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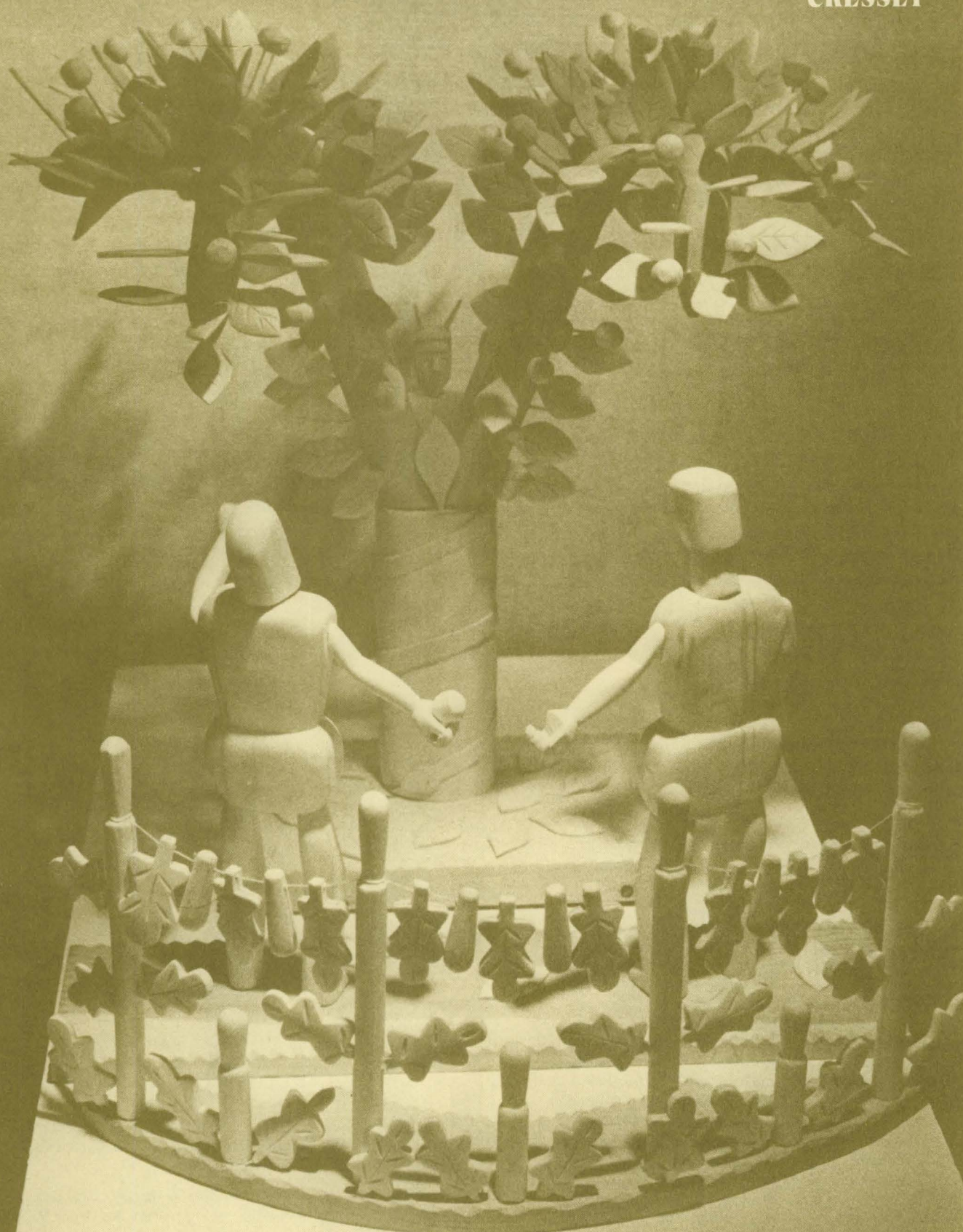
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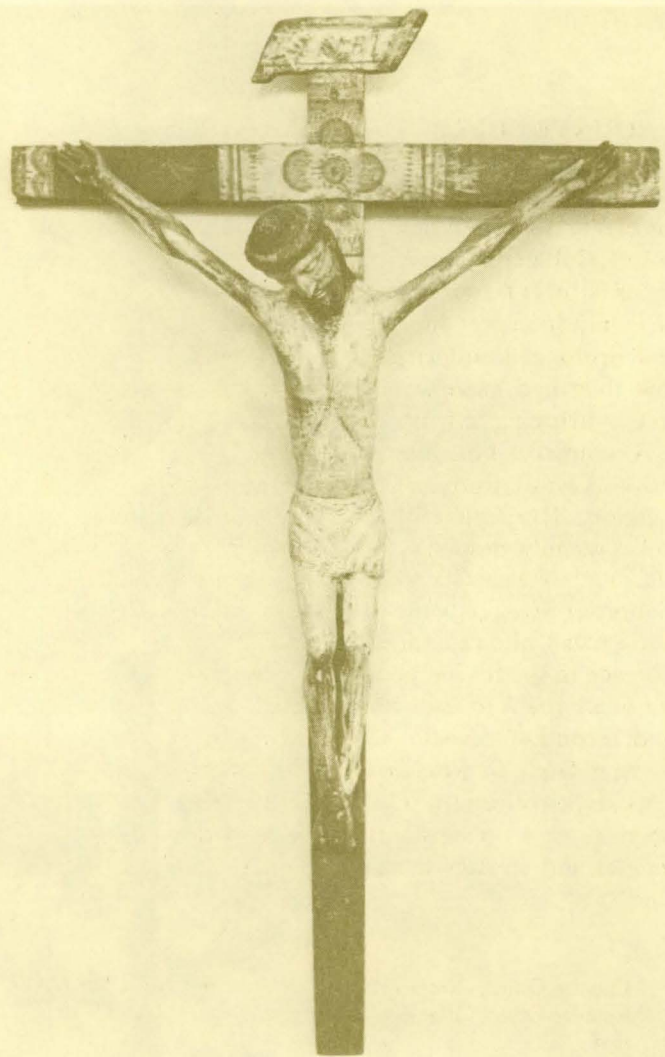
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ABOVE: Jose Arragon, *Painted Crucifix*, circa 1830. Tempera paint on gessoed wood, 28 x 18 x 6". Purchase. Valparaiso University Art Collection.

COVER: George T. Lopez, (1903- ), *Tree of Life (Temptation in the Garden)*, circa 1976. Cottonwood, 30 x 30 x 30". Purchase. Valparaiso University Art Collection.



William H. Hansell

## PERSONAL, RACIAL, AND SPIRITUAL AFFIRMATIONS IN THE MAJOR RELIGIOUS POEMS OF COUNTTEE CULLEN

COUNTTEE CULLEN DESCRIBED HIS ORTHODOX religious upbringing as occurring in "the conservative atmosphere of a Methodist parsonage";<sup>1</sup> and throughout his career, although he was not conservative on certain points, Cullen remained faithful to every critical precept of his faith. It is more easily understood, therefore, that he would interpret and portray his fate and the intense and prolonged suffering of Afro-Americans as a sign that they had been given a necessary and privileged role in bringing to fruition God's plan for mankind.

A summary of the themes in three of his major poems will serve to introduce Cullen's basic attitudes towards religion. "Heritage" states the Afro-American's devotion to Christianity, despite atavistic inclinations.<sup>2</sup> "The Shroud of Color" states his acceptance of suffering and his renunciation of revenge, which would jeopardize his soul; it also states Cullen's understanding of the special role of his race in the divine plan:<sup>3</sup> first, to reveal to man that his one hope is to endure his trials in the name of God and, second, to reveal that the only true happiness is in serving God. In what many have called Cullen's last important collection, *The Black Christ* (1929), the title poem reveals no substantial change, includes all these themes and stresses the poet's desire to serve a black God.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Countee Cullen, *Caroling Dusk* (New York, 1927), p 179.

<sup>2</sup> Countee Cullen, *Color* (New York, 1925).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Countee Cullen, *The Black Christ* (New York, 1929).

The discussion below examines "Heritage," "The Shroud of Color," and "the Black Christ," major poems which span his most productive years. The chief reason for dealing with them at some length is that many critics have used portions of them to support arguments which have seemed to me to miss or to undervalue their essential significance. A second reason is that Cullen's longer poems are dramatic in the strict sense. The narrators undergo a demonstrable change in the course of the narrative; their conflicts are resolved as they achieve new understandings about themselves and religion. As a result of experiencing an insight, or "vision," these narrators, whatever their early doubts, uniformly reaffirm their religious faith. A third and final reason for discussing these three poems in detail is the fact that Cullen regarded all these works favorably, for he selected them for his posthumously published *On These I Stand* (1947).<sup>5</sup>

"HERITAGE" DOUBTLESS GAVE SOME IMPETUS to the cult of the primitive, which had its vogue in the 1920s.<sup>6</sup> The poem declares that atavistic impulses work almost constantly in the black man, so that the civilized veneer imposed upon him, of which Christian attitudes to which he is strongly committed are a part, is always threatened as a fire threatens "merest wax." In 1927, well after all the poems in *Color* were written, Cullen himself acknowledged that his "chief problem has been that of reconciling a Christian upbringing with a pagan

<sup>5</sup> Countee Cullen, *On These I Stand* (New York, 1947).

<sup>6</sup> See Frederick J. Hoffman, *The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade* (New York, 1962), pp. 306-307.

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William H. Hansell teaches in the Department of English in the University of Wisconsin, Center System, Sheboygan, Wisconsin.



inclination." The next sentence in that passage is not so often cited by commentators: "His [i.e. Cullen's] life so far has not convinced him that the problem is insoluble."<sup>7</sup> It is instructive to indicate early what one influential critic has made of Cullen's remark and to show how it colored his interpretations of Cullen's poetry. Professor Arthur Davis seems to me to have determined his conclusions when he misquoted Cullen, changing the poet's phrase "pagan inclination" to "early pagan beliefs," then traced "the progress of this change of heart," i.e., from "pagan beliefs" to Christian faith.<sup>8</sup>

Stanza one of the poem poses the central question and implies part of the answer:

What is Africa to me:  
Copper sun or scarlet sea,  
Jungle star or jungle track  
Strong bronzed men, or regal black  
Women from whose loins I sprang  
When the birds of Eden sang?  
*One three centuries removed  
From the scenes his father loved  
Spicy grove, cinnamon tree,  
What is Africa to me?*

The answer suggested here is that Africa might be only a point of physical genesis; but the speaker of the poem, presumably Cullen himself, next describes atavistic sensations which clearly he may control but not altogether suppress. The speaker explains that the question of his relationship to Africa derives not only from intellectual curiosity but also from these very atavistic sensations which, however he resists them, accompany the images aroused by his thoughts:

So I lie, who all day long  
Want no sound except the song  
Sung by wild barbaric birds  
Goaded massive jungle herds,  
Juggernauts of flesh that pass  
Trampling tall defiant grass  
Where young forest lovers lie,  
Plighting troth beneath the sky.  
So I lie, who always hear,  
Though I cram against my ear  
Both my thumbs, and keep them there,  
Great drums throbbing through the air.

It is not exactly an Eden described here; the juggernauts are ominous. Human life, on the other hand, is simple and exotic. The lovers are very much at home in the

forest. To this point nostalgic escapism is really the strongest note in the poem, but the speaker turns to a more compelling explanation of his sense that the ancient life survives in him. His very skin and "dark blood" are irrevocable and complex bonds:

So I lie, whose fount of pride,  
Dear distress, and joy allied,  
Is my somber flesh and skin,  
With the dark blood dammed within . . .  
Like great pulsing tides of wine  
That, I fear, must burst the fine  
Channels of the chafing net  
Where they surge and foam and fret.

Pride, distress, joy—these compose his mixed attitudes towards his racial inheritance. The "dark blood" seems to be primitive, perhaps savage, instinct, another inheritance just barely held in check by the "chafing net" of civilization.

The poem goes on to detail memories and images ceaselessly reminding the narrator of his relationship to Africa, and he adds a further reason, besides his skin and ancestry, to account for the enduring ties. Certain components of the ancient life were so closely allied to natural events that similar natural events automatically trigger within the modern Afro-American the original impulses or yearnings. The very pulsing of his blood constantly revivifies primitive instincts:

Night or day, no slight release  
From the unremittant beat  
Made by cruel padded feet  
Walking through my body's street.  
Up and down they go, and back,  
Treading out a jungle track.

The images concretize the influence, the pull he feels; remembered rhythms change his "body's street" to "a jungle track." And the sound and rhythm of rain also arouse very powerful impulses:

I can never rest at all  
When the rain begins to fall;  
Like a soul gone made with pain  
I must match its weird refrain,  
Ever must I twist and squirm,  
Writhing like a baited worm,  
While its primal measures drip  
Through my body, crying, "Strip!  
Doff this new exuberance,  
Come and dance the Lover's Dance!"  
In an old remembered way  
Rain works on me night and day.

