- Transmission and Transformation: Arts of Translation
- Flunking My Shower: Advice to Young Humanists
- Thoughts on the State of American Political Community

A review of Literature, the Arts, and Public Affairs
March, 1988
The CRESSET
Valparaiso University
Valparaiso, Indiana 46383

Contributors
3 The Editor / IN LUCE TUA
5 Mark Schwehn / FLUNKING MY SHOWER
10 Gregory D. Alles / TRANSMISSION AND TRANSFORMATION
13 J. T. Ledbetter / NOTRE DAME (Verse)
18 Travis DuPriest / POEMS WITH NO NAMES: THE SACRED PATHWAY VII (Verse)
19 Charles Vandersee / WE'RE NUMBER 11
21 Albert Trust / CHANGING PERSPECTIVE
24 Edward Byrne / FILM & THE NOVEL
27 J. T. Ledbetter / HOLING THE ICE (Verse)
28 John Steven Paul / TIMELY ISSUES FOR THE AGING
31 Kim Bridgford / GRIEF (Verse)
32 Dot Nuechterlein / TRAPPED

Departmental Editors
Jill Baumgaertner, Poetry Editor
Richard H. W. Brauer, Art Editor
Sara Combs, Copy Editor

Advisory Board
James Albers Frederick Niedner
Richard Baepler Mel Piehl
James Caristi Mark Schwehn
Alfred Meyer Sue Wienhorst

Business Managers
Wilbur H. Hutchins, Finance
Betty Wagner, Administration and Circulation

THE CRESSET is published monthly during the academic year, September through May, by the Valparaiso University Press as a forum for ideas and informed opinion. The views expressed are those of the writers and do not necessarily reflect the preponderance of opinion at Valparaiso University. Manuscripts should be addressed to the Editor and accompanied by return postage. Letters to the Editor for publication are subject to editing for brevity. The Book Review Index and the American Humanities Index list Cresset reviews. Second class postage paid at Valparaiso, Indiana. Regular subscription rates: one year—$8.50; two years—$14.75; single copy—$1.25. Student subscription rates: one year—$4.00; single copy—$1.75. Entire contents copyrighted 1988 by the Valparaiso University Press, Valparaiso, Indiana 46383, without whose written permission reproduction in whole or in part for any purpose whatsoever is expressly forbidden.

Above: Vaino Mathies Seth Hannell, American 1896-1964. Steel Making, 1936, oil on canvas, 42½ x 48 inches. Sloan Collection, Valparaiso University Museum of Art. Gift of Hazel Hannell. 87.25. Painted after a visit to a steel plant, this painting recalls the social realist murals of the '30s, and records the primary work life on the "steel coast" of southern Lake Michigan.

Cover: Audrey Ushenko, American b. 1945. Age of Iron, 1985, oil on canvas, 36 x 48 inches. Sloan Collection, Valparaiso University Museum of Art. Sloan Fund Purchase. 87.23. By a former VU art teacher, this painting is an expressionist interpretation of the classical Shepherds-in-Arcadia theme showing humans pondering the meaning of death.
Thinking about Community

Presidential election campaigns provide among other things an opportunity for Americans to consider what kind of community they are and what kind they would like to be.

The conventional wisdom suggests that Americans are not very good at community, that their traditional emphasis on individualism and individual rights renders them incapable of any sustained concern for the common good. There is some truth in this view: a nation founded on the Lockean assumption that government exists only to preserve individual rights to life, liberty, and property is not one to which the language of community comes naturally or easily. Foreign observers of our politics almost invariably focus on individualism as the distinguishing mark of American political culture and they characteristically note it as the abiding weakness and debilitating blind spot of what passes for a common life among us.

Our individualism takes its most common political form in a pervasive mistrust of government. President Reagan gave that view classic expression in his inaugural address in a phrase that has become the dominant theme of his administration: “Government is not the solution to our problem; it is the problem.” Only in America is one likely to hear the chief of state trash the enterprise of which he is the head. It has been the subliminal message of the Reagan administration that the federal government would achieve its highest fulfillment in finding a way to go out of business. Behind this distrust of government lies an essentially libertarian instinct, one which celebrates the heroic lone individual in his perpetual struggle against the oppressive powers of the collectivity as mobilized and expressed in the state. Thus in an ironic inversion America’s central common value—individualism—becomes the occasion by which community, at least as manifested in political form, regularly gets denied.

The worship of individualism and the concomitant skepticism concerning bonds of political community are less in evidence among contemporary liberals. Ever since the New Deal, American liberals have embraced encompassing visions of national communal ties. Franklin Roosevelt argued that citizens should extend “to our national life the old principle of the local community” and think of themselves as neighbors on a national scale. In the last 25 years, liberals have increasingly turned to the metaphor of family to give expression to their communal visions. Lyndon Johnson pictured America “as a family, its people bound together by common ties of confidence and affection” while Walter Mondale, picking up on a theme artfully developed by Mario Cuomo, urged Americans in 1984 to think of themselves as “a community, a family where we care for each other, knit together by a band of love.” (These quotations are borrowed from Michael J. Sandel’s thoughtful essay, “Democrats and Community,” in the February 22 New Republic.) Liberal Democrats typically affirm strong government—especially at the federal level—as a molder of community, and they are far less likely than their conservative Republican opponents to compose hymns of praise to American individualism. Liberals invert the Reagan formulation: government is the solution to social problems, and in acting to solve them it shapes and enlivens the ties of community.

Yet even American liberalism has problems speaking of community in persuasive terms. As Sandel notes, our version of European social democracy, the welfare state, finds roots rather different than is the case elsewhere. The American Left bases its appeal not so much on grounds of communal ties and obligations as in ideas of individual rights and entitlements writ large and insistent. Collectivist liberals in America have learned to turn the language of traditional individualist liberalism to their own advantage, but they have not thereby managed to change the rules of the rhetorical game. Indeed, one often hears charges that American liberalism today constitutes not so much a cohesive communal vision as an endless accumulation of special individual and group interests. Thus liberalism seems less a lesson in solidarity than a cautionary tale in individualism run riot.

But the problems of the American Left run deeper than that. American liberals encounter difficulty in credibility more when they are taken at their collectivist word than when they come under suspicion of a camouflaged individualism. The metaphor of the nation as family invites suspicion not because one doubts it is genuinely intended but because it is inherently implausible. What can it possibly mean to imagine a quarter-billion human beings in terms of family? All of us know on a moment’s reflection that the metaphor of society as family cannot withstand close analysis. It destroys all sense of proportion, all measure of public/private distinction. Moral seriousness requires moral modesty, and American liberalism has failed to capture the national social imagination on this point because it is morally grandiose.
Community to be genuine, to constitute more than rhetorical gesture, requires expression within human scale. The nation is a community only in the most generalized sense. There are too many of us to form bonds of national intimacy, and our common beliefs and values, cohesive enough to generate a broad political consensus, do not make of us an ideological or moral family. The bonds of American patriotism, the strength of which no one doubts, do not require that we pretend to ties deeper than actually exist.

It is true that individualism is not enough. Fulfillment of ourselves as moral beings requires that we transcend the personal and even the familial. But Americans have never been mere individualists. The most acute observers of American life from Tocqueville onward have understood that the national genius is not radical individualism but voluntarist cooperation. From the earliest days of the nation we have sought out unforced forms of community as eagerly as we have resisted statist coercion. Americans are better at achieving genuine community—as the incredible vitality of our private religious, cultural, and social realms indicates—than the public political language of either Right or Left begins to suggest. Those who view the American people as nothing more than an agglomeration of possessive individualists are simply not paying attention to the social evidence that exists all around them.

As Michael Novak has suggested, the American ideal of social life has to negotiate the narrow path between extreme individualism and constricting collectivism and hold up as its model the vision of the "communitarian individual," the independent and self-reliant citizen who nonetheless takes his place as a member of the many communities that together constitute his social existence.

Serious talk of community requires attending not only to Tocqueville but also to Edmund Burke, who understood that it is our "little Platoons"—our natural communities of family, neighborhood, religion, and voluntary association—that both form the essential training grounds of more generalized political attachments and constitute our most intimate and enduring bonds of social affection. (It is noteworthy that President Reagan, for all his customary bashing of government and exaltation of the individual, displays an instinctive—and politically compelling—appreciation of Americans' deep communal attachments at the local and personal level.) Those who cannot genuinely love what is near and dear will never be trustworthy members of the larger political community. More than that, our prior attachments to our little Platoons will inoculate us against the idolatrous forms of nationalism towards which political community at its most intense is regularly tempted.

Translated into political terms, this means taking federalism seriously, and acting on the traditional wisdom of the principle of subsidiarity, under which decisions are wherever feasible made at the level most directly accessible to those whom the decision will affect. It means as well that authentic notions of community should ever seek the revitalizing of the "mediating institutions" of church, trade union, ethnic community, neighborhood organization, etc. that intervene between the isolated individual and the larger political society. (Peter Berger and Richard Neuhaus have written wisely and in detail on this point.)

Those who view the American people as nothing more than an agglomeration of possessive individualists are simply not paying attention to the social evidence that exists all around them.

It is perhaps most important of all in thinking about community that we think of it in the plural. That not only conforms to the reality of our social lives—we all are part of many communities, with which we are associated according to varying principles and intensities of attachment—but it helps keep political community in the proper perspective. The political community is neither our enemy, as the language of libertarian conservatism too often suggests, nor is it the "beloved republic" that the sense of community at its most intense compels us to seek. The most monstrous deformations of political community of our time (on both Left and Right) have been rooted in unrestrained dreams of Total Community that eventuated in one form or another of totalitarian nightmare. The great Anglo-American principle of limited government has to do with matters not just of jurisdiction but of ambition.

We come together as a political community to order our common life in justice. That is a noble undertaking. But it does not make of us a family, a comprehensive philanthropic enterprise, or a communion of the like-minded. We honor the idea of community most when we recognize its limitations as well as its inherently pluralistic nature. It is important that we remember always that we are by nature social animals; it is important as well that we recognize and cherish that element of irreducible individuality in our natures that renders each of us, in Michael Novak's haunting words, "curiously alone in the midst of solidarity." Out of that necessary tension is our search for political life together endlessly crafted.
FLUNKING MY SHOWER

Advice to Young Historians and Other Young Humanists

Several years ago I learned that at the University of Chicago one cannot escape the life of the mind even in the shower. It was early on a Monday morning. I had just finished jogging in the old Bartlett gymnasium, and I was showering alone in the small shower room next to the faculty lockers. I was soon joined, however, by a small, elderly gentleman who proceeded to introduce himself. He was, as it happened, one of the senior Americanists in the History Department. I was also an Americanist, newly appointed to a position in the Humanities Division of the College, not to the History Department. Thus, we had not until that moment met one another.

He rushed through the conventional opening gambit that is played out whenever a senior faculty member meets a new junior one. When had I been appointed? Which graduate school had I attended? Advisor? Thesis topic? Subject of current research? I have never much cared for these little interrogations, but this one seemed, given the time and the place, particularly unnerving. It was a case of double exposure.

Oblivious to my discomfort, he pressed on. Had I studied at all with David Potter? I told him I had. What did I think of Potter's work? I told him I thought it was brilliant, perhaps the best work done since World War II in the field of American history. "But do you know who was really the best American historian during the last thirty years?" he asked. I was not sure that I knew. But I knew that he thought he knew and that he thought I should know. Then I began to worry.

Finally, I began to guess. Richard Hofstadter? No. Bernard Bailyn? No. Eugene D. Genovese? No. (Was my interlocutor expecting me to mention his name? I resolved that I would not name him even if I came to believe, in my increasingly desperate state, that he really was the greatest.) Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.? No. At last, I insisted that I had been right at the outset: I re-nominated David Potter. No. For the first and only time in my life, I had the strange sensation that I was somehow managing to accomplish something inconceivable. I seemed to be flunking my shower.

I was reminded of this episode while I was reading Gertrude Himmelfarb's recent collection of essays, The New History and the Old (Harvard University Press, 1987). The old history, according to Himmelfarb, was primarily about politics and ideas, and its characteristic mode of explanation was narrative. The new history is primarily about popular values, beliefs, and attitudes (mentalities, to use the fashionable word), and its characteristic mode of historical explanation is analytical. The old history was synthetic and morally serious, an autonomous type of human understanding. The new history is theory-laden and methodologically promiscuous, a kind of retrospective cultural anthropology. Having set up her contrary terms in this manner, Himmelfarb of course laments what she takes to be the "triumph" of the new history over the old.

I found myself in agreement with Himmelfarb up to a point, but I kept thinking of my unpleasant shower and of my former teacher David Potter. It occurred to me that perhaps Potter was such a great historian because his work cut across the categories that Himmelfarb places in opposition to one another. He was a master both of the grand narrative synthesis and of the rigorous, analytical article. And his major work,
The proverb was, in other words, often uttered in one form or another within the Stanford history department, and I cannot be sure (in fact doubt) that it originated with Potter. Still, when he said it, in his own humbly eloquent way, the dictum somehow carried more authority.

