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THE CRESSET

A REVIEW OF LITERATURE, THE ARTS, AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS



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THE CRESSET

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In Luce Tua

everywhere I go I hear the sound of marching, charging feet

As you read this, the United States will be at war with Iraq. That is not a prediction I make from my desk in mid-January; that is the reality of U.S. involvement in Iraq for more than a decade now. To be sure, the war drums now beat more loudly, but the drumming is nothing new. The U.N. sanctions against Iraq and the enforcement of the No-Fly zones in the north and south of Iraq are the two most visible manifestations of that war in which we have been engaged at little apparent cost to Americans. Cynics may suspect that the new peace movement is more concerned with protecting American lives than with either the well-being of the Iraqis and their neighbors or a just peace in the region.

These war actions of the past decade are not morally unproblematic. As many as a half million Iraqi children have died as a result of the sanctions imposed in 1990 in response to Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Saddam Hussein's hands are not clean in the deaths of these innocents, but neither is it plausible that these deaths were primarily the result of the failure of the Iraqi regime to justly and mercifully distribute their resources. By radically restricting the flow of basic goods into Iraq we have brought about widespread suffering. It is hard to escape the conclusion that the international community has been willing to use the citizens of Iraq as barter with one whose atrocities against innocents have long been well-documented.

It may not always be immoral to embargo, blockade, or lay siege against the citizens of a country. Whether or not that is the case will depend, in large part, upon how democratic a nation is, and upon how supportive a people are of the actions of their government. The benefits of citizenship in a totalitarian nation are few enough; one benefit does seem to be greater immunity from sieges. It is appropriate to encourage those who suffer under the yoke of an oppressor to throw off that yoke. It is wrong to aim at their harm as a means to achieving a liberty necessary for their flourishing. The Iraqi people who have suffered greatly with this tyrant, whose allegiance is coerced by his despotic rule, are not appropriate objects of our economic sanctions, even were those sanctions arguably effective.

Those sanctions must end. The condition for the end of the sanctions has been a regime change in Iraq, a change President Bush seems intent to oversee. Looked at from this perspective, the prospects of a swift, smart war on Iraq appear, if not good, then the lesser of two evils. But which—good, or the lesser of two (unnecessary?) evils?

First, we should distinguish between wars and rumors of war. Whatever else one may say about President Bush's policies, at the time I write this the conditions for containment of Saddam Hussein have increased dramatically over the previous eight years. Bush's bully pulpit and his willingness to rightly and justly insist upon U.N. inspections of Iraq even in the absence of support from our rather spineless European allies has altered the landscape. The U.N. inspectors are in Iraq and their inspections have been, so far as one can tell, relatively unhampered. President Bush seems to have convinced Saddam there would be hell to pay were he not to cooperate. There may yet be hell to pay, but there remains a way out, a way few would have considered a possibility two years ago—exile for Saddam.

Grant all this, grant that Bush's bellicosity has, at least for the moment, improved the prospects for a more stable peace in the Middle East. Does it follow that a war on Iraq would be morally justified? The answer to this is not as clear as either the Bush administration or the ELCA presiding bishop, Mark Hanson, would have us believe.

The most troubling thing is not that our action may be, relatively speaking, unilateral. It is good to have friends and allies, but some lack courage and prudence; their lack of virtue does not excuse one from the duty to act to protect the innocent. The inability to enlist one's friends should give pause, but should not paralyze.

Nor, I think, is there anything especially problematic about a preemptive war, though following the political theorist Michael Walzer, I would distinguish between “preventive” war and “preemptive” war and would agree with Walzer that the Bush administration has advanced a morally troublesome doctrine of preventive war. Preemptive strikes respond to an imminent threat. Preventive wars aim to prevent a much more remote and apparently less likely attack. At this time there is insufficient evidence that the threat Saddam Hussein poses to U.S. citizens or to innocent neighbors is either sufficiently grave or sufficiently imminent.

That, of course, is a prudential judgment based on information not yet available to many. Should the Bush administration provide credible evidence that Iraq possesses nuclear capabilities, an arsenal of deadly chemical and biological weapons, and intends to use these weapons in an attack against us, and/or a record of attempting to encourage terrorist strikes against U.S. citizens and to trade these weapons with terrorists, then we might have grounds for a preemptive strike. At this time, that evidence is not forthcoming.

We can but hope, then, that President Bush is taking the morally risky action of threatening to do what it might be wrong to do, and that that risk will pay off with a chastened Saddam Hussein whose regime we appear to have successfully contained this past decade. We can but pray that Saddam might be lured into exile. But failing in that, we must end the punishment of the people he has battered into submission. We, and they, may be required to endure a tyrant we cannot (yet) morally remove.

TDK

VISITING THE PAST

Sometimes I wish that there could be a place—
A rustic B&B with welcome sign—
And there I’d meet the past, its open face,
To show me all the ways I could have gone.

But first the piles of things: the keys and coats,
Umbrellas left to gather dust like mail;
The papers that say *Good!* and something small
That I can’t read; the kitschy Christmas lights.

Here, my host calls out; but now the weights
Of early loves, the sweat and crush of greed,
The kisses like corsages that have died.

One moment, I call out, filled up with nights
I couldn’t sleep, and heard the wind outside,
Then turn to find I’m left there, terrified.

Kim Bridgford

household freedom and home education: new agrarian dreams for the twenty-first century

Allan Carlson

ALTHOUGH ALLUDED TO IN DISCUSSIONS OF John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, and even Robert Penn Warren, the New Agrarians are not as well known and understood as they deserve to be. They were more diverse than usually supposed. Best known are The Southern Agrarians, among whom were the four mentioned earlier, a group of twelve authors centered at Vanderbilt University during the late 1920s and 1930s and architects of the book, *I'll Take My Stand*. Yet other New Agrarians came from the Northeast and the Midwest. While the majority were Protestant, a large minority were Roman Catholic; still others were Jewish and atheist. Their work has been called, at different times, the "country life campaign," "agrarianism," "traditionalism," "distributism," "de-centralism," "anti-urban," and "anti-industrial." In my analysis, I label them "The New Agrarians," borrowing that phrase from one of their number, Herbert Agar. I do this to set them apart from the simpler Jeffersonianism found in the 19th Century, rooted in a pre-industrial culture and mindset, and to emphasize their deliberate confrontation with modernism or modernity.

the new agrarian platform

Their platform was, at once, socially conservative and economically radical. Broadly put, they were advocates for a unique brand of "radical conservatism." What might this curious phrase mean? One answer comes from a 1934 essay called "The Task for Conservatism." Written by the popular historian Herbert Agar, it appeared in the remarkable, albeit flawed and short-lived journal, *The American Review*. This article stands as a model of "activist" or "radical" conservatism.

Agar wrote at the very worst point of the Great Depression: one-third of American workers unem-

ployed; the nation littered with failed banks; stock certificates issued during the exuberant 1920's rendered worthless. In seeking the label, "conservative," Agar argued that it had been twisted by what he called the "apostles of plutocracy" into the defense of economic "gamblers and promoters." As Agar wrote: "According to this [strange] view, [Wall Street politico] Mark Hanna was a conservative." The author sought to save the term by appealing to "another, and an older, America," a time when there was virtue in and a moral plan for the nation, a way of life worth conserving.

Central to this, Agar said, was "[t]he widest possible distribution of [productive] property." All of the American founders, he maintained, had held that "a wide diffusion of property...made for enterprise, for family responsibility, and in general for institutions that fit man's nature and that gave a chance for a desirable life." Material property, in short, was so important to the full and rich human life, that everybody should have some.

But America had lost its way, Agar continued. Under current economic conditions, the ownership of property was falling into ever fewer hands. "The normal human temptation to sacrifice ideals for money" had grown, lifting "the rewards for a successful raid on society to dangerous heights." A culture of widely distributed property fell under attack by "the barbarism based on monopoly." The great banking houses and financial institutions had destroyed "an entrenched landed interest" in the South during the Civil War. In 1914, the same group determined that America no longer needed an agricultural surplus for export, and so set out to destroy the independent farmer as well.

Agar called for an effort—at once "radical" and "conservative"—to restore the Property State. This "redistribution" of ownership must become

“the root of a real conservative policy for the United States.” As he explained, the ownership of land, machine shop, small store, or a share of “some necessarily huge machine” needed to become the normal thing, in order to set the necessary moral tone for society. Agar stressed the radical and political nature of this attempt, for it was not in line with existing economic developments. As he wrote: “It must be produced artificially and then guarded by favorable legislation.”

The virtue of self-sufficiency and the recognition that liberty rests on a family’s ability to meet its own basic needs were widely acclaimed by the New Agrarians. All families, economist Ralph Borsodi said, should produce two-thirds of needed goods and services within their own homes, workshops, and gardens. He showed how new technological innovations—especially electricity and the internal combustion engine—allowed for an efficient decentralization of most productive acts. The truly “free person” was not “merely the man who has the infinitesimal fraction of the political power represented by a vote.” Rather, the free man was one “so independent” that he could “deal with all men and all institutions, even the state, on terms of equality.” Only the self-sufficient household could support this level of independence.

Following the priority given by the Agrarians to widely dispersed property and the virtue of self-sufficiency, the New Agrarians endorsed a prescient ecological sensitivity and love of the planet. Liberty Hyde Bailey, named Dean of the College of Agriculture at Cornell University nearly 100 years ago, crafted most of the themes that would characterize 20th Century agrarian thought, and this environmental passion was at the core of his vision. His most provocative book appeared in 1916. Entitled *The Holy Earth*, it emphasized “the oneness of nature and the unity in living things,” a process guided by The Great Patriarch, God the Father. As Bailey explained:

Verily, then, the earth is divine, because man did not make it. We are here, part in the creation. We cannot escape. We are under obligation to take part and do our best living with each other and with all creatures. We may not know the full plan, but that does not alter the relation.

Every man, Bailey said, should know “in his heart...that there is goodness and wholeness in the rain, in the wind, the soil, the sea, the glory of sunrise in the trees, and in the sustenance that we derive from the planet.”

The New Agrarians agreed, as well, on the unique power of marriage, a point made with special effect by the contemporary agrarian writer, Wendell Berry. Proper marriage, the Kentuckian writes, is a sexual and economic unit; the sexual function without the economic function is ruinous, with “degenerate housewifery” and “degenerate husbandry” the result. When brought together, though, the consequence is beauty. As Berry explains in his poem, “The Country of Marriage”:

Our bond is no little economy based on the exchange of my love and work for yours, so much for so much of an expandable fund. We don’t know what its limits are—that puts us in the dark. We are more together than we know, how else could we keep on discovering we are more together than we thought?

Marriage stands, in fact, as a “great power” able to transform not only individuals, but the world. Held in the grip of marriage, time flows over husband and wife “like swift water over stones,” smoothing and shaping them to “fit together in the only way that [human] fragments can be rejoined.”

A New Agrarian theme emanating from the value of marriage is the positive value of human fertility. Harvard sociologist Carle Zimmerman, founder of the discipline of “rural sociology” in the 1920s, was the New Agrarian writer most committed to dismissing the gloom of Malthusian ideas. Instead of fretting about “overpopulation,” Zimmerman celebrated high human fertility and an abundance of large families as signs of social health. In his massive tome, *Family and Civilization*, he stressed that hope for the future rested on “the making of familism and childbearing the primary social duties of the citizen.” Zimmerman’s celebration of the small family farm rested on their very biological vitality. As he wrote: “These local family institutions feed the larger culture as the uplands feed the streams and the streams in turn the broader rivers of family life.”

This high valuation of marriage and the family was easily extended not only forward, to future

offspring, but backward as well, to a bond of the living with their ancestors and posterity. The Ohio-based agrarian writer, Louis Bromfield, emphasized the linkage of generations in his great novel, *The Farm*. Drawing on his own family history, Bromfield described the apogee of his family farm under the tutelage of his grandparents, here fictionalized as Maria and Old Jamie. During this time, the Farm was a cornucopia. Maria would preside over Sunday family meals as “a kind of priestess,” watching happily as all her children and grandchildren consumed what she had grown and prepared.

Later, when Bromfield himself resolved to return to the land and to build the Farm again, he saw this as a way to restore the bond of generations, those who went before and those to come. As he wrote in the fine agrarian book, *Pleasant Valley*: “[I sought] a piece of land which I could love passionately, which I could spend the rest of my life in cultivating, cherishing and improving, which I might leave together, perhaps, with my own feeling for it, to my children who might in time leave it to their children.”

Another New Agrarian concern, taught with special energy by the ‘Southern—or Vanderbilt—Agrarians’, was the suspicion of the industrial mindset; the true conservative must serve as watchdog over industrialism’s mindless sprawl. In their book, *I’ll Take My Stand*, the twelve Southerners accepted industrialism when it assured “the laborer of his perfect economic security” and protected labor as “one of the happy functions of human life.” Yet in the early decades of the 20th Century, they said, the assumption behind machines had been that “labor is an evil”; the new technological devices did not so much “emancipate” workers, as “evict” them. They criticized modern advertising and modern salesmanship as “the great effort of a false economy of life to approve itself.” The industrial mindset, they added, damaged art, manners, learning, and even romantic love. In an insightful turn of phrase, poet John Crowe Ransom emphasized that industrialism was a force “of almost miraculous cunning but no intelligence.” It had to be controlled, he said, “or it will destroy the economy of the household.”

The importance of local attachment and regional identity was central, as well, to the voice of the New Agrarians. In his splendid essay, “Still Rebels, Still Yankees,” Donald Davidson showed

how differences in key aspects of life—from ways of thinking to daily behavior—continued to give a marvelous variety to America. In his volume, *Land of the Free*, Herbert Agar lashed out at “world cities” such as Chicago and New York. With their cosmopolitanism, their skepticism, their falling birthrate, their lack of morals, and their imitative and decadent art, such cities were the sure signs of the end of a civilization, marked by “a hospitality to death.”

Fortunately, he continued, America still had a healthy “native” culture, born—as in ages past—out of farming settlements. As Agar explained:

[T]here are signs of the conversion of the intellectual class in the Mississippi Valley to the idea that if America is to have a culture of her own the intellectuals had better stay at home and take part in that culture instead of streaming to New York and becoming good little copies of an alien civilization.

He had special praise for the regional cities of Nashville, Tennessee (home of the Southern Agrarians) and Indianapolis (then home to novelist Booth Tarkington). He might have added Cedar Rapids, Iowa (home to artist Grant Wood, novelist Ruth Suckow and poets Paul Engle and Jay Sigmund), and other cities of the regionalist revival of the 1930s.

Although there was no unified religious voice of the New Agrarians, there was a general agreement upon the necessary role of religious faith as the source and protector of community. The Iowa-based Roman Catholic Priest Luigi Ligutti was the most effective New Agrarian advocate in the 1940s and 1950s, as leader of The National Catholic Rural Life Conference. He emphasized how the ownership of land and other productive property and the control of technology for human ends were mandates from God. “This thesis is true,” Ligutti concluded, because it “fulfills God’s intention in man’s creation, because it exhibits Christ’s love for mankind, and because it furnishes all of us with the assurance of a good life here on earth and a good life for eternity.”

In 1946, Monsignor Ligutti joined with seventy-five other religious leaders—Catholic, Protestant and Jewish—in a statement declaring “God’s intention in creation” to allow man to live in dignity and “to establish and maintain a family.” Land

was "God's greatest material gift to mankind" and "the farm is the native habitat of the family."

Property ownership, self-sufficiency, marriage, human fertility, the bond of the generations, love of the planet, suspicion of the industrial mindset, local attachment and regional identity, the role of religion in the creation of community: these were the defining goods of the New Agrarian Mind.

education and the new agrarians

Regarding education, though, the New Agrarians were conflicted and of two minds. Several of them were enthusiastic about the value of public schooling and viewed it as a necessity for the creation of the communities they desired. Herbert Agar, for example, argued that true democracy required "immense sacrifice" and "immense self-discipline" which could not be left to the randomness of private decisions. A system of free public schools must lie at democracy's core, he said, in order to give democracy "a fair chance to justify itself" and create the necessary type of human character. Rural sociologist Carle Zimmerman shared this belief in the necessity of the common school, downplaying the importance of family-centered education.

For his part, Liberty Hyde Bailey, Dean of Cornell's College of Agriculture, believed in a Federally-guided redirection of public education, one that would strengthen traditional gender roles and families. In the 1909 Report of the National Commission on Rural Life, Dean Bailey called for a new kind of rural education, one "freed from the conventionalisms of mere educational traditions." He continued: "It is perfectly apparent that the fundamental need is to place effectively educated men and women into the open country. All else depends on this."

What form would "effective education" take? Agriculture, Bailey insisted, was not "a technical profession or merely an industry, but a civilization." He saw the farmhouse as the very pivot of this civilization. Accordingly, "the homemaking phase of country life" was just as important as "the field farming phase." Bailey called for the creation of an Extension Service within the U.S. Department of Agriculture. This Service would train young men in agricultural techniques and young women in homemaking skills. Indeed, the Smith-Lever Act, approved by Congress several years later, embodied this very approach. The Smith-

Hughes Vocational Training Act followed in 1917. For the first time, federal dollars would go to support public schools, but in a novel way. The law provided funds for the training and hiring of homemaking, agriculture, and industrial arts teachers. Through these measures, Bailey would shape husbandmen, homemakers, and new families capable of building a true and strong Rural Civilization.

Other Agrarian voices, though, focused on very different models of education. The Southern Agrarians at Vanderbilt, for example, indicted the public schools for undermining rural vitality. As Andrew Lytle explained, the public schools taught the farmer's children "to despise the life he has led" and, now against hope, would like them to lead as well.

Wendell Berry, writing sixty years later in the book *What Are People For?*, was more blunt. He rejected the "powerful superstition of modern life" that people "are improved inevitably by education." In fact, he argued that the real purpose of state education had long been to teach country folk to leave the country and to "take their place" in industrial society. Public schools, in Berry's view, were no longer oriented to a cultural inheritance to be passed on to the next generation. Rather, the schools focused on the career, or the "future" of the child. Such schools, said Berry, innovated "as compulsively and as eagerly as factories." Under such circumstances, educators logically saw parents as "a bad influence" on their children. And many parents, in turn, had no useful work for their children to do, and, in Berry's words, were eager to turn these encumbrances "over to the state for the use of the future." As Berry summed up the situation: "The local schools no longer serve the local community; they serve the government's economy and the economy's government."

Berry has been less than certain about where to go for an alternative, though. In contrast, several others of the New Agrarians had a fairly clear sense of what to do. Most of the Southern Agrarians, for example, affirmed Goethe's maxim, "that everything that frees man's soul, but does not give him command over himself, is evil." They held that the purpose of education is to produce "balanced" persons, at home in the world yet also with strong spiritual and local roots. Accordingly, they praised the old, private Southern academies, dominant in the region before the Civil War, and using classical

curricula focused on Greek, Latin, rhetoric, and logic. Where the modern public high school was “nothing more than a mass-production factory,” the Academy model produced complete, moral human beings.

The Catholic Agrarian, Father Ligutti, urged the redirection of parochial or church schools toward a practical agrarianism. In his parish at Granger, Iowa, Fr. Ligutti reorganized the curriculum of Assumption High School in the early 1930s to prepare its pupils for home in the country. While the specifics resembled Liberty Hyde Bailey’s focus on skilled husbandmen and housewives, Fr. Ligutti fused Christian spirituality to this practical training. As he wrote in his book, *Rural Roads to Security*: “This school strives to imprint deeply in the hearts and minds of children the philosophy of agrarianism.” For the boys, the curriculum held up “farming-for-a-[subsistence] living” or “homemaking agriculture” as the ideal. Courses included animal husbandry, vegetable production, landscaping, fruit growing, bee culture, woodworking, metal working, soldering and forging, plumbing, the care of ignition systems, wiring, and leatherwork: the skills necessary to operate a small farm. The girls, for their part, learned that “a home on the land means children and a working husband.” Their curriculum focused on “how to conduct a home in the country” and “the arts and crafts,” with courses including clothing construction, care, and repair, weaving, rug making, planning and preparing food, home care of the sick, and home management. Ligutti reported that the boys made looms in the farm shop, while the girls used them to produce rugs and patterned pieces, some of which “have won prizes at the Iowa State Fair.” Where most public high school education aimed theoretically at “the white collar job and the swivel-chair position,” Assumption High School at Granger sought “the economic, social, and spiritual enrichment of rural life.”

