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Above: Value Study, chalk; grade 6.
T. S. ELIOT’S "GERONTION":

WISDOM LITERATURE OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

T. S. Eliot's "Gerontion" is compared with the poem of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. The author assumes that the philosophy of the protagonist in the Eliot poem coincides with and is influenced by the philosophy of Koheleth, the preacher-king of the Hebraic poem.

EXPLICATIONS OF T. S. ELIOT'S POETRY tend largely to pinpoint selected allusions and images here and there throughout a poem and tracing them to a source in search of meanings. Since the poem appears to be a jumble of allusions and images violently juxtaposed, it is assumed that it is also a jumble of ideas violently juxtaposed and impossible to interrelate. This method of explication frequently gives rise to the charge that Eliot is something of a "nonsense poet" (defined with various connotations), that there is no cohesive, ordered thread of thought moving through his work. Sir Albert Quiller-Couch, for example, questions whether Eliot ever wrote three consecutive lines of poetry and even his most enthusiastic admirers sometimes view it as mumbo-jumbo rather than message-bearing art. Conrad Aiken, while appreciative of beauty and tone, suggested that an Eliot allusion does not necessarily allude to anything, though sometimes serving as "a broken finger-post" in the "wilderness," and the result is poetry that is not "in any formal sense, coherent." Elizabeth Sewell, defending nonsense as a T. S. Eliot art form, contends that therein "All tendencies towards synthesis are taboo. . . . Whatever is unitive is the great enemy of Nonsense to be excluded at all costs." While it is true that philosophy and theme are couched in a wide variety of images, the line of thought is generally united and unified if examined from the proper point of view. A large majority of Eliot's poetry is spiritual or even biblical, and, allied to this background, it becomes a cohesive and coherent statement, the images interlock, and there are no breaks or contradictions to obliterate meaning.

1. Of course there are some notable exceptions. Cleanth Brooks, for instance, has constructed outstanding "scaffolding" for meaning in T. S. Eliot's poetry.

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Gerontion meditates on the fact that members of modern society have turned from the "word" to substitutes of their own creating. Like Koheleth and the people of his world, they have turned from "wisdom" to "foolish," searching out and worshipping gods that cannot fill the emptiness.

"Gerontion," so frequently considered a mass of unrelated impressions, is a case in point. William Rose Benét contended that the poem means nothing and, like The Waste Land, yields only a "botched explanation." I incline more to agree with Philip Headings who said that while "Gerontion" remains the least understood of Eliot's major poems, it is not because of "insuperable difficulty," but a question of failing to place it in proper reference. As Eliot himself has said, the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes is a major source upon which he drew for the barren setting and the sterile society of his poem The Waste Land. This ancient book with its existential thrust, is an equally important influence in the shorter poem. Against this background, the spiritual-existential statement is constant and coherent. Koheleth, the aged protagonist of Ecclesiastes, is the early paradigm of Eliot's Gerontion, the protagonist in the poem, who, like the preacher-king, is a character with the wasteland perspective and philosophy, asking the same questions about the meaning of life and arriving at the same conclusions.

Both protagonists describe themselves as enfeebled, desiccated, and hopelessly looking back over a spent and futile life. Koheleth defines his own decayed and declining state through a series of vivid metaphors at the end of his dissertation in chapter twelve. Eliot's protagonist, more terse than the preacher of Ecclesiastes, simply tells us that he is "...an old man...Being read to by a boy." This brief, imagistic picture projects a double impact, a view of the feeble man whose eyesight has dimmed to the point where he can no longer read for himself and also of one who is just filling in time, listening to the boy who reads. Here Gerontion parallels the thought of the protagonist in Ecclesiastes who is waiting to go to his "long, long home," and as he waits, listens to the hired mourners who stand ready in the streets.

In Koheleth's view of age there is the suggestion not only of physical dryness, but, in the imagery of the broken pitcher that holds no moisture and the broken wheel that can no longer draw water from the well, there is the indication of spiritual dryness as well. He looks forward to the time when, shortly, "the dust returns to the earth as it was and the spirit returns to God who gave it" (Ec. 12:7). Eliot's protagonist finds himself "in a dry month," the final, fruitless period of his life in which his desiccated spirit is "waiting for rain." Neither Koheleth nor Gerontion, during a long lifetime, actively sought for the grace of God that the rain symbolizes. Now, at the end, each pictures himself passively waiting.

It is in motive and philosophical perspective that parallels can truly be drawn, however, and Eliot's message as conveyed through the interior monologue of his protagonist is strikingly similar to Koheleth's message. Both Koheleth and Gerontion explore the meaning of existence and its bearing upon those values which frame character and formulate conduct. They meditate upon the destiny of the soul and man's final disposition, and, having looked inward to the mysterious core of being, the poet-protagonists declare existence to be meaningless and purposeless. Both ascribe the sense of existential futility to the fact that belief in God has been abandoned.


7. Ecclesiastes 12:1-8. The Interpreter's Bible, V (New York: Abingdon Cokesbury Press, 1956), 83-84. I have chosen to use this work as reference because of its complete and advantageous arrangement. It contains two versions of the Bible: the King James, Authorized, published in 1611, and, running parallel with it, the Revised Standard Version. The Interpreter's Bible also contains a running exegesis as well as a parallel exposition of the text. The particular Revised Standard Version included was published in 1946, which, of course, is subsequent to the publication of Eliot's "Gerontion." The text, however, is not substantially changed from the earlier Revised Standard Version (Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, 1881-1885) with which T. S. Eliot was obviously acquainted. In particular the texts which are involved in my study are unchanged. Further, the Interpreter's Bible also includes Scripture quotations from the American Standard Version published in 1901, revised in 1910, and copyrighted again in 1929. In phrasing, the ASV is identical in those portions with which my study is concerned. Eliot was presumably conversant with this version.


9. The King James Bible (1611) translates Ec. 1:14 as "all is vanity and vexation of spirit" (I.B., p. 32). The Revised Standard Version (English, 1881-1885) translates it as "behold, all is vanity and striving after wind." The American Standard Revised (1901) translates it as "behold, all is vanity and striving after wind."

Actually these various translations do not conflict as is evident from the following commentaries on this translation: J. J. Peroword, Dean of Peterborough, D. D., gen. ed., The Holy Bible: The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (England: Cambridge University Press, 1888), p. 110, comments: "14. [all is vanity and vexation of spirit] The familiar words, though they fall in with the Debater's tone and have the support of the Vulg. 'afflicto spiritus,' hardly express the meaning of the Hebrew and we must read 'vanity and feeding upon wind.' The phrase has its parallel in Hos. xii. 2 ('Ephraim feedeth on wind') and Isai. xliv. 20 ('feedeth on ashes') and expresses, with a bold vividness, the sense of emptiness which accompanies unsatisfied desire. Most commentators, however, prefer the rendering 'striving after the wind' or 'windy effort,' but 'feeding' expresses, it is believed, the meaning of the Hebrew more closely. The LXX gives ... (-resolve of wind, i.e., fleeting and unsubstantial). Symmachus gives ... (-feeding). The word
In both cases, however, it is primarily the life on the earthly level that the protagonist has in view, the life that goes on "under the sun," without special concern for what lies beyond. The premise of both poems is that wisdom endows life with meaning, folly deprives life of meaning. In Ecclesiastes, wisdom equates with knowing and fearing God. Folly, on the contrary, equates with disregarding or ignoring God (I. B., p. 29). Koheleth says that he determined to "study folly" and he has discovered that life without God is "an unhappy business" (Ec. 1:13). Gerontion, token and example of his own society, has also rejected God, and now, standing at the threshold of death, he looks back over the wasteland of his life. Having reviewed man's spiritual defection, he accepts Koheleth's repeated dictum that life is a vain "striving after wind."  

Existential meaninglessness, in the experience of both protagonists, is the result of having lived non-committed or merely self-committed lives, which, they imply, is the result of having severed spiritual links. Koheleth declares that he applied his mind "to know madness and folly" (Ec. 1:17), and having decided against any spiritual commitment, he also rejects moral and ethical commitments. He is not concerned with his fellow men, but dedicates himself wholly to his own pleasure. In Ecclesiastes 2:3-9, the preacher-king describes his self-indulgence in building for himself "great works," the houses and vineyards and gardens and parks he created for his own satisfaction. He says, "I got me servants and maidens" and "I gathered me also silver and gold," entertainers and concubines. In all this self-seeking, there is no hint of concern or responsibility for others, though he was king of the land. Gerontion is likewise uncommitted to other than self. He says

I was neither at the hot gates
Nor fought in the warm rain

in question occurs seven times in Ecclesiastes but is not found elsewhere. The rendering 'vexation' rests apparently on a false etymology."

F. C. Cook, M. S., Canon of Exeter, Bishops and Clergy of the Anglican Church, gen. ed., The Holy Bible: with an Explanatory and Critical Commentary (London: John Murray Press, 1892), p. 631, comments on the two plausible translations of the text in question: "'Striving after wind,' or 'windy effort.' 'This derives some sanction from the Septuagint ... and is accepted by the majority of modern interpreters, Gesen., Rosenm., Ewald, Knobel, Vaihinger, Zöckler, Ginsburg, Grätz, &c. But as the primary meaning ... is 'to feed,' another translation, feeding on wind, seems preferable. It is adopted by Aquila, Theodotion, Symmachus, Van der Palm and Doderlein. It is moreover the translation of nearly the same phrase in our Authorized Version of Hos. xii. 1. There are also similar instances of such use of the verb ... the fool feeds on foolishness, Prov. xv. 14; the idolater feeds on ashes. Isai. xiv. 20; and the faithful man is exorted to feed on truth, Ps. xxxix. 3.'"

George Aaron Barton, gen. ed., The International Critical Commentary: A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1908), pp. 84-88, N. 26b, comments: "Q's declaration was, that there is nothing better for a man than to eat and drink and enjoy life, that God had ordained that this is man's destiny, but that there is no real satisfaction even in this—this also being vanity and a desire of wind."

Nor knee deep in the salt march, heaving a cutlass,
Bitten by flies, fought (11. 3-6).

Gerontion has never fought evil right up to the gates of hell nor struggled for spiritual right in the "warm rain" of God's grace. And if the hot gates symbolize hell and the warm rain symbolizes heavenly grace, the "salt marshes" symbolize earthly duty, man's responsibility to his fellow beings. So what Gerontion is telling us is that he has never committed himself to the cause of God or man.

And like Koheleth who, in his old age, compares himself to a grasshopper, a desiccated, frail structure with no spiritual or moral vitality, Gerontion finds that his "house is a decayed house." He then goes on to describe in detail both its interior and exterior condition. He has also sold out his soul to materialism and the usurer, the "owner," now "squats on the window sill" of Gerontion's "house," from which vantage point he can peer inward, keeping watch over his investment. So Gerontion finds that there is nothing left but the shell and that "patched" and "peeled" from his contact with life. And if his life's beginning "in some estaminet of Antwerp" was ignoble, even more so will be its frail and barren termination.

In vivid, imagistic description, Gerontion tells us what it is like to be dead in every way except for the feeble pulsing of the blood. The goat that "coughs at night" is his ailing and dying animal nature, its living force extinguishing. In the following companion line, the view of barrenness and waste is again emphasized—"Rocks, moss, stonecrop. . . ." Without the "warm rain" neither body nor soul can flourish. What remains is impenetrable, solid as "iron" where it should be tender, and, like "merds," fit only to be eliminated.

