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Cover: Joy Boettcher (VU soph.). I Call Him Father, 1988, cast concrete. Included in Matriculated: Visual Art in Northwest Indiana, a four-college student show now at VU. Photo: Post-Tribune.

The Cresset
Comment on Contemporary Affairs by the Editor

Temptations and Conflicts

Only now is the number of people who have seen The Last Temptation of Christ beginning to approach that of those who have commented on it. The movie hasn’t reached our corner of Indiana yet, and so the observations that follow can be added to that vast company of commentaries undistracted by personal knowledge. Since even one who presumes to write in luce Tua cannot be expected to review a film he has not seen, those observations will examine The Last Temptation not as a work of art but as a cultural phenomenon.

No film in memory has created the furor this one has, and it is the nature and significance of that uproar that calls for attention. One way of getting at that is through comparison with a related event that occurred recently in our area.

Last spring the black community of Chicago became incensed over a painting displayed in a gallery of the school of the Art Institute of Chicago that portrayed the late mayor, Harold Washington dressed in women’s underwear. When news of the painting leaked out, outraged black members of the city council, accompanied by members of the city police force, descended on the Art Institute and quite literally tore the painting from the walls (the painting was damaged in the course of the operation). Reaction to the event quickly polarized: the student artist, supported by the American Civil Liberties Union and other partisans of unfettered expression, pressed charges against those who had taken action against the painting, while most members of the black community, in the company of a large number of sympathetic whites, expressed indignation over the insensitivity of the Art Institute (which publicly apologized for its actions) in allowing the painting to be displayed in the first place.

So the issue became defined: presumed first amendment rights vs. the offended sensibility of a significant portion of the community. Legal questions aside (the case is still under litigation) most people assessed the matter in common-sense terms. The city council members, the majority of people decided, should not have acted as vigilantes, and they behaved crudely when they did. At the same time and more significantly, most argued, the Art Institute displayed egregious misjudgment in exhibiting a second-rate piece of art that portrayed a revered and recently-deceased member of the black community in demeaning and humiliating fashion. The right of an individual to create art, after all, does not imply a corresponding duty of an exhibitor to display it. All people understood both the deep honor in which Chicago’s black community held Harold Washington and the great pain and offense the painting aroused in that community, and—first-amendment absolutists to the contrary notwithstanding—most people sensed intuitively the balance of moral right in the matter. The law might protect the painting, but moral decency would condemn those who let it see the light of day.

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If we were to operate by simple analogy, then, the Last Temptation controversy would seem quickly to resolve itself. If it is an outrage to portray an honored member of a socio-political community in degrading fashion, surely it is unacceptable to do the same for one understood by the Christian community to be the incarnate son of God. Here gross insensitivity edges into blasphemy, and whether or not the law recognizes blasphemy as an actionable category, most people understand, even when they do not share, the emotional pain it can inflict. Imagine, for example, how most of us would react to a film that portrayed the prophet Mohammed in terms as offensive as conservative Christians see the depiction of Jesus in The Last Temptation. We might not want to see the film censored, but we would fully understand and sympathize with those in the Moslem community offended by it. We might also join in condemnation of those responsible for the making and distribution of the film.

But the question of The Last Temptation in fact is not simple at all. It cannot, to begin with, automatically be equated with the controversy over the painting of Mayor Washington. It would require the most latitudinarian definition to categorize the painting of the late mayor, either in intent or effect, as a serious statement of art. It was, in the first place, badly executed; more importantly, it had—despite the artist’s protests—no significant point to make. One cannot know the mind of the artist, but it was difficult to read his painting as anything other than the effort of a callow and insensitive young man to make a sensational impact without regard either to artistic purpose or to the effect of his work on those for whom Mayor Washington was a figure to be held in reverence. We

September, 1988
may have no reason to expect more of young art students, but neither are we required to take their attempts at career making with moral seriousness.

Such is not at all the case with The Last Temptation of Christ. By all reports, Martin Scorsese's film is a seriously-intended rendering of Nikos Kazantzakis' wrenching novel. This is neither sensationalism nor triviality; it may not be intended as a statement of faith, but no one is likely to deny its seriousness of moral or artistic purpose. There are Christians who have seen it who regard it as a powerful effort to consider with radical intent the central Christian doctrine of the dual nature of Christ, that He was at once fully human and fully divine. Most previous film attempts at a portrayal of Jesus have so minimized his human nature as to render it invisible. It is perhaps inevitable in artistic terms that an effort to capture fully Jesus' humanity should be incapable of capturing his divinity. Many of us have long since come to the conclusion that Jesus of Nazareth, son of man and son of God, is beyond plausible presentation as a figure of dramatic imagination. He is to be worshiped, not artistically interpreted. But even if attempts to capture Jesus dramatically are inherently doomed to frustration (and the point is surely arguable), that does not mean that those who attempt them in good faith should necessarily be condemned for impiety. At the same time—and to add to the complexity of the matter—neither can we assume that estimable art is always commensurate with orthodox piety.

A number of matters come into consideration here, beginning with that of theological integrity. It is significant in this context to record the response to The Last Temptation of James Wall, editor of the liberal Christian Century and a serious film critic. Wall is certainly no fundamentalist, and he reports that he went to the film wanting to like it, but he came away from it deeply disappointed not only by what he saw as its artistic failure—he found it tedious and lifeless—but by its being "utterly lacking in any serious theological vision."

The debate over the film's theological vision focuses on the half-hour segment in which the dying Jesus hallucinates over his "last temptation": being seduced by Satan to renounce the cross and instead lead an ordinary life. Here and apparently elsewhere, the film departs entirely from the New Testament record and uses considerable literary license to imagine in full and, for conservative Christians, offensive detail what it might have meant for Jesus to be simply a man and reject his messianic purpose.

Critics, religious and otherwise, disagree vigorously on how well the film works within its own artistic and theological terms, and only those who have seen it are qualified to make those judgments. But that's not all there is to say about the question.

One gathers that the film's critics are divided for the most part between those who see it as a serious artistic effort and those who see it as an offensive, even blasphemous, affront to Christian faith. But perhaps that sets up a spurious distinction: why might it not be both? In previous efforts to capture the life of Christ, we have often enough seen good (or at least pious) theology make for bad art. Why should we not expect to see good (or at least intriguing) art make for bad theology? (A less interesting possibility is that suggested by Wall: bad art and bad theology.)

Christians of a non-fundamentalist persuasion often fall into a subtle trap in such matters. We don't want to be identified with cultural or theological yahoos, and so our instinct is carefully to distance ourselves from any taint of fundamentalism when issues like response to The Last Temptation come into play. But perhaps we should proceed with caution. If it is the temptation of fundamentalists to be offended for trivial reasons, perhaps it is our temptation not to be offended—or not to be seen to be offended—when there is every reason we should be.

No reverse snobbery is intended here. We know of serious and committed Christians who have seen this film and who found it a faith-enhancing, if troubling, experience. But reconsider in imagination that painting of Harold Washington in women's underwear. The young artist said he meant it to shock the black community into rethinking its tendency to regard the late mayor not as a flesh-and-blood human being but as a semi-deity; he wanted, he said, not to insult Harold Washington but to ensure that he be taken seriously. Imagine that the young man was sincere in that intention. Imagine as well that his painting had been rendered with a skill commensurate with that intention. Sophisticated followers of the mayor might come to understand and appreciate the point intended, but for the great majority of people who loved Harold Washington the painting would remain a grievous offense.

Then think of the conceded liberties—including imagined adultery—that The Last Temptation of Christ takes with the life of Jesus. Ought we be surprised that Christians of traditional and unsophisticated faith find that film—whatever its artistic or theological intentions and whether or not they intend to see it—an offense in its very existence?

That's no argument for censorship (though Plato thought it was) but it may be an argument for conceding that there are circumstances where the demands of art and of social comity come genuinely into conflict.
I am deeply honored to address a convocation of Valparaiso University on such a significant occasion. I hope that my thoughts and the ways in which I express them in some measure appropriately honor President Schnabel and his years as the head of this university. As a theologian whose career has been in very secular universities I have observed from the outside the ways in which church-related universities and colleges have sought to be loyal to a historic religious heritage while pursuing aims and aspirations for high quality of research and teaching in the arts and sciences and in their professional schools. And I have very deep respect for faculties who are devoted to teaching while engaged in their various areas of research. The recognition that Valparaiso University has received, I believe, shows appreciation for its work and life from a broader public community.

In my letter of acceptance of this invitation I noted that I had in my possession a carbon copy of a lecture delivered here years ago by my mentor, colleague, and friend, H. Richard Niebuhr. Its title is “Martin Luther and the Renewal of Human Confidence.” It has never been published. In a way I build from that lecture. But I will focus on some preoccupations of my own that have been nourished by participation in cross-disciplinary work as well as by my concentration on theology and ethics in the Christian tradition.

When we look at the tradition in Western thought that deals with matters of religion we are faced over and over with literature that differentiates between

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faith and reason. This is not the occasion to rehearse the proposed relations between these contrasting terms and that to which they conventionally refer. For many secular persons in university life they refer to mutually exclusive opposites: faith is not reasonable in any way and reason does not include any elements of faith. (I have been frequently angered in my participation in universities by the religious illiteracy of some of my very vocal secular colleagues for whom all religion is dogmatic fundamentalism, or blind leaps to authority, or totally irrational. They would not tolerate equal ignorance and dogmatism in any outsider speaking of their own areas of research and teaching.)

Niebuhr’s reflections on faith pick up traditional meanings and set them into a wider and modern context. Faith, he pointed out in several places, is confidence or trust and it is loyalty or fidelity. As such, “faith” is not confined to religion. Confidence and fidelity are present in common human experience of a variety of sorts. That insight, too, was not utterly novel. One thinks of the exposition of the First Commandment in Luther’s Large Catechism: “To have a god is nothing else than to trust and believe him with our whole heart. . . . The trust and faith of the heart alone make both God and an idol.” And, to be sure, the temptations of idolatry, to excessive or total confidence in that which is less than God, less than universal, are present in all of life. But the burden of my reflections this morning is not prophetic critique of idolatries in universities. I want to call to our attention the deep and broad pervasiveness of human confidence in university life, teaching, and research.

One need not be a theologian to perceive this. A great deal of recent history and philosophy of science has pointed this out. One thinks of Michael Polanyi’s book, Personal Knowledge, with its exposition of “tacit” knowledge, and the ways in which that influences areas of scholarly investigation. There are beliefs, not all of which we are conscious, which inform our investigations. One thinks of the writings of Thomas Kuhn, Stephen Toulmin, Norwood Hanson and others who have provided accounts of the development of the sciences.

While they differ among themselves, a common strand notes the existence of human confidence in the received traditions, theories, and methods of research that characterize much of scientific investigation. Like political and religious communities, so also scientific communities are the bearers of traditions into which members become socialized, consenting (in a way) to much learning, much theorizing, as the ground from which teaching and investigation moves forward. And there are evidences that excessive confidence in what is received sometimes blinds investigators to important features of what they are studying.

What Niebuhr called human confidence is a pervasive fact of life in universities. It is not pervasive enough for some prophetic critics of universities; I take it that one way to understand Allan Bloom’s interpretation of the perils of higher education is to say that for him there is insufficient prejudice, i.e. pre-judgment, in the minds of students to orient and direct them through the course of their studies. Their minds are too open.

One way to understand Allan Bloom’s interpretation of the perils of higher education is to say that for him there is insufficient prejudice, i.e. pre-judgment, in the minds of students to orient and direct them through the course of their studies. Their minds are too open.

Put another way, perhaps too strongly, all of us argue at some point from authority. All of us trust in research and theories that we have not ourselves conducted and proved. This is, I take it, as true in physics and chemistry as it is in the humanities and religious studies. This trust, this human confidence, is not blind compliance with what is received. We, at some point, argue from authority because the demonstration of that from which we argue is itself authoritative. That is, we can have confidence in what we ourselves have not established or proved because what is received has been developed and transmitted by competent and knowledgeable investigators. And it has been tested within a community of competent people. To have confidence in the work of our predecessors as well as the work of our colleagues is a matter of consenting to what they teach us.

Consent, as a form of human confidence, is not blind resignation based on the reputations of others; it is not believing something or someone simply because of who wrote it. Consenting, I believe, involves our intellects, but it also involves reliance on what we have received based on its authoritative arguments and presentation.

I think none of us, teachers or students, would get very far in our work if our primary disposition was, in every instance of what we research, read, or study, to have fundamental mistrust, an utter skepticism toward the material. An infinite regression of skepticism or doubting would paralyze all of us, faculty and students...
alike. We not only question what is received; we also have confidence in much we have received and we proceed from that in which we trust to explore new possibilities. At some point we consent. But this is not traditionalism; it is not submission in a blind way to the authority of that past.