(Rain is used several times in his poetry as a means of triggering similar responses.) Natural processes revivify

<sup>7</sup> Cullen, *Caroling Dusk*, p. 179.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Davis, "The Alien-and-Exile Theme in Countee Cullen's Racial Poems," *Phylon* XIV (Fourth Quarter, 1953), 393.



ancient impulses.<sup>9</sup> It seems fairly obvious that this animistic tendency is a way of saying the earlier life was more natural. Was it, in the narrator's view, better for that?

The following sections of the poem do not entirely answer that question. The speaker states two important points: (1) he is now a Christian and (2) he is somewhat dissatisfied with Christianity. It might seem that his sudden introduction of religion is not germane to an examination of emotional or instinctual ties with Africa. What I believe Cullen intended was a development by simple steps through the narrator's personal, racial, and spiritual ties with his heritage. Also, with the allusion to the pagan worship of nature, Cullen had prepared the way for some comment on the Afro-American's personal spiritual-religious ties in his present condition.

The narrator's denial of any religious links with primitive gods comes abruptly, seemingly in a pause between exotic reminiscences of Africa:

Quaint, outlandish heathen gods  
Black men fashion out of rods,  
Clay, and brittle bits of stone,  
In a likeness of their own,  
My conversion came high-priced;  
I belong to Jesus Christ,  
Preacher of humility;  
Heathen gods are naught to me.

This comment on primitive anthropomorphism, so obviously a parallel to the same tendency in Christianity, seems almost sarcastic. The little prayer which comes later,

Lord, forgive me if my need  
Sometimes shapes a human creed,

does not eliminate the possible irony. The reminder that making God in man's image is an ancient convention is relevant to the concluding section of the poem. It is here that Cullen portrays the duplicity the narrator—perhaps any Afro-American—feels in worshipping the traditional image of Christ. He longs in his heart for a black Christ:

Lamb of God, although I speak  
With my mouth thus, in my heart

<sup>9</sup> Compare Davis, "The Alien-and-Exile Theme," p. 393: "The poem, of course, is not to be taken literally. Rain on the roof really does not incite us to strip and do the Lover's Dance 'in an old remembered way.' What the poem does say is simply this: the American Negro, hopelessly frustrated by the horrible ugliness of Jim Crow living, as one means of escape, must create in his own mind a beautiful world—a dream world if you will, of past loveliness—to which he can turn for consolation and relief. In short, it is the typical romantic search for a better world in the distant past and in a 'far countrie.' This, it seems to me, is the message of all these glorification-of-Africa poems in the works of Cullen."

Do I play a double part.

Wishing He I served were black,  
Thinking then it would not lack  
Precedent of pain to guide it,  
Let who would or might deride it;  
Surely then this flesh would know  
Yours had borne a kindred woe.

The belief that Christ understands man's fate because he too became flesh and suffered is, of course, a distinctive appeal of Christianity. Nonetheless, Cullen was fully aware that the prevailing anthropomorphism envisioned God as a white man. Prevailing prejudice, moreover, degraded Afro-American humanity. So it is understandable that Cullen felt his image of a black Christ would be derided. In fact, some of the contempt heaped on Marcus Garvey by black intellectuals was aimed at his belief in a black God; and Garvey's experience could very well have been a lesson to Cullen, whose father was a personal friend of Garvey's and continued to support him even after his exile.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps, however, it is the next few lines which cause the greatest difficulties for many readers. The narrator says that his vision of God presents to him not only a black man's features but also a God partially shaped by the influences of "dark gods":

Lord, I fashion dark gods, too,  
Daring even to give You  
Dark despairing features where,  
Crowned with dark rebellious hair,  
Patience wavers just so much as  
Mortal grief compels, while touches  
Quick and hot, of anger, rise  
To smitten cheek and weary eyes.

Although the symbolism may be unconventional, I believe the theological position here is orthodox. The "dark gods" fashioned by the narrator and the qualities attributed to God appear to sanctify both righteous anger and humble submission. Christians who can reconcile Christ driving the moneylenders from the Temple with Christ scourged and crucified will not regard the conflicting attitudes as heterodox. Cullen's psychological intention, however, is directed primarily at Afro-Americans. As he will state again in "The Black Christ," a God with black features could be expected to know from experience the special torment of the black man who must constantly restrain his anger and outrage.

It seems to me, moreover, that Cullen has posed some very old questions in a new context. Theologically it

<sup>10</sup> Blanche Ferguson, *Countee Cullen and the Negro Renaissance* (New York, 1966), p. 108.



makes no difference if one's image of God is black or white; either could be harmful or helpful. As to the supposed opposition of the "dark gods" to Christ, couldn't this be a metaphorical way of stating the eternal struggle between the forces of good and evil? Frequently in the Bible we are told that heathen gods, if not Satan himself, rule the flesh and the "baser" drives and emotions. In this vein, Cullen could simply be describing the contest of forces struggling for his soul or for any soul. The Afro-American is not different from any other man in having to deal with a nature stained by sin in a world subject to Satan's "dark" forces.

Beginning the last section of the poem with a description of the fragility and instability of his spiritual condition, torn as it is between competing impulses, Cullen writes:

*All day long and all night through,  
One thing only must I do:  
Quench my pride and cool my blood,  
Lest I perish in the flood.  
Lest a hidden ember set  
Timber that I thought was wet  
Burning like the driest flax,  
Melting like the merest wax,  
Lest the grave restore its dead.  
Not yet has my heart or head  
In the least way realized  
They and I are civilized.*

Pride and passion threaten at any moment to overwhelm humility and restraint. The narrator thus states that the struggle against the opposite impulses is never-ending and requires God's help. Uncertain of his capacity to withstand temptation, the narrator can be certain only that to surrender to "pride" and "blood" is to destroy himself as a "civilized" creature. A major difficulty I find with the concluding passage is that "civilized," if considered in the context of the entire poem, seems intended as a synonym for "Christian." As a result, the author's concept of civilization is made to appear extremely provincial. Furthermore, the earlier emphasis on the spiritual necessity for resisting the influences of "dark gods" seems to be lost sight of in the implication that the restraint of passion and pride, rather than testifying to one's faith and rectitude, becomes merely a sign that one is conventionally "civilized."

SEVERAL OF CULLEN'S POEMS GO FURTHER than "Heritage" in portraying the difficulty of adhering to Christian principles. For example, both "The Shroud of Color" and "The Black Christ" illustrate Cullen's belief in the spiritual benefits of accepting cruelty and injustice in the name of God. "Heritage," if read as a

Christian's meditation upon the forces competing for domination of his soul, uses Africa and the pagan gods as symbols of that struggle. The poem also throws some light on the psychological conflicts inherent in the Afro-American's struggle to understand his heritage, both African and American. Both concerns argue against the conclusion that Cullen was simply exploiting a faddish interest of the 1920s in primitivism. Suffering and struggling as the means to achieve salvation are more important, in Cullen's view, than are the immediate causes, social or otherwise, of the suffering.

By not recognizing this point, some critics have, I believe, misinterpreted the poem. Even though essentially intended to praise Cullen for the universality of his appeal, Owen Dodson's remark, I believe, leads our attention away from the spiritual concerns at the heart of Cullen's work: "All my dilemmas [any Afro-American, according to the author, might say this] are written here—the hurt pride, the indignation, the satirical thrusts, the agony of being black in America."<sup>11</sup> Likewise, Arthur Davis' comment—"In Christianity with its doctrine of restraint and the other cheek, the exile cannot find an answer to the questions of his dark and rebellious heart"<sup>12</sup>—ignores a major statement in "Heritage." On the contrary, the narrator of the poem does find an answer; he affirms the necessity of constantly struggling to live within the "doctrine of restraint and the other cheek." Whereas Davis implies that an "answer" for the narrator should free him of any further torment, the poem portrays a man totally persuaded the "answer" is that the struggle is worthwhile.

Just as some critics have seen almost a rejection of Christianity in "Heritage," so they have condemned Cullen's attitude toward Africa as merely escapist. For example, Professor Davis argues that Cullen portrayed the black man separated from Africa as an "alien-and-exile." This is to be seen in Cullen's poetry, first, by observing what he asserts are instinctual and natural ties with Africa and, second, by examining poems dealing with the specific question of the Afro-American's relation to Africa. An assumption underlying all Cullen says about the past and the present is that his race had been subjected to unremitting grief, fallen from past greatness, and blocked off from any sources of joy or dignity except through escapist dreams. This interpretation of Cullen's response to Africa is best summed up in Davis's article, "The Alien-and-Exile Theme in Countee Cullen's Racial Poems."<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> As quoted in Beulah Reimherr, "Race Consciousness in Countee Cullen's Poetry," *Susquehanna University Studies*, VII, No. 2 (1963), 67-68.

<sup>12</sup> Davis, "The Alien-and-Exile Theme," pp. 396-397.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 390-400.



Emphasizing Cullen's escapist intentions, Davis contends that the poet arbitrarily insisted upon racial links with an ancient African tradition and style of life in order to escape the oppressive realities of life in America. Another critic, Beulah Reimherr, in phrasing her interpretation of the significance of Africa for Cullen, quotes Davis:

To conclude, Cullen knew nothing about Africa save what he had gleaned in the course of his considerable reading. In the words of Arthur Davis, "Africa in his poems is not a place but a symbol; it is an idealized land in which the Negro had once been happy, kingly, and free."<sup>14</sup>

Both Davis and Reimherr, however, ignore important implications of a parallel Davis himself draws between Cullen and W. B. Yeats:

Just as William Butler Yeats found in a noble, legendary Ireland a background for the heroic characters in his early poems, so Cullen postulated for the Negro a beautiful past existence in this mythical Africa.<sup>15</sup>

Unless he feels Yeats was an escapist too, Davis should have given more weight to the positive and dynamic functions of myths and legends. For it does seem valid to conclude that, like Yeats, Cullen sought to demonstrate that Afro-American lives could be inspired and shaped not only by their experience since slavery but also by their ancient past, and this not as an escape from reality but as reassurance as to the merit of their predecessors and as a means of enriching their present and future aspirations. Seen in this perspective, myths can shape and guide actions in the present.

Davis and Reimherr are not alone in accusing Cullen (1) of having no authentic knowledge about the African heritage and (2) of taking advantage of a current fad. Harvey Webster flatly accuses Cullen of writing "phonily of his presumptively uncivilized heart and head" in such poems as "The Shroud of Color" and "Heritage."<sup>16</sup> Almost as disparaging is Saunders Redding's description of Cullen as "'The Ariel of Negro poets' who could 'not beat the tomtom above a faint whisper.'"<sup>17</sup>

These critics do have some grounds, of course, for accusing Cullen of exploiting "the cult of dark paganism"

which flourished during the 1920s.<sup>18</sup> Yet "Heritage" alone should prevent anyone from regarding Cullen as one who simply revelled in the "carefree" primitive. It is true that the narrator of "Heritage" feels the urge to behave in "outlandish" ways; but the poem's whole intention, as I attempted to show, was that such yearnings must be resisted. The "alien" had found a superior code on which to ground his faith.

RACIAL PROBLEMS ARE INTERWOVEN WITH spiritual problems in another of Cullen's major religious poems, "The Shroud of Color," published, like "Heritage," in *Color*. The title is intended to be taken both literally and ironically; for the black man's features do mark him out, in a special way, for the most part even shrouding him in our society from human sympathy. Written when Cullen was barely twenty, this poem evoked mixed responses. It is among those of his poems Harvey Webster labelled phony and presumptive; but it was also included in a list of "the most distinguished poems to appear in *American Mercury* for 1924."<sup>19</sup> As much as any poem Cullen ever wrote, this one clearly states his view of the special role of Afro-Americans in the divine plan.

"The Shroud of Color" is a vision poem in which the narrator is granted privileged insights into the nature of the created world and into the seeming paradoxes of reality. Beginning in a state close to despair, the narrator is on a "high/And sacrificial hill" where he beseeches God for release from a world that for one "being dark" is too painful:

I strangle in this yoke drawn tighter than  
The worth of bearing it, just to be man.  
I am not brave enough to pay the price  
In full; I lack the strength to sacrifice.  
...  
My color shrouds me, I am as dirt.

Although the narrator has felt ecstasy at the earth's wonders and been given, by God, "a many-colored coat of dreams" (the gift of poetry?), he cannot live with the harsh truths of human nature he has discovered. The few blessings he retains do not compensate for his lost vision of the purity and innocence of life. His request is to have that pristine vision restored and then to die.

Prostrate on the ground, "all passion spent," the narrator next reports a visionary experience. This vision begins when he is lifted from the earth "on a great black wing." Taken where he can view the earth as if dissected, he sees ". . . what no man saw before:/Earth, hell, and

<sup>14</sup> Reimherr, "Race Consciousness in Countee Cullen's Poetry," pp. 74-75.

<sup>15</sup> Davis, "The Alien-and-Exile Theme," pp. 390-391.

<sup>16</sup> Harvey Webster, "A Difficult Career," *Poetry*, LXX (July 1947), 222-225.

<sup>17</sup> Saunders Redding, *To Make a Poet Black* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1939), pp. 108-112.

<sup>18</sup> Cedric Dover, *American Negro Art* (London, 1960), p. 33.

