A Review of Literature, the Arts, and Public Affairs
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Speaking Lightly

It is time to mention a piece from the *Concordia Theological Monthly*, which came out last year but has gotten some press since. Several people have sent copies of this material, which comes from an article written by Professor David Scaer. In conducting his argument about the impossibility of women being ordained, Scaer refers to the old penguin story (if a penguin is baptized by mistake, is the penguin saved? answer: no, because baptism can't “take” on a penguin.) The analogy then continues that ordination can't “take” on a woman. Scaer wrote, “Where women serve as pastors, the doctrines of God and Christ are distorted, because women cannot represent God and Christ in his incarnation. . . . Women do not have the constituted nature to be icons of God in his. . . . relationship to the world, or of Christ in his. . . . relationship to the church.” It's sort of nice to see Aristotle alive and well as an explainer of reality, isn't it? Kind of gives you the warm, comfortable feeling that nothing ever changes. Whatever “constituted nature” means, (I have suspicions, but I'm not about to write the word in a journal like this) I might be willing to grant that a woman doesn't have the same one as Jesus. But what possible thing could be meant by saying that a woman doesn't have this X quality that could equip her to be a icon of God in relationship to the world? The ontological argument used seriously today leaves me speechless. Unless someone can tell me what noise it is that penguins make.

On a more cheerful note, let us report that Will D. Campbell is alive and well, and making delightfully obstreperous noises when he gets the chance. Last week at a conference of Christian writers at Calvin College, Campbell had some grand words about subversion, which needs always to be based on the authority of I AM, the speaker who so startled and alarmed Moses with preemptory demands to subvert, and a reluctance to take “no” for an answer. It is this authority that stands behind the radical writer’s demand for changes in institutions. “All institutions are bad,” says Campbell, “because they are after my soul, and my soul belongs to I AM.” Telling the Bible stories of David and Jael, and emphasizing the violent and radical nature of their insistence on the Lord’s authority, he brought the audience again and again to the point that Christian writing must begin from the point of faith, not belief. Out of certainty, creed, and belief you get theology, tract, and doctrine. But literature comes from faith, and faith rests in I AM, where it rested for Jesus. The early church, he said, quoting Edith Hamilton, was composed of very good people, who with good intentions sought to secure the church from the methods of Jesus.

It is good to hear the voices of the prophets, for they trouble us to the very heart, and may give us joy at the same time.

About This Issue

In December or January, Dick Brauer and I talked about the covers for the May issue, and how we might use the work of some alumni artists whose work would be shown on the campus during the spring. We threw several possibilities around, and it was a pleasant enough conversation, because we were very far from the realities of an April deadline. Wouldn’t it be interesting, we thought, to feature the work of alumnus Jim Seemann, a theatrical designer now working at Theatre Memphis, in Tennessee? In April, the Valparaiso University Theater would be opening with *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, designed and executed by Mr. Seemann. We thought it would be a good idea, and when we began to put together dates it looked as though it might work. The play would be ready to photograph (if everything went well) by April 24, so with some fast photo-developing, we could get our covers ready to print by the end of the week, coinciding with the opening of the production. And it just might work.

The front cover shows Seemann’s design, the rendering of the main set for the production. Doing the drawing takes skill, but the drawing is only the rough representation of the more important element: the idea. On the back cover is another representation: a photograph of the reality, the stage set, the actors in costume and makeup, the lights in place, the play itself ready—albeit in silence, and in a frozen minute—but
still only a representation of the idea. That difference, between front and back covers, is the distance artists and performers travel every day, a rugged journey, beset with monsters of all kinds. The ideas are hard enough; wrestling ideas into shapes firm enough that they can be presented to others is so difficult that much art is stopped before it moves beyond idea. But artists then have to deal with exigencies of all sorts to get the ideas presented at all. There’s paint, for example, with its intransigent refusal to dry. Or clay, which likes just enough water. Or bronze, which costs the earth to cast. Or organ pipes, which bend, or swell, or stick, or get birds caught in them. Or oboe reeds, which have to be whittled and then lovingly sucked into playability. The dancer’s instep, the singer’s teeth—equipment, means, the ways to present the idea. And actors—how does any play ever make it to the stage at all?

A number of pieces in this issue are about the distance between idea and expression, about the means to expression being at the same time an obstacle. If they are not about that subject directly, they provide us with some space for thinking about it. It seemed to me that Norm Widiger’s graduation address asks us all to commence.

Peace,

GME

(If it might be a surprise to see this obit in The Cresset. Ray Goulding was not a Lutheran, a churchman, or an educator, nor did he ever contribute to this magazine, except indirectly, by affecting the editor’s frame of mind. But when our colleague Gus Sponberg handed this in the other day, the piece seemed a modest and reasonable tribute from a modest and reasonable journal. Goulding was one of those artists who tried to keep people honest, especially people who have anything to do with media; are there any of us who can afford to ignore his cautions?)

Ray Goulding, 1922-1990

Ray Goulding died on March 25th. He was one half of the comedy team of Bob and Ray. But to anyone who enjoyed their work over the years, he was Herbert Pitgrab, owner of America’s only private atomic bomb plant, or Captain Gibbes, public relations man for the Oatmeal Institute, trying to change the average American’s approach to Thanksgiving dinner. He was Mary Backstayge, Noble Wife—and a thousand other characters.

His New York Times obituary headline called him an “amiable spooper.” That’s understandable. He looked like Captain Kangaroo’s twin brother. But his style was as deadpan as Keaton’s or Chaplin’s. Furthermore, he worked in a very short form. A long Bob and Ray sketch might last five minutes. Many ran under a half-minute. Bob and Ray were minimalists long before the word entered our vocabulary as critical chic.

Their humor is often described as “gentle satire” but it is parody and it bites. It both assumes our knowledge and raises our consciousness. Bob and Ray must be counted among our first and most perceptive media critics. They caught on early to the way their medium altered the subjects it was supposed to report on, and the medium became the object of their satire. They send up every form—soap opera, interview, editorial, reply, ad, public service announcement, newscast, sports cast, educational documentary, panel discussion—with a familiar nonchalance that belies a cold-eyed view of producers, advertisers, and audiences.

Many of their sketches open on normal, orderly situations that we are familiar with and know the rules for. Then, sometimes only by transposing words or sentences from other normal situations, (speaking slowly, or instance, or having the interviewer ask the question that was just answered) confusion creeps in. We recognize the dissonance immediately, but the characters never do.

In memory, Goulding’s voice and appearance can make the sketches seem more jovial than they are in print or on tape. In reality, they offend the audience. Goulding played the average man as absolutely convinced of his significance, incapable of seeing himself as others see him. Among Bob and Ray’s characters, there are few examples of shy, self-effacing middle-Americans from towns like Lake Wobegon. Bob and Ray’s characters are victims of rigged quiz shows and knaves who produce them; experts who work hard to make simple ideas seem complex; liars who assume you’ll gratefully buy land where you can fish in your attic and shoot alligators from your porch. If Garrison Keillor tugs at our hearts, Bob and Ray remind us to use our heads.

Kurt Vonnegut, Jr. wrote of them: “Historians . . . will congratulate us on very little other than our clowning and our jazz. And if they know what they are doing, they will have especially respectful words for Bob and Ray. . . . I could never write anything as funny as what I had heard on what was for them a perfectly ordinary day.”

Hang by your thumbs, Ray. Write if you get work.

Arvid F. Sponberg

The Cresset
A LIFE OF POSSIBILITIES

Graduates, Friends, and Colleagues:

Dr. O.P. Kretzmann, God bless his charismatic spirit, used to talk about the "xaritic moment" (from the Greek word xaris, meaning grace, favor, or gift), that moment when history's cup, laboriously filled over decades and centuries, generously overflows, pours itself out, running furiously over the sides, flooding into the nooks and crannies of human existence, making possible a time of grace—a gift of opportunity, of significance for the human race or for a nation or community, and hopefully even for us here today—a time when events can be touched and turned toward human good. Such seems to be the nature of our time.

But there's no doubt that among the multitudinous influences, the myriads of circumstances (among which is your own past) surrounding you and pounding for your attention, what you allow into your becoming depends on what you have chosen for your goals, aims and ends. These range from the superficial to the profound, from mere squawks to what O.P. used to call the "trumpets sounding from the other side" sorts of ends, from the ridiculous to the sublime. What fulfillments can you expect?

Let me read a letter to Santa Claus from a local second-grader, a second-grader with powerful ambitions. Others asked for Barbies and Nintendo games, but listen to what he asks for:

"Christmas is a time for giving. I have been working hard at school I would like to be the Savior. I hope you have a Merry Christmas. Love..." (signed Kevin Schmidt and printed in the Vidette-Messenger, during the 1989 Christmas season.)

Normand J. Widiger

"I want to be the Savior"—what presumptuousness! What a grandiose ambition! He probably means to play a part in the church pageant, and we may think too of the saviors we fear with their blueprints of conformity, their patterns of orthodoxy, their either/or-ness. But, let's use the wish for awhile, and let us see what we discover with it. It certainly has a good reputation in Christian circles. But three questions do emerge—save from what, in what set of circumstances, and for what ends? What are the circumstances of our times?

We live in a time characterized by a deep-running pluralism, the chief characteristic of which is the process of relativization, a movement away from all forms of absolutes, whether of transcendent truth or unchanging foundations at the depth of life or of orthodox tests and dogmatic ideologies. There are varieties of symbol systems attempting to integrate life. There is a proliferation of experts in a variety of disciplines with expertise for innumerable segments of nature and the human. There is a historicizing of texts and interpretation of texts. There are varieties of stories of families, communities, cultures, nations, but no common story. All of it represents a growing subjectivism—and you know the outer edges of it, the phrase so common to most of us, "Who's to say?"

Pluralism does have a negative side. It involves us in moments of isolation, in a loss of common ground and of uniting symbol systems, in loss of community, in fragmentation of meaning and value. Pluralism creates the conditions for the isolated individual struggling to be Number One in an environment of a "war of all against all." Only one king of the mountain, only one Trump at the top.