My responses to this proverb have naturally varied over the years. When I first heard it in my twenties, I thought it was arbitrary and silly, a restricted application of the more general and equally dubious suggestion that wisdom comes with age. Then, in my thirties, I came to regard it as a source of consolation. I believed that I was "no damn good," but I had an excuse. Who could fault me for not being forty? I am now over forty, so I can be faulted for my inadequacies as a historian. So I have naturally grown "more philosophical" about this whole business.

Just what is the wisdom behind the judgment that the quality of one's historical thinking somehow improves with age, reaching a kind of watershed at age forty? Some obvious truths come to mind here.

Herein lies the rub. For it seems peculiar to suggest that moral growth of one kind or another is directly related to the quality of scholarly or artistic achievements. Indeed, most of us are prone to think otherwise. Some would wish to distinguish sharply between moral and intellectual virtues. Others would instantly multiply examples of human beings who were allegedly despicable persons, but great critics, historians, poets, or philosophers. Was it not Yeats who taught us that we must choose "perfection of the work" or "perfection of the life"?

In order fully to appreciate the force and wisdom of Potter's dictum, we must perhaps be prepared to consider, first, the possibility that the cultivation of certain moral virtues might lead to better thinking about certain subjects, and, second, that some moral virtues gain strength over time. If I have grown to treat my fellow human beings with justice and charity, am I more or less apt to treat my historical subjects in the same manner? I am surely more apt to do so. And would such treatment increase or decrease the quality of my historical thinking? Again, I think that the exercise of justice and charity toward my historical subjects is bound to make me a better historian—more cautious in appraisal, more sympathetic with human failings, less prone to stereotype and caricature.

For these reasons, I think that it is misguided to suggest that someone or another is a vicious person but a good humanistic scholar. Pascal overstated the case when he said, "Thought is the whole dignity of
man; therefore, think well, for that is the only moral­
ity." But he is a useful corrective to Yeats. We do not
do our scholarship in one place and live our lives in
another.

But do human beings become more virtuous with age? Not necessarily; indeed, human beings probably
become more vicious as often as they become more
virtuous. Still, life itself might well enlarge our
capacities for, say, kindliness and patience. And our
accumulated experience with others and ourselves,
most especially our suffering and our inner sense of
human limitations, might well extend the range if not
the depth of our sympathies. So there is some sense
or another in which living well over time is connected
to thinking better over time about the subject matter
of the humanities.

Potter was wise, I think, in not attempting to specify
the precise nature of that connection. A person needs
much else besides moral excellence in order to become
a good, much less a great, student of the humanities.
I nevertheless believe that living well is more apt to
improve the quality of one's humanistic scholarship
than improving one's humanistic scholarship is apt to
make one a better human being. I add my personal
and self-evident corollary to Potter's wisdom: "Hist­
orians aren't very good until they're forty, but goodness
of any kind is still comparatively rare even after forty."

III

"If historians had a little more foresight and a little
less hindsight, we'd all be better off by a damn sight."
This maxim was quintessential Potter. All historians
are to some degree or another sworn enemies of
hindsight, but Potter fought a fierce and relentless war
against it. And the intellectual strategies that he em­
ployed against hindsight gave his teaching and his
writing their distinctive character. He must have
known this. He reserved the use of the word "damn"
to statements that dealt in some way or another with
the problem of hindsight.

All historians guard against the dreaded "presentist
fallacy," a kind of wholesale version of the post hoc,
_ergo_ propter hoc argument. Historians know that John
Locke was not preparing the way for or "anticipating"
the American Revolution, regardless of the extent to
which the American colonists might later have used his
teachings to justify their behavior. Even if a historian
wishes to argue that the American Revolution was in
part a consequence of Locke's teachings, he or she
cannot sensibly suggest that Locke intended such a
consequence. Unless, of course, the historian in ques­
tion is bewitched by hindsight.

Potter not only managed utterly to avoid the presen­
tist fallacy, he also managed to notice and then to cor­
correct many other more subtle and systemic errors in
historical reasoning that stem from hindsight. And he
did so, not by overcoming hindsight altogether, but by
restricting its influence upon him in such a way that
he could use it to his advantage. He understood that,
however perilous hindsight might be, one cannot es­
cape it. And he therefore argued that the historian's
awareness of the past is inevitably discrepant, consist­
ing of at least two discrete perspectives at once—the
perspective of the historical subjects, which the histo­
rian can occupy only through disciplined effort, and
the historian's own perspective, which he or she oc­
cupies naturally.

So, for example, Potter did not choose to concen­
trate upon the period in American history extending
from 1846 to 1861 because he accidentally grew fond
of the mid-nineteenth century. He chose to study that
period because he knew, by virtue of hindsight, that it
ended with the outbreak of the American Civil War.
He nevertheless began Chapter VII of The Impending
Crisis by contrasting the manner in which other histo­
rians had interpreted the 1850s with his own emerging
treatment of the same period. "Hindsight, the histo­
rian's chief asset and his main liability, has enabled all

---

**THE CRESSEY**

**The Question Of the Ordination Of Women**

The Cresset was pleased to publish the position
papers of Theodore Jungkuntz and Walter E.
Keller on "The Question of the Ordination of
Women" in its regular pages.

In response to reader interest, the Cresset is
further pleased to announce that reprints of both
position papers in one eight-page folio are now
available for congregational and pastoral con­
ference study.

Please accompany reprint orders with a check
payable to the Cresset and mail to:

The Cresset
Valparaiso University
Valparaiso, Indiana 46383

Single Copy, 25¢
10 Copies for 20¢ Each
100 Copies for 15¢ Each

March, 1988
historical writers to know that the decade of the fifties terminated in a great civil war. Knowing it, they have consistently treated the decade not as a segment of time with a character of its own, but as a prelude to something else. By the very term 'ante-bellum' they have diagnosed a whole period in the light of what came after.

By contrast, Potter proceeded to treat the 1850s both as "a segment of time with a character of its own" and as a prelude to the Civil War, a task that he managed brilliantly through the device of ironic emplotment. Indeed, irony might well be called the trope of discrepant awareness. Potter neither invented irony nor was he by any means the first, much less the only, historian who used irony to great effect. But Potter was the supreme ironist, precisely because of his relentless determination to avoid the abuses of hindsight.

David Potter neither invented irony nor was he by any means the first, much less the only, historian to use irony to great effect. But Potter was the supreme ironist, precisely because of his relentless determination to avoid the abuses of hindsight.

Potter's cunning deployment of irony consistently enriched his historical analysis. The aforementioned Chapter VII, for example, is about the notorious Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854, the measure that overthrew earlier guarantees of freedom north of 36°30' by substituting popular sovereignty for the provisions of the Missouri Compromise as a way of settling the question of slavery in the territories. But Potter did not give this chapter the expected title, "The Kansas-Nebraska Act." Instead, he entitled it "A Railroad Promotion and Its Sequel."

The latter title focused attention primarily upon the intentions and preoccupations of men like Stephen A. Douglas who were not, during most of 1853, plotting to circumvent the Missouri Compromise. The chapter proceeded to render a dramatic and convincing account of how Douglas and other like-minded railroad boosters found, late in 1853, that they needed Southern votes in order to build a Northern railroad. Driven by their desire for gain, obsessed with the idea of a trans-continental railroad, some of these men thought to placate certain powerful Southerners by repealing the Missouri Compromise. But it was left to Douglas eventually to formulate a "remarkable fiction," according to which the Missouri Compromise had already been repealed by the Compromise of 1850. "Instead of merely claiming that the Missouri settlement had been inadvertently removed four years before by men who did not know what they were doing—which would itself have strained credulity—he made, in effect, the more stunning claim that this crucial political action had been taken knowingly and yet without a contest by men who did not even bother to discuss what they were doing."

The remarkable achievement of this chapter is that it leads readers to sympathize with Douglas, even though they might well deplore the results of his actions and deride the tormented logic of his arguments. It shows, better than most historical writings, how something that makes little or no sense in strictly analytical terms can make perfect sense in narrative terms. And Potter insists upon both of these things, not upon one of them to the exclusion of the other. By virtue of the shrewd manipulation of his discrepant awareness of the past, Potter explained the Kansas-Nebraska Act ironically: "few events have swung American history away from its charted course so suddenly or so sharply, yet the act accomplished nothing that anyone intended and a great deal that no one intended."

Again, Potter's ironic viewpoint was not unique, but his manipulation of it was. And it informed, even perhaps evoked, a greater gift that he possessed, one suggested by the word "foresight," but really a capacity for retrodiction—practical wisdom applied to the past. Sir Isaiah Berlin has best described this gift as "knowledge of the inevitable: of what, given our world order, could not but happen; and conversely, of how things cannot be, or could not have been, done; of why some schemes must, cannot help but, end in failure, although for this no demonstrative or scientific reason can be given. The rare capacity for seeing this we rightly call a 'sense of reality'—it is a sense of what fits with what, of what cannot exist with what; and it goes by many names: insight, wisdom, practical genius, a sense of the past, an understanding of life and human character."

Whatever we may choose to call this virtue, Potter indicated at least two things that are related to it in ways that are impossible to formulate exactly: a comparatively long life, and vigilant opposition to the evils of hindsight.

IV

"Gold is where you find it." Potter did not coin this phrase, but he applied it within a context that is of vital importance to young scholars today. He had written a historiographical article on the history of the South, an article that he had concluded with a
metaphor that seemed both strained and puzzling to a number of us graduate students. "There are plenty of nuggets yet to be mined in the streambed of Southern history," he had written. Just what did he mean by "nuggets"? we wondered.

He did not mean "materials." He was not so old fashioned as to think of historians as researchers whose primary task was to fill gaps in the historical record. Indeed, he rejected the "you-take-Texas-you-take-Georgia-I'll-take-Alabama-and-pretty-soon-we'll-put-them-all-together-and-have-a-history-of-the-Con federacy" approach to historical scholarship. If by "nuggets" he did not mean materials, then perhaps he meant "methods"?

Knowing where you stand and what you care for and why: self-knowledge, more than anything else, places the young student of the humanities in a position to find gold. But of course he or she may nonetheless fail to find gold for countless reasons.

Indeed, we graduate students hoped that Potter did mean to suggest that there were many new methods to be mined, even though this notion would have strained his metaphor beyond reason. Methods in the streambed of Southern history? How can one mine a method? In the midst of questions such as these, Potter chose to "clarify" matters by responding to all of them with the aphorism, "Gold is where you find it."

We resented this aphorism, in part because we thought of it as a cute evasion, in part because we found the burden of historical thinking somehow thrust back upon us in a way that we were not prepared to shoulder. We preferred to think of graduate school as a place where we would be given fashionable techniques, say, statistical analysis, that we could then apply to fashionable subjects, say, social mobility. We had overcome the primitive view of history as a science that gathers, stores, and organizes information, only to adopt the more modern and equally dubious view of history as a science that tests new hypotheses and methods in the social sciences.

In other words, the most troublesome word in the proverb "gold is where you find it" was not the word "gold" but the word "you." We believed that the profession somehow found the gold. We came to graduate school to be equipped with the proper tools for mining it. We wanted to be given a hammer, so that we could then proceed to construe the past as a thing to be pounded. Potter wanted to instill in us the capacity to formulate questions and problems (at last the meaning of "nuggets") that would engage both our sympathies and our interests, so that we could then determine for ourselves whether or not we needed hammers or saws or wrenches in order to explore them.

Young scholars then and today seem determined, however, to lead the life of the mind backwards, to find subjects to fit either pre-established methods or fashionable professional preoccupations. And up to a point scholarly life must be lived this way, in accordance with certain academic imperatives. Potter sought to correct this inevitable tendency of the academy by urging us to live life the other way around, to prefer a life devoted to the pursuit of historical understanding to a life devoted primarily to methodological dispute. He would have agreed, I think, with J.G.A. Pocock, who once observed that disputes between rival methods are tiresome and pointless because they reduce finally to some form or another of the charge, "You should really be doing what I am doing."

Knowing where you stand and what you care for and why: self-knowledge, more than anything else, places the young student of the humanities in a position to find gold. But of course he or she may nonetheless fail to find gold for countless reasons—fatigue, sloppy research, and, yes, faulty or inappropriate methodology among them. Self-knowledge may be a necessary but it is surely not a sufficient condition for sound scholarship. There is, however, an additional consideration here. Even if your work turns out to be comparatively undistinguished, it will, if it stems from self-knowledge, at least be, in a vitally important sense, your own. In today's world, to do a piece of scholarship that is really and truly your own is by itself no small achievement.

At least some of Potter's advice must have been subliminally present in my consciousness while I was flunking my shower many years ago. Being over forty and being "really damn good," my senior colleague had me at a considerable disadvantage. Thus, when he insisted finally that Allan Nevins was the best historian of the preceding generation, I, being under forty, deferred to his judgment. But now I know that he was wrong and I was, doubtless by accident, right. I am over forty now, still not much good as a historian, but better able to recognize true greatness when I see it, which is perhaps the second-best thing. Allan Nevins was indisputably more prolific than Potter, but Potter was by far the better historian. And we are all to some extent, I hope, the better for Potter's advice.
Recalling the emigration of German scholars to America in the early 1930s, Erwin Panofsky, the art historian, once wrote: "There are more words in our philosophy than are dreamt of in heaven and earth, and every German-educated art historian endeavoring to make himself understood in English had to make up his own dictionary. In doing so, he realized that his native terminology was often either unnecessarily recondite or downright imprecise; the German language unfortunately permits a fairly trivial thought to declaim from behind a woolen curtain of apparent profundity and, conversely, a multitude of meanings to lurk behind one term. . . . [But] when speaking or writing English, even an art historian must more or less know what he means and mean what he says, and this was exceedingly wholesome for all of us."

