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THE CRESSET Lent 1997
The baby and the dynamo

With respect to the young, one is often in the position of the unwilling travel guide. “Yes,” you admit, “it is possible to go there, but I wouldn’t advise it.” Or, “My experience down that particular path was not entirely successful, and in fact, left me with some scars.” Few travel guides would make a living if their advice were as frequently cautionary and tentative as one is inclined to be in giving advice to the young. My sense about looking backward is, like Satchel Paige’s, don’t. Which is why the young are well advised not to listen very hard to their elders, at least in the consciously advice-giving mode.

Sometimes, though, giving advice is not so much like the travel guide providing possibly useful tips on the uncertainties of the trip ahead as it is like the person who, from higher up the mountainside, sees the avalanche headed straight for the little group on the trail. This time, one is not simply advising about what might happen, but what certainly will happen, and the urge to call out with all one’s strength overcomes a reticence about the possible lack of value in one’s advice. “You’re on the wrong trail,” one shouts. “Move! Now!”

This was my instinct when reading an article called “Missing Children” by Bob Shacochis in a recent Harper’s, an article that appears again in a book called Family, published by Pantheon. The subtitle refers to “one couple’s anguished attempt to conceive,” and indeed the article chronicles with painful deliberation the story of years of unremitting and fruitless effort at procreation using every means of current technological prowess. Subsequent letters to the editor detailed any number of outraged responses, most of them accusing the writer and his wife of self-pity. And it is true, they do appear to be filled with self-pity, according to the witness Mr. Shacochis has put before the public. What strikes me about the article, though, is not so much its tone of self-pity as the hard truth that these people are indeed to be pitied, though not because they cannot make a baby. They are pitiable because they have shaped their lives according to a false faith, and it has betrayed them. These smart young people believed and accepted as the heart of their faith the premise that the relation between the human being and the natural world is one of master and servant. When their relentless efforts to bend the natural world to their will brought them nothing but evidences of failure, they reacted with bitterness. Their faith has been broken. We should not be surprised at their bitterness, but we might use their sad story as a warning of the avalanche of sorrow in store for those whose faith in the power they hold over reproductivity is broken by ineluctable experience.

One might assert that if the previous generation had to learn the limits of this faith in the matter of nuclear power, this generation is having to learn it in the intimate area of reproductive ethics. The first involves the vast mystery of power on a mammoth scale; the second involves the smallest spaces we know as humans, the spaces inside the bodies of our mothers. Yet both spaces challenge our fundamental understanding of ourselves in relation to others and to the universe of which we are a part. It is as though we are being asked, again and again, that old question, “Did God indeed say that you should not eat of every tree of the garden?” Is the tree (read: the natural world into which we are placed, and the processes of the natural world including reproduction) present to us only in terms set forth by some power to which both tree and person are subjects? Or is the tree there to be an object of our attention, to enjoy and use its beauty and its goodness at our will, on our
terms? Or, more to the point, are we asked to make distinctions among the different trees, responding to a command that some are available, others not? Many people seem to regard the manipulation of the material of the world as simply that: what I need to make, I make. What I do not want, I will destroy. In our own culture, this formulation has the language of rights; thus, I have a right to make, or unmake, what I want out of the world and its processes. Iron, bronze, wheel, fired porcelain, polyphony, flying buttress, double entry bookkeeping, dynamo, satellite, X-ray, nuclear reactor, microchip, baby. Baby?

Our national policies concerning abortion, though they may arise out of benevolent instincts to protect people from pain, encourage us to keep 'baby' in the list of things we can make or unmake. A faith that the world will be malleable to our desires and skill drives most of what we do in the world as we know it, and when we include the making and unmaking of life in that category, we are standing, surely and squarely, in the path of the avalanche. The person who blithely says, “Oh, we’re planning on waiting a few years before we have a family,” and the weeping girl who opts for abortion as a last resort are both believers in the same faith, that our knowledge of how to do something authorizes our doing it. There is an infinite amount of pain in the failure to conceive and in the choice to abort; the pain is increased in a world that believes all situations are ultimately ‘fixable,’ given enough effort or money or skill. Such a faith can only betray the hopes that it raises.

Surely the generation to which I belong did very little right in the matter of nuclear power. Though we didn’t invent it, we believed in it and used it. We did argue about it, though most serious discussions of its purposes and meaning were “academic,” and thus beside the point. So I don’t make my pleas to the next generation on the basis of having achieved success in grappling with the difficulties of knowing what to do with the serpent’s question. The apple still looks good to the eye, and it still is good for food, and the temptation is the same temptation the writer of our first book knew it to be: will you act in the world as though both you and the world are subject to God, or as though you are free to act on the world as you see fit? Framing the questions of reproduction—or of genome research—in this way will not provide a set of guidelines about what should be legal or illegal. But framing them this way is the only way to make certain that the debates about legality are debating on the right ground. Should we do what we are free to do? And if our faith in this freedom and our agency is strong, how will we respond when that freedom and agency produce what we neither want nor expect?

This issue of The Cresset is composed mostly of the work of young people, and for that reason I have included a commencement address given here last December by the distinguished professor of political philosophy, Jean Bethke Elshtain. Both of us have thus sought to address young people with the most serious warning and challenge either of us knows how to frame. The challenge is perhaps both strong and serious in proportion to the affection and regard that we, as teachers, feel for these young people, recently our students, now beginning to be adult citizens—doctors, builders, poets, teachers themselves—in our shared world. In these pages, you can enjoy their skill, their wit, their earnestness of purpose, their sense of wonder and humor and delight in the world as it is. Handing off to them does not seem so difficult, because they look eager to move on into the challenges of life with all the strength and optimism that once looked easier to me than it now does. Lent, with its reminders of failure and opportunities for repentance, is a good time to think about young people, what we need from them and what we have to give.

Peace,

GME
Curing the Human Condition?

a commencement address

Jean Bethke Elshtain

What sort of world are you graduates about to enter? Consider a few signs of the times. We are bombarded daily with the promise that nearly every human ailment or condition can be overcome if we just have the political will and technological skill; if we just put our shoulders to the wheel. We are in flight from finitude—the limits of our bodies—limits now understood in many quarters as but temporary disorders we can eliminate. Increasingly, we seek cures for the human condition itself. And our desperate seeking bespeaks a brittle conviction that our embodiment, our creatureliness, is the problem.

Consider the premise lying behind the Human Genome project, an effort to map the genetic code of the human race and to intervene decisively in order to guarantee better if not perfect human products, for that is how human beings are more and more talked about. Where human beings find the will to engage in acts of self-overcoming, they must find a way. Only the fearful and the backward, we are reassured, will cavil at a project of human perfection. In the words of two enthusiasts, “If the creation of new life forms seems a godlike power, what more noble goal can humanity have than to aspire to godlikeness? Like Prometheus, the mythical Greek hero who defied the gods and stole from them the secret of fire, should we not challenge the gods and make their powers our own? Or to put it in more scientific terms, should we allow ourselves to remain at the mercy of genetic accident and blind evolution when we have before us the prospect of acquiring supremacy over the very forces that have created us?”

The aspiration here articulated involves a search for an almost-perfect person. This person would be a product. Once developed, he or she would be in full possession of the self and, as well, would exercise sovereign choice over who lives and who dies. Prometheus unbound. So the body we currently inhabit—the imperfect body, the one subject to chance and the vagaries of life, and illness, and aging—is our foe and decried. The new body to come—extolled in manifestoes, promised by experts, sought by techno-philes, embraced by many ordinary citizens—is our gleaming fabrication. For the unstated problem seems to be this. The body weakens. But we must not. So the body must not be permitted to falter. The body grows older. But we should not. So we must devise multiple strategies to fend off aging. These strategies and concerns and gnawing uncertainties speak to our repudiation of finitude and to our longing for full self-possession. Ours has become a gnostic society for whom the body is a source of pollution and danger, not itself good, not the gift of life of a good God. Thus, we come to repudiate those limits framed by birth—natality—and death—mortality.

Now, you graduates might be wondering, why is this woman bringing up such matters on our happy occasion? Besides, we were safely born years ago now and death is a long way off for we are healthy for we are young. I appreciate your frustration. But I beg you to consider that the flight from finitude is now one of the most striking and dramatic features of contemporary culture. As a result, we are losing our ability to think responsibly about our limits—not just the limits to what
politics and science might accomplish or can or should do, but the limits marked by the frailty and mortality of the human body itself. Nowadays we want instant cures and total wellness.