Gerontion's own death-in-life is mirrored by his wife, the companion of his youthful lust, now become simply "the woman"—asexual, impersonal, unloved. She reinforces the image of sterility and dryness and peevishness; she "sneezes at evening," even as the goat "coughs at night." The repetition of imagery suggests that, as with Gerontion, the animal urges in her are dead. Not only that, but she holds no attraction for Gerontion. The dying body and extinguishing soul are symbolized by the flickering fire that fails to respond to her prodding. Sadly Gerontion sums up this section with the picture of himself as "an old man/A dull head among windy spaces." It is the echo of Koheleth's conclusion that the life of self-seeking is only a "vapor," a "breath," a "striving after wind."

Both Koheleth and Gerontion go on to suggest that the meaninglessness of their lives is the result of failing to place spiritual and moral values at the center of experience. And this to continue the existential emphasis, is a matter of choice. Koheleth, as the spiritual leader of his people, had inherited the accumulated teachings of the fathers, surpassing, he himself tells us, "all who were over Jerusalem before me, and my mind has had great experience of wisdom and knowledge" (Ec. 1:16). The
key to ancient wisdom was the covenant relationship between Yahweh and the people of Koheleth's race. They owed Him love and obedience, and He promised them in return abundance and security in this life and eternity in the life to come. Koheleth, looking around him; saw that the unjust as well as the just were the recipients of blessings, and that in the end all men went down to the same grave. In his finite view, what Yahweh had offered was not enough. Koheleth looked for something other than what had been promised and when he didn't find it, he applied himself "to know madness and folly" (Ec. 1:17) or, in other words, to searching for something to replace the Yahweh relationship. Koheleth's abandonment of God was not the result of a lack of knowledge but of his deliberately blinding himself to that knowledge and, by his example, the blinding also of the people of his kingdom.¹⁰

IN THE SECOND SECTION OF THE ELIOT poem, Gerontion sees the scribes and Pharisees as doing, in effect, the same thing. Like Koheleth, they were the depositories of the spiritual wisdom of the race during the time of Christ and they, of all people, should have understood the pure truth of God. But Gerontion sees them also turning a blind eye to wisdom and knowledge and choosing, instead, a way of their own devising.

Signs are taken for wonders. "We would see a sign!"
The word within a word, unable to speak a word,
Swaddled with darkness (11. 17-19).

Here the Biblical allusion is to Matthew 12:38-40 where the Pharisees, unable to recognize Him, are asking Christ to prove that He is indeed the Messiah. "Master, we would see a sign . . . " (verse 38). Gerontion, going back to what he considers the beginnings of modern spiritual defection, quotes their request in line seventeen: "We would see a sign!"

Within the connotative context of Gerontion's quotation is Christ's reply to their demands: "An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign: but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah" (Matt. 12:39). He tells them that their belief that they were being led by divine "signs" or tokens was a specific perversion that had been incorporated into Pharisaical teachings and was not what God had promised. Christ uses the word "adulterous" to define a generation which alters and waters down scriptural truth. And "adulterous" is a term Gerontion picks up specifically in line fifty-five and applies to his own generation.

¹⁰ The exegesis in the Interpreter's Bible explains that the meanings of the word wisdom are specialized. "With a capital letter it is a personification, a divine agent furthering God's creative purposes in ways difficult to understand. From that, through many intervening stages, one moves back and forward, to wisdom without a capital letter—the technique of dealing well with situations, conducting oneself wisely. It has overtones of knowledge, suggests insights and understanding" (p. 33). Koheleth paints the picture of himself and his people as deliberately turning from knowledge and wisdom, i.e., from God as primary Wisdom and, in consequence, wisdom in its secondary implications.

"As the poem progresses, a subtle change takes place in the protagonist." Gerontion, having the identity of generic man as well as an individual man, becomes more clearly the generic man. The individual identity remains, as it were, backstage, watching the action. The generic identity poses the question, "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?"

As the key to ancient "wisdom" (knowing God) was the covenant relationship between Yahweh and His people, so the key to modern "wisdom" is the new covenant relationship, the revised link between God and His people. The terms of the new covenant were not substantially changed from the terms of the old covenant: the people were to love and obey God and He, in turn, offered blessings for this life and, through Christ, eternal life after death.¹¹ In Christ's reply to the Pharisees, He goes on to define the "sign" of Jonah in Matthew 12:4: "For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth." This death and resurrection was the "wonder," this salvation through Christ, but the Pharisees were not satisfied and continued to cast around for a "sign," the equivalent of Koheleth's search for "folly" (ignoring God).¹² God had promised man a means of escape from eternal damnation, and "The word!" (promise of eternal life) "within a word" (the Scriptures) was now fulfilled in the person of Christ (the concrete form of the abstract promise), who had come into the world as an infant "unable to speak a word."

Koheleth found that following the dictates of human whim was a "striving after wind" and that "wisdom" (recognition of God) excels folly (disregard of God) as light excels darkness. "The wise man has his eyes in his head but the fool walks in darkness . . . " (Ec. 2:13-14). Gerontion says that the infant was "swaddled in darkness." In other words, the Pharisees couldn't "see" Him and the miracle went unrecognized by the dulled senses of men who looked for less than they were given.

¹¹ For a deeper view of this comparison as suggested by the context of Eliot's Biblical allusions, see the general articles and introduction to The Interpreter's Bible, V, 22-24 and VII, 24-28.
¹² See Matt. 12:38-46 for material that is contextually relevant. Consult also the exegesis which comments: "38-42. Signs False and True—Why should the Pharisees ask a sign when they had just witnessed a remarkable work of healing? Because they had called that the sign of the prince of devils; and because by sign they meant a prodigy like a light streaming from heaven at midnight, or like the dividing of the River Jordan, as the impostor Theudas promised, or like the plucking of a star from the sky. Perhaps the Pharisees feigned the eagerness. Certainly they were intent to discount him. Perhaps they were so confounded in mind as to believe that truth is not truth unless accompanied by sensational portents: Jesus must leap from the pinnacle of the temple. "Christ repudiated the demand. They were 'adulterous'—that is, apostate. How, then could any sign help them?" (J.B., pp. 402-403).
Concluding this portion of the Matthew 12 contextual allusion, we are told that here is One who in “wisdom” is “greater than Solomon” (v.42). In the Eliot poem He is “Christ the tiger.”

In the juvescence of the year
Came Christ the tiger.
In depraved May, dogwood and chestnut,
flowering judas,
To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk
Among whispers, by Mr. Silvero
With caressing hands, at Limoges
Who walked all night in the next room;
By Hakagawa, bowing among the Titians;
By Madame de Tornquist, in the dark room
Shifting the candles; Fraulein von Kulp
Who turned in the hall, one hand on the door

(11. 19-29).

Elizabeth Drew believes that Eliot has here picked up William Blake's symbol of the tiger as fire and light. Certainly the symbol is apt and a clear repetition of Koheleth's contrast of light and darkness. The coming of the “tiger” in the “juvescence of the year” is the spiritual equation of the secular thought of The Waste Land.

April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain.
Winter kept us warm, covering
Earth in forgetful snow, feeding
A little life with dried tubers (11. 1-7).

The people of The Waste Land, lullèd to inaction, do not want to be disturbed from their lethargy. They are barely alive, but they want to remain that way, and April, the spring of the year, arousing “memory and desire,” is “cruel” because she rouses them from the stupor which numbs the pain and fear incumbent upon the “human condition.” Gerontion is making the same application but with a spiritual connotation. The scribes and Pharisees were bogged down in comforting complacency. Christ came as the “tiger,” light to illumine the way to full spiritual life with its attendant aching joy and beautiful pain. But the scribes and Pharisees refused to “see,” preferring the “little life” fed “with dried tubers.” “Christ the tiger,” the living Light that “devours” darkness, threatened their complacency and lethargy which they would protect with lies and treach­ery, and, finally, betrayal—theyir own “depraved” and unregenerative springtime, their “flowering judas.”

As Koheleth’s unbelief established the stance and set the tone for the people of his time, so Gerontion sees the unbelief and complacency of the scribes and the Pharisees as being the archetype of those attitudes taken by men all through the centuries, attitudes that peak dramatically in the godless twentieth century in which unregenerate spring becomes the permanent season. As Gerontion’s mind leaps the span of time and space, he sees that Christ was meant to be all things to all men of our era as well as to the men of Pharisaical times: “To be eaten, to be divided, to be drunk/Among whispers” by Mr. Silvero, who represents the Jews, by Hakagawa, who symbolizes the Oriental peoples, by the Latinate Madame de Tornquist, and by the Germanic Fraulein von Kulp of the western world. These people are symbol and representative of those members of modern society who turn from the “word” to substitutes of their own creating and through them Gerontion shows us that “depraved May” and “flowering judas” are by no means exclusive with the scribes and Pharisees. His meditations suggest that this defection extends to both Eastern and Western cultures; the Jews and the Orientals and the Gentiles alike have rejected the fire and the light that would shatter their specific darknesses, turning, like Koheleth and the people of his world, from “wis­dom” to “folly,” searching out and worshipping gods that cannot fill the emptiness.

Koheleth describes how he and the people who “came after the king” searched out substitutes for spirituality, turning to “study” madness and pleasure, from pleasure to toil, from toil to appreciation of beauty in the arts and music, from beauty to love, from love to self-aggrandizement and fame. At the end of his searching Koheleth exclaims, “So I hated life, because what is done under the sun was grievous to me; for all is vanity and a striving after wind” (Ec. 2:17).

Like the people of Koheleth’s time, the men of Gerontion’s society also discover that the secular life that provides no place for God, yields nothing. For them, also, all experience is as “vacant shuttles” that “weave the wind.”

Gerontion tells us that his own condition is even more pitiable; he has “no ghosts” at all. His experience has been non-questing; he has done nothing to fill the vacuum of his existence, a statement that takes us back to the beginning of the poem in which he pictures his activities as lukewarm and useless. He is like Koheleth’s fool who refused to toil or to create, but, as Koheleth decided, for the one who strives and the one who does not the “issue” is the same. The godless life is “a vapor, a breath.” And Gerontion concludes his meditations with the portrait of himself as dwelling “in a draughty house/ Under a windy knob,” an aged man, physically, mentally, and spiritually empty.

AS THE POEM PROGRESSES, A SUBTLE change takes place in the protagonist. Throughout the poem Gerontion has a dual identity; he is both individual man and generic man. He starts out with his personal history, an individual identity of whom we have had a detailed description in the first section. Always, however, he is a symbol of mankind in general. We now


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see the generic identity emerging to the fore, gradually assuming the dominant position while the individual identity remains backstage, as it were, watching the action. And it is as this emerging generic identity that Gerontion's troubled mind poses the question: "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" "Such knowledge" refers to the "sign" of Jonah or Christ's death and resurrection. So what Gerontion is really asking is this: Is there an all-encompassing forgiveness that can overlook such colossal rejection as is constituted by the denial of the resurrection? Here the poet returns to his Matthew 12 allusion and Christ's conversation with the Pharisees. Christ tells them that "whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come" (vv. 31-32). Contextually, this fits within the framework of the discussion in which the Pharisees reject every conviction of Christ's divinity. Christ's term, "speaks against," is another way of saying "whoever refuses to believe" the convicting whisperings of the Holy Spirit. This, according to Christ, is the one sin for which there is no forgiveness since man, in his stubbornness and impenitence, cuts himself off from the source of forgiveness.