Another Agrarian author, Ralph Borsodi, advanced several important educational innovations. As noted earlier, he believed that true liberty rested on household self-sufficiency. But he was also aware that under the regime of centralized industry, the continuity of persons educated to this liberty had been broken. Whole American generations had been reared without training in the ways to live in independence and family-centered secu-

arity. Borsodi observed that modern city dwellers, even if provided “with all the tools and implements which the Swiss Family Robinson providentially found,” would in fact “die of exposure, of sickness, and of hunger” before they could use them, so “pathetic” was their dependence on factory-made necessities. Borsodi concluded that men and women would have to be retrained to live in a sustainable free society.

Accordingly, in the early 1930s he created The School of Living in New York’s Ramapo Mountains. This school sought to save civilization from its over-specialization, providing adult re-education for life on the land. The School of Living had five divisions:

- The Homemaking Division focused on teaching the skills of cooking, food preservation, and laundering;
- The Agriculture Division taught the cultivation of home gardens and the care of poultry and dairy animals;
- The Craft Division held classes in woodworking, furniture production, and spinning and weaving for family use;
- The Building Division taught students how to construct their own home;
- And the Division of Applied Exchange focused on the challenges facing small home businesses, urging steps to decentralize “wasteful central industries.”

Several thousand Americans passed through the School of Living during its decade of operation. They shared in Borsodi’s vision of the good life: “A comfortable home in which to labor and to play, with trees and grass and flowers and skies and stars; a small garden; a few fruit trees; some fowl [chickens and ducks]; some kine [goats and a cow]; some bees; and three big dogs to keep the salesmen out—and I, at least, have time for love, for children, for a few friends, and for the work I like to do.”

Borsodi pioneered in another area of education, an event recounted in his 1933 book, *Flight from the City*. After leaving his job as a consulting economist in Manhattan and moving to a rural New York county, Borsodi found the local rural school “impossible” for his two sons. Searching for an alternative, he finally looked to his own wife and, “[w]hen I compared Mrs. Borsodi to the

average school-teacher in the public schools, I saw no reason why she could not teach the children just as well, if not better." Working out an arrangement with the county school superintendent, the Borsodis simply brought their children home. This so-called "experiment in domestic production" quickly proved its superiority to schooling organized on a factory model. It turned out that only two hours of course work a day were necessary for the Borsodi boys to keep pace with their public school counterparts; this underscored the inefficiencies and great waste of time found in mass education. The Borsodis also discovered that the remaining hours could be filled with reading and creative activities in the garden, the kitchen, and the workshop. Moreover, this family-centered form of education taught the Borsodis that true education "was really reciprocal; in the very effort to educate the boys, we educated ourselves." In short, Ralph Borsodi invented—or perhaps better put, discovered—modern home schooling.

Of course, the campaign mounted by The New Agrarians to build a vital Rural Civilization, to encourage new subsistence homesteads across the land, and to decentralize economic, social and cultural life, could claim little success when the 20th Century came to an end. Policy victories in 1914, 1917, and again during the 1930s may have slowed the pace of social change, but could not reverse it. The decay of regional and rural cultures, the emptying of the land, the ongoing crisis of small-scale agriculture, the sprawl of the cities, and the industrialization of human life and culture were the Twentieth Century's dominant forces.

All the same, the New Agrarian campaign left some important lessons, particularly in the field of education. For example, the model of the Southern Academies, celebrated by the Southern Agrarians, shows new life in those institutions making up the Association of Classical and Christian Schools and in their attention to the Trivium curriculum of rhetoric, dialectic, and grammar.

The curriculum shaped by Father Ligutti at Assumption High School in Granger, Iowa, stands as a once-successful model for alternative education: It guided young men and women toward skills that would sustain both marriages and rural living. Perhaps it may become relevant again in this new and uncertain Century.

Finally, the Agrarian credo also contributed to the near-miraculous emergence of home schooling as a major movement in American education after 1975. A half-century earlier, Ralph Borsodi had crafted the basic principles and recognized the special gifts of this radically decentralized form of learning: it is more efficient, more child-centered, and more flexible; both children and parents become learners; and the process strengthens the family. Contemporary home-schooling circles, moreover, are disproportionately "agrarian" in their behavior: they are more likely to live in rural places, villages, or intentional communities; they are more likely to maintain a "family garden" and simple animal husbandry; and their families are larger and more stable, another Agrarian trait. It seems that once having tasted household freedom in the act of home education, the family looks for other ways to grow into autonomy.

In short, it is in private academies, in religiously inspired communities, and in home schools that the dreams and values of the New Agrarians survive and grow in the early 21st Century. †

Allan Carlson is President of The Howard Center in Illinois and Distinguished Fellow in Family Policy Studies at the Family Research Council. His books include The New Agrarian Mind (Transaction, 2000). This essay is adapted from a lecture presented at Washburn University, Topeka, Kansas, on November 8, 2002.

the oneida experiment

Frederica Mathewes-Green

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROOM THERE WAS A WOOD-burning stove. The small iron door was open on this chilly day, and the red flames could be seen leaping within as if in time to music. For there was music, too, a marching song, and the little girls who circled the stove marched around it in time.

The girls were not happy.

Each girl was holding in her arms her favorite doll. These were pretty dolls with painted faces, who usually wore fancy clothes reflecting current fashion. But today the clothes had been left in a pile, and the wax figurines were exposed, hard and bare. One by one, each girl marched up to the open door of the stove. One by one, each girl threw her doll into the "angry-looking flames."

The phrase is that of Harriet Worden, a woman who participated in the sacrifice that day and recalled the painful event long after. It was 1851, in the utopian community of Oneida, in upstate New York. What was being burned up that day was an unseemly trait that their teachers had observed developing in the little girls of the commune. The dolls had become too important to the children; these were frivolous toys, indicating an affection for worldly finery and vain display. Women of Oneida were expected to bob their hair rather than fuss it to flattering styles and to wear efficient clothing rather than long, sweeping gowns. They were to work in the factories alongside the men, while men took their equal share of labor in the kitchen. Pretty dolls were a tantalizing, subversive distraction.

But there was another concern: little girls were becoming attached to specific dolls. A child might choose one as her favorite, rock it and croon to it, tuck it in at night. This was a dangerous tendency. Oneida was founded on the principle of "Bible Communism." Founder John Humphrey Noyes insisted that, under his personally devised philosophy, there were to be no selfish attachments, no hoarding of love. The tender affection a little girl might feel for a special, beloved doll had to be burned away. So each girl marched up to the oven

door with her "long-cherished favorite" in her arms, then stared as the flames consumed it.

"We. . .saw them perish before our eyes."

What was being burned up that day was the tendency for any human to form an intense and private bond with another. Noyes could not permit this because he had put sexual freedom at the head of his agenda; he was the inventor of the term, "free love." The Yale Divinity School student and sometime Congregationalist minister believed that "complex marriage" was God's will, as indicated by the scripture, "in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like the angels in heaven" [Mt 22:30]. (This may not be how most of us imagine the angels pass the time, but the American 19th century was a fertile time for private interpretations of the Bible.)

"The abolition of sexual exclusiveness is involved in the love-relation required between all believers by the express injunction of Christ and the apostles," Noyes wrote. "The restoration of true relations between the sexes is a matter second in importance only to the reconciliation of man to God."

"Sexual freedom" is a term that could suggest a carefree heedlessness that did not obtain at Oneida. A man wishing to enjoy the company of a specific woman would submit his request to an appointed official who kept a ledger of such engagements. This official would then present the request to the woman who was the target of the man's intentions, and she might agree or refuse as she chose, though agreement was the general rule. According to the records, most women had two or three visitors per week, and a popular young woman might entertain as many as seven.

The purpose of the ledger, however, was not to restrain the free exchange of sexual favors. Nor was it to track the fathers of children born in the community. Such a task would have been nearly impossible in any case, but considering the era and the circumstances, astonishingly few children were

born. Noyes understood that, for a scheme of sexual freedom to succeed and not be overwhelmed by progeny, non-procreative sex must be absolutely required. This was accomplished through Noyes' command that men utilize a primitive method for the prevention of pregnancy. It was effective: over a twenty-year period, only thirty-five children were born in the community of a hundred adults.

The purpose of the ledger was not to restrain sexual freedom but to ensure it by monitoring whether any couples were becoming overly attached to each other. There was always the terrible danger that a man and woman might fall in love and begin consorting with each other to the exclusion of others. Such incipient selfishness had to be stamped out.

Noyes phrased it this way: "The new commandment is that we love one another. . .not by pairs, as in the world, but *en masse*." When a man confessed that he had fallen in love with a woman in the community, Noyes responded sharply, "You do not love her, you love happiness."

A policy of free sex sounds like a dandy idea to a great number of people, something on the order of free ice cream. What's the harm in it? "To be ashamed of the sex organs is to be ashamed of God's workmanship," said Noyes. It feels good, so do it. Love is a good thing, and the more people you love the better. Free sex speaks to all the popular virtues: generosity, tolerance, pleasure, broadening of experience, deepening of empathy. The tree is good for food, a delight to the eyes, and to be desired to make one wise.

Those who are old enough will recall the onset of the contemporary sexual revolution, back in the late 1960s. The movement was heralded by a titillating novel, *The Harrad Experiment*, which imagined a programme of intentional sexual freedom being staged on a college campus. It wasn't just racy stuff (though it was that), it was also a seriously-advanced philosophical position, an example of progress marching on. As at Oneida, the sexual revolution was seen as an attribute of utopia. It was promoted in every form of media and entertainment, from Make Love, Not War buttons to the musical *Hair*.

We can gain some historic perspective by comparing this free-love message with another message popular at the time. Though it's hard to believe now, there was once a time when mind-altering

drugs were recommended; they were thought to actually be "beneficial." Promoting this view is how Harvard professor Timothy Leary won his fame. A drug like LSD was represented as "mind-expanding," and who could oppose expanding your mind? There was no doubt that drugs could induce altered states of consciousness, and it was claimed that these altered states would produce great art and deep thoughts. The enlightening effects supposedly produced by drugs were contrasted contemptuously with the effects of alcohol. Booze made you stupid and sloppy. Drugs made you wise.

This theory swiftly went down in flames. Nearly everyone with any contact with this experiment saw uncontrollably hallucinating, terrified friends carted into mental hospitals. Everyone knew someone who had been seriously, perhaps permanently, burned by drugs. It turned out that these chemicals didn't produce great art after all, but incomprehensible garbage. The deep thought looked stupid the next day. Of course, despite all this disillusionment, drug use didn't cease entirely, and the problem remains to this day. But drug use did lose its trendy glow. It became impossible to continue the pretense that drugs held promise of enlightenment.

It's important to note something here. Mind-altering drugs did not lose their status because of a clever anti-drug campaign, or hard-hitting public service announcements, or improved anti-drug legislation. They lost their cachet because they were found to be damaging. Drugs turned out to be not as advertised. The heartening news here is that it is possible for cultures to change for the better, once given a dose of truth. Like a body, a culture has an innate impulse to health. Though this can be subverted in a million ways, it can be nurtured as well. That should give us hope.

As we all know, however, the sexual revolution message was more successful than the pro-drug movement. While a measure of shame has been restored to taking drugs, sex outside of marriage is still viewed as a harmless pastime. One reason this revolution was so successful is that the locus of shame was shifted; not the practitioners, but those who oppose free sex, were supposed to be feeling shame. This was especially true during the first blush of this movement, when free sex was presented as just one more aspect of the cheerful, daisy-sprinkled, bell-bottomed sixties. Only

sour-faced moralists would disapprove of anything so innocent and pleasant. They must think sex is dirty, it was presumed; they must have unresolved sexual hang-ups. Thus the tables were turned; to oppose the sexual revolution was to stand revealed as a cramped and dirty-minded snoop. An advocate of the revolution, on the other hand, was a free and healthy child of nature. In a clever twist, those who indulged in behavior previously thought shameful turned the weapon against traditional morality, and accused them of shameful thoughts.

Why didn't the sexual revolution meet the same fate as the drug movement? It was swiftly clear that drugs were damaging lives pretty severely, sometimes beyond repair. Free sex, on the other hand, appeared to be like that bowl of free ice cream. It was a distinct and severable experience, with no impact on any other part of life—mere pleasure, with no repercussions.

Of course, this isn't true; free sex has innumerable repercussions, physical, emotional, and spiritual, and they can replicate indefinitely through many lives, and even through generations (just look at the cost of growing up without a daddy). But these effects are delayed. If your friend took some bad acid it was evident within hours, and the sight could be enough to scare you off the stuff for good. But at the moment sex feels good, and it might feel good in memory for a while afterwards. Sometimes there are no perceived ill effects at all.

As Josh McDowell wisely asks teens, if you are doing it because it feels good, how long does it have to feel good? Fifteen minutes? The rest of the day? Does it have to feel good when you find out you have herpes? What about AIDS? When your lover tires of you and spreads gossip about your body, or your adequacy in bed? What about when you find out you started a baby? Or when your parents find out? When you walk into the abortion clinic? When you're a school dropout, raising a child as a single parent? How good does it have to feel now, to make up for how bad it'll feel then?

Similar questions apply to adults as well. Will it feel good to be alone at the end of your life because you always played around and never made a commitment? When you're middle-aged and saggy and can't attract lovers any more? Will it feel good when all the classmates at your 30th high school reunion are showing pictures of their grand-

children, and you're showing a picture of your dog? Will it feel good when you divorce? When you get to see the kids only on weekends? What about when your lover skips off to enjoy "free sex" with someone else, and you are left behind, a loser nobody loves? Those are the rules of the game, and anyone who plays can lose everything.

Reality has a way of freeing us from confusion. This happened quickly with drugs, but it's taking longer with sex. Yet there has already been a marked toning-down of initial pro-free-sex rhetoric. For example, in the mid-seventies there was a bestseller titled *Open Marriage*, written by a couple who claimed that adultery strengthened their relationship. They made it sound so reasonable: husband and wife explained that extracurricular activities deepened their enjoyment of each other and enhanced their ties. No one could deny it was so, since they made the claim based on private experience. The book caused quite a stir, which faded a few years later when the couple divorced. The complex knots in the human heart—jealousy, insecurity, the craving to be loved alone—can't be untied by an act of will, no matter how lofty the sentiment.

This was why John Humphrey Noyes set a goal of combating possessive love, and why the little girls had to burn their dolls. It may look like free sex is as innocuous as free ice cream, but it has reverberations that run all down human relationships, requiring distancing and independence where interdependence would be the natural norm. It requires shifts in the underlying ways we view each other and interact and touches a wider range of human experience than would be initially thought necessary. The repercussions of free sex are not as immediately visible as those of mind-bending drugs; but, because they take longer to emerge, they resound more deeply.

The initial problem free sex poses is that the sexual urge is, at root, a reproductive urge. It is planted in us to ensure that we have children, that the human race goes on. The urge is strong because it is a survival urge, as strong as the impulse to eat, drink, and find shelter. This is not to say that everyone who is moved to have sex does so because he or she consciously wants to have a child. The contrary may well be true. Likewise, some may gobble a bowl of ice cream while hoping it has no effect on the waistline. Wishes to the contrary, our craving for yummy fats is strong because it is a

command of basic nutrition; fats are necessary to our bodies' health, the basic energy fuel. We want it because of something our body commands from the depths, though our mind may have a very different intention.

Sex is most deeply about reproduction, and human reproduction is a long-term project. It requires ongoing attention from two adults, not just one. The human child is born vastly more unformed and immature than any other mammal, unable to communicate, unable to feed itself. It requires care so intensive that a single mother and child operating alone are a fragile family; they are vulnerable to too many kinds of danger, in the jungle, the arctic, or the inner city. She needs a male to protect and provide for herself and the child; he needs to protect them, or the child will not survive and his deeper goal of reproduction will fail. The circle of man, woman, child is the basic unit of any human society.

Sex is about reproduction, and reproduction requires sex. Contrary to popular opinion, God is in favor of this. It was his idea, after all. He devised many different ways for creatures and plants to reproduce on this earth, and lots of them don't look like much fun. Probably there were more efficient ways—and certainly more dignified ways—that God could have designed for human reproduction. But this funny business was his idea, and every indication is he meant us to enjoy it.

We're sometimes told that the historic Christian Church is opposed to sex, but this is simply not true. Christians have always favored sex within marriage but opposed its appearance in other situations, much as we approve water in a pitcher but oppose it in a basement. Sex within marriage is not merely permitted but honored.

The icon known as *The Conception of the Theotokos* demonstrates this. [See front cover] "Theotokos" is the name Eastern Orthodox Christians apply to the Virgin Mary; it means "God-bearer." An ancient heresy suggested that Mary bore only Jesus's humanity; the Church responded that no, she was the mother of the Incarnate God himself.

The conceptions of St. John the Baptist and of Jesus are described in scripture, and these rapidly became annual celebrations in the early Church. Not much later, the conception of Mary was honored as well. But although the Bible records miraculous stories surrounding the conception of Jesus and his cousin, Mary was conceived in the regular

way. The icon of the feast, accordingly, shows a married couple in the privacy of their bedroom. In my copy, Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna, are standing on a blue carpet before their bed, which has a blue striped cover and an embroidered pillow. They look serious, yet tender. They are in a graceful embrace; Anna has stretched up on tiptoe to press her face against her husband's, with her arm around his neck. This is how the life of a daughter begins.

This is a popular icon in Orthodoxy, one often given as a wedding gift and hung near the marital bed. It is a reminder of the goodness of sexual love, and God's intention that we use it in joy. But Christians do oppose the misuse of sex, including temporary heterosexual encounters that lack a wedding ring. This is an impulse associated more with men than with women. Some theorize that the male is programmed to impregnate as many women as he can, and the woman's task is to capture and domesticate him against his will. There's a flaw in this logic, however. Reproduction only succeeds if the child survives and grows up to reproduce again; this is much more likely to happen if the child has two parents. Nature is biased in favor of reproduction, and what serves it best we find deepest in our hearts.

Thus we find a profound, instinctive conspiracy that binds mother, father and child ever closer together. When another item is moved to the top of the agenda—sex without commitment, sex without consequences—it flings them apart. A culture such as ours, which has been dominated by the notion of free sex for decades, makes at least three shifts to accommodate the demands of that ethic and to avoid the demands of the nuclear family. First, it must eliminate the requirement that some lasting, exclusive commitment (like marriage) be made before sex. Second, it must find a way to prevent or eliminate children conceived in these uncommitted sexual relationships. Third, it must train women to support themselves with no help from men.

As John Humphrey Noyes understood, one of the first things required is a valiant commitment to eradicating "selfish" love. For free sex to succeed women and men must be willing to forego deep emotional commitment to each other. Not that these connections never happen, but that they cannot be required as a prerequisite to sex. It is apparent that, under this arrangement, women

lose. The old saying goes: girls give sex in order to get love, boys give love in order to get sex. When the board at the commodities exchange reads "Free Sex," girls aren't getting a very good deal. A teenage girl told me that a friend had confided in her, "I slept with Rick last night. Do you think he likes me?"

Ironically, this kind of sexual availability was promoted by feminists a few decades ago as an aspect of women's equality and freedom. The double standard was decried, as well it might be, but the remedy suggested was that women adopt male values. If men want sex without commitment, it must be what women want too. The Playboy philosophy—sex without commitment—was transformed from an example of oppression to one of liberation.

