A Review of Religion, Politics & Culture

# Commonweal

NOVEMBER 13, 2015

## THE BEGINNING OF THE END

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Mexico's Crackdown on Migrants

Thomas Buffer:
Vatican II and Communion for the Remarried

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# LETTERS

## *Labor's losses, 'parvity,' hands off the ointment*

**THE WAGES OF WALKER**

The editors appear to overlook their own evidence in their essay on "Walker, Work & Dignity" (October 9, 2015). After describing an American economy that has increased net productivity 64 percent since 1980 while real wages have stagnated, they draw a conclusion based on a 1984 study that "productivity and the dignity of workers can and often do go hand in hand." What they could have said was that the past thirty years have broken the connection between dignity (represented by wages) and productivity: it now appears that workers can be squeezed indefinitely to produce more and more for less and less. To return to the editors' larger point, this is the "Walker Revolution" and the new normal. If we want to argue for stronger labor unions, it will not be on the basis of economic growth as represented by the GDP.

FRANK SCHWEIGERT
*Saint Paul, Minn.*

**REFLEXIVE RESPONSE**

It was heartening to see you remembered "Ronald Reagan's decision in 1981 to fire eleven thousand employees in the air-traffic controllers union" in your editorial, "Walker, Work & Dignity." It's one of the high points or low points in his presidency, depending on where you stand.

I was living and working in Philadelphia at the time. Bicycling home from work, I stopped to cross the street in front of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. There was a cop there to direct traffic, and I mentioned it to him. His remark that you don't fool with Reagan sounded almost praiseworthy or respectful, certainly not sympathetic to the workers.

This was a big blow to the unions. Whenever I hear Reagan compared to FDR, I vomit.

JERRY McCARTHY
*Yonkers, N.Y.*

**NOT THAT LITTLE RED BOOK**

Donald Cozzens's take on "under pain of mortal sin" ("Sins, Mortal & Otherwise," October 9) brought me back instantly to a little red book titled "Safeguards of Chastity" that I found under my pillow as an eighth-grader, circa 1966.

Subtitled "A Frank, Yet Reverent Instruction on the Intimate Matters of Personal Life for Young Men," it was written by the Rev. Fulgence Meyer, a Franciscan missionary, and published in 1929 in Cincinnati.

After looking at the first few pages, I was so horrified, I threw it in a drawer. Roughly a half-century later, I still have it. I'm not sure I can explain why.

After thumbing through it again a few days ago, after years as a seminarian and decades as a husband and father, I'm grateful that most of the bats have left my belfry. OK—there are a few stragglers.

Thanks, Fr. Cozzens, for reminding us of how much we have grown.

BOB McCABE
*Chesapeake, Va.*

**DOCTRINE & DISCERNMENT**

Donald Cozzens's article "Sins, Mortal & Otherwise" hits the nail on the head as to why the hierarchy and clergy have lost

The next issue of Commonweal will be dated December 4.

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# Commonweal

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credibility as moral guides for the average Catholic Christian. The central issue has to do with the moral principle of proportionality as regards the consequences of particular sins. As the article indicates, it doesn't appear logical that eating meat on Friday or missing Sunday Mass should be made equivalent to murder and adultery, all of these acts being considered "grave matter" and qualifying as mortals sins for those who commit them.

The other major issue has to do with there being no "parvity of matter" as regards sexual sins, meaning that official church teaching, for all practical purposes, has no category of venial sin in the sexual area. Every thought, word, or deed of a sexual nature "outside of marriage" is grave matter and therefore mortally sinful.

Once again the issue of proportionality emerges. Does a teenager masturbating commit as serious a sin as a bishop who transfers a known pedophile to a parish without warning the pastor, or even worse, giving the pedophile priest a positive recommendation? Common sense would recognize that the latter offense is exceedingly more serious than the former.

Most discriminating Catholics are not willing to accept a doctrinal system that does not allow for degrees of sinfulness in the sexual area as it does for all other violations of the Decalogue. Also, there is the acknowledgment that the traditional "act-centered" morality makes no use of modern scientific approaches to sexuality that recognize developmental processes in humans achieving sexual maturity. These moral issues will remain continual points of division between the clergy and laity unless there is mature dialogue about them within the church.

THOMAS SEVERIN
*Connellsville, Penn.*

**BACK TO THE SOURCE**

Donald Cozzens has written a decent essay on a quaint theme: mortal sin. I think the concept needs a good critical look and perhaps he has begun one, but I have some reservations about his article.

First there is no "poverty of matter." He meant or should have meant "parvity of matter." "Parvity" comes from *parvitas,* or smallness.

Second, I wish he had distinguished what he remembers being taught with what he should have been taught or should have learned. Surely good theologians in the 1940s and 1950s knew the difference between sin and temptation, but Cozzens's memory has blurred this distinction.

Third, there seems to me a great difference between the church interpreting the Ten Commandments of the Decalogue, the church teaching the "natural law," and the church creating its own laws like fasting and Mass attendance.

Renewal means that we have to look at our teachings in the light of the Gospel and our most sober and serious assessment of what the Gospel says about God's law, natural law, and church law. We should not start putting all these things on the same level.

PAUL A. HOTTINGER
*Naperville, Ill.*

**NO JUDGMENT**

I enjoyed the recent article by Donald Cozzens discussing various aspects of the concept of mortal sin. I don't think many practicing American Catholics deny the idea of mortal sin or hell, but many seem to live their lives without fear of committing a mortal sin or being sent to hell at judgment after death. Some believe that it is very difficult to commit a sin whose gravity rises to the level deserving of eternal punishment. The idea of the proportionality of offense and a just penalty may be involved here. Others believe that they live a morally good life and try to follow the teachings of Christ. The issue is whether they are ever by commission or omission guilty of a very serious sin. My observation in my Catholic world is that at Sunday Mass virtually everybody goes to Communion every Sunday. It is also a fact that many have not gone to confession in years. Our parish of two thousand families offers confession to parishioners for thirty minutes a week. Mostly older people receive the sacrament. My question is whether there is a problem of lax

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*From the Editors*

# Walking Together

No knowledgeable observer expected the Synod on the Family to alter church teaching on the indissolubility of marriage or homosexuality. The synod's final report, a consensus document replete with the requisite ambiguities, opens a path for divorced and remarried Catholics who have not received an annulment to be welcomed back into the church. Whether they may receive Communion, the synod suggested, is a decision that in certain circumstances could be made in consultation with their pastors. Sacramental marriage is not possible for homosexual people, the bishops reiterated, but they too have a secure place in the Catholic family. On these hot-button issues, the synod affirmed traditional Catholic doctrine but avoided condemning those whose lives do not conform to church teaching. Engagement rather than denunciation marked the synod's formal pronouncements, a pastoral style deeply rooted in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, and profoundly embodied in everything Pope Francis does.

In taking up the synod's recommendations, Francis is expected to issue an apostolic exhortation, or perhaps even an encyclical, setting forth the church's pastoral response to the challenges facing the family today. Of course, he is free to change church discipline or practice, as he recently did in streamlining annulment procedures. Yet given his commitment to consultation and episcopal collegiality, one would expect Francis to make changes only when a strong consensus among the bishops can be achieved. That will take time. As Francis has often noted, the necessary foundations must be put in place if change is to be received as an authentic development in church teaching.

In that regard, the real achievement of the synod has been the reinvigoration of the synodal process itself, one in which bishops feel free to speak their minds, to disagree with one another, and even to explore the possibility that reform is essential to the church's evangelical mission. In his address at the conclusion of the synod, Francis was both blunt and celebratory. The synod, he said, was about opening "closed hearts" and dispensing with the "superiority and superficiality" with which some approach "difficult cases and wounded families." He dismissed "conspiracy theories" about the synod, and implored bishops to move beyond formulas "encrusted in a language which is archaic or simply incomprehensible." In defending the family against "ideological and individualist assaults," he emphasized that the church's "first duty is not to hand down condemnations or anathemas, but to proclaim God's mercy, to call to conversion, and to lead all men and women to salvation in the Lord." Catholics must guard against the self-righteousness of the prodigal son's jealous elder brother.

Francis's critics complain that he has a weakness for ad hoc solutions and off-the-cuff remarks that sow "confusion." Some prelates openly questioned the synod's procedures and aims, warning that it would only exacerbate divisions within the church rather than confirm people in their faith. Progressives, it is speculated, will be disappointed and thereby disillusioned by a seeming lack of action. Conservatives, already deeply suspicious of this pope, will be further alienated in light of Francis's insistence that the church cannot bury its head in the sand when dealing with changes in family formation and sexuality more broadly.

In ceremonies commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the synod process, Francis laid out a vision for the fulfillment of the promises of the Second Vatican Council that was anything but ad hoc or confusing. The Synod of Bishops, he noted, "was meant to keep alive the image of the Ecumenical Council and to reflect the conciliar spirit and method." This effort at collegial governance "is one of the most precious legacies" of the council. "Synod" literally means walking together, the pope pointed out, and that process of discernment includes all the baptized. The laity are not just recipients of church teaching, but have an active role in safeguarding the faith. It is the faith of the whole people of God, the *sensus fidelium*, that protects the church from error, Francis reminded the bishops. "How would we ever be able to speak about the family without engaging families, listening to their joys and their hopes, their sorrows and their anguish?" the pope said. A "synodal church is a listening church.... It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn."

It was *Gaudium et spes*, Vatican II's "Constitution on the Church in the World," that opened this dialogue with both the world and the Catholic laity. The Synod on the Family has made clear that Francis is a reformer following both the spirit and the letter of that still fiercely contested council. The questions surrounding *Humanae vitae*, the celibate priesthood, and the role of women in the church are all areas where the church can learn from those in the trenches and in the pews. Future synods must include in a more systematic way the views of priests, women religious, theologians, and the laity. Listening, the pope reminds us, is an evangelical activity. Jesus was especially good at it. ■

*October 27, 2015*

*Fr. Nonomen*

# Setting the Table

## THE HOLINESS OF HOSPITALITY

I cringe when a priest begins Mass by asking everyone to shake hands and introduce themselves to the folks around them. To me, there is something false and forced about that, a simulacrum of the friendly gesture it is intended to be. It's too little, too late. Parish hospitality must begin long before people are parked in their seats. It entails a lot more than ripping open a bag of Oreos and serving them with coffee after Mass.

I will never forget what I learned many years ago from a lay pastoral minister who was conducting a morning of reflection for women that began with breakfast. Although the group was rather small and the meeting took place in a cavernous parish hall, she took great care in setting the table. She lugged in her grandmother's china and silver, arranged fresh flowers, made use of beautiful stemware and table linens, all for a meal that was to last less than an hour. Yet, it set a tone for the whole morning. The women who attended not only felt welcomed but treasured. The way they were treated raised the level of reflection and discussion, and that meal became a turning point in the development of a women's parish discussion group.

It also made a lasting impression on this then-young cleric: It is in the details that true hospitality is established. In the gracious way the parish secretary answers the phone, never knowing whether it's a nervous bride-to-be or a grieving parent at the other end. In what the DRE says to the woman with three children who shows up six weeks late to register for Religious Education classes. In how the eucharistic ministers greet people at the church doors. In a parish hall that is warm in the winter and cool in the summer. In the volunteer meeting that ends in an hour, mindful of people's valuable time.

BUKAS PALAD

In asking same-sex couples to bring up the offertory gifts. In refusing to hector parishioners about the collection when Mass attendance is low due to bad weather or summer vacation. In taking the Oreos out of the bag and putting them on a nice plate. In offering current, quality, and free-for-the-taking reading materials to all parishioners. In having well-trained lectors and musicians at every weekend Mass.

Ecclesial hospitality is a natural outcome of the larger attitude of a faith community. Believing the Risen Christ is in its midst, a parish recognizes that presence in both visitors and neighbors. Guest and host each have an important part to play and something lovely and profound happens in the exchange. The subtleties and holiness of hospitality begin to emerge when we remember Abraham and his angelic visitors under the terebinth tree or Mary visiting Elizabeth or even the disciples on the road to Emmaus.