Thus by contextual implication, Gerontion concludes that repeated rejections result in permanent rejection. Koheleth's rejection of the God-relationship is permanent. The Pharisees' rejection of the Christ-relationship is permanent. And this is precisely the position of the half-aware man of Gerontion's time who turns from spiritual "knowledge" to his worship of secular "gods." His also is a permanent rejection of the "Word" (spiritual "knowledge") as conveyed by the Holy Spirit and therefore there can be no forgiveness. Gerontion repeats Christ's statement in the form of a question and applies it to his own time. This view is, apparently, the protagonist's concept of the unpardonable sin.

But "forgiveness," here, seems to have another level of meaning also: that having refused this knowledge, any other knowledge or experience that man can devise must fall short. "Think now," Gerontion says—face up squarely to the situation, see your condition for what it is, do that which you have tried hardest to avoid—"think!" This is the first of several such exhortations preceding passages that point out the deception man is heir to as a result of having refused all-surpassing knowledge.

It is in his capacity as generic man that Gerontion calls upon us to recognize that the church—organized theology—has failed man. "History," and this is specifically the history of the collective Church, includes many "cunning passages" and "contrived corridors/And issues." Clever passages and corridors are ingenious routes to "issues" or outlets. But "passages" are also textual paragraphs of dogma leading to "issues" or points of disagreement. So "cunning passages" are routes leading in all directions away from the central way. They are also clever arguments that lead away from central truth—the Way and the Truth that equal life—and in Eliot's view "life" is meaningful existence. And all these substitutes are devised by leaders for other than spiritual interests—in the interest, Gerontion tells us, of satisfying their own "whispering ambitions," of satisfying their "vanities," or pride. But "vanities" also suggests Koheleth's use of the term as worthless and futile ends, "a striving after wind."

"Think now!" Gerontion stresses the importance of clear and deep contemplation of a new deception. "She [the church] gives when our attention is distracted," when we are absorbed with other concerns that blot out the greatness. Or she gives "with such supple confusion/That the giving famishes the craving." The "Word" has been polluted with dogma which man, in his vast fear, has dared to superimpose. In the resulting superstition and gossiped philosophies the church becomes an empty tabernacle. We can find only traces of the "Word," leading man on to hope, to wish, to search, but unable to believe.

Or the church's timing is wrong; she gives "too late." Faith no longer exists when the true "Word" can be understood. Where once one believed what he could not understand, now he understands what he can no longer believe. He remembers a childish conviction, but the flame has died and the ashes are cold. Or she gives "too soon," when the spiritual backbone is too weak to stand for convictions or before one feels the need. When one is young, the world is his challenge; he is his own man, not needing a greater power to lean upon. But when the struggles have left him battered and beaten and he turns to the Power he has cast away, he finds, as did Koheleth, that continual rejection has rendered him incapable of acceptance and "the refusal propagates a fear"—again a reference to the fear of having committed the unpardonable sin. For the man of Gerontion's world, belief is atrophied and incapable of being resurrected, but fear of damnation is not.

Or we worship God from wrong impulses. There is only one form of worship that is pleasing to God, Gerontion implies, and that is worship in love. "Think/Neither fear nor courage saves us." To utter prayers, to go to church, to light a candle, to perform any act of worship out of fear, will not buy man his salvation. Nor will an act of courage in behalf of the church buy grace. To do anything apart from the context of love only results in greater spiritual meaninglessness. "History" proves that man's urge to foist meaning upon spiritual existence often leads to a kind of frenzied courage, and "Unnatural vices/Are fathered by our heroism." Such terrible acts as stemmed from the Crusades and the Inquisition (which latter barbarity he refers to specifically in line 56) are the result of trying to defend God—or individual man's narrow version of God. Gerontion implies here that in the name of religion are many hei-

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14. See also "the sign of the Prophet Jonah" in the exegesis, I.B., p. 403.
15. See Matt. 12:31-34 where Christ defines the unpardonable sin in the same discussion with the Pharisees.
“Where once one believed that he could not understand, now he understands what he can no longer believe.”

rous crimes committed—crimes that we think of as keeping “Truth” alive. In the name of religion, men destroy “heathen” civilizations, pillage the “pagan,” and slaughter the “savage.” Justice mixed with mercy is the attribute of God, unfortunately foreign to humankind. In his frenzy to destroy God, man offends and angers Him and thus “These tears are shaken from the wrath-bearing tree.” On the “tree,” the cross, Christ looked into the “virtuous” souls of men and saw reflected there man’s inhumanity to man. The “tears” wrung from that “tree” were shed for the world’s sin against humankind, much of which is inspired by man’s misconception of God’s will.

In the midst of all these confusions “The tiger springs in the new year.” Again Christ appears as fire and light to “devour” man in his darkness, destroying his spiritual stupor, the image paralleling that in lines 19 and 20 of the poem. The change of tense is significant, suggesting that modern man must consider the question of Christ’s divinity even as the Pharisees had to do. Just as Christ came to mankind as a revitalizing force, unsettling the people of His own time, so He comes to twentieth century man who, unwilling to face up squarely to his perplexing theological systems, has burrowed under the “forgetful snow” where he feeds his own little spiritual life with “dried tubers,” vague religious impressions that he calls “Christian.”

In the preceding section, Gerontion has several times insisted that we “think.” And each call has been to the contemplation of an important point in his debate. First there was the “Word,” the simple “Promise” of God. But various perversions have turned us away from this knowledge. “Think.” We have been misled by self-seeking spiritual leaders. “Think.” We have been fed dogma rather than the pure “Word.” “Think.” We have come to the knowledge too soon or too late. “Think.” We see great wrongs masquerading as great rights.

IN THIS NEW SECTION CHRIST BESEECHES modern man to complete the circle which began with God’s promise; the “Word,” wound through the circumlocations of “cunning passages,” returns now to the “Word.” In the dialogue between Himself and mankind as represented by Gerontion, Christ reasserts the significance of His death.

Christ begins the dialogue with His own call to “Think at last!” (Emphasis mine.) Rouse yourselves and meditate deeply, man, upon this. As my coming was for all men so is the proffer of eternal life through my death and this central truth is all you have to be concerned with. Forget the debates and disagreements of the centuries and contemplate only this essential “knowledge”: “We have not reached conclusion when I/ Stiffen in a rented house” (Emphasis mine.) And again we have a word with multiple nuances. His house or tomb is “rented” in the sense that He was there only temporarily. It did not belong to Him but to Joseph of Arimethea. Furthermore, it was “rented” or rent, torn asunder, to release Him from the grip of death. And so, He is saying, my death is not the end of existence for me or for you, but my resurrection is the eternal beginning for “us” all.

“Think at last!” (Emphasis mine.) Let us have the conclusion of the whole matter, the summing up of the argument. This “show,” this spectacle of the cross, is not without purpose and meaning and direction. And it is not simply by the “concitation/Of the backward devils,” the design of the aggregate powers of evil, that I came to this place and this event but in accordance with an Infinite plan.

Gerontion now responds to the invitation to “reason together” on two levels: he speaks as generic man and he speaks as Gerontion when he says, “I would meet you upon this honestly.” He doesn’t argue with any of the points that Christ has made. He does not deny that the death of Christ has meaning and purpose and power. He simply says, “I that was near your heart was removed therefrom/To lose beauty in terror, terror in inquisition.” There was a time when the race of man was close to God but “removed” as the beauty of simple grace was eclipsed, and the terrors of hell-fire and eternal damnation were magnified. In place of peace, there was the agony of personal “inquisition”—the terrorized inner searching. These individual and personal inquisitions, organized and concerted, led to the horrors of the great Inquisition by which men sought to eradicate other men’s inner searchings.

Man thus learned that strong convictions lead to horrifying and inhuman acts and it was necessary to compromise, his fierce allegiance to his beliefs had to be “adulterated” in order to maintain harmony and peace. So, sickened and terrified by such extremes as the Inquisition, he gradually watered down his convictions, and now Gerontion, speaking still for mankind, says “I have lost my passion.” “Passion,” like the word “inquisition,” has a dual and intertwining significance. Man has lost his fervor, his early and compelling ability to be stirred, and his loss of “passion” results in a lukewarm attitude toward Christ’s “Passion” or suffering and its implications of salvation through grace. This simple “word” (passion) which once inspired man has itself been “adulterated,” and Christ alludes to the conversation with the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 12 in which He deplores the disbelief and the introduction of half-truth or even non-truth into the pure “Word.” The “Passion,” then, the true meaning of Christ’s death, has been watered down by the inferior dogma of men so that what remains is no longer genuine or true. And Gerontion questions of what value it is to him, “Since what is kept must be adulterated.” What good is half-truth when only the pure “Word” can save a man? (This double use
of words like “Passion” and “Inquisition” also serves to
demonstrate technically and illustrate symbolically the
“dualism” of good versus evil in the universe—a micro-
cosmic illustration of a macrocosmic principle.

Koheleth’s inheritance of religious “knowledge” was
as direct as that of Gerontion, having been passed on by
the Fathers from as far back as Adam, who was instructed
by God. Both Gerontion and Koheleth accept the exis­
tence of God, but both seriously question the relation­ship
between Him and man. Looking around him, Kohe­
leth saw sorrow and pain and death to be the lot of all
men, evil and good, and he passed judgment upon God’s
ways with men. In this manner Koheleth’s belief was
“adulterated” and he was “removed” from God’s “heart.”
Losing his “passion” for “Wisdom,” he turned from
faith to follow other pursuits— petty concerns compared
to the “eternity” that God “has put into man’s mind”
(Ec. 3:11). Now that a lifetime of self-seeking was about
to end as a puff of vapor, Koheleth concluded that only
“whatsoever God does endures forever and nothing can
be added to it nor anything taken from it” (Ec. 3:14).
But firm commitments are to be made by the young, as
he cautioned his son: “Remember also your Creator in
the days of your youth, before the evil days come and
the years draw nigh when you will say, ‘I have no plea­
sure in them’” (Ec. 12:1). This is what Koheleth had
failed to do. Now he finds that faith-building requires
spiritual vitality and he cannot muster his flagging ener­
gies to make the only meaningful commitment.

Gerontion discovered the same sad truth that Kohe­
leth learned three thousand years before him—that a
spiritually sterile youth leads to a spiritually dried-up
old age. The race of man-without-faith has grown senile,
insensitive, emotionally enfeebled. Gerontion says, “I
have lost my sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch:/How
should I use them for your closer contact?” If in
his spiritual youth, generic man wavered in his commit­
ment, if he failed to “contact” Christ through sight and
touch and hearing when Christ was perceivable in phys­
ical form, how can he establish closer “contact” with
Him now that his own senses are “chilled” and feeble,
and Christ Himself is invisible and untouchable?

On the symbolic-spiritual level, Gerontion sees him­
self as the archetype of the wasteland man who finds it
too late to stir up the “little life” that has so long fed on
“dried tubers,” that has so long been famished by what
the church gives. He goes on to tell us that

These with a thousand small deliberations
Protract the profit of their chilled delirium,
Excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled,
With pungent sauces, multiply variety
In a wilderness of mirrors (11. 61-65).

