Beauty and Justice
Nicholas Wolterstorff

Beauty and Truth
Christine Chaney

Experiencing Beauty in the Music of the Holocaust
Benita Wolters-Fredlund

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Tying the Spirit's Wings

I have read the article by Paul Gregory Alms entitled “Where is Jesus?” (Advent/Christmas 2008) and would like to comment. When I was about sixteen, I recognized that, though I loved being in church, loved every aspect of corporate worship, I was empty inside. This is similar to what Rev. Alms found, except in reverse order. Because I knew I didn’t know God, I went on to look for Jesus in every way I could. It was one reason I transferred to Valpo—to find God. I heard from Him at Valpo. In the dorm room. By myself. For three days I walked on air, a promise of wonderful things to come.

I want to say that John 3:6-8 is not a comment on corporate worship. We do not stop with celebrating in church; we begin there. We do what every faithful individual, from Nicodemus to Paul to Martin Luther, had to do. We seek Jesus individually until He finds us.

I hope that Rev. Alms will not be content with the “shared experience of church,” and that he doesn't so restrict his flock, since I know that if the people he’s sharing with in church haven’t made contact with Jesus individually, the corporate experience is restricted, the Holy Spirit must do what He can with His wings tied behind His back.

Anita Born
Westford, New York

Paul Gregory Alms replies:

Thank you for the thoughtful response to my essay. As I reflect on your comments, I am struck by two things. First is the joy you obviously find in your relationship with Jesus. How wonderful that is! There are many variations to our personal relationships with Jesus our Savior. Yours and mine intersect and diverge in several ways, as you pointed out. The joy you find in an intensely personal, individual experience, I find in sharing a common liturgical service with fellow Christians. The two are equally personal and individual. It is not the case that my joy is not somehow real or meaningful for being corporate. I experience the liturgy as an individual. It is meaningful to me and emotional, yet it happens in a group setting. That setting enriches the inner benefit, the joy, I derive from it. I find my own inner satisfaction precisely in that corporate setting.

The second thing that occurs to me is that we ought to be careful when we speak of finding God. God promises to give himself in certain ways, according to the Scriptures, in Word, proclamation, and sacraments. In these divine avenues, we can be sure we are in contact with the Holy Spirit. Of course, God can do whatever he wishes and reveal himself in whatever way he wishes. He is God, after all. But we find certainty and an anchor for our faith in seeking him in the places where he himself has promised to be (Word, baptism, supper). It is these promises that have come to mean so much to me. The objectivity and strength in reaching outside of my own weak frail psyche to something that is solid and beyond my own doing is a joy that, paradoxically, I feel deep inside myself. That these promises are fulfilled and experienced in a group setting, in a community of people just as weak and fallen as myself, is a blessing. One aspect of the church which is part and parcel of the Gospel, I believe, is the community, the communion, we share in Christ. God has created us to be sharers of ourselves with others, and in the church that design of God, lost in sin, begins to be restored.
What's Justice Got to Do with Beauty?

What makes something beautiful? Everyone has their own favorite objects or places of beauty. I see beauty in the softness of sunlight as it flows through the morning mist and reflects over the still waters of a lake. And I hear beauty when I listen to the counterpoint of interwoven melodies in a J. S. Bach cantata.

I can't explain why I find either of these things to be beautiful, but there is no question that I do. It seems to me that the beauty of a sunrise must come from its natural purity and intensity. And a fugue is beautiful because of its balance and symmetry. But if they are beautiful for such different reasons, does it make sense to use the same word to describe both experiences? Do they share something real, some single natural characteristic that makes them beautiful? We have been asking these kinds of questions for centuries. In Western civilization, they go back all the way to the pre-Socratics—at least to Pythagoras who thought beauty was a reflection of proper mathematical proportion.

Some insist that beauty is entirely in the eye of the beholder—that there is no natural standard of beauty. In this line of thinking, the experience of beauty is completely subjective, probably no more than a bio-chemical response deep within our brains to various external stimuli. But this sort of thinking fails to explain how most of us experience beauty. For example, there are certain experiences—flavors, aromas, pictures, etc—that I like and enjoy, but that aren't appealing to my family and friends. This difference of opinion doesn't bother me. To each their own. On the other hand, when I think something is truly beautiful, I expect others will think so too. If they don't, I might even take offense. When we perceive an object as beautiful, we feel a sort of obligation to it and expect others to as well. Unlike other kinds of pleasurable experiences, beauty draws us toward something outside of ourselves. When we see a beautiful natural vista, we feel obliged to preserve it from development. When we see the beauty in a child's face, we are filled with compassion and love and want to protect that child from any harm.

And that raises the question, "Beauty. What's Justice Got to Do with It?" This question was the theme of the eighteenth annual national conference of the Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts, held at Seattle Pacific University in Seattle, Washington, on 10–12 October 2008, and the essays in this issue were originally presented as lectures to plenary sessions of that conference. We are able to bring these issues as well as this issue of The Cresset to you through the generous support of the Lilly Fellows Program. In "Beauty and Justice," philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff considers whether a refined sense of beauty contributes to a heightened concern for social justice, and he recognizes that—in many cases—it does not. In her essay "Beauty and Truth," Christine Chaney presents beauty in works of art as a form of truth-telling that goes beyond what can be communicated through the written word. Finally, Benita Wolters-Fredlund, in "Experiencing Beauty in the Music of the Holocaust" shows that it is possible to find beauty even in the midst of one of the greatest injustices ever perpetrated.

Together, these essays help us recognize that our experiences of beauty are more than moments of isolated, selfish pleasure. Beauty serves as a reminder of something that is noble and deserves to be remembered, as a means of communicating a kind of truth for which words are inadequate, and as an expression of human dignity in the direst of circumstances. We cannot help but perceive the beauty permeating the world that God has created, but we must ask ourselves if we will always respond to that beauty with the justice that it demands.

-JPO
The Arlin G. Meyer Prize is awarded biennially to a fulltime faculty member from a college or university in the Lilly Fellows Program National Network whose work exemplifies the practice of the Christian artistic or scholarly vocation in relation to any pertinent subject matter or literary and artistic style. The 2008 Prize has been awarded to the director of a creative work that emerges from his or her practice of the vocation of the Christian performing artist, in accord with the principles and ideals of the Lilly Fellows Program. In subsequent years, the Meyer Prize will honor those who practice in the fields of non-fiction, creative fiction, the visual arts, and music. The $3000 prize honors Arlin G. Meyer, Professor Emeritus of English at Valparaiso University, who served as program director of the Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts from its inception in 1991 until his retirement in 2002.

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**Rogue**
*Erik Ehn*

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*Westmont College*

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*Stephanie Sandberg*

Stephanie Sandberg, Director
*Associate Professor of Theater*
*Calvin College*

**Life is a Dream**
*Pedro Calderón de la Barca y Henao*

Fr. George Drance, SJ, Director
*Artist in Residence*
*Fordham University*
IN HER BOOK ON BEAUTY AND BEING JUST (PRINCETON 1999), Elaine Scarry notes that there has been a widespread banishing of beauty from the humanities in recent decades, and that this “has been carried out by a set of political complaints against” beauty (57). In Part Two of the book, she responds to these complaints. “Beauty,” she says, “is at the very least innocent of the charges against it, and it may even be the case that far from damaging our capacity to attend to problems of injustice, it instead intensifies the pressure we feel to repair existing injuries” (57). As Scarry sees it,

[The political critique of beauty is composed of two distinct arguments. The first urges that beauty, by preoccupying our attention, distracts attention from wrong social arrangements. It makes us inattentive, and therefore eventually indifferent, to the project of bringing about arrangements that are just. The second argument holds that when we stare at something beautiful, make it an object of sustained regard, our act is destructive to the object. This argument is best understood as having two prongs: one prong pertaining to human beings and one to other things.]

About these two arguments, she makes the acute observation that whatever merit each has in and of itself, “they are unlikely both to be true since they fundamentally contradict one another. The first assumes that if our ‘gaze’ could just be coaxed over in one direction and made to latch onto a specific object (an injustice in need of remedy or repair), that object would benefit from our generous attention. The second assumes that generous attention is inconceivable, and that any object receiving sustained attention will somehow suffer from the act of human regard” (58–9).

Nicholas Wolterstorff

Scarry doesn’t say much about the second argument. Her attention is focused on the first; so mine will be as well. But before we get to that, let me say a word about the second argument.

I would state the argument rather differently from how Scarry states it. Her formulation of the argument is that when we stare at something beautiful, our act is destructive to the object. I think the argument is best understood as having two prongs: one prong pertaining to human beings and one to other things.

As it pertains to human beings, the argument is not, I think, that our gaze is destructive of the human being at whom the gaze is directed but that it wrongs him or her. And the examples that most powerfully make the point are not those in which our gaze is directed at someone beautiful—but no doubt we do sometimes wrong a beautiful person by staring at him or her—but those in which, often with the aid of a photographer, we subject a human being who is not beautiful to an aestheticizing gaze. The photographs by Diane Arbus, of human beings malformed in various ways, are an example of the point. I think a serious case can be made that these people have been wronged by the combination of Arbus photographing them and you and I now gazing with aesthetic intent at them in the photographs. Speaking for myself, I would strongly dislike being the subject of an Arbus photograph!

The other prong of the argument pertains to those cases in which the aestheticizing gaze finds beauty in trash—photographs taken from a half mile up of a city dump, photographs taken from close-up of peeling paint on a door in a ghetto. Not infrequently, photographs of dumps taken from a distance or of a rotted door from close up are things of beauty. No more than in the first case is the aestheticizing gaze destructive of the object, but neither, in this case, does it wrong the object. What merits
concern is rather that the aestheticizing gaze conceals from us the ugliness, conceals from us the fact that this dump is a besmirching of the earth by the human beings whose detritus this is, conceals from us the fact that the ghetto is a place of squalor. In short, I think that Scarry mis-formulates the second argument and thereby blunts its considerable force.

That said, however, I want to focus on her response to the first argument, which says that attention to beauty distracts us from wrong social arrangements. Her claim is that beauty, rather than distracting us from justice, “assists us in our attention to justice” (86).

Her defense of this claim is threefold:

She argues that there is a deep analogy between the nature of beauty and the nature of justice.

She argues that there is a deep similarity between our response to beauty and our response to justice.

She argues that there is an equivalence between the concern that there shall be beauty in the world and the commitment to justice.

These analogies, similarities, and equivalences have the consequence, so she says, that attention to beauty evokes in us attention to the need for justice.

Begin with the analogy between the nature of beauty and the nature of justice. Beauty, as Scarry understands it, is grounded in symmetry, or as she often calls it, equality. Justice, so she says, is likewise constituted of symmetry or equality. She regards the phrase, “a symmetry of everyone’s relation to one another” (95) as descriptive of both beauty and justice. In the course of discussing this analogy, Scarry claims the existence of two other analogies in the region. She insists that attention to one instance of beauty exerts on the beholder a pressure to treat other instances of beauty with equal regard, equal treatment being a feature of justice. Beautiful things, she says, “give rise to the notion of distribution” (95). And she holds that what she calls “the generous availability to sensory perception” of beauty (110) has an analogy in the equal distribution that constitutes justice. Putting these three analogies together, Scarry says that the “pressure” of beauty toward justice “comes from the object’s symmetry, from the corrective pressure it exerts against lateral disregard, and from its own generous availability to sensory perception” (110).

As to the similarity between our response to beauty and our response to justice, Scarry remarks that “at the moment we see something beautiful, we undergo a radical decentering” (111). “All the space formerly in the service of protecting, guarding, advancing the self (or its ‘prestige’) is now free to be in the service of something else” (113). Scarry doesn’t actually complete the argument by claiming that attention to justice and injustice is likewise decentering, but clearly that is what she has in mind.

And as to the equivalence between the concern that there shall be beauty in the world and the commitment to justice, Scarry observes, first, that the former concern is manifested both when one “acts to protect or perpetuate a fragment of beauty already in the world” and when one acts “instead to supplement it by bringing into being a new object” (114). And she then observes that these “two distinguishable forms of creating beauty—perpetuating beauty that already exists; originating beauty that does not yet exist—have equivalence within the realm of justice, as one can hear in John Rawls’s formulation of what, since the time of Socrates, has been known as the ‘duty to justice’ argument: we have a duty, says Rawls, ‘to support’ just arrangements where they already exist and to help bring them into being where they are ‘not yet established’” (115). (Scarry takes note of a second “feature shared by the kind of creation we undertake on behalf of beauty and the kind of creation we undertake on behalf of justice” (115). This second feature is somewhat more complex than the first; explaining it would not contribute significantly to the reader’s understanding of Scarry’s line of thought.)

So what shall we say about these lines of argument for the conclusion that “beauty, far from contributing to social injustice... or even remaining neutral to injustice as an innocent bystander, actually assists us in the work of addressing injustice” (62)? Let me first observe that what we have here is yet one more re-statement of classic Romantic claims concerning the power of art. With
due allowance for the fact that Romanticism is by no means a sharply defined category of classification, it can fairly be said that the Romantics were the first to sense that, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, there had emerged in Europe a quite new form of society and culture, call it modernity, and that they were also the first to claim that the essence of what was new was that modernity fractured old unities, this fracturing being driven mainly by the relentless and pervasive application of rationality. In his long poem Lamia, John Keats said of the new natural science that it "unweaves the rainbow." The Romantics believed that modernity blances, attending to beauty does not have the inherent power of energizing the beholder to struggle for justice. Beauty does not have the inherent salvific power that Scarry and her Romantic predecessors claim for it. We have all known people who were intensely attentive to beauty but cared not a fig for justice; we have all heard about horrible people who live in large elegant houses and work in elegant offices. Historians tell us that a good many of the Germans who supervised the concentration camps during the day attended concerts in the evening and expanded their art collections with paintings plundered from the occupied countries. And let us not forget that many of the artifacts whose beauty now mesmerizes us were created on the backs of indentured labor. Scarry nowhere takes note of this obvious objection to her thesis, that attending to beauty has the inherent salvific power of energizing us to pursue justice. I have no idea why she does not take note of it.

Just now, I used the phrase "inherent salvific power" a couple of times. The claims made by Scarry and her Romantic predecessors concerning the salvific power of attending to beauty and art are claims concerning its inherent power. It is those claims that I contest on the ground that they are patently false. Not for a moment do I deny that now and then, here and there, attention to art and beauty does energize us to seek justice. But to understand why this is, we have to get down into the trenches. We have to uncover what it is about particular works and particular types of works that gives them this potential and what it is about particular viewers and particular types of viewers that actualizes this potential. We will discover nothing if we remain at the ethereal level of discussing what is inherently the case.

Art and the Memory of Injustices

Let me now get down into those trenches for a while. Let me call attention to two roles art plays that

Attending to beauty does not have the inherent power of energizing the beholder to struggle for justice. Beauty does not have the inherent salvific power that Scarry and her Romantic predecessors claim for it.
sometimes energize the struggle for justice. And let me now re-configure the discussion, so that henceforth it is primarily about art and justice rather than about beauty and justice. My description of each of these roles will be brief—only enough for you to get the idea. Each could be elaborated in an essay, indeed, in a book.

No doubt some people struggle for justice out of a sense of duty; perhaps all of us do some of the time. And some people struggle for justice because this is what good and virtuous people do. But if my own experience is any indication, in most people these motivations tend to be weak unless undergirded and reinforced by a quite different motivator, namely, compassion. The Samaritan was moved by compassion when he saw the mugged man lying at the side of the road; that’s what led him to come to his aid.

And what evokes compassion? Perhaps compassion is evoked in some people by calm and dispassionate newspaper reports of someone’s plight. Possibly this is true for most of us some of the time. But once again, if my own experience is any indication, what mainly evokes compassion for some person or group of persons is having that person in his predicament, or those persons in their predicament, brought vividly before one. This vivid presentation may take the form of their actually being present to one, so that one sees their faces and hears their voices. Alternatively, it may take the form of seeing vivid photographs or films of them. Or it may take the form of their being made vivid to one by imaginative literature.

By the early 1970s, I knew a good deal from newspaper reports about the plight under apartheid of the so-called blacks and coloreds in South Africa, but it was when I attended a conference in South Africa in 1976, and came face to face with blacks and coloreds, that I was moved by compassion to speak and work for their liberation. In the early 1970s, I also knew a good deal from newspaper reports about the plight of the Palestinians, but it was when I came face to face with Palestinians at a conference in 1978 that I was moved by compassion to speak and work for their liberation.

In these two cases, it was compassion evoked by face-to-face meetings that energized me to work for justice. But the point I want to make here is that visual representations and imaginative literature also sometimes evoke compassion in us for those who are wronged and thereby energize us to struggle for justice.

Over the past several years I have made a point of asking people who teach nineteenth-century American literature whether they ever include Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* in their course. I have yet to meet anyone who did. The reason, I’m sure, is that *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* doesn’t measure up to our current aesthetic standards; it doesn’t have enough of the beauty that Scarry talks about. Yet the novel was, so I am told by historians, extraordinarily influential in the abolitionist movement. It is easy to see why: it made the plight of the slaves vivid to the reader. I read *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* on my own when I was a young teenager. To this day I remember how my heart bled for Uncle Tom and how angry I was at his tormenter, Simon Legree.

Let me move on to a second role that art plays whereby it sometimes energizes us to struggle for justice. “Remember Sharpeville” was a cry that echoed for decades in the South African liberation movement. Why so? “Sharpeville” was the name of a village in which the South African police mowed down a large number of blacks who were peacefully protesting against their oppression; the year, as I recall, was 1960. The reason the cry was kept alive is that fundamental to the success of a liberation movement is keeping alive outrage over the injustices being protested, and one way to do that, in turn, is to keep alive the memory of the most egregious examples of those injustices. I must add at once that cries to remember—cries such as “Remember the Battle of the Boyne,” “Remember the Alamo,” and “Remember Sharpeville”—can also serve to keep alive the memory of perceived injustice rather than real injustice, and to serve the cause of vengeance rather than the cause of justice.

To speak more generally: we human beings find it important to keep alive the memory of some person or event from the past—so as to honor that person or event, so as to keep outrage alive, and so forth. But we are forgetful. So we make things and do things as a memorial; we name the capital city “Washington” so as to honor and keep alive the memory of George Washington; we commission a Lincoln Memorial so as to honor and keep alive
the memory of Abraham Lincoln; we paint nativity scenes so as to honor and keep alive the memory of the birth of Jesus, and so forth, on and on. And as my examples indicate, art is caught up in this activity of making and doing as a memorial. Many of the things that are made or done as a memorial are works of art, and conversely, many works of art are made or done as a memorial. They are memorial art. It is a role of art that has been almost entirely neglected by the tradition of modern aesthetics, but just a bit of reflection will make clear that it is, in fact, one of the most important and pervasive of all the roles that art plays in our lives.

And now for the point: works of memorial art often serve to keep alive the memory of outrageous breaches of justice; often in doing so they energize the struggle against present and future injustice. A work that comes to mind immediately here is Picasso's famous painting, Guernica. Another that comes to my mind is the sequence of poems by the contemporary Irish poet, Micheal O'Siadhail, entitled The Gossamer Wall: Poems in Witness to the Holocaust.

_Destruction turns all their presence into absence unless some testimony breaks their infinite silence. In remembrance resides the secret of our redemption._ (112)

And here are just a few more lines:

_Neak millions of pairs of abandoned shoes Creased with mute presence of those whose Faces both stare and vanish.... Friedländer, Berenstein Menasche, Blum. Each someone's fondled face. A named few. Did they hold hands the moment they knew?_ (122)

Poetry about the Holocaust poses in extreme form the danger I discussed earlier, of aestheticizing the horror and thereby wronging the victims. O'Siadhail is acutely aware of the danger. To my mind, he succeeds admirably in overcoming it.

We could discuss other roles art plays that sometimes energize the struggle for justice and roles it plays that sometimes obstruct the struggle for justice. But enough has been said to make my point: attentiveness to art does not inherently energize the struggle for justice. It is rather particular roles art plays that sometimes, not always, energize the struggle for justice.

**The Intrinsic Value of Art**

Let me return to the topic of analogies, similarities, and equivalences—not now between beauty and justice, however, but between art and justice. I have argued that even if there is resemblance, the evidence is clear that attentiveness to art does not inherently enhance attentiveness to justice—and just as clear, let me add, that attentiveness to justice does not inherently enhance attentiveness to art. Nonetheless there is, in my view, a fundamental similarity between the two and taking note of it deepens our understanding. Let me begin with art and take up justice second.

In the spring of 2007, the distinguished American poet, Donald Hall, paid a visit to the University of Virginia. He read some of his own poetry to a large audience and conducted a small closed seminar about writing poetry, to which I was invited. In the seminar he often illustrated the point he was making by referring to changes he had made in some of his own poems between first draft and final version. I remember one of those changes. In an earlier draft of one of his poems, he had spoken of a dog wagging its tail; he changed that to the dog swinging its tail. A student asked why he made that change. He answered, "Because it made it a better poem." Those were his exact words.