A former colleague of mine wrote an article many years ago on the dilemma of the religious intellectual. Put too pithily, it was that one believed what one was questioning and one questioned what one was believing. That is not simply a matter of the intellectual in the sphere of religious thought; it is, in a way, simply a description of a process by which intellectual and academic activity go on quite broadly. One has confidence in what is received while at the same time questioning the adequacy of what is received. This is why, I think, Stephen Toulmin can describe the development of knowledge in evolutionary terms. New forms of life develop out of old and usually not by destruction of the old.

But one must honestly and straightforwardly admit that in different areas of university life there are different presumptions in favor of, or against, what is received. Consenting to the received, confidence in the received, seems to occur at different points in the process. And it is not the same for all teachers and students in the same field of study. One does not need to know Aristotelian biology and the history of biological ideas to be a good investigator and teacher of biology today. One does not need to know pre-Socratic theories about the nature of all things in order to contribute to current investigations of physics, or even metaphysics. In contrast with this, for some of us at least, one cannot be a competent student of contemporary literature or student of religion without not only reading great texts from the past but also having confidence in the power of those texts to disclose certain aspects of reality that concern us. But even for the current student of biology and physics there are established theories and principles which direct reflections into phenomena and from which new problems are designed and articulated.

I have labored this point long enough. But I state it briefly once again. If faith refers to human confidence, then faith, human confidence (and also faith as faithfulness or loyalty about which I have said nothing), is a necessary condition for learning and research. In a general way this is the case as much in the sciences and social sciences as it is in the humanities, including the study of religion and theology.

Now we turn to rational activity. I choose to speak of rational activity rather than "reason" per se. Why do I do that? I suspect that even in higher mathematics and logic persons are reasoning about something.

To be sure we often respond to something by saying "It stands to reason," but I suspect we do not always take that to mean that what was said avoided all possible problems of formal logic. I think we usually mean that what was said was reasonable with reference to the subject under discussion. That is, one could give reasons to support what was averred. And I use rational activity because, as many articles and books have argued, the kinds of reasons we give are related to the content of our studies and investigations. To be sure we are all under the constraint to avoid the pain of contradiction and to observe other rudimentary rules of argument and discourse. Something cannot be what it is and its opposite at the same time.

In universities when we begin to converse across the boundaries of our disciplines and fields we quickly grasp that, descriptively at least, different ways of arguing are appropriate for different areas, and that different persons argue differently even about the same area. Let me illustrate the latter from the realm of morality, of ethical thought.

Anyone who has taken an introductory course in ethics knows that there is a difference between utilitarian ethics and Kantian, or deontic, ethics. Utilitarian ethics requires that we assess the possible outcomes of alternative courses of action so we can maximize what we judge to be desirable outcomes and minimize the undesirable outcomes. Deontic ethics requires that we adhere to generalizable moral principles and act in accordance with the maxim or rules they support. For the latter an act is right insofar as it accords with the principle. Some of you surely know Kant's famous essay, "Is it ever right to lie from a benevolent motive?" The issue is whether you can justify lying for the sake of some beneficial outcome.

Perhaps to a person deeply committed to one position or the other, the contrasting one appears "unreasonable." But that is not the case to all of us. Both patterns are reasoning about morality. Both are ways of arguing about what makes human actions right and good. There are clearly different judgments about what is most important in deciding that; in a sense each has a different center of gravity in its understanding of morality. While both share a common focus on morality, their rational activity about it differs because of differences of judgment about what makes actions morally commendable or praiseworthy.

I suspect that in their ordinary moral lives most people reason about their actions in ways that appeal to what are two different moral theories in the eyes of scholars. We do assess the possible consequences of alternative courses of action, and the consequence of not doing anything at all. Thus if we could save an innocent life by withholding information from someone
who would use it to take that life, most of us would do that. But at the same time we would not agree that one can justify speaking falsely for the sake of some trivially convenient outcome.

My point is that in much of human experience when we think about what we ought to do, or ought not to do, we use more than one pattern of rational activity. The utilitarian is not unreasonable; s/he reasons about outcomes of actions and about how to determine whether they are good or bad, or mixed. The deontologist is not unreasonable; s/he reasons about principles, their generalizability or universalizability, and how they are applicable to a particular set of circumstances.

It takes no statement of evidence in a university to make clear that investigators in the field of enzymology or cell biology are engaged in rational activity about the entities under examination. Nor that metaphysicians are engaged in rational activity about what it means for something to be rather than not to be, or about the ultimate reality of all things. Nor that professors of law are engaged in rational activity about the justification for laws, and the application of laws and judicial precedents to quite precisely distinctive cases. Nor that historians are engaged in rational activity about factors that seem to condition, if not determine, a sequence of political or cultural events, even when the intentions of the actors in these events is necessary for us to understand them, if not explain them. All of this, it seems to me, is beyond serious dispute.

We also know how difficult it is when each of us, student or faculty member, undertakes to grasp the concepts, the modes of establishing evidences, and the modes of argumentation in fields of study that are novel to us. To apprehend the importance of technical information is not the only difficulty. It is also that our own rational activity is context-related; it has developed in a particular community of specialized scholarship as that has been in focus on particular issues. It is not that a historian is unreasonable to a plasma physicist, but that the canons of rational activity in each field are appropriate to its subject matter and are established over time in a community of scholars within that specialization.

The study of theology is also a rational activity. It involves in fact a variety of rational activities. The scholar assesses, for example, the adequacy of the exegesis of biblical materials used by a theologian. Or s/he assesses in a historical framework the extent to which the formulation of a theological position is conditioned by the historical context in which it is developed. Or, if theology is studied in a more constructive or systematic mode, one is engaged in rational activity about God, the Divine Reality, and God's relations to human beings, to society, culture, and history, and to the natural world. God is an appropriate object of rational activity; arguments about what constitutes adequate conditions for what is claimed to be known about God are rational. They are appropriate to the subject matter. Questions asked in other disciplines are also asked by theologians: what counts for adequate evidences for believing in God? What inferences are drawn from the evidences adduced, and how are they marshalled into a coherent argument? And so forth.

III

I hope I have established, at least provisionally, the grounds for thinking about university life and activity in very general terms as an intricate commingling of human confidence and rational activity. All this is done to serve a larger purpose.

If what I have delineated is plausible, then in a significant way it establishes conditions for both general and somewhat theoretical inferences on the one hand, and some practical inferences on the other. These inferences pertain to how a university like Valparaiso (or any other) can sustain and develop in modest ways
some centers of coherence and integration as it also pursues proper specialization.

First, if we can think about the continuity and com­mingling of human confidence and rational activity as quite common through all the diverse activities of a university we have the door ajar, at least, to a room in which some of the suspicion we have of each other can be mitigated. I would never go so far as to argue what seems to me to be involved in some religious thinkers' response to what I have described, namely that the sciences work more by faith than many persons will admit, and therefore they are intellectually softer than the public believes. Consequently theology or other humanistic and social scientific studies have a kind of license they did not have before.

But I would develop the argument that the recognition of the degree of commonality I have described begins to make possible significant discourse about phenomena, realities, and even concepts that are shared among specialized disciplines. A kind of intellectual humility is appropriate which is a necessary condition if we are to interact on matters that are relevant to a number of fields of endeavor. An acknowledgement of the extent to which the rational activity of each of our disciplines is context-related and involves forms of human confidence can have the outcome of opening each of us to mutual education, to mutual correction, and to modest increments of growth in understanding and knowledge.

Second, we might become more open to recognizing those matters of teaching and research that escape the nets of our specializations. We know that this goes on within restricted areas of various sciences as well as other fields. New areas develop as physicists become biophysicists, or as psychologists become neurologists. And we know that issues of public life, very properly a concern of universities, can never be reduced only to economics, only to political science, only to ethics, only to sociology or psychology.

And we know that within defined areas of specialization there are arguments that are as forcefully pursued by the partisans of one or the other as are arguments between specialties when they address the same phenomenon. One needs only to be a general reader to know that this is the case in economics, in literary critical theory, in philosophy, in theology, and many other places. Excessive confidence in a particular theory or approach to a subject matter functions often to define what the subject matter is, and in so doing some things we at least intuit as being important are missed.

I resort to an anecdote to illustrate this. About twenty years ago I participated in a conference on ethics and public policy. A very distinguished moral philosopher presented a paper contrasting two proposals for urban planning and argued for one of them on the basis of his technical and quite abstract moral theory. The first response from the floor came from a city official from Montreal who described what he had to take into account in urban planning: special economic interests, political interest groups, legal restraints, and much more. He then asked the moral philosopher how his theory would help him. The response he got was that his problems belonged to political philosophy and not to moral philosophy. My point is that a particular disciplinary approach defined for this philosopher what a problem, indeed, a practical problem, was. The urban planner, quite correctly, showed how the problem of urban planning was more complex than the presentation could address.

If the university is to be a fruitful location for exploring larger issues of life, perhaps we need to acknowledge, each of us as scholars, teachers, and students, that all our knowing involves "faith," human confidence in what we have received.

This is only one example I could adduce of matters intellectual and practical that can (to speak colloquially) fall between the disciplinary tracks. To recognize the context-relatedness of our rational activity might free us to explore creatively the margins of that activity and to open possibilities of discourse with other relevant fields in facing significant issues.

Let me further illustrate this with reference to work in which I am soon to be engaged. I have designed a seminar for faculty persons under the title, "Human being/Being human." The first invites participation of more explanatory disciplines: bioanthropology, biology, psychology, sociology, history, and others. The second invites participation of more normative disciplines, those that are concerned with the meaning and indeed the calling of humans. It takes little imagination to grasp the fact that our humanness is looked at from many disciplinary perspectives in a university. Does any one of them provide a sufficient explanation or understanding of the human?

The philosopher working in theories of action is likely to focus on the capacity to have intentions and purposes as that which distinguishes human life. The human geneticist is likely to point out the distinctive chromosomal structure of our species in contrast with
other species. The cultural anthropologist is likely to explain humanity in the contexts of its particular and different cultures, as might other social scientists. Perhaps a theologian might prefer to write about what is essential to human nature, and thus what is shared by all regardless of their social and cultural locations. A religious thinking influenced by Kierkegaard or Reinhold Niebuhr will call attention to the anxiety caused by the fact that we are spirits, and not just physical phenomena, and show how this lends to the sins of pride on one hand or sloth on the other hand if we do not have some profound trust or faith. One who has read Rabbi Heschel might denigrate what can be learned from all possible scientific explanations of the human because the meaning of being human is never accounted for in such accounts. What is the relation between various explanations of the human and what we value about human life?

Years ago I read a paper by a population geneticist who proposed that the human gene pool be legally declared public property so that legislation and regulations could be enforced to keep the gene pool from deteriorating over a long future time span. That is a different center of value from what might be adduced by the artist who values most human capacities for creativity. A knotty philosophical issue emerges that can be properly addressed to all participants: what is the relation between what are defended as the facts about human being and the value of being human? That can be turned a bit: if one has an ideal or normative view of what being human is or ought to be, what are the necessary physical, social, and other conditions for its actualization?

In what relationships do we interpret and understand the human? Karl Barth, the theologian, argues that real "man" is the human being in relation to God. Someone else might argue that the real human is located in what it shares and then what it does not share with other forms of life.

Let me tie this back to the title of this address. Each conceivable approach to explaining, understanding, and valuing human life involves a commingling of rational activity and human confidence. The fact that biopsychologists have not persuaded theologians or cultural anthropologists that their arguments are sufficient is evidence that the phenomenon of the human seems to escape the net of a single discipline or perspective.

But "human being/being human" is a matter of very great importance not only to the intellectually curious who might enjoy defending one or another perspective which in the eyes of their opponents is reductionistic. It is also a matter of great moral importance in our culture. The issue is imbedded in many controversies. For example it is imbedded in issues of medical care: how defective must a defective infant be if one considers not sustaining its life? What degree of neural system and brain function is necessary to back the continuation of life support systems? Or, take a quite different arena: ecology and the dangers we pose to the sustained viability of nature. If, as has been argued, all of nature exists for the sake of human life since humans are made in the image of God, or since the lower always exists to serve the higher and humans are the highest we know, is that a dangerous understanding of the human? Does another interpretation which accepts our continuities with all of nature, rather than our superiority, militate against such dangers? My point is that imbedded in very practical concerns are differences in perceptions, explanations, understandings, and valuations of the human. If there is an institution in modern society that has the resources to explore these matters, it is the university.

But if the university is to be a fruitful location for exploring larger issues of life, perhaps we need to acknowledge, each of us as scholars, teachers, and students, that all our knowing involves "faith," human confidence in what we have received. And all our knowing involves "reason," rational activity about issues that are appropriate to the subject matter, but not sufficient to embrace in isolation much that is worthy of our disciplined and sustained intellectual attention.

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She in the Garden

After the crocuses curl into husks, she reads signs in green stems and weaves earth through white hands, guesses births, pokes at primroses. Crouching, she sways and weeds lavender; narrow leaves wake when she coaxes. In the oregano roots she prods; then he's there, home at noon, brushing past tansy before he goes. Tansy stays in the air as she waves with the grass.

