A Review of Religion, Politics & Culture

Commonweal

JANUARY 10, 2014

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Commonweal

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SHORT TAKE

ARTICLES

ART

Unknown photographer, [Thomas Mickleberry Merritt (left) and Unknown Fellow Officer, Company G, Second Georgia Cavalry Regiment], *1862–63*

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UPFRONT

COLUMNISTS

BOOKS

THE LAST WORD

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Cover image from Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* (Fox Searchlight Pictures)

LETTERS

Married priests, mourning a miscarriage

HUSBAND, FATHER, PRIEST

Richard Gaillardetz's "Married Priests: A Countercultural Witness" (December 6, 2013) is thoughtful and succinct.

I am an Episcopal priest, married almost forty-nine years. I know several Episcopal priests who have become Roman Catholic priests and a number who have gone from Rome to Canterbury. My friends who have become Roman Catholic priests have seemed to seek a church in which ordination and clerical celibacy (even for those who are married when they are received by Rome) confer a status of superior "purity," both in some deep-seated sexual sense and by treating the priesthood as a higher state, reflected in a theology that regards ordination as descending "from above."

Anglicanism considers the ministerial priesthood as deriving its ultimate meaning and authority from the baptized—"from below"—with episcopal ordination confirming one's call to minister as an icon of the faithfulness to which we are all called by virtue of our baptism. That I am married, have children and grandchildren, and wrestle with family life, mortgages, and all the other issues my parishioners might wrestle with (including sexual issues) makes it impossible for me to think of myself as purer or above them in any ontological sense. Married priesthood has its problems (ask my wife and children!), but in the long run, it seems healthier for both the clergy and the church—and a better reflection of at least my understanding of the gospel. I don't say this to be superior, and I certainly value those in my church with the charism to live the celibate life. The Roman Catholic Church has so much that is great and good and holy; the rest of us are never completely separated from it. I watch with interest what Pope Francis may open us up to in the years to come.

(REV.) JOHN McCAUSLAND
Weare, N.H.

LOST CHILD

Agnes Howard's essay "Comforting Rachel" (November 15, 2013) brought back memories for me. In 1955 I had a miscarriage about five months into pregnancy. My husband Francis and I had gone to my parents' home that evening for two reasons: to be closer to the doctor in case my symptoms turned into something serious, and to have someone care for our three other children, ages two, five, and six.

In the middle of the night it happened. The baby came as I was lying on the bathroom floor. Francis phoned our doctor, who came right away. (Doctors made house calls in those days.) He checked me thoroughly and said I should stay in bed a day and I would be all right. The baby was a miniature boy, complete with fingers, toes, and everything. The doctor told Francis to take the baby home to our farm and bury it in a flowerbed or where it would not be disturbed, so Francis went home in the morning and did just that.

I was sad to lose the baby, as he was to be my youngest child's playmate. We named him David, and I am sure he is in heaven waiting for us. When I went for a checkup a few weeks later the doctor, a kindly older man, comforted me, saying, "Don't blame yourself for losing the baby. These things happen for no reason that we know of. You did not cause it."

But I was never comforted by the church.

TERESA MOTTET
Fairfield, Iowa

Correction

Due to a transcription error, the term *lex credendi* was misspelled in Robert P. Imbelli's letter "Text & Context" (December 6, 2013). We regret the mistake.

From the Editors

Minimal Wages

In a recent speech on economic inequality, President Barack Obama drove home his argument for raising the national minimum wage with a quotation: "They who feed, clothe, and lodge the whole body of the people should have such a share of the produce of their own labor as to be themselves tolerably well fed, clothed, and lodged." Karl Marx? Franklin Delano Roosevelt? No: Adam Smith, described by the president as the "the father of free-market economics." Not that FDR would have disagreed with Smith. Before helping to establish the nation's first minimum wage in 1938, FDR declared that "no business which depends for existence on paying less than living wages to its workers has any right to continue in this country."

Today many businesses in this country depend, if not for their existence, then for some of their profits on paying less than living wages to their workers. The government keeps many of these workers out of poverty by providing them with tax credits and public assistance—in effect subsidizing their employers by making up for inadequate wages. A full-time worker making the current minimum wage ($7.25 an hour) earns just over $15,000 a year, almost 20 percent below the poverty line for a family of three. If such a family is to be "tolerably well fed and lodged," they will need food stamps and housing subsidies. Many of them, lacking employer-based health insurance, will also qualify for Medicaid. From time to time, a big company will unwittingly acknowledge that many of its own workers don't make enough to meet basic needs. A Walmart in Canton, Ohio, was recently embarrassed by reports that it had organized a Thanksgiving food drive for its "associates."

It wasn't always this way. In 1968 the minimum wage was $10.65 an hour in today's dollars. If it had kept up with inflation and gains in labor productivity since then, it would now be $25 an hour. No one in Washington supports raising the national minimum wage that high, but Sen. Tom Harkin (D-Iowa) and Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.) have introduced legislation that would raise it to $10.10 and index it to future increases in the cost of living—making the minimum wage not only more fair, but also more predictable and less subject to political exploitation. The Economic Policy Institute estimates that such legislation would affect 30 million American workers.

Contrary to popular misconceptions nourished by some in the media, most of the low-wage workers who would benefit from a higher minimum wage are not teenagers earning a little pocket money and learning some basic job skills. More than 90 percent of them are adults and almost a third are parents. The federal government spends around $7 billion a year on public assistance just for the families of fast-food workers. If conservative lawmakers are serious about streamlining entitlement programs and promoting self-reliance, they should be lining up behind proposals to raise the minimum wage.

So why aren't they? It isn't for lack of public support. A large majority of voters from both parties are in favor of raising the minimum wage. Whatever their opinions about welfare, most Americans agree with Adam Smith that those who work for a living should actually make one. Opponents of a higher minimum wage say it will only hurt the poor by reducing the number of jobs: when labor costs are higher, they warn, employers will hire fewer workers. This argument has a certain intuitive force, but several recent studies suggest that modest minimum-wage increases have no significant effect on employment levels. Lobbyists for retailers and fast-food restaurants also argue that higher wages will drive up business costs, which will be passed along to consumers as higher prices. But research suggests that a $10.10 minimum wage would add only a few pennies to the price of a hamburger. The lobbyists don't mention that the big corporations they represent could also absorb some of the higher labor costs by accepting lower profit margins. Some of what a McDonald's franchise owner pays in higher wages, for example, ought to come out of the fee he has to pay to the McDonald's Corporation, which made $5.5 billion in profit in 2012.

A higher minimum wage would be good for the nation's economy. It would stimulate demand by giving low-wage workers more spending power. It would save Washington and the states billions of dollars on entitlement programs by reducing poverty. But the argument for raising the minimum wage is as much moral as economic; it is an argument about fairness and the dignity of labor. No one who works full time in the richest country in the world should need to supplement her income with handouts, public or private. Or as the president put it in his speech, "If you work hard, you should make a decent living." Adam Smith couldn't have said it better. ■

Cathleen Kaveny

The ACLU Takes On the Bishops

TRAGEDY AT A CATHOLIC HOSPITAL LEADS TO A MISGUIDED LAWSUIT

On November 29, 2013, the American Civil Liberties Union filed a federal lawsuit on behalf of Tamesha Means in the Eastern District of Michigan. The lawsuit demanded compensatory and punitive damages for medically negligent treatment she allegedly received in the course of her pregnancy and miscarriage at Mercy Health Partners (MHP), a Catholic health facility in Muskegan. The plaintiff suffered from a decreased volume of amniotic fluid caused by the rupture of her amniotic sac. Means claims that MHP did not inform her that this situation would be lethal for her unborn child and could be seriously harmful to her if not treated appropriately.

Of course, medical malpractice lawsuits are not uncommon in the United States. What makes this case unusual is the identity of one of the defendants: the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The alleged negligent act: promulgating the Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services.

According to the complaint, the USCCB is responsible because it "directed the course of care Plaintiff received" from MHP. According to the plaintiff, Directive 27 does not require Catholic hospitals to disclose the option of a "previability pregnancy termination," because (she claims) the church does not see it as morally legitimate. The plaintiff also blames Directive 45, which prohibits abortion. That directive reads: "Every procedure whose sole immediate effect is the termination of pregnancy before viability is an abortion, which, in its moral context, includes the interval between conception and implantation of the embryo." The plaintiff contends that Directive 45 prevented MHP from either completing the miscarriage or referring her to a place that would do so.

But has Means identified the right defendants? Contrary to popular belief, the USCCB does not have the power to tell individual bishops—or Catholic health-care systems—what to do and what not to do. The conference promulgates the directives as an abstract set of norms applicable to Catholic hospitals. But it lacks the power to make them operationally effective. When it comes to canon law, the local bishop has the authority to enforce and interpret the directives in his diocese. But when it comes to secular law, what makes the directives binding on the Catholic hospital are their inclusion in its bylaws—a decision made by its religious sponsor, not the USCCB or even the local bishop. So the USCCB's promulgation of the directives cannot be considered the proximate cause of any harm suffered by the plaintiff.

In any case, the directives themselves are not to blame for the harm suffered by the plaintiff. The facts as alleged suggest a combination of garden-variety medical malpractice and misinterpretation of the directives. Not informing the patient about her treatment options is clearly negligence—but it is not uniquely *Catholic* negligence, even if it occurs in a Catholic hospital. Nothing in the directives prevents a Catholic hospital from being fully honest with a patient about her situation and its prognosis. Directives 47 and 49 *do* allow a hospital to induce labor in situations like the plaintiff's under the principle of double-effect. In such a case, the death of the unborn child, who would not have survived anyway, is not intended; it is foreseen and accepted as a side effect of treating the mother's illness. Therefore, the procedure the plaintiff claims she was not offered would not count as a prohibited "abortion" under church teaching.

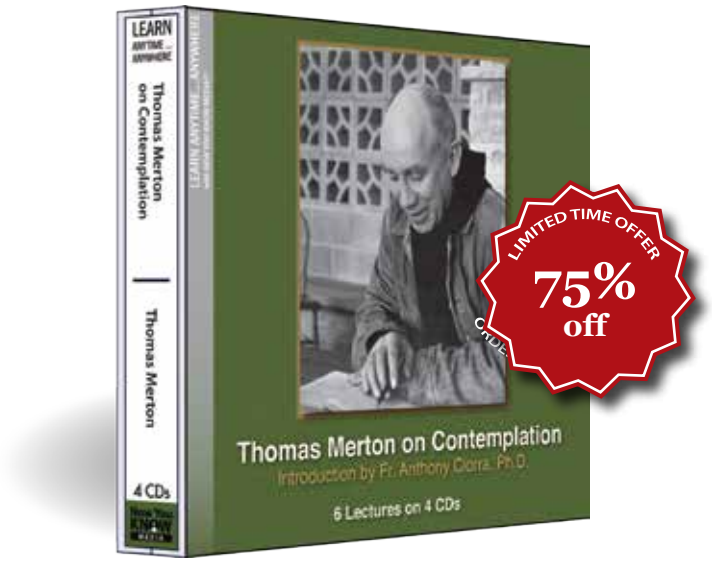
Bishop Thomas Olmsted

CNS PHOTO / NANCY WIECHEC

But the bishops do face a larger problem. A couple of years ago, Phoenix Bishop Thomas Olmsted excommunicated Margaret Mary McBride, RSM, for authorizing a Catholic hospital to perform a procedure necessary to save the life of a pregnant woman with severe pulmonary hypertension. Focusing mainly on the physical structure of the act, he claimed the procedure was an impermissible direct attack on unborn life. If he had had his way, the woman would have been left to die along with the baby—and the hospital would have, and should have, lost its license.

Fortunately, Catholic moral theology has moved beyond Olmsted's sort of rank physicalism in analyzing human acts. It is repudiated by John Paul II in in *Veritatis Splendor* and by conservative moralists such as Germain Grisez and Martin Rhonheimer. Nonetheless, taken out of context, a few lines in the directives could support Olmsted's mistaken view.