The senses that Gerontion refers to in line 59 are the
antecedent of “these” in line 60. In their prime, “these”
failed of their appointed task; now it is too late to make
the larger commitment; his spiritual energy is consumed
by “small deliberations,” dogmatic trivia of various
kinds. These petty concerns of the aged church “pro­
tract the profit” or use up what faint spark of energy the
dying senses can generate in “their chilled delirium.”
Here “chilled” suggesting extreme cold, and “delirium”
suggesting feverish warmth, come together to create an
image of lukewarmness, which, as the author has im­
plied, is the state of modern religion. The suggestion of
lukewarmness also takes us back to the first lines of the
poem where Gerontion pictured himself in youth as
being lukewarm. While the emphasis in section one was
on the physical aspect, there was the application to the
moral and spiritual character of Gerontion as well.

The duality of Gerontion the man, and Gerontion the
symbol of the spiritual race of man, has been maintained
throughout the poem. The discussion that began on the
personalized, physical level with spiritual overtones,
broadened to an exposition of mankind’s “spiritual con­
tion” with Gerontion as individual confined to his
capacity of background symbol. From this broadened bi­
level view, the discussion now narrows again to the in­
dividual and physical aspect of Gerontion’s “human
condition” with a lessening of spiritual implications
and an emphasis on his decline and dissolution. The
discussion has reached full circle, progressing from the
individual-physical to the general-spiritual and now
back to the individual-physical.

WITH THIS IN MIND, WE GO BACK TO LINES
60-63 which describe Gerontion, the senile man with
senses debilitated—drained by “small deliberations,”
the petty concerns of the aged. To stir the senses that
can no longer respond, he suggests, is useless and cruel.
It is of no “profit” to “Excite the membrane when the
sense has cooled/ With pungent sauces.” In other words,
why arouse sexual desire that the flesh can no longer
appease, or stimulate the appetite for food that the taste
buds are unable to appreciate? Nor is it of any “profit”
to “multiply variety/ In a wilderness of mirrors.” Why
appeal to his vanity when the finest trappings cannot
conceal a withered body from even his own bewildered
and fading eyesight? Why allow one’s pride to lead to a
reflective truth that terrorizes?

Of what avail also to try to deceive oneself when the
course of nature is forward set and there is no way back?
Koheleth has observed in anguish that “the few days of
man’s vain life” pass “like a shadow” (Ec. 6:4). Gerontion
asks, “What will the spider do/ Suspend its operations,
will the weevil/ Delay?” The implied response is, “Ob­
viously not.” Nature continues in its ordered path and
man must travel the same route. He can only go on to­
ward dissolution.
Both Koheleth and Gerontion picture the physical part of man as returning to the elements from which he originally came. Koheleth saw “all the living who move about under the sun” and of them he says, “All go to one place... all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again” (Ec. 3:21). All become part of the general matter that flows with the wind in a constant, purposeless circle, their death without God being as meaningless as their life without God. Koheleth says, “The wind blows to the south, and goes around to the north, round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns” (Ec. 1:6, emphasis mine).

Like Koheleth, Gerontion concludes hopelessly that modern men, having rejected Christ, reach the same end. He sees all mankind as moving toward dissolution into nature, but where Koheleth sees man as returning to “dust,” Gerontion sees him again becoming “fractured atoms” that are “whirled/Beyond the circuit of the shuddering Bear” (emphasis mine). Gerontion here picks up Koheleth’s term “circuit,” to suggest the same constant, meaningless flow in the lifeless atmosphere. The image is reinforced in the vivid conclusion: “Gull against the wind, in the straits/Of Belle Isle, or running on the Horn” which, as in Ecclesiastes, describes the wind that blows endlessly from north to south. And the Bear, the constellation, viewed through this meaningless, whirling human dust is no longer a thing of pure beauty but rather of horror. The significance of man’s fate looms large and the stars do not twinkle but “shudder” before man’s shuddering gaze.

Koheleth and Gerontion agree that eventually, tragically, even man’s dust disappears, dissolves into nothingness. But where Koheleth saw nothingness as darkness, Gerontion pictures it as “White feathers in the snow,” which, in turn, “the Gulf claims”; they are swallowed up by the sea. And so, as Koheleth observed, “A generation goes, and a generation comes... and none will be remembered” (Ec. 1:4, 11).

Gerontion ends with the picture of himself as an old man “driven by the Trades/To a sleepy corner.” His own spiritually uncommitted life, like Koheleth’s, has been spent in a “striving after wind,” a vain pursuit of meaning. The pursuit has only led Gerontion to a “corner” from which he cannot escape but where he can only await his long, last sleep. Gerontion also sees, as Koheleth saw, that for the man without faith in God’s promise of eternal life, this is all that remains, the moment of dissolution with nothing gained. And these, he tells us, are the “Tenants of the house,/Thoughts of a dry brain in a dry season.” These are all that remain of a life’s experience. In a desiccated body resides a dessicated mind and spirit with no hope of a renewing “spring” in this wasteland time of life.

HIGHWAY PATROL

I tend to speed dreamily
down open roads, and not to see
traffic lights, except to ask
what makes them beautiful in dusk
and darkness. Then, there comes this cop
who brings me to a screeching stop,
just when the road was widening out
and traffic lights were strung about
like lights on a magic Christmas tree.

How I seethe when he motions me
to the dull curb, and makes me hear
how laws do not except my car.
His world is warnings and Thou Shalt Nots,
and slithering up on my blind spots,
revoking licenses, clamping wheels.
He’s never felt how magic feels.
But I hear he’s being transferred soon.
What shall I do for friendship then?

HELEN J. WILLIAMS

February, 1975
TO REPENT IS TO LIVE IN JOY

KENNETH F. KORBY

I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.

I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents. St. Luke 15:7, 10.

THE CRESSET
ter of starting with a blank, an empty life. Rather, a life full of antagonism and perversity must be killed off. The hostility must be overcome before there is reconciliation and reunion.

There are many ways to picture this double movement. The favorite image in St. Luke 15 is the image of the lost and found. Another favorite way to describe the double movement is to use the word “reconciliation.” Reconciliation means the antagonists must lose their hostility and come together again in peace.

This morning I want to use the picture of untruth and truth as the way to talk about repentance and joy. The basis for this picture is Psalm 51 where the singer tells us that God desires truth in the inward being. Now that speaks to our condition, for we know two things to our sorrow. One is that we have (in our own beings) a longing to be true human beings. From time to time we even find ourselves striving to become true human beings. Surely that striving, that desire, that longing, signals to us the second fact about ourselves: in the inward being we are full of lies. Our longing to be true is only a partial index of the pollution at the center. God’s revelation of his desire for our truth in the inward being is a far more accurate index to the nature of our distortion.

The sad and melancholy fact is that even our desire to be true is corrupted by the lie in the inward being. Our sighing and our longing to be true, our protestations that we are trying, not only signal an experienced deficiency. They also reflect the defeat which flows from the poisoned center. With genuine longings and vociferous protestations we neither can nor will meet God’s desire.

How can a liar tell the truth? How can he who is a liar become true in the inward being? The answer is the confession of his sin by joining in the demanding desire of God. The liar speaks the truth only when he concurs in the judgment that he is a liar. The liar who will not be the sinner, is the enemy of God. Fearing to be an enemy of God the liar deceives himself by trying to do those things which prove he is God’s friend, trying to prove that by aspiration, enthusiasm, and performance he has become a true human being.

He who confesses his sin is a liar who speaks the truth. Hence, he joins the truthful and right verdict of God upon himself. In that he is a real, confessed sinner he faces God as the enemy of God. But mystery of mysteries and wonder of wonders, this very God is in truth the Friend of sinners. Truth in the inward being of God is manifest (especially) in this fifteenth chapter of St. Luke where Jesus is condemned for his friendship with sinners: Jesus is God’s inward being expressed and enfolded for us. The confessed sinner (the enemy of God) cannot be the enemy of God any longer, for God is the Friend of sinners. While we were yet sinners, Christ came for us. By his befriending the confessed sinner, God reconciles himself to the sinner and calls the sinner to be reconciled to him.

Joy is neither the sought goal of our lives nor the goal of the quest in Lenten preparation. Joy is the name for the complete peace in the reunion between God and confessed sinners through the deadly destruction of their death and the vivification to the life in the truth. Joy is the word to describe the life put back together in its wholeness. The whole inner being of God unites the inner being of the believing sinner in the truth. Joy is not the description of our feelings. It is the description of the rectified relationship. Joy is the reconstructed harmony, the restored fellowship of those entruthed in the inner being. Joy illuminates even the pain and sorrows of sinners, as it did our Master when “for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame.” Joy is not euphoria but restored rectitude.

To be in repentance is to be in joy itself, the joy of heaven. Surely the author is right when he calls the liturgy “the joy of heaven on earth.” Beginning with the baptismal invocation, we are called into the great anamnesis, the union with Jesus Christ in his death and resurrection. He himself is our joy. As the confessing and absolved sinners we participate in the advent waiting, the Christmas coming, and the teaching ministry of Jesus. As the confessing people we offer up our prayers and move into the Holy Week sequence, from Palm Sunday through the Holy Supper of the Kingdom to the final life of peace.

Although the invitation may sound strange to our ears, it is familiar to the heavenly life: “enjoy your repentance”; that is, by repentance live in joy.

February, 1975
MAKING CHOICES AND JUDGMENTS:

AS WE GROW physically older and mature, objects that once bombarded our senses and intrigued us no longer stir our curiosity; their novelty disappears. Perhaps due to their physical closeness as well as an unfamiliarity with their surroundings, children experience objects intently through active touch, sight, and smell. An art program in the elementary grades can put this freshness and natural curiosity children possess to educational profit by presenting “novel” materials like stones, wood, yarn, and wire in daily lessons.

Margaret, an outspoken kindergartner, was walking through the hall with her class, and as she passed, she yelled, “I know what I’m going to make on Wednesday!” The statement was quite striking at the time (since as yet I had no idea what art “project” was to be presented). In a way she typifies all children who have an untapped library of ideas waiting to be tested and expressed in various media; she was more conscious of her idea than most. If the art lesson is planned in an open-ended yet structured way, that is, if “novel” materials and techniques are introduced, the child will formalize his own “idea,” and the question “What are we going to make?”—which implies “teacher” has all the ideas—will be avoided.

Art experiences involving the use of “novel” materials can be most effective in building creative, self-evaluative, independent personalities, because a lengthy decision-making process takes place in each child. Given the material, the student decides (1) technique, “how to use it,” (2) subject, “what to use it for,” and (3) the degree of completion of his idea.

Technical solutions and systems of organization used by children vary considerably. When given colored chalk for a picture, most children will use whatever color appeals to them at the moment, changing colors when they tire of the old one. Seven-
year-old Brent, on the other hand, systematized the color combinations in his picture by numbering each piece of chalk on a paper towel, using them sequentially forward and back.

When a group of sixth graders were given cardboard to design a record jacket, one boy made a puppet head instead; his ingenious technique of folding and cutting to form a basic head structure has been introduced and received enthusiastically by third and fourth graders.

Sometimes the question of subject matter, or “what to use the material for” requires extra effort and thinking. It’s wonderful to see this taking place—for example, the puzzled expressions on the faces of children who are trying (perhaps too hard) to think of what to paint a picture of while listening to classical music.

Children are encouraged but not forced to work with the “material” being presented; sometimes their ideas are better expressed in a drawing. When Taminy had finished work on a wire/cardboard project, she asked for an extra sheet of paper, took it to an unoccupied corner of the room, and began drawing. Fifteen minutes later every child in her class had moved with extra paper from the regular work area to that corner, to draw “whatever they wanted.” This situation illustrates that children become more absorbed and work for a longer period of time if they decide what to use a material for.