Yet if we take pluralism seriously as a condition of our times and do not retreat from it into dogmatisms and simplistic answers, it can become the moment of xaris a gift of possibilities and newness. For if there are no overarching authorities requiring conformity to truth, if there is no status quo to quell change, then we

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are in a situation of creativity, of invention, of newness, choosing out of the multiplicity of influences that which may further new possibilities, even for undermining the long-held centers of despotic power—bureaucratic, corporate, political, economic, or even ecclesial.

Let's take another step into our situation. Globalization is a new buzzword on our campus, echoing the "global village" of the recent past, reflecting the computer networks of our immediate future, the info overflow that hooks us into the private spheres of our neighbors. From the kiwi fruit in our corner grocery, to the quaint outer-Mongolian villages appearing in the vacation slides of our friends, to the warship launches bobbing in our own puddles—the faraway is now the everyday. What to do with this new version of "the mob at the gates"? Shall we censor, or withdraw, or protect the turf? Shall we put the stereotypes in a circle and isolate the alien, the savage, the barbarian, the heathen? Shall we think up new justifications for our dominations?

Yet, precisely here is the xaritic moment, the moment of saving possibility. Here is the possibility of dialogue and exchange, of Buber's I-Thou. This is the time for mutuality, supportive—certainly, critical—perhaps, but always mutual. For you see, we cannot become a genuine "us" unless we have listened to, learned from and contributed to a genuine "them." The globalization of our world and of our consciousness invites us to transcend the boundaries that encapsulate us into our selves, our disciplines, our nations and our ideologies.

Let's take another step into our situation. We live in a world of change, and it is indeed rapid. The political upheavals of recent months were unimaginable only a few short months ago. Yet, rapid change is scary. We experience dislocations of mind and structures, prompting deep uncertainties. So we seek for certainty, sometimes in nostalgic yearnings for a past made better by fond memories. The past is more than affirmed; it becomes marked by a fundamentalism about the certain, true way, by which we mean our way and its eternal verities.

But there is a saving moment in rapid change, a gift for the future that needs affirmation, for therein are possibilities for new maturities. The saving power of the times may lie with the new metaphors and paradigms that come from those among you who are the poets, artists, curious scientists, and innovative theologians. Herein is the opportunity to give direction to the change in the interaction between cultures and their stories, disciplines and their skills, persons and their inventiveness.

But what are the creative energies that suggest directions? That offer alternatives to the words some commentator has used to characterize our time: "violence, bureaucracy, centralizing technology, hierarchy, patriarchy, ecological carelessness, debilitating competition?" What are these alternatives? I can only hint at them, and what I believe to be their creative power for change. Out of my experience, hopes and dreams—and out of yours—these principles require our further exploration as we construct the future.

1. Question radically our current idolatry of competition and rugged individualism. It seems to offer only the despair of the war of all against all.

2. Measure success not by the quantity of possessions nor the scarcity of the talent, but rather by the quality of contribution to the on-going creation and beauty of the world. The garbage collector may do more valuable work than the efficient expert, even though there are more garbage collectors than experts.

3. If the world is inevitably pluralistic, so also are the possible contributions. Frequently the most profound contributions are quite fragile, and in a competitive society become quite vulnerable. We need to be very careful with such contributions so we don't destroy.

4. Meaning, significance and beauty, as tender elements within our world, require not only our creative contributions to them but our sensitive and appreciative awareness of them. Such elements are the result of creative interaction within subject/object relations.

5. There is a relative character to all of our existence, and hence truth is always dynamic.

6. There is also an interdependent quality to our existence as people. We become what we are through our relationships with others, through an interdependence with nature, other cultures, and God. We need to be thankful about this.

7. The future is not based on blueprints or computer projections, but upon the creative movement toward harmony based on love, peace-making, and openness.
Can this be more than a fantasy? I believe that right now creative energies are beginning to flow in the world, bringing alterations to civilizations and human consciousness, new shapes to values, norms and meanings. In the past we have seen glimpses of these new shapes in such lives as Gandhi, King, Mother Theresa. For Christians this convergence is focused in "the Christ" in the life of that human who focused the creative energies of his own life and even the creative energies of God into healing—the healing of his own environment, and finally into the beginning of healing his world.

But the time is up, the bells have almost stopped ringing, graduation is at hand. What advice, what conclusions come out of the last few minutes? There is no one pattern or blueprint for how to live with this creative inventiveness. But the metaphors for harmony are good ones; let us seek a common hymn, an emerging liturgy, an artistic pattern that finds its justification by advancing the beauty and the possibilities of God's creation and God's people. And to paraphrase the poet Wendell Berry: Minimize the harm for yourself and for that to which you are inevitably related (if that's the most you can do). Maximize the harmony and the beauty of life as much as possible (if that's what you're capable of). Work that kind of work that enables you to celebrate not only your week-ends, but your work-days as well. And may God who has become part of our enterprise, with whose creative energies we are intertwined, may that God go with you. ☪
The Quilt Sermon

Preached at the Chapel of the Resurrection, 1 April 1990, in the presence of the AIDS Quilt.

A piece of this, and a patch from that, favored colors, chosen with care, set aside together lovingly.

She began to sew.

At first quickly, with passionate intensity, then more and more slowly, lest this, as well, too soon slip through her fingers.

One stitch at a time, to hold a memory, a moment, a milestone.

Stitch by stitch, tear by tear.

Tiny stitches, oceans of tears, Some on the outside, more on the inside.

A treasure, a trinket, a token, to reflect his soul.

A word, words, to reveal her own.

The final stitch taken.

The last thread cut.

Her own heart, broken, torn out, stretched to fit the space (three feet by six), held high, on display, for the WORLD to see and not forget the one she will always remember.
Sitting here,
in the middle of this —
is an overwhelming experience,
wrapped 'round in this shroud of sorrow.

It seduces us at first—
it lures us in through our own curiosity;
it flirts with us with its carnival of bold colors.

Then it begins to get into us—
as we look and read and reflect,
and begin to find the feelings beneath the fabric.

As visually unique as it is,
and as specifically focused,
The Quilt is cut from the fabric
of our common human experience.

Upon this same cloth is etched our sorrow, our pain:
As presidents and human rights leaders
are shot down,
As young men and women go off to war,
never to return,
As astronauts ride a doomed rocket
to its fiery end,
As millions watch
young, vigorous Hank Gathers
slump into death on the basketball court.

And beyond such grief we share together,
these patches reach down deep inside each one of us,
stirring up the pools of tears,
our unfinished grieving over those we have lost:

a father or mother,
son, daughter, infant,
brother or sister
grandparent, friend,
the one no longer at our side,
the companion whose absence
is still a presence.
A piece of this,  
and a patch from that,  
favored colors,  
chosen with care,  
set aside together lovingly.

Mary spread the pieces out in pattern,  
Martha prepared needle and thread,  
on that day when Jesus came too late:  
too late to make a difference,  
too late to turn things around,  
too late to save the day!

"JESUS, NOW YOU COME! HE'S BEEN DEAD FOUR DAYS!"
("Look, we've begun to sew his quilt.")

"WHY WEREN'T YOU HERE WHEN IT COULD HAVE MADE A DIFFERENCE?"
- I am the resurrection and the life -

"NO, JESUS, WE ALREADY HAVE WORDS CHOSEN FOR HIS QUILT:

OH, BROTHER, HOW WE LOVE YOU!
OH, BROTHER, HOW WE GRIEVE FOR YOU!
OH, BROTHER, HOW WE MISS YOU!

YOU WANT WORDS ABOUT RESURRECTION, JESUS?
THEN YOU MAKE YOUR OWN QUILT!"

Yet, as the Gospel for today tells us,  
they took Jesus out to the place where Lazarus lay.

Suddenly, their quilt was as unnecessary  
as the grave cloths upon the living Lazarus.

They danced into town: Mary holding her brother's arm, giggling,  
Martha rushing on ahead into the house  
(embarrassed),  
scooping up the pieces for the quilt and  
hiding them away,  
so Lazarus would not see  
what they had been up to.

That day—when Jesus came too late—and Easter came early.

The mighty power of God to transform death into life,  
welling up in the earth  
and soon to burst forth in  
a stone rolling away to reveal an empty tomb,
that mighty power of God could not be contained;
it pushed in through the cracks—early—
and Lazarus of Bethany lived!

And those who later would look back at what was worked
on Good Friday and Easter morning,
would know such was not merely the happy ending for
one special person,
but God's final word for all!

IN THE MEANWHILE:

A piece of this,
and a patch from that,
favored colors,
chosen with care,
set aside together lovingly.

GOD SEWS.

Stitch by stitch God pulls the thread,
to hold together the memory,
the moment,
the milestone,
that no one slip through God's fingers, ever.

A treasure,
a trinket,
a token (on God's quilt),
water, wine, and bread,
reflection of his soul,

A word,
words,
to reveal God's own.

God's heart broken,
torn out,
stretched wide,
held high on display,
for the world to see,
never to forget!

Until stitches need be taken no more,
and every tear is wiped away,
and all our quilts can be folded up, forever. ☐
WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS: A Prophet in His Own House

Warren Kleiwer

There is a gentle, genteel haze surrounding the memory of William Dean Howells (1837-1920). He is remembered, if at all, as a "Man of Letters," an office once highly respected, though today somewhat uncertainly regarded since we have so few current examples. He is remembered as a novelist in whose works not much happens but always with correct grammar. He is remembered as the editor who encouraged Samuel Clemens to write *Life on the Mississippi* and without whose encouragement there might never have been a Mark Twain. Book publishers sometimes remember to re-issue one of the novels of his so-called middle period, usually *The Rise of Silas Lapham*, and there is a forty-volume series issued by a university press, which includes all the major works and many of the minor ones, at a cost far too great for the "common reader" Howells once wrote for.

We have an old habit in America of forgetting what our forebears thought out and said well, a particularly sad way for Howells' nearly sixty-year career to end: a misty memory. We do, however, remember Mark Twain, and we might do well to follow his advice in this matter. As the sworn enemy of ineptitude, hypocrisy, and humbug, Twain continued to love and admire Howells and his work throughout a lifetime, and must have seen more in his friend and mentor than we remember.

