• Charles Burchfield at Valparaiso University
• Jerome McGann on History, Facts, and Pluralities
• An Excerpt From Amy Clampitt's "The Prairie"

A review of Literature, the Arts, and Public Affairs

May, 1989
Comings and Goings, and a Rumble

This has been a year of changes for The Cresset. As regular readers will remember, long-time editor Jim Nuechterlein left in January to head a quarterly journal based in New York. As Nuechterlein began enjoying his view of Madison Avenue—from a long way up—Gail Eifrig, associate professor of English at Valparaiso University, was immersing herself in Hebrew at the University of Chicago. Little did Eifrig think upon the deadlines of journalism, at least until a month or two ago, but she has recently agreed to assume command of The Cresset, beginning with the September 1989 issue. Eifrig's career in literary and theological studies make her a strong choice for this position, which I will to her with best wishes for the future.

A second editorial change should not go unnoticed. Jill Baumgaertner has for many years been poetry editor of The Cresset. She now becomes an editor-at-large at The Christian Century. Baumgaertner has arranged to leave her present position with some style: she has just won the Goodman Prize in Poetry, along with a Fulbright teaching award which will take her to Spain.

Under normal circumstances, that would be the end of this account of editorial comings and goings, but as the May Cresset goes to press, word of a further development reaches me. No sooner had Jim Nuechterlein settled into his New York editorial offices than a notable rift on the American right came to a head. Nuechterlein had assumed the editorship of This World, which is affiliated with Richard Neuhaus's Center for Religion and Society, itself supported by the Illinois-based Rockford Institute. Now it happens that Rockford is also financing another magazine, Chronicles, whose editor, Thomas Fleming, has recently argued for new immigration laws to restrict the entry of non-European peoples into the United States. According to Neuhaus and other neo-conservatives, such views suggest a kind of revived nativism. Along the same lines, Chronicles has also been accused of a discreetly coded anti-Semitism. A dispute about prejudice soon branched into a quarrel about money. On May 5, at 10:45 in the morning, Neuhaus, Nuechterlein and several associates found themselves all but defenestrated when—see the front page of The New York Times, May 16—"five conservatives from Illinois seized the Manhattan office . . . carted away office equipment and dismissed the office's five-member staff." The Center for Religion and Society, which will continue operating, is now looking for a stabler set of New York offices.

For those who like intellectual rumbles (myself included), this is all very exciting. A look at Chronicles (June 1989) suggests that there is substance as well as excitement in the controversy. Interested readers should start on page 41 of this issue, where editor Fleming eloquently defends the incarceration of Japanese-Americans in California during World War II. After reading Fleming's comments, I immediately began to see why Neuhaus, Nuechterlein and others might be eager to put some distance between themselves and Rockford (more honor to them), and why Rockford might be angry at Neuhaus's accusations (they're true). More broadly: I began to wonder how long the American right can survive as a coherent and directed force. The Bush years are upon us. And it's not only left-wingers in this country who tend to break down into irreconciliable groups.

I Paid For It

Consumerism is a great American tradition. On the other hand, as a tradition in higher education it has its limits, a point that was recently brought home to me. Almost simultaneously, three faculty members at three different universities volunteered in my presence the same complaint: that during the last few years their students had begun treating them as employees. This attitude has been spreading for at least a decade, I suspect, but sporadically and without much visibility. Nothing much betrayed it; it was, for the most part, a set of unverbalized student assumptions about the way things were and apparently always had been. Such assumptions, however, come to light sooner or later. Perhaps there is a moment of anger: "I paid you, you didn't pay me; I'll only come to class if I want." Or a sudden eloquence: "You're paid to teach me to write, why can't you do it?" Or a long descent into despondence: "I paid so much for this course and I'm not getting anywhere." These arguments are futile and self-defeating; that doesn't mean that they're scarce or that they lack power for those who make them.

One possible source of such comments, and of the attitude behind them, may be rising costs at colleges and universities. As an undergraduate, I managed to acquire a B.A. from the University of California just before the first enactment of full-scale tuition charges. No student at California in that era (circa 1970) could have thought in terms of employing a faculty member, because the
faculty was clearly employed by the state—that is, by the citizenry considered in its public and institutionalized form. This arrangement made possible virtues as well as vices unimaginable by a student of the present decade, when education at all kinds of schools is increasingly funded by those who (in theory) most directly benefit from it—i.e., the customers. I'm not sure how far to accept charges that university costs have been grossly and unnecessarily inflated: official tuition fees and the amount that a student actually forks out are often very different figures. Nonetheless, the burden on students and parents has been increased; with that increase may come a change in attitudes. The citizen receiving an education for the good of the whole is replaced by the aspirant to individual success, dispersing limited funds strategically. Someone in this latter position naturally wants his money's worth.

The above hypothesis tells part of the truth. It can't account for the whole truth, though. Private universities have generally charged higher tuition fees than have public ones—and without, in the past, fostering much of the "I paid for it" attitude, even among those students who attended them without vast personal wealth. "I paid for it" must be the product not only of higher costs but also of a particular cultural atmosphere. One of the turning-points in the 1980 President campaign was Ronald Reagan's assertion during the New Hampshire primary that he had "paid" for a microphone used during a TV debate. Though Mr. R borrowed his bon mot from an old Spencer Tracy movie, he justly laid claim to it; he made it his own. Reagan was speaking for a state of mind most commonly identified with the newly educated if not before I possessed the money.

One can't help but feel considerable frustration. I'd rather be teaching in the United States and struggling with such people—they are not yet a majority—than trying to get on in (say) Margaret Thatcher's Great Britain. I think that we educate our citizenry more effectively than the general run of modern nations; democracy and learning can still be reconciled, regardless of rumors to the contrary. On the other hand, the attempt to integrate higher education with the market system—to make the whole process of teaching and learning just one more cog in that amazing machine, to elevate Carlyle's "cash nexus" to the formative principle of academic life, to make students into customers—has threatened and perhaps in some cases destroyed the rather delicate human bonds on which the better aspects of higher education are based. I'd wager that this turn of events will be worrying a goodly number of people over the next decade. And in one sense... or another... students will be paying for their educations.

Notes on the Present Issue

For many years the Valparaiso University Art Museum has managed to exist without a permanent exhibition space. This awkward situation has been mitigated (or perhaps I should say exacerbated) by the resourcefulness of director/curator Richard Brauer and the generosity of donors. A recent gift to the Museum of a Charles Burchfield watercolor (see caption, page 2) inspires the cover of the present Cresset. The same gift inspires Brauer's survey of Burchfield's life and of his works as represented in the Museum collection (see pages 33 ff). The Burchfields illustrated in the Brauer essay have been on exhibit at VU's Moellering Library during the last few weeks; one day soon I hope to see them grouped in an apter space, along with the other outstanding works that the Museum has accumulated over the years: a superb early painting by Georgia O'Keefe (whose later work, I must admit, I detest), a good Frederick Church landscape, a frightening harbor scene by William Glackens, two Joseph Cornell collages, a pair of superb Piranesi prints, notable pieces by John Marin, Childe Hassam, Eastman Johnson, Lionel Feininger, John Marin, William Hopper, George Bellows, Walt Kuhn, William DeHoff.

A further feature of this Cresset deserves a special note. The essays by Jerome McGann and Mollie Sandock, as well the excerpt from Amy Clampitt's "The Prairie," can hardly be said to prepare a quick consensus on the nature of historical thinking and thinking about history; nonetheless, all three of these contributions open up the question of history, and do so in a way that both novices and experts may find useful. This isn't a special issue of the Cresset in the sense that everything fits together thematically; nonetheless, the above-mentioned pieces—different though they are—can benefit from being read as a group.
HISTORY, HERSTORY, THEIRSTORY, OURSTORY

A Mediation on History, Facts, and Pluralities

Because "history" takes place as a matter of pluralities, it should always—like Herodotus' exemplary work—be written in the plural. But of course it is not, of course people frequently tend to write Theirstories in the singular, tend to write a history of something or other, and tend to suggest thereby that "history" is integral, uniform and continuous. We are all familiar with Thesestories—e.g., with the commonplace view that there are basically three "theories of history," the degenerative, the progressivist, and the cyclical (with due allowance made for the "spiral variant," usually imagined as moving in an upward rather than a downward direction).

History thus imagined creates problems for people who work as "historians," a fact which people who work as "anthropologists" have been pointing out to them for some time now. But "history" thus imagined is worse still for people who write and study literature; indeed, the linear imagination of "history" was probably the single most important factor in separating literary work from historical studies in the 20th century.

In literary criticism, for example, the classic argument against an historical method in criticism has been that "facts" in "poetry" are not like "facts" in "history": a fact is a fact in history (whether we mean by the term "history" the historical event or the historical text), but in poetry facts transcend any one-to-one correspondence relation. In poetry facts are taken to be multivalent, or as we sometimes like to say, symbolic.

They are open to many readings and meanings, and any effort to explicate them by an historical method, it is believed, threatens to trivialize the poetic event into a unitary condition. Furthermore, to the degree that a poem solicits an historical condition, to the degree that it seeks to define itself locally and topically, to that extent, it is argued, does the poem abandon its poetic resources. Byron's "Fare Thee Well!" became one of the most notorious pretenses to poetry in the language, so far as the academy was concerned, precisely because the academy knew that it was a poem written to his wife on the occasion of their marriage separation, and because the academy therefore knew—or thought it knew—what the poem meant. Its meaning is simple because its meaning was simple; worse still, that meaning is and was sentimental and mawkish.

I will return to the example of "Fare Thee Well!" at the end of these brief remarks. For the moment I want merely to say that the historicity of the poem is no more linear or unitary than is the historicity of any other human event. The problem of understanding the historicity of poems is grounded in a misunderstanding of what is entailed in "facts" and "events," whether poetical or otherwise. Every so-called fact or event in history is imbedded in an indeterminate set of multiple and overlapping networks. The typical procedure in works of history is to choose one or more points in those networks from which to construct an explanatory order for the materials. Furthermore, works of history commonly cast that explanatory order in a linear form, a sequential order of causes and consequences. These procedures are of course perfectly legitimate heuristic methodologies for studying human events, but they often foster the illusion that eventual relations are and must be continuous, and that "facts" and "events" are determinate and determinable in their structure.

But in fact history is a field of indeterminacies, with movements to be seen running along lateral and recursive lines as well as linearly, and by strange diagonals and various curves, tangents, and even within...
random patterns. Such variations are a consequence not merely of the multiplicity of players in the field (persons, groups, institutions, non-human forces, chance events, and so forth), but of the indeterminate variations in scale and speed which operate in dynamic sets of events. Herodotus wrote his *Histories* out of his understanding of the play of such variations, and Tolstoy constructed *War and Peace* from a similar imagination. In our day Marshall Sahlins' *Islands of History* used Captain Cook's voyage to Hawaii as a dramatic instance for showing how a "set of events" may be seen to have different and antithetical "meanings" because the same "set of events" is incommensurate with itself—because the same set of events is *not* the same set of events, is not equal to itself but is multiple.

In telling Thatstory Sahlins wrote History (a history, or perhaps A-history). That is to say, he sought to define, for certain critical and heuristic purposes, a structure of particular events. He produced a new order of explanation which restored commensurability to the order of events whose problematic character he had initially exposed. (The new order involves the introduction of anthropological categories into an historical field.)

These matters are important for anyone interested in the relation of history and literary work for two principal reasons. In the first place, through them we may be reminded that "facts" and "events" in history are not integral or stable or commensurable with themselves. They are multiple, and normative historical texts work to regularize them only because such texts are committed to using their materials to develop explanations and to moralize events. Second, these regularizing procedures in historical work are very different from the procedures to be found in literary or poetical work. Briefly, the orders of poetry operate to increase our sense of the incommensurable structures of facts, events, and the networks of such things. Poetry, in this view of the matter, does not work to increase one's explanatory control over complex human materials (an operation which, as we know, purchases such control by delimiting the field of view); rather, poetry's function is precisely to "open the doors of perception," and thereby to re-establish incommensurability as the framework of everything we do and know. In this sense poetry is precisely a criticism of our standard forms of criticism, which is I take it approximately what Aristotle meant when he said that poetry is more philosophical than history and more concretely engaged than philosophy.

If poetry operated within physical and biological orders we would perhaps say that it represents a kind of Second Nature, with the matter of its universes disposed according to a human rather than a divine consciousness. But the order at which poetry operates is sociological (or more strictly sociohistorical). It represents not the natural but the human world, an eventual field with two important features that distinguish it from a natural world: first, it functions consciously, within the complex networks of various conscious agencies; and second (but contradictorily), those networks undergo constant and arbitrary change. This means, among other things, that whereas such a world is always both reflexive (like God) and integral (like Nature), its consciousness and integrity are both indistinguishable and incommensurable.

The antithesis of poetry displays that world for us through its special modes of acting within such a world. The clearest way I can think of to explain this is to contrast what I would call "Poetry in Action" from what Bruno Latour has called "Science in Action." The latter involves consciousness in immensely complex sets of goal-directed operations: literary criticism, this very paper and this entire annual conference, are perfect instances of "Science in Action." The object of these activities is knowledge. Latour uses the analogy of a road map to define the complex networks of scientific activities because the road map is for him the sign of the human preoccupation with destinations and the desire to be master of destinations.

