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LETTERS

How to reform public education

I was disappointed by Jackson Lears's uncritical summary ("Reform of the Reform," November 15) of Diane Ravitch's new book criticizing the education-reform movement, *Reign of Error*. Some of her points have merit. She's right to draw attention to the troubling proliferation of online charter schools. And Ravitch rightly questions the value of standardized testing models. One would be hard-pressed to find an education reformer satisfied with the quality of standardized testing. On the whole, however, her arguments are flawed for the same reasons she claims education reformers are wrong.

First, Ravitch criticizes reformers for using data to posit an education crisis, yet it is her use of statistics that is incoherent. She seems to suggest that we have nothing to worry about: assessment data and graduation rates have been steadily improving, and schools alone can't change economic outcomes. But she doesn't account for the vast racial and socioeconomic gaps reflected in the data, nor does she take stock of the different quality of education received by students in under- and over-supported districts. We agree that there are "better" and "worse" schools—should we stop trying to make the worse schools better? Ravitch also fails to consider that these improving metrics may flow from the work of the reformers she criticizes.

Second, Ravitch fails to engage with the actual goals and policies of the reform movement. Lears praises the "risibly easy" job Ravitch does knocking down the purported myth that "poverty is an excuse for ineffective teaching and failing schools." We don't need Ravitch's "mountain of studies" to intuit that poorer students face far greater obstacles in education, and no reformer, even the bogeyman herself, Michelle Rhee, believes that poverty has no effect on schools. Reformers agree that "poverty is highly correlated with low academic achievement." What are we supposed to do with this knowledge? Reformers say we must demand that teachers and administrators have the same expectations for poorer students that they have for privileged students. That isn't too much to ask. Plenty of teachers and schools—even charter schools—have met this challenge. Is it really "depriving teachers of professional dignity" to make rigorous professional demands instead of worrying about hurt feelings?

Ravitch invokes "privatization" to scare off supporters of reform. Privatization and the education-reform movement are not one and the same. Ravitch's accounts of under-the-table deals and corrupt handouts to profit-seeking education "entrepreneurs" are very troubling. But charter schools have been a useful part of the reform agenda. At their best, charter schools are incubators of teacher talent, they can adapt quickly to experiment with new ideas in education, and they can be regulated just as easily as district schools. Where corruption is found, charter schools can easily be closed or put under new management. After all, charter schools are, legally and practically, public entities.

So: Are public schools in great shape or should we improve them? Are things getting better in spite of, or because of, the reforms Ravitch criticizes? Should schools serving poor students set the same

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Happy Christmas to All

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academic goals as they would for other students or not? Should we keep working to improve assessments and data; ensure that curricula and classrooms are rich places of learning, not "test prep" factories; increase oversight of all public schools; and demand that teachers be held to the same standards we demand of any other professional—or not? These are questions I wish Lears asked, and Ravitch answered.

TOM McSORLEY
Washington, D.C.

THE REVIEWER RESPONDS

I wish Tom McSorley had read my piece a little more carefully. I make it clear that if students can graduate from high school and even attend college without knowing how to put a sentence together (and we know they can), then there are definitely problems with public education that cannot be concealed by rising high-school graduation and college-admission rates.

Of course, there have always been problems with public education, and since the days of Horace Mann, most reformers have tried to address them without reference to the larger social context of economic inequality, promising utopian transformation through schooling alone. The single exception to this pattern was the Great Society era, when reformers did try to address the larger context (however inadequately) through such programs as Head Start.

But that was fifty years ago. Now the people who call themselves reformers are part of a much broader neoliberal movement that is hostile to any government-sponsored efforts to alleviate inequality, a movement that seeks to import market models and quantitative standards into areas—such as education—where their impact can only be destructive.

To be sure, McSorley is correct that education reform is not reducible to privatization. Many decent people are alarmed by mediocrity or worse in public education, and are trying to do something about it. Sometimes their efforts pay off. Charter schools (for example) can be genuinely public entities, and can provide excellent learning experiences, especially for brighter and more fortunate students. Diane Ravitch and I both acknowledge this quite explicitly.

What Ravitch also sees, and what so few of her critics seem able to acknowledge, is that the wealthiest and most powerful supporters of education reform are also part of the broader neoliberal effort to hollow out the public sector and refill it with managerial groupthink. However citizens may define school reform at the local level, the monied interests at the top do seek to reduce it to privatization. And with the aid of ignorant and ideologically driven state legislators, they are succeeding. If we are not more careful to distinguish between genuine reformers and privatizers deploying the rhetoric of reform, we will end up turning education over to a bunch of pinheaded technocrats. Ravitch sees how high the stakes are in this struggle, and for that we owe her a debt of gratitude.

JACKSON LEARS

Out of the Tomb

Pope Francis's recently released apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium,* is a 47,500-word pep talk. It is sometimes severe and demanding, sometimes consolatory, but all of it is intended to motivate. In other words, it is exactly as advertised: an *exhortation*.

Francis wants to remind us that the church derives its whole identity from its mission to preach the gospel and to do so joyfully. This means that all Catholics, whatever their particular vocations, should understand themselves as missionaries. Most important, in order to share God's mercy with a suffering world, Catholics must not allow their own sufferings to rob them of joy or apostolic vigor. Despite Francis's characteristically upbeat tone, there is a suggestion of exasperation with those he describes, in the English translation, as "sourpusses." He cautions against a "tomb psychology" that "slowly transforms Christians into mummies in a museum." He does not quote St. Francis de Sales's famous maxim "A sad saint is a sorry saint," but he might have. If Christians really are people who have been liberated by God's mercy, then, Francis insists, they should *act* as though they have been liberated. If their faith itself seems to be a source of sorrow, they are a "counter-witness" to the promises of the gospel.

The differences between Francis and Benedict have been somewhat exaggerated in the press (almost always at Benedict's expense), but the exhortation does signal a real contrast of emphasis between the two popes. Benedict foresaw the possibility that the church might grow smaller; and, while he did not greet this prospect eagerly, he did speculate that a smaller church might turn out to be a purer one. Francis generally seems less concerned with moral relativism outside the church than with worldliness within it. He rejects the notion that the church is an exclusive club for the preservation of moral purity and traditional piety, and wants the church to be open to as many people as possible. "For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?" Evangelization is not simply one of the church's functions; it is its raison d'être. The church exists to evangelize.

The element of the exhortation that has grabbed most of the headlines is the pope's sharp criticism of unregulated capitalism. Francis says he wants a church that is poor and *for* the poor. And to be for the poor is, in his judgment, to be against any social structure or ideology that deprives poor people of what they need and deserve as human beings. Some may worry that the exhortation's critique of global capitalism is excessively antagonistic or rhetorically self-indulgent. But the pope has at least made it difficult for his judgments to be misrepresented by those who would rescue the church from social teachings they find embarrassing or inconvenient. Francis brushes aside the shibboleths that are supposed to justify the economic policies of much of the developed world. "Some people continue to defend trickle-down theories which assume that economic growth, encouraged by a free market, will inevitably succeed in bringing about greater justice and inclusiveness in the world," he writes. "This opinion, which has never been confirmed by the facts, expresses a crude and naïve trust in the goodness of those wielding economic power and in the sacralized workings of the prevailing economic system."

Until recently, the Catholic debate about political economy has mainly been about how best to interpret the church's teachings, with many Catholics on the right arguing that the modern church favors a laissez-faire capitalism softened only by a few modest welfare programs and private charity, while Catholics on the left insist that the church has been skeptical of capitalism all along and has always taught that distributive justice was one of the main responsibilities of government. Now, after Benedict's encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* and Francis's exhortation, the debate is no longer about what the church teaches, but about whether the church's teaching about politics and economics is right or whether the church has any competence in this domain. At the same time, it is crucial to recognize that Francis's argument isn't just about ethics, economics, or political theory; it is also, and above all, about ecclesiology—that is, about how the church understands itself and what its mission entails. That doesn't mean the church pretends to have the solution to every problem, nor does it mean that the Vatican thinks it can dictate economic policy. But it does mean, at the very least, that we should expect to hear more from this pope about the social perils of growing economic inequality. To be any kind of Christian means to imitate Christ, and to imitate Christ means to take the side of the poor. Or so, at least, says the new bishop of Rome. ■

John Garvey

'I Do' Undone

WHAT WE'VE FORGOTTEN ABOUT VOWS

Carmelite nuns professing vows

CNS PHOTO / LISA JOHNSTON, *ST. LOUIS REVIEW*

An Irish friend who keeps up with the situation of Catholicism in his country told me that the great falling off in church attendance there has not been only among the youth, who, in Ireland as everywhere else, are expected to drift away, but also among middle-aged and older Catholics. They had been taught to believe that the clergy were on the whole faithful to their vows and trustworthy, when in fact many priests were not and many bishops turned out to be more concerned with the reputation of the church than with the well-being of the victims of sexual abuse.

This is frequently presented as a matter of hypocrisy, which La Rochefoucauld famously defined as the tribute that vice pays to virtue. But much more is involved here—specifically, the collapse of our common understanding of what a vow means and what a vowed life is. It goes beyond the scandals that have arisen around clerical sex abuse to include the ways we deal with marriage and politics and business.

I've seen firsthand the difference vows can make in a culture where many expect them to be broken. I was once about to go into business with a friend. We knew someone with connections who could help us succeed, and we were thinking about bringing him in as a partner. One night my friend went out for a drink with this potentially helpful associate, and listened as the man called his wife on his cell phone to tell her he was staying late at the office, winking at my friend, who told me later, "If he could lie so easily to his wife, how can we trust him?" He was right. I have thought of this when people make easy distinctions between the public and private lives of adulterous politicians. While some distinctions should be made, why, really, should we trust them?

When I was in college I became friends with several women who belonged to an international students' society. There was a certain flirtatiousness in those friendships, and they were somehow less than serious. That ended when I got engaged. Suddenly there was a new depth and seriousness in those friendships, because those friends knew I had made a vow.

One always has to consider the cultural background of a vow. A vow made in our culture today means something different from one made in our culture fifty years ago. I had a complicated conversation with a Catholic priest, a friend, who was considering leaving the priesthood to get married. (In the end he did not.) His argument was that the vows he had made as a younger man were not made by the person he had become. I pointed out that the same is true of anyone who has been married for a long time. It is true of anyone who says, in effect, "This is who I will try to be from now on," or "This is what I claim to be, whatever else may change."

Apart from the obvious gravity of the crimes often involved, sexual scandals involving clergy are horrible partly because they involve the betrayal of vows. You promised to be a certain sort of faithful person and you were not. It is equivalent to an adulterous husband or wife in terms of betrayal. This is true also of those bishops who claim to be true successors of the apostles and were more concerned with the reputation of an institution than with the children under their protection. They were false and should be deposed. I feel sorry for those who have deprived themselves of the sacraments because of this horrible situation, but I understand their disgust.

One of the rules shared by every culture is that one should stand by one's word. If we say something, we should stick to it. This is not to say that no one should ever acknowledge failure: some marriages should end, and some people should leave the vowed religious life. But the ease with which we do these things, the ease with which we divorce and remarry, is truly disturbing. In our culture now, vows count for much less than feelings, which are notoriously unstable. A vow says implicitly that something transcends my feelings and expectations. If I am serious, it eclipses them and yet, mysteriously, over the long haul, it begins to include and enhance them. Anyone who has known a long and good marriage learns this. You are indeed not the person you were when you made that vow years ago. Your life is, precisely because of the vow, deeper and more serious and much more filled with joy. Any serious commitment to the Christian life involves a measure of self-denial, and this is what our culture has no use for. It is the consensus of the Christian tradition that if we say honestly, "This is what I will be and do from now on," something—some One—will back us up. ■

Charles R. Morris

System Failure

HOW OBAMA BOTCHED OBAMACARE

President Barack Obama's signature on the Affordable Care Act

The unraveling of George W. Bush's administration can be dated to the triumphal march into Baghdad when he, his Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, and Vice President Dick Cheney missed the significance of Iraqi looting and rear-guard attacks. Iraq is very far away, so it took a long time for the extent of the disaster to sink in. But when it finally did, the collapse of the administration's authority was patent.