Properly understood, Catholic moral teaching requires Catholic hospitals to try to save *both* mother and unborn child, and if that is not possible, doctors must save the patient that can be saved. In early pregnancy, that's the mother. The time has come for the bishops conference to revise the directives to make that crystal clear. ■



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J. Peter Nixon

Alternative Medicine

GETTING TO THE RIGHT OF OBAMACARE

The disastrous rollout of the Affordable Care Act (ACA) has revived Republicans' hope of repealing the law. It's hard to remember that the Republican slogan was once "repeal *and* replace," suggesting the party would offer an alternative to Obamacare. Now, with the new law in crisis, the Republican leadership seems to hope it will collapse under its own weight.

Not all conservatives are convinced of the wisdom of that approach. Ramesh Ponnuru and Yuval Levin argued recently in the *Wall Street Journal* that "some Republicans think that political success requires nothing more than watching Obamacare fail. But if the new system quickly implodes, that would be all the more reason to have an alternative on hand—other than another leftward move toward single payer."

Ponnuru and Levin are part of a small network of (mostly) young conservative activists dubbed "reform conservatives" or "reformocons." Ponnuru writes for *National Review* and Levin is the editor of *National Affairs*, a new conservative policy journal. Also among their ranks is *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat, who, with his collaborator Reihan Salam, authored a reform manifesto for the GOP titled *Grand New Party,* in which they called for a serious conservative policy response to economic insecurity.

While these conservative intellectuals do not march in ideological lockstep, what unites them is the conviction that the Republican Party needs a policy agenda beyond saying no to whatever President Obama is proposing. The problems with the health-care system are real, and, in the absence of conservative alternatives, anxious families will embrace liberal solutions as the only ones available.

Except that the ACA really isn't that liberal. Unlike the kinds of social-insurance systems favored by the left (like Medicare or Canada's single-payer system), Obamacare has its roots in market-based approaches. These were proposed in the 1970s and '80s by Stanford health-care economist Alain Enthoven and a group of center-right thinkers known as the Jackson Hole Group. The ACA's individual mandate—now denounced as a form of socialist tyranny—was championed in the early '90s by the conservative Heritage Foundation as an alternative to President Bill Clinton's proposed employer mandate.

This history puts reform conservatives in a bind. They can't simply dust off the old plans, because what was once mainstream conservative thinking has now become heretical to large swaths of the Republican Party. So they have aped the Tea Party's over-the-top rhetoric. Writing in the *Weekly Standard* shortly after the ACA's passage, Yuval Levin

Yuval Levin

described the new law as a "ghastly mess, which began as a badly misguided technocratic pipe dream and was then degraded into ruinous incoherence by the madcap process of its enactment."

They have also embraced policy solutions that would have seemed impossible for earlier generations of conservatives. Many reform conservatives have been championing a plan developed by James Capretta of the Ethics and Public Policy Center, a conservative think tank. Capretta would like to move *all* Americans into the individual health-insurance market. Using either a cash voucher (in the case of Medicare and Medicaid beneficiaries) or a tax credit, individuals would choose among competing insurance plans. If the plan cost more than the amount of the voucher or credit, the individual would pay the difference. In theory, that would give consumers an incentive to be cost-conscious and force plans to keep premiums under control in order to gain their business.

Virtually no Republican officeholders have embraced Capretta's proposal in its entirety. Unlike the Affordable Care Act—which leaves employer-based insurance, Medicare, and Medicaid largely in place—the Capretta plan would change how *every* American obtains health insurance. The political backlash from such a plan would likely dwarf the current controversy over Obamacare.

For this reason, some conservative reformers are leaning toward a more incremental approach that draws on Capretta's ideas but focuses first on the individual insurance market. Ponnuru and Levin have proposed that uninsured individuals be given a tax credit large enough to purchase "catastrophic" insurance—in most cases, plans that cover hospitalization and serious illness but not routine services like checkups. In addition to this carrot, individuals also face a stick. They would be protected against premium increases related to their health status only if they purchase insurance and remain continuously insured. If they let their coverage lapse and then developed a serious health problem, insurers would be able to charge them whatever they liked for a new plan.

"The new alternative would not require the mandates, taxes, and heavy-handed regulations of Obamacare," argue Ponnuru and Levin. "It would turn more people into shoppers for health care instead of passive recipients of it—and

encourage the kind of insurance design, consumer behavior, and intense competition that could help keep health costs down."

That approach, however, looks a lot more like Obamacare than its advocates are willing to admit. The continuous-coverage requirement is clearly a "soft" individual mandate. Under the ACA, those who fail to purchase health insurance face a modest financial penalty. Ponnuru and Levin's proposal would punish the uninsured by driving up their premiums in the future, which could bring them to financial ruin if they remain uninsured and incur large medical bills.

While conservative reformers may claim that they are leaving consumers free to make that decision, the reality is that they are just as desperate as the architects of Obamacare to get young and healthy people to buy insurance. If their combination of carrots and sticks fails to convince that population to remain "continuously covered," the people who do maintain their coverage are probably going to be those who are sicker than average. Once that happens, insurers may have to keep premiums in the individual market high, making coverage unaffordable for many.

Still, the conservative reformers have an ace in the hole. Unlike the ACA, their proposals would not mandate any minimum-benefit package, making it easier for insurers to offer cheaper plans. Indeed, many of these reformers have been singing the praises of catastrophic health plans, lamenting that most consumers won't be able to buy many of the cheapest plans available today.

It's not unreasonable to give consumers some freedom to take greater risks so that they can pay lower premiums. On the health exchanges, consumers can choose from four levels of coverage—bronze, silver, gold, and platinum. Each of the four levels covers a different share of the enrollee's costs, with the platinum plan covering roughly 90 percent of costs and the bronze plan covering 60 percent.

Bronze plans may not technically count as catastrophic insurance, but they're close. The deductible for a family plan is $10,000 ($5,000 for an individual), and the maximum a family will have to pay out of pocket in a given year is $12,500 ($6,530 for an individual). Consider that gallbladder surgery (one of the most common surgical procedures in the United States) can cost between $5,000 and $10,000. For a family earning the median national income of $51,000 a year, a bronze plan will still leave them bearing a significant degree of financial risk.

While it's true that consumers have been able to purchase plans offering even "skinnier" benefits than these, how many of those plans could really be called health insurance? According to the National Women's Law Center, just 12 percent of plans serving the individual market prior to the ACA covered pregnancy and childbirth. One of the more bizarre twists in the Obamacare debate has been watching ostensibly prolife conservatives argue that this is an acceptable state of affairs.

Ross Douthat has argued the conservative case for catastrophic plans in his *New York Times* columns. He is willing to accept that catastrophic plans expose their buyers to significant financial risk. But, he argues, they also "create a sensitivity to price—and with it a curb on cost growth—that is rare in a system where third-party payment has made prices opaque, arbitrary, and inflated." Has Douthat actually looked at what's been happening in the insurance market over the past decade? High-deductible health plans are the most rapidly growing type of insurance product, and many employers have implemented fixed-premium contributions, higher deductibles, and co-pays for high-cost services like emergency-room visits.

This cost-shifting has not done much to bend the cost curve because, when it comes to buying health coverage, patients aren't the only decision-makers. For all but the most mundane of health-care services, patients depend heavily on their physicians to tell them whether a particular treatment is medically necessary.

The refusal of conservative reformers to endorse a standard-benefit package also works against their desire to promote more competition in the insurance market. Standardizing the benefit package is important because it allows consumers to compare the cost of similar products from multiple sellers. It's hard for consumers to assess the true value of a health plan when faced with a dizzying variety of covered benefits and cost-sharing arrangements.

The irony is that for all these differences, Obamacare and the conservative reform plans have a lot in common. Both subsidize the purchase of private insurance as a means of expanding coverage, both seek to increase competition among health plans as a way of driving down costs, both want to prevent insurers from discriminating against the sick, and both try to make this economically viable by bringing more healthy people into the insurance pool.

One could certainly imagine changes to Obamacare that would address many of the concerns raised by Ponnuru, Douthat, et al. The benefits package could be made less generous and more catastrophic options could be allowed. States could be given more flexibility in running their exchanges or managing Medicaid. The excise tax on high-cost employer-provided health plans could be raised, making plans less generous and consumers more cost-sensitive.

But that is hardly "repeal and replace." Rather than being a radically different "conservative alternative" to Obamacare, what the reform conservatives are proposing is just a few steps to the right along the same continuum. While one can hardly expect the left to endorse it, the real problem for reform conservatives may be their friends on the right. For the GOP base, the struggle against Obamacare has become an apocalyptic battle between Freedom and Tyranny, not an opportunity for the kind of policy give-and-take the reform conservatives are offering. ■

J. Peter Nixon *is a regular contributor to* Commonweal *and has worked in the health-care industry for more than twenty years.*

Seeing as God Sees

Terrence Malick's The Tree of Life

Karen Kilby, Luke Timothy Johnson, Bernard G. Prusak

Karen Kilby

Is it part of being a Christian to have a vision of the whole of things? Does faith give you a perspective on everything? Does it provide a unified story, a vision of how all things fit together—good and evil, creation and salvation, love and suffering and death, the smallest and the greatest, the best and the worst?

I tend to be wary of the idea. Thomas Aquinas, it is true, said that theology was the science of God and all things in relation to God, which might seem a license for thinking that the theologian should have a vision of everything. But Scripture is an unsynthesized, confusing, at times chaotic affair, and Thomas himself proceeded with great modesty and a constant sense of the overwhelming ungraspability of God. The best theology, in my view, has always been in large part about acknowledging intellectual brokenness, limits, defeat, incompleteness.

Against the background of my own instinctive wariness about supposing you can get a hold on everything at once, it was fascinating to watch Terrence Malick's 2011 film *The Tree of Life*. It is an extraordinary film—too long, perhaps, but beautiful, baffling, strangely compelling. And one way of understanding it is as an attempt to present a vision of, precisely, everything.

Up to a point the film tells a concrete story. There is a family with three sons. The mother is loving and ethereal. The father, an engineer who would have liked to have been a musician, is somewhat domineering. We see bits of their lives, and we see the parents grief-stricken when they learn of the death of their second son at the age of nineteen.

But this story is told out of order, and incompletely, and jumbled up with other things. We hear whispered voice-overs addressing God. The film dwells on babies and toddlers, on the wonder of the newborn to his father, on the wonder of the world to the infant. We see a single, uneventful scene from the childhood of the mother—she is standing in a field, looking around, and then her father is with her. We see swirling, beautiful depictions of the origins of the cosmos, of the galaxies as they move, of the formation of the earth and the development of life. We see a couple of dinosaurs, and we see the asteroid that brings the age of the dinosaurs to an end. We see the eldest son later in life, in a city, moving through his workday in a modern glass-and-steel skyscraper, and we see him, wearing the same suit, wandering in a desert, coming upon a surreal gate, eventually passing through it.

Watching the film, one searches for a thread to bring coherence to all the pieces, to untangle and reassemble them as a unified, ordered story. Perhaps it is all about the eldest son, his memories and reflections on childhood and growing up, on his complex relationship with his father, on the brother he lost. But then why do some of the most significant parts of the film take the mother's perspective? And why does the camera dwell with such love on an infancy that he wouldn't remember? Or again, perhaps it is all about a death, bereavement, a family struck by loss. But then why would we need to know about, say, the father's thwarted vocation as a musician, and why the long vision of the creation of the cosmos?

Too much certainty about what such an elusive and disorienting film is "about" would be a little foolhardy, but one way to watch *The Tree of Life*, I think, is as a meditation on the wholeness of things, on how all things fit together, or if not that, at least on how all things *are* together. With its leaps and its fragmentariness, the film promotes a sense of simultaneity—of past and present, of the smallest and the greatest, of the most human, intimate, and particular with the whole sweep of the spinning cosmos and the emergence of life. So Malick can show us the beauty of a newborn baby's toes, as seen by his father, and he can give us a vision of the beauty and grandeur of the growth of galaxies, and neither is allowed to upstage the other. A very particular family drama and the evolution of all life on earth are depicted side by side, each with a similar level of intensity.