The child must decide when his project is completed. If suggestions for additional work are offered by the teacher, and the child replies (not out of laziness or stubbornness), “But I don’t want it that way!” a high degree of self-evaluation and independence has been attained; that child has realized that teacher is not his critic—someone he strives to please—but rather is a resource person available for suggestions in case a stalemate of ideas or technical problems occurs. If satisfied with the final product, the child cannot be expected to do a finer job, because he has been true to himself, and that work of art must stand as it is, regardless of the personal taste or influence of others.

How will these elementary art experiences benefit the child in later years? Regardless of hobbies, interests, or final occupation, as the child grows up, he also grows in the ability to perceive and conceive objects in the environment in new, inventive combinations.
THE FAITHFUL APPROACH to any exercise of political power lies through an exercise of prayer. The best way to talk about theology and politics is to describe what goes on in such prayer. This description, we must assume, will come to terms in its own way with such worrisome data as recent ceremonies in the East Room and present separatism in much popular religion. We may take courage from the recent Hartford statement by politically acting Christian spokesmen calling for explicit spiritual disciplines and acknowledgment of transcendence. Since we cannot say with specificity what the outcome of any prayer will be (which would obviate the need for prayer), we must approach our topic in terms of its generic aspects and movable parts. Thus prayer may be inspected for its effects on our political thought, our political passion, and our political action, though consideration of any one of these elements would lead on its way to consideration of the others. Moreover, we may draw the lines backward to take note of particular modes and forms of prayer in each case. But our descriptions must be verified by reference to actual praying at every step.

I. Political Thought: Meditation and Confession

PRAYER BEGINS, NECESSARILY, as a demolition exercise, a shaking of customary preconceptions. The opening phrase of most prayers provides a basis for meditation on political power which is both critical and constructive. Any half-examined religious prejudice against political power, or any uncritical sanction of present forms of power, any simple judgment that “power corrupts” or contrariwise that “powerlessness corrupts,” becomes loosened at the very outset of prayer. “Our Father,” as we have been taught to begin prayer, compels us to pray intentionally with and for all men and overrules with the very first utterance any merely privatized religious stance. “Almighty God,” a familiar invocation, calls upon one who is thought of not simply in terms of truth or love but also of power. The same phrase brings into question any public exercise of power that lays claim to ultimacy or, which amounts to the same thing, that serves vested interests. It requires an acknowledgment of power where it is not always seen—for example, in religious organizations in so far as these occupy property, expend wealth, enjoy tax immunities, and lay claims upon their members’ time. Though we speak of an official political neutrality in the churches, there is no final neutrality for that reason—only more or less awareness of institutional assumptions and effects.

Having jarred our most basic prejudices concerning power, prayer proceeds to shake loose previous
rigidities in our conception of its meaning. Day to day political activity usually does little more than extend previous lines of meaning and action. Prayer by its very nature requires one to transcend fixed definitions and accounts of power. The "transcendent" lies beyond or behind or around fixed meanings; it cuts across the categories. Thus the first words and attitudes of prayer are such as may overcome any "hardening of the categories."

We are all likely in a mechanical age to think of power primarily in mechanical terms on the model of physical "force." More than one community analyst has taken "power" to mean the ability to make persons or groups do something they do not wish to do. But while such a notion works well enough in describing external relations among bodies, a moment's reflection reveals complications in the political sphere: for here the extent and duration of power depend very much on what is going on in the minds of the respondents. Any exercise of sheer force in human affairs is likely to put an end to willing compliance or co-operation in the future; further control then depends on surveillance or imprisonment, both costly and unproductive measures. This view of power, by itself, fosters definitions of social problems in terms amenable to mechanical or allopathic solutions. But such solutions in housing, transport, education, health, and rehabilitation have proven less than helpful in recent decades; they have often "healed a wound and made the patient worse." Further techniques of a behavioral sort, it is said, will help people to want the right things. But this sort of push-pull, and the knowledge required for its exercise, amounts to something less or other than the choosing of ends and mutual persuasion implied by "political" activity or power.

Thus in the public sphere the word "power" is often supplemented by the word "authority," which does take account of attitudes within those acted upon. The distinction between "power" conceived as force and "authority" has been described by G. K. Chesterton as follows: If he were seated in a restaurant, he said, and an elephant came in and demanded his chop, he would be the first to acknowledge that elephant's "power" to do so but the last to admit his "authority." Authority, as distinct from coercive force alone, may be established in either of two ways: by virtue of the intrinsic wisdom of the proposal or at least the undoubted wisdom of the proposer, or by virtue of the procedure by which it came to be adopted.

The first form of authority is that of truth, which now refers to wisdom bearing on human action and not merely to expertise concerning stresses and forces. Prayer recalls how the prophets spoke with authority in the public realm, even though they were (especially in the case of the literary prophets) without institutional power. Jesus taught "as one having authority and not as the scribes" (that is, not merely as an exegete), producing astonishment in the people and chagrin in the established leaders. Exousia here refers to direct authorization, to speaking as an author. The Centurion had a certain authority over a hundred soldiers which was transmitted in a regular way by the empire; Jesus had an authority to which imperial procedures did not reach: to speak a word at a distance and heal a servant. "By what authority" did Jesus do these things—cleansing the temple, for example? It is close to the point that Jesus gave no formal answer to this question but simply referred to John, a prophet whose authority had been a matter of truth and spirit. Authority may lie in the patent, if uncommon, truth of the utterance itself. "When truth is at issue," comments Aquinas on the complaint of Job, "the size of the disputant does not matter." "Out of the mouth of babes hast thou ordained strength." The child who piped that the emperor had no clothes spoke with authority. The year-old who listened to the rationalized account of CIA intrigue in Chile, namely, that other nations were fishing there as well, spoke with authority: "If the good guys do what the bad guys do, doesn't that make them bad guys too?" (Christian Century, November 27, 1974). As theologian Joseph Sittler has put it: "One does not have to have an institution behind him in order to say 'bullshit' with authority." Such authority, moreover, is more than a matter of speaking truth to power (as professors sometimes describe their role vis-a-vis government); it is powerful in its own right, as in the stories of the prophets and the kings. There is a certain power in truth, just as there is a certain truth in power.

"Authority" may qualify political power in a second way, namely through the legitimacy of procedures. Consensus attaches to the exercise of power not only when the action is seen to be right but when it is seen to have been determined in the right way—through due process. Political structures make common action possible; they are, to that extent, capacities of freedom. But new perils emerge with centralizing policies, as prayer remembers from the alternating nays and yeas of the Prophet Samuel in making and breaking the first king of Israel. The attentiveness trained in prayer is tuned to hear how any presumed wisdom or presumed legitimacy may also come to be doubted. "Hecha la ley, hecha la trampa," they say in Chile and on Chicago's West Side ("Who makes the laws sets the trap"). The resistance of the rebel to the powers that be is called to introduce a final term qualifying the exercise of power, "violence." But it is not so designated by those who find in the rebel the authority of truth and look forward to the authority of a just
polity—even though they be few in number. (Luther said at Worms, “I am the church.”) Occasionally, this word is frankly accepted by the previously cowed or co-opted; thus “violence” is viewed as healthy in the writings of Franz Fanon.

Such meditation can uncover neglected—perhaps deliberately neglected—aspects of power or leadership. This becomes basic in the task of discovering emerging problems. “The worst, the most corrupting, of lies,” says Georges Bernanos, “is a problem poorly stated.” That “lie” obtains when we persist in previous conceptions and programs under altered circumstances, or when we define our problems without giving consideration to the various sorts of elements which must enter into any sufficient statement or solution.

It is when the rigidities of “individualism” or “collectivism” are relieved that we begin to discover ways in which individual freedoms depend on societal arrangements and conversely, the ways in which any societal improvement depends on changes in individuals. Similarly, when prayer erases hard lines between “economics” and “culture,” political problems may become transformed. During the recent past we have treated problems of poverty without much attention to the culture of communities or cities; present counter-stagflation proposals seek merely to modify our spending. On the other hand, counter-cultural ventures have taken their stand against current economic trends without achieving viable forms for city living. It is by reopening paths of exploration between economic and cultural aspects of community that genuine alternatives may be discovered and new political problems come to be posed. Consider how some contemplation of the City of God, with its organization through self-sufficient ends, might help to sort out instrumental policies and proposals and to counter the absurdity of endless one-track development.

Such meditative exploration and inquiry into political realities seems closely analogous to what takes place at the outset of prayer. There is in it a kind of risk—a willingness to let go of familiar and daring private conceptions for the sake of entering into what is—which rests on faith in the creating and sustaining power of God. There seems an analogy to the traditional theological locus which was entered with prayer, in which previous utterances could be reviewed and new considerations added, and which was regarded as a source of discovery. One is tempted to make a reference to the “unknowing” and “unlearning” which the mystics have found in prayer.

Such a practice seems prerequisite for any Confession of Sins which penetrates beyond infringement of social customs. Hannah Arendt has spoken of “the banality of evil,” and might also have spoken of “the banality of good,” where the culprit is merely under orders and not engaged in a conscientious discussion or inquiry—first of all within himself. Only by virtue of such exploration will Confession come to include sins of apathy and collaboration shared with nation, race, church and class—of entanglement in social ideology and structures from which the penitent also profits. Forgiveness of Sin must then signify a somewhat specifiable “change of mind” or “new beginning”—a liberation from the previous course and a conversion to a new direction for thought and action in the public sphere.

Finally, there is here an intimation of the answer to prayer, of a meaning for the promise: “While you are yet speaking he will hear and answer.” There is also some appreciation for an initial reluctance to pray: not because we can’t be sure whether prayer is answered, but because every faithful prayer is answered—perhaps unfortunately! There is in this first description of political prayer some unfolding of the basic command and promise: “Seek and you will find”—perhaps more than we would have wished to find. “You would not seek me if you had not already found me,” was the answer to Augustine—or if you had not been found by me.

II. Political Passion: Contemplation and Intercession

HERE WE SHIFT TO THE EFFECTS of prayer, not on political meanings but on political feelings, interests, or aspirations. The procedure or mode of prayer shifts from meditation to contemplation, to borrow a traditional distinction. Attention is not given to terms (force, power, authority, and violence; individual and society; economics and culture) but to concrete images, both of ancient story or scene and of actually-known individuals or groups. Once again there is a movement from something more attentive to something more active, only this time what ensures is not Confession of Sin but Intercession.

The alternation between passivity and activity in any description of prayer, though it is as obvious as that between listening and speaking, deserves a moment’s reflection. One does not denigrate the importance of any basic human activity—pursuit of learning, public ambition, artistic creation—to observe that there is an ineluctably passive moment within it. In order to know a subject, one must attend to the subject itself and not merely to one’s own knowing. Aristotle said that in knowing “the soul becomes all things.” Similarly, in loving one must attend to the woman he desires, or to any other object of his affection; if one turns to measure his own satisfaction, the passion becomes abstract and degenerates into something else. There is a dilemma in the pleasure theory of value, as Gilbert
Ryle has shown: one has to forget his own pleasure in order to have it. In the creation of great works of art, we speak of "the agony and the ecstasy": both terms bespeak an objectivity and a getting outside one's self. Any passion implies a certain passivity, a letting-be in contemplation. For Christian prayer, moreover, every true passion refers in some way to the Passion. "He who seeks to save his own life will lose it, but he who will lose his life for my sake and that of the gospel shall find it."