As a signature policy issue, President Barack Obama's national health-care program is right up there with Bush's Iraq. After more than seventy-five years of failure to pass a national health program, Obama finally broke through. The accomplishment was all the more impressive because of the difficult congressional environment. The Affordable Care Act (ACA) embodies some strange administrative twists and turns, but the country could learn to love it all the same.

Canny Republicans stated frankly, and fearfully, that if "Obamacare" ever went into effect, the public would like it so much that it would be entrenched forever, and they mounted a frantic and unsuccessful legal and political campaign to block it. After thirty years of conservative rule, the launch of the ACA looked like a harbinger of a new generation of liberal ascendancy.

Nobody expected the launch to be perfect. The health-care exchanges, after all, were supposed to be operated by the states. But the Republican recalcitrance had long been telegraphed at governors' conferences, so it was well-known that the majority of states would shuck the job off on the feds. There is no excuse, therefore, for the utter debacle of the computer system that is supposed to support the federal exchanges. And the responsibility sits squarely on the shoulders of Barack Obama.

There are rules for building big data systems. Computers are stupid. Almost every detail of their instructions has to be perfect for them to run properly. So you keep them simple, especially in the first version. Your data schemas have to be accurate all the way down, your protocols for transferring data must be consistent… and so forth. It's crushingly boring, detailed work. Insurance data systems are especially complex because of the great masses of data involved. In light of the unforgiving political environment surrounding the ACA rollout, an experienced executive would have settled the essential bare-bones minimum for a usable product; frozen the design and fought off kibitzers; empowered a trusted, technically sophisticated, "tiger-manager" to drive it the finish line; received regular, no-holds-barred updates; and personally knocked heads over slippages.

If the anonymous interviewees buttonholed by the *New York Times* and others are telling the truth, none of that happened. The system was built by a welter of contractors, some of them working at cross-purposes. Designs were never completely settled. The managers were civil servants with little computer-systems experience, and minimal decision-making power. Nontechnical people forced technology choices. Minor issue after minor issue had to be referred to "the White House," and it could take weeks to get answers. To top it off, the system objectives were maximalist—as the *Times* put it, "creating a cutting-edge website that would use the latest technologies to dazzle consumers with its many features."

What was the White House thinking? Obama himself explained it at a September press conference: "This is real simple. It's a website where you can compare and purchase affordable health insurance plans side by side the same way you shop for a plane ticket on Kayak, same way you shop for a TV on Amazon. You just go on, and you start looking, and here are all the options."

The president must really have believed that—how else to explain the casualness with which the White House treated the entire process. Some people must have told him, or tried to tell him, how daunting the systems challenge was. He must not have listened—after all, systems are boring—and he has thereby placed in jeopardy his one historic achievement, and possibly all the hopes of a liberal revival.

The current system may not be fixable. Big federal computer projects at the IRS and the FBI have recently been scrapped or restarted after years of work and billions in spending. If an honest review concludes that the health-care system is indeed unsalvageable, the focus has to shift to maximizing other, traditional, ways of accessing the exchanges. If enrollments are still artificially low by, say, the end of March, the "failure of Obamacare" could decide the congressional races. Democrats in marginal districts are sufficiently dispirited that the risk of a veto-proof repeal is not beyond imagining.

It's a pity that the fate of a national health-care program may turn on fixing a computer system screw-up. But the administration has only itself to blame. The priority now is an intelligent, focused, full-court press, not an uncoordinated fire drill, to come up with a rescue plan. The clock is ticking. ■

CNS PHOTO / CHUCK KENNEDY, WHITE HOUSE

J. Peter Nixon

Health Scare

OBAMACARE IS DOWN BUT NOT OUT

Obamacare 1.0

It wasn't supposed to be like this. After more than half a century of effort, the Democratic Party finally realized its goal of passing legislation to provide health insurance to millions of uninsured Americans. The law almost died several times during its tortuous road to passage. When President Barack Obama finally signed the Affordable Care Act (ACA) in 2010, Democrats could be forgiven for thinking the hard part was over.

As candidate Obama might have put it in a very different context: "The invasion went fine. It was the post-invasion planning that left a bit to be desired." Over the past several weeks, the administration's implementation of the ACA has moved from one crisis to another. The rollout of Healthcare.gov—the web portal to the federal health-insurance exchange—has become the most disastrous software product launch since Microsoft Windows Vista. Obama knew how important it was that the site function. On the night he signed the ACA into law, as he and his staff were celebrating their victory, he warned, "If the website doesn't work, nothing else matters." Was no one listening?

Following coverage of the website's problems came more bad news: millions of Americans losing their health-insurance policies because of the ACA. While it is estimated that only 3 percent of Americans will end up paying higher premiums because of the ACA, that still amounts to millions of people—enough to cause headaches for members of Congress.

Is Obamacare doomed? Some Democrats fear (and many Republicans hope) the answer is yes. Yet, while the next few months are likely to be rocky, there are still good reasons to be optimistic about the ACA's future. To understand why, it helps to know a few details about the law. The ACA has two principal mechanisms for expanding insurance coverage. The first (often forgotten) is a large expansion of Medicaid to cover significantly more low-income families. The Obama administration's original projection was that roughly half the uninsured would be covered by that change alone. The expansion is an exceptionally good deal for the states because the federal government is paying the vast majority of the costs through 2020. While twenty-one states with Republican governors or legislatures have refused to participate, it remains to be seen how long they will be able to resist the program's alluring fiscal logic.

Even if other parts of the ACA were changed or repealed, the Medicaid expansion might well survive. Pulling back the federal money would blow a large hole in the budgets of many states, forcing them either to raise taxes or to throw millions of newly insured people out of the program. This is not a choice that governors of either party want to face, and past efforts at the federal level to scale back the Medicaid program have usually met with failure.

The ACA's second mechanism for expanding coverage is subsidizing the purchase of private health insurance through an "exchange," a marketplace where consumers can compare health plans offered by different insurance companies. Consumers can choose from one of four options—"bronze," "silver," "gold," and "platinum"—each of which offers a different level of financial protection. While the cost-sharing varies, the covered benefits (office visits, hospitalization, prescription drugs, etc.) are standard across the plans. Insurers must sell coverage to all comers and cannot charge higher premiums because of an individual's health status. (They can, however, charge older customers and smokers more, within limits.)

This latter policy—a change that Americans across the political spectrum support—is one of the most important features of the ACA, but it is also one of the most difficult to implement. Health insurance is essentially a form of socialism, a transfer of money from the healthy to the sick. For that to work, an insurance plan must strike a rough financial balance between the two groups. In the absence of any other policy change, requiring insurers to take anyone regardless of health status increases the number of sick people in the plan, which means premiums must go up in order to cover the additional costs.

That's what makes the so-called individual mandate so important. By requiring everyone to purchase insurance, health plans will be able to achieve the necessary balance between the healthy and the sick. In the absence of the mandate, the people motivated to buy insurance would probably be sicker than average, which would force plans to raise premiums. That would lead some people—mostly the healthier ones—to drop coverage, leading to a further round of premium increases. In the industry, this is known as the "death spiral."

While the individual mandate is good policy, it's not popular. Candidate Obama, you may recall, campaigned against it. Most people don't like to be required to do anything, much less something that costs money. That's why the Obama administration was holding its breath over the summer to see what premiums the insurance companies

participating in the exchanges would charge. Fortunately, most came in at a reasonably affordable level. When coupled with the subsidies, the cost of a "bronze" plan for many low- and moderate-income individuals will be close to zero, if not entirely free.

The longer Healthcare.gov fails to work, the greater the threat to Obamacare itself. A broken website could make it harder for insurance companies to achieve the necessary balance of risk. If you're healthy, how likely are you to continue trying to enroll? Sicker pools mean higher premiums. Obama's decision to allow individual policyholders to keep their current policies longer creates the same problem because it means this group of relatively healthy people will remain outside the exchanges.

If the federal website can be fixed quickly, these problems may go away. Several states, including Kentucky, California, and New York, have websites that are working quite well. That suggests the technical challenges are not insurmountable. If problems persist, however, lawmakers will face enormous pressure to modify the March 1 deadline for the individual mandate. If that happens, panicked insurance companies could raise premiums dramatically—or exit the market entirely.

But that's not a foregone conclusion. The ACA provides insurers an unprecedented opportunity to enlarge their customer base. With job growth at a snail's pace and many new jobs not offering benefits, selling health insurance has become a Hobbesian war in which one insurance company gains business by taking it away from others. The ACA, by contrast, offers the possibility of enrolling tens of thousands—perhaps even hundreds of thousands—of new customers.

Once those customers enroll, they are likely to stick with the plan they have, particularly if they are no longer forced to abandon it when changing jobs or retiring. Being the first mover in this new market carries significant advantages. Insurers don't want to be on the outside looking in. They have every incentive to absorb some short-term losses in order to build market share later. What's more, the ACA contains little-known provisions that protect insurers in case their enrollees end up costing them significantly more than expected. Known as "risk corridors," these are essentially payments from the federal government to insurance companies that end up with more than their share of high-risk enrollees.

If the individual mandate were to be repealed entirely, many insurers probably would throw up their hands and flee the exchanges. But if it's delayed a few months, then they may be inclined to ride out the storm. Conventional wisdom among the ACA's critics is that many people would rather pay the penalty than buy insurance. That penalty, however, is larger than most people think. For 2014, it's $95 or 1 percent of your taxable income, whichever is greater. If you are an upper-middle-class person with $75,000 of taxable income, that's $750 a year, for which you get nothing in return. The penalty increases over time, rising to 2.5 percent of taxable income by 2016. For all but the most ideologically opposed, buying health insurance will seem smarter than burning a thousand dollars or more.

An often overlooked feature of Obamacare's current crisis is that it is the most "conservative" elements of the law that are causing the most trouble. The law's ancestry—including its reliance on an individual mandate and private health insurance—can be traced back to proposals offered by President George H. W. Bush in 1992 and by Sen. Bob Dole during the 1994 fight over President Bill Clinton's health-care-reform bill. While Rep. Paul Ryan (R-Wis.) has vociferously opposed the ACA, his proposal for Medicare reform—which expects seniors to purchase subsidized insurance in a regulated market—is structurally very similar.

If Obamacare does collapse, the conservative victory may be short-lived. Many liberals never completely reconciled themselves to the ACA's market-based approach. They would like nothing better than to take the money being spent on premium subsidies and "risk corridor" payments and use it to expand Medicare and Medicaid instead. It would be ironic if the conservative war against Obamacare ended up resurrecting the movement for single-payer health insurance. ■

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

Jerry Ryan

Journet's Blind Spot

WHY A GREAT THEOLOGIAN FEARED VATICAN II

On Saturday mornings, Charles Journet, (more commonly known simply as Abbé Journet) would take the train from Fribourg to Geneva to teach a course on church history. He would usually stay overnight in Geneva and celebrate the 11 a.m. Mass at Sacred Heart Church—until the local bishop put a stop to that. Although some people came from far away to listen to Journet's hour-long sermons, the locals of the parish found that his Masses were much too long and complained about it. If Journet was hurt by the bishop's decision, he didn't let it show. In fact he seemed oblivious to whatever concerned only himself. In those years just before the Second Vatican Council, Journet was among the most prominent intellectuals in the church, but you wouldn't know it from the way he presented himself; there wasn't a self-important bone in his body. He was the founding editor of the review *Nova et Vetera*, which was recognized as one of the better theological journals, and he was a close friend of the famous philosopher Jacques Maritain and his wife Raïssa. Journet was in his seventies when I first met him. He was one of several professors of dogmatic theology at the seminary of Fribourg, but he interacted very little with his colleagues and didn't make much of an impression on most of his students. He was very hard of hearing and that contributed to his isolation.

Abbé Journet would always arrive promptly for our classes, even when the weather was bad. A thin wisp of a man, he was bald, wore very thick glasses, and spoke with a delightful sing-song Swiss accent. He was still quite spry and would begin the classes by reciting the *Veni Creator* on his knees. There were only about twenty of us in the class but it was obvious that he had carefully prepared his material. I was impressed by the intensity of his delivery; he put himself heart and soul into what he was trying to communicate. Often he would pause and say with a naïve and authentic wonderment: "Isn't that beautiful, isn't that marvelous?" And, coming from him, it usually was.