Rather than approaching matters of life, death and health with humility, knowing that we cannot cure the human condition itself, we seek cures in the assumption that the more we can control the better. The fewer abnormalities and frailties, the closer we will have come to reaching a goal of human betterment, if not perfection. But much of what this has yielded in practice is a narrowing of our acceptance of human life in all its variety; a constriction of the moral community. It is by now the routine to screen out and to eliminate fetuses on the grounds that early detection and selective elimination of the imperfect unborn is a compelling social good. And why not, the purveyors of technological control over human reproduction opine? Flawed human beings are less likely to be productive and, as well, will surely suffer and that is something bad we can stop, so stop it we must. Genetic screening and testing, intervention into reproduction, manipulating the stuff of life itself: on what basis can we resist or even raise questions if we think about the body on utilitarian or cost benefit grounds? It is important to stress just how widely accepted this view is. In a recent review of four new books on the genetic revolution, the reviewer, himself a scientific expert, opined, matter of factly, that “we [—that means you—] must inevitably start to choose our descendants. We now do this by informed and strictly individual choice in permitting or preventing the birth of our own children according to their medical prognosis, thus selecting the lives to come. We will see a better future based on taking the best bets we can on the quality of our offspring in a society which does not cramp the individual’s freedom of action. Ideally, our choice over who is born and who is not should be exercised by the parents, with a regard for the potential of the foetus to develop into a person with a life not marred by an excess of pain or disability.” It is hard to think of a position more antithetical to the Christian understanding of ourselves in relation to our Creator, and hence, in relation to our own finitude and our loving acceptance of the bodies and lives of others who are to be welcomed into our midst rather than systematically eliminated for their imperfections.

So I call upon you today, on this estimable occasion, to think for a moment or two about how you might make a difference to this current cultural understanding, this runaway train that makes an idol of the sovereign self and its power to control and to purge and to fabricate. For if we accepted our bodies with better grace, meaning if we recognized and honored the human life cycle and the fact of aging, the creaks and wrinkles and moans and groans that are part of a lived life, we could more realistically think about what a complex, sprawling late twentieth century society can reasonably and responsibly and decently accomplish in so many areas. We could ask whether the presuppositions that lie behind current approaches to life invite us to think of human weaknesses as temporary conditions that a bevy of expert fixers can move in on and come to control. We would ask, instead: How are people in their plurality well? How are they strong? How might we help them? We would alter current regimes of drastic and desperate intervention at the end of life designed, not to ease the suffering of the dying, but to display our prowess at staving off death. True dying with dignity is not a right requiring the ministrations of physicians with death machines but a feature of our finitude, a way to take our leave of our loved ones and of this beautiful earth and to give thanks to our God for the gift of life and of death—as Cardinal Bernardin recently taught us.

At the beginning of life, we would welcome life in its many varieties and leave off playing God. We are already beginning to sow the whirlwind in the dangerous area of genetic manipulation, as if the terrible story of mid-twentieth century horrors hadn’t already taught us about the evils that flow when human beings take it upon themselves to decide to sever from the human community “life unworthy of life.”

Are there currents flowing through our culture at century’s end that might help us to see ourselves once again as creatures as well as creators; that might help to chasen, at least somewhat, our aspirations to escape bodily limits? The answer, of course, is yes—as you graduates of Valparaiso surely understand. Those who have not utterly closed the window to transcendence; those who hold fast to a sense of awe and mystery; those who know that our minds cannot encompass the
whole and cannot, therefore, control everything; those who honor God’s sovereignty as a brake on human hubris; those who welcome into the human community humanity in its many varieties, including children who can never become perfect or ‘normal’ by the world’s reckoning; those who tend to the little things, who feed and warm our bodies and soothe our souls, all these and more embrace limits in the sure and certain knowledge that this acceptance helps them to truly see and to respond to the claims of their neighbors, near and far. During one of the Lincoln-Douglas debates, Lincoln claimed that, in his support of the Dred Scott decision, Douglas was guilty of “blowing out the moral lights among us.” For too long too many have been blowing out moral lights in our culture. But the flames still flicker. They need our tending—they need your tending—now more than ever.

So this is a day for celebration, yes, but also for reflection. Enormous tasks lie ahead. We rely on you to help show us the way. Congratulations to you all.

A LITANY FOR TRAVELING FROM WINTER

"...he took bread, blessed and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he vanished from their sight."

In the passage
from winter to spring
there, to the side of the road
beneath the layers of snow and earth

there is a waking-up
a twist and turn from seeds
an outpouring of history
a re-telling of life
a remembering what was lost
an uplifting of dirt
a pushing free from the past
a crying with the spring rain
a settling down next to some strangers
a greening in the sun
a leaning towards the light (together)
a holding of arms on the wind
a touching (just for a moment)

a blessing
a breaking open
a dying seed
vanishing before wide and wondering eyes...
sometimes...in winter.

Christopher J. Renz, O.P.
The Leashed Among You

David P. Westerberg

It would not make me at all sad to see that fuzzy little tract called “Footprints” fall out of circulation. For the sake of the individual out there who has not received a well-intended card or bookmark bearing this parable, the story goes like this: A person looks back on the beach that is his life and sees two sets of footprints most of the time; one is his own and one is God’s. During rough times, he sees only one set of footprints and moans that this is when God had abandoned him. “No,” chides God, “that is when I carried you.” If, as I do, you find that message off the mark, then perhaps this is your story:

Dragmarks

In Texas, before the age of trucks and trailers, ranchers were continually faced with the problem of retrieving strays. Cattle would wander off and become too confused to find their herd. Horses spending the winter in pasture made themselves scarce when they got wind of the fact that spring had arrived and it was time to get back to work. And because the terrain was so vast and so rough, and the animals so stubborn, it wasn’t practical to have a man on horseback spend days helping just one animal to get home.

So, smart ranchers enlisted the help of a donkey or burro. A well-treated, well-fed burro loves to be home. Taken from there to a lesser place, he will find a way to return, and nothing short of bullets can stop him. Burros are alarmingly smart, hopelessly single-minded and brutally strong. I submit that if you can hold on to the rope in your hands when the burro on the other end of it decides to leave, he will drag you to where he wants to be. There is no debate. There is little concern for your fussing. A donkey on a mission is a beast obsessed. So if you are a rancher with a few well-treated burros, your problems with stray animals are pretty much solved. You locate the stray, put a length of rope around its neck and attach the other end to a homeward bound donkey. It may take a few days. It won’t be pretty. The larger animal will put up a valiant fight. They both will look a little haggard after the trip. But the donkey will come home, and the stray will be with him. Period.

It is this version of the story of life as a walk with God that I see. Ours is a rough trail, made grueling by our own resistance. We fuss and moan and kick and scream. We try to get away and give up. We seek distraction at every turn. We attempt to undermine the very ones who would help us. We want to be spared our troubles, to be carried, but God does not excuse and does not carry. We must walk our own walk home, and stand to face our troubles as we go, never alone, but as one with a God Who is not impressed by obstacles, Who will not let us turn away. And maybe there are some who see in their lives a time of pain and trouble so traumatic that when they look back they see themselves then as helpless passengers in the arms of God. But the Amazing Grace that saves a wretch like me is a Relentless Little Cuss Who pulls and yanks and hauls and drags and wonders why on earth I resist progress so often and so vigorously. Mine is a donkey, bound fast to me, and with or without my enthusiasm, He is headed home.
As Through a Looking Glass Darkly
a review essay

Christopher Hanson

This is a book of obsessions,” Simon Schama remarked at a recent lecture on Landscape and Memory, which has just been published in paperback. Schama, a historian and art critic for the New Yorker, brings both history and art to bear on the cultural values debate surrounding environmental issues in a unique way. Rather than chronicling a particular or even several strains of Western thought about the natural world, he offers a series of studies in history and art. The book is full of biographical sketches and color photographs of the work of artists whose obsessions were their landscapes. In the lives and works of painters such as Albert Bierstadt and Caspar David Friedrich and sculptors such as Gianlorenzo Bernini, Schama invites one to see the deep connection between culture and nature most clearly: Bierstadt thought the giant sequoias California embodied both national magnitude and spiritual redemption; Friedrich found in the forest a deep connection with the resurrection of Christ; and Bernini’s fountains captured the mysteries of ancient civilizations.