The story of Jesus in the gospels enfolds great political affirmations and expectations and, at the same time, a strangely passionate restraint. The song of Mary before his birth gathers up revolutionary convictions and anticipations which are identical with faith in God and which reach backward to the song of Hannah and the exodus. At his death, we find her silent at the cross. Prayerful contemplation must include both magnificat and stabat, not something in between. The triumphal song of Simeon is followed by a dire prediction; this juxtaposition requires all the "pondering" Mary is said to have given it. At the outset of his public life, Jesus' proclamation is nothing short of revolutionary: The spirit of the Lord, good news to the poor, release for the captives, liberation for the oppressed; blessed are the poor, woe to the rich. Such affirmations are of a piece with faith in God. But something in addition becomes learned along the way. Consider the progression with John the Baptist. At the magnificat, the unborn John leaped in his mother's womb: he could not wait to preach, to get on with the action, to bring in the new kingdom. Later he chafes at the delay: Was Jesus the one who would do it or should he look for somebody else? In his reply, Jesus pointed to the blind, the lame, lepers, the deaf, the dead, the poor, all coming to new consciousness, "and blessed is he who takes no offense at me." Then a postscript for the crowd: "From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence as strong men try to take it by force."

Political action and program here become qualified not by dalliance but by passion. Our reference to Mary serves to recall an observation by Kenneth Clarke in his first "Civilization" series that religious cultures which kept woman near the center also preserved passion, reflection, mystery, and art, while those which pushed her out made commerce and wars in the name of religion. The great burst of industrial activity in the past century, with its twin commercial and military engines, has caused second thoughts today. We take pause, through the images of Christ and Mary, to wait for the understanding which comes from standing under the cross.

That understanding, when it comes, is not a new thought so much as a new passion. What we come to see in Christ is not merely public proclamation and action but also a strange bearing and forbearing. He is bearing with men; he is weighed down with the load of footdragging men. Those who understand become bearers and forebearers with him; that we see first and eminently in Mary who has pondered and now understands—who is first among those who "complete what remains of Christ's afflictions." Bonhoeffer took a song of the Servant King (itself a strange union of power and forbearance, of offensive suffering and surprising revelation), "Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows," and put it together with the New Testament injunction, "Bear ye one another's burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ." The clue, he says, lies in "freedom."

There is something contradictory about a corporate program which diminishes rather than augments the freedom of its participants. A question arises; what would it mean for participation, not only in religious communities, but in (say) the city if we bore with the freedom of strangely different people, with "everything that produces frictions, conflicts, and collisions among us"? What sort of purposes and structures might emerge, if we involved ourselves with the created reality of others and, in bearing with it, broke through to the point where we take joy in it?

Significantly, the mode of approach for this writer is Intercession. This form of prayer exactly enacts the respectful bearing of free men toward each other. Community, he says, "lives and exists by the intercession of its members for one another..." (The) face that hitherto may have been strange and intolerable to me, is transformed in inter-
cession into the countenance of a brother for whom Christ died” (p. 86). Something similar must take place with respect to political enemies or even (God help us) with clients. May not even statistics of unemployment, of substandard housing and divisive schooling, become transformed into faces of people for whom Christ died—thereby summoning passion and transmuting intentions for action?

Political passion is born in prayer which (1) brings a heightened conviction concerning the need and certainty of revolutionary change, and which (2) is joined with a deepened sense of the need to bear with the freedom of other men—which is what revolution is about. The resulting sentiment is not sympathy in the sense of pathos, but passion which includes joy and hope. “For the joy that was set before him, Christ endured the cross despising the joy in its effects . His pain was like which includes joy and hope.

His pain was like which includes joy and hope. Such prayer, which brings passion to our thinking about other men, may sometimes require a certain restraint; but it may also become inescapably political.

III. Political Action: Appropriation and Offertory

HERE WE CARRY FORWARD the effects of prayer on political thought and passion to questions of political action. The focus of prayer is no longer on images of Jesus so much as on his central meaning and benefits.

“To know Christ is to know his benefits not his characteristics,” said Melanchthon. There have been new attempts to find precedents for specific political activities in the life of Jesus. If anything, Jesus was more, not less, political than the gospels depict him. He was, after all, executed in the manner of a political insurgent. His transmitted speech and action did break open the social structures of the world in which he lived: its traditional relationships (“These are my mother and my brothers”; “Let the dead bury their dead”); its hierarchies (“Call no man master”); its divisions and exclusions (“Not the righteous but sinners”; “Mary has chosen the good portion which shall not be taken away from her”). Yet it is no decisive question to ask whether Jesus was a political revolutionary, where he stood on violence, property, slavery, etc. It is not clear that Jesus ever addressed himself to the structures which produced quailing tax collectors or prostitutes; but that fact neither affords a criticism of him nor a defense of present quietism.

The point is rather to lift out the fundamental intention or tendency, and to appropriate the effect, of the entire event of Jesus Christ from the proclamation of the imminent Kingdom of God to its new introduction in the Resurrection. This brings the power of eschatology into the realm of politics for the believer; it requires some “politicizing of eschatology” (Metz’s phrase), some “entry into future truth” (as Habermas puts it). But present realities, when prayed over, also play a decisive role in determining what is to be done by one who stands in the power of the Resurrection.

Bonhoeffer was the first of many voices since World War II to venture that “thought and action have entered into new relationship today.” Hence the widespread use of the word “praxis.” Social structures (beginning with those of sex, marriage, parenthood, and family), cultural symbols, even environment, have become much more subject to human decision and arrangement than ever before. Yet present institutional trends may be seen to diminish personal and communal choices, to disperse community, to divide the society, and to degrade the biosphere in terminal ways. Two thirds of the earth’s people are consigned by present modes of development to the wretched of the earth; eco-disaster is predictable and prior social and political collapses appear likely.

This is not to say that political efforts to reconstitute public functions are identical with salvation. Yet extension of present trends very nearly guarantees unfulfillment—i.e., loss of response and initiative—for vast numbers in urbanized regions, especially in those which have been heteronomously developed. Events themselves have served to deprivate the reflection, passion, and activity of faith. Prayer is the place where this deprivatization happens.

Let us venture the following descriptions for inspection. Christian prayer will not culminate today simply in activity for greater rational efficiency in current modes of production and service; we have observed how many previous functions have become dysfunctional. (Even Luther observed how institutionalized reason may become a whore.) It will not issue simply in almsgiving or social welfare programs; it might, in fact, prompt reflection on how our giving up mercy and pity for social welfare was not in every respect a gain. It will not point simply toward an increase in professional and paraprofessional services (a hope of the “new vocationalism”); legitimation of such services could serve to deligitimize citizens and displace their mutual functions. It will not issue in simple identification with large scale political programs; prayer does not produce “useful idiots.” Social action groups can become manipulative in their own way and fail to increase identity and activity on the part of their adherents.
Christian prayer will penetrate to something more radical than that. It will do so by asking what it would mean for public action today if (as Luther insisted) the Councils of Perfection are to be brought down from the mount and the monastery to the streets—if they are not to be subjected to compromise but are to be made a matter for passionate application in the manner we have described. This may point attention to the very constitution of political units and the very structures of social activity today. Those who pray may find themselves emboldened to acknowledge a de facto global community, transcending present internationalism, which alone could provide stability with respect to energy and food (to name two now inaccessible systems) on which all societies depend; to envision metropolitan communities, transcending spheres of present city government, able to enter into co-operative relations with other world cities; and, not least, to work at creation of local communities, transcending what we remember as community organization and consumer programs, which are able to invent structures for health, rehabilitation, communication, and education employing replicable human energies and preserving traditional human freedoms.

Thus prayer will result in fundamental discussion and inventive activity with the nearest “public.” This need not entail an anti-technological bias, but it does point toward recovery of a logos of technē, an investigation of what sort of things ought to be made. It need not mean an end of “growth” but discovery of new directions for growth—sideways. It need not mean an end of culture but a new union of economics and culture. The Lenten story of the woman with the alabaster box is arresting at this time: Why should the ointment be sold to the rich? Why should the money be given to the poor? Why should not more people be squeezing their flowers and pouring its juices on whomever they prize?

We might wish at this point to examine actual materials from groups devoted to deliberate practice of political prayer (like the two volumes from the Politisches Nachgebet in Köln, ed. Soelle and Stefensky, 1971). But let us be content to focus on a particular form of prayer which seems illustrative, namely the Offertory. This prayer joins reflection on the self and thoughts about others with a handling of things: a gift of one’s hands to represent all one’s labor, of bread and wine from nature and industry for the work of the “new creation,” of one’s very body as a “living sacrifice” (as St. Paul put it for those accustomed to ritual sacrifice). Consider what doing the Offertory might mean for scientists and technicians, scholars and students, artists and craftsmen, politicians and civil servants, who have been disposed to work in terms of the “present age” without reference to that which is to come.

More important, here is enacted a “universal priesthood,” not merely in the sense that all men have access to God without mediation by other men, but in the sense that all men are to be priests or “Christ’s” in their bearing toward one another and in the care of the earth. All are active in the Offertory; the prayer is “for all sorts and conditions of men, for all useful arts and sciences, and for the fruits of the earth.” While we discriminate among gifts, we may not discriminate against givers—on pain, said Jesus and Paul, of undoing the whole thing.

The Offertory becomes a functional enactment of “city,” in which each offers his gift while acknowledging dependence on fellow citizens by whom his own efforts are supplemented and corrected. Each both rules and is ruled, both serves and is served, both enriches and is enriched. Therefore the future is open, stretching toward something not entirely programmed by any individual or group, toward “God’s future.” This is not, according to the New Testament, a return to any Garden, nor a Happy Hunting Ground, nor Cloud Nine, but a City. For how should God adopt and redeem mankind except by adopting and redeeming his most distinctive work?

Prayer closes “in Jesus’ name”; that is the prayer which bears the promise, and for a very good reason. To pray in this name is not merely to remember Jesus’ life, to recite his words, or to repeat his actions; it is to stand in his place as he stood in the place of man. Standing there, one may say anything he wishes—he may bleat, chirp, plead, rage—but his words are sure to change. By the time such a prayer is ended, the petition is right and therewith granted. The last word is amen, a kind of affirmation or even oath. According to my catechism it means “Yes, it shall be so.” “Right on!” Jesus made it also his first word to men: “Amen, Amen, it shall be so.” But who can really believe it: a revolutionary future in which the poor are blessed, in which all must become poor in order to be rich? In which individuals and communities must find their own identities on the way to social peace? There is a clincher: Who is going to tell it to the poor themselves? The answer to that, said Jacques Ellul in The Meaning of the City, must be given in three parts: 1) The poor, like everyone else, will have to come to such perceptions by themselves; 2) No one can tell it with conviction who does not live in some provisional solidarity with the poor; and 3) Even if it is spoken by a fool or by an ass, it shall be so.

“Prayer is a space in which to become more fully human,” wrote David Jenkins. The first political result of prayer is to make such spaces, so far as possible, for other men. Prayer is a political act and must have political consequences.
A SENSATION IS A SENSATION is a sensation, but not necessarily a gratifying play or opera. A thousand and one motivations can prompt the creation of a work. The public is never invited to ponder the secrets behind the genesis of a work of art, particularly because the real motivations may often remain veiled to the artist. We are only invited to share an artistic experience with him. Art history can never be written from the viewpoint of what makes an artist create. This is even more true for a specific work. Artists face too many imponderabilities leading to the act of creation: these are always of a very private nature.