He spoke of simple things with great depth and penetration. His history of the church was bathed in the light of his central intuition: The church is holy, pure, without sin, and its boundaries pass through our hearts. Whatever is pure in us, in all of human history, belongs to the church; whatever is sordid remains outside of it. It is impossible to love God without also loving the church, for the two are united as a bride to her bridegroom. Our own membership in the church militant is partial and fragile and, ultimately, a mystery. The hierarchical structure of the church is a gift of God, and this too should be loved and respected. The corollary is that whenever we use the church's authority to prophesy in our own name and justify our own ambitions, we have nothing to do with the true church of Christ. But even such abuses would eventually lead to a greater good and a purer truth.

I'm very grateful for all I received from Abbé Journet. Later on I would read his great work *The Church of the Incarnate Word*—his unfinished magnum opus, which I found luminous. We had only one private meeting and that was in Toulouse. He was staying in a small cottage not far from where Jacques Maritain lived. I can't recall why I was invited to have tea with him on an Easter Sunday afternoon. It had rained heavily that morning and the grass around his cottage was still very wet. I arrived on my bike, a bit late, pedaling furiously. Approaching the cottage, I slammed on the brakes, but they failed: I crashed into the door of Journet's cottage at full speed. As I sat there, contemplating the ruins of my bike, I heard a sing-song voice from within the cottage: "Come right in!" The partially deaf Abbé Journet thought I had simply knocked on the door. I don't recall much of the ensuing conversation except that he had a hard time deciphering my accent. I'd talk about one thing for a while and then he'd talk about something else.

When Paul VI named Abbé Journet a cardinal, everyone was stunned. Abbé who? He wasn't a bishop; he wasn't even a pastor. He was hardly known outside a small circle, and his own bishop barely tolerated him. No one was more stunned than Journet himself. It took nearly a week to convince him that he had to accept. It was Maritain who finally persuaded him that this was not a personal honor but a way of honoring St. Thomas Aquinas and the neo-scholastic movement. Paul VI also had to reassure Abbé Journet (as he insisted on being called even after he was named cardinal) that he could continue to teach at Fribourg and would need to get dressed up in red only for very official ceremonies.

Vatican II was now in progress. I didn't follow the council very closely. I was in Latin America, facing other challenges, discovering, to my great disappointment, just how closely the Catholic hierarchy had come to identify itself with brutal political regimes. I was in Chile when the Pinochet coup took place; I saw the dirty war in Argentina and the "cocaine coup" in Bolivia. In almost all the conflicts in Latin America, most bishops supported the dictatorships du jour. I heard a few rumors about Abbé Journet being a

wet blanket at the council. I later learned that these rumors were quite true—that Journet was agonizing about the changes that were taking place. There was evidently a side of him that had not been apparent in the classroom. Journet's reservations at the council struck me as ironic. It was the very principles I learned from him that opened me up to all sorts of new possibilities, giving me a sense of great freedom even as they anchored and broadened my love for the church. Nothing noble and holy was a stranger to the church; no truth, however partial, was alien to it, for all that was good was the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit was the life of the church. Yet for Abbé Journet, it became apparent, all that was not pure truth was dangerous. There was an intolerance for any sort of "deviation," for any questioning of the church's structures or hierarchical authority. Abbé Journet seemed locked into a formula. He was very suspicious of the ecumenical movement in all its forms. He refused to have anything to do with Taizé or any other group devoted to dialogue. Part of this is understandable. He grew up in a Switzerland, where Catholics were often a persecuted minority, and his earliest publications were apologetical works. These controversies of his younger days seemed to have marked him definitively. He was critical of modern theologians—of Rahner, Zendel, Congar, and, of course, Hans Küng.

In retrospect, I think Journet's strengths were his weaknesses. He loved the Truth with passion—not as something he possessed but as Someone who possessed him as he was, with own his personality and idiosyncracies. There's an old Thomistic axiom, "Whatever is received is received according to the mode of the recipient": each person's particular character colors his or her perceptions, and character is partly the effect of circumstance. Abbé Journet was an intellectual and a loner, a seminary professor during most of his active life. His milieu was a clerical milieu, which was still linked to the upper classes of society. Journet's "apostolate" consisted mainly in preaching retreats to nuns and groups of people who were cultivated and well-to-do. This is not to imply that he was on the side of the rich and powerful. His personal poverty was extreme and authentic; he preached and lived the evangelical virtues. He was not afraid to oppose the Swiss government and even his own bishop during World War II for their discreet collaboration with the Nazis in the name of "national interest." The only "power" he was interested in was the power of truth. But he was perhaps too quick to dismiss unfamiliar manifestations of the truth, which can offer itself to us under various disguises—as an ordinary traveler met on the road or a gardener at the tomb, as a humiliated prophet whom Pilate could not recognize. The title of the review Journet founded, *Nova et Vetera* ("Things Old and New"), evokes the Gospel parable of the scribe versed in the Kingdom of God and defines the program of the review. Abbé Journet did indeed bring forth new insights from old concepts, but he was less adept at bringing new insights to bear on old concepts, which is a different thing. Pope Leo XIII had given Thomism the church's official endorsement in *Aeterni Patris* (1879), and Journet was worried about any development within the church that might threaten Thomism's preeminence.

Journet, Maritain, and Paul VI formed a sort of troika of like-minded neo-Thomists who seemed to be overwhelmed by the scope and implications of the proposals of the council; they feared that things were spinning out of control. An old order was being abolished and there was genuine confusion and apprehension about what would replace it. Many lost their footing. Was this a valid excuse to rein things in? My own experience of Abbé Journet leads me to believe that the answer is not simple. What set St. Thomas apart was his ability to assimilate all forms of truth, whatever their source, and incorporate them into a dynamic synthesis. In this, he was continuing the works of the great fathers of the church, who incorporated the insights and categories of pagan philosophies and mysticism in their effort to better know and love the self-revealing God—and his ultimate revelation in the Incarnate Word. This is an ongoing process. Journet would not have denied this in theory, yet in practice he seemed to resist anything outside of his own theological scheme. Such rigidity risked making neo-Thomism irrelevant in the wake of the council. In contrast to this narrowness, we have John Paul II in the chapter titled "Why Divided?" in his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*:

> Why would the Holy Spirit have permitted so many different divisions and enmities among those who claim to be disciples of the same Gospel, disciples of the same Christ?... There are two possible answers to this question. The more negative one would see in these divisions the bitter fruit of sins committed by Christians. The more positive answer is inspired by trust in the One who is capable of bringing forth good from evil, from human weakness. Could it not be that these divisions have also been *a path continually leading the church to discover the untold wealth contained in Christ's Gospel and in the redemption accomplished in Christ?* Perhaps all this wealth would not have come to light otherwise.... It is necessary *for humanity to achieve unity through plurality, to learn to come together in the one church, even while presenting a plurality of ways of thinking and acting, of cultures and civilizations.* Wouldn't such a way of looking at things be, in a certain sense, more consonant with the wisdom of God, with his goodness and providence?

The neo-Thomism of Journet and Maritain still has much to recommend it; it rescued the basic intuitions of St. Thomas from the shallow scholasticism that had obscured them, and those intuitions are as valuable today as they were before the council. But Journet was as suspicious of theological innovation—as ill-disposed toward the distinctive intuitions of the modern world—as the unreconstructed scholastics had been of the neo-Thomists. The same syndrome is visible among some of Journet's theological descendents, but it is not irreversible. Thomism is adaptive and resourceful; it will always survive the anxieties and blind spots of rearguard Thomists. ■

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Sending the Wrong Signal

How Luxury Compromises Christian Witness

David Cloutier

In the early days of Francis's papacy, few things have provoked as much comment—almost all of it positive—as the new pope's efforts to eschew pomp and luxury. In his choices about where to live and what to wear, Francis has opted for simplicity. He urged rich Argentines not to travel to his installation as pope and to give the money they would have spent on airfare to the poor. He has urged priests and nuns to forsake fancy cars and smartphones, saying, "It hurts me when I see a priest or a nun with the latest model car. You can't do this. A car is necessary to do a lot of work, but please, choose a humbler one." He decried the "culture of waste," saying, "We should all remember…that throwing food away is like stealing from the tables of the poor, the hungry!" Pope Francis's example should give all Catholics pause: if even the pope can dispense with luxury, so can the rest of us. But it's not only a question of what we can do without. Our attachments to worldly goods—and to the social status they're supposed to signify—is a hindrance to Christian witness.

If it is unusual to see a pope give up his palace for humbler digs, there is nothing novel in the idea that the Christian life involves renunciation. Voluntary poverty has long been understood as an important Christian ideal, and many volumes of patristic writings are filled with stern admonishments to the wealthy. Take, for example, St. Ambrose addressing the rich Christians of Milan: "You give coverings to walls and bring men to nakedness. The naked cries out before your house unheeded; your fellow man is there, naked and crying, while you are perplexed by the choice of marble to clothe your floor." Hundreds of other passages like this one could be cited. As the historian Helen Rhee notes, the writings of the church fathers assume that "Christian self-definition includes unequivocal denunciation of avarice and luxury as irrational desires and displays of wealth."

Yet most lay Catholics in the United States have been reluctant to take up these challenges. We admire Dorothy Day, but from afar, forgetting that she and Peter Maurin hoped that every parish would one day have a house of hospitality and that ordinary American Catholics might set aside a hospitality room in their own homes. Many are quick to accuse the Catholic clergy of extravagance (often justifiably) while remaining silent about the wealth displayed in the parking lots of our churches. This inconsistency is partly the residual effect of the old "two-level ethic," according to which voluntary poverty was only for a few exceptional Catholics with special vocations. Poverty, like celibacy, was for the rectory and the monastery. But Vatican II reminded us of "the universal call to holiness," and Pope John Paul II explicitly rejected the two-level ethic in his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. The evangelical counsels are no longer to be understood as only for monks and nuns.

But if many Catholics are more willing to admire someone like Dorothy Day than to follow her example, that is also partly because many of us have adapted to our country's consumer culture—a culture in which affluence is morally innocent or even commendable. "More" is taken to be a universal aspiration, perhaps one of the few we are all supposed to share in our multicultural society. Everyone wants "a better life" or "the American dream" for their children. In *The Unintended Reformation*, Brad Gregory suggests that "the goods life" is the social glue uniting an otherwise "hyperpluralistic" society. Whatever else we may disagree about, we agree that if you can have nicer things, you *should* have nicer things. In such a culture, it is easy for Catholic Americans to forget their church's teaching that our excess wealth must be directed to the common good rather than to private indulgence. We cling tenaciously to the ideology of happiness as the pursuit of limitless wealth, buying into what Fr. John A. Ryan called the "higher-standard-of-living fallacy." Ryan insists that social reform requires us to "put away that false conception of life and values which permeates all classes of contemporary society, and which holds that right life consists in the indefinite expansion of material wants."

So why, despite the church's longstanding message on this point, are some Catholics still surprised to see Francis questioning our consumer choices? One reason: popular misconceptions about economics. Wouldn't less consumption

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Pope Francis accepting the gift of a used Renault 4

CNS PHOTO / L'OSSERVATORE ROMANO VIA CATHOLIC PRESS PHOTO

wreck the economy? This objection goes back to eighteenth-century defenders of luxury like Bernard Mandeville and David Hume, who observed that the pursuit of new luxury goods seemed to lead to more production overall. Luxury equaled economic growth; growth equaled general prosperity. Why is this a misconception? It's true that a healthy economy requires the circulation of wealth, but consider all the things we could be spending money on that have nothing to do with personal luxury. We could be giving our money to those who don't have enough of what they actually need. We could be paying more for the things we do need so that the workers who provide them can make a proper living. The question is not whether to spend or to hoard. The question is how we spend and why. What do we value most? As Francis pointed out, "That homeless people die of cold on the streets is not news. In contrast, a ten-point drop on the stock markets of some cities is a tragedy. A person dying is not news, but if the stock markets drop ten points it is a tragedy! Thus people are disposed of, as if they were trash." Getting beyond the sound bite that "spending is good for the economy" means asking what an economy is *for*. Economies don't exist simply to perpetuate themselves; they exist for the purpose of human flourishing. Our focus on numbers like the GDP and the stock market—"scoreboard numbers," up-or-down numbers—is a mistake. As the economist Amartya Sen puts it, "Why should we be concerned with [maximizing] opulence, rather than with what people succeed in doing or being?" The first question to ask is whether an economy is improving people's lives. No purely quantitative measure will answer that question adequately.