Looking back on this from the vantage point of thirty years, I think we got conned. Women fell for a shell game and gullibly assumed that male sexual values were better than their own traditional, self-protecting ones. And like many victims of a clever con game, they continue to tell themselves that they got a good bargain.

Some, even in the feminist camp, are rethinking this. How did that which purported to liberate women somehow end with women feeling more endangered than ever? Instead of women's bodies becoming more securely their own private possession, these bodies were presumed to be open for business, available for public evaluation and use. Sociologists like Deborah Tannen and Carol Gilligan began writing about women's tendency to frame all interactions in the context of human relationships, unlike men who were more able to run mental, emotional, and physical functions on separate tracks. Much more than men, women are apt to be thrown off balance when sex is snipped out of the fabric of personhood and isolated as sheer mechanical act. A sexuality that more accurately respects women's nature is going to look a lot more like the kind of commitment-based arrangement that our mothers, grandmothers, and their ancestors demanded. In the history of women's sexuality, free sex is a brief, crazy experiment, and it has failed.

Second, in order to implement a regime of free sex, the sex that takes place must be free of children. John Humphrey Noyes insisted that men practice "male continence," but many less onerous methods are available today. The pill, which made

its debut in the early sixties, is widely credited with enabling the sexual revolution. It and other chemical and mechanical methods have enjoyed seasons of popularity, but nearly all come with side effects that can give pause. This should not be surprising. Fertility is a condition deeply inscribed in the female body, and chemicals and devices strong enough to overcome it are likely to have other effects as well. As a friend of mine said regarding the birth control pill, "Why would I put in my mouth something I wouldn't put in my compost heap?"

The method that has won widest approval is condoms, perhaps because they are cheap and require no prescription, and alone among all methods provide some protection against disease. They are not perfect, of course, and can fail in many ways; failure is most guaranteed when they are left in the drawer of the bedside table. For this is the feminists' greatest complaint against condoms: men don't want to use them. Since it is the one modern method that men control, their refusal leaves women unprotected. And refuse they do. Although condoms are available in small towns across the nation for less than the price of a pack of cigarettes, and their use is promoted as nearly a patriotic act, half of all women having abortions said they were using no prevention method at all during the month they got pregnant.

Even when contraception is used, it isn't always effective, as indicated by the other half of abortion customers. As Maggie Gallagher points out, if contraceptives properly used are 95% effective over a year, a sexually active woman who uses them faithfully over a 10-year period stands a 43% chance of getting pregnant at least once. Her chances jump dramatically if she uses them with less than exacting care.

But free sex requires freedom from babies, so the second, grimmer enabler of the sexual revolution is abortion. A million and a half of these are done every year, one for every four births. About three-quarters are performed on unmarried women, often signaling the sad end of a fleeting affair. There was a time, of course, when unexpected pregnancy would be the occasion of some fast maturing: a young man would do the right thing, marry and support his family, or a young woman would quietly have the baby out of town and place it for adoption. The availability of contraception has subtly changed the equation,

though; it promises that people have the right to have sex without pregnancy. If contraception fails, the appearance of a pregnancy is felt as an injustice, and the baby viewed as a trespasser. In this perspective, abortion is a right.

One might charge that, though there are some parallels between Oneida's regime of free sex and that of the present day, no one would command children to burn dolls. The maternal instinct to bond with a child is not feared but admired. We love children; we dote on them. Yet it seems to me that sometimes there is something unhealthy in the way we love them—perfect, beautiful children, wanted children, chosen children, the ones who survived when their unwanted siblings went in the abortion clinic dumpster.

We love children, all right, but not in their own right, with their own needs. We love them in the manner of Shel Silverstein's rhyme: "Do I like children? Yes I do! Boiled, baked, or in a stew!" We love children as consumer items: pets, toys, providers of entertainment and prestige to their owners. Their existence is permitted if they fit adults' plans—if adults want them. If they fail to please, the results are not pretty.

The change in the rate of child abuse over twenty years of abortion tells the story. In 1974, 60,000 cases were reported: over a thousand children were being battered each week. But hope was on the horizon: *Roe vs Wade* was only one year old. As availability of abortion spread, women could weed out the children they didn't want before birth. Soon, only wanted children would get born. A world of wanted children, as the slogan goes, would make a world of difference.

Two decades later, the world is very different. Every person in America under the age of 30 could have been aborted; every child, teen, and 20-something living escaped that fate by being sufficiently "wanted." And the reported cases of child abuse inflicted on all these chosen children? After twenty years of abortion it was still 60,000—except that was the figure for a single week. In 1994, the total number of reported child abuse cases was 3.1 million.

How can this be? Perhaps it's due to better reporting; perhaps people are under more stress. Perhaps the disintegration of the family means that parents pushed to the limit no longer have an aunt or grandma—or husband—to take the baby for a while. (Though single-mom households make up only 17% of the population, they account for 40%

of reported child abuse.)

But a simple, seismic shift was contained in the very notion that children had to be "wanted" before they earned the right to live. Parents' pleasure superceded their offsprings' right to breathe, and there was no reason this right would cease after birth. In fact, numerous studies confirm that the most "wanted" children are the most likely to be abused. As measured by parental eagerness for the child during pregnancy, the child's being named after a parent, the mother going early into maternity clothes, the percentage of "wantedness" among abused children is between ninety-one percent and ninety-six percent. Perhaps the higher the (unrealistic) expectation, the deeper the disappointment. A cuddly bundle of joy in the delivery room may not be so wanted at the age of Terrible Two, or five, or fifteen, and the parent's right to reject feels just as valid then as during the Supreme-Court-sanctioned initial nine months.

Does our current free-sex utopia eradicate the maternal impulse by requiring little girls to throw their dolls into the fire? No, it does it by requiring grown women to throw their children away in abortion clinics; and if children are something to throw away before birth, they are never safe after.

Thirdly, if an ethic of free sex replaces the nuclear family, women must be able to support themselves with no expectation of help from a male partner. Popular imagination might suppose that a free-sex utopia like Oneida was a disorderly paradise of leisure, but such was not the case. Men and women trooped off to work together daily, and the many products of the Oneida community made it a highly successful economic concern. It remains so to this day, though company philosophy about employee behavior has become more conventional. (The Oneida silver-plate platter remains a staple wedding gift, and every newborn needs an Oneida baby cup.) Oneidans were taught to expect women to labor at the same jobs as men, and men were required to share women's work in the communal kitchen.

A similar thing happened, of course, with the advent of the sexual revolution a few decades ago. The opportunities for women to compete in the public sphere have been a blessing, and I have been the beneficiary of groundbreaking work done by those women who demanded just such a chance. A problem can arise when the demand is not for a

chance to compete, but for guaranteed success. I think this insistence on equality of outcome is a backhanded insult, implying that on a level playing field women couldn't compete. Speaking personally, being a woman has been far from a handicap, and is more like an advantage. Conservative, pro-life, and Christian groups, in my experience, go out of their way to give women a chance. Maybe on the other side of the fence sexism and anti-female bias are more common; women on that side are clearly more touchy about it and more insistent on regulatory enforcement of "fairness," suggesting that discrimination is a familiar problem.

A strong work ethic is, of course, not a bad thing. Where the problem arises is when women are expected to provide for themselves without support from men and where the thrill of a paycheck is supposed to be a substitute for long-term romance.

When free sex becomes the dominating social value, a society must adjust in many ways. We've examined just three of them: discouragement of a requirement of commitment before sex, methods to avoid childbearing, and expecting that women be self-supporting. All three of these were values championed by the feminist movement as essential to improving women's lives. Thirty years later, many elements of women's lives—and those of men and children as well—are worse. There has been an explosion of sexually transmitted disease, single mothers and children living in poverty, child abuse, teenage childbearing, divorce. It's not clear that anyone is happier. Free ice cream has a high price.

The root problem is that it's not sex that animates us so, but something deeper and more broad: eros. Sex and eros are not the same thing. Sex is a physical act, but eros is the underlying emotional attachment, and it is much more powerful. Eros is the force that makes you want to claim this man, or this woman, as your own, and cling to him or her forever. It's exclusive, craving fidelity and rejecting competitors.

John Humphrey Noyes knew it to be the ultimate enemy of Oneida's dream, capable of wrecking his utopia of "free love." Sex was to be spread abroad in that garden of delights, but true love was the enemy. Eros commands with a more powerful voice than mere physical appetite. And Eros wins in the end.

Thirty years after they burned the dolls at Oneida, John Humphrey Noyes' dream was falling apart. As an old man he had fled the grounds of the commune under cover of darkness, a step ahead of rumors that Oneida defectors were telling federal investigators that he had been having sex with underage girls. These charges were true. Though Noyes wrote exhortatory letters to his followers from exile, and many tried to follow his dream, the old longings for fidelity and marriage began appearing once more.

Before long, virgins were refusing to follow the custom of being initiated into sex by the older men; they were holding out for marriage. Women who had borne children out of wedlock now began refusing further sexual relations, likewise demanding a wedding ring and exclusive fidelity. Teenaged couples were falling in love and pledging fidelity to each other, against all the rules. Younger women began growing their hair out and wearing long-skirted dresses. Mothers would no longer allow communal child-care workers ultimate control over their children's lives, but demanded the right to raise them as they saw fit. The dream of Bible Communism was ending.

Women want to raise their own kids; it's a longing that can't be burned away as easily as burning a wax doll. Men love women and feel a yearning they can hardly understand to select one and cherish her, provide for her, even risk his life for her. We have tried for decades to burn away those longings by setting out bowls of free ice cream, and they have looked beguiling indeed, on movie screens, magazines, and MTV. But the body has an impulse to health, and can't live on ice cream alone. Pretty soon people start looking around for healthier fare. In the process they are apt to find each other, settle down, and form families once again. And in the heart of many a healthy family is a little girl holding a doll. ♣

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wisdom for the recovery of local culture

Eric Miller

IF THE AD HOC TERM “POSTMODERN” MEANS anything, it has to do with the breaking of the long-fraying bonds that for better and for worse have tied westerners together, whether as towns and cities, as intellectual communities, as ethnic groups, as nations, or even as “genders.” Great centripetal powers have, often with our own cooperation, had their way with us, and we know it. We find ourselves searching for something that seems lost. We find ourselves remembering less and less what it was that we lost. Even the idea of lostness has become problematic: we find ourselves doubting that anyone or thing can truly be lost.

Often this longing for a world more tightly bound finds expression in calls for a return to “community.” Strangely, even as we issue these calls we tend to glory in the very means by which real communities—families, neighborhoods, towns, colleges, churches, businesses—have been dramatically weakened. A short list of the dissolvers might, with some argument, include: the great modern technologies, from the car to the computer, that have made possible an unprecedented disconnecting (in the name of enhanced connecting); corporations, which have refashioned our world with these technologies; scientific language, replacing and subsuming older understandings of nature and obligation; national organizations of various types, with their commitments to dictating the shape of and direction of the local institutions they (ostensibly) serve; and a national “government,” providing, in the name of liberal democracy, the political framework and ballast for all of these developments.

This dissolution raises a fundamental question: Can we have it both ways? Can we expect unity while serving the agents of (dis)unification? To believe that we should seems foolish. The post-

World War II fantasy of a nation of interchangeable parts, in which all “individuals” are free, as Southwest Airlines would have it, to “move about the country,” has turned us into a mere collection of parts, held together by little more than economic and personal convenience. This form of convening is, needless to say, not the most fulfilling or noble of social ends. Human relations of all kinds prosper only by fidelity: fidelity to kin, to neighborhood, to church, to country. We have made betraying these loyalties a way of life. True cultural prosperity, on our nation’s present terms, would not seem to be in the offing.

For those who long for such prosperity, the place to look, then, is likely not to the nation (or anything else “national” in scale), but rather to older social and moral traditions as mediated through local institutions: to the churches, schools, and families that preserve other visions of being human. These past fifty years of loss have left many in the mood to do some real rebuilding, to do the hard, unglamorous, but necessary work of building with integrity, from the soul outward. If national institutions of almost all sorts have abandoned their responsibility to nourish us, we know that we need to fix our gaze at the local and start again. Put one way, this vision might be termed “decentralist”: it attempts to decrease the dependence of human communities upon national organizations and structures. Put positively, the term “localist” is useful: it seeks to direct our energies toward the strengthening of those institutions that we ourselves, as face-to-face communities, have the ability to own and shape.

Fortunately for those committed to enacting this localist way of life, much of great value from the last century remains to build upon, despite its often ruinous record. Contained in this treasury

are the voices of three shrewd, perceptive observers of that century, critics who neither fantasized about a bliss-filled pre-modern world nor prostrated their minds before the claims of "progress." Each was critical of the world that industrial capitalism made, but none embraced the moral anarchy and metaphysical blindness that so many other critics of capitalism did. Most heartening, these critics, Christopher Lasch, Wendell Berry, and C.S. Lewis, achieved a broad and at times deep resonance. They struck, and still strike, chords. This makes grappling with their work a worthy starting point for those trying to think about how to recover local culture in our time.

Christopher Lasch and the hope for haven

Christopher Lasch (1932-1994), one of the most prominent American social critics and public intellectuals of the last third of the twentieth century, had by the time of his death authored eleven books and hundreds of essays and articles, which appeared regularly in venues ranging from *Harper's* and *The New York Review of Books* to *The New Oxford Review* and *Salmagundi*. A (somewhat idiosyncratic) socialist in the 1960s and 1970s, in the 1980s Lasch gradually moved toward what he, in his profound 1991 volume *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics*, termed "the populist tradition." Populism was, he thought, a way of seeing and living that centered in a high estimation of loyalty, an understanding and embrace of the "limits" of our human and global circumstance, and what he termed a profound "respect for workmanship."

Lasch's maternal grandfather managed a grain elevator in turn-of-the-century Nebraska and also worked as a local and state politician; if he was a little late for Populism proper, he surely bore its imprint long after its rather abrupt passage from the political scene in the mid-1890s. Lasch's father, a newspaper editor, worked for the *Omaha World-Herald* in the early part of his career, a newspaper that had in the previous century been edited by the Great Commoner himself, William Jennings Bryan. True to form, Lasch, as a socialist in 1969, called for "a drastic scaling down of institutions," stressing the imperative to "combine planning with as much regional and local control as possible." He understood as well as anyone that work is at the center of the social crisis brought on by industrial capitalism and that this crisis can achieve no resolution apart from addressing "the degradation of

work," as he put it. In a retrospective piece published in 1991, he recalled how he had come to see that "The authority conferred by a calling, with all its moral and spiritual overtones, could hardly flourish in a society in which the practice of a calling had given way to a particular vicious kind of careerism, symbolized unmistakably, in the eighties, by the rise of the yuppie." For Lasch, like populists a century before him, rebuilt communities, structured by a more equitable distribution of property and laws that protect the integrity of both the earth and its families, would be comprised of people working on behalf of one another—not massive, faceless concentrations of power in the form of political and economic organizations.

Lasch's most famous calls for these sorts of communities came in the late 1970s, when he made his brilliant, bracing defense of the traditional family in *Haven in a Heartless World* and then savaged the *Culture of Narcissism* two years later. These books won him some celebrity, many adversaries, and a prominent perch as a national seer. Much to the frustration of his critics and many of his boosters, though, Lasch spoke most easily in these years in the critical, rather than constructive, voice. He proved to be much more adept at showing how deplorable the absence of "community" was rather than at suggesting how it might actually be achieved.

His penchant for pathology is not surprising when one considers his debt to Freud and Marx. These men and their followers tended to see diagnosis as itself a form of correction, assuming that mere analysis of deformity goes a long way toward the restoration of wholeness. As a young scholar Lasch enthusiastically embraced this way of seeing, what he termed in 1969 the "rationalist tradition," confident in its ability to make sense of the world, to guide it toward the "rational" outworking of its own telos.

Such rationalism, alas, ended up militating against the realization of his political and social ideals. It was inadequate, above all, because it did not yield for him a satisfactory understanding of that which he knew, somewhat intuitively, that he was for. His conservative views on the family and sexuality, and beneath that, his political hope itself, seemed to require something beyond science, with its pure analytic gaze, in order to be sustained. Analysis, he was coming to sense, does not "community" make.

It was with great, surprised, delight, then, that Lasch in the early eighties read Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue*, with its historically and philosophically rich notion of "tradition." Here was a way to speak for a particular way of life. Slowly he began to move toward an embrace of a sort of post-calvinist Calvinism, a theological tradition that he understood to have sustained the more narrowly political "populist tradition" that he attempted to rehabilitate in *The True and Only Heaven*. Even in that book, though, Lasch's use of the theological insights of people like Jonathan Edwards, though deeply appreciative, seemed more like "equipment for living," as the historian Christopher Shannon puts it, rather than an unqualified embrace of another, greater reality. That community requires that a people be bound together not in a world of their own making but rather in a given world was a conclusion Lasch seemed to be slowly working toward at his death in 1994.

The question that Lasch's work raises for us, then, is, Can community cohere apart from some sort of shared apprehension of and submission to an overarching spiritual reality? Put differently, can a deeply rooted social coherence obtain when the common framework is a rationalist one? Lasch had begun to think not.

Wendell Berry's delightful submission

Wendell Berry never fell prey to rationalist assumptions about community; from the outset his thought was touched with a religious aura. Born into a northern Kentucky farming family and community in 1934, Berry struck out in the 1950s as a young poet, novelist, and college professor, teaching in the early sixties at New York University. In 1964 he returned home to Kentucky, taking an appointment at the University of Kentucky and purchasing a farm in the area where he had been raised; he became the fifth generation on his mother's side of the family to farm in that county. His writings broadened to include not just poetry and fiction but also essays on politics and culture, written from an agrarian point of view that echoed earlier writers such as Allen Tate and Liberty Hyde Bailey. He later stopped teaching in order to devote himself more fully to farming and writing.

As Lasch in the sixties was gravitating toward Marx, Freud, and friends, Berry at the same time was encountering the sensibilities and assumptions that would awaken the "green" movements of the

last third of the century. His organicism, strict and dusky as it was in those years, reflected the conviction that the questions raised by our presence on this globe require a turning toward metaphysics. The questions he was asking, he acknowledged in an early essay, were "religious": "They are religious because they are asked at the limit of what I know; they acknowledge mystery and honor its presence in the creation; they are spoken in reverence for the order and grace that I see, and that I trust beyond my power to see."

Unlike Lasch, whose parents were, in his own description, "militant secularists," Berry was negotiating the Christian faith as one who had been reared in a family and a local culture that was church-going. Having established early on his intellectual independence from Christian orthodoxy and its ecclesiastical forms, he moved back toward them, and began in the eighties to sound distinctively Christian notes. His 1983 essay "Two Economies" beautifully captured the way in which he had come to see a just political economy as rooted in the Creator's vibrant affection toward His creation. "The Kingdom of God," or, as he put it in a more "culturally neutral term," the "Great Economy," was the place where the fall of every sparrow is accounted for, and in which all that is made is intended for the pleasure of God; this notion of a God who takes pleasure in His creation became a touchstone for him. Given our subordinate place within the Great Economy, Berry contended, our own political economy must find its proper scale and pattern by measuring itself against the mysterious but immanent ways of the Kingdom of God.

Berry's understanding of the relation between the Creator, the earth, and its creatures had become by the 1980s searching and profound, full of the sort of harmonic vision that made Lasch's worldview look flat in comparison. Berry's starting point, in one of his formulations, was that the world is not something to be learned about, as the rationalists would have it, but rather something to be learned from. The fitting stance for the doer is one of respectful submission to a grandeur that infinitely surpasses our understanding and that must above all elicit our gratitude. Submitting in this manner to our Creator, our political sensibilities are enlivened: we find ourselves standing before one another on common ground, caught up together in the symphonic wholeness that brings

both Creator and creature such delight, and working together for our mutual nourishment and for His continued pleasure.