When science is in action, the best road map is the one that most clearly defines the relative importance of different places on the map and the relative mobility which comes with the various roads. Old maps and new maps, good maps and bad maps: none of these are prima facie without importance or interest to science in action. Everything depends upon the object in view, the goal, the destination. An old map might be more useful,
might function with more useful information, than a new one—depending on your goals and purposes.

When poetry is in action, the situation appears quite different. The poetical “object in view” is precisely not to set limits on the objects in view. Of course, poems will always have very specific goals and objects set for themselves—by the original authors, by various readers, early and late. Poems do not achieve their vaunted universality from the fact that their authors set out for themselves transcendental goals: were this the case, we would have no mute inglorious Miltons (Milton Friedman, Milton Eisenhower, Milton Berle or perhaps Alexander Hamilton?). Nor is it that they affirm nothing and deny nothing—explicitly didactic poetry is merely the index of the ideological dimension which is a necessary component of any use of language, including poetical language.

The poetical use of language is special in so far as it preserves materials which—according to any of the work’s possible sociologies—may be experienced, through a poetical deployment, as heterodox, irrelevant, contradictory, enigmatic. Poetry operates with the same kind of socio-logics which Latour observes in “Science in Action,” but it veers away from the pragmatistic horizon of scientific knowledge. It is consequently the framework within which a critique of scientific knowledge is alone possible—for this reason: that only a poetical deployment of language can make one aware how every ordering of knowledge is at the same time, and by the very fact of its orderliness, a calling to order of what must be experienced simultaneously as non-congruent and irrational.

Near the outset of this talk I mentioned Byron’s “Fare Thee Well!” as a kind of epitome of the “factive” poem—a work fairly defined by what Blake called “Minute Particulars.” Some have taken those particularities as a sign of the poem’s poverty, of its merely local habits. Others have read those particulars with a different negative twist: the poem is bad not because it is full of particularities, but because it is absurdly sentimental. But though Ronald Reagan has imagined, and said, that “Facts are stupid things,” they are by no means stupid—nor are they “fixed and dead,” as Coleridge thought. Byron understood, as all poets, more or less consciously, understand, that “facts” are what Blake would call the “vehicular forms” of social events. They are neither dead nor stupid, and “Fare Thee Well!” illustrates that fact very well.

Many—myself included—have missed the factive life of Byron’s excellent poem because we have imagined its facts were, perhaps like the poem’s author, “stupid things,” and hence have imagined the poem to be as stupid and sentimental as this way of reading the poem. In fact, the poem is as much a work of revenge, hatred, and hypocrisy as it is a work of suffering, love, and cant-free talk. Its minute particulars tell a set of contradictory stories, and finally make up one story whose central subject is contradiction itself—a contradiction we know as the torments of love and jealousy which were realized and played out through the Byron marriage break-up. This poetical work is at once a part of and a reflection upon that immensely complex set of connected and contradicted events.

"Fare Thee Well!” tells HisStory, then, but it also tells HerStory; and because neither of TheseStories are simple or commensurable (and least of all pretty or sentimental), in thosestories the work develops TheirStory as well. These tellings finally make possible a number of other histories, which we might call OurStory. Thesestories began among the first readers of the poem and they continue to work their ways down to and beyond ourselves.

But that is what poetry is supposed to do. What we forget sometimes is the fact that it will do so only as it works with minute particulars—with those hard facts (linguistic, bibliographical, sociological) which can never be made commensurate with the meanings we lay over them. It is in this context that we should say, therefore, after Lyn Hejinian’s excellent prose sequence, that “Writing is an aid to memory.” Normative histories and memorial forms tend to use writing in order to disable the contradictions and differentials which constitute the field of memory. But writing in Hejinian’s poetical imagination functions to multiply those differentials, and thereby to increase our potential access to ranges and ways of remembering we might otherwise have hardly known.
JANE AUSTEN'S POLITICS

The English Novel and the Real Business of Life

To many twentieth-century readers, raising the question of Jane Austen's politics seems ridiculous. Many of Austen's modern readers have assumed that her novels do not deal with political events—some have claimed to like her works because she does not deal with such matters. This common view of Austen assumes that she was unconcerned with writing about them. She lived through the French Revolution and England's ensuing wars with France, the Napoleonic Wars, the industrial revolution and social upheavals in England, but she, a clever, retired spinster, lived at home and limited her concerns to three or four families in a country village. Somehow she ignored the French Revolution even though it touched her family (her cousin's first husband was beheaded), and she was not concerned with the wars with France although two of her brothers were fighting in the navy: the fictional world she creates or echoes was not a world in turmoil. Some version of this view has been held by critics and general readers alike. Winston Churchill, for example, held this view: "What calm lives they had, those people! No worries about the French Revolution, or the Napoleonic Wars."

Furthermore, Austen sometimes seems to make fun of "politics" as something that men discuss in a pompous way while the real action is going on elsewhere—and the real action is personal, not political. In Northanger Abbey, for instance, the naive Catherine Morland accompanies Henry and Eleanor Tilney on a walk to Beechen Cliff. They have been talking about picturesque landscape; Henry has been instructing the young girl, trying to educate her eye, and then the subject gradually changes:

Delighted with her progress, and fearful of wearying her with too much wisdom at once, Henry suffered the subject to decline, and by an easy transition from a piece of rocky fragment and the withered oak which he had placed near its summit, to oaks in general, to forests, the inclosure of them, waste lands, crown lands and government, he shortly found himself arrived at politics; and from politics, it was an easy step to silence. (NA 111)

Apparently, windy pronouncements on "politics" are not part of the real business of life, which has more to do with Catherine and Henry than with crown lands and government.

Our assumptions about Austen have been shaped by the interpretations of twentieth-century critics from Lionel Trilling onwards, both inside and outside the academy, who have supplied the framework within which Austen's novels are read and taught. These critics have held that while Austen is indeed not concerned with temporary political or historical questions, she is concerned with eternal or universal moral questions; they have interpreted her and venerated her as a moralist. Her novels are not simply stories of girl meets boy, but stories of moral struggles and difficult moral triumphs. In Jane Austen, small things stand for large things: details of ordinary family life and social life involve right or wrong moral choices. In this moral understanding, Austen is not talking about how to organize a society nor how to catch a husband, but rather how to live as a rational and moral being. Catherine's problem is not how to attract Henry, but how to see clearly what life is really like in her world and how to judge correctly the people she meets there. Similarly, the question facing Elizabeth Bennet is not how she can snare a man with ten thousand a year, but whether she can learn to use her intelligence in the right way, and not misuse it as she begins to do and as her father has done—whether she can learn to see and judge what is really going on outside of her and within herself. In this "moral reading," Austen is not crassly concerned with class and property as good things for a young woman to marry into: the well-run estate is not simply a source of wealth but something that stands for an ordered world, reflecting a greater order. People who care for their estates, like Darcy as the benevolent head of Pemberley, are showing respect for an entire inherited system of values and

Mollie Sandock wrote her PhD. dissertation on Jane Austen, Anthony Trollope, and Henry James at the University of Chicago. She has published on Austen, as well as on various aspects of American literature.

The Cresset
principles of which the estate is the visible symbol. People who neglect their estates, like Henry Crawford, demonstrate that they are abdicating membership in a way of life ultimately based on a divinely inspired order.

Recently, however, I have begun to read scholars and critics who undermine and re-define these universal-sounding moral interpretations of Jane Austen by putting her works into their historical context and arguing that the novels are part of a fierce political debate which arose in reaction to the French Revolution. Recent scholars like Marilyn Butler, Tony Tanner, Claudia L. Johnson and others have argued that no novel published in Jane Austen's time could be "apolitical." Novels that seem like innocent love stories to us were ideological instruments in this debate, and all readers at the time would have understood that clearly. Some scholars, most notably Marilyn Butler, look at Austen's contemporary situation and conclude that she is a Tory ideologue—a conservative defender of conservatism, a defender of the system in which a very few people physically own chunks of the planet because they are born to do so, and everybody else is subservient to those few in a system of interlocking hierarchies. Butler believes that as England reacted to the French Revolution, Austen wrote novels which assumed and defended the present economic and political position of the English landed gentry. In this view, Austen's novels do not ignore politics: they are part of what Marilyn Butler calls "the war of ideas" which raged in England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, especially in the 1790's when Austen began to write. Butler claims and effectively demonstrates that no literary work, especially no novel, could be apolitical in the 1790's:

...at the period when Jane Austen began to write, literature as a whole was partisan, in England as well as on the Continent: so were the other arts, as Kenneth Clark observes in drawing a general parallel with painting. "Doctrine was found in works which seem to us very harmless. We may think that The Marriage of Figaro was written solely to give us pleasure, but in 1785 it was considered a political bombshell, for from 1780 to 1790 every play and every ballet was interpreted in a political sense." (3)

Citing published reviews and unpublished letters of Jane Austen's day, Butler demonstrates that novels were indeed read as political documents; even a poem on gardening, if it showed a suspicious fondness for wildness, would be reviewed with specific reference to the French revolution and the civil laws of England.

How can novels, how can love stories especially, have political content? Broadly, a novelist can portray a world in which people are naturally benevolent and good—a world which implies that people do not need to be kept in line by strong repressive governments or by strict obedience to inherited principles. If people are naturally good, they should be as free as possible. If the promptings of a heroine's heart spontaneously show her what is right—if she can tell at first sight that a young woman is a true friend or that a young man is her soulmate because of the instinctive sympathy she shares with him—if the private internal promptings of individuals are trustworthy, then society does not need a heavy system of authority: people can naturally rule themselves. But a novelist can also portray a different sort of world. If people's first impressions are wrong, if characters delude themselves with private imaginings and need to learn to submit to shared, external standards instead of wayward individual impulses, then human nature looks different: people are flawed, fallen, always liable to go wrong unless they submit to some kind of authority other than their own wishes. If this is the case, government too must be strongly authoritative and dependent upon tradition and long practice. There can be plots in which a character escapes from the artificial constraints of a repressive society, and there can be plots in which a character learns to defer to and take a place in a just social order. Besides these broad plot outlines, Butler also points to historically particular buzzwords and stock characters which indicated the political camp of the author and which would have been immediately apparent to every contemporary reader.

Marilyn Butler examines many examples of once-popular "jacobin" and "anti-jacobin" novels, and she attempts to place Jane Austen squarely within the conservative camp. She discusses Jane West's A Gossip's Story as a typical Tory or anti-jacobin novel, and she points out unmistakable parallels between that novel and Sense and Sensibility. In Mrs. West's novel, two sisters, Louisa and Marianne, illustrate the right way and the wrong way for a young woman to think and act. The thoughtful, self-controlled Louisa has "an informed, well-regulated mind," while her younger sister Marianne is proud to claim a nature "trembling alive to the softer passions." Marianne resists a staid suitor whom she finds unromantic, although her father points out his solid virtues: "I am told he is a kind master, an indulgent landlord, an obliging neighbour, and a steady active friend." That is not enough:

"He is not, indeed he is not, the tender, respectable sympathizing lover, which my heart tells me is necessary for my future repose. He does not love me, at least not with that ardent affection, that deference, that assiduous timidity—But you smile, Sir?" (99)

Marianne prefers the dashing Mr. Clermont, who saves her from a runaway horse and who shares a "wonderful
coincidence of opinion” with her in all matters of taste and art. But her heart has misled her: such love brings her only misery, while her patient, prudent, long-suffering elder sister looks forward to quiet happiness. Butler concludes,

What seems more interesting, however, even than so many apparent echoes of a name, a scene, a speech, is the strong generic resemblance between Jane Austen and Mrs. West. The coincidence of outlook is more important than the trivial alleged borrowings. Like other conservative moralists, Mrs. West denigrates the individual’s reliance on himself. She shows for example how dangerous it is to trust private intuition or passion in forming judgements of others ... the same discovery—that objective evidence should be preferred to private intuition—is made by a succession of Jane Austen heroines, Catherine Morland, Marianne Dashwood, Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse. (101)

To Butler, the only difference between Jane Austen and her politically conservative sister-novelists is that she is a better artist, a “born novelist” who can disguise the doctrinaire outlines of her cautionary tales better than the others; Sense and Sensibility simply is the same novel as A Gossip’s Story, only better written. Butler points out that the novel with paired protagonists was especially popular in the mid and late 1790’s when Mrs. West’s novel was published and Sense and Sensibility was begun. She claims that all novelists who chose the contrasting paired heroine format did so “in order to make an explicit ideological point” (182)—it was an inherently political form, chosen to demonstrate the right way and the wrong way, and Jane Austen used it just as Jane West did. Marianne insists upon being a law unto herself: “She believes in an innate moral sense, and since man is naturally good, his actions when he acts on impulse are likely to be good also.” (187) She therefore has no doubts about herself or about Willoughby, and she is of course proved wrong. She must adopt Elinor’s self-control, self-distrust, restraint, civility, and deference to the established order: “It is the role of Marianne Dashwood, who begins with the wrong ideology, to learn the right one.” (192)

When I first read Marilyn Butler’s formidably knowledgeable work, I was both fascinated and disburbed because it seemed that the novelist I have read and loved for many years was in fact writing in defense of a system of inequality and privilege which I find repellent. Butler’s historically-based “political reading” seems to undermine or explode the apparently neutral “moral reading” which had formed the basis of my own writing about Jane Austen. If “moral readers” try to say that Austen is not writing about money and land, but that she is using money and land to stand for a larger system of inherited values and religious beliefs, “political readers” can surely reply that this underlying system,
too, is conservative ideology. These moral and religious ideas themselves support the hierarchical rule of the landed gentry: apparently God wants some people to be the Master of Pemberley, and he wants other people to be women who by nature are not capable of inheriting power or property, and still other people to be servants who appear on the shadowy margins of Jane Austen's world and do not merit stories of their own.