Kristin Searfoss

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The Cresset
CONTEMPORARY CHINA AND
THE GHOST OF CONFUCIUS

The Dialectic of Past and Present in Chinese Culture

In November 1986 an international conference was held in Beijing to discuss the relevance of Confucianism for China today. That might be seen in some circles as a startling development, for little more than a decade ago in one of the dying gasps of China's greatest twentieth-century revolutionary, Mao Zedong, Confucius had been the target of a bitter national campaign. Such a campaign was, in fact, nothing very new. China's greatest teacher, Confucius, who lived roughly 200 years ago, has been roundly condemned throughout this century by Communists and some non-Communists alike. The rallying cry of the famous May 4th movement of the 1910s and 1920s out of which revolutionary China emerged was "Down with Confucius and Sons."

Whether Confucius has been extolled, condemned, or simply analyzed, his ghost has haunted and continues to haunt the makers of China's ongoing modern political revolution. This essay suggests that in the years of Mao Zedong's leadership (1949-1976), Confucius was a ghost from which Mao could not free himself. The years of Deng Xiaoping (1979 to the present), in contrast, evidence Confucius' partial resurrection from an early twentieth-century grave. To provide a background for both, I offer a brief survey of pertinent Confucian ethics.¹

In Confucius' view, China was a society of points, of discrete units. Traditional Chinese ethics is noted for its particularity, not its universality: as a proverb put it: "Sweep the snow from your doorstep but not the frost from your neighbor's roof." Ethics were family-centered and the family was a patriarchal group bound together by the virtue of filial piety. Filial piety meant respect to the family line shown in specific care

¹By contemporary China I mean, following the practice of Chinese historians, China since 1949.
²Any number of works offer overviews of the Confucian ethical system. Two recent surveys are Richard J. Smith, China's Cultural Heritage: the Ch'ing Dynasty, 1644-1912 (Boulder, Co: Westview Press, 1983) and Lloyd Eastman, Family, Field and Ancestors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.)
of parents, reverence of ancestors, and producing children to perpetuate the family. The family unit properly lived in the locality of the ancestors and linked past, present, and future.

Within the family, the predominant ethical dynamic was that of "authority-submission." Confucius talked of five crucial bonds. Three of these were familial, all structured on this dynamic: father-son, husband-wife, and elder brother-younger brother. Commemorative arches dotted areas of the Chinese landscape honoring filial sons and chaste widows. They joined tombs of ancestors often placed on some of the best farm lands.

For a smoothly functioning, harmonious society—and that was the goal of all Chinese philosophy—each person had to fulfill the social role of his name, i.e., the son must be the son and respect the father; the father must be the father, controlling and directing the son. In addition, each social being must follow the proper social procedures and forms, which often became so important that they seemed to take on the character of ends rather than means.

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In the polity as a whole the authority-subject nexus was also crucial. The fourth social bond in Confucian thought was the relationship of the ruler to the ruled. The traditional Chinese ruler was the emperor or Son of Heaven who, by the late imperial period, theoretically held absolute authority, an authority which extended beyond China to the universe as a whole. In rituals, the emperor acted so that the universe would function harmoniously. Subject to the emperor but with authority over the people was the bureaucracy, composed of the scholar-elite class. Often called the gentry, these men had passed the civil service examination based upon an education in the classics and held various levels degrees which made them as intellectuals the political and social leaders of the society.

Education then served as a most important vehicle by which authority was established. The teacher-disciple relationship through which one studied to become a degree-holder operated according to the authority-subject dynamic. A man submitted to the training of his teacher in order to become an authority figure himself. For the masses of Chinese, the inculcation of the value of submission was promoted by the state through frequent public readings of socio-political regulations and ethical norms and the promotion of models to be emulated.

Finally, traditional Chinese culture was marked in the natural world and the metaphysical by the authority- or (in this case) power-subject nexus. The importance of the Chinese farmer before the forces of nature is an obvious likely source of this dynamic—pictured in so many Chinese landscapes where nature dwarfs human beings, making them seem insignificant. Envisioning life in such natural, political, and social environments, one can easily understand how the concept of fate emerged as a rationalization of one's place in the universe, the polity, and the family—with the authority figures stressing the *fate* of the respective subordinates and their necessary acceptance of it.

**III**

Mao's goal was a modernized socialist nation that could gain the wealth and power which China had lacked in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He faced the same question that has confronted all twentieth-century Chinese leaders: how is the new society to be restructured, or, put another way, how does one take a society of points and, as in a dot-to-dot drawing, link them to bring about a meaningful picture? Mao used some Marxist categories or groupings, but more importantly, given the fact that China lacked a viable proletariat to serve as the revolutionary class, he focused on the peasants who made up 85 per cent of the Chinese populace. Establishing social groupings—landlords, rich peasants, middle peasants, poor peasants—and using these categories politically, Mao sought to provide individuals in family or local groups an identity beyond "points."

Yet Mao's primary concern was not social identity and cohesion but building a modern socialist nation. Thus the basic question: how does the state mobilize the energy and resources of new categories of the people in order to achieve that goal? How can the traditional subjects of authority be transformed to seize and use authority for themselves? That's what Mao's revolution was all about. His answer was to stand traditional society on its head. The authority-subject dynamic remained Mao's dominant paradigm and concern, except that the authority figures now became the peasants, and the former political leaders, the intellectuals, became the subjects.

Mao's teachings imbued peasants with all the elements of authority which the intellectuals had once held. Peasants possessed moral authority: they are, he
saw, "clear-sighted"; they "have never been wrong on the general direction of the revolution"; they are enthusiastic and they have a will to succeed (the matter of will is central). They are teachers: intellectuals, writers, and artists, he argued, must learn from them. In Mao's perspective peasants were transformed from people with no right to speak to people with the right to rule. Through revolution, he asserted, peasants had cast off their subject status. In a poem, Mao described them as lifting their lances with red pennons against those who held the whips.

Mao thus took the traditional political-ethical authority in Chinese culture and shifted it to the peasants. He clearly distrusted the intellectuals, even if he recognized them as necessary for modernization. Before they could be used and useful, he insisted, they first had to submit to the peasants and to the Communist Party. Such submission meant remolding thoughts and feelings through labor and through experiences of struggle. Even then, Mao's prognosis on intellectuals was notably cautious: "a thorough change in world outlook takes a very long time and we should work patiently and not be impetuous." When Mao called in 1956 for the blooming of a hundred flowers (i.e., for the intellectuals to voice their ideas openly), he was staggered by the bitter attacks on the system that followed; as a result, the flowers were trampled underfoot: intellectuals were suppressed, many of them sent to the countryside for re-education.

Mao's difficulties in the late two decades of his rule came in part because of his inability to perpetuate the new authority-subject pattern. The revolutionary model of peasant rule and intellectual subjection presented several problems in the effort to mobilize the populace for the making of the new China. For if intellectuals are submerged, ideas and options are obviously restricted. And if Mao depended, as he desired, on the peasants, he had to deal with what even he recognized as their low political consciousness. It was this problem that undoubtedly prompted Mao's famous "poor and blank thesis" set forward in 1958. He wrote: "Apart from their other characteristics, China's 600 million people have two remarkable peculiarities; they are first of all poor and secondly blank. That may seem like a bad thing, but it is really a good thing. Poor people want change, want to do things, want revolution. A clean sheet of paper has no blotches and so the newest and most beautiful words can be written on it, the newest and most beautiful pictures can be painted on it." There is an obvious tension between the authority with which Mao imbued the peasants and the "poor and blank" quality he attributes to them here. The crucial question becomes: who will write the words; who will paint the pictures?

The answer at least until the late 1950s was the Communist Party, the vanguard of the revolution, the instrument of authority in carrying out policy and combating deviations. The party was "to collect the opinions of the masses, sift and refine them, and return them to the masses who take them and put them into practice." Beginning in the late 1950s, however, as Mao projected rapid economic development in the Great Leap Forward, party leaders came to seem to Mao like obstacles to progress as they cautioned about the undue speed with which Mao was moving. The Great Leap Forward with its backyard smelters and gigantic communal mess halls proved a disastrous failure, Mao lost considerable power: the years 1960-1966 saw him with very little support in Beijing.

For Mao, that situation was intolerable. Ultimately he came to see that he himself would be the writer of words and the painter of pictures on the peasants' "blank sheets." Thus the origin of the cataclysmic Cultural Revolution. The story of the Chinese revolution is in part a tortured search for new authority in social hierarchy and political action, a search bound by the age-old Confucian paradigm of authority-submission. Mao destroyed the old authority in order to unleash the energy of those long subordinate. But in the shifts and turns of political change and in the face of what he saw as the perversion of his revolution, Mao finally worked to subordinate the new authorities and install his personal authority with totalitarian force. In one of the closing scenes of his masterful The Last Emperor, Bertolucci depicts the 1960s cult of Mao, shown looming on a billboard as Red Guards dance through the streets below. The last emperor, the filmmaker seemed to be saying, was clearly not Aisin Gioro Puyi.


10In Works, see Mao's "Talks at the Yenan Forum on Literature and Art," p. 264.


At Mao's end, then, we have to return to the memorial arch in Hangzhou. For ultimately, the authority of the Confucian cultural heritage overcame Mao's promethean effort to cast it off. That heritage framed Mao's response to China's problems, a response which highlighted the hierarchial authority-subject model of relationships, the ethical-political nature of leadership, the centrality of education, and the central role of the intelligentsia (either as leaders or as targets).

While Mao wrestled Confucius almost to the death in the Cultural Revolution, today's Chinese leaders have resurrected him, not unthinkingly, but with a pragmatic hope he can aid in modernization.

If the transcendent dynamic of the Chinese political culture was the Confucian authority-subject heritage from which Mao was unable in a practical political sense to extricate himself, the theoretical and psychological import of Mao's attack on old authority was, nonetheless, his greatest contribution to and his greatest success in the Chinese Revolution. Like traditional intellectual-political leaders, Mao wrote a considerable amount of poetry. His poetic vision provides evidence of the broad nature of his attack on authority-subject system which Deng instituted has opened the way for sprouts of capitalism and some diminution of state economic control. The openness to the international scene has overwhelmed Mao's ideas of self-reliance; 40,000 Chinese students are currently studying abroad, 27,000 of them in the U.S. In such a pragmatic aura, it is perhaps not surprising that a conference on the possible role of Confucianism today would be held. While Mao wrestled Confucius almost to the death in the Cultural Revolution, today's Chinese leaders have resurrected him, not unthinkingly, but with a pragmatic view to see what Confucius can bring to the modernization effort.

It has been twelve years since Mao's death. The policies of the regime of Deng Xiaoping have led almost to the extinction of the spirit of Mao. The responsibility system which Deng instituted has opened the way for sprouts of capitalism and some diminution of state economic control. The openness to the international scene has overwhelmed Mao's ideas of self-reliance; 40,000 Chinese students are currently studying abroad, 27,000 of them in the U.S. In such a pragmatic aura, it is perhaps not surprising that a conference on the possible role of Confucianism today would be held. While Mao wrestled Confucius almost to the death in the Cultural Revolution, today's Chinese leaders have resurrected him, not unthinkingly, but with a pragmatic view to see what Confucius can bring to the modernization effort.

Since 1985 there has been a spate of articles in Chinese journals and newspapers on China's cultural legacy and the 1980s. These writings reveal two different attitudes: a comparatively positive attitude toward Chinese traditional culture to accord with the post-Mao outlook, and a more negative view reflecting that of many of China's most important twentieth-century revolutionaries.12

The writers in the positive school assume that the very survival of an independent and unified Chinese

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13Ch'en, Mao and the Chinese Revolution, p. 346.
state today after the internal upheavals and foreign aggression of the last century and a half argues for the existence of strong enduring values in the cultural heritage: China, they rightfully point out, possesses the world's longest continuous integrated culture. Certain cultural values, the positive school suggests, can be utilized in and adapted to the modern world. For one example, the traditional Confucian concept of the collectivity as the fundamental social unit, rather than the individual as in the West, emphasizes the public as opposed to the private. Upholding the ideal that the value of a human being is realized only in his or her relationship with fellow human beings ties the destiny of the individual to that of society and facilitates the goal of modernizing the largest collectivity, the nation.

Furthermore, a proper authority-subject dynamic in the context of a modern state mobilized for action can bring about goal-directed activity to strengthen national feeling and help achieve state political and social aims. (A similar concept of the loyalty of subordinate master to master in Japanese culture has been seen as a source of the rapidity of Japan's modernization.) Utilized in a new context and instilled with new content, traditional values might thus play a positive role for reconstructing China. The great economic success of Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea, all of which developed initially out of Confucian culture or with basic Chinese cultural values, would seem to provide at least partial corroboration of the positive school.