Those words have the tone of a brush-off. But the remark came near the end of a two-hour session, and by then I had discerned enough of Hall's character to know with a surety that he was not giving the student a brush-off. He meant no more and no less than what he said. He changed the line because
the change made it a better poem. He didn't explain why the change made it a better poem, and no one asked.

Upon returning home from Hall's seminar, I looked up a passage I had known for some time that was written in 1785 by the German author, Karl Philipp Moritz. My previous response to the passage had been a blend of annoyance and bafflement. The passage goes like this:

In the contemplation of the beautiful object... I contemplate... something which is completed, not in me, but in its own self, which therefore constitutes a whole in itself, and affords me pleasure for its own sake.

While the beautiful draws our attention exclusively to itself... we seem to lose ourselves in the beautiful object; and precisely this loss, this forgetfulness of self, is the highest degree of pure and disinterested pleasure that beauty grants us. In that moment we sacrifice our individual being to a kind of higher being.... Beauty in a work of art is not pure... until I contemplate it as something that has been brought forth entirely for its own sake, in order that it should be something complete in itself. (Abram 1986)

What had annoyed me in this passage was the suggestion that works of art belong to a higher kind of being than human beings. I don't accept that. What had baffled me was Moritz's obliviousness to the fact that while declaiming that a work of art is brought forth entirely for its own sake, he was assuming that works of art exist for the pleasure to be experienced in contemplating them.

In the light of Hall's comment, the passage now looked quite different. I was still annoyed with the suggestion that works of art are of greater worth than human beings. I now think that in addition to such instrumental worth, often works of art also have intrinsic worth. Let me develop the point by approaching it, as Hall did, from the side of the artist who makes the art rather than from the side of the public who engages the art. And for no very good reason, let greater pleasure from the revision. He changed it because the change made it a better poem.

The reason I found Hall's remark so striking is that it awoke me from a dogmatic slumber. Let me explain. Every articulate theory of the modern or contemporary period concerning the worth of works of art with which I am acquainted is an instrumentalist theory: the worth of works of art resides in some effect they have on us when we attend to them. There are brief passages, such as that from Moritz, that point in another direction. But every developed, articulated theory that I know of is an instrumentalist theory. Works of art do not have intrinsic worth. Their worth lies in causing something that is of intrinsic worth. The "something" that is of intrinsic worth is an experience of a certain kind, coupled, perhaps, with certain effects of that experience. The deepest disagreements among modern theories of artistic worth are disagreements over the nature of that experience.

The emotivist tradition, represented preeminently by Tolstoy and Collingwood, insists that the intrinsically valuable experience which imparts worth to works of art is an emotion of a certain sort, or perhaps a certain range of emotions. The alethic tradition (from the Greek for "truth," "aletheia"), of which Hegel, Heidegger, Adorno, and Marcusse are prominent representatives, insists that the fundamental worth of works of art is located in their giving us knowledge of certain sorts. And the aesthetic tradition, represented by many writers, Kant and Monroe Beardsley prominent among them, holds that the worth-imparting experience is what has come to be called the aesthetic experience. These three traditions do not cover all the positions that have been set forth, but they are, I would say, the main traditions.

I now think they are all mistaken. Of course it is true that works of art often have instrumental worth. Just a few minutes ago, I was arguing that works of art sometimes energize the struggle for justice, but I now think that in addition to such instrumental worth, often works of art also have intrinsic worth.

Let me develop the point by approaching it, as Hall did, from the side of the artist who makes the art rather than from the side of the public who engages the art. And for no very good reason, let
me formulate what I have to say in terms of music rather than poetry. The application to the other arts of the points that I make will be obvious.

I am not a composer. When it comes to making art, I have done no more than dabble a bit in architecture. So I stand to be corrected in what I say by those who are composers, but it appears to me that at the heart of the activity of composing are three constituent activities: imagining sound patterns, evaluating the sound patterns imagined, and choosing from among the sound patterns imagined on the basis of those evaluations. Works of music, so I suggest, are traces of imagining, evaluating, and choosing. Or to use a different metaphor: works of music are imagination, evaluation, and choice embedded in sound.

Let me say just a word about the imagination that goes into musical composition. This is not wild and unfettered imagination; it is not whatever some wandering muse happens to whisper in the composer’s ear. It is both schooled and guided. In calling it schooled I mean that the composer’s imagining of sound-patterns is shaped by the sound-patterns he has previously heard, including especially the sound-patterns of works of music he has heard. Bach did not imagine sound-patterns like those in Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring but discard them on the grounds that he was waiting for something better to come to mind. He never imagined such sound-patterns—or it is extremely unlikely that he did. In calling it guided I mean that the composer usually will not just sit down to compose music but will have requirements or parameters that he wants to satisfy. He wants to compose a piano sonata, he wants to compose a song to fit the words of some poem that moves him, and so forth. And in good measure, his imagination will follow this guidance. I find it both wonderful and mysterious that our human imagination can be guided in this way.

Let’s move on to evaluation and choice. Suppose the composer has resolved to write a piano sonata—that’s one of the principal requirements or parameters he has set for himself. Naturally, he also wants it to be playable, so he will keep in mind the powers and limitations of the modern piano and the abilities of skilled performers. And he hopes that it will get performed, and that when it is performed, there will be an audience that finds it rewarding to listen to. But here is my question: does the composer make his evaluations and choices by reference to what he expects will give greater satisfaction to anticipated audiences? Does he say to himself that passage A is likely to give greater satisfaction to audiences than passage B, so I’ll go with A?

I feel sure that he does very little of this—those of you who are composers will have to tell me if I am wrong—if for no other reason than that the pleasure of audiences is so fickle and unpredictable. I suggest that, for the most part, he evaluates and chooses as he does because he wants to compose a good sonata. He chooses this sound-pattern over that one because he thinks it makes for a better sonata. Sometimes he may be able to identify what it is about this sound-pattern that makes it better than that one, and often he will not be able to do so. He senses that it is better but isn’t able to say why.

And now for the conclusion of the argument: when the composer evaluates sound-pattern A as making for a better sonata than sound-pattern B, and accordingly chooses A over B as part of his finished sonata, he is making a judgment of non-instrumental intrinsic worth. He is not making his evaluation and choice by reference to which of the two options will bring about more aesthetic pleasure. He’s not making it by reference to anything at all that he expects it to bring about.

From this it follows that works of art have intrinsic worth. I’m not happy with calling that intrinsic worth beauty. The traditional understanding of beauty connects beauty with pleasure. In Aquinas’s classic formulation, beauty is that which gives pleasure upon being perceived. The intrinsic
worth of works of art has nothing directly to do with pleasure, but if some want to call it beauty, I won't object.

One last point here. If what I have said about works of music having intrinsic non-instrumental worth is correct, then the next question to ask is, how should we think of the relation between the worth of works of music and the activity of attentively listening to those works? If we reject the instrumentalist view of artistic worth, which holds, in the aesthetic version, that it is the worth of the pleasurable experience of attentive listening that gives worth to the work, then how should we think instead?

If the work of music itself has intrinsic worth, then the core value of attentive listening to the work does not consist in the satisfaction one experiences in such listening; it consists in the worth of becoming perceptually aware of something of intrinsic worth and of perceptually recognizing that in it which is of intrinsic worth. The worth of the activity of attentive listening is derived from the worth of the work. Of course, we are not innately capable of perceptually recognizing the intrinsic worth of works of art; we have to acquire what the eighteenth-century writers called "taste."

**Justice and the Intrinsic Worth of Human Beings**

Now for the other member of the similarity-pair, justice. On this occasion, my presentation of what I understand justice to be will have to be dogmatic, I won't be able to defend my understanding. I do defend it at length in my recently published book, *Justice: Rights and Wrongs* (Princeton 2008).

I hold that justice is constituted of enjoying rights; a society is just insofar as its members enjoy what they have a right to. And I hold that rights, in turn, are normative social relationships; sociality is built into the essence of rights. A right is always a right with respect to someone. For the most part, those normative bonds of oneself to the other are not generated by any exercise of will on one's part. The bond is there already, antecedent to one's will, binding oneself and the other together. The other comes into my presence already standing in this normative bond to me.

Of course there are other sorts of normative bonds than rights. So what sort of normative bond is a right? Well, for the other to have to me the normative bond of a right is for her to have a legitimate claim on me as to how I treat her—a legitimate claim to my doing certain things to her and a legitimate claim to my refraining from doing other things. If I fail to do the former things, I violate the bond; if I do not refrain from doing the latter things, I likewise violate the bond. I do not break the normative bond; that still holds. She continues to have that legitimate claim on me as to how I treat her. I violate the bond.

The legitimate claim of the other on me as to how I treat her is a legitimate claim to the good of my treating her a certain way—this good of my treating her a certain way being, of course, a good in her life, a life-good, something that enhances her well-being. If a student writes a first-rate paper in a course that I am teaching, she has a right to the good of my giving her an A—that being a good in her life, a life-good, something that enhances her well-being. A common saying in present-day political liberalism is that “the right has priority over the good.” In the order of concepts it is the other way around: the good has priority over the right. A right is a legitimate claim to the life-good of being treated a certain way.

The converse does not hold: there are many ways of being treated by others that would be goods in one's life but to which one does not have a right. I think it would be a great good in my life if someone would offer me one of the classic Frank Lloyd Wright houses for my living quarters. Sad to say, I don't have a right to that good.

What accounts for the fact that someone has a right to the good of my treating her a certain way, rather than it just being a good thing for me to do? That's the big question that any theory of rights has to address. My own view is that what accounts for it is her worth, her dignity. Specifically, the rights of the other against me are actions and restraints from action on my part that due respect for her worth requires of me. To fail to treat her as she has a right to my treating her is to demean her, to treat her with disrespect, to treat her as if she had less worth than she does. To spy on her for prurient reasons, for example, or to insult her, to torture her, to bad-mouth her, to do any of these things to her is to treat her in a way that does not befit her worth.

And to treat her in a way that does not befit her worth is to wrong her. If I fail to treat her in the way that she has a right to my treating her, she is
wronged. My moral condition is that of being guilty; her moral condition is that of being wronged. Just as guilt is the dark side of duty, so being wronged is the dark side of rights.

I'm sure you now see where this is going, so I can be brief. I don't accept most of the analogies that Scarry professes to see between beauty and justice. For example, symmetry is not necessary and sufficient for beauty, nor is justice to be identified with equality or symmetry. But on this occasion I don't have time to argue these points. Let me instead simply observe that works of art have intrinsic worth and that human beings have intrinsic worth. When we engage in engrossed contemplation of some worthwhile work of art, we dwell on something of intrinsic worth and on that in it which is of intrinsic worth. When we treat some human being justly, treat her as she has a right to be treated, we treat her in a way that befits her worth. Engaging in the engrossed contemplation of some work of art and treating some human being justly are two modes of acknowledging worth, two modes of acknowledging excellence. By virtue of being two modes of acknowledging the worth of something other than oneself, both are inherently decentering. On this point, Scarry was correct.

I can now re-phrase one of the points made earlier, a sad feature of our human condition is that a person can be deeply committed to one of these two ways of acknowledging worth and indifferent to the other way.

Allow me to make one final point, this time not about the relation of art to justice but about the relation of beauty, or aesthetic excellence, to justice. It is easy for those involved in service organizations to fall into the trap of thinking that to be a human being is to be a food-eater, a clothes-wearer, and a house-dweller. After all, more often than not the people one is dealing with are people who don't have enough to eat, people who don't have adequate clothes, and people whose housing is squalid or non-existent. Food, clothing, and housing are urgent. Justice requires that we give them priority.

But when one stands back to reflect, it is clear that to be human is more, much more, than this. To be human is to be a creature who is treated with disrespect if he or she is deprived of education. To be human is to be a creature who is treated with disrespect if he or she is not allowed, to a considerable extent, to set her own course of life rather than having someone else set it for her. And to be human, so I suggest, is to be a creature who is treated with disrespect if he or she is forced to live in aesthetic squalor. When social arrangements force some of our fellow human beings to live in poverty, they are wronged, treated unjustly. It is just as true that when social arrangements force some of our fellow human beings to live in aesthetic squalor, they are wronged, treated unjustly. Living in aesthetic decency is not an optional luxury but a moral right. Justice requires it.

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Bibliography
Beauty and Truth

One of the greatest Nobel Prize acceptance speeches ever given was made by Alexander Solzhenitsyn in 1972. In that speech Solzhenitsyn reflected on a comment made by Fyodor Dostoevsky.

Dostoevsky once let drop an enigmatic remark: “Beauty will save the world.” What is this? For a long time it seemed to me simply a phrase. How could this be possible? When in the bloodthirsty process of history did beauty ever save anyone, and from what? Granted, it ennobled, it elevated—but whom did it ever save?

There is, however, a particular feature in the very essence of beauty—a characteristic trait of art itself: the persuasiveness of a true work of art is completely irrefutable; it prevails even over a resisting heart.

A political speech, an aggressive piece of journalism, a program for the organization of society, a philosophical system, can all be constructed—with apparent smoothness and harmony—on an error or a lie.... A true work of art carries its verification within itself: artificial and forced concepts do not survive their trial by images.... A true work of art carries its verification within itself: artificial and forced concepts do not survive their trial by images...

I'd like to take up this claim inherent in both Solzhenitsyn's and Dostoevsky's words—that “beauty can save the world.” In doing so, I want to set aside any worries that I might be arguing for the Romantic view of beauty that lands perhaps too completely in the ideal realm. Instead, I must take up the challenge of the “truth” problem or “alethic” argument (always so compelling to academics!)—that is, art “as a way of knowing.” Surely that is a question or problem that must be taken up more thoroughly in a talk entitled “Beauty and Truth.” And while I agree that we've got some very well-worn grooves here in the philosophical and epistemological frameworks we've erected around discussions of beauty and knowing—surely we aren't simply locked into rehearsing the same old eighteenth and nineteenth century arguments, either.

Rather, as a narrative theorist in literature—a philosopher of story and interpretation, if you will—I'd like to take up Solzhenitsyn's two statements that “the persuasiveness of a true work of art is completely irrefutable; it prevails even over a resisting heart”—and—“A true work of art carries its verification within itself.” In each of these claims, Solzhenitsyn takes as given the fact that art contains within itself the constituent elements of its own dialogue—indeed its own argument (by the language of both “persuasiveness” and “verification”).

This is not a position unique to Solzhenitsyn but it does seem to be particularly compelling to Russian thinkers and believers—an idea I will investigate further in just a moment. For now, though, it is important to note that in this definition, beauty is not self-enclosed but always in relationship. Therefore, I want to offer my central claim that “beauty” is the term best used to characterize what it is that brings about “persuasiveness” and “verification”—indeed, that very notion of “truth-telling in a work of art.”

“Beauty,” in this formulation, is the term for the discursiveness outside of words that exists in any beautiful thing.

It wasn't only Jacques Derrida—although he famously gets the credit—who noticed, back in the old twentieth century, that the entire foundation of
western epistemology has been erected on the slippery foundation of human language. As far back as Edmund Saussure in the nineteenth, of course, the dangerous territory of linguistic instability had set off alarms. And nothing seems to be more problematic than trying to talk about truth in beauty with so wobbly a tool—words being so alarmingly multivalent. But we humans rely so heavily on language—indeed it is our species’s distinctive gift. And God himself spoke to us in “the Word made flesh,” of course. How then do we find our way out of these thickets?

LET ME MAKE AN ATTEMPT BY FIRST TELLING YOU about something beautiful I saw one day. The first time I visited London was in 1994 when I was a graduate student to give a paper at a conference. Of course, who could resist the lure of the British Museum and all that problematic imperialism and compulsive collectivity on display—especially for a scholar of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries?

As I walked around the very large room that reproduces the Parthenon Frieze (or “Elgin Marbles” in the Victorian terminology) at a height suitable for viewing, I was particularly struck by both the incredible beauty of the sculpted marble and the powerfully life-like figures that proceeded around the hall—but also by the compelling narrative that starts to emerge as you walk with all the people and animals in each marble section. A viewer has the mesmerizing sense of being part of the parade as the figures seem to move alongside you as you walk the hall.

Suddenly, one jarringly different scenario stopped me in my tracks—this hilarious scene of a recalcitrant bull and the two guys desperately trying to keep him in line. You can practically hear the animal bellowing. I paused in my walk along the procession and read that little white explanatory note below the figures. It says:

Figure 117 quickens his step and turns sharply. A youth leading the animal also turns while the beast itself raises its head to bellow. This slab is thought to have inspired Keats to write of “that heifer lowing at the skies in his Ode on a Grecian Urn.”

You could have just knocked me over with a feather at that moment.

Of course, every English major worth his or her salt knows that famous poem backwards and forwards. What hit me then was that I was standing literally on the exact same piece of flooring that had stopped Keats, too. The beauty—and humanity—of this ancient sculpture has “intrinsic worth,” as it were, that has lasted through the ages, but what interested me was that it was still speaking. The incredible—and even clichéd—fame of both these marbles and that Romantic poem did nothing to silence the conversation that we two were able to have that morning in September 1994. And I hasten to add that this claim does not foreground the Marbles’ “instrumental” worth in making me “experience” its beauty (or recall the poem), either. Rather, it was an encounter rooted only—and temporarily—in the short instance of space and time when that object and myself met and “mutually completed each other,” to quote another Russian philosopher.

But look again at that famous last stanza of Keats’s poem.

Who are these coming to the sacrifice?
To what green altar, O mysterious priest,
Lead’st thou that heifer lowing at the skies,
And all her silken flanks with garlands drest?
—John Keats
O Attic shape! fair attitude! with brede
Of marble men and maidens overwrought,
With forest branches and the trodden weed;
Thou, silent form! dost tease us out of thought
As doth eternity: Cold Pastoral!
When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty"—in disputed quotation marks, no less (since scholars aren't totally sure if Keats or his first printer put them in)—implying that someone is actually speaking these lines, correct? But who? The urn? The poem's speaker? And is that "all ye know on earth" and, even further, "all ye need to know"? And who exactly is this "ye"? We who stand and see? The reader of the poem? Anyone who comes close and listens? The longer you look the less clear that statement seems. The editors of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* go so far as to say in a footnote that the famous phrase is either "a profound metaphysical proposition, an overstatement representing the limited point of view of the urn, or simply nonsensical" (8th ed., 906).

In fact, I believe that this powerful yet ultimately mystifying moment in poetry-reading makes one thing clear—while beauty makes us notice our own attempts to understand it, it also evades the rational certainty, the "finalizing" of any kind of fixed reference in language. As we see, the poet's words here finally fail to capture the ultimate "meaning" of truth and beauty in a rational or epistemological way; they collapse into their own jumbled system of reference. Indeed, Keats, like me, was stopped right in his tracks, jolted by the marble's beauty into a moment both inside and outside of time and stunned with a sense of our shared humanity across the ages by the "discursiveness without words" of a humorous moment with a boy and a bull. But it is, in fact, the poetic lines before these that seem to me to be the actual point here. The comforting incarnate presence—and even love—of the beautiful thing itself will continue to be always in relationship outside of itself: "Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe/Than ours, a friend to man..."

So I want to turn back to my central claim that "beauty" is the term best used to describe that artistic "persuasiveness" and "verification"—indeed, that "truth-telling"—of the discursiveness outside of words that exists in any beautiful thing. As with the Hebrew notion of the God who is not named, the "not-said" of the holy word "YAHWEH" carries within it all the divine meaning of the One True God. It is not silence or absence—it is the "not-said" that is all-encompassing and divine PRESENCE.

What is central to my argument here, then, is a re-framing of "truth" into a much broader conception of "telling." Mikhail Bakhtin has written that the representative beauty of the arts is a shorthand means of artistic perception and cognition," one that "restores the ambivalent wholeness" of life (*The Dialogic Imagination* 201). What Bakhtin notices here, long before Jacques Derrida, is that a reliance on language alone gives a deceptively rational and linear view of things—and that's the whole trouble. Rather what we need is a better way to restore this ambivalent wholeness of life.

One way to restore wholeness is to see beauty as what Bakhtin calls a "transgressive"—an incarnate aspect of the relational interplay of being and knowing that reaches across the seemingly impossible separation between concrete things (such as marble sculptures and American graduate students) and enters into the very heart of our ability to know anything at all, least of all ourselves. As he writes in the 1919 fragmented text we know as *Art and Answerability*:

The more the moment of trust and the tones of faith and hope gain immediate actuality, the more certain aesthetic moments begin to penetrate into self-accounting. When the organizing role [in our narrating inner voice] passes from repentance to trust, an aesthetic form, a *concord*, becomes possible... in anticipation of beauty in God, tranquility, concord, and measure become possible... values that are shared in common by life and by art... are an aesthetic of *lived life*. (3, his emphasis)
This is “bio-graphical” architectonics—literally “life” in “writing”—as he calls it. As such, it is a relational philosophical system founded on the ever-shifting and never-finalized time/space interplay between the inner and outer discourses of each individual person in conversation with the narrating “others” both within and without our lives—including, of course, works of art. It is in precisely this way that beauty functions as that space/time “transgredient” that encodes its role as the boundary-bridging element of epistemological truth-telling outside of words.