Sin, conflict, deformity, loss, and death also play a part. On the whole the touch here is light. We see the boys encounter men who are crippled, and prisoners. We see them experiencing the shock of a child's drowning, and dressed in black at the funeral. Jack, the eldest son, goes off the rails a little: he breaks a window, fires a rocket, steals a bit of lingerie. We see him, without provocation, shoot his brother's finger with an air rifle. No great damage is done,

but the film's score lends to the incident the seriousness Augustine's Confessions gives to the theft of pears from a neighbor's garden. We hear Jack's whispered prayer, echoing St. Paul's: "What I wanna do I can't do. I do what I hate."

In spite of the lightness of touch, however, theological issues around loss and death in particular are right at the heart of the film. How can the suffering of the innocent, the sudden, pointless loss of life, be reconciled with the love of God? The question surfaces early in the film in connection with the death of the middle son in the family, but its centrality is signaled still earlier, in a quote that stands at the very opening of the film: "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?… When the morning stars sang together and all the sons of God shouted for joy?"

To see how these lines can be taken as a kind of key to much of *The Tree of Life*, one needs to recall their place in the Book of Job. They come near its end. Most of the book has been taken up with an extended debate between the afflicted Job and his three friends. Repeatedly Job defends his integrity, rejecting the view of his "comforters" that some transgression must be at the root of his sufferings, and repeatedly he demands that God should appear. He wants to stage a trial: he wants God to show up and justify himself, to provide an answer to the question of why the innocent suffer. And then suddenly, shockingly, God does appear, speaking from a whirlwind. But the great oddity of the book of Job is that what follows is a massive non sequitur. God pays no attention to questions of the injustice of the world, shows no interest in the suffering of the innocent in general, or in why Job in particular has been stricken. In fact, he seems to show no interest in humanity whatsoever. Instead he dwells boastfully, almost bombastically, on the sheer magnitude of creation, the terror and splendor of it.

What if one assumes, though, that it is *not* a non sequitur: what if God's speech is not a rebuke of Job, or a rejection of his question, or a change of subject? What if one assumes that it is, in fact, somehow, a genuine answer? This, it seems to me, is part of what Malick is trying to imagine in *The Tree of Life*. "I want to see as you see," prays the young Jack, and perhaps the film itself is trying to see as God sees: What does the world look like if God's speech is not a rejection of Job's question, but truly an answer to it?

The figure of Job is, to a certain extent, represented in the film by the boys' mother. She is good, kind, gentle, wondering, loving. We hear her early on describe and commit herself to "the way of grace." (The opposition Malick sets up, incidentally, between "the way of nature" and this "way of grace" is the one theological misstep I spotted—his "way of nature" doesn't sit well with a traditional theological concept of nature, nor with the film's own portrayal of the natural world.) "I will be true to you," she says, "whatever comes." And then the scene changes and what comes is in

IMAGES FROM *THE TREE OF LIFE* COURTESY FOX SEARCHLIGHT PICTURES

fact the mailman, delivering the telegraph with news of her son's death. We see her grief. And we see her questioning, her inability to make sense of the death. And it is precisely at this point, after this question of senseless death has been posed, that the long, beautiful, awe-inspiring scenes of the world's creation begin.

Of course, how the whole history of the universe and the origin of life is an answer to the question "Why did my son die?" is made no clearer in the film than by the Book of Job. There is no theodicy here, no intellectual resolution to the problem of evil. The film tries to see God's answer to Job, rather than to explain it. It does not give an account of the interconnectedness of all things, but tries to envision it.

In medieval theology one sometimes meets a distinction between reason and understanding, *ratio* and *intellectus*. *Ratio*, reason, is laborious, discursive, moving from one proposition to another, from premise to conclusion. *Intellectus* is a simpler and more immediate form of knowing—something like seeing all at once. *The Tree of Life*, then, is not a rational exploration of how all things fit together—it is not a matter of *ratio* at all—but an effort to imagine, to glimpse, fleetingly, something of the *intellectus* that belongs only to God: "I want to see as you see."

If there is a reaching for a perspective on the whole in this film, however, there is also an intense fragmentariness to it, at every level. The central narrative is unfinished (we learn nothing of the fate of the youngest brother, never find out how the central father-son relationship develops, never learn where the mother's grief leads her, and so on). Individual scenes are shot chaotically, full of shifting angles, inconsistencies, discontinuities. Dialogue is only half heard. But this fragmentariness is fitting in a film that strives after the whole: if one is going to attempt a vision of everything, it is only right at the same time to be as clear as one can about the unattainability of this vision. Like all the best theology, the film is woven through with an acknowledgement of limitation, of the brokenness of our understanding and the defeat of our vision.

Does the film succeed? Not entirely. It drags at times. It isn't rounded, doesn't feel balanced or quite finished. Many have found the final scenes, which contain a kind of eschatological vision of reconciliation, particularly unsatisfying. The older version of Jack, wandering in the desert, finally goes through the mysterious gate and comes to a beach where all the characters from his life are to be seen, reunited and solemnly joyful. The father lifts up and embraces his son, a movement in which all of the earlier love and wonder are present but none of the conflict and domineering; the mother, assisted by a mysterious figure (the Holy Spirit?) repeatedly, joyfully, offers her son to God in prayer. It is all perhaps a little heavy-handed, just as some of the other scenes are, undoubtedly, a little drawn out.

But one can't expect heaven to be easy to portray in a film, or a perspective on everything to be neatly delivered in two-and-a-half hours. If Malick's ambition exceeds his execution, the resulting film is nevertheless something important: not only the work of a contemplative, but a work with the breadth and the beauty, the ambiguity and the provocation, to draw its viewers down contemplative paths of their own.

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Luke Timothy Johnson

The Tree of Life may or may not be a cinematic masterpiece, but it is certainly one of the most impressive attempts to use cinema to do theology. Many critics were swayed by the film's impressionistic style, its ravishing musical score, its exquisite cinematography and elaborate special effects; *The Tree of Life* won the Palme d'Or at Cannes and was nominated for Academy Awards in the categories of Best Picture, Director, and Cinematography. But many ordinary viewers—and some critics—consider the film's impressionistic and nonlinear style a symptom of narrative incoherence. They left the movie with a sense of having been exposed to something important, without being sure of what that might be.

The film's story is at once universal and highly particular. The middle-aged protagonist, Jack O'Brien (Sean Penn), is a successful architect, the oldest of three brothers who grew up possibly Catholic (the movie does not make their religion clear) in 1950s Waco, Texas. Jack looks back at the joyous and poignant memories of his early life, memories triggered by the commemoration of his younger brother's death at the age of nineteen. Terrence Malick's own life seems to have supplied much of the scaffolding for the film; the director grew up in Texas and had a brother who died at nineteen.

The lives of the three brothers are evoked with stunning attention to the details of childhood experiences and perceptions, above all those concerning their parents. Their father (Brad Pitt) is a gifted musician who works for a corporation while seeking in vain to make a fortune through developing patents. He loses his job, and the family must move from the place where, with his first son, he had planted a "tree of life" in the yard—a tree that became a point of reference for many of the boys' activities. O'Brien is a complicated man, driven partly by rigid idealism and partly by envy of those who are better off in life. Righteous, but unaffectionate and formidable, he demands of his son, "Do you love your father?"—forcing the son to answer, "Yes, sir."

In contrast, the boys' mother (Jessica Chastain) is a blithe and gentle spirit who seems to desire nothing more than the life she shares with her husband and children. Lovingly nurturing in her boys a sense of playfulness and wonder, she personifies the film's definition of grace; even as she gives to others, so does she receive affliction. The boys feel pulled between the ways of life exemplified by their parents, which *The Tree of Life* explicitly identifies as "the way of grace," which "does not please the self and accepts being slighted," and "the way of nature," which "only wants to please itself, and gets others to please it." We must, Jack O'Brien's voice-over tells us, "choose which one to follow."

But while the two younger boys—above all the middle son, R. L.—are drawn unambiguously toward their mother's way of grace, Jack is divided within: drawn to the simplicity and joy of his mother, he envies R. L. for being so much like

her; at the same time he grasps that this envy, and the rage it engenders, make him more like his father. He desires his father's death, yet declares to him, "I'm as bad as you are. I'm more like you than her." The film traces Jack's movement, through memory, toward an attitude of acceptance and forgiveness, such as he learned from his mother and brother, which extends also to his father.

The family dynamics are instantly recognizable. We may think of Cain and Abel when, alone in the woods, Jack coaxes R. L. to put his finger over the barrel of a BB gun and then fires it. We may think of Oedipus when Jack's gaze lingers on his mother and glowers at his father ("Please kill him," the voice-over whispers; "She only loves me.") But if the dynamics are universal, the setting is acutely specific. One of the virtues of the film is how it so cannily captures the nature of those years, in that place, as experienced by boys like these: the feel of summer evenings spent throwing a ball or chasing the DDT truck as it sprays for mosquitoes; the fear and wonder at the sight of people who look and act differently; the tense moments at meals when the authoritarian father's demands for proper behavior explode into physical violence ("Why does he hurt us, our father?"). And any boy who has survived adolescence will recognize the painful moments of awakened sexuality—the helpless obsessiveness—as well as the surges of deflected anger that find expression in cruelty to insects and toads, and, alas, younger siblings.

Despite its magnificent precision in capturing these discrete moments, the film also frustrates. Malick relies heavily on small snippets of dialogue, and above all on whispered voice-overs, some of which are simply hard to hear. The episodic and almost dreamlike character of *The Tree of Life*, its impressionistic style—with many bridging views of treetops, water, grassy fields, birds, butterflies—can seem incoherent. Why is the cause or manner of R. L.'s death never stated? Why should it elicit such remorse in O'Brien, who mentions "shaming" the young boy? How did the planting of a tiny tree become a mighty live oak in subsequent shots? If O'Brien's loss of his job meant the loss of their house, how is the family living in an elegant setting when news arrives of his son's death? Why does the middle-aged Jack light a votive candle for R. L.—as his father had done earlier in a church? Why does he have visions of trudging through a desert landscape? What is the meaning of the door in the middle of the wilderness that morphs into a door at the end of a pier? What exactly are we to make of the seaside beach on which the family—with countless others—seems to be wandering at the end of the film? Why does Jack appear in that final scene as his adult self while his parents and brothers appear as they were in his childhood? The sheer gorgeousness of the film allows us to forgive these and other loose ends, but they are bothersome nevertheless.

Perhaps these problems reflect not a lack of cinematic craft—the evidence of Malick's skill on that score is abundant—but rather the daunting nature of trying to make a film about ordinary people that is suffused with cosmic significance. There is no mistaking Malick's theological intentions, nor for that matter the academic credentials he possesses to make such an effort. A Phi Beta Kappa scholar who graduated from Harvard University in philosophy, Malick was a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford, worked on a thesis on Kierkegaard, translated Heidegger, and taught philosophy at MIT.

The theological dimension of his film is by no means limited to the realm of the religious. True, the O'Brien family evinces the conventional piety of the 1950s: they go through the rituals of baptism and Eucharist; hear sermons and light votive candles; say grace at meals; attend funerals. But the true theological dimension enters through the means Malick employs to subvert the traditional Jewish and Christian choice between the "two ways." The film opens with an epigraph drawn from the words of God in the Book of Job (38:4, 7): "Where were you when I laid the foundation of the earth, when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy?" And at both the beginning and the end of the film, we see a flame flickering in the darkness, signaling the eternal offstage presence of God behind the surface play of the human drama.

What happens in the lives of the O'Briens, Malick suggests, must be perceived not only as the interaction of human desire and revulsion, and surely not merely as a controllable calculus of reward and punishment, but rather as participation in the impenetrable mystery of God and God's continuing creation of the world—a mystery that at once relativizes and enhances the drama of familial interaction. Malick asks us to see that while God is not visibly present among the O'Briens, God's implicit power and presence is active among them, in ways both light and dark.