Perhaps Panofsky was a little hard on his own past. Masters of communication can and do clothe the trivial with profundity in every language, including English. But Panofsky's comments have a special relevance for me. I have been translating selected works written in the 1920s by a German scholar of religions, Joachim Wach.

The circumstances to which Panofsky alludes forced Wach himself to translate his thought into English. The Nazis did not overlook Wach's ancestors. He was a descendant of Felix Mendelssohn and thus of Moses Mendelssohn, the Jewish Enlightenment philosopher. When Wach lost his job at the University of Leipzig in 1935, he came to America to teach, first at Brown, then at the University of Chicago. At Chicago, he established a program in the "history of religions" that would become better-known through the activities of his pupil, Joseph Kitagawa, and his successor, the late Mircea Eliade.

Wach never abandoned the directions his thoughts had taken in Germany. He sought to elucidate "religion"—all religions—with the tools of a general rather than a special (i.e., theological) hermeneutics.

Wach never abandoned the directions his thought had taken in Germany. He sought to elucidate "religion"—all religions—with the tools of a general rather than a special (i.e., theological) hermeneutics, and he viewed "objective" religion as the expression of religious experience. But in translating his thought for the American audience, Wach had to transform it. In Germany he had talked mostly about talking; in America he talked more about religion. In Germany Wach vehemently argued that his discipline did not belong in a theological faculty; in America Wach took up theological subjects himself. The degree to which translation into English required transformation—and the degree to which Wach failed—can be seen in the most basic nomenclature. Wach—and Kitagawa after him—have never found a satisfactory English designation for the program Wach advocated in Germany: Religionswissenschaft. "History of religions" was a poor second-best.

The decision to translate Wach's German works thus involves the translator in an inevitable paradox, first of all because one is being asked to do what Wach himself could not do. The paradox is most pronounced, Erwin Panofsky, Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History (Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1955), pp. 329-330.
perhaps, in the work over which I have labored the most: *Religionswissenschaft: Prolegomena zu ihrer wissenschaftstheoretische Grundlegung*. The title defies precise translation.

The book was written in 1924, for Wach's *Habilitation* at the age of 26, and the signs of youth are difficult to miss. Wach himself apologized in the Preface for the book's stylistic flaws. The organization is rough and uneven. There are paragraphs that consist of nothing more than generic topic headings that Wach failed to develop. The writing is at times stiff, rigid, and downright pedantic. And, like many young writers, Wach wastes a great deal of space disputing in detail the views of his better-known, older contemporaries. Some had names that are still remembered, such as Ernst Troeltsch and Max Scheler; others, like Cornelis Tiele and Heinrich Scholz, have joined the nameless ancestors.

These failings of youth are not fatal, but other characteristics make adequate translation impossible. Wach is writing academic German to impress—that is, to befuddle—fellow academics. At times his syntax is so convoluted that he literally seems to say the precise opposite of what his entire argument demands. His language is always abstract, and rather than trying to dispel the clouds that gather around the peaks, Wach seems to enjoy the fog. One sentence merges into another with the help of references that are rarely precise: "Here," "In this [regard]," and so on—"and so on" is a phrase that Wach repeats ad nauseam. Worse yet, when Wach’s style is not stiff and pedantic, it errs on the side of quasi-mystical enthusiasm. Apparently mindful of his pedigree, Wach is continually paraphrasing and alluding to librettos and musical lyrics, or so Karl Luckert, my native German collaborator, tells me.

The youthful character of Wach’s undertaking gives me the strange feeling that I have been called upon to tidy up unfinished business. *Religionswissenschaft* should not have been published so hastily at the age of 26. If Wach had to publish it so young, he ought to have given it at least one more massive revision. To translate it—to make it mean what it says and say what it means in English—I have had to do what Wach left undone. I have had to revise: to polish sentences and finish thoughts. But translation only permits a limited amount of revision. I am not entirely happy with the result.

If Panofsky’s diagnosis is correct, however, the biggest problem involves not the signs of youth but the symptoms of disease. That disease called for more than a translation of Wach’s words. It required a complete transformation of his thought in the more salubrious climate west of the Atlantic. I then find myself in a considerably more uncomfortable position. I am not called upon to complete what Wach left unfinished; I am condemned to doing only half of what is needed. I am condemned to trying to make Wach’s German speak English, when to make complete sense it would be necessary for Wach himself to (try to) speak English. Worse yet, I must try to make Wach’s German speak English when Wach himself did in fact speak English, but found it necessary to think different thoughts to do so, at least, to do so intelligibly.

How can I make Wach entirely clear, when parts of the book were intended to be obscure? How can I overcome the vertigo and mystification of the abstract, when the original author delighted in being dizzy and expected the same reaction from his readers? How can I express in English Wach’s demand for a discipline that cannot even be named in English? And what about the constant musical allusions?

Oddly enough, it is in this middle ground of translation—flawed translation devoid of transformation—that I see the most promise of success.

II

In a recent short story, “Events at Drimaghleen,” William Trevor contrasts two modes of responding to tragedy. A young girl, her fiance (a man of questionable character), and her fiance’s mother are found dead. In dealing with the shock, the girl’s family, their neighbors in Drimaghleen (a small Irish village), and the local authorities reconstruct the tragic events: the girl was murdered. Months later, reporters from a London newspaper carefully sift the evidence to refute the local story. They bribe the girl’s grieving parents into granting an interview and then publish a lurid account, proving that the girl was not the victim but the killer. We are left with the local priest trying to console the outraged and devastated mother: trying to reassert the credibility of the local reconstruction of the events.

It is difficult not to read Trevor’s story in terms of

two different manners of constructing acceptable narratives about the past: two different manners of telling history. One is local and primarily oral. It is based on first-hand knowledge of the participants and their general characters, and it provides an account of events to facilitate life in the community where the events occurred. The second is distanced and primarily literate. It is based on a careful, rational sifting of the evidence, and it details "what actually happened" for the "enjoyment" of readers. It has no regard for the effect that the account will have on the community that remains. The readers of "Events at Drimaghleen" are stretched between these two poles. From the beginning we notice clues that the local historians overlook, but the newspaper report leaves us with a foul aftertaste, a feeling of nausea.

The published accounts of Wach's life and work are all written by persons who have a personal stake in Wach's memory. They present "the truth" about Wach: a scholar as his own academic communities remember him.

The correlations between local and oral and between literate and impersonal make so much sense intuitively that we tend to think they are universal. But in Wach's case, the position of oral and literate histories is the reverse of that in Trevor's story. The published accounts of Wach's life and work are all written by persons who have a personal stake in Wach's memory. They present "the truth" about Wach: a scholar as his own communities (the Universities of Leipzig and Chicago) remember him, a Wach that scholars can live with. But outside these communities, others preserve in their memories and occasionally convey orally a somewhat different Wach, a Wach who invites us to modify the received reconstruction. I met this "oral Wach" in a community that I associate not so much with "truth" as with "reality," with marriage, hunger, birth, and death.

"Ah, my dear, do people still read Wach? I was a student in Leipzig in the early '30s when Wach was teaching there." I had mentioned my translation project to A. A. had himself just come out with a small book on Stefan George. Wach was a member of the George circle, wasn't he? "That I don't know. He could have been. He had his own circle of sorts at Leipzig. He was always surrounded by a group of young men, very handsome young men; never women. For you know, my dear, Wach was strictly gay." A. spoke this final cadence with a flourish born from years on the stage. He tilted his head back slightly, raised his right hand, and squinted his eyes. The rolled "r," in fact the entire italicized syllable, seemed to last forever. His left hand tightly gripped my forearm. Had he known Wach? "No, dear. I wouldn't say that I knew him exactly. Oh, I was at his house once or twice when he would have a group of students over. But I didn't know him really. Why should I have? Religion was not my field. And then, well, let us just say that I was not Wach's type. Coming from the east [somewhere in eastern Europe], I was a little short; I had dark hair, thin legs, and to be honest, my dear, I was not myself particularly handsome as a young man. Wach preferred tall boys—tall, beautiful, blond boys. I heard that when the Nazis took over, Wach took the most beautiful of these boys, Horst Matthäus, to Switzerland with him. Wach's family had a summer home in Switzerland." Several days later A. gave me a picture postcard of Wach, a formal 3/4 portrait that was sold at Leipzig University in the early '30s. "You know, my dear, I really don't know why I saved Wach's picture all these years. I found it in one of my books. You should have it. Wach means more to you than he does to me." I keep the postcard on my desk.

The other account of Wach came from a man—call him B.—who had belonged to Wach's inner circle in America—the "Samgha"—but who had become distanced from the "official" community after Wach's death. Not only had B. been Wach's student, he wrote his dissertation on Wach. "Wach was basically a spoiled rich kid. His family had money from banking. So, while other students stayed in one place and studied, Wach drove all over Germany in a new Mercedes Benz. Whenever he found out that some big name was going to give a public lecture, Wach drove over and took it in. He came to know all the hottest topics, and he knew how to play his cards." B. lent me a copy of his dissertation, which "presents quite a different picture from the Wach you learned at Chicago."

Oral accounts are notoriously difficult to assess. I do not even claim that I have remembered every detail of these conversations correctly. But both have one point in common: they both urge us to consider the broader context of Wach's thought in Germany.

From our post-Nazi vantage point, we are bound to wonder where Wach's political commitments lay. Was he a Vernunftrepubikaner, like Troeltsch and Friedrich Meinecke, a supporter of the Weimar republic out of necessity but not out of conviction; or was he a member of that "caste which had become redundant and was doing its best to poison the political climate," the "families which under the monarchy had provided the manpower for the middle and higher ranks of of-
Wach is reputed to have been liberal, cosmopolitan, and eirenic—and, if A. is correct, homosexual. But his family was both wealthy—Hitler confiscated their estate overlooking the Elbe near Dresden—and well-placed. Wach's grandfather was a jurist, Joachim's senior colleague on the Leipzig faculty. His father had been the comptroller for food in Germany during World War I. An aunt of his lived at the Swedish court, and the Wachs were family friends of the Saxon king. The disciplines that Wach refers to the most—history, law, German philosophy, and Protestant theology—were bastions of the staunchest monarchicalism. In addition, Wach's distant involvement with the prophet of the ethereal "neue Reich" (George) and his participation in that Weimar oddity, the "German youth movement" (eventually a right-wing advance guard out of ignorance), also look suspicious.


Notre Dame

Inside Notre Dame the organist practiced for a recital. Four nuns spread arms to capture children who threatened to escape into long shadows. The talk was hushed but not quiet and we waited for the presence.

You coughed and motioned to my hat and the glass box containing coins, and the two old women, bonneted and bent moving toward the holy water fount, jostled by the crowd, separated, as they strained against the bodies that swelled around the large black doors, until one stretched and touched the water and reached across me, the water beads pendant from her finger tips, as the people surged towards the blazing altar beneath the stained glass, caught in the sensuous music of the chant. Then I found your hand and took you out, out in the bright Paris day where we watched the pigeons flare up from the flying buttresses and melt into the golden sun.

J. T. Ledbetter

I cannot help feeling that if I had a more precise idea of Wach's politics, I might be able to turn it to good advantage. But for the present, I must limit my remarks to the writings that I have translated. To what extent do they reflect the trends and fads of Weimar Germany? The major themes are certainly suggestive, as B.'s comments would lead us to suspect.

(1) Wach forcefully insisted that Religionswissenschaft is an empirical discipline. He rejected both the normative concerns of theology and the subjective slant of "psychologism." When the Prolegomena was published in 1924, expressionism—itself a "psychologism" of sorts—had just run its course and demands were being raised for a Neue Sachlichkeit, a "new objectivity"—demands not altogether unrelated to Germany's new-found economic and political stability after the runaway inflation of 1921-1923.

(2) Wach relentlessly urged "totality" upon his readers, in opposition to the "atomizing analysis" of the positivists. His discipline was to study religion as a whole; a historian, he said, must understand the phenomenon in its entirety. Weimar culture in general.

"Of the youth movement (basically romantic, right-wing boy scouts), Otto Friedrich writes: "In 1896 . . . a twenty-one year old youth . . . organized a group dedicated to self-improvement through the practice of shorthand . . . [Five years later] ten of his associates gathered at a Steglitz tavern, drew up a constitution for their hiking society, and named themselves the Wandervögel . . . They saluted each other with the word 'Heil.' " The movement grew rapidly. At a convention in 1913, tens of thousands of Wandervögel "lit bonfires, sang songs, recited Goethe, [and] listened to speeches on the German spirit . . . The Wandervögel were not originally a political movement—except to the extent that the wandering youths already shared certain political views, ranging from an emotional patriotism to an equally emotional mistrust of Jews (and girls)." After the war, the movement was more fragmented and more politicized. Cp. Otto Friedrich, Before the Deluge: A Portrait of Berlin in the 1920s (New York: Avon, 1972), pp. 261-262. Many of the details of Wach's family are buried in a speech that Robert Carey (then of Cambridge) gave at Wach's memorial service, printed in The Divinity School News (University of Chicago) 22, no. 4 (November 1, 1955), pp. 32-33.