A PARTICULAR EXAMPLE OF THIS IDEA AT WORK can be found in a short scene from the Academy-Award-winning 1999 film *American Beauty*, directed by Sam Mendes and written by Alan Ball. In this scene, the troubled teenaged boy next door shares his video image of “the most beautiful thing in the world”—a floating plastic bag on a windy day. “Beauty,” as the character tells us, is to him an emblem of all that lies unseen and unsaid and, in this case, taken for granted: “[I]t was then that I knew there was this incredibly benevolent force that told me not to be afraid.” In fact, this amazing scene of the slowly floating and dancing bag makes his “heart feel like bursting from so much beauty.” It also shows its audience the transcendent truth that the simplest beautiful thing is also capable of teaching a troubled soul that “an incredibly benevolent force” both existed and did not want him to be afraid.

I was first alerted to the hidden power of this scene—and its transcendent and even spiritual imagery—in a keynote address by Robert K. Johnston of Fuller Seminary at a recent conference held at Azusa Pacific University. Johnston has written several books about the power of contemporary art forms (such as film) for people of faith who may have only a limited understanding of the way unsettling truths can be, should be, and are used by God. This film’s overall argument is that beauty is what helps jolt us alive and what helps transform our sadness and brokenness into “so much gratitude for every single day of my stupid little life,” as the main character Lester Burnham (Kevin Spacey) says at the very end of the film. As such, then, we know we are in the presence of a kind of beautiful truth-telling that “embraces the ambivalent wholeness of life” when encountering a film such as this one.

As in Bakhtin’s formulation, the beauty here is also truth-telling because of the “responding and answering soul” there present in the same space/time moment—both the troubled teenaged boy and the young girl who comes to love and understand him through the eloquent silence of this powerful filmic moment. Once again, these images are examples of the way that art can communicate silence that is not absence as a “transgredient” that bridges the gaps in our ability to know some of the deepest, truest things. And the “not-said” here certainly seems to be grace and redemption—and possibly even the presence of God. Certainly “the incredibly benevolent force that told me not to be afraid” is both divine and mysterious for both characters and viewers. Even, in fact, marked and incarnated in each of the young character’s lives by both holding and a kiss—another emblem of the visible presence of unspoken things.

The language of truth-telling in long narrative forms such as film and the novel, then, “makes possible new things,” according to Bakhtin, through its capacity to grasp the many-sidedness and potential of both the fleeting moment and of the most commonplace individuals and events. Such a vision is able to capture phenomena in the process of change and transition, what he calls “their continuous, creative, renewing, changeability.” Life is both too full and too important to “permit seriousness alone to atrophy and break away from the unfinished wholeness of everyday existence.” Art works to restore this ambivalent wholeness—with all its unfinished, changing, living breath—by operating as discursiveness outside of words. What more truth could we ask for?

Even the apostle Paul taught that the deepest frameworks of knowing truth lie in human minds that discern not with rationality but with the mysterious and beautiful truth-telling of the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit searches all things, even the deep things of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. We have not received the spirit of
the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught to us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.... The spiritual man makes judgments about all things, but he himself is not subject to any man's judgment: "For who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ. (I Cor. 2:10–16)

My third and final example of truth and beauty is a film entitled The New World, written and directed by the renowned and reclusive Terence Malick, and brought to my attention by Jeffrey Overstreet, Seattle Pacific University's own resident film expert and Christianity Today writer. This story is the historically accurate re-telling of the first encounters between native peoples and Europeans in America in the early seventeenth century and of the life of the native woman sometimes called "Pocahontas" (although that name is never spoken in this film). More specifically, it is a brilliant attempt to represent in the multidisciplinary art form of film the actual process of the spirit animating a "new world" being born—both in the historical implications of that term for Americans and Europeans and in the literally "Edenic" newness of creation itself. The film uses to powerful effect another masterpiece telling of the birth of a new world—Richard Wagner's opening music to the first opera of the epic "Ring" cycle, arguably one of the greatest total art works (gesamtkunstwerken) ever created. This musical leitmotif, heard in the opening of both the film and the opera, is the metaphor and musical representation of creation itself, as you may notice from the way the filmmaker interleaves the notes of Wagner's overture along with natural sounds of the forest and river in this scene—literally allowing the sound of God's creation to "finish" Wagner's score. It is almost like witnessing the very act of creation itself.

The multi-valence of many different modes of beauty in film allows Malick to enact and embody a new world being born. Spirit is called forth, almost literally "hovering over the waters." And a scene of baptismal immersion and celebration of water, as well, recalls both Genesis and Wagner's Rhinemaidens who open the Ring cycle in a joyous celebration of the "concord" and peace at the waterside dawn of creation—so soon, of course, in both cases to "fall." Here Malick actually invites our "future remembrance," as Bakhtin says, of this sin and brokenness, as the deadly clashes between native peoples and European conquerors are shown through maps and lithographs at exactly the moment Wagner's overture begins. Malick also foregrounds in several filmic images how both sides are so baffled in their ability to "see" something so completely "other" (that is, each other) that all they have in common, quite literally, is the very life-giving waters both cultures are so utterly reliant upon.

So, can "beauty save the world"? Certainly its way of knowing and truth-telling need to enter (or re-enter) the conversation, carrying as it does within itself both persuasiveness and its own verification. We began and now are ending, too, with history. We are inheritors of an immense tradition of truth and beauty in art—and yet we must also embrace our historical chance to re-frame the dialogue for a new time, a new historical framework that is even now emerging in the postmodern period. It appears to me, so far, to be an age seeking models of epistemology and ontology that are relational without being relativistic, and ethical without begin dogmatic. Its best model may be "dialogue" and "community," if we follow what Bakhtin has told us about the way we need each other to complete ourselves, embracing a horizon of vision that recognizes its human limitations while not fearing but trusting what lies beyond. It seems to also be a model that embraces beauty in order to expand the avenues of access to truth—to embrace the ambivalent wholeness of life.

And so, as the scripture in Psalm 90 says: "Let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us."

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Experiencing Beauty in the Music of the Holocaust

Few events in Western history have had the kind of impact—historically, ideologically, culturally, and psychologically—as the Holocaust. A series of incidents of almost incomprehensible horror, the Holocaust is not only a diabolical chapter in the history of the twentieth century but a powerful cultural symbol of humanity’s evil on the one hand and humanity’s suffering on the other. Even seventy years later, the events of the Holocaust continue to influence our thinking on issues such as racism, nationalism, and fascism, and we remain fascinated with and moved by stories and art related to the holocaust in a variety of genres.

I too am drawn to the history and art of the Holocaust, both as a Christian and as a musicologist. As a young girl I heard stories of how my grandparents on both sides of the family lived in Nazi-occupied Netherlands during the war and helped Jews hide from the Nazis. My paternal grandparents (Syrt and Luciena Wolters) hid a family of four in their attic in Enschede for two and half years, beginning in 1942 (Wolters, 1995), and my maternal grandparents (Hendrikus and Wilhelmina Van Andel), along with another Dutch family, took a young Jewish woman and a small Jewish boy into their home in Arnhem in 1944.1 For my grandparents, this was an act of faith. They believed that there was no other option for Christians but to help their victimized neighbors. I grew up understanding Holocaust stories from the lens of Christian ethics and was terribly disillusioned to realize, as a young teenager, that far more Christians persecuted or ignored Jews than helped them during the war, and furthermore that there was in the history of the church a long tradition of anti-Semitism. Nonetheless, I am still drawn to Holocaust topics in part because they invite discussions about good and evil doing battle in history. Even when these discussions are difficult, such as when we ask how God could have allowed the Holocaust to take place at all, they are rooted in a clear sense of right and wrong.

As a Christian musicologist, I am drawn to studying music of the Holocaust for some of the same reasons. This study allows me to talk about good and evil in the realm of musical activity in a way that would be more difficult in relation to other, more ubiquitous, settings. Although issues of music and morality are notoriously difficult, few will disagree that when SS officers forced prisoners to play joyful tunes as other inmates walked to their deaths, evil was taking place, whether they understand the concept of “evil” in secular or religious terms. This acknowledgement can lead to further insights about social and moral issues in music making generally. But more broadly speaking, the music of the Holocaust allows me to argue for the all-important role of context in understanding musical meaning, musical identity, and the experience of beauty in music. The use of music in the original historical context of the Holocaust and our continued fascination with music related to that context invites fundamental questions about the very nature of music, musical hermeneutics, and musical aesthetics. These are questions that I invite you to ponder with me.

Music: Object or Action?

Before examining specific instances of Holocaust music, allow me briefly to address some larger philosophical questions in musicology that have bearing on this discussion. Of the many changes that postmodernism has brought to the discipline of musicology in the last twenty-five years, one of the most profound has been a shift in our understanding of the very ontology of music. Rather than seeing music as work-based phenomenon, a “thing,” a new breed of music scholars, who sometimes call themselves cultural musicologists,
argue that music is an experience-based phenomenon, or “action.” This point was famously argued by Christopher Small in his book *Musicking*, in which he writes,

[T]he fundamental nature and meaning of music lie not in objects, not in musical works at all, but in action, in what people do. It is only by understanding what people do as they take part in a musical act that we can hope to understand its nature and the function it fulfills in human life. (Small 1998, 8)

I will argue that this categorical or philosophical shift—seeing music as an action rather than an object—is enormously helpful in understanding how music works in a particular historical and social context, especially a context of crisis such as the Holocaust. While I believe there is still some place for thinking of music in terms of works, thinking of it *only* in these terms is limiting. Small and others have helped clarify that if one is attempting to make sense of the beauty, ethics, and meaning of a musical practice, such as listening to Holocaust music, it makes quite a difference whether you think the heart of that practice is a thing, i.e. a musical work, or an action, i.e. a musical experience. If you believe that the heart of musical practice lies in a musical work, you will concern yourself primarily with structural aspects such as melody, harmony, rhythm, instrumentation, form, and other patterns of sound in determining its beauty, ethics, and meaning. If you believe that the heart of the musical practice lies in a musical experience, you have a much broader discussion that can include the structural aspects I’ve just noted, as well as a wide variety of social, historical, and cultural realities as interpreted by those participating in the music making. Using this methodology, the central question of musical beauty changes from “Is the musical work beautifully constructed?” to “How is the musical experience constructed as beautiful by those engaged in it?”

In the following examples, I hope to show that the experience of music as beautiful or meaningful is dependent to a significant degree on the context in which that music is experienced. This is especially obvious when the context for music is an extraordinary one, whether positive (such as falling in love) or negative (such as war or oppression). If this is true, the experience of music which is related in some way to the Holocaust—whether composed and experienced during the war or in later years—cannot help but be shaped to a significant degree by our knowledge of this cataclysmic event in world history. While much Holocaust music has structural aspects that can be understood as beautiful—tuneful melodies, rich harmonies, or poignant settings of texts, for example—these structural aspects alone cannot fully explain why such music has the power to move us so deeply.

**Music and Context—”Ani Ma’amin”**

To put some of this theorizing into practice, allow me to tell you about “Ani Ma’amin” or “I believe,” a Hebrew song sung by religious Jews who were executed in the concentration camps. The text for this song comes from a creed based on the writings of Rabbi Moses ben Maimon, a twelfth-century theologian and philosopher also known as Maimonides. In his commentary on the Messiah, Maimonides compiled thirteen articles of faith which were later written as a creed by an anonymous author. These articles include:

1. The existence of God
2. The absolute unity of God
3. The incorporeality of God
4. The eternity of God
5. That God alone is to be worshipped
6. That God communicates to prophets
7. That Moses is the greatest prophet
8. That the Torah was given by God
9. That the Torah is immutable
10. That there is divine providence
11. That there is divine punishment and reward
12. That there will be a Messiah
13. That the dead will be resurrected

(See skin)

It is common among observant Jews to recite this poetic version of the thirteen articles as a daily prayer, beginning each article with the phrase “Ani
ma’amín be-emunáh sh’lema” (“I believe with perfect faith”). These powerful statements of belief were in turn used as texts for songs, especially the penultimate article, “I believe with perfect faith in the coming of the Messiah.”

*Ani Ma’amin*
Traditional, arr. Robert Applebaum

*A*ni ma’amín,
*Be’émunáh sh’léima*
*B’viát hamashiáh*
*V’af al pi she’yitmamei’ah*
*Im kol zeh achakeh lo b’chol yom sheyavo*
*A*ni ma’amín

I believe,
With complete belief,
In the coming of the Messiah.
And even though he may tarry,
I will await him each and every day.
I believe.

(Aplebaum 2003)

One version of this faithful text set to music became popular in the Warsaw ghetto, where it was also known as the “Varshever geto-lid fun frumer yid” (“song of religious Jews in the Warsaw ghetto”) (Gilbert 2005, 48). It soon spread to other Polish ghettos such as in Lublin, Lodz, and Bialystock, and subsequently to death camps where ghetto inhabitants were sent to be killed (Rubin 2000, 425 and 457). Singing this familiar text about hope in the Messiah in the face of persecution, starvation, and the knowledge of certain death transformed a ubiquitous daily liturgical ritual into a profound statement of faith.

According to the accounts of survivors, believing Jews sometimes sang this song while walking to their deaths in the gas chambers (Gottfarstein 1981, 299). In the Jewish tradition, willingly going to one’s death “for the Holy Name” (kiddush ha-shem) rather than forsaking Judaism is considered the highest form of religious devotion (Eisenberg 1981, 280). In addition to other sacrificial humanitarian acts on behalf of others, using one’s death to witness to God’s existence and righteousness was understood as a way to sanctify the Name of God and an important aspect of so-called “spiritual resistance” during the war (Melnick 1995, 396). Thus proudly singing “Ani Ma’amín” on the way to death changed what might have been yet another meaningless death of a faceless Jew into an act of courageous martyrdom. Jewish music scholar Ruth Rubin, commenting about such religious songs sung on the way to death, describes the powerful ability of music to frame an event: “[W]ith a tune, religious Jews martyred themselves” (Rubin, 425). Indeed, in this context music acted as a powerful tool for constructing social meaning in this specific context.

After the war, the song “Ani Ma’amín” came to hold special symbolic meaning in relation to the Holocaust and was used in some of the very first Holocaust memorial ceremonies and programs (Ofer 2000, 36). It continues to be a favorite musical choice for Holocaust commemorations today, often in new arrangements by contemporary composers (Gilbert 2005, 196) such as Robert Applebaum’s arrangement for four-parts. The tune has a folk-like poignancy and the harmonies used in Applebaum’s setting are austere and powerful, but our experience of the beauty and meaning of this piece are inextricably bound to our knowledge of its original context. We respond to the beauty of the melody and harmony, yes, but even more we respond to the poignant act of faith and courage that this song represents. Furthermore, our knowledge about the context of deep suffering and loss of the Holocaust makes this piece far more moving than its structural aspects alone would be, and this experience of being moved is mapped onto our experience of its beauty as well.

Musical Meaning in Context—Handel’s *Judas Maccabaeus*

So far, I have argued that in experiencing music’s beauty and meaning, context is key. This is demonstrated in my next example as well, the performance of Handel’s oratorio *Judas Maccabaeus* by left-wing Jews in North America during the 1940s who interpreted it as a Holocaust piece (Wolters-Fredlund 2005, 197–212). You might think that a work written by Handel in England in 1746 is an unlikely candidate for Holocaust music, and in a way, that is precisely the point I am making. One musical work can be interpreted and experienced in radically different ways in different contexts.
In order to understand the different contexts in which Judas Maccabaeus was interpreted, a brief explanation of the work’s content and history is warranted. The oratorio outlines the rebellion and eventual victory of the Jewish people, led by the Maccabee family, against their Syrian oppressors in the second century BC. The text for the oratorio, written for Handel by Rev. Thomas Morell and based on the account of the Maccabean family as found in the Apocrypha, describes the Jewish people mourning the loss of Jerusalem and the temple, the loss of their religious freedom, and the death of the leader of their rebellion, Mattathias. It then outlines a series of military battles led by Mattathias’s son, Judas, who, despite having a smaller and less sophisticated army, leads the Jews to a series of victories. The most important of these victories is the recovery of the temple, which subsequent generations have celebrated during Chanukah, the festival of re-dedication or festival of lights.

As it happens, Handel’s musical setting of the story of the Maccabees has a long history of being interpreted in relation to contemporary politics. When Handel wrote the oratorio in 1746, he did so to celebrate the British victory over the Jacobite rebellion of 1745, led by Bonnie Prince Charlie. The principal concerns in the story of the Maccabean revolt—religious identity, freedom of worship, liberty, national unity, and national independence—had strong parallels to British fears of French imperialism generally and the alliance between the Jacobites and the French specifically (Smith 1998, 61). Handel’s oratorio, dedicated to the Duke of Cumberland, the leader of the British at the decisive Battle of Culloden, was a huge success.

Judas Maccabaeus was quick to become one of Handel’s most enduringly popular oratorios. In the decades after it was written, the work was brought over to Germany, where it also became “a treasured national possession” (Dean 1959, 465) and the most popular of all Handel’s oratorios except Messiah (Levi 1994, 79). In fact, it was used there too in celebration of war victory and national pride. In the late 1920s, the hero in the oratorio was understood as “an exemplar of Teutonic military superiority” (Smith 1995, 212). The association between Judas Maccabaeus and German nationalism became a problem for the Nazi party in the 1930s, however, since the work’s Jewish hero did not fit with the party’s anti-Semitic worldview. As part of the party’s initiative to “Aryanize” all music in Germany, Judas Maccabaeus was revised and rewritten numerous times in German. One version, which portrayed the main character as a “powerful military dictator—in other words, the Führer himself,” was quite popular and received several performances throughout Germany (Levi 1994, 80).

Amazingly, only a few years later, several composers and conductors working in the cultural circles of the Jewish left in North America came up with the idea to sing this same oratorio in Yiddish as an act of solidarity with their brothers and sisters persecuted in Europe. For these Yiddish choruses, the story told in the oratorio had numerous meaningful parallels to modern circumstances: sorrow and anger at the oppression of Jews, the determination to fight against this oppression, and especially hope in the ability of a small Jewish minority to triumph over a sophisticated and brutal persecutor.

One could argue that the story of the Maccabees is amazingly well-suited to speak to the struggle of the Jews against the Nazis. In fact, the parallel between the Jews oppressed under Syrian rule and the Jews oppressed under Nazi rule is a remarkably straightforward and self-evident one, much more so than Handel and Morell’s original parallel of the story to the victory over the Scottish uprising or the manipulation of the story by Nazi Germany to parallel their perceived military and Aryan supremacy.

A few other aspects of the interpretation of this work by left-wing Jews are worth mentioning. One point I have already alluded to, which is that in a somewhat strange and ironic twist, these choirs used this Jewish story to express a Jewish identity, rather than an English or German one, an association made more potent by singing the work in Yiddish translation. In addition, for these choirs, which were associated with the communist-sympathizing arm of the Jewish labor movement, the story of the Macabees was interpreted as politically progressive. As one long-time member of the Jewish left, Millie Gold, described it: “we could interpret the Maccabees as revolutionaries”
In their socialist reading of the story of the Maccabees, the figure of Judas was seen as a Jewish folk hero, a grass-roots leader who overthrew tyrannical forces to bring equality and justice to the people through revolution.

All this background information about the history of interpretation of *Judas Maccabaeus* makes the point that experiences of the same musical work can vary wildly in different contexts. While the melodies and harmonies and basic plot were similar in each circumstance in which *Judas Maccabaeus* was performed, its meaning and effect changed considerably. It changed from an English story celebrating victory over perceived political and religious persecution, to a German story celebrating military strength and Aryan supremacy, to a Jewish story celebrating socialism and the triumph of a small minority. The character of Judas, meanwhile, was understood to be either the Duke of Cumberland, Adolf Hitler, or a Jewish folk hero. For all groups who sang the work, it held very rich and multi-layered meaning, but their messages were startlingly dissimilar.

Moreover, I assume from the huge popularity of the work in each of these contexts that the work was considered beautiful. The famous post-war Handel scholar Winton Dean pans *Judas Maccabaeus* in his 1959 opus on Handel's oratorios, claiming that the work has been “consistently overvalued,” and calling it “not so much a work of art as a victory concert,” with a libretto that is “crude” and “blatant” (Dean 1959, 465–6). But for centuries this oratorio has been loved by communities who found it meaningful. Today, one who listens, for example, to the slow and mournful soprano aria “Ah! Wretched Israel” and who considers the rich layers of meaning held in this work by North American Jews who performed it during the war, will find it difficult to describe the music as “crude.”