It may be that we forget Howells because his contemporaries tried to. It must have been shocking to some of his readers, who had grown accustomed to the sweetness and charm of his earliest books and the delicacy of the books of his middle years, to detect his moral sternness becoming more discernable with each passing year, and to see that his stories of private relationships were beginning to talk about public obligations. Critics have been fond of dwelling on Howells’ notion that “truthfulness to American life would inevitably picture the smiling aspects of experience.” To be sure, Howells did say that in *Criticism and Fiction* (1891), but he had a good fifteen more years of writing ahead of him.

In his later works—the novels, the plays, the essays—Howells became increasingly intent on causing his readers to remember unpleasant, ugly, or even evil realities which those late Victorians were ready to forget: the plight of the homeless and the very poor, the obligations of the wealthy to the common good, the possibility that all wealth is tainted and that ill-gotten wealth may carry its stains into the next generations. For that matter, there's some question about whether we're any more eager than our Victorian forebears to dwell on these topics today.

The change in tone became quite clear by the time Howells wrote *A Hazard of New Fortunes* in 1890. The novel shows the evidence of his having read various American and British socialists and having absorbed the moral intensity of Tolstoy, whose *War and Peace* helped to turn the gentle author of social comedies into a social prophet grieving over a nation that had failed to solve its economic and social problems. Retaining his thoroughly American subject matter and treatment, Howells introduced into upper-middle-class New York society a radical European socialist, a young society woman aching to do charitable deeds, and an ineffectual Southerner who yearns for the restoration of slavery, all these brought together in a context of labor troubles, riots, and violence.

Perhaps most poignant, and most Tolstoyan, of the characters in this large cast is Conrad Dryfoos, whose family, like many others in Howells' novels, has come quickly and without preparation into great wealth. The young Conrad, who yearns to go into the ministry, is forced to go into business. His spiritual cravings lead him to desire to help the lower classes even though he lacks the skills to do so effectively. While in the vicinity of a streetcar workers’ strike, he is senselessly killed by the police, and his family is devastated with grief. Mindless wealth, instead of developing a conscience, has led only to spiritual deprivation and waste.

Warren Kleiwer lives in Secaucus, New Jersey, where he is the founder and director of the East Lynne Company, a group devoted to the production of 18th and 19th century American plays, and to reviving the traditions of style and technique of our 200-year theater history.
A family is similarly destroyed in The Quality of Mercy (1891), in which an embezzler who escapes to Canada sets in motion a chain of ironic consequences. The banal, commonplace man, by committing a purely financial crime and then escaping the consequences, destroys his daughters' livelihood and peace of mind, and then undermines the financial condition of friends who try to help the daughters. A reader's sympathies go to all the characters who suffer the effects, for the unsympathetic protagonist never fully comprehends the harm he has done, dwelling instead on his isolation in Canadian exile. He is a thoroughly self-centered man, lacking the imagination to be aware of social obligations. The novel was strong stuff when published, and it still is, concluding with one of the characters' tough-minded judgment of the perpetrator's sensibility: "His environment made him rich, and his environment made him a rogue." In its careful analysis of the mind of a white-collar criminal, the novel is as current as the latest financial scandal in the headlines.

The entrepreneurial process itself is at the heart of The Landlord at Lion's Head (1896). We watch a charming but vengeful little boy grow up and attempt to turn a country inn into a major resort hotel catering to the idle rich. But for him, character is fate. He feels driven to revenge himself on anyone who tries to improve him. This quality is his undoing. Not a mere anti-capitalist tract, the novel explores deeply the convoluted psychology of a person who is driven to acquire power, accumulate wealth, and improve his social standing, and who is doomed to fail partly because the motives which drive him onward also drive him against himself.

An even subtler examination of the effects of wealth is offered in The Son of Royal Langbrith (1903), which follows in another direction the effects of the sudden accumulation of wealth. Royal Langbrith, who died early and left behind a widow and a small son, was a small-time robber baron in a one-industry town. The son, James, now grown, has created a myth about his father's life. He, the compassionate one (or has he also been corrupted?) replies, "Then you don't believe that the children's teeth are set on edge by the sour grapes their fathers have eaten? What does the scripture say?" He, the compassionate one (or has he also been corrupted?) replies, "There are many scriptures, my dear. The scripture also says that the son who has not done the iniquities of the father shall not pay their penalty."

In two of his very late plays, Howells finally elected to point the moral sharply and explicitly. There are a pair of related one-act plays entitled "The Impossible: A Mystery" and "The Night Before Christmas: A Morality," both published in 1910. These two represent a sharp turn in Howells' playwriting career—which, incidentally, is even more forgotten than his novels. Though he seldom wrote for the professional stage, and when he did, seldom succeeded, Howells found his theatre audience through publication in Harper's and Atlantic. The most popular of his plays were a continuing cycle of farces and social comedies revolving around two amiable families: Mr. and Mrs. Roberts and Mr. and Mrs. Campbell, based on Howells himself, Samuel Clemens, and their wives. These and similarly pleasing pieces were an integral part of domestic Christmas celebrations. Richard Moody, in Dramas from the American Theatre, 1762-1909, quotes Booth Tarkington as saying that "a college boy of the late eighties and 'golden nineties' came home at Christmas to be either in the audience at a Howells farce or in the cast that gave it. Few things were surer."

"The Impossible" and "The Night Before Christmas," however, took a turn that must have been more than a little startling to his many fans. Unprecedented from their first lines, these plays introduce a new set of characters who appear in no other works. Mr. and Mrs. Clarence Fountain, wealthy upper-class New Yorkers setting out to negotiate (in their words) between the chic and the smart. These are people, remember, whose physical needs have all been taken care of. In "The Impossible" they plan a lavish dinner party, to which are invited people who are not hungry. On Christmas Eve the Fountains give and receive gifts which are unwanted and definitely not needed. These are people of a social class that has an abundance of superfluity.

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That’s not to say that the plays are the harsh satires a small-minded writer might have offered. Howells’ characters are genuinely intelligent and amiable. They have not lost all their concern for ethical values. Though now surrounded by wealth, they came from a lower social class and still remember a purer and simpler life. This is comedy, of course, and in these plays as in his other works, Howells enjoys watching the spectacle of the newly rich trying to figure out the etiquette of their new status. We enjoy with him the Fountains’ interminable conversation about how to arrange the table, who shall sit with whom, what the topics of conversation shall be, and whether a joke is permissible at table. These are wealthy people but not villains. As one often says when excusing the bad deeds of good people, “They mean well."

But other voices intrude. Mr. Fountain has a habit of letting his mind dwell on thoughts that are not relevant to the moment. In “The Night Before Christmas” his mind strays to earlier Christmases. Unlike this one, they had no maddening crowds in frenzied last-minute shopping for presents their friends don’t need, can’t use, and are embarrassed to accept. “A superfluity of naughtiness,” he calls it. In Fountain’s case all his friends and relatives have decided, independently, to give him bath robes. In the forty-five minute play he receives seven of them. They’re all blue.

Suddenly his stray thoughts coalesce, and he launches into an uncharacteristically serious speech:

What if it was all a fake? Those thousands and hundreds of thousands of churches that pierce the clouds with their spires; those millions of ministers and missionaries; those billions of worshippers, sitting and standing and kneeling, and singing and praying; those nuns and monks, and brotherhoods and sisterhoods, with their ideals of self-denial, and their duties to the sick and poor; those martyrs of the other true faiths whom the one true faith tortured and killed; those masses and sermons and ceremonies, what if they were all a delusion, a mistake, a misunderstanding? What if it were all as unlike the real thing, if there is any real thing, as this pagan Christmas of ours is unlike a Christian Christmas?

His wife, not missing a beat, succeeds in missing the point:

I knew it! I knew that it was this Christmas giving that was making you morbid again. Can’t you shake it off and be cheerful—like me?

Then she breaks down in tears. These are desperate people, who cope by means of wit, charm, cleverness and energy—the stuff of comedy. This hilariously funny play hovers above a great, silent emptiness.

In “The Impossible” the voice that intrudes comes over the telephone, a new and still unreliable invention in 1910. To their dinner party the Fountains have invited ten guests carefully selected to balance the table and the conversation. The phone rings. Two guests beg off because of “the grippe.” The phone rings again and again and again. Within fifteen minutes the other eight guests cancel as well, all having come down with the same ailment, and the perfect dinner party has been ruined.

But the telephone has not yet finished. We hear a strange, unearthly voice. It’s the telephone talking to itself, indistinctly at first, then intelligibly: “Go out quickly,” it says, “into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor and maimed and blind and lame!” What an impossible situation! Jules, the caterer’s man, an expert in all the subtle nuances of etiquette, is sent out to find ten men in a nearby bread line and bring them in to the table. Jules returns, but with a new problem: the elevator operator has refused to bring the men up in the front elevator, and Mrs. Fountain insists that “We couldn’t sit down with people who had come up the back elevator, could we?” No less snobbish are the cook and maids, who refuse to let the homeless men eat in the kitchen. Sensible Jules, wise in the ways of etiquette, saves the situation: “Well, sir, if you excuse my suggesting something: I could put them up a nice lunch, and let them take it out, and eat it where they live, don’t you know—where they usually eat—in the street.”

The Fountains go in to dinner, its perfection restored. Their consciences have been soothed, except for Mr. Fountain’s having another of his stray thoughts, a moment of wondering whether the telephone would approve of the way in which the commandment was carried out.

The author of these late-career works still has much to say to us nearly a century after the works were written—at the very least, the depressing message that news about homelessness and financial crime and callous abuse of wealth is not new at all. He never lost sight of his playwright’s obligation to entertain, never let his extraordinary literary skill slip, but at the same time Howells succeeded in confronting us with major spiritual and moral crises. The problems he confronted have not gone away. It may be that we need this half-forgotten writer now more than ever.


Hanging beside my desk is a print of Robert Campin’s Merode altarpiece, a fifteenth-century Flemish Annunciation. The central panel of the altarpiece depicts the Virgin Mary seated in front of a fireplace. To her right is the angel Gabriel; he has just appeared and, as can be inferred from his half-bent knee, is in the act of kneeling. The Virgin does not yet see him. Behind the angel, through a circular window, shine seven beams of light. Sliding down the central one is a kind of homunculus, a Christ Child, who must be about two inches long: he bears a tiny cross and is headed directly for the Virgin’s ear. Through this (biologically anomalous) passage he will enter her womb.

