Contributors

3 The Editor / IN LUCE TUA
7 David Morgan / KANDINSKY AND THE SPIRITUAL IN ART
14 Jan Schumacher / BUILDERS AND TRAGEDIANS: CHRISTIANITY AND TRAGEDY IN BRIDESHEAD REVISITED
19 J.T. Ledbetter / GOOD BARNs AND WATER (Verse)
20 Gail McGrew Eifrig / PARADISE REGAINED: THE ART OF JOHN AUGUST SWANSON
24 Charles Vandersee / LETTER FROM DOGWOOD: MULTI-WHAT?
27 Thomas Trimborn / LEONARD BERNSTEIN (Illustration)
28 Edward Byrne / FILM: THE ART OF WATCHING
30 Barbara Bazyn / MYSTERIUM TREMENDUM (Verse)
31 Margery Stomme Selden / REVIEW ESSAY: PLAIN TALK AT TWO TABLES
33 REVIEWS / Bonhoeffer, Ching, Hoyer.

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Above: Detail from The Fishermen, John August Swanson. Reproduced on p. 20-21. The Swanson works are reprinted with the kind permission of the artist.
p. 23: Swanson, Psalm 85, ink drawing.
[This month we have given over the editorial space to two comments on our previous editorials concerning the war in the Gulf. The first is from Gilbert Meilaender, Professor of Philosophy at Oberlin College. Professor Meilaender has titled his remarks, "What The Cresset Lost in the Gulf War." Since his piece is directed at the credibility of this journal, a member of the Cresset Advisory Board, Professor Mel Piehl of Christ College, responds.]

In the aftermath of the Gulf War we tote up the winners and the losers. Many of the winners are obvious: George Bush, Colin Powell, Ronald Reagan (for his unswerving commitment to a stronger military), Ronald Reagan (again, for his commitment to Star Wars technology, which will get a fresh look now that we've seen the Patriot), the people of Kuwait (liberated from a destructive aggressor), Dick Cheney (who turns out to have as much on the ball as his wife), the people of Iraq (who have at least a chance to get rid of a tyrant), Arthur Kent (whose reports from Saudi Arabia for NBC gained quite a following). The list could go on a long time.

And there are the losers: Saddam Hussein (however we pronounce his name), Mikhail Gorbachev, folks like Sam Nunn (who may be a little old by the time Bush serves another 6 years and Colin Powell serves 8), Arthur Kent (who suddenly disappeared from view after Tom Brokaw went over to Saudi Arabia), The Cresset.

What's that? The Cresset? Playing in this league? What could the Cresset possibly have lost in the Gulf War? In a word: credibility. I confine my observation here only to The Cresset's editorial pages where in two consecutive issues, given an opportunity to address serious moral question seriously, The Cresset's editorial comments settled for mere jerking of the knee. Given an opportunity to demonstrate how a university like Valparaiso might be different, The Cresset offered instead a pale imitation of what we can get anywhere. Given an opportunity to reflect upon the fact that Lutheranism (via its Confessional writings) is one of the bearers of the just war tradition of discourse, the Cresset preferred assertion to argument.

Measured by the canons of just war discourse developed over centuries, we are, I think, unlikely to find many better illustrations of a just war than the Gulf War now ended. This is, of course, an arguable proposition, but it surely is that. In terms both of jus ad bellum—according to which it is certainly just to repel an aggressor—or jus in bello—according to which only noncombatants are to be the target of direct, intended attack—this war was justly begun and justly waged by the United States and its allies. The rhetoric of President Bush clearly appealed to such categories, as did the targeting decisions made by U.S. military planners. I have to say that on the basis of what I have thus far seen and heard, I would sooner seek moral wisdom from General Schwartzkopf than from the editorial comments of The Cresset.

Without any attempt at reasoned argument The Cresset assures us that we have been "immoral" in our pursuit of this war, that it is merely an attempt on our part to humiliate a "dark, foreign nation" in order to foster our own self-esteem. (Exactly how this argument is to apply to some of our allies—the Egyptians, the Saudis, the Kuwaitis—is a little hard to see, but The Cresset feels no obligation to concern itself with a minor problem like that.) The Cresset, alienated it would appear from ordinary human affections and attachments, is put off by "cheery tokens of patriotism" which serve as a front for a togetherness which seeks "to kill other people because we can do it." There are, of course, serious possibilities here that might have been explored—for example, Hegel's notion that the external enemy a war provides might be "necessary" for the health of a people. Perhaps The Cresset had something like that in mind, but we will never know, since the Cresset did not bother to argue the point.

But there is more: We are told that as a people we will at some point "have to call ourselves to account for our destruction of other people's lives and fortunes." To be sure, we should always feel the tragedy that war involves. But if a war has been justly begun and justly waged, there is no reason to feel this false sense of guilt that The Cresset—displaying the least desirable feature of its Lutheran roots—seeks to elicit. So I cannot join The Cresset in its desire to "weep for the idea of an America we thought we were." I might, though, weep for the lost credibility of The Cresset, its failure to establish itself as capable of thoughtful editorial commentary at a time of great moral significance—and weep also perhaps for one more small piece of evidence of Lutheranism's failure to foster serious moral reflection shaped by concerns other than those...
we encounter every day in most colleges and universities.

How are we to account for such failure? No doubt in many ways, but I offer here just one possibility, a theological point. In an earlier editorial during the Gulf War The Cresset transformed Horace's famous "dulce et decorum est pro patria mori" into "dulce et decorum est pro patria vivere"—displaying thereby the roots of a dangerously mistaken manner of thinking.

It is indeed a sweet and seemly thing to die for one's country, and no nation that does not instill in its people some readiness for such sacrifice can long endure. That moral sentiment reckons with the great debts we owe each other, acknowledges that we are finite beings located in a particular time and place, and affirms our ability to transcend our own self-interest and care for the needs of others. It reckons seriously with the kind of sacrifice that may be necessary in a sinful world. But to suppose for a moment—even an idle moment while fashioning a title for an editorial—that we ought to live for our country...that is to fashion an abstract idol that will never take on flesh and blood, an abstraction which in its very transcendence becomes a competitor for the loyalty which ought to be offered to God, for whom alone we ought to live.

I write during Lent, a time for repentance. Not the sort The Cresset has in mind, in which it more or less unilaterally repents on behalf of the rest of us who have not seen its truth. But real repentance. Perhaps even for editorials which—at a university avowedly working as late as October, Bush suddenly and inexplicably changed course on November 6, ordered a massive offensive military force to the Gulf, and issued military threats under deadline. As late as December, numerous very conservative and highly credible military, political, and intellectual figures—Zbigniew Brzezinski, Senator Sam Nunn, and two former Chairs of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—argued strongly in favor of maintaining sanctions a viable alternative.

Whether or not such contentions were correct we will never know. But the "success" of the war is no proof at all that other methods might not have worked, or that the war had to be fought. Furthermore Meilaender surely ought to be aware that, even if a war might be justifiable on abstract principle, that says nothing about whether it is morally right—much less

Professor Piehl responds:

Gilbert Meilaender tells us that The Cresset is a "loser" in the Persian Gulf War, unlike Ronald Reagan, Dick Cheney, and "the people of Iraq" (presumably meaning those who were not killed), who are "winners." Let us examine his assertions.

First, The Cresset offered "knee-jerk" opposition to the war, "a pale imitation of what we can get anywhere." From this, one would think that published opinions critical of the war were a dime a dozen, rather than what was in fact the case: that media opinion was almost unanimous in uncritical cheerleading for the war, from the elite New York Times and Washington Post to the local press. Almost all opinion journals joined in. One had to look hard to find any kind of alternative view. At the very least, war supporters ought to be grateful that a rare voice like The Cresset challenged this all-pervasive consensus by forcing them to think more critically about the reasons for their support.

Unfortunately, on the evidence of Meilaender's article, it has not had that effect. By the canons of just war discourse, we are told, "we are...unlikely to find many better illustrations of a just war than the Gulf War now ended." Personally, I doubt whether the just war standards can ever be effectively used as a critical standard for morally evaluating wars. But even most of those who consider themselves seriously committed to the just war tradition could find plenty of better examples to fix on that the Persian Gulf War. Michael Walzer, author of the best contemporary treatise on the subject, thought this war just, but "just barely," and offered several important arguments on the opposite side. The assertion that the war was fought to "repel an aggressor" represents just the kind of fuzzy generalization that the best just-war thinking tends to undermine. The just-war criteria surely do not mean that any nation, in anywhere, must "repel aggression" against any other nation. It was Kuwait that Iraq attacked, not the United States, and the claim that the national defense required a military assault on Iraq is at the very least debatable. It was, in fact, widely debated in this country throughout the summer and fall of 1990—with intelligent and responsible people on both sides.

The just war criteria also commonly declare that war must be the last recourse, when other options have failed. Leaving aside untried diplomatic options, did the sanctions "fail"? They were, of course, not continued long enough to find out. After imposing them, defending them, and indicated that they were working as late as October, Bush suddenly and inexplicably changed course on November 6, ordered a massive offensive military force to the Gulf, and issued military threats under deadline. As late as December, numerous very conservative and highly credible military, political, and intellectual figures—Zbigniew Brzezinski, Senator Sam Nunn, and two former Chairs of the Joint Chiefs of Staff—argued strongly in favor of maintaining sanctions a viable alternative.

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politically right—to fight it. As Luther says in the Commentary on the Sermon on the Mount, “You need more to start a war than having a just cause. . . .It is not right for a prince to make up his mind to go to war against his neighbor, even though, I say, he has a just cause and the neighbor is in the wrong. The command is, ‘Blessed are the peacemakers.’”

As to the jus in bello arguments concerning civilian targeting, Meilaender asserts that “targeting decisions by U.S. military planners” did not include “direct, intended attack.” Once again, this formulation oversimplifies what has been a long debate along just-war lines concerning the relation between military and civilian targeting. Meilaender probably believes he understands the moral distinction correctly, but others, including the Roman Catholic bishops in The Challenge of Peace, take a different view of the moral issues involved in “collateral damage” to civilian populations during military attack.

In any case, the conclusion that just war criteria were not violated in this instance is drawn “on the basis of what I have thus far seen and heard.” This is nicely hedged, because Meilaender is aware at some level that what he has thus far seen and heard has been almost entirely what the government wanted him (and us) to see and hear concerning civilian casualties. In this war, unlike all previous wars of American history—including the Civil War and World War II—a free American press was not allowed to move with the American military, making the public almost entirely dependent on the Defense Department for its view of the facts. For anyone who has studied the reasons behind government attempts to prevent independent media coverage in previous conflicts, the absence of free reportage alone ought to set off a few alarms about the meaning of this war.

Meilaender does display a hint of recognition that the Persian Gulf War just might have had something to do with Hegel’s notion that external enemies may be “necessary” (his quotation marks) or the “health” (my quotation marks), of a state. This line of inquiry ought surely to raise some further questions about whether this was the most just war ever, since St. Augustine, St. Thomas, and Luther are a far cry from Hegel’s shrewd Prussian staatspolitik. Certainly significant features of this war ought to put people in mind of the view presented by Freud, William James, and Reinhold Niebuhr that nations frequently project their difficult and seemingly unsolvable internal tensions outward upon external enemies. We have now had, in regular succession, the extraordinary government-sponsored demonization of a series of small-scale foreign figures—Noriega, Ortega, Bishop, Khaddafi—at the very time we have faced the gravest
patriotism, as every thinker in the tradition of the Apology and Crito has recognized, is that they so readily lend themselves to political manipulation for questionable ends. To fail to distinguish, for example, between support for human beings in the military and the politically determined policies they obey is itself a species of confusion and sentimentality. Yet this kind of unwarranted equation—sometimes naively held—is frequently encouraged by political elites disinclined to have their policies rationally and critically examined. I take that, and not any deficiency in “ordinary affections,” to be the basis of the Cresset’s critique—transparently so to anyone not disposed to attribute base motives to the editorial writer.

Finally, Meilaender proffers a “theological reason” for The Cresset’s alleged failure to “foster serious moral reflection.” The Cresset is promoting idolatry by suggesting that it is sweet and seemly to live for one’s country. Why is living for one’s country an idolization of an abstraction, while dying for the same country is not? To “live for” something, in ordinary usage, means to spend a portion of one’s life’s energies on its behalf—to wish it well, to work for its benefit, to concern oneself with its general welfare—in the sense that we “live for” our families, communities, universities, and churches. In that sense, to “live for” the nation means to seek by thought and action the common good of its people and land—not an abstraction at all. In the Reformation, for instance, Luther certainly “lived for” (among other things) the goal of liberating Germany from oppressive church taxation—a “national patriotic goal. The Cresset nowhere said or implied that one ought to offer to the nation one’s ultimate commitment or trust—Luther’s definition of idolatry. But one may certainly “live for” many secondary commitments without making them “transcendent” (Meilaender’s unwarranted interpolation) while reserving religious faith for its proper object.