**Handel’s *Judas Maccabaeus* (1746), “Ah! Wretched Israel”**

*Text: Rev. Thomas Morell*

> Ah! wretched, wretched Israel! fall’n how low, From joyous transport to desponding woe.  
*Handel 1939*

**Yiddish Adaptation by Max Helfman**

*(music and text, 1942)*

> From the deep, deep valley of lamentation, brothers, hear!  
> It’s the crying of the children of our people,  
> Of a people in sorrow, of a people in pain.  
> Hear the lamenting cry!  
*(Krasny 1942)*

**Yiddish Adaptation by Emil Gartner (music) and Vladimir Krasny (text, 1942)**

> You fall, Oh poor Israel, deep down  
> From the peak of celebration into the pit of lamenting.  
*(Helfman 1942)*

**Musical Identity—Helfman’s *Di Naye Hagode***

Another Holocaust piece allows us to explore how music can be used to express and construct identity and how beauty plays a role in that dynamic. Composed in 1948, *Di Naye Hagode* (or New Haggadah) is a cantata by Jewish-American composer Max Helfman for narrator, chorus, orchestra, and dancers. It is an adaptation in English and Yiddish of the epic Yiddish poem by Jewish-Soviet poet Itzik Fefer called “Shadows of the Warsaw Ghetto” about the events of the Warsaw ghetto uprising. This work quickly became popular in circles of the Jewish left in post-war years and remains a popular work today (Wolters-Fredlund 2005, 154–161).

Since the reception of this work among North American Jews after the war is tied closely to the iconic status of the story of the uprising itself, a brief summary of these events seems warranted. After the Nazis had deported over 250,000 of the inhabitants of Poland’s Warsaw ghetto in 1942, a small army of partisan fighters successfully resisted further deportations in January 1943 with smuggled and hand-made weapons. This small success prompted them to make plans for an uprising, so that when the German troops returned on 19 April, on the eve of Passover, to deport the remaining 50,000 inhabitants of the ghetto, most residents were concealed in hideouts and subterranean bunkers and about 750 were organized in a resistance unit. In the largest single instance of Jewish rebellion during the
war, the ghetto fighters defended the ghetto for a month's time before they finally were crushed on 16 May.

Although most involved in the uprising eventually died or were sent to camps, the story of the uprising had, and continues to have, tremendous symbolic importance as a story of human dignity and honor in resistance to oppression. Ghetto fighters were untrained and had few resources against the sophistication of Hitler's army, and yet they refused to be taken away without a fight, insisting, in the rousing words of underground organizers to “die as human beings” (Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies 2004). Amazingly, they were able to keep back German troops longer than some European countries. As historian Israel Gutman asserts,

No act of Jewish resistance during the Holocaust fired the imagination quite as much as the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising of April 1943. It was an event of epic proportions, pitting a few poorly armed, starving Jews against the might of Nazi power.... The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising is a historical event, but it also has become a symbol of Jewish resistance and determination, a moment in history that has transformed the self-perception of the Jewish people from passivity to active armed struggle.... [It] has become a universal symbol for resistance and courage. (Gutman 1994, xi–xii)

As Gutman describes it, the story of the ghetto uprising was and is inexorably tied to constructions of Jewish identity in the post-Holocaust era. For many Jews, the story of the uprising acts as proof that Jews are not a weak, helpless, and defenseless people, but a proud people willing to fight for their freedom or die trying. For left-wing Jews, of course, this story, like Judas Maccabaeus, could also be interpreted as a story of revolution in which the poor starving masses took up arms against their brutal oppressors.

In both Fefer's original poem about the uprising and in Helfman's adaptation, the militaristic resistance of the ghetto fighters is emphasized in dramatic fighting scenes which describe the shooting, blood, and flames of the battle in vivid and sometimes graphic language. The attackers are said to have had “venom in their eyes, with satanic faces;” the ghetto martyrs “boldly threw themselves on tanks”; the gunfire is described using the phrase “it rained lead in the Warsaw ghetto”; and the casualties are implied in the phrase “bloody rivers streamed on” (Helfman 2006). In one passage, fierce language is used to express the view that if even one German dies at the hands of the ghetto fighters, the uprising would hold meaning: “If into these Jewish fingernails shall fall even just one butcher to be strangled and choked, one who will not live to see the crack of dawn, I will, from the grave, bless these sons of mine” (Helfman 2006). In the middle of the cantata the battle is evoked using colorful language:

**Max Helfman's Di Naye Hagode (1948)**

**Narrator (English):**

*What three-footed messenger flies through the ghetto?*

*The terrible news has routed the Seder like the crack of a shot.*

*All eyes are aflame, all hearts filled with courage.*

*They've come! They've come!*  

*The poison-filled hordes, the slayers have come!*  

*They were met, met like rare guests, but with lightning and thunder*  

*by the white-robed fathers,* by the queen of each house.

*Each room is a bastion, each cellar a fortress.*  

*They shoot in the ghetto!*

**Di Shlakht (The Battle)—Chorus (Yiddish):**

*There's shooting in the ghetto, and the ghetto replies,*  

*Hate with hate, fire with fire.*  

*Guns converse here.*  

*The ghetto seethes with new infernos.*  

(Helfman 1950)

Juxtaposed with this militaristic language and music are passages which describe the everyday lives of ghetto inhabitants and their observance of the Passover ritual in particular. In his poem about
the uprising, Itzik Fefer makes frequent reference to the Jewish Haggadah, a word translated generically as “narrative” or “saga,” but conventionally used to refer to the ritual retelling of the Exodus story during the Passover Seder dinner, the account of the ancient Israelites being liberated from slavery in Egypt and their journey to a new homeland. Fefer makes a connection between the Jewish resistance in Warsaw and the Exodus, suggesting that the ghetto uprising is a “new exodus,” and referring in his poem to “di naye hagode,” a “new haggadah” that will commemorate the Warsaw Ghetto fighters. Because the uprising began on the eve of the Passover this correlation has a special poignancy.

The cantata opens with one of the four questions traditionally asked by the youngest member at a Seder celebration, “Ma nishtano halaylo haze mikol haleyloys?” “How is this night different from all other nights?” But in this instance the “night” in question is not the night of the ancient Israelites’ flight from Egypt but the night of the German attack in Warsaw in 1943.

Ma Nishtano—Chorus (Yiddish)

How is this night different from all other nights?
Why?
Why is this night different from all other nights of our lives?
Why?

They roam through streets and alleys
They knock in darkness on wide-open doors,
They mourn near ruins, they sleep on hard floors,
They fall upon dark, cold dirt roads.
They rise once again and wander exhausted
Through gray abysses, over verdant peaks.
They have not yet recited their confession;
They cannot yet find their rest.
Early in the morning, late at night
They roam, the shadows of the Warsaw Ghetto.
(Helfman, 2006)

This central question is repeated throughout the work and finally answered by the Narrator in English, who says,

Why is this night different from all other nights? Because on this Seder night we remember them all, those nameless shadows who have died so that we may live; who have borne their suffering so that we may live in freedom. In us and in our children, their blessed memories shall live on and on. (Helfman 2006)

This emphasis on religious themes is one of the more interesting aspects of Helfman’s cantata and its reception. On the face of it, it would seem quite incongruous that a work with blatant religious themes would become so popular among Yiddish folk choirs in North America, since they had historically been resolutely secular. Before the war, Yiddish choruses of the Jewish left pointedly had avoided sacred music of any kind. It is worth noting, for example, that Helfman was one of the many who wrote adaptations of Judas Maccabeus in the early 1940s, and his Yiddish text omits all references to God and all religious language found in Morell’s original libretto. For example, one Judas Maccabaeus chorus, which in the original spoke of not bowing down to idols (“We never shall bow down to the rude stock or cultured stone”) became a chorus about not bowing to the enemy in Helfman’s 1942 Yiddish version: “We will never bow before the rod, The enemy’s rod, the barbarian whip smeared with our blood” (Helfman 1942).

But by the time he wrote Di Naye Hagode in 1948, Helfman was following in the footsteps of others in the circles of the Jewish Left who began to have a more relaxed attitude to religious themes during and after the war. Even years earlier, during the war, other Yiddish versions of Judas Maccabaeus, for example, kept the religious language of Morell’s libretto intact, such as the adaptation by Vladimir Krasny. In Krasny’s Yiddish adaptation, even such devout texts as “O Father, Whose Almighty Power,” “Father of Heav’n, from Thy eternal throne” “Hear us, O Lord, on Thee we call,” and (most amazingly!) “We worship God, and God alone” were sung in almost exact translation in Yiddish—a practice that would have been unthinkable before the war.3

This relaxed attitude to religious themes can be explained in part by the trend among those in the circles of the Jewish Left to identify themselves with a broad Jewish diaspora during the war rather than primarily the Jewish working classes and commu-
nist-sympathizing Jews. During the war, concert program texts of the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir, for example, speak of “our brothers and sisters in Europe who are standing on the front lines of the struggle against our enemy” (Harris 1943). In the program for this choir’s May 1943 concert, which contained several essays about the war, one choir leader asserts that “unity needs to be strengthened among all Jews,” and choir director Emil Gartner argues that unity is a vital component to ending the war, and adds, “that unity we owe to the millions of our brothers and sisters chained and murdered by the Nazi beast” (Gartner 1943).

Helfman’s cantata Di Naye Hagode is certainly not a religious work in the conventional sense. In fact, no mention is made in the cantata of a God who controls the destiny of the Jews. The work is focused entirely on the heroism of the ghetto fighters. But throughout the cantata, images from the Seder ritual permeate the work in such a way as to add poignancy and depth and are always treated respectfully. It affectionately describes households celebrating the Seder in the ghetto who have opened their doors “in expectation of the prophet Elijah,” and after the Seder has been interrupted by the German attack, it describes how “the Seder is deserted. The wind now alone chants the prayers.” At several points in the cantata, the text is spoken as a prayer, for example, “O Father in Heaven can it really be that in this city of desolation our people once lived and worked and bargained and played with their children?” Moreover, Helfman made use of traditional Judaic chant formulas in several sections of the work, especially in places where the text of the original Haggadah is recalled. By including religious language and allusions to the Passover ritual and at the same time emphasizing the militaristic and revolutionary aspects of the story, Helfman paints a picture of the Jewish people that is united across religious and political lines. Music is thus used as a tool to shape Jewish identity in quite specific ways in relation to the Holocaust.

For the Jews in North America who sang and continue to sing Di Naye Hagode, its connection to a Jewish identity goes beyond a corporate Jewish identity to include a personal Jewish identity as well. Especially when it was sung just after the war, Di Naye Hagode had an intense emotional impact on those who sang and heard it because so many had lost and friends and family in Poland or in other ghettos and prison camps. One Toronto chorister, named Brenda Fishauf, who had come to Canada from Poland in 1937 and lost most of her extended family in Poland during the war, highlighted Di Naye Hagode as one of the most meaningful works she sang in her decades with the Toronto Jewish Folk Choir. She felt as if in singing Di Naye Hagode she was telling her own personal story. When I asked her about singing this work after the war, she described her experience by interweaving themes of meaning, identity, suffering, and beauty. In her description, these elements (meaning, identity, suffering, and beauty) seem to be different ways for her to describe the same experience. As she explains,

The music was so beautiful. Not just the music but the contents of it, you know, what it was all about. And of course, having left family in Poland, you know, I mean it was sort of like tied up with my past, my suffering and so on.... It was so moving. I mean, I had to fight with myself not to cry while I was singing it, because I felt just because I came from [Poland]... I was telling my story, sort of, you know? That's what it meant to me. (Fishauf, interview by author, 31 October 2003)

Fishauf’s words demonstrate how the context of this work and its role in “telling her story” were both inextricably bound to her experience of the work generally and the work’s beauty in particular. Her comments indicate that Holocaust music not only shaped and expressed corporate Jewish identities but personal ones as well. Her description also strongly suggests that the experience of beauty is not just heavily shaped by the meaning and context of a work but can often be related to specific personal experiences.

Musical Memorialization—A Child’s Journey (Horvit/Barzlai)

The theme of telling a personal story runs through our final example of Holocaust music as well, a piece called A Child’s Journey. The poems for this work were written many years after the
Holocaust by Yaakov Barzilai, a Hungarian-born Jew who survived the Bergen-Belzen concentration camp as a child and immigrated to Israel in 1949. In these poems, Barzilai looks back on his childhood and reflects on the traumatic loss of innocence experienced in his own life and in the lives of other Holocaust children. That Barzilai is an adult looking back and interpreting his experiences is made clear by the reflective opening phrase, “fifty years ago...” but his use of sparse and simple language throughout evoke a child’s voice and perspective as well. Throughout the poem these two perspectives—the knowing adult and the innocent child—are understood simultaneously. While the child in the poem is not fully aware of his or her circumstances, the author and audience understand it all too well.

Text (Hebrew): Yaakov Barzilai (b. 1933);
Translation: Shulamit Riedman

1. An Accidental Meeting
   Fifty years ago
   when all the trains
   traveled toward one destination
   my mother introduced me
   to God
   He joined us—on our journey.

2. I Once Had a Friend
   I once had a friend
   a symbol of cleanliness
   who even defeated the lice.
   One day,
   he was taken to the shower
   and never again
   did I see him
   clean.

3. There are No Stars in the Sky
   “Why are there no stars in the sky?”
   The children of God inquired,
   “And why even lamps do not shine there
   either?”
   The children repeatedly wondered.
   “And if there are no stars
   or lamps
   then, how can God see
   when we wash in the shower?”
   “He does not see in the dark”
   the angels responded.
   And it was the truth,
   when the faucets were open
   that God did not see
   they did not have water
   And never again
   did the children ask
   “Why?” (Horvit, 1998)

The composer Michael Horvit intentionally kept his musical setting of these poems sparse and restrained as well, to match the naïve tone of the poems and to reflect, in his words “the wonderment of innocent children who could not fully comprehend the horrors they faced in the Holocaust” (McCullough 1999). This child-like simplicity of the text and the music, and also the childhood innocence it represents, are some of the most moving and beautiful aspects of this set of pieces.

Another important aspect of Holocaust music and our experience of it is our understanding that performing and listening to Holocaust pieces today is an act of commemoration and memorialization. Experiencing Holocaust music today is an act of remembrance. By listening we are saying “we remember the millions who suffered and died, and we remember the millions more who survived but were never the same.” This type of cultural work is sometimes explicit—as in the cantata Di Naye Hagode, whose text charges the Jewish community to remember the Warsaw Ghetto fighters every year in the same way that they remember the Exodus every year, in a new haggadic ritual. And it is sometimes tacit, as in the poems and music of A Child’s Journey, which provide an unspoken invitation to us to remember and contemplate the special suffering of children of the Holocaust. This act of respectful remembrance is part of our experience of the music, and, I would argue, helps to make our experience of the music meaningful and beautiful. We react not only to the stories and the sounds we hear in the music but the very act of commemoration.

The act of memorialization through musical activity also goes a long way to explaining how it is that Holocaust music can have a redemptive and healing effect despite the deep suffering to which it
alludes. The themes of music of the Holocaust are some of the darkest imaginable, including unspeakable violence, the tragic death of millions, the depravity of humankind, and the silence of God. At its worst, dwelling on such themes has the potential to become a kind of glorification of horror, violence, and sin and may even, as some have worried, blind us to the evils of our own time (Kimmelman 2009). But at its best, our acknowledgement and articulation of these dark themes allows us to pay tribute to those who suffered, and ensures that we will not add to the tragedy of the Holocaust by forgetting its victims.

In order to understand the ways in which music affects us and shapes our world, we need to understand music as far more than an object but also as a social and cultural experience rooted in a specific place, time, group of people, and circumstances. As I hope my various examples have shown, performing and listening to Holocaust music cannot be fully understood if it is analyzed entirely in terms of an act of detached aesthetic contemplation. Listening to Holocaust music is far more than this. Other actions hovering around the musical space are the construction of identity, the interpretation of musical meaning, and the performance of memorialization, to name only those discussed here. Each of these acts affects our experience of the music generally and our experience of the meaning and beauty of the music specifically.

I'd like to leave you with the suggestion that what seems true in the music of the Holocaust is true in all our musical experiences, although it is perhaps less obvious and less profound. We delude ourselves if we believe that we can fully understand a musical experience by scrutinizing the formal aspects of a musical work alone. Our experience of a piece of music always will be shaped to a significant degree by the context in which we experience it. Furthermore, I would argue that if musical experiences are indeed that deeply embedded in the fabric of human life and are open to all the good and evil of humanity, that it is our responsibility as scholars, and as Christian scholars in particular, to study and understand this experience. The study of music of all types from this perspective becomes a study of our place in the world and an act of Christian discernment.

Benita Wolters-Fredlund is Assistant Professor of Music at Calvin College. In its original setting this lecture included five listening examples—two were performed live by the Seattle Pacific University Concert Choir and three were recordings. Those interested in hearing these excerpts may consider listening to a podcast of the lecture, which can be downloaded from iTunes University.

Works Cited


Gartner, Emil. “Hearty Greeting to our Concert Guests and the Jewish Folk Choir.” Concert Program, 21 May 1943. Library and Archives Canada, Toronto Jewish Folk Choir, MUS 43, Box 1.


Notes

1. In 1993 my paternal grandparents were honored for their bravery by the Israeli government with the Medal of the Righteous Among the Nations. The honor was granted posthumously to my grandmother, who passed away in 1959. My maternal grandparents and the other family soon fled Arnhem on foot together and lived together in nearby Velp, since Arnhem was declared a war zone after the battle there in 1944.

2. A white robe (kitl) is worn by the head of household presiding over the Seder in many Jewish customs.

3. My thanks to Gloria Brumer, whose comparison of the Yiddish text used by the choir against the original English text I am drawing from here.
I used to say whenever it rained, “At least it’s good for the farmers.” No matter if rainstorms were ruining my outdoor plans, there were farmers somewhere who were benefiting.

That is what I thought. These days I am a pastor whose congregations are comprised of farmers, and I no longer know what to think. I do not pray for sunshine, and I do not pray for rain. I pray for “sunshine and rain in the right proportion.” I pray for “weather that will make our crops grow.” One farmer in my parish will refer to it only as “the r-word,” lest the good Lord hear the word rain and open the faucets too far. A few summers ago, we had enough showers that people were kicking themselves for not planting rice. The next summer we had dry, cracked fields. Then, it rained. There were sighs of relief, but in some quarters relief gave way immediately to apprehension: let’s just hope we don’t get too much.

For all the things humankind has learned to tame, weather remains uncontrollable. We have messed up global climate systems through negligence, but we have not figured out how to get the weather we want when we want it. Since farming depends on weather, it is one of the few jobs whose success remains truly uncertain year after year. Will our granaries be full or empty? God knows. And he is the only one. There is no use pretending we can really control the outcome by our own machinations. By our machines, we might increase yields proportionately to labor, but in the end, God determines abundance or famine.

If modernity has diminished our religious humility, the subject of weather has been one of the last strongholds for God’s sovereignty. Natural selection may determine the idiosyncrasies of species; class struggle might be the cause of political upheaval; and social constructs might be to blame for gender roles; but weather has been one phenomenon where people still feel God’s absolute rule. Prayers increase during crisis, and my farmers are aware of the perpetual crisis that their livelihood hangs on God’s decision to send rain and sunshine in good measure.

That is why it has surprised me recently to see pastors and congregations excusing God from responsibility for natural disasters. A recent publication from church headquarters commended a church sign in Mississippi that read: “Hurricane Katrina was an act of nature. What goes on here is an act of God.” A strange contradiction.

Hurricanes, tornadoes, and wildfires have made a lot of headlines the last few years. What a funny notion that in each case God arrived just a little too late. He made it in time for the rescue workers. He arrived when churches opened their doors to care for the victims. If only he had been there when the trouble started!

Deism is rearing its head, although today’s is a new mixed breed. This is a gentler deism. Gone is the cold theology suggesting that God created the world like a clock, wound it up, and then just stood back to watch. The newly arrived warm theology teaches that God wound it up, stands back during disasters, presumably cursing himself for those errors in his design, and then steps in to do clean-up.

This is a kinder deism, since God gets credit for the good stuff, and nature gets blamed for the bad. Some theologians try to squeeze a little divine sovereignty into this mix by saying that God limits himself during disasters. God could intervene to stop hurricanes, but he chooses not to, so as to preserve either the system he fashioned, with all its rules of action and consequence, or human freedom, which to be truly free, supposedly, must be allowed to stumble—although why God values these rules or human freedom so much is left a mystery.
And if a little divine sovereignty is squeezed in, why not a little divine sympathy as well? Fear not. God does not just limit himself. When tragedy hits, his is the first heart to break. I do not know if William Sloane Coffin was the first to say it, but preachers have been repeating it ever since. So, there you have it: God’s sovereignty and compassion are both left intact.

What is not left intact, however, is a biblical portrait of God. “He it is,” Psalm 135 says, “who makes the clouds rise at the end of the earth; he makes lightning for the rain and brings out the wind from his storehouses.” This is not a clockmaker who sits back and watches his handiwork tick. This is a king who enters his own treasury—the King James captures it well—and pulls out the treasures of the wind. Of course that makes God responsible for destruction and human suffering, but Scripture thinks God is justified in inflicting it. The prophetic corpus is glorious for its promises that God will restore his people, but they need to be restored precisely because God has scattered and destroyed them. For idolatries and oppressions galore, God sends invading armies, both of the military and locust variety.

It has always been an intricate calculus, trying to figure out who is responsible for suffering—whether God, his creation, or the devil—but Scripture does not view these options as mutually exclusive, and through it all God’s sovereignty is maintained. Who inflicts all that calamity on Job? Satan does but only when God allows it. God places Job in Satan’s hands, and when Job’s livestock are stolen, his servants and children are all dead, and his own body is covered in sores, Job knows that regardless of Satan’s involvement, it is God who has given and God who has taken away. Job asks, “Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil?” Remarkably, scripture pronounces a rare verdict on Job’s assessment: he did not sin with his lips.