Of course, it's a constant challenge to translate these religious precepts into the habits of parish living. Creating an atmosphere of welcome and graciousness means first building an awareness of the value of such a climate and how it is an essential element in a vibrant parish. It also means encouraging a sense of the congregation's ownership of the parish. On my first visit to a nearby Reform synagogue, one of the religious education teachers gave me a tour. She asked if I would like to see the scrolls of sacred Scripture that are locked in the ark, the holiest place of this house of worship. With a great air of confidence, she obtained the key, opened the ark, and unrolled part of the Torah for me. It was a beautiful work of art, but even more impressive was the comfortable ease with which she did all this. Her self-assurance made this guy in a Roman collar feel like a warmly welcomed insider!

In my parish we don't have designated "ministers of hospitality." Everyone, from the staff on out, is responsible for extending that sort of Christian welcome. I admit that we are better at this on some days than on others, but it seems to be working. We do spend an awful lot of time washing real glasses after parish receptions and enrolling latecomers in First Communion classes, but I guess you could say we save a little time at the very beginning of Mass. There's no need for further introductions. Chances are very good that you already know who is sitting next to you. ■

**Fr. Nonomen** *is the pastor of a suburban church. He has been a priest for more than twenty-five years.*

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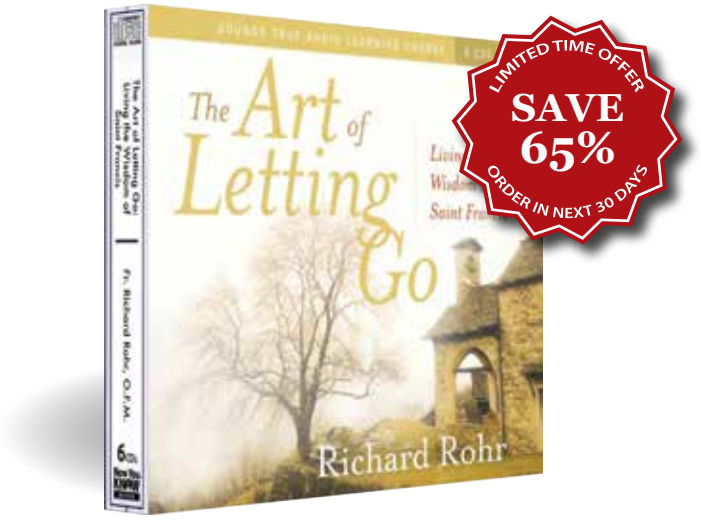


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*Thomas Buffer*

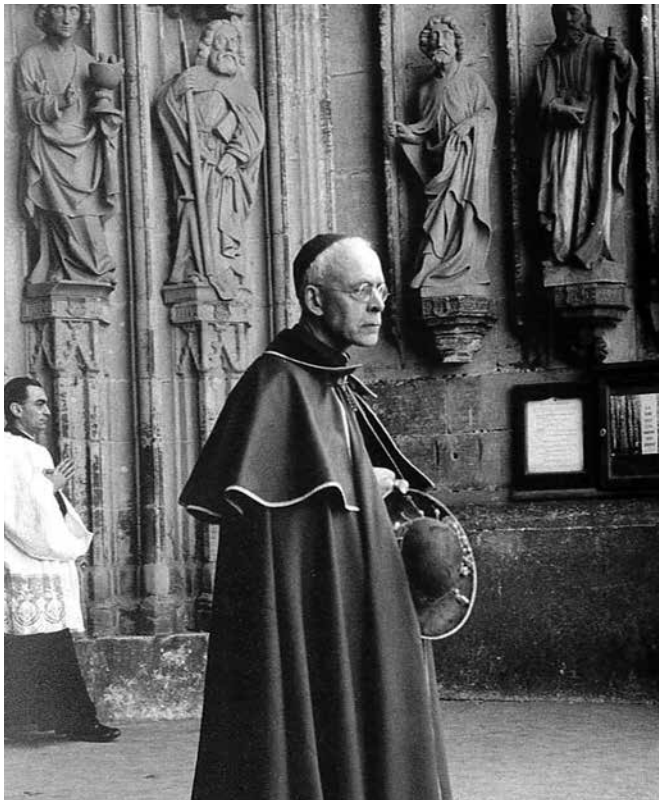
# The Zoghby Affair

## THE LAST TIME THE BISHOPS CONSIDERED REMARRIAGE & COMMUNION

Will divorced and civilly remarried Catholics ever be re-admitted to the Communion line? That was the question—first raised by Cardinal Walter Kasper in a February 2014 speech to the College of Cardinals—that shaped much of the media coverage of the two Synods on the Family. Many church-watchers noted how remarkable it was that bishops were considering a change in church practice—and that many of them have been disagreeing about it in public. But most news coverage of the debate failed to mention one of its most remarkable features: It has happened before—fifty years ago, at Vatican II.

On September 29, 1965, the Melkite Archbishop Elias Zoghby, patriarchal vicar for Egypt and the Sudan, rose to address the council fathers. They had been discussing the part of *Gaudium et spes* that treated marriage and the family. While contraception was the most hotly debated issue, Zoghby announced that he would discuss a problem "more crucial than birth control"— namely, how the church could assist an innocent spouse whose husband or wife had abandoned their marriage to form an illegitimate union with another person. Zoghby argued that it was wrong for pastors to tell an abandoned spouse that she or he had no other choice than perpetual continence. He acknowledged that marriage was taught to be indissoluble "by the positive law of Christ," while noting Christ's words "except on the ground of unchastity" (Matthew 5:32; 9:6-9). A proper response would be to allow the innocent spouse to contract a second marriage. Indeed, that practice had been "preserved in the East, and was never reproved during the ten centuries of union [with Rome]." He remarked that the Council of Trent had even taken the traditional Eastern procedure into account. In conclusion, Zoghby urged that during such a period of ecumenism, dialogue, and recovery of Patristic tradition, the whole church should consider adopting this practice.

That night, Pope Paul VI's secretary asked the Swiss Cardinal Charles Journet to respond to Zoghby. The cardinal worked until 1 a.m. to prepare his speech. The next morning, on orders of the pope, Journet displaced the scheduled first speaker. In his brief but forceful intervention, Journet stated that the Catholic Church preserved Jesus's teaching on the indissolubility of marriage, and had no power to change matters of divine right (*ius divinum*, referring to Mark 10:2ff and I Corinthians 7:10-11). The seeming exception in Matthew, "except on grounds of unchastity," means that separation is allowed in the case of adultery, but does not mean that a second marriage is licit. Journet continued:



*Swiss Cardinal Charles Journet*

It is true that some churches in the East have admitted divorce in the case of adultery, and have also allowed innocent spouses to contract a new marriage. But this happened, given the existing relationships between state and church at the time, under the influence of civil law.... When these [Eastern] churches admitted other grounds for divorce beyond the one introduced above, it appears that they followed...a procedure (*modus agendi*) more human than evangelical.

Paul VI's choice of Journet was significant, because the Swiss theologian was eligible to speak as a Council father only because the pope had made him a cardinal in February 1965. For years, he had been one of Paul VI's favorite theologians. The pope would later ask Journet to help him write his apostolic constitution on indulgences, *Indulgentiarum doctrina*.

The newspapers described Zoghby's proposal as a "bomb" dropped in the council chambers, suggesting that he had advocated for divorce (not unlike some of the news coverage following the news that Pope Francis had streamlined the annulment process). As Zoghby left the aula after Journet gave his response, reporters rushed to question him. In his *My Journal of the Council*, Yves Congar took note of the

controversy: "Discussion on marriage. Journet responds in an unyielding (*raide*) fashion to Zoghby who had, yesterday, brought up the Greek fathers on the indissolubility of marriage. He does not see any solution for broken and destroyed marriages other than heroism. I don't take notes of the discussions, it's in the newspapers."

In the *Acta* of the Council, the only hint of support for Zoghby's proposal is found in a comment by Archbishop Giuseppe Descuffi of Smyrna, an Italian Vincentian. His position was very similar to Zoghby's, with the aim of promoting union with the Eastern churches. He argued that nullity could be declared because of deliberate and ongoing adultery, which would indicate a lack of the kind of consent needed to form an indissoluble bond.

Zoghby's superior, Patriarch Maximos, was asked by the newspaper *La Croix* about his vicar general's proposal. The patriarch replied that he did not know beforehand that Zoghby was going to raise the topic, and distanced himself from Zoghby's position:

> The church must hold fast to the indissolubility of marriage, for, even though in certain cases the innocent spouse is sorely tried because of this law, the whole of family life would be shaken and ruined without this law. Moreover, if divorce in the strict sense were to be allowed on the grounds of adultery, nothing would be easier for less conscientious spouses than to create this cause. The contrary practice of the Eastern Orthodox churches can be supported by a few texts by certain fathers. But these texts are contradicted by others and do not...constitute a sufficiently constant and universal tradition to induce the Catholic Church to change its discipline on this point.

That didn't silence Zoghby. He spoke again on October 4, 1965, reminding the council fathers that his proposal was limited to the innocent abandoned spouse who was "condemned to live...in forced continence" through another's fault. He had deliberately avoided using the word "divorce" so as not to call into question the "immutable principle of the indissolubility of marriage." He was not asking the church to recognize divorce, but rather to offer a pastoral dispensation. Such a dispensation would not undermine the indissolubility of marriage any more than the "Petrine Privilege," which allows a pope to dissolve a valid natural union in order to allow someone to enter a sacramental union. Zoghby had only meant to suggest that the Catholic Church consider adding adultery or definitive abandonment to its list of grounds to declare a marriage null. He left it to the church to judge whether it was opportune to accept his proposal. With that, discussion of the matter during official council proceedings came to an end.

Yet the conversation continued. A year later, *Time* ran an article covering new Catholic thinking about divorce. Zoghby's "jarring" intervention featured prominently:

> The church's willingness to grant annulments while refusing to permit divorce troubles many Catholics. At the Vatican Council's concluding session, Melchite [sic] Archbishop Elias Zoghbi [sic] denounced the "subtle casuistry" of the church: "It happens that after ten or twenty years of marriage, they suddenly discover an impediment that permits everything to be resolved as though by magic..." He suggested that the Catholic Church allow divorce on certain grounds, such as abandonment, as the Orthodox churches do.

*Time* noted that while Journet, "presumably on Pope Paul's orders, hastened to spike further debate by reasserting the church's traditional teaching," Zoghby had nevertheless, according to theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, "placed the problem on the table, and that in itself is most important."

There are some striking parallels between the Zoghby and Kasper proposals. Both came to the attention of the media when presented to a meeting of bishops in Rome. Both were offered as pastoral responses to a pressing problem. In both cases, a pope called on a theologian to make a public intervention. Cardinal Journet was favored by Paul VI. Pope Francis invited Kasper to speak to the College of Cardinals last year, and has recommended his book *Mercy*. But there are also significant differences between Zoghby and Kasper.

Zoghby carefully avoided speaking of divorce. He addressed only one kind of marriage breakup: the separation resulting from the abandonment of an innocent spouse by an unfaithful one. In that case alone, the church could allow the dissolution of the existing bond in favor of the innocent victim, he argued, allowing her or him to remarry and receive other sacraments. Zoghby found support for this option in tradition and patristic teaching. Kasper's proposal is both more novel and more far-reaching, if I understand it correctly. In determining whether a divorced-and-remarried person could return to the sacraments, the reason for the failure of the first marriage would be of less weight than one's "sincere interest" in receiving the sacraments in the present.

In the Zoghby affair, one bishop on his own initiative made a revolutionary proposal that was quickly slapped down by a cardinal hand-picked by the pope. This effectively silenced further discussion. At the 2014 consistory, a cardinal hand-picked by the pope presented a radical proposal—as Kasper himself has called it, meaning "getting down to the root (*radix*)"—leaving it to other bishops to decide. The paragraph of last year's final synod report mentioning the Kasper proposal failed to win the customary two-thirds vote required for publication, yet the pope put it in the final text anyway, setting the stage for last month's synod. Paul VI shut down the debate. Francis enlarged it. The similarities between the two events are striking, but it's their differences that may be more significant. For when Pope Francis opened the synod process last year, he urged the assembled bishops to "speak freely." In the end, that may be the difference that matters most. ■

**Thomas Buffer** *is the pastor of St. Mary Catholic Church in Marion, Ohio.*

*Joseph Sorrentino*

# A Long Walk Through Mexico

## FORCED OFF THE TRAINS, MIGRANTS TAKE TO THE ROAD

José and Jorge approach me while I'm standing outside a small shelter for Central American migrants in La Patrona, Veracruz, and ask if I can give José my shoes. I say I'm sorry but I can't; I need them. Besides, the top of José's head barely reaches my shoulder, and his feet would swim in my shoes. If I had given him my shoes, he surely would have stuffed the toes with newspaper or toilet paper, which is what he's using now to keep the straps of his sandals—themselves a couple sizes too large—from scraping any more flesh off the tops of his feet. After I tell him no, José says he understands and walks away, limping slightly, pained by feet rubbed raw by weeks of walking to America in those sandals.