The book is divided into four basic sections: wood, water, rock and a final section on the persistence of the myth of Arcadia. These three “natural media” are correlated with what Schama sees as three enduring myths in Western culture. First, there has been a persistent myth in Western culture of the forest as the seat of barbaric or primitive freedom. This myth reappeared and played an important role in the Polish and Lithuanian resistance movements during World War II, as well as the primitivistic myths of Nazi racial superiority. Second, over history there has been a likening of the functioning of water flowing through a landscape to that of blood flowing through the body. As early as the Osiris myth in ancient Egypt, and as lately as Turner’s preoccupation with the Thames, this myth plays its part in our sense of water’s vitality and its place in the body of the world. Third, the mountains have served as a place in which one may be radically tested, or another emptied and purified. In Europe the Alps have served this function over the last two hundred years, but there are places in America where this myth has persisted, including Mt. Rushmore and Holy Land USA in Waterbury, Connecticut. This is not to say that the book explores only these myths, but they serve as the basis for the rest of the chapters in each section. The final section on Arcadia shows how all of these myths and cultural relics have been fused with the myth of the idyllic pastoral paradise of Greek mythology.

However, Schama is not without a mission for these landscapes of Western culture. Given the current debate in academia and elsewhere about Western culture’s culpability for, and ability to lead us out of, the current environmental crisis, Schama wants to make certain points with the stories in this book. First, the stories in this book are about us, and Schama hopes to contribute to our self-knowledge about our cultural legacy with the natural world. Far from the innate nature-destroyers characterized by some environmentalists, Schama believes we, as heirs to Western culture, carry with us a rich heritage to be celebrated, a heritage that can serve as the basis for positive attitudes toward nature.

Second, Schama believes the myths in these stories are persistent and influential into the late twentieth century. Rather than seeing them as empty shells which no longer carry cultural significance,
he believes that the ways in which we have appropriated nature into our collective cultural consciousness still shape the institutions with which we live. This perception may be in response to those who say that with the commercialization of nature has come the dissolution of substantive cultural ties with the natural world. Yet, Schama has faith in the strength of these ties to withstand the kind of nihilism of meaning associated with a consumerist culture. This book is as much about what we have lost culturally as it is about what we have yet to find, as yet unearthed treasures of collective cultural symbols that give meaning to our relationship with nature.

Last, if it is with a lightened heart that we approach the pages of this book, then it is also with a slightly perplexed one. That is, if one of the purposes of the book is a contribution to self-knowledge, another purpose is also to show us that there is no hard and fast line between nature and culture. For Schama, it seems, we see ourselves as through a looking glass darkly. He points this out in the introduction, “Even the landscapes that we suppose to be most free of our culture may turn out, on closer inspection, to be its product. And it is the argument of Landscape and Memory that this is a cause not for guilt and sorrow but celebration.”

It is on two fronts that I am most interested in this work. First, I believe that Schama’s purposes fly in the face of certain ideas in popular cultural and environmental discourse from the last thirty years. Second, one of the overarching tasks of this book is a celebration of cultural and historical particularity. As such, it raises questions of the value of particularities in relation to the categorical claims we can make regarding the relationship between nature and culture. Furthermore, the tension between the particular and the absolute is especially important for religious people generally and Christians in particular.

The idea that our cultural ties to nature are the cause for celebration and not shame runs counter to a great deal of environmental rhetoric in the last thirty years. Lynn White, Jr., in his now famous 1968 essay in the journal Science, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis,” lays the blame for our current environmental state at the feet of Judea-Christian Western culture. Because Christianity, over its history, has promoted a view that there is some form of disconnection between heaven and earth, between God and human beings, it has held nature in low regard and has therefore wreaked havoc on the natural world. The reasoning goes that because Christians have been focused traditionally on the eternal salvation of their own souls, they have treated the natural world as a stomping ground on their way to heaven, with little regard for the consequences. Far from being a simple historical analysis, the essay recommends that since the Christian worldview is mostly to blame for our current state, that it is up to them (that is, us) to set things right by rearranging or reconstructing our cosmology or cultural myths to prevent our situation from growing worse. Such a worldview can be found in the writings and stories of St. Francis of Assisi, who White believes should replace Jesus Christ as the central religious figure in Christianity.

White’s essay would not be worth so much attention except for the fact that both secular and religious environmentalists seem to have accepted his thesis without much criticism. It fits and undergirds the growing trend in the culture to find that Western culture and tradition is something to be ashamed of and overcome rather than explored more deeply. The tacit acceptance of White’s thesis can be seen among students in graduate environmental studies programs such as those at Yale and Duke where few people seem to have actually read White’s essay, but almost all implicitly agree that religion in general and Christianity in particular are responsible for a serious number of social ills, especially our environmental crisis. Students’ familiarity with the life of John Muir, who was raised in a strict Presbyterian household and who later rejected his upbringing and its worldview for a life in the mountains and more romantic pursuits, supports their outlook. Furthermore, students find evidence for White’s thesis in the tenure of James Watt, Secretary of Interior under Ronald Regan, who was a fundamentalist Christian and for whom environmental protection was not a priority because Jesus Christ was returning to Earth and the world was soon going to end.

On the religious side, Christians have implicitly, and in some cases, explicitly, accepted their alleged complicity in the crimes against the environment, again in many cases, without having actually
read White’s essay. I discovered this at a conference held at Union Theological Seminary in 1994. Here the focus was more on ways in which the attendees could atone for all manner of abuses perpetrated by Christians on the environment.

This phenomenon signifies the acceptance of just one cultural story about how we have arrived at our current environmental state. Contrarily, one of the purposes of *Landscape and Memory* is to show the many and varied stories composing the tradition of our relationship with nature. Far from needing to start over with a cultural *tabula rasa*, Schama believes our cultural legacy complex and rich enough to provide meaning and significance even in these trying times.

Part of embracing the complexity of our cultural tradition involves the acceptance of another increasingly controversial thesis: there is often no clear distinction to be made between nature and culture. Schama seems to believe that in many cases it is impossible to distinguish one from the other. This is at odds with White’s essay which seems to presuppose that it is possible to isolate the influence of religion from other factors influencing cultural myths. For if it is the case that nature and culture are not truly separable, then it might also be the case that religion and culture are not truly separable either.

Many historians, Schama included, commonly list religion as only one factor among many affecting our relationship with nature. For example, the Puritans as a group have received a significant amount of the blame for our domineering attitudes towards nature. However, in his authoritative environmental history of colonial New England, *Changes in the Land*, William Cronon gives religious influences no more attention than other factors affecting the Puritans’ behavior and attitudes, including a burgeoning work ethic and sheer material necessity.

Hence, far from the one-sided story of domination and destruction, Schama finds in our tradition a rich cultural legacy that is multifaceted and ambiguous with regard to our friendship with nature. This is not to say, however, that Schama is a total apologist for Western culture. *Landscape and Memory* is about the environment, and has little to say about Western culture’s historical oppression of women and peoples around the world.

One of the most skillfully crafted parts of the book examines a work by the Roman historian Cornelius Tacitus, entitled *Germania; or, On the Origin andSituation of the Germans*, written around 98 C.E. The work itself is a backhanded tribute to the German barbarians, who defied conquest by the Romans during the first century. Tacitus characterizes them according to the Roman definition of “uncivilized,” living deep in the forests and swamps and clothing themselves with animal hides and tree bark. Yet at the same time he invests them with a “natural nobility through their instinctive indifference to the vices that had corrupted Rome.” It was this nobility that interested and would later be appropriated by the Nazis into their myths of Germanic purity and noble origins. The Nazis attempted to make categorical claims about the innate superiority of the Aryan race (and the inferiority of others) out of a particular historical situation and a particular ethnographic account. Schama’s chapter regarding Tacitus is meant, I believe, not only to give an account of how forest myths have persisted into the twentieth century, but more importantly to demonstrate the effects of cultural myth turned cancerous. Hence, while Schama wants to celebrate the historical and cultural particularities of human beings’ relation to nature, he also seems keenly aware of the dangers of making absolute claims on these particularities.

This is a powerful theological as well as historical point; it is particularly meaningful for Christians and other religious people, who place their faith in an absolutely powerful God who stands beyond history and yet who also participates in it. Feminist theologians and historians have argued that the problem of the oppression of peoples around the world has sprung in part from the fact that a single story of human experience of God was allowed to become the dominant story to the exclusion of all others. They are quite right about this. The white European male version of human experience has dictated the Western world. Those particularly well-versed in cultural studies and/or psychology may very well find ample evidence in Schama’s work as well for a thesis of patriarchal and phallocentric cultural domination of Western culture. Perhaps they will be accurate in their critique. There is little doubt that men over the centuries have made God in their own image; it should not be surprising that
they have done the same with nature as well.