The negative school argues that Confucianism above all created relationships of personal dependency in the family, in education, and in political relationships. Such relationships run counter to the spirit of modernization, which must bring into full play individual creativity. The Confucian and Maoist obsession with social and political authority is an impediment to the process of modernization. In addition, the adherents argue, emphasis upon human relationships encourages pre-modern values of "rule by man" rather than the modern values of "rule by law" in working and legal relationships. An emphasis upon feeling and sentiment so crucial in traditional culture is a powerful obstacle to modernization.

The negative school asserts that traditional culture, despite its glory, beauty, and contribution to human civilization in the past, has become on balance a burden for today's China that must be cast off. Certainly any examination of contemporary Chinese life illustrates some of the concerns of the negative school. The continuing emphasis upon the family and the desire within families for a son have made long-term effective birth control difficult, and birth control is a necessity if China is to deal with its tremendous population problem. China remains a society where personal connections are a crucial way of life: two results of this social situation are widespread use of "the back door" (i.e., circumventing regularized procedures by bringing personal relationships into play), and the rapid development of factions. Traditional emphasis upon forms and procedures in the imperial bureaucracy has been perpetuated in the overblown bureaucratized structures of the Communist state.

A recently completed film, King of Children, by Chen Kaige, China's most internationally acclaimed young filmmaker, portrays the destructiveness of China's cultural traditions on the creativity and individualism of the Chinese. Set during the Cultural Revolution, the film recounts the story of Lao Cha, sent from the city to teach Chinese at a thatch-and-bamboo school in rural western China. The textbook required by the headmaster is a compilation of Maoist pieties which the children must memorize: "The East is Red. The sun rises. Tens of millions of people turn their red hearts to the sun." Aware that recitation of Mao's maxims is no more beneficial than memorizing Confucian classics in years past, Lao Cha eventually scraps the textbook and instructs students to write essays about their lives, which they do with considerable beauty. On their discovery of Lao Cha's techniques, however, local authorities dismiss him.

In two scenes, Chen pointedly attacks the grip of the past and of authority in the Chinese tradition. At one point, Lao Cha is startled by the sounds of ominous chanting and drums that come from the Chinese characters in the dictionary he is reading. Chen later explained that "my concern [here] was our inheritance of the ancient Chinese spirit and what effect it has on our lives." Specifically, he noted, "All of Chinese history and culture lie in those pages. People can create culture but culture controls them."

At the end of the film, authorities burn away the lush, uncultivated vegetation on the hills surrounding the school—the vigorous growth had been a symbol of innocent youth. Lao Cha's comment as he leaves the school for the last time can serve as a reflection of the authoritarian thrust immanent in traditional Chinese culture: "I've been here seven years, and I don't know how many times they've set the hills on fire."

Even if Chen's bleak view of the nature of Confucius' ghost is inaccurate, it is obvious that the spirit of Confucius and traditional culture is a force that will continue in contemporary China. Whether the Chinese will use it or exorcise it will in large part shape the nation's future.

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See the analysis of this film in The Christian Science Monitor (February 24, 1988).
Rabbit Season, Mouse Season

Richard Maxwell

In a 1943 article for *The New Republic*, Manny Farber said the unsayable. Farber suggested that the recent work of the Disney Studios—*Bambi* had appeared the year before—was vastly inferior to the *Merrie Melodies* being produced over on the Warner Brothers lot.

It took thirty years or so for people to start agreeing, but by the mid-Seventies Farber's opinion was widely shared. The new consensus was defined in Film Comment's special 1975 issue on animation and the 1980 anthology, *The American Animated Cartoon*. Now it's 1988: even the Disney Studios, if they want to pay tribute to the art of animation, have to do it in Warner Brothers style. *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, the splendid new Disney movie mixing cartoon characters with human actors, is virtue's tribute to vice, Mickey's tribute to Bugs.

The line between Disney and Warner Brothers might have been a bit fuzzy in the early Thirties, but it soon got clearer. Disney's post-*Snow White* cartoons aspired to realism, particularly in observation of motion. The great Warner animators relied on exaggeration: think of the kinetic competition between Road Runner and Coyote. Disney allowed his cartoonists their gothic indulgences (they were best handled by Vlad Tytla, responsible for the wicked queen of *Snow White*, Stromboli of *Pinocchio*, and several similar characters). Warner Brothers, on the other hand, remained faithful to a kind of comedy that drew on the resources of caricature and vaudeville: there was little or no room for terror, unless in something like the *Fantasia* parody of *What's Opera, Doc?*; there was every opportunity for manic disorientation.

Even the shorter cartoons at Disney tended to be based on elaborate moralistic plots where actions always had consequences and there was only one right way of doing things. Whatever the values of a Warner Brothers cartoon, they were seldom communicated through narrative; most often, plot was replaced by an entropic themewith-variations structure. For example, the notorious "Rabbit Season-Duck Season-Rabbit Season" joke could be enacted over and over, with minute changes; the joke was always on the point of running down, but, in the process, its near-repetition reduced the viewer to jelly—or rather, to the same kind of mess that Elmer Fudd made of Daffy Duck when it was finally established, as it always was, that Rabbit season had departed and Duck Season arrived.

Even the colors at Disney tended to be different from the colors at Warner Brothers. Disney cartoons were dressed up in "sweet sugary tints, flowery violets, fancy-pants pinks" (Farber's words about *Bambi*) moderated—just barely—by careful draughtsmanship and naturalistic detail. Warner Brothers used flat colors rather than glowing ones, schematic backgrounds rather than detailed settings, broad lines for its caricatured protagonists—a choice only partly attributable to limited budgets.

Aside from Farber, no critic before the Sixties seems to have had a good word to say about Warner's. Tex Avery, Chuck Jones, Frank Tashlin, Fritz Freleng, and the other superbly inventive animators at the studio worked more or less in a critical vacuum. There was enough response from audiences to keep the business going. Leon Schlesinger, who was putatively in charge of the Warner's cartoon line, looked in occasionally to see what was happening, but he seldom interfered unless it was to accept a few Oscars at awards time. (He kept them too.) Bugs, Daffy, and the rest managed to become a part of American folklore at the same moment when Disney—always the absolute monarch at his enormous organization—was reaching, with much acclaim, for Art. Largely because of Disney's enormous financial and critical success with feature-length animated cartoons, it seemed for years that Walt had defined a future for the medium, whereas Warner's had just been pandering to vulgar tastes.

**Walt Disney's post-*Snow White* cartoons aspired to realism, particularly in observation of motion. The great Warner animators relied instead on exaggeration.**

Cartoons became respectable when they adapted classic tales by means of lush illustration and powerful narrative, comic interludes enlivening but not altogether dominating the whole. This for-
mula worked beautifully; almost from the start, however, it demanded an outlay of capital which strained even the resources of Disney Studios. The last full-fledged essay in the Disney feature-length cartoon was Sleeping Beauty (1959). If Disney’s great animated features ended with the Fifties, so, for all practical purposes, did the Warner Brothers Merrie Melodies and Looney Toons shorts no longer in demand.

By the time that the revaluation of the Seventies began, neither Disney’s version of the cartoon nor Warner Brothers’ was a going proposition; the choice was retrospective, between two extinct alternatives. It seemed hardly likely that the overdue revaluation of Warner Brothers could have much effect on the future of animation; in mass culture, there wasn’t going to be any future of animation—unless Ralph Bakshi’s half-baked hippie fantasies or Hanna-Barbera’s computerized TV work could be counted.

Roger Rabbit tries to treat Disney and Warner Brothers even-handedly, but the movie wears its heart on its sleeve. Roger begins with an animated cartoon starring the title-hare and “Baby Herman.” Typified by polka-dotted bow tie, red nose, enormous feet, and very good intentions, Roger has to watch Baby carefully or (Mom warns him) he’ll be sent back to the rabbit farm. Baby, it soon transpires, wants a cookie on top of the refrigerator; in an attempt to rescue the kid, Roger gets locked in the oven, cooked, skewered (nearly) with knives, and brained with the aforementioned refrigerator. The violent, exaggerated, nonstop action is Warner Brothers style as seen from the perspective of the mid-1980s; head animator Richard Williams is trying to make the ultimate Warner’s cartoon—and coming pretty close.

We never get to finish watching the cartoon. His head stuck through the refrigerator, Roger sits motionless, stunned, with little (Warner) Tweety Birds chirping around his skull. At this point the camera pulls back; we see that Roger and Baby Herman are live actors—live cartoons—in a real studio, being filmed by human technicians and instructed by a human director. The director is hopping mad: the script says that Roger should have stars circling round his skull. Because of those gratuitous Tweety Birds, the tale has been ruined. The movie can now proceed with its governing conceit—that, back in the good old days, cartoon characters literally had an existence independent of their films—but subliminally, another, equally important notion has been planted in our minds: Warner Brothers made the prototypical cartoons.

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We might suppose that this first sequence is an accident, or that the choice of Warner Brothers style is incidental. Later incidents suggest otherwise. A cover story in Newsweek (June 27) reports that producer Steven Spielberg acquired from Warner’s the right to use Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck. The studio stipulated that Bugs must be given equal time with Mickey Mouse, Daffy with Donald Duck. Roger’s method for holding to this agreement is instructive. The Daffy-Donald scene occurs in a Forties nightclub populated by cartoon characters (“toons”) as well as by humans.

The celebrated fowl are attempting, unsuccessfully, to collaborate in an onstage musical routine. The routine culminates with Donald spontaneously stuffing Daffy into a piano, then aggressively slamming away on it. This is more a Warner Brothers joke than a Disney one, but at least both birds are in character (even more than Elmer Fudd, Daffy became the great fall-guy at Warner’s—and Donald was always impulsive).

Later the balance tips a little more. Detective Eddie Valiant (Bob Hoskins with American accent) visits Toon Town, where he is faced with the kind of perils to which cartoon characters are subjected more often than human. At one point he falls off a vertiginous cartoon skyscraper, past Mickey and Bugs, both wearing parachutes. They discuss his predicament facetiously. Bugs is believable in this role, Mickey isn’t. The Disney figure has been Warnerized, transformed from Mr. Nice Guy (his usual station in life, after a very early mischievous stage, when Disney was just getting started) to Mr. Wise Guy.

Roger obeys different physical laws than we do as well as different emotional laws: when he discovers that Jessica has been “playing paddycake” with the mysterious Mr. Acme, he goes into a perfect cartoon fit—working up to a terrific shot during which he smashes through a real window, leaving a Roger-shaped cartoon outline behind him. These real world-cartoon world mixtures are jokes with a point: they follow the Warner Brothers premise whereby comic conventions are constantly refined so that they become more exaggerated, more deliriously logical or logically delirious.

The Disney tradition, had it prevailed, would have been concerned
with greater and greater realism, working towards the impossible moment when animation could replicate the effects of live-action photography. And of course this film wants to stay away from that sort of effect: the cartoon characters must remain quite different from human beings; otherwise the great special effects lose their point.

Once you visit the cartoon world, you are able to internalize the craziest of its workings; sometimes, you can even fight with a toon on his own, incredible ground.

The reverse is not necessarily true: it might be interesting in this context to watch human beings act like cartoons. Roger uses a trick of this sort at its climax, where Eddie Valiant is compelled to adapt to the Warner Brothers laws of kinesis—and eventually to learn from them. I've already mentioned a sequence in which Valiant visits Toon Town. This wonderful section is followed by a confrontation between the detective and Judge Doom. Doom is now possessed of a doomsday machine which will eliminate all toons from the earth forever. In order to prevent him from starting up this steamroller-like contraption, Valiant has to act like a toon. He discovers some ingenious methods for doing so; almost simultaneously, it is revealed that Doom is a toon, the same one who killed Hoskins' brother many years before. Roger's emphasis shifts from the sheer, comic conventionality of the toons to the possibility of using that conventionality, Warner Brothers-style. Once you visit the cartoon world, as Valiant has, you are able to internalize the craziest of its workings; sometimes, you can even fight with a toon on his own, incredible ground.

I have treated Roger Rabbit as a movie that not only uses cartoons but is centrally, perhaps obsessively, about them. This kind of reflexivity comes as no surprise; American movies have been feeding off themselves for the last twenty years. Roger does intelligently what others (Raiders of the Lost Ark and Star Wars to mention the most famous cases) have attempted without much evident thought though with ample financial reward.

At the same time, Roger Rabbit makes gestures in the direction of specifically political and social themes. Two examples will suggest why the film is not altogether successful when considered in this light. Writing for the Chicago Tribune, Dave Kehr notes that "toon" sounds like a familiar racial epithet, and that the mythology of toons—boisterous, violent, sexy characters who live on the wrong side of the tracks, living life at its rawest—can be easily connected to stereotypes of black American life. True. Nonetheless, if Spielberg and company mean us to pursue this line of thought, then we are more likely to move towards accepting racial stereotypes than to achieve a critical distance from them. The toons, after all, are intrinsically violent, raw, sexy, etc.—in the words of Jessica, Roger's curvaceous wife, they're "drawn that way." Or as Roger later says, he can do anything, as long as it's funny.

