A Review of Religion, Politics & Culture

Commonweal

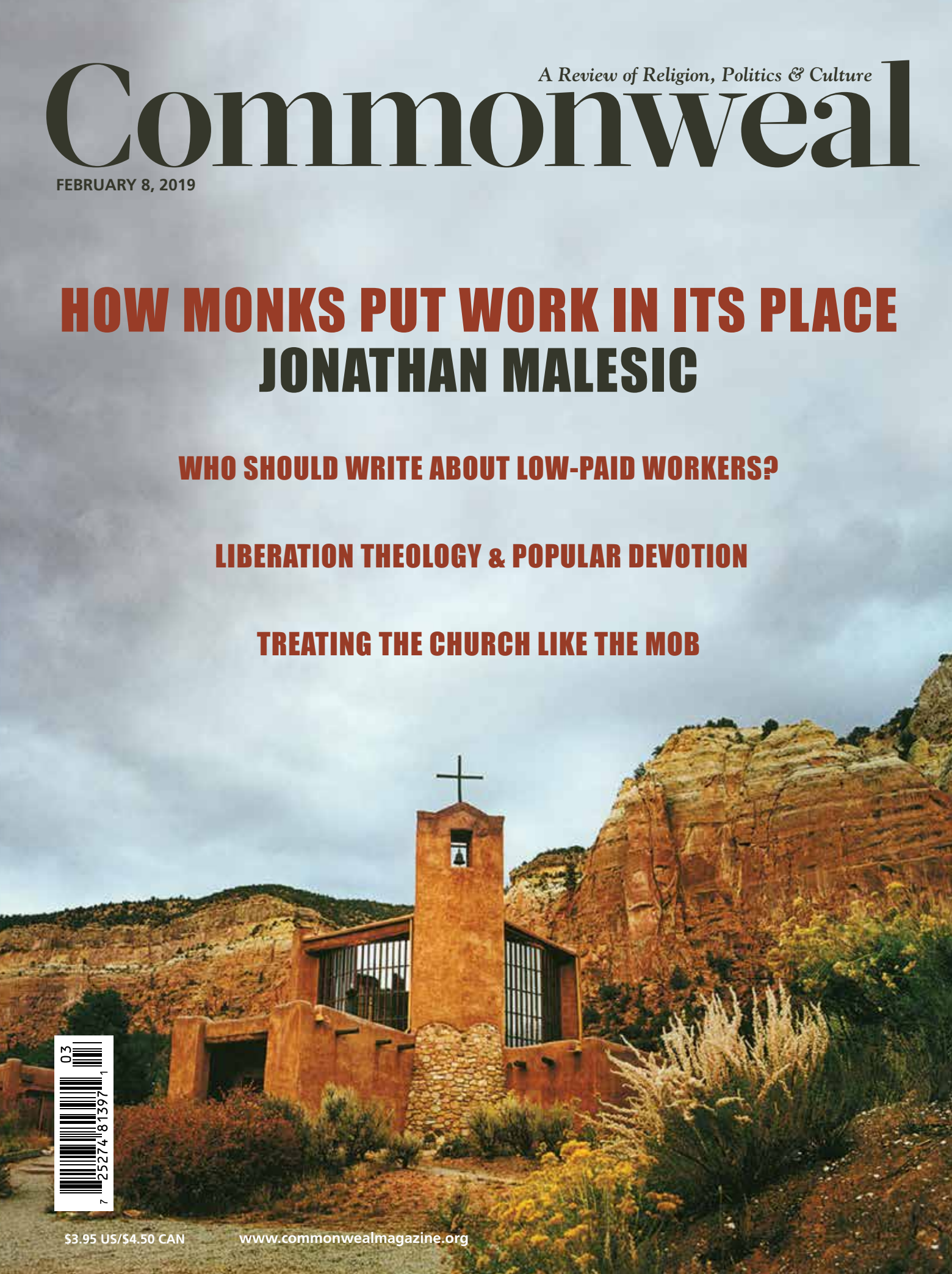
FEBRUARY 8, 2019

HOW MONKS PUT WORK IN ITS PLACE
JONATHAN MALESIC

WHO SHOULD WRITE ABOUT LOW-PAID WORKERS?

LIBERATION THEOLOGY & POPULAR DEVOTION

TREATING THE CHURCH LIKE THE MOB



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LETTERS

Rebuilding after abuse, rejecting the Benedict Option

REBUILDING THE KINGDOM

Helene Stapinski's article ("Why I Left," December 1) draws attention to the damage caused by James Poole, SJ. Poole was a founder of KNOM, the Catholic radio station in Nome that has continually served a wide area of western Alaska since 1971.

The author correctly asserts that no one at KNOM had knowledge of Poole's abusive and inappropriate behavior. The sense of guilt described by Stapinski—the feeling that one could have done more to uncover the abuse or stop the abuser—is well-known to many people who worked alongside Poole during the nearly two decades he was at KNOM. The complicity she describes was unknowing, and visible only through the lens of hindsight.

Poole's actions are indefensible. He brought pain and humiliation to his victims and shame even to those of us who never knew him but are forced to deal with his reprehensible legacy. The lawsuits against Poole and other priests and religious sent the Diocese of Fairbanks into bankruptcy in 2008 and nearly ended KNOM. But the station emerged in 2010 as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit corporation, remaining faithfully Catholic in its identity, and with a volunteer board of directors serving as owner in place of the diocese.

We are a Catholic institution that carries the scourge of an abusive priest in its past, but we choose not to abandon our ministry because of it. The needs for inspiration, information, and positivity are as present now in our remote region as they ever have been—not to mention the profound amount of healing necessary for the families and communities of those abused. We choose to be part of the future of the church as we all humbly contribute toward rebuilding God's Kingdom.

TIM BODONY
President of Knom
Nome, Alaska

ANGER RAGES

I too had an experience with James Poole when I was a religious sister in Berkeley from 1979 to 1980. I didn't know much about life then, and didn't report anything until 1992. My anger rages once again to learn how his many cases were handled. And it wasn't just children Poole harmed, but also vulnerable adults. I am sorry for Stapinski's pain and for all those so affected. But I am grateful that Stapinski wrote the article, as grim as it needed to be.

JEAN EAKINS
Renton, Wash.

NOT OPTIONAL

I read with great interest the three responses to Patrick Deneen's jeremiad on liberalism, and his slightly dyspeptic thank-you ("Has Liberalism Failed?" December 14). While I am ill-disposed to accept Deneen's recipe for overcoming the parlous state of modernity, I do think that his respondents all missed one important point, albeit one that he doesn't actually stress. The problem may be that the logic of liberalism, if left unchecked, reaches a point where it is beyond human control. Neoliberal economics, climate change, and the destruction of our physical world are perhaps close to that point, and that may explain the attractiveness of the Benedict Option. However, the Catholic tradition at its healthiest will not promote homeschooling or other kinds of ostrich-like behavior. The gospel does not sanction turning inwards for comfort, but rather turning outwards to the hurting world. *Why Liberalism Failed* seems strong on scorn and definitely light on compassion. Small is often beautiful, of course, but that could mean the PTA or the local labor union, not necessarily back to the farm with Wendell Berry.

PAUL LAKELAND
Fairfield, Conn.

From the Editors

'Righteous Struggle'

The recently settled strike by thirty thousand Los Angeles public-school teachers offers a timely reminder of what organized labor can achieve with a well-planned and well-executed work stoppage. Union leaders began preparations about two years ago, and when teachers walked off the job in mid-January there was a clear strategy in place for articulating their demands. These included pay raises of 6 percent, smaller class sizes, and greater funding for support staff and other resources. All of those demands were accepted in the tentative deal reached with the city six days later.

The Los Angeles strike was the latest in a series of successful teacher walkouts, following strikes in West Virginia, Oklahoma, and elsewhere. Like teachers in those states, the Los Angeles strikers had widespread public support, underscoring the reality that Americans by and large have a positive view of both teachers and organized labor. But unlike the 2018 "red-state rebellion," in which grassroots activism fueled strikes against Republican governments openly hostile to organized labor, the Los Angeles teachers' strike unfolded as a traditional, union-led effort in a progressive, Democratic city in the bluest (and wealthiest) state in the nation. California's public schools have been chronically underfunded since the infamous passage in 1978 of Proposition 13, which cut and capped the property taxes that used to support them. A recent study shows that spending for low-income districts falls 47 percent below the baseline established by the state itself. While there has been talk of raising the limit on corporate property taxes to help fund schools, so far no official proposal has been made. Property taxes remain the third rail of politics in California—home to the highest concentration of billionaires on the planet—and the Los Angeles strike isn't likely to change that reality.

The unique demographic makeup of the Los Angeles public-school system was another significant aspect of the strike. In the United States as a whole, more than half of public-school students are children of color, while more than 80 percent of teachers are white. But in Los Angeles, not only are a majority (73 percent) of students Latino, but so is a plurality (43 percent) of the teaching force. In no other large system where students of color predominate is the faculty so reflective of kids in the classroom. Striking teachers stressed the sense of solidarity they have with their students, a dynamic strengthened by the fact that many faculty are themselves products of the public-school system and are still dealing as teachers with the same problems they faced as students—from a shortage of nurses and English-language instruction to leaky roofs and understocked libraries. For some teachers, their activism was further fueled and informed by having participated in student walkouts protesting Proposition 187, a 1994 state ballot initiative that would have banned undocumented people from receiving education and healthcare benefits. Many said they were striking less to secure their own livelihoods than to improve the welfare of their long-neglected students, 80 percent of whom are from low-income families.

Teachers and other supporters of traditional public education have also criticized California's heedless embrace of the charter-school model. More than 600,000 students are now enrolled in charters statewide; in Los Angeles, the largest authorizer of charters in the nation, there are about 150,000 charter students. Studies estimate that charters cost the Los Angeles school district about $500 million a year, and that traditional public schools lose nearly $5,000 in state funds for every student who leaves for a charter school. During the strike, Alex Caputo-Pearl, president of United Teachers of Los Angeles, called for the city to "back away from what corporate Democrats have been promoting for a long time, which is charter schools and privatization." The union, long adamant in demands for better regulation of charters and a cap on their growth, won a concession from the board to consider a resolution on the issue. But it's hard to see much else happening soon. Charter-school operators and advocates dominate the Los Angeles school board, after wealthy charter backers spent more than $9 billion in the 2017 election to wrest control of it from the union.

The union cast its strike as a "righteous struggle" for the future of public education in Los Angeles, and that doesn't seem like hyperbole. In stressing common cause with their students and community, and in challenging the policies undermining their mission, Los Angeles teachers have provided inspiration and a good example to anyone who values the importance of public education as a great leveler in American society. The righteous struggle for public education must now continue on other fronts. ■

January 23, 2019

Cathleen Kaveny

Not the Mafia

WHY RICO DOESN'T APPLY TO THE CHURCH

Mobsters?

Does the clergy sex-abuse crisis make the Catholic Church a continuing criminal enterprise analogous to the Mafia or a drug cartel? Some people think it does. In the wake of the Pennsylvania Grand Jury Report, federal prosecutors in Philadelphia launched an investigation that will consider whether charges should be brought against Pennsylvania dioceses under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Practices Act (RICO).

Passed in 1970, RICO is a powerful federal law designed to target organized-crime syndicates by going after their leadership as well as the rank-and-file members who physically commit most of the crimes. Its provisions are harsh; RICO not only provides for hefty criminal penalties, but also authorizes civil lawsuits that may result in treble damages for victims of racketeering acts. In fact, several civil RICO suits have already been filed against church authorities and policymakers, including individual bishops, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, and even the Holy See itself. One such civil suit brought in 1993 against the diocese of Camden was settled for a seven-figure amount.

A good lawyer may be able to fend off RICO suits against the church. In fact, it will likely be a challenge for prosecutors and plaintiffs' lawyers to shoehorn the clergy sex-abuse crisis into the elements of a successful RICO suit. It will be difficult to show that the church engaged in acts of racketeering, which are modeled on mob activities such as violence, corruption, bribery or theft, fraud, drug trafficking, or money laundering. Moreover, civil litigants seeking monetary compensation need to demonstrate damage to their business or property, not simply personal injury, no matter how grave.

But RICO suits point to a bigger problem that the church can't fix with a good lawyer. The criminal law has a pedagogical function. So do criminal indictments. A RICO count in a federal complaint conveys the message that the government thinks that the defendant organization deserves no more moral or social approbation than the mob.

Is this true? Are Catholic bishops—even those who grossly mishandled accusations of abuse—really akin to mobsters? Are Catholics who go to their local parish every Sunday really analogous to the friends and family of mobsters, morally complicit in the church's illegal activities, even if they are not legally accountable for them?

Some victims of sex abuse would answer yes. "I can't think of another criminal syndicate that has destroyed as many lives as the church," said Joey Piscitelli, who eventually won a $600,000 verdict after being abused by a Salesian priest fifty years ago in California.