That Malick regards the Book of Job as the text through which the film's events are to be perceived is made clear by the sermon, preached by a priest in mid-film, pointing out that misfortune befalls the good as well as the evil, and that no human effort can protect us from suffering. Another unmistakable allusion comes in a relative's statement of comfort to Mrs. O'Brien following the death of her son: "The Lord gives, the Lord takes away; that's the way he is. He sends flies to wounds that he should heal." More subtly, Malick uses Jack's voice-overs not only to express aspects of his remembered family history, but to articulate his relationship with God, in questions and statements that evoke those Job posed to God: "Who are we to you? Answer me." "I want to be where you are. I want to see what you see." "I didn't know how to name it then, but I say it was you. Always you." "God's hand the whole time. I shall fear no evil for you are with me." "Before I knew I loved you, I believed in you. When did you first touch my heart?"

Strikingly, Malick wants us to see that the relationship with God is not distinct from human interactions but in fact is mediated by them; speaking of childhood, Jack says, "That's where God lives." Above all, Jack's path toward God is linked to the way of grace displayed by his mother and younger brother. "Brother. Mother. It was they who led me to your door," Jack whispers in voice-over. And at the end: "The only way to be happy is to love. Unless you love, your life will flash by."

In all of this, I find *The Tree of Life*, its irritatingly quiet voice-overs notwithstanding, an astonishingly rich exercise

in theological reflection. The combination of everyday life and life crisis, read through bits of Sacred Scripture and interpreted through meditative recollection, strike me both as an exemplary theological method and as an innovative use of cinema in service to theology that goes far beyond any film I can recall.

Those who have seen the film may wonder at my omission of one of its most attention-grabbing sequences—the sixteen minutes of sight and sound that begin with the Big Bang and end with the birth of the infant Jack, and the vision of the "end-time" in which members of the family reunite on a sandy strand that we assume stands for the shore of eternity. I will leave aside the obvious imbalance between these two explicit pointers to transcendence: whereas the depiction of cosmology is powerful and clear, the eschatological vision is oddly weak and vague. More important for the question of theological method is whether such explicit glimpses of the divine process detract from, rather than enrich, the theological texture of the film. Certainly, viewers are provided help in perceiving the human drama as participating in a larger cosmic drama. But I think it is precisely such breaking of the narrative plane that shifts attention from the way in which Malick has so compellingly interwoven the empirical and the transcendent, and represents, in fact, a distraction from what is most genuinely theological in this movie.

The rich allusiveness of the film extends to its title. What does Malick want us to understand by "the tree of life"? It is not clear. The planting of a tree that becomes the center of childhood activity roots metaphorical meanings in something real that lives and grows as the boys themselves do. And the constant attention to trees and leaves and the things that live in and among them serves to remind the viewer of the tree motif. Given the film's commitment to biblical intertextuality, we might think in terms of the tree of life planted in the garden of Eden; certainly Jack's eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—a way of reading his progression to adolescence—appears to lead to a banishment from the Eden and the tree of life that was the place of the boys' childhood. Yet that Eden was already one in which both good and evil were at work. Alternatively, the tree of life might allude to the theme of the cosmic tree from which all flows and in which all things are united.

As with so many other aspects of this movie, these possibilities stimulate thought while providing no easy resolution. What greater praise might a theologian give to a film than to say that it also demands of its viewers serious and difficult thought about the meaning of life before God?

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Bernard G. Prusak

Philosophers who have written about the films of Terrence Malick typically note three biographical facts. First: Malick studied under the philosopher Stanley Cavell at Harvard, from which he graduated summa cum laude in 1965. Harvard's philosophy department then was intensely "analytic" in orientation—to simplify, it was focused on logic and language—but Cavell's interests included, as his faculty website states, "the intersection of the analytical tradition (especially the work of [J. L.] Austin and Wittgenstein) with moments of the Continental tradition (for example, Heidegger and Nietzsche)," for whom philosophy was also about the meaning of being and the death of God.

Second: After Harvard, Malick went to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, where his adviser was the philosopher Gilbert Ryle, famous in academic circles for his 1949 book *The Concept of Mind*. Malick wanted to write a thesis on Heidegger and Wittgenstein (and perhaps on Kierkegaard and Nietzsche as well). Ryle purportedly resisted Malick's request on the grounds that the topic wasn't "philosophical enough," which is another way of saying "that's not what we do here." (For reflections on academic philosophy in that period, see Daniel Callahan's essay "Out of Step: God and Me at Harvard and Yale," October 29, 2012.) Malick returned to the United States after only one year at Oxford.

The third fact: Although he came back to this country without a terminal degree in philosophy, he did not initially abandon his academic ambitions. In 1968 Malick taught a course on Heidegger at MIT, and in 1969 he published a translation—with an introduction and a set of critical notes—of Heidegger's *Vom Wesen des Grundes* under the title *The Essence of Reasons*. Also in 1969, however, Malick entered film school in Los Angeles, apparently having judged himself to be wanting as a teacher. He has not published in philosophy since—unless, of course, his films can be considered contributions to philosophy.

I do not doubt that one could give a thoroughgoing "Heideggerian" interpretation of *The Tree of Life*, but it is questionable whether such an interpretation would illuminate Malick's film or only restate its perplexities in terms no less perplexing, if not more so. Consider, instead, some of Malick's reflections in the introduction to his translation of Heidegger's text:

> Our problems are problems with Heidegger's language. What gives them their force as problems is that they ask to be solved in and through his language, without further recourse.... If Heidegger resorts to his own peculiar language, it is because ordinary German does not meet his purposes; and it does not because he has new and different purposes. If we cannot educate ourselves to his purposes, then clearly his work will look like nonsense. And yet we should not conclude that it is nonsense merely because we are not sure what is to keep us from the conclusion.

Our problems with *The Tree of Life* are likewise problems with Malick's peculiar cinematic language: weird, wordless visions; whispered voice-overs that emerge from deep within the characters, like springs breaking through hardened ground; infinities without and within juxtaposed with the most ordinary of everyday settings; a tissue of quotations and allusions; music that neither merely accompanies, nor simply comments, but suggests new, untold dimensions to what is unfolding before us; and, of course, dinosaurs. Even Sean Penn, who played the character of the grown-up Jack, had trouble construing Malick's purposes and came close to calling the film nonsense. "Frankly," he told the French newspaper *Le Figaro*, "I'm still trying to figure out what I just did there and what I could have added in that context!"

To figure out what Malick's up to, it might prove helpful to consider why he wanted to study with Ryle at Oxford. In other words, what attracted Malick to Ryle as a teacher? Malick would have known, I imagine, that Ryle published a long review of Heidegger's *Being and Time* in 1929, just two years after the book appeared in German and decades before its translation into English. Ryle's judgment of the book was at once admiring and suspicious: admiring of Heidegger's "analysis of the root workings of the human soul"; suspicious that the direction in which Heidegger was taking his philosophy was "an advance toward disaster" likely to end either in subjective idealism (dissolving the world into "man-constituted" meanings) or in "a windy mysticism." Yet Ryle hazards this rather strong "personal opinion…with humility and with reservations since I am well aware how far I have fallen short of understanding this difficult work." In light of this confession, Malick might have thought that Ryle, like Cavell, would be open to working through Heidegger with him.

Malick surely also would have been familiar with *The Concept of Mind*. Here Ryle attacks what he calls "the dogma of the Ghost in the Machine"—the "philosophers' myth," as he also calls it, that sets mind over and against body as two distinct substances. Ryle's method in this book is to focus on the mental concepts that we use in our ordinary language: thinking, feeling, knowing, imagining, and the like. His principal claim is that our theorizing about the mind is riddled with what he famously calls category mistakes. It is, for example, a category mistake to think that Oxford University belongs to the same category as the colleges it comprises. Visiting Oxford, one would search in vain for the university if one mistakenly put it in the same category as the colleges with their distinct buildings that everywhere meet the eye. A person is liable to make category mistakes either when he does not know how to use a concept (like that of a British university) or when, though he knows well how to talk sense *with* a concept like thinking or willing, he does not know how to talk sense *about* it. This, Ryle argues, is our plight when it comes to our many concepts having to do with the mind.

Why do we make the category mistake of thinking of mind as a substance just like the body, to which the mind is somehow "internal" (even though, unlike the brain, the mind is nonphysical and so does not occupy space)? As he struggles to answer this question, Ryle turns to the seventeenth century—to Galileo and Descartes. But, as Ryle briefly acknowledges, the interpretation of mind in terms derived from the natural world goes back much further in history. Malick would have known this from his own study of Heidegger, who showed that, since the ancient Greeks, what it means to be has been understood in terms of the beings we encounter in the world. Our own mode of being in the world—what Heidegger called our "being-here"—has been overlooked. For this reason, Heidegger believed that Western philosophy needed to be destroyed and replaced, which is the project that his *Being and Time* begins. Through an analysis of our own mode of being-here, he wanted to pose the question of the meaning of being on a new foundation.

One can perhaps sympathize with Ryle's reluctance to take on a student enthusiastic about this project. Can "windy mysticism"—or at least Germanic fog—be far away? (Ryle might also have been put off, understandably, by Heidegger's Nazism in the 1930s.) But it is undeniable that Ryle's *The Concept of Mind* pushes in the same direction as *Being and Time*. For if mind is misconstrued when it's cast in the same category as body, then while mind-body dualism is wrong (mind is not another substance just like, but over and against, body), it is no less wrong to suppose that mind can be reduced to body—that mental states and processes may be understood in terms of physical states and processes. This is one of the points Thomas Nagel makes in his recent book *Mind and Cosmos*, the opening line of which claims that the mind-body problem, properly understood, "invades our understanding of the entire cosmos and its history." (See the symposium "Nagel's Untimely Idea: Is There More to Nature Than Matter?" May 23, 2013.) Unfortunately, though Ryle too makes this point in *The Concept of Mind*, he does not develop it at any length. It is an interesting fact that another American student of Ryle's in the 1960s, the arch-materialist (and arch-atheist) Daniel Dennett, rejected it altogether. Such was the direction, at that time, of Anglo-American philosophy.

As far as I can surmise, what attracted Malick to Ryle was likely twofold: not only his openness to Heidegger's thought, as evinced in the 1929 review, but, even more, the conjunction of anti-dualism and antireductionism in Ryle's own thought, as evinced in *The Concept of Mind*. I suspect that Malick's purpose in studying with Ryle was to work out the implications of the fact that mindful life is not that of a ghost within a body, alienated from the "external world." How, then, should we rethink the world?

Here's a start. If mind can no longer be excluded from the world, nor accounted for in physical terms, then the world itself cannot be adequately conceived in physical terms on the model of a machine, and this makes the world larger and more luminous. This point has been made beautifully by the novelist and essayist Marilynne Robinson, whose work bears comparison with Malick's. (See, in these pages, her "Thinking Again: What Do We Mean by Mind?" May 7, 2010.) I think it is also presented to the mind's eye, so to speak, in Malick's film.

Whatever else there is to say about what Malick is up to in *The Tree of Life*, I think he is clearly aiming to change the way we see ourselves in relation to the whole, "the entire cosmos and its history." Filmmaking cannot replace philosophical argumentation. But it can help reorient our thinking by changing the angle or increasing the scope of our vision. I have in mind the film's astonishing interplay of the galactic, the microscopic, and the quotidian. Against this background, the quotidian remains quotidian while also being charged with mystery and grandeur and, perhaps, the glory of God. It is as if Malick is saying: Behold, seekers of wisdom! Begin your thinking here. The drama of human life unfolds against the background of a cosmos pulsing with the same mysterious stuff that makes up both our conscious and our unconscious minds, our waking experience of the world and our dreams. ■

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Elizabeth Kirkland Cahill

Calling Cards of the Dead

PHOTOGRAPHY AND THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

On May 10, 1905, my great-great-grandfather—a Civil War veteran, a former U.S. congressman, and at that time a federal judge—gave an address at the laying of the cornerstone of a monument to the Confederate dead in his hometown of Chester, South Carolina. He reflected on the Civil War that was then forty years past, a conflict in which he had lost his left arm. Recalling the comrades who had fought with him, he observed, "The pen of history can only record its larger events.... The spirit of an epoch, its true atmosphere, can be gathered only from the actions and incidents in the lives of individuals, often obscure and generally unknown to fame."