"Psychologism" denotes any attempt to explore religion entirely in terms of internal, psychological phenomena. In positivistic form, psychologism treats the religious object as a [generally pathological] projection. Against positivistic psychologism, Wach set Max Scheler, who insisted that to understand a religious experience one could not ignore or explain away its "intentional object." Against psychologism in general, Wach insisted that external forms—das objektive Geist—have structures of their own that can and must be comprehended, not simply as "expressions" but in relative independence from psychological experience.

March, 1988
seems to have been enchanted by "totality," from Lukács' "orthodox Marxism," Gropius' "total architecture," and Piscator's "total theater" to Gestalt psychology and those who—perhaps with the least self-deception—saw republican government as a reflection of uncultured Anglo-French individualism and longed to return to the wholeness and unity of the German monarchy.

(3) Wach proposed a new academic pursuit that he called the "formal systematization" of religion. The task of this subdiscipline was to identify abstract religious forms devoid of any particular historical content. His proposal reminds one of Weimar plays whose characters have generic designations instead of names, of paintings that locate beauty not in accidental content but abstract form, and of the Bauhaus, which reduced buildings to essential forms devoid of superfluous, concrete ornamentation.

(4) Sociology was the hottest topic in Weimar academic circles. It receives special acclaim in Wach's Prolegomena, and to his dying day Wach remained above all a sociologist of religion.

(5) In other writings from the period (some of which I have also translated) Wach defines religion in terms of salvation and a savior. This emphasis looks uncomfortably like a sacralization of the contemporary longing for a Führer and political deliverance—the concern for Heil that made the Wandervögel such easy prey for right-wing ideologues—or else like a staunch Lutheranism (devoid of its particular historical content) of which "German eschatological monarchicalism" was but a slight secularization.7

The volume that contains Trevor's short story about Drimaghleen also contains a frank if controversial commentary on the theological enterprise: a critique of Reinhold Niebuhr by Noam Chomsky. Niebuhr, Chomsky maintains, was not really a thinker. He was too inattentive to facts, and he did not attempt to provide convincing arguments for his positions. Instead, Niebuhr always remained a preacher who had a gift for clothing contemporary problems and intellectual fads with religious language. This, Chomsky asserts, was the secret of Niebuhr's enormous influence and success.8

Wach's influence was never so enormous as Niebuhr's, and in proposing a Religions"wissenschaft", Wach tried to shield himself from the kinds of political criticism that Niebuhr's ethical assertions invite. As an empirical discipline, Wach said, Religions"wissenschaft" is independent of all normative positions. Its practitioners serve neither theology, philosophy, nor politics. Wach would apparently have us believe that only the logic and substance of what we say should be important. His biographers have learned this lesson well. They treat Wach's contributions as if they simply addressed some problem or other in the logical development of the history of religions—informe, of course, by the profound advantages of Wach's noble family heritage.

Wach may not have preached in the "normative" sense, but like Chomsky's Niebuhr, at any rate, he offered few genuine arguments for his positions. He often simply contradicted the views of others and then asserted his own. I have no idea how widely Wach was read in the "golden twenties," but I have begun to suspect that whatever influence and success he may have enjoyed at the time was due primarily to the trendiness of his observations. In Religions"wissenschaft", Wach seems to have picked up and elaborated several significant Weimar themes, themes with which he could have expected a significant portion of his audience to agree without hesitation—without thought. If he did so, he would not be at all unusual.

III

I do not expect a large "audience" for my translation: acquisitions librarians, a handful of graduate students, a handful of the old guard—perhaps a few others. And I would not presume to estimate the effect the translation will have on the future course of the study of religions. It is more interesting, I think, to consider the conditions under which the book would be received the best.

Translation, as I have practiced it, is not transformation. It is not an alchemy that creates new thought out of old. It is more like transmission. It conveys old thought in a different medium. And as transmission, translation does not belong to a work's "effect." It is a moment in its "after-effect." These differences are crucial.

Today, Wach's effect has run its course. B. indirectly echoed A.'s initial amazement that I was translating Wach. "In Germany I picked up a volume of Das Verstehen [Wach's three-volume survey of nineteenth-century hermeneutics] for a quarter. Nobody there reads Wach anymore." Wach shares this fate with many of his generation. Twelve years of Nazi rule irreparably altered the peculiar constellation of forces and trends that produced Weimar culture. Walter

---

7Max Scheler, a Catholic phenomenologist who profoundly influenced Wach, clearly sacralized this longing. In the opening of his article, "Führer und Vorbilder," he wrote (to paraphrase): Today everyone is asking, Who will be our Führer? The real question is, Who will provide the Vorbild?

Laqueur writes: "After the war, the problems and the preoccupations of the Weimar intelligentsia seemed remote if not incomprehensible."

In America, Wach's effect was never so great as, say, Eliade's. Americans cannot be expected to get excited about a discipline they cannot even name, and Wach's sweeping generalizations contained too little of the concrete detail that most of us look for in scholarship. Wach's (partially) transformed thought had its largest impact on his students. But their later comments—and their scholarly publications—seem to indicate that Wach's force derived as much from his personality as from what he had to say, and today Wach's students are themselves pushing retirement.

That Wach's effect would wane was inevitable. Like clothes and food and heavy metal music, scholarship is largely a matter of fads. It reflects Marshall Sahlins' view of fashion. A creative and influential book—a fashionable book—is one that presents the customary with a new look. It gives a new twist to the familiar, so that it contains just enough of the unfamiliar and different to fascinate, but not enough to repel. Today, Wach is simply out of style.

But what one hopes to avoid in a book's "effect" may be desirable in its "after-effect." A translation—at least one kind of translation—is valuable because it allows the audience to encounter what is not fashionable and familiar. It grants new life to a once-successful work (or a work successful elsewhere) by exploiting conditions that would impede its success if published as an original. Despite the conscious intentions of translators from at least Luther on, translation does not so much transform—as transmit—convey the foreign, as foreign, into the realm of the familiar. A translation is most valuable when it presents difference with just enough of the familiar to make confrontation possible: familiar words, familiar patterns of expression, what would appear to be familiar intellectual contexts.

Thus, the quote from Panofsky with which I began actually raised the wrong question. When a translator's conscious intentions confront a book like Wach's, which so stubbornly resists familiarization, intense anxiety may result. But this anxiety is misplaced. The real question is not: What am I to do if I cannot make Wach always say what he means and mean what he says in English? It is: What can be done with the foreign that my translation inescapably transmits? A single, suggestive theme—a typical Weimar theme—will serve as my example, *pars pro toto.*

Like clothes and food and heavy metal music, scholarship is largely a matter of fads. It reflects Marshall Sahlins' view of fashion. A creative and influential book is one that presents the customary with a new look.

As already noted, the theme of "totality" recurs throughout *Religionswissenschaft.* Explicitly, Wach situates this theme in its traditional home, hermeneutics: "the spirit of the whole can only be comprehended indirectly, by comprehending the parts, and all particulars can be fully understood only through that principle which provides internal coherence"—the notorious "hermeneutical circle." But for all Wach's talk of totality, a full vision of the concept eludes him. Despite his talk of understanding, he continually exploits "totality" to do something that he never actually articulates: to critique, especially to critique "one-sided" psychology and "atomizing" positivism. Wach's insistence upon totality breaks the hermeneutical chains in which it is thematized. His theory may praise understanding, but his practice raises the possibility of a "critique from totality" that has far-reaching implications. Naturally, these implications begin with the current state of Wach's own discipline, the history of religions.

In recent decades, many have come to distinguish the history of religions from other religious studies by identifying it with the ideas of a single scholar, Mircea Eliade. After all, what do "historians of religions" do, if they do not explore sacred time and space, identify *axiis mundi* and unrecognized returns *ad origines,* and search for manifestations of other familiar Eliadean

9Laqueur, p. 271. Of the late Weimar revival, he notes: "Gradually it became clear that there was a growing discrepancy between the real Weimar and the myth of Weimar. . . . Some reputations were inflated out of all proportion . . . because [some writers and artists] had had the good fortune either to survive in the right place, or because good friends were pushing their cause. Others were less fortunate, as their work did not suit the fashions of the 1960s" (p. 276).


March, 1988
themes? The identification of this discipline with Eliade's ideas is unfortunate. Eliade's particular interpretations and methods are open to severe criticism. All too frequently they are both superficial and arbitrary. When the inevitable criticism comes, the history of religions often seems fatally wounded in the cross-fire.

A critique from totality inspired by Wach addresses this situation in two ways. First, it frankly calls Eliade's enterprise into question. In Religionswissenschaft, Wach condemns as utterly premature the kinds of comparison that Eliade practices with reckless abandon. In latching onto similar appearances, Eliade ignores the total contexts in which these apparent similarities occur. He does so partly because he advances a false totality as a comprehensive paradigm for the history of religions. That is, Eliade limits religion, or more specifically religious meaning, to the manifestations of "the Sacred"—what he calls the "dialectics" of the Sacred. Perhaps the most telling failure is Eliade's complete conceptual inability to address the sociological questions that, true to the Weimar heritage, Wach pursued so relentlessly.

But in rejecting Eliade's enterprise, this critique does not automatically reject the history of religions: the academic study of all religions from a point of view not explicitly aligned with any of them. In Religionswissenschaft Wach envisions the history of religions as a comprehensive hermeneutics of religions (not of the "Sacred") that in theory avoids Eliade's failings. Of course, Wach's language was never entirely fluent, and his concepts now crack with the brittleness of age, but at least Religionswissenschaft raises the possibility of a more adequate formulation of this discipline.

Nevertheless, I am convinced that in the end Wach's insistence on totality must turn against his own hermeneutical slant: religions are always more than religious meanings to be interpreted. A broadened view of the discipline's subject brings with it a broadened view of its tasks. A critique from totality drives historians of religions beyond hermeneutical familiarization and the thematization of foreign meanings (as in one sense it drove Wach) to the practice of defamiliarization and a broader cultural critique.14

On this view, the "after-effect" of Religionswissenschaft is riddled with irony, and Wach's model for the history of religions stands upside down.

IV

I am terribly impressed with the current "high fashion" of writing in the humanities: its titillating wit, its brilliance, and its dazzling semantic displays. Writers have ripped words apart and stitched them back together in unaccustomed and unforeseen ways. They have manipulated traditional and not so traditional concepts with every rhetorical device until they have burst forth with unsuspected surpluses of meaning. Some have feasted so well and so long at the tree of knowledge that in their satiety they have convinced themselves and others that the fruit of this tree always contains the seeds of its own de(con)struction. Rarely have these scholars been tempted to nibble at the fruit of the tree of life, even when they have invoked their favorite Lebensphilosoph, Friedrich Nietzsche. Their virtuoso gymnastics require the isolation of language from life, the self-sufficiency of discourse, and a notion of truth that repudiates any attempt to mirror reality.

The condition of contemporary scholarship is symptomatic of the condition of contemporary life. Of course, the American populace shows a decided preference for the body over the mind and for physical and material pleasure rather than intellectual amusement. But the same desire for titillation, for brilliance, and for dazzling display animates, for example, the

14See my article, "Wach, Eliade, and the Critique from Totality," forthcoming in Numen.
The current cult of the human physique in all its vicissitudes. Contemporary life feeds on a concern for immediate, individual profit and pleasure that is, like much contemporary scholarship, self-directed and self-sufficient. At the root of both lies an analytic reasoning that directs all activity to the manipulation of isolated resources (Wach would say “atomized” resources), whether semantic or monetary, for personal stimulation and gratification.

The most unfortunate victim of this broad cultural fashion has been American higher education. During the last two decades business and professional programs have multiplied in this country at an astounding rate. Many colleges and universities, driven by a desire for continued enrollment, have bowed to the whims of prospective students and surrendered the ideals of education for a total life that they once espoused. They have sought instead to sell their customers a simple commodity: training in one or another specialized branch of manipulative analysis. Alleged defenders of the liberal arts have recently articulated a very dangerous response to this trend. The liberal arts, they have claimed, are a better training for achieving professional success than is a degree in business. Such a defense is so lame that one might as well simply surrender.

I am, of course, not the only person whom these current fashions disturb. Why do they remain viable? It seems to me that they do so at least in part because they successfully masquerade as false totalities. In the general imagination, they represent “what everyone really wants,” “the way things are.” The fashionable think that contemporary vogue supply all of what is significant in life. They consider their own aims and means—be they so paltry as techniques to amass a small monetary fortune—to be both self-evidently desirable and universally pursued. It is at this point that the history of religions, practiced as a critique from totality inspired by Wach, can make its own, distinctive contribution.