A very recent book has suggested a way out of my dilemma while introducing a new one. Claudia L. Johnson's Jane Austen: Women, Politics, and the Novel attempts to demonstrate that Austen is indeed a political writer, but that Butler has misread Austen's politics. Johnson agrees that the novel was fiercely partisan in Jane Austen's day, and that no contemporary reader would approach fiction apolitically. She agrees that there was a group of doctrinaire conservatives resolutely writing "anti-jacobin" novels, and that the question of the behavior of young women in novels was relentlessly politicized. But she draws a very different picture of the way Austen's works fit into this "war of ideas." Broadly, her Jane Austen is not a Tory apologist; she is seeking a middle ground and examining rather than simply repeating or proclaiming the conservative plots, characters, key words, and assumptions that appear in her novels. To Johnson, Austen is not simply repeating the inherited ideas of her class (Johnson points out that twentieth-century readers have "elevated" her class), but she is carefully examining and testing those ideas, and she is particularly aware of the ways in which conservative ideology works to the detriment of women.

Johnson feels that scholars like Butler have oversimplified the complex political debate in the novels of the 1790's and have drawn blunt, broad, inaccurate lines to include Austen so squarely in the conservative camp: "Most of the novels written in the "war of ideas" are more complicated and less doctrinaire than modern commentators have represented." (xxi) These commentators have not sufficiently appreciated the covert social criticism of the position of women in generally conservative women novelists. In Johnson's view, Austen was writing not to defend conservative principles, but to "de-polemize" political discussion, especially concerning the lives of women, and open up a broad middle ground between the camps.

Johnson points out that in Catherine, or The Bower, Austen makes fun of the rabid concern for the political consequences of young women's social behavior. The heroine's fussy aunt, Mrs. Percival, is sure that because Catherine has heard a silly young man's declarations of love, civilization as we know it is in deep trouble:

"Oh! Catherine, you are an abandoned Creature, and I do not know what will become of you. ... if you are really sorry for it, and your future life is a life of penitence and reformation perhaps you may be forgiven. But I plainly see that every thing is going to sixes & sevens and all order will soon be at an end throughout the Kingdom."

"Not however Ma'am the sooner, I hope, from any conduct of mine, said Catherine in a tone of great humility, for upon my honour I have done nothing this evening that can contribute to overthrow the establishment of the kingdom."

"You are Mistaken Child, replied she; the welfare of every Nation depends upon the virtue of its individuals, and any one who offends in so gross a manner against decorum and propriety is certainly hastening its ruin." (MW232-233)

This is a caricature of the attitude which Butler ascribes to the conservative camp and to Austen: here Austen pokes fun at it.

Johnson points out further that the conservative novelists of the 1790's followed Burke in seeing the patriarchal family of the landed gentry as the school and the bastion of morality. They depart from the social criticism of earlier eighteenth-century novels of Fielding and Richardson: they do not depict "gluttonous and sycophantic clergymen, tyrannical fathers, wastrel eldest sons, or comic plots favoring the romantic energies of the young over the inflexibility and greed of the old." (8) But Jane Austen does.

Clara Johnson draws a very different picture from Marilyn Butler of the political implications of Sense and Sensibility. Johnson feels that Austen's novel is not doing the same things as a typical conservative novel like A Gossip's Story. West's novel indeed "tirelessly reiterates the moral difference between two daughters, one good, decorous, obedient, and contentedly married to a modest country gentleman her father appoints, and the other bad, self-willed, and doomed to a connubial infelicity of her own choosing." (23) But Sense and Sensibility, on the other hand, seems to set up antithetical contrasts and simplicities only to dismantle them throughout the course of the narrative. It dismantles these simple contrasts by "suggesting that the differences are more apparent than real." (24) The two sisters are not opposites, and they are "deluded in identical ways about their equally shadowy, weak, and unworthy suitors." (24) There are things very wrong with the social system of the landed gentry in this novel, the system that makes young men dangle about for years waiting for relatives to die, and being like Elinor won't save a woman from the results of this pernicious system.

To Johnson, Sense and Sensibility is not the admonition to submit to an external order that Butler sees; it is instead an expose of the way "those sacred and supposedly benevolizing institutions of order—property, marriage, and family—actually enforce
Johnson claims that this novel, which so many have read appears to be a sharp criticism of England's social as avarice, shiftlessness, and oppressive mediocrity." (49) 

Conservatives had asserted the political importance of the family as the institution which inculcated moral affections and channeled self-interest in socially constructive and cohesive ways (50). But In Sense and Sensibility, Jane Austen shows the patriarchal family in a vastly different light. The beginning of the novel makes us experience the inheritance of money and estates through sons rather than daughters as arbitrary, rather than "natural," and we see the effects of this male-centered system on a group of displaced women, the Dashwoods. The portrayal of the family life of John Dashwood, the Middletons, and the Palmers makes it clear that the family, far from being the mainspring for all moral and social affections, is the mainspring instead for the love of money, the principal vice in Sense and Sensibility, and in so much progressive fiction . . . the family very severely restricts, rather than enables and broadens, acts of generosity, and all considerations—even promises to dying patriarchs—can be dropped by appealing to the future needs of the toddling male heir. (53)

Instead of a call to self-restraint and duty, the novel now appears to be a sharp criticism of England's social arrangements.

If I accept Johnson's reading of Austen and her contemporaries, my favorite novelist is no longer defending ideas which appall me. I am not sure, however, that Johnson has effectively refuted Butler and the other "conservative" critics, although she has convinced me that Butler paid insufficient attention to questions of gender in Austen's work. And as I read Johnson's reply to Butler and the work of others who have investigated Austen's politics since Butler wrote in 1975, I am struck by the diversity of their conclusions: at this moment I have on my desk essays variously identifying Austen as a Tory ideologue, a conservative critic of conservatism, a progressive critic of contemporary social structures, and a radical critic of contemporary sex roles. Diversity of interpretation should hardly come as a surprise to any academic, but somehow I expected contextual studies—work based on re-historicizing our view of a major author—to exhibit more agreement about matters of fact. That expectation no doubt betrays a touching naivete about the notions of "history" and "fact" (vis. Jerome McGann's essay in this issue), but it continues to surprise me that scholars who agree about the existence and the terms of the "war of ideas" in the novel come to such different conclusions about Austen's place in it.

Does the cause of this diversity lie within Austen's works or within the methods of the investigators? Did Austen's political views change at some point, so that early works and later works provide evidence for different conclusions? Or do contradictory strands of political thought exist in tension simultaneously in all her works (or in all of anyone's works)? Do the various modern scholars work from different assumptions about or definitions of "the political," so that their differing assumptions make their differing conclusions inevitable? Do they have different concepts of what counts as evidence? I would like to see an historiographical comparison of these scholars, investigating their methods, assumptions, and definitions in order to see if they are really talking about the same thing. The debates over Jane Austen's politics usefully undermine a "moral reading" which does not admit its political implications, but they also illustrate the immense difficulty for modern readers of reading Jane Austen's novels with the eyes of her contemporaries.

Works Cited


What the Star Said

A star never knows, and the sky has made a boss of the seasons.

It's why we lie nailed to their charts but hold down nothing. Why we bob on the stillest water, like bottles without messages and find ourselves on the walls of glass buildings, like lamps someone forgot and left on.

It's why we appear to seed ourselves in the smallest places—a half cup of coffee, a rearview mirror, a bluish eye. And falling, we blur under the dark like the last tail of neon, the first dime in the upturned hat, a headlight coming over a steep hill. It's why nothing connects us but proximity and still they imagine us ticking out some sound they can't hear, some knowledge beyond them. Better this than to suffer this bright body, the endless pump of night.

 René Steinke
We have listened too long to the courtly muses.
Perhaps. My father's father, from the spring he
turned the sod out there, preserved a sonnet:

*There crowd my mind* (he wrote) *vague fancies
of Aeolian harpings, twined with weird oaks' murmurings.*
In those wind-scathed solitudes,

impelled by absence so immense it all but
unpropped Man Thinking, he'd reached for that
old lore for reassurance—as one day a grandchild,

likewise impelled, would travel eastward,
backward to the precincts of grass-overrun,
mere, actual Dodona. A venture he'd

have been bemused by. I feel a halfway need
to justify, to whisper, Please don’t disapprove,
don’t think me frivolous. Can the courtly muses

of Europe, those bedizened crones, survive the
manholes, the vaunt and skitter of Manhattan, or
consort with the dug-in, the hunkering guardians

of the Dakotas? The Louisiana Purchase
passing (as it were) from hand to hand,
my father’s father, having staked a claim

by planting trees there, rented out the eighty,
trekced back with his bride, a homing pair,
to set up as a storekeeper’s son-in-law.

The year is 1885. Next spring will see
a son delivered yelling into the rooms above
the store. Still nobody is settled. The railroad

makes people restless. Chekhov too: in 1867, bound
from Moscow to Taganrog, he'd cross the steppe again,
this time by rail; would see

the wheelbarrows, the dugouts where the work
crews lived, mounded under the moon.
By spring of that same year, a railborne exodus
to California, the latest Land of Promise, of figs and pomegranates, had begun. Whole neighborhoods were going. In September my grandparents-to-be would be among them. From an uncushioned sleeping car, the first arid glimpse of Colorado. The Spanish Peaks. A washout in New Mexico. Immoderate heat and chill. The desert's rigors and mirages. Then Pasadena. Date palms. Dust.

Ramshackle housing. Gamblers. The bare arroyo. The mountain wall. Pregnant again, my father's mother-to-be had been trainsick all the way.

Pasadena: the name a borrowing from the Chippewa, who'd never lived there. Of those who did, what history there is is an erasure. Called—after the mission that came to save them, that brought in measles and the common cold—the Gabrielinos, they sickened as the mission prospered, as it came to own the valley, carved it up and sold it off, rancho by rancho. Irrigated, planted to vines, walnuts, oranges, with prairie-dwellers hurrying in, the ranchos were carved up again, sold, subdivided: a pandemic frenzy, land changing hands. The country's mind, aimed low, grows thick and fat: thus Emerson, who looked for such as ravished from the East to rise, to blaze forth in the West. A West that proved—as one, musing, would later write—to be, essentially . . .

* * *

Essentially a customer: thus the exile, musing of empire's westward course, of intertwinnings: everything is, in a sense (he wrote), a pattern in a carpet. Trodden underfoot. The West (in short) was offering nothing. Whatever it might choose to take, it took: zeal, doctrine, manpower: all trodden underfoot. No new thing usage cannot foul. Who was San Gabriel? Who thinks of archangels, of angels in Los Angeles?

That winter, while blizzards caromed and careened over Dakota, Chekhov in Moscow, out of who knows what stored-up fervor and revulsion, for the money-fond, obliging Jew who'd tended him, brought forth a disturbed, disturbing, money-loathing brother, with his strange smile, so
complex, expressive of such feeling, in which what predominated was an unfeigned scorn. February, the tale written and sent off, would see my father’s father with a surveyor’s transit, platting a tract of greasewood and sagebrush—desert really. The wells there would soon go dry. The year is 1888; the place, on North Raymond in Pasadena, in the midst of tent poles and canvas, a shake-roofed, newsprint-papered shack, long since demolished. Here, on the sixth of April—no doubt yelling, as we’ve all done—my father entered on a scene of which he’d have no memory.

They’d stay, all told, not quite two years. How can a descendant, pondering this, not pause, bemused by the fortuity of things?

The fever runs its course. Less land changes hands; more wells fail. Jobs dry up. Hired by a grocer, for six months my father’s father handled accounts, while sick headaches made his life hell. Eyestrain, he surmised it was. What was he good for but what he’d been brought up as, a dirt farmer? Unless you counted a thing like friendship. The best friend, best he’d ever have, would stay on out there; would, unracked by misgivings, prosper. The in-laws would likewise trade, seduced, a banshee-ridden interior winter for living at the edge, with earthquakes. Living at the edge, or near it, the Pacific twenty miles away: in all that time they’d never seen it. Driving, one day, a hired team to Long Beach, where the descendants of ten thousand settlers throng, these days, they found a boardwalk, a cliff above the moiling surf, the sands. What did it mean, that roaring? Existences, as they listen and then turn away, tremble: fate, memory, seaweed-clotted polupholebeio thalassés pouring in immense, immersing all and every road not taken:

the pagan muse, unwizened, living out there at the edge, with earthquakes, not to be counted on. They listen, turn away, head east toward an interior without a rim, an absence that can, and does, unsettle—my father’s mother motion-sick, again, much of the way.
"I think places matter... One of my difficulties about being a poet at all was that I came from a place that didn't have much history and it was hard to know how to write about it... Out there there are a few monuments—there's not much sense of a past. That is the thing: there is a sense of the past well shed and well rid of it too we are—hard work, discomfort, long hours. Farmer's lives are not idyllic. As they got more affluent and more machinery was brought in, then the hard part, discomfort, was mitigated but also some of the charm—the agricultural setting, the communal charm, the thing about the harvest. These things went..."