I respect the victims' position. But I also worry about its broader implications. In essence, it means that the church should be targeted and destroyed, not reformed and purified. The point of RICO, after all, is to smash organized criminal enterprises that have wreaked incalculable harm in their communities. A good deed here and there is beside the point. No prosecutor wants to save the mob just because their capos hand out free turkeys to the poor at Thanksgiving. The prosecutorial goal is annihilation of the mob, because its *central* purpose is to obtain power and riches through illegal and immoral means.

I do not believe that sexual abuse and cover-up is the central purpose of the Catholic Church. Its central purpose, I still believe, is to follow Christ. The corporal and spiritual works of mercy that Catholic dioceses, health-care institutions, social-service agencies, and individuals practice are at the heart of its mission—they are not a cheap publicity stunt for the holiday season. Consequently, I think Catholics are justified in committing to the work involved in reforming the church and eliminating the filth—even if the task is akin to cleaning out the Augean stables.

Is there a federal law that pedagogically captures the challenge facing the Catholic Church right now? I think the best pedagogical model is provided by U.S. bankruptcy law. More than twenty American dioceses have already filed for bankruptcy due to expenses related to the sex-abuse crisis. Unlike RICO, the point of bankruptcy law is not to destroy the organization filing for bankruptcy, but to allow for it to make a fresh start after paying its debts as best as it can.

Of course, the sex-abuse crisis has not only left the Catholic Church financially bankrupt, but also morally bankrupt. We might ask ourselves: What would happen if the American church ran with the metaphor, and declared its own moral bankruptcy? What would a just settlement require? First, it would entail the recognition that the moral debts to the victims cannot be repaid only with restitution in the form of monetary awards. They also demand public contrition, penance, and a firm and detailed plan of amendment. That would allow the church to reform and restructure itself so it can continue its charitable work, albeit with continuing sorrow for its misdeeds, and constant vigilance to protect the vulnerable. ■

CNS PHOTO / BOB ROLLER

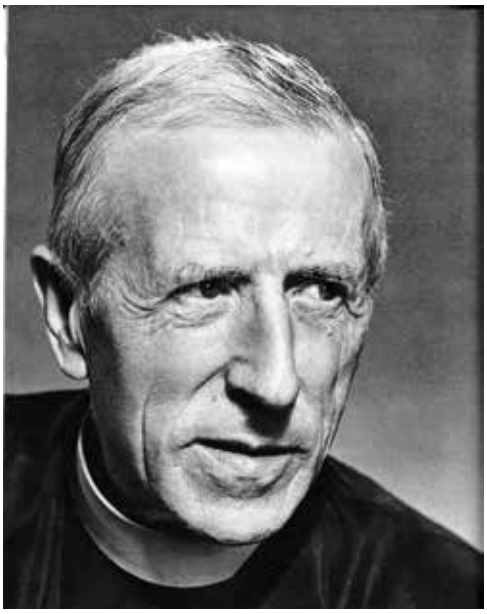
John F. Haught

Trashing Teilhard

HOW NOT TO READ A GREAT RELIGIOUS THINKER

Was the Jesuit priest and scientist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin really a racist, fascist, and even genocidal opponent of human dignity? I had thought that, at least among educated Catholics, this question was almost dead, and that holdout pockets of hostility might be vanishing for good, especially after several recent popes admiringly cited Teilhard's cosmic vision for its theological beauty and Eucharistic power.

But my optimism was premature. In a December 2016 article in *Philosophy and Theology* titled "Dangerous Tendencies of Cosmic Theology: The Untold Legacy of Teilhard de Chardin," John Slattery writes that "from the 1920s until his death in 1955, Teilhard de Chardin unequivocally supported racist eugenic practices, praised the possibilities of the Nazi experiments, and looked down upon those who [sic] he deemed 'imperfect' humans." Slattery, a recent graduate of Notre Dame's Department of Theology, claims that a persistent attraction to racism, fascism, and genocidal ideas "explicitly lay the groundwork for Teilhard's famous cosmological theology." This, he informs us, "is a link which has been largely ignored in Teilhardian research."



Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in 1955

A more recent article by the same critic in *Religion Dispatches* (May 2018) is entitled "Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's Legacy of Eugenics and Racism Can't Be Ignored." In it, Slattery hangs his case on eight stray citations from Teilhard's letters and other scattered writings. Most of the quotes present what were speculative inquiries on the part of Teilhard—questions that countless other thoughtful people have asked, including many Catholics—rather than systematically developed theses for public consumption. Their style is provocative and interrogatory, not declarative. Exactly what Teilhard really meant by them is, in every single case, highly debatable.

And yet Slattery holds these excerpts out to us as undeniable evidence that Teilhard's true "legacy" is one of hostility to Catholic affirmation of human dignity, racial justice, and concern for the disadvantaged. Still more important, however, is Slattery's claim that it was Teilhard's commitment to these evils that grounds and undergirds his "cosmological theology." Nothing could be more preposterous.

Slattery doesn't deny that the bulk of Teilhard's religious writings are uncontroversially Christian and in tune with Catholic teaching. Yet he ignores this fact in defining what he calls Teilhard's "legacy." Though he surely knows that most readers will be unfamiliar with the man and his thought, he has decided to expose them first to what he considers Teilhard's most sinister side. In the process he takes a thimbleful of quotes out of context, posts them on a blank background, and says nothing substantive about the remaining 99.9 percent of Teilhard's work. Failing to take into account the general architecture of Teilhard's thought always leads to the kinds of exaggeration and distortion that Slattery commits.

He begins by reciting the best-known of Teilhard's treasurable remarks: "If humanity ever captures the energy of love, it will be the second time in history that we have discovered fire." Noting that millions who tuned into the wedding of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle heard these lines recited in a moving sermon by Episcopal Bishop Michael Bruce Curry, Slattery remarks that listeners who "swooned" over them were unaware of the poisonous roots of Teilhard's religious worldview. He proceeds to reveal the rot he finds in a package of eight passages cherry-picked from Teilhard's voluminous letters and writings. I shall condense the most offensive of these below, but I want to begin my response to Slattery by summarizing what other students of Teilhard's work consider to be his real legacy. Only after becoming acquainted with his core ideas can we interpret rightly what Slattery finds so offensive in Teilhard's work.

Seasoned Teilhard scholars are aware of the questionable remarks he points to; but the seeming offensiveness of such comments fades into the shadows when we read them in terms of the fundamental principles guiding Teilhard's scientifically informed vision of the world and God. Here are four of these fundamental principles:

The universe (as science has demonstrated) is still coming into being. Hence the world is not yet perfected. Theologically, this means that creation remains "unfinished," and

FRIENDSHIP INTERCEPT

We never know how many days we have
until the call goes out to us, wordless,
the crow says, cawing on my morning walk,

caw-caw-caw-cawing, breaking up the walk—
But, of course, he doesn't say that, cawing.
The melody, obstreperous monotony

breaks open spaces in me I despise,
mounting paths through my cold jugular
I have to find new lyrics for, sky-morning-wide—

The crow is gone, perched on some neighboring street—
We never know how many days we have
I repeat to the wind, old friend holding my name

summer into fall, into oblivion.
And, shouting it, the street opens ahead,
star-morning-wide, its only end these stars.

—Peter Cooley

Peter Cooley's tenth book of poetry, World Without Finishing, *was published last year by Carnegie Mellon University Press.*

that humans, who are part of this universe, may contribute significantly to its making. The opportunity to participate in "building the earth" is a cornerstone of human dignity. (It is also a teaching of Vatican II.) The fact that our creativity can sometimes lead to monstrous outcomes does not absolve us of the obligation to improve the world and ourselves. Taking advantage of this opportunity is sometimes dangerous, but it is also essential to sustaining hope and a "zest for living," Teilhard maintains. Moreover, nothing "clips the wings of hope" more severely than the now obsolete theological idea that the universe was completed once and for all in the beginning, and that there is little or nothing we can do to make it new.

To create is to unite. The world comes into being—and becomes new—by a process of unification. Scientifically understood, the emerging cosmos becomes intelligible only by gradually bringing increasingly more complex forms of coherence out of its primordial state of diffusion and atomic dispersal. As the universe in the course of time becomes more complex, it also becomes more conscious. Theologically, this principle is implied in Christian hope as summed up in Jesus' prayer that "all may be one" and in the Pauline expectation that everything will be "brought to a head" in Christ, "in whom all things consist." Teilhard stated explicitly that his whole theology of nature is consistent with the expectations of the Apostle Paul and the Fourth Evangelist: "Lord make us one." His true legacy lies in his rich Christian sense of a universe converging on Christ and being brought into final union in what he called God-Omega.

True union differentiates. As the creative love of God brings increasing unity to the unfinished universe, it is God's will that the diversity of creation increases as well, including the emergence of free and unique human persons. In Christ, God seeks to become continually more incarnate in the world not via an order imposed on it, but by a differentiating, liberating, and personalizing communion with it. Many distortions of Teilhard's intentions, including Slattery's, stem from a failure to understand what Teilhard means by *true* union. As we shall see, to miss the deeply Christian motif of *differentiating* union in his writings is to do him grave injustice.

The world rests on the future as its sole support. As we follow the course of cosmic history from its remote past into the future, Teilhard observes, we discover a "law of recurrence" in which something new, more complex, and (eventually) more conscious has always been taking shape "up ahead." Scientifically speaking, we now know that subatomic elements were organized around atomic nuclei; atoms were gathered into molecules; molecules into cells; and cells into complex organisms, some of which made the leap into thought. The most important kinds of emergence can occur, however, only if the elements allow themselves to be organized around a new and higher *center,* one that lifts them up to a more elaborately differentiated unity. To experience true union, true being, true goodness, and true beauty, therefore, we must allow ourselves—like Abraham, the prophets, and Jesus—to be grasped by the Future.

Only after becoming familiar with these four principles can we rightly decide whether Teilhard was a racist, a fascist, an enemy of the disabled, and a genocidal monster. Let me examine these charges in turn.

Was Teilhard a racist? Slattery notes that in 1929, while working in China, Teilhard had asked: "Do [the Chinese] have the same human value as the whites?" and went on to speculate that racial "inequalities" might be less cultural than "natural." If he were here today to respond to Slattery's accusation, I think Teilhard would point out that almost all evolutionists are aware of the paleontological evidence of a variety of lines of human descent. And they would understandably wonder whether and to what extent genetic "inequalities" may still remain, in humans as with other species.

For Teilhard, at least, the term "inequality" does not imply a lower value for some peoples than others *in the eyes of God,* but rather has more to do with "differentiation" as set forth in the third principle I cited above. Acknowledging differences

among races and among our evolutionary ancestors poses no theological problem, since "true union differentiates." In fact, Teilhard's understanding of the overriding *unity* of the "human phenomenon" is loving and expansive; he even includes extinct hominid forms within the category of "the human." Finally, he locates the metaphysical basis of human unity not so much in our murky biological past as in the future communion of all creation with the God who is coming. Moreover, as he goes on to say in the same passage that Slattery cites, "Christian love overcomes all inequalities, but it does not have to deny them." Surely these are neither the ideas nor the sentiments of a racist.

Was Teilhard a fascist? While he asserted his loathing for nationalism, he did pronounce himself "very interested in the primacy it returns to the collective," and pondered further: "Could a passion for 'the race' represent a first draft of the Spirit of the Earth?" It is important to understand such musings properly. When Teilhard expresses interest in the fascist experiments of the twentieth century, far from approving them, as Slattery sneakily implies, he is simply observing that such movements feed parasitically on the pervasive cosmic tendency toward union as set forth above in the second principle. The evil in fascism, Teilhard understood, consists of its failure to heed the third principle, namely, that *true* union differentiates. If we are honest, we can recognize the intoxicating spirit of unification even in its most twisted forms; but true unity promotes differences. Contrary to Slattery's accusation, Teilhard always considered fascist and communist experiments as evil insofar as they failed to look beyond uniformity, homogeneity, and ideological conformism to the *true* unity that differentiates, liberates, and personalizes.

What about Teilhard's regard—or alleged disregard—for the dignity of the disabled? Slattery quotes him:

> What fundamental attitude…should the advancing wing of humanity take to fixed or definitely unprogressive ethnical groups? The earth is a closed and limited surface. To what extent should it tolerate, racially or nationally, areas of lesser activity? More generally still, how should we judge the efforts we lavish in all kinds of hospitals on saving what is so often no more than one of life's rejects?... To what extent should not the development of the strong...take precedence over the preservation of the weak?

