a problem. Most of these cases are dealt with officially by the juvenile system. Many are the result of careless adults who may be appropriately sued civilly or punished criminally. Some are, irredoubtably, the price paid for permitting private weapon possession. As Ollie North likes to say, "It's a dangerous world out there." But let us not move toward "solving" this problem with the electric highchair.

And in the case of the elderly Copelands, criminal prosecution is surely appropriate as is serious punishment if they are convicted. This case moves us into more uncertain issues of degree. I do not argue here that imposing the death penalty on the elderly is unjust, only that it is symptomatic of an extremely strong retributive impulse. It is akin to shooting a mouse with a cannon. Most serious studies cast grave doubt on whether the threat of capital punishment ever has measurable deterrent effect, and presumably any such effect would be diminished when aimed at persons nearer the end of their lives. So, rather than pass over the question with rhetoric about deterrence and wars on crime, let us admit that we need to kill people like the Copelands to get our fair measure of revenge, that imprisoning them for the rest of their lives is simply and finally not enough.

The same analysis applies to executing teenagers. The only plausible explanation for doing it is to exact retributive payment. If we are afraid of what they may do, they can be restrained; we have as much power to deliver life sentences with no prospect of release as we do to kill. As to deterrence of others, if we cannot demonstrate that the death penalty influences adults, can anyone believe that the problem gets less complicated when we introduce the teenage mind? I've been unsuccessfully trying for years to deter my fifteen-year-old son from leaving his coat on the floor, which seems less complex than preventing killing. (I often wonder if it would help if I didn't leave mine on the floor.)

Even when the death penalty is not involved but the debate is over how long a prison term should be, Americans consistently intuit a period of time long by any comparative standard. Law students often complain about some perpetrator of, say, a petty theft, "getting off with only a year in jail." I understand, indeed share, their frustration with crime,
but I wonder what would lead anyone to put the word "only" in a sentence that contains "year in jail."

The movement toward abolition of the insanity defense suggests either an unwillingness or an inability to distinguish illness from evil. If this statutory trend were simply a confession of inability, abolition would be defensible on deterrence grounds—after all, insanity can be faked, so if we make the defense unavailable, we will at least deter the would-be fakers. (Trying to figure out how to deter the truly insane will only make your head hurt.) Yet, there are a variety of ways to control the uncertainties of the distinction between illness and criminality without destroying the decisive moral difference. These may include: maintaining a definition of insanity which includes only gross mental illness and excludes neurotics and persons with personality disorders, conditions not only less serious, but more difficult to diagnose with accuracy; restricting the scope of expert psychiatric testimony so that the ultimate question remains a moral one for the jury, not a "clinical" one for experts or pseudo-experts; placing the burden of proving insanity squarely on the defendant; increasing the standard of proof as by requiring defendants to prove insanity by "clear and convincing evidence." The failure to try such intermediate steps (a few states have and they seem to work) suggests that, for many, there is not an inability, but an unwillingness, to maintain the distinction between criminality and illness.

The whole theory of criminal punishment, however, rests on the assumption that humans are creatures with the capacity to make choices. When facts demonstrate that the choice to kill or not is unduly compromised, we either applaud the choice as right (justification defenses like self-defense) or recognize that to ask more of a person in such a position is to ask too much (excuse defenses like duress). Insanity, when properly defined, is the label for people who have so far lost the capacity to make choices or to discern the propriety of those choices that no criminal punishment could be effective or appropriate. If they are dangerous, we should protect ourselves from them. There are many legal and extralegal techniques for this. For example, we quarantine those with serious, communicable diseases. But we don't view it as "punishment," we don't insist on visiting a criminal conviction on them, on announcing to them that they are to be morally condemned. There are many factors in this complex question of abolishing the insanity defense. One fair conclusion, however, is that there exists in America a spirit which possesses and indulges a willingness to impose punishment beyond our ability to account for it rationally.