The exhibit "Photography and the American Civil War" beautifully expresses the spirit of that epoch. Organized by New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art, where it opened, the exhibit was on view at the Gibbes Museum of Art in Charleston, South Carolina, until January 5 and will be at the New Orleans Museum of Art from January 31 to May 4. With more than two hundred items, this powerful and exhausting show constitutes a record of those obscure and often unnamed individuals, documented through the then-new medium of photography.

In an age of image saturation, when Snapchat, Twitter, and Instagram transmit photographs around the world in seconds, it takes an act of the will to place oneself in a time when photography was in its infancy, a new artistic form of astonishing power. And while the images would be stunning in any museum, there is a special poignancy to their display in the city where the Civil War began.

During the course of that war, hundreds of photographers produced hundreds of thousands of photographs: body-strewn battlefields, carefully documented medical studies, and small portraits of individual soldiers. The curators invest the breadth and depth of the collection with a rare unifying power: "The creation of this vast treasury did something the opposing armies and their leaders could not: it defined, and perhaps even helped to unify, the nation via an unrehearsed and unscripted act of collective memory-making."

Photographers in both the North and the South worked separately and in teams to document the war; they included well-known artists such as Mathew Brady and his protégé (and ultimately his rival) Alexander Gardner, as well as many unknown photographers. The photographs of landscapes and battlefields range from Gettysburg to Bull Run; the human subjects span the spectrum of soldiers and sailors, doctors and politicians, women and children, and former slaves, whose slow march toward freedom is documented through such images as an 1865 portrait of Private Louis Troutman of the U.S. Colored Infantry (at left), annotated on the verso side to read: "Sharp & will soon be a non-commissioned officer." Each photograph commands our attention, reflecting a different aspect of a tragic and complicated conflict.

Gayford & Speidel, Private Louis Troutman, Company F, 108th Regiment, U.S. Colored Infantry, *January–May 1865*

To the cell-phone-camera artist of our time, it is difficult to comprehend the daunting challenges of cumbersome equipment, rough terrain, and complicated photographic processes that faced the battlefield photographer. Despite these barriers (vividly embodied in the display of Mathew Brady's clunky studio camera on its heavy tripod), intrepid photographers managed to convey, if not the chaos of action, at least some of the dramatic landscape of war. A rare panoramic view of the Pennsylvania Light Artillery near Petersburg, with its speckled shadows and gentle gradations of light, its dark figures in suspended motion

and its ghostly cannon; a slave dealer's storefront in Alexandria, which became a prison for captured Confederate soldiers; the charred ruins of the Gallego Flour Mill outside of Richmond, an icon of the South's defeat; photographs of Fort Sumter taken just days after the Confederate assault—all these constitute a visual poetry of the war. Its violence is captured, too, in such famous photographs as Alexander Gardner's "A Harvest of Death," which portrays stiffened bodies littering the fields of Gettysburg.

Also on view is another of Gardner's photographs, the controversial "Home of a Rebel Sharpshooter," which shows a dead Confederate soldier splayed out behind a rocky embankment with a gun by his hand. Not only was the photograph staged with props (the weapon in question is a musket, not a sniper's rifle), but it is likely that the body itself was moved and repositioned, since, in another image, the same corpse appears in a field. While we are decades away from the "quick fixes, creative enhancements, and endless fun" promised by Photoshop, already the camera's capacity to manipulate reality is abundantly evident.

While the landscapes and battlefields leave their impression, the most searing truths about the war are to be found in the faces of its people. The stars of this exhibit are the portraits. Confederate and Union, slave and free, prominent and unknown, they are, as my great-great-grandfather knew, the "little rills that go to make the larger stream." The images, or "shadows," of these individuals were created through a variety of photographic processes as artists experimented with the new medium. Although the exhibit displays some relatively large portraits, including four imposing hand-colored albumen silver prints of Union soldiers commissioned in 1866 by the Quartermaster General of the United States Army, it is the constellation of miniatures that captures in most vivid detail the human element of the war.

These small portraits—of soldiers going off to war, and of the families

left behind—were placed lovingly in lockets, housed in small brass cases, or tucked into uniform pockets. To family members at home, they were perhaps seen as talismans against the death of a beloved brother, father, or uncle, or as placeholders for memory, in case the portrait sitter did not survive. To a soldier facing battle, a miniature portrait of his children or his wife was a comforting reminder of what he was fighting for. They are witnesses to the strong belief in the power of the image. They are also, as the curators note, "masterpieces of vernacular picture-making." And they are heartbreaking—a nineteenth-century Facebook of the dead.

The cheapest and most portable photographs were known as cartes de visites (the French term for "calling card"). Roughly the size of baseball cards (4 ¼ x 2 ½ inches), these photographic prints usually depicted a person or a small group. The first photo albums in the country were created to hold them: such albums might contain portraits of presidents (Lincoln and Jefferson Davis) and generals (Grant and Lee) as well as family members gone off to fight. Soldiers would carry small leather-bound pocket albums that accommodated multiple cards; there are several such albums on display.

Because they were inexpensive to create and easy to disseminate, the cartes de visite proved to be useful in a variety of ways. There is the striking photograph of Sojourner Truth on a carte de visite, titled "I Sell the Shadow to Support the Substance"; here, the abolitionist, feminist, and former slave markets her image, or "shadow," for the benefit of her causes. Down the wall is the terrible image of "Gordon," a runaway slave from a Mississippi river plantation whose scourged back is covered with scarred wounds and welts. Farther along in the exhibit is a full case of cards of African Americans: freed slaves who became Union soldiers, formerly enslaved children who are learning to read. A card that was particularly popular with soldiers toward the war's end depicted Frances Clayton, a woman who disguised herself as a man to serve in the Union army. She poses as Jack Williams, her left leg crossed jauntily across her right knee and the sword held—pointedly, as it were—between her legs.

The genre was a handy tool for political satire, too. An 1863 card portrays Lincoln holding a banjo, singing "I Wish I Was in Dixie." Nearby is a caricature of Jefferson Davis from 1865, humiliatingly dressed in woman's clothing at the time of his capture by the Fourth Michigan Cavalry, with a caption reading "How Do You Like It, Jefferson D?"

After the war, amputees often relied on the sale of cartes de visite for their survival: Alfred Stratton, a Union soldier who lost both his arms at Petersburg, was unable to return to his trade as a blacksmith, and sold his image to generate what meager income he could for his family. In a woeful photo, he stares despairingly into the camera, his truncated arms hanging at his side; the caption informs us that he died within a few years of complications from his wounds. The first photographs ever to appear in a "wanted" poster were cartes

de visite: the broadside for the capture of John Wilkes Booth and two accomplices in the assassination of Lincoln displayed their cartes de visite portraits at the top of the poster.

Ambrotype and tintype portraits were slightly more durable than the paper cards. Tintypes (a misnomer: they were made of iron) were particularly popular, because they were lightweight, low-cost, and easily mailed. Unlike the cartes de visite, which were black and white, the majority of these portraits have applied color—a bit of rouge on the cheeks, a dab of gold on the buttons. Many were housed in brass cases or small portrait frames. Not far from where the image of the scarred slave Gordon hangs, for example, is a small ambrotype in a portrait case. It shows two brothers, Charles and John Hawkins, who signed on with the 38th Regiment of the Georgia Volunteer Infantry. Charles died under Lee's command in the Shenandoah Valley; John would survive Appomattox. In the photograph, both boys' hands rest at the ready atop their swords. The older brother, on the left, looks feistily at the camera; the younger, on the right, seems a bit taken aback by it all. They are hauntingly real; as I gazed at them, I could not help thinking that, but for the span of a hundred and fifty years, they could have been my two oldest sons.

There are scores of such portraits. The faces are grim, haunted, confident, resolute, sad. The four bearded Pattillo brothers, brandishing Bowie knives, look as if they've wandered in from the set of *Duck Dynasty*. Elsewhere, a ghostly, over-exposed Union soldier stands in a light cape, his eyes eerily radiant. An image by A. J. Riddle of an emaciated soldier rescued from Andersonville is accompanied by Walt Whitman's searing condemnation of that notorious prison camp. And there is the melancholy portrait of Robert E. Lee, taken days after his surrender; his hat held at his side, he stares pensively into the distance, wondering what might have been.

An especially moving image depicts three young children. Titled "Frank, Frederick & Alice," it was clutched in the hand of an otherwise unidentified dead Union soldier at Gettysburg. After the photograph appeared in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* with the caption "Whose Father Was He?" the orphaned children and their widowed mother, Philinda Humiston, were located and given assistance. Eventually they moved into the National Homestead for Widows and Orphans that opened in Gettysburg in 1866, its establishment spurred to no small extent by photographs like this one. These small children embody the real human cost of the war for both sides.

And so perhaps the curators are on to something in seeing the medium of photography as conferring a unity upon the Civil War experience. In these photographs of seasoned veterans, jaunty privates, newly emancipated slaves, and small children, the personal dignity of each individual stands out. Political allegiance, geographic location, and skin color aside, their faces radiate a common humanity. While historians may continue to debate the economic factors, political influences, and proximate causes of the war, these photographs reflect why the war was fought: to establish the equal dignity of each human person.

For four terrible years that common humanity was forgotten. A century and a half later, in our own politically fractured time, we seem to be forgetting it again, frenziedly focused on what divides rather than what binds us together as a people. But as my great-great-grandfather noted four decades after the war, healing unity is always possible: "It is the everlasting glory of the American people," he told his audience in Chester, "that within a half-century of the close of the most bitter and deadly contest they are more united now than ever before, nearer to that 'perfect Union' designed by the fathers, every part vying with the other in devotion to a common country and pride in its great destiny." ■

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George Scialabba

Voracious

We Have Only This Life to Live
The Selected Essays of Jean-Paul Sartre
Edited by Ronald Aronson and Adrian van den Hoven
New York Review Books, $24.95, 555 pp.

"Time," wrote W. H. Auden, "Worships language and forgives / Everyone by whom it lives. / Pardons cowardice, conceit, / Lays its honors at their feet." Time certainly has a few things to forgive Jean-Paul Sartre for. Not cowardice or conceit; he was brave enough and not particularly vain. But he let himself be carried away by his enthusiasms, and he wrote far too much, which practically guarantees that a writer will occasionally make a fool of himself. In private life he was decent but not irreproachable, though the sexual temptations of male intellectual superstars in the 1950s were undoubtedly fierce, and were in any case rarely resisted.

But Sartre was unquestionably one of those by whom language lives, and vice versa. Many people read voraciously; Sartre wrote voraciously. Novels, plays, stories, memoirs, literary criticism, biography, autobiography, political essays, and philosophical treatises flowed unceasingly—and, it must often have seemed, effortlessly—from his pen (though we learn from an interview included in these *Selected Essays*, they typically went through five or six revisions). Renown does not always correspond to merit, of course; but Sartre's degree of eminence as, simultaneously, a creative writer, a political thinker, and a philosopher is, I think, unique.

Sartre's essays are prodigious in quantity and range. They are collected in ten volumes called *Situations* (the French word does not precisely mean what "situations" means in English—there's a soupçon of actively "situating" or "putting in context"). This new selection from NYRB Classics culls from all ten volumes. It leaves out a couple of my favorites: "The Situation of the Writer in 1947" and the poignant tribute to Albert Camus after his sudden, early death. But it's an excellent selection nonetheless, almost doing justice—for full justice, the fiction and plays are indispensable—to this protean, exasperating, revelatory author.