If the ontological flatness of Lasch's social vision diminished its power, his Calvinist sensibilities at least protected him from one of Berry's tendencies: an overly hopeful estimation of the fallen human condition. It is not that Berry did not allow for a "fall," or that he did not believe in the hideous reality of evil. Rather, his poetic pursuit of a fugitive wholeness tended to steer him away from coming to understand selfhood as what Lasch in the mid-eighties described as "the inescapable awareness of man's contradictory place in the natural order of things." The tilt of Berry's thinking went against the extremity of this sort of premise; Berry at times seemed to suggest that by submitting to nature's healing graces humans possess the ability to undo whatever harm their deviance may have caused; for him, nature itself seemed to possess redemptive power. Lasch, on the other hand, by the 1980s reacted skeptically toward those who posited the possibility of final resolutions of any sort. If Berry tended to spawn his localist, decentralizing vision in the name of organic completion, Lasch opted to ground his in a call for fundamental decency.

The difference between the two is the difference between shalom and justice, between kingdom come and this present darkness. Surely both elements, the ideal and the real, are necessary for any adequate political vision. If we as humans fail to grasp and grapple with our creational parameters, we lose sight of our nature and destination. At the same time, if we fail to acknowledge our corrupt estate, we lose our capacity for wise and shrewd judgment about what is possible and necessary. Discerning how to weigh the ideal and the real, and how to temper one against the other is, of course, the perennially bedeviling challenge.

C.S. Lewis and the longing of the local

For the most part, C.S. Lewis did not bother to take up this challenge, and so to include him in this threesome seems like a category error. As Gilbert Meilaender notes, Lewis "offers no alternative program for society, for he doubts whether radical change would be, on the whole, beneficial." Perhaps had Lewis lived to see our day he would have changed his opinion on the matter. The fact is, though, that he did not insist that industrial

society move in decentralist directions, as both Berry and Lasch did.

But if Lewis was not politically a decentralist, he surely was one ideally. To read of Narnia is to open up a world of the localist/decentralist imagination. Here cities are absent and in their stead one beholds "a rich, lovely plain full of woods and waters and cornfields," with inhabitants who glory in dances, feasts, and tournaments that go on and on completely apart from the bourgeois considerations of punctuality and industry. Narnians belong to one another even as they belong to their shared land, the beauty of which is itself ennobling and enriching of all that takes place within it. The loyalty its inhabitants feel for their homeland is rooted, crucially, in their mutual affection and connection to it as land.

Here Lewis and Berry seem to meet in full embrace, for even when rendering heaven itself Berry tended to depict it not as the transcendent other but as the final completion of the cherished, earthly place. At the end of his novel *Remembering*, for instance, when the main character goes on a brief Dantean journey from hell to heaven, it is his own hometown, the town of Port William in its completed paradisaical form, that he witnesses. Heaven, here, is the perfection of the local.

This points to a central motif in Berry's vision: connections above or beyond the local seldom nourish the local, except by protecting it from malign external influences and powers. Accordingly, at their best his heroes direct their focus toward the local, content to give themselves to discrete, democratic communities, communities which offer the possibility of the sort of "membership" (as Berry often put it) that is their hope of health and wholeness.

This is a strict localism, to be sure, and in our globalist day a strong immediate attraction to it comes easily for many. Berry's recent account of the life of Jayber Crow, in his novel by the same name, astounds in its beauty; it is perhaps his most powerful rendering yet of his point of view. Jayber, a smart young man with some time under his belt as a student at the University of Kentucky, begins to ponder anew his lowly rural origins, and is stunned to discover that, in his words, "Far from rising above them, I was longing to sink into them. . . ." So he goes home to Port William and finds a hard-fought contentment, affection, and, most importantly, "membership" there as the town

barber and gravedigger. Once more, the local is the locus of hope, the world beyond it the threat to the realization of that hope.

In both Lewis' Narnia and Berry's Port William the respective inhabitants fiercely love their native place and feel little yearning to be elsewhere. In the final book of Lewis' series, when the old Narnia is destroyed, loyal citizens discover, to their great joy, that, as one character puts it, "All of the old Narnia that mattered, all the dear creatures, have been drawn into the real Narnia . . ." Lewis and Berry knew that as creatures we were made for places, for it is places that make us. To make us placeless is to deform us; to ground us in a place is to move us toward completion.

And yet Lewis's decentralism included at least one element that is almost entirely absent in Berry's: the reality of social and political spheres that both transcend and nourish the local. Berry's vision of wholeness contains little place for interconnecting, hierarchical, enfolding levels of mutual good will and sustenance. He did not, in other words, envision what Lewis so richly and continually perceived: the presence of kingdom as a valid social form. Lewis does not stop with the democratic circle of membership, as does Berry. For Lewis, there is something larger than us of which we are a part and in which we long to take part—not in ways that disrupt the local but in ways that enhance it, that nourish it, that give it a necessary reference point, that enfold it and complete it. In the Narnia series, all of this is captured, both actually and symbolically, in the character of Aslan, whose business—one might say "calling"—is to protect and help prosper the local, even as he moves in and out of it in the name of a higher order. Lewis's understanding of "membership" transcends the local, yet at the same time makes the local more local, for it helps it to understand itself in relation to the ultimate referent.

a chastened, humble, and transformed localism

The ultimate referent is, in the end, essential for helping us to find our way out of our lost, frac-

tured estate. If Lasch goads us into remembering what civic decency requires, and Berry captures for us the creaturely estate that is our birthright, Lewis confirms for us the necessity of participation in a kingdom, in a social form that links us to that which is beyond even as it nourishes us where we live. Those decentralists who despise on principle the social forms that transcend their particular communities will be fated to watch as their own children are lured away by that which lies beyond the particular place they know. The answer is not to reject the universal for the particular, or the particular for the universal, but rather to understand and enact the proper relation of the one to the other.

Which brings up the relation of not just the particular to the universal but also the relation of our present to our future—a sobering consideration in our recklessly cosmopolitan age. At their best, though, these writers provide evidence that hopeful eyes, eyes that see history with a comic vision, will give localists their best chance of being not merely heard but heeded. In his last books Lasch dismissed "progress" and, instead, embraced hope and justice. Berry has taught us about heaven through the eyes of a gravedigger. Lewis wrote of triumphal last battles even as he warned of devils, witches, and evil enchantments. They each came to see that the goodness and justice that, finally, governs this world manifests itself most fully in the concrete, particular realities of local life. It is with this premise that successful calls for community in our time will begin. ♣

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Film history in image

Fredrick Barton

I HAVE TAKEN SOME RIBBING FROM MY FRIENDS since the appearance of director Spike Jonze and writer Charlie Kaufman's *Adaptation*, a movie about a screenwriter who can't write a screenplay about a nonfiction writer who has trouble writing a piece of nonfiction about an environmentalist who doesn't want to obey laws designed to protect the environment. This is because my friends thought I had cornered the market on writing about not being able to write. In the 1980s I published a novel in the form of a memo to a university doctoral committee from a man confessing that he can't write his Ph.D. dissertation. A year and a half ago in this space, with considerably less irony and vastly more anguish, I published an essay in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, about not being able write the essay I was supposed to write.

My friends think it's funny that I've been doing this writing about not writing schtick for ages without much of anybody noticing, but when Charlie Kaufman does it, he wins all sorts of awards. Right now, they're thinking that I've said all this to launch into a review of *Adaptation* and perhaps other examples of self-conscious cinema. And then again, they're suspicious that I'm about to write an essay about not being able to write an essay about *Adaptation* and other examples of self-conscious cinema.

But I'm not.

Instead, I've said all this to reflect again on my novel *The El Cholo Feeling Passes* and its protagonist Richard Janus who couldn't write a Ph.D. dissertation in history because he didn't really want to be an historian. Like Richard Janus, I once failed to write a Ph.D. dissertation in history, but not because I didn't want to be an historian. I have recently come to realize that I've perhaps always wanted to be an historian—only one who dealt with history through the telling of stories, rather than the assembling of facts, through image, rather than analysis.

So what I'm going to do in this essay is celebrate three gifted cinematic storytellers who have taught us some history through their recent

movies. Writer/director Alfonso Cuarón sets *Y Tu Mama Tambien* in contemporary Mexico but endeavors to produce a metaphor that stands for five hundred years of his nation's history. In *Far From Heaven* writer/director Todd Haynes exposes the ugly underbelly of a post-World-War-II America that aging baby boomers sometimes recall as a golden era innocent of the strife which stains contemporary society. And in *Gangs of New York* director Martin Scorsese looks at a fictional slice of New York history to underscore that religious hostility and ethnic violence are genetically embedded in its social, economic and political evolution.

class allegory

Shameful punster that I am, I should warn uninitiated viewers that Cuarón gets *Y Tu Mama Tambien* started with a bang. Its opening images involve first one and shortly later a second teenaged couple in acts of sexual intercourse about as explicit as moviemaking gets this side of the triple X industry. The film features full frontal nudity of both sexes, several other graphic intercourse scenes involving two and more partners, and sex talk candid enough to make most of us blush. In short, this is not a film for anyone offended by the frank depiction of human sexual interaction. Still and without question, this is a movie that endeavors to stimulate its viewers between their ears, not below their waists.

Co-written by Cuarón's brother Carlos Cuarón, *Y Tu Mama Tambien* operates on two entirely different levels. On its surface the film is the story of two male high school friends off on an adventure with an older, married woman that will change their lives and their relationship with each other forever. Tenoch (Diego Luna) and Julio (Gael García Bernal) grew up together in Mexico City and have been friends since childhood. They are both handsome, smart, sexually experienced, and nonetheless very much still in the process of becoming. In this last regard they are cautiously wild, if such a consciously paradoxical description is understood to mean that they are open to various kinds

of experimentation with sex, drugs and attitudes, so long as a path of retreat remains clear and close by.

Despite such similarities, and despite the apparent strength of their friendship, Tenoch and Julio are actually from very different places. Tenoch is the son of a Harvard-educated economist who has risen to the highest levels of Mexico's socio-economic-political world. Tenoch's father is the kind of man who gives parties attended by the nation's president. Julio, in contrast, is a child of the lower-middle class. His mother is a secretary, and his father disappeared when Julio was five. Tenoch, moreover, is fair-skinned, a Creole Mexican child of pure European blood, while Julio is dark, a Mestizo, a child whose ethnic heritage is presumably as much Native American as European.

When Tenoch's and Julio's girlfriends both head off to Europe for the summer, the two teens are left to self-gratification until they convince twenty-eight-year-old Luisa (Maribel Verdu), the wife of Tenoch's cousin, to accompany them on a road trip to a Pacific beach. Luisa is not quite the elite princess they think she is, despite her university professor husband's political and professional connections. She's a native of Madrid who has only recently arrived in Mexico, where she feels alien and remains uncomfortable. Luisa is a dental technician, a low-level professional who attended a training institute rather than college. Self-conscious about the difference in their class and educational backgrounds, she is always ill-at-ease with her husband's intellectual friends. Then she discovers that he's habitually unfaithful. In response, she takes off for the beach with the two teenaged boys. Along the way the three become friends, confidants, and ultimately sexual partners as well. But don't for a second mistake this film for a Mexican version of *Losin' It*.

For all around the edges of what pretends to be a randy sex comedy are somber images of worrisome reality. Though the action never points to the roadside, the travelers are constantly passing through armed roadblocks where peasants are being searched and bullied by rifle-toting soldiers. At the beach the threesome are graciously assisted by a kind fisherman whose future, we are told, is grim. His fishing grounds will shortly be appropriated by a luxury resort complex, and he will spend the rest of his life struggling to provide for his family as a janitor.

Gradually we come to understand that Cuarón has built his tale as an elaborate allegory about

Mexican history and society, and in that recognition we grasp why we have liked the principals in the film so little and found their sexual escapades discomfiting rather than arousing. Tenoch's father had intended to name him Hernan for the Spanish conquistador and plunderer Cortez, but chose an Aztec name for him at the last minute. Such a disguise evokes the oligarchical domination of Mexico for most of the 20th century by a political party calling itself "revolutionary." Tenoch starts out wanting to be a writer, an artist, the creator of something new. But his father is a man once indicted for selling tainted food to the poor, and in the end, Tenoch is his father's son.

The film's last scene is an undefended left hook to the jaw. Events on the road trip have brought class distinctions out in the open. But the boys meet for coffee to talk about the summer past and their college careers now undertaken. Like so many of the Mestizos who have benefitted from their allegiance to the Spanish Creoles, Julio has had experiences unavailable to the Native American peasantry. But the Spanish connection which has brought them together is corrupt and now both figuratively and literally dead. And on this day, as for all time, it's the Mestizo who pays the bill.

tv land exposed

Civil-rights activist Will Campbell recalls being a Louisiana pastor at a relatively prosperous white Baptist church in the early 1950s. His congregation would nod with feigned sympathy when he would preach about racial equality. They thought their "little" pastor's concern for "darkies" was "cute." But that was before *Brown v. The Board*. Once integration became the law of the land, they thought Campbell was a communist. Although relocated from the rural South to the suburban Northeast, these attitudes are revisited in Haynes' powerfully affecting *Far From Heaven*.

Far From Heaven has been compared to such 1950s pictures as Douglas Sirk's *All That Heaven Allows* and *Imitation of Life*, but one can also see the film as a commentary on white-bread 1950s television. *Far From Heaven* is the story of Cathy Whitaker (Julianne Moore), a 1957 Connecticut housewife who seems to live in Rob and Laura Petrie's house from *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. Cathy wears the sprayed hair and full dresses favored by every 1950s TV mother from June Cleaver to Harriet Nelson to Donna Stone, and she

lives in a fantasy land where problems are what happen to other people. The fall landscape surrounding the Whitaker home seems to have been painted in bright, but artificial, reds and oranges.

Cathy's husband Frank (Dennis Quaid) works in advertising. Their children are as polite and obedient as those on *Father Knows Best*. Cathy has lady friends with whom she drinks coffee and for whom she hosts fancy cocktail parties where husbands don tuxedos and wives drape mink stoles over long dresses. The Whitakers' neighbors are "progressive." They go to art openings even when the exhibitions are curated by New York homosexuals. They compare themselves favorably to the people in Arkansas. The Little Rock school integration scandal would never happen in their town.

Then into this hypocritical Eden slithers the Satan of sex, even the act that dare not speak its name. Frank is gay. And though he wishes he were not with enough desperation to seek psychiatric counseling, he cannot control his desire. Despite the fact that Cathy and Frank have little in the way of a sex life, she remains blithely unaware of his sexual orientation until she catches him in the act. Even then, she believes Frank can and will overcome his homosexual urges.

Ultimately, *Far From Heaven* compares 1950s attitudes toward homosexuality and race. Townspeople may whisper snide remarks about certain New Yorkers being "light in the loafers," but it occurs to no one that Frank might be gay. Homosexuality is something made manifest behind closed doors, not, like skin pigment, displayed in plain view. People may be repelled by the idea of homosexuality, but they neither look for it nor see it. In psychological terms, Cathy doesn't recognize Frank's situation even after having witnessed it with her own eyes.

Still, Cathy is disoriented after discovering her husband's "weakness." And her life takes an unexpected turn when she becomes friendly with Raymond Deagan (Dennis Haysbert), a college-educated businessman who owns a gardening-supplies store and a contract gardening service. Raymond is a widower, the father of a young daughter, a fan of modern art and a man who reflects thoughtfully on matters of philosophy and religion. He is also black. And however much Cathy may be allowed to tell her friends that she's a supporter of the NAACP, she's not allowed actually to have a black friend. If Cathy dares to talk to Raymond at an art

exhibition, if she has lunch with him at a diner, that can only mean she's sleeping with him. And in this way the film is about 1950s attitudes toward gender, as well. A white woman could not conceivably find any interest in a black man other than sex.

Despite stylizing his setting and costumes to fit a colorized version of 1950s family television, Haynes develops his characters in surprising depth. Frank is not merely a haunted homosexual unable to sustain the carefully created fiction of his own life. He is, in fact, ultimately a little less sympathetic than we first anticipate. He's a remote father, and he's capable of cruelty and even hot-headed violence. Cathy isn't perfect either. She disciplines her children in a way most contemporary parents would regard as overbearing. And her naivete about racial matters waxes unintentionally close to rank insensitivity. A fascinating measure of how far we've come as a society can be found in audience reaction to some of Cathy's well-meaning declarations. The audience who saw *Far From Heaven* with me guffawed when Cathy assures Raymond that she isn't prejudiced. Dressed as if he stepped from the pages of an L.L. Bean catalogue and largely depicted with the same kind of unassuming nobility Sidney Poitier brought to his roles in the 1950s and 1960s, Raymond would perhaps seem too good to be true. But surely there's as much exasperated devilry as physical hunger in his decision to take Cathy to an all-black restaurant/nightclub.

In sum, in sketching three-dimensional characters trapped in a two-dimensional world, Haynes slyly turns an era on its head, exposes TV Land's happy endings for the hetero-WASP fraud they were, and touches our heart in a way few pictures any longer dare. The only glimmer of hope that endures resides in the goodness of two human souls and points both to how far we've come and how far we've yet to go.

mean streets

As if charting the progress of the human race, Scorsese's *Gangs of New York* starts in an underground cave and rises through levels of horror as if visiting the various rungs of Dante's inferno, then bursts into an open landscape of urban decay where no paradise has ever existed. Written by longtime Scorsese collaborator Jay Cocks with Steven Zaillian and Kenneth Lonergan, the film opens in 1846 when a horde of American-born "Protestants" fight a gang of Irish immigrants in an

appallingly brutal battle for control of a desolate corner of Manhattan called the Five Points. At the climax of this bloodbath fought with nail-embedded clubs and kitchen cutlery, Bill "the Butcher" Cutting (Daniel Day-Lewis), the leader of the "natives," kills his Irish counterpart Priest Vallon (Liam Nelson) and orphans Priest's six-year-old son. After his father's death, the boy is placed in a reform school and remains there until 1862.

Upon his release, Amsterdam Vallon (Leonardo DiCaprio) dedicates himself to avenging his father's death. To that end, he insinuates himself into Bill's gang and eventually emerges as his enemy's protégé. Enconced in Bill's inner circle, Amsterdam enjoys the power and money he's able to command as a fixer and strongarm. Here, the script would have been stronger had it suggested a developing bond between stalker and prey, for then we might better grasp why, Hamlet-like, Amsterdam waits so long to strike.

As Amsterdam ponders the occasion for assassination, significant subplots are set in motion. Amsterdam finds romance with a beautiful pick-pocket named Jenny Everdeane (Cameron Diaz), who remains Bill's confidant and was once his lover. Bill lends the forces of his gang to the corrupt Tammany Hall political machine that manipulates recent immigrants for votes to turn patronage into wealth. Bill hates immigrants, but he's hardly above selling his services as an enforcer to Tammany Hall leader Boss Tweed (Jim Broadbent). And outside the city, on battlefields south and west, the Civil War's cannons and Gatling guns produce unprecedented human carnage. In the draft President Lincoln institutes to man the ranks of the Union Army, the poor must serve, but the rich can buy an exemption for \$300.

When Amsterdam finally acts, his motives are largely personal. But like his father before him, he assembles urban warriors from the ranks of his immigrant, Catholic brothers, and Bill, in turn, rallies supporters from his own nativist, Protestant kind. As Amsterdam and Bill lead their troops toward a second battle for Five Points, however, they are engulfed in draft riots so sudden and violent that Manhattan seems poised to surrender to chaos. Beside this uprising, the animosities between Amsterdam and Bill are so insignificant that the gangs of both take far more casualties from a naval bombardment and a counterinsurgent police strike aimed at draft rioters than either of

their sides suffer at the hands of the other. And thus emerges one of Scorsese's central points: From time immemorial, rather than unite in their common need and common humanity, the poor have fought each other over inconsequential differences, often at the behest and direction of those who are their true enemies.