The Merode altarpiece is notorious for the beautiful intricacy of its symbolism, most of which—naturally—relates to ideas of virginity, incarnation and redemption. Many people looking at this panel find the notion of ear-insemination rather comical at first, but theologically it works in quite an orthodox way: the Word enters by the organ of hearing, the Word gives life. It is good to remind ourselves how firmly this ideology is implanted in Western minds (perhaps in Eastern ones too, though that would be a different subject). On many occasions such a bias has contributed positively to our civilization; in one crucial instance it has been disastrous. That instance, the main concern of this review, is our attitude towards deafness and in particular towards the languages of the deaf.

Ideas have consequences. Sometimes they seem to possess most influence where those influenced are only vaguely aware of them. The association between language and oral channels of communication (vocal cords to lips to ears) is in many quarters virtually indelible. One example close at hand is instructive. About a year ago, at a university not far from the offices of the *Cresset*, a faculty committee was asked to vote on whether American Sign Language is a language, that is, whether it belongs to the same communicative category as French or German. The Foreign Language department of the university submitted a memo on this subject, a memo which claimed, first, that “American Sign Language is a modified form of English and not a foreign language,” and second, that “Sign language is not, in fact, a language as such, but a secondary communication skill...like typing.” These claims, especially the second, derive ultimately from Edward Sapir’s *Language* (1912) and Leonard Bloomfield’s *Language* (1933—heavily influenced by Sapir). But it’s been a long time since either Sapir or Bloomfield could be understood as an authority on Sign. The history of ASL, repeated in virtually every

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modern work on the subject, shows that it developed independently of English; the research of Edward Klima and Ursula Bellugi (The Signs of Language, Harvard University Press, most recent edition 1979)—accepted, to the best of my knowledge, by all current students of the topic—shows that ASL has its own grammar and vocabulary, both distinct in structure from corresponding forms in English and other spoken languages.

It is possible that at this late date arguments over ASL are simply a matter of academic politics; since Foreign Language departments do not normally offer Sign (which tends to crop up in other parts of the curriculum), they are—understandably—eager to defend their turf: that is, to keep the language market cornered. However, I would guess that something even more basic than a fight for money, staff, and students is involved here. By mainstream standards, ASL is hard to categorize. Like writing, it works in a visual channel; on the other hand, it lacks writing's fixity, its permanence. Unless you videotape a signer (the whole body, not just the hands), his or her mode of expression is evanescent in roughly the same way that speech is. The temptation, then, is to assume—despite all the evidence—that ASL is dependent on spoken English in the same manner that written English is, but not to associate ASL with the authority of formal learning. (To put the point a little differently: how can a language as visual as writing but lacking, nonetheless, a writing system be considered anything but a freak?) The result is that sign loses out two ways at once. The Word, or just the word, remains the property of the hearing.

One would think that such difficulties could get straightened out, even by university bureaucracies, but there's another twist to the story, one I haven't even mentioned—and it creates, in the case mentioned above as well as in other contexts, perhaps the greatest current stumbling block for people who want to think about language and the deaf. Sign language, according to the memo already quoted, cannot "provide a solid basis for further study of any foreign language or culture, including its literature... Though it might enhance the student's awareness of language in general, it cannot give insight into the relationship of a foreign language to the culture in which that language is spoken." The implication of these sentences is that ASL has no connection with a distinctive culture—is neither grounded in such a culture nor reliant upon it. Nobody speaks of typists as belonging to a typing culture. Why then try to connect Sign with a "deaf culture?"

It couldn't be said that this question has gone without answers over the years but a recent book, Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture, written by two deaf educators based in San Diego, provides an unusually rich response. Though Deaf in America is published by a university press (California), it is not a technical work; in some ways, as I shall suggest below, it would be richer if the authors were more conversant with the philosophical underpinnings of their subject. All the same, Carol Padden and Tom Humphries have done a fine job of opening up an often unexplored and misunderstood topic.

When people refer to human "culture," they tend to mean one of two things: first, in Clifford Geertz's phrase (quoted by Padden and Humphries), "a set of control mechanisms—plans, recipes, rules, instructions...for the governing of behavior;" second, art, both high and low: opera, verse, theater, movies, etc. Wisely, I think, Padden and Humphries allow these two senses to overlap. The early chapters of their study emphasize ASL's affiliation with a defined social group: namely the 250,000 to 500,000 people in this country and Canada who claim it as their native language. An orthographical convention helps clarify the argument. Lowercase "deaf" is used to mean "the audiological condition of not hearing;" capitalized "Deaf" is used to mean ASL users who "have inherited their sign language, [rely on it as] a primary means of communication among themselves, and hold a set of beliefs about themselves and their connection to the larger society." This more or less anthropological sense of culture is gradually allowed to blend into the somewhat narrower aesthetic sense: for instance, later chapters of Deaf in America have much to say about the potentialities of lyric poetry released by the special virtues of Sign.

The two kinds of culture remain distinct; on the other hand, they are intertwined throughout Deaf in America by way of a central thesis. The book argues that both sorts of culture, social and aesthetic, must be understood as means towards the self-definition of a community. The Deaf are not geographically "foreign," nor do they possess a state of their own. If the Deaf had acquired an essentially independent commonwealth (the notion was seriously debated in the 1850s), attitudes towards ASL might have developed very differently: languages in the West tend to be taken seriously only when they have a political identity, when they are connected with nation-states or at the very least with nationalism. Under current circumstances, the Deaf get the worst of two worlds: they are as set apart from mainstream American life as if they had seceded and formed a state—only without the prestige that a successful secession would have brought.

The isolation of the Deaf is frequently underrated. In a town like Valparaiso, Indiana, where I live,
it is possible to run across deaf people who really don’t mingle with anyone at all, except possibly at a church. These people live in the world as though they were invisible. Their language is correspondingly singular. They often work out idiosyncratic sign systems (idi­olects, as the linguists say) because they have had little exposure to ASL, much less to American English, and they talk mainly to themselves. More typically, deaf people—the Deaf—find institutional ways of bonding with one another: through attendance at schools catering to them (Gaulladet University being the best known); through local organizations known as Deaf Clubs (there’s one in Merrillville, down the road from my house twenty miles or so); through cultural enterprises like the National Theater of the Deaf; sometimes through family life (though only where ASL is either the dominant or a recognized language in the family); finally, through social work agencies, which, after school, tend to serve as the Deaf person’s main means of contact with the hearing world. By means such as these, a shared set of social conventions is able to sustain itself. Thomas Pynchon’s The Crying of Lot 49 describes the quest of Oedipa Maas, who discovers a secret world of the dispossessed, a surreptitious body of exiles linked by an enigmatic postal system. The Deaf are rather in this position. You don’t see them unless you look for them. Once you look, you realize that there are a lot of people out there communicating by channels you may not even be aware of (not just ASL, by the way: new communications technologies are bringing the Deaf community ever closer together, in a myriad of ways I will not discuss here).

Padden and Humphries show skillfully how self-de­finitions arise in the Deaf community of North America. An early chapter, “Learning to be Deaf,” is especially effective. It demonstrates that children in Deaf families or sometimes in hearing ones have to “discover” their deafness; have to learn, in other words, that it sets them apart. As the authors establish, this discovery often does not happen until a child is between five and ten. A confrontation with deafness frequently occurs when the child is sent away to a school for the deaf; it can also come about on less traumatic occasions. An instructive bit of testimony is given by “the youngest child of a Deaf family on a farm in the heart of Indiana.” He observes, “I never knew I was hearing until I was six. I never suspected in any way that I was different from my parents and siblings.” As the authors add

This is not a case of pretended deafness; Joe did not fail to hear, but simply understood sound in a way he could reconcile with the experiences of his family. We can imagine a range of phenomena in this child’s world that have double but compatible interpretations: a spoon falls and makes a sound as it hits the floor. Someone picks it up, not simply because it made a sound but because it slipped from view...

Such “double interpretations” eventually break down, one way or another, but the striking point is that they can be maintained for such a long while. Deafness is thus an idea into which one must grow as much or more than a self-explanatory biological fact.

Subsequent chapters explore further the idea of deafness evolved by the Deaf, although most of this discussion is unforced, one crucial section of the argument should be treated with caution, I think. There is a longstanding semantic problem in American English: how does one refer to people who are blind, deaf, or crippled; is there some logical category which includes these various attributes and, if so, what is its name? The word “handicapped” seems to evoke an image of pathetic outcasts humbly begging for charity. “Dis­abled” is a bit more neutral but still comes off as condescending. I recently heard someone refer to the “physically challenged.” Close, but no cigar: everyone is physically challenged, only the challenges differ from one person to another. Is deafness to be compared with emphysema, near-sightedness, sheer clutziness, or the rigors of mortality? Or is it rightfully to be placed in another category altogether?

The Padden-Humphries position on this crux is elusive, partly because the authors so often claim to be reporting what the Deaf believe rather than evolving arguments of their own. “For him [a deaf commuter, uneasily taking advantage of a discount for the ‘disabled’], ‘disabled’ describes those who are blind or physically handicapped, not Deaf people....’disabled’ is not a primary term of self­identification, indeed it is one that requires a disclaimer.” To which I would want to respond: OK, and do you agree? Apparently Padden and Humphries do side with the person quoted above. Their notion is that the Deaf experience the world from “a different center” where deafness, far from being a disadvantage—except in relation to the hostile hearing world—becomes a desirable norm. They establish that many Deaf people think of themselves in these terms; they convince me that this is a possible, often desirable way of living. Nonetheless: I still want to know (maybe this is naive, maybe not) whether there’s some frame of reference which would allow us to make effective comparisons among different groups and to agree on words that would make these comparison intelligible to all. Or are we just stuck with the notion of different, mutually incompatible centers, each setting up its own standard, each to be evaluated only in its own self-defined terms?