ALBERTO KORDA

Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir with Ernesto "Che" Guevara in Havana, 1960

It's said that William James wrote psychology textbooks that read like novels, while Henry James wrote novels that read like psychology textbooks. Sartre's criticism of literature and art is saturated with philosophy, while his philosophical writings invariably have a literary flair (which is not to say they are usually either vivid or clear). This collection includes essays on John Dos Passos's *1919*, William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, Camus' *The Stranger*, Georges Bataille's *Inner Experience*, Francophone African poetry, and the sculpture of Alberto Giacometti and Alexander Calder. These critical essays rarely contain much in the way of aesthetic judgments or patient delineations of technique. Sartre does not much care about influences, relative merits, or demonstrations of how one or another verbal or visual effect is achieved. He is concerned with historical, moral, or metaphysical significance. His insights are often startling, provoking, sometimes thrilling, but one isn't always sure whether Sartre has found them in the work or put them there.

The essay on Faulkner is celebrated, and typical. In *The Sound and the Fury*, "the past," according to Sartre, "acquires a sort of surreality…its outlines become crisp and hard—changeless. The present, nameless and fleeting, suffers greatly by comparison: it is full of holes and, through these holes, it is invaded by things past, which are fixed, still, and silent, like judges or stares." Man, Sartre objects,

> is in no sense the sum total of what he has but the totality of what he doesn't yet have, of what he could have. And if we are immersed, in this way, in futurity, isn't the formless harshness of the present thereby attenuated? The event doesn't spring on us like a thief, since it is, by its very nature, a having-been-future. And, in seeking to explain the past, isn't it first the historian's task to research into the future?

The essay concludes with an ambivalent valediction:

> Faulkner's despair seems to me to precede his metaphysics. For him, as for all of us, the future is blocked off. Everything we see and experience suggests to us that 'this cannot last,' and yet change is not even conceivable, except in cataclysmic form. We are living in an age of impossible revolutions, and Faulkner employs his extraordinary art to describe this world that is dying of old age and our suffocation in it. I love his art; I do not believe in his metaphysics.

This is glittering wordplay and concept-play. But one can't help wondering whether Faulkner's preoccupations aligned so neatly with Sartre's.

Sartre's philosophy is represented in this collection by his essays on Kierkegaard and Husserl and by "Existentialism: A Clarification." For this reader, Sartre's philosophical prose has the ethereality and delicacy (though not the color) of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century French orchestral music; and like orchestral music, it cannot be rendered into intelligible, everyday meanings. The word "Being" induces one of two opposite reactions, depending on one's philosophical temperament: either the pulse quickens or the eyes roll. As a member of the second, metaphysically tone-deaf tribe, I must acknowledge that Sartre's (and Husserl's and Heidegger's and Merleau-Ponty's) theoretical ideas mostly elude me. I appreciate their emphasis on the "embeddedness" of perception, identity, and consciousness; and Sartre's explication of *mauvaise foi* seems to me original and valuable (though I think he says it better in the novels and plays). But alas, I cannot follow him any further than that.

Sartre excelled at intellectual portraiture. *Selected Essays* contains two lengthy memoirs: one of Paul Nizan, the novelist, philosopher, and Communist militant who was killed early in World War II; and one of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Sartre's longtime collaborator on *Les Temps modernes*, the enormously influential journal they founded in 1945. (Sartre's essay introducing the first issue is included here, with its famous proclamation of the writer's responsibility: "The writer is situated in his time; every word he utters has reverberations. As does his silence.")

Nizan was Sartre's roommate at the École normale supérieure, the French version of Oxford/Cambridge or Harvard/Yale/Princeton/Stanford. He seems to have been a Rimbaud-like figure: a dandy and an enfant terrible who rebelled against a solidly bourgeois background, getting into scrapes and wandering off to Africa. But Nizan turned to politics with a fury that bewildered the youthful Sartre: "My anger was a mere soap bubble, his was real.... His words of hate were pure gold, mine were false coin." After twelve years, Nizan left the Communist Party—the unforgiveable sin. When he died soon afterward, a chorus of slander buried his reputation. Sartre's essay helped rescue it.

Next to Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre's closest relationship was with Merleau-Ponty. They also passed through the École normale at the same time, though in different circles. The Resistance brought them together. Sartre's long, tender, intimate reminiscence reveals what few suspected at the time: that it was an unequal partnership, and that Sartre always felt himself the junior partner. The imperturbable Merleau, bequeathed an apparently unshakeable psychic equilibrium by what Sartre calls his "golden childhood," was the real guiding spirit of *Les Temps modernes* and a political/philosophical lodestar for the excitable Sartre.

In the aftermath of World War II, politics eclipsed—perhaps "annexed" would be a better word—philosophy and literature. The future of Europe seemed up for grabs. For the first time since the crushing of the German workers' uprising in 1919, anticapitalist revolution was a live option in Europe. Intellectuals in France felt the need to declare themselves.

Sartre never joined the French Communist Party, and in fact always despised its leadership and its generally disgraceful opportunism, intellectual dishonesty, and internal conformity. Nonetheless, he admired many Communists' heroic role in the Resistance, and, more important, he believed that no other group enjoyed the confidence of the working class or aimed at funda-

mental political change. So he consistently offered them his support (which they consistently scorned) and defended their right to a leading role in French politics. Likewise, he continued until the mid-1950s to maintain that the Soviet Union had not definitively forfeited its claim to incarnate revolutionary socialism, however imperfectly, and still deserved, in respect of its concentration camps, show trials, and subjugation of Eastern Europe, if not the benefit of the doubt then at least a suspension of final judgment. An editorial of January 1950, "The USSR and the Camps," written by Merleau-Ponty, set out their joint position:

> We have the same values as a Communist…. We may think he compromises them by embodying them in today's communism. The fact remains that they are ours, and that on the contrary we have nothing in common with a good number of communism's adversaries.... The USSR is on the whole situated...on the side of those who are struggling against the forms of exploitation known to us.... We do not draw the conclusion that indulgence must be shown toward communism, but one can in no case make a pact with its adversaries. The only sound criticism is thus the one which bears on exploitation and oppression, inside and outside the USSR.... The decadence of Russian communism does not make the class struggle a myth…or Marxist criticism in general null and void.

The editorial pleased no one and scandalized many. In the English-speaking world, Sartre's and Merleau-Ponty's reputations for intellectual integrity and political judgment have never recovered from it. I think, on the contrary, that the general condemnation reflects badly on the critics. I have several disagreements with the passage above. "Nothing in common" is too strong—refusal to acknowledge the fundamental decency of one's opponents is a failing more characteristic of Stalinists than of Sartre or Merleau-Ponty. By 1950 (since 1917, in fact) the USSR (like the United States) was on no one's "side" except that of its own ruling class. And the authors might have said which values they shared with which communists—Marx and Victor Serge, presumably, rather than Stalin and Louis Aragon. Still, by virtue of at least acknowledging the existence of exploitation and class struggle, it seems to me a more penetrating and honest grappling with the contemporary situation than anything penned by Walter Lippmann, Reinhold Niebuhr, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Isaiah Berlin, or other esteemed Cold War liberals.

Similarly, Sartre's preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* has seemed to many the epitome of irresponsible Third-Worldist bravado and an unforgiveable romanticizing of revolutionary violence. It is true that some West European New Leftists read it that way, and Sartre failed in his responsibility to disabuse them. Does the essay deserve its notoriety? Here is the *corpus delicti*:

> No gentleness can efface the marks of violence; it is violence alone that can destroy

them. And the colonized cure themselves of the colonial neurosis by driving out the *colon* with weapons. When their rage explodes, they recover their lost transparency, they know themselves in the same measure as they create themselves; from afar, we regard their war as the triumph of barbarism; but it leads by itself to progressive emancipation of the fighters, it progressively liquidates the colonial darkness within and outside them. Once it starts, it is merciless. One must remain terrified or become terrible; that is to say: abandon oneself to the disassociations of a falsified life or conquer native unity. When the peasants pick up guns, the old myths pale, prohibitions are one by one overturned: the fighters' weapons are their humanity. For, at this first stage of the revolt, they have to kill: to shoot down a European is to kill two birds with one stone, doing away with oppressor and oppressed at the same time: what remains is a dead man and a free man; the survivor, for the first time, feels *national* soil under his feet.

The burden of this passage is: "You—my Western readers—have driven anti-colonial rebels to violence, even senseless violence. You have left them no way to gain their freedom or self-respect non-violently." That seems devastatingly true—about brutalized colonial subjects, though not about middle-class European youth. If only Sartre had paused in the magnificent rush of his eloquence—and here he was indeed at fault—to admonish the rebels, however futilely, that inevitable savagery—torture, the killing of civilians—was still savagery, and that their children, if not they themselves, would (or should) come to feel ashamed of it. But here, as with criticizing the USSR, he feared comforting the enemy. He should have been less fearful.

No one can tell the whole truth about his time or strike exactly the right balance among its conflicting moral demands. Nor can anyone combine passion and dispassion in unfailingly correct proportions. Sartre did a creditable job, on the whole. Few writers have given more offense (often justified) to their readers, but even fewer have deserved so well of them. ■

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Paul J. Griffiths

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The Highest Poverty

Monastic Rules and Form-of-Life

Giorgio Agamben

Translated by Adam Kotsko

Stanford University Press, $17.95, 157 pp.

What does it mean to separate oneself entirely from the law's precepts by embracing radical poverty as a form of life? That's the central question of *The Highest Poverty*. The Italian political philosopher Giorgio Agamben arrives at an answer by way of a detailed analysis of texts describing the early Franciscan impulse to establish just such a form of life.

Agamben begins by examining the grammar of ordinary legal thinking about ownership in order to show what the early Franciscans were rejecting, and why it is so difficult for us to see just how radical their proposal was. The first thing to see, he argues, is that the law's precepts apply not to actual persons but to juridical ones. Juridical persons are abstractions—legal fictions that can bear rights, enter into contracts, own property, and be subject to the prescriptions, proscriptions, punishments, endorsements, and supports of legal codes. Such persons are not identical with actual persons. That's evident from the fact that we all think—and all legal codes agree—that some aspects of our lives are extra-legal, subject to no law. We may call these aspects of our lives "private," but whatever we call them, we fully expect that they lie beyond the law's scope. To consider ourselves as juridical persons is therefore to consider only a part of what we are. All this is true if we understand "law" to mean "positive law"—codes brought into being by legislative bodies. According to Agamben, the juridical person is brought into being and maintained by statute. The actual person—you and me in our particularity—are by contrast biographical, constituted by the lives we lead and the history we have.

Against this understanding of the relation of law to life, Agamben gives us that of monasticism generally, and of Franciscanism as its most consistent and radical form. Francis's aspiration, as Agamben depicts it, was to bring into being a community, a form of common life (*koinos bios* in Greek, *coenobium* in Latin, cenoby in English), in which there would be no distinction between the rule governing the community's life and that life as it was lived. Rule (*regula*) and form-of-life (*forma vitae*) cannot, according to the Franciscan ideal, be distinguished.

Agamben wants to help us imagine a form of life that cannot be subject to legal rule, because the form of life and the rule have become coextensive. There is nothing left outside such a form of life, no part of a person that is external to it, and so those who adopt it are not subject to laws (*regulae*, *leges*) because they are no longer juridical persons and it is only such persons who can be understood as subject to law's rule. Juridical persons have been replaced by monastic persons whose form of life is the *vita Christi*, Christ's own life. They have, in the ideal case, become assimilated to Jesus in all that they do, imaging his life in theirs as Francis imaged Christ's wounds in his own flesh.

The difference between a legal-juridical understanding of monastic life and an understanding of it as a form of life in Agamben's sense can be a bit hard to keep in mind. Don't Franciscans have more-or-less legal rules that order their life together? Aren't they subject to these rules just as juridical persons are subject to the law? Aren't there punishments for breaking them? And isn't all that sort of thing simply a necessary condition of all social life, cenobitic or not? Well,

yes and no. It's the great strength of this book to show, by careful analysis of the arguments surrounding central features of the Franciscan life, what the difference between the two ways of thinking comes to.