<sup>19</sup> Beulah Reimherr, "Countee Cullen: A Biographical and Critical Study" (unpublished master's thesis, University of Maryland, 1960), p. 36; Webster, "A Difficult Career," p. 222; Reimherr, "Race Consciousness in Countee Cullen's Poetry," pp. 67-68.



heaven; sinew, vein, and core." The panorama of life as a brutal struggle opens for him:

The earth that writhes eternally with pain  
Of birth, and woe of taking back her slain,  
Laid bare her teeming bosoms to my sight,  
And all was struggle, gasping breath, and fight.

Plants and living creatures fiercely struggle for a life rapidly snuffed out. Notwithstanding the sight of one bud which "burst and flowered/ Into a rose whose beauty challenged, 'Coward!'" he winces at the appalling strife in the larger scene and begs for death.

At this point, a voice speaks; it is apparently God, although the narrator does not recognize Him. The voice he can neither identify nor comprehend addresses him:

*"Dark child of sorrow, mine no less, what art  
Of mine can make thee see and play thy part?  
The key to all strange things is in thy heart."*

Immediately a second vision unfolds in which life continues to reveal itself as fearful combat "Of tooth and talon, fist and nail and claw." Nonetheless, the participants reveal more clearly this time that "no thing died that did not give/A testimony that it longed to live." Mankind, "strange composite blend of brute and god," struggles as futilely and viciously as all the rest. The narrator's contempt for the combatants and a distinctive note of racial bitterness is revealed when he comments: "Well, let them fight; they *can* whose flesh is fair." The implication seems to be that "fair" men, in contrast to all colored races, benefit at least temporarily from the struggle. Immediately following the narrator's bitter observation, a third vision, announced by lightning and thunder, begins. Taken to heaven,

privileged beyond degree, this flesh  
Beheld God and His heaven in the mesh  
Of Lucifer's revolt.

God, Christ, and the angles, their backs "against a wall," fight against a mighty Lucifer, who loses "inch by inch." When Lucifer is overcome and clutches at stars to take with him into perdition, the narrator comments:

He filled his hands with stars, crying as he fell,  
"A star's a star although it burns in hell."  
So God was left to His divinity,  
Omnipotent at that most costly fee.

Faintly Miltonic in rhythm and syntax, the poem also resembles the earlier epic in that it presents Satan in a partly heroic light, proud in his defiance, choosing to live in hell as a rebel rather than submit to arbitrary

power: "A star's a star although it burns in hell." Satan in his fall has lost little of his dignity or brilliance, and perhaps, as shown in this poem, it is God himself who is diminished:

So God was left to His divinity,  
Omnipotent at that most costly fee.

Cullen intimates that the cost of asserting his power has denied God the reflected glories of one of his greatest creations.

The idea that God was diminished by Satan's banishment is heretical, I believe, but for Cullen's purposes it is essential. The narrator is literally awe-struck by Satan and recognizes a "lesson" in what he has seen. He fails, however, to see how it applies to him. In short, the narrator is still too overcome by self-pity to understand that power can "reduce" but not humiliate. That requires the acquiescence of the will of the individual.

A brief comment on Cullen's portrayal of evil in other works might throw more light on this point. Satan is not the only traditional "villain" Cullen undertook to portray in a positive light. Judas, in "Judas Iscariot," also in *Color*, is another. Betrayal to the authorities was essential if Christ's mission was to be completed. Judas, therefore, whom Cullen views as a lover of Christ and extremely saddened by his role, is a base creature only when seen from man's imperfect perspective. Having served an essential function in the divine plan, Judas is portrayed by Cullen as one of those closest to God in heaven.

In "The Shroud of Color," the "lesson" of Lucifer's fate reveals nothing to the narrator at this point, and a fourth vision begins. A "strange wild music" recalls to him "jungles, primitive and subtle." The effect is to restore his sense of intense oneness with and pleasure in nature:

And I was wind and sky again, and sea,  
And all sweet things that flourish, being free.

This momentary restoration to the naturalistic joys of his ancestors is interrupted by a different kind of music, heavy with "bitterness and death,"

The cry the lash exhorts, the broken breath  
of liberty enchained.

The idyllic vision of African life before blacks were forced into slavery is interrupted, but not totally destroyed. Slavery and misery, however, do not erase the better memory:

there ran  
Through all a harmony of faith in man  
A knowledge all would end as it began.

The narrator, after the vision of his ancestors suffering in Africa, hears a different sort of music. This newer



music, "dominated by bitterness and death," rather than obliterating the preceding music, which celebrated freedom and the joys of nature, incorporates it. Pain and joy inextricably combine to epitomize the "music" of his race:

All sights and sounds and aspects of my race  
Accompanied this melody, kept pace  
With it; with music all their hopes and hates  
Were charged, not to be downed by all the fates.

This music, the complex creation of his own race, finally produces a revelation:

And somehow it was borne upon my brain  
How being dark, and living through the pain  
Of it, is courage more than the angels have.

His race thus shares in the heroic stature of both Lucifer and the loyal angels. So we are reminded of the bud he saw come to flower, but whose significance he ignored, of the people, "all dark people," whose struggle for life he contemptuously dismissed, and of Lucifer's defiance, which impressed him but failed to reveal the meaning of the "lesson." The message in these visions failed until his racial heritage succeeded in supplying the key to knowledge:

The cries of all dark people near or far  
Were billowed over me, a mighty surge  
Of suffering in which my puny grief must merge  
And lose itself; I had no further claim to urge  
For death; in shame I raised my dust-grimed head,  
And though my lips moved not, God knew I said,  
"Lord, not for what I saw in flesh or bone  
Of fairer men; not raised on faith alone;  
Lord, I will live persuaded by mine own."

Despair is banished, his pleasure in nature restored, and he accepts his state.

The narrator carefully designates the source of his revelation: it is not from "faith alone," and it is not from abstract teachings or the acts of "fairer men." Through the visionary experiences which build to a spiritual rebirth, the narrator finally achieves the insight needed to understand the history and actions of "all dark people." His faith is, however, inscrutable the ways of God, fully restored—"My spirit has come home"—and life is again desirable. The evidence of the survival in Afro-Americans of love and faith despite the seemingly endless and pointless struggle banishes all his doubts and restores his hope.

If those who see the black experience as one of unmixed suffering reject Cullen's Christianizing of the spiritual significance of the experience, they can still accept most of his other beliefs in racial pride and in the unvanquished

desire for freedom. The narrator of this poem, very much like the narrator of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, is discovering that to know the present, the past must be understood, and that to subtract the achievements, the joys, and the hopes from the past is as false as to ignore the sorrows.

Restored to the actual world, then, the narrator of "The Shroud of Color" renounces "cringing" and grovelling and places his faith now on a "loyal dream":

Right glad I was to stop to what I once had spurned,  
Glad even unto tears; I laughed aloud; I turned  
Upon my back, and though the tears for joy would run,  
My sight was clear; I looked and saw the rising sun.

The general struggle and suffering in life and the particular ordeal of his race are endurable so long as he can believe, as he now can, that they are meaningful. The special role of the Afro-American, the particular significance of that role to Cullen, was to prove by means of their enduring faith in God, that man can be subjected to degradation without becoming degraded, to desperation without despairing, and to humiliation without being humiliated. Dignity, pride, and faith are not necessarily stifled or placed beyond reach by external conditions.

This dream is described as an "escape from reality" by Bertram Woodruff; but one need not accept this interpretation.<sup>20</sup> The poem makes clear that the narrator has been searching for the wisdom not only to understand his personal suffering and that of his race but also to understand why suffering and struggling are universally prevalent and pervasive. His dream does not tell him earthly suffering will soon end. It tells him it will be rewarded, that it is part of the divine plan. Perhaps, as with most Christians, his faith in the ultimate coming of God's kingdom on earth is restored. Only if Christianity is itself assumed to be "escapist" can Cullen's poem rightly be so termed as well. Closer to Cullen's intention, although it tends to slight the broader spiritual and Christian implications of the poem, is Professor Davis' comment: "when he [the narrator of "the Shroud of Color"] is convinced in a vision that there was struggle and suffering even in his beloved Africa, he is reconciled to living."<sup>21</sup>

CULLEN'S LONGEST ORIGINAL POEM IS "THE Black Christ," which is subtitled: "Hopefully dedicated to White Americans." The central narrative event is the lynching of a young Afro-American who was caught making love to a Southern white woman. After his "crucifixion" by the demon-driven mob, his spirit briefly

<sup>20</sup> Bertram Woodruff, "The Poetic Philosophy of Countee Cullen," *Phylon*, I (1940), 214.

<sup>21</sup> Davis, "The Alien-and-Exile Theme," p. 392.



appears to his family before being taken into heaven. Without using these precise terms, Cullen seems to equate the relationship of Christ to the Jews with that of blacks to white men. As Christ was both victim and redeemer, so is the Afro-American. White men, Cullen implies, need only to read correctly the lesson in his poem—and in the black experience—and they will understand.

Cullen announces two intentions in the opening section of "The Black Christ." The first is to show that Christ's crucifixion on Calvary was the original redemptive sacrifice in a line reaching to the present.

How Calvary in Palestine,  
Extending down to me and mine  
Was but the first leaf in a line  
Of trees on which a Man should swing  
World without end, in suffering  
For all men's healing, let me sing.

The second intention is to demonstrate that if all men truly believe in Christ and accept all events as his will and serving his ends—if, in short, all men have faith, Christ will be manifest on earth.

Did we but let our credence sprout  
As we do mockery and doubt,  
Lord Christ Himself would stand revealed  
In every barren, frosty field  
That we misname the heart.

Professor Davis argues that "the poem is really a debate between the pagan, younger Cullen and the reclaimed Cullen of 1929, which the latter wins."<sup>22</sup> In supporting his interpretation, Davis emphasizes poems or parts of poems in which Cullen implicitly or explicitly evokes a kind of atavism; but it is clear enough even in the poems concerned that atavistic impulses never stifle or overwhelm significant Christian principles. Davis' interpretation slights the fact that Cullen's earlier poems on religious themes, as well as later ones, affirm essentially Christian and spiritual verities. Even to argue that in some of the poems referred to Cullen evidently found it difficult to reconcile the claims of the flesh and the spirit does not in itself make the conflict pagan versus Christian.

The lynching of Jim, the "Black Christ" of the poem, is clearly linked to Christ's crucifixion, and thereby fulfills the first intention of the poem. The response of Jim's mother, who is also the mother of the first-person narrator, accomplishes the poem's second intention; that is, her unqualified faith in God is fully justified by the manifestation of God's power to raise up and reward those who unjustly suffer persecution. The mother is a

model Christian;<sup>23</sup> her orthodox Christian views teach her to accept the major assumptions of the faithful: simplicity ("like a child believe"), humility ("shall the mind that grew this globe" explain itself to man?), and acceptance of the mystery of God's ways:

The puzzle shall grow simple when  
The soul discards the ways of dust.  
There is no gain in doubt; but trust  
Is our one magic word.

When all men are equal before God, all will be opened to them. Her greatest ordeal, however, is in the attempt to convey her unshakeable faith to restive and embittered sons (Jim and the narrator), who, because of the treatment they receive from whites, because of the frequent lynchings which occur around them, and because of their doubts that God is truly concerned about black men, have great difficulty in believing in him. When we first see the three characters in the action of the poem, the men want their mother to leave the South. In return she presents her reasons for staying:

"This is a cruel land, this South,  
And bitter words to twist my mouth,  
Burning my tongue down to its root,  
Were easily found; but I am mute  
Before the wonder of this thing:  
That God should send so pure a spring,  
Such grass to grow, such birds to sing,  
With timid leaves first coming out.  
A land spring yearly levies on  
Is gifted with God's benison."

Her affection is clearly not blind. The evils of the place, her own bitterness are very real to her; but the abundance and richness of the land signify to her the generosity of a loving divinity. Furthermore, her relationship to the land is very close.

I saw the thin bent form, the gray  
Hair shadowed in the candlelight,  
The eyes fast parting with their sight  
The rough, brown fingers, lean with toil,  
Marking her kinship to the soil.

Earlier in the poem the mother herself had declared that her claim upon the land was greater than that of any white person:

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 398 and 399. I believe Davis' mixed response to the mother can be seen in the following quotations. In the first he seems to admire her; but in the second, he seems very close to contempt for what she represents: "Cullen has made the heroic mother of the poem a symbol of the power of orthodox faith. . . ." "If we take the mother's stand as Cullen's message in this poem, he seems to imply that a deep religious faith will overcome all racial difficulties; all we have to do is 'love, trust, and wait.'"

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 396.



"The whitest lady in the town  
Yonder trailing a silken gown  
Is less kin to this dirt than I."

The mother might also have said that whites were not only "less kin" to the Southern earth than Afro-Americans but also less kin to God; for in her mind nature manifests God.