In the sense it obviously intended, The Cresset’s appeal is quite consistent with a genuine love of country, and contrary to the false patriotism that gauges the depth of that love primarily by support of things military. We need a lot more patriots who genuinely care and work for the common good by pursuing the well being of our fellow citizens, many of whom are undereducated, poorly housed, unemployed, addicted, retarded, imprisoned, abused, isolated, and medically untreated. And it wouldn’t hurt if everyone who think of themselves as staunch conservative patriots asked themselves whether or children and grandchildren—who even in the middle class are increasingly unable to afford such things as college educations or houses—will really thank us for new and more extensive overseas military commitments and fabulously expensive Star Wars boondoggles.

The United States won the war over Iraq, and Meilaender thinks The Cresset ought to have been on the “winning” side. One of the things that a religious sensibility can lead to, however, is a more complex sense of what it is to really win and lose. Lots of people who think they are winners, and who are viewed as such, are really losers. And sometimes those who are deemed losers according to the calculus Meilaender applied in his piece turn out to win. Maybe in this case The Cresset will be among them.

Mel Piehl

And, in closing:

Having been given the opportunity to respond to Professor Piehl, I will content myself with three observations: 1.) I am not aware that the views I expressed are in any particular way “conservative.” 2.) That The Cresset editorialized against a war which the US won matters not a bit to me. I wanted it to be not on the successful side, whatever exactly that might mean, but on the side of those who provide reasons when discussing weighty matters. 3.) Even if I had to offer the beginnings of part of the argument myself with my reference to Hegel, I am pleased to have provided the stimulus that elicited such reasons from Professor Piehl in The Cresset’s pages. My only regret is that, since he read my first two paragraphs rather more seriously than I intended them, he did not also defend the honor of Arthur Kent.

Gilbert Meilaender

About This Issue

Jeff Larson, a California artist, asks in a series of comments about art whether Lutheran Christians can take art seriously as an expression of faith. He asks for a Christian art that shuns jargon and sentiment, and has the “depth to penetrate the hearts and minds of men and women.” In this issue, three Lutheran writers have chosen to discuss works of art by non-Lutherans. In those choices, perhaps, they display a most Lutheran quality—the ability to see clearly what we might wish to be but are not, the capacity to admire what we may not endorse.

This issue closes another academic year, and sets the editor free to take a deep breath and contemplate next year. Letters from readers will get careful attention.

Peace,

GME

The Cresset
In Memory of Professor George Strimbu

Very few would object that within the era of modern art Wassily Kandinsky’s short treatise of 1912, *Ueber das Geistige in der Kunst*, which is usually translated as *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, is a classic, indeed, may even be the single most important reflection by an artist on the nature of modern art. My purpose here is first to determine why this is so and then to examine what, in light of recent developments in art and critical theory, appears to be problematic in Kandinsky’s concept of the spiritual in art.

To begin with: why does a text like Kandinsky’s become a classic? Briefly put, Kandinsky captures in his book not only the Zeitgeist of the early twentieth century, but also provides a meditation on the scope and power of art, what has been a perennial theme in the Western tradition. Moreover, Kandinsky manages to couch his reflections in an array of imagery and rhetoric which has continued to appeal to many readers.

Kandinsky, who was born in Russia and moved to Munich in 1896, wrote *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* at a time when the European art world was rife with secessions, factionalisms, avant-gardes, rear guards, pamphlets, broadsheets, credos and manifestos—particularly manifestos. It was a period in the first decade of this century when impassioned and theologically infused rhetoric often rivaled actual artistic production. If it is rhetoric we are in search of, we shall find it in abundance in Kandinsky’s apologia for artistic rebirth. He gave full rein to his Romantic inheritance by presenting the artist as prophet, priest, king, martyr, and the unfortunate visionary who is so often misunderstood and despised by a philistine, bourgeois public, who must battle courageously against the full, dead weight of nineteenth-century positivism, who persists precariously as a single flame surrounded by darkness, promising a new day. Kandinsky lovingly portrays a heroic psychomachia, a struggle for the soul engulfed in what he calls the “nightmare of materialism,” the age of unbelief and mechanistic science totally preoccupied with the senses. This source of evil stood in opposition to the coming “epoch of the great spiritual,” the new age, to use a term familiar nowadays and significantly indebted to the theosophy of Kandinsky’s generation.

Progress toward this future epoch was Kandinsky’s abiding concern. It is the artist’s talent alone which can lead to the realization of what Kandinsky calls the “spirit of the future” (12), for the artist works with feeling, not material existence and its scientific interpretation. This is of course William Blake’s Romantic railing against Newtonian mechanics revisited. But Kandinsky injects his ideas with the reeling energies of Wagner, who envisioned in an essay of 1850 entitled “The Artwork of the Future,” a synthesis of the arts into a single, encompassing work, what he called in German a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in which music, drama, and stagecraft merge into a higher artistic ontology, a creative *non plus ultra*. Kandinsky and his contemporaries such as Walter Gropius a few years later at the Bauhaus, revived this idea, spurred on as they were by the prospect of configuring the cumulative spiritual forces of their age into a total work of art that would unlock the secret to a utopian future. Kandinsky claimed that “there has never been a time when the arts approached each other more nearly than they do today” (19) and believed that from this fusion would rise the art that would advance the spiritual enlightenment of humanity toward its ultimate goal of reaching heaven (20).

Of special interest to Kandinsky and many of his
contemporaries was the proximity or intimate analogy of music and painting, which recurs with the persistence of a Wagnerian leitmotiv in Concerning the Spiritual in Art. "A painter," Kandinsky said, "who finds no satisfaction in mere representation, however artistic, in his longing to express his inner life, cannot but envy the ease with which music, the most non-material of the arts today, achieves this end" (19). And he continued: "Painting today is almost exclusively concerned with the reproduction of natural forms and phenomena. Its business is now to test its strength and methods, to know itself as music has done for a long time, and then to use its powers to a truly artistic end" (20).

This artistic end, Kandinsky argues, is the direct expression of the artist's soul or inner life. Kandinsky posits that all formal elements of art, especially color, possess the capacity for directly affecting the soul. The artist's vocabulary of form, color, and line is able to touch the soul immediately, unmediated by resemblances or associations. "Generally speaking," he wrote, "colour is a power which directly influences the soul. Colour is the keyboard, the eyes are the hammers, the soul is the piano with many strings. The artist is the hand which plays, touching one key or another, to cause vibrations in the soul" (25). Kandinsky wishes to argue that if musical tonalities can move the soul, the non-representational configurations of color and form can as well. He is not arguing for a literal parallel of the two art forms as many in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did. Kandinsky warns against a superficial application of the analogy between music and painting. He never proposed a lexicon in which musical and pictorial effects might be tabulated and transliterated. Indeed, he pointed to the uselessness of a device invented by Leonardo which purportedly translated color into a system of mechanical harmonies (35, n. 14).

The purpose of Kandinsky's comparison is clear in his painting dating from the period of his text. These works, on the verge of complete abstraction, but still exhibiting the residues of representation, do not display the patterns or beat of music, are not structured as a transliteration of musical rhythms. Instead, they possess a suggestive, evocative, resonant quality which Kandinsky takes to be analogous to the effects—but not the structures—of sound. Kandinsky often entitled work from 1910 to 1914 "Improvisation" or "Composition" in reference to this analogous effect. Yet, as the traces of subject matter indicate, these works originate in the world of appearances. As one important Kandinsky scholar, Rose-Carol Washton Long, has demonstrated, until 1914 Kandinsky felt the use of this "hidden imagery," veiled or disguised but nonetheless present, provided the viewer with a necessary transition from representation to the realm of the abstract.

According to Kandinsky, color registers a direct vibration on the viewer's soul and does so in a way that corresponds to what Kandinsky calls the "inner necessity," the "inevitable desire for outward expression," (34) as he defines it, which guides the artist's hand and eye in the creation of a work of art (26). The same applies to form, which Kandinsky says is "the outward expression" of inner meaning (29). This linkage of interior and exterior serves as Kandinsky's primary model for understanding expression. He sets up a pervasive distinction between 'inner' and 'outer,' between the immaterial, imperceptible, and eternal soul and the material, visible, contingent world of phenomena. To create a work of art is for Kandinsky to determine an immediate correspondence between an image and the depths of the artist's soul. Unhindered by any extrinsic concerns, the artist's sole authority in the creative process is the "inner necessity."

Eventually Kandinsky severed the link between appearances and the inner reality. In such a painting as Black Lines of 1913 (see cover), the world of representation has been left behind in a flurry of childlike scrawls and gaseous, disembodied zones of color that float in an uncertain space before the viewer. The expressive effects of line and color had become so autonomous for the artist that he could emancipate himself utterly from reference to the objective world for the sake of what he contended was a direct expression of inner experience.

This idea of artistic expression is characterized by an ideology of freedom or liberty whose history in art parallels the development of free speech and civil liberties in European society since the eighteenth century. It is no mistake that the history of art theory from Kant's notion of the disinterested aesthetic judgment and Romanticism's 'art for art's sake' to twentieth-century formalism is coincident with the age of constitutional democracy in Western Europe and North America. The hard-fought battles for free speech have significant counterparts in the history of modern art. Recent controversy regarding the use of the American flag as art represents a fascinating intersection of these two parallel streams. For Kandinsky, the themes of freedom and expression are soundly fused, for it is the inward impulse to create which is to be the only principle for judging the value of a work of art. Kandinsky insists that the artist's choice of color and form are solely based on the necessity of a particular picture. He writes:
In fact, the artist is not only justified in using, but it is his duty to use only those forms which fulfill his own need. Absolute freedom, whether from anatomy or anything of the kind, must be given the artist in his choice of material. Such spiritual freedom is as necessary in art as it is in life. (53)

Kandinsky makes extensive use of the rhetoric of liberty and freedom. He can speak of the “tyranny of materialistic philosophy,” (2) on the one hand, and the necessity of the artist’s “absolute freedom,” on the other. Indeed, more than anything else, Kandinsky’s treatise sets out to establish this creative liberty as the basis of the new art of abstraction. In fact, his new art would be neither conceivable nor intelligible without the premise of the artist’s need for and righteous claim to complete freedom from convention and representation.

This rhetoric of liberation from the strictures of past artistic conventions argues for the autonomy of the artist, yet Kandinsky sharply distinguishes his position from ‘art for art’s sake”—what he regards as the vacuous enjoyment of the “vulgar herd [which] stroll through the rooms [of an exhibition] and pronounce the pictures ‘nice’ or ‘splendid.’” (3) The artist has responsibilities to everyone who is not an artist. The artist, Kandinsky writes, must repay the talent which he has been given (54). This metaphor provides a solemn tone not only because of its earnest Biblical source, but because it also recalls an earlier, audacious stand for artistic liberty. In 1794, Asmus Jakob Carstens, the Silesian painter on extended leave in Rome, refused to return to his teaching duties at the Berlin Academy, and wrote in a now famous letter to the Prussian Minister of Education:

Moreover, I must tell your excellency that I do not belong to the Berlin Academy, but to humanity, . . . My capabilities have been entrusted to me by God; I must be a conscientious steward, so that when it is said: “Give an account of thy stewardship!” I do not have to say, “Lord, the talent which you entrusted to me I buried in Berlin.”

This letter, which quickly acquired canonical status, is not merely a charter for the painter as prima donna, but asserts that the artist plays to a large, even yet unborn audience and that the artist’s primary duty is to the future, to posterity.

And nothing appeals to Kandinsky more than the future. His prose is charged with a futuristic, apocalyptic, prophetic energy that surrounds the artist with the aura of the martyr-hero whose self-sacrifice advances the cause of human enlightenment and spiritual progress. But this progress is not promoted in a strictly democratic, egalitarian configuration of liberties. Kandinsky appears to be of two minds in considering the artist a law unto himself. On the one hand, Kandinsky could use the word “anarchy” to describe avant-garde painting. In an essay in the Blue Rider Almanac, a group of essays co-edited by Kandinsky in 1911, he defined the term not as the lack of order, but as order created by “the feeling for the good” (157). The artist imposes “internal limits” on his work which usurp all “external” constraints such as academic standards, public taste or political censorship.