Consider the vow, the means of entry into the monastic community. One way, the ordinary legal way, to understand this is in terms of contract. On this view, when aspirants take the vow they sign on to a set of precepts (poverty, chastity, obedience), and are subject to sanction if they violate these sanctions. The monks are, de facto, juridical persons, whose relations to their fellow monks and their monastic superiors are understood in broadly contractual terms.

On another understanding, the one Agamben advocates as the proper way to think about Franciscanism, the friar's vow is a unilateral declaration of intent to enter a form of life ("I want to serve God in this way...") to be accepted (or not) by the community. The precepts (poverty and so on) are a description of the form of life in question. There is no juridical subject on this understanding, and no contract; instead, there is entry into a mode of living (*forma vivendi*) with a particular configuration. This mode of life involves every part of the person who enters into it; it cannot be limited to its precepts, and to observe its precepts perfectly is not enough to keep it perfectly—any more than just observing the precepts that define the form of life called marriage is enough to be a good spouse.

Offenses against the precepts are understood very differently according to this second view of vows. Suppose you're a Franciscan and you offend against one of the precepts governing how you should dress, what your habit (*habitus*) should be. On the contractual-legal-juridical understanding of precept, when you do this you've broken a law and are subject to punishment. But if the precepts are understood descriptively, then when you fail to dress properly you depart from both the habit and the *habitus* of your form of life. You alienate yourself. There is, according to this view, no distinction between what the monk does—his form of life as lived—and the monk himself. Agamben makes the difference abundantly clear by contrasting what he takes to be the Franciscan view of the religious life with the classic distinction between person and office in the case of a priest. There, office and life are deeply distinct: a priest is no less a priest for being a man who lives badly. He can still administer the sacraments, which is the important thing as far as his office goes. Hence the principle *ex opera operato*. But in the nonjuridical understanding of the monastic form of life, a monk or friar is less of a monk or friar precisely to the extent that he breaks his vows.

Religious life as Agamben sees it—with Franciscan life as its ideal type—tries to leave behind completely the fundamental distinction between law and life that informs all ordinary understandings of the scope and force of law. It does this by subsuming all norms, all laws, into a form of life, and thereby reconstituting them as essential aspects of a life, rather than as extraneous regulations.

What about poverty? This is the distinctive mark of the Franciscan form of life, and almost half of Agamben's book is devoted to an analysis of the convoluted debates about whether radical renunciation of ownership is possible, and if so how it should be understood, debates that marked the century following Francis's death in 1226. Agamben is very good on this. He doesn't write as a historian trying to get at what those who contributed to these debates may have thought they meant. Rather, he writes as an intellectual archaeologist, trying to get at the essential structure of the debates. That structure concerns the possibility of using things (food, clothing, and so on) without owning them. For the mainstream—the anti-Franciscans, we might say, though some of them were actually Franciscan—simple use (*usus simplex* or *usus facti*), is an incoherent concept. All use implies ownership (*proprietas*), and that position eventually became the doctrine of the church on the question. Agamben, in a pregnant passage, understands this decision by John XXII in 1322 as foreshadowing the understanding of the relation between use, consumption, and ownership that defines "the very canon of mass consumption" we have now. Today nearly everyone understands use to be parasitic upon an understanding of ownership. But Agamben argues it didn't have to be that way.

He thinks that the Franciscan theorists lost the argument with the broader church because they adopted the language of their opponents. They tried, that is, to give an account of poverty in juridical language, reaching for conceptual devices that would permit them to find a corner of life free from the reach of law. What they should have done instead, Agamben thinks, was attempt a definition of use in its own terms, not in terms of its opposition to ownership. If they had done so they might have succeeded in showing the intimate connection between radical poverty and a life lived without the law.

Agamben's book is an intellectual delight. It's analytically sharp and profoundly illuminating in its treatment of the rules of religious communities, materials too often left to canonists who are so close to the material that they cannot think about its meaning. As in some of his other work, he reveals the power of materials from the Christian archive in ways that can be surprising to theologians and canonists for whom these materials are in some sense authoritative. What Agamben offers the church is a good example of the gifts those outside the church can bring to it: he did this for Paul's Letter to the Romans in his *Il tempo che resta* (2000), for some central eschatological ideas in his *Il regno e la gloria* (2007) and *La chiesa e il regno* (2010), and here in this book for the idea of radical poverty. Catholics should be grateful, and we should certainly read him. ■

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BOOKMARKS

Anthony Domestico

This, we're told, is the moment of the short story. Critics, desperate for encouraging news in discouraging times, have declared the short story the perfect form for our attention-addled souls. Why read a novel, which requires hours away from Twitter and Tumblr, when you can read a short story in a single sitting? Why read a lyric poem, which asks you to read slowly and listen intently if you are to uncover its riches, when the short story can give you the same thrills at a much cheaper temporal cost? Universally acclaimed (and relatively strong-selling) collections by Alice Munro, Junot Díaz, and George Saunders have all been published in the last six months, and they all seem to say the same thing: If contemporary fiction is to get up off the mat, it will be as much through the blockbuster collection as through the blockbuster novel.

Much of this critical narrative is suspect. After all, art doesn't have to reflect the kinds of attention cultivated by modern technology; it can also challenge them. I'd argue that the defining modern experience of art isn't reading a short story but rather watching an entire television series in a marathon session. You start watching *The Wire* and can't tear yourself away; Twitter tumbles away and all you care about is Baltimore crime, Baltimore politics, Baltimore newspapers. We seem to want extended experiences of art that are more immersive, not less.

But critics are right about one thing: 2012 and 2013 have been excellent years for the short story. Over the past month, I've read four new short-story collections. Taken as a whole, they show the incredible flexibility of the form—its ability to represent short, epiphanic experience and longer, more expansive narratives, to be played for straight laughs and to generate pathos. The short story isn't especially well suited to the Age of Twitter because, in the end, "the short story" isn't any one thing.

I Want to Show You More is Jamie Quatro's first collection of stories, and it is an outstanding and occasionally baffling work. Most of the stories take place in the town of Lookout Mountain, where Quatro herself lives. The town borders Georgia and Tennessee—for the houses that lie in both, Quatro writes, "state of residence depends on the master bedroom"—and the stories are obsessed with the border

lines between the sacred and the secular, the faithful and the faithless, the banal and the apocalyptic.

The collection's opening story, "Caught Up," is one of its most powerful. Told by an unnamed female narrator who returns throughout the books, the story begins with this memory:

> The vision started coming when I was nine. It was always the same: I was alone, standing on the brick patio in front of our house, watching thick clouds above the mountains turn shades of red and purple, then draw themselves together and spiral. Whirlpool, hurricane, galaxy. The wind picked up, my hair whipped my face, and I felt—knew—that the world was on the cusp of cataclysm. Then came a tugging in my middle, as if I were a kite about to be yanked up by a string attached just below my navel. Takeoff was imminent; all I had to do was surrender—close my eyes, relax my limbs—and I would be catapulted, belly-first, into the vortex.

For the narrator's mother, these visions are premonitions of the Rapture: she tells her daughter that "God speaks to his children in dreams" and that she "should always be ready for the Lord's return." But as the narrator gets older, the visions depart. Rapture gives way to realism—she marries, has kids, and leads an ordinary life.

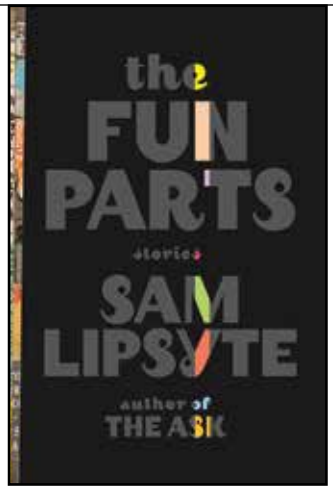
But then, after seventeen years of faithful marriage, the narrator enters into a long-distance affair with another man, complete with phone sex and the exchange of explicit photos. When she considers meeting up with the man for the first time, her old visions return. Consummating the affair would be, it seems, its own kind of apocalypse.

The story ends up being about the visionary possibilities of erotic experience: if they were to meet up, the man tells the narrator, "It would be devotional.... I would lay myself on your tongue like a Communion wafer." The narrator thinks about what happens when we accept these possibilities ("God is there, smiling down, and what he is saying, over and over, is Yes") and what happens when we renounce them. The story concerns crucial decisions—whether or not to cheat—and our feelings of insufficiency when confronted with these decisions (notice the passive voice of the title). All this is done in just over three pages, in language that is both precise and lyrical, in a voice that uses religion to describe sex but doesn't, somehow, reduce one to the other.

Not every story is as delicately written and dramatically imagined as "Caught Up." Some, like "1.7 to Tennessee," trade too easily in liberal pieties; others, in their surrealist allegories, read like Donald Barthelme–lite. But when Quatro is on—when, for example, she's describing how a teenage track star feels "touched by the divine" in "Sinkhole"—she's really on.

Unlike many contemporary writers, Quatro writes seriously and convincingly about sex; unlike almost all

contemporary writers, she writes seriously and convincingly about God. In "Relatives of God," the collection's final story, the narrator (the same as the one in "Caught Up") has phone sex with her long-distance lover and then, years later, after painfully ending the affair, marvels with her husband at the beauty of their children: "Look what we made, he said. We are relatives of God." It's a sign of Quatro's skill that she is able to address both topics, the creaturely and the godly, with equal seriousness.



"Seriousness" is not a word generally associated with Sam Lipsyte. The darkly comic writer attracted a cult following until finding popular success with his 2010 novel *The Ask*—the most incisive, funniest study of late capitalist/American/masculine desperation I've ever read.

The book followed the misadventures of Milo Burke, a critical-theory spouting, self-lacerating schlub working in "the development office of a mediocre university in New York City." But the real heart of the book is Lipsyte's voice—smart, vulgar, and disciplined despite its constant flirtations with derangement. Here Milo describes how his wealthy friend, Purdy, lives a relatively modest life:

> I suppose there was a certain glory in it, this slumming with the middle and upper-middle classes. Maybe not the glory of rushing a Nazi mortar position, or braving municipal billy bats to stop a war in Indochina, but the privileged of our generation did what they could, like the rest of us. We were stuck between meanings. Or were the last dribbles of something. It was hard to figure. The fall of the Soviet Union, this was, the death of analog. The beginning of aggressively marketed nachos.

The ability to blend the world-historical (the fall of the Soviet Union) with the completely banal (nachos); the careful control of rhythm and pacing that leads to the final punch line: that is why you read Lipsyte, and it's why fans of *The Ask* will also enjoy Lipsyte's new story collection, *The Fun Parts*.

Almost every page—strike that: almost every paragraph—has a perfectly paced, memorably phrased line. In "Nate's Pain Is Now," a story about a memoirist whose moment of fame has passed, we read, "Out my window was traffic, suffering, euphoria, pretzel carts"; two paragraphs later, we hear that a character "got by, as many widowers do, on peanut butter and hate." In "The Worm in Philly," the best story in the collection, a broke, unemployed drug addict considers writing a book for young readers about the boxer Marvelous Marvin Hagler: "Why for children? Children were people you could reach. You could reach out and reach them. Plus, low word count. That meant I'd get the money faster. I was experimenting with unemployment, needed to make rent quickly. I was no longer experimenting with drugs. I knew exactly what to do with them."