Nothing is wrong with righteous anger and outrage. If we never experienced it or acted on it, we would be ill, morally bankrupt, or in paradise. And clearly our institutions for channeling and expressing that outrage are morally advanced from lynch mobs. But "how?" and "how much?" are different questions. Regardless of how stunned we may be at the havoc wreaked by nine-year-old children or by those with profound mental illness, moral outrage expressed by invoking the criminal process is inappropriate. As to other situations, in which such outrage is justified, we must be vigilant of both upper and lower boundaries in venting it. Too little punishment risks moral decay. Too much risks cruelty. My thesis is that the current pressure is on the upper boundary.

Will we become kinder and gentler, at least in this area of criminal punishment? Not until two things happen. First, we must overcome the intuition that harsher and harsher punishments will alleviate the crime problem. We must stop blaming the fever on the aspirin. We must cease camouflaging retributive impulse with rhetoric about deterrence, education, and "wars on crime." We must, in short, own up to our thirst for revenge. Second, we must want to reduce that thirst. The revenge instinct is strong; it is probably insuperable by mere human effort.

To the extent one thinks the punishments chronicled above are proportionate expressions of righteous moral outrage, it is neither necessary nor advisable to become kinder and gentler. For those of us who would like to so change, who see in ourselves more thirst for revenge than we like to admit, we will often find changing very difficult. Anger and anguish, frustration and fear are not light-heartedly left unrequited. These beasts are overcome only with profound struggle.

One helpful strategy is to follow those who lead by example. They live in all times, cultures, and traditions. The patriarch Abraham, as well as Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mother Teresa all come to mind. At a University under the cross, it shouldn't be too difficult to think of one more.
Editor's note: In the fall of 1989, seven VU students who were to have been the first group to study at the newly-organized VU overseas study center at Hangzhou University, spent their semester in Taiwan instead. They made a trip to mainland China as part of their study, accompanied by Director Sara Dorow. This letter is a collaborative journal, pulled into final form by Eric Mason and Marla Bisquera.

October 24, Taiwan

I'm finally finished with all my Chinese characters. Li and Feng have been helping me with the pronounciation. They both wish they could go with us to the mainland, but of course the Kuo-mintang regulations don't allow students to leave Taiwan that easily. Odd that I should see their homeland before they do.

October 24, Hong Kong

Ghostbusters was playing throughout the plane as we landed in the city. I had imagined Hong Kong as a dirty, crowded Chinatown out of some Charlie Chan movie. But there are more skyscrapers here than in New York City, and three times as many tourists. Tonight we went to the top of Victoria Peak to look at the city lights. A fantastic sight, the buildings shoved together on the waterfront, the dark mountains silhouetted behind them.

October 26, leaving Hong Kong

Our overnight ferry to Guangzhou has pulled out of the Hong Kong harbor. The old man in the bunk next to me is staring at me as I write. Somehow I can tell that he's from the mainland. There's something of a gruff grayness about him. I don't know how else to describe it. He doesn't have the city self-confidence of the people in Hong Kong. They're well dressed, active, and seem at home among subways, chic department stores, condomini-ums. But this man is different in his drab polyester, his awkwardness as he rummages around in his luggage. He's from another place and a stranger time. He watches me and it's like he's on the outside looking in. Or am I on the outside looking in at him?

I'm glad to be leaving the city. One can only buy so many inexpensive clothes, and eat so many one dollar Big Macs before you have enough. I don't think Hong Kong knows what enough is, and it can't know. For a city that is so dependent on business, an attitude of being satisfied with what you've got would be detrimental. When the Communists take over in 1997, how will they run it successfully? I don't think the Hong Kong people are ready for the austerity of Communism.