On the other hand, there is a component of aesthetic elitism or cultural aristocracy in Kandinsky’s view of the artist and public. The artist’s liberty meant the artist’s privilege, and was the result of an innate gift, an inner necessity which could be neither taught nor acquired. The artist’s mission reflected this privilege. In the second chapter of his treatise, Kandinsky imagines “the life of the spirit” as a “large acute-angled triangle divided horizontally into unequal parts with the narrowest segment uppermost” (6). Situated in the highest portion are the progressive artistic forces of human society, for it is these souls who prophetically yearn for higher vision and seek to advance the height of the triangle and therefore to broaden its base as well. As one descends from this lofty region, one finds the increasingly mundane and finally torpid souls mulling about under the heavy yoke of matter, sunk in evil and misery, oppressed by lethargy and blindness. In this gnostic vision, the enlightened souls are those drawn upward toward the light of the future and thereby offer humanity deliverance from spiritual darkness. Although he expressly refuses to state that representational painting is defunct, Kandinsky associated naturalism in art with the despised materialism of the nineteenth century. In Concerning the Spiritual, Kandinsky really leaves no doubt what form of art will be most appropriate in the coming spiritual age:

When we remember . . . that the spiritual experience is quickening, that positive science, the firmest basis of human thought, is tottering, that dissolution of matter is imminent, we have reason to hope that the hour of pure composition is not far away. (47)

The succession from representational to non-representational art presupposes Kandinsky’s belief that art is a vital means of spiritual rebirth in what he considered to be an age of extreme decline. The world of material appearances and the total epistemological apparatus by which science has described that world are crumbling and the new art will share the dematerialized reality of the new order, indeed, prophesies and foreshadows it.
Kandinsky is up to something very important here: he is searching for a way to renew and redefine the spiritual charge of the artist’s vocation. I would like to suggest that his impassioned rhetoric responded to the problem of fundamental institutional changes in the nineteenth century which had severely eroded the traditional role of sacred art. With the rise of independent and state-sponsored art academies, exhibition societies, and art unions and the emergence of governments and the private sector as primary patrons of art, traditional sacred art failed to attract the attention of increasing numbers of important artists. Patrons, public, intelligentsia, and artists who had previously nurtured and produced religious art now looked to secular institutions and sources of funding. Accordingly, if Kandinsky was to contend for the relevance of a spiritual art, he needed to provide a new framework in which the spiritual in art would not suffer the institutional fate of conventional sacred art. This meant securing a new understanding of the artist and his relation to both the sacred (whatever that might be) and the public who received his work. For Kandinsky the strategy consisted first in reaffirming the Romantic conception of the artist as visionary, prophet, martyr, and hero; second, in adapting a notion of spirituality that could flourish without official, ecclesiastical sponsorship; and third, in characterizing the artist’s relation to the public in a way that would simultaneously account for the meager reception of abstract art as well as engender a widespread desire for the new art.

I have already described Kandinsky’s Romantic vision of the artist. I will focus, therefore, on the second and third strategies. Under the influence of the theosophy of Madame Blavatsky, whom Kandinsky mentions enthusiastically in Concerning the Spiritual in Art, he found an enormous patchwork of ancient, infinitely flexible, non-ecclesiastical religious beliefs which allowed all works of art from all times to manifest in their own, idiomatic way a single, pervasive spirituality. For Kandinsky and others taken with the hermetic mysteries of theosophy, this ‘occult science’ offered a lexicon of spiritual realities which were regarded as universal as the artist’s language of form and color. In addition to theosophy, Kandinsky could rely on the heritage of Idealist philosophy which likewise understood history as the movement of a single spiritual force. In terms that recall Hegel’s ontology of art and spirit, Kandinsky claims that the historical period and personality of the artist are the particularities of a work of art which serve the inner necessity and the progressive unfolding of art as “an ever-advancing expression of the eternal and objective in terms of the periodic and the subjective” (34). All true works of art manifest in their individual way a single spirit whose movement is forever “forwards and upwards” (4).

Kandinsky’s preference was for the Romantic ideal of universality, unity, and progress. This ‘aesthetic unitarianism’ was well received in Kandinsky’s day and has continued to be ever since largely because it appeals to the aesthetic of formalism and its correlates going back to the late eighteenth century such as disinterestedness and art for art’s sake—all of which have been taken to their logical conclusion in André Malraux’s image of a “museum without walls,” a global display of artistic achievements that transcends time and place by embodying eternal aesthetic quality. This is particularly evident in the Blue Rider Almanac, the collection of essays and images which accompanied the first exhibition of the Blue Rider group in 1911. Together with his friend, the painter Franz Marc, who collaborated with Kandinsky in organizing the exhibition and editing the Almanac, Kandinsky collected a panoply of works separated widely in time and place, and bound them together in the representative totality of the Almanac by virtue of their respective manifestations of inner necessity.

Kandinsky’s understanding of the public and the relation that existed between public, art work, and artist are the third strategy dedicated to securing for art a high spiritual purpose. Kandinsky’s simile of the triangle of spiritual progress, his elitist idea of artistic freedom, and his espousal of theosophical ideas enshrouded within occult circles all suggest that the ‘public’ of the new art of abstraction was not a large one. Indeed, in the 1914 preface to the second edition of the Blue Rider Almanac, Franz Marc struggled with this reality in a way that reminds one of a certain fox and an unattainable bunch of grapes:

We know that the great mass cannot follow us today; the path is too steep and too far from the beaten track for them. But a few already do want to walk with us . . . We know that everything could be destroyed if the beginnings of a spiritual discipline are not protected from the greed and dishonesty of the masses. We are struggling for pure ideas, for a world in which pure ideas can be thought and proclaimed without becoming impure. (259)

This rationalization of a meager public response exposes the excess to which the Romantic sensibilities of expression and creation can go: because the truth of a work of art is measured principally by the degree to which it “proclaims” a feeling or a “pure idea,” it can with disturbing facility, in the name of vision, very nearly dispense with an audience, a public, a community of reception—or even totally if the artist is inclined to write his own credos and manifestos. In
this aestheticized world populated by the privileged few, purity can come to mean quarantine from the masses, which can only contaminate art.

This politics of the aesthetic in Kandinsky’s view of the spiritual in art has been subjected in recent years to what is known as a ‘Postmodernist’ critique. I would like to turn to this critique and then offer some concluding remarks about what the spiritual in art might entail in the late twentieth century.

Postmodernism is a buzzword one hears frequently these days. The term itself suggests that a basic shift has taken place which has left Modernism behind or is in the process of transforming it in a significant way, perhaps analogous to the manner in which the so-called Post-Impressionist work of Seurat, the later Cézanne, and Van Gogh changed their common predecessor, Impressionism. But what is Modernism and what is the shift away from it? Three essential tenets of Modernist art are classically set forth in Kandinsky’s book. These are his notion of expression as the revelation of inner truths, his concept of absolute artistic freedom or autonomy, and his belief that what the artist expresses in accord with this freedom is eternal, universal, and progressive truth. Postmodernism leans away from each of these views and on occasion even deliberately subverts them. Interestingly, one of the principal reasons for this shift is to be found in Kandinsky’s practice as well as his theoretical work: the democratization of imagery, the conviction that aesthetic value is to be found in images of all kinds: those by artists, children, primitives, and amateurs, in images originating in the hothouse culture of European art capitals as well as in the popular culture of peasant piety. But artists in the last thirty years, artists who grew up in the age of television and the mass media explosion, have even gone further by presenting as art virtually anything one could imagine—including junk, commercial imagery, the American flag, and images of a deceased mayor in women’s underwear. While such titans of Modernism as Kandinsky, Marc, Bracque, and Picasso enshrouded icons, African sculpture, and votive imagery in the neo-Romantic ideology of direct expression, as art untrammeled by pretensions of ‘high culture,’ artists of our own day have challenged the distinction between ‘aesthetic’ and ‘non-aesthetic’ by focusing exclusively on the imagery and even refuse of popular and commercial culture.

In the 1960s Pop Art made a definitive move away from the high aesthetic of Abstract Expressionism. Andy Warhol experimented with images of popular heroes like Elvis, but did so in a way that mimicked the techniques of mass production. Unlike traditional portraiture, Warhol’s silkscreen depictions of Elvis, Mao or Marilyn Monroe do not refer to actual individuals, but to media events, to celluloid persona who flicker and sparkle with the ephemeral fame of the celebrity whose being is no deeper than the flatness of its image. The image is not the revelation of a mysterious, metaphysical depth, but a momentary play across the restless surface of popular visual culture. From Courbet to Kandinsky to Motherwell, the artist’s brushstroke, the slurry or scrape of pigment across the canvas was a personal signature of artistic presence. In Automatism A, Robert Motherwell leaves viewers the splashy trace of his presence before the page. The slap-dash of his wrist and brush celebrate not merely the accidental spill of ink, but the freedom and joie de vivre necessary to produce such a freely-flung gesture. Throughout the Modernist period, the loose, but masterfully applied brushstroke has ensured the spontaneous, free, autonomous expression of the artist’s inner experience. In marked contrast to this ideology of the infused mark, Warhol buries the presence of the artist beneath the traces of mechanical reproduction. We see row upon row of the same image which is varied...
only by the chance distribution of ink in the printing process.

The traces of creation in Kandinsky, which vouchsafe the immanence of the artistic soul, become in the work of such Pop artists as Robert Rauschenberg or Roy Lichtenstein the marks of reproduction. Although Rauschenberg recalls his debt to Abstract Expressionism by leaving visible the unresolved, overlapping edges between each image and its neighbor, in placing this loose brushwork within the new context of apparently randomly selected, mechanically reproduced popular imagery, Rauschenberg calls into question the Modernist idea of the 'expressive' mark as the guarantee of authorial presence. This is taken to even greater lengths by Lichtenstein, whose manipulation of paint is no longer the freewheeling dance of action painting in which the brushstroke is the imprint of an individual artistic personality. Instead, the brushstroke has been drained of presence, disenchanted, reduced to the Ben Day dots and melodrama of comic book illustration.

Recent art contradicts the thrust of Kandinsky's discussion of the spiritual in art in numerous ways. Where Kandinsky and many Modernists speak of art as a manifestation of something eternal, progressive, and universal, postmodernism refuses to confer on any work this sort of all-encompassing, totalizing privilege. Art is temporary, fragmented, finite. Consider, for instance, the happening of the 1960s or Christo's monumental, but necessarily short-lived works, which are not meant to endure beyond the brief moment required to construct and experience them. Whereas Kandinsky asserted that the image spoke a purely pictorial language, postmodernists refuse to isolate the image, but regard it as yet another sort of text, a visual code coming to us in our daily experience of a welter of texts and codes. And where Kandinsky focuses on the privileged artist and an elite public and understands artistic purity in terms of the absolute absence of social or institutional restraints, postmodernism revels in the egalitarian, in popular culture, in the generic effects of mechanical reproduction, in the erasure of originality, in the unabashed contamination of the 'artistic' by the 'non-artistic.'

We need not look far for an instance of a Postmodern reflection on the low-brow, the ephemeral, and the contamination of the pristine image with the conceptual sensibility of the written text. Robert Sirko, professor of graphic design at Valparaiso University, has produced a magazine cover which both exemplifies postmodern design and applies to it a critical meditation. [This cover is reproduced on the back cover of this issue of The Cresset.] Professor Sirko has assembled a space where heterogeneous forces coexist, where totality, dominance, authority, continuity, and uniformity are not the aesthetic ideal, but give way to a disjunctiveness and plurality which may seem to many as downright chaotic. The image resists resolution into an overarching, single order. We do not detect a general idea, a ruling abstraction, an indwelling essence. There is no final or definitive meaning here which we may pocket and walk away with. Pluralistic worlds clash, rival one another, grow, stretch, overlap, dissolve. Traces of text float above images and refuse to offer us a master key for deciphering or determining a complete message. What we see is a conflicting field of typography and imagery which appears incoherent when viewed in the conventional manner of a uniform and single plane of graphic signs. The image promises meaning in each of its components, but then subverts that promise in the clashing white spaces between each type font, spaces which ought to provide a seamless transition from one letter or word to the next. The prospect of meaning fissures into scraps of text which fail to deliver what convention ascribes to them. We are deprived of the presence of the world of meaning which ought to come before us clinging to words.

Looking at this dissection of text and image, we are made poignantly aware of what George Steiner has recently characterized as the "break of the covenant between word and world": the decisive rupture of the metaphysical fabric joining language and all that it reveals, i.e. reality, history, God, and the human soul. As our eye moves from one phrase to the next in its attempt to construct a continuous message, we become uncomfortably aware of numerous fields collapsing into one another and the muting or confusion of a single voice or uniform narrative. We lose our way in the text. And not only do we lose sight of a single author, but we are threatened with the loss of our own unitary consciousness. Many of us may turn away in disgust. Those of us who linger find ourselves weaving the texts into a pastiche of units in the search for an intelligible pattern. We construct fragments of conversations, identify general themes, denote kinds of statements such as ad slogans, truisms, imagery from popular culture, a biblical passage, a meditation on communication by the French sociologist Jean Baudrillard. Yet each time we attempt to compile these suggestions of order into a master narrative or scheme, the image deconstructs itself.

Professor Sirko knows this and offers us a reflection on the state of contemporary design and image-making. "Advertising in its new dimension," he quotes Baudrillard, "invades everything," makes all space public, deprives us of privacy, fills every gap, every interval, every vacant space with its gaudy slogans promoting one product or another. Sirko turns
postmodern design against itself, but does so in a way that is visually engaging and averts the superficiality and nihilism which he laments.

Recent and Postmodern art offer a very useful criticism of modernist art. Perhaps the chief benefit from Postmodernism is the development of the idea that the unresolved, polyvalent Postmodernist image is no longer a metaphor for a pristine soul or an authoritative order, but an emblem of the political reality of otherness, of difference, of heterogeneity, pluralism, egalitarianism, even anarchy. Postmodernism celebrates otherness. This comes at the expense of the Modernist ideal, namely the autonomous artistic master, that typically male authority whose genius is his claim to immortality and the evidence of his god-like power to create solely from within himself, purified of tradition, convention or social constraints. Contemporary artists such as Judy Chicago have demonstrated that this male conception and its ultimately theological roots need not prevail. Chicago's well-known Dinner Party was not the work of a single individual, but a massive collaboration of women and men in a creative attempt to recover an overlooked history of feminine creativity. Scores of people assisted in the four-year realization of Chicago's design.