José and Jorge are Salvadorans and, like hundreds of thousands of Central American migrants, they're fleeing countries plagued with entrenched poverty and violence. They're traveling through Mexico on their way to the United States. Until recently, they would have made the trip riding on top of cargo trains collectively called La Bestia ("the Beast"). But now, most of these trains have only a handful of migrants and many have none. It isn't that there are fewer migrants. It's just that they've been forced to find other, more dangerous routes because of Programa Frontera Sur, a Mexican policy implemented last August, under pressure from the U.S. government, that's made it almost impossible for migrants to board trains. Instead, many of them are walking most of the way from Central America to the U.S. border. For one stretch of the journey, Jorge walked for twenty days straight. "Three in the morning until six at night," he says. "Forty to forty-five kilometers a day" (twenty-five to twenty-eight miles).

It's estimated that about four hundred thousand Central American migrants enter Mexico each year. The overwhelming majority plan to enter the United States. Most come from Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador—three countries with extremely high poverty rates (53 percent of Guatemalans, 41 percent of Salvadorans, and 67 percent of Hondurans are poor). But as bad as the poverty is, it's the violence that's driving people out. Honduras has the world's highest murder rate, El Salvador the fourth highest, and Guatemala the fifth. Much of the violence in all three countries is perpetrated by gangs like the Mara 18 and Mara Salvatrucha—the most vicious gangs in the Americas.

Cristina is a forty-year-old Salvadoran I met while she was staying at Hermanos en el Camino, a shelter in Ixtepec, Oaxaca. She had a small bee-keeping operation in El Salvador and, while she certainly wasn't rich, she was earning enough to support herself and her five sons. But one of the gangs (she didn't say which) evidently thought she had a lot of money. On January 27, someone called and said she had until January 31 to pay them $1,000. "If I did not pay, they would kill one of my children," she told me. "I left the next day at dawn.... I have no reason to be a migrant. I have a nice business, workers, and suddenly I lost everything." In addition to extortion, gangs forcibly recruit young men. A refusal results in gang reprisals; often, either the young man himself or someone in his family is murdered. Because of this, Cristina took her eighteen-year-old son with her to Mexico. She was frightened the whole time. "In Salvador, they do not talk, they kill. We were afraid we would be pursued and killed." Cristina and her son made it across the border into Mexico and almost as far as the shelter without any serious incidents. But outside of Juchitán—about a forty-five-minute bus ride from Ixtepec—they discovered that gangs and thieves aren't the only dangers for a migrant.

According to the Mexican government, Programa Frontera Sur will make migrants safer by keeping them from risking their lives on La Bestia and by protecting them from criminal groups. To keep the migrants off the trains, more police and agents from Mexican Immigration (INM) guard train stations. Train speeds have been increased to make it harder for migrants to climb aboard while the trains are in motion. And there has been an increase in *operativos*—operations where police and INM agents stop buses and trains, detaining anyone they suspect of being a migrant.

The bus Cristina and her son were on was stopped by four policemen. Two boarded the bus while two waited outside. If they thought someone might be a migrant, they asked for an ID; if the person didn't have one, he or she was taken off the bus. Cristina was lucky: the police didn't ask her for an ID. But they did ask her son, and he and six other migrants were taken off the bus. "The police asked for money," she says, "and since he didn't have any, they brought him to Immigration." There he faced deportation. As soon as Cristina reached the shelter, she asked for help. Alberto Donis Rodriguez, the shelter's coordinator, hurried to the INM office. "Only Immigration can ask for identification," says Donis Rodriguez. "It is not legal for police or soldiers to do it unless they are working with Immigration." He argued that the migrants should be released because they had been seized illegally, and he was certain they would be. When I bumped into Cristina on my last day at the shelter, she was smiling for the first time. Her son was to be released that day. But later she learned that, instead of being released as scheduled, he had been deported.

PHOTO BY JOSEPH SORRENTINO

*Three refugees in Chahuites*

Railroad companies are also doing their part to keep migrants off trains. Along train tracks that run behind a shelter called La Sagrada Familia in the northern Mexican state of Tlaxcala, small cement poles have been installed to keep migrants from running alongside trains and climbing aboard. Several migrants have been injured after being struck by a pole as they clung to the train. At least one was killed. The train companies are also placing private security guards called *custodios* on trains. The guards, who dress all in black and wear masks, are supposed to protect the trains and their passengers, but many migrants and advocates report that *custodios* are preying on migrants.

Ronald Isaac Varaona Saucedo, a twenty-three-year-old Honduran who spent a couple of days at La Sagrada Familia on his way to the United States, had a run-in with *custodios* on his way north. "They made us get off the train. They threatened us with guns. They said, 'Give us all your money.' I gave them two hundred, three hundred pesos [about $14 and $21 respectively]. This was all my money. I was left with no clothes, only pants." He and some friends walked to the next village, where they were given clothes and shoes.

The Mara 18 and Mara Salvatrucha are also doing their part to make it harder for migrants to ride the trains, charging them $100 to board—a fee most migrants can't afford. Those who do manage to pay the fee are sometimes robbed on the train by the same gang that charged them to board.

Because it's now more difficult to ride La Bestia, migrants are making the journey in other ways. Some travel by bus or van, but most walk. This leaves them more vulnerable to assaults, robberies, and rapes. "When people were coming by train, it was dangerous, but it kept migrants together," says Daniel Ojalvo Cordero, who has worked at Hermanos en el Camino for two years. If gangs wanted to assault them, "it had to be a big group, had to be organized. Now, [the migrants] arrive walking in small groups and anyone can assault them."

Almost all the thirty-five migrants I interviewed told me they had been assaulted during their journey. A man named Juan was traveling with his uncle and brother when they


PHOTO BY JOSEPH SORRENTINO

*Private security guards have been hired by train companies to keep migrants off the trains.*

were assaulted and robbed of all of their money in Oaxaca. Carlos and his nephew Miguel were robbed in Tierra Blanca, Veracruz. Luís was robbed outside of Tenosique, Tabasco. In many of the cities along the main routes from Central America to the U.S. boarder, migrants are begging on street corners, holding up their passport with one hand, while holding out their other hand for change.

Programa Frontera Sur, with help from criminals and train owners, has certainly succeeded in keeping migrants off the trains. But it has failed spectacularly in keeping migrants out of Mexico. Rubén Figueroa, the coordinator of Movimiento Migrante MesoAmericano, an organization that defends migrants' rights, insists that "the same number are entering Mexico." Pedro Ultreras, a journalist who has covered migration through Mexico for several years, agrees: "Nothing is stopping people at the southern border. The door is wide open. They just wade across the Suchiate River."

The dramatic drop in apprehensions of Central Americans at the U.S. border is being touted as proof of decreased migration. In fact, just as many Central American migrants are reaching Mexico. The difference is that the Mexican government is now deporting more of them back to their countries of origin before they reach the U.S. border. According to information released by the Guatemalan government, Mexico deported almost 50 percent more Central Americans between January and March 2015 than it did during the same months in 2014.

People will continue migrating north until conditions in Central America improve. People like Alberto and Maricella Delgado, who spent a few days at a shelter in Chahuites on their way to the United States. They rode La Bestia until they were chased off by INM agents. Later, as they were walking along the tracks, they were robbed of their backpacks and all their money by three men with machetes and a gun. But still they continued. "I have a lot of fear on this trip," Alberto told me. "It is too dangerous for my wife. But we have to do it. We have a child and want a better life for him." ■

**Joseph Sorrentino** *is a freelance journalist and photographer.* *This article was supported in part by a grant from the Puffin Foundation. The author wrote a longer article on the same subject for the June 2015 issue of* In These Times.

# The Beginning of the End

## *A Decisive Instant in the Gospel of John*

Paul Elie

I have never been to Jerusalem, but I have crossed the brook Kidron, and that has made all the difference. J. S. Bach, with the *St. John Passion*, conveyed me across; but I am getting ahead of the story.

Don DeLillo's novel *The Names* begins at the Acropolis, the place that for many people is the point or end of a visit to Athens:

> It daunted me, that somber rock. I preferred to wander in the modern city, imperfect, blaring. The weight and moment of those worked stones promised to make the business of seeing them a complicated one. So much converges there. It's what we've rescued from the madness. Beauty, dignity, order, proportion. There are obligations attached to such a visit.

The speaker is a risk analyst posted to Greece by an international bank, but here he speaks in the voice—a distinctive oracular-vernacular—that DeLillo has made his own. "What ambiguity there is in exalted things," he declares. "We despise them a little."

> The ruins stood above the hissing traffic like some monument to doomed expectations. I'd turn a corner, adjusting my stride among jostling shoppers, there it was, the tanned marble riding its mass of limestone and schist. I'd dodge a packed bus, there it was, at the edge of my field of vision. One night (as we enter narrative time) I was driving with friends back to Athens after a loud dinner in Piraeus and we were lost in some featureless zone when I made a sharp turn into a one-way street, the wrong way, and there it was again, directly ahead.

He slams on the brakes. The sudden vision of the "white fire" of the Parthenon "floating in the dark" pulls him up short. It arrests him—stops him in surprise. That's something like what happens to us as readers when we run across DeLillo's parenthetical declaration that we are entering "narrative time." It's as blunt as a security broadcast at the airport.

*Detail of* The Taking of Christ, *Caravaggio, 1602*

Now entering the zone of what happens next. Abandon all general truths. No oracular pronouncements past this point. Here the story begins. It happened one night.

And that's something like what happens to us at the point in the Gospel of John when Jesus and the disciples cross the brook Kidron. The passage, at the beginning of Chapter 18, is akin to what photographers after Henri Cartier-Bresson call "the decisive moment." It's the moment when the hide-glue cut-and-paste job that is this gospel enters narrative time once and for all. It's the beginning of the end, a giant step into the drama of crime and punishment whose end is the reason the story is still told.

The gospels are exalted texts, daunting to write about. So much converges there and is shown to be complex and paradoxical. But the crossing of the brook Kidron is a piece of the action that stands alone, a slice of time as distinct as anything in the New Testament.

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Who really "understands" the Gospels? I can't say that I do (though I can't help but try). But the crossing-over into narrative time: this is something I can begin to understand. The crossing of the brook Kidron: this I can approach undaunted.

When Jesus had spoken these words, he went forth with his disciples across the Kidron valley, where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered. Now Judas, who betrayed him, also knew the place; for Jesus often met there with his disciples. So Judas, procuring a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went there with lanterns and torches and weapons. Then Jesus, knowing all that was to befall him, came forward and said to them, "Whom do you seek?" They answered him, "Jesus of Nazareth." Jesus said to them, "I am he."

The four Gospels take up 125 pages in the zippered leather Bible I've had since college, less than a tenth of the whole. In English translation John's gospel, with its cradle-to-grave depiction of the Son of Man, is about fifteen thousand words—about the length of an old *New Yorker* profile or a new Kindle Single.

Even by gospel standards the scene at the brook Kidron is exceptionally brief. It takes up a third of a page of that zippered Bible. Jesus and his disciples cross a valley and enter a garden, and Judas musters a militia and goes after them, and Jesus puts a question to them and they reply, and he replies in turn—all this in a hundred words, in a scene lit with lanterns and torches and shadowed by the threat of violence.

The scene seems even tighter when read in sequence with what has come before. This is because what has come before is the Last Supper, and the Last Supper in John's gospel is the longest episode (nearly five chapters) and most verbose one (if you doubt it, take a look) in all the Gospels.