However, while there are some for whom this leads to relativism regarding the claims we can make about God, there are others who insist it remains the case that if we are to have any God worth worshipping (i.e., one not totally of our construction) then we are forced to make some absolute claims. The paradox Christians find themselves in then lies in the fact that we want to give validity to our own experience, but at the same time recognize that our experience is not the final word on human experience generally. This is the cultural, and sometime political, Scylla and Charybdis of tyranny on one hand and complete relativism on the other. Hence, while it may not be possible in the end to distinguish the things of God from the things of human beings, the difficulty or even impossibility of success should not rule out the endeavor. One of the great services feminist thought has performed for us is to point out that some of the things we thought were of God are really only things of human beings (men). This requires both resoluteness and humility. This is one of the lessons of Nazism as well as one of the lessons of this book.

However, where Schama may meander too far afield is his claim near the end of the work that culture and nature are not separable and that those who are trying to distinguish clearly between them are on the wrong track. He doesn’t seem to realize that without those guardians who are searching for the line between nature and culture, we are more likely to fall into the cultural traps of Nazism. This is not to say that the roots of Nazism can be isolated any more than any other historical phenomena; however, part of its causes lay in an attempt to universalize from a particular set of cultural myths. As a consequence, we need people who will stand up and point out where we have made God and/or Gaia in our own image. It may not be possible to establish the claim that we have the whole truth, but this acknowledgment does not mean we should not take up our lanterns and go in search of it. Yet, because Schama doesn’t clearly acknowledge the value of those who go in pursuit of an understanding of things as they are in themselves, one wonders what he learned from his analysis of Nazism and the persistence of Germanic forest myths.

The reader should not be left with the feeling that this is a work of either philosophy or environmental studies. This is a work of history and art, of obsessions. Its stories meander through historical time and place. Its characters, both heroic and sad, haunt us with their triumphs and failures. It explores landscapes we have loved and those we have only dreamed of loving.

As a contribution to self-knowledge, as well as on most other counts, this book is a complete success. Whether one believes that Western culture should be banished or enshrined, this book shows how deeply it is embedded within us. If when we next walk our most familiar and treasured landscapes, and we think about how our myths and stories intertwine to give meaning to these places, then Simon Schama will have done us a great service with this book. His storytelling is luxurious in its attention to detail and his prose is lucid and invigorating. Seldom have I read six hundred pages of non-fiction so fast, or enjoyed them so much.

This is a book for walkers. This is a book for those who love to meander, to stroll, and to stop and reflect as they do so. This is a book for those who like to roam art galleries, libraries, and woods, stopping as they do to collect bits and pieces of sustenance for their journey. This is not a book for those in a rush. Despite its significant contribution to the debate about environmental values, this is not a book for the environmental crisis. Rather, this is a book for people who wish to explore the meaning of landscapes with an open mind, people who know that answers do not come easily. We see ourselves as through a looking glass darkly in Schama’s work and we are richer for the experience.
One of my tasks as a Presbyterian minister is to select hymns for the worship services at which I preach. Over the years I’ve learned how important hymns are to people. I’m sure there are people who pay more attention to the hymns we sing than to the sermons. Everyone has a favorite; whole congregations seem to embrace certain hymns and disdain others. Hymn selection is one of the dicest tasks for ministers and often it is one for which we are ill-prepared.

I heard about a minister who, early in his career, preached the same sermon on consecutive Sundays. When he was asked why he did that, he responded, “Look, if you want to sing the same six hymns every Sunday, I figure I can repeat myself once in a while.” I know this is true, my brother got it off the Internet. Since then, the writer has repented from that particular approach, and learned to deal better with the frustration inherent in hymn selection.

In three years of seminary I had one hour’s instruction in picking hymns. Because I can read music, having spent my cavity-prone years playing the trombone in grade school, park district, high school and college bands, I was ahead of many of my classmates. Still, I’d spent years going to church singing hymns and reading their words without thinking, “One day, when I get to pick the hymns we’ll sing this one a lot.” Most of that hour in seminary was spent discussing inclusive language and why choosing hymns without lots of “Him’s” is a good idea. We also learned that most hymnals have indices in the back where one can find guidance for selecting hymns topically, metrically or scripturally.

One hour was not enough to undo all the unintentional training I’d had in musical appreciation over 24 years. For example, when I read in Isaiah the phrase “trampled underfoot” the first association I make is with the Led Zeppelin song from the Physical Graffiti album. My favorite Christmas carol is “Angels from the Realms of Glory” because it’s a march in a key that I can play easily on my trombone. I spent eight years marching in all kinds of weather with my trombone, we’re close.

Remember records? They were big, flat, black things that people used to put on a thing called a phonograph (later they were called stereos) that would make music. They came in cardboard sleeves that were decorated with all kinds of things, usually photographs of the performers. Often these sleeves were works of art in their own right. Anyway, there are still some stores that sell these relics. For almost ten years I couldn’t pass one of these stores without stopping in to look for a copy of “This Old Heart of Mine (Is Weak for You)” by the Isley Brothers. On one occasion when my search was again fruitless I left the store with used copies of Patsy Cline’s greatest hits, backed by the Jordanaires, and “The Message,” an early rap tune by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five. I went walkin’ after midnight with Patsy, then joined the grandmaster in shouting “Don’t push me ’cuz ah’m close to the edge.”

I am the man who decides what you sing on Sunday morning.

For one quarter in college my roommate had a turntable. I was in heaven. I’d gone to school with two milk crates full of LPs, and I was always trying to find somebody to join me in “More Songs About Buildings and Food” or “Dream Police.” For this one quarter I pigged out on vinyl pleasures. One evening as I typed up my notes, I played what I felt like hearing: Bobby Sherman’s greatest hits, “Get the Knack,”
“Stardust” by Willis Nelson, Petula Clark’s greatest hits, and the debut album by rap masters Run-DMC. Midway through this last selection the guy next door came over to ask how I was feeling.

“Is everything all right?” he asked.

“Sure, I’m gonna get these notes done in a few minutes. Wanna play some backgammon after that?”

“Not really. Tom, you’ve been playing some really strange music tonight, are you sure you’re all right?”

I was stunned. Could it really be that Rudy didn’t like Bobby Sherman?

Five years later I was picking hymns for Presbyterians.

I had a lot to learn. At first, I thought all hymns were equal. I would page through the book, reading lyrics that echoed the sermon’s theme. I came up with some great matches, but they were hymns with unfamiliar tunes. No one commented on the service’s integrity and how well message and music meshed; they carped about singing weird stuff. For my last sermon at the church I served as an intern I picked “Blessed Assurance.” United Methodist classmates lent me a copy which was an insert in the bulletin. I’d never heard it until I saw Geraldine Page sing it in “The Trip to Bountiful.” The people loved it. One said, “It’s really nice to sing these old hymns, we should do it more often.”

Exactly two years later, I received a copy of How To Become A Bishop Without Being Religious by Charles Merrill Smith (New York: Pocket Books, 1965). Smith writes satirically of “Blessed Assurance’s strengths:

It focuses on the internal, spiritual experiences of the individual worshipper. Here are parts of the text: “Blessed assurance” (this means my blessed assurance) “Jesus is mine” perfect delight (I am perfectly delighted); “Visions of rapture” (This means I am filled with spiritual thrills). . . “Filled with His goodness” (I am filled with His goodness). Then the song has what so many hymns lack—a refrain to be sung after each stanza. “This is my story, this is my song, Praising my savior all the day long.”

Naturally “Blessed Assurance” is popular—it’s about me. Smith contrasts it with “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” which comes up short because “it gives all the attention and praise to God and none to the worshipper.”

A year after reading this book I was left alone in the wilds of Minnesota for three consecutive Sundays while the senior pastor was on study leave. I don’t remember what hymns I selected and no one commented to me on them. Two months later, however, I heard from the organist that people were uncomfortable singing so many unfamiliar hymns. There’s nothing like direct communication and this was nothing like direct communication. After this incident I devised a rule of thumb: at most one unfamiliar hymn per service. Later I narrowed that rule in this way: When selecting an unfamiliar hymn, put it in the middle of the service. Generally, people like to get off to a good start with something like “When Morning Gilds the Skies” or “Praise to the Lord, the Almighty.” Then you want their toes tapping as they leave, so “Lord Dismiss Us With Thy Blessing” is always a good choice.

I do have one glaring exception to my rule. I like to sing “Lift Every Voice and Sing” as a closing hymn. Of all the hymns in our hymnal it is my favorite. I chose it as the closing hymn at my ordination and both of my installations. Its lyrics were written by James Weldon Johnson in 1921 and it soon became the unofficial national anthem of African-Americans. Once on New Year’s Day when I had selected it for the closing hymn I asked people to tell me if they agreed that it was a good hymn to sing at the close of one year and the start of another. One woman as she was walking out said, “That has got to be someone’s national anthem; it’s so hard to sing!” I was laughing too hard to tell her whose national anthem it is.