Struggling along with this dilemma, and failing
to come up with any great solutions, I remembered a story by H.G. Wells, “The Country of the Blind.” Wells’s point in this insidious tale is that the one-eyed man is not king among the blind; instead he’s an irritating anomaly, a freak instance which must be eliminated or standardized so that life according to social norms can continue. Wells’s blind are horribly unsympathetic; they are presented as, in fact, blind to possibilities which only the tale’s seeing narrator understands. Very likely, Padden and Humphries would have no argument with this thesis; perhaps, as they seem to believe, the blind are “disabled” whereas the deaf aren’t. Then again, Wells may have a useful lesson to teach. Perhaps there are times when the acknowledgement of a loss or a lack is a crucial good. To know that one is missing something can, on occasion, be a positive experience rather than a negative one. A hearing person who tries to learn ASL soon discovers that his or her capacities for decoding visual knowledge are relatively limited compared to those of the Deaf. A corresponding acknowledgement on the part of the Deaf concerning the world of sound might not need to be destructive, not if conceived properly. Padden and Humphries quote a song popular among the Deaf in the 1930s: their English translation begins, “The birds sing, sing, sing, but I hear them not at all, Darn, Darn, Darn…” The authors don’t say anything much about the content of this jingle, but it seems to treat the subject of loss with a winning and rather wise ruefulness (loss is simultaneously defied and acknowledged). I would guess that they are, in fact, a bit too concerned with their “different center” to grasp the importance of this ruefulness as one part of a possible Deaf heritage.

I hasten to add that most of what Padden and Humphries say about centers is politically quite useful; given the present circumstances of the Deaf community, not exactly an overprivileged group, thinking from “a different center” is a virtual necessity. Making this approach an exclusive method for conceiving deafness might well be a long-term disaster, however; it could encourage a kind of provinciality which no community, Deaf or hearing, should tolerate for long. Avenues of escape from this dilemma have not been well defined, as yet, but two further books on deafness offer some interesting clues, and it is with a notice of these volumes that I will conclude this review.

Harlan Lane’s *The Deaf Experience: Classics in Language and Education* is an anthology of eighteenth and nineteenth-century documents. Many of these documents assume or arrive at ideas now known to be erroneous but they have one strength possessed by few modern writings on deafness; they are vitally connected with a great tradition of social thought. Lane’s book reminds us that Rousseau, Condillac and Diderot, among others, concerned themselves with the relation between thought and words, the nature of gestural language and the plight, in particular, of the deaf. Condillac’s *Traité des sensations* (1754) proposes that we imagine a statue, endow it with one sense, then another—smell, taste, hearing, vision, and touch in that order—conceiving along the way of what it learns at each stage. It is not so much Condillac’s conclusion that is relevant to the present purpose as his method: a thought-experiment of the Enlightenment kind, seriously thought through, could well illuminate the way the senses interact with one another and tell us a few important things about the effect of removing one sense or another from the group. I propose (briefly) a variant on Condillac’s fable. Imagine, in the manner of certain science-fiction writers, a creature which has a hitherto unknown sixth sense. Then conceive of people with five available senses as compensating and readjusting for the absence of that sixth one. The difference between five-sensers and a sixth-senser is perhaps analogous to the difference between four-sensers (such as the Deaf) and a fivesenser. Or is it? There doesn’t actually have to be a sixth sense—any more than there has to be a state of nature or a statue whose endowments can be changed with alarming ease—for such a debate to be capable of sharpening distinctions on this matter of the senses and how they connect us with reality. At all events, Lane’s anthology shows writers of the second rank inspired by the example of such philosophers as Condillac; these thinkers, whatever their flaws, are not content to rest with the mere assertion of difference, and of all differences being equal, as the terminus of their arguments. Modern thinkers, take note.

A third recent book, Nora Ellen Groce’s *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language*, concerns a pair of towns on Martha’s Vineyard where, for two hundred years, there was an especially high incidence of hereditary deafness. In this context, as Groce suggests, the concept of a handicap is revealed as “an arbitrary social category”; to put the point another way, Vineyard people—whether hearing or deaf—simply learned a variant of sign language as a matter of course, without the conviction that they were doing anything charitable, condescending, or out of the ordinary. As a result, deaf and hearing people mixed on equal terms. There was no radical separation, no Deaf community which need to be “helped.” If Deaf culture existed under these circumstances, and I suspect it did, then it took a radically non-separatist form. “The community must be willing to change slightly to adapt to all,” concludes Groce.

A gloss on that qualifier, “slightly,” is in order.
It is far easier for hearing people to take a few classes in ASL and learn some of its fundamentals than it is for the Deaf or just the deaf to learn English. Consider the deaf person’s options: (1) Lipreading is a skill far more difficult to acquire and use effectively than the popular mythology of deafness would have it. (2) Where there is any considerable amplification involved, hearing aids put an enormous strain on people: for the hearing aid user, life is as loud as an O'Hare runway. Maybe even louder. (3) Implant operations for deaf people are not only extremely expensive, they involve the risk of blindness and assorted forms of drastic nerve damage. To sum up, training in the visual channel for someone who has a visual channel is more practical than training in the auditory channel for someone who (basically) can’t hear.

*Deaf in America* chronicles the sort of situation that results when slight adaptations prove difficult or impossible, due to various forms of cultural resistance and ignorance. *Everybody Here Spoke Sign Language* gives us the opposite side of the coin. It shows, by implication, that the rhetorical weapon of difference, used so pointedly by Padden and Humphries, is less a way of asserting the rights of the Deaf than of confirming their necessary isolation within a society that cannot bend. After all, when institutions of higher education are incapable of conceiving that ASL is a language, much less a language connected with an indigenous culture, how much hope is there for anything but this aggressively partisan version of political action and social behavior?

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**To the Unknown Child in the Neighborhood**

The diamond shaped yellow sign  
on a green pole sprung up  
from the earth  
across the street.  
Instead of stamen, letters pronounce:  
Caution Deaf Child In Area.  
I read the words and imagine:  
Snow fills an hermetic globe for centuries.  
Without warning,  
mute winds splash faces with damp or arctic cold.  
Finch’s, robin’s crow’s calls flash  
as flight and color.  
Trees submerge in green.  
Balls bounce, friends run, cars roll—  
all floating corks.  
Leaves do not rustle in falling  
but rise up without sighs.  

I want to believe your deafness protects  
you in a charmed circle,  
as that around the scenes on a Grecian vase,  
shields you from ambulance cry, police siren, howl of pain,  
gunshot.  
But I know you must hear a roar  
no tidal wave could equal.

Janet Krauss
After my first week in the Spanish Basque province of Vizcaya, my new friend Arantzazu presented me with a map of the Basque country and said, “This is to help you forget the appalling idea that you might be in Spain.” She had been the one to caution me about the way I used the word Spanish. “We don’t speak Spanish here,” she said, “We speak Castellano.” It is the same language, of course, but the two words have distinct political implications.

And I had thought that I was returning to Spain. I knew, of course, that this would not be the country I left in 1964 when Franco had been in control. At that time billboards loomed over Madrid, boasting “veinte cinco anos de paz.” Twenty-five years of peace. I remember the Guardia Civil from those days—omnipresent, heavily armed, sinister. Now, in Bilbao, I see them again, guarding government buildings—not Basque government but Spanish government—with submachine guns strapped to their backs.

There is reason for fear. These Basques are a fiercely determined, militantly independent people, and terrorist acts against Spanish officials are common. Last year, when a nuclear power station was being constructed on the northern coast, two of the officials involved in the project were assassinated. The work stopped. The ETA, the party for Basque autonomy, had spoken.

One quarter of the people here speak the Basque language. All signs and public messages are presented in both Castellano and Eususkera, a language with no known roots in any other Indo-European language. The people are strongly featured and dignified. The women of Bilbao, known for their stylishness, walk arm-in-arm down the Gran Via in the evening, dressed in their furs and silks. When I remarked to my landlady that the women here were particularly elegant, she said, “Yes, we are. And it is something that cannot be imitated.” There I stood in my sweater, skirt, flat shoes and trench coat, clearly from another planet.

This is ordinarily a green land, known for its heavy mists, its wet winters, its eternal cloudiness. But a two-year drought has scorched this city, has browned the countryside, has left forests blackened from fires. The water in Bilbao is turned off from 6:00 p.m. to 6:00 a.m. now.

This is a city almost untouched by tourism. Ten miles from the coast, on a river heavy with pollution from nearby industries, Bilbao offers few postcard vistas. But it is a charming city nonetheless, especially the winding streets of the old section now closed to vehicular traffic, in deference to pedestrians.

I am here as a Fulbrighter to teach doctoral courses in American literature at two schools: Deusto University, run by Jesuits in Bilbao, and the University of

Jill Baumgaertner, who teaches English at Wheaton College, is a former poetry editor for The Cresset, and currently an associate editor of The Christian Century.
the Basque Country, a public institution forty miles away in Vitoria, the capital of the País Vasco. For a course in Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy, I ordered the video of O'Connor's story, "The Displaced Person." Even though this was ordered from an American library in Madrid, the version that arrived was in Spanish and provided some new interpretations for a story I thought I knew pretty well. I think Flannery would have enjoyed hearing Mrs. Shortley speaking fluent Spanish as she talked about "them foreigners."

The English department has no secretarial staff at all. Recently, a new professor of linguistics was approached by the department chair and asked if she would like to become his secretary. A fairly common practice is for the catedraticos, or senior professors, to use the junior professors in this manner. In fact, it seems to be the only way for advancement. After many years of fiefdom, one might become a catedratico oneself and have a secretary of one's own.

Undergraduate classes are unbelievably large—up to 175 or 200 in a single literature class, but the level of discourse in these classes is surprisingly high. The failure rate is also high, I have been told. But in most respects the students have an authority which is unheard of in Stateside universities. Students determine the final exam schedules, and they can call a strike at any time, for any reason. In fact, the Universidad del País Vasco, where I am supposed to be teaching half of the time, has been on strike for six weeks now. The issue is the paucity of public funding for new teachers.

I have been told that plagiarism is rampant, even among the doctoral students, and I have noticed that there is another type of behavior which inspires not even a blink of hesitation. Departments commonly buy one copy of an assigned text and then photocopy multiples to sell to students. Because of the costliness of English editions (a Penguin paperback can easily cost between fifteen and eighteen dollars), this is, of course, much cheaper. My colleagues here think my reaction to this practice is peculiar. One member of the department had the audacity to require for one of his courses a particular edition of a text, but the students were so outraged that they concluded that he must be receiving a kickback from the publisher. When he heard the rumor, he was so insulted that he went on strike, coming into the office everyday, but refusing to teach, to grade papers, to see students. He said he would teach again only after the students had apologized. The apology took three weeks to organize.