But, someone might ask in response, doesn't "the pursuit of happiness" mean encouraging everyone to buy what will satisfy them? Jefferson, whose ideal citizen was a yeoman farmer, did not have our modern consumer culture in mind when he wrote that famous phrase. More to the point, empirical research has shown again and again that the never-ending pursuit of nicer stuff is a great way to make yourself miserable. Past a certain point, more income and nicer possessions do not make us any happier. In part, these things disappoint because they involve what economists call opportunity costs: the time we spend on them could have been spent on nonmaterial goods. More important, in an affluent society, much of our spending does not satisfy real needs, but only desires for "positional" goods. Francis explains how money leads to "vanity that is useless, but makes you feel like an important person." Some positional goods are inherently exclusive. The very rich want things that only a few can have (famous paintings, penthouses with a view of Central Park). To have such things is to prove oneself part of an elite, and so it is easy to see why they should be considered luxuries. Precisely because so many things the rest of us want are quite common—at least in our part of the world—it is easy to assume they aren't really luxuries. But what makes something luxurious in the most basic sense is not that it is rare but that it is unnecessary. Whatever we spend just to "keep up"—whether it's with the Joneses or the Vanderbilts—can be counted as luxury.

The pursuit of nicer but unnecessary stuff also places us on a "hedonic treadmill": the more we get, the more we want. We adapt very quickly to a new normal and then need

even nicer things to produce the same effect. Studies have shown that, while people have stable aspirations for things like getting married or having children (having three kids doesn't necessarily make you yearn for a fourth), aspirations for material wealth and rewards constantly increase. Once you check one thing off your wish list, you add two more. Francis describes the danger in a homily, contrasting starkly "the road of covetousness, which ends in idolatry" with "God's road of humility, of bending down to serve." Each road is not a once-for-all grand choice, but rather a matter of what we choose to do with our resources each day.

The pursuit of happiness properly understood means that, once we have a sufficiency of material goods, we should devote our time and attention to other, higher things. Summarizing the recent research on the topic, Richard Easterlin writes, "The happiness of an individual can be increased by allocating his or her time to those domains…in which hedonic adaptation and social comparison are less important" (*Economics and Happiness*, 2008). Friendships, family, and personal health are especially important, but so is involvement in civic and charitable activity. People simply tend to be more satisfied with the persistent, intrinsic rewards of these activities than with an endless cycle of making and spending more money.

Of course, most of us *say* these things about relationships and community, but our lives appear to tell a different story. Middle-class Americans, including Catholics, have developed consumer habits that can be broken only by a deliberate effort of self-denial. Weaning ourselves off common luxuries will be hard. It will mean replacing one set of habits with a better set. Francis's remarkable choices as pope are the result of his long habit of making do with less as bishop in Argentina. In Buenos Aires he dined with the poor or prepared his own meals, lived in a modest apartment, and used public transit. Luxury names the vice opposed to such practices. While some people go into debt in order to live *above* their means, Francis has for many years chosen to live *below* his. The choice was made day after day, year after year, quietly, unostentatiously, but not in secret. It was an important and visible part of his Christian witness, as it is now.

In thinking and writing about these questions as a theologian, I have frequently experienced some personal discomfort. I joke that, once people hear what I have to say about luxury, they'll never invite me to their homes. But the greater discomfort has to do with my own home. Is my apartment too nice, or in too nice a neighborhood? Did I really need to buy all those books when there's an academic library across the street? The truth is I am a bit cheap and use things till they wear out—or even after they wear out. Miserliness is also a vice. Still, I constantly run into temptations simply to buy the newest available thing, to upgrade, to make my already comfortable life even more comfortable. For example, there's my car. I have a 2000 Honda Civic with nearly 150,000 miles on it—but when I bought the car, I could have paid about $5000 less to buy the very similar Chevy Prizm (which, according to the experts, is just as reliable as the Civic). But try as I might, I couldn't picture myself driving a Chevy. It's embarrassing to admit, but I was concerned with what my car would say about me…and, really, college professors drive Hondas, not Chevys.

Try as I might, I couldn't picture myself driving a Chevy. It's embarrassing to admit, but I was concerned with what my car would say about me...and, really, college professors drive Hondas, not Chevys.

In a highly mobile consumer society where we often interact with new people, we use our possessions to signal how we wish to be perceived. We might feel self-conscious about making consumer choices that conspicuously signal a disdain for extravagance, but in fact we *already* send very powerful messages about ourselves and our priorities with the choices we make as consumers. Take clothing. Our society pays lip service to the idea that what one wears shouldn't matter much; the alternative—a society in which people are openly judged by their clothing—seems repugnant. And yet this, too, seems to be a case where our conventional wisdom is radically at odds with our conventions. If clothing matters so little, why do lots of us spend so much of our disposable income on it? The obvious truth is that in a consumer culture like ours—and especially one in which we are strangers to most of those we encounter in public—what we wear ends up mattering a lot. The same is true of our hairstyle, furniture, personal electronic devices. They all send a message about us—a message about how we fit in or stand out.

So does the message they send about us have anything to do with our vocation as Christians? Does it bear witness to what we say we value? Or does it signal our allegiance to rival values? When we lose sight of how our economic decisions relate to our vocation, calls for "simple living" can lead to trivial outcomes or even other forms of consumerism—to fastidious (and often expensive) minimalism or to rustic chic. For Christians, simplicity is primarily an ethic, not an aesthetic. Again, Francis is showing us the way. Take his choice to live in a common apartment residence and celebrate daily Mass with the other people who live there. Sure, this involves some discomfort and inconvenience, but that isn't the point. The point is Francis's deep sense that

his housing should be well suited to the fulfillment of his vocation as pope. He clearly believes he is more available to others, less subject to isolation, if he shares a household. We are moved by this choice not only because it pleases us to consider a pope turning down a palace but also because the choice signifies such a compelling understanding of what the papacy is about.

How might our own consumer choices arise from and serve our vocation? It's worth noting here that, in premodern theology, the choice to buy and use more than what was strictly necessary was often justified in terms of one's "station." Choices about what one wore or where one lived were not considered luxurious as long as they were necessary to signal one's rank in a feudal society. As one might expect, St. Thomas Aquinas thought that one's clothing could indicate virtue or vice: he quoted St. Ambrose, who warned against "costly and dazzling apparel" and favored "ordinary clothes" with "nothing added to increase [the body's] beauty." But Aquinas also argued that moderation should be governed by custom, so that one neither exceeds nor falls below what is expected. Certain apparel, he writes, is "an indication of man's estate" and is judged according to "the virtue of truthfulness." We may now scoff at this idea of "station," but do we have a better excuse for expensive clothes? For Christians today, vocation should take the place of station as the governing concept. Germain Grisez's detailed treatment of material goods makes this point well. Grisez writes that "Christians should subordinate possessions to the kingdom," by which he means that "an individual's personal vocation or a group's proper mission provides the standard for judgments about acquiring, holding, and disposing of things.... Desiring or clinging to things which exceed this limit, whether by their quantity or their quality, is inconsistent with the total giving of self which Jesus requires of every one of his disciples." (Would that Grisez's many admirers took these lines as seriously as they take his stringent defense of the church's sexual teachings.)

A vocation is more than a rank and more than a job. A vocation ties every part of one's life together into a whole. That should include our practical decisions—not only about how we make money, but about how we spend it. Do we spend money to separate ourselves from the poor? The suburban neighborhood of single-family dwellings accessible only by car can isolate us the way Francis was worried the papal apartment might isolate him. Such neighborhoods are splendidly private and entirely under our control. In ancient Rome, the life of luxury was associated with the country villa—a private escape that, as Peter Brown notes, was "presented as a place of unproblematic abundance." How can we say we have a vocation to serve the poor if we've arranged our lives so that we and our families rarely encounter them?

We've all met Catholics whose lives appear to be *egregiously* at odds with Francis's example—Catholics who own the most expensive cars or spend thousands of dollars on the latest devices or keep up with the latest designer fashions. And, indeed, we can all probably remember instances in own lives when we fell prey to the lure of luxury. But beyond these obvious cases, it is often hard for us to recognize the higher-standard-of-living fallacy at work in our ordinary habits, hard to imagine giving up things that have come to seem basic even if, objectively, they aren't. It can also be hard to see what real effect such renunciation would have. It might tickle our moral vanity, but would it really be useful? Would it attract anyone to the gospel? Answering that question truthfully requires discernment and humility, but we must not be too quick to accept answers that makes our lives easier. It may turn out that these questions need to be answered with the help of a community. A number of parishes (including my own) run Catholic Relief Services Rice Bowl programs for Lent, inviting people to skip a meal and donate the money they would have spent on their own food to the hungry. What if parish communities also programmatically scrutinized their other purchases, and decided, together, to buy less and give more?

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There is no sin in living in the richest country in the world, the richest ever known. But do we really imagine that we won't be judged precisely on the question of how we dispose of our wealth, individually and collectively? I don't mean to minimize the importance of other moral questions, but Catholics in twenty-first-century America should at least be able to agree that no other moral question is more important than this one. "For the church to heed the New Testament's challenge on the question of possessions," Richard Hays writes in *Moral Vision of the New Testament*, "would require nothing less than a new Reformation." Pope Francis has certainly got Catholics thinking again about poverty. Perhaps his own example will startle us into thinking about it not only in terms of economic *policy*, but also in terms of personal vocation, so that our lives bear better witness to the gospel's radical claims about wealth. ■

Heard on High

The Religious Imagination of Wallace Stevens

Stephen Sicari

Did Wallace Stevens, one of the greatest twentieth-century poets, convert to Roman Catholicism as he lay dying in the summer of 1955? This question has provoked more controversy than one might expect. In *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism* (1987), Joseph Carroll provided a synopsis of the debate, offering the testimony of the Catholic priest who claimed to have initiated Stevens into the faith—and of the poet's daughter, Holly, who strenuously denied the priest's claim. Whatever the truth of the matter, careful readers of Stevens's poetry would not be surprised if he did in fact convert on his deathbed, since much of his later poetry reflects, and is shaped by, what we may call a "Catholic imagination."

Born in 1879 in Reading, Pennsylvania, Stevens grew up influenced by his father's very American kind of Christianity, one that put great emphasis on self-reliance and the rewards of hard work. His mother was pious in the more traditional sense, and the young Stevens was familiar with the Bible, especially the New Testament; significantly, he was also drawn to quiet places where meditation was fostered, and would remain so all his life. But Stevens was his father's son to the end, and so put the advancement of his legal career before his poetry. By the time he wrote the poems I want to discuss here, he had become a successful insurance lawyer and vice president of the Hartford Insurance Company, a married man with a daughter and a house in the suburbs. Safely ensconced in this bourgeois life, Stevens could take all the risks he wanted to in his poetry.

In a 1942 lecture Stevens spoke of the need for a space free for contemplation. That last word is crucial, since for Stevens, poetry grows out of contemplation. His second book, *Ideas of Order* (1935), is a collection of tightly interrelated poems written in response to certain philosophical problems involving transcendence and its relationship to belief. As Stevens was putting the book together in 1935, he described a group of its poems as "an abridgement of at least a temporary theory of poetry." (He was a poet for whom most things were "temporary," and theories especially.) In a letter to his editor describing what was originally the first poem in *Ideas of Order*, "Sailing After Lunch," Stevens provided a clue to this theory. "When people speak of the romantic," he wrote, "they do so in what the French commonly call a pejorative sense. But poetry is essentially romantic, only the romantic of poetry must be something constantly new and, therefore, just the opposite of what is spoken of as the romantic. Without this romantic, one gets nowhere; with it, the most casual things take on a transcendence, and the poet rushes brightly." Romance is the essential thing in poetry, in other words, but it continually risks becoming stale. Thus Stevens writes, in "Sailing After Lunch":

> The romantic should be here.
> The romantic should be there.
> It ought to be everywhere. But the romantic must never remain,
> Mon Dieu, and must never return again.