Yet insofar as Postmodernism is purely superficial, inasmuch as it denies the idea of personal identity, sacrifices all seriousness to playfulness, jettisons individual commitment in favor of nihilistic abandon, undermines the artist's concern for a public, and replaces all private reflection with political posturing—Postmodernism is less than appealing. In the end, both Modernism and Postmodernism in any pure sense are objectionable. Their usefulness consists in their ability to throw light on the tensions which appear to animate genuine works of art: the relation of artist and public, the question of the artist's responsibility to an audience, the relation between what is universal and what is local, the authenticity of the artist's vision, the political and ethical aspects of representing ourselves and others, and the metaphysical implications of our rootedness in time and our steadfast yearning for transcendence. Kandinsky's meditation on the spiritual in art advocates what I have dubbed an aesthetic unitarianism which represents one undeniably 'classic' answer to these questions. But the spiritual in art ought to preserve 'otherness' rather than reduce it to a unitary, ultimately narcissistic discourse in which everything is merely a version of something else. I find Kandinsky's inner necessity in and of itself no more spiritually compelling than the Jungian Esperanto of Joseph Campbell's readings of world mythology. What I am suggesting is that we now begin to look beyond the question of artistic autonomy as the sole basis of the spiritual in art at a time when late twentieth-century democracies are in need of nurturing a greater sense of community, public, and citizenship which will continue the Western experiment of government of, by, and for the people. Kandinsky's view, it seems to me, fails to satisfy the need to understand the spiritual in art as an inclusive sense of community, as the encounter of an I and a Thou, fails to recognize that art can enjoy a relation with a public which is not privileged to the few, but provides the basis for dialogue and reflection on our relations with one another. Works of art possess the transformative power of representing the other: the other of race, gender, class, religion, and culture as well as the mysterious otherness at the heart of each of us which energizes our encounter with one another. And it is the creative treatment of this otherness which ought to receive our attention as the spiritual in art today.

Works Cited


BUILDERS AND TRAGEDIANS: 
CHRISTIANITY AND TRAGEDY IN Brideshead Revisited

Jan Schumacher

During his lifetime, Evelyn Waugh became notorious for his rudeness, something which has made his diaries a pet matter for journalists wishing to raise a memorial over him as some sort of holy monster. Perhaps he deserves better to be remembered for his unique mixture of rudeness and kindness, of darkness and light, as his friend Graham Greene depicts him in Ways of Escape. In any case, among those who fell victim to his caustic description was the Norwegian novelist Sigrid Undset. After his short visit to Oslo in the autumn of 1947, when his publisher invited him to dine with the Nobel-winning novelist, he described her in his diaries as “a malevolent house proprietress.” But despite this disrespect, there are certain points of contact between their literary work, closely associated with their mutual commitment to the Roman Catholic Church, and a devotion shaped by the full-bloom Post-Tridentine liturgical development.

Both in Brideshead Revisited and in Undset’s corresponding novel Den brennede busk (The Burning Bush, 1930) about a young Norwegian businessman’s conversion to Roman Catholicism from agnosticism, crucial moments of recognition are associated with the vision of the flickering, small red flame from the lamp burning in front of the tabernacle with the consecrated host. While he is kneeling in an empty church, completely dark except for the small gleam of light in the choir, the hero in Unset’s novel is given a recognition of his own part in the dark tragedy of his life. Everything he has painfully achieved through his conversion to Catholicism is completely lost. But this radical anagnoresis is perceived through the vision of the flickering light in the darkness as the presence of God in a tragic mode:

“My God, when everything is in Thy hands, why hast Thou voluntarily placed Thyself in the hands of men—?” In the quiet and dark church this vision expands into a mental reenactment of the Gospel story in a tragic shape, wherein the last Station, the extinguishing of the light of the world on Good Friday, is outstretched in time as if to contain all human mischief, neglect and opposition to God. Then, “total darkness fell around the dark cross, and the darkness grew yet deeper, and in an inconceivable darkness God was hidden from God—There was a darkness in which God had forsaken God. But men He has not forsaken—” (415-16) It is this same way of perceiving God’s presence in and through the middle of human mischief, neglect and opposition that Waugh explores in Brideshead Revisited. I intend here to examine how he achieve this through elements taken from a distinctive Roman Catholic liturgical devotion, for one thing to hint that perhaps the different traditions of spirituality represent divergent ways of approaching the “problem” of Christianity and tragedy.

A brief plot synopsis will assist most readers in following my discussion. During WWII, Charles Ryder, captain in the British army and narrator of the novel, is brought together with his platoon to a new camp. It turns out that this is a place Charles has visited before, the once-beautiful house of a Catholic family, who for a period of about twenty years played an important role in his life. Brideshead was the home of his close friend from Oxford, Sebastian, who had lived there with his mother, his elder brother (called Brideshead) and their two sisters Julia and Cordelia. The mother is a pious Catholic, while Sebastian’s father, Lord Marchmain, has abandoned his wife and lived abroad for many years with his mistress.

Charles' friendship with Sebastian comes to an end as Sebastian develops into an alcoholic, and finally ends up in a Franciscan monastery hospital in North Africa. Charles' relationship with the family is renewed when, several years later, returning from America to
England, he meets and falls in love with Julia.

Both Julia and Charles are unhappily married, and they plan to divorce in order to marry each other. But these plans are never realized because of Julia’s growing sense that this remarriage for her would mean to live the rest of her life in a state of sin. This growing conviction becomes definite when her father, having returned from abroad to spend his last months in England, dies after having received the sacrament and with a feeble sign shown that he repents his sins.

Charles’ reenactment of these memories and his being witness to the grim desolation of the once-beautiful Brideshead, end in a final moment of recognition when he sees that the house chapel—abandoned when the family left the house—has been reopened, and now serves as a place for prayer and worship for the troops. The title of this essay is taken from this recognition of the hidden purpose behind the tragic debasement of Brideshead.

From a Protestant background, Northrop Frye raised the issue of the compatibility of tragedy with the Christian view of life as a “venerable puzzle” (116) and he states as something like a fact the incapability of institutional Christianity to encompass the tragic vision. But in the same breath he says that “all we can see, out there, of the activity of God in human life comes from a focus in the absurd and anguished figure of the crucified Christ.” This sounds like a faint echo of the words from the Epistle to the Hebrews: “we see not yet all things put under the crowned and glorified Lord; but we see Jesus who was made a little lower than the angels” (2:8-9). As far as we can see, Frye says, the earthly end of Christ’s career was exactly the same as the end of a failure. Thereby he connects a genuinely tragic Christian attitude to some sort of suspension of the happy ending; in terms of Frye’s predilection for the Gospel as a comic myth, a prolonged hold is made before the unexpected twist in the plot. Or, in yet another way, it consists of replacing the listening ear turned to the Christ narrative as it moves and unfolds through time, with the highly atemporal and spatially related eye.

Metaphors of sight and the art of painting are familiar to every reader of Brideshead; the narrator Charles Ryder makes his success as an architectural painter, occupied with committing England’s glorious past to the permanence of painting as if freezing the moment just before the tragic *peripeteia* of the modern age—the age of Hooper—turns his objects into deserted or debased buildings.

But there are other pictures in the novel—pictures where the lowest point in the Gospel narrative is frozen, like a moving film made to stop at a particular frame. There are the devotional images which Julia recalls during a hysterical outburst, caused by her pious brother Brideshead, who has let fall a remark to the effect that Julia is “living in sin,” as he says, “merely stating a fact well known to her” (326). The experience of sudden compunction triggered off by Brideshead’s flat remark is filled with significance from the devotional pictures gazing at her from the walls of the night nursery of her childhood:

Christ dying with my sin, nailed hand and foot; hanging over the bed in the night-nursery; hanging year after year in the dark little study at Farm Street with the shining oil-cloth; hanging in the dark church where only the old charwomen raise the dust and one candle burns; hanging at noon, high among the crowds and the soldiers; no comfort except a sponge of vinegar and the kind words of a thief; hanging forever; never the cool sepulchre and the grave cloth spread on the stone slab, never the oil and spices in the dark cave; always the midday sun and the dice clicking for the seamless coat. (328)

Julia’s compunction opens into tragic depth through a still picture of the station of the Cross, wherein the full pattern of the Christ story is deliberately withheld. The short span of time when Christ was hanging on the cross is focused without any consideration given to the implication of the Resurrection and the Ascension. The unexpected twist given to the narrative by Easter Day is suspended, and the crucifixion is not presented as part of a narrative, but rendered in the present tense: Christ is hanging, comfortless and without shelter from the scorching sun. A past tense part of the moving narrative is made continuous into and beyond the present. The image of the Crucified, or of the Seven Dolours of the Mother of God, recalls or represents the past in such a way that it is presently operative. But it is operative not as an internally divine affair—as the subject of a doctrine of atonement—but as an unveiling of what the Son of God is constantly exposed to in the hands of men. If one could speak of the tragic force of Good Friday, Julia’s broken sentences do not hint at the isolated victim-figure as its source; he was ‘afflicted of men,’ and the tragic representation is not complete until the afflictors become visible. Thus the core of Julia’s recognition is her own being identified with the builders who disallowed the precious cornerstone.

A devotional picture is even held up as a mirror to Sebastian in his final state of disgrace. Having at last traced his dear friend from Oxford days to the hospital in Morocco, Charles Ryder finds Sebastian gazing at a
religious oleograph of the Seven Dolours. Again, as in Julia's case, a tableau of the agony over Christ's suffering gives the key to a permanent, inescapable condition of human tragedy.

Sebastian's spoiled life is summed up in the image of the suffering Mother of God. Even here, the tormentors seem to be included in the picture. Sebastian's mute gaze at the Mater dolorosa is his way of reacting to the message brought to him by Charles that Lady Marchmain is herself lying in extremis. His mother's agonizing pursuit of Sebastian in order to keep him from relapsing into alcoholism is exactly what has driven him abroad, not only literally, but also spiritually. When he eventually begins to speak, he gives her an epitaph with a twofold meaning: "Poor Mummy. She really was a femme fatale, wasn't she? She killed at a touch" (246).

Sebastian has become a victim of her well-meaning zeal, but at the same time his rebellion has turned back on her; at the last, her life is summed up in the image of the suffering mother. The expression that she was a femme fatale is given a new meaning, and her "killing at a touch," which Sebastian has experienced, corresponds to Julia's words about her mother "carrying her [Julia's] sins with her to church, bowed under it and the black veil" (328). Her life is brought to completion as Sebastian recognizes that the agony she has brought upon him and the suffering she has undergone are inextricably interwoven. It is at this point that Waugh comes closest to establishing a place within Christianity for a tragic hero. At the same time, the long and tortuous downward curve of Sebastian's life is revealed as a prelude to transfiguration. Sebastian is stuck in Morocco because he who previously had been "looked after" has finally found someone to look after himself—the outcast German ex-soldier Kurt. And for those who are able to understand, he is a saint, as Sebastian's younger sister Cordelia later fruitlessly tries to explain to Charles. Tragedy, as it has become manifest in Sebastian's life, is the reverse side of sainthood. His inability to fit into the world, his mute suffering, only expressing itself through his drinking bouts—everything which could be summed up as a desolated life—may also be fitted into another code, where 'tragic' is an inapt word. But not everyone is up to the task of understanding this.

Throughout Brideshead the reader is introduced to a world of two orders. A manifest order, where people are happy or unhappy, and a hidden order, resembling a cryptogram, a language conceivable only for the initiated. Charles Ryder, who introduces himself as an "agnostic," is the one who throughout his dealings with the family at Brideshead, represents the manifest order. For him, the obvious failure of religion in making its adherents "happy" becomes an insoluble riddle. He even regards himself as capable of explaining the second, hidden order. But his various attempts to sort out the real meaning of the religious anguish of the Marchmain family always end up in a kind of trivializing of their doings. His lack of understanding religion is due to his taking 'happiness' as a standard, while the characters at Brideshead are propelled towards a fate of despair and desolation. It is within this dark landscape that the conflict between the different orders, the two different worlds, is intensified. It is here, and only here, that the limits of Charles' trivializing view of religion are laid bare. It is when life's tragedy demands an interpretation that the wall of partition between Charles' world of "five senses and three dimensions," and the other, hidden world begins to crack. Written against the background of the dysfunction and eclipse of traditional religion in a world fallen into the hands of human beings—called "the world of Hooper" in the prologue—Waugh's novel emphasizes and accentuates the eclipse of faith itself. Only in the depths, only where Christianity has reached the dead end of its functionality in a world come of age, might Christianity's claim of making sense have any sense at all.