On the recent two-hundredth anniversary of Charles Darwin’s birthday, a National Public Radio host commented that Darwin’s theories had liberated God from responsibility for suffering. It’s not God, after all, who kills things; it’s just the system he created, a system which results in salutary adaptations through survival of the fittest. Here we see the devil’s mischief. When we think that God is in need of liberation and that we are his liberators, theology has gotten itself backwards. We do not liberate God; nor is it our place to question or judge him. He liberates, questions, and judges us. His opinion is ultimately what counts.

This is a hard position to maintain when American Christians view their churches with the same consumeristic mentality they wield on their grocery stores. Give me a palatable portrayal of God, one pleasant to my way of thinking, or I’ll shop elsewhere. Suggesting that God’s opinion is what counts, and that his wrath means death for us, does not attract customers. After September 11, 2001, preachers rushed to defend God: he was surely not responsible for all that suffering. But when considering the Galilean victims of Pilate’s cruelty and the Tower of Siloam that killed eighteen people, Jesus did not liberate God from responsibility. In fact, he made God more unattractive still. A nervous, modern preacher would have denied both that God was responsible for the tragedies and that they were punishments from God against sin. But in Luke 13, Jesus rules out neither possibility. He says, rather, that the victims of these tragedies were no worse sinners than anyone else. Repent, he told his listeners, or you will all perish as they did.

It is a harsh judgment against us and certainly a harsh way for God to reveal himself, but through
it all God is already bearing in on us with his grace. What is there for a sinner to do when God really is sovereign and when he really does find me wanting in righteousness? What is there to do if God's wrath against my sins really means the death of me? What is there to do but cry for mercy? 

I T IS NO ACCIDENT THAT ONE OF THE CHURCH'S MOST PENITENTIAL MOMENTS ARRIVES ACCORDING TO THE AGRICULTURAL CALENDAR. ROGATION DAYS ARE ALWAYS THE DAYS LEADING UP TO ASCENSION, NOT BECAUSE OF ANY CONNECTION TO EASTER BUT BECAUSE THE EASTER SEASON IS THE TIME OF TILLING AND PLANTING IN THE NORTHERN HEMISPHERE. ROGATION IS A TIME OF ASKING FOR GOD'S MERCY, AND IT IS LARGELY AN AGRICULTURAL CUSTOM. WHERE GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY IS FELT—AS IT IS BY FARMERS SO DEPENDENT ON WEATHER SYSTEMS BEYOND THEIR CONTROL—THERE PEOPLE MUST PRAY FOR MERCY. DURING PROCESSIONAL LITANIES, THE FAITHFUL SEND UP THEIR CRIES OF "KYRIE ELEISON." LORD, HAVE MERCY. YOU, O GOD, RULE OVER THE SUN AND RAIN, SO MERCIFULLY BLESS US WITH A GOOD GROWING SEASON. BLESS US WITH ABUNDANT CROPS THAT WE MAY FEED OUR FAMILIES AND CARE FOR OTHERS IN NEED.

I have to wonder whether Rogation processions will catch on again—and not only in farming towns—as our economy collapses, our ecosystems falter, and our country labors on in multiple wars. A person could analyze any of these disasters and seek their causes simply in terms of human error: our greed, our lack of government regulation, our militarism, our disregard for future generations. But a Christian cannot look at such things and see only human agency. A Christian must look at these things and see also the hand of God, punishing us, demanding repentance. The difference between the two perspectives may seem slight—indeed, in either case, we find human culpability—but the difference is significant. If we alone have gotten ourselves into this mess, then we alone might get ourselves out of it. If, however, God is working against us, driving us to repentance, and if it is his power we are up against, then we would be wise to ask him for merciful assistance.

Indeed, not only does God drive us to repentance, but he drives us to cling to him where he actually offers mercy, in his Son. Jesus did not come for the righteous but for sinners. He came for people like us who have come up against God's sovereignty and been crushed by it. He came announcing forgiveness and told sinners to start talking to God not only as the Sovereign Lord but as their merciful Father. Where preachers show up (with their beautiful feet, as Isaiah and Paul say), not diminishing God's sovereignty but actually preaching Christ, there people find a merciful God. There we can stop our delusions about liberating God and start knowing what it means to be liberated.

A few years ago on Ash Wednesday, I watched with disappointment as the snow piled up outside. Ash Wednesday is one of my favorite services as a pastor, and it seemed a shame to cancel it because of the weather. I planned to go ahead with the service. Whoever could make it would make it. Then I got a call from one of my parishioners who drives a school bus, the same fellow who will only refer to rain as "the r-word." He had put his bus in the ditch. He was serving as council president that year and so he made the executive decision to cancel services that night. He made the right call. I was sad not to be able to draw the ash crosses on my parishioners' foreheads that year, but God was busy drawing that cross on my own forehead with snowdrifts. The cross of our mortality is not just a symbol. I really am dust. I am not able to leap over snowdrifts, and neither are my parishioners. I am bound by such earthly considerations as weather conditions. There is one who is unbound by such matters, the same one who binds us by bringing wind and snow out of his treasury. He still rules, and I thank him that the cross is not just a symbol of my mortality but, more importantly, of his own Son's death and resurrection, the place where his sovereignty poured itself into mercy.

Pray for sun or pray for rain? I don't know, but prayers for mercy are always in season. 

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FOUR YEARS OUT OF SEMINARY, I LEFT THE CLERGY ROSTER AND RESIGNED MY PARISH IN OHIO. DISENCHANTED WITH THE WHOLE ENTERPRISE KNOWN AS "THE CHURCH," AND CONVINCED OF THE NEED FOR A MORE ORGANIC, INCARNATIONAL CHRISTIAN EXISTENCE, I EMBARKED ON A JOURNEY TOWARD "INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY." I SPENT A FEW COLD, WET WEEKS OF EARLY SUMMER ON A NORTHERN VERMONT HOMESTEAD DELIGHTING IN WONDER AND SLIPPING INTO DESPAIR. THEN, TAKING ONLY WHAT I COULD FIT INTO OR STRAP ONTO MY CAR, I HEADED TO MY PARENTS' PLACE IN SOUTHERN MISSOURI... AND STAYED THERE FOR THE NEXT SIX YEARS.

WHAT LED ME BACK TO MY PARENTS WAS MY FATHER'S RECENT DIAGNOSIS OF ALS AND THE ONSET OF HIS DEMISE FROM DEMENTIA. THAT SLOW SOJOURN INTO THE UNKNOWN LINGERED WITH ANGUISH YET WAS FILLED WITH SOME OF THE DEEPEST SWEETNESS I HAVE EVER KNOWN.

Shortly after arriving, while adapting to familiar surroundings and uncertain circumstances, I noticed something I never had before: a spindly persimmon tree with lopsided foliage towering above the propane tank.

My parents had bought the place ten years earlier, just after my father's resignation from his dual-parish in Texas and from the clergy roster as well—thirty years after his ordination. The son and grandson of pastors, my father was mired in disillusionment and futility and simply could abide no longer. His most vital and vibrant years of ministry had been the dozen he spent in the Philippines. Toward the end of his life, he often said that coming back to this country had been his biggest mistake.

I first encountered persimmons while trying to adjust to this land called America after my father's decision to leave the country where I had spent the first seven years of my life. On a class expedition through the woods neighboring our school, the teacher pointed to the orange orbs hanging from the limbs of a small tree and told us they were edible. I had grown up plucking fruit from trees—mangoes, jackfruit, papaya, mangosteen, and tamarind—fruit that I now longed for. I pulled a persimmon from a limb, bit into the firm flesh, and experienced a sourness that made me swear to never try one again. Years later, as a ruined and disgusted pastor much sooner than my father, seeing those green orbs heavy on the branches above the propane tank made me desire a second chance.

Toward the end of Jesus' short-lived ministry, just a few days before his crucifixion, he did something seemingly bizarre and erratic.

In the morning, when he returned to the city, he was hungry. And seeing a fig tree by the side of the road, he went to it and found nothing at all on it but leaves. Then he said to it, "May no fruit ever come from you again!"

And the fig tree withered at once. (Matthew 21: 18-19)

He cursed a fig tree because it had only leaves, no fruit... and figs weren't even in season! When Jesus uttered those words and blasted the fig tree, he was, I am convinced, symbolically cursing the tree of knowledge of good and evil. When the primal pair first became aware of their nakedness, they used fig leaves to cover themselves—probably from the tree by which they still stood. The rebellion which took place at that tree was the reason Jesus journeyed to Jerusalem, the reason he himself would all-too-soon be stripped naked and die cursed on a tree.

Puzzling as it may seem, the cursing and withering of the fig tree has to be looked at through Jesus' parable earlier in his ministry: the unproductive fig tree.

A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it
and found none. So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come look­ing for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wast­ing the soil?’ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’ (Luke 13: 6–9)

The parable is a plea for mercy, but one with an unsure outcome. Spared despite bearing no fruit for three years running, the tree is given a grace­period for intense cultivation. All will be well and good if the tree fruits the following year, but if not, then it will be cut down. If Jesus’ cursing of the fig tree in Matthew is crucifixion, then this parable is the demonstration of his renewing labor on behalf of blessing and resurrection.

MINISTRY, AS JESUS KNEW, IS THE STRUGGLE between blasting the fig tree out of existence and cultivating it so that fruit may finally come. It is a visceral and ongoing vacillation.

Three years into his life in the Philippines, my father sat looking out on the endless sea and wrote vividly damning and beautiful sketches of the people and events that filled his childhood as a pastor’s son in rural Illinois. It was as though he needed the distance of time and place and culture to see and discern the truths of those memories. But his understanding was not confined to the surroundings of his distant past; he looked with equal clarity of vision on the tragedies and truths of the people in his present world, so different yet so commonly human. Whether in the rural Midwest or in the Far East, the universals of human experience were what he learned to define: pride and shame, possession and loss, hypocrisy and reverence, sadness and joy, cruelty and redemption.

I found those sketches, which my father had written three years prior to my birth, while tending to his withering frame... while dealing with the dissipation of his once keen mind and the gracious disappearance of the bitterness that had gripped him for so long.

Late each autumn during those years of my father’s demise, I took great counsel from that old persimmon tree with branches way out of reach. I learned that one has to wait for persimmons to drop when ripe. The fruit, soft and fragile, looking like the rising or setting sun dusted with a gentle white haze, falls to the ground and awaits discovery as a gift from above. The flesh of ripe persimmons, readily reducible to mush, is faintly sweet and beckons wildlife. I was always mindful while gathering the fallen fruit to share the abundance with those nocturnal gleaners. I could preach with ease a sermon to the birds (and people) on the virtues of persimmons; about waiting and being given, about bitter turning to sweet.

My father died a year ago this past December—five months after I returned to parish ministry. In the late spring of that year, a hard freeze came and damaged many a crop. The persimmon tree bore no fruit that fall, and my visits home were devoid of that sensory solace. But that year gave way to another.

Persimmons fell in abundance once again this past autumn. I savored their pleasant sweetness even more due to the year’s absence, thinking of life and death and a calling abandoned and restored. That tree calls me to remember barrenness and anticipate resurrection. I can look at a cursed and withered tree, even a beam with the Son of God hanging on it, and see the tree of life.

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**being lutheran**

**God’s Justice in the World**

Nicholas Hopman

**Liberation theology has become a powerful force** in many mainline Protestant denominations. This teaching claims that God “does justice” by bringing an end to unjust systems that provide power for “oppressors” at the expense of the “oppressed” (see Houston 2008). Conservative American Evangelicals tend to understand justice in a more personal way. Their piety is personal and more religious in the traditional sense. It is a piety about “Jesus and me.” They define being a good Christian as being a just person, but here justice is located primarily in the church and the family rather than in massive sociological and international systems.

Lutheran theology allows one to enter into this discussion about justice without choosing sides. Lutherans should sense that there are some theological problems with the liberationists “justice” meta-narrative. Lutherans confess the doctrine of original sin. The doctrine of original sin tells us that the distinctions between the poor and the rich or the oppressed and the oppressors are merely penultimate. Before God “there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:22–23). All are sinners. On the judgment day of Jesus Christ, the poor and oppressed too will have to answer for their sins alongside their oppressors.

While Liberation theology is all about justice, we Lutherans also have justice at the center of our theology. Perhaps the central passage of all Lutheran theology and all scripture is the third chapter of Romans. It states:

> But now, apart from law, the righteousness of God has been disclosed, and is attested by the law and the prophets, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction, since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God displayed as a mercy seat, effective by faith in his blood. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.

Luther claimed that his breakthrough came when he understood the term “the righteousness of God,” as used by Paul in Romans. He saw that the righteousness of God is the righteousness by which God makes us righteous. Out of this insight bloomed the Lutheran dogma of justification by faith.

The New Testament Greek word for “righteousness” is dikaiosune. The Old Testament Hebrew word for “righteousness,” which stands behind the New Testament understanding of righteousness, is tsadaq. Both these words and concepts can be translated either as “righteousness” or “justice.” This is also true of the Vulgate’s “iustitia Dei” (righteousness/justice of God), through which Luther learned this concept. These were also the actual words Luther used in the preface to his Latin writings, in which he described his Reformation breakthrough. The Luther Bible’s “Gerechtigkeit” works the same way. It can be translated as “righteousness” or “justice.” The traditional rendering of Luther’s “iustitia” as “righteousness” is simply the translators’ preference. The choice of the word “justice” is not necessarily a better translation than “righteousness,” but in the current theological climate, filled with claims about “justice,” it should be remembered that the Apostle Paul had his own
claim about justice and this claim is at the heart of Lutheranism. As we read in Romans, God is establishing a new “justice... apart from law.” A justice based on faith in the mercy of Christ’s blood.

Romans 3 shows us that if we define God’s justice as liberation theologians do, then God has a credibility problem, i.e. we cannot have faith in him. Why? He has “passed over sins.” Because he has not delivered the justice the oppressors deserve and liberated the oppressed. God’s wrath and punishment do not work like human justice. He does not hand out punishment in accordance with human law attempts to do (See Elert 40-43). God as a Liberationist is a failure.

So how does God demonstrate his justice? “He justifies the one who has faith in Jesus.” This is a strange justice. It is the justice of faith alone apart from works. It is a justice that comes not from our works or even from our attempts to end oppression. Instead, it comes “by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God displayed as a mercy seat, effective by faith in his blood.” This is a mercy not equated with a worldly goal but with the blood of Christ shed to forgive “all,” who “have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

The world knows not this justice. Liberation theologians suspect this justice as being an excuse for the status quo. However, justification or being made righteous or just by faith alone is not a master form of status quo politics. God’s word of liberation from death and sin is the most revolutionary thing on earth. Robespierre, Washington, Lenin, and all other worldly revolutionaries merely rearranged the deck chairs on the Titanic compared to this. God is making a new creation with his justifying word and creating new life that no oppressor can ever take away.

Those justified by faith are free to serve their neighbors. Although the world is no longer a stage for utopian schemes for justifying ourselves, justification by faith frees our created nature, and with it our reason, to think of how to help our neighbors. And on this level, we must be thankful for Liberation theology. The Liberationists have shown us that sin does not take place merely in the realm of personal responsibility and acts but is also systemic. Merely by trying to do the right thing and live our normal daily lives, we take part in these systemic sins. This is perfectly consistent with the Lutheran claim that sin is a power that rules over us and we are unable to free ourselves from it.

In this way, liberation theology is more biblical than what I call American Evangelical theology. American Evangelicalism reads Romans 3 as a claim that we do not have to do any good works before God to be justified save “accepting Jesus Christ as your personal Lord and Savior.” This accounts for the inherently personal piety of conservative American Christianity. Liberation theology is a good antidote to such thinking.

God does not like pietists who spend all their time examining their own hearts trying to figure out how things are “between me and Jesus.” He wants faith in his Son, which takes us outside of ourselves into Christ. We do not participate in God’s justice by being “good Christians” who fulfill familial and local obligations. Instead, God’s justice is to make us just/righteous by faith alone. We are then free to serve our neighbors with our works. Small acts of kindness and dealing justly with those we come into contact with on a daily basis are very important. Here conservatives can remind us that all ethics, even fighting against systems, always begin on the personal level among individuals and that it is much harder to help the poor person in your neighborhood, church, or
family than to be in favor of helping "the poor." However, we can hardly claim to be fighting against the devil if we do not think big.

For example, big sins of government and rich institutions that have benefited many average people are today threatening the very stability of our society. Is it right to permanently indebt our children in an effort to prop-up the value of houses we paid too much for and in many cases could not afford? Was it right to expect 12 percent returns from the stock market for 401k plans every year? Is an economy based on credit just? Why are the rich bankers "too big to fail" but Mom and Pop stores are expendable? Sometimes conservative evangelicals can help us ask such questions also. For example, is it just that our nation kills millions of unborn children every year?

By correctly preaching God's justice as defined by Romans 3, Lutherans announce the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. This in turn frees people for true life in this world. In this freedom, we use our reason to unmask evil in the world. We create as much human justice as we can. We are not bound to particular political agendas but are free to use true insights from wherever they come. If there is any hope for American Christianity, it is the apostolic and catholic doctrine of justification by faith alone. The Evangelical-Lutheran churches have this doctrine at their core. It is a way forward out of the liberal-conservative debate, even if many would rather reject God's righteousness and justice in an effort to keep their own fictitious righteousness and justice.

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Works Cited


PERTHI

Perthi Sheep Farm, Beddgelert

England's flooded. Here, too, it's been too wet for shearing. Long wool shedding the rain, ewes graze the fields; lambs the color of cloud butt and punch at the udder. Our own coats drip in the hall as we sit and gaze through the picture window, taking in the grey-green landscape, the confluence of earth and sky that bore us, beauty we crave like milk.

Daniel Polikoff
During a two-week media blitz tour of the United States in support of their new album, U2’s lead singer Bono was asked which song by another artist he wished he’d written himself. Without hesitation he said Leonard Cohen’s “Hallelujah,” a song he described as “extraordinary.” Laboriously written over years and released on his 1984 album Various Positions, “Hallelujah” has become one of the most famous pop songs ever with more than 150 cover versions, some as popular as Cohen’s own. (Jeff Buckley’s version is of particular merit.)

Currently on a North American tour at the age of seventy-four, Cohen has been on the music scene for more than forty years. A Canadian poet, novelist, and singer-songwriter, Cohen has achieved the pinnacle of his art, receiving accolades for both his music and his writing. Many of his songs bear religious themes that echo his long immersion in Jewish thought and Scripture study. As a child, he spent long hours at the side of his Rabbi grandfather studying sacred writ, with the Prophet Isaiah emerging as his favorite. His appeal has to do largely with his willingness to articulate beautifully his own seeking—of God, of truth, of the pleasures of life, and of his own struggles with depression and loss. What many find in his writing is an authentic voice helping them to speak of their own holy and broken lives.

Of all Cohen’s songs, only this one is larger than life—a literal pop culture icon. “Hallelujah” is the kind of song that seems as if it has always been written. Of course that is partly because its main theme, the chorus “hallelujah,” has indeed “always” been written. It is the ancient Hebrew word הַלֵּל meaning “praise God” and is found over and over in the Psalms. It also strikes a chord because of the interplay of the music and lyrics. The song rewards careful reading. Three versions exist: Cohen’s album version, a live version from his tour in support of his seventh album Various Positions, which includes a couple new verses, and a compilation version first sung by John Cale (The Velvet Underground) in 1991 that combines the two versions Cohen himself has sung.

This song, and Cohen’s work generally, provide the jumping off point for a book I’m currently writing on theology and pop culture. It has the working title, Broken Hallelujah: Pop Culture, Imagination and God. I draw on Cohen, and especially this song, for a few reasons. First, it is important to me that it is not a “Christian” song. It is, first of all, a pop song with immense and broad appeal—so much so that it was even used in the wildly popular animated family film Shrek.

Second, it does have a particular religious depth, drawing on Biblical references. The song begins with a reference to King David, well known both as a musical genius and a womanizer, and also alludes to Samson and the Exodus, where Moses learns “the name” of God. Third, however, it is not “just” a biblical song but one that draws from those roots to speak about both the power of the Holy and the brokenness of human life.

The song begins with David but moves progressively out of the Bible and into the challenges of daily life. The last verse speaks to the challenge of living. A deep humility about human goodness comes through as Cohen sings, “I did my best, it wasn’t much.” Perhaps this is easier to say in Canada, but in eternally optimistic USA where pastor Joel Osteen’s Your Best Life Now became a best seller, such sentiment is often dismissed as misguided—a downer, at best, and at worst unfaithful. Theologically, however, I think Cohen is spot on; his lyrics get what a faithful life means. In this life, all we are capable of is a broken hallelujah.
because of what God has done for us. Knowing that keeps us from trying to please God with our shiny “holy hallelujahs” and allows us to be honest about ourselves, our need for God’s mercy, and our call to join in God’s mission of mercy in the midst of a broken world.