"When Jesus had spoken these words..." That's how Chapter 18 begins. Among biblical scholars "these words" are called the Farewell Discourses, or the Last Discourse. In the New Jerusalem Bible, they are typeset with a ragged right edge akin to poetry; they run down one page after another, a kite-tail of exhortation and prophecy. In the thirty-volume Anchor Bible—text and learned commentary—the Last Discourse is found in Volume 29A; the chief commentator, the late Catholic biblical scholar Raymond Brown, treats the Last Discourse as three "divisions," each with several units, and his commentary, polyglot and closely spaced, runs from page 545 to page 782. It's *long*.

"When Jesus had spoken these words...": this, then, may be a piece of wit on the part of John the Evangelist or his redactors—a way of saying that even Jesus Christ tended to go on for a bit. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word refused to end. More likely it's a structural punctuation mark: an exclamation point. George Herbert in the great poem "Prayer" calls prayer "the soul in paraphrase"; and in John's gospel "these words"—Jesus's words at the Last Supper—are the whole gospel "in paraphrase," as the Herbert poem has it. First Jesus tells the disciples what is going to happen next: one of you will betray me, and the cock will not crow till you have denied me three times. Then he tells them what they ought to do and why, in a series of epithets as consequential as any words ever spoken by anybody. And then he spells out the limits of the words he has spoken.

Few of us know all of them, but most of us know some of them and some of us know most of them and just about all of us know a few of them. Here they are in paraphrase: Love one another as I have loved you. Keep my commandments: that is how they will know you as my disciples. I am the way, the truth, and the life: no one comes to the Father, but by me. I am the Father and the Father is in me, and he who has seen me has seen the Father. I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Peace I leave you; my peace I give to you, but not as the world gives do I give to you. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in me, as I abide in you. No longer do I call you servants; I call you friends, and greater love has no man than this, that he lay down his life for his friends. A little while, and you will see me no more, for the ruler of this world is coming; again a little while, and you will see me. You will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. I have said all this to you in figures; the hour is coming when I shall no longer speak to you in figures but tell you plainly of the Father.

Augustine and his contemporaries were so full of the sense of their participation in eternity that they were matter-of-factly convinced that they'd fallen out of it into human time. The question was not whether but how and why.

What more was there to say? He had said enough, done all he could do in figures. "When Jesus had spoken these words," then, he crossed the brook Kidron with the disciples—passing over to a place beyond words. He entered narrative time, that is, and became fully a fallen creature like the rest of us.

When we think of the fall—if we think of the fall (do we think of the fall?)—we think of it as a fall into sin, or into disobedience, or into carnal life and the life of the body, or war and violence, or the realm of conscience that Flannery O'Connor, concluding her story "Everything That Rises Must Converge," called "the world of guilt and sorrow."

For St. Augustine in *The Confessions* the fall was a fall out of eternity into time. "Our hearts are restless until they rest in you." The book's famous early insight, the starting point of Augustine's *peregrinatio*, or wandering back to God, leaves unstated a conviction that was so obvious to him that he hardly needed to put it into words. It is the conviction that before he was restless, all astir in this mortal coil, he was at rest with God outside of time. The sense of that opening sentence, a sense that emerges distinctly in the course of *The Confessions*, is something like this: Once upon a time before time I rested in you. Now I no longer do. I fell away from you and into time. But I yearn to rest in you again. Meanwhile I am restless, as I try to find my way back home—back out of time.

It's a conviction shaped by the same philosophical outlook—known to us as Platonism, or Neoplatonism—that shaped John's gospel. Nothing so much as that conviction brings home just how different the outlook of the early Christians was from ours. Just as the Christian believers of late antiquity were so convinced of Jesus's divinity, so imbued with the sense of it, that they required two ecumenical councils to settle on the affirmation that Christ was not only fully divine but fully human as well, so Augustine and his contemporaries were so full of the sense of their participation in eternity that they were matter-of-factly convinced that they'd fallen out of it into human time. The question was not whether but how and why.

In *The Confessions* Augustine sets out what many modern commentators call psychological evidence for the human person's past participation in eternity. We seem to have memories of an earlier, better time. We see things transhistorically. We feel, each of us, our own self as a constant presence running through time. These pieces of evidence are apt enough to remain persuasive today. Even so, that Augustine evidently felt the remnants of his pretemporal life so powerfully, and that he described them so confidently, makes him, and his outlook, strange to us.

"In my beginning is my end," T. S. Eliot wrote near the beginning of *Four Quartets*, a work that, toward the end of the Western Christian literary era that entered a major phase with St. Augustine, takes something like a Neoplatonic view of time and eternity and makes of it something new. In John's gospel the brook Kidron is the site where eternity and time meet, and the crossing of the brook Kidron is the moment when Jesus and the disciples pass from the world of

## EAGLE

She releases the earth,
every dawn, opens
like day and closes like night.
The human highway
is nothing to her,
blunt in its purpose,

coursing to no destination
she calls home. The squirrel's
chatter, the flycatcher's shrill
empty gossip beneath her shadow,
no rumor scores her quiet.
All night
she wakes and wakes again,
nothing to tell, no story
to sound, the broken syllables of the lake,
the susurration of the river her

names for hunger.
He talons seize the steelhead
and grasp the trout,
but in a kingdom of pinprick
birdsong she is the tidings,
now and now, echoing nothing,
prey to no rumor, silence her anthem.

***—Michael Cadnum***

*Michael Cadnum is the author of thirty-five books, including the novel* Seize the Storm.

antique Neoplatonism to a world something like ours—from a world charged with the eternal to a world of space and time. The world back there is a world of immutable forms and divinity undivided. The world over here is a world of false kisses and trumped-up charges, where the clock is always ticking and the swords are kept sharp.

What happens next is like a scene out of Caravaggio:

> So Judas, procuring a band of soldiers and some officers from the chief priests and the Pharisees, went there with lanterns and torches and weapons.

It is like a scene out of Caravaggio because it *is* a scene in Caravaggio. *The Taking of Christ*, as the painting is called, is a work as powerful as anything Caravaggio ever painted, even though it hung in the refectory of the Jesuit house in Dublin for a hundred years without being recognized as his. Caravaggio's biographer Helen Langdon characterizes it as "an elaborately orchestrated tableau vivant, in which every aspect of the composition is concentrated on creating the unprecedented immediacy and reality of the figures."

Judas takes hold of Christ, pressing himself on him: arm, beard, lips. A soldier in gleaming armor goes for Christ's neck. A young man flees: John the Evangelist, it is said—the author of John's gospel, that is. A bearded man holds a lantern: Caravaggio himself, illuminating the scene, at once practicing and highlighting his technique of biblical realism.

It is the beginning of the end; and the use of light, the arrangement of the figures, the equality of attention paid to Jesus, Judas, and the band of soldiers—all these effects work together to create the sense that the taking of Christ is happening once and for all. This isn't a decisive moment. This is a decisive instant.

*The Taking of Christ* derives much of its power from what is left out of the four-by-six-foot panel of the painting—all that leads up to the taking and all that leads away from it.

Johann Sebastian Bach, treating the episode, included all that surrounded that, and much more. And yet this *St. John Passion*, which runs about two hours in performance, derives its power from similar effects of excision and concision. This is clear from the very opening of the work. Following the liturgical convention of the Passion narratives—the way they were read in churches—John's account of the Last Supper is left out. The transition at the beginning of Chapter 18—"When Jesus had spoken these words"—is lopped off. In this Passion, the beginning of the end comes at the beginning.

The *St. John Passion* was a new beginning for Bach himself, and, in telling his story at a dramatic moment in a book about Bach (called *Reinventing Bach*), I tried to get behind the work's canonical authority and recover the sense of discovery that surrounded it in the beginning. It happened this way. After serving for several years as the court musician to the prince of Cöthen, in 1723 Bach took a new job in the market city of Leipzig. The city's cantor and music director had died, and Bach had been hired to replace him. He arrived on a Saturday afternoon in two carriages with his family, following on "four wagons loaded with household goods." The role would be a step down socially, and would involve more teaching and administration than he wished. But he took it, in part because it would give him supervision of the sacred music at two grand churches and two smaller ones. These churches required programs of sacred music week in and week out. In them, through them, he would broadcast his work to a wide public.

The Thomaskirche and the Nikolaikirche are a short walk apart: the one a gray stone Gothic church with a steep roof softened by a Baroque bell tower and a baroquely remodeled interior, the other older, of brown stone, its Romanesque design highlighted by ribbed arches throughout. Bach wore a path between the two churches. As the role of cantor and

music director enabled him to focus, so city life enabled him to conduct his affairs with efficiency in the shops, taverns, market square, and town hall.

His family numbered a dozen people, including a newborn daughter. He settled them in a rambling apartment in the schoolhouse, equipped with a composing room, or *Komponirstube*, which contained a large music library. There, he turned to writing music. In his first nine months in Leipzig he composed a vast body of sacred works: cantatas, motets, a radiant Magnificat—about fifty pieces of twenty minutes or more. The city churches were suddenly filled with his music. The cantatas were not all wholly new, but as music composed serially, week by week, they are astonishing.

They were exhausting, too. "The singers or instrumentalists or the composer, or indeed everyone involved including clergy," the Bach scholar Peter Williams proposes, "had found the cantor's initial efforts too taxing." Even Bach was relieved to reach the *tempus clausum*: the forty days of Lent, when liturgical music was set aside in favor of chant or silence. But he didn't rest. Lent opened up time for him to compose. In those forty days he completed the *St. John Passion* for rendition on Good Friday at the Nikolaikirche—at once taking up a form new to him, composing a work more intricate than any he had done, and dramatizing the central event of Christianity for the first time.

Given the demands of the new job, it is amazing that Bach composed the *St. John Passion* at all. But it may be that the chance to compose a Passion was a key reason for his move to Leipzig. In the Passion, a profound new form of sacred music was emerging, one that would allow him to deploy all his musical strengths at once.

The words of the opening chorus make his ambitions clear. As one English translation has it, they go: "O Lord, our Sovereign, Whose Glory / Is magnified in all lands, / Testify to us by Thy passion." With this work Bach would see his own work magnified, so to speak—all his talents concentrated on a setting of the story of God put to the test.

The grand, doleful opening chorus; the Evangelist's plain-spoken recitation; the sonorous voices of Jesus, Pilate, Peter, and the others; the crowd, wide-eyed and sharp-tongued, exultant, fierce, righteous, astonished; the rueful piety of the individual believer as expressed in a sacred aria; the chorales, softened by five centuries of Sundays; and all this over the polished stones on the streambed of the orchestra—this musical plan, this set of patterns in satisfying alternation, is so right as to seem permanent, and makes it seem as if the *St. John Passion* is a sacred work that existed "in the beginning." And yet the Passion form was substantially new to Bach. The cantatas he was writing were settings of discrete gospel passages: adages, sayings, and the like. The Passion text was a story. Where the cantatas are slices of the Christian drama, the Passion is the thing itself; where the cantatas follow the seasons of the year, the Passion (it seems) happens on a particular Friday afternoon. Composing a Passion to be heard at the Nikolaikirche in Leipzig on Good Friday—Friday, April 7, 1724—Bach entered narrative time once and for all.



It happens this way. After the opening chorus (ten minutes or so in most renditions), the singer known as the Evangelist begins, declaiming the gospel text in German in a plangent tenor voice:

Jesus ging mit seinen Jüngern über den Bach Kidron...
("Jesus and his disciples crossed the brook Kidron...")

In German, the word for brook is *Bach*. With the *St. John Passion,* Bach created a brook of music, a work of art, that fills the gap between eternity and time as a river runs through it.

Some years shy of three centuries later I crossed that brook of Bach, and did what the ancients claimed you just can't do: I stepped into the same river twice. Holy Week began on April 1 that year, and on Palm Sunday (as we enter narrative time) I made the crossing from Brooklyn to Manhattan. Carnegie Hall was hosting a *St. John Passion* performed by a crack Baroque ensemble called Les Violons du Roy. Ian Bostridge, a celebrated tenor, would be the Evangelist. WQXR would broadcast the performance live on FM and online. Friends who were out of town gave me their tickets—an apt gift as I reached the end of the Bach book I had spent several years writing—and as I made my

way down the aisle, it became evident that the tickets were for seats in the front row.