In a 1940 letter Stevens remarked that "what the world looks forward to is a new romanticism, a new belief"; and in "How to Live. What to Do."—a poem that "definitely represents my way of thinking," Stevens asserted —we see his reformulation of Wordsworth's romanticism, especially as it was presented in "Tintern Abbey." In Stevens's poem, a man and his companion leave "the flame-freaked sun / To seek a sun of fuller fire," but end up finding only "this tufted rock / Massively rising high and bare." There is nothing else there, "neither voice nor crested image, / Nor chorister, nor priest"; yet the poem ends with a triumph, as the cold wind makes a "heroic sound / Joyous and jubilant and sure." While Wordsworth and his companion look on the world and hear "the still sad music of humanity," Stevens and his companion hear the desolate but heroic wind. This is a new kind of romanticism.

But is it a Catholic kind? In "The American Sublime," Stevens asks, "How does one stand / To behold the sublime...?" and goes on to answer, "the sublime comes down / To the spirit itself, / The spirit and space, / The empty spirit / In vacant space. / What wine does one drink? / What bread does one eat?" Such questions evoke the Eucharist, yet the romanticism of *Ideas of Order* cannot fairly be described as Catholic. Indeed, the most important poem in the volume would

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seem to undermine the claim that Stevens was in any way a religious poet. In "Evening without Angels," the poet notes that "sad men made angels of the sun," and that banishing these angels, we have returned to "bare earth," where "the voice that is in us makes true response…" Angels, like the bread and wine of the Eucharist, are an outmoded invention; we're better off in a "disenchanted world," where a fully human voice finally rises up and responds "truly" to the world outside. This is a romanticism without angels, indeed without any of the traditional paraphernalia of religion. This is transcendence without the supernatural.

Wallace Stevens in 1954. Photo by Sylvia Salmi.

If we stopped here, we could agree with critics who see a secular Stevens intent on the realization of purely human powers. But Stevens's work developed over time. In 1941, six years after the publication of *Ideas of Order*, he delivered a lecture, "The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words," that shows him continuing to worry about the nature and role of the romantic. Stevens wants to counter what he views as a pervasive "spirit of negation," which denies "all the great things," but he now seems less sure that "the romantic" offers "the way out." Six years later still, in 1947, he is even more nervous about this word, writing in "Imagination as Value" that "the imagination is the liberty of the mind. The romantic is a failure to make use of that liberty. It is to the imagination what sentimentality is to feeling." It seems Stevens now wants to sever the romantic from the imagination as he strives to comprehend the latter in the fullness of its powers.

Indeed, one could use this growing comprehension of the power of the imagination to chart the development of Stevens's poetry. His 1942 collection *Parts of a World* reveals a strategy designed to strip away the romantic quest for higher things as an obstacle to rapprochement with the world. In "The Man on the Dump," the poet imagines "rejecting the trash" of romantic imagery to feel the purifying change, "the moment when the moon creeps up to the bubbling of bassoons," when "everything is shed" and we are empowered. As "On the Road Home" quite clearly tells us, "It was when I said, / 'There is no such thing as the truth,'" that the poet sees the world more fully and experiences life with superlatives: "warmest, closest, and strongest." And the very next poem, "The Latest Freed Man," tells us that "having just / Escaped from the truth, the morning is color and mist, / Which is enough." We achieve satisfying sensory experience when we give up the romantic quest for higher, transcendent things.

Later poems in the volume, however, recognize that this effort of sweeping away entails subsequently finding something that will suffice. "The Well Dressed Man with a Beard" begins with this recognition, using language from Carlyle: "After the final no there comes a yes / And on that yes the future world depends." Of the protagonist in "Mrs. Alfred Uruguay" we learn that "Her no and no made yes impossible," yet someone passes by her who can bring us to yes, a "figure of capable imagination." This is the figure we aspire to become, equipped with an imagination capable of creating "the ultimate elegance, the imagined land."

This poem leads us in turn to the most important poem in the volume, "Asides on the Oboe," whose opening contains of one of the most important phrases in Stevens's entire body of poetry:

> The prologues are over. It is a question, now,
> Of final belief. So, say that final belief
> Must be in a fiction. It is time to choose.

It's as if Stevens believes that all he has done up to this point, in all his work to date, has been prologue to this moment, when we are (finally!) ready to understand what is at stake—namely, belief, and final belief at that. We are asked to choose what fiction we will believe in. And this challenge leads to what most critics consider Stevens's greatest poem, *Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction*, finished at the end of May 1942.

Any attempt to talk about one aspect of such a complex poem is bound to be misleading, but we may focus on two ideas we have been sketching: angels and belief. As the poem

AT THE END

of a late August evening
comes a light through maples
and over orange marigolds
a light that eddies over fallen apples
a butterfly light that slows
and begins again
a light like a snake's shed skin
a shiver of light you carry home
like the remains of a season
all but over

—Harry Humes

Harry Humes has published several collections of poetry, the most recent of which is Butterfly Effect, *selected for the 1998 National Poetry Series and published by Milkweed Editions.*

comes to its final climax, the poet at last discovers a way "To find the real, / To be stripped of every fiction except one / The fiction of an absolute—Angel, / Be silent in your luminous cloud and hear / The luminous melody of proper sound." That we find the real by stripping away fictions should come as no surprise. But what may startle is the news that we require a fiction, that of the absolute, and that this one fiction is associated with the kind of being banished by this secular poet. Fictions are made things, constructed by the power called the imagination, and the only one Stevens allows back into his world is the fiction of an absolute order and perspective, a way of looking unbounded by time or space—like that of the angels we thought he had denied.

Stevens then asks the ultimate question: "What am I to believe?" By way of responding, he imagines the now necessary angel "leaping downwards through evening's revelations" and asks, "Am I that imagine this angel less satisfied?" The answer is no. Through the angel the poet achieves an "expressible bliss" by creating, through the power of the imagination, an angelic way of looking and hearing, he is able to find what suffices—and to assert, quite boldly, that "I can / Do all that angels can." A later poem, "Angel Surrounded by Paysans," provides the best gloss:

Yet I am the necessary angel of earth,
Since, in my sight, you see the earth again,
Cleared of its stiff and stubborn, man-locked set,
And, in my hearing, you hear its tragic drone
Rise liquidly in liquid lingerings,
Like watery words awash.

Beyond romantic sentimentality, these lines express what the imagination is capable of giving us, angelic sight and hearing. Stevens plays the angel in another late poem, "One of the Inhabitants of the West":

"I am the archangel of evening and praise
This one star's blaze.
Suppose it was a drop of blood...
So much guilt lies buried
Beneath the innocence
Of autumn days."

As his title suggests, Stevens recognizes the angel as a product of the same Western theological imagination that enables us to retain innocence even after Hiroshima and Auschwitz. The earlier banishment of angels now seems merely a stage in the clearing-out process preliminary to the poet's imaginative attempt to be both man and angel, both timeless and temporal—to occupy what T. S. Eliot called "the point of intersection of the timeless with time."

Does this make Stevens a Christian poet? One final look at a poem may help us feel more secure in this assertion. "St. Armorer's Church from the Outside" addresses the matter of a decaying church and an imaginative effort at renewal. At the time the poem was written, the foundation of the Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd in Hartford, Connecticut, was rotting and causing the 150-foot steeple to lean. The name Stevens gives the church, "St. Armorer's," is inspired by the gun engravings in the entrance, or "armorer's porch"—the church was built by the Colt firearms family—and suggests wittily a once-mighty edifice clearly fallen from its former strength. But the poet begins constructing, in the space outside St. Armorer's and beneath its now-leaning tower, a chapel: "something seen / In a mystic eye, no sign of life but life, / Itself, the presence of the intelligible." The chapel is the poet's creation, from nature and in the presence of the outmoded church, of something new:

St. Armorer's has nothing of this present,
This vif, this dizzle-dazzle of being new
And of becoming, for which the chapel spreads out
Its arches in its vivid element,
In the air of newness of that element,
In an air of freshness, clearness, greenness, blueness,
That which is always beginning because it is part
Of that which is always beginning, over and over.

The church is always beginning over and over, and the poet's job is to help that process of renewal, of maintaining the ancient strength in a fresh new element. I for one am prepared to accept that Stevens made a conversion to the Catholic Church as he lay dying, since so much of his poetic work had prepared him for finding a way to live comfortably and securely in its light. The poem ends simply:

The chapel underneath St. Armorer's walls,
Stands in a light, its natural light and day,
The origin and keep of its health and his own.
And there he walks and does as he lives and likes. ■

Richard Alleva

All At Sea

'CAPTAIN PHILLIPS' & 'ALL IS LOST'

Can a movie be both thoughtful and electrifyingly exciting? I think *Captain Phillips* is. Its omniscient camerawork makes you feel like a helpless god viewing everything from every angle without being able to intervene. Its blitzkrieg editing, throbbing soundtrack, complex but coherent action choreography, and naturalistic acting all go to work on your senses. You leave the theater wondering how many complete breaths you've taken during the last 140 minutes.

The film is mainly based on Richard Phillips's memoir *A Captain's Duty*, a story that almost begs to be turned into an action-rescue movie, containing, as it does every plot twist, tease, and reversal known to the genre. It's like the real-life version of Steven Seagal's *Under Siege*. Pirates attack an American container ship just off the coast of Somalia, but the well-drilled crew goes into hiding just as the captain (played by Tom Hanks) is taken prisoner, and soon they capture the pirates' leader, Abduwali Muse (played by Barkhad Abdi). Cheating on a prisoner exchange, the pirates transfer Captain Phillips onto a lifeboat, which gets tracked by a U.S. destroyer. (The American government, unlike the Europeans, has vowed not to pay ransoms to pirates labeled as terrorists.) Then, like the cavalry in a Western, a Navy SEAL team arrives. Surely, given these ingredients, any yeoman director could have succeeded simply by milking the suspense for all it was worth.

But Paul Greengrass has more than yeoman credentials and aims. With *United 93* and two of the *Bourne* movies, he perfected his signature blend of documentary cinematics and thriller content. In those films evil was easy to recognize. Something more complicated is at work in his latest—something that made me wonder whether a better title would have been *Captain Phillips and Captain Muse*. For it becomes increasingly clear that this is the story of two leaders: the American trying to fulfill his duties to employer and crew; and a desperate pirate in thrall to the real villains of the story, the offscreen fat cats, in Africa or the Middle East or even the Americas, who target ships and then pay starving Somalis a pittance to do the dangerous dirty work while skimming off millions for themselves. At one point Muse boasts to Phillips that he once captured an Indian ship ransomed at $6 million. "Six million!" exclaims Phillips. "Then what are you doing here?" The question, naïve yet pointed, gets no response, but Muse's braggadocio evaporates. This isn't *Die Hard* dialogue, with Bruce Willis outquipping the bad guys just before he offs them. Phillips may be temporarily trapped, but his captors have been trapped for their entire lives by history, geography, and economics. Even as they scream their threats and brandish their guns, the armed forces of a superpower are preparing their doom. Once the SEALs complete their mission, Greengrass's camerawork suddenly becomes uncharacteristically subjective: we see the bodies of pirates littering the lifeboat through the eyes of the harrowed Phillips. His happy ending has come at the expense of their tragedy.

COLUMBIA PICTURES

Mismatch

I don't mean to suggest that Greengrass is proposing some sort of moral equivalency. ("See, the agents of capitalism are just as bad as pirates!") We never stop rooting for Tom Hanks and hoping for his escape. But the director makes sure that our relief is devoid of smugness. The good guys have won, but the bad guys—the real bad guys—remain unscathed and ready to strike again. They will find other Muses.

Another seaman is in trouble of a very different sort in *All Is Lost*, written and directed by J. C. Chandor. On the Indian Ocean an unnamed man (played by Robert Redford) awakens on his private boat to find that a floating container of sneakers has ripped a large hole in his hull. The entire movie details his efforts to patch his wounded vessel, reestablish contact with the world, learn celestial navigation from a book, maintain his water supply, and avoid storms. When the boat finally sinks, he tries to survive on an inflated life raft, catch fish, and avoid sharks, all the while scanning the horizon for rescue.