Her views probably explain why one critic calls "The Black Christ" Cullen's fullest synthesis of the racial with the religious theme.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Davis says that the mother serves to repudiate the idea that the black man in America is an alien and an exile.<sup>25</sup> Another prominent critic certainly shared the mother's, and perhaps Cullen's, sense that the greatest source of the black's imaginative and spiritual strength was indeed the land:

It is this that must happen; a spiritual and physical return to the earth. For Negroes are yet an earthly people, a people earth-proud the very salt of the earth. Their songs and stories have arisen from a loving bondage to the earth, and to it now they must return. It is to this, for pride, for strength, for endurance, that they must go back.<sup>26</sup>

Still trying to convince her sons, the mother continues to cite reasons for her decision to remain in the South. Like any person, the land has nurtured and sometimes punished her; the bond she acknowledges is based both on gratitude and on having suffered to earn the right.

"This ground and I are we not one?  
Has it not birthed and grown and fed me;  
Yea, if you will, and also bled me?"

The South has also been the scene of her greatest personal pleasures:

"Here, too, your father, lean and black  
Paid court to me . . .  
And here were born, and here have grown,  
His sons and mine, as lean and black."

Continuing the recital of her reasons for remaining in the South, the mother asserts that Southern social mores are insignificant to her because of her own spiritual resources:

"I count it little being barred  
From those who undervalue me.  
I have my own soul's ecstasy."

<sup>24</sup> Reimherr, "Race Consciousness in Countee Cullen's Poetry," p. 77.

<sup>25</sup> Davis, "The Alien-and-Exile Theme," pp. 398 and 400.

<sup>26</sup> Redding, *To Make a Poet Black*, p. 124.

Neither natural dignity or spiritual ecstasy can be circumscribed by society. To this belief she adds one more reason for her decision to remain in the South. The passage sounds more like the college educated Cullen than a farm woman, but Cullen states through her that the imagination is a valuable outlet of those who are otherwise confined and excluded.

"And more than this (and here's the crown)  
No man, my son, can batter down  
The star-flung ramparts of the mind  
So much for flesh; I am resigned,  
Whom God has made shall He not guide?"

She goes on to deliver the best summary of her attitude: "love, trust, and wait."

Her sons are not convinced. Lynchings continue to occur, they argue, and white men remain brutal. More than this, the younger man, Jim, feels that the role he is expected to play is beneath him, temperamentally, by virtue of his natural dignity. He is a proud and handsome man who avoids whites rather than "truckle" to them because he believes "The world is large enough for two/Men any time, of any hue." Also a cause of friction in Jim's relation with whites is his appearance and carriage, which reveal a heritage perhaps of noble blood: his "bearing spoke his imperial breed." Whites grudgingly acknowledge Jim is not an ordinary man, but their comments that he is a proud "nigger" obviously contain more of hate and fear than respect. From the white man's perspective it is enough to be black to be hated; for to whites, as Jim says, all blacks are

as one more fly,  
Or one more bug the summer brings  
All shaped alike; antennae, wings  
And noxious all; if caught, to die.

In any case, Jim senses that some day his race or condition will be insulted and he will be forced to strike back in the name of his own dignity and on behalf of all his people have endured.

"Some man contemptuous of my race  
And its lost rights in this hard place,  
Will strike me down for being black.  
But when I answer I'll pay back  
The late revenge long overdue  
A thousand of my kind and hue."

Jim leaves the house then, and the narrator and his mother continue to argue about the South and God. Jim's foreboding of evil is shared by the narrator; it springs from immediate conditions but it is also grounded on ancient evil:



A curse lay on this land and clime.  
For all my mother's love of it

Corruption, blight and rust  
Were its reward, and canker must  
Set in.

More specifically, the "curse" derives from "hosts" of lynching victims:

Of dangling bodies in the wind,  
Too many voices, choked and thinned,  
Beseeching mercy on its air.

The ring of destiny, though, seems to close on these young men in that they are bound to the South through love of their mother:

. . . she by staying nailed  
Us there, by love securely jailed.

The narrator best expresses their attitude towards a God the young men see as remote and merciless. Better, he says, to have gods like those of Greece or Rome, who rewarded "devotion," piety, and obedience on earth. Better even to trust in oneself than to rely on an indifferent deity:

"Once we were blown, once we were hurled  
In place, we were as soon forgot."

The mother is appalled, of course. They stand at this impasse when the younger son, Jim, bursts in and tells them a lynch-mob, "two-limbed dogs," is chasing him, because a white man discovered him with a white girl.

What follows is a dramatically improbable, overly long passage in which Jim provides the details of his meeting with the girl, their discovery, and the insults which provoked him to strike the man. Despite the protracted account the girl and the white man are never realized as personalities; for Cullen concentrates too much on demonstrating, actually on stating, that love is natural, especially in the spring, and is a far more powerful drive than social mores—at least to those who can be moved by beauty. In this circumstance, the white man who intrudes works against nature, beauty, and love, as of course do those who support him. Infuriating to Jim as are the insults he and the girl received, the affront to spring is even worse: "Spring now lay frozen at our feet."

With the entry of the pursuing white men into the house, the narrative focus is on the contrast between them and the young man they seek to lynch. They are announced by the bestial sounds they make:

A thin noise first, and then a roar  
More animal than human grew  
Upon the air until we knew  
No mercy could be in the sound.

When they fall upon Jim, they are like a pack of hounds, "a mad, blood-sniffing crowd." In sharp contrast, the victim is all be apotheosized:

He stood as if evolved from the air . . .  
. . . he and the light were one,  
A man by night clad with the sun.

. . .  
Never such a tragic beauty shone  
As this on any face before.

. . .  
The air about him shaped a crown  
Of light, or so it seemed to me.

Momentarily his appearance is enough to make the lynchers blanch and stare amazed, but they soon return to their purpose. A policeman in the mob weakly reminds them of the proper legal procedure before instantly washing his hands of responsibility for whatever happens. The biblical allusion is unmistakable.

In the moments just before the lynching, it becomes quite clear that we are watching, participating in, a ritual re-enactment. Doubtless it is a dramatic weakness in the poem that the rebellious Jim, who until now has been scornful of religion, should suddenly be transformed. Nonetheless, we are to assume that his insight has deepened and that he wants his death to have definite significance:

"For life should not go to the tomb  
Unless from it a new life bloom,  
A greater faith, a clearer sight,  
A wiser groping for the light.

Then he is lynched: "dragged out to be/Queer fruit upon some outraged tree."

The narrator is enraged by his mother's pious response:

Faith was a tower for her, grim  
And insurmountable; and death  
She said was only changing breath  
Into an essence fine and rare.  
Anger smote me and most despair  
Seeing her still bow down in prayer.

He attempts to parody her prayer by holding up a stone and declaring that he will question it and God to see



who answers first. In his rage, he speculates on Christ's failure to respond:

"Is the white Christ, too distraught  
By these dark sins His Father wrought?"

"White Christ" in this context clearly bespeaks his sense of remoteness from God. In his grief and bitterness, the narrator wants to show contempt for the men responsible, for his mother's faith, and for a God who permits lynching. Quite predictably, a white Christ is more difficult to acknowledge, easier to scorn. This moment marks the narrator's lowest point, his farthest descent to total despair.

My Lycidas was dead. There swung  
In all his glory, lusty, young,  
My Jonathan, my Patrocles,  
(For with his death there perished these)  
And I had neither sword nor song,  
Only an acid-bitten tongue,  
Fit neither in its poverty  
For vengeance nor for threnody,  
Only for tears and blasphemy.

But in the next instant, with the miraculous brief appearance of Jim's spirit in human shape, proof of God's love is given, the mother's faith is confirmed, and the narrator's faith restored. Together they acknowledge that Christ, although each day "surrendered, tortured, crucified," ceaselessly loves mankind. As important as any of this is the fact that Christ, for the narrator, now wears his "brother's face." Thus, the poem's first intention is accomplished: "Calvary in Palestine" extends "to me and mine."<sup>27</sup> Jim does not reappear in the person of Christ, but his conversion and miraculous reappearance are taken as proof of Christ's mercy and love. That God has resurrected a black martyr, I believe Cullen means to say, demonstrates that God and Christ are "Black" in the sense that they do understand the Afro-American's condition and do not ignore or neglect the race's sufferings.

BENJAMIN BRAWLEY, WHO PRAISES MUCH in the poem, nonetheless has criticized Cullen for dealing "with a lynching in a mystical rather than a realistic vein."<sup>28</sup> I agree with this criticism and would add that in several places Cullen evidently deliberately abandoned realism in an overly literal attempt to link events in

"The Black Christ" to earlier models. The policeman who washes his hands of responsibility, Jim's speech on spring and love even while the lynch-mob is closing in, the narrator's own speech beginning "My Lycidas was dead"—all these, although intentionally designed to elevate the style and subject, seem unsuccessful to me. The narrative is not enriched by such attempts at heightening so much as it is stalled. And I believe the survivors, the mother and the narrator, should not have left the South. All the arguments in favor of staying given earlier in the poem seem more compelling by virtue of the stronger faith which follows upon the "Black Christ's" murder and spiritual resurrection. Jean Wagner argues that the mystical events portrayed in "The Black Christ" are too private or subjective and therefore fail to record more than a spiritual experience of Cullen himself.<sup>29</sup> Unquestionably, a poet's treatment of his subject is a crucial concern in evaluating and analyzing his work; however, the subject matter cannot be labelled unpoetic or inexpressible because the poet fails to create a moving and beautiful poem. "The Black Christ" may fail to persuade its audience of the mystical significance in the events portrayed, but it successfully expresses Cullen's beliefs.

There is much, on the other hand, to be said in favor of the poem as a revelation of Cullen's religious and racial attitudes. That he believed the Afro-American experience supplied materials appropriate to epic expression is obvious. He has also stated his belief in the essential freedom of the black man, the freedom of the spirit or soul which no amount of terror can imprison or obliterate. Perhaps he is most successful in portraying that "black is beautiful." The mother's earth-colored hands are significant as both symbol and fact; she is proud of her "lean and black" husband and sons. The lynched man is proud and handsome in his blackness. Finally, of course, the skeptical and bitter narrator is restored to faith and the capacity for love by the discovery that the ordeal is not a product of God's wrath. It is the sign that attests the Afro-American's special role in the divine plan.

To praise blackness for its own sake, to portray Afro-Americans in their weakness as more noble and dignified than whites in their power, to say in effect that blacks can teach whites the way back to their religion and their humanity, and to do all this without calling on blacks to do the unnatural and bestial things which are condemned when whites do them—these affirmations go a long way towards enhancing the poem's value as a spiritual testament.

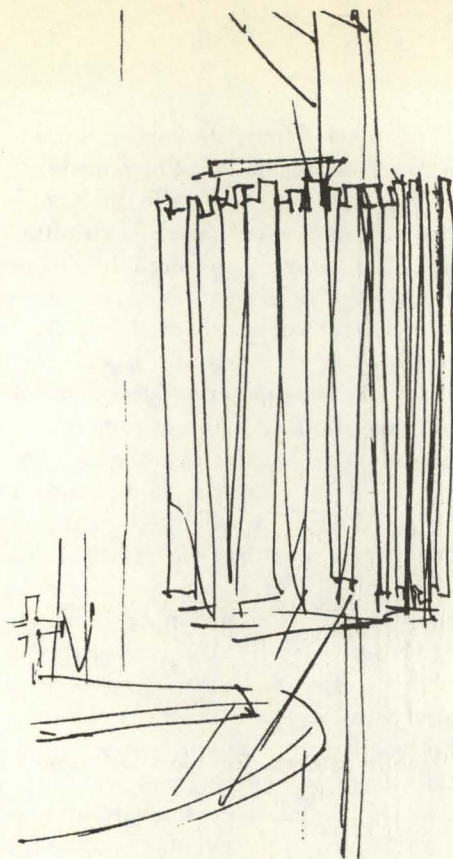
<sup>27</sup> Cf. "We cannot be sure if Jim was intended to be a second Christ, this time a black one, or Jesus Christ returned in the form of a Negro." Stephen H. Bronz, *Roots of Negro Racial Consciousness* (New York, 1964), p. 61.

<sup>28</sup> Benjamin Brawley, *The Negro Genuis* (New York, 1937), p. 227.

<sup>29</sup> *Les Poètes Nègres des Etats-Unis: Le Sentiment Racial et Religieux dans la Poésie de P. L. Dunbar à L. Hughes (1890-1940)* (Paris, 1963), pp. 380-382.



# From the Chapel



## THE MAN OF FAITH IN THE MOVIE OF YOUR MIND

RICHARD LEE

1 Kings 18:17-40

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*Richard Lee, Associate Professor of Humanities in Christ College, Valparaiso University, has published regularly in The Cresset.*

INI

This Old Testament lesson might make a good movie. Two bulls dripping guts. Nearly a thousand false prophets slashing their bodies bloody. One fireball from heaven burning up the very stones of the earth. And Elijah single-handedly slaying all the failed Baal worshippers in a dry brook. If you run those rough cuts through the movie of your mind you are not likely to enjoy your lunch.

In church and chapel we may forget that blood and guts and bad manners spill over in the holiest of Scriptures and that witnesses to the faith in its pages are rarely polite. But our God is no gentleman and neither are his prophets, especially when they are separating the true God from the false god, and the true prophets from the false prophets. Then all heaven breaks loose and it may look like all hell.