I took a front-row seat uneasily. I had heard the *St. John Passion* live and in person only once before, an evening performance on Good Friday at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine the year after I graduated from college—twenty-five years earlier. That year Holy Week came early. Winter stayed late. The midtown workday fluoresced endlessly. I had never heard Bach's sacred music performed live. I got to the cathedral after dark and claimed a rickety seat at the rear. The *St. John Passion* began: violins, harpsichord, voices by the dozens. The chill of the place, the remoteness of the sound and action, the length of the performance after a day of soul-sapping office work, the forbidding aura surrounding Bach.... Reader, I fell asleep during that *St. John Passion*, like a disciple in the garden.

Since then I had heard it dozens of times, but always through recordings; I had come to own half a dozen CD sets of the *Johannes-Passion*, filed together in a shoe box in the small workspace in our apartment where I'd spent a thousand and one nights. Now I was here at Carnegie Hall, coaxed out of the interior castle of recordings and into the metropolis of live performance. I was in the front row, and that I was in the front row was both a gift and a challenge. I had to stay awake no matter what.

The musicians entered European-style: singers and orchestra, trailed by the soloists. There was Ian Bostridge, six foot six in formal dress but without a tie, as boyish as on the CD booklets but tall and lean to an extreme that no head shot could show. He stood diplomatically off to the side as the music director, Bernard Labadie, led the ensemble through the opening chorus: five minutes, and then another five as the whole section was repeated, concluding emphatically. The audience went as silent as 2,800 New Yorkers sitting together in a big room on West Fifty-Seventh Street can be. A spotlight followed the Evangelist. With my eyes I did likewise. I had never seen a singer this close-up before.

He strode to the lip of the stage and planted his feet, in shoes black and highly polished, on a prestigious spot of hardwood. He crossed his arms at the elbows. He leaned back, like a tennis player about to serve; he opened his mouth—unscrewed it, screwed it open: that was the effect from up close—and out came the first words of recitative:

Jesus ging mit seinen Jüngern über den Bach Kidron...

So we entered narrative time: the triple time of Bach's passions, where biblical time, the time of Bach, and what can be called "the time of this hearing" converge. And I felt, from a cubit's distance away, the power of art, and live art in particular, to lead us across and into the far country of narrative and make us apprehend a familiar moment as if for the first time. When he had finished those words, all together we heard all that happened next. ■

*Richard Alleva*

# Men on a Mission

## 'THE MARTIAN' & 'BRIDGE OF SPIES'

To hell with postmodern irony. Here are two unabashedly earnest movies with straight-arrow heroes: *The Martian* gives us an astronaut who survives all alone on Mars after being left for dead by his crewmates during a windstorm, while *Bridge of Spies* presents a real-life lawyer, James Donovan, who pursues justice in the face of public opinion and then negotiates a diplomatic maneuver that frees two Americans from the clutches of the Soviet Union.

Watching *The Martian* made me feel like an ingrate. Here is a science-fiction movie dedicated not only to getting its science right but also to dramatizing the way scientists and astronauts perform under pressure, and how NASA must weigh the relative values of achieving a specific mission, safeguarding its public image, and caring for the imperiled lives of individual astronauts. And the movie has more going for it than just good intentions. Its scientific accuracy often leads to thrills: when the stranded NASA botanist Mark Watney (Matt Damon) uses some of his oxygen supply to create fire, he underestimates the amount of oxygen his own breath produces and nearly blows himself to pieces. The film's last few minutes will have you biting your nails as the commander of the rescue mission (Jessica Chastain) floats outside her spacecraft waiting to grab Mark as he hurtles through space.

Drew Goddard's script, based on a novel by Andy Weir, is shrewd about how the PR concerns of any governmental agency compete with strictly humanitarian obligations. NASA's head honcho (Jeff Daniels) certainly wants to get Mark back alive but cavils at telling the public too much too soon, aware that hard decisions must sometimes be made away from public pressure. Even scientists can be excluded from decision-making: when a brilliant astronomer comes up with a spectacular but iffy rescue plan, the boss curtly ejects him from the office in order to confer with other higher-ups. This is a hardheaded movie.

*Matt Damon in* The Martian

Most of the cast turn in appropriately understated performances, especially Damon (stoic but vulnerable) and Chastain (conflicted but steely). Benedict Wong's character, a jet-propulsion specialist, embodies yeomanly pluck, while Sean Bean convincingly portrays a mission director whose compassion leads to insubordination. But I found Jeff Daniels much too supercilious as NASA's chief executive. He's carried over his let-me-explain-everything-to-you-idiots manner from his HBO series, *The Newsroom*, but his character here is working with near-geniuses, so it's out of place.

*The Martian* also has humor (Damon, driving a space buggy containing enough plutonium to send him to blazes, listens to a tape of Donna Summers singing "Hot Stuff"), pathos, and idealism—not just about American know-how but about humanity in general, with Chinese scientists putting aside their secrecy concerns to help fellow space explorers.

So why did the movie finally make me feel like an ingrate? Why didn't I feel an affection and excitement equal to my admiration? Well, despite the earthbound NASA scenes, this is essentially a Robinson Crusoe yarn, and such a yarn must evoke two emotions that *The Martian* avoids almost entirely: loneliness and wonder. Our hero spends nearly two years on a desert of a planet (the movie was made too late to include the latest news that Mars has water), initially expecting to spend four. The passing of time must weigh on his spirit, yet the film does virtually nothing to convey this. Indeed, the narrative is flippantly elliptical. The months fly by in a series of captions: "three months later," "seven months later," etc. It's

implausible to think that Mark keeps so busy with his survival tasks that he never encounters boredom. What does he do to counter it? Does he have any books, aside from tech instructions? Vivid dreams and nightmares? Does he pray? Meditate? Exercise? He records himself on a video log for the benefit of NASA, but does he ever babble to himself out of loneliness? Near-crazy, Crusoe ran down to the water's edge to shout out the Psalms, just to hear his own voice, but Mark just keeps smiling stoically. For me, this diminishes his heroism. The film's director, Ridley Scott, has suggested that Mark never feels truly alone because of the support of his colleagues. Yes, but even when they manage to communicate with him, it's only through computer messaging. Mark never sees faces or hears voices. Friday saved Crusoe's sanity but there's no Friday in *The Martian* and, apparently, we're never meant to feel the need for one. There's a fatal lack of empathy in this film.

There's also a strange lack of awe. Late in the movie Mark observes, with a note of astonishment in his voice, "I'm the first person alone on an entire planet." But that's the first note of wonder struck by the movie, and, despite the employment of 3-D, nothing in the visuals comes close to evoking a sense of the sublime. Mars remains a backdrop, never a real—and frighteningly empty—world. Mark is a can-do hero, yes, but the entire film is a can-do straight-ahead narrative with no breathing room for amazement.

How odd to think that Steven Spielberg was once regarded by critics as a sort of Peter Pan of cinema, providing kids, and the kids abiding inside adults, with adventure stories on the high seas and other exotic locales. Nowadays—after *Schindler's List, Lincoln, Saving Private Ryan*, and several other projects—he seems more like a pop historian wresting tales of heroism out of the annals of European and American history. In fact, Spielberg the master of juvenile thrills hasn't vanished but lurks within Spielberg the mature chronicler, sometimes helping him remain lively, sometimes undermining him with kid-stuff simplifications. As witness his latest, *Bridge of Spies*.

The first third of the script (by Matt Charman and the Coen brothers, derived from several nonfiction accounts, including James Donovan's memoir *Strangers on a Bridge*) shows how Donovan, in 1957, was pressured by our government into defending Rudolf Abel (real name: Vilyam Fisher), a man accused—and almost certainly guilty—of being a Soviet spy. The government's aim was to show the world that American justice doesn't railroad anyone. The hiring of an insurance lawyer for an espionage case was probably intended to guarantee a guilty verdict, but Donovan did better than expected, saving Abel from capital punishment but bringing public obloquy on himself, even death threats. Later, in the early 1960s, when spy pilot Francis Gary Powers was shot down over the U.S.S.R., Donovan was dispatched by the CIA to bring about a prisoner exchange of Abel for Powers. Without encouragement from the agency, he also secured the release of a hapless American student arrested by the East German police during the chaos leading up to the erection of the Berlin Wall.

The acting is excellent. Tom Hanks, who plays Donovan, has really become his generation's Spencer Tracy: gravity without pomposity, courage without bravado, manliness without machismo. Equally impressive is the film's authentic look. Spielberg and his technical collaborators have magisterially evoked the United States and the Germany of the late 1950s and early '60s: the relatively formal attire of people on their way to work in New York City, the men still wearing hats; the righteous stiffness of secretaries for big-shot lawyers and the pervading quiet of the office staff; the big, boxy TV sets in American living rooms, where whole families actually watched the news together. When Donovan pleads a case before the Supreme Court, he wears not just an ordinary suit but British-tailored morning dress. Even better is the Berlin reconstruction. The dim, dank look of governmental rooms emphasizes the Kafkaesque quality of Donovan's back-door negotiations with officials unwilling to reveal their true functions or even their real identities.

But Spielberg is so eager to certify Donovan's heroism that he presents him in the early legal scenes as virtually alone in his pursuit of justice, without solid support from government, colleagues, or even his own family. The era's McCarthyite paranoia certainly did real harm to innocent people, but Spielberg's stylized treatment of it is often ludicrous. When all the passengers on a train taking Donovan to work spot his photo in a newspaper, they eye him with such hostility you could swear they were about to lynch him. The scene belongs in *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, not in a serious biopic.

The German scenes are much better and earn their suspense honestly, for the turmoil of Berlin doesn't need melodramatic underlining. But even here a streak of juvenility in the director somewhat spoils things. His handling of the marvelous actor Mark Rylance, who plays Abel, makes of this possibly dangerous spy nothing but a sweet grandfather figure, stoic, benevolently beaming, somewhat pawky. I'm guessing this is because, like most creators of adventure stories, Spielberg favors bromance among his heroes. Just as D'Artagnan had his three musketeer pals and Richard Dreyfuss bonded with Roy Scheider in *Jaws*, Donovan must tear up when this nice old man is finally released on the bridge of the film's title. But the pathos is misplaced. Donovan was a hero because he defended an important constitutional principle and later rescued two Americans, not because he realized that Soviet agents are people, too.

Then again, how many other directors could have taken such a hoary trope as the FBI tailing a spy through New York crowds and refreshed it through sheer cinematic skill? And how many could make the downing of the U2 plane as exciting as the outer-space rescue in *The Martian*? Despite its outbreaks of puerility, *Bridge of Spies* grips. ■

*Margaret O'Brien Steinfels*

# Report from the Trenches

## After Roe
**The Lost History of the Abortion Debate**
*Mary Ziegler*
Harvard University Press, $39.95, 367 pp.

When does history begin? One answer: when an author is born after the events she describes. Mary Ziegler was born in 1982, just at the end of the period she depicts as the "lost" history of *Roe v. Wade*. Not lost to all of a certain age, perhaps, but her account may surprise even the closest (and oldest) observers of the battles that followed the 1973 Supreme Court decision. Until then, changing abortion law had required a state-by-state effort: thirty states banned abortion while twenty had legalized it within strict limits. The Court's decision made abortion legal in all fifty states with few restrictions. None of the state-based advocacy organizations, whether pro or con, were prepared for the scope of *Roe*. Those opposed to legalization couldn't believe that the Court failed to acknowledge any fetal rights. Those in favor of legalization were pleased: the Court had gone further than they expected.

Prolife groups were quick to organize, while proabortion groups (later recast as prochoice) became complacent, only reacting over time to their opponents' success in organizing political dissent. Over the next decade, each side went to battle with different strategies and resources; one to overturn *Roe*, the other to preserve and strengthen it. Ziegler has disinterred this decade, 1973–1983, from the archives of these battling groups—correspondence, minutes of meetings and conferences, news stories, newsletters, and press releases—supplemented with the accounts of surviving advocates. This varied and complex story is indeed often "lost" amid today's entrenched positions.