The film's very title signals doom, and even before the main action begins, we hear Redford's voice bidding goodbye to loved ones—words that turn out to have been in the note he put in a bottle and cast into the sea after eight days of courageous struggle. Yet there's more story to be told after that bottle floats away. Will the sailor survive his despair?

What we have here is a *Robinson Crusoe* in reverse. Through sheer gumption and resourcefulness, the stranded Crusoe builds a habitat, hunts and farms, sews new garments, acquires pets and a faithful manservant, fights off cannibals, and generally extends human dominion over nature. Defoe's book was an ode to self-reliance. *All Is Lost* gives us a man every bit as determined as Robinson, yet here nature wins at every turn, finally reducing our hero to King Lear's vision of "unaccomodated" humanity as "a poor, bare, forked animal." There is a Sisyphean hopelessness here but also a Sisyphean defiance, which reminded me of Samuel Beckett's "I can't go on, I'll go on."

All Is Lost offers the usual satisfying excitements of any survival story, but this isn't primarily a nail-biter or a spectacle or even a piece of at-one-with-Mother-Nature mysticism in the manner of *Life of Pi*. It's a dogged, Spartan work kept sufficiently entertaining by pacey editing, beautiful but unpretentious cinematography, Redford's unimprovable performance, and Chandor's almost clinical interest in pushing his hero to biological extremes.

The narrative doesn't indulge us. There is no prologue (as in *Cast Away*) to tell us what the hero's life was like before the disaster—or even why he undertook such a far-flung, solitary voyage. Nor are there any soliloquies in which the protagonist can reveal his thoughts. (All the dialogue in this hundred-minute movie could be packed into a single tweet.) No flashbacks. No dream sequences or voices from the past. No hallucinatory dialogues with animals or anthropomorphizing of soccer balls. In fact, *All Is Lost* can be seen as a reproach to *Cast Away* and *Life of Pi*. Those movies took shelter in oases of comedy, flights of fancy, and beautiful sunsets. Chandor's movie is as hard and bare as a sea-swept rock.

In a way, the film's real terrain isn't the ocean but Redford's aging physique. Now seventy-six, in reasonably good shape, he does nothing to conceal an elderly body's dwindling reserve of energy. And the frailty amplifies the suspense as we watch the actor doing all his own stunts at just the pace he can maintain while suffering all the pains and discomforts such a hardship entails. (It's reported that one of Redford's ears was actually injured during the filming.) Chandor's camera stays so pertinaciously close to the actor that we feel the protagonist's reactions and apprehensions with an intimacy rare in films as intensely physical as this one. Every time Redford sees trouble looming, we see it, too—in his features. Chandor and his camera crew admirably simulate disaster, but it's Redford's eyes that make us inwardly flinch. ■

Leo J. O'Donovan

Painting in Slang

FERNAND LÉGER AT THE PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM OF ART

One of the revelations at the New York Museum of Modern Art's "Inventing Abstraction" exhibition earlier this year was a wall of early work by Fernand Léger. Three oils, painted with strong primary colors, black lines and patches of white, showed tumbles of ovoid and box-like forms that seemed to dance into the viewer's space. They came from Léger's *Contrast of Forms* series of 1913 and suggested a brilliant attempt to render musical sounds. Further on in the show a later painting, *Disks* (1918), revealed the artist developing an even more original gift for intense and evocative abstraction. I wondered whether this legendary figure, relatively neglected by recent critics, might be about to receive his due.

Now it has happened. In a vigorous and superbly contextual show, "Léger: Modern Art and the Metropolis"—at the Philadelphia Museum of Art through January 5—curator Anna Vallye has focused on the most experimental years of the artist's life, from 1918 through the mid-1920s. Léger is the show's central figure, and *The City*, his major statement of 1919, its central work, but the many artists whom the highly gregarious Léger met in Paris are also strongly represented, as are the interests he shared with them: the hectic course of urban life; the circus; mass media; graphic design; theater, and, in a special way, cinema.

Born in 1881 to a farming family in Normandy, Léger studied architecture, then moved to Paris in 1900 and worked there as an architectural draftsman. Rejected by the École des Beaux-Arts, he enrolled at the School of Decorative Arts and began to paint independently in 1905. Like much of the rest of Paris, he was stunned by the Cézanne retrospective of 1907. Relocating to Montparnasse, he joined the company of avant-garde artists such as Jacques Lipchitz, Jean Metzinger, Albert Gleizes, Henri Le Fauconnier, Robert and Sonia Delaunay, Francis Picabia, and the Duchamp brothers—all of whom are present in Philadelphia. Early on he also met Piet Mondrian and, later, his lifelong friend the architect Le Corbusier.

In the pre–World War I years, Léger was identified with the Cubists and continued largely in that vein through *Acrobats at the Circus* and the patriotic *Bastille Day at Vernon* (both 1918). But his two years as a soldier on the front lines of battle affected him deeply. "The crudeness, variety, humor, and downright perfection of certain men around me… in the midst of the life-and-death drama we were in," he wrote, "made me want to paint in slang with all its color

Fernand Léger, Disks, *1918*

IMAGES COURTESY THE PHILADELPHIA MUSEUM

Fernand Léger, The City, *1919*

and mobility." Putting the abstract art of 1912–13 behind him, he set to reconsidering everything—subject, palette, and method.

What resulted was *The City*, a 7 ft. 7 in. x 9 ft. 9 in. oil for which Léger did fourteen careful studies (all reproduced, for the first time, in the show's catalogue). With its spectrum of vivid colors, the final work presents abstracted forms of modern life pressed together—posters and railroad trestles, billowing factory smoke, the zigzag of electric current, stenciled lettering, silhouetted figures descending a staircase. A rose-colored column to the viewer's right is balanced by a series of smaller vertical forms to the left, but there is no single focus, just as there is no horizon. The longer you look, the more throbbingly alive the painting seems—and the more powerfully it pushes forward toward you.

Léger and his colleagues rejoiced in the new publicity of the postwar years and the energy of mass media. His friend Blaise Cendrars recommended to fellow poets the "lyricism" of advertising as the "finest expression of our time." "The view through the door of the railroad car or the automobile windshield, in combination with the speed," Léger had written in 1914, "has altered the habitual look of things. A modern man registers a hundred times more sensory impressions than an eighteenth-century artist." Soon he became known as the father of the contemporary French poster, and one section of the Philadelphia show gathers graphic material and posters from artist friends alongside paintings by Léger inspired by machinery. The latter include the homage of *Typographer* (1919), the severe *Mechanical Element* (1924), and the softly poetic *Scaffolding* (1919).

Part of the postwar excitement was cinema—for which Léger almost abandoned painting. You could easily spend half your visit to "Modern Art and the Metropolis" watching the films Anna Vallye has put on display. René Clair's *Entr'acte* (1924), with screenplay by Picabia and score by Erik Satie, is here, one of Parisian Dada's most hilarious moments. So too is Abel Gance's eight-hour tribute to the railroad train, *La Roue* (1922), with a marvelous poster by Léger. Also Man Ray's *Return to Reason* (1923), Marcel Duchamp's hallucinatory *Anemic Cinema* (1926), and Marcel L'Herbier's *L'Inhumaine* (1924), for which Léger did the set designs.

Best of all, though, is *Ballet Mécanique* (1924), a plotless helter-skelter, made by Léger and the American director Dudley Murphy, that builds a Hitchcock-like suspense, sets wine bottles dancing, pays loving tribute to Charlie Chaplin, and plays bewilderingly bold tricks with face-shots of the entertainer Kiki de Montparnasse.

Modernist theatre and architecture had passionate supporters in Léger and his fellow artists. In a coup de théatre the exhibition includes the enormous reconstructed backdrop he designed in 1921 for the Ballet Suédois's *Skating Rink*, with seven of his saucy costume designs in front of it. Nearby are several impressive pieces by Alexandra Exter, with whom Léger taught at the free studio he had opened with Amédée Ozenfant in Paris in 1924. His interest in architecture, spurred especially by conversations with Le Corbusier, led him to make "mural paintings" such as *The Large Tugboat* (1923), a severely abstracted "landscape," and entirely abstract decorative pieces such as *Mural Composition* (1926), meant for a contemporary building. "Of all the painters working today," wrote Le Corbusier, Léger is "the one whose paintings demand a new architecture."

In her long and learned introduction to the show's catalogue, Vallye argues that *The City* deserves to be considered on a par with Picasso's *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* of 1907, today generally regarded as the key work ushering in the twentieth century. Only slightly smaller than *The City*, the Picasso canvas famously presents five women in a Barcelona brothel treated with varying degrees of disfigurement. The effect is assaultive, savage, and unsettling. Léger's enactment of his archetypical metropolis, on the other hand, is bold and brash, fairly bursting from its crowded canvas. One painting is interior and anxious, the other exterior and exuberant. Suggesting their complementary contributions, Vallye writes that they "posit contrary subjectivities: the one enveloped in the privacy of the self, the other pulverized and blown out across the streets."

Fernand Léger, Composition with Hand and Hats, *1927*

The case is well made. But in my view it would be more persuasive still if Vallye would include a third great early-century work in her argument for the modern manifesto—namely, Henri Matisse's *Bathers by a River*, another very large painting (about 8 ½ x 13 feet), now in the Art Institute of Chicago. "Finished" in 1917, after successive reworkings over the course of eight years, the painting shows four highly abstract figures: two among green palms to the left of a black band of river; and two to the right, against a practically barren background with a snake rising from below. *This* is our condition, the four massive figures in their infected Eden tell us. In a version of the Golden Age theme they are at once together and alone, idyllic but exiled, Cycladic figures torn from their time into a century of terrible conflict—but still of hope for the human.

Matisse's fractured traditionalism and desperate hope for beauty adds something inestimable to the vision of his great younger colleagues, it seems to me, making claims for their eminence even more urgent—and balanced. Modern life both reflected and required not only Picasso's formal intensity and Léger's committed populism, but Matisse's openness to the mythic as well. ■

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Anthony Domestico

Making the Past Present

For the Time Being
A Christmas Oratorio
W. H. Auden
Edited by Alan Jacobs
Princeton University Press, $19.95, 142 pp.

There are some writers who hit you like a lightning bolt, whose work moves you so deeply and immediately that you can't believe you ever lived in a world without them. There are other writers who are more of a slow burn, whose work you first respected but didn't like, then liked but didn't adore, and then, in the end, loved absolutely.

For me, W. H. Auden is the second kind of writer. When I first read his poetry, I certainly could see its merits: the technical brilliance, the intellectual heft, the flexibility that enabled a move from apocalyptic portentousness to light comedy in the matter of a few lines. But, for a while at least, I found myself resistant. I rolled my eyes at the incessant name-dropping (Freud and Jung and Marx and Heidegger), and I found myself annoyed by the intentional obscurity of the early verse and the occasional smugness of the late. Auden was a poet I admired but couldn't quite commit myself to.

All of that changed when I read *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*. The long poem circles around the Incarnation from various angles, showing us how it must have felt to the high and the low, to Christ's family and to complete strangers. It is a daring, confident work, and its gifts are many. It contains passages of lyrical beauty ("Love can but confirm the more it would deny") and abstract theology ("History is predictable in the degree to which all men love themselves, and spontaneous in the degree to which each man loves God and through Him his neighbour"). It is frequently humorous, especially in its depiction of Herod as a frustrated liberal complaining of the existential crisis brought about by Christ's birth: "I've hardly ever taken bribes. How dare He allow me to decide? I've tried to be good. I brush my teeth every night. I haven't had sex for a month. I object. I'm a liberal." But it is also frequently moving, as when we hear Joseph struggling to understand what is happening to his young bride: "All I ask is one / Important and elegant proof / That what my Love had done / Was really at your will / And that your will is Love."

As with many of Auden's longer poems, *For the Time Being* is a slippery beast. Whenever you think you've got a hold of it, it goes off in another direction: it moves from a section in which Jungian archetypes—Intuition, Feeling, Sensation, and Thought—hold forth on how they "manage" man's "fallen estate" to a conversation between the archangel Gabriel and Mary; from a colloquy at the manger to the theological musings of Simeon. The poem, combining choral songs, dramatic monologues, and philosophical arguments, is as varied in tone and form as anything Auden ever wrote. It is, as he said of an earlier poem, "a form that's large enough to swim in," and swim he does.