Now I’m at a new church and it’s impossible to know what songs are familiar here. Songs like “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” that the church in Minnesota finally got familiar with, may be unfamiliar here. In addition, this church has a choir that processes and recesses at each service. The choir director will not have the choir move to a rhythm that might cause their robes to sway, so most 3/4 hymns are out for processionals and recessional. “Blessed Assurance” is also out because it’s in 9/8.

During our last new member’s class I explained who is in charge of what in Presbyterian churches. Most authority in our churches is lodged in the ruling board, the
Session. Ministers have the authority to select scripture for worship, preach their consciences, compose the pastoral prayers and select hymns for worship. One man was quite surprised that the ministers pick the hymns, he'd assumed that it was the organist. He had some favorites that he thought it would be nice to hear in his new church. I asked him to give me a list, I'd be happy to work them in. Two weeks later when he and his wife were received into membership during one of our Sunday morning services, as I shook his hand, I asked, “Bob, how’re you coming with that list?”

He pulled it out of his pocket, a study in black and white, 44 of his favorites on two sheets of notebook paper, everything from “Abide With Me” to “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.” I keep it in my hymnal and whenever I am stuck and want to be sure to pick something familiar, I refer to Bob’s List. His tastes are eclectic (though not as eclectic as mine—he didn’t list anything by Petula Clark). He included both “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” and “Blessed Assurance.”

Coda: As I write this they are tuning the organ at my church. We have an antiphonal organ here, a big huge one in front of the sanctuary, and an even bigger, huger one in the back. They must be working on the pedals now, because they’re tuning chords. It’s been going on since 9:00 this morning. Luckily, a member of my church died last week, so I’ve been doing his funeral most of the day. Since returning I’ve somehow managed to keep myself from yelling, “Don’t you know any other songs? Why not play ‘This Old Heart of Mine?’”

NEW PSALM

I am dry, drier than the Dead Sea entombing ancient wisdoms I would otherwise disdain. Pray for rain.

My bones creak heavy with the burden of drought; I would drown all mysteries I can’t explain. I pray for rain.

I have fallen, stumbled mightily after mirages, mistaken by the rasping of my brain. I pray for rain.

Silence is a kind of death. I wander, shout, beseech to keep my dust world sane and pray for rain.

I will cry until the sand cracks to devour me. I will call to him who parts and imparts water and makes the life flow thick through one great vein. I’ll pray for rain.

Heath Davis Havlick
MARDI GRAS:
French for Fat Tuesday, the single day culmination of the Carnival season

CARNIVAL: from the Latin *carnivale*, loosely translated as "farewell to flesh"; the season of merriment in New Orleans which begins annually on Jan. 6, the twelfth night (the feast of the Epiphany), and ends at midnight on Fat Tuesday; the Carnival season leads up to the penitential season of Lent in which fasting replaces feasting.
KREWE: the generic term for all Carnival organizations in New Orleans, first used by the Mistik Krewe of Comus, which coined the word in 1857 to give its club's name an Old English flavor.
THROWS: inexpensive trinkets tossed from floats by costumed and masked krewe members; among the more popular items are krewe-emblemed aluminum doubloons, plastic cups, white pearl necklaces. Throws are tossed in response to the cry, "Throw me something mister!"
FLAMBEAUX:
Naphtha-fueled torches, traditionally carried by white-robed black men; in the past century, flambeaux provided the only source of nighttime parade illumination.

photographs by:
Aimee Tomasek
Jennifer Voigt reviews film in The Cresset alternately with Fredrick Barton. She has recently completely a Master's degree in English at the University of Colorado at Denver.

politics and the house of Dior

Jennifer Voigt

Tim Rice has got to be the worst lyricist in the world. Who can forget the *Octopussy* debacle? When he wrote the theme song to that James Bond film he had a tradition of clever, fluffy songs made even lighter with double entendre to guide him. But what did he do when it came to be his turn to write an amusing, risque musical Bond introduction? He wrote, in part, the following:

> We're an all time high  
> We'll take on the world that waits  
> So hold on tight  
> Let the flight begin . . .

We're an all time high? This is when he had "Nobody Does It Better" as a model? In *Evita*, the stage musical for which Rice wrote the lyrics a decade before he did the Bond film, Rice had to create a song for Augustin Migaldi, the man who "discovers" Eva Duarte de Peron, a song that would indicate the character's inherent sleaziness. Migaldi sings,

> On this night of a thousand stars,  
> Let me take you to heaven's door,  
> Where the music of love's guitars  
> Will sing forever more!

Clearly, the songwriter unwittingly mocks himself with the similarity between Migaldi's pick up lines and the lines that Rice evidently meant to express elevated human feeling.

What unintentional self-mockery doesn't do to Rice's lyrics, time and fashion do. Even if you could avoid the pious self-righteousness of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, just three lines of that rock opera's lyrics betray its origins in the sixties. Didn't Rice know that slang is a finite quantity? While listening to the disciples or the High Priests converse in *Jesus Christ Superstar* is embarrassing, *Evita* is probably the worst example of Rice's indulgence in slang lyrics. He should have realized that such words have a shelf-life.

For all his money and his knighthood, Andrew Lloyd Webber doesn't fare much better than his partner when it comes to *Evita*. The songs, with the one, famous exception of "Don't Cry for Me Argentina," are wholly unmemorable.

Alan Parker, who directs the film version of *Evita*, is lucky that his medium is primarily one of images, for relieving *Evita* of the burden of having to convey all through words and music gives it a life and a legitimacy that the stage version has never been able to bestow. But while the film revives the musical *Evita*, it also betrays its (massive) vulnerabilities. Parker and his screen-writing partner Oliver Stone (of all people) have remained faithful to the stage-play's original book, though wisely they have in most cases updated Rice's out-of-date lyrics. The result is a conservative rendition of the musical, one that buys into its assertions, and challenges nothing.

*Evita* masquerades as something incisive and even cynical. When Che, a character modeled on Che Guevara, played on the screen by Antonio Banderas, narrates for us the story of Eva Peron's rise to prominence, he promises to show us how Eva Peron "did nothing for years." Throughout the film, he "exposes" Eva's ambitions, and some of her shady ways of achieving them. But really what does he tell us? Nothing we didn't already know.

Madonna plays Eva Peron with exceptional sympathy, and it is this vision of the title character that prevails in the film. The cynicism dissolves by the end of the film, and Che, who spends the majority of the movie angry at Eva, kisses her coffin. Wait a minute. Che Guevara kissing Eva...
Peron's coffin? It is Eva’s story after all! When I saw *Evita* as part of a full house on the first day of its release, people around me were actually *crying* as Madonna sang Eva Peron’s last words, and it wasn’t just a few isolated cases. The whole theatre was sniffing.

Up until its early release in Los Angeles and New York, Hollywood people were wondering whether the American movie-going public would go to see a relatively long film version of a twenty year-old musical with no spoken dialogue. Oprah Winfrey wondered aloud about it on national television and Madonna was dispatched to her show in part to suppress moviegoers' apprehensions. *Evita* does eschew many of the conventions of traditional movie musicals, which are shot much as if they were still on stage, whose songs emphasize moments in the action of the play and contain dialogue to alert the audience as to the progress of the narrative. Instead, *Evita* is more like a long music video. Madonna was not being gratuitous when, along with her now legendary eight-page letter begging him to cast her as Eva, she sent Parker a copy of her “Take A Bow” video, in which she plays a wronged bullfighter's mistress circa 1950. And Parker wasn't stupid to choose Madonna over other actresses rumored to be considered for the part. Madonna is the uncrowned queen of the music video. Americans can turn on VH1 every day and see her from musical television to musical film.

Though *Evita* utilizes conventions of the music video like exceptionally short scenes, near-continuous use of montage, shifts in time and place that nevertheless do not upset the flow of the narrative, and shots coordinated in a rhythm in step with the rhythm of the music, *Evita* and music video differ markedly. While music videos can be about anything at all, and often have little to do with a song’s subject matter, to work as a film, the images in *Evita* have to comply with the score. And they do. Parker’s images are beautiful and the cinematography is first rate, but there’s nothing revolutionary in the way Parker narrates. The montage he constructs to illustrate Juan Peron’s rise within Argentina’s military hierarchy is funny, but has been done before, much like the audition sequence in one of Parker's earlier films, *The Commitments*. Parker doesn't shock us with new ways of telling story on film, though a re-introduction of musicals and movies after years of estrangement would have been a good place for such innovation. Maybe if the movie had allowed music video to influence it more in terms of content, letting the images work against the grain of the songs, *Evita* could have done something extraordinary. This is not Martin Scorsese photographing Robert DeNiro from above in *Taxi Driver*. *Evita* is gorgeous, but it isn’t progress.