The remarks in the first paragraph were made by George Watson, a literary historian of British provenance. The remarks in the second were made by Amy Clampitt, an American poet. These two commentaries chime together in some obvious ways, but I find the differences more instructive than the similarities. Both Watson and Clampitt note (neither for the first time) the tendency of American landscapes to resist or obliterate the marks of history. Both suggest that this apparent nullity is tied in with affluence and progress. We get more comfortable. We have (consequently) less to say, less, perhaps, to remember. This much Watson and Clampitt share. Perhaps they also share an implied conclusion, that American relies much more on English literature than some of us suppose.

The two quoted paragraphs are quite a bit like each other; they can be distinguished by a divergence of tone. Clampitt is tentative. Watson is smug. From what source, I wonder, does he derive his vision of a seamlessly prosperous and serene land: has he been watching the Bill Cosby show? He certainly hasn't been spending any time in the weird corner of Indiana where I teach and write. Nor has he, I suspect, experienced Clampitt's Iowa—or even, perhaps, those suburbs which he supposes our Utopia. It is possible to enjoy Watson's deft puncturing of poses and pretensions (he is especially good on Robert Lowell's obsession with being a Lowell and more broadly on American literature's claims to a semi-mystical uniqueness) without feeling much respect for his snide dismissals. Something has gone wrong here.

I'm going to suggest that there are special problems for American poets (just as there are special problems for poets anywhere, depending on the local culture, economy, and geography). I'll also suggest that there are ways of working through them, Clampitt's work offering an instance. The point will not be to hold up her verse as a Shining Example for others—imitation-Amy Clampitts are not precisely what we need—but to show that beginning with the dilemma anatomized in the two paragraphs above does not necessarily mean ending in some form or other of culturally-induced narcissism.

Clampitt's work began getting attention at a somewhat peculiar moment in American poetry, around 1980. The confessional mode of the sixties—autobiographical, emphasizing what seemed to be raw self-revelation—had played itself out. "Minimalist" poetry, emphasizing meaningful silences and lots of white space, hung on with a vengeance but not to much effect. (Even W.S. Merwin, a master in this mode, showed signs of exhaustion.) The outstanding practising poet was...
James Merrill, a writer whose technical mastery deepened rather than trivialized his treatment of love and of manners.

Given this frame of reference, Clampitt was hard to place. Though autobiographical in some cases, her work was never conspicuously raw; she avoided the strategies of self-display essential to the work of Sylvia Plath or John Berryman among others. Occasionally she appeared to write on the assumption "the more words the better," which distinguished her conclusively from someone like Merwin. And she was a lot messier than Merrill. (On the other hand: the messier, the more sprawling, Merrill's work got, the more she relished it: she says she read The Changing Light at Sandover in three days, an extraordinary achievement given the bulk, complexity, and variety of that book.)

It was clear, then, that Clampitt had little desire to descend into searing confession and that she wasn't going to be either a minimalist or one of those dandified Merrill-imitators even then proliferating. The set poetic postures of the day were inapplicable. Stating what it is that she has achieved is perhaps more difficult. One way of summarizing a poet's accomplishment is to produce a list. Randall Jarrell did this in many of his reviews: here are Auden's great poems, here are Frost's, he would announce—and there would follow two pages of titles. I may succumb to the list-making instinct later, but challenged to introduce Clampitt's work in a small space I would rather emphasize her mastery of a certain sort of poem: an extended, ambitious lyric often developed through the use of parallel plots. In this poetic kind, two or three lines of action or discourse typically interlace; they converge on the page and in the mind (though seldom elsewhere). Such convergences allow the writer to mediate among worlds which would otherwise remain isolated from one another, unless in secret, unarticulated ways. The scheme just described is particularly well-suited to elegance; it becomes a way of connecting lost or isolated things, of connecting them with the rest of the world. More generally, it lets a poet stretch out lyric forms as they have seldom (in recent decades) been stretched by American writers. One's expectations go up. It starts to seem that a poem can accomplish what novels have at times accomplished, only with greater sophistication, rhetorical force, and concentration, not to mention light-footedness.

So far as I know, the first person to discuss Clampitt's way with large lyrics was Helen Vendler. Her notice of The Kingfisher appeared in The New York Review of Books on March 3, 1983. Its tone was somewhat recklessly laudatory. "A century from now, this volume will still offer a rare window into a rare mind," &c.

Some of Vendler's praise is overly-theatrical; not for the first time, she is out to make a reputation, to act as a literary arbiter in a way that doesn't quite work for our culture. All the same, the New York Review piece has some excellent things in it, most particularly a commentary on Clampitt's "Beethoven, Opus 111."

Vendler describes, I think with great precision, this poem's meditative association between Beethoven's struggles in his last piano sonata and the strivings of Clampitt's father, a farmer "setting out rashly, one October, / to rid the fencerows of poison ivy;" at another time, attempting the transplantation of "a flower/he'd never seen before;" and—finally—dying in enormous pain. "Opus 111" communicates the frustrations of the composer "wrecked by repeated efforts to hear himself," also the energies of an enterprising man out in the middle of Iowa attempting to get things right in a way that simply isn't possible. (Burning the withered poison ivy vines, trying to eliminate them for good, he is touched by the polluted smoke, becomes a mass of blisters, suffers for weeks.) The farmer's dilemma and the musician's are both like and unlike; moreover, there is between them, as an historical link, the vexed status of "High art" in the American Midwest during the early twentieth century (and perhaps the later twentieth century as well).

Vendler shows beautifully how Clampitt makes a poem out of such connections. She doesn't add (but might have) that many midwestern farmers seem to be powered by a frustrated, even a warped aesthetic impulse. I've been driven through maddeningly identical fields for what seemed like hours: asked to admire the neatness, the sheer precision of the rows, the superb quality of the soybeans or the corn. A victory over nature had been achieved: since it might not last, this victory needed a witness, even an idiotically undiscerning one. For me, "Opus 111" catches that particular twist in farm work, and does so within a series of related frames that make the topic continually fresh, continually surprising. The poem is in one way personal; in another, it becomes a reflection on a particular territory of American culture, one which has tended to resist intelligent representation.

There are several other poems in Clampitt's first book that belong with "Opus 111," developing in their own ways the formal and substantive possibilities on which it touches. One of them is "Rain at Bellagio," perhaps my favorite poem from The Kingfisher. In "Rain," the poet has just arrived in Italy; to cite Clampitt's own note, she is "met at Naples by a friend who has been living with her father at a villa on Lake Como and who is about to join a contemplative order of nuns in England." This type of subject matter is in
Some respects familiar. Americans encounter Europe (high art in the flesh) and are shocked, transformed, perhaps defeated by, perhaps triumphant over it. Here be Henry James. Increasing one’s uneasiness, a first reading suggests that the treatment of these materials is cursory:  

_Fiefdoms. Latifundia. The wealth of nations.  
The widening distance between rich and poor, between one branch and another of the tree of misery.  
A view of lakeside terraces to sell one's soul for._  

Such passages seem at first like notes taken on a train or at a lecture, transcriptions of random thoughts: an attempt to add depth to a string of anecdotes. However, a few re-readings (I’m slow, I admit it) reveal the inaccuracy of this impression. “Rain at Bellagio” is an extraordinary piece because it is set within a framework of renunciation. It is not just that the poet’s friend has decided to join an order of nuns; it is also that this approaching commitment is significant in the context of the history as well as the present status of landed property. My eye then lights on the word “rain,” a choice between civilization and barbarism. Clampitt never falls into this trap, largely because she’s willing to try some approaches James would have turned up his nose at: for example, she brings scholarly reading into a work of art. “Rain,” then, makes no effort to present itself as a self-contained or self-validating text. It's part of a larger effort to understand, an effort which extends (somewhat unpredictably) into other areas than the personal and which includes such conventionally unpoetic activities as study and tourism.

flooding in Lombardy. They annihilate the traces of time (disastrously, on occasion); they cause malaria (a conference concerning which will be held at the villa where the poet’s friend has been staying); they create the conditions of work through which this world has developed. I start to notice that we’ve gotten back to farming—but not the kind that went on in Iowa, in Clampitt’s youth. A long note to “Rain” quotes a passage from Ferdinand Braudel’s book on the Mediterranean—a wonderful passage, starting with a description of rice-growing, going on to the economic implications of casual (as opposed to year-round) labor, and ending with the question of how best to kill an unfaithful wife. One way or another, all of these matters will prove pertinent to Clampitt’s poem.

I’m not going to move any further into an explication de texte of “Rain at Bellagio.” Other readers, I hope, will want the pleasure of rising to this challenge. Instead let me try to state two tentative conclusions. First, the Jamesian atmosphere is a bit deceptive. “Rain” is in the line of the old Americans-confront-Europe novel but gives it a new twist. Despite its look of realism, James’s _Princess Casamassima_, say, is ultimately a denial of historical investigation in favor of something rather different: an abstract and all-too-abstracted choice between civilization and barbarism. Clampitt never falls into this trap, largely because she’s willing to try some approaches James would have turned up his nose at: for example, she brings scholarly reading into a work of art. “Rain,” then, makes no effort to present itself as a self-contained or self-validating text. It's part of a larger effort to understand, an effort which extends (somewhat unpredictably) into other areas than the personal and which includes such conventionally unpoetic activities as study and tourism.

Secondly, it’s important to see that Clampitt wants “Rain” to spin on several axes at once. One’s view of the choice embodied in an act of renunciation is modified by other choices, other contrasts, some world-historical, some not. Moreover, the relation between renunciation and culture keeps shifting: this poem encourages a reader to investigate the place of the ascetic in the modern world. I particularly like the way (at the end) that “Rain” works out the relation between Clampitt and her memories of the Italian trip:  

_Sometimes since, in dreams... I find myself  
face to face with the transparent strata of experience, the increment of years,  
as a wall of inundation, the drowned  
glimmering above the flood plain.  
Waking,  
I hear the night sounds merge,  
as of silk, as though becoming might amend,  
unbroken, to one stilled, enclosing shein._  

For her the water is stillness; meanwhile, for the friend—who has since joined the order—it runs “liquid and garrulous through a life of silence... indivisible, unstilled.” The temptation is to say that, all along, this poem has been mainly...

2Asceticism has recently become the object of sustained attention, in an interesting book by Geoffrey Galt Harpham, _The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism_ (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Harpham writes of asceticism as a “fundamental operating ground on which the particular culture... is overlaid.” I’ve started to wonder if this insight might not help with “Rain at Bellagio,” by breaking up any overly-simple conception of how the commitment of Clampitt’s friend relates to the somewhat decadent culture described in the poem: perhaps renunciations (of various sorts) can become a ground for a critical view of society because renunciation is also a basis for society.
about the narrator, about who she is in juxtaposition with a (lost) companion, about her very different renunciations, but that's not altogether true either. "Rain" is a series of artful deflections. They hold out the promise of a unity which remains ungrasped, unembodied—except in the poem's omnipresent water. The strength of such deflections is that they chart a path between self, or selves, and the press of history on an impersonal level.

I've concentrated on poems from Clampitt's first volume. Since The Kingfisher was a more fully-accomplished collection than most first books, this decision is not very limiting. Perhaps it is time to complete the list I have begun: Clampitt has written a number of lyrics that develop or extended the kind of achievement represented by "Beethoven, Opus 111" and "Rain at Bellagio." Among these are "A Procession at Candlemas" (an elegy on the poet's mother); "The Kingfisher"; "Triptych" (a sequence on Easter themes); "The Dahlia Gardens" (on the Quaker Norman Morrison, who immolated himself in front of the Pentagon); "What the Light Was like"; "Voyages: A Homage to John Keats" (a kind of Keats biography, with special emphasis on the emigration of John's brother George to America, and a concluding section that interweaves the deaths of Keats, Hart Crane, and Osip Mandelstam); finally, "An Anatomy of Migraine" (another elegy, this one haunted by doublings and twins).

Each of these poems deserves an essay in itself—but since the present review isn't going that far, I'll conclude by returning to George Watson's recent comments on American poetry and contrasting them with one further Clampitt production. Watson states a problem which he supposes to be insoluble. In one way Clampitt's work seems to admit the justness of this position: many of her lyrics (not all) are the work of someone struck deeply by differences between the United States and Europe and trying to make art from those differences—as though the American continent were, in itself, unwriteable. Out of and around this contrast, however, emerge some possibilities for which Watson doesn't have room. Most importantly: Clampitt discovers ways of writing poems about subjects associated with self but directed outwards, towards an altogether larger territory. Not everybody should be taking this route. (At a far extreme from Clampitt's work one finds the L = A = N = G = U = A = G = E school, where the emphasis on the medium of words is so heavy that representation and mimesis are beside the point.) But if American literature has suffered, on occasion, from blandness or narcissism (at worst from bland narcissism), Clampitt shows that this need not be the case.