"The sense of tragedy"—that is what Charles Ryder recognizes as he turns over in his mind the family story of Sebastian's maternal ancestors:

The family history was typical of the Catholic squires of England; from Elizabeth's reign till Victoria's they lived sequestered lives, among their tenantry and kinsmen, sending their sons to school abroad, often marrying there, inter-marrying, and sending their sons to school abroad, often marrying there, inter-marrying, if not, with a score of families like themselves, debarred from all preferment, and learning, in those lost generations, lessons which could still be read in the lives of the last three men of the house...they told the same tale of men who were, in all the full flood of academic and athletic success, of popularity and the promise of great rewards ahead, seen somewhat as set apart from their fellows, garlanded victims, devoted to the sacrifice. These men must die to make a world for Hooper...[they were] marked for destruction. (160)

This sequence has a twofold bearing on our "venerable puzzle"—the compatibility of tragedy with a Christian view of life. First, the novel refers to the descending history of what is (in an important respect) a non-institutional religious body, a Catholic minority in a Protestant country; its members have learned lessons different from those of a privileged religious body, one that sanctions society's values and fears. Secondly, with the sudden turn towards a modern society, these lessons, handed down through the
generations, are accentuated as a "tragic sense." The age of Hooper has inaugurated a time ripe for a genuinely tragic Christian view of life. Someone has to pay the price; with new cultural and social constellations, some are brought to zenith, while others descend to nadir. Someone has to give way, now that society reveres people like Julia's husband Rex Mottram, who "simply wasn't a complete human being at all; who simply wasn't all there. He was a tiny bit of one, unnaturally developed: something in a bottle, an organ kept alive in a laboratory. I thought he was a sort of primitive savage, but he was something absolutely modern and up-to-date that only this ghastly age could produce. A tiny bit of man pretending he was whole..." (229)

In a society like this, the decline of religion is not something that can be just talked away. Trying to do that, the interlocutors will suddenly find themselves on the way to the temple where homages are paid to "the age of Hooper." For if a religion looks important and vital in a world fallen into such hands, then that religion is probably far too comprised with the values of such a world. If we pursue this train of thought further, Waugh’s tragic vision is revealed, for those with a critical awareness of society’s failure will be those whom the law of progress has labeled misfits because of their faith.

This critical awareness knows that the potential of meaning in human history is not limited to the victors and the subjugators. As the Catholic theologian Johann Baptist Metz reminds us, meaning is not a category reserved for the champions. Against a historical Darwinism, celebrating the survival of the fittest, Metz contends, the great tragedies of world literature have tried, again and again, to trace continuity and meaning in history through the vestiges of suffering, asking for the forgotten and supplanted to tell in their stories a kind of anti-history. This fact deserves the particular attention of a Church and a theology in whose midst is a "memoria passionis."

Metz’ essay on the importance and relevance of "memoria passionis" for a Christian interpretation of history confirms the relevance of Waugh’s tragic vision not only as a story of individuals. The characters in his novel are part of a larger history, a history of a religious minority who during the centuries since the days of Elizabeth had learned important lessons which the established Church didn’t know when the age of modernity suddenly arrived. That this age is ripe for a rethinking of Christianity and tragedy is something Waugh explores as a novelist and Metz presents as a challenge to contemporary theology. I would summarize his thought this way:

As the churches in our societies have been drifting towards a state of minority, their public functions have been eclipsed. Instead of functioning as society’s institutional religion, their true role is to be cognitive and affective minorities. The question is raised whether the churches are on the way to becoming sects; and, if this is the case, whether the churches’ future is to play a role as more or less irrelevant sub-cultures within our technological society. Whether the churches will end up in a cul-de-sac of false sectarian isolation depends on whether they learn to articulate and reenact the memory of Christ’s passion in the middle of society. This memory, Metz states, preserves as unforgettable all human suffering. To preserve the “memoria passionis” turns the church into a bearer of a dangerous, subversive memory—a memory which becomes the key to much more than the self-preservation of religious institutions; rather, such a memory will enable us to continue to be human in the face of inhumanity. So far Metz.

The various motifs in Brideshead have this “memoria passionis” as the common denominator. In Waugh’s novel the tragedians’ unimportance in the “world of three dimensions and five senses” is matched by their importance in the other, hidden world. And the agnostic’s attempts to explain their doings in terms of a human world where God is absent are challenged, though not by postulates asserting His existence. The religious sense in the novel consists of a representation of the central mystery of faith as an ambiguous drama wherein the divine protagonist is not only hidden, but has to endure so much that he retains nothing. He must even endure the desacralizing of the chapel at Brideshead. After having removed the Host, and left the door of the tabernacle ajar, the last celebrating priest leaves behind what Cordelia describes as “just an oddly decorated room.” But even this horrible event can be referred to the Christian universe of meaning. For what the priest did is not a scandalous act, turning the effort of the builders into nothing. The closing of the chapel and the desolation of Brideshead is not an act rendering the faith obsolete. Rather, the desacralizing of the chapel is nothing but the celebration of the Liturgy of Good Friday; far from seeking the sense of meaning by looking only at what is happening to the characters in the present—their failures or successes as the world sees them—we will see the fate of the builders and the building inscribed into the lamentations over the deserted Jerusalem, reiterated through generations in remembrance of the deserted and betrayed Son of God. Charles Ryder’s unambiguous explanation of religion is thrown into relief by the act of God, celebrated and reenacted in the liturgy as a story, in whose ambiguity resides the
very power to give meaning the human tragedy.

Even in Lord Marchmain's long death-bed scene, God operates as the hidden protagonist. But not only at the end, when the dying man manages to make a feeble sign of the cross. The entire description of his last months is given a religious sense through a transfiguration of the passion of the Lord into this fictional Lord's death. God is present, but not as the *deus ex machina* who by an unexpected twist of mercy alters the plot from tragedy to comedy. Rather, from the very moment when he enters what he calls "his Gethsemane," the story of Lord Marchmain's last months in the Chinese drawing-room is propelled towards consummation by another story, beneath the surface, a story as full of agony, as full of the fear of death and abandonment as is Lord Marchmain's story. When finally "the veil of the temple is rent from top to bottom," as Charles recalls, witnessing Marchmain's passing, it is clearly the consummation of a life he witnesses, not the sudden intervention from an up-to-this-moment absent God.

*Brideshead Revisited* is a novel whose religious realism is generated by the belief that Christ's sacrifice is an ongoing event. At its bottom lies the belief in a God who is willing shamelessly to exhibit himself in the consecrated host and as a "flickering, small flame." This belief sets free an energy which makes it possible to include within the Christian view even a world totally taken over by humans. Both as a novel and as what a critic has described as a "camouflaged sermon," *Brideshead Revisited* is centered around a devotional presence where Christ's griefs are inseparable from our own, as past is from present and history from commemoration. As described in numerous studies of English religious lyrics, this form of participation in Christ's grief is deeply rooted in Catholic spirituality, while the Protestant tradition redefined the relation between history and ritual, between the acts of God and their commemoration.

In Waugh's novel we may discover him as a Christian novelist. So far, the connection between Catholic spirituality and literature has resulted mostly in commentary on the poetry of meditation. Waugh's novel may lead us to consider a category of meditative fiction. His contribution to the long conversation about Christianity and tragedy depends on our perception that the anguished and absurd figure of the desolated Lord never became for him a character in a tale long concluded.

**Works Cited**


Good Barns and Water

She lifted the last box and waited
for the man to put it in the truck
that waited on the white-rock road
beside the porch then turned to the house
as if to find something to bring with her,
some piece of their life to save from auction.
But there was nothing but the house
and the one dog who wouldn't come in to
her from the woods where it waited for him
to come from the barn after throwing hay down to the cows.

There were some who said it wouldn't last,
that she, city woman, could not stand the farm,
or that she would surely die in winter.
And still others waited for her to leave him
when spring thawed the frozen ruts and she
could stand on the porch at last and smell
rain on the warm air.

But she didn't leave, or die in winter.
It was he left her, as the cousin from
Cincinnati said after it was over. It was
he who took his gun into the woods with that
half-wild dog and never returned. And when
they brought her news of it—the wire fence
he leaned the gun against—she knew she would
not stay now, could not wait for another spring,
or remember the autumn winds that lifted the
nap of hair on her neck as they stood together
on the porch and watched the birdbath catch fire
in last light. Nor did she see the notice in
The Advocate when it came, with the picture
of them standing in the yard, half in shadow,
with the words:
Arnold Havilke of rural Greenville
died of accidental shooting Friday.
He leaves 100 acres with good barns
and water.

J. T. Ledbetter
To glance at the sun and then close your eyes is to experience light in a new way. Somehow colors you never suspected, and might find it hard to name, are blazing and flashing away there in your head, and even when you open your eyes, the world that was in front of you has been transformed; it is still blazing and flashing. Though the outlines of things have changed and their more plastic shapes now seem to shimmer, the shapes themselves are yet somehow solid and real, more themselves than they are in their ordinary flatness. Everything seems to move, as though you could see—impossible in the world of ordinary seeing—the very atoms of their existence. This experience is as close as I can come to describing what happens when I look at one of John August Swanson’s paintings.

Wonderful things are going on in the spaces he fills for us to look at. Creating a picture has about it an atmosphere of magic and foolery, as if the artist wants us to believe that on that board, in those inches, another larger world is going on. We are pulled into the space both by its flatness—the board or canvas or paper we know—and the depth—the unguessed world of reality the artist convinces us is there. Sometimes Swanson’s spaces are as dynamic as a moving picture, or a glimpse of a microscope slide filled with splashing and curvetting paisleys. Sometimes they are as still as an icon.

These are pictures that hang in the Vatican Museum, in the Smithsonian, and the Tate. And they are also pictures that children, who had run about in Swanson’s house while their father laid carpet, asked their friends to come and see. People in poor parishes collect money to have them on the walls of their churches, and celebrate their installation with parades and dances.

In my mind’s eye, I see those dances and those people—Mexicans, we used to call them in California, before we knew the term Hispanic. The Garcías were our neighbors on the wrong side of the tracks in Palm Springs. They lived just on the other side of the fence, but in a world that seemed to me much more real than mine. They had lots more friends and relations, for one thing. Their religion had tears and dances, and *The Fishermen*, 1990 Acrylic on canvas, 4’ x 7’.
loud music and bright colors. They laughed, and had pictures of the Virgin. They knew the saints by name, and had favorites, and were named after them—Diego, Jose, Maria, even Jesus. Their grandmothers dressed completely in black, but when their sisters had weddings—the bright blues and greens and purples and pinks would whirl and flash in the sun till seeing them would make you dizzy, would make you think it was the sun you were seeing.

John August Swanson’s mother was Mexican, his father a Swede. His eye is Californian—but it is a lost, or unrealized California, a Mexican California, not a Hollywood, hard-edged, glitzy California. It is an eye both innocent and knowing. The pictures look simple, but they are composed with great skill, and carried out by the unremitting effort of craft. Before the composition, though, what has this eye seen?

A world of beauty, figures of humanity calm and good, nature undisturbed by the beneficent presences of people and their doings. A world of actions that spring from real needs—planting and harvesting, and singing, and fishing, and catching balls, and playing the viol, making processions and saying goodbye. It is an eye flooded by the memory of a world before the Fall, and in the dazzling brightness of those tears of loss, it sees a vision to put onto paper, so that we all may acquire the vision.

Swanson, born in 1938, did not begin to draw until he was thirty. He studied with Sister Corita, later known as Corita Kent, at Immaculate Heart College, but she had the grace to teach him some things and them encourage him to find his own way. Many of his images include texts, and in this way, some of the lessons of his teacher move through his work still. Finding his own way has not been easy, for Swanson has a quality of slow, stubborn individuality (is this the heritage of that Swedish father?) which makes him learn in his own way, and demands a perfection of outcome that denies theereotype of the artist as slap-dash genius, whipping out pictures as a frenzy of creative energy turns the crank.

No, Swanson’s work takes shape slowly. His media are various. He has worked a great deal in prints, often a serigraph, involving as many as fifty screens to produce a final image. The Fishermen, reproduced here, is a 7 by 4 foot acrylic, mounted on wood. But asked the typical interviewer’s question about a favorite medium, Swanson is resolutely uncommunicative.

“An academic’s question,” he said, particularly when I tried to lead him into a discussion of various media and their political implications.

“Don’t you deliberately choose media that are accessible to many people,
media that are less expensive, and therefore often
denigrated by the high art establishment?” A long
silence on the phone.

“That is more an intellectual concern. I like
serigraph because it . . . makes the picture I want to
produce. And people like it. All kinds of people like it,
which is what I want to happen.” Another long silence.
“And prints let me take a long time. I’ll be in London
for three months working to produce the new version
of Ruth. I like to take that long time, concentrating on
it, getting it just right, working with these master
printers. It is slow, and exacting, and it is what I like to
do.”

The Fishermen, like many Swanson works, has a
long history. It began as a little painting, in 1970.
Then, in 1973, he worked it out as a serigraph. An
earlier version has the text, “Let down your nets” in the
breath of the figure in the wind, in the upper right
corner. But the people in the church wanted one for
themselves, a painting about fishing all night for
nothing, a picture about not being discouraged, a
picture about coming up full in the end. And so the
present painting came into being. The text, in Spanish
on the top frame, and in English on the lower edge,
fascinated me.