First, the history of religions vigorously refutes the presumed universality of contemporary orders. It studies “the whole ‘world of religion,’” and in doing so it transmits into the world of the familiar the entire range of human dreams and aspirations. This discipline knows its share of brilliance and dazzling displays—rituals and beliefs that titilate precisely because they exude an alluring, exotic scent that the all-too-familiar Christianity often lacks. But to the material and hedonistic obsessions of modern life the history of religions juxtaposes other aims, such as liberation, nirvana, selflessness, salvation, well-being obtained through integration with natural orders or by obeying a god’s commands. Furthermore, the history of religions counters the manipulative, analytic reasoning currently fashionable with a world of techniques and procedures that not infrequently requires the renunciation of all that the devotees of analysis hold most dear.

A genuine encounter with this broader world can be very sobering. My students are at times rather inarticulate, but they often display an intuitive sense for the issues: “When we studied Hinduism and Buddhism, I thought they were weird; then we started to study us, and I realized we’re just as weird as they are.” The history of religions defamiliarizes our current presumptions. Contrasted with others, our limited aims and techniques no longer appear self-evident, universal, noble, or even all that desirable.

But the history of religions does not limit itself to setting our views and actions in a more total context. This discipline also scrutinizes the relations of our own culture to religion. Our peculiar secularity is not exactly devoid of religion. I am not making the obvious point that many persons still practice religious traditions, and that some even practice them energetically. I mean to say (with a bow to Eliade as well as to Wach) that the history of religions can reveal the extent to which our secularity is itself not exactly devoid of religion. Contemporary patterns of thought, action, and association are, so to speak, the skeletons of dead gods, primarily Greek and Near Eastern. They are fossils of structures and ideals that were once generated and animated by religion.

My own work, for example, is focusing on a comparison of classical Greece and India. It has sought to elucidate by contrast the structures of power peculiar to the religious life of the Greek polis, structures that still govern the modes of American political interaction and intellectual activity, including contemporary science and technology. In this way, the history of religions functions as a sort of cultural psychoanalysis. It recalls to memory what our secularity represses: the substance that was lost when our gods died, or rather, the flesh that we flayed from their bones in order to kill them. In doing so, the history of religions helps reveal the emaciated, attenuated nature of American life.

Let me be clear. The history of religions does not issue a call to return to religion, either to one specific religion or to one among several alternatives. No religion can avoid the defamiliarization of the history of religions practiced critically. More generally, to support religion—either one religion or religions in general—would violate this discipline’s age-old tasks, tasks that were first announced clearly in Wach’s *Religionswissenschaft*. The history of religions is not a

March, 1988
covert ally of those who advocate a traditional religion. Instead, it tempts us to nibble a bit at the tree of life. To scholars it issues an invitation to abandon not their brilliance and their wit but their ultimately disappointing narcissism of discourse and "texts" and to reinsert knowledge into the context of life: it issues a late-twentieth-century call an die Sachen or, perhaps more appropriately in an article inspired by Wach, to a neue Sachlichkeit. It invites those who prefer matter over mind to recall that the appropriate question is not how to make a living—and more than a living—but how in the first place it is best for us to live. To echo Wach: This is a question to which the history of religions leads, but which it cannot itself address.16 I prefer to state the matter more positively. In an era of inevitable historical and global consciousness, the history of religions prepares the ground so that questions of life may again be asked with profundity.

V

What precedes is clearly a personal response to a prolonged encounter with Joachim Wach. It is an example, an attempt to use some of the foreign that my translation transmits to transform past thought—Wach's thought—about the history of religions. There is irony in the way I use Wach. Wach was noted for being eirenic, for stressing agreement and similarity. I aim to be critical, to stress distance and differences. Wach was isolationist, stressing the need to free the history of religions from the theological, political, and cultural winds by which it had been buffeted. I wish to reinsert the history of religions back into the life of culture. Wach's history of religions was hermeneutical; it advocated translation as transformation, a process that made the foreign as familiar as a dear friend. I am content with a history of religions that advocates translation as transmission and uses the foreign to unsettle.

These ironies that arise in the attempt to "translate" Wach's thought parallel the irony inherent in the project of translating Wach's words. To be successful, a translation of Religionswissenschaft must violate its own subject. It is impossible to translate Wach's book as the book itself demands. I cannot transform Religionswissenschaft so that it becomes as familiar as a dear, lifelong friend. The most I can do is transmit Wach's thought, partially hiding its foreignness behind familiar veils. Transformation begins when readers confront the foreign that my veils cannot conceal. It is no longer something that actually happens to Wach's thought. It happens to yours and to mine.

16Ibid., p. 95.
Dear Editor:

We rank #11, according to U.S. News & World Report last fall (Nov. 7).

Nobody knows if these polls mean much, but there it is: After Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, and four state universities (Berkeley, UCLA, Michigan, North Carolina), with Duke, Chicago, and Davidson interspersed, our university here in Dogwood sends on to the nation’s law schools their best students. This according to the deans of the top schools.

Even though we’re only 15th in the nation in general undergraduate reputation, according to U.S. News the previous week.

As dean of the undergraduate scholars program, I see a certain number of the students who go on from this university into law school. Most law schools require a “standard dean’s reference form”; this states that an applicant has or has not been disciplined by the university, for academic or other reasons. (These days, one way you get an official reprimand is to serve beer at graduate happy hour, as did one underage young woman last summer.)

The dean’s form also wants to know class rank, year by year. Also, the rigor of the student’s academic program, and how much writing the student did. So I ask students to supply some information, and then come in for a formal follow-up interview, which typically lasts a half hour.

The dean’s form has one final open-ended question, asking about the applicant’s “capacity for professional law study.” For that I go to the student’s official file and to my interview notes. I like, when possible, to talk about a student’s unbroken line of achievement from secondary school onward, with emphasis on real distinctions rather than just performance of assigned tasks.

Why tell you all this? By way of getting to some information. With too little time to do everything worth doing, we tend to think about the future more than the past—for those students who really want law school, let’s help them along. Only later, if time, find out where they got in and what they think about their #11 alma mater in retrospect. Our Office of Career Planning and Placement compiles valuable data, but I have certain curiosities beyond their questions.

So not long ago I sent off a small questionnaire to the 30 people whose forms I filled out in fall of 1986—people who, if going to law school, are now in first year. Sixteen have responded so far. Nine are in law school, three at Virginia and one each at Brooklyn, Columbia, Harvard, North Carolina, Stanford, and Vanderbilt.

Of the seven not in law school, two work in New York with trendy two-year investment banking programs (Morgan Stanley and Smith Barney). One is in a master’s program in public policy at Chicago. One, who graduated in 1984, continues to work with a consulting firm in the Washington area; another works in Washington for her Carolina congressman; another is an account executive with a large regional communications firm. Of these six students, four will enter law school later, through deferred admission: Columbia, Harvard, Stanford, Virginia.

The seventh took the Radcliffe Publishing Procedures Seminar last summer (confesses that he “dreaded the notion of practicing law”) and is now writing for a satire magazine, Spy.

So already, in this trickle of returns, I am interested to see the large proportion choosing not to be in law school right away. The student enrolled at Stanford told me that “about half” his class “did not come straight from another academic program.” The student working at Smith Barney (accepted at Columbia, Texas, NYU, and Virginia) is “looking forward to returning to grad school, either business, law, or both, but working for two years first is great.”

What also interested me was the success of these able people in getting into good places. The Stanford student was also accepted by Yale and Harvard law schools and by the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard. Of the 16 respondents, five got Harvard acceptances, four Yale, four Columbia, and five Stanford. (These are the top schools, according to U.S. News.) Only two applied to the fifth school, Chicago (one accepted, one waitlisted), and only three applied to the sixth-ranked school, California at Berkeley (one accepted, one waitlisted, and one denied). Seven applied to Harvard.

Of the 16 students, eight were accepted by all the law schools they applied to—ranging from two to nine.

You might ask (as I did) whether it helps to take a prep course for the Law School Admission Test. Eight of the 16 took such a course (the Stanley Kaplan course is prob-
ably the best known), but the student who got a perfect score of 48 didn't. The student with the second-highest score (46) did take a prep course. But one of the seven not in law school, who scored in the 30s, didn't—"obviously a mistake in my case"—and neither did the lowest-scoring student (29), also not in law school. Each of these last two students, by the way, did get one acceptance to law school.

As to those raw figures: A score of 48 on the LSAT means you're nationally in the 99.8th percentile. The 46 puts you at 99.3 per cent, 40 puts you 89.8 per cent, 30 puts you way down at 47.6 per cent. Of my sampling of 16 students, 10 scored 41 or higher, and another three were 38 or 39.

While with raw figures, you might be interested in the cumulative grade-point average of the people accepted at places like Harvard, Yale, and Stanford. As I know from writing recommendations year after year, GPA alone does not measure achievement. One of the two students accepted by all three schools, for example, was a major student leader last year, and his GPA is only the third highest in my group. Harvard took two men and three women, with GPAs 3.70, 3.68, 3.66, 3.63, 3.48. Stanford took exactly the same five. The Yale four were 3.86, 3.70, 3.68, and 3.48.

Of the 16 students, all but one are in our computer database (the exception is a student who graduated in the quaint mechanical era of 1977). So in gathering supplementary information (I kept the survey itself brief), I leave out this one student, whose file is in an attic of a distant building.

Meanwhile, with 15 returns, only five students completed departmental honors programs. That surprised me. Also, only three got into Phi Beta Kappa, which surprised me even more.

Four students elected the option of the scholars program to choose no major, instead constructing individual programs according to their desires. Another student created a formal Interdisciplinary Major, and one followed our interdisciplinary Political and Social Thought program. Two had double majors (that is, completed separate majors in two distinct areas); one did foreign affairs and Latin American Studies, the other did mathematics and history, and both were women. English and economics were the most popular majors, four and three, respectively. Five of the 15 students studied abroad for degree credit.

**What surprised students in their first law term? We got a fascinating range of responses.**

Given my choice of "very well prepared," "well prepared," or "not well prepared," the nine students ending their first semester in law school responded six "well" and three "very." The student at Harvard stated cautiously: "I believe that most people are 'well prepared' because law school is quite different from undergraduate school." The Stanford student offered statistics preceding an apparent compliment to alma mater: "64 of 175 (of my class) are from Harvard, Yale, Stanford, or Princeton—I've seen no evidence that their educations have prepared them better."

What surprised students in their first term? Even from only nine students, a fascinating range of responses. The "uptight attitude of the students in general" at Columbia is "very different from the relatively relaxed atmosphere" here. Even at Vanderbilt, in Country Music City, "the students are a bit up-tight." Law school at Virginia "is easier than I expected and less confrontational"; also at Virginia, law is "enjoyable," and "students work together, not against each other."

The Harvard student was surprised at "the intensity of those who have taken some time off between college and law school." Perhaps fitting into that category, the 1977 graduate, enrolled at a school not in the top ten, went on at some length about surprise "that I have not been at a distinct disadvantage by entering after a long hiatus from college." With an LSAT score of 43 (42 is 94.6 per cent), he obviously has ability on top of real-life experience, and his thoughts unfolded as follows:

It appears to me that the nature of law school is quite different from college—much of the learning of the law is on an independent rather than "spoon-fed" basis—and lectures tend to highlight areas of the law on which the law student is expected to have already gained an insight. To this end, I believe that a student must draw on *skills* developed through study and simple observation of the world, rather than "knowledge" of facts.

I therefore suggest strongly [the student happens to have been a biology major] a well-rounded exposure to the humanities as a background, without too much concern given to "pre-law" curricula. It really matters little if you come in with background in "constitutional law," "jurisprudence," or "the operation of government."

Yet, when asked to recommend two or three undergraduate courses to future law students, they chose exactly those law-related courses that I privately predicted. (We have no "pre-law" program at the university in Dogwood, but we assuredly have an "invisible curriculum" that pre-law students early learn about: Henry Abraham teaching Constitutional Law, Kenneth Elzinga teaching Antitrust Policy by case method, Charles
McCurdy teaching two semesters of major cases in Early American Law and Modern American Law.)

Take micro- and macroeconomics. Add an intermediate writing course; perhaps add Joseph Kett teaching two semesters of U.S. Intellectual and Cultural History. Take in the Commerce School the course in commercial law, and in our philosophy department the Philosophy of Law course.

Summing up the informal pre-law curriculum is my perfect 48 scorer who turned down acceptance at Yale and Chicago in order to enroll less expensively at his state university, Virginia: "A diverse course of study with classes in economics, English, philosophy, and history is the best preparation for law school." He himself did the departmental honors program in economics. Looking up his record to see how many philosophy courses (two), I note also that he took physics, chemistry, and differential equations, though our scholars program waives all area requirements.

Now all of this does tend somewhere—these anecdotes, statistics, and fragments of fact and opinion. The smallest reflection on the foregoing paragraphs will suggest some reasons why the university in Dogwood is regarded as #11 rather than #22 or #100.

The obvious: We are blessed with a fair number of super students, and certain of our faculty are world-class. The mean SAT scores for the students admitted to our scholars program (some 150 each fall, out of 2,000 in Arts and Sciences) are 680 verbal and 700 mathematical. Students we later add to the program often have lower scores, but both groups display splendid achievements, abundant energy, and willingness to "Get involved!" (as their elder peers demand).