The prolife movement began with feminists and antifeminists alike, those in favor of birth control and those opposed, those who supported a fetal-life amendment and those who did not. Foreseeing that *Roe* would not soon be overturned, some "incrementalists" turned to legal efforts to restrict the procedure through informed consent, medical regulation, a ban on federal funding, and an end to late-term abortions. "Absolutist" prolifers wanted *Roe* overturned altogether. During the Reagan administration, two versions of a fetal-life amendment emerged in Congress. Both failed. The absolutists later turned to picketing clinics, curbside counseling, and ultimately, for a handful of individuals, attacking physicians and clinic workers, a period that lies beyond Ziegler's time frame.

The prochoice movement faced a different kind of sorting out. Before *Roe*, legalizing abortion was a secondary issue for the population-control movement. The Population Council and its allies,


CNS FILE

*The first March for Life in Washington, 1974*

funded by John D. Rockefeller and the Rockefeller Foundation, were concerned with reducing population growth around the world, focusing their efforts on contraception and sterilization. Though proabortion groups were well placed to take advantage of those organizational and financial resources, they had to disentangle themselves from the eugenics movement of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, which had become linked with the population-control movement. The taint of race and class prejudice offended many, especially African Americans who had to be convinced that abortion was not a plot to reduce the size of the black population. Over the decade, the growing importance of feminism for African-American women dampened some, if not all, of these suspicions.

In addition to their internal differences, both sides had to thread their way through a maze of issues that came to be associated with the abortion debate: family values, working mothers, women's rights, the sexual revolution, and the campaign for an Equal Rights Amendment. Divisions between the two emerged out of disagreements over these issues as well as abortion. Ziegler's interviews with movement leaders show that there were prolife women who favored contraception, smaller families, and the women's movement; some were members of their local Planned Parenthood. As the prochoice movement grew, a range of opinions emerged. Some members defended family values, shunned the language of population control, and worked to promote effective contraception rather than abortion. Yet even though both camps included members who did not follow a party line, the public debate became dominated by extremists. Each side ultimately aligned itself with Democrats or Republicans, contributing to the partisan divide that persists today. (Yes, Virginia, back in the day many Republicans were proabortion; many Democrats were not.)

Ziegler pays particular attention to the mid-1970s alliance of the resource-poor prolife movement with the well-funded religious right and the Moral Majority. Ziegler makes much of this alliance and its wooing and vetting of Republican politicians. Though she is otherwise evenhanded in her account, Ziegler's emphasis on the prolife/Religious Right alliance overshadows the role that Rockefeller and other foundations played in funding and directing prochoice organizations. Donald Critchlow, whose *Intended Consequences* Ziegler cites, provides a detailed account of the support and direction given by the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations to the prochoice movement, which parallels the relationship between prolifers and the religious right. But Ziegler fails to perceive that the rich and established can be no less political in pursuing their agendas than the prolife and religious "outsiders"— a curious lapse in her otherwise fair-minded analysis.

Many lay Catholics appear in this story of the prolife movement. In her 1984 study, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*, Kristen Luker found that 80 percent of prolife women activists were Catholic. But Ziegler's "lost" history barely mentions the U.S. Catholic bishops conference, or any individual bishop. Is that because she didn't attempt to study the bishops' actions (no doubt, most of the relevant archives are closed), or because, in fact, the bishops played a far less active role than is often advertised? Perhaps Michael Harrington's observation that the prolife movement was one of the great grass-movements of the seventies is confirmed in this history.

In a final chapter, Ziegler surveys the legacy of the issues fought over in this "lost" history. What fueled abortion politics in that decade, she maintains, were battles over women's rights, family values, gender equality, and sexual liberation. *Roe* itself, she argues, was far less central. Luker too argued, "While on the surface it is the embryo's fate that seems to be at stake, the abortion debate is actually about the meaning of women's lives." Luker's conclusion has often been cited by prochoice advocates who would prefer to "change the subject." To the extent that Ziegler gives the same impression, it diminishes the importance the prolife movement attaches to the moral and legal status of the fetus, the very error the Court was seen to make. Even today, that status roils the controversy over harvesting fetal organs for medical research. Ziegler may have a point about references to *Roe* in these battles. Indeed, critiques of the 1973 decision by the likes of Justices Antonin Scalia and Ruth Bader Ginsburg and legal scholars such as Cass Sunstein, Richard Posner, William Eskridge, and John Ferejohn leave *Roe* looking far less substantial than it once appeared. Nevertheless, however tattered that decision looks today, it precipitated a political and cultural debate that is far from over—and far from resolved. ■

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*Robert K. Landers*

# Never Definitive

## The Impossible Craft

**Literary Biography**

*Scott Donaldson*

Penn State Press, $39.95, 284 pp.

After working for ten years on what would become *Bellow: A Biography* (2000), James Atlas drove to Saul Bellow's house in Vermont. "So tell me," the novelist said to him, "what have you learned?" Atlas's disillusioned answer: "What I've learned is that you can't know anyone." *In Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession* (1981), Janet Malcolm came to much the same judgment: All personal relations are "tragic" because "we cannot know each other."

If that is so, where does it leave biography? In *The Impossible Craft: Literary Biography*, veteran biographer Scott Donaldson writes:

> Let's say that you accept the conclusions of Mark Twain and Paul Valéry, Thornton Wilder and Julian Barnes, Sigmund Freud and a host of others that you cannot take up residence in anyone else's mind. Then the writing of biography assumes the status of any undoable task, and appeals to the human desire to challenge boundaries…. You cannot go inside another human being's heart and head: agreed. You cannot reconstruct his bone and blood in a word portrait: also agreed. But it may be that if you are diligent and devoted, persistent and perceptive enough, you may come close.

Donaldson is a newspaperman-turned-professor (now emeritus) who has written biographies of three novelists and three poets. In *The Impossible Craft*, he draws on his decades of experience and the knowledgeable observations of others to provide a realistic look at the pleasures and challenges of literary biography. His willingness to acknowledge imperfections in his work and the mistakes he's made in pursuit of his subjects makes him an especially winning guide to the craft.

There are, first of all, "the pleasures of the process itself," including the reading of the admired author's works and the immersive research into his or her life, via letters, diaries, and interviews with people who'd known him. I can testify to that. In working on my biography of novelist James T. Farrell, I spent some five hundred pleasurable hours at the University of Pennsylvania's Rare Book and Manuscript Library, so absorbed in Farrell's long-vanished world that the hours sped by, their passage hardly noticed. The interviews, which took me to Chicago, New York, Pennsylvania, Florida, and California, were also enjoyable.

Donaldson quotes Victoria Glendinning, author of books on Trollope and Rebecca West, on what makes for an ideal literary biography. It should have "the tension and entertainment value of a novel," she writes, "using any and all narrative techniques, [while] including nothing that could not be backed up by documents or other evidence, and suppressing nothing of significance, however inconvenient it might be structurally or artistically."

Despite what reviewers or publicists might say, Donaldson observes, no biography can be "so splendid and comprehensive, so valid and insightful, so attuned to the past, in harmony with the present, and anticipatory of the future as to merit the term 'definitive.'" Biography is necessarily subjective. It can't help but reflect, to some extent, the biographer's experience, outlook, and values. In Donaldson's case, "it mattered to the books I wrote about [F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway] that I identified with Fitzgerald's need for approval and insecurity about social status, and did not share Hemingway's passion for blood sports and compulsion to prove himself in dangerous situations."

In one of the several extensive case studies Donaldson presents, he ex-

amines how fourteen different biographers—including himself, in *Fool for Love* (1983)—treated Zelda Fitzgerald's flirtation or affair with one Edouard Jozan in the summer of 1924. Whatever happened between them, Donaldson says, it "opened a rift in the Fitzgeralds' marriage that could not easily be mended." But he found a "wide disparity" in the biographers' treatments of the relationship and its import. "A few felt certain that Zelda was unfaithful to Scott with Jozan; others were sure that she was not. Some chroniclers thought the affair of little importance; others saw it as of great significance. From fourteen books you get fourteen different accounts." According to Donaldson, this indicates "the precarious nature of the craft."

*Scott & Zelda Fitzgerald in 1921*

As distinguished from biography in general, Donaldson observes, literary biography has the advantage that the subject tends to offer eloquent source material in letters, journals, and drafts, as well as in the published works. "Novels and stories, poems and plays represent the first and most indispensable source for the literary biographer. So far as possible, he must read everything his subject/author wrote, both published and unpublished." In my own case, that proved impossible. Farrell wrote more than fifty published books, and his archive at the University of Pennsylvania contains more than a thousand boxes of material. I read all his novels that were published in hardcover, but not all his short stories. As for the archive, I read selectively, trying to choose the letters, diary entries, and other unpublished material that promised to be most pertinent. With so massive a collection, however, one could never be entirely sure that one wasn't missing some vital piece of the puzzle.

Of course, it's one thing to have access to the deceased author's letters and other unpublished material; it's another to have permission from his estate to quote extensively from his works, published and unpublished. Donaldson had that difference painfully driven home to him in the course of bringing *John Cheever* (1988) to publication. "Midway through the process the Cheever family decided to fight the book." Cheever's daughter, who was writing a memoir of her father, and a son who was editing a collection of his letters viewed Donaldson's biography as competition. Their efforts to undermine his biography, along with an appeals court's radically restrictive decision in 1987 with regard to a British biographer's planned quotation from about seventy of J. D. Salinger's letters, turned Donaldson's endeavor into an ordeal. When *John Cheever* finally appeared, Donaldson felt relieved to be done with it—and still "jumpy" about possible legal action. For his next book, a biography of Archibald MacLeish, Donaldson made sure to get permission in writing to quote from the poet's works, published and unpublished, before he started in earnest on the project.

Almost all literary biographers begin their work with admiration for the subject's literary accomplishments, which readily segues into admiration for the artist. But artists being human, some disillusionment is almost sure to occur, as the biographer digs into the life. Donaldson found that Hemingway, for example, "was often cruel to his friends. He married serially, and did not devote much time and attention to the children of the discarded marriages."

In a 1991 essay, poet Donald Junkins criticized a half-dozen Hemingway biographers, including Donaldson, for projecting "their own shadows onto their subject, creating Hemingway the Bad Guy," and failing to grasp that his dark side was the source of his creativity. Donaldson says he "resisted Junkins's conclusions at first, for I'd tried to eliminate personal disapproval of Hemingway's behavior from *By Force of Will* [1977]." But by documenting "the various and sometimes 'subtly shaped put-downs' of Hemingway" in that book and the other biographies, Junkins finally persuaded him. "Without meaning to do so, we all passed judgment on him."

But is passing judgment always to be shunned in a literary biography? Not if essayist Joseph Epstein is correct in thinking that "the formation of character is what biography is about." But the conviction that the artist is to be judged only by the quality of his art, Epstein noted in a 1983 essay (unmentioned by Donaldson), makes it hard for the literary biographer to judge character.

Still, Donaldson insists, in telling the stories of literary figures and their often difficult lives, "the biographer has to find a balance between, say, admiration for Hemingway's 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro' and abhorrence for his practice of casting off friends and wives. Over time—thinking of one's own mistakes—I have become less judgmental about the writers who were my subjects. God knows they were hard enough on themselves." ■

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**Robert K. Landers** *is the author of* An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell *(2004).*

KENNETH MELVIN WRIGHT

# BOOKMARKS

*Anthony Domestico*

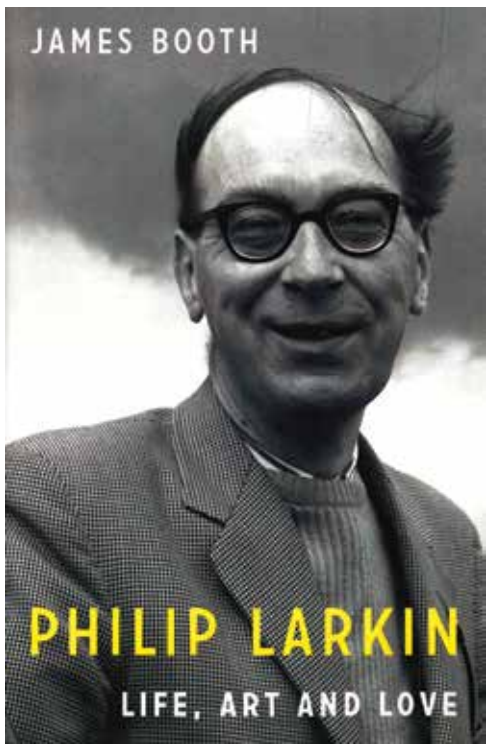
You'd be hard-pressed to name a modern poet more quoted or loved than Philip Larkin. His perfectly cadenced, precisely phrased lines come unbidden to the mind when you think of mortality ("Death is no different whined at than withstood") or life's bitter unfolding ("Life is boredom, then fear"), the potentially poisonous effects of family ("They fuck you up, your mum and dad") or religion's beautiful but—in Larkin's view—false promises ("That vast moth-eaten musical brocade / Created to pretend we never die"). No poet has expressed a certain dark and death-haunted mood better than Larkin.