**Broken Hallelujah as Theological Perspective**

It bears a bit further unpacking if I am to make the case for how I draw upon the song “Hallelujah” and especially this phrase, “Broken Hallelujah,” for thinking about pop culture in relation to faith. “Broken Hallelujah” offers a wonderfully poetic shorthand, a way into a fundamental view of human life as a broken reality, broken beyond our ability to fix. The Christian term for this is “sin”—a concept that many people today see as an antiquated and unenlightened idea. However, that cultural shrug in response to the idea of sin usually is a reaction to the idea of sin as “sins.” The shrug throws off the presumed legacy of a medieval and psychologically damaging introspection in relation to sinful acts and impulses which modern liberated society now knows are actually normal. Like: sex is not “epilepsy” or the “influence of the devil”—it is created by God as good, and psychology and biology tells us it is supposed to feel good. Or: alcohol is not the “devil’s drink”—wine, for instance, is the beverage of the feast, and medical research tells us that in moderation it has numerous health benefits.

While some Christians focus narrowly on these sorts of issues (e.g., code morality regarding things like the sinfulness of having sex or drinking alcohol), such questionably bad acts are not what I mean when I speak of human life as broken. What I actually mean to say is that we are broken to the core. The Christian tradition sometimes calls this by a Latin phrase: *incurvatus in se*. The term literally means “the self curved in on itself.” In common parlance we call it “navel gazing.” I love the phrase because it so directly points to the human fault. It reminds me of the joke: “Well, enough about me. What do you think about me?” Add to this, then, an over-optimistic sense that we can work out some spiritual peace for ourselves (through Yoga or “just being a good person” or even by attending church). We end up with this: sins are bad acts, and if we just act better we can feel good about our relation to God and to others in our daily lives. It’s a view encapsulated in the 1970s therapy slogan, “I’m okay, your okay.”

Cohen’s song, however, is grounded in another view of life. A way to read Cohen’s meaning is that we want to pretend that we have a “holy hallelujah” to offer God when actually all we ever have is a broken hallelujah. The Christian story is that through the gift of Jesus Christ we are judged fairly, seen for what we are (navel gazers, every one of us), and despite it all, forgiven. That gift of God’s holiness, through Christ, gives us a “holy hallelujah” to sing even if our lives are always “broken.” We share in something “unbroken” if you will. Cohen gets at this beautifully in his portrayal of the one who, despite it all, is able to “stand before the Lord of Song” with “nothing on my lips but Hallelujah,” a circumstance that implies something like the Seraph putting the hot coal on Isaiah’s lips. It is a way of saying that God gives us a standing we do not earn, and a purity that is not from us, even as it begins to draw us into becoming what we were intended to be and will be in the end.

Living in this mixed state, with unclean lips yet bearing the gift of God’s purifying touch on our lips, points to another classic Latin phrase:
simul justus et peccator. We are by birth joined to a sinful world, and as sinful creatures, we are simply “peccator,” that is, sinners through and through. That means we seek ourselves even in doing good; we presume that we are good, worthy, and righteous because of our own good acts. Or, more likely, we just love our selves and our pleasures so much that we don't really care either about other people or about doing good. Britney Spears's recent anthem, recorded and released in the midst of her personal flame-out, is ironically titled “Gimme More.” It is not that I think Ms. Spears or anyone else needs to find Jesus and thereafter only sing songs of glory in the narrow sense. People who sing only hymns or explicitly spiritual songs often are those who feel the need either to earn or prove their salvation through good behavior. No, instead when we find ourselves confronted by the accusing judgment of God, and give up, literally, by dying to ourselves and being “born anew,” then we can begin to live out of a “justus,” that is, a right-ness that is not one's own but given. Then we can sing, with Cohen, “and even though it all went wrong / I'll stand before the Lord of Song / with nothing on my lips but Hallelujah.”

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NO SIGN

No rain has fallen from forty day gray sky.

No ark rises on the flood of its absence to the top of a mountain.

No sign of peace today.

Steven Schroeder
"Can you tell me where the votin' place is?"

The simple question from the tall, weary-looking, slightly disheveled African American man took me off-guard that Tuesday morning. As he approached me on the street as I was returning home from casting my ballot, I braced myself to be hit up for a hand-out. Instead, as I looked into his tired eyes and heard his slightly slurred voice, it hit me that this was one thirsty man asking someone who clearly had access to the well where he could find water. I pointed him in the direction of the junior high school that served as our local polling place, but even as he went on his way, he stayed with me all day.

Perhaps it was the contrast he provided to what I had witnessed earlier as I walked into the schoolyard gates to join my fellow voters, a line of about twenty people of all ages and races standing outside the school patiently waiting to enter. A well-dressed white woman pulled up to the gate in her shiny new SUV and asked to park on the school grounds so she could run in and out quickly to cast her vote. The people at the gate explained that parking there was reserved only for poll workers and school personnel but that she could park for free on the other side of the narrow, one-way street. Looking at the economically distressed neighborhood and the (briskly moving) line, she announced that she couldn't possibly do that and that she would just have to forgo voting this year, and then she went on her way.

Granted, the immediate surroundings of this particular school are not the finest that Washington, DC has to offer. It is certainly less "gentrified" than my own Lincoln Park neighborhood, five blocks away, and it has far fewer services and businesses to offer its residents. Drug violence and street crime are also more common here, but certainly neither she nor her vehicle were in any danger, particularly on Election Day. Many of the folks who live there look more like the man I met on the way out than like me or this woman who chose not to vote out of fear for her Lexus and the "inconvenience" she might have to endure—such as standing in line for a few minutes with the mixed-race couple who were bringing their toddler son into the polls to see what Americans do on the first Tuesday in November every four years.

Of course, I don't really know what was in her heart or mind or Blackberry that day, nor do I know the story of the man who approached me on the street. I do know, however, that when the TV networks announced at 11 PM Eastern time that Barack Obama had been elected president of the United States, millions of Americans felt that they had found the water they had long been seeking.

Many of the "good-news" days, by contrast, such as the first man walking on the moon or the nation's Bicentennial, are inspiring but seem to carry less emotional weight. They have less obviously enduring effects on our national psyche and are not necessarily transformative, for good or ill. The election and inauguration of Barack Obama

David Lott

Many of the milestone days we remember over the past century are those marked by violence and tragedy: the assassinations of JFK, RFK, and MLK; Pearl Harbor; the stock market crash of 1929; the onset of the Gulf and Iraq Wars. These days stick with us, not only because of the immediate traumas but also for the long-lasting impacts on our common life. 9/11/01 is perhaps even more of a terrible and ambiguous touchstone than it might otherwise have been, because it spawned not only two wars, but also intense battles over privacy, torture, and military interventionism.

Many of the "good-news" days, by contrast, such as the first man walking on the moon or the nation's Bicentennial, are inspiring but seem to carry less emotional weight. They have less obviously enduring effects on our national psyche and are not necessarily transformative, for good or ill. The election and inauguration of Barack Obama
seems to mark the end of the legacy of 9/11—if not an immediate end to the ongoing effects of the Bush administration’s policies, necessarily, then to the political mind-set that nurtured, and even celebrated, the undermining of national values and human decency. In many ways, these events have felt like the “anti-9/11.” The dates of 11/04/08 and of 1/20/09 may not stick in the mind like 9/11, but they have the potential to be remembered as the first good-news days in a long time, days that have effects as lasting as those of other, bad-news days.

Like many others, I am still haunted by memories of the emptiness of Washington’s streets that day when I walked a long five miles home through the heart of the city—empty except for police and military personnel. On a beautiful day, people holed up in their homes in fear, glued to their televisions, filled with anger, grief, and tension. By contrast, on 11/04/08, masses of Washingtonians poured out into the streets, gathering at the White House and overtaking the area around 14th and U Streets NW—home to what was once known as the nation’s “black Broadway”—an area only lately coming back from the post-King assassination riots. And on 1/20/09, nearly 1.8 million people from all over the country gathered on the Washington National Mall to witness Barack Obama take the oath of office—free from fear, free to rejoice rather than cowed by dire pronouncements or lulled by anodyne exhortations to go shopping.

As momentous, exciting, and extraordinary as Obama’s inauguration has been, perhaps the greater meaning of this day is that such an occasion will never again need to be so important. Over the next four years, as we become accustomed to seeing President Obama carrying out the duties of his office—meeting with world leaders, presiding over national celebrations, comforting citizens in tragedy, and confronting national and international crises—the racial significance of the inaugural events, which is still so fresh and great, will gradually fade. And that’s good news. There are still other barriers yet to be broken—for women, for Asians, for Latinos, for sexual minorities, and others—but with this inauguration we again were reminded that these barriers can be broken.

Nevertheless, we do rejoice in this inauguration, and, if you are like me, your eyes well up with each new story of a person who experienced or witnessed racial discrimination and now finds some redeeming power in Obama’s ascendance to the presidency. Reverend Joseph Lowery said it best in his inaugural benediction, when he quoted from James Weldon Johnson’s “Lift Every Voice
and Sing”—though I think the most apt part may be from the verse he did not cite:

Yet, with a steady beat
Have not our weary feet
Come to the place for which our parents sighed?

In commemorating these good-news days, Christians need to remember what the “real” good news comprises: good news to the poor, release to the captives, the blind recovering sight, letting the oppressed go free. That is not something that Barack Obama or any other politician can do. But with our words and our service we can hold our country accountable for policies which assure that the good news announced in this momentous election and inauguration also translates into those biblical marks of the good news coming to pass among us and in the world.

Most immediately, that means paying attention to how we conduct ourselves in the midst of our world economic crisis. With the various financial and housing market bailouts and economic stimulus packages, there has been not a small amount of loud protests from people and “experts” wondering why they, the “responsible” ones, should have to help those who did not behave so well. The temptations to meanness and lack of charity are certainly rife, and these are surely being stoked by talk radio, the blogosphere, and other media sources. Indeed, some make it seem that scorning, if not punishing, these who are now characterized as “the least among us” is our patriotic duty and what we owe future generations. And even when punitive measures are taken off the menu, it’s all too easy to back away in fear, or turn our heads in denial, or just say, “It’s not worth it.”

The temptation is always before us to pull up to the gate and decide the risk or inconvenience is too much. But, as Martin Luther said, “We are all mere beggars asking other beggars where to find bread.” Or water. Or refuge.

Or, “Can you tell me where the votin’ place is?”

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President Franklin Roosevelt came clean with Fireside Chat No. 9; he admitted that the Judiciary Reorganization Bill of 1937 was the "court packing" plan everyone knew it to be. He had presented the bill, which would have allowed him to appoint an additional justice to the Supreme Court for every justice over seventy years old, as necessary to allow the elderly and overworked judiciary to handle its case load. When this subterfuge was met with skepticism across the ideological spectrum, President Roosevelt attempted to impress upon the nation the critical need for the Court to support legislation increasing the role of the federal government in economic matters. The United States had just pulled itself out of an economic crisis and the Court was striking down the very solutions that the voters had approved overwhelmingly. Congress and the President needed to take action to save the Court from itself and the nation from the Court.

Even viewed from today, in an era of expanding executive power, Fireside Chat No. 9 is a breathtakingly direct assault on a coordinate branch of the federal government.

Many people believe our current economic crisis finds its nearest American analog in the 1930s, and President Obama is said to face challenges similar to those confronting President Roosevelt. Perhaps it is not surprising that some commentators are calling for a modern-day court-packing scheme. But what is surprising is that they are right—and it has nothing to do with the economy, the ideological drift of the Court, or the current occupant of the White House.

At least two Supreme Court justices are expected to step down during President Obama’s first term. When they do, choosing their replacements will spark fierce political battles. And no wonder, considering that each new justice will be a powerful political actor who will have almost no external accountability and who could retain office for decades.

The observation that Supreme Court appointments are highly political is nothing new. Just look to *Advice and Consent: The Politics of Judicial Appointments* by Lee Epstein and Jeffrey Segal (Oxford 2005) for a thorough analysis of the wide range of political forces at work in the appointment process (and a less-than-satisfying account of how political forces affect actual decisions). In this quick read, Epstein and Segal cover a lot of ground around the simple point that judges are political actors. One is never quite sure whether this is a premise or a conclusion, but the ground they cover is fascinating nonetheless. The authors draw on an array of examples to illustrate the political considerations facing the relevant actors—the President, Senators, political parties, legal organizations, interest groups, the appointees themselves—and how these considerations bump up against each other in the process of selecting new justices.

Of course the process is political. It is, in fact, a part of our political system. But Epstein and Segal go further; they provide evidence that individual justices make decisions within a fairly predictable range on the usual conservative/liberal spectrum. We know this, too. The authors steal their own thunder by quoting newspaper editorials from throughout our history making the obvious connection between the political inclinations of the justices and the policy implications of their decisions.

There are still many interesting questions to be asked regarding the effects of ideology on decision-making. Recent scholarship—more in the realm of behavioral science than political science or law—has been yielding intriguing puzzles. *Are Judges Political?* (Brookings 2006), written by Harvard Law School professor Cass Sunstein (who has been ap-
pointed by President Obama to head the Office of Information and Regulatory Affairs) and others, looks at how a judge's decisions are affected by other judges' ideologies. Drawing on a large body of decisions by three-judge appellate panels, they find evidence of a "panel effect"—a tempering or amplification of a particular judge's expected vote depending on the ideologies of the other two judges. There are many potential explanations for this phenomenon, but I raise it to make the same simple point that Epstein and Segal seek to make: Who we pick as judges actually matters.

Although we may not fully understand the "why," we recognize the importance of an appointee's outlook, and we try to predict an appointee's future behavior by inquiries into past behavior, exhaustive interviews, and ideological litmus tests. And then the seemingly intractable battles begin.

The stakes are high, and they are getting higher. Although Epstein and Segal contend that these political considerations have not changed—politics are politics—they admit that the landscape certainly has changed. There has been a marked increase in press attention to the appointment process, with national papers running multiple-page spreads on potential appointees when a vacancy is on the horizon. Add to this the increased involvement of media-savvy interest groups, and the amplified media coverage gets vitriolic.

This increases the risk for political actors. As the public becomes more aware of the choices, and those choices take on ideological overtones, politicians must be cognizant of how the public perceives their stance with respect to the appointees. So in addition to being a very important battle for a very powerful office, judicial nominations become proxy wars for other ideological and partisan battles.

But the stakes don't need to be this high.

A group of legal experts from across the political spectrum recently sent four proposals to Washington, urging reform of the judicial branch.* Although the Third Branch was created by the Constitution, its actual composition and structure was first articulated by the Judicial Act of 1789 and remains within the control of Congress.

One of these proposals suggests regular appointments of new justices to the Supreme Court. Every two years, a new justice would be appointed. To get around the Constitutional requirement of life tenure for judges, the proposal envisions a continuing but diminished role for justices who don't retire when their spot comes up for re-appointment.

The experts who are advancing this proposal want to keep the High Court fresh—to make sure that "the Court's many important policy decisions will reflect the moral and political values of the contemporary citizens they govern." While this rationale smacks of results-oriented overreaching like President Roosevelt's, regular appointments would have the beneficial effect of lowering the stakes. This is a move in the right direction, but eighteen years on the Supreme Court followed by "a continuing but diminished role" is still a big deal; the stakes would be lower, but materially so.

This proposal could be effective if combined with an increase in the size of the Supreme Court, diluting individual votes and complicating the overly binary distinctions between party appointments. This would not decrease the importance of the Supreme Court. Unlike President Roosevelt, I am not advocating a "rebalancing" of the branches of government. Rather, I am suggesting that we decrease the importance of any particular justice so that potential compromises are allowed room to develop and the appointment process becomes less of a proxy war for general ideological disagreements.

In order to succeed, such a proposal would need a built-in time delay. This would demonstrate to the minority party that this is not an opportunistic subterfuge like President Roosevelt's "old age" yarn. Behind a veil of ignorance regarding who would immediately benefit from additional appointments, a debate over the long-term merits of a larger court and regular appointments might have a chance of moving us in the right direction.†

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* A copy of the proposal for reform of the judiciary discussed in this column can be accessed at: http://paulcarrington.com/Four Proposals for a Judiciary Act.htm.
in memoriam

Richard John Neuhaus, 1936–2009

The death notices for my friend and colleague Richard John Neuhaus, who succumbed to cancer on 8 January at age seventy-two, all emphasized the two great transitions in his life: in politics from Left to Right and in religious affiliation from Lutheran to Catholic. Most of what was written about the two moves was more or less accurate, but there is more, I think, to be said about both of them, and also about another, related, move that has drawn little attention.

Like most people, Richard emphasized the continuities in his ideas and beliefs. He spoke often of the personal quadrilateral that, in his mind, had remained steadily in place over the decades: he always regarded himself as theologically orthodox, culturally conservative, politically liberal, and economically pragmatic. There was some truth in that package, of course, but its terms, the last two in particular, had a certain amount of slippage in them.

His liberalism shifted over time from collectivist to classical—Galbraithian to Lockean in intellectual shorthand—and there was in fact not much in common between them but the term itself. Similarly, his pragmatism in economics flirted with socialism early in his career and wound up sympathetic to the free market and suspicious of government intervention.

There was, in other words, considerable discontinuity between the youthful radical and the mature neoconservative. Richard touched on this briefly on occasion, but he never, to my knowledge, addressed in detail the reasons for his drift to the Right. When pressed on the matter, he would emphasize two things.

First, there was the Left’s insistent pro-choice position on abortion, a stance he—rightly, in my view—viewed as radically inconsistent with its self-definition as defender of those in society most vulnerable and in need of protection. For Richard, defense of the unborn was the overriding issue of our time, and from first to last he never wavered or wearied in the pro-life cause. From Roe v. Wade onward, abortion assumed a prominent place in the Left-Right divide in America, and Richard felt himself compelled to reconsider his political allegiances accordingly.

Second, he was dismayed when many of his former allies in the anti-Vietnam War movement refused to join with him in condemning the tyranny imposed by the Hanoi regime after its victory over the South in 1975. The failure of a good part of the Left to face up to the implications of the war’s outcome led him to a broader rethinking of Cold War issues, and by the 1980s, Richard was a strong anti-Communist committed to the formulation that, “on balance, and considering the alternatives, the United States is a
force for good in the world.” That statement may not sound all that controversial today, but at the time it drove many of his erstwhile friends on the Left to distraction, and it hardened the alienation between them.

Abortion and the aftermath of Vietnam: both major issues, and taken together they form a plausible explanation for Richard’s defection from the Left. But that explanation has never entirely satisfied me, and I have always suspected that there was something more involved. Which brings us back to theology, which for Richard always took precedence over politics.

I am not speaking here of his movement from Lutheran to Catholic. That had nothing of politics in it. There were personal issues involved. He was finding it increasingly difficult to sustain within Lutheranism his dual vocation as pastor and as public intellectual. But in the end, his was an ecclesial decision. He had over the years come to accept Rome’s view that it was, as he so often put it, the church of Jesus Christ most fully and rightly ordered through time.

Acceptance of that claim had theological implications, of course, but it did not require a fundamental reordering of his theological universe. He had always been Catholic in his sensibilities—already in his Lutheran years he was widely known as Father Richard—and for him the upper-casing of his Catholicism was more a fulfillment than a conversion. His more astute Catholic parishioners detected Lutheran accents in his homilies, and, in basic theological inclination, he was always more Augustinian than Thomist.

That is not to suggest that his decision was in any way equivocal or anything less than wholehearted. From the time he became a Catholic, I never heard him utter a single reservation about the teachings of the Catholic Church on any matter whatsoever. He was as a Catholic priest what he had never been as a Lutheran pastor: a fully obedient servant of his church. He found in Rome an authority to which he could happily bend his will and in the priesthood an identity more complete than any he had known.

Becoming Catholic did not change Richard’s politics. His turn to the Right long preceded active consideration of a journey to Rome. But there were, I think, theological influences in the evolution of his attitude toward political affairs.

He was always, as he claimed, “theologically orthodox” in the sense that throughout his career he consciously placed himself within the great tradition of Catholic Christian belief and affirmation. He never reduced credal claims to social ethics. But the young pastor caught up in the 1960s’ crusades against war and racism supposed a closer integration of history and eschatology than would later be the case. He usually acknowledged the tension between “the now and the not yet,” but as late as the mid-1970s, he conceded that his view of politics “assumes a more unified notion of history and the salvation promised to history” than the classic two kingdoms tradition rooted in St. Augustine. Indeed, he went so far as to argue in Time Toward Home (1975) that “all of history is redemptive history or none of history is redeemed.” His provocative credo in the 1960s insisted that “any gospel that is not social is no gospel at all.”

The moral and political certainty implicit in all this is far removed from the sensibility that would lead him, in his last hurrah as a Lutheran in 1990, to urge the ELCA and the LCMS to close down their political advocacy offices in Washington. Critics to his Left would charge that, writing in First Things and elsewhere as a “theocon,” he simply transferred his theologically-charged moral urgency from one side of the political spectrum to the other. But that is not actually the case. He vigorously contended for his sociopolitical conservatism, and he obviously thought it compatible with his religious beliefs, but he was more cautious as a conservative in drawing direct lines between politics and theology than he had been as an advocate of the Left.