Our faculty, as noted, offer a range of courses perfect for pre-law students—but courses not intended as such. Law and Society is a sociology course. Constitutional Limitations is an American government course. We have no writing course aimed toward a specific profession. University #11 is large enough to have an impressive array of "pre-law" courses, and sensible enough to give each of them a disciplinary integrity.

Then the question of requirements. As long as you carefully select for your scholars program people who have already proven themselves self-starters and eager to find challenges, give them freedom. Don't insist on area requirements or a major, but do make each student justify to a responsible adviser every course each semester. Make sure the "invisible curriculum" for pre-law students is openly publicized within the program.

Finally, make sure the career office and the academic deans work directly together, with a shared commitment. In our pre-law handbook the career office makes plain that you don't have to major in government to go to law school. It affirms explicitly a traditional liberal education—breadth of study along with depth in the area of your personal passion.

One could say more, perhaps insisting that all advisers remind students really to become people as interesting as they are capable of becoming. The student out working since graduating in 1984 no doubt put on his application (which earned him acceptances at Columbia, Georgetown, Harvard, NYU, Penn, Stanford, and Virginia) his plans for last spring: a four-month leave of absence for travel "independently through Hong Kong, China, Tibet, Nepal, Burma, Thailand, Japan, and Hawaii." Now he's ready for Harvard.

From Dogwood, yours faithfully,

C.V.

March, 1988

Changing Perspective

Albert Trost

I regularly teach courses in comparative foreign governments and international relations. Practically speaking, my coverage, in our small department, takes in almost the whole world.

When I first started teaching some twenty-five years ago, my department head told me I would need a subscription to the New York Times, not only because it was the best American newspaper in its coverage of the world and the way to keep current, but also because it represented the middle of the American ideological spectrum in its editorial position. He was so convinced of the paper's value that he doubled as the campus subscription agent. If he received a commission for this service, I am sure that it did not even pay for his own subscription. His salesmanship was the beginning of my own love affair with the paper, which some might say grew into a consuming addiction and dependence. My office has become notorious on campus for its stacks of yellowing pa-

Albert Trost is Chairman of the Department of Political Science at Valparaiso University and a regular contributor on public affairs to The Cresp-
Just as I was about to be consumed on the rest of the world. It comes once a week, is never more than a most of the old papers, but reading, I switched to my source for current information more time for other kinds of reading, and makes a neater stack. (I hundred pages, covers the whole world, and makes a neater stack. (I might add that I still buy the Times at the newstand as I have time to read it, and my office remains cluttered.) As it has turned out, the switch led to a beneficial change in perspective.

Many of our readers will know The Economist, as it is a frequently-cited source in undergraduate term papers. It is a cross between a Time or Newsweek and the Wall Street Journal. Most importantly for me, it is British, that is, not American. It is in the middle of the British political spectrum, standing closest to the Liberal party. Certainly in economic policy it stands for liberalism. Like the New York Times, it tends to be internationalist (as opposed to nationalist) in its foreign policy perspective. Though it is British, British news takes up a far lesser proportion of the publication than does American news in the New York Times. If it sounds close to the Times, I have so far given the wrong impression. The differences in perspective between the two are profound. Since I have taken up The Economist, I have lost confidence in the New York Times as a comprehensive and cosmopolitan source for information (though I have not lost enjoyment in reading it).

In the interests of a neater office and more time for other kinds of reading, I switched to The Economist as my source for current news on the rest of the world.

Not unexpectedly, the British publication is interested in developments in parts of the world only infrequently covered in the Times. It also provides regular coverage from more places. Given the great extent of the former British Empire, this is probably to be expected. South and Southeast Asia get regular coverage. This area contains one-quarter of the world's population and, in India, the largest democracy in the world. Also to be expected is the greater attention to Europe, especially the nations of the European Community. Less expected, and highly welcome, are the frequent articles on Eastern Europe. The Middle East receives extensive coverage, with much more on the Arab nations than one would find in any American newspaper. Israel rates only slightly more coverage than would any nation of four million people in a strategic area. Unfortunately, Africa is the same neglected mystery in The Economist that it is in American papers, despite the fact that a large part of it was also part of the British Empire.

The most important effect of shifting one's focus from primary concern with Central America, Japan, and the Soviet Union to the Middle East and Asia, at least for an American reader, is that developments in the world can be seen in a light other than that of strategic encounter with the Russians or trade rivalry with the Japanese. The most obvious pattern one sees from the new focus is the persistence of religion and nationalism (or ethnicity) in motivating political behavior. For instance, this more traditional dimension of conflict is the major feature of what was formerly British India—the modern states of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka. Its influence is also critical in Southeast Asia, Afghanistan, the Middle East, and Africa.

The influence of religion and ethnicity is not denied in our press, but it is harder to find because of a more limited geographical focus and something of a fixation on ourselves and our influence on the other national cultures of the world. We tend to assume that the rest of the world, when they know better, will want to follow us and a banner-carrier like the New York Times down the road of liberal democracy, modernization, and secularization. The British have already suffered their disillusionment on this score.

Another clear theme in the perspective of the contributors to The Economist is that they are much more accepting of an American political and military role in the world than we are. President Reagan, Casper Weinberger, and Oliver North notwithstanding, the American public and most of the press have never been enthused about American intervention or a military presence abroad. Most of the American press, and certainly the New York Times, are very skeptical about American intervention in
Central America, or the placement of American troops in Lebanon or American ships in the Persian Gulf. There is even growing disillusionment with American troops in Europe, as can be seen by comments in Congress and the press and by the results of public opinion polls.

The editors of The Economist are dismayed by the low level of American political leadership, of which they see President Reagan as more than representative.

The intended withdrawal of American medium-range ballistic missiles from Europe (in line with the recent American-Soviet agreement), far from placating the withdrawal fever, is likely to stimulate it even more. The Soviet Union does not seem as threatening as it once did. The European public does not seem to want us. Indeed, the Europeans appear not to be able even to rouse themselves to increase their own defense. The Economist, speaking on behalf of governing elites in Europe and of Center and Center-Right political opinion there, pleads for caution on our part and for a renewed commitment to European defense. People of The Economist's persuasion view Europe as more vulnerable than ever to a military threat from the Soviet Union, and they note with dismay the disinclination of European parliaments to do anything about it. They see the continued presence of American conventional forces and the deterrent effect of American long-range nuclear forces as the main guarantees of their security.

The Economist also sees the dangers of President Reagan rushing to disarm all nuclear forces for Europe, though it recognizes that American public opinion may not see things in the same way. Similarly, The Economist gives us an alternative perspective on our presence in the Persian Gulf. It reminds us of the interests of Europe and Japan in securing a steady flow of oil from that region and of the incapacity of their own forces to do this. With better connections to the Arab world, the magazine is also more sensitive to the interests of Arab governments in limiting Iranian power.

Although skeptical about the prospects for peace in Central America, of the inclination of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua to reform itself, The Economist was as critical of the Iran-Contra affair as was the New York Times. Like most Europeans, the editors of The Economist are mystified by the crusading zeal of Americans. Also like most Europeans, they are dismayed by the low caliber of American political leadership, of which they see President Reagan as more than representative.

The Economist remains unconvinced that the American process of Presidential selection can do much better. With tongue in cheek, the lead editorial in the October 17, 1987 number said that our process was especially good at "flushing out the false boast, the sexual peccadillo, and the murky incident back in college." But as for eliciting good leadership—the "ability to cope with the unexpected" and to "bring about the unexpected"—it did not really expect our system to meet the test.

The journal is likewise dismayed by the level of political debate in our country, which is characterized in a November 14, 1987 editorial as "pure and simple." The article was written on the occasion of the withdrawal of Judge Ginsburg from consideration for a position on the United States Supreme Court and in the wake of continuing revelations about Senators Hart and Biden. The editorial suggested that the standard of moral purity and simplicity in judging public officials was not as important as qualities of wisdom, intelligence, and experience. In The Economist's view, the parliamentary systems of Europe are more the standard to which we should aspire for both the selection of leaders and the style and substance of public debate.

The Economist does not have everything right. Its focus is Europe, and Europe, though close to us in heritage and through alliance, is not the only interest we have. The Economist does not have everything right. Europe, though close to us in heritage and through alliance, is not the only interest we serve. Nor is it likely that, in the celebration of 200 years of the Constitution, we will throw off our system (or our political culture) for a parliamentary system. However, I, for one, find The Economist's alternative view of things quite bracing. I was becoming too introverted. American problems and perspectives were becoming my exclusive preoccupation. Hopefully, I will not have to wait for the next change of offices to find new sources of stimulation. There is certainly even a wider world available than that of The Economist. Its understanding of international security and global responsibility is also, finally, too narrowly-based. But for the change of perspective it offered me I can truly say, "thanks, I needed that."

March, 1988

23
Fifty thousand dollars for your thoughts.

—Sam Spiegel

The films take our best ideas. We work like slaves, inventing, devising, changing to please the morons who run this game. We spend endless hours in search of novel ideas and, in the end, what do we get for it? A lousy fortune!

—Alexander King

III. The Writer and Hollywood

That the relationship between writers and the leaders of the film industry has always been strained, at times antagonistic, and that in many cases this situation continues today, is almost a given fact in Hollywood. Nevertheless, when young, untested novelists can collect $1 million for screen rights to their unpublished manuscripts and even the average screenwriter can command $150,000 just to polish a filmscript, the writers' reluctance to work with Hollywood becomes difficult for most moviegoers to comprehend.

Perhaps this inability to understand the confrontational relation-

ship between writers and film producers is the result of a failure to grasp the complexity of the conflicts at work in such a kinship. After all, any investigation of the history of the relationship between the writer and Hollywood may reveal as much about the impact the cinema has had on American literary art and American society as it does about the positions of the principal parties involved.

No one would deny that the art of filmmaking was altered forever when the narrative forms of literature were introduced to the cinema in those early days of the silent-film era. As has been noted, D.W. Griffith's adaptation of Thomas Dixon's novel, The Clansman, into a movie masterpiece, Birth of a Nation, not only readjusted the expectations for fiction in film by the growing American audience, but also further redefined the way in which future directors would view their own medium. As Francois Truffaut stated: "When cinema was invented, it was initially used to record life, like an extension of photography. It became an art when it moved away from the documentary. It was at this point that it was acknowledged as no longer a means of mirroring life, but a medium by which to intensify it."

Thus the dominant form for filmmakers became fictional storytelling on screen. And accompanying the acceptance of plays and novels as legitimate sources for narrative film, directors discovered that they often had to make an effort to enter into an uneasy alliance with the playwrights and novelists who gave birth to those narratives. The result has been the kind of uncomfortable relationship filled with bickering one often finds existing between biological parents and stepparents or adoptive parents: despite everyone acting only with the finest of intentions, each desiring that which is best for the child, a confrontation often occurs among all and the chaos which results creates a confusion as to whose interests are being served—those of the child or those of the parents.

During the silent-film era, difficulties between novelists and filmmakers did not occur on a large scale. Still, in the beginning, as the first books were adapted for the screen, film producers did attempt to reject any arguments that fees ought to be paid for screen rights, declaring that the publicity received by both the book and its author would be ample reimbursement for all rights. When the courts upheld the claims of authors for monetary compensation, the economic concerns of novelists and playwrights were protected; however, an additional regard for retention of authorial rights was forfeited. Any entitlemen to power over the production process of the film was relinquished by the writer when the business transaction took place, unless otherwise covered in the contract.

The film studios acceded to the demands for payment of writers but held firm on contract concessions which would surrender any power or control over the final film product. Anyway, at the time such statements were considered unnecessary by most writers and, therefore, did not appear in the contracts. In the 1920s, the novel was the preferred art form and America's novelists, led by F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, were among the country's most noted celebrities. In addition, along with the literary critics and academics, America's fiction writers did not take the cinema seriously as an art form or as a potential source of competition.

Even into the 1930s, Hollywood was merely a place for a novelist to make some quick cash between

Edward Byrne teaches in the Department of English at Valparaiso University and writes regularly on Film for The Cresset.
summed up his attitude toward as fewer novels were bought, fewer at a point in literary history when a movie theatre provided an escape of Fitzgerald and William Faulkner, ants, and questioned the worth of Thirties and the extravagant munificence of its work, but neither could refuse its environment, mistrusted the motives of its inhabitants, and questioned the worth of its work, but neither could refuse the lucrative offers originating from the West Coast. Faulkner summed up his attitude toward working in film when he commented that “Hollywood is the only place in the world where a man can get stabbed in the back while climbing a ladder.”

Writers who in the 1920s viewed the movies as harmless diversions not worthy of serious consideration soon came to see films as a threat to their positions in society and to their art. Four major reasons can be cited for this transformation of authors’ feelings toward the cinema. First, as the economic depression of the 1930s forced Americans to clutch more tightly to their income, that portion spent in non-essential areas, including entertainment, lessened—and the cost of a movie ticket was cheaper than the cover price of a novel. Next, the popular comedies of the early Thirties and the extravagant musicals of the mid- and late Thirties witnessed in the dark sanctuary of a movie theatre provided an escape from the troubles many Americans were experiencing in everyday life, at a point in literary history when the best novels served only as reminders of the hard times. Third, as fewer novels were bought, fewer were published. At the same time, the production of films flourished. As a result, with a few exceptions novelists lost their power as celebrities, replaced by the larger-than-life figures of the silver screen. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, with the transition from silent films to all-talking features, filmmakers trespassed upon terri-
(Joel and Ethan Coen), Planes, Trains, and Automobiles (John Hughes), Hope and Glory (John Boorman), and Broadcast News (James L. Brooks).