October 27, Beijing

Flew from Guangzhou to Beijing. For the first time I feel like I'm in a strange place. Taiwan isn't strange; 7-11s and a Mercedes Benz around every corner. But driving from the airport into Beijing we kept passing horse-drawn wagons, and were delayed by a shepherd herding sheep across the asphalt road. Farmers were working their fields as the sun was setting, and the light fell golden
October 30, Beijing

Explored the Forbidden City yesterday and did the Great Wall today. There’s something wrong with those words. How does one do the Great Wall? There were all kinds of tourists that did it today, and they all left with their “I Climbed the Great Wall” sweat-shirts. But did they leave with an understanding of the lives that were led there in a different age? Did they huddle around a fire, in a stone-cold guard tower, waiting for Mongol armies? Were they peasants lugging stones to build it, or a concubine in the Forbidden City anticipating the arrival of the Son of Heaven?

We were none of the above. We were tourists with our own lives to lead, tourists who walked 200 yards of the Wall’s 6000 miles, and who sat on its cool steps to eat a picnic of peanut butter sandwiches. But I wonder how we can just pass through a place like this without really touching the lives of those who stay. I feel like we are vultures feeding on the body of the past. Yet Li and Feng have spoken of these symbols of China’s history with pride, or maybe a longing for the China that once was.

October 31, Middle of Nowhere?

We left last night on an overnight train from Beijing to Shanghai, but during the middle of the night the train stopped outside a village. No one seems to know exactly why we’ve stopped or when we will begin moving again. The train officials aren’t letting anyone off the train, so we sit here in cramped quarters, waiting. There’s an older man on the bunk across from me who stares at me as I stare at him, and I think he understands—but he rejects the tangerine that I offer him. (Is this Chinese politeness, or just the individual’s temperament?) It’s very odd being physically close to people whose language I don’t speak, and sometimes there’s a passive indifference. But always there is awkwardness between us because both are aware that the other is strange.

I wonder what this man opposite me sees as he looks at us. We must seem so young and brash and free. We are only eight people out of a train car of about fifty, but I think that we make more noise than all of them together.

We wanted to get out and walk, and Sara thought they might let us out since we were foreigners. We asked one train official and he said okay. But he never unlocked the door, so four of us climbed out a window and went into the village. People in the village market crowded around to stare as if they had never seen foreigners, let alone foreigners trying to buy Chinese snacks. After about fifteen minutes three train officials came after us and escorted us back to the train. I had the feeling of being an escaped prisoner, my flirtation with freedom ended.

The train is moving now, after sitting for fifteen hours. I wanted to cheer when the train started to pull out, but the Chinese didn’t seem to show any elation. Doesn’t it matter to them that they are a day late? Someone explained it by saying that time isn’t money in China.
November 3, Hangzhou

We were only able to spend an afternoon in Shanghai. There was a man with his wife and child who came up to me and asked to change money. He wanted to go abroad, where Chinese currency is worthless, and was willing to give me a markup of 75 percent on my foreign currency, but I couldn’t bring myself to take advantage of his desperate situation. Finally I changed with him for the official bank rate, but had to wonder what I could have bought with the extra money.

We’re in Hangzhou now, and I’ve been enchanted. Yesterday we biked out into the country to see a Buddhist temple that was begun around 300 A.D. From there we biked down a cobbled road criss-crossed by quiet, slippery streams. Wooded countryside gave way to villages of 100 years ago. Later I was traveling alone, and a woman invited me to her house for tea. She was a tea grower, and showed me how she dried and processed the leaves.

In the evening we went to an English conversation class at the Medical University. Each of us became the center of a tight circle of intent Chinese students. They’ve been studying English for eight years on the chance that they might go abroad, and asked many questions about life in the U.S. and Taiwan. Many wanted to know why their economy lagged so far behind these prospering places. How does one begin to answer that question? The differences are so great.

This morning I got up and went to West Lake to watch the old people practice their morning Taiji. In the slow, silent movements their aging bodies are filled with grace. I look past the wrinkles into their eyes and I wonder at all the changes that they have seen. They remember China before cars and electricity, back to a time when the Rule of Heaven was overthrown in the name of modernization. They’ve seen famine, and the tearing apart of their country between Communists and Nationalists. They’ve watched Mao come and go; they survived the Cultural Revolution. And they are still watching. I look into their eyes and I feel embarrassed at the shallowness of my own experience.