Slattery tendentiously glosses this passage as "a reflection that strongly suggests, for lack of a better word, genocidal practices for the sake of eugenics." Yet notice again that what Teilhard is putting forth are questions rather than declarations. In these questions we find him struggling for a moral vision consistent with the four pillars of his religious cosmology, especially with the fact that the universe is still coming into being. In an unfinished universe, somehow human moral life must include our striving to intensify vitality, complexity, consciousness, and beauty. Teilhard is not "putting down" the disabled as Slattery claims; and those who have read Teilhard more fully and fairly know that he *never* equates "life's rejects" with "God's rejects." Far from being indifferent to the suffering of the disabled, he consistently fosters a vision of life that offers them hope and a deeper sense of dignity. Teilhard shows how our sufferings can be "divinized," and insists that all the broken twigs on the tree of life contribute creatively to its richness. As he reflects with quiet empathy on the incessant suffering of his invalid sister, for example, he develops a Christian theology of suffering that gives the disabled a place of paramount importance in the larger scheme of things. Accusing him of moral insensitivity to the disabled is simply wrong.

Finally, and proceeding from the charge that Slattery levels above, we must ask: Was Teilhard a eugenicist? He did write that "our generation still regards with distrust all efforts proposed by science for controlling the machinery of heredity...as if man had the right and power to interfere with all the channels in the world except those which make him himself. And yet it is eminently on this ground that we must try *everything*, to its conclusion." In judging this idea as morally reckless, however, Slattery ignores the fact that for Teilhard it is always—and only—within the constraints of a responsible moral vision rooted in Christian hope, and in the principles listed above, that we must be ready to "try everything." Teilhard is looking in the age of science for a more adventurous, world-building, and life-enhancing moral life than we can find in classical religious patterns of piety.

Because humans are part of nature, and nature remains far from finished, it is legitimate to wonder to what extent humans may morally participate in their own and the world's continuous creation. In doing so, may we justifiably tamper with our genetic heritage as well as that of other living beings? Perhaps Teilhard was at times incautious and too optimistic about human potential in this domain. Yet the efforts of Slattery and others to burden him with a tainted worldview need to be resisted.

I do wish that Teilhard had expressed himself more clearly at times. I wish too that he had been more ecologically sensitive, less Eurocentric, a bit more Darwinian and less Lamarckian, more aware of gender issues, more attuned to the ambiguities of technology, and so on. Well, I wish too that John Chrysostom and Martin Luther had purged their preaching and prose of every trace of anti-Semitism, and that Thomas Aquinas had given us a deeper understanding of human sexuality. My point, of course, is that most of us do not take the blemishes in our religious classics to be foundational or legacy-defining. If we are fair, we can usually find in the main writings of saints and scholars the very principles that demolish those defects. Surely we can and should read Teilhard's vast body of writings no less leniently. Teilhard's reflections and principles put forth a theologically and morally rich framework within which we—and he—should be able at least to *ask* the hard questions without having to be accused of ethical monstrosity. ■

John F. Haught *is Distinguished Research Professor at Georgetown University and author of* The New Cosmic Story: Inside Our Awakening Universe *(Yale University Press, 2017).*

Taming the Demon

How Desert Monks Put Work in Its Place

Jonathan Malesic

In a remote canyon in northern New Mexico in the mid-1990s, Benedictine monks of the Monastery of Christ in the Desert spent their mornings at a dozen Gateway computers in a room with a dirt floor, creating the internet. A crucifix hung on the wall right above a whiteboard where they sketched out webpages. The monks were doing a digital-age version of work that Benedictines have done for more than a thousand years. They were scribes.

The monks gave their web-design service the hokey dotcom-era name scriptorium@christdesert and targeted the vast Catholic market of parishes and dioceses; they even hoped to land a contract with the Vatican. The scriptorium produced pages that approximated the look of medieval illuminated manuscripts (and must have taken forever to upload on the single, primitive cellphone that served as their modem). Because their product was electronic, the monks' remote location was no obstacle to the work, though their phone bill ran to over a thousand dollars a month. The project aimed to profit both the bottom line and the HTML scribes' spiritual lives. Abbot Philip Lawrence, who led Christ in the Desert from 1976 until his retirement this past December, told the Associated Press at the time, "What we're doing now is more creative, and that's good for the monks. If you're doing something that's creative, it brings out a whole different aspect of the soul."

The scriptorium was a hit. It got a boost from national

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ALL IMAGES COURTESY OF THE MONASTERY OF CHRIST IN THE DESERT.

news stories and soon had an abundance of orders—including one from the Holy See. In 1996, Brother Mary-Aquinas Woodworth, a systems analyst in his secular life who started up the scriptorium after he became a monk, predicted it would quadruple the monastery's revenue. He pitched a Catholic internet service to the U.S. bishops, naming AOL, then a ubiquitous provider of dial-up service, as "the model, the competitor" to his vision. (The bishops passed on his proposal.) As the scriptorium's reputation grew, Brother Mary-Aquinas began hatching plans to open an office in Santa Fe but was willing to look to bigger cities—including New York and Los Angeles—if he couldn't get the space he needed in New Mexico. He dreamed of hiring up to two hundred people. At one point, traffic to the monks' website was so great, it caused the whole state's internet service to crash.

But then, in 1998, the scriptorium closed up shop. Monks adhering to Benedict's rule can't pull eighteen-hour shifts to fill orders. They can't respond to clients' emails while they're praying the Liturgy of the Hours, studying, or eating—the activities that make up most of their day. Abbot Philip told me in an email that the project ended because he couldn't justify the labor the scriptorium demanded. It took a long time to train monks for the work, but he couldn't fully capitalize on their skills, as he would soon need to send them off for theological study. In her history of the monastery, *Brothers of the Desert*, Mari Graña writes, "There were so many orders for design services that what at first seemed the perfect answer for work that would not interfere with the contemplative life, soon began to take over that life."

It goes without saying that no company in the world beyond the canyon would call an end to an enterprise with as much promise as scriptorium@christdesert. If its staff couldn't keep up with orders, it would hire more workers. Possessed by the spirit of capitalism, it would encourage people to work overtime. But the monks can't do that, not without thwarting the reason they went to the desert in the first place. So they quit.

I wondered, an exhausted ex-academic at midlife, what it was like to live in a community that works only a few hours a day, one that would give up a project with such potential. So I went to the desert. I suspected the monks knew something about the proper role of work in life; I wanted to know what it was. I rented a car in Santa Fe one autumn and rumbled down the thirteen miles of dirt road that lead from the highway to the monastery, which sits at the base of an ochre mesa dotted with piñon trees. Across the broad canyon, bright yellow cottonwood leaves shimmered in the wind. I had never been in such a beautiful place.

Still, I had misgivings, a lurking uncertainty about what I'd have to confront at the monastery. To prepare for the trip, I read some of the sayings of the Desert Fathers—the earliest Christian monks, who left the maddening bustle of third-century cities to live as hermits in the Egyptian wilderness. They spoke often of demons. St. Antony, the greatest Christian ascetic of them all, said that if you go to the desert but don't renounce all the things of this world, the demons will tear at your soul in the same way wild dogs would tear at a man who walked through town wearing meat on his otherwise naked body. What demons would visit me over several days in the silent, starlit canyon? Abaddon, from the Book of Revelation? Juiblex, the Faceless Lord? Or some fear my ego had buried under heaps of deflection and self-deceit over the decades?

On the second day of my visit, a Sunday, I met a brother who was in early middle age and wore glasses and a black knitted skullcap over his tight haircut. I told him the Desert Fathers had me worried. I hoped he would reassure me, tell me they were just exaggerating. No such luck. "There are many demons," he replied, without a hint of irony. "That's why we're here."

Over several days of working and praying and eating with the monks, I realized that the ceaseless, obsessive American work ethic was one of those demons, certainly the one that haunted me, and most of the people I knew. We are a society almost totally under its power. We assess people's value by their jobs and demean anyone who can't work. We forego vacation time, anxious to prove that we're indispensable. We drive ourselves to burnout. And we do all this even while artificial intelligence promises to take our jobs. The demon is chasing us over a cliff.

These monks battle that demon, too. Abbot Philip observes in his weekly newsletter that "spiritual life is spiritual combat." Every so often, he writes, the temptations of mundane existence arise—including "too much time on the internet, making my work in the community more important than taking the time to pray, and so on." At times, he admits, "it would be much easier just to abandon the whole effort" of contemplative life. Like the bread and power the gospels say Satan tempted Jesus with in the desert, the goods that our work ethic offers are real goods, from increased pay and productivity to the esteem of others. But they come at a cost. For monks, these goods compete with their spiritual ideals and relationship to God. In secular life, they can entail subjection to bosses, physical and emotional erosion, and the eternal sense that there's more work to do.

Abbot Philip and his brother monks manage to tame the demon of this work ethic, though, by limiting their labor while they pursue higher goods. We who live in what monks simply call "the world" need to learn their strategies for spiritual combat. I don't think we all have to join monasteries to live the good life. But the monastic principles of constraining work and subordinating it to moral and spiritual well-being might help us keep our demons at bay and recover the dignity in our labor and in ourselves.

It's 3:30 on a cold Monday morning, the third day of my visit, and the monastery's steady-clanging bell has me up. I pull on my boots and coat, grab a flashlight, and trudge a quarter-mile up the canyon from the low-slung adobe guesthouse to the chapel. I enter and take a seat in the corner that's reserved for guests. The bell rings again a few minutes before four, this time more urgently, and thirty-some Benedictine monks, all yawning and sniffling and wearing either trim black cassocks or broader-cut habits, file into their choir stalls.

We open our spiral-bound breviaries and begin the first office of the Liturgy of Hours, the seven periods of communal prayer that punctuate the monastic day. The monks and guests recite the psalms in Gregorian chant for about seventy-five minutes. We break for about fifteen minutes, then come back for another hour. Guests mumble along while they puzzle out the medieval musical notation. No one, not even the monks, projects their voice, creating a soft conformity of sound.

At one point, a brother stands at a lectern and reads the usual Monday-morning passage from Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians: "Anyone unwilling to work shall not eat."

It's a stark admonition to begin the week. The brother finishes reading and returns to his stall. We continue to chant, then have Mass. When Mass ends, at around seven in the morning, the monks file out two by two. They bow deeply to the altar in the center of the chapel, then genuflect before the tabernacle, bow to each other, and exit, hoods up.

The bell clangs again at 8:45, and the monks are back in the chapel dressed in short, hooded tunics over jeans—their workwear. The youngest, in their early twenties, wear track pants and sneakers. At this session, called an office, they pray that they'll remember the sacrifice of Christ, who hung on the cross for three hours—hours they'll spend cooking and cleaning, minding the gift shop, sorting through the immigration paperwork of the many brothers who have joined the community from abroad, and making products whose sale will help keep the monastery afloat: beer, soap, wooden rosaries, leather belts, greeting cards.

Work ceases for the day with a 12:40 bell. That's it; they've upheld their end of Paul's bargain. The monks clean up, pray another brief office, and then eat their main meal in silence. They spend the afternoon at rest or in silent prayer, eat a light meal, and enjoy a brief recreation period in the evening. The final office of the day, entirely in Latin, concludes by 8:00 in the evening with a ritual of sprinkling the community with holy water. Thus begins the Great Silence, when the monks return to their cells and may not speak. They won't go back to work until the next morning.

I asked Fr. Simeon, a monk who spoke with a confidence cultivated through the years he spent as a defense attorney, what you do when the 12:40 bell rings but you feel that your work is undone.

"You get over it," he replied.

Getting over it is a spiritual discipline that is in short supply in secular life. It's what makes the paradoxical but deeply humane approach to work at the monastery possible. The Benedictines who live in the canyon keep strict watch over their time and attention. Doing so keeps their desires in order. But it also keeps labor within limits. They get over work so they can get on with something much more important to them.

Un travail de bénédictin—literally, a Benedictine labor—is a French expression for the sort of project someone can only accomplish over a long time through patient, modest, steady effort. It's the kind of thing that can't be rushed: illuminating an entire Bible, writing a thousand-year history, recording the position of stars at each hour of the night and each day of the year. It's work that doesn't look good in a quarterly earnings report. It doesn't maximize billable hours. It doesn't get overtime pay.

But it's a way to work without the anxiety that drives us to put in long, intense hours and uproot our lives every few years in pursuit of "better" jobs. One elderly, stooped monk with bright eyes behind his glasses told me over homemade cookies and instant coffee after Sunday Mass that he had been assigned to catalog all the books in the monastery's library. That was in 2003, fourteen years before my visit. He started the task and kept going, day after day, book after book. He wasn't even close to finishing.

Benedictines often say they aim to unite prayer and work—their rule is *ora et labora*. And in some ways, their prayer itself looks like a kind of work, with early hours and a rigid schedule. St. Benedict, author of the rule that governs life in the monastery, called the Liturgy of Hours "*opus Dei*," the work of God.

But monastic prayer is much more unlike work—at least secular work—than like it. There are no salaries, no promotions, and no productivity quotas. It never hangs over the monks' heads. They can't put off the day's offices and vow to pray twice as hard tomorrow. They can't use prayer to prove their worth in others' eyes. They don't get anxious that robots will replace them. The process for *opus Dei* hasn't changed in 1,500 years. In the Middle Ages, monks were early adopters of water mills, to improve their agricultural labor. The monks at Christ in the Desert are debating whether to connect to the grid or stick with solar power and satellite communication. Benedictines care about efficiency. Just not when it comes to their prayers. In fifteen centuries, they've made no effort to streamline them.