Although when viewing these movies one is aware that all these writers appear to have recognized the need to fit their scripts for the screen and to surrender some of the inherent strengths and intrinsic merits evident in the written word for the force cinematic techniques can afford, this trend seems to be one which will assure more possibility of creative unity, of imaginative input, and of constructive contribution, on and off the set.

In recent years, John Sayles has been the most visible example of a novelist-filmmaker. Sayles' work, both as a writer and as a director, has received critical praise. Although he has made a fine studio film (Baby, It's You), Sayles has felt more comfortable in the role of independent filmmaker, creating such films as Return of the Secaucus 7 and The Brother from Another Planet in addition to his latest about the 1920s West Virginia mine war, Matewan, a film that resulted from research for his novel, Union Dues. The critical success Sayles has increasingly enjoyed as each of his films has been released, although not yet matched economically, has served as a model for others, most noticeably David Mamet.

House of Games, a film written and directed by Mamet, best known as one of America's leading playwrights (his 1984 play, Glengarry Glen Ross, won a Pulitzer prize), has found itself listed on many critics' year-end "Best of 1987" honor roles. Mamet, who has won praise as a scriptwriter for the film remake of James M. Cain's novel The Postman Always Rings Twice as well as for The Verdict and The Untouchables, was frustrated by the pseudo-collaborative nature involved in "working as a screenwriter-for-hire" and answering to directors who had the right to ignore his suggestions, even if those directors happened to be such fine filmmakers as Sidney Lumet or Brian De Palma.

**David Mamet has joined John Sayles as an independent filmmaker, a writer-director. He has discovered the director's role as true auteur of the medium.**

Speaking of his experiences at work on The Untouchables in an article written for American Film, Mamet bitterly echoes the sentiments voiced by a long line of writers since the publication of F. Scott Fitzgerald's The Last Tycoon and Nathaniel West's Day of the Locusts:

"Hollywood is the city of the modern gold rush, and money calls the turn. That is the first and last rule we know of Hollywood—we permit ourselves to be treated like commodities in the hope that we may, one day, be treated like valuable commodities. . . . We all do it either in resignation, or in the hope of subsequent gain. But none of us like it. . . ."

Mamet has therefore joined Sayles as an independent filmmaker, a writer-director. He has discovered the director's role as true auteur of the medium, has determined that the real nature of film "is not a collaboration, which implies equality, if not of contribution, at least of position. Film is produced under the most stringent and detailed conditions of hierarchy. . . ."

Some novelists, however, have been able to work successfully within that hierarchy. In the last couple of months, William Kennedy and Jay McInerney have reported positive, cooperative relationships with the directors of the film versions of their books. Kennedy's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, Ironweed, has been brought to the screen by director Hector Babenco, who previously directed Kiss of the Spider Woman. Kennedy says of the experience: "Film is Babenco's medium and I sit in the front row of the loge and cheer. I don't expect a full translation of the novel. . . . Cutting a novel to pieces is not serious. But shaping a story for another medium can be a totally different sort of artistic exercise of the imagination." Kennedy has acknowledged the disgruntled writings of screenwriters of the past, particularly Raymond Chandler, but he believes he has been more fortunate for having arrived "in a later year, working not within the studio system, but with an independent producer . . . and with a contract that gives as much control to a writer" as his lawyer has ever witnessed.

Jay McInerney, too, has been blessed with a director for Bright Lights, Big City who has encouraged a close working relationship with the writer. In fact, it was James Bridges, best known as director of The China Syndrome, who had requested McInerney's contributions and who had retained in the film chapter titles from the novel, not in an attempt to re-create exactly the novelist's version of Bright Lights, Big City, but to benefit by a blending of that version and the director's vision. McInerney recognizes that directors are the authors of films, that "writers don't make movies. But at the same time, every writer wants to participate, to have some kind of input."

Still, the desire of many directors to maintain whole control and not deal with another's version, another's vision, has created a perplexing situation. It seems that the most popular solution to this
pleasant dilemma, a scenario which is becoming more and more a commonplace circumstance for filmmakers, is for the directors to write an original screenplay. This is certainly not new. For filmmakers during the silent era like Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, it was a normal occurrence.

However, since the uttered word entered the movies, the writer-director has not been the rule in American film, but the noted exception. Nonetheless, with the end of total control by the studios, the acceptance of the auteur theory, the new, universal access to film as videotape recorders have become a standard addition to almost every home, and the social reception of cinema as our most popular and most influential art form, filmmakers in America, evidenced by the current films of Woody Allen, Oliver Stone, James L. Brooks, and a number of others, have moved inexorably toward the nearly complete independence once enjoyed by writers of novels and plays. European directors such as Federico Fellini, Francois Truffaut, and Ingmar Bergman demonstrated this sort of independence decades ago, but American moviemakers are only now starting to secure a similar tradition.

Finally, just as *Hannah and Her Sisters* by Woody Allen, himself a prize-winning fiction writer, originally had been conceived as a novel but was transformed into a filmscript (also retaining its chapter titles in the movie), resulting in a binding together of both means of expression, likewise other American filmmakers, as true "authors," are now blurring the artificial boundaries separating story-telling in cinema from the other narrative literary forms, strengthening the case for consideration of American film as another branch of American literature.

*Holing the Ice*

I

The ice was thick the morning my uncle asked me to chop holes so the fish could breathe. The few chickens he had watched me climb the fence to the pond, while he watched from the kitchen to see if I would put the poles in so the ice wouldn't freeze shut. I knew he was watching, but I couldn't tell if it was a joke, just something to watch me do before I returned to California, something to laugh at over biscuits and gravy as we sat close around the big table in the kitchen, remembering. But I swung the axe and the ice splintered. I swung and drove the axe deeper, listening to the echoes of the axe from the timber across the tracks from the stubbled corn. I dug whole chunks of ice out, there in the milky sun, biting into the ice as it showered over me, humming sounds with the axe bathed in the brutal joy of swinging. Then when the posts were in place I turned toward the farmhouse, knowing my uncle was there at the kitchen window, his breath warm against the cold glass, watching.

II

At the funeral I was the only one not wearing a suit as we carried him past the relatives and friends that stood in the rain that wasn't expected. I think even now I only half-believe them when they tell me how I wouldn't let him down into that black hole; how I wanted to leave the shovel in so the dirt wouldn't close over him, and how the cemetery workers watched from beneath the maples as I threw the dirt down into the coldness, into the darkness, working in the soft rain, throwing the black wet earth, watching it rise towards me, until they stopped me, staring.

I left without looking back, knowing the ice would freeze over, sensing the dark-holed fish suspended in their silence, not knowing if they would last until spring, remembering only the swinging.

J. T. Ledbetter
I'm Not Rappaport has found its audiences—everywhere. It arrived in New York in 1985 from its birthplace at the Seattle Repertory Theatre with Judd Hirsch and Cleavon Little giving virtuoso performances in the leading roles. It won the Tony Award for the best play of the 1985-86 season. Hirsch and Little took the play on a hugely successful national tour, while the production, featuring other actors, played on at the Booth Theatre in New York. Recently, Hirsch and Little returned to the Booth to reprise their roles. 

Two old men sitting in Central Park passing time. Nat Moyer is a Jew; Midge Carter is black. They share very few common memories, interests, passions, or commitments. Nat was a waiter and a radical socialist dedicated, at least intellectually, to the liberation of the workers from the chains of capitalism. Midge still ekes out a living as a building superintendent, studies the weekly Sporting News, and fondly reminisces about his triumphs in amateur boxing tournaments. Apparently, the two have nothing in common. But the fact of their age—they are both in their eighties—forces them into a comradeship that transcends any of the historical details that might separate them.

Daily, Nat and Midge confront the antagonists of the aged: cataracts, glaucoma, brittle bones, loss of balance, and encroaching senility. They are victims of high prices, hoodlums, and a younger generation that has neither the time to deal with them nor a true sense of their needs.

None of these villains is more terrifying to them, however, than the prospect of losing the self. The specter in I'm Not Rappaport is "I'm Not." Nat and Midge fight to defend their frail "I Ams" against the powerful forces of "I'm not." They are united in this struggle, the two, and they battle more desperately than Nat ever fought against the bosses or Midge his Golden Gloves tournament opponents.

In his stunning Driving Miss Daisy, Alfred Uhry also deals passionately and compassionately with the latter stages of the aging process. This play has also received unanimously positive notices.

Uhry drew on some of the elements in his own Atlanta boyhood for Driving Miss Daisy. One of his grandmothers had an accident, like Miss Daisy's, in which she demolished her car, but didn't even break her eyeglasses. Now Daisy's son doubts that she can get further driving insurance, and he doesn't want to live with the worry if she could. Over her fierce objections, he retains a sixty-year-old chauffeur for her. Much of the play's subsequent action takes place in the car.

Two old people sitting in a car on the road to nowhere important. Daisy Werthen is a Jew; Hoke Colburn is black. They share practically no memories in common. Uhry has given us few details about Daisy and Hoke's histories, but her whiteness and his blackness against the background of Atlanta give us as clear a picture of their different experiences as we need. What they do share is the outsider status their ethnicity brings them. For Daisy, Hoke is one of "them"—the colored. For Hoke, Miss Daisy is one of "them"—the Jews. And, of course, they are members of another minority subculture—the aged.

The focal point of Driving Miss Daisy is the car, or, rather, a series of cars, as the action unfolds over twenty-five years. Uhry uses the issue of the car to open Daisy's character for our inspection. When her well-meaning son Boolie insists that his mother no longer drive herself she takes offense on several levels. She worries about appearing to be wealthy enough to employ a chauffeur. She frets about having another one of "them" around the house (we hear about Idella, a maid who is also black, though we never see her). She feels the ironic sting of a son
revoking his mother's driving privileges. Finally, though there is no reason she can't go wherever she wants whenever she wants, Daisy fears the loss of her independence. For Daisy, the chauffeur is living evidence that she has lost the first battle in the long war in defense of her independent self.

It must be said that while Rapaport's Midge Carter and Daisy's Hoke Colburn are allies in the struggle to preserve the self, it is Nat Moyer and Daisy Werthen who are on the front lines. Their objectives are similar. Both Nat and Daisy strive to maintain the illusion of their own independence. One who is not independent, they seem to believe, is of no consequence; one of no consequence is of no significance; and one of no significance is no one. Nat and Daisy each fight fiercely to remain someone.

Nat Moyer is a past master of illusionism. Creating characters is his modus vivendi. From time to time, he is "Hernando," a Cuban Terrorist; "Harry Schwartzman," a cover for "Sam Schwartzman," spy; "Ben Reissman," a labor lawyer from the firm of Reissman, Rothman, Rifkin, and Grady; "Dr. Fred Engels," of the Socialists' Club; "Anthony Donatto," a gangster; and "Nat Moyer," a movie mogul.

Along with the name goes a line of chatter that Nat reels off with the enthusiasm of a man who lives to hear himself talk. More importantly, Nat deploys his characterizations to make himself effectual. Early in the play, he watches as Midge suffers a visit from Pete Danforth, the president of his building's tenant committee. Due to Midge's advanced age and poor eyesight, the committee has decided to find a replacement for him; that is, to retire him. Uninvited, Nat springs into action as "Ben Reissman," representing HURTSFOE, "the human rights strike force." Chutzpah incarnate, Nat assaults the president's resolve with threats of legal complications for his tenants should they proceed to dismiss Midge without exhaustive due process to protect his rights. The president backs down. Nat glows with a feeling of accomplishment.

**I'm Not Rapaport and Driving Miss Daisy both confront the burdens and fears of the aging.**

Later, Nat dons the mask of "Tony Donatto," mafioso godfather, to talk a violent drug dealer temporarily away from a girl who took a bit too much cocaine on credit. In another moment, he is promoting himself as another of the masses tyrannized by the capitalists' system in order to convince a young hoodlum not to extort money from Midge. Each time he extends his eloquence in service to the weak, Nat strengthens his own illusion of significance. Ironically, his assertion of independence depends on the presence of others.

Daisy Werthen protects her independence by asserting her superiority over Hoke, the chauffeur. He responds deferentially to her in tones of "yassum" and "no um." When she finally deigns to get into the car with Hoke at the wheel, she plays the backseat tyrant, issuing decrees on everything from speed to parking spaces. Later, she condescends to accept Hoke's kindnesses and she is especially pleased to teach him to read. For as long as possible she struggles to stay in the driver's seat, even if she can't drive. Because her sense of racial superiority is integral to her sense of self, Miss Daisy is very slow to accept Hoke as an equal. But his irrepressible humanity and her increasing enfeeblement drive their relationship slowly from that of the mistress and the servant through the helpless and the helper and, at last, to the friend and the friend. It is not an easy progress. When Boolie declines to threaten his position in the white business community by attending an honorary dinner for Martin Luther King, Jr., Miss Daisy has the opportunity to invite Hoke to accompany her. It would have been a happy outcome to Uhry's play had the old Jewish woman and the old black man gone arm in arm to honor America's greatest champion of civil rights. But it doesn't happen. Miss Daisy can't bring herself to invite Hoke, and Hoke won't stoop to asking.