The gory and the grotesque are surely here in our story. But quiet faith is also here, and it is very important that we see that too. It is that faithful part of the story I would now try to direct in the movie of your mind.

We need not seek the spectacular for the marks of faith in our movie any more than we need to seek the spectacular for the marks of faith in our lives. The witness of faith in our story should be seen long before it comes to its fiery and bloody end. As good mental movie-makers we seek the significant, which is not necessarily the spectacular.

First, Elijah quietly shows us that *faith takes the offensive and never lets the world define the issues for the faithful*. When King Ahab calls Elijah the "Troubler of Israel," Elijah refuses his definition of trouble and who the troubler is, and he puts the title, "Troubler of Israel," back on Ahab where it belongs. It is Ahab who is flirting with the god Baal, and it is Ahab's unfaithfulness which is troubling Israel. Faith insists upon calling everything by its right name because faith cannot speak in a world where things are not called by their right names. Faith defines the world, not the other way around.

That much settled, Elijah next shows us that *faith makes demands upon the world, especially upon those in the highest*



*worldly authority.* Faith does not meet the demands of the world, but it sets its own agenda and calls the world to meet it. What is astonishing in our story is that Elijah orders King Ahab and the prophets of Baal up Mount Carmel for a showdown, and even more astonishing is the fact that the King and prophets of Baal dutifully follow him up the mountain. No great spectacle here, but the commanding presence of faith has already given you the first memorable moment in the movie of your mind.

There at the mountaintop showdown, perhaps where we least expect it, we see that *faith arouses humor toward the world.* Elijah worries not at all while the Baal prophets rave at their god to light their fire and roast their beef. His attitude is rather one of humor. Elijah's humor begins in the assurance that the Lord alone rules over the affairs of men, and his humor ends in seeing the crazy ways men mess up their lives when faith is false, or wavering, or wanting. Our faithful humor might not be as ribald and bawdy as Elijah's in this story (students who enjoy that sort of thing are invited to learn Hebrew and discover what Elijah really says about Baal in this text), but humor toward the world is surely partner to our faith too. Perhaps our humor most appropriately falls upon the Baalful parts of ourselves.

NOW, MOVE YOUR CAMERA IN FOR A SERIES of close-ups. The man of faith is beginning to move. We now see that *faith builds for God and man.* Elijah repairs "the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down." Not just any old altar will do, nor does Elijah build a new altar in his own name. The man of faith is neither careless about the things of God nor ambitious for himself. Rather Elijah rebuilds the tradition for worshipping his God. He does not take over the tradition slavishly, for like all tradition it is chronically in disrepair, but he rebuilds the tradition, fits it for new purposes, and puts it to work. No great spectacle here, just the quiet placing of stone upon stone, but the camera must not miss it in the movie of your mind.

The final altar stone in place, we next see that *faith serves men at the same time that faith serves God.* The altar of the Lord does not separate God from men but brings them together for common action. Elijah pours water over the altar three times and trenches it to catch the spill. What could this strange gesture possibly mean for his people? We note that our Old Testament lesson today fits into a larger story of a great drought parching Israel and leaving the people near starvation. Yet Elijah lavishly sacrifices upon the altar that which his people need most, and the drought does miraculously end as

our story ends. What did Elijah do to serve men in his service of God?

Here we must look very carefully into our story and venture an interpretation of its meaning appropriate to its time. The religion of Israel in this day of its development was still hospitable to magic, and primitive texts must be interpreted primitively lest we miss their meaning. We would trivialize the text with our modernity if we suppose that the water poured over the altar makes God's work more glorious by starting a fire with wet wood. As God is no gentleman, neither is He a Boy Scout. The three pourings of water are more likely an act of sympathetic magic, or a demonstrated prayer, to end the drought and return the fruits of the earth to men. So, as your movie ends, record thunder and rain on the sound track and fade-out into refreshing clouds.

But not until you have caught the climax of the story. Still your camera, for here we come to our toughest shot. We see that *faith receives the peace of God.* While the prophets of Baal cinematically run amok, Elijah quietly prays. The still small voice in which he hears his God is like the still small voice in which he speaks to his God. "Lord . . . let it be known this day that Thou art God in Israel, and that I am Thy servant, and that I have done all these things at Thy word." In the movie of your mind, this is the truly dramatic center of the story. It is not in the shouting of the false prophets, nor in their bloody slaughter, nor even in the fireball from the sky and the approaching thunder and rain. Rather it is in the moment when all movement stops and Elijah, the only prophet of the Lord left in Israel, speaks quietly to his God. There is the ultimate mark of faith in our story, the man who is calm and still in the midst of the frenzy of the world because God gives him that peace which is the greatest action of all.

ALL THESE MARKS OF FAITH APPEAR IN OUR story before the fire from heaven and the bloody purge of the false prophets. These latter spectacles are really anti-climactic from the point of view of faith. What is most important in the story has already been shown and told, and it is already clear how the story will end. We know before the heavens open who has the divine fire on his side.

As I say, this Old Testament lesson might make a good movie. If we focus on the marks of faith and restrain the cinematic special effects, we might be able to show and tell the whole story. The first and most important task is casting the part of the man of faith with all the marks of faith. It is worth pondering today whether you are playing that part in the movie of your mind.



## "WATCHMAN IN THE CITY": C.S. LEWIS'S VIEW OF MALE AND FEMALE

"The Watchman found me,  
as they went about in the city,  
'Have you seen him whom my  
soul loves?' "  
*Song of Solomon 3:3*

THE TITLE OF THIS ESSAY could have been "Lewis's view of Women." While that might have been a more popular title, it would have been not only inaccurate but would have an anarchistic ring. Lewis would have objected. C. S. Lewis did not profess a "view of women." He professed a view of the believer in Christ. Yet in his essay "Priestesses in the Church,"<sup>1</sup> Lewis has given a convincing and forceful argument against women taking a position of priestly authority in the church.

Considered as it stands, Lewis's essay is clear enough, yet his argument receives considerable illumi-

nation by a further consideration of his concept of gender, of what constitutes that which is masculine or feminine in Christianity. By specifying "in Christianity" we mean something more, of course, than simply the genetic or biological distinction. The arguments of "Priestesses in the Church" must be seen, then, in the light of several related statements of Lewis on the nature of gender. Specifically, we should like to consider the argument as amplified by two scenes from Lewis's fiction. The first is from the closing pages of *Perelandra* wherein Ransom witnesses the manifestation of spiritual energy in generic form, and reflects upon the meaning of this male-female polarity. The second revealing scene from Lewis's fiction occurs in *That Hideous Strength* in which he portrays a marriage in the making. Thus Lewis

discloses both mythic insight into the true meaning of being male and female, and, further, that these insights may be translated into everyday life.

It should be noted that Lewis's argument is not couched in rancor or chauvinism. In fact, his own life testifies to the contrary.<sup>2</sup> One has only to consider, for example, his commitment to Mrs. Moore. Out of youthful fidelity to his friend Paddy Moore, who died in World War I, Lewis had made an arrangement with Mrs. Moore which bound him to her service for thirty years. Mrs. Moore was not an easy person to live with, often crotchety, selfish, and thoughtless. Lewis had to wait on her, run errands for her, hire maids and handymen to serve her, minister to

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W. Andrew Hoffercker is professor of Theology in the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Grove City College, Grove City, Pennsylvania. John Timmerman, a professor in the Department of Philosophy in the same College, has published before in *The Cresset*.

<sup>1</sup> C. S. Lewis, "Priestesses in the Church," in *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1970).

<sup>2</sup> Much of the information outlined in this discussion of Lewis's life is recounted in detail in the recent biography of Lewis by Roger Lancelyn Green and Walter Hooper, *C. S. Lewis: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975).



her many physical ailments—both real and imaginary. What emerges from these years is a picture of Lewis as a deeply sensitive person loyally fulfilling an obligation to a dead friend at the expense of deep anxiety and often social pain to himself. Lewis was not freed of his burden until 1951 when Mrs. Moore died at the age of 79. A few months after her death, Lewis wrote a friend, "I am travelling across a plain called ease."

We should also bear in mind a far more rewarding experience of Lewis's which tempers the difficult years with Mrs. Moore, and that is his love for Joy. Lewis's relationship with Joy Davidman began through a series of letters, and deepened after she showed up as an uninvited guest in 1952 at Lewis's home, the Kilns. Lewis found Joy a splendid companion, vivacious, gifted with a shrewd and insightful wit, and knowledgeable about literature. Their relationship grew over the next few years, and the ties grew yet stronger when, in 1957, it was discovered that Joy had bone cancer. The couple were married, first in a civil ceremony at Joy's hospital bedside, then in a religious ceremony when she was brought to the Kilns.

But at the Kilns, in what Lewis described as a miracle, the dying Joy began a recovery. By the spring of 1958 she was walking and was expected to live three or four more years. Lewis was ecstatic. "The Kilns is now a real home," he wrote a friend. To another he wrote, "We are going to honeymoon"; and they did. This became the happiest time of Lewis's life, highlighted by their trip to Greece.

The remission was brief, however, until the cancer set in again. Joy's decline was slow and peaceful, and she died on July 14, 1960. She spoke

two sentences before dying: "You have made me happy" and "I am at peace with God."

"For those few years," Lewis wrote, "Joy and I feasted on love."

We have some indication, then, of Lewis's private experience of the male and female relationship, and it is important to retain this perspective in considering his argument in "Priestesses in the Church." The reason is not so that we may thereby examine the essay as biographical criticism, but rather so that we may avoid that fault. This perspective merely indicates what kind of man lies behind the work, so that we may consider the work fairly for what it says.

### **"Priestesses in the Church"**

AT THE OUTSET LEWIS CONSIDERS certain pragmatic arguments for having women officiate as priestesses in the church. Lewis considers the fact that at his time the Church of England was short of priests. Can't we fill the shortage with women wanting to become priestesses? He fully acknowledges that women can do very well all sorts of things which were once supposed to be in the power of men alone. Certainly he would not say that women are any less capable of piety, zeal, learning, and whatever else seems necessary for pastoral office. If he admits, then, that women are fully as capable of being priestesses as men are of being priests, what is his objection?

Lewis demonstrates that it is not a lack of reverence for women. He points out that the Middle Ages, as a matter of fact, revered the Virgin Mary so highly that they nearly made her a fourth person of the Trinity. But never in the Middle Ages was

woman given sacerdotal office. So the question is dissociated from that of reverence.

If women can carry out the administrative duties with equal acumen, if they can be fully as sensitive and competent in visitation, why can't they be priestesses? Lewis's argument here focuses upon what a priest is in *office*. He argues that the priest is primarily a representative—in fact a double representative who represents us to God and God to us. In the Episcopal liturgy, for example, the priest will sometimes turn his back on the audience and face the East. In such a posture he represents the people to God. When he turns toward the audience he represents God to the people.

Lewis argues that the difficulty with having women priestesses lies in the second action—representing God to the people. The woman is fully as God-like as the next man in representing the people, but Lewis pauses to examine her as representing God. He says turn it around. We can say the good woman is like God, but can we say that God is like a good woman? Can we pray, he asks, to "Our mother which is in heaven" as to our Father. If so, we must say that the incarnation may just as well have taken place in female form as male. Why wasn't Mary the Christ instead of her son? Further, Lewis says, let's switch the mystical marriage of Scripture and consider the church as bridegroom and Christ as the Bride. All this, Lewis claims, must necessarily follow if a woman serves as priest.

The crux of Lewis's argument is his acceptance of the Anglican conception of the priestly office and its dual roles. Not all Christians would agree that the representative role of the priest is twofold. Some would



argue that the Reformation notion of the priesthood of all believers severely compromises if not wholly abolishes the necessity of priests representing men to God.

However, when Lewis argues that a woman's representing God to the people changes the very nature of Christianity, he introduces a compelling point that Christians of every denomination must confront. He states unequivocally: "If all these supposals (i.e., calling God 'Mother' etc.) were ever carried into effect we should be embarked on a different religion." Scholars in comparative religions have found many religions where goddesses have been revered and priestesses served as ministrants. But in such cases we find not religion but magic, manipulation of impersonal, mysterious powers, and sacred prostitution. Even those who insist that both religion and magic are classifiable as "religious" phenomena hasten to point out features which distinguish them. Religions which have introduced goddesses and their accompanying priestesses have often been magical in nature.

Lewis considers that one might take issue with this point and argue that since God is not a biological being and has no sex it does not matter how one speaks of him. However, Lewis counters, God himself has taught Christians how to speak of him. While not making a detailed case for Biblical revelation, Lewis clearly presupposes that the Scriptures authoritatively teach Christians to use masculine imagery in speaking of God. His point is that the masculine imagery not only is inspired but is absolutely essential. Lewis's high opinion of imagery is evident. The relationship between image and apprehension is

so organically united that it is strikingly analogous to the Biblical view of man as a unity of body and soul. Human sexual distinctiveness in the Christian view is so significant that male and female are not merely homogenous, interchangeable neuters that can be employed willy nilly like replaceable cogs in a machine. The differences in sex are a reflection of the basic differences between all men.