The Civil War draft riots are little remembered today, even less so the violent nativist/immigrant turf struggle on which this picture is based. But Scorsese clearly thinks these events bear lessons for our own day. The picture closes with a series of dissolves that transforms the Manhattan skyline from three- and four-story nineteenth-century wooden tenements to a progression of concrete high-rises and ever ascending glass and steel skyscrapers. In the distance of the last shot, like mournful, paired ghosts, stand the twin towers of the World Trade Center. And thus we are reminded how ethnicities and religions may change but the hatred and the violence continue.

Karl Marx called religion "the opium of the people"; he might better have called it the angel dust or PCP of the people. Serious Catholic that he is, we can see in *Gangs of New York* Scorsese's ambivalence about the religious impulse. As Amsterdam and Bill prepare for their climactic battle, both pray for victory. Amsterdam prays to the God he knows through the Roman tradition, Bill to the God he knows through the Protestant tradition. Both pray for vengeance, and both pray for the spoils of dominance. Uptown a mile or so, a family of blue bloods sit down to a meal. These are people who have grown rich off the sweat of men like Amsterdam and Bill. They pray too, thanking the God who has blessed them with privilege they have neither earned, deserve, nor employ wisely. And so Scorsese makes his most important point: Men spend a lot of time beseeching God to stand beside them but precious little time endeavoring to know and stand with God.

For those of us who believe in God, Scorsese's last lesson is a particular scourge. We see religion as our hope for salvation. History wonders if religion isn't the paving material on the road to perdition. ♣

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things haven't changed

J.D. Buhl

ON A CRYSTAL-DARK NIGHT IN 1998, THE CHILL OF the Concord Hills hung low over the Pavilion seats. I'd just seen one of my favorite artists, the great American songwriter Lucinda Williams, pour her heart out for a growing crowd. She was followed by Van Morrison in a thrilling set that swooped and swirled, teased and pleased. Pushed by Georgie Fame at the organ, Van gave definitive readings of several old texts. It was hard to believe there was yet to be a third performance—by Bob Dylan.

Dylan. The last time I had seen him perform he'd hardly moved, just nodding now and again in his big white Stetson. And more recently, on *Time Out of Mind*, he sounded so broken, so utterly stuck in despair, it was hard to imagine what he had to offer anyone, why he was still performing.

Then it was time. The lights came up and smoke machines went off, a low rumble rolling from the stage. A wiry character in a tight suit, guitar riding on his hip, came forward, legs insolently shooting out like a daddy-longlegs approaching dinner; he ran a hand through his bushy hair and shook his head and did a little twist. And as he ground his heel a sound emerged that, compared to the polished funk of Van The Man's six-piece band, was crude and dirty; two-guitars-bass-and-drums churned from the amps a song I knew but had yet to recognize. Then he stepped to the mic:

You may be an ambassador to England or France

No, it couldn't be.

You might like to gamble, you might like to dance

Of all things; I couldn't believe it.

You may be the heavyweight champion of the world

*You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls
But yer gonna have to serve somebody*

Yes indeed! Dylan was opening with the song that had scandalized and rent his audience down the middle in 1979, the explicitly Christian first single from *Slow Train Coming*. I had to hand it to him: he could still surprise an audience.

That the ruined-by-romance *Time Out of Mind* was followed by "Things Have Changed," a movie soundtrack single reeking with rancor, made Dylan's opening with the flagship song of his "Jesus period" all the more astonishing. Did he still believe that stuff? Was he still what anybody would consider a Christian? Over the years since his alleged conversion in 1979 he'd referred to his "Christian phase" (spread over three, maybe four, albums, '79 to '83) as intangible, evidence of his celebrated changefulness, pleading an inconsistency in his own identity: "I don't know who I am most of the time," he told *Newsweek*. "It doesn't even matter to me."

As for his religious beliefs, he once bargained with Kurt Loder of Rolling Stone, "I've never said I'm 'born again,' that's just a media term. I've always thought...that this is not the real world and that there's a world to come. That every soul is alive, either in holiness or in flames." It seemed in the '80s that when Dylan crawled back into the Platonic cave to tell his fellow prisoners of the real world above, they prevailed upon him to stay below and soon the blinders and chains were back on him and he forgot why he had returned. Though wittier and more ironic than his fellows, Dylan became just as attached as they to what passed as knowledge in the cave, and was soon singing lines like "If you want somebody you can trust, trust yourself."

In that *Newsweek* story from '97, Dylan got down to it:

Here's the thing with me and the religious thing. This is the flat-out truth: I find the religiosity and philosophy in the music. I don't find it anywhere else. Songs like "Let Me Rest on a Peaceful Mountain" or "I Saw the Light"—that's my religion. I don't adhere to rabbis, preachers, evangelists, all of that. I've learned more from the songs than I've learned from any of this kind of entity. The songs are my lexicon. I believe the songs.

So on he went, his eyes fixed on the thing before him—most often a woman—downplaying and confounding that evangelical peak.

* * *

Another cold California night, this time in Berkeley, October 2002. "Bush Gets Power To Strike Iraq" is beaming from the newspaper boxes and Bob Dylan is at the Greek Theater. But instead of something meaningful, or even comforting, we are greeted by "Bob Dylan Forever" emblazoned on camouflage T-shirts at the souvenir stand.

After a ridiculous introduction reducing his career to a series of exclamations ("...shocked the world by going electric!"), the former Voice of a Generation is stomping that heel and cranking out the creepy mid-'80s kiss-off "Seeing the Real You at Last." But the set list did not continue to offer such surprises. With few exceptions, all the night's selections came from his '60s heyday or his most recent album, *Love and Theft*—no Jesus songs, no recantations. The intervening decades were acknowledged only by "Knockin' on Heaven's Door," "Brown Sugar" (yes, "Brown Sugar," one of the few songs for which Dylan strapped on an electric guitar, otherwise standing legs spread behind a keyboard, pounding out chords), and Neil Young's "Old Man."

He also performed a number of Warren Zevon songs that night. Notwithstanding Zevon's approaching (and very public) death, Dylan has been trying to find himself in his contemporaries' work since *Self-Portrait*. But these days he is clearly enjoying the search more than then. While such wild cards as Don Henley's "The End of the Innocence" keep the audience guessing, they also dis-

tance Dylan further from more dogmatic times. Still, a Seattle show six nights earlier was opened with "Solid Rock," a stomper from *Saved*; and I learned he performed "Every Grain of Sand"—the most exquisite of his Christian songs—the following night in Berkeley. Determining whether or not Dylan is still a Christian may be a dubious pursuit, but he continues to delight by how well he's integrated that period of his work with the many others.

What he offers with his current work, however, is decidedly bleak; like *Time Out of Mind* before it, *Love and Theft* is no *Southern Harmony*. Dylan's abiding love for the blues and attraction to rustic settings may place him alongside the great hymn and gospel writers he admires—Thomas A. Dorsey, A.P. Carter and the like—but he possesses none of their candor, reverence, or perseverance. The recent album is distinguished from its predecessor by a wealth of puns, riddles, and knock-knock jokes, but in every song Dylan is randy, not joyful; clever, never humble. Supposing in "Floater (Too Much to Ask)" that he once had dreams and hopes, "to go along with all the ring dancin' Christmas carols on all of the Christmas Eves," the narrator, like so many others here, has left them, in this case "buried under tobacco leaves."

As for Dylan's *Theology of the Song*, the characters on *Love and Theft* spend all their time in the first few lines of each verse to "I Saw the Light"—wandering aimless, lives full of sin, like blind men and fools who won't let their Savior in—never making it to the chorus:

I SAW THE LIGHT, I SAW THE LIGHT
No more darkness, no more night.
Now I'm so happy, no sorrow in sight.
Praise the Lord I SAW THE LIGHT.

The album's unifying statement comes in "Mississippi": "Got nothing for you, I had nothing before/Don't even have anything for myself anymore." Here Dylan's wheezed lamentations sound most poignant, as he ends each section with, "Only one thing I did wrong/Stayed in Mississippi a day too long." "High Water (for Charley Patton)" and "Moonlight" represent the album's other themes, the former a gripping record of desperate times with allusions to classic folk and blues songs, the latter recalling images of moon-in-June sheet music.

In the days immediately following September 11th (the date *Love and Theft* was released) Clear Channel Communications, the largest radio conglomerate in the country, distributed a blacklist to its 1200 stations. A sampling appears in the December 2001 issue of *Harper's Magazine*. There, among songs with such "questionable lyrics" as "Bridge Over Troubled Water" and "What a Wonderful World," is "Blown' in the Wind." That flat-out peace songs ("Imagine," "Peace Train") and not just antiwar anthems (like Springsteen's cover of "War," which no Clear Channel station would play anyway) could be yanked from the air then, only make more chilling thoughts of what could happen now. That night in Berkeley, while Dylan generously laid out "The Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll" and "A Hard Rain's a-Gonna Fall" (one indicting the rich and powerful, one indicting us all), I realized how precious the moment was, how lucky we were to be hearing them.

When he first revived "It's Alright Ma (I'm Only Bleeding)" in a tense political environment—his 1974 comeback tour with The Band—Dylan's charge that "even the president of the United States sometimes must have to stand naked" met with roars from the audience, so emboldened were we by the slow undressing of Richard Nixon. But leaving the Greek Theater that night, remembering the crowd's *pro forma* cheers at the line, I passed George W. Bush's confident smirk in the news boxes and wondered if we'd ever have that satisfaction again.

It may just be that Dylan has such a good stock of protest songs to pull from—and plenty of religious scorchers, if he chooses to play them—but while other rockers of his generation have lately shown themselves as free trade's best and brightest, Dylan's critical perspective is much appreciated. We can wait for that slow train to come up around the bend, or we can denounce the same idolatry, exploitation, and brutality as we always have with the words inscribed in our hearts. Just don't have inscribed any words from his recent recordings—

there's no light to be seen. Throughout them Dylan is either the trusting kind whose heart has been broken, or the wise man who trusts no one. All around him are people boxed in, backed against walls, painted into corners, seeing no escape. They are left with only their charm, counting on seduction to see them through.

As he says in "Mississippi," "some people will offer you their hand and some won't." And Dylan's having too much fun doin' nothin' for nobody. One of the things that makes him "better than he's ever been" is his apparent loss of contempt for the audience and their expectations. Watching him slide across stage to grab a harp, stripped of the rock-star poses he'd perfected, is to see a musician enjoying the downhill stretch of his journey.

But why is this interesting? Why do we care about an artist who gleefully reminds us "I don't know who I am most of the time; it doesn't even matter to me"? Whereas Jagger was able to turn his insincerity into an essential element of the Stones' appeal, Dylan just sounds dastardly. The singer pledges, "Gonna make you see just how loyal and true a man can be" ("Bye and Bye") and the listener says, Yeah, right. Looking sadly at the English, Mahatma Gandhi saw that modern civilization was "ensouled by [a] spirit of selfishness and materialism, which is purposeless, vain, and . . . a negation of the spirit of Christianity". Since Dylan planted his boot heels firmly in rock's modern civilization (" . . .shocked the world by going electric!"), he's pointed emphatically away from himself, even while bringing his work to bear on little else. And he's been right to do so. The only constant in this confusion of flaky religious convictions and camouflage T-shirts, is that it still ain't him, babe. I believe the songs. ♣

J.D. Buhl holds down a number of jobs, some of them even paying, all so he can spend time with his daughter Maurie Grace Hamilton.

Books

Thomas L. Martin (ed.). *Reading the Classics with C.S. Lewis*. Grand Rapids MI: Baker Academic, 2000.
David Graham (ed.). *We Remember C.S. Lewis*. Nashville TN: Broadman & Holman, 2001.

C.S. Lewis once commented that he woke in the morning with a “thirst for print,” and Bruce Edwards—in his essay in *Reading the Classics with C.S. Lewis*—writes of Lewis’s “quite palpable love of reading itself.” Lewis never ceased to read: from (as a young boy) Edith Nesbit and Beatrix Potter, to Rider Haggard and Norse myth, to 100 lines of Homer (in Greek) at age sixteen, to Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* at age eighteen, to science fiction and medieval literature throughout his adult life. And, of course, while reading he was also writing—from the imaginary world of *Animal-Land* that he created as a child, to his early attempts at epic poetry, to the works of scholarship and fiction that he wrote as an adult.

Reading the Classics with C.S. Lewis provides an insightful and instructive series of essays on Lewis as reader and literary critic. It includes chapters on a wide range of literatures in which Lewis read widely. On some of these authors and genres he made his literary reputation. Others he merely read often and commented on in essays or letters. Thus, there are chapters on topics as different as “Medieval Literature,” “Milton,” “Modern Literature,” “Science Fiction,” and “Children’s Literature.”

In many cases, the authors of these essays not only summarize Lewis’s reading and criticism but

also provide some sense of how his critical perspective has held up over the past fifty years. Thus, for example, in the chapter on “Medieval Literature,” David Lyle Jeffrey discusses *The Allegory of Love*, the book that first established Lewis’s academic reputation and notes how more recent scholarship has departed from Lewis’s approach to courtly love. Yet, the judgment of Helen Gardner, cited by Doris Myers in the chapter on “Spenser,” remains true: *Allegory* was “a masterpiece of literary history, the work of a truly original mind.” In an excellent chapter on Lewis’s Milton criticism, Charles Huttar notes of Lewis’s *Preface to ‘Paradise Lost,’* that—even though contemporary critics will dissent on a variety of matters—“no other book on Milton that old has remained continuously in print to the present day.”

In a chapter on “Literary Criticism,” Bruce Edwards discusses Lewis’s approach to criticism. To characterize Lewis’s critical writings, Edwards quotes Lewis’s description of one of his own teachers: He “seemed able to enjoy everything; even ugliness. . . . I learned from him that we should attempt a total surrender to whatever atmosphere was offering itself at the moment.” Edwards suggests that this describes well Lewis’s own work as a literary critic. It was, he thought, the critic’s job to help readers into the text—to get out of the way so that a reader could himself encounter the text. And, as more than one author in this collection notes, the most striking aspect

of Lewis’s critical writings is the ability to make his readers want to read the texts (even very old texts) about which he is writing. Thus, Leland Ryken comments in the first essay in this volume, “The most salient quality that I experience when Lewis introduces me to authors and works is a desire to read them.” Likewise, Bruce Edwards writes: “In reading him, one encounters an uncommon enthusiasm for reading itself rather than an allegiance to a particular school of criticism or set of theories about reading. Here one finds a contagious pleasure in residing in the poetic landscapes of other authors, times, and cultures.”

We Remember C.S. Lewis approaches Lewis not so much from the written as from the spoken word. The short pieces collected here—first published in *The Canadian C.S. Lewis Journal*—are, for the most part, though not exclusively, reminiscences of Lewis as tutor and lecturer. Of varying length and impossible to summarize in a brief review, these pieces provide many different angles of vision on Lewis. Not all are favorable. Thus, Hugh Sinclair recounts an occasion when Lewis—having set the wrong time for a dinner with the Patriarch of Pakrov, who arrived late but nonetheless wanted his dinner—finally had to accompany the Patriarch to a hotel that was still serving.

Among the most interesting and thought-provoking reminiscences is Roger Poole’s “Lewis Lecturing.” Lewis had for years been a renowned lecturer first at Oxford

and then at Cambridge. Poole attended Lewis's last series of lectures on Spenser in 1960-61 at Cambridge, and some of Poole's reflections merit our own reflection:

For what exactly was the magic element in Lewis's lecturing technique? It was the ability to ask questions no one had thought of, and to start towards an answer of them by reference to sources no one had read. It was, in other words, the exact antithesis of clear lecturing. . . . Clarity, indeed, in the sense of spelling things out, explaining, waiting until the back row had caught up, was never offered. Indeed, the boot was very much on the other foot. The assumption was that only those who were committed, interested, and prepared to put a great deal of work into thinking these lectures through were really part of the audience anyway. . . .

It is precisely because Lewis himself was not pellucidly clear at all points, but difficult and demanding, drawing his audience on to things they had not thought about, that I (for one) remember his lectures. It was precisely because he did not conceive of literature in a quantitative way as a learnable "skill," that he kept redefining all his terms of reference. It was precisely because he did not think that literature could be "taught" at all (in this new, naive, self-indulgent sense of the "skills" theorists) that he kept on enquiring, both of himself and of his hearers, how it could be learnt about, entered into or existentially grasped.

Perhaps we need to set beside this the more down-to-earth note contributed by Peter Brierley. He recounts secondhand a story he'd heard of Lewis "travelling on a train

one day, shabbily attired as usual, in a first-class compartment, when a rather superior lady came in and after one look at him, she enquired, 'Are you sure you have a first-class ticket?' 'Yes,' replied Lewis, 'but I'm afraid I shall need it for myself.'"

For those who wish to know a little more about Lewis the man there is much of interest in *We Remember C.S. Lewis*. But the man himself believed books far more interesting than his life, and *Reading the Classics with C.S. Lewis* will serve well to introduce readers to that most abiding of Lewis's passions.

Gilbert Meilaender

Alan Jacobs. *A Visit to Vanity Fair: Moral Essays on the Present Age*. Brazos Press (Baker Book House Co.), 2001.

Generally, a reviewer's most fundamental task is to render a succinct judgment on the thing under review. That task is surprisingly difficult when considering Alan Jacobs's collection *A Visit to Vanity Fair: Moral Essays on the Present Age*. Jacobs has assembled some fifteen of his own wide-ranging, previously published essays under one cover. Topics of the essays run the gamut from children's bibles to Bob Dylan's brush with Christianity. With such a variety comes some unevenness in quality. One blurb on the book's back cover describes the essays as "Wise, witty, winsome," and, though bowdlerized snippets on a book's jacket are seldom reliable indicators of the quality, or lack thereof, of the contents, one would be hard pressed to find a more fitting and succinct description than this alliterative trifecta.

A professor of English at Wheaton College, Jacobs's interests

include British literature, British Commonwealth literature, religion and literature, as well as philosophy and literature. Jacobs is particularly interested in the poetry of W.H. Auden and has published one book, numerous essays and articles, and delivered many, many lectures and talks on the subject. Jacobs's long list of published articles and essays in books, journals, and magazines is especially impressive, so it seems logical to collect some of his best work of the last ten-or-so years in one volume.

To his credit, however, Jacobs resists the urge of many English-teachers-turned-expository-writers who portray themselves as extraordinarily sensitive parents and spouses, supporters of all the right causes, as well as caring, beloved teachers. Because these are personal essays, Jacobs has more than ample opportunity to do so, yet the persona the author builds of himself is one focused more on cultural reflection and commentary than on concern with the reader's image of him. What readers get is what Jacobs thinks and what he makes of things—a far more effective way to convince them what a wonderful human being Jacobs is than creating a saccharine narrative persona.

A characteristic of many of Jacob's essays that is doubtless influenced by his extensive background in British literature is his tendency to reflect an organizational pattern in his essays more typical of the English Romantic lyric poem. That is to say, such pieces often open with a very general, almost circling, reflection on an issue or problem with the poet presenting some sort of resolution at the very end. Such an organization is entirely consistent with Jacobs's vision of the function of what he terms "moral essays."

They are not preachy or pedantic, but are “intrinsically exploratory” and reluctant “to say the last word on anything.” Indeed, according to Jacobs, they can be “the ideal vehicle for moral reflection in a postfoundationalist age” precisely because they present the foundational “conviction that there is a common moral code that all human beings should, and almost all do recognize[. . .]without making the mistake of arguing for it.” While that was effective for the Romantic poets, it doesn’t always serve Jacobs particularly well as it can have a reader wondering just where Jacobs is going with an issue until quite late in, even the very end of, the essay. At times, many readers will feel as if they are reading wonderfully written homilies rather than the more conventional thesis-support essay.