I asked why the texts were not the same. “Oh, it
is the same text,” he said, until I showed him that I
could read the Spanish, which quotes the part of the
text about the nets not breaking, whereas the English
does not. “Why the difference?” I asked. I wanted a
theology for the picture, though I was ready to
construct one.

“The words fit on the top differently,” Swanson
said. He wanted to talk about how the picture
contains many moments of time, shown
simultaneously. So we talked about that.

Other typical works deal with time and narrative
in another way, depicting a sequence of Biblical events
in separate little boxes, framed by descriptive text. The
Joseph story is like that, and critics say that this shows
the influence of Persian miniatures on his work.
That’s true, Swanson says. He saw these in London
when he was first there, when he went to learn about
printmaking in the early 70s.

But though it is no doubt true that these pictures
show the convergence of folk art tradition, and the
influence of exotic Oriental imagery, they are for me
most striking because they exactly recapitulate the way
I first met the stories, and the way I knew them. I knew
“Joseph” as a set of little stories, and they were
illustrated too, in Sunday school leaflets, with soft
pictures, where people looked just like me and my
friends but were wearing funny clothes. Which seemed
odd to me then, because they didn’t do things at all
like me and my friends. The editors tried to make me
see how the stories “applied” to me; there was always a
last paragraph in the leaflet, which told you how you were as bad as Joseph's brothers when you hit your little sister, or how you should be brave like Joseph and tell the truth and you could get out of jail.

This dislocation always puzzled me, because the stories were wonderful, and I loved them, but the pictures were goofy because they didn't match the stories at all. When I first saw Swanson's "Joseph," I knew that here it was—the pictures of the story, at last. These people look strange—like you would expect of people who would throw their brother down into a well and tell their father that a wolf had eaten him. They live in a hot, bright landscape. Each of the things that happens to Joseph is a separate thing, for there is in the Biblical narrative a marvellous sense of discontinuous continuity—here he is being introduced to Potiphar, and suddenly, here he is running away from Potiphar's wife, and then, in jail! How surprising! How strange and unlike what happens to me. And yet how powerfully true to this text, with big pictures and little pictures tracking spatially the patterns of meaning in the text—a truth that the Sunday school leaflets smoothed out into a bland and meaningless uniformity. And all of it swirls in a world of color that is like the color the sun leaves in your eyes, if you ever dare to look at it.

John August Swanson, forever trying to escape the connotations of the term 'artist' for Western high art culture, continues to grow and develop. He does more quick work now, freeing up his stroke by doing ink sketches, and looser brush work. Partly, that is because the press of business makes it harder for him to concentrate over the long periods of time required for the detailed works. But in every work there is what he calls his offering, like the offerings of the workmen in the medieval cathedral. Though it is his own, his work includes our images, becomes our world, gives shape to our visions. Out of our reality, and the world in which we live, Swanson calls a more dazzling truth, to remind us of the Paradise of God's making, in which we also walk.

May, 1991
Dear Editor,

You would think, from all the sniping and carping these last few months, that "multiculturalism" is a social disease, of people leading "ill-regulated" lives, as they said in General Custer's day. Yet the fact seems simply to be that some colleges and universities are starting—or talking about starting—a "multicultural" requirement. As far as I can tell, this is something like building a new boulevard, in a city with too many traffic accidents. This might be called Wachet Auf Boulevard, if I understand the German words for the old Advent hymn: Hey, wake up! Shape up! Look around at what's actually happening! Get ready for what's coming! You can get on this boulevard from Know-Nothing Street, also from Know-It-All Street. You can always get back onto your original streets, their potholes and false fronts, but for a while you look at new scenery and new neighborhoods.

Charles Vandersee, at the University of Virginia, has lately explained "The Real Reason for a Canon" in The Gal-latin Review (New York University).

This is sounding allegorical, like John Bunyan, but more than a few students, even at respectable American colleges, seem to have a mindset of the 17th century, or even some earlier caveperson era. The reason I know this will soon be coming down the pike, as modest enlightenment to the cranks and their acolytes who are so infuriated about "multiculturalism" that they have set up an instant subculture on this issue.

Let us ponder some documents. They seem to point in a direction. Whether they do so might clear up if I were member of more than my own present subcultures. My vocational culture is academia, and my subculture within academia is that of the midsized research university. This means I have only a casual knowledge, or anecdotal impressions, of the small college, the church-related college, and the multiversity. And of those universities (usually urban) serving the "new" student, which is to say ethnic minorities, part-time students, women who've raised their children, and so forth.

I am justifiably modest, believe me; of these subcultures and that of the community college I know chiefly what I glimpse in the weekly Chronicle of Higher Education. But curiously, I may grasp something of the subculture of American high school youth. In an annual spring ritual I spend dozens of hours in our admissions office reading applications from high school seniors. As dean of our undergraduate scholars' program, I need to see the thinking and other credentials of people we consider inviting.

It's there, in the airless conference room of Miller Hall, that I glimpse the subculture of the college-bound and its folkways. Within that subculture exists an American folk belief that I commend to the antimulticulturalists. If they wish a real nut to crack rather than a non-cause to natter on, I've got it.

Again this year we had on the admissions application—and I am glad we had it—a question about the applicant's "knowledge of a culture other than your own, either domestic or foreign." Look first at the baby talk. One young man went with his family to a restaurant. It was a Japanese restaurant, and he actually faced—and miraculously liked—sushi. “This experience left a profound lesson ingrained in my mind. That lesson is that whether we are Soviet, American, Chinese, or any other race, we are all people, we are all brothers, sharing a simple kinship that transcends national boundaries and binds us all together.”

Another young man: “I was fortunate enough to visit the Soviet Union for ten days in the spring of 1988. I realized that the Russians are not so different from us than...
are pretty much like us.

we give people the benefit of the doubt. Because it seems to me that the Soviet people thought of their own country and how they viewed the American people. They desired much the same that Americans want: peace, prosperity, and an understanding between our two countries."

Now, I read this as a member of a subculture, and I want to be careful not to make too much of it. There is a national subculture of college professors and professional staff whose work it is to decide which young Americans shall join the subculture of college students in the next academic year. When we read essays on applications, we realize that a subculture may be speaking, not simply an individual. We, the reading subculture, expect that an applicant be interesting, open-minded, intelligent but not nerdish, and of course literate. The writing subculture knows these criteria, and tries to meet them, but within the time limits of that all-important senior year in high school.

That means little time for actual reflection. Time for intelligence, yes, but not for genuine reflection, on the typical application essay. So we in the reading subculture sometimes do not find out what a writer genuinely thinks. This is a mercy; we give people the benefit of the doubt. Because it seems to me that a student at age 17, or an American at any age, is quite wrong to conclude that people of other nations are pretty much like us.

Showing at least some reflection is this response, from an applicant who met two German girls at a summer fine arts camp, girls who ate Mueslix every morning and declined Kool-Aid: "As we became better acquainted, I began to realize that the differences between us weren't just our tastes in foods. I perceived an attitude of disgust toward American materialism and our apparent total lack of concern for the environment. Germany is a capitalist country, but the people maintain a preference for the simple life and a strong bond with nature. I also learned that many Germans consider Americans boisterous, and are offended by the generally extroverted personality of the American people. This seemed ironic considering the American stereotype of the German as cold and aloof."

Two last quotes, from this valuable material that the antimults never see, the first from an applicant who met Italian students at Harvard Summer School: "The differences in our lifestyles and our educational experiences were fascinating. I was amazed to discover that cheating in school in Italy is quite common. They explained to me that the Italian mentality towards cheating is very different than in America."

Finally, from an applicant who spends a lot of time in the home of a Korean-American classmate—observing, for example, physical gestures of courtesy and the use of respectful pronouns by the young: "My acquaintance with my friend has shown me that the world is not all like what I see around me, and that American culture must seem as strange to other cultures as other cultures seem strange to us."

So here's where we're at. The three previous testimonies are fairly reasonable, especially the last one. They seem to represent actual effort to learn something about what's really out there in the world, rather than leap to the conclusion that everything out there is red, white, and blue, with golden arches. Unfortunately, speaking from within the privileged subculture of applications readers, I judge these reasonable responses to be in a definite minority. I suggest that most of the American students bound for elite colleges stand somewhere in a golden haze represented by that testimony from the soccer player whose four days in the USSR place him on Know-It-All Street: "We are all brothers, sharing a simple kinship."

Of course, when the international soccer subculture gets together, there will presumably be shared values felt. The same with international subcultures in any sport, and in academia often. Recreational and intellectual issues are apt to provide that golden haze obscuring fundamental national differences.

This golden haze, or ideology, is something that secondary schools may help spread, wittingly or not. Certain civic organizations, with their scholarship and exchange programs for study abroad, may be implicated. Ingrained American optimism about the fundamental decency of human nature may be at work.

I have seen these same responses on applications year after year. It is not as if the golden haze has descended suddenly, with the Chinese student movement, the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and Soviet groping toward democracy. And I think the golden haze, in these golden years of youth, is a pernicious thing; that is the point to which all this testimony leads. I'm suspecting as many accidents on Know-It-All Street as on Know-Nothing.

Had I been intended for a cosmic worrier, I would worry a good deal about the large number of intelligent Americans who enter college with these gilt illusions—especially when they
believe they have evidence and experience to stand on. The institution of the foreign "homestay," for example. More and more I surmise that host families in French villages and German towns are people already "Americanized," super-ready with good will and deference toward the visiting golden-browed American youth. No wonder the traveler concludes, back home in Virginia, that the French are like American suburbanites; they just consume saucisson instead of sushi.

Convinced that such a haze exists, and that it's an important haze to dispel, as important for the curriculum as the mystical aura surrounding modern science and the misty skyline of patterns/events/personages of our own American culture, I support efforts toward "multiculturalism" in the American university.

My guess is that very few of the people arguing the mult issue one way or the other have access to the database drawn on here. This is because subcultures often do not interact. It is heterodox for me to provide you the above quotes, not because those texts are top secret (though admissions files are naturally confidential), but because people reading applications do so only for a one-time practical purpose: making decisions about entry into an elite subculture. The idea that you could actually use these texts for revelations about what's going on in an American subculture is not conventional in the admissions subculture.

And you will have noticed my pains to "deconstruct" these texts—to suggest that they may not always represent actual human views but the haze and haste of the American youth subculture.

I feel like ending with aspersions. I just don't trust the antimults. They are themselves, as I've said, a subculture—but with what end? What common ideology? If they had my database, would they shut up, wake up? Wachtet auf? Are they just pissed off by the pedantic Latinate non-unisyllabic infelicity of the term "multicultural"? You could go Greek and get "poly" something, but wouldn't they gyre and gimble over that too? Are they afraid that students' minds will change, after a mult course? But we know that students have virtually a polyester resistance to change; college courses are just what you "go through" in those golden years.

I will keep on listening to antimults, but I confess to suspecting a ludicrous irony. Most antimults appear to be cultural "conservatives," afraid that somehow the general American heritage and also our variegated subcultures are going to be sacrificed, as a subject of study. But without a new boulevard, an actual opportunity for young people to change their accustomed direction, won't too many of these golden Americans go through life as those awful "one-worlders," the bugaboo of conservatives? Still thinking, in other words (as American businessmen keep misconstruing the Japanese), that in other parts of the world the nature and function of language, social custom, ethics, familial relationships, religion, commerce, and vocation are pretty much the same as in El Paso and Bar Harbor.

Some of us would prefer not to affirm this gilded illusion, and in fact think that mult-study might even have the spin-off consequence of helping us see El Paso and Bar Harbor a little more clearly.

From Dogwood, yours faithfully,

C.V.

The Cresset
Specialize. It seems that everywhere we turn, we’re told to specialize. In higher education, young people are encouraged to select a major as soon as possible. Somehow, college students who choose to “explore” are suspect. But Bernstein’s example reminds us of the richness of possibility, the bounty of multiplicity. He did so many things so well that people were always upset with him. “You’re a great classical composer, why waste your time on Broadway?” But would we want to choose between West Side Story and the Chichester Psalms? Bernstein—as conductor, composer, teacher, activist, writer —gave of himself, without narrowing his focus. How rich we are for that refusal to specialize!

Drawing and text by Thomas Trimborn

May, 1991
The Art of Watching

Edward Byrne

He is a good critic if he helps people understand more about the work than they could see for themselves; he is a great critic, if by his understanding and feeling for the work, by his passion, he can excite people so they want to experience more of the art that is there, waiting to be seized.

—Pauline Kael, I Lost It at the Movies

A brief announcement tucked well inside the March 11th issue of The New Yorker informed its readers that Pauline Kael, who had served as the magazine’s film critic since the mid-1960s, had decided it was time to retire from regular reviewing. The editors attempted to assuage the concerns of Kael’s followers by assuring that she would return on occasion with special feature articles. This short news note may have been overlooked or little noticed by many readers; however, the announcement stunned those lovers of film who regard Pauline Kael as one of their own.

Edward Byrne, a member of the Department of English at VU, teaches poetry writing and publishes in a wide variety of poetry magazines and reviews. He contributes regularly to The Cresset.