I'm going to assume that the creators of Roger do not want us to adopt a similar, deterministic line on racial minorities; the analogy with American race relations is suggestive at times but never the film's central or controlling device. Throughout, the toons are what the movie says they are—cartoon characters—and their status is exactly equivalent to the status of Warner Brothers cartoons (enjoyed but treated condescendingly) during the cultural period in which Roger Rabbit is set. The ghetto of Toon Town is aesthetic.

A second example of the film's failed attempt to treat wider themes is its parody-pastiche of Chinatown. Chinatown, for those who haven't seen it, is a Seventies imitation film noir with Jack Nicholson as a disillusioned detective pursuing Faye Dunaway, John Huston, and the Los Angeles water supply. The film develops an analogy between two different misuses of power: Huston commits incest with his daughter (Dunaway) and steals water to manipulate Southern Californian real estate values. Each of these crimes casts light on the other; each, in its own way, is a kind of ultimate horror.

Roger Rabbit tries to come up with a similar plot, based on the destruction of LA's mass transportation system and its replacement by freeways. This attempt is not altogether successful: the film has no feeling for the old trolley system it supposedly celebrates; imaginatively—in some of its most brilliant special effects—it is on the side of the freeways. Moreover, there is no very obvious connection between the impending doom of the trolleys and the threat to the cartoon characters. The script tries to establish such a link. Toon Town is on the site of what will become a massive freeway interchange; the same character, Judge Doom (Christopher Lloyd), is both the bane of the toons (annihilating them with a sort of erasing fluid) and the advocate of the automobile. Nonetheless, these connections remain forced. They never quite come into focus.

If, in the end, these missed connections don't much hurt the film, it's largely because the Warner Brothers/Disney contrast is worked
out so appositely. According to Roger Rabbit, it is the possibilities explored by Warner Brothers rather than those pursued by the post-Snow White Disney that define the vitality of the American animated film. It is Bugs, not Mickey—and certainly not Bambi—who
differently next month).

I admire the flair with which Roger Rabbit was made; it's the product of an organization only slightly smaller than the Pentagon, but it looks light and easy.

However, even if we are convinced, we are left with a problem: what happens to cartoons now? Here Roger Rabbit equivocates. Hoskins wins his battle with Doom; then the doomsday machine goes crashing through a wall. Perhaps Toon Town is still endangered. Of course, we know that cartoons did
decline in popularity and financial feasibility—just as we know that freeways did take over Los Angeles. Roger Rabbit's sunny finale is thus peculiar, alluding to certain apparent inevitabilities while refusing to face them.

It could be argued that the filmmakers pull their punches. All the same, Roger's conclusion makes sense in that it matches, even expresses, the equivocal circumstances under which the film was made. Perhaps this is the film's political message. Roger responds, quite brilliantly, to a climate of opinion in which Warner Brothers seems superior to Disney... but it does so by Disney means.

The cover story in Newsweek is titled "Who is Roger Rabbit/Spielberg and Disney Take a $45 Million Gamble." The guys at Warner Brothers never took a $45 Million Gamble. They goofed around in the back room and tried to stop Leon Schlesinger from finding out exactly what was going on. If they spent more money than they were supposed to on one cartoon, they spent less on the next, then cooked the books so that it looked like both cartoons cost the same amount. (Chuck Jones has detailed some of these hijinks in interviews; his advice is germane for anyone trying to survive bureaucratic imperatives for standardized production.)

I admire the flair with which Roger Rabbit was made; it's the product of an organization only slightly smaller than the Pentagon,* but it looks light and easy. On the other hand, the Toon Town admired by this film really has gone forever. Warner Brothers style can be brought back, it seems, only by the combined forces of Steven Spielberg and Disney Studios, a team that could probably have gotten the Space Shuttle off the ground by now. Bohemia, so to speak, lives—but only if it's supported by a capital investment of forty-five million dollars.

Wonderful film, Roger Rabbit. The sequel, we are told, is now in progress. Chuck Jones, nonetheless, has retired. Even though Mickey acts like Bugs, he's still Mickey at heart.

*As I write, an item by John Richardson from the Los Angeles Daily News has been reprinted in the Chicago Tribune (July 23). The Los Angeles animation unit that worked on the film is here reported to have seventy-four members. Collectively, these people are responsible for the crucial Toon Town sequence, the Benny the Car sequence, and "400 feet of additional work." The Los Angeles unit is miffed because its contribution to Roger Rabbit is listed in the film's credit under "additional animation."

Dear Editor:

I spent $5 just off Harvard Square last June and got the summer issue of The American Scholar with your essay about Valparaiso University—"Athens" and "Jerusalem" in tension, as communities, respectively, of "inquiry" and "conviction." Like you, I recall those metaphorical cities in the remarks of President O. P. Kretzmann on frequent public occasions. Each time, with the wisdom of sophomores, we sat down expecting a tension between possible elevation and rather certain banality. Did the same sonorous truth have to start every academic year, and maybe even echo at Christmas vespers?

It occurred to me, reading your thoughtful observations about Valpo in these last 30 years, that the relation of students to the rhetoric of their elders is still one of skepticism. They do, however, pay attention to the advice of their peers. Every year, for example, in our scholars program I ask for advice to pass on to the new crowd. Then, in one big advising mailing I quote a lot of students directly. Future archeologists will discover this.

Charles Vandersee has returned to Dogwood from Schenectady, Cambridge, Cornish, and various towns, including Athens-and-Jerusalem, in Indiana.
to be rather curious in places, owing to unexpected outcroppings like food:

"It's best to study in the afternoon, but this makes one hungry for pizza, and this makes one thirsty for bubbly beverages." "Bring a fan and a popcorn popper. My class was told not to bring the latter because everyone else would—they didn’t. Popcorn is an essential part of your diet at midnight." "Don't leave food out—bugs won't exist unless you do." "Be proud to be from the Midwest—and don't shy away from saying 'pop' just because the Southerners all say 'soda.'"

But as to more abstract matters, it might be fair to summarize peer advising as follows:

1. Choose courses by professors, not by subjects.
2. Get involved.
3. Expect to learn more outside of class than you do in.

These hardly need amplification, being so characteristically American, so recognizably rich in displaying the contradiction between the official purpose of the academy and what actually transpires. By the mid-twentieth century, the American university came to exist not really for the mind, but, as Daniel Boorstin has unflinchingly put it, as a place for the "worship of the growing individual." Or, in the candor of one student this year: "Academic work is quick frozen and thawed as needed. People are more important—learn from them and have fun doing it at the same time."

A brief amplification of the above injunctions, based on what students write down, would run as follows:

It doesn't matter much what courses you take in a given semester. Just, if you have any reservation about the teacher on the first day of a course, get out. It won't get any better. Second, get involved outside of class in something that interests you, probably something new, something you didn't do in high school. It doesn't matter what. Third, what you'll really remember and cherish about your college years are the friends you made (not the metaphors and truths). The really important thing in college is learning to get along with other people, no matter who they are.

So our students sound a bit like the "mindless relativists" you encounter at Valpo. Still, the relativism turns out to be in service of certain absolutes. From several years as an academic dean—which means I listen, interrogate, and assure people they're sane—I infer the following dogmas:

1. Intellectual work is by definition solitude and stress, not good. You have to get away from it, and this means recreation and projects done with other people your own age.

"I'm doing well in my classes. I have friends. I'm involved." Long pause. "But I keep thinking college ought to be more than this."

2. The young American mind is incapable of finding out things by itself, especially the ways knowledge is structured and the ways experts decide what really constitutes knowledge. Professors know secrets about this stuff, and a good professor makes these unimportant secrets sound kind of neat.

3. It's important to keep the world going around, in pretty much its accustomed orbit. You do that not by reading, or thinking, or meditation, but by learning how to get along with other people. The cosmos is give and take.

Now, as I may have mentioned to you before, as an academic dean I do one other thing: counsel students in decision-making. The dogmas just listed will sometimes leave a student unconsciously restless, unconfident—even subject to despair. The vague sense does arise among some American students that college should be more than these common certainties, that there is some other knowledge. The decision to be made is whether to look further.

Further, that is, than affirming good human relations, the status quo, avoidance of margins, distrust of one's mind. These are a sort of foursquare academic gospel among undergraduates in the United States, and like hard-edged fundamentalism generally, they produce trouble in the soul. As counselor in decision-making, I am available when (may I quote you?) "ideologues burdened with unexamined and premature certainties about the world" find deeper cravings arising. They wish to decide whether these deeper impulses are to be suppressed or accepted.

Not in so many words, often. It may be just a plaintive string of certainties that would delight their parents: "I'm doing well in my classes. I have friends. I'm involved." Long pause. "But I keep thinking college ought to be more than this."

This sounds speculative and melodramatic, but I find it reinforced constantly by students and by fellow members of the university "support staff." So you will not be surprised that at the beginning of another school year I feel moved to introduce my own certainties. Though not a physician or a clinical psychologist, or social worker or pastor, I do wish to sustain life. So I sustain in private conversation with students, and sometimes in groups, a certain small number of convictions—for which, unlike O. P. Kretzmann, I have not found
resonant metaphors.

Taking for granted the skepticism of students to most rhetoric outside of their own generation, my aim is not to assert convictions but to find ways of insinuating them into consciousness. Which is why I'm glad that my other chief occupation (as an English teacher) is the habitual investigation of the ways language works.

These are the convictions in service of decision-making; please understand me as speaking them to myself, not to the skeptical ear:

1. There are no secrets; the life of the academy is not gnostic.
2. Truth is not a gift or an offering but a display; if young people refuse it, we elders should not have our feelings hurt, and should not be surprised.
3. This display is not like a table full of mayonnaise salads on a hot day; it won't spoil if you don't take it right now.
4. No matter how knowledgeable, comfortable, "correct," and mature various individuals among us in this academic community may already be, we are all becoming new creatures.
5. Like a good parent or a good candidate for public office, let me try to be consistent, regardless of audience.

A few paragraphs to connect these:

A university is merely an institution, and a small one, even though some of us, like O. P. Kretzmann, can envision it as the nearest human approximation to the heavenly city. Since it is a human institution rather than a force of nature, its demons can be found out and usually exorcised. The highest of its exhilarations can be attained or at least tasted by all. The apparently mystifying behavior of bureaucrats can be understood and dealt with. The ways of "getting the most" out of college are well established and not mysterious.

We have codes to break, perhaps, and folkways to study and codify, but no secrets. You can figure out what a particular professor wants out of you (and why), and you can petition (often successfully) to waive a policy that makes no sense. You can even learn to grasp why men and women, evidently sane and mature, will sometimes willingly remain poor in order to live at a university.

College is not a present or a gift, with a gift's tiresome obligations. At age 16, the poet Marianne Moore "received the present of a bicycle—a maroon Reading Standard. Was I delighted? Not at all. I would have to learn to ride; riding itself was work." College is a display, of certain truths not self-evident in Ann Landers or the daily horoscope: The mind is strong. The status quo is plaster of Paris. The pleasures to be gained from life are not always from peers and from involvement. But if you don't learn these truths in first or second year of college, we're not going to suffer a crisis of confidence. Because we too, the faculty, as we do our work (our real work, often distant from our teaching and our conversation with undergraduates), ourselves are changing, aware that the pace and kinds of human change can't well be legislated. We entered the academy because there we could forever become new creatures without the endless hassle of inventing explanations. It is not so easy for an accountant, let's say, to tell his firm he plans to spend a month in Cambridge to read and think and write.

Finally, it is one measure of credibility in an adviser to remain consistent, and persistent, in these convictions, whether speaking with the gifted student, the marginal student, the student feeling disenfranchised, the editor of the student paper, the skeptical, the hopeless time-server. Because, as I've said, students do talk to each other. But one doesn't always speak one's convictions quite directly.

Thus the student who has the grades, the friends, and the involvement need not languish in

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**Looking North**

By late day, the sun leafs gold
The green of Florida. Great oaks glow
Above the fields until the final burn
And darkness. No night is so dark
As summer night here. Not even far north's
Deepest white in winter holds dark
As dark as this. Here the seasons bend
Shadows back little; time ticks
In steady state; and we peer home-
Ward darkly through the summer's lost
Light, looking for a night we once
Knew bright where our sharp shadows
Rose and fell like steaming breath.

Robert Pawlowski

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September, 1988
mystification when feeling something is missing. But you don’t “give” or “offer” the secret cure. You suspect he is dutifully writing papers and taking tests but has not experienced the passion to find out things on his own, from the library stacks or from visits to professors—that messy but satisfying involvement that the code calls “research” or “scholarship.” Or “love of learning.”

One insinuates this into his mind by displaying instances—the student one knows who was lately thrilled by an expedition to the Library of Congress; the pair of students who actually took a professor out to lunch to graze on the insides of his better-than-popcorn mind; the visiting lecturer who will tell you what the Civil War and Reconstruction look like today, which may or may not coincide with your five-year-old textbook.