A recent Clampitt poem, "The Prairie," offers an especially notable instance. Though "The Prairie" has not yet been published as a whole, parts four and five of this eight-sectioned work appear in the present issue of The Cresset: enough to give the inquisitive reader a sense of the possibilities opened up. "The Prairie" begins in Manhattan, then becomes a kind of family history, moving west from Indiana to Iowa to California—enlarged, furthermore, by an uncanny intersection with Chekhov's story, "The Steppe." (The poem dwells upon the strangest character in that tale: a melancholic Jew who burns a fortune in a stove, who denies the profit motive which impels everyone else in their movements across steppe or prairie.) "The Prairie" will be richest for a reader who knows some of Clampitt's previous poems (e.g., "The Quarry" from The Kingfisher, where the Midwest is reimagined as a fossilized sea, and the "Voyages" sequence mentioned above, where echoes between midwestern and Russian landscapes are important). An acquaintance with Emerson's "American Scholar" essay would also be helpful: the section of "The Prairie" printed here begins with a quote from that memorable piece. What I would want to underline, though, is not so much sources and analogues as a way of recounting history which is at once commodious and concentrated. I like the geographical spans traversed (quickly in the poem, more slowly by the characters), the cross-references, the way (in the fragment printed above) it all ends at the Pacific, suddenly, rather shockingly, and the way the Greek words delineate this useful surprise. It's hard to know how to write about America. It can be done.
That in Dark 
Earth Many 
Days Hath Lain

Jill Baumgaertner

J.F. Powers. 
Wheat That Springeth Green. 
New York: Alfred A. Knopf. 
355 pages. $18.95.

Fans of the British novelist, Barbara Pym, learn to recognize drama in altar flowers and jumble sales. In fact, when a Pym heroine heads for the tea kettle, one knows that the book’s climax is imminent, particularly if the vicar is coming to tea. What actually happens in novels such as these? Lives are simply lived and they are simply lived. These lives are not caught up in the sweep of history, but rather they are miniatures—small portraits of individuals at a particular place in a particular time, living somewhat unremarkable lives. But for some reason we keep on reading, and that reason is usually because in these apparently ordinary characters are unacclaimed elements of strangeness and strength.

Reading J.F. Powers is in this way similar to reading Barbara Pym. Powers’ latest novel Wheat That Springeth Green is about a priest who conducts building campaigns, plays poker with the Monsignor, purchases a bed for his new assistant, and takes his garbage to the dump. As a child, he had announced to his parents that he would become either a priest or a businessman. Either would do because, so far as we could see, what one vocation lacked, the other contained. But he also heard the words of one of the school Sisters: “Just remember this, class, the next time there’s an electrical storm—thunder and lightning are as nothing, no more than the buzz of a fly, compared with the power of the priesthood.”

It is remarkable that even though there is a great deal of reader-imposed irony in the juxtaposition of the early memories of Joe Hackett with the reality of his later vocation, Joe himself does not seem to regret his choice or to see much irony in it. If he is mildly disappointed in what he has accomplished, he just accepts it as part of the way it has to be “down here.” He is an average Joe of a priest, he figures, but he is not paralyzed by his inadequacies, nor is he disillusioned, and perhaps it is in these ways that he reveals himself a saint.

In many ways this is an exclusive novel describing an exclusive world. To admit women as equals would be to write another book.

While in seminary he had tried wearing a hair shirt, but he discovered he was too fastidious to achieve sainthood in that way. He refused to wear it twenty-four hours a day because, like his socks, the hair shirt needed washing every night before bed, and then, of course, it needed to dry before he could put it on again the next morning. He also tried spiritual training, which required long hours in prayer, and of all of his fellow seminarians he seemed the most insisted that this was the only way to be an effective priest, but in parish life, Joe discovers that day-to-day responsibilities keep him from the intense prayer life he covets. He looks with admiration at the loused knees of the few contemplatives he finds, but he also notices that these priests have assistants in their parishes—and these overworked assistants are the ones who finally keep the business of the Church going. A businessman or a priest? He finds that as a priest he must be both.

Joe Hackett settles into his solitary life, drinking too much in the evenings, watching too much television—and then his long-awaited assistant arrives, not in an appropriately sedate black car, but in a caramel colored Volkswagen. Because of a snafu in the local church hierarchy, he is never told the new priest’s name, is too embarrassed to admit it to the curate after he arrives, and so spends several days trying through circuitous means to figure out what it is. Perhaps that is why he finds himself (much to his dismay) coming across at first as gruff, distant, and judgmental. At any rate, once he is forced to admit the problem to the curate, they settle into an easier routine, although as Joe makes clear right away, that does not include wearing jeans in the parsonage.

Joe confronts the theological liberal friends of his new assistant, Bill, and discovers once again that he is not at all in step with the world, even the world of the seminary these young men have just left. Joe finds himself monopolizing conversations with them, giving them lectures on “Human Nature,” or “Changing Standards.” Nonetheless, Joe begins to grow attached to his curate, but only after he learns to hand over responsibilities to him. He had once looked forward to having just such an assistant to whom he could relinquish some of the more monotonous duties of running a church, but once he has one, he doesn’t know quite what to do with him. It is only after receiving an
outrageous assessment from the Archdiocesan Renewal Fund that he is forced to accept Bill as a full partner in the ministry, and they set out on visitations every evening, approaching the non-contributing members of the parish—members who they hope will finally feel led to contribute more than they have in the past.

It is an impossible task, the two priests finally realize, but not before they have forged a new alliance and become fairly good friends. Finally, in something of a deus ex machina development, a fellow priest dies and wills Joe several thousand dollars and the painful visitations cease.

But his story continues and he moves on to another parish. There is always another parish.

In many ways this is an exclusive novel describing an exclusive world. The club is not only Roman Catholic, it is male, and any women who appear are either servants or temptresses. There are no completely drawn female characters; instead there are housekeepers, a couple of tarts who tempt Joe at age fifteen (and to whom he succumbs in Augustinian style), and several featureless nuns. To admit women as human beings, as equals, would be to write another novel in which Joe Hackett is not a character.

Powers is well aware of the insular nature of the world he describes and he is not above poking fun at it occasionally, as in the character of Joe's first housekeeper who has trained the parsonage dog to attack only men (including the resident priests). Powers is part anthropologist, recording data about life in a suburban Midwestern Catholic rectory; part poet, writing in spare but richly juxtaposed images; and part comic, creating funny scenes and delightful characters. More significant, J.F. Powers had in Joe Hackett created a character whose faith is realistic and believable. "As for feeling thwarted and useless, he knew that feeling, but he also knew what it meant. It meant that he was in touch with reality, and that was something these days. Frequently reported, of course, like flying saucers, were parishes where priests and people were doing great things together. 'But I've never seen one myself, if it's any consolation to you guys,' Joe said.

At the end of the novel the name of his parish is not Holy Faith in which he began, but rather Holy Cross. Joe Hackett has picked it up and follows Him.

---

Cardinal

A quick scarlet splash
seeping into earth's snowy shroud
halts my passing gaze,
like a careless spot of wine
dropped onto white silk,
a lasting, bleeding stain.

He adheres
when I recall his summer melody,
fluting the fragrant air
with a musical billet-doux
that secretly reaches my heart.

Yet late snow has stifled
his song, and I wonder
what he was doing back
so early, hundreds of miles away
from his warm winter playground,
and the soft sigh of sea,
because it is too soon
for his tenuous wings to beat
through this still-chilled air.

I want to reach for him,
to lift and cradle this tiny red spark
extinguished by eagerness, and I wish
I could shake him alive, tell him
not to rival the pattern of time
or it might lash back at him.

Instead, as silent
as breath fogged in the thick breeze
which flutters his feathers,
I rush off, now noticing
the gathering saffron of sunset,
and remembering everything I'd hoped
to do before darkness.

Amber Schaefer
The March into Feudalism

James Combs

I was watching "Beauty and the Beast" on television one night recently, and a vision of the future of the world came to me. This odd little show uses that ancient and Freudian tale about the mutual attraction of a powerful, intelligent, and bestially ugly man-being with a beautiful and sensual young woman in an unfulfilled relationship that is ble beautiful and sensual young woman been many variants on this venerability.

But the TV show has an interesting twist—The Beast is a member of a subterranean society that lives in the space beneath New York, and the stories revolve around the interplay of that society with the society up above. The New York of the show is acquisitive, cynical, amoral, and violent. The alternative society below is clearly not modern and secular—it has a moral code, a clear hierarchy, no advanced technology but rather the use of magic. In dress and trappings, social order and chivalric values, it comes across as nothing less than medieval. Television has conjured up a superior moral and social world to the insanity of New York, and it looks for all the world like the Dark Ages. The beauty thus lives in beastly New York, and the beast lives in a darkly beautiful world devoid of technology, capitalism, and cab drivers.

This mildly successful TV series grinds through predictably formulaic plots, but it was this juxtaposition of these two societies, the one below the streets as an antithesis of the contemporary American urban condition, that whetted my curiosity. Then I was reminded again of how much contemporary popular culture plays with the Middle Ages—one thinks of the "sword and sorcerer" movies, Dungeons and Dragons and their many imitators, the vast fantasy literature set in imagined medieval worlds, the Tolkien cult, Saturday morning kidvid about chivalric adventures of the Masters of the Universe and suchlike, the Society for Creative Anachronism that stages jousts and sings the songs of troubadours. Even Star Wars, for all of its space technology, is set in the past and has a definite medieval tone to it, with its chivalric code of an order of knights, beautiful princesses in distress, strange peoples and wondrous lands, mentors and magic, and the heroism of knights-errant in the restoration of good. Perhaps then it is no accident that our most astonishing and vivid recent political myth has been the association of the fallen warrior-king, John F. Kennedy, with King Arthur and Camelot, and the Kennedy family since has continued its political course on the unspoken idea that first the brothers and now perhaps one of the younger generation will be the new Arthur that returns from Avalon to restore peace and justice.

Play with romanticized versions of another time suggest dissatisfaction with the present, to be sure, and such play can be dismissed as harmless only at our peril. For every time I browse through a tape rental store or glance over the fare of independent channels, I am struck by the endless number of stories set in a bleak future of decayed cities (see such recent films as Escape from New York, Blade Runner, Brazil, Robocop, and The Running Man) or wasteland deserts (The Mad Max series) which assume a post-civilizational Dark Age of savagery, anarchy, and scarcity. The medieval metaphor, then, conjures up for us in the late twentieth century not only an enchanted dream world of Gothic landscapes, knightly heroism, and ladies fair, but also a future—our future—that imagines the decline or destruction of civilization into a new Dark Age that resembles nothing less than the world after the decline, or if you prefer, the eclipse of the Roman Empire. For some, the myth of the High Middle Ages is a past that is a fantastic refuge from the present; for others, the myth of the fall of Rome and the chaos of the Dark Ages is a fantastic expectation of the future. It is one thing to want to escape for a leisure moment into simulated jousts or novels with sorcerers and dragons; but it is quite another to entertain images of classical decline and fall followed by descent into barbarism. Rather than enjoying the rapture of a courtey medieval dream, this contemporary sensibility imagines the future as a nightmare, with resemblances garnered from the enduring popular vision of a corrupt and opulent world power that slowly but surely collapsed through its inability to adapt to changing circumstances and challenges. Even Gibbon was not immune from the romantic vision of the fall of Rome, rendering his much-quoted list of the causes of Rome's demise, forever inviting the Roman experience as a didactic metaphor for troubles in the present. But for both intellectuals and the popular mind, the Rome analogy...
persists as a kind of "kids: don't do this at home" warning, that unless we're good the same thing that happened to them as the colossus that bestrode the world will happen to us too. Rome remains a powerful image in periods when people feel that things are out of hand, drifting and decaying, and power seems to be shifting elsewhere. Byron's Childe Harold gazes upon the ruins of the Eternal City and thinks of the "rehearsal of the past": "First Freedom, and then Glory—when that fails/Wealth, vice, corruption—barbarism at last." The Roman "imperial cycle" is much on our mind: the New York Review of Books solemnly reviews a new cluster of books (such as Ramsay MacMullen's Corruption and the Decline of Rome) for what they tell us about the present; writers as diverse as Joan Didion and Paul Kennedy write of "America's imperial retreat"; others speak of the American loss of civitas and gravitas, the decline in public spirit and civic pride, and the inability to take public affairs seriously; Lewis Lapham, in his Money and Class in America, writes of our mad pursuit of wealth as similar to that of imperial Rome; the Commissioner of Baseball speculates as to whether American sports crowds are acquiring the savage behavior of Roman gladiatorial spectators. Careful philosophers of history can dispute the appropriateness of such easy historical comparisons and recurrences, but the analogy has reappeared to structure feelings in the present that the American moment has passed and that we are in a "late-empire" stage of political development given over to the abandon of private self-indulgence and the neglect of urgent problems whose very insolubility seal our historical doom. There is now an uneasy and grouchy mood among intellectual and policy circles, as if they expect something uncontrollably apocalyptic to occur soon that will make us, like the Romans, the servant rather than the master of others. The Roman analogy reminds us of the impermanence of the array of power, wealth, and initiative, suggesting the fearful thought that there just isn't as much time as there used to be.

It may be, then, that George Bush will turn out to be the equivalent of Tiberius.