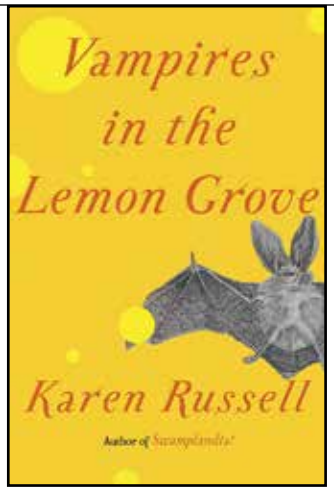
The problem with *The Fun Parts*, though, is that, with rare exceptions, it really is only the fun parts—the gags and the one-liners, the absurd plotlines and the cutting social observations. (My favorite: a hipster restaurant that "specialized in artisanal scrapple"). *The Ask* balanced the stylistic high jinks with real pathos: Yes, Milo was a pathetic loser, but he was also a father. Hiding beneath the jokes and the rants, *The Ask* was a serious consideration of fatherhood and masculinity. *The Fun Parts* feels like literary junk food: lots of calories but little nourishment.

On the occasions when Lipsyte opens his stories up to larger concerns, however, he dazzles. "The Climber Room," for instance, tells the story of Tovah Gold, a failed poet trying to make ends meet by working at a preschool. Lipsyte mines the situation for comedy, as always, but he also shows us how difficult life is for a thirty-six-year-old woman, professionally unsuccessful and without kids, living in a culture that tells her "that all committed mothers could also manage begemmed careers, that only the weak or untalented had to choose." The story ends with a rant about how women are up against it: "We are alone and suicidal or we have children and are suicidal. The only women who escape this are the rich." But this is immediately undercut by a rich, older man exposing himself. The story is ridiculous, of course, but it's also moving. It's greater than the sum of its fun parts.

Two final collections, one by a young star and another by a living legend, are the most successful of the bunch, in part because they show how the short story's liminal status—not quite a novel, not quite a poem—can be used to good purpose.

Karen Russell's *Vampires in the Lemon Grove* is, like her 2011 Pulitzer-nominated novel *Swamplandia!*, weird in the best sense of the word. In one story, a group of young women in Meiji-era Japan are transformed into silkworms and then enslaved, only to rebel against their captors; in another, eleven former U.S. presidents, including Rutherford Hayes and James Buchanan, are reincarnated as horses on a farm that may be heaven, may be hell, and may be something altogether different; in the title story, two aged vampires give up sucking blood and instead try sucking lemons.

Russell is, to quote her earlier collection of stories, the wonderfully titled *St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves*, "a cartographer of imaginary places"—an explorer eager to push off from the shores of the known and journey toward the strange and scary. Such ventures can be a lonesome business. Russell's stories often concern themselves with the monstrous—those whom society deems other and therefore threatening—and the desperate attempts of the monstrous to form their own kind of intimacy. Here is how Russell describes

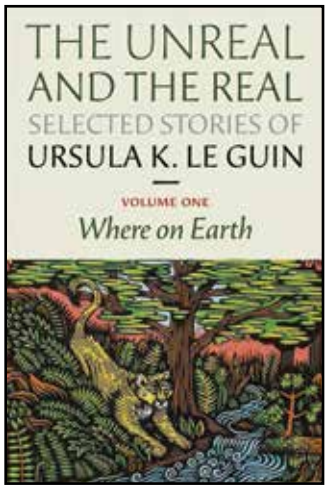


two vampires meeting another of their kind after long years of isolation: "There is a loneliness that must be particular to monsters, I think, the feeling that each is the only child of a species. And now that loneliness was over."

Russell's most effective narrators are adolescents: what feels more monstrous, after all, than being thirteen years old, not quite a child and not quite an adult? Nal, the narrator of "The Seagull Army Descends on Strong Beach, 1979," is a lonely boy with a crippling sense of self-consciousness: "before he could do anything, a tiny homunculus had to generate a flowchart in his brain. If p, then q; If z, then back to a." Larry Rubio, the narrator of "The Graveless Doll of Eric Mutis," is a tough kid who briefly befriends an outsider (nicknamed Mutant) before meanly pulling back, with terrible consequences. In each case, Russell dramatizes what it's like to be the metaphorical mutant—to long for an intimacy that probably can't be achieved, to know that one is considered an outsider and to try to overcome this social fact.

Russell, who borrows tropes and plotlines from science fiction, fantasy, and horror, is one of a number of young writers trying to bridge the gap between "literary" and "genre" fiction. (Others include Junot Díaz, Michael Chabon, and Colson Whitehead.) They cite as influences Tolstoy and Tolkien, Lawrence and Lovecraft. Almost all these writers point to Ursula K. Le Guin as an important precursor, and with good reason. It's hard to think of a living writer who has produced more work of lasting value. She has written one of the best fantasy cycles of all time (the Earthsea cycle); she has written two of the best science-fiction novels ever (*The Dispossessed* and *The Left Hand of Darkness*); she has written excellent young-adult fiction, wonderful historical novels, some accomplished poetry, and everything in between.

Now we have what may be the crowning achievement of her career: a two-volume collection of short stories titled *The Unreal and the Real*. The first volume, *Where on Earth*, brings together some of her more realistic stories (though hers is always realism at a slant); the second volume, *Outer Space, Inner Lands*, collects her science fiction.



The title of this new collection is appropriate, since Le Guin writes realistically about the unreal and fantastically about the real. The collection is too varied to summarize. There are works of allegory and works of unsparing realism; there is rape and rapture, politics and poetry.

Karen Russell is a wonderful writer. But just as everything in Western philosophy is a footnote to Plato, everything in contemporary genre-bending fiction is a footnote to Le Guin. (In *Where on Earth*, there's a story of human-to-equine transformation that far surpasses Russell's.) Most of the stories in *The Unreal and the Real* were written long before Twitter or the iPad, and they celebrate virtues—deep interiority and the necessity of political and ecological engagement—that remain essential. One of Le Guin's stories puts it best: "Nothing is boring if you are aware of it. It may be irritating, but it is not boring.... Being aware is the hardest work the soul can do, I think." ■

Anthony Domestico *is an assistant professor of literature at Purchase College, SUNY. "Bookmarks" is his regular book column.*

Skull & Bones

Harold Bordwell

Some time ago I made plans for my death, also called Preneed Funeral Planning. My "advanced planning counselor" and I sat down over a cup of tea in my dining room and began to discuss the inevitable. This was shortly after I had had a heart bypass operation, so I must have felt more than ever before intimations of mortality. I know I wasn't feeling as desperate as Melville's Ishmael: "Whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet...then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can." But for the first time in my life I must have glimpsed a black ship on the horizon and guessed it was time to begin arranging my steamer trunk.

"Why are you doing this now?" my advanced planning counselor asked me after I had signed the contract.

I thought that was obvious, yet I was at a loss for words. Faced with my silence, he helped me along.

"You probably want to spare others at a difficult time."

In fact, I had been thinking that I really was sparing myself at a difficult time. On reflection, of course, I realized that this was silly—I would not be there for any "difficulties."

"Yes, of course," I said, though to be honest I had also been influenced by the fact that, if what I had heard was true, I would be saving money. Hadn't I read somewhere that funeral costs were on the rise and that they were going to keep rising? Another silly thought, under the circumstances. Or had I believed you really can take it with you?

I filed the contract away and went on with living, thanks to statins, aspirin, and exercise. ("Walk, walk, walk," my heart surgeon had told me.) Recently, however, I took the contract out and reread it—the result of coming across a copy of Sir Thomas Browne's *Urn Burial*. According to the contract, I had chosen a corrugated paperboard casket in which to be cremated and a $60 urn for the ashes. According to Sir Thomas Browne, this thing we call our earthly vessel is a profoundly complex and entertaining artifact. Our brains, which he describes, borrowing from Hippocrates, as "the Metropolis of humidity," may help our skulls burn less than other bones, and "some bones make but Skeletons, some bodies quick and speediest ashes."

It was Browne's philosophical thoughts, however, that I found especially interesting. "If we begin to die when we live, and long life be but a prolongation of death; our life is a sad composition; we live with death, and die not in a moment." Or: "But the long habit of living indisposeth us for dying.... But many are too early old, and before the date of age." And then he nicely puts the final nail in the coffin: "And who had not rather been the good theef, then Pilate?" (Any seventeenth-century book written by an English doctor who practiced "physic" will have its odd moments of spelling and punctuation, especially one whose full title is *Hydriotaphia, Urne-Buriall, Or, A Brief Discourse of the Sepulchrall Urnes Lately Found in Norfolk*.)

Sir Thomas Browne

Reading *Urn Burial* reminded me of the death of the Spanish poet and mystic, St. John of the Cross. After he died in 1591, devotion to him was so great that by the time his body reached Segovia for burial a leg had been left in one city, an arm went missing in Madrid, and a number of fingers were unaccounted for. Most of us are happily exempt from sainthood, so we don't have to worry about our toes ending up in Toledo, but we all know that quotation about the best-laid plans. How confident should we be?

We moderns pay advanced planning counselors to avoid the fate of St. John of the Cross and to get us to our burial on time, but can we ever be sure it will work out as planned? A recent newspaper article on the rising popularity of cremation reported that some families don't know what to do with ashes, or don't have the money to deal with them. Here in Illinois, a funeral home near Chicago took it upon itself to bury 118 unclaimed remains that a county coroner's office had on its shelves. Sir Thomas Browne's own skull, after being dug up in 1840 (he died in 1689), was on display in a bell jar in a hospital museum until 1921, when it was reburied in a grave in his Norwich parish, attractively named St. Peter Mancroft.

My own final resting place, I am hoping, will be about a hundred fifty paces from the grave of James T. Farrell, an unexpected presence I welcome, but I did wonder for a while why the creator of Studs Lonigan from the South Side of Chicago ended up in a suburban Catholic cemetery. (The answer, in brief, is a beloved grandmother.) Perhaps we should take to heart Sir Thomas Browne's own words, prophetic for him and maybe just as prophetic for us: "Who knows the fate of his bones, or how often he is to be buried?" Maybe we just have to have faith.

Harold Bordwell *is a retired editor living in Evanston, Illinois.*

DETAIL FROM *LADY DOROTHY BROWNE (NÉE MILEHAM); SIR THOMAS BROWNE*. ATTRIBUTED TO JOAN CARLILE (CIRCA 1641–50)

Journal of Catholic Social Thought

Call for Papers

"Catholic Social Teaching and the Financial Crisis"

2014

"But it will be necessary above all to abandon a mentality in which the poor – as individuals and as peoples – are considered a burden, as irksome intruders trying to consume what others have produced. The poor ask for the right to share in enjoying material goods and to make good use of their capacity for work, thus creating a world that is more just and prosperous for all. The advancement of the poor constitutes a great opportunity for the moral, cultural and even economic growth of all humanity." (*Centesimus Annus*, 28)

How do we begin to discuss the justice of issues of the economy? Do the contexts of the economy and the world financial markets reflect a commitment to the common good and the priority of the poor in our social, political and economic structures? As we read "the signs of the times," this call for papers invites contributions that address the application of Catholic social teaching to the following concerns:

- Justice and injustice in the markets;
- Constructive elements of new, transformative models of the market system;
- An economy that works for the common good;
- The Housing crisis related to banking models/subprime loan scandals/foreclosure by illegal and unfair practices;
- The proper role of government in financial crises;
- The need for enhanced financial regulation;
- Inequality and financial crises;
- The financial system and the poor; the "Unbanked" and use of non-traditional credit institutions, payday loan companies, and lease-to-buy arrangements;
- The lack of affordable housing, housing practices and policies for the poor, subprime mortgages, etc.;
- The use of austerity measures in the face of depressed economies;
- The student debt crisis;
- The widespread unemployment crisis and its effects on personal lives, families and communities.

To be considered for publication:

- Papers are solicited with a first right of refusal for publication in the *Journal of Catholic Social Thought*.
- Papers must be original work not yet published and not currently under consideration for publication elsewhere.
- Forward one paper copy of the manuscript, preferably an electronic file in Microsoft Word (doc) format.
- Electronic files may be forwarded by regular mail or directly as email attachments.

Papers must be submitted by November 1, 2014 to Executive Editor: barbara.wall@villanova.edu

For more information about submissions, see:
http://www1.villanova.edu/villanova/mission/office/publications/journal/authors.html

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