“I would, if I could, let little things be little things—would be less susceptible to embarrassment,” Moore goes on, in her essay, “If I Were Sixteen Today,” lightly touching the ways our peers and our folkways hurt us. “Give ‘culture’ the benefit of the doubt; don’t look on art as effeminate, and museums as ‘the most tiring form of recreation there is.’”

But, as I’ve said, you can’t say these things to people. You can’t say to a college student (even if you attribute it to Marianne Moore, who actually did say it): “One should above all, learn to be silent, to listen; to make possible promptings from on high.” You can say simply, almost at random, as a carefully planned non sequitur somewhere in the conversation: “A person sometimes likes to walk up along the Appalachian Trail in fall. The Blue Ridge is only 25 miles from here. Would any of your friends loan you a car?”

From Dogwood, yours faithfully,
C.V.

United Kingdom, France, the Federal Republic of Germany, and the Soviet Union.

Over twenty-five years, the texts and our curricular objectives have changed in the direction of including nations in the developing world with non-Western cultural characteristics. The original four nations, while still very important in today’s world, are simply not representative enough of the 160 or so nations in the United Nations. Though I still keep up with developments in the four originals, there is not enough time in a semester to treat all four of them, plus some non-Western representatives. I do, though, manage to rotate the four of them into the course over a cycle of several years.

As I returned to my notes on the four nations this summer, I reflected on what I (and the texts) said about them twenty-five years ago. Were the descriptions and analyses of a quarter-century ago still valid today? If I had been in a coma over that time span, could I go back and use the same notes?

**The more leisurely pace of the summer allows college instructors the time to rethink and rework course notes.**

The answer to the last question is, of course, no. I could not use the same notes today that I used twenty-five years ago or even ten years ago. All political systems change continuously, at least to some extent. The most obvious change is in personnel, and in democracies we further expect the major political parties to alternate in office. Even in the most stable and continuous of political systems, new parties and movements arise and vie for power.

All this is to be expected. What
did startle me more than a little bit in revising my notes was that two of the four nations have experienced quite profound change over the last twenty-five years. Those two nations, the United Kingdom and the Soviet Union, were precisely the two that in 1963 I would have confidently predicted would change little. The United Kingdom has always been the political analyst's prime example of stability and incremental change. When change comes in the United Kingdom, it is supposed to come slowly and almost by consensus. The Soviet Union, for its part, seemed stifled by bureaucracy and ideological thinking in the early 1960s. The somewhat fresh breath of air, the unconventional Nikita Khrushchev, was removed from office by his Soviet colleagues. Even the benefit of another twenty years of observation of the Soviet system, roughly the entire tenure of Leonid Brezhnev (until his death in 1982), would only have confirmed the unlikeliness of the Soviet system to change.

On the other hand, in 1963 I would have felt the future of France, then only five years into the Fifth Republic, to be uncertain. The uncertainty was compounded by the unusual leadership of the elderly leader of France, Charles De Gaulle. Many were predicting the fall of the Fifth Republic, a regime which had been designed with De Gaulle very much in mind, upon De Gaulle's death or retirement. France's previous regime, the Fourth Republic, had lasted only twelve years, and during that time had seen on average a new government every ten months. France had changed constitutions or regimes nine times since the birth of the American constitution in 1789, and one could not be too optimistic about the one adopted in 1958.

Yet it is still around in 1988. It has survived the retirement and death of De Gaulle and much more. It recently survived a split in power between Left and Right. It has survived a President, Mitterand, who had earlier promised to abolish it. Indeed Mr. Mitterand, after winning re-election this summer in a convincing manner, actually appeared to give the constitution some credit for his successes. France has now become something of a bastion of political stability. Even the large Communist Party, which some saw as a threat to stability, is now only half of its former electoral size and no longer perceived as a danger to the regime's longevity.

**Articles in newspapers and magazines that talk about “the Thatcher revolution” are right in choosing that label.**

West Germany, the last of the original four, was only fourteen years old in 1963. It had had only one leader, Konrad Adenauer. But an already booming economy and a strong German aversion to extremism or radical experimentation in politics led many, myself included, to predict stability and continuity in German political institutions. And so it has been: West Germany is the only one of the four nations that has lived up to my expectations. Only the growth of the Greens in the 1980s has not fit earlier analysis and expectations, and even that surprising political movement now appears to have peaked with less than 10 per cent support among German voters.

The biggest surprise for me has been Britain, the country I have followed most closely over the years. As with the Soviet Union, Britain has changed significantly only in the most recent past. The British change is associated essentially with one political figure, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. The articles in newspapers and magazines that talk about “the Thatcher revolution” are close to right in choosing that label. Not everyone, myself included, would suggest that the changes are all for the good. Nevertheless, Mrs. Thatcher has accomplished at least four major changes in British politics that were anticipated by almost no one as late as the election of 1979.

She has radically revised the tax system in the United Kingdom, pulling back from taxing the rich at high rates. She has attacked major aspects of the welfare state, most lately the vaunted National Health Service. She has privatized many of the previously government-owned segments of the British economy. Finally, she has attacked and partially succeeded in diminishing the power of the trade unions.

Before Thatcher, political observers of Britain commonly said that while Conservatives in that country might not be wild about the tax system, the welfare state, nationalized industries, and the power of trade unions, they were all part of the essential structure of the British system and would not be repudiated by any government. They might be tinkered with or reformed, but their existence seemed fully accepted by both of the major political parties. Margaret Thatcher has turned out not to be part of this presumed consensus.

So far, she has sold off most of the profitable nationalized industries. She has also used her majority in Parliament to pass laws regulating elections in trade unions so that votes for leadership and for strikes might be conducted with some secrecy and without obvious intimidation of union rank-and-file. Mrs. Thatcher is now about to change the basis of local govern-
ment financing from property taxes to a poll tax. In addition, the highest brackets for income tax will be lowered and simplified. She has also introduced competition in the provision of education by schools and is about to make the same proposal for health services. And under her tenure, the number of owner-occupiers in housing has almost doubled.

Prime Minister Thatcher has been able to accomplish these major changes through personal determination, control of her party and its majority in Parliament, the strong constitutional position of a British prime minister, and—the one factor which lies outside her own control—the changing ideological position and electoral decline of the Labor Party. Next to Mrs. Thatcher's own appearance on the scene, this last change has been the major unforeseen occurrence in British politics. Through the 1970s and the tenures of moderate Labor prime ministers like Harold Wilson and James Callaghan, political analysts saw moderation and convergence in the policies and ideological positions of the Labor and Conservative parties. The British seemed destined to maintain healthy two-party competition.

Instead, the triumph of at least a “Soft Left” position in the Labor Party has driven many moderates out of that party to form the Social Democratic Party. This has split Labor's vote and is partially responsible for two of Thatcher's three election victories, those in 1983 and 1987. There is also evidence that the ordinary Labor voter has found that party's platform too extreme and has decided either not to vote at all, to vote Conservative, or to vote for the Liberals or the Social Democrats. In any case, Margaret Thatcher's appeal and the decline of Labor's appeal have handed to the Conservative leader three successive election victories and a tenure that now totals nine years, the longest in this century for a prime minister. Such longevity would help any leader, and when combined with Thatcher's will and determination it has made a policy revolution possible.

The changes in the Soviet Union, again linked to one leadership figure, Mikhail Gorbachev, have been much commented on in the West for the last two years. It is probably more noticed by the ordinary American than change in the United Kingdom. We want to believe that a nation that has been seen as our major competitor is changing for the better. Unlike Britain, the changes so far in the Soviet Union have not matched the rhetoric. If they do, my notes for that country will need a major revision.

The changes seen so far in the Soviet Union do not mandate a wholesale revision of class notes, but they may yet.

Up to the summer of 1988, the changes in the Soviet Union appeared to be largely at the rhetorical level, or in the personal style of the General Secretary. We have had our attention called many times to that fact that Mr. Gorbachev is relatively young for a Soviet leader, that he is acquainted with and admires some Western ideas, that his wife is attractive, and that his ideas and style have provoked some of his “conservative” colleagues on the Politburo. His ideas are usually focused on three concepts, glasnost, perestroika, and democratization. It is the last that we think we understand and applaud, but which is still largely a hope or expectation.

Glasnost means openness or frankness, and there has been a certain amount of this in the public media, and apparently in the not-yet-public Communist Party meetings. There is much admitting of past mistakes. In a notable speech in November of last year, Mr. Gorbachev conceded that not only Stalin had made mistakes, but Mr. Brezhnev as well. In the Party Conference held this past summer, the Soviet press reported unprecedented openness and criticism of the system. Some speakers went so far as to criticize senior members of the present Politburo.

Perestroika means restructuring, and seems to be aimed mainly at the economic system. One intended aspect of restructuring involves the decentralization of decision-making from the central government ministries down to factory and collective farm managers. Another proposal would introduce bidding and competition in the supply of materials to factories and other production units. Factory managers are to be allowed to search for the best deal in finding the supplies they need. Finally and most radically, there is recognition of the validity of small private enterprises, particularly in the provision of services to ordinary Soviet citizens. Much of the perestroika concept was embodied in the Law of State Enterprises that was proposed and passed last year. Demonstrating glasnost, the Soviet leaders and the Soviet press have been frank to admit that this law has not changed behavior as much as they intended.

The actual changes seen so far in the Soviet Union do not mandate a wholesale revision of class notes, but this revision may yet be necessary. The rhetoric of change remains radical. At the extraordinary meeting in Moscow this past summer, and in the events and preparations leading up to it, we heard proposals for reforming political institutions that are as far-reaching
as those proposed by Lenin or the early Stalin. They would change substantially the political system the Soviet Union has known for the last twenty-five years. Taken together they would increase democracy within the Communist Party and would diminish the role of the Party in the day-to-day direction of Soviet society and the economy.

Specific proposals include a ten-year limit on the terms of top Soviet leaders, real choices and elections at all levels of Party activity, the elimination of the departments within the Secretariat of the Party that monitor and direct the economic system, cutting the size and number of Government ministries involved in running the economic system, and the institution of a French-style president in the Soviet constitutional structure. If these reforms are implemented, not only will my notes need to be revised, but it will then be reasonable to expect even further significant change. At this stage, I am prepared to be shocked out of my complacency about the Soviet system and its resistance to alteration.

It is the anticipation of change that brings excitement to the teaching of political science courses, especially one taught as long as I have taught Comparative Politics. At the same time, there is never as much change as one might like. Perhaps this long-term continuity stands as a testimony to the validity of our earlier analyses of these political systems and to the aspiration of political science to be a science and to explain and predict the behavior of political systems.

Yet I did not anticipate the significant changes in the United Kingdom, nor the prospect of change in the Soviet Union. This presents both challenge and excitement enough to carry me—and maybe the students as well—through another year in Comparative Politics.

Review Essay
A Proper Knowing
Gail McGrew Eifrig

Flannery O’Connor: A Proper Scaring
By Jill Baumgaertner. Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw. 191 pp. $11.95.

It is by now perhaps a truism to say that many texts both reveal and conceal truth from their readers. Those who know already how to read the text find truth revealed, those who don’t find the text an impenetrable jungle. The fiction of Flannery O'Connor is a striking example of this phenomenon, and Professor Jill Baumgaertner’s book, Flannery O’Connor: A Proper Scaring, is designed to help those people in the latter category find their way into the first.

Most people who read a lot of fiction are comfortable with such a paradox: they tend to expect that there is a lot about a given situation in the text that the text is revealing, but not saying. Readers, I suppose, could be divided into two groups: those who know, accept, and even enjoy this fact, and those who don’t. Without trying to be judgmental, but simply descriptive, I will refer to these as knowing and unknowing readers. And before looking closely at Baumgaertner’s approach to O’Connor, it would be helpful to examine this knowing/unknowing quality of reading more closely.

When Huckleberry Finn, for example, tells us that he thinks Jim is really a wonderful person, in spite of his being a nigger, knowing readers are aware that the text is not saying “niggers are inferior.” Something else about the text allows us to know that what is “really” meant is that Huck, a somewhat innocent product of the prejudices of his times, has correct instincts about relationships between the races which run counter to the beliefs of those he has been taught to regard as his moral superiors. His youth prevents him from trusting the truth of his instincts, and thus he repeats the words of the prejudices of the community which is attempting to shape him. Thus the words of the text tell us one thing, but the meaning of the text is something other, and much more complex, than any particular group of words might appear to mean.

The problem of what the text says and what it means has been particularly difficult, and remarkably public, in the case of Huckleberry Finn, because teachers have been accused of teaching racist attitudes by having young people read a book in which a young person expresses racist attitudes. A great American novel has been very unjustly criticized, and a great deal of bad feeling, anger, censorship, and misplaced criticism of Twain has resulted, principally because unknowing readers have made a contact with the text, but do not understand how that text makes sense.

But of course this distinction only opens up more problems for
us as we consider what goes on when people read. My casual description of two classes of readers, for example, cannot be taken as defining fixed categories. A person may be a knowing reader of Hemingway, and an unknowing reader of Austen, to pick two writers who may be very surprised to find themselves in the same sentence. To be a knowing reader requires a combination of knowledge and detachment, involvement and disassociation.