Lewis would say that those who advocate that men and women can equally perform priestly functions have not seen the full implications of the distinctiveness of the two sexes. Lewis does not profess to understand exhaustively the uniqueness of the two sexes. Certainly they exhibit a commonality. After all, the Biblical record recounts that "God created man in his own image . . . male and female he created them." Despite this obvious commonality Lewis contends a distinction between the two that goes beyond their merely physical differences. Using another Biblical image, he says they are like organs of a body which compliment one another. They "symbolize to us the hidden things of God." Thus the distinction of sexuality points to something more basic still, something that is, in Lewis's words, "opaque to reason though not contrary to it—as the facts of sex and sense on the natural level are opaque." Here Lewis hints that a merely rational consideration of the matter is insufficient.

Lewis concludes his essay with an acknowledgment and a caution. The burden on men to fulfill the priestly office is awesome, and the failure of some men in their priestly role is evident. This is due to these priests being "insufficiently masculine." But this failure is not sufficient justification for tampering

with God's created order by substituting "those who are not masculine at all." He warns that when we are in the church "we are dealing with male and female not merely as facts of nature but as the live and awful shadows of realities utterly beyond our control and largely beyond our direct knowledge."

Lewis broaches the problem of Biblical authority as it relates to this issue, but fails to follow it up. He asserts that masculine imagery is inspired, refers to Genesis 1:27, and alludes to New Testament references to an organic union of body and soul and the relationship between Christ and the Church. But as is the case not only with his essays but also the sermons he preached, Lewis as an apologist tends to avoid *detailed* discussion of specific Biblical material. Why, for example, does he not deal with the classical texts in the Biblical tradition such as I Cor. 11:2-16; 14:33-36; I Tim. 2:8-15; Titus 2:1-6; Eph. 5:21-33, and show how these relate to Paul's affirmation in Gal. 3:28 that in Christ "there is neither male nor female"? One might well ask also, specifically how does the argument in "Priestesses in the Church" relate to the Biblical model?

### *Perelandra*

THUS LEWIS ENDS HIS ESSAY. We might consider it a rational examination of the problem. But his references to the symbolic nature of sexuality which reflects the hidden things of God, and especially to the fact that sexual distinction may be opaque, suggest that rational discourse in essay form is inadequate alone to grasp the subject. Here Lewis's unique epistemology demands that in



addition to reason's contribution, imagination also contributes to our knowledge. When reason and imagination function together dialectically, man has knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Lewis's imaginative treatment of human sexuality is to be found in two of the three novels in *The Space Trilogy*. In *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength* are two instances where Lewis broaches the subject of the relation between male and female. We might call these Lewis's mythical treatments of the subject, for they enable the reader to have an immediate grasp of the non-conceptual through the vehicle of language.

At the conclusion of *Perelandra*, Ransom, the hero of *The Space Trilogy*, is confronted with the Oyeresu Malacandra and Perelandra of Mars and Venus, respectively. They are the tutelary deities which rule the two planets under Maleldil. Both appeared to him naked yet devoid of any sexual characteristics. The absence of sexual distinction did not conceal, however, the uniqueness pertaining to each. Using music as an illustration, Malacandra appeared like rhythm, Perelandra like melody. Ransom concluded that he was privileged to perceive the "real meaning of gender." He immediately apprehended with mythical insight why in almost all languages certain inanimate objects are masculine while others are feminine. That seas are feminine and mountains are masculine is not due to man's anthropomorphically projecting male and female characteristics

upon them. Rather, the exact opposite is true. The seas and females are simply two things in the natural world that have feminine gender and mountains and males are two things of the creation that participate in and represent an ontological polarity that separates all things.

Ransom realizes that "Sex is in fact merely the adaption to organic life of a fundamental polarity which divides all created things. . . . Masculine and Feminine meet us on planes of reality where male and female would be simply meaningless." As applied to priestesses in the church Lewis would say that God is not male and we are not female; rather, he is Masculine and in relation to him we are Feminine. Therefore one who "represents" God to man as a priest ought to be one who most adequately represents or participates in that masculine nature which God alone is ontologically.

This ancient philosophical notion of participation which underlies the thought of Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas is consistent with a major theme which dominates the novel. Maleldil (God) never makes the same thing twice. A twofold uniqueness characterizes all things. In the created order nothing ever occurs exactly the same a second time. Paralleling this in the created order are generic distinctions and a uniqueness that makes each and every created object *sui generis*, its own kind, even within the same classification.

Ransom realizes that this polarity which he is privileged to view in incarnate form is basic to the created order and is universally perceived. Men in various societies and under widely diverse circumstances simply acknowledge what is

present in reality. In simplest terms man receives imaginatively through the vehicle of myth those things which are Masculine and Feminine. Even on fallen earth the gleam has not been totally extinguished, though it is often perverted and distorted. Ransom concludes "There is an environment of minds as well as space. The universe is one—a spider's web wherein each mind lives along every line, a vast whispering gallery where . . . though no news travels unchanged yet no secret can be rigorously kept." Realities such as gender can be imaginatively received and understood by the person who is open to receive the myth. While it is not itself rational it is not in opposition to rationality. It is apprehended by the imagination, not the rational.

Ransom thus comes to the same conclusion that Lewis does in other of his apologetic works: that the triple distinction between myth and fact and of both from meaning is erroneous and a consequence of the Fall. Our mythology is rooted in what is ontological, not that which is less real. The distinction between the sexes is a real distinction based on the real genders Masculine and Feminine, or Ares and Aphrodite if you wish. The sexuality that must be blurred if priestesses are to serve in the church is a homogenized or neutered man. To see man in such a way ignores the real distinctiveness that makes male and female unique despite their obvious similarities.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> The uniqueness and sameness of male and female is analogous to the three species of hnau in *Out of the Silent Planet*. The Sorns, Hrossa, and Pfiltriggi of Malacandra are all hnau, yet their distinctiveness of position, nature, and function within society accentuate the uniqueness of each.

<sup>3</sup> For a complete discussion of Lewis's epistemological use of reason and imagination see Chapter 3 "The Foundation of Apologetics" of R. B. Cunningham's *C. S. Lewis: Defender of the Faith* (Westminster, 1967).



Thus Lewis illustrates in this mythical account the importance of the masculine imagery of Christianity. As he states in the article on priestesses: "Without drawing upon religion, we know from our poetical experience that image and apprehension cleave . . . together." Christians ought to make every effort to mirror accurately in their corporate religious life that which exists in reality and that in which each individual participates by virtue of his very existence.

### ***That Hideous Strength***

FURTHER LIGHT MAY BE shed on the subject of gender by an examination of the only overt example of Lewis's view of a marriage in his fictional writings, this in the concluding novel of *The Space Trilogy*, *That Hideous Strength*. Lewis writes about love throughout his fiction—it is the central theme of *The Great Divorce*, in which he claims that the only place outside of heaven that one can be free of all the troubles and perturbations of human love is hell. In heaven one gets absorbed into perfect love, in hell there is no love at all. But rarely does he depict a love relationship of man and woman. One such scene, however, occurs in *That Hideous Strength*. To understand the marriage relationship of Jane and Mark Studdock one must understand the larger plot of the novel. Throughout the *Trilogy* Lewis has unraveled the theme of good versus evil. In the first novel this takes place out of the silent planet earth on Mars. In the second it occurs in a new Eden on Venus. In the final novel the struggle is returned to Earth. Similarly, for

our argument here, we see another level of the male-female structure, that in everyday life.

An institution known ironically as N.I.C.E., which it isn't, is building a center from which they are plotting the rule of the world by scientific methodology. Their Lord is Satan, their religion is Scientism.<sup>5</sup> Opposed to this powerful and growing organization is a small group of loyal followers of God led by Ransom, the space traveler of the previous two novels. The forces teeter-totter in a fearful struggle, and in the outcome of this battle rests the outcome of man's efforts for Christ on the planet. Finally, by the help of God, or Maleldil as he is called throughout the *Trilogy*, the forces of Ransom in the name of Christ, the ransom for many, win.

While the mythic purpose of the novel is clearly to reveal this clash of powerfully opposed forces, Lewis uses as a framework the faltering marriage of Jane and Mark Studdock. In fact, this sub-plot may be one of Lewis's nicest touches in the novel. We tend throughout the *Trilogy* to see the clash of good and evil in the scope of great cosmic forces that hurtle through all space. With the scope narrowed down in this novel to Belbury and St. Anne's, Lewis provides a still more familiar scale in the marriage. For the marriage here parallels the broader struggle of the novel, yet focuses and familiarizes the struggle of the novel in everyday terms.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis details the religion of Scientism in the *Abolition of Man* (New York: Macmillan, 1965). There he argues that by his technological achievements, man is reducing man to the level of a machine. A belief in Scientific Technology as the deliverer of man to the best of all possible worlds here and now, is acquired at the expense of belief in man's spiritual nature.

To say that Jane and Mark's marriage is faltering is to pay it a compliment. As both partners have sought first the kingdom of their own desires they have hollowed out their relationship with each other. With proleptic insight Lewis has envisioned in Jane the liberated female who has enslaved herself in whimsy. And in Mark he has drawn an accurate portrait of the male who has sterilized his love in empty dreams and fierce competitiveness. He was, as Lewis writes, "a man of straw."

Mark is recruited by N.I.C.E. only because they want Jane's visionary power in their camp. The promotion to N.I.C.E. becomes an imprisonment for Mark, but it is one for which Mark has cast the bars long before. Only when Mark learns that he cannot leave N.I.C.E., that every vestige of free will has been wrenched from him, does he learn just what he has lost. He has sacrificed everything, and would do nearly anything to escape. What he cannot do until the very end of the novel, however, is to give up his rational scrutiny of all things, his insistence upon analyzing all things, in order to find them suitable to some grand plan.

While Mark discovers his need by the total loss of all freedom, Jane discovers her need by the total subjection of herself to the will of God which grants freedom. She is uncertain of her love because she has not learned that service and obedience are constituents of love. In this lesson the whole household of St. Anne's tutors her. Out of sheer loneliness at one point, Jane was willing to crawl back to Mark, begging him to take her. Jane realizes, however, that this was a false humility, a humility of slavery



to Mark. Such a slavery had no moral basis, and no redeeming worth. It is utterly unlike the freedom of obedience which raises both marriage partners to worthiness in each other's eyes. True humility emerges from love, from genuine concern and appreciation. Obedience in this sense is mutual respect, not a servile following after another. It is found, as Ransom says, only through Christ. This is a fact which no one at St. Anne's can simply hand to Jane. It works from within and must be discovered by one's self. Left alone in the garden of St. Anne's, Jane comes precisely to this point, discovery of one's true nature before and in Christ.

The reunion of Mark and Jane after the destruction of N.I.C.E. seems inevitable. As they come together again at the close of the novel, Mark transformed to the point where he can read a fairy tale and actually enjoy it, and Jane transformed from servility into obedience, St. Anne's is bathed in supernal glory as angels gather to grant their blessing. Ransom gives the benediction to the new couple, and just before he is called to the mystic Isles of Avalon to join the Kings of Logres, he says to Jane: "Go in obedience and you will find love. You will have no more dreams. Have children instead. Urendi Maledil."

In Lewis's view one clearly finds his sexual identity only by complete obedience to Christ. This obedience glorifies sexuality and human gender. Seeing thereby the ultimate subordination of all mankind to Christ, each person is liberated into a fuller realization of individual sexual identity. This does not obliterate gender, in Lewis's view, but gives gender ultimate meaning and significance.

### Evaluation of Lewis's Argument

ONE CANNOT HELP BUT admire Lewis's visionary power, and one may in fact be swayed by the force of that power in his essays and fiction. Yet one must admit certain difficulties in Lewis's argument on the nature of gender. The crucial problem is whether the mythic apprehension of generic distinctions described in *Perelandra* can be translated into rational terms; that is, can one sustain what Lewis "envisions" by rational argument. One might say, I apprehend a difference in male and female, but this is not the same as answering the question, what does it mean to be male or female. Nowhere did Lewis attempt a "rational" discussion of what it is to be male or female. His imaginative presentation in *Perelandra* is provocative. Is there not also a forthright way of discussing what it is to be male and female or can it only be received by means of the imagination?

Secondly, while "Priestesses in the Church" presents a convincing argument within the framework of the Anglican tradition, it would seem that the argument would be more applicable to the broad spectrum of Christianity if it were to consider the Biblical as well as the liturgical basis for distinction. Lewis's subject in "Priestesses" is far deeper than a liturgical issue. It reaches into basic Biblical concepts about the nature of male, female, and God, which simply cannot be answered fully on the basis of one liturgical tradition. Previously in this study we have indicated several

of the Scriptural passages which we feel should figure into any such argument.