Yet the perfection of the work existed alongside a decidedly imperfect life. In 1993, Andrew Motion published his official biography of Larkin, and the picture it presented was ugly. Larkin was frequently unhappy in his work (he served as the librarian at the University of Hull) and in his romantic life, which for years consisted of a love triangle with Monica Jones, a lecturer in English literature, and Maeve Brennan, one of his colleagues at Hull. Larkin was nasty about other poets ("that shit Yeats, farting out his histrionic rubbish"), about women (he had a taste for pornography, going so far as to ask the wife of his friend Kingsley Amis to participate in what Amis called a "dirty-picture proposal"), and about large swaths of the non-British, non-white world.

In ***Philip Larkin: Life, Art and Love*** (Bloomsbury, $35), James Booth wants to change the terms of the conversation about both Larkin's life and his work. First, contrary to the popular vision of Larkin as the mid-twentieth century's preeminent poet of unhappiness, Booth argues that Larkin was so horrified by death precisely because he was so in love with life: "Inexistence consists precisely of the concrete loss of vision, hearing, touch, taste or smell, and Larkin fears this loss." "Everyday things are lovely to me," Larkin once said in an interview, and Booth goes to great lengths trying to prove how lovely Larkin found bicycles and beer and jazz and delicious solitude.

To support this critical reevaluation, Booth focuses much of his attention on the affirmative moments that can be found in the poetry. He reads "The Whitsun Weddings," for example, as "an Ode to Incipience"—that is, a poem that finds perfection in the just-about-to-be, the moment that, as Booth puts it, "distil[s] the livelong minute of life." Booth will often acknowledge a pessimistic reading of a poem only to offer an interpretation that is more tempered, admitting the misery but insisting that it isn't the whole story. Take his reading of "An Arundel Tomb," a poem in which the speaker first describes seeing a fourteenth-century sculptured tomb and then how time has "blurred" its features. The poem ends with these lines:

> Time has transfigured them into
> Untruth. The stone fidelity
> They hardly meant has come to be
> Their final blazon, and to prove
> Our almost-instinct almost true:
> What will survive of us is love.




Booth argues that the final two lines aren't as cynical as we might think: "Logic tells us that love cannot defeat death, but…the contorted syntax, by making 'love' the poem's final ringing word, strives to assert permanence. The poet knows that the concluding affirmation is mere rhetoric; but its ineffectuality is precisely what makes it so moving." It's a complex argument about a complex poem: understanding a statement as rhetorical does not leach it of all feeling, Booth suggests. Likewise, Larkin's dark vision doesn't leach the world of all beauty and meaning.

Booth's readings of the poetry are usually convincing and always sensitive to matters of form. He does an admirable job of showing how subtly Larkin used enjambment and stanza breaks to reaffirm or complicate meaning. If there is a flaw in Booth's method, it lies in his commitment to accounting for all the poems. Rarely does he allow himself to slow down and unpack a work at great length; even the masterpieces like "Aubade" get just a page or two. This means we too often get a drive-by reading: Booth will summarize a poem's subject, mention a formal detail, and then, before you know it, he's on to another poem. The reader

learns something about almost everything Larkin wrote, but not enough about the best things he wrote.

What of the attempt to rethink Larkin's "reputation as a man"? Booth's main argument is that the most loathsome stuff the poet said in letters and interviews—the racism and misogyny especially—was an act that Larkin played for a particular audience. When Larkin remarks that "deprivation is for me what daffodils were for Wordsworth," for instance, Booth tells us, "these are not the words of a gaunt, emotionless failure, but of an ebullient provocateur with an instinct to entertain." In other words: It's all performance, so what's the big deal anyway?

Of course, there is a difference between saying hateful things in a letter to a friend and actually doing hateful things in the world, and sometimes Booth's defense of Larkin is convincing, as when he points to the fact that Larkin corresponded with the young Indian novelist and poet Vikram Seth and tried to help him get published. At other times, though, the defense just sounds like special pleading. In one of the stupidest moments you'll find in this smart book, Booth writes, "In 1946 [Larkin] dreamt he was a black man walking through racecourse crowds with Amis's future wife, Hilly Bardwell, sobbing with fear that he might be lynched. His subconscious was not racist." That last sentence would be laughable were it not so sadly revealing of Booth's desire to exonerate Larkin by any means. (Booth, who taught at the University of Hull, knew Larkin for years.)

Booth's attempts to dispel the myth of Larkin as Mr. Nasty can themselves become nasty. For instance, here is Booth's description of Larkin's love triangle with Monica and Maeve: "He was the victim of the breadth and generosity of his sensibility and the narrowness of theirs. The rut of Monica's reductive pessimism on the one hand, and the limitations of Maeve's complacent Catholicism on the other, meant that to reduce himself to a one-legged relationship with either of them would have brought pain to all three. It would also have put an end to his poetry." So Larkin's stringing along these two women for years is justified not only on moral grounds (to end things with one or the other would have caused pain), but also on aesthetic grounds (he needed both women to write poetry). Again, this is just plain silliness. And it distracts from the book's simpler truth: that whatever personal nastiness Larkin displayed—and there was plenty—he still wrote great poetry, and we shouldn't let the nastiness distract us from the greatness. As a man, Larkin could be brutish. But as a poet, he enriches our lives. He is the like the sun at the end of his great poem, "Solar": "Unclosing like a hand, / You give for ever."

Colm Tóibín's ***On Elizabeth Bishop*** (Princeton, $19.95) is an entirely different kind of criticism. Where Booth's book often reads like a brief for the defense, Tóibín's reads like a love letter from one writer to another.

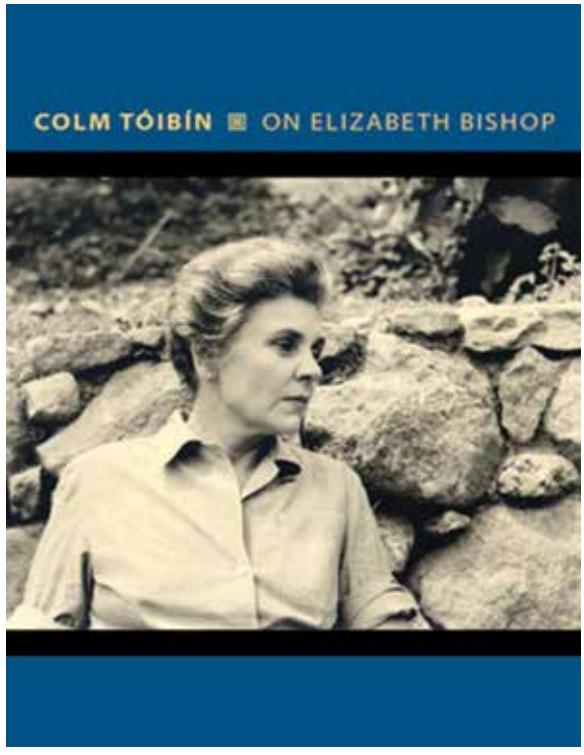
Tóibín is an Irish novelist noted for the restrained, disciplined style that he has displayed in works like *Brooklyn* (2009) and *The Testament of Mary* (2012). He finds the same stylistic virtues in Bishop. He begins his short, lyrical meditation of a book with this description:

> She began with the idea that little is known and that much is puzzling. The effort, then, to make a true statement in poetry—to claim that something is something, or does something—required a hushed, solitary concentration. A true statement for her carried with it, buried in its rhythms, considerable degrees of irony because it was oddly futile; it was either too simple or too loaded to mean a great deal. It did not do anything much, other than distract or briefly please the reader. Nonetheless, it was essential for Elizabeth Bishop that the words in a statement be precise and exact.

In a few words, Tóibín manages to capture much of what is distinctive about Bishop: her puzzlement before the world's shifting nature; her frequent use of rhythm to carry poetic meaning; above all, her commitment to precision along with her acknowledgment that even the most precise language will always come up short and so must always be qualifying itself.

The most typical moment in a Bishop poem, after all, is the moment of self-correction, when the speaker says one thing only to quibble with herself immediately afterwards. In "The Map," for example, the speaker looks at the boundary between land and ocean on a map and sees "Shadows, or are they shallows, at its edges…" In "Sandpiper," we hear that the titular bird "runs… watching his toes. // —Watching, rather, the spaces of sand between them / where (no detail too small) the Atlantic drains / rapidly backwards and downwards." Perhaps shadows, but also perhaps shallows; not toes, but the spaces between toes. No detail is too small.

*On Elizabeth Bishop* doesn't display much in the way of large-scale organization. It drifts and meanders, as Tóibín



follows the issues raised by Bishop's poetry—sexuality (Tóibín is gay, and so was Bishop); the relation between one's life and one's art—wherever they might lead him. The book doesn't engage much with other critics of Bishop's work, which is fine because his own insights are so sharp. Here he is on Bishop's descriptive mode: "In Bishop's work, much was implied by what seemed to be mere description. Description was a desperate way of avoiding self-description; looking at the world was a way of looking out from the self." And here he is on "Roosters," Bishop's 1941 war poem that doesn't actually mention war: "She managed to write one of the great poems about power and cruelty by not doing so, by describing, suggesting, by working on her rhythms and cadences, her rhymes and her half-rhymes, by leaving it at that, by understanding what might be enough."

In the book's best and most surprising section, Tóibín reads Bishop's "At the Fishhouses" alongside James Joyce's short story "The Dead." He shows how both works display a similar trajectory: they begin with "very detailed and exact description"—the "benches, / the lobster pots, and masts" of "At the Fishhouses," the "diamond-bone sirloins, three-shilling tea and the best bottled stout" of "The Dead"—and then move toward "a moment that is totalizing and hallucinatory in its tone, which moves above the scene and attempts in its cadences to wrest meaning and create further mystery from the scene below." Bishop's poem ends with this vision of the ocean:

> It is like what we imagine knowledge to be:
> dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free,
> drawn from the cold hard mouth
> of the world, derived from the rocky breasts
> forever, flowing and drawn, and since
> our knowledge is historical, flowing, and
> flown.

We've moved from exact, everyday description to something different—something that is elemental and terrifying and awesome. Bishop's language isn't quite religious (she wasn't a believer), but it almost is. Tóibín describes this moment wonderfully:

## TWO POEMS BY BR. JOSEPH MICHAEL

### El Greco's Evangelist

Paint. Paint the soft lines
of damp cheeks across a canvas.
Paint the deep eyes, the little
hand and the orb.
Splash some color along the curve
of her neck and suggest
the wafting scent of his musty flesh,
the earth soiling her mantle's hem,
the wet hay and animal sweat.
Fill out her rounded face
and his chubby legs. Paint well
her ponderous humanity and his
unquestioned divinity
and her smile, Luke. Paint her smile
and we shall see
how well your lazy eye can see.

### Sacred Oil

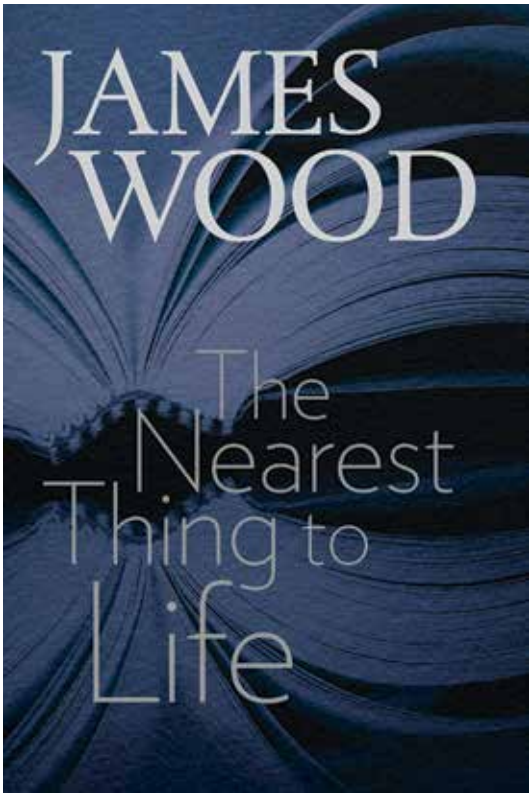
Priests—
I found this
outside on the pavers
by the parked car,
the Legacy.
It may be life for the dying.
It must be one of yours.