In fact, the monks go out of their way to resist efficiency in the work of God, reciting prayers at a pace much slower than what I'm used to at Catholic parishes. Even within religious communities I've visited at Catholic universities, Vespers—evening prayer—takes about fifteen minutes. At Christ in the Desert, it's half an hour. Both groups follow the same text. It's just that the monks in the desert sing it, drawing out every syllable.

During the first few offices I attended, I grew impatient

Monks sorting hops at the Monastery of Christ in the Desert

with the pace. The monks sing the Psalms—all 150 in the course of a week—antiphonally, with choirs in opposite corners of the chapel alternating verses. The pause between verses extended too long for me. We were wasting precious milliseconds. The monks *could* pray faster, but they don't want to. They don't have something better to do.

That first Monday morning, after prayers, I reported to the guestmaster for work, but there was nothing for any of the guests to do. So, led by the demon of our work ethic—who demands constant productivity—we found things to do. Someone noticed the windows in the monastery's reception area were dirty and wondered if there was Windex to clean them. Others dusted the windowsills and picked up stray bits of trash in a courtyard. A tall guy, fiftyish, said he wanted to clear a gravel path that was becoming overgrown with weeds. I wanted to be useful, too, so I went with him. After an hour of uprooting tumbleweeds and marking the edges of the path with rocks, we admired our work.

I headed back to the guesthouse and encountered two middle-aged women who were straightening up the kitchen in the guests' common room. I got some water and left them to it. Meanwhile, young brothers wearing blue nitrile gloves were ducking into and out of bathrooms and empty guest rooms, preparing for new arrivals. One wore a discreet pair of earbuds. When they finished their work, they leaned back in chairs outside the guest rooms and chatted in Vietnamese. They were taking a load off, like any manual workers. They headed back toward the cloister even before the bell rang.

Father Simeon told me that, in mentoring novice monks from all over the world, he gets to see the whole range of work ethics. Americans are the most obsessive about work, he said. But he finds that, regardless of nationality, it takes time for younger monks to adapt to the monastic schedule and the priority of prayer. Young brothers are often anxious about their labor, he said. They struggle to get over the fact that they can leave it at the end of the work period and pick it up again the next day. They want to prove themselves, because they haven't yet learned what it means to live a life of prayer for the world, a world they've renounced.

"You're giving your life away and not seeing any results," Father Simeon said. "So *of course* you want to work."

Monks may not be driven by a desire for measurable results, but they do need to support themselves. They have to engage with the world; that's where the money is, after all. The guesthouse is a major source of the monastery's income. The monks rely on donations, too. They've tried many ventures to find the right balance between profitability and maintaining the integrity of their calling. In the 1990s the monks opened a thrift shop in Santa Fe that lasted a few years. They also attempted beekeeping, but never produced enough honey to sell at a profit. In the next decade they signed a record deal with Sony Masterworks to produce

CDs of their chants and hosted a reality TV show for the Learning Channel, on which five men—including one obligatory loose cannon—lived like monks for forty days.

The scriptorium was the most ambitious project; its potential seemed revolutionary. At the head of it was Brother Mary-Aquinas, a monk with rare technical ability and an expansive vision. He told the *National Catholic Reporter* in 1998 that there needed to be "a new kind of spirituality" for monks doing work in information technology. "It's extremely demanding, it takes a lot of concentration. It often takes you eight to ten hours to get your mind around a problem," he said. "It doesn't fit easily into the monastic schedule." He drew a contrast between the agrarian roots of Benedictine labor and information-age models. "The modern sense of work is, in a way, a much more perfect vision," Mary-Aquinas said.

St. Benedict himself acknowledged that the monastic community would include members with marketable skills. If it's going to survive, it ought to. But he had a stern warning for his monks: an artisan who "becomes puffed up by his skillfulness in his craft, and feels he is conferring something on the monastery" should be ordered to cease his work until he's able to do it with humility. This rule makes no sense to secular eyes. Out in the world, talent is considered a rare commodity. Firms compete for workers with expertise—whether they're coders or surgeons or quarterbacks—and then try to get them to work as many hours as possible. That's how corporations believe they'll make the most money. In the monastery, though, expertise can get in the way of the community's health and impede the expert's spiritual development. If a skilled artisan invests himself in his craft, he'll develop his talent and become more productive. But this investment carries the risk of pride, the fundamental human sin. If the monk isn't vigilant, or if his brothers aren't vigilant on his behalf, the pleasure he takes in the craft might overtake the purpose for which the craft is done.

Abbot Philip told me in an email that "one of the challenges, even now, is to develop artisans and artists whose first identity is to be a monk." A talented weaver and a furniture maker each left the monastery to pursue their crafts in the world. "The challenge for us is the formation of a monk," Abbot Philip continued. "And sometimes the other activities have become more important and we lose the monk while producing a great artist."

Brother Mary-Aquinas left the monastery, too, in 1998, the same year the scriptorium closed. According to the current website for NextScribe, a scriptorium spinoff he directs, he returned to secular life after "his Archbishop judged that his new vocation in the field of Computer Supported Spiritual Development…was no longer that of a hermit monk."

On Tuesday morning, I again reported for work with the other guests, and there was something for us to do: stuff envelopes. Several boxes of newsletters sat in a corner of the monastery's public-reception area, waiting for someone to prepare them for mailing. Father Simeon gave us this task. He encouraged us to take our time, get some coffee, stop when we get bored, and not worry about finishing today. "Make sure you talk to each other," he added.

The eight or so guests sat around tables and got to work. I sat with a physician, an attorney, and a retired administrator in a cabinet-level government agency: all of them Catholics in their fifties and sixties. Some were regulars at the monastery. One woman studied at the same universities I did, and we traded alumni gossip. We all drank coffee, and we talked, but we also worked diligently. The prospect of finishing the task in one morning became an irresistible temptation. "I think we can do this!" someone said. We invited familiar demons to the table. I arranged the stack of machine-folded newsletters in such a way that I could pick one up with my right hand and slide it into an envelope in my left in a single motion. Almost through instinct, I found the most efficient way.

We stuffed eleven thousand newsletters into envelopes and stacked them into trays for the post office in under two hours. It didn't matter. Our speed didn't earn us or the monastery anything. When we finished, I could only think, "Now what?" A copy of the newsletter arrived in my mailbox six weeks later.

Six months later I return to the desert, though I don't go to the monastery. Instead, I drive to a brewery in the old Route 66 town of Moriarty, where Abbey Brewing Company makes its staple beers. Christ in the Desert holds a financial interest in the company: another venture that renews an old monastic trade. But monks aren't doing most of the work; the company couldn't function solely on monastic labor. Neither could the scriptorium, for that matter. Abbey Brewing has a general manager, Berkeley Merchant, who is also an oblate of Christ in the Desert. I meet him on the brewery's loading dock, where he's stacking cases. He wears a blue, untucked work shirt over jeans and hiking shoes. White hair and a beard frame his lean face. "Take your time," he tells a forklift operator loading kegs onto a truck for delivery to bars in Albuquerque and Las Cruces.

We go inside, where two workers are bottling Monks' Dark, a toasty porter. Bottles clatter along a belt to be filled, capped, and labeled. Merchant stops to inspect the glue on the labels and give an instruction to the men. Each beer's label depicts one of the monks. An image of the brother who's been cataloging books for fourteen years graces the bottles for a Belgian dubbel.

We go sit at a picnic table in the brewery's taproom, and Merchant describes his work. If the digital scriptorium threatened to bring too much of the secular work ethic into the monastery, then Merchant is aiming to bring monastic practices into the business. One way he does this is to make experimental or seasonal brews at the monastery every few

Monastic choir singing antiphonally

weeks. There's a small brewhouse and a field for growing hops on the grounds, near the bank of the Rio Chama. When Merchant is there, he's "juggling two schedules," the Liturgy of the Hours, governed by the chapel bell, and the brewing cycle, governed by the laws of chemistry. Both schedules demand careful attention. His day begins when the monks' does, at 3:30 a.m., and he starts brewing when they start chanting. One or two monks he has trained usually join him for their work period beginning around 9 o'clock. For years, his assistant was Brother Bede, whose wide-splaying red beard would draw approving nods at any taphouse in Portland or Brooklyn. In the early stages of the brewing cycle, Merchant says, "There are a lot of things happening: watching time, taking constant measurements. You're really hustling." But the work isn't all hustle. If Merchant is cleaning kegs when he hears the bell, he stops and picks up a breviary to pray the office. "Everything we're doing is clearly not a matter of life and death," he says of his work. "You realize that unless it's absolutely critical, you can leave it and pick it up later."

Abbey Brewing has had mixed success. It distributes beer throughout New Mexico and exports to Taiwan and Chile. The company operated a bar in downtown Albuquerque, Monk's Corner Taproom, for two years, until it closed last summer. Merchant told me they're looking for another location that might do better business.

As Merchant and I sit at the picnic table, surrounded by six-packs and T-shirts for sale, he talks about the dignity of work, how it stems from the inherent human dignity of the one who's working. This concept echoes something Pope John Paul II wrote in his 1981 encyclical on work, *Laborem exercens*: "human work has an ethical value of its own, which clearly and directly remains linked to the fact that the one who carries it out is a person, a conscious and free subject." We need to acknowledge this value, in others and ourselves, if we're going to keep the desire for productivity from turning demonic. A quarterly profit goal isn't worth as much as the person who labors, at the cost of her health, to meet it. No reputation for customer satisfaction is worth as much as the person who fills orders and endures complaints. Your pride in a job well done, or your anxiety, or your ego: none of those is worth as much as your dignity as a person.

Merchant asks me to recall the way the monks leave their choir stalls at the end of every prayer office. Each one bows to the altar, then to his brother opposite him. They repeat this action seven times a day. As Merchant sees it, it's a way of saying, each monk to the other, "I am respecting your dignity and the presence of the Spirit in you." Compared with an economic culture that demands you labor constantly to prove your value, it might be the most radical thing the monks do. ■

Down & Out at Amazon

Who Should Write about the Working Poor?

Madeleine Davies

Among the discoveries James Bloodworth made, while working undercover in low-wage jobs in Britain for six months, was that working in an Amazon warehouse entailed walking ten miles a day. Eight hours into a ten-hour shift, and "oppressively tired," it became difficult for him to find things to daydream about. It was also tricky to know what his rights were, because he never received a copy of his zero-hours contract, but he knew that the two fifteen-minute paid breaks were mostly spent walking the length of the warehouse—about ten soccer fields long—and through security scanners designed to detect petty theft. "I wouldn't do that work," a local man told him, unapologetically. "I'd fall out with them over how they treat people."

In the middle of the longest stagnation of earnings in Britain since the 1860s, with a majority of the poor living in working households, Bloodworth's book ***Hired*** (Atlantic Books, $19.95, 288 pp.) has been hailed by commentators across the political divide. It has put flesh and bones on labor-market statistics, demanding that we look at the reality of the jobs underpinning high employment rates. It has also posed some awkward questions to consumers—What sort of working practices ensure that we receive our online order the next day?—and exposed some ugly attitudes. "A wretched and miserable job does not appall the middle classes so much as the behavior exhibited by a person who does such a job," writes Bloodworth, who found himself falling into bed with junk food, and craving cigarettes and alcohol.

His is not, he acknowledges, an original or pioneering way of reporting on working-class life. *Hired* joins a well-established tradition of left-wing journalists exploring the world of low-paid work, most famously *The Road to Wigan Pier*, George Orwell's account of life in industrial Lancashire in the 1930s. Since the turn of the century, other examples include *Hard Work* by the *Guardian* journalist Polly Toynbee and, in the United States, Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*.

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Reading these books, I was struck by how little some things have changed. What's new in the reaction to Bloodworth's contribution is the suggestion that maybe it wasn't his story to tell in the first place. "I will, of course, be denounced by some for writing this book at all," he writes, in his introduction. Burning alongside conversations about economic inequality is a debate about access, platforms, and social mobility. More than half of Britain's top journalists went to elite, private high schools (confusingly called public schools), and the methods writers adopt in attempts to get under the skin of poverty are increasingly subject to scrutiny. "If *The Road to Wigan Pier* had been written by a Wigan miner, and not an Etonian rebel, this is what might have been achieved," reads a review printed on the back of another recent book—***Poverty Safari*** (Pan Macmillan, $12.46, 240 pp.), Darren McGarvey's account of growing up in Glasgow.

Bloodworth's roots lie a long way from Eton. He left school with few qualifications and did the sort of work he documents in *Hired* well into his twenties. But he's happy to acknowledge that, for the purposes of the book, he was a tourist: if things got too bad he could "beat a hasty retreat to a more comfortable existence." His preemptive defense includes a questioning of where the demand for authenticity can lead ("quietism if treated as an absolute"). In the end, he argues, the sort of change that would free up working-class people to pick up the pen will require an alliance with the middle classes—the people likely to read his book.