I have been here five weeks and will stay another three months, hardly time enough to coax my Spanish back to the level of proficiency I had acquired twenty-five years ago. Before I left Chicago, a colleague asked me why I wanted to do this, why it was at all appealing. Surprised by the question, I nonetheless found it difficult to answer. Part of it is Spain, of course. I wanted to return to the country I loved for two years long ago, the country of my father's family. But there was something else, too.

I needed new images. I needed to get out and rattle my bones a bit, to see the world from a new angle. I did not anticipate that my eye would continue to seek the familiar in the midst of the unusual, but that, I suppose, is the human response. I sit in a park, for example, and do a doubletake because I think I see David Morgan from church walking toward me—or Harold Best, Dean of Wheaton's Conservatory—or Beatrice Batson, Wheaton's regal professor emerita. Even my mother has a double walking around Bilbao in a blue coat. There are, no matter where one travels, certain similarities of gesture, build, expression. Besides, I suspect that the brain can admit only so many new images at a time before it seeks to make connections, many of them false. I have probably just deconstructed this essay. Read it then, as a casual note, not the final word, from someone far from home trying hard to allow new images to coalesce in unfamiliar contexts.
Dear Editor:

One day early this year the Dogwood Daily Progress reported a traffic summons issued to a 46-year-old area resident, for an illegal radar detector and no vehicle sticker.

"We just issued a summons and released him, same as we would you or anybody else," said the county police, referring to playwright Sam Shepard.

At the same time, our weekly paper, the Observer, noticed interesting details in a major novel just published. There was our own airport in this book, the construction work going on, also our downtown park and the sounds you hear when sitting there. The novel is Picturing Will, by local resident Ann Beattie. She was also, according to the newspaper, pictured in People magazine that week, kissing her husband in Williams Corner Bookstore, on our downtown mall.

Also that week in January the African-American literary journal Callaloo, edited at the university here, sponsored a poetry reading. Introducing the three black women poets was Rita Dove, a member of our writing faculty, Pulitzer Prize 1987.

You find a lot of literary activity and literary people in Dogwood. The February-March issue of Albermarle, newstand magazine for central Virginia, featured Jonathan Coleman, lecturer in writing at the university. He was just back from touring U.S. bookstores and TV talk shows to promote Exit the Rainmaker, his second book.

The university museum was launching its third annual literary contest, with prizes for stories and poems based on pictures and objects in the museum collection. Prose judge is John Casey, local resident, who won this year's National Book Award for his nautical novel, Spartina. Poetry judge is Michael Ryan, local resident, National Book Award nominee, whose new collection, God Hunger, came out last fall.

On the English Department list of spring 1990 courses you see six sections of introductory poetry writing, five of fiction writing, and seven upper-level undergraduate courses in creative writing. You can study creative writing at the community college, and downtown there are two reading series, one on Sunday nights and one on Thursday nights, featuring local and visiting writers.

In short, ever since Poe was at the university in the 1820s,
writers happily take writing workshops (sometimes three or four, in four years), but they don't peruse literary magazines in the library or buy them at Daedalus Bookstore or the Book Gallery. I know this from conversations and advising conferences, since it interests me to talk with young writers.

As an official adviser, or in my role as an academic dean, I notice something else. When I see on a course schedule an intermediate or advanced creative writing course, I ask, aware of a dilemma, how many writing courses the student has taken and intends to take. A very serious writer, future poet, should probably work with everybody; Greg Orr, Charles Wright, and Rita Dove are all considered excellent mentors, certainly diverse in their writing, and admired for being nondoctrinaire. But each writing course evicts from a student's program a course in literature, religion, anthropology, or political theory—courses which would enlarge the stock of stories and images for this future poet. How do you choose?

Let me of course not sound too naive. A large number of students love writing seminars for reasons they confess when signing up for public speaking and for the workshop called Acting and Directing: They meet and really get to know a small number of students and quickly form a community. Community in fact will often take precedence over creativity. Many students over the years tell me they can't write a poem except for a class. Their lives are too full otherwise; unless they actually make room to write, they can't do it. Furthermore, they need the critical judgment of their peers; without putting it to the group, they can't tell whether the poem is working or not.

Thus entering a poetry workshop with diverse motives, some undergraduates are aware of Ashbery and Wright, but I think it's safe to say that most aren't. They enter as they enter an economics survey, never having heard of Adam Smith or Keynes. In America, if you want to know something, you take a course. You don't investigate on your own, or open a book in advance.

Since they typically do not read literary magazines, and don't know where in the library the periodicals room is, beginning students find themselves in the same odd position of local residents who read Alhambra magazine or run into Sam Shepard as a front-page desperado. All are fortunate denizens, that is, of a thriving literary community, but pretty much ignorant of what literary "craft" is all about. Aware of personalities, perhaps slightly acquainted with the books themselves, but as far removed from the "creative process" as most writers are from the fuel injection systems of their Volvos. Michael Ryan as written up in Alhambra last fall: Yale Younger Poet, Guggenheim Fellow, "son of an accountant," "linebacker on his high school football team."

The most interesting example of this knowledge gap may well be the fact about which most modern poets agree: the counter-intuitive way that you start writing a poem, by waiting rather than deliberating.

I ponder this, having at times conducted one of those beginning poetry writing seminars. And having chatted with colleagues—full-grown, intelligent adults who do not write
poems—about the activity involved in writing a poem. Particularly this year and last, when they notice in the museum flier that I’m the screening judge for adult poetry submissions—the person who hands on the good stuff to Michael Ryan for final selection. "I could never write a poem," people say. "I wouldn’t even know how to start."

But poets agree on this matter; all you have to do is read what they say—in interviews in magazines such as Paris Review, Contemporary Literature, New York Quarterly, in the periodicals room of the library, terra incognita, and in books that collect interviews and essays and talks.

Poets agree that a poem generally starts with the "gift," from an unknown giver, of an image, a line, a phrase, or even something larger. Richard Eberhart goes on at some length about a poem of his: "The writing of 'The Groundhog' is an example of a theory I have that poetry is a gift of the gods. It cannot be had only by taking thought . . . . When a poem is ready to be born it will be born whole, without the need to change a word, or perhaps the need to change only a word or two. I thus go back to an ancient theory of inspiration."

Stanley Kunitz: "Practically all my poems start with something given to me, that is, a line or a phrase, or a set of lines, that take me by surprise. When that happens, the challenge is to accept the blessing and go along with it." John Berryman, asked why he chose to write a long poem about Anne Bradstreet, "this boring high-minded Puritan woman": "Somehow she chose me." Vassar Miller: A poem has "almost a will of its own." James Dickey: "Now and then I began to hear lines of verse, lines without words to them." Howard Nemerov: "Why should a phrase come to you out of the ground and seem to be exactly right?"

The only thing is, you have to be ready for a gift, as May Swenson explains: "The poet’s pre-creative condition must be an emptiness, a solitude, a stillness close to inertia."

John Ashbery in New York: "A possible title occurs to me, and it defines an area that I feel i’ll be able to move around in and uncover." "I often begin writing a poem with a collection of odd notations that have come out of conversations, dreams, overheard remarks on the street." I "pick up whatever is in the air." Jared Carter in Indiana: Beginning to write a poem "is a surrendering of all intention except to be receptive."


Helpful also, especially because it deals with poets who sometimes write in forms, traditional and invented (rather than free verse), is David Lehman’s recent book Ecstatic Occasions, Expedient Forms (1987). He presents 65 poets, all of them choosing a poem of their own to comment on, to make the point that form too is a gift.

Joyce Carol Oates writes of watching a fish being boned at dinner; that was the source of the "image" in the poem. But also: "The abstract form immediately suggested itself as well." Amy Clampitt on her poem "Portola Valley": "The form taken by the first stanza pretty much found itself." Jonathan Galassi on his villanelle: "The form chose itself." John Updike: "The first stanza came, and then the challenge was to duplicate its rather intricate form repeatedly." Frank Bidart, quoting Coleridge but adding italics: "In the true work of art, that which is within the thing takes on form . . . and by a kind of self-manifesting, shows itself to us."

Bidart quotes Coleridge, and Wilbur invokes Emerson, finding himself "stuck with the Emersonian feeling that a poem is something which finds out what it has to say, and in the process discovers the form which will best stress its tone and meaning." Robert Morgan, like Eberhart above, credits "the gods"; "many of the happiest touches in a poem are accidents, gifts, of the gods of chance."

The only reason for producing all this consensual testimony is that people need in their lives more mystery and power. We actually need power and mystery more than we need trivia about poets’ lives. A person who knows that a poem begins with the accessible mystery of a "gift," from the "gods," received (not earned) simply by the quiet act of "surrendering" in "solitude," need only take the next step of thought. Which is to say, simply, "I myself have the power to write a poem."

From Dogwood, yours faithfully,

C.V. ☐
Recently I came across a book entitled *Gumshoe*, which I found to be utterly fascinating. It tells the story of a Haverford philosophy professor who leaves the sacred grove to become a private detective in San Francisco. He begins to reflect upon Sartrean absurdity in a faculty meeting locked in earnest debate over stationing condom machines on campus (this was in the late Sixties. The author, Josiah Thompson, recounts the alienating feeling that many other faculty members have experienced, that academic debates live up to their general reputation as merely academic. ("Often it had seemed," he writes, "as if Haverford were a stage set for a comic novel or movie about life in a small college.") Thompson isn’t the first academician to feel as if he or she were a character in an elaborate comedy of collegial manners. Novelist such as David Lodge and Robertson Davies write about professorial casts of characters who are all slightly off center, ranging from rampant paranoia to studied eccentricity to quirky ideas. It is an oft-expressed notion that academic concerns and conflicts intensify according to the magnitude of their irrelevance, forever reconfirming the lay stereotype of academic foolishness.