The outcome of the struggle is, of course, inevitable. As she gets older, Daisy comes to depend on Hoke to get through the day. Idella dies and Hoke's help extends beyond the car and into the house. She struggles to retain her illusion of independence, but her mind turns, and by the last scene the ninety-seven-year-old woman has been removed to a nursing home. When Boolie drives Hoke to the home for a Thanksgiving visit, he finds her so incompetent that he must spoon the pecan pie into her mouth.

Gardner gives us an equally tough vision in I'm Not Rapaport. Nat as Ben Reissman has temporarily saved Midge's job and has driven away the extortionist using his cane. The kid beats him severely, but he's recovered. Now he's got a real problem. His daughter Clara has found him again, even though he's done his systematic best to give her the slip. It is Clara who must pick up the pieces when her father's radical schemes go awry. Typically, the business card that "Ben Reissman" thrust in the tenant committee president's face had her office telephone number on it and she's been drawn
into another embarrassing situation.

Clara has been Nat's dearest daughter and the most loyal of his four children. She took up his radical legacy with pride. Now she looks at her battered father and lovingly, firmly gives him three options: live with her family, move to an old people's home in New Jersey, or register for monitored day care and hot meals at a West Side senior center. If he doesn't accept one of these options, she's prepared to go to court to have him declared incompetent.

Desperately, deftly, Nat conjures up his grandest illusion. Long ago he met a girl at the Grand Street library, his story begins, and they fell in love. Four months after they met, the girl left for a new life in Israel. Six months later, says Nat, he got a letter: there is a child. And now this child, Sgt. Perlmann, has come from Israel to take care of him. They will return to Israel. Clara need no longer worry about her father. After agreeing to meet her half-sister the following Friday, Clara tearfully rushes off.

Clara leaves fully believing the story Nat fully believes he had to tell to save his life. Before Midge can finish castigating Nat for "conning his own kid," their attention is drawn to the beautiful twenty-five-year-old artist who has been sitting sketching on the bridge above them throughout much of the play. She's being visited by an angry, violent bill collector. He slaps the girl hard and demands payment for cocaine bills long overdue—by the next Friday.

When the drug dealer leaves the girl quivering in front of the old men, Nat conceives a way that his fantastic stories can merge and save both his life and Laurie's. Laurie the junkie can stand in for Sgt. Perlmann long enough to fool Clara and then Nat and Laurie can beat it out of New York. For a moment, necessity seems to be the mother of a wonderful new invention.

But it is not to be. Nat's attempt as "Tony Donatto" to threaten the drug dealer into leaving the girl alone backfires. The hoodlum attacks Nat, and Midge draws the man's fury when he tries to rescue Nat. Both are badly beaten. Laurie fails to make an appearance as Sergeant Perlmann and Clara's heart is broken by the ruse. Pete Danforth and the committee have found out there is no HURTSFOE and have summarily fired Midge. Even the young hood is back, now demanding more protection money than ever. Nat's attempts to maintain his effectiveness and independence have only debilitated him further.

Yet where Uhry has left us with the tragic sense of life, Gardner leaves us laughing, or at least smiling. At the last, Nat confesses to Midge that every one of his aliases has been false. For the last forty years he's been nothing but a waiter, a nobody. Having said that, Nat makes to leave the park, but Midge's retort holds him. Even now, says Midge, he can't tell the truth—he couldn't have been just a waiter. Nat gratefully seizes the opportunity to assume yet another identity and fashion another illusion: Nat Moyer, Hollywood mogul.

It is quite fitting that the stories of these determined illusionists have found their way to the theatre, which, as Pirandello has reminded us, is the domain of illusion. Herb Gardner derives his title for I'm Not Rappaport from a vaudeville routine. It's a little bit of shtick wherein the straight man repeatedly responds "I'm not Rappaport" to a series of his partner's questions, until the questioner can find a way to trap the answerer with one of his own, seemingly innocent, responses. Nat Moyer, played by Judd Hirsch, is the interlocutor, and Midge Carter is the straight man.

Much of the action has the rhythm of a vaudeville turn. While Midge rather resents being used as a straight man, Nat Moyer loves every minute: he is both on stage and in the audience. Nat is a connoisseur of the language. His lingo is equal parts of Karl and Groucho Marx. Judd Hirsch brilliantly blends the seriousness of the radical tradition with the zaniness of the vaudeville clown into a tour-de-force.

If the texture of I'm Not Rappaport is vaudeville, Driving Miss Daisy is pas-de-deux. The performances are as economical as they are beautiful. Every word, movement, and gesture employed by Dana Ivey and Morgan Freeman seem carefully chosen. What is not needed is stripped away. Each scene has just the necessary number of words—and the requisite amount of silence—to move us to the next stage in the progression of the relationship.

Thomas Lynch has selected just a few objects to create the setting for Driving Miss Daisy. Two stools serve for the car. Boolie Werthen's office is suggested by a desk and two chairs; his home, by a dresser. Miss Daisy's house is suggested by an arm chair, the small table next to it, and a rug in front. The only decorative pieces on the set are a window table set with a graceful vase brimming with a lush bouquet of flowers. On the sparsely furnished stage the vase and flowers speak eloquently of Daisy's taste, refinement, and sensibility. The two houses and the office are mounted on scenic wagons that move soundlessly onto the stage as needed. The action is played against a cyclorama softly lit with blue light.

There is a wonderful functional purity to the setting. It is by no means monastically austere, but the
setting does suggest the inevitable attenuation of life. In the latter days of life there is only what is necessary, a chair and a table. And, perhaps, one or two items, like a vase of flowers, to recall the days of a more fully accoutered existence.

Similarly, Nat Moyer and Midge Carter burden themselves with but a few material possessions. Nat uses a cane and a walker and is never without his briefcase (and who knows what a library of radical literature might be in it); Midge has his Sporting News. They have reduced life’s venue to an area just big enough for a couple of park benches.

Tony Walton has designed a romantically realistic Central Park setting. His recreation of the park in October is lushly detailed and exact down to the fallen leaves. The rich colors of the sky—azure tinted with golds and pinks—give the setting a constant luminescence. This kind of extravagant scenery satisfies the forty-dollar-a-ticket patron, and the artistic and technical brilliance are delightful. But it certainly works no better than Lynch’s minimalist concept. In fact, the Walton set is somewhat distracting and it’s not as if we need all those leaves to tell us that Nat and Midge are in the autumn of their lives.

It is the older characters who are center stage in I’m Not Rappaport and Driving Miss Daisy. But no doubt most members in the large and devoted audiences for these plays are closer in age to Nat’s character Clara, in her early forties, and Boolie Werthen, who ages from 40 to 65 during the course of the play. It is Clara and Boolie who look on at the octogenarians with mixed senses of love, bemusement, sorrow, frustration, and some degree of outrage. It is outrageous that life will, in time, leave us enfeebled, ineffectual, and insignificant. This is the timely issue for the aging.

---

Grief

Walking the lane by the wood side, I find the ground,
With its sparse green, a cool, unhesitating rock. The leaves
Arch like a church window, like the leaves over the street you
Used to like to take home, the trees in their fierce, intimate stand
Shutting out the sky. Flocks of leaves. And, when the wind
Took them, it was like birds shaking off gravity, their treeward pull.

The braille of the trees speaking coolness, I feel the pull
Of this old spot. Yet, although the past lies brambled on the ground,
My first feeling is, strangely enough, a respect for what the wind
Cannot destroy. The wind is everywhere. In this weather it leaves
Nothing alone—not man or brush or tree.

And, of course, as I stand
Here, cold and calm in the pale light, I can’t help seeing you

Walking this lane, bowing under the lowest leaves. You
Would go, sometimes, to gather blackberries for me, pulling
Them from their netting of thorns as you made a purple stand
In the dusk. (We ate them with cream later on familiar ground.)
And do you remember that time you brought flowers to me—leaves
Merry with dirt—the roots with their little vines winding

Around your knees? I feel like those flowers, but my pain unwinds
More slowly. I wonder what you’d say if, as you used to, you
Could pause and watch me, sweater to my chin, buried in the leaves
In this unbelievable stance, leaning to a tree for comfort as I pull
A leaf apart until its skeleton lies cradled on the ground.
The sky is dead like metal. Oh, I wish I could understand

What this means—this blur of unforgiveness—could understand
The one long thread that connects this lane, these trees, this wind
On my shoulders. Perhaps it’s nothing so much as this cold ground
And the sun with nothing to say.

Darling, I know that you
Would want me to unfist my grief, but—can’t you see?—the pull
Of sadness snapped is like torn knitting, is like those leaves

Crowding their deadness into the sky, those brown, sad leaves
Weighing down the air until it’s impossible to stand
There for the numbers. Maybe one of these days I’ll pull
My imagination back, not find my only pleasure in this cold wind,
And be able to think, without a winter’s grief, of you
Lying there, your face a circle of otherness in the ground.

I want the wind to go along my bones, to cover my body with leaves.
I don’t realize your dying or see any possible way to pull
Some kind of understanding out of this impenetrable ground.

Kim Bridgford

March, 1988

31
Trapped

Dot Nuechterlein

Funny how things can remind you of other things. Recently I worked very late at the office, long after everyone, including the custodians, had gone. When I visited the rest room the door jammed briefly, and I visualized spending all night trapped in this tiny cubicle.

It was momentary, hardly long enough to reprimand myself for locking the door with no other living creature around (apart from that mouse family in the Dean's office). But it stirred a memory of once being locked inside a church.

It happened my senior year of high school. I was a Preacher's Kid, and that year I agreed to play the organ for Dad's three churches. Actually I just added two organs, the large country church (pipe) and the small-town mission (electronic), since I already played for the little hillbilly congregation's monthly service (pump).

Now you should understand that while I played the organ, I was not an organist. I have always been a singer. My parents and two brothers and three sisters all sing; at family reunions, and whenever we go to church together, we harmonize, making it up as we go along. (This has been a source of much embarrassment to my children, since it is habitual and therefore I sometimes do it alone.) Several of us siblings also married musical people, and nearly all of our 13 collective offspring make music.

But my only musical training was from choirs, beginning in first grade. My sisters came along when family finances permitted formal lessons. But I wasn't so lucky. Apart from Mom's teaching me some piano basics, whatever I learned was on my own. I practiced faithfully, though, using the hymnal as a lesson book.

At age nine I got my first job: the one-room parochial school teacher/organist/church custodian paid me 25 cents each week to dust the pews and windowills and altar carvings, and as a bonus he sometimes let me try some hymns on the pipe organ.

So when we moved to a new parish and Dad needed a hymnplayer for the little church tucked away in the hills, I was, at age 13, qualified to try it. That tiny congregation was supported by one man, a farm boy who had moved to the city and made good; he paid the rent on the small white building, bought the fuel for the potbellied stove (I sometimes played with gloves on!), and gave me the fantastic sum of five dollars each month for helping out.

Then when the organist for the country and town churches left suddenly, yours truly—untrained, but better than nothing—filled in for a year. (Later I was "better than nothing" again, serving as third-stringer in two different congregations I attended. My specialty was foreign languages: someone would sit by me and tell me when to play what, while the services proceeded in Danish, or German, or Estonian. They seemed tickled to have me, mistakes and all.)

Now my family lived in the country, but my high school was in town. Whenever I stayed for evening activities I'd walk to church after school and practice. On this particular occasion a workman had come and gone while I was taking a break; not realizing I was there, he locked the door behind him. I discovered my plight when I tried to leave. That was in the days before mandatory crash bars, so the door wouldn't open from the inside. There was no phone, and no church bell to summon the outside world. I was trapped.

Have you ever had such an experience? It is not pleasant. I wasn't afraid, exactly, but it occurred to me that rescue might be a long time in coming. My parents knew I planned to spend the night with a friend, so they wouldn't miss me, and when I didn't show up my friend would simply think my plans had changed.

Naturally I checked the windows, but they did not open. In a fire or other emergency I suppose I could have broken one, but my situation was not that desperate. We had a small kitchen, but no supplies were kept besides coffee and tea. I remember thinking if I stayed all night I could sleep on a pew, using a tablecloth for a blanket.

After a couple of hours fruitlessly looking for a solution, I decided I might as well do some homework. I had barely sat down at a basement table when my eye landed on a small window near the ceiling. Ah, yes! There was a window well on each side of the church—maybe I could reach it and climb up to ground level.

Whatever strength I possess has always been in my head and my mouth, not my hands or arms. It took every ounce to drag the table over and lift a chair onto it, then unlatch the window hook. Fortunately that was a few pounds ago, so I could squeeze through the tiny opening into freedom.

There is no moral to this story, except maybe a small warning. A church can be a refuge for the sinner and a haven for the spirit, but it can also be a prison for the silent. I was trapped because nobody knew I was there. Which leads me to wonder if it is really such a good idea to shush our kids in church all the time. Would it be safer, do you think, to get them to practice the Biblical admonition to "make a joyful noise unto the Lord"?