*Br. Joseph Michael is a Franciscan Friar of the Renewal living in the South Bronx.*

A sort of homecoming is enacted by allowing the image to transform itself, free itself from the shackles of the concrete, the positive, the world of things, and move like a boat sent to rescue someone, into an uneasy, shimmering, almost philosophical, almost religious space, using words with both freedom and restraint, suggesting something that has not been formulated or imagined by anyone before.

Tóibín here has identified the strongest moments in Bishop's poetry: when the patient description of the ordinary cracks open something extraordinary in the language and in ourselves.

Tóibín reads Bishop as a poet who explores the new possibilities offered by a world in which faith in God has diminished, if not disappeared altogether. In this new world, "the language of transcendence can have a special power because it invokes something that was once familiar, once possible, and is now lost." The ability of literature to invoke a sacredness that was once possible and is now lost has been a central topic of James Wood's writing for the past two and a half decades. His first book of criticism, *The Broken Estate*, had the subtitle "Essays on Literature and Belief" and examined what Wood called "the distinctions between literary belief and religious belief." His first novel, *The Book Against God*, likewise explored what might be left for life and for literature after God had been declared dead. The loss of religious belief and its relation to literary expression: it's an itch that Wood can't stop scratching, and he scratches it again in his newest book, ***The Nearest Thing to Life*** (Brandeis, $19.95).




The book consists of four essays, most of which have appeared in one form or another in the pages of the *New Yorker* (where Wood is a staff writer) or the *London Review of Books*. "Why?" is the title of the first essay, a shifty piece that moves from a consideration of death and theodicy ("Death gives birth to the first question—Why?—and kills all the answers") to a longer, exhilarating discussion of how the novel is, by its very nature, torn between secular and religious modes of narration.

As Wood writes, "To read the novel is to be constantly moving between secular and religious modes, between what could be called instance and form." By this, he means that the novel is secular insofar as it is interested in the sheer endless particularity of the everyday ("the novel is the great trader in the shares of the ordinary") but it is religious insofar as it possesses the "tendency to see life as bounded, already written"—that is, to see the everyday not as endless but as determined and shaped by an end beyond itself. The secular focuses on the details and moments of a life, and it "strives to run these instances at a rhythm close to real time," while religion "teaches us about the relation of instance to form," how instance only gets its meaning by "being bounded by death." For Wood, the novel is a secular form that can't quite escape its theological underpinnings—and for him, that's a good thing, since instance needs form in order to become meaningful.

Readers of Wood's previous work will recognize many of the arguments articulated in *The Nearest Thing to Life*: for example, Wood's privileging of fictional detail, which he imagines as "nothing less than bits of life sticking out of the frieze of form, imploring us to touch them." In "Using Everything," he also offers a lovely account of good criticism as "a way of writing through books, not just about them." The idea that criticism might be as metaphorical and imaginatively daring as the work it interprets is familiar from Wood's earlier work, and it is exemplified in Wood's own prose.

But the most fascinating bits of this book—and what makes it, in my opinion, his best—are the parts where Wood reflects on his own life, using his childhood reading and his exile (Wood moved from London to the United States in 1995 and has remained here ever since) as a new way to approach literary questions. We hear that when, as a child, Wood "asked where God came from, my mother showed me her wedding ring, and suggested that, like it, God had no beginning or end." This story then leads to a consideration of the beginnings and ends of fiction. We hear about the young Wood's headmaster, whose "ancient Oxford shoes were black, his thick spectacles were black, the pipe he smoked was black. He seemed to have been carbonized centuries ago, turned into ash, and when he lit his pipe, it seemed as if he was lighting himself." This leads to an account of the "pungency" of fictional detail. The play between biography and criticism is exquisite, and it's unlike anything Wood has done before.

In "Using Everything," Wood relates his encounter at fifteen with Martin Seymour-Smith's *Novels and Novelists: A Guide to the World of Fiction*. The book contained a list of 1,348 author names, with short but impassioned summaries for each. Wood describes the excite-

ment with which he dived into these capsule descriptions: "These short descriptions seemed like passionate messages sent to me from inside the world of literature: they had an intoxicating air of urgent aesthetic advocacy, an apparent proximity to the creative source, a deep certainty that writing mattered, that great books were worth living and dying for, that consequently, bad or boring books needed to be identified and winnowed out. This, I felt, was how writers spoke about literature!" Wood's work has always expressed this critical urgency, this sense that books matter to the life of literary and religious culture. In *The Nearest Thing to Life*, he shows something different: how books have mattered, deeply and lastingly, to his own life. ■

## LETTERS continued from page 4

conscience among Catholics today. Is the concept of mortal sin dying among practicing Catholics?

JOHN BUGGY
*Drexel Hill, Penn.*

### AUTHORIZED ANOINTING

A recent column by Rita Ferrone, "Unction Dysfunction" (September 25) and a letter by Br. William Longo (Letters, October 23) assert that the pope can change the church discipline that requires a priest to administer the Sacrament of the Sick. Regarding the sacraments, canon law is subject to sacramental theology, which also binds the pope. The Anointing of the Sick is intimately connected to the Sacrament of Penance and therefore cannot be delegated to a deacon or layperson, as Ferrone and Longo suggest. The rite itself makes many references to this sacramental complementarity. If, as Br. Longo contends, lay people heard confessions and anointed the sick during the late Middle Ages, it must be noted that in no way was this practice ever recognized as sacramental. After the Council of Trent these ministrations disappeared.

(REV.) MICHAEL P. ORSI
*St. Agnes Church, Naples, Fla.*

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# Damascus Road

*Brad Hoff*

Iraq, Libya, Syria—countries ripped apart by sectarian and political violence in the aftermath of foreign interventions: American invasion and occupation in Iraq, NATO intervention in Libya, and an international proxy war in Syria. It is now commonplace to observe that violence and conflict are endemic to the region. We say, "they've always hated each other." But it was not always so—in prewar Syria, I found a place of beauty, peace, and coexistence that most Westerners either never knew of or have already forgotten. But the Syrians themselves will never forget.

I served in the Marine Corps during the first years of the Iraq War and was a 9/11 first responder while stationed at Headquarters Battalion Quantico in Virginia from 2000 to 2004. When the War on Terror began, I thought I knew something about Iraq. Along with many of my fellow soldiers and fellow citizens, I believed that Arab culture, with its tribal and sectarian divisions, must be brought to heel by the West: "the Arab world" would have to adopt the distinctively Western values of pluralism, secularism, and equality if peace and stability were ever to have a chance. This was a guiding assumption among the many Marine officers, active and retired, with whom I talked during my years at Quantico. Iraqis and Middle Easterners in general were, for us, abstractions; they fit neatly into categories we had picked up from a college course or perhaps a C-Span lecture: there are Sunnis, Shia, some dissident sects; they all mistrust each other; and they all want theocratic states with their group in charge.

*Damascus, 2009*

Starting in 2004, just after I had completed my active-duty service and while I was still on the reserve list, I made several trips to Syria in order to study Arabic. These trips ended up undoing every assumption I had made about the culture, politics, and conflicts of the Middle East.

The surprises began as soon as I arrived in Damascus. I had expected to find a city full of veiled women, mosques on every street corner, religious police looking over shoulders, rabid anti-American sentiment preached to angry crowds, persecuted Christians and crumbling hidden churches, prudish separation of the sexes, and so on. I quickly discovered how little Syria conformed to my ideas about "the Arab world," which were probably more reflective of Saudi Arabian life and culture.

Instead of burkas and niqabs, I saw mostly unveiled women wearing European fashions and sporting bright makeup—many of them wearing blue jeans and tight-fitting clothes that would be commonplace in American shopping malls on a summer day. Even venturing into "conservative" sections of the city, one could find clusters of restaurants filled with carefree Syrians, partying late into the night, playing cards, eating elaborate pastries, drinking beer and whiskey, and smoking hookah. There were plenty of mosques, but almost every neighborhood had a large church or two, and crosses figured prominently in the Damascus skyline. As I walked near the old walled section of the city, I was surprised to find entire streets lined with large stone and marble churches. At night, all the crosses atop these churches were lit up—outlined with blue fluorescent lighting, visible for miles. In some parts of Damascus, these blue crosses even outnumbered the green-lit minarets of mosques.

Before the current conflict Syria had about two million Christians, nearly all of them Orthodox and Catholic, living peacefully with their Muslim neighbors, often in mixed villages and urban neighborhoods throughout the country. To many Americans, "Middle Eastern Christianity" sounds like an oxymoron, or is at the very least highly suspect. Though they're part of an unbroken tradition that goes back to biblical times, Arab and Eastern Christians who come to the United States are often asked, "When did you convert from Islam?" In the years right after 9/11, when Syria was said to belong to the "axis of evil," such flawed assumptions became even more deeply ingrained.

After the Syrian civil war began in 2011, much was made in the international press of Syria's "tribal and sectarian" fault lines. But the Syria I encountered was a notably secular and pluralistic society, especially when compared with some other countries in the region. What bound Syrians together was not Islam but Arab nationalism and secular socialist institutions.

Many of the families that graciously hosted me in the years just before war broke out didn't even know the religious identity of their next-door neighbors. (I am told that was also true in Baghdad before the U.S. intervention in Iraq.) Many Syrians complained openly to me about the corruption of the Ba'athist regime. But they also conceded that, while the Syrian government was deeply authoritarian in many respects, it generally allowed (and enforced) social and religious openness.

The Syrians I stay in touch with now see themselves as the powerless victims of a proxy war between global powers. As one woman recently put it, "My country has become one big weapons bazaar, and we want the shipments to stop." Pre-war Syria was certainly not ideal. But the fruit of revolution—a country thrown into a state of utter chaos and destruction, cyclic violence, and economic ruin for years to come—has proved to be the greatest of all possible evils. ■

**Brad Hoff**, *a Marine veteran, currently teaches history and literature at a classical Christian high school in Texas.*

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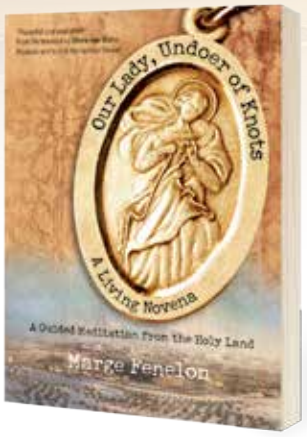


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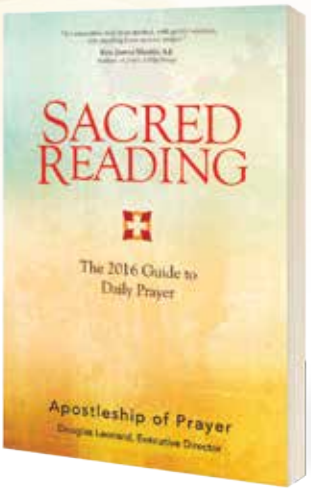


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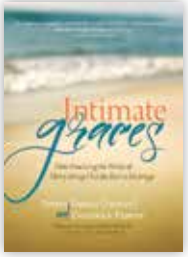


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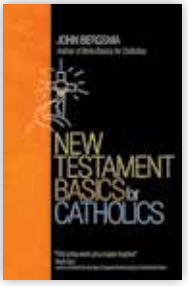


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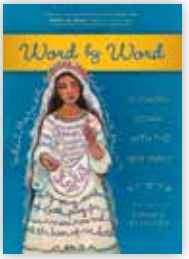


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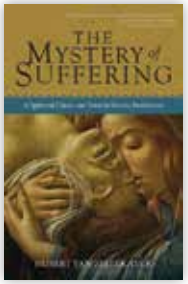


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