We ended our stay in Hangzhou with a boat ride on West Lake. I am sad that we could not spend our semester in this place, but assure myself that I will be back.

Our plane for Hong Kong leaves this afternoon.

November 6, Taiwan

I’m back to Chinese characters. Li and Feng ask me about China and I’m not sure how to respond. I say that it was beautiful and I show them pictures, but that does not communicate to them what I have seen and thought. How can I tell them that the grandness, and the history of their homeland have left deeper impressions on me than has this small, developing island? They ask me about the people and what they were thinking, and I feel awkward because I don’t know. I was just passing through.
Healing, Humor, Redemption


This brief (47 pages) work is a reprint of three lectures the author gave at Wake Forest University and published in Linacre Quarterly in 1988 under the auspices of the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds. The booklet's origins may help explain why a Lutheran looking for a Lutheran theological perspective on AIDS will find little here on which to build. The Lutheran Publisher simply hopes in the Foreword that "the author's use of Plato's four cardinal virtues... might be seen as pointing to the noblest expression of the law written in the hearts of mankind." (4)

"Sickness and Sin," the first of the three chapters, is the most overtly theological. In this chapter Meilaender helpfully argues that hasty recourse to either "the language of compassion" or the language of "divine judgment" is out of place. But here he runs up against the problem of Paul's words in Romans 3 that "there is no difference: for all have sinned and come short of the glory of God." (17) In a Lutheran book one expects at this point the standard distinction between uses of the law found in Lutheran theology. Perhaps because of the context of the lectures, however, the author ignores the distinction and does the best he can with a lengthy quotation in which Abraham Lincoln gropes for such a distinction. (18f.) Meilaender goes on to cite Karl Barth's authority that "the believer is set free to discern God's rule in history." (20) But he seems unwilling to use Martin Luther's insight that a distinction between God's left- and right-hand rule may help us in such discernment.

Chapter Two, "Obligations—Caring for the Sick," discusses the obligations health care professionals should be expected to assume in caring for people with AIDS. Meilaender seems to recognize here the need for a Lutheran twofold rule view when he says that "we should be careful not to set the standard of obligatory behavior too high in contexts where we are unprepared to appeal...to the grace of God needed to empower such behavior." (27) It is troubling, however, that a book billed as Lutheran theological reflection for the Lutheran community should fail to place this discussion of obligations into an explicit context of Lutheran theological principles concerning the proper distinction and use of Law and Gospel.

Meilaender is drawn to "the language of the virtues," currently of great interest in general ethical discussion. But he recognizes that life in this sinful world places us in circumstances requiring an analysis more profound than is provided by such language. "To describe such circumstances in the language of virtue will not

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dissipate our problem." (30) One of the virtues of the Lutheran theological tradition is that it draws deeply on biblical resources for confronting just such problems. Yet, in this book those resources rarely come to the fore.

The final chapter, "Virtues—Protecting the Healthy", discusses principles for approaching the issue of admitting HIV+ children to public schools. Some helpful considerations are brought into view, and a tour of the four cardinal virtues is undertaken. Once again, however, little specifically theological reflection is provided.

James A. Bachman


In this ambitious study Ralph C. Wood, Professor of Religion at Wake Forest University, focuses on the various strains of Christian comedy operative in the works of Flannery O'Connor, Walker Percy, John Updike and Peter DeVries. Measuring the validity of their comic vision against a Barthian ideal, Wood feels that Reinhold Niebuhr’s more pessimistic theology falls short of truth because it fails to consider the comic nature of Christian faith. The Gospel, Wood contends, is more comic than tragic; in fact, “the grim sobriety of the old aeon has been replaced with the gracious hilarity of God.”