In my Dionysian moods of anarchic play, I sometimes think that the Roman analogy more apt than we are willing to admit. Maybe we are witnessing the transformation of the republic into an imperial State characterized by the perpetuation of a static social and political hierarchy; the awesome power of praetorian forces both at home and abroad, yet with the inability to maintain domestic peace or defeat foreign foes at the perimeters of empire; and the elevation of the executive "first citizen" into a god-like emperor, ruling over an ever more opulent and expensive court society and patrician class insulated and protected from the plebeian life in the streets and byways. We may recall that figures as various as Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Shakespeare, Gibbon, and the Founding Fathers were fascinated by the agonizing transition of power that meant the demise of republican institutions and virtues and the rise of imperial dictatorship that was the beginning of the end. Perhaps in some sense Richard Nixon was our Julius Caesar, who made the initial moves to elevate the "imperial Presidency" above constitutional controls, was foiled by the Senate, but set in motion the historical forces that eventually effected the change; Barry Goldwater was Brutus, finally joining the Senatorial revolt against the assertion of executive fiat and dispensing the would-be dictator; Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, like Marc Antony and Cassius, attempted to rule in the interregnum, but were finally dispensed by the accession of our Augustus, Ronald Reagan; Reagan, like the stolid and popular Caesar Augustus, presided over the facade of a restored republic but actually furthered its descent into imperial corruption and stagnation; Nancy Reagan was remarkably similar to Livia, with her palace intrigues, burning ambitions, and interest in astrology. It may be, then, that George Bush will turn out to be the functional equivalent of Tiberius, the emperor with the patrician background and resume who reveals the bankruptcy and ineptitude of the ruling class. "If the emperor (Tiberius) was not a hypocrite," wrote F.B. Marsh in The Reign of Tiberius, "there was at any rate something in his character or conduct which made such a charge seem plausible." Perhaps Bush, like Tiberius, will attempt to rule in an increasingly impossible situation, and retreat in dismay to his Capri, Kennebunkport. Perhaps too Oliver North will turn out to be our Sejanus, attempting a praetorian coup to restore order and faith; Dan Quayle might be our own golf-playing Caligula, Sam Nunn our Claudius, and Donald Trump our Nero.

So is it the case that we are now seeing the future and know it as a rehearsal of the past? Do "Beauty and the Beast" and the "warriors of the wasteland" movies reveal our apprehension about, rather than anticipation of, a forbidding and predestined future? Surely not, we reassure ourselves, but the explosion of such thinking about historical fate out of political control at the moment can serve as a self-fulfilling prophecy. To the extent that both intellectuals and popular culture are drawn to such ancient imagery as a
scenario for our future, they give credence to the notion that our own fate is out of our hands, since we are now involved in an historical process that cannot be stopped or defeated by collective effort. *Newsweek* writes openly (February 22, 1988) of America as a “hegemony in decay,” an “ignominious and profligate empire” showing “signs of internal decay” as an “ossified society.” “When Rome got too complex in all its interactions,” writes futurist Jeremy Rifkin, “we got the Middle Ages with the manor system.” Well, if all this is true, maybe we should capitulate and just go with the flow. Feudalism has a future. Capitalism doesn’t evolve into socialism, it devolves into feudalism. We might have to give up the “bread and circuses” of the consumer economy and television, yet some of our progeny might experience the barbarian vitality of the future equivalents of the courts of Charlemagne and Alfred the Great. New and vigorous societies inspired by fresh ideological and political thinking might create a re-enchanted order that stabilizes and legitimates a status hierarchy that lasts as long as the medieval world.

Such speculation tells us more about the present than it does the future. I am so struck now by the widespread lack of faith in, and fear of, the future. By anticipation a recurrence of the fall of Rome and the advent of a new Dark Age, we seem to express more faith in the past than in the future. The myth of historical progress has fallen on hard times, to be sure, but I see no advantage in replacing it with a myth of historical inevitability. Even if we are in a period of imperial decline, there is no iron rule that we have to go through a ghastly demise and descent into a long and torturous period of disorder. Like the Romans, American influence will be around for a very long time, although in very different form than in the glory days of the *Pax Americana*. For my part, I would like to think that our best contribution to the world is yet to come, like the Greek Hellenic period or Roman Silver Age, with a real burst of creative energy in the arts and sciences that makes us truly memorable in history. This would include a popular culture with wide and daring forms of expression, including satire. The Romans discovered that when going through periods of difficult change, it helps to retain a sense of the comedy of it all. As Juvenal said of the second century A.D., it’s hard not to write satire. There is a sense abroad in the land that we are on the verge of momentous historical changes, changes that should invite ridicule rather than remorse. If this is so, let us enjoy the roller coaster of history and heed the comic poets.

---

**Galatea**

“A gifted young sculptor of Cyprus, named Pygmalion, was a woman-hater.”—Edith Hamilton

She found herself being born by inches first a finger-tip, a knuckle, then a thigh, three toes, a neck. At first she could not see, just feel the chisel’s edge as it deliberately released her from the stone.

Her jaw clenched hard on marble.

Whoever was the midwife seemed the laborer, too, so slow, meticulous the hammer strokes. He’d sometimes straddle her and bring a muscle out, blowing find dust in sunlight, polishing the limb he had pushed out of deadened bounds.

When hearing came, it was a touch that made it, a tickle deep inside her head and suddenly the mute vibrations were both sharp and definite. She heard what she had only felt before—the hammer on the chisel head, the traveling out of motion as the sharp edge hit the mass which kept her still encased.
He shaved the stone like soap and she began to hold herself less rigidly.

She had no knowledge of the world, just vague ideas of forms created. She heard the many things she listened to with curiosity. The barking dogs far off she thought were echoes of her God's swift strokes. She thought he must be making more like her, those echoes filled the quiet times when he was gone.

And then one day her nostrils filled with a new type of hearing, a warm intimation made her at the same time want to fill herself and let it go. But even though she had stepped out from stone, she will still surface, smoothed, indented. When motion came to her, she just received it. Her gesture, moment's capture, was her time forever.

Pygmalion left the eyes till last and then she saw the things she'd heard before. The sharp indefiniteness of shattered glass, the chisel with its terrible keen edge, the rain which she had heard before as threads, then sheets of sound, not individual pieces of the sky. She noticed most Pygmalion's hands, still shadows of realities, but taking more form everyday she practiced looking through those new formed eyes.

He brought caged birds to sing to her, a bunch of alabaster grapes, some flowers made from wax. She watched his lips move through the wreaths of sound. He kissed her once. His softness was unbearable. She longed to capture him inside herself, to make him stone.

Instead the goddess came to her and finished off the work. Her limbs were loosened, her hair unbound. She felt the blood rush to her fingertips. She felt the scraping of the stone she stood upon. She felt Pygmalion's hand upon her wrist, his softness upon hers and then she moved to motions of mortality.

Sometimes at night as she lies breathing by his side, she thinks of faces gone to hardness. She presses hard, beyond the surface softness of her skin and there she feels it underneath her flesh the hardness he calls bone but she knows as the prison of her soul, still tied to form.

Jill Baumgaertner
In November of 1988, President Bush was elected with 53.4% of the popular vote, a modest victory in the perspective of modern presidential elections. It was not the landslide of 1964 or 1972, nor was it the "squeaker" of 1976 or 1980. The margin of victory was fairly unremarkable, as was the campaign itself. However, the election of last November merits attention for reaching another kind of political benchmark. The turnout in this presidential election was 50.1%, a sixty-four year low. One out of every two Americans of voting age stayed home!

It is hard to discern a long-term trend in turnouts, though they have been falling over the last twenty years. Turnout was around 60% in the presidential elections from

President Eisenhower's victory in 1952 through President Nixon's in 1968. 1960, the year of President Kennedy's win, was the modern high for turnout at 62.8%. Participation in the 1972 election (Nixon/McGovern) fell to around 55%. It then slipped slightly and varied between 53 and 54% in the next three elections, 1976 (Carter/Ford), 1980 (Reagan/Carter), and 1984 (Reagan/Mondale). In this same period, turnout in the congressional mid-term elections has also been falling. Barely one of three adults cast a ballot in the 1986 mid-term elections, the lowest rate since the war-time elections of the early 1940's.

The American electorate really did not need to try so hard to achieve this negative mark. Even at our high mark in 1960, the United States was the record-holder for low voter-turnout in national elections among industrialized nations. Canada and Japan are our closest competitors for low participation, and they are both over 70%. West Germany's rate in national elections is well over 80%. Our participation rate really ranks us among developing nations. Among democratic nations in the Third World, our record is only middling. India's turnout has been higher than ours in the 1980's. We are only slightly above Egypt's.

As troubling as the phenomenon of low turnout in the United States is, there is not a lot of consensus on all of its causes, nor whether the phenomenon itself needs fixing. It was popular in the immediate aftermath of the past election to attribute the low turnout to the campaign and the quality of the candidates. It was a campaign low in discussion of issues and presentation of alternative policies. The one candidate never escaped the "wimp" label, and the other had been one of the seven Democratic "dwarfs." While focusing on the immediate campaign and candidates might explain some of the difference between the turnout in 1984 and 1988 (and make Democrats feel better about their chances "next time"), it does not deal with low turnouts in all elections in the last twenty years, or with our low level against other nations.

In comparing the United States specifically with the European nations, there are some structural and institutional differences that are obvious. One is the difficulty of voter registration in the United States. We put the burden for registration on the potential voter. In most European nations, the local election officials register residents without any affirmative action on the latter's part. The difficulty of registration in the United States needs to be considered along with the much greater residential mobility of Americans. Even if the registration systems were the same, the American would simply end up registering more than the European because of more moves to a different jurisdiction. It is felt that the extra effort required of the American voter discourages many from registering to vote. Some countries also schedule national voting for Sundays, when there is less interference from work schedules. Obviously, reforming the registration process and changing the day for elections are concrete proposals and seem to lie within the realm of possibility. A major argument for easing the registration procedures in the United States is the fact that among registered voters, the number voting is very much higher.

Even in the 1988 election, about 80% of the registered voters voted. Remove the impediments to registration, so the logic goes, and more people will vote.

Another major difference between our system and other industrialized states is the extended campaign in the United States, compared to a concentrated three to five weeks in most other industrialized countries. Our presidential
campaigns begin well over a year before the actual election. Senatorial and gubernatorial campaigns are almost as long, and with a two-year term for our congressmen, one could say that their campaigning never ends. When the length of American campaigning is combined with extensive media coverage, it is easy to see why many potential voters may simply lose interest before the campaign is over.

Further, the United States presents the voter with the longest ballot in the world. In most of the European systems, almost all of which are parliamentary, the voter is presented with a choice for only one office per election. In their national elections, the voter would only be choosing a member of the national parliament. The election of a local government council member would come in a different election and would also feature only one contest. It is not uncommon for the American voter to have to make a choice in fifteen to twenty different contests for offices at the national, state, and county levels, often in addition to referenda on constitutional amendments and other issues. It is an extraordinary person who has interest and knowledge in all of these items on the ballot.

The foregoing are only the structural impediments to voting, the hurdles the potential voter must surmount to get to the ballot box. From the economic standpoint they are disincentives. We have also removed some of the incentives. In the past in the United States, local party organizations and labor unions could mobilize voters for an election. They could offer both material and symbolic rewards for voting and working in a campaign. These institutions have declined in their role in American politics. They certainly have declined in their reputation with the individual voter, who often sees them as slightly corrupt and old-fashioned. Parties have also lost some of their influence over candidates. They lack the financial resources to really help the candidate, who in turn sees little reason to be grateful to the party. Labor unions and other interest groups are more constrained by laws than ever before, limiting the amount of help they can give the candidate. With more independence of both party and interest group, the candidate who is elected can take a more independent stand. While such independence is valued in our system, it does mean that the voter is deprived of at least one guide to how a candidate might behave if elected, his or her party label. Such a guide is often critical as the voter moves away from the top of the ballot and the better-known candidates and offices.

Because of the disincentives and lack of incentives, many potential voters (about half in the last election) do not vote. What are the consequences of this non-participation for our political system? In answering this question we find the greatest disagreement, even among political scientists. At one end of the scale are those who see the non-voter as one who is mildly contented with how things are going. To not vote is to register approval with politics as usual. Naturally, Republicans would be better served by this view. There are a few public opinion pollsters who also take this view. The mainstream in political science is more apt to see non-voting as apathy. Apathy in this context means that the person does not care enough to vote. The person could feel mild content or mild discontent, but in any case has more important things to do than think about politics and vote. Apathy is often combined with political cynicism, which reinforces the decision not to register to vote or not to vote. Not only does one not care enough to vote, but it probably wouldn't change things if one did. Non-voters are most likely to be young, poor, members of minority groups and less-educated. They are also likely to be from the South. Many political scientists have felt that these groups are more concerned with finding jobs and adequate housing, and that politics is a distant concern. Because they are in low-status positions they do not feel efficacious in dealing with government or participating in the political system. Because they are less-educated, they are less inclined to seek out information about politics, which reinforces their feelings of low efficacy and disinterest in things political. Some mainstream political scientists have gone so far as to say that the American political system is more stable because these people do not participate. Because their stake in the system is smaller and they are less informed, they could be a volatile and unpredictable group were they to participate.