Ever since the sixties, in the eyes of many aficionados of film, Pauline Kael has held a high position of honor. She has been seen by her fans as a film critic whose writing is worthy to be included alongside the other notable literary figures who grace the pages of The New Yorker week after week. Kael’s prose is often as elegant and as lively as the essays which annually win praise for the magazine. In addition, the vivid language and carefully chosen metaphors evident in her reviews have consistently rivaled the clarity and innovation which so often characterize the best New Yorker works of fiction.

More than any other critic, Pauline Kael has contributed to the notion that good film criticism is that which combines an education in the history of the cinema with a strong belief in personal taste and common sense. She never abdicates her duty to respond to a movie as an individual whose judgment, although it may be tested and challenged by others, always remains distinctly her own. For this reason, Kael’s criticism often is viewed as idiosyncratic. Her obviously biased commentaries about particular films, actors, or directors are sometimes difficult to accept; her isolated elevation of an ordinary film to the status of a classic or her occasional cranky attack on a proven artist reveal an erratically personal prejudice—a characteristic trait probably shared by all film viewers, but not publicly acknowledged by most film critics. Perhaps the most controversial of Kael’s criticisms is contained in The Citizen Kane Book, published in 1971, an infamous extended essay which took issue with many of the claims concerning Orson Welles’s authorship and control over Citizen Kane. Twenty years later, the points of contention raised by Kael in that volume continue to be debated. Still, Pauline Kael’s readers identify with her belief in the necessity of strong individual opinions in order to instigate examination and to stimulate discussion of difficult issues.

Unlike many other critics, Kael’s reflections on film have always begun with an impulse that arises from heartfelt passion and proceeds to the intellectual analysis only through her unravelling of emotions in the form of the written word. Kael cannot be tied to any ideological or theoretical classification. Whereas many academic film critics have staked their claims to recognition on their connections to various schools of theory or abstract intellectualized approaches (neo-Freudian, Semiological, Marxist, Feminist, Structuralist, etc.), and have produced writings resembling the obscure and unreadable criticism found in other humanities studies, Kael’s emphasis on the primacy of the personal passion, emotional excitement, and enriching experience associated with the simple act of attending a movie overrides any pre-conceived intellectual pigeonholing. Instead of writing a criticism filled with jargon resulting in the exclusion of many readers, Kael’s common and colloquial language encourages inclusion of a larger readership. Therefore, rather than existing as artifacts in the deadly vacuum of academia, Kael’s articles are easily understood and appreciated by all interested in the lively arts of filmmaking and film criticism. As
a result, Kael always has been near the top of that long list of non-academic critics investigating various areas of the arts and humanities who are creating much more engaging and important writings than those now found in the articles of academic journals and in the papers at academic conferences.

At the same time, as the power of journalistic criticism like that of Pauline Kael, Andrew Sarris, Richard Schickel, Kenneth Turan, and Stanley Kauffmann has been overtaken by the slick and stylish television reviewing conducted by Gene Siskel, Roger Ebert, and other lesser figures during the last decade, Kael has maintained a proper balance between style and substance. Her articles in The New Yorker continually have reinforced the importance of careful examination and complete consideration of all aspects of filmmaking when informing her readers.

Nevertheless, one of the keys to Kael's success has been her constant identification with her readers. Just as Siskel and Ebert are shown sitting in their balcony seats, Kael repeatedly reminds her readers she is also among them. As Tim Bywater and Thomas Sobchack have noted in their book, Film Criticism: "Often Kael identifies so closely with the audience that when she is not using the first person singular to refer to herself, she uses the first person plural. She compares and associates her reactions with the audience's reactions. It may be for this reason she seldom goes to press screenings of films. Instead, she sees films along with the audience."

Kael's identification with the audience is solidified by her unabashed expressions of love for the medium. Sometimes she seems to be more of a fan—in the true sense of fanatic, or a devotee—with its full suggestion of devotion, than a critic, and she often appears personally pained by a disappointing film or affronted by a poor performance on the screen. Kael's admiration, perhaps adulation, for film is the characteristic that endears her to millions of film buffs throughout the nation, since her attitude toward the medium reaffirms the affection for cinema held by so many others—a love of the movies which most cannot put into words the way she can. Consequently, she acts as a spokesperson for the masses who have been moved so many times by the scenes depicted on the silver screen.

Since the movies have become the most powerful and influential art form of the twentieth century, this love for film is not rare; however, Kael's ability to express that love again and again over nearly a quarter of a century is a unique and precious quality. Kael has eloquently articulated a universal affection for film in the thousands of pages she has written over the years. Similarly, numerous directors—including such illustrious international filmmakers as Francois Truffaut (France), Ingmar Bergman (Sweden), and Woody Allen (United States)—have created works which also have tried to illustrate the worldwide love affair with the movies. However, perhaps none has succeeded as well as Italian director Giuseppe Tornatore in his wonderful film, Cinema Paradiso, recently released on videocassette.

When Cinema Paradiso was first released in 1989, only those living in large urban areas of the country had an opportunity to view it; even then, most in the metropolitan cities were unaware of the magnificence of this small foreign film. However, Cinema Paradiso, distributed by Miramax, is another one of the numerous independent and foreign films which benefit from the recent VCR revolution. Fortunately, rather than becoming an obscure gem displayed only as part of a retrospective at a museum theatre or in a film series at a revival movie house, Cinema Paradiso is available now for all to discover anytime at the local video rentals store.

Cinema Paradiso arrives at the video counter with stellar credentials. The film won the Special Jury Prize at the 1989 Cannes Film Festival, where it is rumored to have received from the festival's tough and sophisticated audience a 15-minute standing ovation, lasting throughout its roll of credits and long beyond. Subsequently, Cinema Paradiso received the Academy Award as the Best Foreign Language Film of the year.

One might expect such endorsements would lift expectations too high ever to be matched by any movie. Nevertheless, Cinema Paradiso does not disappoint. The film is a delight which offers in pictures what Pauline Kael's writings deliver in words—a loving tribute to the emotional power and social impact of the movies in the twentieth century.

Although the film is shown mostly in flashback, as a middle-aged man looks back at the influence movies and moviegoing had over his formative years in a small Sicilian town, the personal scope of the picture is deceptive. Cinema Paradiso examines the relationship film has with other elements of society, especially religious and civic institutions. The townspeople are informed about events outside their own little world, most poignantly of news concerning their loved ones at the distant fronts during war, through the Movietone-like newreels preceding the full-length feature films. An interesting metaphor plays throughout the film as the cinema, representing the standards and values of contemporary times, rivals the more conservative morals of the Catholic...
Church. In fact, during the early years films shown in *Cinema Paradiso*, quite appropriately the name of the town’s sole movie house, are censored regularly by the local priest, who removes any hint of intimate contact. However, the influence of religion eventually wanes as couples later are allowed to be seen embracing and kissing on the large screen. Significantly, the movie house is located on the town’s center square where all the citizens meet in times of crisis or deliberation, and inside the theatre a microcosm of the society’s class structure is reflected as members of the economic upper levels are seated in the balcony to look down and even spit upon the poorer lower-class townspeople below.

*Cinema Paradiso* is replete with indelible images demonstrating the poetic beauty, as well as the potential danger, of film. If all the remarkable scenes contained in this movie were reported here, the whole film would be revealed, and yet none of the descriptions would do justice to the emotional force of the film’s individual images. Still, we are touched by the recurring shots of awe-filled facial reactions registered by audience members on our screens as they watch the moving images on their silver screen and are mesmerized by the novelty of the world presented to them. They give themselves, emotionally and spiritually, to the pictures on the screen, transport themselves to a place of the imagination. In the darkened movie house, these Sicilian townspeople have found a contemporary paradise, a safe refuge removed from the gritty reality outside the theatre’s walls.

Like Pauline Kael, director Giuseppe Tornatore identifies with the audience in *Cinema Paradiso*. Both know that viewing movies ought not to be passive, but ought to be passionate. Attending a film is an interaction—an act of giving one’s heart and soul, as well as an act of taking. Whether as a film reviewer seeking to increase enthusiasm for the extraordinary fictional lives presented by the medium or as a movie viewer searching for emotional release from the mundane routines of real life, the activity of watching the flickering images on a screen is in itself an interpretive act, one Kael and Tornatore excel at demonstrating—the art of watching.

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**Mysterium Tremendum**

The leaves flew through the air.  
The storm was loud as God.  
Then branches flew.  
It had no mercy,  
My hat flew down the hall.  
Or only the strange mercy of its power:  
I slammed the window,  
To throw five maples down  
But water still came in.  
And leave the pansies,  
Which looked so sick and wilted all July,  
Standing unharmed and fresher than before.  
Among the shingles tumbling overhead,  
Among the shingles tumbling overhead,  
We heard this mercy storming, howling, roaring.  
Almost too amazed to be afraid.  
Electrified, we stood beside the window  
Barbara Bazyn  

We ran for buckets.  
Electrified, we stood beside the window  
Meanwhile all the sky  
Almost too amazed to be afraid.  
Filled up with clumps of  
Barbara Bazyn  
Maple leaves, catalpa,  
We heard this mercy storming, howling, roaring.  
Walnuts, pine cones—  
Electrified, we stood beside the window  
Anything could fly.  
Almost too amazed to be afraid.  
Wind slapped wet leaves  
Barbara Bazyn  
Against the windowpanes.
Plain Talk at Two Tables

Margery Stomne Selden

As a lifelong Lutheran I am not unfamiliar with Martin Luther's *Table Talk*, or *Tischreden*, that collection of comments gathered from the Reformer's lips by his closest friends, recorded in various versions, and issued from 1566 on. Only recently, however, have I made the acquaintance of another *Table Talk*, that of John Selden (1584-1654), a compilation made by Selden's amanuensis, the Rev. Richard Milward. John Selden, described in one college textbook as "the most learned name in English literature" was a statesman, jurist, philologist, orientalist, and author. He was also a Protestant whose own traditionalist (Anglican) upbringing was influenced by the waxing Puritan influence.

It has been interesting for me to observe how often similar topics were of concern to these two, the one a gifted cleric, the other a gifted layman, separated as they were by nationality, vocation, religious climate, and almost a century's time.

I share these excerpts in the hope that some may be moved not only to explore more fully these two *Table Talks* and possibly others of that informal literary genre, but also to use certain excerpts as useful, even provocative, points of departure for discussions in class or church.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that in both cases one is reading remarks recorded by others and that, in Luther's case, one is not only dealing with translation (I have used William Hazlitt's, 1846) but also with differing recollections of Luther's table companions.

Margery Stomne Selden, a graduate of Vassar and Yale, was for over twenty years organist-choirmaster at Christ Lutheran Church in Maplewood, New Jersey. She also served on the Board of Directors, New Jersey District, LC-MS. She now lives in Greencastle, Indiana, and is Trustee and Secretary of the Scar­molin Music Trust.

May, 1991
understands all things at once; but a man's writing has but one true sense...." (232)

Selden also pointed out the possibility of error in copying or printing the Bible, noting—no doubt with some amusement—that "here were a thousand Bibles printed in England with the text thus: 'Thou shalt commit adultery,' the word NOT left out; might not this text be amended?" Selden was referring to the so-called Wicked Bible printed by Barker in 1631 and, in a footnote on that page (232), the reader is informed that, in a set of Bibles printed in 1653, St. Paul's famous question accidentally turned into "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall inherit the Kingdom of God?"

Luther and Selden, no killjoys, praised God's bounty. "Our loving Lord God wills that we eat, drink, and be merry, making use of his creatures, for therefore he created them...." stated Luther (45). Selden, no doubt reacting to certain oppressive influences from the growing Puritan presence in England, commented, "Tis much the doctrine of the times that men should not please themselves, but deny themselves everything they take delight in; not look upon beauty, wear no good clothes, eat no good meat, etc., which seems the greatest accusation that can be upon the Maker of all good things. If they be not to be used why did God make them?" (234).

In another discussion, Selden referred to the same subject, "Whilst you are upon earth, enjoy the good things that are here (to that end were they given), and be not melancholy and wish yourself in Heaven. If a King should give you the keeping of a castle, with all things belonging to it, orchards, gardens, etc., and bid you use them; withal promise you after twenty years to remove you to the Court, and to make you a Privy Councillor; if you should neglect your castle, and refuse to eat of those fruits, and sit down, and whine, and wish you were a Privy Councillor, do you think the King would be pleased with you?" (238).

Luther and Selden, both of whom married relatively late in life, had an appreciation for women in the manner of their times. Luther remarked, "The hair is the finest ornament women have. Of old, virgins used to wear it loose, except when they were in mourning. I like women to let their hair fall down their back; 'tis a most agreeable sight" (307). The German was incensed by "satirical attacks upon women" and judged "that such will not go unpunished. If the author be one of high rank, rest assured he is not really of noble origin... (309).

John Selden observed, "He that hath a handsome wife, by other men is thought happy; 'tis a pleasure to look upon her and be in her company..." (242).

Marriage and celibacy were often topics of dinner conversation, especially at the Luther table. It seems clear that both Luther and Selden regarded marriage primarily as a legal matter. The latter, himself a celebrated jurist, asserted, "Marriage is nothing but a civil contract. 'Tis true 'tis an ordinance of God; so is every other contract; God commands me to keep it, when I have made it" (236). Luther, in a similar vein, had said, "I advise in every thing that ministers interfere not in matrimonial questions... because these affairs concern not the church, but are temporal things, pertaining to temporal magistrates.... Therefore, we will leave them to the lawyers and magistrates. Ministers ought only to advise and counsel the consciences, out of God's Word, when need requires" (306).