Madonna admits an affinity for Eva Peron. She actively sought the role for years before the film ever went into production, and in the film she plays Peron with a conviction that this will be the part for which she will be remembered as an actress. The sympathy she brings to the role softens the musical’s portrait of Peron as a well dressed prostitute, taking Argentina for everything it’s got. In an interview in *Vogue*'s October issue, Madonna admits to being "enraged" by the play’s characterization of Peron, and defends her character, the real woman, and herself by asserting that there are aspects of all three of them deeper than the “one-dimensional” and “power hungry” personas attached to them in the collective consciousness.

Madonna’s insistence on a more compassionate reading of Eva Peron exposes *Evita’s* faulty gender politics. In the original stage version, Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber go out of their way to censure Peron for her ambition and even her sexuality. The movie retains the same censorious feeling, hinting that Juan Peron, played by Jonathan Pryce, wanted to look elsewhere for “job satisfaction” as a dictator, but that it was Eva who, out of a sense of her own political ambition, convinced him to go on to campaign for the presidency of Argentina. Army officers wonder behind Juan’s back if a woman isn’t actually running the country. The film keeps alive the myth that Eva, not Peron, organized the workers to demonstrate when Juan was imprisoned by the Argentine oligarchy, when in reality, Eva Duarte had no labor contacts or even a telephone. In the sequence portraying Eva’s trip to the Vatican, she laments that the crowds protesting her visit called her a whore. “It is an easy mistake,” her escort replies. “People still call me ‘Admiral’ though I gave up the sea long ago.”

These are low blows, and though they are designed to discredit Eva Peron, they discredit her by way of the combination of her gender and her ambition rather than because of her ethics. There
are a few lines of song devoted to the way she funnelled money from the foundation she set up to help the poor into her own bank account, but according to *Evita*, Eva Peron sinned because she had power and ambition, not because she misused it.

Madonna herself has noted that in 1950 in Latin America there were probably few career options for women. From this standpoint Eva Peron’s life choices appear obvious: to accomplish what she did, working in tandem with her husband was the most expedient way to do it. When the movie documents Juan Peron’s first presidential campaign, Eva stands next to him, applauding as he casts a vote for himself, though as a woman, she lacked the right to do the same. Eva Peron used her prominence, and her husband’s presidency, to win the vote for women in Argentina, but Madonna, in part blessed with having a birthdate in the latter part of the century, has made a point of building a career free of a male mentor or partner. In the *Vogue* interview, she asserts both her independence and her distance from women who rely on men to fulfill all of their needs, stating flatly, “I’m not Melanie Griffith,” referring to Banderas’s wife, who reportedly followed him constantly throughout the filming of the movie.

Though back in the early eighties when she appeared on “American Bandstand,” Madonna told Dick Clark that she wanted to rule the world, Madonna resembles Eva Peron more in the way that she is perceived than in the way that she has orchestrated her career. When in *Evita*, she sings “Screw the middle classes!” we hear Madonna’s own frustration with the American middle class. Madonna has sustained her career in part by shocking the middle classes with her own sexuality and her ambivalence toward her Catholicism. Had her shock-value stemmed from undirected rebellious energy, she would have disappeared quickly like any flavor-of-the-month pop star. Instead she shocks by attacking bourgeois piety and values. The most recent example of this comes from her private life, in which she has made a point of not marrying her new baby’s father. Madonna recognizes the sexism inherent in criticism from people like Jonathan Alter, a writer for *Newsweek*, who has suggested that Madonna should not only get married but “become a spokesperson for marriage.” Such assertions are “pathetic and sexist and disgusting,” Madonna replies in *Vogue*, “and if people don’t change the way they view this thing... nothing’s ever going to change.” It is possible that in Eva Peron Madonna recognizes a similarly misunderstood soul. From an outside perspective, it seems easier to call them both power obsessed prostitutes than recognize Peron’s accomplishments or Madonna’s potentially revolutionary messages.

In *Evita* Madonna shoulders none of the burden of providing the movie’s sex appeal, a task almost all of her previous films have required her to do. Instead, the film relies on Antonio Banderas’s good looks and Jonathan Pryce’s attentive glances at Madonna for the majority of its electricity. In *Evita*, Madonna looks “like a 50’s mom,” as Amy Spindler notes in the *New York Times*, and her wardrobe does indicate a certain conservatism previously not associated with the actress. *Evita* implies Eva Peron’s sexuality through a song and a sequence of scenes which show Eva using men as if they were rungs in the ladder to success. The film is suspicious of Eva’s sexuality, and as a reaction portrays it as acidic. Madonna’s 85 costume changes make her Eva look impenetrable. In the same October issue of *Vogue* Madonna discusses costume designer Penny Rose’s search for a way to recreate Eva Peron’s clothes. The designers at Christian Dior wanted to update the Peron look, but Rose wanted to stay within the period, wanted to make Peron’s clothes so structured they were like “armor.”

Though the film is in many ways “about” fashion, it overemphasizes it, and in doing so subverts its power. Penny Rose’s clothes look fabulous, but Alan Parker turns them into candy with the fawning way he photographs them. *Evita* indicates that Parker thinks that fashion photography is all about adoration, rather than the creation of an aesthetic. The film glimpses none of the intricacies suggested by Eva’s line “I come from the people / They need to adore me / So Christian Dior me.” Instead, Eva sings it as she drools over herself in furs and silks, and as we see shots of shoes, shoes and more shoes taking up space in her closets. These images force the line to come across as a way to discredit Peron further, to make her interest in her image a fault. It suggests that fashion itself is frivolous, and art without meaning or power. But Peron was a First Lady, and for First Ladies, politicians by default no matter how uninvolved in their husbands’ jobs, fashion has always...
been a matter of political power. The public most often prefers to see First Ladies rather than hear them. What else can we make of J. Edgar Hoover’s admission that he never married because there are women like Eleanor Roosevelt? Hillary Rodham Clinton’s hairstyles garner her nothing but ridicule, which adds to the hostility aimed at her because of her role in her husband’s presidency. Barbara Bush, who once joked that the only time she ever wore makeup was to her husband’s inaugural ball, was famous and even adored for her indifference to fashion. But Barbara Bush also always gave us the impression that politics is a man’s domain, and that she was most useful when she praised broccoli growers, or talked about her dog to the press. She represented the suburban housewife as First Lady. First Ladies’ wardrobes have even come to represent their husbands’ political excesses, or have even contributed to the nostalgia of their presidency, like Imelda Marcos’s shoes, or Jackie Kennedy’s pill box hats, respectively.

Evita, unfortunately, is not what it could be. Frustrated by a too faithful adherence to the original songs, and a conservative cinematic aesthetic, what could be stinging or explosive becomes a story about a political figure that shies away from politics. However, though it does not achieve the force of something like the opera Nixon in China, it isn’t The Sound of Music, either. Evita is refreshing because its subject isn’t a nanny and her precocious charges, and because it assumes that a political subject can occupy a space within the genre of movie musicals and not be relegated to the “art house” or to the pallid kinds of films that win Academy Awards.

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MAD ANGELS IN THE BRONX
*for Kevin & Allison*

Mike Chasar

It is the flat slap of cards
across the table top, here
in the low-lit, hot back room
of Murphy's Irish Pub,
where the sour barkeep prowls
behind a bar lined with men
in crumpled felt hats who stare
into their drinks, where Gomer Pyle reruns
flicker on the TV screen,
it's the flat slap, like a hand
on the cheek, that calls
one to the living—

—Four young pilgrims
flannel shirts large
and flapping at their sides like wings,
scallop two decks of cards
in their hands. Their play is foreign,
Chinese. They whisper *guang pai*—a prayer
at the bar—to the barkeep angered
at his early loss of hair,
the rent and at the city rolling
in a fog outside his door. His clientele
is small, select, sitting in a church row
for the cast-off, forlorn faithful,
and he wonders why these four
wander to his pub each Thursday
night, why they laugh like geese
around amber beer in the low-lit back room,
laughing at the slap
of cards, laughing at the bar.
They must be mad, he thinks,
mad angels in the Bronx,
but he’s carded them and knows
their names, he watches them,
walks through their hot back room
on nameless chores, slows his service
at the bar to stand them there a minute
more. They catch his eye
and grin, the corners
of their mouths prick up from the game.
He thinks mad angels, they nod,
and when they nod
he laughs, and when he laughs
his mournful congregation of down-
turned hats turns up—

—They are butterflies unfolding
their flannel wings in the Bronx,
testing the breath of hope and gauging
the updraft of faith, ready
as they’ve ever been
to spread their wings and fly.
John T. Shawcross is honored here for all of his work in Renaissance poetry and Donne studies, as both editor and critic, but primarily for his 1967 edition of Donne’s poems (reprinted in 1968 and 1971 and now unfortunately out of print) under the Anchor Seventeenth-Century Series. Shawcross’ collection is most significant because of his opposition to the editing of H.J.C. Grierson, John Hayward, Helen Gardner, and others who disregard manuscript copies circulated in Donne’s lifetime for posthumous printed versions. By demonstrating Donne’s aversion to printing his poetry, and its circulation almost exclusively in manuscript form during his lifetime, Shawcross emphasized the need to study earlier manuscripts rather than posthumous publications for a text and canon truer to Donne’s hand than those of printers, as well as the simple need for a truer text and canon, as his studies show far greater variations than other editors have found.