On certain contested moral issues, abortion preeminent among them, the imperatives of the natural law—accessible to all people of good will, religious or not—left little room for political accommodation, but for the most part, Richard was Niebuhrian in his acceptance of the moral ambiguities of politics. (It is true, however, that he took sometimes inordinate pleasure in pointing out to those still on the Left the susceptibility to political idolatry—and general moral
fecklessness— that he found characteristic of their ideology. Richard's politics dropped their transcendent claims but not their combative edge.

Richard was a complicated man, not least in his attitude toward politics and public life. Intensely competitive by nature, he was forever keeping score and forever working to see his side prevail. Yet another side of him genuinely disparaged political maneuvering and felt that preoccupation with politics tended to coarsen one's intellectual and moral perceptions.

As he grew older, that latter perspective came to predominate (though he never could stop keeping score). Over the course of his career, he worked to disinvest himself of commitment to politics. He was proud of his achievements as a public intellectual but took his deepest satisfaction in being a Catholic priest. He was pleased when I told him I thought his Lenten devotion, Death on a Friday Afternoon, the best and most important work he had ever done. That was the kind of writing, he said, he wanted most to do. His repeated insistence that the Eucharistic table was the axis mundi expressed his deepest conviction of the truth of things. It was finally there, and not in politics—however construed—that you changed the world.

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A LONG NIGHT BEFORE MORNING
GREENVILLE, ILLINOIS

Morning is in the trees in the upper garden you raised on the rocky field and worked last summer, and soon it will slide down the smooth alders into the pond, waking the geese who stayed the winter with us.

From the kitchen window, I watch the old horse come up from the fields for her carrots and oats,—and when the heat rises shimmering and wet, I'll turn the cows into the pasture, their bags swaying comically as they go in a line to the creek where they will chew their cud in the cool water.

The rest of the day will go without notice, full of lists saying to stay busy. Watch the weather, one said. Mornings will be best. But after the last words by the new grave, and the pressure of their bodies against me, there is still the awful silence in the house, and a long night before morning.

J. T. Ledbetter
Wanting to be a *Slumdog Millionaire*

Charles Andrews

The sappy contrivance that critics derided in *A Life Less Ordinary* has become a central component of Boyle’s oeuvre. Few directors seem as capable as Boyle of jumping between flashy, gritty projects (like the excellent blood-fest *28 Days Later* [2002]) into cheery, sincere ones (like the earnestly Christian, family-oriented film *Millions* [2004]). Prior to *Slumdog Millionaire*, Boyle made *Sunshine* (2007), a futuristic fantasy about a crew of astronauts attempting to reignite the dying sun. The film was strongest in its slower, meditative beginning which borrowed heavily from Andrei Tarkovsky, and, in my judgment, fumbled in the third act which played like a contrived *Aliens* redux or the worst of Paul Verhoeven’s *Hollow Man*. The rapid shifts between the sweet (though not quite saccharine) and the brutal (though not quite depraved) occurs not just between Boyle’s films but within them.

*Slumdog Millionaire* achieves a similar feel to Boyle’s other films by mixing equal parts sweetness and brutality in a signature visual style. The flashy editing, whip-pan camera movement, and montages set to pulse-pounding tunes are familiar techniques from *Trainspotting*, and the bright color palette recalls *Millions* and *The Beach* (2000). Boyle’s narrative draws upon the conventions of popular Hindi cinema—colloquially known as Bollywood—but these conventions were already at play in his earlier films.

The film’s Oscars and other prestigious awards might tempt us to see *Slumdog Millionaire* as belonging to a tradition of more serious Indian cinema, but the parallels with Bollywood style are readily apparent. In critical evaluations, a divide seems to exist between India’s high culture productions, whose leading figure is Satyajit Ray (*The Apu Trilogy* [1955–1959], *The Home and the World* [1984]), and the more popular forms that account...
for the majority of movie-making in India. The hallmarks of Bollywood movies are melodramatic plotlines, blends of action-romance-comedy-pathos, long run-times, and musical sequences. Stars in the Bollywood system dance though colorful production numbers while lip-synching to songs sung by “playback artists,” pop music stars whose recordings may be sold well before the film is released and account for a major percentage of its profits.

While filmmakers like Baz Luhrman (Moulin Rouge! [2001]) have reached mass audiences in American and European markets with Bollywood-inspired films, and some Indian filmmakers have translated their aesthetic into Western forms (as Shekhar Kapur did with his films Elizabeth [1998] and its sequel The Golden Age [2007]), attempts to create crossover hits like Gurinder Chadha’s Bride & Prejudice (2004), starring one of Bollywood’s biggest stars Aishwarya Rai, have been middling at best. The success of Slumdog Millionaire may mark a turning point in this trend.

Slumdog Millionaire was adapted from the novel Q & A by Vikas Swarup, but the original structure is borrowed from the game show Who Wants to be a Millionaire? which originated in Britain and has nearly a dozen international versions. At each stage of the film, the tension ratchets up another notch in much the same pattern as the show itself. Our hero Jamal (Dev Patel), a street kid (or “slumdog”) with little formal education, faces impossible trivia which he miraculously answers using knowledge gained from his painful life in the Mumbai slums. Each question prompts a flashback, which for the viewer turns the narrative into a kind of guessing game—when will the crucial detail pop into frame and give Jamal his answer?

Though this narrative seems somewhat mechanical, the hooks are compelling, and the characters have enough richness and texture to keep us attentive to them rather than to the self-consciously nifty plotting. Jamal’s relationship with his shrewd, often-sinister brother Salim (Madhur Mittal) is complex and tortured, and the love triangle formed among the brothers and Latika (Freida Pinto), a girl who shares their slum life, lends greater poignancy to the film’s inevitable ending.

Most interesting is how this narrative tries to contain the realistic horrors of India’s urban poverty in conventions more fitting to light musical theater. Some scenes, particularly those involving graphic violence toward children, are stomach-turning, yet they serve a romantic plotline which is joyful at its core. Of course, the lives of actual Indian poor children may include joy and romance. In his memoir Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found (2004), Suketu Mehta writes: “We tend to think of a slum as an excrescence, a community of people living in perpetual misery. What we forget is that out of inhospitable surroundings, the people have formed a community, and they are as attached to its spatial geography, the social networks they have built for themselves, the village they have re-created in the midst of the city, as a Parisian might be to his quartier or as I was to Nepean Sea Road” (55).

But though the film presents Mumbai slum life as awful, there remains about it a stylized,
Dickensian sort of awfulness, where children gather in gangs run by a Fagin and spurred by artful dodgers. This is not the slumdog life of Mira Nair’s *Salaam Bombay!* (1988) which approached the setting with a seriousness indebted to the Italian neo-realists of the 1940s. Poverty for Nair (as for Rossellini, Visconti, de Sica, *et al.*) was depressing and dehumanizing and could be diminished through appropriate social action. For these filmmakers, the cinema was a place to teach the world about horrors unfathomable to those outside their given conditions, and through that teaching, real social change might be possible. *Salaam Bombay!* even ends with contact information for agencies trying to alleviate the suffering of homeless children.

*Slumdog Millionaire*, on the other hand, has less didactic aims and focuses more upon the romance of slum life which even the grittiest moments of the film serve to amplify. Mehta’s *Maximum City* included unforgettable descriptions of toilets in Mumbai, most of which overflow because of the extraordinary population density and minimal attention to sanitation. Toilets like these play an equally unforgettable part in one gross-out sequence of *Slumdog Millionaire*, but the scene is played more for squirms and giggles than as a serious critique of urban administrative failure. Likewise, the villainous crime lords who complicate the lives of our protagonists engage in vile activities—child prostitution and torture are most prominent—but these elements add weight to their threat without presenting them as insurmountable obstacles to the ultimate happiness of our leads.

And yet, for all of its backing away from serious political implications, *Slumdog Millionaire* is hard to dislike, largely because of its sincere heart. The film is undeniably a companion piece to Boyle’s *Millions*, an echo even heard in their titles. Faith is central to both films, and both similarly engage real-life horrors without flinching, yet never allow the central characters to face serious consequences from these horrors. While *Millions* pits secular, capitalist ambitions against a socially-conscious, Roman Catholic vision of charity, *Slumdog Millionaire* stages Hindu-Muslim violence as central to Jamal’s young life, and the story is framed by his inscription within Qur’an-like prophecy. Fantasies of wealth among the working classes are also central to these films, much as the Oscars themselves indulge a collective fantasy about watching artists gather amid swirls of wealth and fame.

In a recent segment of Charlie Rose’s roundtable interview show, the film critics David Denby and A. O. Scott discussed the 2008 Academy Award nominees. The Academy nods, Scott reminded us, do not reflect true merit but rather reflect “how the Academy wants to present itself.” This observation goes into a long list of truisms about the Oscars that includes chestnuts about the length, tackiness, and self-indulgence of the ceremony—not to mention the fact that the whole event is merely a commercial designed to sell more movie tickets, DVDs, merchandise, and designer clothes. Regarding this year’s best picture winner, the cynical edge to Scott’s comment is that the Academy is not really multi-culturally aware, aesthetically adventurous, or morally conscious but once a year merely pretends to champion all of these virtues.

At the very least, we might take heart that the heap of awards garnered by Danny Boyle’s *Slumdog Millionaire* may indicate a broadening awareness of transnational cinema. You may need to go back as far as 1987 when Bernardo Bertolucci’s *The Last Emperor* won the best picture award with a largely non-European cast to find a major Oscar winner with this sort of cultural hybridity. At the fanciful and fantastical core of Danny Boyle’s Bollywood-inspired film is a set of tropes—love conquering all, rags-to-riches, underdogs prevailing—that seem to have cross-cultural appeal. To touch upon realistic horrors without examining them, to provoke our sympathies and culminate with a neat happy ending, to cram a movie full of cinematic delights—these are the goals of Bollywood and Hollywood alike, and *Slumdog Millionaire* is evidence of truly transnational desire.

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Wandering Roads


Almost two thirds of the way through Michael Ondaatje's most recent novel, *Divisadero*, the reader encounters a scene in which a road that two characters are following is submerged in a river ford: “They merge,” Ondaatje writes, “the river and the road, like two lives, a tale told backwards and a tale told first” (167). This image of routes that mingle and merge resonates in a book whose plots also flow both forward and backward, with one of the interlocking narratives winding into and then pushing back, unfolding the others, so that—as in the image of the crossed river and road—one's sense of direction begins to break down. For all this resonance, the image is both curiously belated and understated, and, as such, it is of a piece with a novel that seems designed to frustrate rather than fulfill a reader's expectations of what a novel will be and will do.

Ondaatje's earlier novels often reveal a preference for mosaic, both in terms of their formal structure (in his early and experimental *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid* and *Coming Through Slaughter*, where snatches of dialogue, journalism, history, and lament mingle) and in their plots, where characters' experiences are often juxtaposed to create jeweled, if sometimes opaque, surfaces. *Divisadero* features a plot whose multiple tributaries do indeed intersect, as the image of the flooded road suggests, though Ondaatje leaves wide open the question of what that intersection amounts to. In the opening pages, three almost-siblings, Anna, Claire, and Coop, grow up under their father's watchful eyes on a farm in Petaluma, California in the 1970s. Their father lost his wife in childbirth and adopted Claire a few days afterward, at the same hospital where Anna was born. Years later, he takes in Coop after the boy's family is murdered. These improvised ties prove vulnerable: Anna and Coop fall into a love affair whose discovery by the father prompts a storm of violence. Coop is beaten almost to death, saved only when Anna stabs her father, seriously but not fatally. Tended briefly by Claire, Coop disappears; Anna herself runs away. Though the novel picks up each of their lives later, the family is, even at this early stage in the book, definitively shattered.

When we rediscover Coop he is learning how to become a cardsharp, sliding haphazardly into a high-stakes life of crime. Anna resurfaces in one of the book's other plots as—rather implausibly, given that she disappears from Petaluma in the cab of a stranger's tractor-trailer—a Berkeley-trained scholar with an interest in an obscure French poet. Claire, whose story constitutes the most definitive cul-de-sac in a book strewn with useless specificity, works as a research assistant in a public defender's office and spends weekends roaming the California hills on horseback. In the second main narrative, we follow Anna's research in the Gers region of France into the life of the poet Lucien Segura and her involvement with a local man who as a boy knew Segura and whose own history we see in passing flashes. The third narrative—as the river flows backward, the last plot being the earliest in time—follows Segura's own early years as a child and then a young man, lingering over an episode of almost unrequited love and the later dissolution of his own family life.

As if that weren't enough, interspersed with these plots the reader is offered brief glimpses into still more lives, which are presented rather like flashes of some complicated landscape seen from the windows of a train. We see the delicate labor of Lucien's mother Odile's second husband,
a clock-maker; the foreboding venality of a band of born-again gamblers whom Coop too casually cons; a nightmarish gallop through a forest taken as a boy by Anna's lover, Rafael, when his horse was spooked by an eclipse. Amongst the excess of detail, some elements of the plots echo one another. Sexual infidelity, freak weather, and shards of glass link the narratives. Even motifs from other Ondaatje novels repeat. Like The English Patient, Divisadero features a good-hearted thief and a night-time visit to a church. As in In the Skin of a Lion, we see a man at work dangling from a great height, the world made small around him.

Tracking the swirling currents of plot in Divisadero, however, imposes too much solidity on a text that, on the level of structure and of plot, is about fluidity—life as Heraclitean flux or, in the spirit of Coming Through Slaughter, jazz improvisation, the mosaic of detail arranging and rearranging itself. While Ondaatje has always been interested in formal experimentation—even The English Patient, perhaps the most conventional of his novels, had to be pared of much of its poetry to succeed as cinematic melodrama—Divisadero bluntly whets our appetite for the satisfactions of novelistic fullness and then yanks away our plate.

In an early sequence, Claire enters a barn to find a horse loose and Anna injured and is then knocked down herself. The two are only saved by the appearance of Coop, whose confusion of the girls' identities is dreamily noted by the semi-conscious Claire. But nothing much develops out of this sequence, just as nothing much develops out of the early attention the novel lavishes on the girls' relationship. In annual family photos, Anna remembers, "One became more beautiful, or reclusive, one became more self-conscious, or anarchic. We were revealed and betrayed by our poses" (17). But the tensions in this relationship, though hinted at when Claire later crosses paths with but cannot save Coop as he descends into a shadowy criminal world, remain unexplored. Coop's story itself dead-ends just before the image of the road hidden by water obtrudes into the narrative, and the novel at that point plunges into the story of Lucien Segura and doesn't look back. Yet even if the novel's heart is arguably in the Segura story—a romance narrative in mid-twentieth century European countryside, a return of sorts to the landscape of The English Patient—the denial of the ordinary satisfactions of plot remains the same. Divisadero echoes and shimmers with images and bits of language that never quite assemble themselves into a whole, a patterned formlessness with which the book seems explicitly concerned: "the raw truth of an episode never ends," Anna observes toward the end of the novel (267).

To the extent that Anna's passing remark comments on what, precisely, the satisfactions of plot are, it sheds some light on what exactly Ondaatje is doing in Divisadero. If the truth eludes closure—it "never ends"—it eludes too being understood as the product of an immaculate causality that is plot's persistent promise: that decisions close a circuit with results, that the present engineers a sturdy bridge to the future. In this novel, characters find themselves across the river with no clear sense of how they navigated the gap. They tend to operate by whim rather than principle: Coop, overreaching himself in a consummate con, "looks up at the eye in the sky"—the closed-circuit casino camera that has taped his fraud—"that he knows... never captured what he has already done, and waves to it" (58). It's a foolish gesture, but the novel repeatedly honors the substitution of gesture for action, the aestheticization rather than the actual living of life. If such aestheticization seems profligate, it also, the book makes clear, is faithful to the way people attempt to sublimate the potentially dreary slog of life—of prosaic narrative—into the illumined instant of art.

Even when characters themselves elaborate gesture into plot, moreover, the novel makes clear that doing so is only an exercise in wish fulfillment incompatible with real life. Toward the end of the novel, Lucien Segura transubstantiates an imperfect real-life romance with the wife of his neighbor into a dashing adventure series whose publication makes his fortune. But Ondaatje's gift here is to suggest how Segura's act is at once vital and hopeless. "Lucien gave his readers the happiness of a resolution," Ondaatje writes (263), but Segura's lover is dead, and his novels' success gives him the financial wherewithal to abandon his own family. The satisfactions of fiction thus fit poorly with real life but, paradoxically, are what
make that life worth living. In Divisadero, we see characters half-aware that their lives are only a kind of raw material of narrative, caught between sadness and delight in the fact that the truth only emerges as the lie of an invented plot. "[T]he terrain of my sister's life and the story of my time with Coop are endless to me," Anna writes near the end of the book (267). Like any novel, Divisadero grapples with how to bound that endlessness into a coherent form. By refusing fully to do so, and by thus compromising the fiction of novelistic realism, it aims to remain true to the aimless, formless beauty of real life.  

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Santa Ynez Mountains

When the sky gives way to sun
it's because clouds forget themselves.

The madrone below will tell you
each thing is loved in the wind
if only we sit, listen as dusk falls.

This moment may find a hole,
branch out, grow full in the silence
if I don't look too hard.

Mule deer off the canyon trail
forage thimbleberry. Along hillsides,
in the shade of leaning alders, a run
of water draws closer to the sea,
guessing each rock on the way home.

Following could lead us anywhere.

James Lee
Two natural disasters form the historical banks of the Mississippi Delta blues. One is the Flood of 1927, which served as subject matter for so many artists and marks the beginning of record labels’ interest in the area. The other is the stock market Crash of 1929, which brought all recording activity to an end. Between these two events, reports Ted Gioia in Delta Blues (Norton 2008), the major record companies launched no fewer than seventeen talent searches to Atlanta alone, and they canvassed many cities even closer to the Delta proper, such as Jackson and Clarksdale, looking for African-American artists. A sound was arising from plantation shacks and juke joints that would change music as we know it, yet this sound itself evades knowing. Even its contents suggest deeper levels of experience and conception than the surface narrative is willing to commit to. As Gioia so memorably puts it, “the familiar ‘I woke up this morning’—the opening phrase of so many blues songs—is never just ‘I woke up this morning.’” This “submerged region” of emotion and meaning is “the true psychological terrain of the blues.”

Gioia’s enjoyable book acknowledges the many volumes of blues scholarship, advocacy, biography, and discography that have tried to make sense of this sound. He is in the fortunate position of being able to weave together three marvelous epics of talent and tenacity: the mysterious origins of pre-war Delta blues and its brief ascendency, the musical lives of those practitioners who made it out of the Delta, and the emergence of the “folk blues revival” of the 1960s that reinstated many of these careers and established new ones. This means his cast of characters is large; the names of such researchers, writers, record collectors, and promoters as Dick Waterman, Peter Guralnick, and Dave Evans become as important as those of the musicians whose art they preserved and protected. There are so many adventures, in fact, unfolding simultaneously that it is a wonder Gioia holds it all together in one very readable narrative.

The book is not without its oversights. Gioia takes care throughout to mention trajectories of influence with each major blues artist, often reminding us which rock band covered what Delta classic, but he completely misses the Fleetwood Mac connection when discussing Elmore James. Thanks to guitarist/vocalist Jeremy Spencer, “Shake Your Money Maker,” “The Sun is Shining,” and other blues number became late-1960s concert faves in England. The fanatical Spencer even wrote a few Elmore James songs himself!

Gioia’s use of backtracking and repetition also hangs him up, such as when he reminds readers of the Muddy Waters-Johnny Winter partnership, saying it originated “around the same time” as B. B. King’s breakthrough to young white audiences at the Fillmore in 1967. However, the author already had established in an earlier chapter that these events occurred nine years apart. 1976 is a stretch for “around the same time.”

And Gioia errs on the side of literality when it comes to one of John Lee Hooker’s greatest hits: “Boom Boom” is not the man’s contribution to “the distinguished Delta tradition of songs about firearms” but his best use of the shoot-down-as-sexual-conquest metaphor, as the lyrics make clear:

Boom, boom, boom, boom  
Gonna shoot you right down  
Take you in my arms  
I’m in love with you

J. D. Buhl
I need you right now
I don’t mean tomorrow
I mean right now.

But these are minor oversights in a fine book filled with panoramic storytelling. Of particular interest is Gioia’s focus on how the story of the Delta Blues was driven by a tension between the “sacred” and the “secular.” This dichotomy was potent for many of the Delta’s finest songwriters, many of whom engaged in a real-life struggle between vocations, one to the pulpit, the other to the stage. Son House is Gioia’s favorite expression of this turmoil, and indeed the story of this “fallen preacher” is strong stuff. But many other players along the way questioned whether they should pursue a career path perceived as sinful. For a few, even touching a guitar or allowing one in their home was a major offence to their family or religious community. During the blues revival of the 1960s, the same quandary arose. Some, like the reverends Ishmon Bracey and Robert Wilkins, were satisfied; they agreed to help the young researchers, but declined to play the blues. Any efforts at reviving their careers would be in the realm of gospel music or not at all. Others, such as the great Skip James, continued to struggle, so much so that when the cancer-seared James went home to die in 1969 after his “second career,” he wondered if it had been that very return to the blues that condemned him. “James promised,” Gioia relates, “that if the Lord favored him with a return to health, he would restrict his performances to religious songs.”