Over the past several years, Princeton University Press has been reissuing some of Auden's best works—*The Sea and the Mirror* and *The Age of Anxiety*, for instance—in beautifully designed, meticulously annotated editions. Alan Jacobs, a professor of the humanities at Baylor University, has provided an introduction as well as extensive notes for the new edition of *For the Time Being*. Jacobs's previous books include *Theology of Reading: the Hermeneutics of Love* and *Original Sin: A Cultural History*, and he proves to be a perfect guide to Auden's most theological poem.

Auden started *For the Time Being* in late 1941, after his move to the United States and his return to the Christian faith; he completed it in 1943. The poem was originally to have been set to music by his friend,

the composer Benjamin Britten. For various reasons, this never came to pass. Imagine trying to turn some of Simeon's theologizing into an oratorio:

> As long as there were any roads to amnesia and anaesthesia still to be explored, any rare wine or curiosity of cuisine as yet untested, any method of torture as yet undevised… there was still hope that man had not been poisoned but transformed, that Paradise was not an eternal state from which he had been forever expelled, but a childish state which he had permanently outgrown, that the Fall had occurred by necessity.

In his introduction, Jacobs explores many of Auden's religious influences: the Anglican poet, novelist, and theologian Charles Williams, whose *The Descent of the Dove* traces the workings of the Holy Spirit throughout history; the historian Charles Norris Cochrane, whose *Christianity and Classical Culture* Auden reviewed for the *New Republic*; and Paul Tillich, whose *The Interpretation of History* examined the relations between *kairos, kronos*, and *logos*. (Auden wrote a poem in 1941 titled "Kairos and Logos.") To this list we might add Reinhold Niebuhr, Auden's close friend and an influence on everything Auden wrote from about 1939 onward, as well as Karl Barth, whom Auden often criticized as a Manichean but whom he also admired. It's easy to forget, but Auden was as well versed in contemporary theology as his more obviously religious peers, T. S. Eliot and David Jones.

If there is a guiding theological thread to *For the Time Being*, it is the contrast between *kairos* (holy time) and *kronos* (clock time), between the shattering event of the Incarnation and all that is left in its wake. As Auden's narrator tells us at the end of the poem, after the "Christmas Feast" is over and the decorations have been put "back into their cardboard boxes," we are left with the "Time Being"—the time that isn't quite empty but isn't quite filled, either; the time that demands our purposeful action. This, the narrator claims, is "the most trying time of all":

> In the meantime
> There are bills to be paid, machines to keep in repair,
> Irregular verbs to learn, the Time Being to redeem
> From insignificance. The happy morning is over,
> The night of agony still to come; the time is noon...

Auden's attention to the "meantime" comes as a surprise. Eliot's "The Journey of the Magi," another Nativity poem, focuses on the absolute drama of the Incarnation: the magi declare that "this Birth was / Hard and bitter agony for us, like Death, our death." For Eliot, Christ's birth means death—death of the old, pagan world and death of the old, sinful self. Yes, this death eventually leads to new, more abundant life, but this hopeful fact doesn't take away from the terror of Eliot's vision.

Auden's poem, on the other hand, ends not with death but with "bills to be paid" and "irregular verbs to learn"—in other words, with the everyday and banal. Yes, the banal possesses its own kind of terror, but it's a very different terror from the one Eliot describes. "The Journey of the Magi" expresses the fear we feel when it seems as if an old world is passing away; *For the Time Being* expresses the fear we feel when, even after divine truth is revealed, the old world seems to remain with us.

Christian theology often employs the concept of *anamnesis*—the idea that in the celebration of the Eucharist the past is really and truly made present again. Christ's sacrifice isn't something we remember. Or, rather, it is something that we remember in a truer, fuller sense than the verb "remember" usually expresses. The poet David Jones described this activity as a "re-presenting," as a folding in of time that enabled the past to once again become the present.

For the Time Being achieves a similar feeling of temporal plenitude. Joseph waits for Mary not in a manger but in a twentieth-century bar: "The bar was gay, the lighting well-designed." Herod boasts of his decidedly modern political and social reforms: "Barges are unloading soil fertiliser at the river wharves. Soft drinks and sandwiches may be had in the inns at reasonable prices. Allotment gardening has become popular." The soldiers presiding over the massacre of the innocents sing bawdy songs: "Before the Diet of Sugar he was using razor-blades /And exited soon after with an allergy to maidenheads; / He discovered a cure of his own, but no one would patent it, / So he showed up again in the Army."

In a letter from which Jacobs quotes in his introduction, Auden explains how this blending of time periods has serious theological meaning:

> Sorry you are puzzled by the oratorio. Perhaps you were expecting a purely historical account as one might give of the battle of Waterloo, whereas I was trying to treat it as a religious event which eternally recurs every time it is accepted. Thus the historical fact that the shepherds were *shepherds* is religiously accidental—the religious fact is that they were the poor and humble of this world for whom at this moment the historical expression is the city-proletariat, and so on with all the other figures.

Auden wants to remind us that the events of the Incarnation are historical in a certain sense—that is, that they actually happened. But he also wants to show that the events of the Incarnation are not historical in another, more limiting sense. For Christians, what actually happened at a certain moment in the past has remained present ever since, changing the rest of history and pointing beyond it.

The degree of difficulty involved in writing *For the Time Being* was high. Auden wanted to create a work that was funny and theological, exuberant and serious, attentive to the holy times but also to the "meantime." That the poem's achievement matches its ambitions is remarkable. It's one of the reasons why *For the Time Being* remains one of Auden's greatest works and why Auden is now, despite my initial resistance, my favorite poet. ■

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Gerald Russello

No Mere Colony

Algerian Chronicles

Albert Camus
Edited by Alice Kaplan
Translated by Arthur Goldhammer
Harvard University Press. $21.95, 223 pp.

The vicious fighting and terrorism that consumed Algeria for decades, beginning in the 1930s and lasting till Algeria declared independence in 1962, is already a distant memory in this country. Yet the lessons of twentieth-century Algeria are sobering ones for the contemporary West. The country's tragic history illustrates the real difficulties of maintaining a true multicultural polity.

French Algeria was no mere colony. Since the mid-nineteenth century, it was an integral part of France, a department just like Rhone, Moselle, or Martinique. Hundreds of thousands of French citizens had emigrated there since the 1830s to live alongside the Arab and Berber populations. By the postwar period, some of these European French families, called the Pied-Noirs, had been there for generations and Algeria was their home. But even at the best of times there were serious tensions between the French and the Arabs, between the Arabs and the Berbers, and indeed between the French of Algeria and those in France.

When a famine struck Algeria in the 1930s, it reduced an already-poor country to misery. In a series of articles for the anticolonialist journal *Alger républicain*, Albert Camus wrote about the effects of the famine in Kabylia, a Berber stronghold that would later figure in in Camus' fiction. As Alice Kaplan explains in her thoughtful introduction to *Algerian Chronicles*, this series of articles, titled "The Misery of Kabylia," was the beginning of the end for Camus' career as a journalist in Algeria. His reports on the dire conditions faced by the people in Kabylia were taken by some as an implicit criticism of French rule. Embarrassed by the attention Camus had drawn to what had become a humanitarian disaster, the French government blacklisted him.

Apart from "The Misery of Kabylia," *Algerian Chronicles* includes four other sections, each dealing with different aspects of the Algerian crisis in roughly chronological order. Some of the pieces collected here are appearing for the first time in English. They comprise reporting, essays, lectures, and letters. The earliest of them were written in the late 1930s, the latest in the late 1950s, shortly before Camus' death in 1960. The appendix includes a number of occasional pieces, including Camus' important reflections on "The New Mediterranean Culture" and a haunting reflection on observing the nighttime docking of a prison ship, "Men Stricken from the Rolls of Humanity."

Algeria was a political problem that exercised the imagination of generations of French intellectuals. In the years after World War II, there was a constant stream of proclamations, petitions, manifestos, and various reform proposals. Indeed, Camus broke with his friend Jean-Paul Sartre over the latter's position on the Algerian question. Sartre opposed French rule in Algeria and supported the efforts of the Front de Libération Nationale, or FLN, a group that committed terrorist acts both in Africa and France. But the violence went both ways, as Camus was at pains to acknowledge: the French military's reprisals were often as brutal as the FLN's terrorism.

Camus was born in Algeria in 1913 and lived there until 1942, and he wrote as one "whose entire family lives in Algiers and who is aware of the threat that terrorism poses to my own kin as well as all the inhabitants of Algeria." Hence his disagreement with Sartre and other French supporters of the FLN. In the early 1930s, Camus was perhaps more a classic anticolonialist, blaming the French public for ignoring the misery of their African brethren. He would remain critical of French policy, but over time his analysis of the crisis in Algeria became more complicated. There was guilt on both sides, he believed, and more than one kind of victim. Both the Algerian revolutionaries and the ethnic French opposed his vision of a united but diverse Algeria. By the late 1950s, his opposition to the tactics of the FLN made him an outcast in his own country. (Unbeknownst to Camus, he was under the protection of the FLN when he gave one of his last major speeches in Algeria, "A Call for a Civil Truce in Algeria"—a

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speech in which he criticized the FLN.)

Camus' writing is shot through with appeals to the moral sense of his audience. And it is his own moral sense that makes the occasional writing collected here still so readable. Camus repeatedly condemned the brutalities of both sides of the conflict and personally intervened with the French government to save more than 150 Algerians from execution. (This volume includes two such interventions—letters written by Camus to the president of the Fourth Republic, René Coty.) Most of the pieces collected here, and not only the reporting, are free of academic abstraction. Nor are they encumbered with purely ideological demands that there be some kind of action, violent or otherwise—the sort of demand that became all too common among French intellectuals in the 1960s. Unlike some of his contemporaries, Camus also recognized the limits of his own role. "People expect too much of writers," he wrote. The right opinions weren't enough; instead, Camus implored all sides to recognize the basic humanity of their adversaries.

Camus wanted a French Algeria, but one in which France recognized that "the Arab people also exist…[and] are a people of impressive traditions, whose virtues are eminently clear.... Too many French people in Algeria and elsewhere imagine the Arabs as a shapeless mass without interests." He called on France to live up to its own best traditions. "If we want to save North Africa," he wrote in a "Conclusion" to a section titled "Crisis in Algeria," "we must show the world our determination to give it the best of our laws and the most just of our leaders.... In North Africa as elsewhere, we will preserve nothing that is French unless we preserve justice as well." Even in the late 1950s, when he wrote that "everything is bloodshed," he still hoped for a solution. He believed the French in Algeria could return to peace with their neighbors, if only the French government would further peace and not enact policies that hurt the settlers they were supposed to be protecting.

But why should Algeria remain a part of France? Algeria, Camus argued in 1958, had never been a true nation, much less a nation of Arabs and Berbers alone: "the French of Algeria are themselves an indigenous population in the full sense of the word." Camus thought a Swiss-type confederation might ease the country's internal tensions. But unlike the Swiss cantons, each of which is mostly homogenous, "Algeria is one of the few examples of a country with different populations living together in the same territory." To solve this problem, Camus endorsed a complicated proposal that mixed federalism with a kind of Ottoman millet system, where certain actions would be reserved for ethnic deputies, and others for the entire French parliament. The challenge in Algeria is in some ways similar to the challenge now facing many European capitals, where large groups of immigrants from Africa or Asia now live among earlier inhabitants. Whether European countries can find a workable response to these rapid demographic changes remains unclear. On this question at least, Camus' writings about Algeria remain more relevant than those of Sartre.

Perhaps it was a sign of just how desperate the times were that Camus even endorsed this proposal; he must have known it had little chance of success. At this late date he was still looking for an Algeria that recognized its combined cultural inheritance and maintained its union with France. It was not to be. Less than two years after his death, Algeria was independent, and under its new leaders staunchly monocultural. Most of the Pied-Noirs left or were killed. Even the French language was abandoned by the new nation, replaced by Arabic.