By the same token, to appreciate fully Lewis's argument one must consider it in its broad perspective. Lewis conceived his task as a Christian writer to keep himself within the stream of what he termed "permanent Christianity." Therefore he undertook his creativity within the historic limits of the Christian faith. He tried not to succumb to fads of any kind. Therefore, in his examination of male and female he sought to maintain a healthy tension between understanding the *distinctiveness* of the sexes, namely, his argument in "Priestesses" and his vision in *Perelandra*, while at the same time seeing man and woman in harmonious relations, namely, his vision in *Perelandra* and *That Hideous Strength*. If we could speculate, Lewis would have opposed two contending errors in the contemporary debate. He would have deplored both male chauvinism and female liberationism. Against the chauvinists he would have waged the arguments implicit in the story of Mark and Jane Studdock and against the feminists he would have called their attention to the distinctiveness of the sexes. The image of rhythm and melody in *Perelandra* is an apt one, for it points toward Lewis's vision of a harmony of male and female. Yet a harmony that is established by God's order, which establishes the position, nature, and function of male and female. Forging a *via media* in intellectual ideas has always been a difficult task. Despite the weaknesses alluded to above, Lewis has presented a lucid and provocative view of male and female.



## FROM MY ZÜRICH DIARY

WE ALL ARE AFRAID OF THE moment when both hands of the clock indicate that today is already tomorrow. To cover our fear we celebrate this moment as wantonly and noisily as we can when one calendar year happens to give way to the next. In order to justify our fear and jubilation we adhere to the customary foolishness to telescope meditative thoughts and resolutions into this nonexistent split second between now and then.

I have asked myself the question (which everyone should ask himself from time to time): Is not my whole life a list of errata attached to the last page of the book of Creation? Would I want to live my life differently if I could? Yes, of course. Would I like to be a different person? Decidedly no.

Whenever I have taken a look at myself I have thought to penetrate the reflection in the mirror, to see myself in the perspective of all years past and of all the possible hours and days to come. Sometimes I was reminded of Holbein's depiction of

the fool which must have pleased Erasmus the way this fool looks at himself in a mirror with quizzical self-scrutiny. In it is a hearty inner laugh about oneself, the most liberating gesture I can think of. Erasmus came to my mind not only because I know his image, from the way in which Holbein saw him, but also because I visualize Erasmus as one of the first witty sages who became more and more profound and human the more satirical and humorous he became.

Every decade was a discovery of hidden secrets for me, of new dreams and recurring disappointments. At times I was afraid of myself more than of anyone else; then again I lived in a state of nightmarish anxieties. I still fear those inescapable realities which are a concomitant nuisance of existence. I have come to the obvious conclusion that I understand less and less the more I experience and learn. But in the process of it I have regained the most important virtue of the child: the ability to wonder. Alfred North

Whitehead once said that to wonder is the beginning of all philosophy. I think to wonder is the beginning of living life consciously, of accepting what we think we understand, the seriousness of the moment, the flippancy of events, the constant flow of things.

I welcome the new year with the stern resolution to unmask all fallacies while enjoying them; to disapprove of my mistakes, but to defend to the death my right to be wrong; and never to admit that anything can harm me; on the contrary, to make good use of any adverse experience.

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TIME AND AGAIN I HAVE been surprised about how much a municipal administration in a smaller city like Zürich can accomplish when playing the artistic entrepreneur. It is not only running two theaters and a small concert hall for music, poetry readings, and lectures,



it also arranges cultural fairs on city squares or on ships docked on Lake Zürich, and organizes this and that whenever an occasion lends itself for carrying the arts into the streets and to the people.

Every now and then they open the seven exposition halls to an art show. This year all those who paint, sculpt, and draw were invited to exhibit their works without being exposed to the judgment of a jury. In this free-for-all ambience 800 artists exhibited about 11,000 works. On such occasion the municipal impresario also invites a few world-famous artists, such as Max Bill, Richard Paul Lohse, and others to join the crowd. Such a mammoth exhibition is to be judged as a sociocultural phenomenon rather than one of the many exhibitions subjected to certain standards of artistic accomplishment. It gives everyone a chance to be seen regardless of his artistry, but one did see surprisingly fine paintings as well as some products of bewildering dilettantism. Art dealers are said to pass by in the hope of finding new talents.

For this small city and canton the number of those who wished to expose themselves with the harvest of their idle scribbling and artistic daring is stupendous. If one adds to it the many accomplished artists in this city who have resisted the open invitation, then the number of art-minded people staggers the imagination. It is probably a world-wide phenomenon of our button-pushing era that so many of us escape with the help of the imaginative flow of intuitive thoughts into color and shape. We have learned to see in visual imagery and feel far less induced to write poetry as in former days. It seems man has been reorientated by photography, film, and television.

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SOPHOCLES AND HIS TWO plays about Oedipus have been a cultural treasure with us for quite some time. They have puzzled and

enlightened us. They had the same effect on the ancient Greeks. The question of how to stage these plays nowadays has often induced directors to experiment with new ideas. From our viewpoint, *Oedipus Rex* could be considered a remote ancestor of the theatre of the absurd, for it also involves an enigmatic and unfathomable world and the metaphysical anguish of the hero in search of himself. But this notion may easily be misleading in reshaping the play in our time.

The Zürich Theater am Neumarkt went far out to give Sophocles a contemporary face. Both plays were cut into fragmentary pieces and then pieced together in the form of a collage. It was called *My Crying Mouth — an Oedipus Collage* and tried to pose the question: "Does one have to be a Prometheus in order to be able to say time and again: Nevertheless?" With the story of Oedipus, the director and adaptor of the two plays, Dieter Reible, intended to show in a concept of universal validity the story of human development; he wished to stress the dilemma of starting life as ardent questioners who seek the answers to life's riddles and, at the very end of their journey, realize that they are resigned to doubt and disillusionment. Is it true, the play seems to ask, that after seeking God and the deeper meaning to being, we finally give up, feel beaten, and surrender to the powers that are. A fine idea for a play, no doubt, probably too all-embracing to succeed, even with the help of Sophocles, on whom we ought to be able to rely.

It is a daring endeavor to cut these two plays into a dramatic entity and to contemporize the theme to the point of seeming improvisation. Not even Sophocles can survive Theseus appearing as a Texan tycoon smoking big cigars and tinkling with coins; or another figure introduced as a spokesman for the chorus, eating bananas and reading a newspaper while, in flashbacks, Oedipus, heroically isolated in his moral quest, struggles with himself only to find himself defeated by the will of the gods.

If it had to be a collage with flashbacks, then it seemed right to me to present us with the old and blind Oedipus at Colonus doomed to relive his life's story for our benefit and to unfold his metamorphosis in various stages from the strong-willed and yet hapless human being to what the Greeks called *heros* who, through suffering and final awareness of their actions, acquire a symbolic power for good and evil over the living after death. This concept necessitated the appearance of the younger Oedipus with whom the aged man confronts himself, it called for the materialization of many characters and evoked the visual manifestation of the dead. There were Ismene, Creon and Antigone, Jocasta and Polyneices and many more. In the surrealistic jumble of flashbacks the stage became crowded and many actors stood around occupying themselves with idle and foolish gestures, thus distracting the spectator's attention from the main action.

The stage had almost no décors and was covered with sand, no doubt symbolic of man's fate, its instability if not futility. The chorus consisted of a peasant, a young man seeking god and the ultimate knowledge of what is and what cannot be, while lighting candles at an imaginary and mythical altar. At the near corner of the stage an elderly woman sat in a wheelchair slowly sinking into the sand or being immobilized in it in a Beckett-like manner. The woman modelled a human figure out of clay throughout the action. There were constantly interpolated question-and-answer periods between the godseeker and the woman in the wheelchair. There were graffiti all over the walls. Symbolism hovered over the scenes as thick as doom spelled with a desperately huge D.

Sophocles' plays are characterized by clarity, symmetry, and simplicity. The action moves relentlessly towards the dénouement. Contemporizing the play at the dramatist's expense proved to be doomed. Strange that so many modern stage directors are unaware of their hybris.







## Books

EUGÈNE IONESCO.

By Carol Petersen. Berlin: Colloquium Verlag, 1976. Pp. 95.

IN THIS SLENDER VOLUME, Carol Petersen presents to German readers an able profile of the life and work of Eugene Ionesco. His interpretation of Ionesco's plays is well-balanced, lucid, and persuasive. Petersen characterizes the "world" of Ionesco's drama as one in which conscious and subconscious phenomena strive with one another for mastery. He points to Ionesco's oft-repeated assertion that his creative activity finds its origin in the sphere of dreams. Only in dreams is man fully conscious and clear-sighted. Ionesco sees everyday reality as the occasion for astonishment and for asking the question why.

The question of death in particular permeates Ionesco's work. He declares that a civilization which bases everything on life cannot live. Petersen sees the tension between everyday reality and dream, between human existence and its annihilation, as the key to understanding Ionesco's vision of the "Absurd." He uses passages from Ionesco's diaries to illustrate the playwright's own understanding of his creative activity and of the plays themselves and provides brief summaries and critical evaluations of the dramas.

Petersen's treatment of *The Chairs* (pp. 26-30) is a good sample of his method. Petersen considers this play to be Ionesco's most successful and convincing expression of the absurdity of human striving. He summarizes the plot: An elderly couple take stock of their lives and recognize that they have not achieved any of their dreams. Yet the old man is convinced that, despite all his frustrations, he has been given a "Message" for mankind. The man and his wife invite a distinguished company of guests to the lighthouse which is their home and promise their visitors (who are invisible to the theatre audience) that an orator

is about to arrive to proclaim the old man's message. The orator enters, indeed, and, their lives seemingly fulfilled, the old people jump through a window of the lighthouse to their death. But the orator is in fact mute; his speech consists only of unintelligible croaks and groans. The play ends abruptly with the sounds of laughter from the invisible crowd.

Petersen comments:

[T]he fate of the old people is grounded in their very existence; they must learn to endure it and to accept it, to remain within the framework of their possibilities and to fashion from them the best that is possible. . . . Here, a new tone suddenly came into Ionesco's work: the existential no-exit character of all human life. . . . There are various ways of dealing with this existential distress. While Camus masters it with proud contempt for that which humiliates us, Ionesco does it with an almost cheerful self-surrender, a disintegration or disappearance, in short, with a para-religious transcendence which we encounter frequently in his subsequent work. . . .

His "tragic farce," *the Chairs*, can serve as an impressive proof for this attitude of his. Here we see, although in the extreme case, the loneliness of the uncomprehending individual confronted with the overwhelming wealth of possible life forms. . . . If then, as with the two old people in *The Chairs*, comprehension luminously breaks through, it is usually too late, and that which we designate as the "tragedy of life" is fulfilled. Yet Ionesco does not stop here. While he always opposes the comic to the tragic, he elevates both in a new theatrical synthesis, and precisely in this lies his uniqueness, [in this] consists his renewing function



for the theatre of the present.  
(pp. 28-29, translation mine)

SOME READERS AND CRITICS, it may be observed, use a more comprehensive definition of the "religious" than does Petersen. If, for example, one defines religion, with Paul Tillich, as the "experience of ultimate concerns," then Ionesco's tragi-comic treatment of the "Absurd" is truly religious.

Petersen concludes, in part:

Ionesco's picture of death is always existentially conditioned, through which he wishes to show "that our conditions of existence are a mockery. Humor can heal us from the anxiety of death." (p. 84)

But if, with Tillich, we say that existentialism is "good luck" for Christian theology, then Ionesco's mixture of tragic and comic, and his clown figures in particular, furnish glimpses of the contemporary human condition to which and in which Christians are called to speak a message of hope.

For persons interested in such a challenge, as well as for the general reader, Petersen's little book provides a concise and valuable introduction to Ionesco's work.

RICHARD W. SCHEIMANN

**THE DIALOGUS OF ANDREAS MEINHARDI. A Utopian Description of Wittenberg and Its University. 1508. Edited and translated into English with introduction and notes by Edgar C. Reinke. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University Microfilms International, 1976. Pp. xi, 411. Ill. \$20.50**

IT IS THE GREAT MERIT OF Professor Reinke to have made available the *Dialogus* by Andreas Meinhardi in a scholarly edition of

the original Latin with a translation into English. This treatise, first printed in 1508 in Leipzig for a Wittenberg audience, has never been re-edited or translated, except for chapters 10-14, which J. Hauszleiter translated into German in 1903 in his book *Die Universität Wittenberg vor dem Eintritt Luthers* (Leipzig, 1903), pp. 54-84. Others have mentioned this treatise cursorily since that time, but no major scholarly study has concerned itself with it.

The importance of the *Dialogus* lies in its detailed description of Wittenberg and its university at that particular time. Wittenberg is described in idealizing terms, to be sure, since the purpose of the treatise was to attract students to the young university. In the course of the story the castle of the Saxon dukes becomes Jupiter's dwelling, the hills around Wittenberg the mountains of Apollo, and Wittenberg the new Rome. The fact that Meinhardi wanted to picture Wittenberg as the center of humanism is of major significance. It tells us that humanism was the educational program that promised to attract the student generation.

From other sources, some of them a few years later, we know that in fact Wittenberg was not as attractive as Meinhardi describes it. In 1507 Christoph Scheurl, coming from Nürnberg and Bologna, was disappointed at the small town of about 2500 people, uneducated and quarrelsome. In 1524 Cochlaeus, the enemy of Luther, had nothing good to say about Wittenberg; and Luther in 1532 described Wittenberg as *in termino civilitatis*.