It's striking that similar arguments do not appear in *Hired*'s antecedents. The authors of those books were quick to disavow claims to authenticity ("It was impossible for me to stimulate fear of any sense of insecurity," admits Toynbee), but they didn't anticipate a suspicious or even wrathful response from readers. In fact, the way in which they frame their endeavors tells us something important about the relationship between those who document poverty and those who live it. In 2002, Ehrenreich anticipated that a day was coming when low-paid workers would demand more, a day of anger and strikes. Sixteen years later, the percentage of American workers classified as working poor is even higher, and rage abounds. In the United Kingdom, the majority of

The Amazon warehouse fulfillment center in Swansea, South Wales

MATTHEW HORWOOD / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

people in poverty are in working families. If we did hand them the pen, what might they write? And would we like what they had to say?

If the phrase "poverty safari" suggests the observation of a different species, it is perhaps most fairly applied to Orwell's work. So far from ignoring the chasm that separates him from his subject, he draws the reader's attention to it, noting the impossibility of his doing the work of a coal-miner, while describing that work in slightly breathless prose. "It raises in you a momentary doubt about your own status as an 'intellectual' and a superior person generally," he writes. "All of us really owe the comparative decency of our lives to poor drudges underground, blackened to the eyes, with their throats full of coal dust, driving their shovels forward with arms and belly muscles of steel."

His trip to see the working class "at close quarters" was necessary, he explains, in order for him to clarify his thoughts on socialism. Yet real intimacy with the working-class families with whom he stayed was "impossible" precisely because of the class difference. He was alive to the "impertinence" of "poking into strangers' houses and asking to see the cracks in the bedroom wall." But nowhere did he see the need to defend his own authorship. There is not the slightest hint of the idea that his subjects might have been invited to describe their own lives.

Sixty-six years later, Polly Toynbee, a journalist at the *Guardian*, expressed contempt for Orwell in *Hard Work*, her own account of life on low pay. She had little time for his "self-loathing." Yet she shares with him a belief in the essential alienation of the middle class from working-poor life. The latter are "invisible" she declares; she will shine a light on them. Arriving back home after spending Lent working in low-paid jobs and living on a housing estate, she feels "nothing but sheer relief.... I am glad I know more than I did about life on the other side, but gladder still, more than I can say, that I was born on the lucky side of life."

While she writes of feeling "ashamed" of articles she has written about efforts to get the unemployed into work ("without realising the huge financial quagmire people had to cross"), and admits that she cannot explain the chasm between her own salary and that of a nurse, she also emphatically disavows any "fond notions that the life of the poor of the earth is in some way morally superior or closer to nature than that of the well-off." She concludes that, "If the low-paid had some secret answer to the getting of happiness, the well-off would have grabbed it long ago." It's striking that her prescriptions are heavily focused on Westminster, on a relationship mediated through the tax and social-security system.

Of all these authors, Barbara Ehrenreich comes closest to exploring what low-paid, precarious work does to the humanity of the consumer and employer, not just the worker. She notes, for example, that a cleaning business is designed to avoid "sticky and possibly guilt-ridden relationships," because the customers communicate with management rather than the cleaners themselves. She won't employ a cleaner herself, she explains, "because this is just not the kind of relationship I want to have with another human being." Her attempts to remain detached while scrubbing a floor, despite the suffering of her colleagues, are short-lived, overridden by empathy. "The only thing I'm squeamish about is human pain," she reflects. "I'm sorry, I tried to ignore it, but it undermines my efficiency when I have to work alongside people who are crying, fainting, starving, or otherwise visibly suffering." She concludes that "guilt doesn't go anywhere near far enough" as a response to what she's discovered: "The appropriate emotion is shame—shame at our own dependence, in this case, on the underpaid labor of others."

It's a theme that Bloodworth picks up on fifteen years later, as Britain begins to unwind its worker protections in pursuit of a "flexible" economy. "The fact that a growing number of British people are unwilling to be treated like animals by unscrupulous employers is often viewed as

shameful, when it really ought to be considered a sign of progress," he observes: "The conventional response is to disparage and ridicule the very idea of the English working class having any standards at all." Made to feel by his fellow workers as "a strange being from a distant and alien social class," Bloodworth holds the mirror up to the reader, who is also a consumer and a voter.

In television's clandestine adventures in the workplace—shows like *Undercover Boss*—the moment of reveal is the climax of the experiment. But Ehrenreich describes the reactions elicited by her own moments of reveal as "stunningly anticlimactic." Faced with the incredulity of friends who ask whether she can really expect to go unnoticed, she asserts that low-wage workers are "no less likely to be funny and bright" than those who write for a living: "Anyone in the educated classes who thinks otherwise ought to broaden their circle of friends." She also nicely skewers the idea that writing is a particularly exclusive profession. When her husband tells her uncle, a valet parker, that she's a writer, his reply is "Who isn't?" After an ill-tempered encounter with a colleague, Ehrenreich expresses disappointment that "the original Barb, the one who might have ended up working at Walmart for real if her father hadn't managed to climb out of the mines" is "meaner and slyer than I am, more cherishing of grudges, and not quite as smart as I'd hoped."

Why are low-paid workers still described as "hidden" and "invisible"? And does our connection to them exist only in transactional terms, mediated through the social-security system, or conversations conducted via agencies or helplines?

It is, it seems, easy enough for middle-class writers to be absorbed into the world of low-paid work. It's also easy for them to leave it behind, with relief. What of travel the other way? McGarvey, a poet who grew up in one of the most deprived parts of the United Kingdom with a violent, alcoholic mother, begins *Poverty Safari* with the observation that "people like me don't write books—or so my head keeps telling me." He goes on to introduce the reader to the currency in which he's had to trade, reflecting that "the only way anyone would listen to what I had to say was if I prefaced my opinion with personal testimony about my dead, alcoholic mother and what a difficult childhood I had." This, he realizes, is "the sort of window dressing that is required before the great and the good become willing to take lower class people seriously."

Last year, McGarvey won the Orwell Prize for Books, awarded to those who come closest to Orwell's ambition "to make political writing into an art." Reading *Poverty Safari*, I thought of Orwell asking to see the cracks in the bedroom wall, and his observation that "everyone was astonishingly patient and seemed to understand almost without explanation why I was questioning them and what I wanted to see." McGarvey shows us the cracks, and much more. We hear about alcoholism, drug abuse, and a violent, chaotic home. He's learned that this is what is demanded in exchange for a platform. He's also realized that some of the passengers on his safari will try to control the route.

"The testimony about my childhood was fine but they were less keen on the observations I started to make as my understanding of poverty, its causes and impacts, deepened," he recalls, of his early encounters with the press. "I was learning that even the harshest childhood experience wouldn't get you a free pass to cast a critical eye on the structures around you."

McGarvey asks us to question what it is we want when we demand authenticity. He's familiar with "the people who pay wonderful lip service to giving the working class a voice, but who start to look very nervous whenever we open our mouths to speak." *Poverty Safari*, like J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy*, says things about personal responsibility, and the left's engagement with it, that leave the author wondering whether he'll be condemned as a heretic.

I doubt whether he would be among the fiercest critics of the undercover genre. One of the most moving undercurrents of his book is his growing gentleness, his willingness to ask hard questions of himself, to believe the best of those he might once have dismissed, to confess as much as to condemn. But in offering us such a personal, intimate account of poverty, he also challenges us to consider why this is what we demand of authors with direct experience of it, what it might cost them, and what we will offer in return.

Orwell's writing, particularly his sharp observations about antagonism between the classes, made his own editor feel uncomfortable. Today, his comments on the "proletariat" are likely to cause the reader to cringe. But his observations about the possibility of encounter, of intimacy, remain compelling. Why are low-paid workers still described as "hidden" and "invisible"? And does our connection to them exist only in transactional terms, mediated through the social-security system, or conversations conducted via agencies or helplines?

When Toynbee, who described herself as "profoundly

anti-religious," turns to the Bible, it is to quote from the Gospel of Luke: "The worker is worthy of his hire." But Scripture has other things to say about our relationships with our neighbors, wisdom that goes beyond the exchange of labor for pay. At a tent revival in Maine, Ehrenreich rages against the preaching. She longs for "a rousing commentary on income inequality" and leaves "half expecting to find Jesus out there in the dark, gagged and tethered to a tent pole." In fact, churches and movements of faith have historically been at the forefront of campaigns to secure better pay and conditions for workers. In the United Kingdom, Clean for Good, a cleaning company started by a small church in the City of London, is challenging people to ask, "Who is my cleaner?"—and promising contracts that deliver a living wage, training, and paid leave.

Books in this genre serve an important purpose, introducing readers to working conditions that may shock them, and perhaps triggering empathy or even shame. They may also result in better policies. For the most part, Bloodworth's book has been well received, and it has even prompted some to change their consumer behaviors. In September, he teamed up with Bernie Sanders to produce a short film in which he drew on his testimony from the warehouse. Amazon has since announced wage increases for hundreds of thousands of workers in both the United Kingdom and the United States. If the architect of the British benefit system had known that low-paid workers tend to be paid weekly not monthly, and that very few can afford to wait a month for their first paycheck, there would be less terror surrounding current reforms of Britain's welfare system, exposed for its inhumanity in Ken Loach's award-winning 2016 film *I, Daniel Blake*.

Perhaps it's better to temporarily experience this world than to avoid it altogether. McGarvey himself has expressed regret for attacking a young artist who embarked upon a year-long "durational performance" to learn about life in Glasgow. She was, he concluded, "a decent, fragile human being who had acted with good intentions."

"My aim was never to get drawn into an ego-driven squabble over the 'authenticity' of my approach," writes Bloodworth. "I simply decided that going undercover would be the most effective way of learning about low-paid work, and I still believe that to be true." Unfortunately, he's probably right about that. The question McGarvey poses is not whether middle-class writers have the right to engage in what Ehrenreich celebrates as "old-fashioned journalism," but why the experience of low-paid workers is still mostly invisible to the kind of people who might buy and read books like the ones reviewed here. That this experience can be made visible to us only by means of undercover journalism is itself a sign of deep alienation. ■

Sacraments of Secular Consciousness

An Interview with Peter Cole

Anthony Domestico

I first met the poet and translator Peter Cole at an academic lunch. I was a grad student in English; he was a lecturer in Judaic Studies and Comparative Literature. We shared intellectual interests: I was in the midst of a dissertation on poetry and Christian theology, while he was working on a book of translations from the Jewish mystical tradition of Kabbalah. Cole is a fantastic talker, and the lunch was a delight. As sometimes happens, I knew that I'd love Cole's poetry even before I'd read it. Soon enough, I read it, and I did.

Cole's poems occupy the space of the in-between. They're deeply mystical and deeply physical, impressively learned and gorgeously musical, rooted in tradition and yet sounding unlike anything you've read before. He's one of the best religious poets writing in English, but he's also a lovely love poet (see "Valent(L)ines for A.") and, when he wants to be, a sharply political poet. As he puts it in "Open for Business," he's interested in "paradox riding its cause into song." Poetry is, for him, a way of residing and working within paradox. It's "the praxis perfecting opens into."

Of course, translation exists in the in-between, too. From the first section of Cole's "Notes on Bewilderment": "Translation aspires, clearly, beyond its words, / beyond what it renders, beyond even—if through—/ sense, yielding, or wielding, blunders and wonder, / erasing our notion of a sacred uniqueness— / the original—as incarnation of what it heard." Cole's poetic translations are models of scholarship and exquisite aesthetic creations in their own right. He translates Hebrew and Arabic with equal artistry. His 2007 anthology, The Dream of the Poem: Hebrew Poetry from Muslim and Christian Spain, 950–1492, *is as ambitious as the title indicates and just as accomplished. That book of Jewish mystical poetry he was working on when we first met came out in 2014; it will be the standard collection for a long time yet.*

In 2017, Farrar, Straus and Giroux published Hymns & Qualms: New and Selected Poems and Translations—*a perfect introduction to Cole's sensibility and craft. Last May, the book was issued in paperback. Cole and I spoke by email.*

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AD: Why the title *Hymns & Qualms*? It's borrowed from your 1998 collection of the same name, and I'm wondering how you see the relationship between hymn-making—"to bask in the blessing / of the Crown / and sound Glory, / to utter praises / and link letters"—and the airing or entertaining of qualms.

PC: The two words—*hymns* and *qualms*—are as close in sound as they are in experience: one seems always about to collapse or rise up into the other. Like lyric and cynic, giving and misgiving. The mystical hymn from Late Antiquity you quote doesn't just—as a hymn—represent half of a tonal whole, it embodies the whole itself: "To rise on high / and descend below /…. To see the vision / of the living, / and know the vision / of the dead." Which summons Blake: "Without contraries is no progression." That sort of tension between binaries interests me endlessly. They're two sides of an affective coin and currency: yes and no, faith and doubt, openness and closure, wonder and undercutting wit.