To read *Huckleberry Finn* knowingly one probably must be older than Huck, for instance, or one may be unable to see how strongly his youth, despite his apparent experience and his expressed confidence in himself, hinders him from seeing truly the nature of his and Jim’s condition. One should know something about common attitudes toward slavery in the America which is the setting of the novel, and possibly about the economic and social meanings of the Mississippi River for an emergent America. But this knowledge and awareness have to be combined with the willingness to observe these characters from the distance that such knowledge gives.

We can, to the extent that we are knowledgeable readers, never absolutely share Huck’s world, never become one with it, never know it as he knows it, partly because we recognize the distance between us as character and reader. But readers who cannot figure out the relationship between themselves and Huck (and there are a great many of these, it seems, as readership of fiction declines), will always be puzzled about how to believe what Huck says, and how to make sense of the world he presents and the truths about that world which his words both reveal and conceal.

The problems posed by texts for readers are compounded when the reputation, or label, of the text seems to identify a known quality which the text itself appears not to match. Flannery O’Connor, a self-proclaimed Christian writer, frequently puzzles Christians who read her work. Even knowing readers find themselves baffled about meanings, for though there is never any doubt about the actual events of the narrative in an O’Connor story, deriving what many people would recognize as a “Christian meaning” can be impossible.

**Flannery O’Connor frequently puzzles her Christian readers.**

We are quite certain from the outset of “A Good Man Is Hard To Find” that the family is going on a car trip, and we know all that anybody needs to know about the relationship of family members to each other. Through the descriptive details we know about the grandmother’s dress, and the children’s amusements. Through dialogue we gather something about the psychology of the relationship between the son and his wife and his mother. And we have neatly presented foreshadowing of the catastrophic ending in the newspaper and radio announcements of the wandering killer.

But even after the Misfit has killed the grandmother, and pronounced the story’s final line—"She would have been a good woman if it had been somebody there to shoot her every day of her life"—most readers are understandably uncertain how to account for the meaning of the story, the significance of events. And to be asked to account for these significances as “Christian” not only baffles, but positively angers, many readers.

Baumgaertner’s work quite successfully answers the questions posed by such baffled readers. It probably even goes far to soothe the angers of those who feel that they have been tricked, or bamboozled somehow into reading something which falsely promised to be “uplifting.” As far as I can tell, this term identifies what most people in the world of ordinary readers mean by the term “Christian” as applied to reading. O’Connor herself has some wonderful comments on this subject, which readers of her letters will recall with pleased, if slightly smug, smiles.

* A Proper Scaring* does at least begin the process of turning unknowing readers into knowing ones and it does so with thoroughness and skill. Professor Baumgaertner is herself knowledgeable, and, as a teacher, she approaches her audience with the clearly perceived goal of adding to their information, increasing their understanding, and providing guidance through a difficult territory. As a volume in a series designed to provide the general reader with instruction, this book certainly fulfills all that one could expect of it. It is a useful book, shaped to a particular purpose and completing the purpose.

Probably chief among the elements of information given to the reader is the material on seventeenth-century emblem literature. It is not really a surprise to find that this approach to O’Connor is particularly powerful for Baumgaertner, who is herself a poet and has written on John Donne as well as other Christian writers for whom the emblem offered an immediate and powerful means of conveying two meanings at one instant. Emblems are pictorial symbols, “pictorial representations of scriptural truth [which] literalized a motto, epigram, or scriptural passage to provoke a new response to an old and often too familiar saying.”
Though this information is valuable to the person attempting to become a knowledgeable reader of O'Connor, since to accept the premise of this literalized pictorial representation helps one to understand an essential quality of this writer's artistic presuppositions, the reader wishing to know more about emblem literature as O'Connor might have experienced it may be disappointed to find it rather sparsely described. True, Baumgaertner acknowledges that we have "no direct evidence that she was conversant with the tradition." But if reading for the emblem quality, or what the author calls "the emblematic moment," is indeed central to what we are to learn about O'Connor in this book, then more information and comment on it as background would be welcome.

In any case, Baumgaertner takes her readers on a tour of the O'Connor territory, wisely arranging the stories according to the theological emphasis which must be perceived if the story is to be clear as revelation. Thus the book opens with a chapter on Law, making several short comments on early stories, and concluding with a thorough discussion of "The Turkey" and "Good Country People." The next chapter, "Discharged from the Law," first considers "Parker's Back" and "The Lame Shall Enter First," and then concentrates on "The Artificial Nigger."

This method enables the author to recall to our attention any story she has previously discussed, building gradually a store of understanding and cross reference that makes a complicated structure for the work, but a much more satisfying one than the predictable Early Stories, Middle Stories, Late Stories sort of arrangement. In the course of development of the structure, all the major stories, and the two novels, receive attention and some analysis, though one cannot find everything that Baumgaertner has to say about a given story simply by looking up its major entry in the index. (The jacket suggests that this book would be good to use in a class reading O'Connor, and I would find that this arrangement would neatly prevent a student from simply skimming the critical work's surface for one or two useful tidbits for class discussion.)

Returning to the book's central undertaking in the light of the earlier discussion of knowing readership, we must find in this kind of book an inescapable dilemma. The critic, scholar, and writer Robert Fitzgerald, who was one of O'Connor's closest friends, said, in words she herself used frequently, "It is the business of the artist to uncover the strangeness of truth." Those who find themselves captivated by O'Connor experience exactly that: the strangeness of truth.

Even a list of snatches of dialogue would demonstrate this quality of her writing, that in a moment, in a phrase, a truth in all its strangeness leaps out from the page like a creature with a life of its own. "As far as I'm concerned," she said and glared at him fiercely, "Christ was just another D. P." (The Displaced Person) "The law," Mr. Shiflet said and spit. "It's the law that don't satisfy me." (The Life You Save May Be Your Own) "Is no man that works as hard as Chancy, or is as easy with a cow, or is more of a Christian." (The Displaced Person) "I'm glad I've went once, but I'll never go back again!" (The Artificial Nigger) "What's the matter with you all of a sudden? . . . You just a while ago said you didn't believe in nothing, I thought you was some girl!" (Good Country People)

To put these truths in other ways, one would have to write paragraphs of expository prose, describing, for instance that Mrs. Shortley's conflation of her husband's good hands with a cow and his status as a Christian is an exact reproduction of the secular world's misunderstanding of what Christianity is all about, as though to be a Christian were something positive to put on a resume, something equatable with being an Eagle Scout, or a Red Cross volunteer, or, well, a good cow handler. But as surely as Mrs. Shortley's exposition can be explained and iden-

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*September, 1988*
ified, to that extent the strangeness disappears, and the artist's work is there to do all over again.

At the least, what has been lost by translating the speaker's words into the teacher's explanation is the surprise of the image conveying the writer's sense of the amazing strangeness of truth. This loss is what students complain about when they insist that the teacher's questions "ruin the poem." I think teachers, and in this case that includes Professor Baumgaertner, must always allow that, if their explanations have not ruined the work, they have at least distorted or radically changed it in some way. This danger is especially pronounced when the explainer uses language that limits or unduly specifies the quality of the artist's surprising perception.

For example, Baumgaertner closes her discussion of Manley Pointer by saying that "one knows he will take his contradictory, and yet complementary, messages of sin and gospel with him on a never-ending journey." Now, whatever one makes of Manley Pointer, and I tend to agree with most of what this book makes of him, I think that such language is too closed off and specific. It suggests that the reader can only become knowing about the text by reading this explanation and accepting it, agreeing with its conclusions, adopting its vision. The change to "one suspects" or "one may assume" or even "I know that" in the sentence above would make all the difference. Such language would invite the reader to use the new knowingness which the teacher's premises have provided, and to move toward truer readings on that basis, leaving room for the individual's own response to those surprises and revelations that the original text will provide.

A similar objection can be made to the attitude that sees O'Connor as an emblem maker only, with the focus on the intention of the image rather than on its exterior. This is the stance of the critic who writes "The story is really about the encounter of law and gospel." It seems quite legitimate to say that "In writing this story, O'Connor displays an encounter of law and gospel," or that "This story demands that we consider the encounter of law and gospel." But "Parker's Back" is really about Parker, and his tattoos, and Sarah Ruth Cates. They are not incidental to a sermon about law and gospel. And unlike other considerations of law and gospel, this one, "Parker's Back," is itself, has its own quiddity, its own view, its own details, its absolutely unrepeatable form and design.

**As students are quick to point out, one pays a price for becoming a knowing reader.**

The unwillingness of the critic to consider the thing itself as itself leads in the case of this book to an impression that the stories are solemn. Though it is true that some people do not think O'Connor funny, others do, and the enormously comic quality of both dialogue and incident gets short shrift in this consideration.

Which is a pity. Discussing the foreshadowing of the mother's stroke present in the first sentence of "Everything That Rises Must Converge," Baumgaertner first wants to explain that "her blood pressure has risen because her weight has risen," because the concept of "rising" and the meaning which that term takes in the story is her immediate concern. But in focusing there, she seems to miss the marvels of that comic statement: "Her doctor had told Julian's mother that she must lose twenty pounds on account of her blood pressure, so on Wednesday nights Julian had to take her downtown on the bus for a reducing class at the Y. The reducing class was designed for working girls over fifty, who weighed from 165 to 200 pounds."

Certainly it is true that you cannot explain to anyone why this is funny, but somehow the comic in the statement should not be ignored, especially since it has to do here with a capacity for self-deception, one of the prime elements of comedy. Even if the story is characterized by "bleakness," (and here I do disagree with Professor Baumgaertner) the truth about the quality of this story is that it is often funny. Some might insist that whenever God and people collide, the results are essentially comic; O'Connor's ear for this quality is unerring, but Baumgaertner does not often seem to hear it that way.

Indeed, as students are quick to point out, one pays a price for becoming a knowing reader. Part of the price is the loss of a spontaneous response, the rush of emotion that can make the young, inexperienced reader exclaim, "Oh, I love this poem!" And another part of the loss is a sense of humor, and sometimes a sense of humility before the text. Professor Baumgaertner herself finds an appropriate balance between knowingness and humility. One never hears in her voice the sound of smugness, or of the patronage that can characterize someone who attempts to be what Mr. Head considers himself to be, "a suitable guide for the young."

As the author guides her readers into knowingness through O'Connor's strange byways, she remains aware of the great mysteries of grace which are at the heart of this fiction, dissolving all differences that separate people from each other and from God.
Tooning In

James Combs

Like many other people in the scorching summer of 1988, I went to see the movie Who Framed Roger Rabbit? Indeed, again like many others, I went to see it twice. The first time through, watching the dazzling interplay of animated and human action, I had the typical response: how do they do that? The second time, I could concentrate more on how well the ambitious interweaving of genres (what director Robert Zemeckis called "cartoon noir") worked.

Indeed, the filmmakers seem to have tried very hard to make a movie that was simultaneously for adults and children, and I'm not so sure they completely succeeded at that. Little kids in particular might not understand the adult jokes, but they can understand the menacing violence to cute cartoon characters. Yet I have a feeling that it is adults who will be made more uncomfortable by the movie than kids.

Throughout the film, the animated characters are referred to as "toons" and where they live as "Toon Town." Toons not only rhyme with an ugly racial slur, but toons are attributed some of the behavior patterns that many people always want to believe about minorities—infantile emotionalism, rampant sexuality, and irresponsible playfulness. A clear social message of Roger Rabbit concerns the nature of prejudice.

Perhaps Roger Rabbit hits an even more subtle note. It is adults, after all, who would be prejudiced against toons and what they represent. Children, on the other hand, are very much on the side of the toons. It is the lure of Peter Pan. Toons of whatever form represent for children the anarchic freedom from social rules and even the constraints of nature that they yearn for.

Toon Town is a child's idea of utopia—eternal fun without fear of actually being hurt, suspension of the laws of physics, cheerful violence, a ludenic state of pure play. Further, it is a world where nature is alive, where animals and even inanimate objects have human childlike (very rarely adult-like) characteristics. If you watch children at play and overhear the powerful shared fantasies they conjure up, you gain some understanding of the power of cartoons for them. In the toon world they can all do the things that here at play we can only "pretend like."

There is an old theory in anthropology, most identified with the great Edward Tylor, called "animism." Tylor and other early anthropologists had a bit of a patronizing view of "primitive man," believing that tribal myths were essentially "child-like" explanations of the world that attributed anthropomorphic characteristics to nature. Trees and lightning and animals and "spirit beings" all had some soul guiding or occupying them. All of nature was alive, and deserved respect and even worship.

We may snicker at primitive beliefs in soulful animate nature, but children understand it instinctively. They believe that the world is enchanted, that nature is alive, that magic works, and they do so in part because from the earliest age we adults tell them stories about all that. We tell them about wonderlands and wizards, talking animals and trees, witches and trolls, magicians and sorcerers, devils and demons, angels and friendly ghosts, flying carpets and singing swords, bewitched princesses and pumpkins that turn into coaches, little engines that could and magic slippers that transport you home.