It is not a really large step from the view which sees the non-voter as apathetic, but potentially volatile and disruptive, to the position which sees the non-voter as alienated. This is a view more typical of the left and political activists. There is also a group of political scientists, whose roots are in the radical liberalism of the late 1960's, who subscribe to this view of the non-voter. They work with the same demographic information about these non-participants and point out that they are also the groups that are economically disenfranchised in our society. They do not protest and revolt because there is no vehicle for this in the American political system. The two major parties in the nation are status-quo oriented, and these two parties and their leaders have manipulated the rules and the processes to perpetuate their rule. This position on the non-voter strongly emphasizes the cynicism which has been identified among non-voters, seeing it as an expression of emphatic disapproval.
of candidates and policy positions that are put forward in our elections. People do not vote because there is no possibility for change, change which they strongly desire. Non-voting is a vote for change.

There is some evidence to support each of these positions on the consequences and implications of the low turnout, though most political scientists in the area of American electoral behavior would not subscribe to the view of the non-voter as alienated or contented. At bottom, the current very low levels of participation in American elections are not much of an endorsement for democracy seen as "people ruling." Most of the people plainly are not. President Bush cannot take much comfort in the fact that only 26.8% of the voting age population endorsed his candidacy in November. This is bound to affect the legitimacy and authority of our government. Bush's administration is not alone in this vulnerability. In six of the last fifteen presidential elections, the winner received under 50% endorsement from the voting-age population. The virtue of a two-party system is supposed to be that the winner always receives a majority. This is greatly watered-down endorsement in our case. It is testimony to the fact that the system is not working as it was designed. It is also embarrassing given our claims to be a leader in the world in democratic political development.

I believe that our problems are deep, more at the systemic and cultural levels. We have a complicated political system with its federal and separation of powers features. Our political parties have suffered a serious decline. Our culture does not support self-sacrificing public and community activity. These features are going to be difficult to change. Easing voter registration is not going to put our turnout in the British, French and German league, but it is a practical place to start.

Charles Vandersee, at the University of Virginia, received a prize for his paper at the Southern Humanities conference in February.

Towards a Newsletter of Early Meanings
Charles Vandersee

Dear Editor:

Moebie, as I've mentioned, comes from Ampersand County, very rural, and she spent a week there lately. Various members of her family live there, but she had gone back for the first annual Protothermeneutical Conference.

I didn't expect to hear from her, but a small package arrived about the time she got back. In it were two bumper stickers. I'M NEUTRAL ON Gnostics and HONK IF YOU CAN PRONOUNCE SCHISM. There had actually been one newspaper story on the conference, reporting that attenders had set up an organization called the Early Meaning Society.

"Don't you have your work already done?" I asked, when she got back. "In the Oxford English Dictionary," I said, "are all these old meanings. True, you may never have enough, since the ones you really want must be the ones in oral use, the early yeomen swearing at their early cows in the ungodly hours of the morning." "But," I added (garrulously, as I could tell by Moebie's peculiar seething silence), "you have always had a lot of early meanings from written texts, and there must be rather few old scrolls and parchments, with new old meanings, waiting to be discovered."

"You're thinking lexically," she said gnomically. The conference had been held at the community college, a whimsical notion, I thought, since the college has no dorms and lacks the right atmosphere for scholarly discourse, which is to say large bright hotel ballrooms. The members of the conference stayed with local farmers and harness makers, who were contracted to supply breakfasts and reminiscences, preferably large and tidy.

"We're talking about deep and peremptory structures of meaning," she said. "Not just small equations, such as this-word-refersto-that-object." She paused, evidently to think of an object. "Take a squalvery," she said, "in the olden days that small non-toxic wooden cage for teething children, while the mother was stirring at the hearth and the father out tearing up the recalcitrant soil."

"What you want to know," she went on, "is whether the word embodied or contradicted a whole societal value system." "The issue is social meaning in the singular," she said, "not lexical meanings in the infinite plural."

For an instant this sounded like a sort of knotted apothegm, but then I saw the thing untangled and coming closer.

"As, for example," I said, "in the early days of rhythm-and-blues, what did your Ampersand County farmer, whose grandfather, let's say, grew up on the Welsh border, take to be the meaning of the 'n' in 'rock 'n' roll'? How did it color his future? Was it a threat, or simply a discord, or an inevitability, or what?"

Moebie looked at me as if I were
standing at the back bumper of some vulnerable vehicle, holding a pitchfork. "You more or less have the idea," she granted. "In the structure of stability sought by adult Americans in the years after the War, was the 'n' in 'rock 'n' roll' as innocuous as the 'n' in 'bread 'n' butter,' or was it taken as signifying the imminent breakdown of normative structures of grammar and decency?"

"An entropy of vowel and consonant both," I mused. "Signal of return to grunts and shrieks, when interpreted along with the sounds coming from the records. "The early days of rock 'n' roll," I sighed. "The good old days." Moebie is not very musical, but I thought her host might have had a Victrola. Or a big Bang & Olufsens system; I really have no clear idea of Amersand County.

"The point," she said, "is to get at those early feelings, because those feelings are the meanings." "You can imagine," she said, with a sort of Herculean sigh, quite unlike my sigh of nostalgia, and yet aurally not so remote, "that this is no small task."

"Because," she said, "an Amersand County farmer, or for that matter, anyone alert in the 1950s, does not remember his early, much less earliest, meanings of new phenomena." "What he knows are what were supposed to be his meanings," she went on.

"Everything subsequent to the primal is mediated," I said, not intending an apologem but not unhappy with it. Moebie's face looked as if it had moved from the pitchfork to the bumper, with its bumper sticker. The proposition that the 1950s were in some way primal was probably passing through her mind with a degree of recalcitrance.

"If," I speculated, "you were an active Holy Roller, your probable early meaning of the 'n' was somewhat different from what it would have been if you were a softshell Baptist."

"You mean 'hardshell,' " she said.

"I don't think so," I replied. "I've never heard of a softshell Baptist, but the person saying 'hardshell' must have felt that in the shifting sand or in the parsonage there were also softshells." "This is merely imagination," I acknowledged, "as will likely be the grails at the ends of your quests for early meanings. My point was that people of a lively charismatic religion probably were a little more open to the new beat than were even the more laid-back members of a rigidly verbal persuasion. People who twist 'n' turn would not necessarily regard grammatical entropy as a sign o' the devil."

I smiled elliptically and wickedly, but Moebie was regarding her fingernails as if they were bumper stickers in an early non-vocalized language. She has an uncanny sense of where humor is and is not.

**Was the 'n' in "rock 'n' roll" as innocuous as the 'n' in "bread 'n' butter"?**

"Why did you suggest he was from the Welsh border?" she wondered.

"Only to remind myself to ask you whether you thought that early meanings—the really very early meanings—are in any way conveyed by lingering cultural and geographical conditions." This I said with a certain hesitancy, not sure whether promptings from within or without would yield the necessary examples.

"Would an ancestral Welsh peat bog or coal hill," I asked (the promptings having arrived), "transmit down through mysterious parts of the brain either powerful images or ancient communal experiences (a village solstitial rite, let's say), which would instantly shape in this man a protoreaction to the first notes of a Chuck Berry record?"

"You think, then," she said, with a tone of surprising urgency, "that the grunt everyone took for disapproval was actually the deeply ritualized Welsh border speaking, to the Welsh borderer, rather than the Welsh borderer (or rather his grandson) offering an opinion about music?"

Here we were in territory as uncomfortable to me as the probable treacherous pasture of Moebie's Amersand farmer. I do not have a mind for grailwork. Looking down at my feet and wondering how to get out of it, I thought (and actually heard myself saying): "A Welsh border could of course be speaking down through the generations of those who lived there. Why not? What do we know about these things? We know that borders in such places were ridges or rivers, not straight lines on maps, and such primal phenomena may have powers unmeasurable by modern devices."

I went on recklessly, as if a car on a ridge with the brakes released, an agent of entropy for some fence or cow rather than simply a chrome site for an apologem. "Just as good," I said, "would be the example of your Amersand farmer who takes out a deck of cards at night, after all day cutting back the snapdragons around the milkhouse, and plays a game of zerbozza. Which he learned as a child in Ventimiglia."

"Who knows," I explained, "but that the slapping down of the cards in this late-night solitaire might have something to do with his instantaneous response to a new beat of music." "Is your Early Meaning Society," I inquired, "trying to go into all of this?"

"Closer to the theoretical heart," she said. "What gave birth to the blues? Go back behind the consumers and look at the producers. What
are the existential protohermeneutical genetic phenomena?

"The old infinite regression," I rejoined. "We never know where anything really starts," I observed, suddenly seeing in this whole project not much more than the quixotic hope that some ancient human twinge, or physical reaction, as to the breath of a dragon, had somehow left traces that could be found. The headline on the newspaper story had had a predictable small smirk to it, something like: GROUP GRAPPLES FOR LIGHT IN DARK PAST. Yet that actually did seem about right. I mentally composed a bumper sticker or newspaper headline: SCHISM UNITES Gnostics.

"The motto of the Early Meaning Society," Moebie was meanwhile saying, "is: WHAT WE REALLY KNOW." "Although," she went on, "there is sentiment for WHAT DO WE THINK WE KNOW?" "In the Society," she went on, "there is a rift between the confident and the skeptical. Actually, we seem to be in the wrong era of history for both. Or the wrong country, or the wrong administration, or something."

I was spurred suddenly into a kind of affirmation by unknown and perhaps unknowable forces. "I would like to travel back to the dark days of the past when out under the bright sun, brighter than any ballroom, the people we call Indo-Europeans were actually inventing some very early meanings as in their courts and quarries they were building the great ziggurat we call Babel."

If only we had those early meanings! I said, and she replied, "What, from Babel?"

"The human being craves to know," I said. "The Early Meaning Society craves to know, and so do I. If you really have any hope of attaining knowledge, which the newspaper did not make clear, I will take out an associate membership."

"Which should entitle me," I hazarded, "to at least a newsletter of early meanings if not the whole admirable journal."

"I thought you were beginning to follow this activity," she chided. "Even if you had the Babel talk of stone masons, roasters of joints, prostitutes with hearts of gold, and structural engineers with awls of different sizes in the folds of their garments, you would not have early meanings but rather the aggregate of sounds in the human protolanguage." "We want," she said, "proto-meanings, not proto-languages. The organism, not necessarily the tribe: the prisoner, not the jail."

"But," I said, "in any human activity, such as the building of a ziggurat or the holding of an academic conference, new meanings may emerge. New meanings appear constantly. You might find a great many early meanings just by hanging around that early construction site. More, maybe, than under a ballroom chandelier." "And for that matter," I asked, "why exactly a community college for your conference, rather than, say, a deep underground library, like the one at Johns Hopkins, with books of meanings all around?"

"The fields, the pastures, the woods and streams," she said. "It has to do with that, not the college as such." "We thought," she said, "of using the auditorium in the big IBM park that supersedes the old gully that used to supply water for the moonshine industry."

"Early meanings all around," I said, again driven by primal or perhaps culturally mediated forces. "The word park meaning hermetic walls of plastic, housing decision-makers constrained by directives from headquarters, which is to say the office called home."

"Meanings, to be sure," said Moebie, as impatient as I have seen her, like a mother seeking headlines by flying into fury over a vulgar bumper sticker. "You cite later meanings, recent meanings. What we want to feel is what an ancient nomad meant by home, what the prehistoric soft desert meant by park." "To get at these things," she ventured, without wholly succeeding, as indeed she began fading into the darkness that had begun to surround us, "we place ourselves as much as possible in the grasses, the branches, as do the golden apples of the sun, the silver apples of the moon."

"There," she said, as if from a great distance, "you actively hope for feelings, sensations, that are other than scholarly but wearing all the garments of scholarship, with a sort of rightness that early courtiers, say at the Tigris and Euphrates, would recognize and endorse." "I will give you free," she said, "the first issue of the newsletter, at an early opportunity, since you seem willing to be inscribed by the past through the agency of the immediate."

I could see she was still securely as I had known her, among the confident.

From Dogwood, yours faithfully, C.V.
Biting the Apple
Dot Nuechterlein

I have just returned home from New York and am startled to realize that not many weeks hence that phrase will read, "I have just returned home to New York."

It was most of a lifetime ago that I first thought I'd like to live in what is now called the Big Apple. Grandpa was a railroader, and each year Grandma took a kid or two along on her free pass to visit the Empire State Building, to the top of the Statue of Liberty (back when one could still climb up into the torch), to the top of the biggest roller coaster at Coney Island, I saw and was enchanted by it all.

There were other short stays through the years; then as a bride I moved to Connecticut. Although we were poor and struggling, we managed to slip down to The City from time to time, to walk and to gawk and to dream.

Apparently I have a split personality: I'm a small towner fascinated with the urban scene. My Dad was a country parson, but I never liked rural life at all; you can keep the solitude and the wild things and the foul odors, thanks all the same. People, in small groups and in large crowds, are what light up my skies—they plus neon signs and tall buildings. I enjoy knowing most everyone in my home town, but it's a big kick to explore what cities have to offer. I've lived in half a dozen states and traveled in all the others but two, and whenever possible I head for the biggest place around.

Anyway, here I was, contemplating the onset of old age in my nice, cozy, smallish community—when suddenly things changed and I'm off to seek my fortune in the hustle-bustle. (Kindly stifle those snickers about getting a bit long in the tooth for that, please.)