There's also a Jewish dimension at work here, a sort of alternating current that brings the poles of an apparent dualism into electric tension. That electricity is then put to use. Literary use, civic use, emotional use.

AD: This book, as the subtitle makes clear, moves between poems and translations. Late in the book you write that, where before you resisted Novalis's claim that "all poetry is translation," you find that "nothing now seems more vivid or truer." What brought about this change in attitude? Was it the practice of translating itself? The living of your life? You now seem to agree with Freud that, as you put it, translation "is health, not loss—not failure, but fuller life." How has translating given you fuller life—as a writer of poetry, as a reader of poetry, as a Jew?

PC: That's a little like asking someone about a religious conversion! How does faith develop? Over time? All at once and in a flash?.... There *were* flashes, but I didn't always understand what they were showing me. I was also trying to keep things "honest," and not confuse someone else's work and inspiration for mine. I'm glad I did that, but eventually

Peter Cole at the Kelly Writers House in Philadelphia.

life took over and I began to understand how it is that we are always translating one another and older or other literatures into our present. Which creates a future.

I can't quite account for what brought the change about. All I can say is that the evolution was gradual and magical—to take a phrase from one of Cynthia Ozick's essays. Living and listening led me to poetry and then to translation, and translation intensified and altered the way I lived and how I listened, and what I read and wrote, whom I spoke with, and how. Translation lures us into new prosodies and new poetics, which extend and strengthen and sometimes radically reshape the muscles and muscle memory through which writing emerges. That's the literary yoga of it, which returns us to the world and the word with a difference.

The question of translation and Jewishness takes it all to another level. The Jew has long been caricatured or stereotyped as a go-between. On a good civilizational day, that's as the useful translator or merchant or citizen of the world whose cultural freedom affords him a unique perspective on things; on the bad days, it's as usurer or abuser of debt, traitor, rootless cosmopolitan, or parasite and purveyor of slippery abstraction.

Not surprisingly, Judaism itself has something to say about all this betweenness, and that something is also often contradictory. In the Song of the Sea (Exodus 15), it's from that condition of being between—between land and sea, freedom and slavery—that Hebrew song arises and the ambiguous people(hood) of the Jews begins to take on form. Then there's the long history of commentary on Scripture and its offshoots as the most highly valued and meaningful form of religious activity—so that Jewishness itself is rooted in interpretation, or translation: a performance of the music of this being in the middle. A registration of it.

Translation in this scheme and others like it draws us into key qualities of a text; it "breaketh the shell, that we may eat the kernel…removeth the cover of the well, that we may come by the water," as the preface to the King James Bible has it. More tangentially, but no less important for me, is the role of translation in the Hebrew poetry written in Islamic Spain, where Arabic and biblical Hebrew combined to yield a classicizing avant-garde Jewish literature that gave and continues to give subtle and sophisticated voice to an eleventh-century contemporary Andalusian reality. That poetry—some of the greatest in all of Hebrew verse—emerges from a culture of translation.

But the Jewish dimension is just a part of it—unless "all poets are Jews," as the Russian poet Marina Tsvetaeva has it. In a more universal sense, that being between in language figures in all of these situations as a central human experience, one that comes to powerful expression in the poetry of translation.

AD: In "Open for Business," you urge us "Not to live in abstract deferment / but only to sound the lines we're in," suggesting that we "stay open for business / in this *isness*, no matter the mess / one stumbles into." How does writing poetry help you to say attuned to this *isness*, to the world we're in and the world we build? What about reading poetry?

PC: Becoming and staying open and alert in the face of time and routine, acceptance and rejection, success and failure, is everyone's challenge, and certainly the poet's. Poetry hones you—it demands your attention and then stretches it, sometimes painfully, sometimes wondrously. Writing poetry, certainly, and translating it (which is always first a reading and then a writing) asks you to attend to the sensual, conceptual, and dramatic dimensions of a text, all at once, intuitively and analytically.

KELLYWRITERSHOUSE

Entering into the simplicities and complexities of a poem—watching a student do that, or doing it in silence on one's own—these are fulcral moments of meaning for me. Call them the sacraments of secular consciousness or nondenominational understanding. Even Levitical rites in miniature, not exactly bloodless offerings of the heart and lips. Translation is simply a fuller verbal extension of those pivotal moments into a new life in another language. Or another's language.

AD: You have a beautiful line in this same poem about "paradox riding its cause into song." That's a perfect description of poetry—and of theology, too. In Kabbalah, God creates the world through language, and so distinguishing between poetic speech and theological speech becomes quite difficult. How do you think about the relationship between the two?

PC: Poetry emerges through sensing and making, theology through thinking. Poetry percolates through words, theology through ideas. There is most definitely a poetry at work in theological inquiry, and a sort of theology implicit in the making and sensing of poems. The two feed off one another, and I often find myself veering from one to the other. The danger is the easy access to big ideas that theology affords. Genuine poetry, no matter how minor the poem, takes shape from the ground of feeling upward through thought and speech, not downward from concepts.

AD: You dedicate one of your poems to the late poet and critic Allen Grossman, and many of your poems remind me of a passage from *The Sighted Singer*. There, Grossman writes about "the question of the purposiveness of poetry altogether. One answer to that question is to *find the real*, or to give an account of a mind engaged sincerely in its discovery. The other possibility...is that the purpose of poetry is to *supplement the real*, to disclose something not at hand which it is the business of the poetic speaker to supply." How would you answer Grossman's question of the purposiveness of poetry? Does it exist to find the real or to supplement it? To discover something or to supply it?

PC: The pitch of Grossman's thinking through poetry has drawn me pretty much from the moment I first encountered it when a friend gave me one of his books in 1980—its steepness and timbre, its absolute seriousness and its fearless raising of stakes. It's an antidote to the thinness and inanity of so much contemporary poetry. His earlier work is somewhat forgotten, or looked down on as derivative, but it was love at first hearing for me—"My house is older than my life, and therefore / a continual instruction," which is from *The Recluse*. And there are marvelous things in the signature poetry as well, like these lines from his last book, *Descartes' Loneliness:* "Song is extreme work. Help me, river sister!… / Start love's gift once more: —WORDS FOR ANOTHER." As to your question about his more theoretical writings and the purpose of poetry: it's both. I write and read *to find the real,* but in finding the real, the poetry I read and write in turn creates a reality of its own—it becomes part of the reality it discovers, and that ripples out into everything, moment by moment. For me, and, ideally, for readers.

It's a matter of how one understands "invention." Does invention imply "discovery" in the classical and etymological sense of *inventio* and *invenire*—"to come upon, find, find out"? Or does it suggest a Romantic creation out of nothing, and unique self-expression? Is poetry about the world (and the mind that constructs it), or about the demonstration of the singular self in the process of establishing its difference?

I'm interested in poetry that makes the world more interesting. Period.

AD: You and I have talked before about our shared love of the Anglo-Welsh poet David Jones. What is it about him that you admire so much? Is it the music of his verse? His deep sense of tradition—the deeply Catholic and deeply Jewish sense that, as you put it, "you most exist when you're driven / away, or on—by forms and forces greater than you are"? His vision of poetry as a kind of sacralizing, a "calling forth / and lifting," as you write?

PC: I admire the music of his mind, his celebration of language as a movement through that mind, apart from the image. And the focus in his calligraphy and poetry alike on the letters of the alphabet as a kind of icon beyond the image. I love his shameless, maverick embrace of the religious impulse as a valid subject for poetry, his sense of poetry's purpose—"to lift up valid signs"—and his obsession with "offering" and its analogue with the poet's mediating role. In other words, his ability to surprise and reawaken tradition. And, while we're at it, his calling the poet to "work within the limits of his love." That magnetic honesty, regardless of where it takes one. It's in every line of his prose and his poems alike—that desire, not to describe, but to re-present. In that way he resembles Grossman. Both continue to give me a kind of courage, or permission.

AD: In a recent poem, you describe your interest in "that which hovers here," in "the imperfect / tense and tension of what / in fact articulates the eternal." What contemporary poets express that imperfect tense and tension between that which hovers here and the eternal most powerfully for you?

PC: Christian Wiman, and Forrest Gander in a very different way, and in a previous generation but still contemporary, James Schuyler. Also of another generation but contemporary is Harold Schimmel, an American-born Hebrew poet I've translated. He's now in his eighties. While he writes a poetry that's far from mine, no one has taught me more about the art. It's a question of touch and pitch more than anything else, the lay of a line, the light it gives off and the sound it makes. This, for instance, is from a fairly recent book called *Straw*:

A second Turkish coffee Not exactly
consolation though it helps Sunday morning
it's hard after all to mark

the first month's just beginning properly

demons flitting through my dreams
instead of family coming one

by one all knew what I was yet to
know beside the table threats echoing

spring's in everything except for me
that spring within— not so easily

AD: *Commonweal* recently published a lovely poem by your Yale colleague, Danielle Chapman, which ends "in the Brutalist carpark as I round and brake, / round and brake down seven levels into New Haven." Like Danielle, you and I both live in New Haven. What has the city meant for you poetically? Are there particular places or elements of the city that speak to your imagination?

PC: I grew up in Paterson, New Jersey, and then an adjacent suburb, and went to college in Western Massachusetts. Most of my adult life I've spent in Jerusalem, apart from a post-college year in Providence and a few years in San Francisco in the late eighties, along with patches in New York City and teaching at various places in New England. I felt out of place in America pretty much from the moment we left Paterson, and most certainly whenever I came back to the states from Jerusalem. New Haven is the first American city or town I've lived in since my childhood where I've felt I could work, which is to say, live. The combination of grit and care, the coastal quality of its sky and the irregular call of gulls, the train lines and whistles, the signage, the complex history and deep walkability, and what that does to the hips and chest, and to the connective tissue of writing…the familiar trees and weathers (after years in the Middle East) and assorted flora, the stimulation of the degreed and soon-to-be-degreed fauna, in combination with the pace and scale. The urban marvel and Kabbalistic mandala that is Wooster Square, right outside our front door. It's quiet enough to focus, but highly alive on numerous levels.

There's a lot that it doesn't have, but when I get off the train at Union Station and take in the air along the tracks, I'm happy, at least for an instant. And that's an instinctive instant, which is to say, it's always at the edge of the poem. ■

Rand Richards Cooper

Getting Away with It

'SHOPLIFTERS'

The fifty-six-year-old Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-eda began his career in TV documentaries, and his movies possess a factual straightforwardness offset by qualities that are subtle, elliptical, and quietly poetic. Kore-eda is intensely character- and family-oriented, and his funny-sad dramas contain a lurking potential for sentimentality, which he wards off with pinpoint specificity, and a scrutiny of human fates and foibles that highlights sorrow, duplicity, and neglect.

His films evoke the great Yasujirō Ozu, who tenderly investigated intergenerational family life in quietly luminous 1950s works like *Late Spring* and *Tokyo Story*. Kore-eda's first non-documentary, *Maborosi* (1995), showed us a young widow, devastated by grief after the accidental death of her husband, and her unlikely path to recovery via an arranged marriage of convenience. *Nobody Knows* (2004) followed four young children abandoned by their mother and thrown on their own devices for survival. *I Wish* (2011) portrays two young brothers, separated in a divorce and living in distant cities, who dream obsessively of reuniting. In *Like Father, Like Son* (2013), a workaholic businessman and his wife discover that their newborn was accidentally switched with another infant in the maternity ward, and must decide what to do. And in *Our Little Sister* (2015), a trio of twenty-something sisters discover they have a fourteen-year-old half-sister, via their late father's infidelity, and decide to adopt her.

These summaries suggest the terrain Kore-eda has staked out: the complexities of family life and bonds, the particularities of a child's view of the world (both physical and moral), and the harsh nature of abandonment. These themes inform his current film, *Shoplifters*, winner of the Palme d'Or at Cannes. *Shoplifters* takes up the story of the Shibatas, a family headed by an older father named Osamu (Lily Franky), a cheerful scalawag whose specialty is pilfering. "Whatever's in a store doesn't belong to anyone yet," he tells his twelve-year-old son, Shota, and in the opening scene we watch father and son wander through a supermarket in a practiced routine, the boy slipping items into his backpack as the father blocks the view of an employee. The mood is one of family hijinks and wry complicit humor, a juvenile

pleasure in getting away with things. "How much does that cost?" Shota asks when his father mentions a household tool he wants to acquire. "About two thousand yen," Osamu says, then leans close with a wink. "If you *buy* it."

On the way home the two pass an apartment complex where a waif of a girl is wandering about, seemingly abandoned; in an act of impulsive generosity, they bring her home to feed her dinner. "We're not a foster home," Osamu's wife Nobuya says when they arrive. "Could you at least bring something home that would make money?" But the family's cantankerous grandmother, Hatsue, notices bruises and scars on the girl's arms, and when Osamu and Nobuya bring her back to the apartment an hour later, they overhear loud domestic strife and the sound of a woman being struck. Nobuya clings to the child protectively, refusing to let her go. Thus do the shoplifters end up snatching a human.