Luther, in one of his frequent fulminations about the state of celibacy, referred to it as "great hypocrisy and wickedness" (215), on other occasions taking the Pope to task for the Roman Catholic view about this. "On what pretence can man have interdicted marriage, which is a law of nature?" (300).

"How foolishly decides he touching matrimonial causes. He has forbidden his greased retinue to enter into the state of matrimony, though he commands it to be held and observed as a sacrament. If matrimony be a sacrament, it can not be for the heathen..." (202).

On another occasion Luther is recorded as saying, "St. Paul, himself a widower, enjoins bishops to marry, and predicts that the injunction of celibacy will cause much evil; St. Peter had a son-in-law, and consequently must have himself been married; St. James, our Saviour's brother, and indeed all the apostles, except St. John, were married men; Spiridion, bishop of Cyprus, was a married man, and so was bishop Hilary, of whom we have a letter, addressed to his daughter..." (309). The curious description of St. Paul as a widower is not found in another intimate's recollection of this table conversation.

Nevertheless, Luther agreed, "None, indeed, should be compelled to marry; the matter should be left to each man's conscience, for bride-love may not be forced" (299).

Holy Communion weighed heavily on both Luther and Selden. They approached the altar with signs of respect, Luther saying, "When I am at the altar and receive the sacrament, I bow my knees in honour thereof..." (169). Selden, a traditionalist in an oftimes hostile Calvinistic environment, stated, "Put case I bow to the altar, why am I guilty of idolatry? Because a stander-by thinks so? I am sure I do not believe the altar to be God; and the
God I worship may be bowed to in all places, and at all times" (254).

Luther's description of Communion is well known: "The operative cause of the sacrament is the word and institution of Christ, who ordained it. The substance is bread and wine, prefiguring the true body and blood of Christ which is spiritually received by faith" (168). The Reformer's disapproval of the Roman Catholic practice of withholding the cup from the laity was apparently occasionally qualified by Luther: "They that as yet are not well informed, but stand in doubt, touching the institution of the sacrament, may receive it under one kind; but those that are certain thereof, and yet receive it under one kind, act wrongfully and against their conscience" (167).

A similar flexibility is sensed behind Luther's words about children taking Holy Communion. "It was asked, did the Hussites well in administering the sacrament to young children, on the allegation that the graces of God apply to all human creatures? Dr. Luther replied: they were undoubtedly wrong, since young children need not the communion for their salvation) but still the innovation should not be regarded as a sin of the Hussites, since St. Cyprian, long ago, set them the example" (162). Luther's words suggest that the efficacy of the partaking of Holy Communion is a personal and private, self-regulated matter: "They that do not hold the sacrament as Christ instituted it, have no sacrament" (165).

In another discussion, the German sadly acknowledged, "Yet although such be with us in the church, among the Christian assembly, hear sermons and God's Word, and, with upright and godly Christians, receive the holy sacrament, yet de facto, they are excommunicated by God, by reason they live in sin against their own consciences and amend not their lives" (178).

Selden, with startling bluntness, argued, "Christ suffered Judas to take the Communion. Those ministers that keep their parishioners from it, because they will not do as they will have them, revenge, rather than reform. No man can tell whether I am fit to receive the Sacrament; for though I were fit the day before, when he examined me, at least appeared so to him, yet how can he tell what sin I have committed that night, or the next morning, or what impius atheistical thoughts I may have about me, when I am approaching to the very table?" (241).

Luther's and Selden's informal observations while at table reflect in an intimate way the fresh atmosphere of the European Renaissance and reveal something of the good sense and the robust personalities of the two. The reader may enjoy the following sample of Luther's impatience with the trivial. "Someone sent to know whether it was permissible to use warm water in baptism? The Doctor replied: 'Tell the blockhead that night, or the next morning, or what impious atheistical thoughts I may have about me, when I am approaching to the very table?'" (165).

A more serious parting thought from this Selden, however, is the following: What, dear reader, is your table talk like? And to what extent—if any—do matters of the faith occupy it?

Note:
All references to Selden are from Table Talk: Being the Discourses of John Selden, Esq., 2nd ed., 1696, in A Book of Seventeenth Century Prose, edited by Robert P. Tristram Coffin and Alexander M. Witherspoon, New York: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1929, pp. 230-242. All references to Luther are from The Table Talk, or Familiar Discourse, of Martin Luther, translated by William Hazlitt, Esq., London: David Bogue, 1848.

Books


Dietrich Bonhoeffer's life and death have become symbols of courage and freedom in a century of crushing oppression and violence. This book, lovingly edited by two seminary professors, is clearly the best single annotated collection of the writings of the theologian, ecumenical leader, and martyr. The only better sustained biographical and historical treatment of Bonhoeffer is by Eberhard Bethge, who devoted his mature lifetime to his biography, Bonhoeffer: Exile and Martyr (Seabury, 1975). However, even Bethge's biography cannot match the presentation of the essential Bonhoeffer writings, interspersed with very accurate and sensitive biographical insights. Bethge himself wrote a glowing foreword to this volume, saying this volume "serves...as a guide to the Bonhoeffer legacy, seen as a whole." What greater tribute would two scholars need?

Some forty years of the fruits of Bonhoeffer scholarship are woven into the schema and interpretations of Kelly (professor of Systematic Theology at LaSalle) and Nelson (professor of Christian ethics at North Park). However, what the authors have accomplished that no others have quite done is to bring out the connection between Bonhoeffer's motivation and self-knowledge, at the time, and each essay, sermon, book, article, or letter. Bonhoeffer's ability as a writer,
a poet, dramatist, and speaker shines through the pages, as through no other volume in the English language. Also, the portrait of the man himself, his decisions and commitments, is clearer than ever.

Without listing the selections, it suffices to say that most of the best passages of each of the major works are here. Also are many letters (to Barth, Niemoller, Bishop Bell, family members and others), sermons, addresses, and the best of his prison poetry. Several of Bonhoeffer’s addresses and sermons from the “secret seminary” that survived after the closing of Finkenwalde are presented here in juxtaposition with his maturing break with pacifism. No better volume of Bonhoeffer’s writings will exist. This book would be perfect for any courses on Bonhoeffer, whether taught at the undergraduate or graduate level.

John C. Fletcher


Following the Beijing massacre in June 1989, a spate of almost instant post mortems appeared by scholars, journalists, students, and even tourists who had been in China during that tumultuous spring. Probing China’s Soul is one of that genre. Julia Ching, professor at the University of Toronto, writes as a scholar of Chinese philosophy and religion. This book has at once greater depth and breadth than most of the reports and analyses that have appeared, greater depth because she strives to place the events in the context of Chinese culture, greater breadth because this is in fact an overview of the history of the tragedies of the People’s Republic.

The work takes the form of a series of almost discrete editorial essays all marked by the aggrieved tone of a Chinese woman frustrated and dismayed by the latest turn of events in her homeland. These essays are her attempt to sort out for herself and the reader the sources of the continuing tragic history of the Chinese Revolution. Her interpretation that the difficulty lies in specific political situations and outcomes rather than in Chinese culture itself is perhaps her most important conclusion, though she makes it clear that many Chinese intellectuals today disagree. The writers and producers of the much-discussed four-hour 1988 television series, River Elegy, argue, for example, that “the legacy of a great culture has become a great burden of culture.”

On the whole, despite the lavish book jacket blurbs by some well-known commentators on China, I find this book frustrating. It bears all the hallmarks of instant analysis, and it is not helped by the discrete essay format. It is poorly organized and tiresomely repetitive. Ching needed an editor more attuned to effective presentation. In some factual matters these essays are not even consistent with each other. On p. 68, we are told, as an example, that the devastating Tangshan earthquake in July 1976 killed “at least 200,000 people”; but by p.151, the fatalities had soared to “at least 600,000 people.” A small matter, perhaps, when one is probing China’s soul (!), but indicative of some larger problems with this book.

R. Keith Schoppa


Works of fiction dealing with old age are rare, partly, one suspects, because most writers produce their best work before they have experienced their autumn and winter years. The Poorhouse Fair and Memento Mori, two excellent novels about old people, were written by John Updike and Muriel Spark at the beginning of their careers. Consequently, it is a special delight, particularly for readers themselves advancing in years, to discover a book like Linda Grace Hoyer’s The Predator, written by a woman herself in her eighties.

The Predator is a loosely connected collection of eight stories, each of them a separate vignette chronicling the life of Ada Gibson between the age of seventy, when her schoolteacher husband dies, and eighty-five, when she faces, directly the prospect of her own death. Ada lives by herself on a farm in Pennsylvania. Alone, but never lonely, she has achieved a perfect harmony with nature, a familial companionship with the cats, dogs, and other creatures that populate her farm, and a strong sense of independence an self-sufficiency. Her only son, Christopher, is “a well-known illustrator of children’s books” in New York, and his occasional calls and visits with his wife and children are all the company Ada requires.

Unfortunately, she is visited by numerous other well-intentioned people, most of whom she sees as
intruders into her peace and privacy. In “Unlike Girls” one of her husband’s former students forces her eight-year-old son on Ada as a summer companion and helper because the son “pities you and doesn’t want you to be alone.” Ada, however, was looking forward to being completely selfish and busy with my own ideas.” In “A Week of Prayer” one of Christopher’s grade school classmates pesters Ada about Christopher’s spiritual well-being because she has recently been converted and he has become her “prayer burden.” In “A Gift of Time” another “friend” talks her into sitting for a portrait at a local amateur art studio, and her “gift of time” results in a crude oil painting of “a very old woman, with a liver-spotted face and a shocking pink scalp” that Ada cannot recognize. And in “Solace” the old Wertz sisters obligate Ada to have Christmas dinner with them, a pleasure she would gladly foregone for a quiet day on the farm with her dog, Peter Pup.

These well-meaning neighbors and friends, the reader assumes, are some of the “predators” referred to by the title of the book, although Ada has learned that life itself is predatory. In the first story, entitled “The Predator,” Ada’s prize cat, Ezra, is intentionally shot and killed by a hunter, teaching Ada that “for each of us there is a predator and the game of life is nothing more than an attempt to postpone the day when the predator and prey meet.” And in the final story when Ada is ill and has outlived all of her other doctors, she asks Dr. Mordecai to be the “predator” that ends her life when she becomes too burdensome. He puts her off by telling her she is a “remarkable person,” a characterization that Ada denies but any sensitive reader will wholeheartedly affirm.

Ada’s remarkable life is marked by grace, charm, perserverence, and wisdom. In many of the stories her reminiscences return her to childhood—her own, Christopher’s, or her grandchildren’s. Although these stories are tinged with nostalgia, not an ounce of sentimentality or sappiness creeps into them. Ada’s old age is her present lot in life, and she rejoices in it. In “The Papier-Mache Santa Claus” Ada observes that as she becomes older “her survival began to depend more and more on using her father’s formula for converting hindsight, foresight, and insight into wit that in her conversation— as it had in her father’s—might pass for wisdom.” These stories are filled with the kind of wit and wisdom that can come only from a person who has lived life fully and learned from every moment. Some of Ada’s wit and wisdom is conveyed epigrammatically in sentences like “Widowhood, it seemed to her, was more surprising than her marriage had ever been”; or “When well-meaning friends said, ‘If you feel well, your age doesn’t matter,’ they were trying to be kind and talk nonsense. The truth was that age does matter”; or “It was here [in the Lutheran church] that her father’s spirit sometimes joined her own in celebration of the fact, recognized by them both, that Christianity and the rubbing together of one pair of elbows with innumerable others, known commonly by the name of ‘fellowship,’ are not the same thing.” The more profound wisdom of Linda Grace Hoyer, however, is embedded in the life of Ada Gibson and can only be conveyed by these beautifully written stories themselves. I highly recommend them for pleasure and edification.

Linda Grace Hoyer died in October, 1989. She published one previous collection of stories, Enchantment, in 1971. Since she lived most of her life on the old Hoyer family farm near Plowville, Pa., a farm much like the one in The Predator, one suspects that the stories are highly autobiographical. Her husband, Wesley Updike, a schoolteacher, died in 1973 after which she lived alone on the farm. Like Ada Gibson, Mrs. Hoyer had one son, John, who unlike Christopher, a well-known illustrator, became a famous writer. John Updike has set numerous stories on this farm, as early as 1965 in his novel, Of the Farm, and as recently as a June, 1990 New Yorker short story, “A Sandstone Farmhouse,” a poignant story about a son attending to his mother’s death and cleaning out the old farmhouse. The Predator is illustrated by Mrs. Hoyer’s granddaughter, Elizabeth Updike Cobblah.

Arlin G. Meyer

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and the DEVIL tried to tempt Jesus, and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time. And the Devil said to him:

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\[\text{design: B SIRKO}\]

\[\text{oh say baby...by the way...are you for eighty-seven?}\]