To survive and endure in the academic world, I suspect one has to cultivate an attitude of tolerant resignation towards the more egregious sins of the tribe (such as using words like "egregious"). But for many people who were originally drawn to the intellectual atmosphere and gentle pace of the mythological halls of ivy, after awhile—too many dull and surly students, too many committees slouching toward evening, too many manuscripts labored over to then be savaged by some dreary snob bent on enhancing a critical reputation at your expense—the lure of something more exciting, substantial, or just plain lucrative beckons. Thompson, the philosopher, began to reflect on Kierkegaard and Sartre, a sure sign of academic burnout. To use his term, he had become superfluous. It was time to Quit School and seek out Recess.

Now it is a common impulse among the professoriate to escape what is erroneously thought of as "an ivory tower" which is somehow different from "the real world." But Thompson’s feeling of superfluity does often stem from the sense of being apart from the action. Political scientists both admire and envy those among their numbers who have been lucky enough (it rarely has anything to do with talent) to be taken seriously by the Powers that Be, especially since we know (Jean Kirkpatrick comes to mind) they are the beneficiaries of either circumstance or opportunism. (And, they have far less to say that is incisive than we who are ignored.) In any case, the life of the mind—on those campuses where it exists at all—comes to be seen as not enough. Thinking about power and money and conquest is not as satisfying as doing it, becoming part of the action. (Ever heard what one fellow calls "The American Question: ‘If you’re so smart, why aren’t you rich?’")
The difficulty of such mid-career crises is that professors seeking fulfillment in the world of action are in many instances disappointed and even embarrassed by the requirements of a post-School life. One recalls the great Monty Python skit about the accountant who wants to become a lion tamer. This is not to say that academicians are timid Casper Milquetoasts unfit for a world of tough competition and manual dexterity. There are plenty of people in the academy who are competitive enough to be both smart and rich if they so choose to enter the world of business and finance, and there are likely as many as in most other professions who can competently fix a car or run a lathe. Nor are they lazy, contrary to the “Prof-scam” image so dear to those who would prefer faculties to be reduced to manageable employees propagating a safe and reliable product.

I suspect that if ex-professors seeking a new life outside the confines of the academic institution are disappointed, it is likely because the real world they enter resembles the world they thought they were leaving behind. An economist who goes to work for a corporation or bank, a political scientist who goes to work for the government, a psychologist who goes to work for an institution—all may well find that contact with the real world resembles academia, in that one is now part of another professional and organizational order with the same kind of requirements of rationality and discipline that obtained in the university. Yes, just more committees slouching toward evenin g.

But Professor Josiah Thompson, author of a book on Kierkegaard, really did leave. He became a private detective in San Francisco, the city of Dashiell Hammett and Sam Spade. His book recounts his post-School career, beginning work for a detective agency and eventually doing investigation on his own. Some of the cases he retells are truly mysterious and dangerous. He apparently is no romantic dabbler in his new profession: he was named “Best Detective of 1987” by the Bay Guardian, and was profiled in The New Yorker.

He has completed a rite of passage into an activity and world he no longer feels superfluous. He can now look back on the academic play-world with a modicum of contempt (“...we’d been comrades-in-arms through several skirmishes with the college’s administration, back in the days when such things mattered”). He has lived out a common fantasy, not confined just to academicians, of eschewing contemplation for action. And yet, he doesn’t leave. Thompson is an educated person, a philosopher, a man of words as well now of deeds. He may be able to escape School, but he can’t escape education. Not only does he tell an articulate story about his investigations, he also reflects upon experience. And he does so, lo and behold, by using the books he read in School, complemented by the books about being a private investigator. Gumshoe even begins with a quote from Raymond Chandler: “The story is this man’s adventure in search of a hidden truth.” The professor has never been an archetypical figure in American culture, but the private eye has. But we may wonder if Thompson’s rejection of the academic life for something more elemental or utilitarian was really all that much a break. He writes in a terse and plainspoken style very much in the hardboiled tradition, yet in his various ventures in search of the hidden truth of a case, he cannot resist educated reflection on his experience. Tail­ ing someone or sitting in a car all night in a stakeout or digging through records, he finds meaning in this by reference to people he used to know. He thinks about Hume and “philosophical despair,” Kierkegaard’s metaphor of being as a chess piece, speculation on whether the world he now occupies is a Hobbesian universe, of whether surveillance was an example of the doom of human projects of which Sartre wrote, Nietzsche on the justice of punishment, Merleau-Ponty on the unexpectedness of death. Thompson may now walk Chandler’s “mean streets”, but the intellectual trail leads into the library.

It is to Thompson’s credit that he did not deteriorate into anti-intellectualism. Most veteran faculty members can probably recall the return of an ex-colleague who has abandoned School and made good in some “useful” endeavor, armed with their contempt for us poor innocents laboring fruitlessly in the sparse vineyards of the cloister. Indeed, Thompson uses his new calling to do intellectual reflection on the meaning of the American hardboiled detective fiction, Hammett in particular. He researches Hammett’s life, and analyzes his work (The Maltese Falcon, he concludes, is “a fable about the impossibility of judgment”). On cases, he keeps rereading The Mal­tese Falcon, as a “kind of original text against which I kept comparing my own experience.” Learning to be a detective, the philosopher is fascinated by Sam Spade’s method of operation, asking that most philosophical of questions, how does one find things out?

At this point, the reader should be reminded that the detective genre is a rich and com-
plex one, with at least two philosophically interesting traditions. The older and more European centers on what we might call rationalization, the power of the individual detective to solve intellectually daunting puzzles, in the guise of a mystery usually involving murder. The private detective originated as a figure who exemplified the uses of scientific rationality in the nineteenth century. Usually aristocratic or at least a dandy, the classical detective was a model of individualism, someone who demonstrated that the power of private investigation was still adequate to solve the mysteries of the emerging urban world of large organizations and complex webs of complicit groups. Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Lord Peter Wimsey—all operated virtually independent of the usually hapless police, using only the power of their minds to think through a situation.

Their use of scientific logic was an applied science, taking the promise of science into the resolution of human affairs and the "rationalization" of society. Conan Doyle, himself a doctor, based the character, or at least the methodology, of Sherlock Holmes on his professor, Dr. Joseph Bell. Medicine at that time was a growing applied science, and Doyle thought that Bell's gift for diagnostics a sound basis for Holmes' powers of "deduction." At the same time, the American version of utilitarianism, which came to be termed "the pragmatic school," was developing its own notions of the logic of inquiry. Indeed, it is now argued that what Holmes called deduction was in fact Charles Sanders Peirce's abduction, which is a kind of educated guess very much like an on-the-spot medical diagnosis. The genius of the rational detective is in the power of immediate hypothesis, or as Holmes called it, "systematized common sense." (There is an ambitious book edited by Umberto Eco and Thomas A. Sebeok, The Sign of Three: Dupin, Holmes, Peirce, that explores the logic of detection, including an account of how Peirce himself used the process of abductive reasoning in order to recover a stolen watch.)

For both pedagogical and scholarly reasons, the detective is useful as a metaphor of the powers of investigation. The classical model of the triumph of rationality over logical and social mysteries is inspirational. There is even an article entitled "Sherlock Holmes as a Social Scientist"; if he is, it is as an observer-participant, someone who is detached as a student of social mysteries but attached in his commitment to the undoing of social wrongs. "Holmes," writes Sebeok, "was a brilliant physician to the body politic, the disease of which is crime." If Holmes and his descendants (including P.D. James' Commander Adam Dalgliesh—we need not limit this to strictly private detectives) give us a popular image useful for the philosophy of social science, perhaps it is through the renewed tradition of casuistry, practical philosophy, "practice theory," and social diagnostics.

No less a philosophical personage than Stephen Toulmin has recently championed the "recovery of practical philosophy" through the use of the conceptual and logical power of philosophy. Although he has in mind areas of practical experience such as medical and scientific procedure, like the detective the philosophical investigator is working on a "case," having to use the best practical reason to make a local and timely decision in a particular situation. Casuistry unites the moments of thinking and doing to what is to be done in the here and now. The attitude of both the philosophical and private investigator stems not only from Aristotle but also from Machiavelli.

But as Thompson understands from his actual gumshoe work in the here and now, the private eye not only observes a logical puzzle but also lives an existential puzzle. The American complement to the detective story is in its existential quality, the anti-heroic private dick (Freudians can do with this term what they will, but readers of Sara Paretsky's female detective operating in southside Chicago know that such a representative character is not gender specific anymore) is, as Thompson says, "no hero of reason," no "celebration of the power of reason." He or she searches not through "the sunlit world of the eighteenth-century philosophers," but rather through "a nightmare world where hunch and chance are more important than logical acuteness."

The private detective in terms of cultural history is not a figure of the adventure of the frontier such as the cowboy or sheriff, nor a hero of domestic romance such as the boy mayor of the town or the postwar suburban father; rather he or she is an antihero of the urban mystery, a place not of endless vistas or neighborly tranquility, but of the nighttown of the concrete jungle. He is not part of the Western myth, nor the myth of Our Town, but rather the myth of The City. He is not John Wayne in The Searchers, nor Jimmy Stewart in It's a Wonderful Life, but rather Humphrey Bogart in The Maltese Falcon and The Big Sleep, and Jack Nicholson in Chinatown and The Two Jakes. The Westerner lets us believe in what we once were; the domestic romantic view of what normalcy might look like; but the
private eye lets us glimpse—we do not wish to fully see—what Hobbesian and Conradian darkness lies beyond the blue velvet of our sustaining illusions if we dare to look. The private eye has looked upon and seen the fragility of civilization and the torn fabric of lies that sustains official reality, making him or her rely upon an existential code of knowledge without judgment and choice without cant or hypocrisy. His task is not the taming of the frontier nor the leadership of the town but survival in the wasteland of the decaying metropolis. He or she may solve the specific mystery of a “case,” but they know they cannot penetrate the impenetrable mystery of power and society. We learn from the hardboiled American private detective life lessons and survival skills, but nothing of a moral order or social vision that transcends the knowing individual, the detective who lives through the nightmare.