Shoplifters provides a look into Japan's underclass, struggling on the margins of society, shut out from the default comfort and security of middle-class life. Living off granny's pension of 60,000 yen a month (about $550), the Shibatas do what they have to do; everyone has a scam. An older daughter, Aki, works as a dirty dancer in a porn store. We see the grandmother stuffing items of clothing into a bag in a department-store dressing room, and later playing slot machines at a casino. The grown-ups toil at part-time jobs, Osamu as a day laborer in a construction crew, Nobuya in a huge drycleaners (finding a tie-clip in the pocket of a suit jacket, she pockets it with a conspiratorial grin at a coworker). There are funny dinner scenes in the family's crowded, cluttered flat, everyone loudly slurping noodles as they bicker over the brand of shampoo that Shota has pilfered from the corner store, or over the plight of the little girl, whom they are calling Lin. Eventually she becomes an apprentice in shoplifting, father and son teaching her the tricks of the trade.

Kore-eda is the kind of director who caresses the visual details, lingering on a close-up of the little girl's bare feet curling around the leg of a chair, or on Shota, clacking a stick along the balusters of a railing. He captures the games children play, hiding behind trees, collecting bugs, gauging cloud shapes in the sky, as well as the ways that adults can be childlike—Osamu blowing air into a plastic shopping bag and playing soccer with it, or Nobuya drinking soda with Shota and belching with gusto, the two dissolving into laughter. The film invites us to take pleasure in the innocuous dailiness of family life and

its rituals, like a child throwing a lost tooth up onto the roof with a wish, or seeing the universe in a small blue marble held up to a flashlight. One lovely nighttime scene is shot from above an abandoned lot where Shota is telling his father a story about a school of fish that gang up on a big tuna. The two play a game of catch-me, as Osamu—wearing a walking cast after a workplace injury—lurches about, laughing and trying in vain to catch his son, shouting, "I'm going to eat you all up!" The family struggles, but there's plenty of tenderness amid the travail.

The plot, such as it is, centers on the fate of the little girl, and on the looming question: Will a price have to be paid? And if so, by whom? An undercurrent of worry deepens gradually, then suddenly, as the film reveals darker secrets at the core of the Shibata family's story. These disclosures are carefully calibrated; we spend the first two-thirds of the film seeing the family from the inside, and only later, when things unravel, do we get the world's official account. Kore-eda engineers a subtle play of perspectives and narratives, keeping us within the bounds of this enclosed and secretive family, letting us share its rationalizations and self-deceptions—and kindnesses—so that, in a kind of cinematic Stockholm syndrome, we become part of its worldview. We take in the family's raucous ad hoc happiness and sympathize deeply.

That process sets us up perfectly for the hard denouement, a series of revelations and confessions that alters the film's tilt and tone, replacing merriment with gravity. Along the way, the aftermath of exposure, with its severe reckonings and shamings, reminds us just how skilled, sensitive, and finely detailed are the portrayals offered by the film's two lead adult actors. Lily Franky—a veteran of many Kore-eda films—plays Osamu with an utterly convincing air of merry, roguish selfishness. And as Nobuya, Sakura Ando proves nothing short of astonishing. The arc of her character's undoing is designed to produce maximal catharsis, and it does. The film is a bit of a weepie, but the tears it provokes are well earned.

Shoplifters is not the first time Kore-eda (who also scripted and edited) has explored a Dickensian vision of street urchins and of a family as foragers, doing what they must in order to perdure. The film showcases his deftness at eliciting empathy, creating areas of softness and warmth within a hard and cold world. Scenes of the Shibatas shivering in their underheated apartment in winter, or drenched in sweat in summer, remind us how large weather looms in the lives of people on the margins. Yet such privations do not prevent them from taking pleasure in the same weather, at one point pausing to appreciate the marvel of a sudden thunderstorm on a hot summer day.

There is no explicit religious quality to Kore-eda's vision, but forgiveness, kindness, wonder, and gratitude form its core. On a family outing to the beach, the frail old grandmother, sitting in a chair, ruefully covers the age spots on her legs with sand, while mumbling to herself about her decrepitude; looking down to where her children and grandchildren are playing in the water, she mouths a silent "Thank you." As for the family itself, despite its spectacular flaws, when all the duplicities have been sheared off, what remains is the nourishing and redemptive reality of love. In one touching scene, Nobuya and the little girl compare scars: hers, from a hot iron at work; the girl's, from her abusive parents. Gingerly they touch each other's wounds. "We're the same," Nobuya says quietly. A bit later, she continues: "If they told you they hit you because they loved you, that is a lie. If they really love you, this is what they do." She holds the child tight, hugging her, and swaying a little. "This is what they do."

There is a quiet boldness to the way Hirokazu Kore-eda works in this film. Wielding his trademark tools of pathos and whimsy, he pretty much announces he's out to steal your heart—then tiptoes in and does it anyway. You have to admire a director who can pull off such a brazen heist. ■

J. Matthew Ashley

To Change the World

The World Come of Age
An Intellectual History of Liberation Theology
Lilian Calles Barger
Oxford University Press, $34.95, 392 pp.

Murals of Salvador Allende, Óscar Romero, and Camilo Torres in Panama City

Teaching a class of undergraduates at the University of Notre Dame some years ago, Gustavo Gutiérrez was asked about liberation theology and violence. He paused a few moments and then told a story about his friendship with Camilo Torres, a Columbian priest and sociologist. During their studies in Louvain in the late 1950s, he recalled, they argued frequently, often late into the night, about whether violence was an acceptable—or even necessary—Christian response to the death-dealing poverty and dehumanizing injustice that the majority of Latin America's people endured. Ultimately, Torres left his academic position and the priesthood to take up arms in Columbia. He was killed in 1966 in his first military engagement. Gutiérrez went on to write one of the seminal works in liberation theology: *The Theology of Liberation*. Commenting on this episode in his life, Gutiérrez remarked: "I wanted to write a theology because I was convinced that proclaiming the Gospel could be a powerful response to poverty and injustice." For him, at least, liberation theology was born out of a passionate desire to share the joy of the Gospel at the margins, as Pope Francis would say.

During the same period that Gutiérrez and others were developing liberation theology in Latin America, intellectuals and activists in this country were turning to the experiences of African Americans and women with similar questions and the same determination. It is no coincidence that these three movements arose at roughly the same time. Yet, one did not give rise to the others; and while they all drew on intellectual currents in Europe, their similarities cannot be explained simply by linking them to a shared intellectual origin on the other side of the Atlantic. To write "an intellectual history of liberation theology," one must do justice to the originality and the distinctiveness of each of these different branches while recognizing their common themes and sources. Lilian Calles Barger's sprawling but rewarding *The World Come of Age* strikes this balance well.

Calles Barger argues that those common themes and sources come from the social sciences, particularly those critical social and political theories that trace back to Kant, Hegel, and Marx. Later figures such as Max Weber, Karl Mannheim, and Herbert Marcuse figure large in her story. Liberation theologians drew on them to respond theologically to Marx's famous claim that "philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it." Prior to the innovations of the "liberationists," Calles Barger believes that theology had been mostly an impediment to this task. She contends that during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the Christian churches, along with the theologians who served them, accepted a "Great Separation" between religion and politics. Religion came to be seen as a private matter that oriented one toward a transcendent fulfillment outside of history. Politics was left to "this-worldly" politicians and intellectuals whose theories and policies were based on values that could be fully defined without reference to God, an afterlife, or anything else that transcends this world. For these politicians and intellectuals, religion was, at best, a temporarily necessary "opium of the people," easing the pain of suffering. It should be—and *will* be, in the great march of history—left behind as people find more effective political responses to human needs and aspirations.

The first protests against this "theopolitical truce" came in the middle of the twentieth century. Dietrich Bonhoeffer (who gives this book its title) asserted that "in a world come of age" Christian theology can and should convey the truth and value of the Gospel to the political realm by taking up a perspective that sees the world *etsi deus non daretur*: as if God did not exist. In the 1960s, "death of God" theologies

HANOHIKIRF / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

and works such as Harvey Cox's famous celebration of secularization in *The Secular City* gave liberationists a way to talk about what Calles Barger calls "the full secularization of religion." They also learned from radical social, cultural, and political theories that took account of the underside of modern history in a way Cox, at least, had not. Finally, the liberationists were inspired by radical popular and social movements—the Cuban Revolution, for example, as well as the Black Power and women's-rights movements here in the United States.

Within this common framework, Calles Barger gives an effective account of the differences between Latin-American, black, and feminist liberation theology. She traces genealogies for liberation theology in Latin America that include the Indian leader José Gabriel Túpac Amaru II, who led an indigenous rebellion in eighteenth-century Peru, and José Carlos Mariátegui, who argued two centuries later for a version of Marxism open to the positive role of religion. For black theology, household names such as Frederick Douglass, W.E.B. DuBois, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X are joined by less familiar figures such as Reverdy C. Ransom, who created a distinctively black version of the Social Gospel movement. Similarly, famous feminist thinkers such as Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Daly, and Rosemary Radford Ruether are joined by others such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, whose book *His Religion and Hers* (1923) represented a "nascent feminist theology" combining a radical social theory and a new "female-centered ethic of a God within."

While one can find more thorough histories of each of these three movements, what's distinctive about this book is the way it relates them to one another. Calles Barger provides fascinating vignettes of unexpected connections, such as the friendship between Reverdy Ransom and Jane Addams, or Bonhoeffer's brief sojourn in New York in the early 1930s, during which he encountered the Harlem Renaissance and came to better understand the evils of racism. She also recounts heated debates among different kinds of liberationists in the seventies and eighties, during the course of which it became clear that the texture of oppression based on economic class, for example, was different from that of oppression based on race or gender. One needed different modes of analysis to address these different species of injustice, so the theology that resulted would necessarily be different as well.

Calles Barger's narrative has much to recommend it, but like all sweeping narratives, it achieves coherence by excluding some figures and movements that don't fit the story. In Latin American liberation theology, she focuses most on Juan Luis Segundo, who best exemplifies her definition of a liberation theologian as someone who embraces the full secularization of religious faith. She includes Gutiérrez, but her reading of his work overlooks his early insistence that authentic liberation requires a contemplative openness to a God who has a will for history, but also transcends it. Completely absent is the Argentinian Theology of the People, an important form of liberation theology that influenced Pope Francis. Also missing from her story of liberation theology in the United States is Latino/a Theology, exemplified in figures such as Virgilio Elizondo, Orlando Espín, and Ada María Isasi-Díaz.

These exclusions begin to make sense in light of the criteria Calles Barger uses to determine who is a liberationist and who is not. For her, a liberationist is someone who questions the separation of religion from politics, shows a preference for radical political and economic revolution over reform, and advocates "the full embrace of secularity." If all three are required in order to count as a liberation theologian, then she is no doubt correct to note that Óscar Romero did not consider himself a liberationist. But if the identifying feature of liberation theology is its preferential option for the poor, then excluding Romero makes no sense. Nor is there any mention of the two Salvadoran Jesuit liberationists, Jon Sobrino and Ignacio Ellacuría, both of whom insisted that Romero was "always ahead of us."

The most problematic of these three criteria is Calles Barger's claim that liberation theology seeks the "secularization" of religion. She equivocates on exactly what this entails. At times she seems to mean that traces of transcendence—that is, God's holiness and desire for human fulfillment—are to be found by working within history for a better world. This seems just right. It is what Ellacuría called "being a contemplative in action for justice." At other times, though, Calles Barger slides toward the position that liberationists aim for "a theology free of otherworldly transcendence." This goes too far. It would exclude those theologies—such as the Theology of the People and U.S. Latino/a theology—that insist on the liberating power of prayer or of popular religious devotions, even if these do not translate directly into political action or lead immediately to changes in social structures. It would also exclude Romero and others who saw no contradiction between embracing political activism for the sake of others and a joy that points beyond history. Ironically, Calles Barger often ends up agreeing with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's 1984 "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation.'" As both the CDF and Calles Barger define liberation theology, it advocates a complete reduction of faith to the political. Of course, the CDF condemns this reduction, while Calles Barger endorses it. But both end up misreading or simply excluding the attempts that liberation theology makes to reconcile a radical commitment to justice and human flourishing within history, on the one hand, with hope in a final fulfillment beyond history, on the other. The best liberation theology has refused to concede that the more we have of the one the less we can have of the other. And this is what Calles Barger misses in her otherwise engaging account. ■

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Mike St. Thomas

Surviving Survivalism

Educated
A Memoir
Tara Westover
Random House, $28, 352 pp.