It should be an intriguing adventure. Ten years ago our best ever family vacation was a week in Manhattan, introducing the children to that wonderful, terrible, unfathomable, and downright exhausting place. Now they are old enough to thoroughly savor the experience.

There's something unsettled, though. On each recent visit I've been baffled about a few things, so before getting comfy there I will need answers to these questions:

Apparently I have a split personality:
I'm a small towner fascinated with the urban scene. I head for the biggest place around.

(1)—Why can't I understand New York graffiti? There isn't as much as there used to be—no more spray painting in the subways or on other city property, for example—but what is there cannot be deciphered by the untrained eye. My guess is that Mayor Koch granted the franchise to two guys, one with terrible penmanship and another who scribbles in some foreign symbol system, and they now have exclusive rights. But isn't there a single soul anymore with the urge to scrawl "John hearts Mary," or even a smutty word or two?

(2)—Where do ordinary people keep their clothes? While apartment hunting we noted that New Yorkers—not the Fifth Avenue elites, mind you, but the common folk—live in rather skimpy quarters (for which they fork over huge quantities of cash, by the bye). Two efficiencies we saw could easily fit entirely into the square footage of our present recreation room. So I've tried to think small, think miniscule, think how 17 Honduran refugees could probably exist in what I now call home, and let's not be greedy; I mean, I'm really trying.

But I am accustomed to space, okay? My philosophy of ownership has always been "Buy cheap so you can change often," and maybe I don't actually need four pairs of boots and several dozen pairs of shoes (my cheeky children call me Imelda, not even behind my back) but that's what I own, that's what I like—so now what happens when I get there? Surely people don't just buy for now and then pitch everything, but what on earth do they do with their winter things when summer arrives?

(3)—How would New Yorkers ever manage to communicate without horns? The major avenues and cross streets are filled with a continual cacophony produced by motorists, cabbies, truckers, bus drivers, even cyclists. And the horns are truly multi-purpose: the beeps and blasts say "Look out," and "Get out of the way, I'm coming through," and "Race you to the corner," and "Idiot! That light changed one-half second ago—why aren't you moving yet?" with the return blares seemingly answering with some version of "So's your old man, fellas!" I've always enjoyed the challenge of driving in New York; get behind a taxi and you can get anywhere, quick. But get in front of one and you'd better act like you know where you're going, or you'll hear about it.

Once I saw an illustrated A-to-Z poster of synonyms for the word "home,"—things like "nest," and "pad," and "teepee." "Skyscraper," as I recall, wasn't listed; but if I can solve the scrawl/space/sound puzzle, perhaps it will become so for me. I always did like Apples.
A Commencement Address

Richard Lee

My Dear Graduates

Most of you now are too well educated for me to try to flatter you, and most of you already suspect you bring no more or less virtue into the world today than did your parents and teachers when we were graduated long ago.

Therefore this commencement address dispenses with the customary idealizing of the young as our “brightest and best” who inevitably promise to make the world a better place. It also dispenses with the usual moralizing of the old as we tell you, for the last time, how to make the world the better place we obviously didn’t make it ourselves.

What remains in so auspicious an address are only two small suggestions which may be of some modest help to you in the pursuit of your own happiness.

My first suggestion is that you embrace at least one good, lost cause all the days of your life. A generation so cautious and yet so avid for all the usual advertised signs of success will surely think this suggestion strange, but I submit it offers the last chance for some of you to bring some genuine playfulness into your lives. At a time when the margin for authentic individuality in all our lives is shrinking, taking up good, lost causes may be just the idiosyncrasy you will need to save your souls.

I am not urging loony lost causes, like shoring up the membership in the Flat Earth Society or seeking the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy. Rather, I have in mind those causes which often put one at the margins of our society—away from the movers and shakers and what they think is worthwhile—and closer to the less popular and more protracted struggles for the good.

I have no approved list of good, lost causes, nor would I commend such a list to you if I did. Your cause wouldn’t be on the list. A good, lost cause must be individually chosen as an expression of your own personality and as a discipline freely chosen for the formation of your own character. All the winning causes will solicit you, but you will have to find your own good, lost cause for yourself.

Perhaps one of you will be drawn to researching and preserving the historical artifacts in his community for his local historical society, another will help start a hospice for terminally ill AIDS patients in her neighborhood, a third may be rescuing old silent film footage from nearing extinction, a fourth will be defending animal rights from the predations of our species, a fifth will be building new housing with the homeless, and a sixth will be developing the values of her children by giving them tasks of friendship for the forgotten elderly in her neighborhood. And so on. A good cause, by definition, is worth serving for its own sake. A lost cause, by definition, earns some suspicion, even opprobrium and, at best, beleaguered success. A good, lost cause, however, is also likely to find you more alive to yourself than you could ever be without it.

My second suggestion is that you avoid blaming other people for whatever goes wrong with your life. At some point an adult needs to stop blaming his parents and teachers, genetic constitution and environment, historical accidents and fate for whatever is wrong with him. If you have not already done so, Graduation Day may be as good a day as any to start taking responsibility for the evils done to you and their lingering effects upon your life.

It is, of course, true that each of us is a genuine victim of evil as well as a perpetrator of evil, and it is a bit of a moral fiction to act as if we are as fully responsible for the evil that we suffer as the evil that we do. And yet I commend this useful fiction to you as a focus for your moral energy, and I suggest the sooner you live this fiction the happier your life will be.

This does not mean that you may not, from time to time, pity yourself for some evil you suffer, nor does it mean you do not hold others accountable for the evil they do, but it does mean you ought very carefully—if at all—blame what is wrong with your life upon the evils done to you by other people or your circumstances. The sharper focus for your moral energy is to take responsibility for the evil done to you and quickly move beyond it—by remedying its effects wherever possible and by forgetfulness wherever necessary. As Kipling might put it, perhaps more stoically than would I, if you can take responsibility for the evil done to you as well as the evil you do, you will wholly own your own life and have earned the deepest happiness that life itself ever affords.

These, then, are two small suggestions to consider in your pursuit of happiness. They should not, I think, obstruct your pursuit of the goods higher than happiness, and their convergence upon those goods will be apparent. You now have our fond farewell and our best wishes for many happy homecomings to come.
The Valparaiso University Museum of Art is fortunate to own four watercolors, three drawings, and four designs by the American mystical landscape painter, Charles Burchfield (1893-1967). The watercolors are particularly fine examples of his visionary imagination. These wonderful images span his entire career, and give credence to Christopher Finch's claim that "the scope of Burchfield's ambition and the intensity of his vision are remarkable and entitle him to be considered one of the greatest watercolorists of all time. . . ."

Burchfield grew up in the small industrial, northeastern Ohio town of Salem. Living at the rural edge of town, he frequented the neighboring fields and woods, drawing their trees and wildflowers, and experiencing a deep kinship with the forces and beings of creation. Later, while at the Cleveland School of Art, 1912-1916, he saw Chinese scroll paintings. They inspired him to interpret nature in terms of rhythmic patterns and changing weather and seasons. Then, writing in his journal in 1916, he urged himself to express nature's sounds, and another to visualize abstract thoughts or moods. Rather than use pointed sable watercolor brushes, he boldly used flat oil brushes. That year, Burchfield created perhaps 400 quickly-realized, small paintings based on the nature fantasies remembered from his childhood.

Valparaiso University's Luminous Tree, June 25, 1917, is an example of such a rhapsodic vision of nature. In this watercolor we see bright, shorthand patterns of dots and lines imposed on a commonplace tree. These set off powerful, expanding, concentric rhythms from the center of the tree. At the tree top they create an aureole of shimmering waves whose undulations are Burchfield's symbols for insect sounds. Further, mysterious, peering eyes and reaching, hand-like leaves personify the foreground foliage. All invest this intimate corner of nature with an hallucinatory vision of creation as a vital consciousness. One is reminded of the personifications of nature often found in the Psalms: "Then let all the trees of the wood shout for joy before the Lord." Ps. 96: 12,13.

By 1921, this style seemed spent. Instead, Burchfield turned more and more towards a style of studied, tonal realism, and towards picturing the worn landscapes, houses, and urban workplaces of mid-America. In many of these moody paintings the forces of life seem sorrowfully to endure the elemental forces of decay.

Valparaiso University's Uprooted Tree is an early watercolor in this new, realistic style. Painted probably in the spring of 1921, it is public rather than intimate. Shown is a downed tree almost drained of life by the greater forces of wind, rain, and decay. Their destructive blows have left the dark branches and rootlets quivering. Further, the tree's underside looms upward like a strange creature lifting its blackness to the sky in mourning. However, the rest of the tree merges into the rippling, silvery grey landscape of earth, clouds, and light that recede into the distance. The painting's almost square proportions, and the word "Everlasting" penciled into the foreground, further imply an ultimate repose. In the mid-forties, Burchfield explored the possibility of enlarging Uprooted Tree, giving even greater prominence to the enduring forces of light, sky, and land. The chalk lines on the surface

May, 1989
give some idea of his thinking.

In 1921, Burchfield himself was uprooted. He lost his job in Salem and moved to Buffalo. In the following years he married, raised five children, supporting them the first eight years by designing wallpaper, and then by painting fulltime.

Many of his wallpaper designs were based on his Salem watercolors. For instance, the design of Valparaiso University's vintage wallpaper sheet, *The Birches*, 1921 was based on a 1917 painting. In contrast, Burchfield's drawings during these middle years were invariably undertaken to acquire visual information for his realistic watercolors. Such drawings are Valparaiso University's *Group of Houses*, c.1928, and *Lift Bridge*, 1935. They are crisp, closely observed, realistic line and tone studies of rundown, urban subjects. *Lift Bridge* is a preparatory study for the major watercolor, *Black Iron*.

By 1943, Burchfield turned away from the urban scenes to pursue again the expression of his mystical experiences of nature. He started this new direction by "reconstructing" earlier nature watercolors. We see the beginnings of a reconstruction in *Uprooted Tree*.

Valparaiso University's *July*, 1935-43, is an example of a completed reconstruction. Originally, in 1935, Burchfield painted *July* the size of *Uprooted Tree*, and featured the left tree only. Then, in 1943, he added papers and reworked the entire image to its present monumental effect. *July* represents a fulfillment of Burchfield's realist style. Yet beyond a merely literal or even idealized transcription of appearances, this image of a midwest wheatfield ready for the summer harvest is imbued with intense inner energy. The touch of small brushstrokes pulsates throughout; the tree leaves vibrate with undulations similar to those in *Luminous Tree*; the wheat sways in the hazy heat; and the tree trunks have an iridescent glow. In effect, the midwest farmland is seen as an endless, effortless, paradisal bounty.

By the 1950's Burchfield no longer needed to start his paintings with earlier works. As a seer who has special insight and shares it with others, he painted his visions of nature in ceremonial size, with new gestural breadth and abstraction. Valparaiso University's *North Woods Mood*, 1956, offers an image of mysteriously forbidding forest forces giving way to new life. For Burchfield, "north" was the direction of unfathomable mystery. In *North Woods Mood* the untraversable middle and far distances contain towering trees of indefinite scale, whose branches are peaked in forms Burchfield in his youth had invented as symbols for evil. These forbidding forms seem held back by the protecting rays of light from above, bringing life-giving warmth to the forest floor. In the approachable foreground the new life of a blossoming hepatica and young saplings delicately arise. In the face of sinister forces, the earth is nevertheless renewed.

Valparaiso University Burchfields, in summary, present images of four religious experiences: 1) in *Luminous Tree*, creation's mysterious vitality; 2) in *Uprooted Tree*, creation's mysterious decay and dying; 3) in *North Wood's Mood*, creation's signs of seemingly unwarranted renewal; and 4) in *July*, creation's intimations of a transcendent, paradisal order.

Finally, Valparaiso University's pencil drawing, *Wild Sweet Peas*, 1962 serves as a "Hallelujah!" response to nature from Burchfield's later years. The drawing was created for its own sake with "... no erasures or corrections permitted." (Burchfield) His pencil seems to dance across the surface in complete harmony with the forces of life energizing the tendrils, leaves, and blossoms.

Burchfield's spiritual responsiveness to nature and to the life and words of Christ were brought together in 1944 when he joined the (continued on the back)

"The painting was started in 1935; at the time it was a small study, made on the spot, about twenty miles east of Gardenville. The size was then about 25 x 29" — later I decided that the idea has possibilities for a much grander scale; so I added paper all around, increasing the size to 32 x 50". The tree on the right was added, and many changes made in the middle ground. It was completed in 1943 and exhibited in New York. In 1944 it was included in my retrospective show at the Albright Gallery and later was circulated all over the country in an exhibition of my work picked from the show by the American Federation of Arts. At the time of my retrospective, Mr. Richardson of the Detroit Museum, who was doing an article for the Magazine of Art came to Buffalo to visit the studio and the exhibition. July was one he was particularly fond of. He reproduced it as the headliner to his article which appeared in October, 1944."

—Charles Burchfield


May, 1989
Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod congregation where his wife and children were members. For him, the struggle for faith was a central and life-long concern, one, however, that involved achieving illuminating states. These states came to him especially in the presence of nature, and were then further realized in his paintings.

The Burchfield images at Valparaiso University include such expressions from his youth to his old age, in each of his major styles. They reward much contemplation.