To return to the point that *A Visit to Vanity Fair* is by turns wise, witty, and winsome, unsurprisingly, Jacobs tends to be at his best when he is writing about literature. One of the book’s longer essays, “Preachers Without Poetry,” for example, is a thoughtful examination of “the severing of literature and theology” in America in which Jacobs bemoans the lack of literary quality in much American preaching. Particularly wise as well are his thoughts on *The Norton Book of Friendship*. And, his first-person account of his relationship with English poet Donald Davie is not only insightful, but genuinely touching.

Jacobs can also be quite witty. His piece entitled “Dowsing In Scripture” is a clever reflection on the dangers and temptations of seeking signs and answers by blindly placing a finger on a randomly

selected page of the Bible. Jacobs finds himself facing the situation when he removes a chewed chunk of Bible page from his toddler’s mouth and, suddenly unbearably curious, finds himself trying to discern the verse on the soggy paper. It’s a tradition with a history that Jacobs finds even in the likes of Saint Augustine’s famous “pick up and read” moment. Another essay in which Jacobs’s wit and intelligence combine for a graceful treatment of what could easily degenerate into knee-jerk evangelical vituperation is “Blinded by the Light.” Here Jacobs considers what he calls the “it’s nice to be nice” sort of “vaguely spiritual message[s] of consolation” in some popular publications that he identifies as emerging from “our passion for having the validity of our desires confirmed by witnesses from the distant past or beyond the grave.” Jacobs takes aim at, among others, such popular bromides as “Desiderata,” the Chicken Soup for the Soul series, and, probably most odious, Neale Donald Walsch’s *Conversations with God*, an author whom Jacobs sardonically labels the fourth person of the godhead.

Finally, to be winsome is to be charming, often in a childlike or naive way. Jacobs writing is indeed charming; his own description of his reaction to *The Norton Book of Friendship* as “an entertaining bedtime book. . .indeed, agreeable and entertaining” aptly describes *A Visit to Vanity Fair* as well. When in his introduction, however, Jacobs compares his project to Samuel Johnson’s, he makes a move that any number of disclaimers and amount of humble deference to

Johnson cannot really overcome—a move that seems to border on naivete. The book’s subtitle might also mislead some readers. The essays certainly tend to have important moral or moralistic points to them. But what one finds here is commentary on the quotidian and the pop-cultural, not on what might be termed issues of great national moral divide and debate. There is nothing wrong with that so long as one does not begin the book expecting to encounter, for example, discussions on the likes of abortion, genetic engineering, and war.

Despite its merits, this book will probably not sell especially well due to the somewhat limited audience who will find it appealing. The general public will find much of its material a bit too arcane and academic. How many of those readers really know, or care, who Donald Davies is or Bronson Alcott was? Those expecting a scholarly read will find many of the essays uninviting and unchallenging. How many of them will balk when they see yet another defense of Harry Potter or centennial tribute to C.S. Lewis? Jacobs shoots for the thoughtful, reflective Christian audience—the sort who subscribes to *First Things* and *Books and Culture* (where several essays originally appeared), listens to the *Mars Hill Audio Journal* (which offers the book on tape), and reads *The Cresset*—and the fact that such an audience is relatively small is itself a comment on the present age worth some reflection.

David M. Owens

Spot: Light on Science epiphany for a small planet

Alan G. Padgett

DURING ADVENT I WAS INVITED TO SPEAK AT A local Episcopal church. A Methodist, I stayed to participate in Sunday worship with them and was struck by the new beginning to the Great Thanksgiving:

Grateful as we are
For the world we know
And the universe beyond our reach,
We particularly praise you,
Whom eternity cannot contain,
For coming to earth and entering time in Jesus.

This is a very appropriate thanksgiving for Christians during the time of Advent, as we wait and reflect upon the glad tidings of Christmas. For the wonder of the good news is that God, creator of a vast universe beyond imagination, whom eternity cannot contain, has entered into time on our little planet. This is wondrous and stupendous news indeed!

Because Christmas, like so much else in our culture, has become so commercialized, I try to celebrate the lesser-known feasts surrounding the Nativity of our Lord. These include a good dose of Advent; thanksgiving to God for St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr; the presentation and naming of Jesus (circumcision); and Epiphany. Epiphany is a celebration of light and the presence of God in history, which takes place in the darkness of winter. The maker of heaven and earth has appeared on our little planet, out of love, to redeem us out of our darkness and sin. What a wonderful celebration!

Not everyone believes in the truth of Epiphany. For many thoughtful people today, the vastness of our Universe, made known in amazing detail by modern astronomers, calls into question the idea that the God who has created all this might actually come, in person, to our tiny globe.

Philosophers and scientists who embrace atheism have said as much, on more than one occasion. But even those who are open to religion, respected scientists like Christian de Duve, Freeman Dyson and Paul Davies, find the new view of the universe incompatible with traditional Christianity. The biologist and Anglican priest Arthur Peacocke forthrightly proclaims that the new picture of the universe "radically alters" traditional "paradigms" in Christian thought, "not excluding the significance of Jesus Christ." Despite these powerful concerns and claims, the Church has been slow in responding because, in part, the vastness of the cosmos is a new idea.

That the earth is not the center of the solar system is not very new. The Catholic mathematician and priest, Nicolas Copernicus, set forth a new world picture in 1542 with his great work, "On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres." But the known Universe was relatively small, not only in the time of Copernicus, Kepler and Galileo, but as recently as the astronomy our grandparents learned in high school. It was not until 1923 that Edwin Hubble showed there were galaxies beyond the Milky Way. Before that, scientists thought there was only one galaxy: ours. The discoveries of Hubble in the 1920s revolutionized our understanding of the size of the Universe. The Hubble Deep Space Telescope, his namesake, has now shown us huge clusters of galaxies. Our planet is a small part of our solar system; our sun is a medium-sized star in but one galaxy, which in turn is one in a cluster of galaxies, billions of them in a Universe some 12 billion light-years in size. The immensity of the Universe is a twentieth century discovery, which we have only recently begun to grasp. The Christian Church has, for the most part, ignored this fact. Our liturgies and theologies have not taken seriously the

immensity of the cosmos, and the likelihood of intelligent life somewhere in the vast reaches of creation.

The larger culture has not ignored these things. That we are one small planet among billions of galaxies is now part of our cultural imagination. If life has evolved on our planet, why not others? Many people in our culture today, including many scientists, take seriously the idea that intelligent life most likely exists on other planets. That there are such planets in deep space is one of the more recent findings of astronomy. True, we have no direct evidence of intelligent life elsewhere in space, despite several generations of searching the skies for signs of it. But what if there is? The Big Bang and the early history of the universe point to a fine-tuning which makes life possible. Scientists are now arguing that the universe is "bio-friendly," that life is common because it is an inevitable result of cosmic evolution. Since these ideas are growing in popularity in our culture, we need to respond as thoughtful Christians. Shall we continue to celebrate Epiphany? Does the immensity of space and time, and the (likely) existence of other intelligent beings, call traditional Biblical religion into question?

I think not; but it does call for a larger Christian imagination. What we are talking about is the old "scandal of particularity" on a cosmic scale. Why come to this small planet? Why bother with our sinful species, in a bountiful cosmos full of life? These are simply new versions of the old questions, "Why come to Israel, why so late in time, why as one Jewish man?" The season of Advent is a good time for such reflections upon the particularity and uniqueness of the son of Mary. Perhaps the light of Epiphany can enlarge our imaginations to embrace a God as large as the gospel.

There is only one God, the Triune Creator of all things, the Ruler of time and space. We need a larger image of God to proclaim the good news of Christmas in a cosmological age. The truth of the matter is more amazing than the universe itself: God comes to us in the womb of Mary. There is no other God, no other creator behind or beyond this crucified Messiah. We have no idea exactly why

Epiphany happened when and where it did, but we do know why Epiphany happened: love. The infinite love of God is more vast even than the depths of time, more unimaginable in extent and breadth than the whole of this vast cosmos. For a God of this mind-blowing Infinity, any Universe (however big in human terms) will be small. Size does not matter when you are Unbounded Being. Time is always short for the One who inhabits eternity. A small child may well be more precious to our Creator than an immense supernova.

Christmas is about God's love for the lost and sinful children of this planet. The truth of Christmas, while limited to earth, discloses the nature of the one who is creator of all things. We do not know how God may be known on other planets, or even if other species need salvation as our sinful race does. We can be sure of one thing: this same Father, Son and Holy Spirit, will be God of whatever intelligent species exist, wherever they may be. Christmas and Epiphany are for this planet, true; but they tell us about the Ruler and Creator of all.

Scientists still have no good evidence for intelligent life beyond the Earth. Our new view of the Universe may seem to call the good news into question. But even the vastness of space and time is small compared to the God. We trust in a God who can handle all the unbounded immensity of space and time, because God is beyond space, time, and creation itself. We trust in this infinite God to deal in a loving, just and creative way with whatever intelligent life there may be beyond our planet. In faith, we know he will deal with all those domains of reality that we can only glimpse in small drops of light. The light of Epiphany, which shone so long ago in Bethlehem, is enough for us. If we can imagine a God as large as this gospel, then we can better share the truth of Christmas and the light of Epiphany with the other members of our small planet. ✠

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Pulpit and Pew

sacred places

L. DeAne Lagerquist

WE LIVE, POET STEPHEN DUNN OBSERVES, IN “a world so extravagant it has a sky, in bodies so breakable we had to pray.” How to live well in such a world as this, he asserts “has been the question from the beginning.” In the daily effort to navigate between these extremes, the tension between them may be muted by the conveniences and distractions of modern life, but the tension appears vivid when we enter into a sacred place.

Dunn’s poem evokes the Commandments and, thus, their narrative setting in the wilderness, between Egyptian slavery and the sweet land of promise. In the desolate desert the sky is large, and its extravagance is unending. Equally apparent is the fragility of the human body, immediate with its need for water and shade in the daylight and shelter in the cold night. There, the wandering people learned dependence upon divine sustenance: manna, quail, water. They came to rely upon divine guidance: cloud by day, fire by night, Moses leading them. They also confronted divine judgment, swift and final. Scores disappeared in an earthquake. Moses bargained to protect the revelers around the golden calf. Still, God had to stay back, restraining the impulse to destroy a stiff-necked and yet beloved people.

In the scripture, the narrative locates God active in the wilderness. Its danger and its power are manifestations of God’s character; its limits are overcome by God’s intervention. The poet hints that the Commandments received there offer a way to live with both extravagance and fragility. They counsel restraint amidst “promiscuous flights.” Generations of debates about the relative importance of freedom and obedience, at least forty iterations of the arguments for control and spontaneity, resound in Dunn’s claim that both are needed.

Some Americans, perhaps especially religious Americans, journey to Mt. Sinai, or better, journey to look for Mt. Sinai. Perhaps they are hoping, like Moses, to catch a glimpse of the backside of God. In his *Walking the Bible*, Bruce Feiler recounts his trek to places where the events of the Pentateuch might have taken place. In the beginning, in Turkey, talking to locals about Mt. Ararat, he is caught up in the debate about factuality and historicity. By the end, in the desert, his interest has shifted. Rather than his mastering the story, the story has entered in to him through the places, through the meals of bread, honey, and tuna, and through the people he meets. The wilderness has become an encounter with the holy, a sacred place.

Other Americans are more likely to travel into a closer, more accessible wilderness, perhaps one with lush evergreens and sparkling cascades. We have a long history of attraction to the power of places where wild animals live and the earth is not cultivated. Though not canonized in the same way, we have the record of this attraction too. The colonists’ fascination with the American wilderness was sandwiched with fear. After his trip to Maine, even Thoreau came to suspect that the sublime has a dangerous aspect. The lure of the frontier was in part the temptation to control, to overcome fragility and to contain extravagance.

For us, the wilderness is often a park or a preserve requiring permits, especially for going off the trail, even with a GPS and a cell phone. Without electronics there is still plenty of equipment and protective gear: good boots, the right socks, water bottle and filter, sunglasses and sunscreen, a map. All of it is available on-line or at an outfitter such as REI. The shopping trip begins the ritual of approach to a holy place. The Seattle REI’s stone

and timber are a temple to the wilderness they evoke. Is there any sky? Will the body break? Perhaps not in the store, but it does happen. People go into the wilderness well supplied and wearing boots with Vibram soles; they still may come back transformed by their close encounter with power beyond themselves and by the awareness of their own vulnerability. They speak of a sacred place.

Making the approach to the temple of Delphi, Greece, one passes the remains of a Christian basilica. Behind the stone-walls one sees the rocky mountain. Three days into the course we visited Delphi, our bodies finally synchronized with local time. The January rain had stopped. After a long ride we spilled out of the bus into the museum where we saw a golden calf and were told stories. "This is the navel of the world." "Those whom the gods love, they take young." Then we followed the ancient pathway into the luminous ruins. Even without an interpreter; even though the oracles no longer speak; even so, like the Christians who built a church in the ruins, we perceived holiness there.

How is it that a place conveys holiness? Beauty, of course, if the place is beautiful. But beauty alone is not enough. And not every sacred place is beautiful in the same way. Wilderness is the name for disparate topographies, even for a city street filled with ashes or terror. Indeed the word "wilderness" originated in northern Europe to refer to something more like a forest than a desert, but early English translators of the Bible employed it to carry the experience of the desert, rather than to describe its sandy landscape. The experience was more of fear than of pleasure, more an encounter with the awesome than a view of the pretty.

One more example—the hermits who followed Anthony out of the ancient city and the domesticated church, seeking God and fleeing from their distractions. Anticipating paradise and perfect love they became disciples of the desert's

limitations. Aridity taught them to thirst for living water; scarcity taught generous hospitality. Their sayings are filled with stories of restraint producing extravagance and more stories of enmity overcome with peace. In the wilderness their breakable bodies were filled with enormous spirit.

In these months when Americans have heard so much about how the world is changed, the question of Dunn's poem reverberates. How can human beings live in this world, under this extravagant sky, and in these fragile bodies? Is its extravagance magnanimous or does the sky loom with danger that may crush our bodies? These are also the questions of sacred places, so perhaps this may become a time for encounter with the divine.

We who find God, among other places, in a book, will remember that God spoke from a flaming bush that was not consumed. And, we will learn that an encounter with such power compels response. Moses took off his shoes, thus exposing his fragile feet as later he would risk his eyes to look at the backside of God. To come close to God is dangerous. Even knowing God's name does not contain this power since the name is an assertion of autonomy: "I will be who I will be." That confident Being propelled Moses into the work of announcing God's intentions that the people should be free.

The poet's question—how shall we live in breakable bodies in such an extravagant world—may point us to authentic freedom, the sort we hope to glimpse when we go out into the wilderness, the sort that we long for day-to-day. †

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World: Views

new nose is good news in Kolkata

Marah Carter Stith

AS A CHILD WHEN I PASSED BY A CEMETERY I made sure to hold my breath to avoid taking in the ghosts. Upon seeing grave-markers in the distance, I would inhale deeply, taking in every possible bit of oxygen before cutting off my air supply. You might consider applying a similar technique when entering Kolkata (called Calcutta by the British), to avoid the deadly air rather than the spirits of the dead. As the plane descends, instead of emerging from the clouds into light, you descend from relatively clear air into a haze that sits like a filthy pillow over the entire urban expanse. In fact, the idea of a cemetery almost immediately comes to mind: upon disembarking from the plane, the air goes from stale to stifling and suddenly a premature death from lung cancer appears a real possibility. (For those of us who have preached against smoking cigarettes as a foolish and unnecessary detriment to one's health, voluntarily staying an extended period in Kolkata places us in grave danger of hypocrisy.) The air closes in, and strangles. Despite a lifetime of loud and frequent speaking, Kolkata stole my voice within a week, and I spent three days unable to utter a sound—a cloud with a silver lining, as those who know my capacity in Bengali can attest. My success in communication is much the same, whether voiceless or speaking in the Indian tongue.

Pollution does not entirely overwhelm your capacity to smell, however, and you soon discover the diverse scents of burning incense, roasting meals and, of course, excrement. The first serves to mask the last, while the omnipresence of roadside stands with Indian-style fast food gives one hunger-inducing interludes between open sewers and Hindu shrines. McDonald's might not find its burgers well-received by the primarily Hindu

population, but it certainly could learn something from a tour of India. The street vendors toss together a motley assortment of lentils, vegetables, eggs, sometimes chicken, rice, Chinese noodles and a near-kilo of spices to serve in plates made of leaves. One can also request one's food a la carte (certainly not literally): double egg—single chicken, single egg—single paneer (a kind of tofu-like squishy food made from condensed milk); you name it, they'll make it. Though foreigners tend to be cheated here without the slightest moral qualms, most food sellers either have their prices posted or so relish the sight of a foreigner enjoying their traditional food that they charge you the Indian price. If what some consider a skin-color tax can be avoided, a full meal will settle in your belly for easily under a dollar. However, decide to opt for too cheap of a meal and the meal will not settle easily at all, but will instead make its way through your system via far too swift a route. Montezuma definitely did not travel as far as Kolkata, but encountering a foreigner who has not endured the curse of his revenge is a rarity.

The only advantage to America having remained a British colony would have been that we American travelers to Kolkata might be able to navigate through the wild Indian streets just a hair better. The fact that traffic proceeds on the left side of the street leaves you only more confused by roads already filled with an incessant stream of decrepit bicycle rickshaws, dilapidated taxis, public buses, hand-drawn carts, bicycles, three-wheeled motorized rickshaws, sport utility vehicles, hatchbacks, cows, dogs, pedestrians, and whatever else possibly could make its way onto a public thoroughfare. Ultimately, the constantly blaring horns, rattling mufflers (if fortunate

enough to still remain attached to their vehicles), police sirens, screaming sellers, shouting bus announcers and screeching brakes, combine to leave Americans and Brits alike at a complete loss.

This vision of chaotic Kolkata is not completely fair: Kolkata opens eyes as well as closing lungs. For the traveler who is curious about Indian culture and enjoys exploration, a renovated attitude can send pseudo-Indian blood coursing through her veins and soon warm her heart to the endearing and exciting qualities of Kolkata. As I commented to an American friend of mine here in Kolkata, it is only in India that a woman might catch herself ogling the trash collector with the shining biceps, as he wades and shovels about in human feces and discarded food scraps. "How handsome!" I remark to my friends. Or, "How beautiful," a friend comments, as she sees a woman dressed in a dazzling saree stepping over an uncovered sewer. One simply adjusts to overlook the filth, to tune out the noise, to ignore the stench, and best of all, to appreciate the color, festivity, excitement and amusement of the streets. The Indian people, upon encountering a foreigner interested in their city, their food, or their culture, will immediately burst into splendid smiles and begin to "assist" you in whatever you are wishing to do or find. Often, the hospitality of the Kolkatans borders on burdensomeness. Unlike many other more self-absorbed and hectic peoples, the Indians are thrilled to stop what they are doing and assist you for an endless time. One trades the speed, efficiency and ease of American life for the simplicity and exotic beauty of Indian life, a trade which is both time-consuming and enlightening.

The trade is more than fair.

It is true that certain luxuries remain for me and my friends, such as Internet access (much more available in a country less privately connected) and occasional air-conditioning (a foreign appearance serves as a ticket to enter even the fanciest five-star hotel. My moral sense is not offended by my rest breaks in their fancy lounges; I simply consider it fair recompense for my "skin tax" imposed in all other circumstances.) But the use of Western con-

veniences ends as fast as the seldomly-encountered air-conditioning ceases during an electricity outage. Even the most modern "cybercafe" reveals the incongruous nature of its existence as cockroaches run over your feet and thick incense makes your eyes water as you send near-instantaneous messages to family and friends an ocean away.