What we can judge, however, is the ambiance or mood of the days during which creation unfolds. In other words, the outer influences. It must be hoped that the most minimal prompting for writing an opera based on Thomas Mann's novella Death in Venice, came to Benjamin Britten from the "outside," from the more open-minded and outspoken attitude of the general public towards homosexuality today. For all we know we must accept the fact that it probably was important to the aging and ailing composer to have written this opera, to have come to grips with Mann's subtly perceived story.

In adapting the expression of one artistic medium into another, the crucial question is the choice of the material and the way in which the artist is able to turn the material into an intrinsic part of his medium. We have learned to understand that opera plots need not make too much sense since one can rarely perceive the sung words. This may be the reason for opera stories being either too simple or overly involved in their story line, but, in the most successful cases, full of dramatic action on stage. Probably any artist writing for the stage gets trapped when trying to dramatize an "inmost feeling" — and this was Mann's intent which, in a narrative form, he mastered only too well, leaving the drama of a psychologically intricate incident in the life of an aging writer full of allusions and eluding questions on many levels. The externalization of all this — however tempting — must be doomed to fail. Luchino Visconti's film of the same theme was one of those magnificent failures, although the cinematic medium has much greater potentialities than any stage visualization in capturing the secrets of a tortured soul, as Ingmar Bergman's films prove. I understand that, in a time of outward brutalization, man is increasingly occupied with himself and inclined to look into his own wayward feelings. But I dread the day when a dramatist will present this story as a play.

MANN'S ORIGINAL STORY goes back to an emotional experience the thirty-five-year-old writer had when, in Venice in 1911, he became infatuated with the beauty of a young boy. He turned this experience into a masterly, many-faceted novella. In letters to friends Mann rejected the idea of having written a homosexual story. Probably all great art is, in its final analysis, a triumph over death. Death and decay in all its facets was behind Mann's idea. In defiance of our ultimate fate we perpetuate images and visions of our self. In recreating and somehow completing a work of art we also go, metaphysically speaking, through the process of ecstatic feelings and final death. Moreover, on a less ephemeral plane, love can be seen as rebirth, preceded and followed by death. The concept of love being close to death was already rampant in the twelfth century, as exemplified by Tristan and Isolt, a notion fully embraced again by German Romanticism and Richard Wagner. All this must have been in the back of Thomas Mann's mind when he wrote Death in Venice.

Projecting himself into the aging writer Gustav von Aschenbach who became enamored with Tadzio, a Polish boy, on the Lido, Mann envisioned him as an artist whose creative power has run dry through zealous self-discipline and Apollonian restraint. In recapturing the perhaps repressed emotions of his
youth, he felt—at least in the beginning—like recapturing the Dionysian power so badly needed for his creativity. On the other hand, Aschenbach was an aging man in pursuit of beauty. What strikes him first as an ideal, rather abstract attitude and pleasure, turns into a sick passion. There is also the love of the sea which Mann equated with love of death; facing the sea, Gustav is tortured by visions of this beautiful boy. Gradually his passion becomes such an obsession that he neglects to leave Venice in time to escape the cholera spreading rapidly in the city at that time.

Is it Aschenbach's hubris to be unable to tear himself away from this boy's image in time, or is it a death wish expressed through his sudden realization that he has always lacked spontaneity and has been deprived of that life force making life worth living. Essentially, Mann's story deals with the ultimate extremes: spirit and flesh, creativity and destructiveness, order and chaos.

Myfanwy Piper, the librettist, kept her opera scenario as close as possible to Mann's story—which is more than laudable. But even though she achieved a beautiful synthesis of Mann's Lebensphilosophie, she and the composer had to resort to theatrical gimmicks in order to make Aschenbach's inner dialogue come to life on stage. One of them was the idea of having the boy not sing but dance. I could imagine that a choreographer like Antony Tudor, who successfully staged psychological problems balletically, would be able to create a full-length ballet on the Death in Venice theme. But as insertion in an opera he too might have failed as much as Sir Frederick Ashton, whose choreography was not inspiring and dramatically obvious.

Benjamin Britten—of whose work I am very fond—composed a chamber opera on a grand scale, a contradiction in itself and self-defeating. From a purely technical viewpoint, the composition is a masterpiece echoing, as it beautifully does, the growing menace, the frightful spectacle of a man falling apart in a setting of a mentally and physically diseased world. Certain instruments remain associated with each character; each scene is composed as a little drama in itself, described by the orchestra like the background to a ballad. However ingeniously the composition may be thought through, its con sordino mood creates an impression of monotony. Britten, no doubt, avoided stressing any obvious melodic contrasts in order to accomplish the musical materialization of Aschenbach's inmost emotional process.

But a stage is a stage and whatever happens on it dictates its theatrical rules. Death in Venice is a musical narrative whose narrator is apparently its hero. The real hero, however, is the plot itself which is stronger than the staged music can suggest in its tremendous effort at suggestiveness. Not even the fascinating production of the Metropolitan Opera—I was intrigued by John Piper's sets—can help us over an artistic experience in which the mind remains more engaged than one's senses and in which each detail is accomplished while the total impression is one of having been deceived by a master whose daring defeated him.

To say that Benjamin Britten's opera is artistically and aesthetically superior to Visconti's cinematic version is only to say that Thomas Mann wrote a marvelous novella which haunts the dreams of many creative men challenging their own abilities. With this story Thomas Mann proves to be untouchable, and one can only wish that he and his Death in Venice would remain untouched.
INTERVIEWS WITH BLACK WRITERS.


For those excited by or curious about contemporary Black writing, John O’Brien’s Interviews with Black Writers is vital reading. The opportunity to witness contemporary Afro-American novelists and poets commenting on what they see as the meaning of their work; how they perceive their function as artists; what people, events, or cultural institution helped shape the form (realism, naturalism, experimentalism) and/or the content (“racial” themes, “larger” American themes) of their writing is intellectually stimulating and exciting. O’Brien asked the participants of the interviews sometimes direct, sometimes philosophically probing questions. The answers he received were revealing responses from people who had obviously given thought to their roles as Black writers in American society, what that in itself means, what freedoms they have, and what limitations are placed upon them.

O’Brien’s introduction to Interviews is valuable. He reminds the reader that it is important to recognize the Black literary tradition as literary rather than merely racial. He stresses that literary styles, themes, myths, heroes, structures, and influences, not simply a writer’s complexion should be considered in deciding who is and who is not part of this tradition. He notes that all Black writers do not belong to the Black literary tradition, regard-
usually treated in a social or political context; critical attention to such literary concerns as structure, symbolology, or characterization rarely appears in white critical response. As a part of this same racist orientation, he notes that usually Black writers are compared only to other Black writers and rarely to their white contemporaries.

I like the format O'Brien uses in each of the interviews. He prefaces each selection with a photograph of the writer (we are a visually-oriented society), gives a little personal information about each writer—where they are now, what they do for a "living"—what works they've had published, and what they are currently working on. He tells how the interview was conducted—by telephone, mail, or personal contact—and how each individual responded to the impositions any interview involves. Next he gives a brief synopsis of the various works of each artist and reviews the critical reception of those works. Finally, he proceeds with the actual questionings:

"In recent years a great deal of pressure has been exerted on the black writer to become politically involved and to make his own writing a kind of battleground for political issues. Have you personally felt this pressure and has it affected your writing?" (p. 22) "Are there authors who have affected your writing?" (p. 37) "Are there non-literary influences on your writing?" "Do you think of yourself as belonging to any school of poetry?" "Do you place yourself in a romantic tradition as well as a symbolist?" (p. 116) "Do you think that this preoccupation of the contemporary writer with form is changing?" (p. 217) "What determines your interests as a writer?" "Are there preoccupations you have which you are not conscious of until you begin writing?" (p. 192)

His questions run the gamut from basic "who/what influenced you" type questions to direct comments and observations about an author's work. "You seem to be writing out of a vision which conflicts with that of the culture around you. What I may be pointing out is that you do not seem to see the profound evil present in much of American literature." (p. 193) It's the very lively discussion stimulated by O'Brien's obvious knowledge of an author's work that makes Interviews so readable and exciting. For instance, in response to the comment about "profound evil that is present in American literature" Alice Walker replied: "It is possible that white male writers are more conscious of their own evil (which after all, has been documented for several centuries—in words and in the ruin of the land) than black male writers, who, along with black and white women, have seen themselves as the recipients of that evil, and therefore on the side of Christ, of the oppressed, of the innocent.

"The white women writers I admire: Chopin, the Brontes, Simone De Beauvoir, and Doris Lessing, are well aware of their own oppression and search incessantly for a kind of salvation. Their characters can always envision a solution, an evolution to higher consciousness on the part of society, even when society itself cannot." (p. 193)

In another incisive interview O'Brien directs a question to Ishmael Reed about his unusual experimental novel, Yellow Back Radio Broke Down. (I've read and taught this novel myself and it is fascinating and fun to work through.) "Is it a revolution of the imagination that you are working toward in your fiction?" Reed's response was like a credo: "To create our own fiction has caused quite a reaction. The book is really artistic guerilla warfare against the Historical Establishment. They are responsible for the national mind and the money they've done very bad things with their propaganda and racism. . . . I'm glad I'm on the side of the barbarians. . . . So this is what we want: to sabotage history. They won't know whether we're serious or whether we are writing fiction. They made their own fiction, just like we made our own. But they can't tell whether our fictions are the real thing or whether they're merely fictional. Always keep them guessing. . . . What it comes down to is that you let the social realist go after flatfooted out there on the beat and we'll go after the Pope and see which causes the revolution." (p. 179)

For the student of contemporary Black literature or, for that matter, just for persons interested in ideas, access to this kind of precise challenging debate about American culture, American art and artists, is a necessity.

I've long been enamored of writers like Bontemps, Ellison, Hay­den, Reed, Michael Harper, and Ernest Gaines, but to see their own critical perceptions about their work and each other's work, to be exposed to Charles Wright, Alice Walker, John Wideman, and the commentary of John A. Williams, does so much more for my understanding of their works. I think one of the most valuable things about Interviews is that O'Brien deals both with established writers, Bontemps, Williams, Ellison, Hayden, and with younger writers who are excellent, Reed, Walker, Petry, Wright, but who for one reason or another, have been ignored. He names names and he so thoroughly discusses works that I want to go out and buy some books, despite the current recession. This is the kind of stimulation that Interviews generates.

Let me "back track" for a moment to stress something I brushed over lightly earlier in my comments. Almost invariably O'Brien will ask the authors about direct or indirect influences on their writing. The overwhelming majority indicated that a major influence has been Black music—jazz and blues. (One poet, Michael Harper, has a beautiful volume entitled Dear John, Dear Coltrane for the late jazz musician, John Coltrane.) Several of the fiction writers paid homage to the Russians—Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Turgenev, Pushkin—and to the Greeks. Many said they read a variety of material from histories to physics. Some, like Reed, said that the popular media is an
influence. Many of the contemporary poets, and the fiction writers too, said they read Langston Hughes—and Jean Toomer's Cane. Others said they read T. S. Eliot, e.e. cummings, William Carlos Williams, James Joyce, Camus, Nietzsche, Hobbs, B.F. Skinner, and others. My point is that O'Brien very carefully illustrates that the contemporary Black writer has no thematic or ideological restrictions. The influences that help shape a given author's artistic response to the culture are diverse. O'Brien demonstrates, in part, through the question of "influence" that Black writers cannot be "boxed" in; their scope cannot be limited. We need to recognize that we shall have to evaluate each artist as he/she presents the fictive world through his/her own artistic vision. If John O'Brien's Interview with Black Writers did nothing other than make this point, it would still be an excellent book and a must for those people "into" studying the Black writer.