But after years of neglect and rejection, Camus is being rediscovered in Algeria. In the 1990s, Algeria endured another decade of bloody civil strife, this time between the Algerian army and Islamic insurgents. The questions Camus raised about common guilt, forgiveness, justice, and who is a true Algerian have been recognized as relevant once more. ■

Gerald Russello *is editor of the* University Bookman *(www.kirkcenter.org).*

Michael Peppard

Once Upon a Time

Christian Beginnings

From Nazareth to Nicaea, A.D. 30–325

Geza Vermes

Yale University Press, $30, 288 pp.

From the opening of *Christian Beginnings*, the late Géza Vermes's approach to the history of early Christianity perplexed me. In this, his last book, the eminent scholar of early Judaism, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Gospels turned his attention to later centuries to show that "by the early fourth century, the practical, charismatic Judaism preached by Jesus was transformed into an intellectual religion defined and regulated by dogma." Yes, early Christianity had a few world-class intellectuals, and important dogmas were developing over time. But Christianity, then as now, can be described primarily as intellectual and dogmatic only if one sets aside lots of evidence. That's precisely what Vermes does in this book.

He begins with examples of the "charismatic Judaism" that he first covered in *Jesus the Jew* (1973). This is the world of Jesus and other rabbinic wonder-workers, such as Honi "The Circle-Drawer" and Hanina ben Dosa. These figures acted in the tradition of Israelite prophets: they had a "mystical" connection to God, performed miracles, and received "whole-hearted admiration by simple people." Alluding to Max Weber's distinction between prophets (charismatic authorities) and priests (traditional authorities), Vermes prepares the reader for a sociological analysis of the early Christian movement.

But that's the last we hear of Weber. Vermes leaves out Weber's key concept of the "routinization of charisma." Charismatic authority, according to Weber, cannot be passed on. It dissolves, either becoming traditionalized in a cultural system or rationalized in a legal system. The routinization of charisma was not a problem peculiar to Christianity—these are inevitable processes for most religious traditions (including Judaism). Vermes laments the loss of "nascent charismatic Christianity" but seems not to grasp that charismatic movements can only be nascent. If the group is to survive, its founder's charisma must be channeled into other types of authority.

Vermes's opinions about the historical accuracy of the New Testament show further confusion. On the one hand, he's skeptical of the historical value of many parts of the Gospels. "We know that Jesus did not greatly care about being called the Messiah," Vermes writes. But he skips over Jesus' response to the high priest's question, "Are you the Messiah?"—"I am." On the other, he shows iconoclastic, if haphazard, credulity toward much of Acts. Calling "the picture it hands down...closer to the religion of Jesus than the Christianity of Paul and John," Vermes bases more of his account of Paul on the speeches and actions reported in Acts than would most contemporary scholars.

Rembrandt, Apostle Paul*, circa 1633*

Paul's speeches in Acts are among the most stylized elements of the New Testament, yet Vermes thinks they contain conclusive evidence. "We are now turning to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46) proves to Vermes that Paul had decisively changed his mission. Never mind that it's a narrative device—or that he probably never said it. According to Paul's own letters, at the end of his life he was still wrestling with the mystery of Jewish and Gentile harmony under one God. Paul's letters capture his communities' challenges, paradoxes, and longings, whereas Acts presents a tidy narrative ex post facto.

As *Christian Beginnings* goes on, Paul and John become for Vermes the bêtes noires of Christian intellectual history. The predominant Christian interpretation of the Paschal mystery is "an elaborate doctrinal construct developed by Paul's fertile mind." Vermes continues, "Paul finds his match in John's superb mystical portrait of the superhuman Christ." He shows no interest in major questions of New Testament studies: How did Paul remain a Jew even while proclaiming God's covenant open to Gentiles? And what was the character of John's relationship to the Judaism of his day? The pioneering work of Daniel Boyarin on the Jewishness of Paul and John, along with Krister Stendahl's recovery of the Jewish Paul, appear in the bibliography, but have no effect on Vermes's argument. Instead, he prefers simplicity: "Fully fledged Christianity"—whatever that means—was "created by Paul and John." Not quite.

This preference governs Vermes's narrative at the expense of historical complexity. Vermes clearly favors the charismatic Jesus. He thinks Paul and John broke from that tradition, and that eventually Gentiles took over the movement, and he's willing to overlook evidence that complicates that picture. But many scholars of

the period emphasize the fuzzy borders between Jewishness and emergent Christian identity. In some places, Jews and Christians were difficult to distinguish, even as late as the fourth century. Yet Vermes claims the parting of Jewish and non-Jewish followers of Jesus was accomplished by the "all-pervading influence" of Paul and John. In order to finalize the split, Christian belief just needed to incorporate a bit of Greek philosophy (Justin uses "Plato to envelop Christianity with a favorable aura") and disavow Gnosticism (Vermes relies on Irenaeus's polemical descriptions of the movement, paying little attention to its texts). The Christological road from Paul to the Council of Nicaea, as charted by Vermes, has a few bends, but more or less it's a straight line. A more fruitful approach to Christianity's early centuries would offer richer descriptions of its regional and theological varieties. *Christian Beginnings* pays sporadic lip service to the "dogmatic nebulosity of the pre-Nicene era," but the book as a whole conveys the opposite impression.

Take, for example, his claim that "the Christological debate witnessed no significant innovation in the second half of the third century, so one may directly advance from Origen to... the Council of Nicaea." What about evidence of Christian practice from the mid-to-late third century? The most substantial ante-Nicene ritual texts—the Didascalia Apostolorum and (perhaps) the Apostolic Tradition—are usually dated to this period. And the most popular apocryphal acts—Acts of Paul and Thecla and Acts of Thomas—were circulating widely and influencing how people thought about and followed Christ. This was the era of the two general persecutions under emperors Decius and Diocletian, which produced martyr narratives exhorting an ultimate *imitatio Christi*. Vermes leaves all that out.

Writing a history of Christology without attending to ritual practices and salvation theory is like writing a history of science without mentioning technology and therapeutic medicine.

Theological developments rarely come ex nihilo. Christians were not just sitting at home debating the divine personhood of Jesus for kicks. Their beliefs about Christ were lived out in practice. How, for example, did baptismal practices relate to Christological developments about Christ's uniqueness over time? How did traditions related to martyrdom influence the idea of noble death as imitation of Christ? How should we understand the super-exaltation of Christ in the Nicene era, which emphasized his divinity, as a response to material, cultural, and ritual practices that stressed Christ as exemplar here on earth? Vermes avoids such messy questions, preferring to write straight with the past's crooked lines. ■

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Christmas Eve, Cell Eight

W. E. Mueller

The single piece of evidence in what may be the St. Louis Police Department's oldest unsolved mystery hangs in the lobby of the department's training academy. It is a stunning drawing of the crucifixion. The mystery is who drew it and why.

The story begins on December 24, 1930, a year into the Great Depression. At the time, it was not unusual for Police Headquarters in downtown St. Louis to open its doors to the homeless on frigid nights. Sometime that evening the Central District took in ten or twelve "vagrants" and housed them in Cell Eight, the "holdover" cell. They were not charged with any crime, so they were not "booked"—names were not taken. Drifters and homeless crowded into the cell and slept on steel bunks. Early the next morning they were fed a chunk of bologna, bread, and coffee, and released back onto the streets. It was Christmas Day.

Days later, a porter cleaning the dimly lit Cell Eight discovers the drawing on the concrete rear wall. He reports it to the turnkey, and the discovery soon becomes public.

The drawing is striking in its accuracy. It is four feet high and nearly perfect in proportion. Only the right arm of Christ is not complete, stopping abruptly near the elbow. Speculation begins as to who drew it and what medium he used. Burnt matchsticks, the black rubber heel of a shoe, charcoal, crayon, and pencil are suggested. (To this writer it appears to be pencil.) No one attempts to make a scientific analysis. No one wants to disturb the drawing.

Stories in the St. Louis newspapers turn up nothing. The AP runs a nationwide story without results. Claimants come forward, but none can complete the right arm. "Experts agree," the January 1960 *Police Journal* reports, "the man who drew the picture was either a student of art or anatomy."

In 1932 the chief of police orders a protective glass over the drawing and directs that Cell Eight never be used again. Tours of the department include the drawing, now under a bright light so visitors can see it in the otherwise dark cell.

Barbara Miksicek, department librarian and custodian of the drawing, says that radio legend Paul Harvey told the story of the drawing several times in his Christmas and Easter broadcasts. It may have been a Harvey narrative that motivated John F. Fritsch to seek out the drawing. His resulting epiphany is recorded in his pamphlet *Hope and Help*: "What alcoholic, on some remorseful occasion in the course of sobering up, could look at this drawing without failing to realize what he is allowing alcohol to do to his body, a body given to him to take care of by the very One he is looking at—God, in human form, who put Himself on earth as man and allowed Himself to be put to death so that we could have an opportunity for eternal Salvation."

The mysterious drawing remained in Cell Eight for over thirty years, until Police Headquarters was remodeled in 1967. The drawing and the wall surrounding it were cut away and moved to the training academy. In the mid-1990s, the drawing was encased in a hermetically sealed frame. And that's how it stands today.

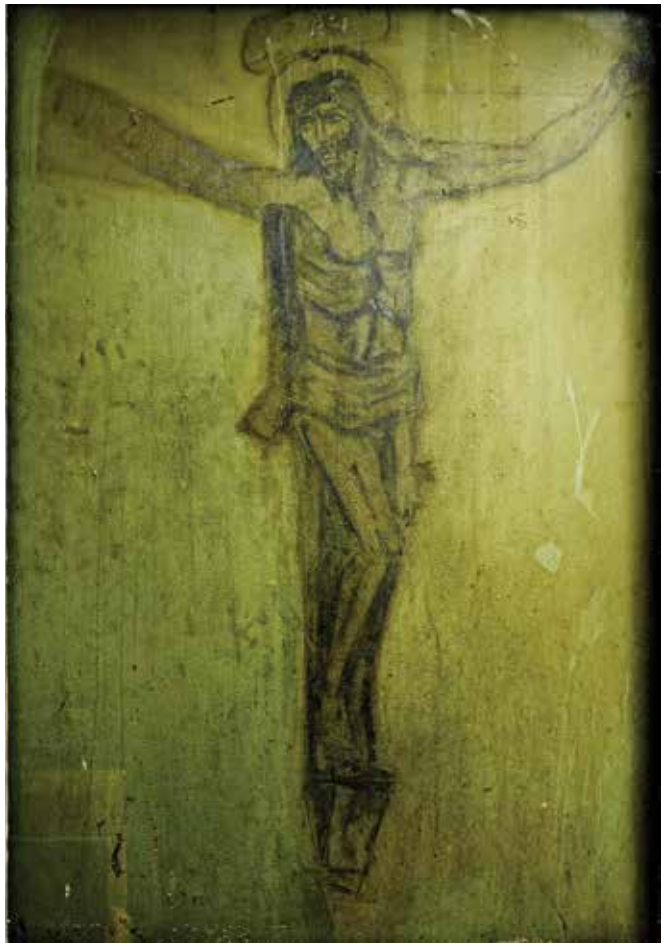

PHOTO BY STEVE SMITH

Few St. Louisians are aware of the drawing now. Tours of the department and academy are rarely given. There are no Paul Harveys reporting its influence. The remaining St. Louis newspaper hasn't written about it in decades. It is an open case of whodunit and why.

I asked Ann Rotermund, senior director of mental-health programs for the homeless at St. Patrick Center in St. Louis, what state of mind she thought the artist was in when he drew the picture. "I see it as a sign of hope," she said, "not depression…of hoping to build a new life." The Crucifixion is a painful image, Rotermund notes, "and the homeless have a painful path in changing their lives. To me," she emphasized, "the drawing is about hope."

Rotermund has never read Fritsch's pamphlet, but her comments parallel his, written a half-century ago: "The full story of the drawing is far from complete. Its message will continue to be told to anyone and everyone who will take the time and effort to go to see it on the wall…from where it will tell its own story as long as the wall stands—the story of Christ in Cell Eight—the story of hope, hope for anyone who needs or wants it—and asks Him for it." ■

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