We tell them about the boogeyman that lurks in the dark to hurt them if they do something bad, about the jolly Santa who rewards them for being good at Christmas-time, about tooth fairies and Easter bunnies, guardian angels and haunted woods, gypsies that steal children, and the little man who turns out the light in the refrigerator. Clearly children get familiar with lots of toons.

Not everybody likes it that kids are told about all those extrahuman beings. Many of the fairy tales and suchlike that we tell to children very likely do have their roots in "the old religion" that predates Christianity, and has its eventual roots in primitive animism. (The Arthurian legend, after all, has both Druid priests and witches and a quest for the Holy Grail.) The boogeyman probably goes back a long way in human consciousness, and that monster from the Id has likely been used by a thousand generations to control the behavior of children. The source of a good bit of the folklore we pass on to our kids has thoroughly pagan origins. Indeed, a glance at children's books and toys produced by contemporary industries reveals that they have much in common with the long tradition of fairy tales and folk figures of yore. (Yoda of Star Wars is a latter-day combination of the frog-prince, warrior-mentor, and Merlin; the disappointing

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Lucas production Willow is a virtual compendium of both ancient and modern toons, everything from “the little people” of medieval legend to Tinker Bell.)

Some folks of fundamentalist persuasion have objected to these stories, and even to the Christmas use of Santa Claus. Awhile back some families in Tennessee objected to the local school board about the use of The Wizard of Oz in class, maintaining that the story contained witchcraft and magic, and taught children that courage, intelligence, and compassion (as exemplified by the Cowardly Lion, the Straw Man, and the Tin Man) could be developed by individuals rather than by being simply God-given. They also objected to The Diary of Anne Frank because it taught sympathy for all religions. (Since they apparently believe that only the moral stories of the Bible should be taught in public school, one assumes they would include the story from the book of Numbers wherein, after a bloody victory, Moses says to the soldiers, “Have you let the women live? . . . Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman who has known man, lying with him. But all the young girls who have not known man by lying with him, keep alive for yourself.”)

But it is not just fundamentalists who try to keep their kids away from the pernicious influence of unseemly toons. Parents of various stripes worry about bad influences on their kids from popular culture. Oftentimes they overestimate the influence of popular culture, and sometimes they don’t understand the function of popular culture for kids. Tipper Gore thinks heavy metal rock music dangerous because it is outrageous and rebellious; the kids like it precisely because it is outrageous and rebellious, an outlet for some, perhaps most, that they find more amusing than compelling. (It might help if we think of rock singers and groups as teenage toons.)

But for the movie and TV fare communicated for smaller kids, there seems to be a psychiatrist or parents’ group that objects to almost everything. A glance at my files reveals objections to the Care Bears, the Smurfs, Sesame Street, and virtually every program on Saturday morning TV, even the all-time classic (made ostensibly for kids but watched faithfully by adults), the Rocky and Bullwinkle Show.

But I suspect this is nothing new. I wonder if there were parents’ groups or moral censors of centuries past that took exception to the fairy tales current in that day? Did someone point to the horrible effects on children of reading them stories about giants who liked to make bread out of the bones of Englishmen, or wandering kids who push witches into ovens, or the dangers to little girls lured by wolves?

More recently, just ask Walt Disney. When Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs first came out in 1937, there was earnest debate all over the country about whether children should see it—the wicked witch, it was said, was too scary, the magic too powerful, the threat too great. (No one, apparently, objected to the fact that the story involved a young and beautiful single girl living with seven adult men; the potential sexual inference was handled by making the dwarfs into toons, and, therefore, not adults.) Indeed, when Disney classics are re-released, the same handwringing occurs. Pinocchio (which, speaking of animism, transforms a puppet into a human) punishes youthful transgression harshly, disfigures boys for lying, and isolates people in the cavernous belly of a whale.

The chorus of objections has arisen most recently with the re-release of Bambi, perhaps the most moving, and didactically helpful, of all the Disney animations. The forest fire, the antler fight, and most of all, the hunters killing Bambi’s mother—it is all pretty emotional stuff. (I myself was never able to shoot a deer after it. Disney’s animism, making animals into cute and very human families, probably is much disliked by subscribers to Field and Stream. The scene where Bambi’s mother is killed probably has done more for animal rights and anti-hunting sentiment than all the appeals of animal rights groups.)

Bambi does upset some children, but I would think the more common response is enrichment. To deny kids the opportunity of seeing things like Bambi is to rob them of one of the joyous experiences of childhood. The children crying in the dark at the end have learned something rather profound about some important human emotions. The kids that weren’t allowed to attend on the basis of silly adult fears should have been more careful in the selection of their parents.

For slightly older pre-teens (9-12 or so), parents also worry about them seeing horror movies. Kids that age love them; the bloodier the better. This is an age group becoming very much aware of changes in their bodies and of social repression, so they seem drawn as a group to the horror genre. (They love to read a fanzine called Fangora, which celebrates the special-effects artists of the splatter movies, with gory color pictures of their artistry—the old ax in the skull scene is ho-hum stuff to these aficionados. When you see groups of these kids enjoying the latest Friday the 13th movie, you get little sense that seeing all that gore is going to turn them all into sociopathic ax murderers, satanic cultists, or political scientists.

These are kids at the age when
they pride themselves on telling the difference between fantasy and reality, and being mature enough to make it through chainsaw massacres and hauntings and transformations into monsters without getting sick or scared proves it, especially in front of the other guys. Horror films for them are a scary amusement, a fascinating exercise in the technology of fright and death. They are horrified only by badly done special effects, and they make aesthetic judgments on the basis of how delicious the frights were. The only kind of film that rivals the horror movie is the war movie, and they went to see the Vietnam films in droves. For them both are better than the stuff that adults go to see, dumb movies about a child emperor who sits around an empty palace for hours or the boring goings-on among people in network news or Italian families.

Parents have a legitimate right to a say in what their children participate in and consume, but I have a counter-worry of my own. I worry that overblown fears about Bambi and Saturday morning TV and so forth are symptomatic of a larger process that some experts see happening now: not letting children be children and enjoy their childhood. Think of the horror stories during the Eighties about highly motivated Yuppie parents trying to create "designer babies" who are sent to spartan pre-school programs, endless rounds of classes (music, language, dance, etc.) before and after school, summer camps where they study investment and stockbroking—all preparatory to being enrolled in the freshman class at Harvard in the year 2005.

If kids are made into miniature adults, and denied the fun and fantasy of childhood, then we will have robbed them of something truly precious and unrecoverable. The combination of national educational demands for high degrees of rational skills and productivity and parental ambitions for their children to be "competitive" might eliminate more and more of the discretionary play of childhood at its best.

Long ago Max Weber wrote about "the disenchantment of the world," arguing that modernity was eliminating the magic and mystery of life. The scientific attitude, organizational rationality, the expectation of conformist habits—all these processes eliminate more and more the "enchanted" aspects of life. Secularization, for instance, has made the enchanted claims of religion more difficult, and indeed some churches have made liturgical and theological changes that remove much of the magic and mystery formerly associated with them. (When was the last time you heard a defense of the rite of exorcism?)

We shouldn't idealize childhood as a romantic world of innocence subsequently lost, since it isn't really.

Weber saw this great historical process as an inevitable result of modernity, but not necessarily as a good thing. The disenchantment of the world is disenchanting to people who lose faith in an enchanted world. I suspect that religious revivalism stems from this vague feeling of progressive disenchantment, as does the desire to read tabloids about UFOs, Bigfoot, miracle cures, healings, and Elvis sightings. The power of scientific rationality has created the organizational and technological world in which we live, but at the price of robbing much of the world of settled belief in the enchanted.

Which returns us to the toons. Childhood should be a time of total enchantment, as free as possible from the encroachments of the adult world kids will have to join all too quickly. I often observe adults who watch children at play with great envy, since they will often remember childhood as the happiest time of their lives, something now lost in the mundane world of work and responsibility.

We don't need to idealize childhood as a romantic world of innocence subsequently lost, since it isn't really. But we should understand that the toon fantasies of childhood are more beneficial than harmful, and let children enjoy them while they can. For kids, toons are projections of all sorts of things, the dramatis personae of their enchanted world. They talk to the toons, learn from them, and make them a part of the treasure trove of images they will later remember with fondness. They can then someday take their kids to see Bambi, and cry along with them.

How else can you explain why adults cry at the end of Roger Rabbit? In the last scene, virtually every toon of our movie memory crowds in, reminding us of the richness and joy of an enchanted world that was, and is, ours. As adults, we can feel nostalgic about our toon experience as part of a time when we could unequivocally believe in an enchanted world.

Perhaps we also have a sense of loss. Now we can't act like toons, and are afraid to visit Toon Town. We have left the enchanted world, and don't know how to re-enter it. We live in the noir and not the cartoon. Maybe if we could act more like toons, and visit Toon Town more, we would be happier and freer. But that would mean stepping over some lines, and allowing ourselves to believe once again in objects and lands of enchantment. As Porky Pig said, "That's all, folks."
My Friend

Dot Nuechterlein

"I couldn't believe it," my daughter said later, shaking her head. "There were 1.2 million people and Mom runs into practically the only person she knows in Chicago."

On the hottest Sunday of a hot summer we attended the Taste of Chicago food festival. We arrived early to avoid long lines, then found a shady spot to wait for the evening's scheduled fireworks, watching the swarming crowds pass by.

It was the largest group I'd ever been in. We didn't actually lay eyes on most of them, of course. But we felt the crowd size at the end, when hundreds trying to walk north crossed paths with more hundreds heading west. As a closet claustrophobe I saw how panic could develop. Then we all marched down Michigan Avenue, the "Magnificent Mile," and when a car tried to drive through, a man's voice shouted, "Don't anybody get out of the way." We all laughed—and nobody budged.

But back to my friend. In midday, while "tasting," I saw him, head and shoulders above most people. When he and his companion reached us I smiled and said hello. He didn't recognize me at first, with my big floppy sun hat and those green sunglasses hiding most of my face—but then he glanced at my t-shirt and grinned. What other old lady would advertise the VU basketball team?

He knew my daughters from having sat at our dining table; they exchanged greetings and he introduced his friend to us. We spoke for a few minutes, then went our separate ways. Our association, once quite intense, has become a matter of pleasant but brief encounters.

One previous meeting was unforgettable. He had invited me to see him play in the city recreation league championship, which was held in a large city park facility, with maybe 75 people present. I guess my light hair and pale skin stood out in the crowd; everyone else in the building—the whole neighborhood, in fact—was black.

Quite often I have been one of a kind: the only female in the company of males, the lone older person surrounded by students, the one practicing Christian among scoffers; but only once before, as a college freshman visiting my Chinese boyfriend in Chinatown, New York, was I ever the only one of my race present. It's an experience minorities have regularly, but U.S. Caucasians seldom encounter. Since I believe most people are kind and decent, I felt no fear, but rather a sort of supersensitivity—like standing back watching myself, taking nothing for granted.

Perhaps that is the essence of my relationship with this friend: it is never matter of fact or assumed. We are as different as could be—not only by race, age, and sex, but also by religion, education, and background. Yet for over a year he openly shared with me his hopes and fears, dreams and disappointments, while I tried to help him master the intricacies of surviving and prospering in my world.

He succeeded in that exchange; I failed. He came into my life through academic difficulties—inner city schools had taught him the fundamentals, but not the more exacting skills and strategies required in the university. We made some progress over the months, but then he fell ill and got too far behind to be able to continue. He left, eventually attending another school; economics prevented his finishing his degree.

Is there someone you can point to who has changed your life, who has had an impact on your perceptions and thinking? He let me see what it is like to be a black living in a white world, how it feels to change from boy to man, how to absorb new experiences, the weariness bred by poverty. Those insights have helped me immensely in my understanding of and working with others.

I also learned about the shortcomings of our educational system. For example, here was someone with a phenomenal memory who had never been shown how to use that gift for school work. Near the end I noticed his aptitude for math—why hadn't he ever been channeled in that direction? He spoke slowly, haltingly; but when I handed him a random book and asked him to read a paragraph aloud, his voice was strong and clear, with little stumbling over unfamiliar words; why hadn't that been discovered earlier?

"People say I'm slow," he once said bitterly, "they think I'm just a dumb athlete." On the contrary, I came to feel that his intellect far outshone his grade report, but he had not learned mental discipline. It was as though people had assumed he would make it with his wonderful physical talents, so why bother to develop other potentials?

Now we know better, at least at the college level; or at least I do. Now the students I advise, especially the athletes, get my full sermon on preparing for the whole of life. Some can't hear me with the stars in their eyes, and it's too late to counteract years of ego-building and concentration on their dream-like goal. But I am a bit better prepared to look for their other strengths and to encourage them—nag them—about using them.

Thanks, my friend; you taught me many valuable lessons, and I hope we keep running into one another in the crowd.