Wood admires the deep comedy of O’Connor’s work, but criticizes the dualism which he feels permeates her thinking. Only in “The Artificial Nigger,” and “Revelation” does Wood feel that O’Connor begins to get it right, avoiding the negativity which “threatens...to convert the joyful tidings of the gospel into a baleful word that is spat upon the world in nearly misanthropic contempt.” He cautions the reader not to rely too heavily on O’Connor’s own statements of intent, but at the same time Professor Wood wants to rewrite her stories to make them more consistent with his own. Tellingly, he even offers specific suggestions for revisions of “The Enduring Chill” and The Violent Bear It Away.

The section on Walker Percy is the strong center of the book, providing the clearest explanation I have encountered of the philosophical and theological forces at work in Percy’s fiction. Rejecting Will Barret in The Second Coming as “spiritually soft,” Wood considers Binx Bolling in The Moviegoer Percy’s master character—satisfyingly comic because Bolling discovers much more than his own sense of alienation. Pointing out the novel’s deliberate echo of the ending of The Brothers Karamazov, Wood seems to suggest that the joyful ending is the only orthodox one.

A reading that constantly measures literature against a theological ideal can be problematical when that ideal is defined as particularly and as systematically as it is here. I can’t help but feel that in a sense Wood is fighting his own instincts. Throughout the book his spirit is for the most part generous and not condemnatory, and his interpretations expansive not narrow. In his assessment of Karl Barth’s strength as a humanist Christian, Wood says that “we can-not begin with Mozart or Shakespeare or Michaelangelo, and then proceed to find the God of Jesus Christ hidden in their work. Only by first hearing God’s unique and saving Word spoken in Christ can we later catch its worldly resonances.” This outlook balances some of his subsequent tendencies to want to rewrite the work for the author and establish what amounts to plotting strategies for the Christian novelist.

With Updike and DeVries, Professor Wood is less stringent in his requirements for orthodoxy and more willing to accept them as literary artists grappling with the Christian comic vision. Updike he calls “an ironist of the spiritual life,” in whose work one finds no “guiltless fornicators”—only “troubled adulterers.” In an astute examination of the Rabbit trilogy, Wood concludes that in the midst of Updike’s doubt is his faith, just as in the midst of tragedy is the comedy of redemption. DeVries, Wood contends, satirizes his own unbelief with characters who “keep backsliding out of their unbelief, stumbling into Zion, lapsing into faith.” In The Blood of the Lamb, Christ is the Fool who has carried our sins and who ultimately wipes away the pie we fling in his face.

This book is a valiant attempt to form a Christian aesthetic in which comedy is seen as the highest and most redemptive art form. The problem is that we have also seen King Lear and find his tragedy no less redemptive.

Jill Baumgaertner

February, 1990
Coming in March...

- Bachman, Klein, Geiman, and Kennedy on philosophy and religion, both/and or either/or?
- Joe Patrick Bean on freedoms of press—theirs and ours
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In Common

I.

The women who love forever
Always have names like Marie and Marguerite
And are engaged to men named Jean-Louis and Albert.
The sun is white and dazzling
Over a park bench
Where there is the clasping of hands.
On the opposite bench
An old man holds a loaf of bread in a sack;
One notices the condition of his shoes—
Black, laceless, and final.
And when the good-bye comes... Well!
Naturally there are tears; the sun darkens;
And mothers pushing their carriages
Are struck by the sorry condition of the flowers.

II.

Somewhere there is a young woman
Pumping water from a well.
The sky is at her back
Like a hot stone.
She too is suffering from torn love,
This one whose lover has gone to the city.
She pushes her hair away from her face
And works the handle
That calls up the water—
A gush as sudden as an answer to a prayer.

III.

In the common room
Two girls move slowly
To the free chairs.
The first is in love with the yellow hair
Of the woman who counts pennies in a cup.
So much suffering with each miscount!
Twenty-two or three? And it begins again.
The second is in love with the world on television—
The world you can turn on and off,
The one with planned laughter
And people as beautiful as rain or flowers.
It's not like this world
Where people sit down to dinner in long rows,
Count their money in a corner,
And call themselves Cleopatra, Joan, or Marie.

Kim Bridgford