SANDRA Y. GOVAN

USE AND ABUSE OF HISTORY.


THIS SLENDER VOLUME bears a master's touch. It is unique in that it provides both a clear introduction into the purpose of history in our time for the layman as well as a reflective view of the discipline for historians themselves. Considering general aspects of history as an historian rather than a philosopher, Pieter Geyl offers a strong, humanistic statement regarding the validity of history today. He is well equipped to make that statement. The author of outstanding studies of Netherlands history, he is probably best known in this country for his Napoleon: For and Against and his Conversations with Historians.

Anyone who turns to this volume hoping to find a concise essay on historiography will be disappointed. Neither will one find here the thoughts of a man who was in conflict with his profession nor one who, like David H. Fischer in his Fallacies of History, mixes nit-picking with well reasoned argument. What the book does contain is an instructive appraisal of the purpose of history by one who considers himself "fairly representative of the modern student of history." The main thrust of the book describes how this purpose, consequently how history itself, has been "abused" and how it should be pursued.

Though the abuses of history stretch back as far as our knowledge of the recorded past allows us to go, they have remained virtually terra incognita for the general reader. Geyl performs a worthwhile service for the educated reading public by explaining the nature of these abuses. Sometimes, he observes, history, which should explain change and movement, has been used as a means to prevent change and movement. At other times it has been subversive to either violent partisanship or naive pragmatism. His treatment of the misuse of history in the nineteenth century is particularly revealing. De Maistre, Ranke, Hegel, Carlyle, Michelet, Macaulay, Marx, Buckle, Taine, and Nietzsche all are brought under Geyl's critical focus. Although the ensuing critique is gentle, it is altogether professional. The dangers involved when historians write as though they perceive God's plan, or when they attempt to impose their own will upon history, are firmly underscored. Similarly, Geyl opposes history as written by system builders, Romantic artists, advocates of an old-fashioned type of triumphant progress, and devotees of applying the language and spirit of science to the task.

In discussing the use of history, Geyl displays a sense of sharp discernment. He premises his thought on this subject on the idea that, although history has served many masters and sometimes has degenerated into mythmaking, it can fulfill many legitimate purposes. But the historian who hopes to contribute to the process must be schooled in rigorous criticism, a "fearless criticism" that leads to independent scholarship. "It is a good thing for society," Geyl reflects, "that there should be a group of men trained in that discipline by which the dangerous mists of fine phrases hallowed by convention can be dispelled." (p. 72) He claims, and rightly so, that "the discipline of history, the historical spirit, is a force for truth and against myth, and that . . . it will exercise a restraining influence, an influence making for sanity." (pp. 80-81) Such history has a wide range of applications, not the least of which is the way it lends itself to checking enthusiastic, abstract, and mythical explorations of the past.

Use and Abuse of History is a splendid volume. Some readers, however, will find it quarrelsome. Systematists of all varieties, men who would make history the handmaiden of revolution and those who would search for God in history, no doubt will be among Geyl's critics. Nevertheless, the volume argues well the position of the traditionalist historian and in the process shows that the position has a continuing relevance. Why? Because, as Geyl assumes, history properly pursued has an educative value and can do honorable things for society.

The reprinting of this little book is eminently worthwhile, for the ideas it contains are as important today as they were when the book was first published in 1955. More to the point, Geyl's message is reassuring and unpretentious; his voice is one raised in defense of intellectualism at a time when anti-intellectualism is all too prevalent. Read and ponder this volume; it deserves the attention of all those who believe that "free and untrammeled argument" lies at the core of Western Civilization.

JAMES D. STARTT

The Cresset
RIDE THE EAST WIND.


This collection of "parables, anecdotes, fables, allegories" will be a disappointment to you if you expect to find the old Aesop you knew and loved. Berkeley feels no compunctions about adding to or altering the old familiar fables of Aesop and others to make his own "up-to-date" point. Indeed, some are so rewritten (the tale of "The Fox and the Grapes" now has the fox trading fertilizer for his grapes!) that the original author is not even cited—and a good thing he's not. Aesop's lessons are nowhere near as naive as Berkeley's versions, for where Aesop uses a fable to say something important about the nature of man, Berkeley too often uses it only to present a moral about why one should or should not do one thing or another. Properly constructed fables, allegories, or even parables make use of symbol and a stylized and pared down economy of language to convey truths of a broad, even a universal sort. These items frequently fall short on the tests of effective symbol, economy, and, worst of all, breadth. And when Berkeley has President Maxon hushing up the truth about his re-election committee for the sake of national security, the item doesn't even qualify as a decent anecdote, even though I agree with his point. There is no point to changing the names so thinly: a good anecdote either tells the story straight, or the names and situations are sufficiently changed so as to make the story unidentifiable with specific incidents and thus have a more generalized appeal.

After each tale, Berkeley appends a few lines of "noteworthy things said" in the item itself, quotations from other men on the subject of the item, or analysis. These "bouquets" are distinguished from each other by hokey but harmless flower devices.

Should you find this book somewhere, you'll probably enjoy skimming through it—provided you aren't offended by the corruptions of some of your old favorite tales; you may even pick up a good thought. But for $6.95, buy something else.

W. RIEDEL

INTO THE WILDERNESS


The subtitle of this book is "Dialogue Meditations on the Temptations of Jesus"—which is an accurate description of the contents. Originally, the meditations were delivered as dialogue sermons which, the Preface suggests, may, by various stage devices, be transformed into chancel dramas.

Each of the seven meditations (the right number for mid-week services during Lent!) has two foci: (a) a moral struggle between Satan and our Lord and (b) a corresponding struggle between Satan and a modern man whose daughter is incurably ill and finally dies. Appended to the meditations are litanies based on the dialogues.

The texts of the dialogues show considerable insight into the complex and subtle character known as Satan and should be helpful to anyone attempting to understand himself and his own moral conflicts. Our Lord is not portrayed as a superman for whom it was no problem to be holy, but as one who felt the terrific pull of the various temptations to which he was subjected. The Contemporary Man is depicted as a vulnerable figure who learns to rely on the One who went through similar struggles before him.

The book should be of value to pastors and their helpers in preparation for Lent.

HERBERT LINDEMANN

"An Elective Monarchy..."

(from page 28)

also go through a process of reducing the power of the President and increasing that of the Congress is an interesting matter for speculation. The fact that Mr. Ford was not elected by the whole nation, and that Mr. Rockefeller, the vice-president, also has not been elected by the nation as a whole, might suggest a change in the character of the executive branch. Using the monarchical analogy, Mr. Ford and Mr. Rockefeller are more of hereditary than elective monarchs. Once a precedent is set, its later enlargement is always a possibility.

On the other hand, the composition of the new Congress opens the possibility for a change in the constitution, not necessarily through legislative change per se but in actual fact, through the exercise of power. Again, the events of the past summer, in which impeachment came near to completion, constitute a precedent which subsequent developments may enlarge.

In spite of the short-lived attempts of George III to recover some of the powers taken from British monarchs by Parliament in 1660 and 1688-1689, the powers of these monarchs continued to shrink in the face of those of the elected portion of Parliament. History, of course, is no compeller in itself; repetitions in history are usually similar reaction to similar situations that develop in one or another aspect of human affairs. But the fact that U.S. Presidents have to live up to powers and responsibilities which belonged to British monarchs in the seventeenth century, and which have since fallen into disuse or been taken away, makes their position very hazardous (in either a passive or an active sense). The present ambiguity of the standings of President and Congress in relation to one another might be said to have produced an ambiguity of both also in relation to the constitution. Even if the constitution is not changed in word, future events may in fact change its operation.

February, 1975

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LET ME SAY FIRST THAT American affairs are not strange or remote to Canadians. About half of all our news broadcasts are concerned either with what is happening in the United States or with our relationships with that country.

Our radio and television networks carried the impeachment hearings, Nixon’s resignation speech, President Ford’s speeches after his accession, as well as numerous interviews and commentaries relating to them. We had a ringside seat on the drama of confidence and conscience associated with “Watergate,” and on the varying moods of hope and doubt associated with the accession of the new President.

One of the things that struck many Canadians, I think, was the very depth of feeling that was involved in the whole drama. The feelings associated with the examination of the behavior of a President, and eventually with his resignation, were very much akin to those experienced at the changing of a monarch. They were certainly very much more intense than any feelings that come to us on the changing of a Prime Minister.

Our head of government, the Prime Minister, is not head of state. Had our Prime Minister engaged in activities such as were charged against Mr. Nixon (leaving aside the question of whether the Canadian political organization would have made such activities relevant), either (1) he may never have been found out; or (2) having been discovered, he might have bulldozed his way through Parliament. Such a course could almost certainly have led to his defeat in the next general election; or (3) if his behavior had been sufficiently repugnant to the majority in Parliament (and this would have to include his own party), he would have been defeated in Parliament and forced to resign in about three days. If either (2) or (3) had occurred, however, there would not have been any great sorrow involved, as there appeared to be in the United States over the Watergate affair.

The depth of sorrow and crisis of conscience and confidence, and the subsequent blooming of great emotional hopes around President Ford, appear to me to be tied up with the fact that the great Republic is in matter of fact a limited monarchy, where its people elect a king for four years, and call him “President.” The President of the United States, while head of government, is also the focus of ceremonial and veneration associated with a monarch, even though allegiance is not pledged to him but to the constitution.

The President of the United States carried powers and initiatives in the late twentieth century such as English kings held in the early seventeenth. This comparison came to my attention some years ago during a seminar course on the Stuart kings. James I, 1603-1625, almost duplicated the powers of a contemporary President of the United States. He was commander-in-chief of the armed forces. His ministers (cabinet) were from outside the elected portion of Parliament, and to be heard had to have special conferences there. Envoys went between House of Commons and House of Lords to discuss bills, as between House of Representatives and Senate. Further, envoys went between either or both houses and the monarch, either at their initiative or at his.

The king appointed officials and ambassadors, but many had to be approved by Parliament. And, finally, King James, sure of his righteousness and ability, lectured Parliament that their demands impinged on his “prerogative,” that is, the rights of the executive branch.

James I’s son, Charles, continued conflicts with Parliament, reigned for several years without calling it into session, after recalling it saw several of his ministers impeached, sent soldiers to arrest his opponents in the Commons, aroused a civil war, and finally was tried and beheaded.

Now, it seems to me that the United States constitution, even though its terminology is different, puts the power relationship of the executive and elected representatives (President and Congress, corresponding to King and House of Commons) in very much the same situation as England was in the seventeenth century. The fact is masked somewhat by the difference in terminology. Also the U.S. monarch is elected for a term of years, rather than inherited. But by the time of James, the English monarch was no longer absolute (though James, as one of the theorists of “divine right,” sought to strengthen the monarch’s position). Later conflicts were further to reduce the power of the British monarch, until the current incumbent has only a few reserve powers, seldom brought into play, and fulfills a more ornamental function.

Whether the United States may

(Concluded on page 27.)

The Cresset