Fortunately, the fact that life in Kolkata can in no way approximate an American lifestyle need not result in disappointment if you can simply cultivate an appropriately adventurous attitude. For example, the Indian imitations of Western desserts are low-quality and disappointing, but an adventurous diner will soon find the traditional Indian condensed-milk sweets sumptuous and satisfying. Likewise, the ease of hopping in the car is happily traded for the adventure of careening through the crowded streets in a motorized rickshaw, watching in irrepressible horror and awe as split-second swerves leave one millimeters from over-loaded buses and honking taxis.

With remarkable facility, India fills the adaptable traveler with novel delights. Banking on this hope, I have quit the impossible task of ignoring the noises, sights and smells of Kolkata and have instead begun to enjoy the city in an Indian sense. While my nose is literally a filter for pollution, my eyes have also begun to filter out the offensive stimulations of my senses. Because the smell of human feces is nearly omnipresent, I simply expect it, and cease to be appalled by it. Instead, I have become acutely aware only of what is uncommon: the scent of fresh air, the still of silence, the rare and confusing expanse of an empty street. Having screened out the inevitable elements of Kolkata that would appall me at home, I now wade into the streets aware only of the magnificent array of colors, wares, personalities, and adventures headed at a breakneck pace in my direction. ♣

Marah Carter Stith, a recent graduate of Harvard University, is spending a year in Kolkata working in an orphanage run by Mother Teresa's sisters.

rookie cop: learning on the job

A. P.

I'VE BEEN A POLICE OFFICER FOR ABOUT A YEAR. Here are some things I've learned.

1. Poverty and crime are inextricably linked. I can't remember the last time I arrested someone who had a job. I've also arrested quite a few people who not only didn't have a job but also didn't know anyone else who had a job.

2. One of the more stressful things about police work is the fear of the unknown. You don't know what's around the corner or who's behind the door, or who might be driving that car you just stopped. Fear of the unknown can quite quickly turn into fear of the known. There's a man with a gun around the corner, or a drug dealer behind the door, or a felony suspect driving that car you stopped. I've been doing this just long enough to have felt truly afraid, not the gnawing nervousness before a public speaking engagement, or apprehension before taking an exam, but a kind of breathless dread where there's a stone resting on the center of your chest and you feel as if you're only half of yourself. It doesn't last long but you don't forget what it tastes like.

3. When you respond to a house or apartment building for a call, never let anyone lock the door behind you. If you need to radio for help while you're inside, you don't want the cavalry held up by a locked door.

4. Watch suspected drug dealers closely as you approach them. They might try and swallow their dope so they don't get caught with it on them. If they do swallow their stash, there's a pretty good chance they could die. Call an ambulance right

away. Then maybe see if you can fish anything interesting out of their throat that can be used against them later in a court of law.

5. Things are not always as they seem. Don't assume that if you get sent to a barking dog complaint, it's just going to be a barking dog complaint. Maybe the dog is barking because a burglar just entered the house, or maybe the dog is barking because his owner just dropped dead from a heart attack, or maybe it turns out that the owner of the dog is wanted for homicide. Situations can get rather complicated rather quickly.

6. Racial profiling, as it pertains to traffic stops, exists in my department as it does across the country. Racial profiling is wrong. But ninety percent of the time, I have no idea what race the driver is of the cars I stop. Most of the time, I can't even tell the sex of the driver, particularly at night. But it's good to always introduce yourself and inform the driver why you stopped them right off the bat (speeding, going through a stop sign, etc.) Simply walking up to the car and saying "License," does not foster strong police-community relations.

7. It's your job to be an impartial gatherer of facts. Don't play favorites. Don't get personally involved in investigations. Include exculpatory information in your reports.

8. Carry two flashlights with you all the time. Once I had an armed robbery suspect at gunpoint in a dark alley and my flashlight went out. I didn't have a backup light and I felt like a jerk. Also carry anti-bacterial hand wash and both rubber and leather gloves. You will touch many unsavory things.

9. Be professional. Maybe you're having problems at work or problems at home. You have to lock them away when you're on the job. Citizens shouldn't know when you're having a bad day. Your mood shouldn't influence your job performance. Act like everything is fine. As one of my police academy instructors said, it's time to put on The Show. The Show is on.

10. If you stop a car and a passenger gets out and sprints away, resist the urge to chase them, particularly if you're working alone. Instead, stay with the driver. Criminals whose cars have been stopped by police have been known to send out a "rabbit," typically someone who has no warrants or only minor ones, in hopes that the officer will chase the rabbit and those remaining in the car, most likely people with more serious warrants, can then drive away, laughing.

11. If someone physically fights you (and here I'm not talking about someone who is just argumentative or struggling to break out of your grasp, but rather, someone who is actively trying to hurt you), you can't afford to lose. Assume they may try and take away your pepper spray, your baton, your gun and use them against you or your partner or a bystander. Hit them as hard as you can. Make it the worst day of their life. But once it's all over, it's time to be nice again. Monitor them, flush their eyes if you had to use pepper spray, and call for medical attention if necessary. Also tell them to plan on spending some time in jail.

12. Thanksgiving and Christmas are excellent times to check for wanted subjects. Often, they are at home or at a family member's house enjoying a hearty meal. You come in and the suspect is eating a turkey leg and watching the game on TV. Glad tidings, pal. You're coming with us.

13. Criminals keep guns hidden under couch cushions. Search those doggone couches before you let people sit down.

14. Sometimes you'll encounter someone who wants to play the Name Game with you. They may be wanted for something so they'll give you a fake name, or use their cousin's or neighbor's name. If you suspect someone is playing this game, ask them their social security number and write it down. Then ask them their social security number again a few minutes later. It's amazing how these numbers can change dramatically.

15. When you're approaching a car you've just pulled over, put your right handprint on the rear driver's side of the car. If things go badly on the traffic stop (i.e. the driver shoots you), and the car turns up later, detectives can use your print as evidence against the suspect. This is called the death print. It's sort of a grim business, but necessary.

16. Every once in a while, in very tense situations, it is appropriate to use loud vulgarities, particularly if you are trying to encourage a suspect to drop a weapon he or she is holding. Other than that, a hearty "Rats" or "What in tarnation?" will suffice for verbal color. I know this to be true, because I learned it from my mother.

17. Those donut jokes you've heard? All right on the money. Cops love donuts. We'd have separate holsters to hold them if the department would approve it. †

A.P. may be found in the donut shops of a Midwestern city.

the burden of cultural correctness

Robert Benne

THE TERM "POLITICAL CORRECTNESS" HAS ENTERED our language, much to the consternation of those who actually spawned the term by their practice of coercive liberalism. Dictionaries now list and define the word: "marked by or adhering to a typically progressive orthodoxy on issues involving especially race, gender, sexual affinity, or ecology." (Random House *Webster's College Dictionary*) Political correctness has led to enforced orthodoxies that suppress contrary opinion and shut down a good deal of public debate on some of the most important issues facing our country. It has led to laws that ensconce progressive opinion into the legal apparatus of the state.

However, the most powerful currents of political correctness do not operate in the political sphere where politicians have to represent the opinions of their constituents, whose opinions are often not politically correct. Rather, political correctness operates most powerfully in the cultural sphere, those institutions most responsible for the communication of meaning and values. It would be better, then, to call this progressive orthodoxy cultural correctness, which I believe more accurately describes the phenomenon.

The institutions in which cultural correctness operates most coercively are the national newspapers, especially the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, followed then by large regional papers like the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*; the major publishing houses; the headquarters, presses, and seminaries of the mainline Protestant churches; the elite universities and colleges and their presses; National Public Radio and to a somewhat lesser extent the Public Broadcasting System, and the three commercial television networks—NBC, CBS, and ABC.

Leaders of the youthful revolutions of the 60s promised a "long march through the institutions"

after they found out that "the revolution" would not succeed politically. To a great measure their prediction has come true. The "commanding heights of the culture" are now controlled by the "progressive" elements of a generation that has had a major quarrel with traditional American politics and culture. Since traditional American culture had and continues to have a major impact on what happens politically, the progressives took the path of least resistance—the cultural route.

I first encountered the coercive power of this march through the institutions when I became a conservative in the midst of a liberal Protestant seminary in the late 70s. In addition to being a public conservative, I made the additional mistake of thinking I could both be a conservative and teach in the field of Christian ethics in such a context. I was on "the wrong side of history" on most of the issues that stirred the students of the day: divestment from South Africa, "inclusive language," support for revolutionary movements in South and Central America, the moral equivalence of Soviet socialism and American democratic capitalism, and the celebration of new found sexual freedoms that emerged from the revolution of the 60s. I found out that contrary opinions on these matters were most unwelcome. Dissenters from cultural correctness quickly learned to be quiet, which then obviated any real debate in the community on these matters.

Since the seminary was something of an avant garde institution, it has taken progressives a little longer to consolidate their power in those other institutions that occupy the "commanding heights of the culture." But cultural correctness is now a force to be reckoned with in almost all the sectors I listed above. Indeed, it operates with such force that it suppresses debate and deliberation in the very institutions

that should prize such practices. That is the burden of cultural correctness.

I experienced a particularly dramatic example of such suppression at the most recent annual conference of the Society of Christian Ethics. An opening plenary luncheon was to feature an "open hearing" on just war criteria and their application to American foreign policy with regard to Iraq. Naively expecting an objective initial presentation by a distinguished university professor, I attended the meeting. Instead of inviting arguments from both sides of the question after an introduction to the just war tradition, the professor proceeded to indicate that scarcely any of the requirements for a just war were met by current government intentions. A series of cartoons ridiculing Bush and his policies projected on an overhead accompanied the presentation. These brought much laughter, but the fun was just beginning. A line of "discussants" took turns lambasting American policy, several even comparing America to Nazi Germany. Two brave souls made some oblique comments that suggested the discussion was not representative and that American policy might be cleverer than it appeared, but both had to couch their remarks in derogatory comments about the Bush administration.

I felt moved to rise in protest of this charade, but decided not to. Later I found out that almost all the conservatives in the society (a pretty small group) found other things to do during the lunch hour. They anticipated a pep rally instead of a fair debate and they were right. This exercise in cultural correctness intimidated dissenters in the midst of an organization that pats itself on the back for its capacity of moral deliberation. Cultural correctness, however, simply couldn't be suspended on such an important matter.

There are many examples of this sort of intimidation. In each case the approved opinion is protected by the use of epithets that fend off anyone courageous or unaware enough to challenge it. For instance, it is increasingly difficult to argue for the traditional teaching on homosexual practice in the institutions mentioned above without being called a "homophobe." Such a psychological reduction of honest dissenters is now whipped out even in the churches, which should be very careful about jettisoning traditional teaching on this matter. In the current debate within the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, it is a challenge to find persons who are willing publicly to defend the traditional

teaching that proscribes homosexual practice. Who wants to be called a "homophobe?" Not only have the seminaries weeded out most of the persons who might have such Neanderthal opinions, but those who do manage yet to hold them are intimidated into silence.

Militant feminism has contributed its share of approved opinions to our fund of cultural correctness. For example, it would take a lot of courage to argue against our liberal abortion laws in any of the aforementioned institutions. At our college, which is several notches below the elite heights, faculty women created such a furor over a privately funded "pro-life" leaflet included in the college newspaper that the editors of the paper had to apologize and pledge never to run anything so offensive again. Likewise, one would be either foolhardy or very brave publicly to criticize the way Title IX has been interpreted in college athletics, or to suggest—particularly if you are a male—that there are real differences between men and women.

Feminism has joined with the guardians of approved opinion on racial matters to propose and enforce certain language rules. Few persons in the commanding heights of the culture will use masculine pronouns with regard to God. They would be called "sexists." In many seminary catalogues there are pages of rules for proper "non-sexist" language and Augsburg/Fortress sends to its authors a compendium of "inclusive language" rules that forbid the use of the word "manhole!" If one violates those rules the language police will strike and snip all the offending words. It takes an established writer to resist these depredations; neophyte writers don't have a chance.

Such sensitivity over language has led to some odd results. John Rocker, the former Atlanta pitcher who used some stupid and offensive language regarding gays, New Yorkers, and blacks experienced the full wrath of the cultural elite. He was hounded out of baseball for a time. Yet, Ray Lewis, the star linebacker for the Baltimore Ravens, was actually involved in murders but was not punished as severely by the cultural elite as Rocker. Indeed, he is now something of a hero in the sports media while Rocker is the object of universal contempt.

Saying certain words violates such powerful taboos that the offender can lose his career and reputation overnight. Who says we have passed beyond the primitive stage when violations of

taboos brought instant death, generally through inward turmoil? Instant “death” can occur to current violators, but now through the external outrage of the enforcers of cultural correctness.

Multiculturalists have joined the protectors of gender and racial correctness in prohibiting any speech that might offend any member of any approved oppressed group. This means that no serious debate can go on about real differences in these matters. At best, conversation must be managed by “diversity trainers,” who duly enforce cultural correctness. A ridiculous extreme of this sort of “sensitivity” happened to an acquaintance of mine whose daughter went to an elite eastern liberal arts college. This poor girl introduced “Hawaiian pizza” in the college pizza parlor that she managed, only to be faced by an organized group who demanded her resignation because of her “insensitivity” to Hawaiians.

Perhaps cultural correctness is most vigorously wielded on religious conservatives, especially those who are called “fundamentalist.” (The enforcers do not distinguish between evangelicals and fundamentalists.) Public action by members of these religious groups—categorized as the “Religious Right”—are perhaps the most closely guarded against. That is because they represent the cultural conservatism that is abhorred in all of the instances I wrote of above. At any rate, they are unprotected by cultural correctness.

John Leo writes on USNEWS.COM that Rutgers banned a Christian group from its campus and stripped it of its funding because it selected its leaders on the basis of religious belief, which practice is proscribed by the university rules of cultural correctness. Leo writes that the real purpose is not to prohibit groups from electing leaders based on common commitments, otherwise the Democratic Club would have to allow a Republican to run for its presidency. Rather, “the real intention is to break or banish religious groups with biblically based opposition to homosexuality.”

This is not an isolated instance. It is a parlor sport among members of the cultural elite to equate American Christian “fundamentalists” (remember again that no distinction is made between fundamentalists and evangelicals or religious conservatives) with violent Muslim fundamentalists. Therefore the opinions of the “Religious Right” can be dismissed from public debate on all issues at the cultural heights.

However, they cannot be dismissed in the political sphere. Thank God for politics! Since cultural correctness has less sway in politics than in the realms of culture and increasingly in business, honest debate can actually go on. Representatives and Senators who are beholden to non-culturally correct constituencies can and do represent them. Conservatives who did not agree with all of Jesse Helm’s political opinions nevertheless admired him because he cared not one whit for the negative—even hateful—opinions of the enforcers of cultural correctness. Many other more moderate political conservatives also violate the canons of cultural correctness and thereby keep genuine political debate alive in the political sphere.

What of the cultural sphere? Is it a closed matter? No, while cultural correctness is intimidating, it is not completely oppressive. Brave souls can and do speak out in the bastions of cultural correctness. I was free to speak and should have spoken my mind at the Society of Christian Ethics; it would have been good for me and the Society. Conservatives should refuse to be intimidated. Further, the very pervasiveness of cultural correctness at the cultural heights has spawned many alternative organizations and agencies to speak for cultural and political conservatism. Some of them have invaded the cultural heights—newspapers such as *The Washington Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*, journals such as *The Weekly Standard*, *Commentary*, and *First Things*, presses such as Wm. B. Eerdmans, and Regnery, conservative think-tanks such as The American Enterprise Institute, The Hoover Institution, and The Ethics and Public Policy Center, and networks such as the Fox Network, though I resist using the word “heights” with anything Fox does. Talk radio operates below the radar screen of the culturally correct, and gathers audiences that are far more educated and sophisticated than the debunkers realize.

However, it would be far better if the cultural heights were more open to dissent. They would then live up to their promise of being genuinely liberal. †

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remembering Charles Vandersee

Hilary Holladay

CHARLES VANDERSEE, 1938-2003

Charles Vandersee valued the life of the mind above all else. A compact man with a sardonic smile and a neatly trimmed Van-dyke, he was a native of Gary, Indiana, who graduated from Valparaiso University in 1960, earned a Ph.D. in English from UCLA, and then took a teaching position at the University of Virginia. With barely a glance at other job offers, he headed to Charlottesville because, he once told me, he admired the region's beauty and history.

As an English professor and longtime dean of the Echols Scholars program, he advised and taught thousands of students during his 38 years at UVA. Even more impressive, he stayed in touch with many of them long after they graduated.

I was among his protégés. I count myself lucky to have known him as professor and advisor and later as peer and friend. When I learned that Chuck, 64, had died of a heart attack in his Charlottesville home on January 2, it filled me with sorrow to think that I would never again talk with this perceptive man who had helped guide me toward a profession that I love.

At the beginning of my freshman year in 1979, I quickly recognized Dean Vandersee, as I addressed him throughout college, as someone I wanted to get to know well. He was all about poetry, ideas, words. That made me want to listen to him, but it also made me want to talk, to show him that I, too, was all about words.

On the first day of his poetry writing class, he asked all of us to tell a little bit about ourselves. When my turn came, I said that I was from central Pennsylvania. He replied, with an impatient gesture, that he wanted to hear the name of an actual town. Well, then, I was from Selinsgrove. The name was a quirky little poem in itself.

I had learned a lesson about specificity of language not ten minutes into the first day of class.

Although I didn't always agree with him, I never forgot Chuck's observations about my writing and the choices I made after college. With a few words of praise, he could make my day. With an incisive dart of criticism, he could send me brooding back to my desk, where I would replay each sentence I had exchanged with him. What he said—and what I should've said—mattered tremendously.

Once, a couple of years after I had graduated, I visited him in his office. I told him that I was so busy with my job as a small-town newspaper reporter that I had no time to write poems. I despaired of ever doing the work that I cared about most. Chuck regarded me with a hint of challenge in his hazel eyes. "You're young and strong and full of energy," he said, "so you should be able to stay up late and work on your poems then."

Well, he had me there. What was I going to say—that I wasn't young and strong and energetic? There was nothing I could do but go home and get cracking.

After I completed my Ph.D. in English at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and began my teaching career, Chuck and I continued to correspond and visit. He loved to write letters, and I always smiled when an envelope arrived with his elegant handwriting on it, embellished with a combination of eye-catching postage stamps that were often five or ten years old. Enclosed with his letters, he would send me poems and occasional copies of *The Cresset* containing his column.

I invited Chuck to a Fourth of July party that my family gave a few years ago. By now the family homestead was in Rapidan, Virginia, where my father had grown up in the 1920s and 1930s. Chuck had long ago let me know that he liked the musical sound of "Rapidan." To my delight, he accepted the party invitation.

Out of the corner of my eye, I watched as he helped my sister move an ice chest and then served wine to elderly ladies on our front porch. He lingered longer than I would have expected.

In his next letter, he had this to say about our sprawling party in the country: "I was transported."

Charles Vandersee made me look in deep mirrors. I will miss his friendship, his robust laughter, and his keen perceptions of the world. ♣

Hilary Holladay teaches American Literature at the University of Massachusetts, Lowell.

The Attic

For almost twenty years, Charles Vandersee penned his Letters from Dogwood for The Cresset. This letter was published in May, 1984.

Dear Editor:

Some years ago, coming to the end of a twelvemonth in England—*real* England, Yorkshire, North Country, not Oxford, Cambridge, or Russell Square—I felt I had grasped something about durability.

Previously I had lived in a Midwest county seat, a Midwest university town, a genteel Southern university town (where I still live), and an expensively eclectic neighborhood of West Los Angeles. All I had known of England was the stereotypical, from books and movies: castles, Gothic ruins, Buckingham Palace, bobbies with sticks, narrow dim streets (the haze produced partly by Sherlock Holmes' pipe smoke), purple moors, blazes of daffodils all over the island, and a sheep here and there between hedgerows, blocking small ugly cars with righthand drive.