Meinhardi, at the time he wrote the treatise, was a member of the liberal arts faculty at Wittenberg, and he was asked by Elector Frederick the Wise to write the *Dialogus*. Soon afterwards he became the city scribe of Wittenberg, in which office he remained until his death around 1526. To call him an appointed propagandist would not seem unfair.

The *Dialogus*, consisting of sixteen chapters, is written in the form of a

dialogue between two students, Meinhard and Reinhard. The school-dialogue during the Middle Ages served two purposes (p. 7): to provide ". . . instruction in the various academic or other subjects pertaining to the daily life of the students or assist them in learning colloquial Latin." Meinhard tries to do both. But it is in the spirit of humanism, not the spirit of medieval scholasticism, that Meinhardi tells his story. His references throughout are to the classics. He shows a thorough knowledge of the classics and tries to go to the sources. Virgil is mentioned more than any other classical author. Even if Meinhardi did not know Greek, he knew Greek civilization, and was steeped in Biblical humanism and the Scriptures. His admiration for Frederick the Wise is largely based on the elector's Christian virtues and conduct.

There are minute descriptions of the university, its professors, the history of Saxony and its rulers, the castle church, and the castle. Chapters 10-14 are devoted to the matriculation and initiation of the new student Reinhard. These chapters are among the best sources for our knowledge of the origin of initiation practices and the concept of the *beanus* of the Middle Ages. Chapters 15 and 16 supply minute descriptions, though clothed in classical allegories, of the surroundings of Wittenberg.

The *Dialogus* is a humanistic treatise by a well-educated man and, even if one-sided and somewhat prejudiced, is certainly the most extensive description we have of Wittenberg at the beginning of the sixteenth century. Meinhardi is a partisan of humanism and leaves little room to scholasticism, even though we know that in 1508 scholasticism was still the dominant intellectual force at the Wittenberg university. But the peculiar Wittenberg humanism which was to emerge within the next few years and which could be characterized as Biblical humanism, is foreshadowed in the *Dialogus*. If this type of humanism was never to develop into the kind of humanism with which we are familiar in the western and



southern parts of Germany, it is because of particular conditions in eastern Germany and because of the impact of the *homo religiosus*, Martin Luther.

IN 1967 PROFESSORS REINKE and Krodell edited and translated the humanist Nicolaus Marschalk's *Oratio* of 1503, the commencement address to the first graduating class at Wittenberg. The same interest in Wittenberg and its humanism has led Professor Reinke to publish the work now under discussion. His intimate acquaintance with the Wittenberg of the time, its people, and the literature and bibliography of the period, is clearly demonstrated here. He has done an admirable job and should be congratulated for the excellence of this edition. Unfortunately, there has been little research on humanism and the pre-Reformation period in the eastern part of Germany. Only recently, Helmar Jung-hans (Leipzig) and Erich Kleineidam (Erfurt) have taken up the subject again, and it is especially gratifying that Professor Reinke continues to work in this area with great skill and knowledge of the period and with a mastery of the classics that is essential to an understanding of German humanism.

Professor Reinke's introduction is excellent. It is divided into five parts: Andreas Meinhardi and the *Dialogus*; The Utopian Wittenberg of Andreas Meinhardi; the Development of Biblical Humanism at Wittenberg; the Freshman Initiation; the text and Latinity of the *Dialogus*.

In the last section Professor Reinke compares the *Dialogus* with the scholastic *Manuale Scholarium* of 1481, which he calls the predecessor of the *Dialogus* as a textbook. Several specific comparisons are given. He comes to the conclusion that even though the *Dialogus* has a generally medieval flavor, some of it is classical in style, aiming towards the classical dialogue. He concludes the introduction: "As a child of his age Andreas Meinhardi was still living in the stream of the medieval tradition. But in his spirit and aspirations he was a classicist.

The Scholastic blemishes of his Latin-ity can be explained and even excused. For its classical qualities he is to be commended. Certainly his Latin is as good as that of Marschalk, who as a stylist was, as the French would, *ciceronisant mais ciceronisant manqué*. Except for his tedious though pious chapter on relics (really a borrowed catalogue), the vigor and enthusiasm with which Andreas Meinhardi wrote the *Dialogus* capture and hold the attention of even today's reader, as in the case of Hauszleiter, from "incipit" to "explicit."

Following the learned introduction comes the Latin text. The notes to the text, unfortunately, are not as extensive as those for the introduction and translation. The editor has "modernized" the Latin text, i.e. has divided it into paragraphs, spelled out abbreviations and contractions, and added punctuation where needed. This makes the Latin easier for modern readers, but does not provide a "critical" edition.

Following the Latin text, a modern, idiomatic English translation is given. Reading the English one sometimes feels that the language has become almost too colloquial, almost too easy to read. The dedication to Frederick the Wise and recommendations by eminent contemporary Wittenberg humanists at the beginning and end of the *Dialogus* are included in both the Latin and the English translation.

Fifty-two pages of notes follow both texts. Most of them are welcome, but a few seem superfluous. Readers of the *Dialogus* need not be told that Plato was "the great Greek philosopher," or that Livy "is famous for his great history of Rome, entitled *Ab urbe condita*." A bibliography and illustrations end the volume.

Professor Reinke deserves our gratitude for his immense work, and we cannot fail to admire the scholarship and erudition which made this splendid publication possible. One must hope that he will continue with further publications of equal value and quality.

MARIA GROSSMANN

## RECORDINGS RECORDINGS

PIANO TRIO IN B FLAT, OPUS 99  
AND NOTTURNO, OPUS 148.

Suk Trio: Josef Suk, violin, Jan Panenka, piano, Joseph Churcho, cello. Vanguard-Supraphon SU 6. \$6.98.

The Trio in B Flat, one of two by Schubert, is one of the great felicities of this prodigious melodist. Written shortly before *Winterreise*, it represents Schubert in the fullness of his lyrical and modulatory powers. The first movement, with its typically Schubertian melody in triplets, features the piano as "singer," with strings commenting. The second movement is both light and lovely, and offers strong contrast to the more symphonically conceived first movement. The third, a scherzo, and fourth movements show the influence of the *ländler*, the earlier and more folk-like ancestor of the waltz.

The Suk Trio has played in ensemble for eighteen years and shows the benefit of extended shared musical life. The string players display the typically sweeter and smaller tone of European artists—advantageous in Schubert. The playing is musically accurate and idiomatic. The sound is clean and "chamber-like" in mix.



The *Notturmo*, which may originally have been intended as a second movement for the trio, is interesting enough to warrant its documentation. This record is highly recommended for easy listening!

**SYMPHONY NO. 88 IN G MAJOR AND SYMPHONY NO. 96 (MIRACLE) IN D MAJOR BY FRANZ JOSEF HAYDN.**  
The London Symphony Orchestra, Andre Previn, conductor. Angel Records. S 37274. \$7.98.

Haydn was one of a small number of composers who, when they did not produce masterpieces, consistently produced music of craft and quality. Symphony No. 88 was one of those which Haydn sent in 1788 through John Trost to publishers in Paris. Although it is not a masterpiece, it brims with sheer joy and pleasure. Symphony No. 96 (nicknamed "The Miracle" because at the first performance part of the audience moved forward to see the composer, thereby escaping a crashing chandelier) is not extraordinary, but is a well constructed member of the "London" Symphonies.

Andre Previn again displays the unusual versatility of talent which enabled him to move from a Hollywood career to the role of international conductor and pianist. The members of the London Symphony

Orchestra play extremely well with the kind of clarity demanded by this style. Previn's tempi make sense, and the engineers have captured a nicely transparent sound. Very pleasant listening!

**VARIATIONS AND FUGUE ON A THEME OF HANDEL, OPUS 24; VARIATIONS ON A THEME OF PAGANINI, OPUS 35 BY JOHANNES BRAHMS.**

Garrick Ohlsson, piano. Angel Records. S 37249. \$7.98.

The Variation form (whereby one takes a given theme and through devices like rhythm, pattern, and ornamentation, achieves musical originality) is one of the most difficult forms to bring off successfully. The problem is that the device itself tends to create sterility. The one composer who triumphed in this arena was Johannes Brahms; and these two compositions are not only superb examples but are also monuments of the piano repertoire. Brahms by turns makes use of classical and romantic devices. A successful performance of these works invokes a prodigious piano technique.

Garrick Ohlsson is among the gifted younger pianists before the public. Here he grapples vigorously with these titans and emerges successful. He uses his splendid pianistic prowess to display a resiliency in changes of mood. The only glimmer of complaint might be from those who would demand a stronger display of musical personality.

**SONGS IN PRAISE OF KRISHNA BY GEORGE ROCHBERG.**

Neva Pilgrim, soprano; George Rochberg, piano. Composers Records Inc. CRI SD 360. \$6.95.

The texts of this song cycle are a translation by Edward Dimrock and Denis Levertov from the Bengall book *In Praise of Krishna*. Rochberg continues to be one of the composers of contemporary music whose works are of more than passing interest. Although the composer writes in modern idiom he makes use of devices which point to the tradition of art song writing, e.g. programmatic use of music to reflect word content; use of singing forms such as aria and recitative; extended interludes for the piano (*a la* Schumann), etc.

These are fourteen poems voiced by three characters: two by Krishna, the Hindu god; two by an old messenger woman; and ten by the lady Radha. The story is an old one in myth and legend: the consorting by a god with a human being. The result is a curious mixture of the spiritual and the sensual. The medium of the music is neither twelve tone nor atonal, but a kind of tonality which makes use of elements from these styles. The writer found songs 4, 10, and 12 particularly expressive but feels that the cycle is best appreciated in its unity. Neva Pilgrim is a marvelous singing artist and Rochberg doubles in the role of a completely competent pianist.

JOSEPH McCALL



# Guest Opinion

GERALD P. SPECKHARD

## PERSPECTIVES IN EDUCATION

### II. Accountability

"ACCOUNTABILITY" has currently become a watchword in educational circles. It is used increasingly by politicians, citizens, school officials, and teachers when speaking of the educational enterprise. Students, from the perspective of consumers, also have expressed interest in accountability.

Tax and tuition payers, having expended huge sums on the schools in recent decades, are wondering if they are getting their money's worth. Schools seem not to be keeping promises (or living up to expectations). Standardized test scores show steady decline. Students complain of not getting what they need or what they are paying for; employers complain of graduates who are functionally illiterate or generally incompetent. Law schools get blamed for Watergate ethics. Peter Doe sues the San Francisco School District for being graduated without learning to read or write above a fifth grade level. Mrs. Ianniello sues the University of Bridgeport for charging her \$150 to take a "worthless" course. Citizen groups express concern about "basics" not being taught. Articles in

newspapers and journals headline, "Accountability Through the Courts," and "Malpractice Suits May Await Teachers."

All of these speak to deficiencies discovered and penalties to be paid. "Who, or what, is to blame for this, and who is to be held accountable?"

Parents blame the schools, courses of study, teaching methods, and teachers. Teachers complain of invalid tests, failure of previous schooling, lack of parental and administrative support, and lack of opportunity to make changes. School officials point to teacher unions, governmental bureaucracy, inadequate funding, teacher training programs, and the breakdown of the home.

Questions without obvious answers abound. If Sally has not mastered fifth grade work, is it the fault of her fifth grade teachers? her previous teachers? her family? her social environment? the curriculum established by school officials? herself? Related, but better, questions would be, "What is important fifth grade work?" "What unique objectives are to be met by students attending school at this age?" Answers for this level of schooling perhaps are easier to give than answers to similar questions relating to the fifteenth grade student in a liberal arts college. Nevertheless, the importance of seeking answers to these questions at all levels remains.

RE-EXAMINING the schooling process by calling the schools to account is a good thing. The noise involved with placing blame, however, interferes with seeing that accountability takes meaning only in relationship to the objectives to be gained in the educational process. The school should be called to account to the extent that it has not met established objectives. Accountability will be better served if the energy given to pinning the blame would be directed to the specifications and clarification of goals.

With specific goals clarified, schools will be able better to direct learning to meet objectives for which schools are legitimately accountable. Schools are not responsible for all learning; most learning is not gained there. The school needs to decide which learnings are uniquely obtained in the school setting; then the process for such achievement can be evaluated.

It is not easy to establish a broad consensus on the objectives of public school education or a liberal arts education. Unfortunately, objectives are often not even examined, much less debated. Objectives are generally attended to only when accreditation visits are impending, and then mostly lip service is given to them. Goals ought to be clarified and redefined regularly; accountability measures will more easily follow. Demands of accountability will serve achievement rather than generate apprehension.

The current stress on accountability will force educators to re-examine the tasks of the schools. Re-examination will be beneficial for all schools; it is particularly important for non-public schools. Quite direct measures of accountability are found there in the form of donors and tuition payers. "Without a sense of mission, a private university is incomprehensible," wrote William F. Buckley, Jr. in a recent article in *Harpers*. He suggested that Yale donate itself to the State of Connecticut to solve its financial problems since, it seemed to him, Yale has lost its sense of mission.

Establishing valid objectives acceptable to all concerned is difficult in any school; it is doubly difficult and doubly important that this be done in the private or church-related institution. The blessing of the call for accountability being raised may be the reconsideration and reclarification of objectives and new resolve to meet them.