The work of twenty scholars is assembled here under Shawcross’ name; and in the shadow of his fine scholarship and demanding expectations. But the collection lives up to his standards. The criticism in this book begins with an enjoyment and passion in Donne’s poetry and aims at furthering that same enjoyment and passion. As revisionary and polemical as the arguments become the revision and polemics do not rise to the primary issue of the criticism. Rather the goal is elucidating the poetry. One sign of the collection’s success in this is that it elucidates at every level of appreciation for the poetry. It is as fitting as an introduction to Donne, read right along side a first reading of the poems, as it is refreshing and challenging thought for the expert. And both the beginner and expert are treated to an understanding designed for greater appreciation and enjoyment.

The subject promised in the title, John Donne’s religious imagination, is embraced impressively—and at a time when it is needed. Much other modern criticism fails to deal with how important an idea of, or at least an openness to, Donne’s religious imagination is to an understanding of his poetry. He wrote and thought in the midst of much religious upheaval, persecuted as a member of the Catholic nobility, converted to the Church of England and made Dean of St. Paul’s. Controversies of religious doctrine and practice were everywhere, especially for Donne, who read and entertained it all with a nearly ecumenical openness and uncommon zeal. Theology is the stuff of Donne’s imagination. As a whole, the book treats this religious element in Donne’s poetry, which is in a quite real sense what his poetry is, very well. Individual essays which strike me as noteworthy: Helen Brooks’ reading of “Goodfriday. Riding Westward.” aided by Augustine’s psychology of time; Theresa M. DiPasquale’s look at “The Flea” as Profane Eucharist”; and George Klawitter’s consideration of Donne’s treatment of the Virgin Mary in public sermon and private poetry. Both of the editors’ essays are also outstanding.

Shawcross’ edition is out of print and we still await the completion of the Donne Variorum edition, with two of the eight volumes out since fall 1995. Arriving in the midst of the Variorum project (for which Shawcross has played a great role), this collection has seized a fine opportunity for its publication. Very refreshing for anyone appreciative enough of Donne to read criticism on him, this book provides a fine account of Donne scholarship, sets a few things straight within that scholarship, and offers a healthy portion of new thought. It is a fitting tribute to Mr. Shawcross.

Joshua Eckhardt


My guess is that Alias Grace has been in the works, somewhere in the shadowy recesses of Atwood’s creative mind, since 1970 when she finished a project on a nineteenth century Canadian immigrant. Probably only Atwood fanatics or scholars would recognize the collection of poems she published that year called The Journals of Susanna Moodie in which she worked from autobiographical accounts of Moodie’s experiences with the landscape to evoke the struggle and estrangement of a woman in Canada in that century. Twenty-five years later, this budding interest in Canada’s women has come to a more complete fruition in a historical novel. In this newest of Atwood’s works, Moodie’s journals again appear to offer their embellished third-hand account of felon Grace Marks’ confession, and are also
Atwoodian addition to this complicated story of truth versus fiction that the author includes Moodie, with whom she previously has been sympathetic, only to cast doubt on the veracity of Moodie's historical accounts of the subject.

In 1843 sixteen-year-old Grace Marks gained notoriety by being convicted of murder. Newspapers in Canada and the States loved the story of violence and sexual scandal linked with a comely young serving maid, but many clergymen and public figures were outraged at the conviction because of Grace's age and apparent witlessness. James McDermott, Grace's partner in crime and supposed lover, claimed that she first had masterminded the murders of their employer, Thomas Kinnear, and his housekeeper/mistress, Nancy Montgomery, and second, offered sexual favors in exchange for his killing them. Grace herself, thirty-two years old at the opening of the novel and unflinchingly prudish, has no memory of events on the day the murders took place. Each morning of the sixteen years she so far has paid toward her life sentence in the Toronto penitentiary she awakes with a vague sense of what happened all those years before but is as unable to explain it as she is to explain the fainting spells she has, the voices she hears, or her recurrent dreams of red peonies.

It's not difficult to see why Grace—although she appears almost as an aside in Moodie's journals—caught Atwood's eye; nor is it hard to guess how her character was tinkered with in the author's psychological workshop. Grace is a shrewd woman, generous with silence but extremely accurate in her assessments: "Murderess is a strong word to have attached to you," Grace tells the reader in the opening pages of the novel. "It has a smell to it, that word—musky and oppressive, like dead flowers in a vase." She has a naivete all out of proportion with her experience which is at once believable and endearing, but also at odds with her dispassionate views: victims are not to be pitied since they are gone and don't have to deal with the mess their deaths have left for the living. All the more mysterious, then, that one so certain should have lapses in memory as Grace has—on more, it turns out, than just the single occasion of the murders. This is where Atwood weaves her best spell and fans will delight in her fantastic imagination as she suggests that all Grace's troubles are linked to Mary Whitney, Grace's "particular friend" and fellow maid, whose clever ideas about the afterlife and strong belief in vindication, even after Mary falls victim to a botched abortion of her employer's child and dies before the Kinnear/Montgomery murders, seem to linger too strongly in Grace's unconscious.

Enter Simon Jordan, doctor of mental illness, who is engaged by Grace's supporters as a last attempt to discover, finally, Grace's innocence. As he draws Grace's story from her, beginning with her Irish childhood and immigration to Canada, he slowly teases her with mnemonic objects which he believes will forge the necessary link in the broken chain of her memory. Inexorably, as Grace recalls the events leading up to the murders and her narrative becomes more emotionally affective, the doctor, as well as others who have investment in Grace's remembering—the vicar who has petitioned for her release, the governor's wife/spiritualist who employs her part-time, the governor's daughter who sees a good husband in Dr. Jordan, and the landlady who sees escape from an abusive husband in him—falls prey to the seductive suggestion Grace's story evokes. The reader finds vintage Atwood as the situation evolves until Grace's sordid situation is only one of many undeterminable relationships in the community. Especially ironic is Dr. Jordan's unhealthy sexual entanglement with his repressed landlady which culminates in her suggesting a murder-elopement scenario in her own household which is rather too like Grace's story to pass unremarked.

Almost predictably, Atwood's interest in the often-elaborate relations between women and men comes through in this material, in Grace's childhood with an abusive father, her employment with the late Kinnear, the mistreatments from prison guards, and her hesitant opening to Dr. Jordan—not to mention the heterogendered allegiances that rise and fall outside the prison walls as the doctor attempts his cure. But what makes Alias Grace unprecedented is how Atwood merges this treatment with one of class issues, developing a clear but disturbing picture of how the distinction between the affluent and those without position gives rise to new commodity from unexpected means. Through Grace's young eyes the reader witnesses wealthy employers attempting to buy the spiritual alliance and physical favor of the serving class. Her confusion about how much personal dignity she can retain and still be loyal to her position is so well sketched by Atwood's pen that it is hardly surprising when the reader discovers that Grace suffers some schizophrenia.

Alias Grace's motivation seems to be the unveiling of a murderer. But this is no ordinary whodunit. Atwood, never one for a linear narrative, lets the reader get only so far toward an answer before mixing things up again. And she never does finally provide what really happened or offer evidence of Grace's guilt or innocence. Or does she? Certainly by the end of the novel, Atwood has finished telling Grace's story, and the reader knows a lot about the case—more, even, than it seems Grace ever knew. The story at work in Alias Grace is really a trope for telling a story, a history. The issues involved have been on Atwood's mind for some time, at least long enough for
her to test the water in her last book, *The Robber Bride*. There she has her female military historian worry this through:

All history is written backwards . . . . We choose a significant event and examine its causes and its consequences, but who decides whether the event is significant? We do, and we are here; and it and its participants are there. . . . Yet history is not a true palindrome . . . . We can’t really run it backwards and end up at a clean start. Too many of the pieces have gone missing; also we know too much, we know the outcome.