But knowledge is not experience. After a year in England, traveling by car whenever possible—a small ugly German car with left-hand drive—I understood that the novels and films were correct. Much of my looking around was in the large county of Yorkshire, from my base in Leeds, where there were indeed old lichen-covered Norman churches and also Gothic ruins called abbeys. Their thick stone walls stood out under the sky, in this vale or that, just as the pictures showed.

Experience confirms knowledge. Even before dwelling for an afternoon at any of the Yorkshire abbeys—Fountains, Rievaulx, Bolton—I would have sworn that they existed. But after having seen them, walked in their shadows and on the grass inside their jagged walls, estimating the weight of this or that large stone, it was no longer merely a matter of faith in texts and pictures, which we call knowledge.

Revisiting Britain last spring, with a stop at Tintern Abbey in Wales, I noticed the birds singing resting on high fragments of walls, children in red jerseys emerging and disappearing among piles of gray, vines clinging, the pointed arches of the windows embracing subtly different formations of rain sky, depending where on the short wet grass I positioned myself. No abbey photographs composed quite the sequence that the camera in my head was accomplishing.

The next day, Sunday, was Cardiff, on the south coast of Wales, and the twelfth- and thirteenth-century Llandaff Cathedral. So I was lingering in desolated Tintern by the light of worship at Llandaff, while also seeing in my mind Llandaff of the future shattered and quiet from some probable holocaust or neglect. Like Tintern, it had already experienced injury. Under Cromwell the nave was a beerhouse and post office, the baptismal font a pig trough, and in 1941 a German landmine destroyed the roof and furnishings.

I saw Time, you might say. Or, at this Eucharistic service during the annual Llandaff Festival, I *felt* Time,

as Dylan Thomas of nearby Swansea, felt Time:

*Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like
the sea.*

Or, I thought more about Time, singing a hymn by George Herbert, than usually, at home in Dogwood, in a church dedicated in 1959, I customarily think about Time. Time, said W.H. Auden,

*"Worships language and forgives
Everyone by whom it lives;
Pardons cowardice, conceit,
Lays its honours at their feet."*

Time worships language. Time forgives those by whom language lives. Time lays its honors at the feet of those who keep language alive. And, of course, to keep language alive means more than using the things of language that we have—more than recognizing and remembering the fine things that King James and Herbert and Auden have given us. It means making new things to live among the old, as Llandaff Cathedral, an undistinguished piece of architecture, was enhanced in the 1950s with a striking piece of sculpture (the "Majestas" by Sir Jacob Epstein) that stands above the middle of the nave on a great concrete parabolic arch.

Tintern Abbey itself does not appear in the Wordsworth poem "Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey." Henry James, in his darkly meditative story, "The Altar of the Dead," does

not tell us the name of the Roman Catholic church in London (in some neighborhood also unidentified) where his protagonist for years maintains a private chapel full of candles. And, in "Church Going," one of the dozen most famous poems written in England since the war that struck Llandaff and Coventry, Philip Larkin does not name the church, the "accoutred frowsty barn," that he happens to enter one day while bicycling. Or say where in all of England he is.

One can't object to Wordsworth misleading us in his title, or to the absent identification in the James story and the Larkin poem. In each case the art is perfect, if by "perfect" we mean that we have been so pleased by the thing as it is, as long as we have known it, that we do not want its present state, its power to please us, to be altered. We don't know whether the feelings Larkin reports are precisely the feelings he had, if the place is real. But it all rings true, and certain of the lines are so perfectly true to everything we have both known and experienced that we can't withhold consent.

I think of the last stanza, where Larkin, librarian at the University of Hull in Yorkshire, deals subtly with one of the many possible meanings of a church building. He has just been speculating that some day in England belief may die, giving way to mere superstition, which may also die. When that time is reached, knowledge of the original purpose of this "barn," a knowledge sustained in part by the imperfect lore of superstition, will die. What's left will be the thing itself, the building and the site: the stone of the fabric and the stones of the churchyard, and almost no vestiges of thought about the thing.

Having said this, he recognizes a thing that will not die. Death,

contra John Donne, will not die, and the symbolism of stones (objects marking burials) is a vestige of thought that will not die. Death will remain a serious fact. Thus the tombstones will tell the ignorant man of a later age, an age deprived of both faith and superstition, that this place, this church, was some sort of "serious" place. And because it expresses that single message, it will never be obsolete,

*Since someone will forever be
surprising
A hunger in himself to be
more serious.*

Auden twice, in the quatrain quoted, uses religious language to speak of Time. Time, the grand incarcerator for Dylan Thomas—a very serious thing indeed—"worships" and "pardons." This is conventional personification ("The heavens declare the glory of God"), but also the idea so interesting to Shakespeare, namely that one absolute of the universe, Time, can be thought of as perpetually in obeisance to human beings. Time, that is, may not decisively efface human memory and human efforts at transcribing. Unless Time itself dies, or tongues and hands are cauterized, certain stories and even certain strict verbal formulations will move from person to person, generation to generation, never quite disappearing, even if in some silent spring the birds do not return.

Still, Larkin has it (contra Auden) that stories will in fact die. Because if people of the future, beyond belief and beyond superstition, will not know what a church building was for, that means that the old poems have died. The most famous poem in English is set in the shadow of a church; Gray's "Elegy" in fact briefly alludes to the archi-

ture of the typical English parish church, its "ivy-mantled tower," "long-drawn aisle," and "fretted vault." Coleridge's "Frost at Midnight" will have vanished, with its

*old church-tower,
Whose bells, the poor man's
only music, rang
From morn to evening, all
the hot Fairday,
So sweetly, that they stirred
and haunted me
With a wild pleasure, falling
on mine ear
Most like articulate sounds
of things to come!*

We would be back to stones, and the power imputed to stones to rouse from some deep universal human core a desire to meditate on the fact of death.

It is quite interesting that Larkin ends as he does:

*A serious house on serious
earth it is,
In whose blent air all our
compulsions meet,
Are recognised, and robed
as destinies.
And that much never can
be obsolete.
Since someone will forever
be surprising
A hunger in himself to be
more serious,
And gravitating with it
to this ground,
Which, he once heard, was
proper to grow wise in,
if only that so many dead
lie round.*

The argument has to do with more than death. The church, says Larkin, is the one building in which for a long time three serious human events—birth, marriage, death (previous stanza, not quoted)—were

enlarged by special attention. These innate compulsions are not to be disdained as merely physical, naked. They are to be clothed, but more than clothed: glorified, "robed."

Well, Larkin belongs to Britain, one wants to say, because he depicts the most durable of landscapes, a landscape of stones. He fashions them into a church, and the church's long-drawn aisle, like a piece of a Roman road, stretches in two directions, toward past and future. Coleridge, likewise; the bells themselves may be old, but they seem to speak not of what's past, and passing, but to come.

These present days, in any region from the temperate zone northward, one meaning of a church building is a very expensive place to heat. Also in these days of bitter exclusivists who want only King James, Common Prayer, and Latin Mass, a church may still be a place for the stiff-necked to be gently soothed into a weekly trance. A trance may be a blessed state, perhaps one of our human compulsions. Still, I'm inclined to rank among our more splendid human

compulsions the five durable senses that can shatter our trances with the noise of serious poems and serious worship.

I recall, for example, learning at age six or eight, with Coleridge's wild pleasure, that I had ears. It happened in the balcony at Trinity, where old, deaf Mr. H. was playing the organ postlude. He played it, this solemn man, with a rare abandon that I recall only one other time, when at the piano in our classroom years later (he also taught grades six through eight) he was suddenly possessed to pound out "Dixie." He did that with terrific rhythm and vigor, this pious sexagenarian who otherwise humorlessly hectored us on the sinfulness of "ragtime." But in church this one time he was putting a great deal of perhaps pent-up feeling into a piece of music I had never heard and did not know the name of.

We had to walk directly behind the organ bench, from one side of the balcony to the other, to get to the stairs, and I remember walking very slowly. It was necessary to gaze up high at the music on the rack to

read the name of the piece being played—almost unbearably lovely, almost transfiguring air into gold or sunlight. It was not God I was feeling; it certainly was curiosity as to what son of man on earth had made that merely perfect music. It was explanation in advance of what "Time worships" means. It was "Jesu, joy of Man's Desiring" reverberating from those walls of nineteenth-century brick and stenciled paint. Time worships Bach, and his glorious loud company.

The very stones in the walls, said Habakkuk, would cry out in rage against those who only take, take, take. Somewhere else, in wisdom preserved or forgotten, must be a vigorous passage about stones that sing with joy—over those who give. The master builder, composer, sculptor, architect, poet, storyteller, putting the finishing keystone into a new work, a gift to the ages.

From Dogwood,
yours faithfully,
C.V.

FATHER STILL

The dead
how they rise in us:
a squinting lid
twist of the tongue
the father we spat out
so many years ago
rips through the heart
and speaks in parables,
weird wisdom or a curse
on what the Bible taught
or teaches still
in motel drawers of assignations.

Early afternoon.
Sunlight cut off
by prayers of synthetic drapes,
the bedlamp finds
our vanities switched on.
All that is.

As for you, old man,
you found us out too soon.
The trivia. Soul's waste.

Your spirit barely let you
feed the flesh. You raised
your stubbornness into a majesty.
Starving at Dachau, you upheld
the dietary law and gave away
your bowl of tainted soup.

You never told a lie except
once when I begged you.
Your voice quailed, wavered at it.
And one more time, years later,
grieved at my ways,
you told my sister that you had
only one daughter.

Jean Hollander

OPENING AN OLD WINDOW

To reach her once, he shattered glass,
his flesh an envelope torn in the transfer.
Too much she felt, and changed

her address. Jitterbug wind, how dare you
scatter his letters now, your vinegar rain
blurring postmarks. The writer's name, mostly

forgotten, bleeds as though he had written
more. Bending down she imagines
his hand, smoothing like silk each crease

open. Then all down his bones like reeds
crossed, glue dripping; the text
re-stretched. Too late she cries. Her fist

bound in its thrifty cocoon, all that string she
saved, unspooling like time. Beyond the sill
there's a man like a kite, soaring.

Laurie B. Klein

Things We Said Today

AT MY LUTHERAN CHURCH WE DID NOT OBSERVE Epiphany this year, and in that omission I suspect we were not alone among those churches that, more or less, order our liturgical lives according to the ecclesiastical calendar. Technically, Epiphany fell on January 6, a Monday, and since January 5 was the Sunday closest to New Year's Day, we observed New Year's Day Sunday. It is easier, apparently, for people attending our church to make sense of a revision to a Hallmark theme than to struggle with a light to lighten the Gentiles. So we did Hallmark, with a little creative help from some friends of the parish down in Missouri. This month we have also had a Blessing of New Drivers, a service especially dismaying to me, although my fifteen-year old son finds in this service warrant for his belief that my lack of enthusiasm for entrusting a car to him is unchristian, among other things. Admittedly, obtaining a driver's license is a big deal for most American teens and their families. And teenage boys, in particular, can use all the help with their driving that the church or anyone else can offer. Still, why a service of blessing of new drivers rather than, say, a service of blessing for those who have become sexually active in the past year? There is likely to be a good deal of overlap in the two classes. And the church might actually have some blessings to offer to the sexually active. The church's wisdom when it comes to driving is pretty much exhausted with the recent WWJD (What Would Jesus Drive?) campaign aimed at SUV's.

A loyal reader, Jon Siess, suggests that we run a regular column WWOPD?: *Contemporary Dilemmas at the Intersection of High Religion and High Thought*. I admit to finding the idea fetching, although not without its problems. First of all, my sense is that it would better be WWOP Think? Or WWOP Say? From what I can gather, O.P.'s greatness lay in his rhetoric rather than his execution, a marvelous and empowering speaker, rather than a wily doer. Nor do I like the sound of "High Religion." It's hard enough to be a moderately successful Christian, I'll leave religion, especially

"High Religion" to those who have figured out how to transcend their particularity. There is, of course, also a problem with talk of "High Thought." I'm not confident I can distinguish between "high thought" and "low thought," and I suspect that many of our contemporary dilemmas are, in fact, located at the intersection of a pretty low faith and an equally low thought, both of which have been tarted up a good deal by their suitors. But, lest I sound the ingrate, here is the intriguing case Mr. Siess offers:

Twenty years ago, Alan H., a teacher at Thomas Jefferson High, converted to Islam. He is now an imam at one of the city's mosques. In recognition of Alan's twenty-five years of teaching at the school, the student committee helping to organize the graduation ceremony has asked Alan to give the opening invocation. Omar, a semi-retired LCMS pastor who volunteers at the high school three mornings a week, has been selected as "TJH's Model Citizen of the Year," an honor to be conferred at the upcoming graduation ceremony. The school principal has asked Pastor Omar to give the closing benediction. Bob and Mary, the parents of a graduating senior, attend the LCMS church in town where you belong. Rumor has it that the ACLU is considering a formal legal challenge to the practice of prayer at TJH graduations. Alan (who happens to be serving with you on the board of the local chapter of the American Red Cross), Omar, and the parents of the graduating senior will all be seeking your advice in the coming week about what to do regarding the prayer at the upcoming graduation. What will you tell them? Should Omar cede the praying to Alan H.? Should each address God as he sees fit? Or would you agree with the ACLU that a ceremony that makes no nod to God is the best policy?

If references to God in a public ceremony are problematic, perhaps Thomas Jefferson High should hire an ecumenical musician for a solution. The Lutheran World Federation has sent out an update

on the forthcoming Tenth Assembly of the LWF this summer in Winnipeg, Canada. One of the songs they'll be singing (to the old standard, Kum Ba Yah) is May Your Breath of Love. What is invoked is "your breath of love," "your kiss of love," "your whispered love," "your spark of love," "your raging love," and "your flagrant love." That love may warm, thrill, quell, fire, stir and fuel us, all the while healing our broken world. Pretty sensuous stuff, but Kum Ba Yah deserves no less. Surprisingly anthropomorphic, though, given

that the words were penned by "an ecumenical musician with a commitment to peace, justice and reconciliation." But God is not mentioned and, if the words are directed to a being (we must forgive this arbitrary preference for being over non-being) whom we can refer to as "you," perhaps it is only because the less traditional have learned from their more traditional brothers and sisters in the blessing of new drivers. The church's liturgy must always stoop to meet the people and, as today's liturgists see it, you can never bend too low. †

ASH WEDNESDAY

We've had enough ashes already this year
we've breathed them in and worn them in our hair
we have seen what ash can claim
cement, brick, paper, glass,
computers, desks, ballpoint pens
and ourselves, somehow,
our very bodies,
hanging heavy and thick in the air

the old priest dragged out of retirement
has it written shakily on a card
which he refers to again and again
as if even he can't believe it after all these years:
dust you are, to dust you shall return.
His left hand makes the mark
as if he's pricing bananas or labeling boxes:
dust, dust, dust

Exposed, we stumble back to our pews and kneel
I avoid my own ashen face in the mirror
but I see it smudged on the foreheads of friends,
as they rub their eyes, and rub their eyes,
and try to take it in.

Heather Roote Faller

on covers—

Liturgical artist Nicholas Papas is a communicant at St. Michael's Antiochian Orthodox Church in Greensburg, Pennsylvania. While studying painting at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Nicholas simultaneously began to learn iconography from his priest, the Reverend John Osacky (now known as Job, Bishop of the Midwest, O.C.A.). After receiving his degree in 1981, he advanced his iconographic skills in Athens, Greece under the tutelage of Nicholas and Basil Lepoura. Primarily, Nick has continued to hone his skills by working as a full-time iconographer.

Nicholas's murals and icons are characterized by an integrity to Orthodox theology. The Holy Fathers and Canons bless the Universal Church's amazing historic and ethnic diversity of artistic expression. These expressions are the cornucopia from which Nicholas draws elements for his work: modeling from Greece, composition from Russia and Serbia, simplicity from Egypt and Ireland, Paschal colors from Spain and on and on. Being an iconographer in this place and time offers the glorious ability to see, know about and be influenced by wonderful iconographers from so many places and times. Most are anonymous but two have been particularly strong influences on Nick; Constantine Youssis of New York and Photios Kontaglou of Athens.

Orthodox iconography manifests an awesome and beautiful paradox by simultaneously being traditional and "new." Papas believes that David the Psalmist and Saint John the Divine refer to this paradox when they say, "sing to the Lord a new song." He also believes this paradox is fundamental to a truly Orthodox image. Not surprisingly, there is something evangelical and didactic about this approach. Nick aspires to express this mystical "newness" in his work.

Nicholas's icons can be found in churches and homes throughout the United States. He particularly loves to paint expansive murals, but his work encompasses all sizes, even miniatures. Nicholas has been blessed with opportunities to paint unique themes and rare Saints as well as "the standards" and hopes that God is using the work of his hands in a way that people may be taught, aided in worship and encouraged along the path of salvation to the glory of Jesus Christ.

on reviewers—

Gilbert Meilaender

is the Richard and Phyllis Duesenberg Professor in Christian Ethics at Valparaiso University.

David M. Owens

teaches English at Valparaiso University.

on poets—

Kim Bridgford

directs the writing program at Fairfield University, where she is a professor of English and poetry editor of *Dogwood*. Her poetry has appeared in *The North American Review*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *The Georgia Review*, her fiction in *Redbook*, *The Massachusetts Review*, and *Witness*. She received a 1999-2000 NEA fellowship.

Jean Hollander

served as poetry editor and columnist for the *Princeton Spectrum* and the *Princeton Packet* for many years and collaborated with Robert Hollander in publishing a verse translation of Dante's *Inferno* (Random House).

Laurie B. Klein

is currently working on a novel set in 1200 BC Canaan entitled *Bloodlines* and a collection of poetry called *Petal, Fin and Marrowbone*. Her poems and non-fiction have appeared in *Mars Hill Review*, *Heliotrope*, *Christ in Our Home*, *The Psalmist*, *The Christian Communicator*, *Stories for the Spirit-filled Believer*, *Gallery*, and *Somerset Studio*. She lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband and two daughters.

Heather Roote Faller

is a native of Cleveland, Ohio. Her poems have appeared in *Theology Today* and *The Ledge* and she was awarded the *Ledge Poetry Award* in 2002. She lives with her husband and Welsh Terrier in Pennsylvania.

In This Issue

Remembering Charles Vandersee

Charles Vandersee: 1938-2003	<i>Hilary Holladay</i>	44
<i>the attic</i> : Letters From Dogwood, May 1984	<i>Charles Vandersee</i>	45

Essays

household freedom and home education: new agrarian dreams for the twenty-first century	<i>Allan Carlson</i>	5
the oneida experiment	<i>Frederica Mathewes-Green</i>	11
wisdom for the recovery of local culture	<i>Eric Miller</i>	18

Columns

<i>in luce tua</i> : everywhere I go I hear the sound of marching, charging feet		3
<i>film</i> : history in image	<i>Fredrick Barton</i>	23
<i>music</i> : things haven't changed	<i>J. D. Buhl</i>	27
<i>books</i> : Meilaender on Martin and Graham (C.S. Lewis)		
Owens on Jacobs		30
<i>spot:light on science</i> : epiphany for a small planet	<i>Alan G. Padgett</i>	33
<i>pulpit and pew</i> : sacred places	<i>L. DeAne Lagerquist</i>	35
<i>world:views</i> : new nose is good news in Kolkata	<i>Marah Carter Stith</i>	37
<i>vocation</i> : rookie cop: learning on the job	<i>A.P.</i>	39
<i>the nation</i> : the burden of cultural correctness	<i>Robert Benne</i>	41
<i>things we said today</i>		49

Verse

visiting the past	<i>Kim Bridgford</i>	4
father still	<i>Jean Hollander</i>	48
opening an old window	<i>Laurie B. Klein</i>	48
ash wednesday	<i>Heather Roote Faller</i>	50

On Covers, Reviewers, and Poets

51

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