In Book 9 of Homer's *Odyssey* we meet the Cyclopes, the race of one-eyed giants who live apart from each other in isolated mountain caves. As Richmond Lattimore's translation has it, "Each one is the law for his own wives and children, and cares nothing about the others." Odysseus exploits this weakness in his well-known escape from the giant's lair. "Nobody is my name," the epic hero tells the giant, and after Odysseus blinds him, the Cyclops calls out to his brothers for help: "Nobody is killing me by force or treachery." Lacking a common bond, the other Cyclopes are easily tricked, and no one comes to his aid.

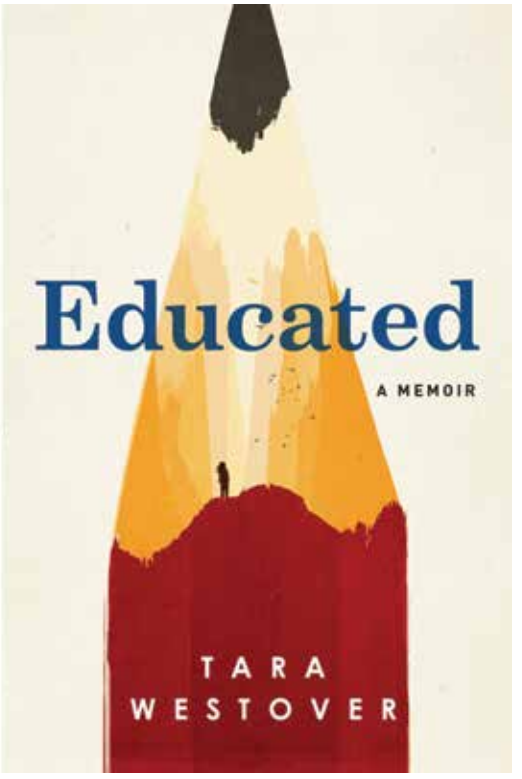
The real "nobody," it turns out, is not Odysseus but the Cyclops himself. For how can he have an identity without a community?

In *Educated: A Memoir*, Tara Westover recounts her own kind of Cyclopean upbringing in rural Idaho in the 1990s. "Feral" might be a better word for it. She and her six older siblings were raised on the side of Buck's Peak by a fundamentalist Mormon family of survivalists. Ruby Ridge was a rallying cry for her bipolar father, who stockpiled weapons and fuel in anticipation of the government's eventual collapse. The family sustained itself by selling herbal remedies and working in their own junkyard, and much of the book is a litany of the wounds the author and her siblings received there from flying exhaust pipes and exploding gas tanks. Though more than a few injuries were life-threatening, none received treatment from doctors or hospitals—herbal tinctures and salves were all her father allowed. Westover's father kept his children out of school, and several of them, including the author, did not receive birth certificates. As far as the outside world was concerned, Tara Westover was a nobody.

How, then, did she become a someone? In telling the story of her improbable journey from Buck's Peak to Cambridge, where she received a PhD, Westover searches for an answer.

The Westover children clearly have limited options for their future. Their work in the family business occupies most of their time, and homeschooling consists of periodically leafing through encyclopedias and grade-school science textbooks. Yet the outside world still makes its way into the family home. Lying on the floor at her older brother's feet, listening to his CD of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, the young Tara Westover's education begins:

> The hymn was familiar to me—we'd sung it at church, a chorus of mismatched voices raised in worship—but this was different. It was worshipful, but it was also something else, something to do with study, discipline, and collaboration. Something I didn't yet understand.



The allure of the world outside begins to work on Westover in fits and starts. She babysits for other families in town, and takes dance classes and voice lessons. In her teenage years she studies math on her own and scores high enough on the ACT to enroll at BYU against her father's wishes. Culture shock ensues. Her mainstream-Mormon classmates drink caffeine, wear form-fitting clothing, and shop on the Sabbath. In one class she is astounded to learn that the Emancipation Proclamation did not set all things right among the races in America. Another class goes stone-silent when she asks what the word

Holocaust means. She had never heard it before.

Despite the steep learning curve, Westover proves herself to be naturally gifted and intensely curious. Her professors notice, and encourage her to pursue an intellectual career. She travels to Cambridge on a Gates Scholarship and stays there to earn a PhD in history, completing a dissertation, appropriately, that examines Mormonism through the lens of social science.

The book-blurb version of *Educated* ends here, a *Hillbilly Elegy*-meets-*Pygmalion* tale of an improbable intellectual coming-of-age. However, Westover digs deeper in this memoir. She wants to tell the story of her soul, not her accomplishments, and she writes surprisingly little of her life at Cambridge. Instead, like a tongue probing a sore tooth, her narrative returns to Buck's Peak, where her identity still lies. How can she break from her family without losing herself?

The answer does not come easily. Throughout her teens and into her graduate-school years, Westover suffers tremendous physical and psychological abuse at the hands of her older brother Shawn. He rages violently, and when Tara starts to wear makeup and date, she bears the brunt of his manic outbursts, which often leave her with broken bones and bruises. Westover's encounter, in college, with early feminist thinkers like John Stuart Mill and Mary Wollstonecraft, gives her a language to understand this experience. When she brings the abuse to her father's attention, however, he refuses to acknowledge it, and eventually, the entire family, except for one brother, turns on her. Isolated and on the verge of psychological collapse while on a fellowship at Harvard, Westover begins to doubt her own memory—perhaps she imagined the abuse?

If we are made to mistrust our memories, how do we know who we are? Westover's entire memoir wrestles with this question. In doing so, she follows the lead of the West's first autobiographer, St. Augustine. In Book 10 of the *Confessions,* he ties memory to identity and, specifically, to language:

> [W]hen a true account is given of past events, what is brought forth from the memory is not the events themselves, which have passed away, but words formed from images of those events which as they happened and went on their way left some kind of traces in the mind.

It is fitting, then, that writing in her journal saves Tara Westover. After one particularly humiliating incident that involves Shawn dragging her through a parking lot, she decides, for the first time, to record the abuse in her journal—not just in the "vague, shadowy language" she usually uses to conceal the abuse from herself, but in terms of what actually happened. This action, she later writes, "would change everything."

Even when it occurs in a private journal, writing is a communal activity, for the simple reason that language itself is. Putting her private experience into language enables Westover's subjectivity to become objectivity; she cannot erase its meaning, no matter how much she would like to. Writing the truth helps her realize that her "voice might be as strong" as the other ones that had narrated her life to that point.

Honesty defines Westover's voice, and redeems her book from occasional lapses into cliché. When she recounts scrawling verses of Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" into her notebook for inspiration, readers are tempted to roll their eyes (attending a college party or two has a way of removing any illusions of Marley as a prophet). But to Westover, for whom the singer is an unknown until that point, "Emancipate yourself from mental slavery" is as fresh and charged with meaning as any line from Locke, Hume, or Rousseau. And though she has every reason to turn her family into villains, she tempers their faults with genuine affection, even for Shawn, whose violent paroxysms were often followed by moments of poignant tenderness.

For the ancient Greeks, education implied much more than our modern conception of "receiving information" or "gaining experience." It meant entering into the patterns of the larger community, so that one becomes an individual only by learning from others and from the past. The Greeks called this process *paideia*, and it is precisely this concept that Homer's Cyclopes lacked. Their caves may have granted them autonomy, but they were not individuals, because they lacked culture and community.

Educated is Tara Westover's account of becoming an individual through *paideia*. She ventures out into the world to discover her identity, and finds it only by making herself vulnerable to the truth, no matter where it lies or how painful it is. Her memoir provides a captivating account of her gradual discovery of an essentially Catholic truth—that we exist in relation to others and to the world around us. ■

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Two Poems by David Dragone

KIND OF HARVEST

Take every yesterday wanting to forget itself in daylight—
Sun-slants prying through the heedless, trying clouds
The way morning stars rise as if nothing happened
To the sea last night
When you stood there, shore-bound
Drowned out by soundless yells
Falling on stone ears—the rain piled up
In your eyes, waiting.

See this dawn, shed yesterday
The way snakes shake out of their skin
Growing into believing they're new
Like how every tree breaks the baring of itself
Each long winter waiting for tints that hint at renewal
Or how rain stands its overflow of repetition
Rehashing the sky with every moon
That never changes its changing ways.

Inhale this air, deeply inspired—
Hold it in your lungs as long as it takes
To feel how desire grows
Until it can't be kept inside you
Much as every winter tree
Almost freezes from foot to branch-tip
Waiting for winter to thaw its grip
Until green exhales.

Coven this ground, soiled in its harvest
Plowing dirt that furrows every farmer's forehead
Brow-beaten from a lack of promise
Budding with uncertainty.
Plant these stars to crop the dark
The same way clouds seed themselves
Without covenant over barren lands
Breathless for another chance.

GRIEVING

Sometimes, the grieving heart
Turns away from what could heal it.
You wait out the long winter
Opposing spring's green faith
The way every sun-starved vine in the world
Turns beclouded by shadows
Bittering wine.

And much as the rain recycles itself
Clings to falling
You look up—feel the wind's undertow
Shaping clouds, stripping midnight trees
Tipsy stars swimming in the dark
And the sea pounding away
Squalling in its cradle of ribs.

The sky is torn apart
Thundering at its broken places, the clipped moon
Waiting to ripen, still
Rippling surefire over everything
Needing to be filled
Eye-catching anyone who needs
Holding on till sunrise spills its simple voice:

Pain hurts.
Rain is a bandage.

David Dragone's poems have appeared in the Bryant Literary Review, California Quarterly, Common Ground Review, Connecticut River Review, The Providence Journal, *and elsewhere. His first volume of poetry,* Temperaments, *was published in 2015.*

Where to Start?

Br. Joseph Michael Fino, CFR

If I stand at Melrose and one-five-six, my back to the big blocked letters of Key Food, my face facing Mama Jo's community garden and P.S. 29, crouching like a wounded dog (dark and low, silent for the night), I see Jackson Housing, towering seven buildings deep. Its electric lights usurp the stars on this and every other night. If I stand at Melrose and one-five-six, the projects, a wave of brick and mortar, crest over the South Bronx. A Number 6 bus passes as a harsh fluorescent rectangle. Then the Number 41, windows opaque with breath, and I see the face of a man: a dark-skinned profile, angularly lined. An underbite. No hook to the nose. No hat on his head. No crease in his narrow neck. He doesn't move. The heat of his breath just crawls over the window, and, mixing with the others, blots each passenger out. Consider: within each of those square project windows is, at least, one such face, one such pair of lungs, one such heart—at least—pumping out a living rhythm under all this manufactured urban noise. And I wish Christ had more hands than mine, more feet and words than mine, because all of me is standing backed to a grocery store feeling as small and as fleeting as the vapor of my breath is small and (look!) how fleeting in the cold night air before the swell of humanity confronting me.

And you tell me—you, happy-eyed and blind, tell me—that yes, Christ does have more. Look at all the great programs buttressing the church. You point me toward twenty-something college-campus missionaries, seminarians with peach-fuzzed faces, internet bloggers, vloggers, traces of parish-renewal programs. Go to Manhattan and see hundreds of adults adore Christ on the Upper East Side! Go to the national youth conferences! Enroll in apologetic programs! This is the time of the laity. The New Evangelization and the New Apologetics is all over the new media. Look around! There is so much happening, you say.

A bus passes. Another, in the other direction, passes. And on those buses I see none of those people you spoke of. I see none of them in those windows. And I don't feel encouraged.

On another corner, in Manhattan this time, at a mid-day hour—projects, again, the backdrop. From a Town & Country stalled in the right lane by a red light, I watch a man holding his jeans at mid-thigh walk his daughter across the street. Her left hand holds his right hand, shades lighter. In her right hand is an orange drink from McDonald's. His tattoos—intricately inked—climb from a white ribbed tank top up his neck, vanishing into the broad shadow of his backwards flat bill. After making sure she lifts her little foot onto the curbs, under the overpass of the Willis Avenue Bridge, he raises her into his arms and spins. She squeaks like a chipmunk. As they twirl, so swirls around them a sleek, perfect stream of orange drink. Liquid spilling from the plastic straw spirals in wide loops around her little body, falling past his lean shoulders and sagging pants, splashing against the sidewalks. He just keeps spinning. New York City has given me few moments as lovely as this. The light changes green and we speed over the Third Avenue Bridge to evangelize—like everyone else—the other classes.

I stand in the Bronx with my back to Key Food, pointing at one thumbnail window of Jackson Housing, ten from the top and three to the left. I say: Okay, Lord. How, for example, do you intend to make your home in that room, or in that one, or that one? I point to more lit rooms. Or those across the courts, where the eight towers of Melrose Housing rise fourteen stories? Or a block west, where the buttressed, brutalist Air Rights straddles the MetroNorth tracks, a row of pale slabs populating other schools that I cannot see? Again, a bus pushes toward Webster. Fogged up flanks. Inside I watch a woman take a child onto her lap and smear a swath of window for him to see out. I turn my eyes back to that first room. Let's start there, Lord. How do you get in? Who takes you there? How does your body make its home inside that room? ■

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