Atwood’s struggle is that she did know where Grace ended up before she began her new novel, and knew as well with the many contrasting accounts of Grace’s conduct, personality and psychological evaluation. So she must qualify all of this in her treatment—even allowing, from the very first, that the identity which the novel assumes as primary—“Grace Marks”—may not be in truth any more credible than the other aliases included within. Atwood is too aware of the responsibility she holds as a writer to fabricate, in good conscience, one ending or another to this case that has gone unsolved for a century and a half. Instead, she concentrates on the character that excites so much mystery rather than the events involved. The result here is the marvelously multi-faceted Grace, a protagonist so sure of herself after the author’s hard work that she is able to articulate what Atwood herself might conclude from this recent foray into writing a historical perspective:

When you are in the middle of a story it isn’t a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It’s only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else.

Certainly we see the wreckage from which Atwood pulled this tale—descending, as she has before (*The Handmaid’s Tale, Lady Oracle, Cat’s Eye*), into subject matter at once alarming and compelling. Although we may feel reading *Alias Grace* as Atwood herself suggests she felt writing it—swept over the rapids and powerless to stop—throughout, we’re glad she let us along for the ride.

Meridith Brand


Creating Library of Congress Subject Headings requires a laconic disposition, but the entries for James Carroll’s *An American Requiem* are conspicuously undernourished. Carroll melds where catalogers distinguish, connecting a subject understood to have historical gravitas—“Vietnamese Conflict 1961-1975”—with a heart wrenching analysis of familial tensions—“Fathers and Sons.”

My local bookstore classifies *An American Requiem* as a memoir but it could have as easily filed it under biography. The first two words are “My Father” and Carroll concludes by observing that “these have been my words, but it was his life that gave me mine.” In part, Joseph Carroll’s story fits a familiar pattern. Like a vast swath of working-class Catholics, he and his wife Mary used the economic boom of the 1940s and 1950s to escape the emotionally and physically cramped neighborhoods of Chicago, and found themselves able to provide for their children in ways once unimaginable. Joseph Carroll attended law school at night while slaughtering hogs in the stockyards, and Mary Carroll quit school at age fourteen to work for the telephone company. Their children, raised in suburban Alexandria, Virginia, include a biochemist, a senior FBI agent, a social worker, a psychology professor and son James, first a priest and now a successful novelist.

Unusual twists that push this narrative beyond historical generalizations are Joseph Carroll’s long stint as a Catholic seminarian before choosing law school and his subsequent career as an Air Force General. Joseph’s wrenching decision not to seek ordination because he did not feel “worthy” shaped his son’s hesitant vocation to the priesthood, and Joseph’s rise through the Air Force ranks gave him considerable responsibility for the Vietnam War which his son was to protest. Joseph Carroll’s confidence in hierarchies, be they religious or military, meshed nicely with the late 1950s, a moment when Catholicism and American patriotism seemed two sides of a single coin. James Carroll’s criticism of the same hierarchies in the late 1960s marks a rejection of not only parental authority but of a specific religious and political vision. When James Carroll joined antiwar marches on the Pentagon he did so with one eye cocked on a corner window, hoping his father wouldn’t recognize him in the crowd.

This intersection of the personal and the political (a phrase, after all, dating from the period) marks all participant histories of the 1960s. Indeed, the steady stream of autobiographies from former members of Students for a Democratic Society, or the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, have allowed historians to recreate the day-to-day trajectory of these movements with a detail
previously reserved for the Bloomsbury set.

What Carroll contributes, along with superb, moving prose, is a Catholic variant on these familiar stories. Carroll's 1960s, in other words, cannot be understood apart from the epochal changes reorienting American Catholicism. His account of his own spiritual trajectory is especially powerful. A brother's struggle with polio had only reinforced, in his account, his parent's belief that religion existed only in relationship to unhappiness and suffering. Much of his childhood seems to have been spent staring emptily at replicas of Lourdes and Fatima, and lighting candles in the hope of assuaging his brother’s illness. His own early interest in the priesthood in part stemmed from this devotional subculture, but even as family friends chatted blithely about his clerical future, Carroll found himself torn by attraction to young women, and an inability to develop anything more than a rote prayer life.

Only the Vatican Council that proved such a jolt to the religious sensibility of his parents' generation allowed for an authentic spiritual life. Carroll vividly evokes the enthusiastic reception afforded Swiss priest and theologian Hans Kung by Washington-area seminarians. Dressed, shockingly, in coat and tie, Kung pleaded for a more democratic and socially aware church. At the same historical moment, another speaker, Martin Luther King, Jr., offered a political vision more religious than that offered by Cardinal Spellman. Carroll's enthusiasm for both King and Kung proves again that the Vatican Council and its ramifications need to be integrated into more general narratives of the 1960s. When James Carroll became the Catholic chaplain at Boston University, he spent some time advising young men how to avoid the draft, but more of his energy went into knocking out pews, eliminating stained glass and placing the altar in the center of the room.

Conflict between James and Joseph was inevitable. At the first Mass he celebrated, in 1969, James attacked the glorification of war, to the consternation of generals and military chaplains present out of regard for his father. (One of the priest-chaplains had mistakenly congratulated Carroll for joining “our side.”) Joseph Carroll decried Vatican naivete after Paul VI's meeting with Martin Luther King, a man he considered a dangerous rebel, while James Carroll rejected Paul VI's strictures against “artificial” contraception.

Memoirs focused on the 1960s do not have a reputation for humility, but the tone of An American Requiem is almost never self-congratulatory. Carroll now recognizes, even as he did not then, his father's own hesitant criticism of the war from within the Pentagon. And too, while Carroll remains a pacifist, the end of the cold war has recast debates about American foreign policy. Patrick Buchanan, not Daniel Berrigan, was perhaps the most famous American Catholic opponent of American intervention in the Persian Gulf war, and some religious leaders have applauded aggressive American action in Bosnia. Debates about church governance and sexuality, by contrast, remain locked into tracks first laid thirty years ago. If there is a false note in An American Requiem, it is Carroll's confidence that his own vision on these matters is identical to what would have happened had not Paul VI and John Paul II halted Catholic reform. Perhaps, but Carroll's evaluation of preconciliar piety is uncharacteristically dismissive, and even his own turbulent career as a priest suggests a more complicated narrative. One of the most enduring legacies of 1960s activists like James Carroll has been a suspicion of authority—as exercised by racist sheriffs, dissembling Presidents, and hypocritical bishops. A healthy skepticism needs to be sustained, and the idolatry of authority exemplified by Joseph Carroll should not be romanticized. But part of the contemporary challenge is also to rebuild confidence in the ability of civic and religious institutions to accomplish larger goals.

This reservation does not diminish Carroll's achievement. Few accounts of the last thirty years possess such immediacy, such a stunning sense of detail. The National Book Award recently given to Carroll for An American Requiem should only be the first in a string of well-deserved honors.

John T. McGreevy
TRAVELING BY SUBWAY

Christopher J. Renz, O.P.

People cue up, like penitents waiting to unravel their humanity inside portable confessionals which will carry them into dark tunnels, turn their gaze towards

what
lives,

there, inside the car. A voice will call out their final destination, the doors will clack open and they will all spill out like ants, workers ascending into daylight,

trying
to carry

more than their own weight will allow, should allow, tiny acrobats weaving in and out of one another, antenna-touching, barely communicating where to go,

needing
to get

somewhere, perhaps back into the boxcar, back inside, where they will realize that they want to be somewhere else, where it is green and perhaps, open, where the

voice
listens,

where sins are unremembered and tomorrow is never called.
ON POETS—

Christopher Renz, O.P., lives and writes in the Oakland area. We find pleasure in his sending us not only thanks for publishing his poems, but his prayers for our well-being.

Heath Davis Havlick has been published recently in The Cresset, but she has also published in Paper Salad Poetry Journal, Ostentatious Mind, and Abbey. She lives in Mt. Hermon, California.

Mike Chasar is finishing an MFA in Creative Writing at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. He has published in the Southern Poetry Review, Nimrod, and Hellas.

ON REVIEWERS—

Joshua Eckhardt is Student Assistant Editor of The Cresset, currently discovering the delights of Cambridge on the VU Overseas Semester.

Meridith Brand is completing a graduate degree at Miami University of Ohio, where she teaches writing. Her poetry has appeared in The Cresset.

John McGreevy, a former Fellow in the Lilly Fellows Program in Humanities and the Arts at VU, is currently teaching at Harvard University and has recently accepted a position at Notre Dame University. His book Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth Century Urban North was published last year by University of Chicago Press.