The private detective, I think, is a figure of our confrontation with urban gigantism and cultural maturity, but also the persistence of savagery in both suites and streets. It is tempting to conclude that there is a profound pessimism in the detective genre, suggesting a pervasive disbelief in progress. Perhaps there always was, since Holmes and other earlier figures moved through a pretty savage Our history is like a mask—the kind a villain might wear in an old film—the features almost identical to the hero’s but less ordinary, more specific, so when the skin’s peeled off in a dark room at the end, it looks like his own, left translucent there in the hands. It’s like a long-necked beaker that’s supposed to be magic if you hold it close long enough for the contents to know your chemistry. Or a favorite book read so many times you’ve begun to dislike it and want to ask the author: “What did you mean by that?” Or a small town parade one July day that won’t end—the Lions club scooters still circling the marching band, silent but for the beat of the bass drum, the square dancers so tired they can only wave from their ragged red and white float. But we have our history, you say, our history, like an old seamstress’s sewing room, the things to be altered crumpled in a pile beside her, her concentration disturbed again by the break-dancers outside her window, the needle on the machine poised above a body of cloth cut to fit the part of us that keeps going.

Rene Steinke

History

Our history is like a mask—the kind a villain might wear in an old film—the features almost identical to the hero’s but less ordinary, more specific, so when the skin’s peeled off in a dark room at the end, it looks like his own, left translucent there in the hands. It’s like a long-necked beaker that’s supposed to be magic if you hold it close long enough for the contents to know your chemistry. Or a favorite book read so many times you’ve begun to dislike it and want to ask the author: “What did you mean by that?” Or a small town parade one July day that won’t end—the Lions club scooters still circling the marching band, silent but for the beat of the bass drum, the square dancers so tired they can only wave from their ragged red and white float. But we have our history, you say, our history, like an old seamstress’s sewing room, the things to be altered crumpled in a pile beside her, her concentration disturbed again by the break-dancers outside her window, the needle on the machine poised above a body of cloth cut to fit the part of us that keeps going.

Rene Steinke
Reviews:

Not Beach Reading


Jeff Smith, a VU graduate from 1979, succeeds with his book in giving his readers the equivalent of major surgery. He opens us up for our own inspection, and for our own good. Looking at the how and why of the nuclear weapons crisis we have all come to regard as nearly normal, Smith deals with cultural history, with spiritual and psychological process, giving us new insights about the anxieties that dominate our thinking in the Nuclear Age.

Smith is not content to join the "knee-jerk opposition" of the anti-nuclearists that lead to the largest assembly of persons on planet earth in the 1982-84 freeze movement, or to discount the deterrence position of the so-called military realists. "Today's nuclear policies," suggests Smith, "result directly from ideas and thus only indirectly from material forces." The purpose of the book is to deal with "the neglected area of culture." Admitting that cultural analysis is not easy, he warns, "Bad weapons policies have been produced by good people." With the position that history is "alterable," therefore not paralyzing, he sets out to do some revisionist thinking.

Reflecting on the religious names given nuclear power is salutary. Why was the first atomic test called "Trinity"? Why Truman's statement referring to "forces heretofore reserved to the Almighty" or the use of names of ancient gods like Atlas and Poseidon? What is established here is an unwitting relationship between atomic bombs and God. Since the idea of God is ancient, Smith concludes we are dealing with thought that is the outcome of ages past. Has our thinking given the bomb transcendent significance? At least we all resonate with Jonathan Schell's statement that "nuclear weapons are a basic change in the circumstances of life."

This reviewer was particularly interested in Smith's chapter, "Antinuclear Psychology and Antinuclear Theology." Smith says, "if the use of nuclear weapons is rooted in culture, then it lies somewhere close to the soul." In fact, he calls the search for the root of our crisis "Soul-searching." To blame strategists and leaders is not acceptable to Smith, who differs with Dr. Helen Caldicott on this point and attributes the cause to human nature—that means all of us. Is Jonathan Schell right when he calls the nuclear age "the second fall of man"? Is Dale Aukerman on track when he sees the splitting of the atom as "a postponed swallowing of the tough core of that original fruit"?

But Smith contends that nuclear weapons are "not altogether new." The linkage of nuclear weapons to sin is clear, "I am endorsing a recognition of nuclear weapons as sin." (37) But his view of sin does not make human nature "unalterable." If "nuclear weapons are the latest in a long series of preposterous human ideas," this does not short-circuit the Last Judgment. Smith does not believe in a nuclear Armageddon (as a previous president at times seemed to believe) with God conceding to us the power to end the world. The Pelagian-Augustine controversy over human nature has simply taken different forms. The bomb is at the apex of two central traditions of our culture.

It is at this point that Smith
turns to cultural imagery, some of it based upon religious imagery such as the Pelagian dream of disarmament as heaven or the Augustinian view of divine redemption. "Nuclear politics will change with changes in cultural imagery," he says.

Nuclear war movies such as War Games, where machines can be made to "save" and Dr. Strangelove, where people are doomed, are really reflections of this cultural imagery. War Games is Pelagian and Strangelove is Augustinian. Pelagian grace where love prevails and Augustine's original sin where knowledge is corrupted are brought to the screen by John Badham and Stanley Kubrick. The problem is in ourselves. We built the machines. We use the knowledge. The best and worst of us emerges in the use of an ultimate siren of the threat to history and sin where knowledge is corrupted such as the Pelagian dream of armament as heaven or the change with changes in cultural imagery, "he says.

I am pleased that Smith pays so much attention to Jonathan Schell's The Fate of the Earth (1982) (which he labels Pelagian) because of Schell's awakening siren of the threat to history and biology. Schell's "second death" in the nuclear fallout leaves no hope for regeneration of biological life on the planet earth. On this basis, the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church in 1986 issued their polemic In Defense of Creation. Creation itself is at stake. After other wars of devastation, a nuclear conflict would destroy life itself on earth where only the cockroaches would survive. Smith does not agree that the spectre of extinction is proven. He reiterates that nuclear weapons are not themselves the cause. In other words, he insists that it is not correct to say that the human race was doing fine until the bomb came along.

Analysis of other writers on the subject, in particular Freeman Dyson's Weapons and Hope, a physicist and weapon designer, reveals much wisdom turned to folly as with those who have learned "to love and depend upon the bomb." Smith makes comparisons of Schell and Dyson, the later relying on wisdom and the former to apocalypse. Schell is a modern day prophet of doom. Dyson sees hope as limiting evil and choosing good.

Of importance is Smith's view of the nation-state which holds a license to kill for us. We allow the insane stock-piling of nuclear weapons (now numbered between 30-50,000) because we have allowed the State to rise above moral censure and assume the role of God. The threat of annihilation raises moral questions about "the just war." These are the same questions raised in Shakespeare's Henry V. Smith asks "Does the state have a soul?" Would banning of longbows or cannon have led to contests of war by jousting?

Conflicts of power make the state a poor arbiter of disputes where self-interest is involved or the supposition that the order of things is underwritten by virtue. Here the "follies of history" as Barbara Tuchman has so well portrayed in her histories, would cause us to recognize the error of our war in Vietnam and also cause us to question the imposition of power upon such tiny nation-states as Grenada and Panama and Nicaragua. Is there enough cultural dynamic to raise the bigger question, "Can we imagine being rid of war?"

Some of the questions raised by this book come to rest on the Reagan "Star Wars" or SDI program. Smith says it rests upon the once-upon-a-time morality of the America myth that this nation is "trustee of the values of history."

Once again we are told that the SDI "will save us again" at an estimated cost of a trillion dollars. Painting the "enemy" as the devil, Reagan made ultimate claims of virtue going back to ancient religious roots. Ideological momentum is hard to break. Perhaps glasnost has done this for us, for without an enemy, SDI and much other exotic weaponry are no longer palatable.

The struggle with evil will go on, with or without nuclear weapons. It is hard to think that "we", individually or collectively, could be evil or wrong. A long history created the nuclear crisis, and history can end it. The sickness is not terminal though the surgery is risky. Smith outlines what a new antinuclear politics should be. He gives signs of hope. The signs give evidence of God's involvement in human affairs. Unthinking the Unthinkable is an important contribution to the nuclear age. I am glad to have read it.

John D. Wolf


This autobiographical tribute can be seen from at least three perspectives. From two I find the book satisfying and helpful, but from the third, disappointingly inadequate.

First, as a chronicle of forty rich years of marriage, L'Engle's story is touching and exemplary. Weaving just enough cultural history and humor into the love story, L'Engle engages
readers' empathy. Her style is clear and intimate. Hugh and Madeleine's life and especially Hugh's illness and death make salutary reading for anyone.

Second, read with other L'Engle fiction, *Two-Part Invention* satisfies our detective curiosity. Consistently optimistic themes emerge: love is a powerful healer and force for good; disunity and discord are signals of evil; human courage and family love prevail, etc. We discover many of her character sources: e.g., a young man who committed suicide; an orphaned, difficult girl who is adopted by a loving family, and of course, the heroine herself, often as a too-tall, shy writer-student.

Third, as a model for Christian optimism L'Engle's book falls short. L'Engle says she believes in an "incarnational universe," yet her theological reading consists of "astrophysics, particle physics, quantum mechanics." She finds reality in a "universe which is enormous beyond comprehension." (168) L'Engle does discuss Christ as the "mystery of the Word made flesh," (193), but focusing instead on a too-simplistic argument—many human deaths are more horribly protracted than that of Jesus—she misses the broader scope of the passion events. L'Engle is religiously fascinated with the Benevolent Creator, but Christ seems incidental. She claims to be optimistic on Christian grounds, but takes her comfort in the "deep rhythms" of the universe, rather than in the Cross.

Susan Bachman  

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*The Cresset* announces a Contest

Over the years, this journal has been consistently interested in the question of Christian higher education, and many articles on the subject have been printed here. We now announce a competition for the best article on this subject by a writer under thirty. Articles should be between 2500-3500 words, suitable for a general audience. A prize of $250.00 will be awarded to the author of the winning article, which will be published in an issue devoted to work by younger writers and artists.

The deadline for submission is October 1, 1990, and entries will be read by members of the Advisory Board, and the editor, who will make the final decision. Entries should be submitted with name, address and proof of age on a separate sheet. For further information, please write *The Cresset*, Valparaiso University, Valparaiso, IN 46383.