Mississippi Fred McDowell, perhaps the best known and most loved of those bluesmen who shot to stardom in the 1960s, carried this burden most gracefully. The idiosyncratic bottle-neck player with the somnolent vocal style (known for saying “I don’t care if it don’t sound good to you, it sounds good to me”) never recorded during the Delta’s glory days. His reputation as a guitarist, however, spread across northern Mississippi. Gioia recounts how McDowell’s mother, before she died, asked him to give up “the sinful instrument.” McDowell obliged and did not pick up a guitar for six years. “You see I got religion,” he would say, “and I quit playing.” By the time researcher Alan Lomax came upon McDowell in the late 1950s, the old bluesman had come to terms with his twofold talent, and was in prime condition to begin a career featuring both secular and spiritual material. With his wife Annie Mae testifying by his side, the man who gave us the pounding “Louise” and “Shake ‘Em On Down,” also spread such gospel numbers as “Keep Your Lamps Trimmed and Burnin’,” “Jesus is On the Main Line,” “Amazing Grace,” and “When I Lay My Burden Down.” He contributed originals to this genre too, giving the Rolling Stones “You Gotta Move” (Sticky Fingers, 1971), and leaving us the lovely “Lord Have Mercy,” recorded for Lomax in Como, Mississippi, at the inception of his career.

The most famous story of existential gambling in the realm of Good and Evil is that of Robert Johnson, a tale that ends in total victory for Satan. Accepted legend has Johnson, a nominally talented young man enamored of the more mature playing of Son House and Willie Brown, standing as instructed at a crossroads, waiting for a mysterious black man to appear and tune his guitar. Once this encounter comes to pass, Robert finds himself endowed with blues power beyond that of his idols, elders, contemporaries, and seemingly anyone who has followed in his wayward footsteps. A Faustian bargain has taken place, of course, and after cutting twenty-nine of the most influential sides in music history, the rambling prodigal’s soul is repossessed when he dies at the hands of a killer whose identity remains unknown.

Gioia does a tremendous job of deciphering this tale. “Although the blues has been called ‘the Devil’s music,’” he writes, “it has always remained on speaking terms with the ministers of the Lord.” This essential tension is best displayed not in the work of those who played both sides, but in a tragic figure like Johnson, “whose life seemed to be lived in purely secular terms, yet whose music constantly returned to the most intense, soul-haunted themes, songs that have irrevocably shaped our image of him as a man at the crossroads between darkness and light.”

These country blues also have shaped our image of ourselves as men and women at that
same crossroads. Gioia writes early in his book that “the whole spectrum of popular music betrays the fingerprints of the blues.” There are those who will claim they hate the blues, that it is full of clichés and self-pity. But “turn on the radio and listen,” Gioia suggests with a smile; the clichés and self-pity amidst which we comfortably live originate from a far more authentic source. The truth is that many people cannot handle the blues because it is too frank, too condemning, and tolerates no bull. Gioia’s book (or any of the many others he mentions in its course) can serve as a sonic solvent, stripping the veneer from our lives of complacency and self-delusion. Each musician in the book presents a model of adaptability and creative insistence, regardless of their bad habits. The songs they sing can give voice to those yearnings we know not how to articulate and render audible the howls, sighs, and screams we keep silent. The music on our radios today has made its own deal with the Devil. It appears to meet this need and convinces us of its communicative necessity, but unlike the blues it is a music of concealment, not disclosure. Cunningly, we have over several decades substituted for the artistry of self-expression the artifice of self-protection, a product Gioia’s subjects would not recognize as music. The fingerprint of the blues may still lie upon our comfort pop, but not so as to implicate anyone.

Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* provides an unlikely illustration. With his Christian wife in protracted labor, a house in patient upheaval all around him, the not-yet-believing Levin compares this mayhem to that which surrounded his brother’s deathbed.

Yet that grief and this joy were alike beyond the ordinary conditions of life; they were openings, as it were, in that ordinary life through which there came glimpses of something sublime.

Openings unto the sublime. That is what the rough and raucous songs of Charley Patton, Son House, Skip James, and so many others appreciated in *Delta Blues* can be for us. Not because they sing praises to our Lord and King but because they give voice to the joy and grief of ordinary life that bring him so near. ✷

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rereading old books
Symbol Drain and "The West Wing"


Some things that were formerly sacred nowadays seem to have lost their luster. This is a common sentiment, as illustrated over forty years ago in one of Bob Dylan's most haunting lyrics. Cheap and garish goods, such as glow-in-the-dark statues of Jesus, evidently do contribute to our loss of the sacred. But behind Dylan's critique, and this essay, is the firm conviction that human beings desperately need the sacred as a centerpiece of our collective imaginations and vocabularies. And if indeed we've badly mangled our ability to imagine the sacred, we better do what we can to recover it. "He not busy being born is busy dying," sang Dylan.

In his masterful study of *The Sacred and the Profane*, Mircea Eliade describes the sacred as a primal, and a primary, human need. We can perceive the sacred as "the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world" (11). Even fifty years ago, when he published his book, Eliade was reporting that western cultures were losing their sense of the sacred, and he was greatly distressed about the barbaric results that might ensue from this loss. How quickly the acceleration has proceeded since then.

Disillusioned words like bullets bark
As human gods aim for their mark
Made everything from toy guns that spark
To flesh-colored Christs that glow in the dark
It's easy to see without looking too far
That not much
Is really sacred.

Bob Dylan, "It's Alright, Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)"

Today, early in the twenty-first century, it might seem commonplace that the sacred has been moved to the margins of much of our so-called "secular" society. But even this bit of "commonplace" is a recent development. Most peoples have believed in the sacred; says Eliade: "the completely profane world, the wholly desacralized cosmos, is a recent discovery in the history of the human spirit.... desacralization pervades the entire experience of the nonreligious societies and... in consequence, [one] self-identify as being "spiritual." While young people and college students by the droves are distancing themselves from the organized churches, they still have a hard time denying that built-in need for the sacred. As a frequent teacher of "spiritual" literature courses, one of the major revelations of my courses often turns out to be the way that the quintessential ideas of the sacred in American culture, such as God and the universal Body of Christ, are being systematically eviscerated of whatever sacred...
power once resided in them. These formerly sacred symbols are being drained of whatever power they once might have held. Consider the change in public perceptions of the church and Christianity over the past generation. Numerous well-publicized scandals have rocked the hierarchy of both the Catholic and the evangelical churches—and often these scandals revolve around sex with children. Furthermore, the loud and insistent public spokespersons of the Religious Right have bullied their way into partisan politics in a manner that appears to many to be sufficiently unchristian, so much so that it has had an ironically off-putting effect on many of the unchurched today.

All of this bad press helps explain why in today’s America, “spiritual” has become such a favored term. Frequently one hears from intelligent adults the distinction that they are “spiritual but not religious.” That pithy phrase has become so conspicuous that Robert C. Fuller used it as the title of his influential volume discussing the phenomenon (2001). According to Fuller, until very recently religious and spiritual were basically synonymous. But now as many as 20 percent of Americans describe themselves without irony as “spiritual, but not religious.” The abandonment of the term religious for self-identification apparently refers to the speaker’s skepticism toward “organized religion,” even though that speaker desires to be understood as a person of metaphysical curiosity and even perhaps commitment. American perceptions of religious institutions have fallen on such hard symbolic times that a fairly substantial number of Americans are choosing not to self-identify as religious anymore. “Religious” has become a nasty word for many Americans, and nowadays hardly any college students will describe themselves in public as religious. It’s just too toxic an adjective.

The swift change in public perceptions of our bedrock religious institutions reflects a phenomenon that the cultural critic Neil Postman referred to as the “Great Symbol Drain,” which he defined in his volume *Technopoly*. Postman described symbol drain as “the trivialization of significant cultural symbols.... Through prints, lithographs, photographs, and later, movies and television, religious and national symbols became commonplaces, breeding indifference, if not necessarily contempt” (165-6). Postman draws upon Daniel Boorstin’s argument in his study *The Image* (1984), as well as an older argument by the Marxist critic Walter Benjamin, to claim that the mechanical reproduction of images empties them of their powers. “One picture, we are told, is worth a thousand words. But a thousand pictures, especially if they are of the same object, may not be worth anything at all.... The extent of symbol overload and therefore symbol drain is unprecedented in human history.... The constraints are so few that we may call this a form of cultural rape, sanctioned by an ideology that gives boundless supremacy to technological progress and is indifferent to the unraveling of tradition” (166, 170).

Postman’s fiercest enemies are the agents of advertising and, much more pervasively, the lords of technology in our lives, or what he calls the lords of “Technopoly,” by which he means the monopoly of technological powers over our culture. Much of Postman’s wrath is directed at television, as in his famous critique of mass media as entertainment. But Postman’s critique came years before the emergence of the cynicism on steroids that today’s cable networks serve up, in the form of Stephen Colbert and Bill Maher, whose mission in life appears to be the complete evisceration of anything that might be considered sacred. (Postman was under the impression that someone as quaint as Johnny Carson was beyond the pale, a contrast that shows just how far we have fallen since the 1980s.) Eliade, Postman, and I all share a great sadness, and a great alarm about our culture’s strange insistence on the evisceration of our most valuable traditions and their emblems.

This phenomenon of draining previously robust and useful terms and symbols reaches well beyond the strictly religious realms of our culture. Consider the change in public perceptions of the federal government over the years. Perhaps the
The greatest symbol of American government is the White House and the office of the President. One of the great expressions of the symbolic weight of that institution was written by Walt Whitman, a man who nearly worshipped Abraham Lincoln. Whitman spent much of his time in the nation's capital during the Civil War visiting injured Union soldiers and acting as a part-time nurse of sorts. During the course of many of his days in Washington, Whitman would drift by the residence of the president and occasionally would even spot Lincoln on the streets of the city. His romantic depiction of these things captures eloquently an older version of how many Americans envisioned these lofty images: “The white portico—the palace-like, tall, round columns, spotless as snow—the walls, also—the tender and soft moonlight, flooding the pale marble... everything so white, so marbly pure and dazzling yet soft—the White House of future poems, and of dreams and dramas, there in the soft and copious moon.” Whitman’s version of the White House focuses precisely on its whiteness: its purity, innocence, and even sinlessness.

And yet, in my lifetime, the scandals associated with the presidency have been enormous, and the media coverage of those scandals unprecedented. I only want to point out what almost any American, whether left or right, should already know: numerous shameful and sickening betrayals of the public trust have been thrust upon us from the confines of that once sacred and hallowed place we call the White House. It is not so much that scandals never occurred in earlier times—but certainly the media were not as overpowering, and the administrations were better at covering them up.

Since Vietnam and Watergate, news coverage has become almost omniscient if not completely vicious. The result has been the drainage of prestige and honor from the symbolic pool of the presidency and the White House.

Since Vietnam and Watergate, news coverage has become almost omniscient if not completely vicious. The result has been the drainage of prestige and honor from the symbolic pool of the presidency and the White House. Few Americans today would be able to embrace Whitman’s description without some serious reservations. In fact, possibly the most famous image of the White House in recent popular culture was in the film “Independence Day.” Who can forget the shocking sequence of sinister aliens as they deploy their mysterious mega-weapon and blow the building to bits and pieces? At least the President got out in time, though most of his staff were left behind. The desire to obliterate the White House, unfortunately, is not so altogether alien among good tax-paying American citizens, sadly.

In this context we might consider one of the most successful and honored prime time network series of the new millennium so far, The West Wing. It was the winner of nine Emmy Awards in its first season, the most ever, and it featured some of the most thought-provoking and edifying stories in recent television memory. The idea for the series began with the success of Rob Reiner’s The American President, a film that captured many of the same emotions and which was written by Aaron Sorkin, one of the major writers for the series. The West Wing featured an excellent cast, headed by Martin Sheen as the President, and although it was Democratic and liberal in orientation, it often managed to come off as somehow beyond partisan politics. Certainly there were issues at stake in which the administration had to show its left-leaning colors: gay rights, women’s rights, capital punishment, social security, and so forth. But often The West Wing modeled a bi-partisan common sense approach that thrilled its audience by being...
precisely what we might hope our government could actually be. In this way, it managed, on many occasions, to transcend the partisan politics that characterize our government these days.

In an episode about Social Security, for example, the administration brokers a deal between Republicans and Democrats and gets no recognition for the part it plays in doing so. In another episode about gay rights, in which a high school boy is brutally tortured and killed by gay-bashers, the audience is tricked at first into imagining the father of the murdered boy as being ashamed of his dead son. Only later do we discover that the father is in fact ashamed of the abandonment of the gay community by the government—including the left-leaning White House. The function of the plot twist is to show how regular Americans really do care about individual adolescents, no matter their sexual practices—and that even politicians can be blinded by partisan stereotypes. The grieving father, imagined by the Administration (and the audience) to be some caricature of conservative homophobia because of his political and geographic particulars, is finally revealed to be the compassionate and caring parent that we all should be. Another plot development involves the hiring of a pretty blond Republican attorney by this steadfastly Democratic administration. While at first she is chastised by her colleagues, she slowly begins to see their value, just as her co-workers do begin to see hers. “These people are patriots,” she tells her snide right wing friends ridiculing the White House, “and I’m their lawyer!”

The West Wing depicted a humane, just, and extremely selfless White House—even though the show did not really pull its punches in depicting the crude infighting, the difficult relations with the media, and even the scandals that are always a part of presidential politics. The Chief of Staff is shown to have been an alcoholic and drug addict in a previous stint as Secretary of Labor; the Vice President is forced to resign due to Clinton-like sexual philandering; and even the President is depicted as having hidden his own life-threatening illness during his election campaign. In other words, this was not just a rosy and peaches and cream kind of White House. It was emphatically situated in the real political world of our day, with all its pettiness and mindless partisanship at play. Through it all, the President and his trusty staff figured out ways to maintain an ethical balance, serve the American public, and believe in the ideas at the core of America itself.

The West Wing succeeded by drawing upon two related American yearnings. First, it attempted to reinvest the great symbols of American government with the power and glory that they previously held for most Americans. Second, it did this by drawing upon the very real desire among the American public for such a reinvestment. In other words, The West Wing took advantage of the American yearning for our great symbols to be filled up again with meaning. The West Wing was a symptom of American shame and disappointment about our abandonment of what matters most to us. In a remarkable episode called “Shibboleth,” the action takes place during Thanksgiving week, and there is much inspiring talk about our history of religious freedoms. Meanwhile, a ship is discovered in San Diego carrying about a hundred refugees from China, who claim to be Christians persecuted for their faith. The President summons a representative, in order to determine the authenticity of their faith, and he is not disappointed. The refugee’s testimony is stirring and convincing, and the President arranges a political solution that both grants refuge and allows the Chinese government to save face. It is a moving episode celebrating the origins of the American mythos—and it was aired originally during the Thanksgiving season, which heightened its clout.

It is true that some critics were not as glowing in their responses to The West Wing as my discussion here. For example, in their volume Why Do People Hate America? (2003), Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies give a riveting and at times brilliant analysis of how the program relied upon Arab stereotypes and, despite the show’s supposed
left politics, was complicit in the War on Terror rhetoric of the Bush administration. And it is worth noting how the series often reinforces certain kinds of stereotypes, especially of Evangelical Christians, Republicans, and to some extent of Arabs and Muslims. There are other criticisms to be made as well.

But my point here is to focus on its positive features as a series fostering hope among Americans and attempting to reclaim the symbolic possibilities of the White House. *The West Wing* was most compelling when it combated the draining of symbolic weight of its subject and ultimately sung the song of America. The *West Wing* phenomenon is symptomatic of both the increasing suspicion toward institutional forces in our lifetimes, as well as the deep yearning to recover and act upon the sources of our most valued ideals. In short, the great symbols of our civilization have been taking a beating lately, and it is most noticeable in the public perceptions of such crucial American institutions as the church, the family, and the Presidency. So is the drainage of the symbol of our national ideal: the White House. Overall, the series constituted a powerful jeremiad calling America back to its sacred ideals, and it reminded us of what precisely those ideals are.

Postman’s concept of the “Great Symbol Drain” is valuable as far as it goes. But his focus on merely the amount of mechanical reproduction of images is not enough. As I have already briefly suggested, it is not just overexposure but also the nature of that overexposure. Over and over, we are shown the dark and corrupt underbelly of things; over and over our media bombard us with the hideous aspects of these symbolic institutions. We are thus suffering from an even more widespread and sinister kind of drainage. Postman hints at this connection between the drainage of symbols and the drainage of something much larger and much more significant: “With the erosion of symbols there follows a loss of narrative, which is one of the most debilitating consequences of Technopoly’s power.... it is certain that no culture can flourish without narratives of transcendent origin and power.... Symbol drain is both a symptom and a cause of a loss of narrative” (171, 173). Postman recognized the loss of faith not just in the symbols of our civilization, but in our mythic stories as well.

Besides the “Great Symbol Drain,” we need to understand what I would like to call the “Great Story Drain,” by which I am referring to the loss of faith in narrative-driven versions of truth in our culture. The “Great Story Drain” follows, of course, the standard prime directive of postmodernism, that we now must have “incredulity toward metanarratives,” surely one of the most famous and puissant three-word phrases available to us in English today. Many Americans today do not envision their lives as being part of a larger story. The only story of which they are a part is their individual life story, and perhaps beyond that the story of their job or their family.

A critical recognition of the “Great Story Drain,” my own term for the loss of belief in the power of communal stories, is a fairly common one. America’s communal vision, once a crucial source of hope for our culture, has almost died due to the current stress on cultural suspicion and paranoia regarding metanarratives. Communal hope and belief may in fact be the chief victims of the Great Symbol Drain that Postman described. And the rejection of communal vision and hope constitutes also the rejection of the sacred—something we humans cannot live without. Again I will quote from Mircea Eliade: “the completely profane world, the wholly desacralized cosmos, is a recent discovery

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in the history of the human spirit.... desacralization pervades the entire experience of the nonreligious societies and ... in consequence, [one] finds it increasingly difficult to rediscover the existential dimensions of religious man in the archaic societies" (13).

Difficult, says Eliade, but not impossible. If we can restore that vision, if we can recover that yearning, and if we can reassert that there is something sacred about America and about our very lives, then perhaps there is still a chance that we will remember this era not as the death of American vision, but as an era in which the American vision almost died. An effort like "The West Wing," miniscule and flawed though it surely was, should be applauded for its contribution to such a project—whatever one's particular politics might be—if for no other reason than that it depicts the possibility of American vision, national consensus, and the reinvigoration of national symbols.

In our current state of symbol drain, such possibilities are very much needed. Just the other day, during his first televised news conference, President Obama was asked by a reporter if his recent efforts had discouraged him from going forward with his attempts at bipartisan legislation. This question came (with a straight face) after only three weeks in office! Such profane levels of cynicism are very hard to overcome, but Eliade and Postman would agree that such jadedness originates in a depleted national imagination, one that has largely lost touch with the sacred (despite all the campaign rhetoric). What comes next—and what Eliade and Postman are not so clear about—are methods by which we might go about recovering that sacred imagination.

The good news is that the electorate evidently agrees. Indeed, it may be the primary reason for the popularity of President Obama: his uncanny ability to scratch an itch that we are all feeling, in these postmodern days. We all await the verdict of history, but given the state of our national symbology, hope is a good thing; maybe, even, the best thing. ¶

Hal Bush teaches American literature and culture at Saint Louis University and is the author of two books and numerous articles on topics ranging from American literary figures to the pragmatics of teaching and reading. He recently was a short term Fulbright Senior Scholar at the University of Freiburg, Germany.

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in a damp bed with bugs.
Seeing smiles of the age-
ing women, “broken plough-
shares” he says watching
lights on the curtain
dance and blur. Product
of the life gamble
in flight
in arthritic slow motion
in mortar fire
the memory recalls whole
families swept by the
tide: moving targets.
“Like debris” he says,
watching the streetcars
pass the streetsweeper.

And at night the
flesh of lovers explodes,
forming blood bridges in
to the future ... as half-
blood soldiers, saunter
the streets, move
artillery north.

Peter Brett

First published December 1979.
on the cover—

Howard Bond (b. 1931) is a noted Michigan photographer who once studied under the beloved American photographer Ansel Adams. He has had numerous one-person exhibitions internationally, has taught countless workshops, and has written many articles as a contributing editor for the magazine *Photo Techniques*. His photographs appear in public and private collections worldwide. Bond is a master of traditional black and white processes and has pioneered the use of a number of innovative darkroom practices.

The Brauer Museum of Art has nine of Bond's portfolios in its permanent collection, as well as individual prints drawn from various portfolios he has produced over the years. The cover image is from Bond's fourteenth portfolio, *English Churches*.

on poets—

David Polikoff

is a teacher of literature who resides in the San Francisco Bay area. His first poetry collection, *Dragon Ship*, was published by Tebot Bach Press in 2007, and his poetry has appeared in numerous literary journals.

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Peter Brett

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