A Review of Religion, Politics & Culture

Commonweal

MAY 5, 2017

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Founded in 1924
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Commonweal [ISSN 0010-3330], a review of public affairs, religion, literature, and the arts, is published biweekly, except in April, July, August, and November, when it is published monthly, by Commonweal Foundation, 475 Riverside Drive, Rm. 405, New York, NY 10115. Telephone: (212) 662-4200. E-mail: editors@commonwealmagazine.org. Fax: (212) 662-4183. POSTMASTER: send address changes to *Commonweal*, P.O. Box 348, Congers, NY 10920-0348.

Commonweal is indexed in Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, Book Review Digest, and Book Review Index. *Commonweal* articles are available at many libraries and research facilities via ProQuest and OpinionArchives. Serials Data program No.: ISSN 0010-3330. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional offices. Single Copy, $3.95. Yearly print subscriptions, U.S., $65; Canada, $70; other parts of the world, $75. Special two-year rate: U.S. $108; Canada, $118; other parts of the world, $128. Add $45 for airmail.

Cover design: Cecilia Guerrero Rezes
Cover image: Johannes Simon Holtzbecher (1610–1671)

LETTERS

Commonweal communities, science fiction, etc.

READING (AND MORE) TOGETHER

For many *Commonweal* readers and writers, 2016 was an unrelenting downer. What started as a quixotic run for the presidency by Donald Trump turned into a victory. That victory has left many of us bewildered and afraid of what the next few years might bring, both domestically and internationally. What has happened to our country? What will happen to our country over the next few years? These are important questions. Many of them cannot be answered yet.

But amidst this pessimism, we have found some signs of hope. One of these signs is the growing number of people and organizations who are making their part of the world a better place from the bottom up.

In the two Commonweal Local Communities to which I belong, we have discussed these questions and shared our fears. One group of readers meets in the morning over coffee. The other meets for lunch at a local Catholic university's café. Fortunately neither meeting venue serves liquor. If they did, we might ease our pain, but probably not be very productive for the rest of the day.

One of our *Commonweal* groups meets in Racine, Wisconsin. Racine sits along the western shores of Lake Michigan. The city has the highest unemployment rate in the state, and one of the highest infant-mortality and childhood-poverty rates in the state.

Two grassroots groups have sprung up in the past two years to mobilize the community to address these issues. One group is called Visioning a Great Racine (VCR). The other group is called Greening Greater Racine (GGR).

VGR is conducting community visioning sessions that involve a diverse group of 2,000 people representing neighborhoods, schools, businesses, not-for-profits, churches, and local governments, as well as many individuals who want to make a positive difference. Community goals are being defined, priorities are being determined, and programs are being developed.

GGR is bringing together a broad range of organizations that impact the environment of our area. At these meetings, the organizations are learning from each other, coordinating their efforts, and celebrating their successes.

Based on the broader environmental concerns shared by all worship groups in the community, Green Congregations helped lead the formation of the larger Greening Greater Racine movement.

From an information standpoint, we have all been amazed at how many good things are already happening in our community every day. Good people and good organizations are making a positive difference to quality of life from an economic and environmental perspective.

From an inspiration standpoint, it lifts all our spirits to meet and work with so many people who are already making a positive difference. As we get to know each other better, build trust, and see new possibilities for future accomplishments, we are filled with hope.

From a celebration standpoint, we make it a point not to take for granted the good work that is already being done to make our community a better place to live, work, and raise a family.

One example of this spirit of celebration happened in the spring of 2016. Greening Greater Racine worked with our local community college to host Eco-Fest. Fifty-plus organizations set up informative and interactive displays of their environmental work. Over nine hundred people visited the Fest. People were simply amazed regarding the many positive programs that are already going on. Many have been inspired to join these efforts.

I am involved in these efforts because of my belief in the sacredness of all life, which Pope Francis has expressed so eloquently in *Laudato si'*.

I look at the challenges ahead remem-

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bering these words from St. Paul's letter to the Romans: "Let us…exult in tribulations also, knowing that tribulation works out endurance, and endurance tried virtue, and tried virtue hope. And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God is poured forth in our hearts by the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

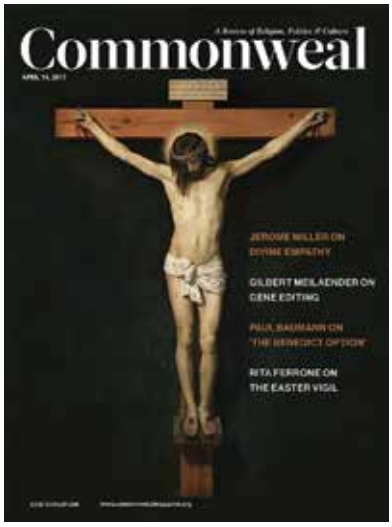
We all need to make this period of tribulation an opportunity for the Holy Spirit to pour forth God's love into our hearts and into our world.

Robert Beezat
Mount Pleasant, Wis.

THE EDITORS REPLY:
We are so pleased that our Commonweal Local Communities have helped foster meaningful conversations and community for our readers around the country—especially in an era in which civilized public discourse seems all but extinct. If you're interested in forming a CLC in your area, or if you'd like to check out whether there's already a group meeting, head over to www.commonwealmagazine.org/local to learn more or sign up. Email or call Ellen Koneck with any questions: ekoneck@commonwealmagazine.org or 212-662-4200 ext. 7005.

ANOTHER OPTION
I wonder if Rod Dreher, author of *The Benedict Option*, ever read *A Canticle for Leibowitz* by Walter M. Miller Jr.? (See Paul Baumann's review of Dreher's book, "Detachment Plan," April 14). This science-fiction novel covers the life and work of a monk in a post-apocalyptic world (following the Flame Deluge) in an "Albertian monastery" that stands alone to save Western culture, science, and Catholicism. The way things are going right now, that may be a more realistic background for the need to save Christianity itself more than fret about LGBT-inspired political correctness. Other books deal with the future with or without Christianity. Isaac Asimov in the Foundation Trilogy projects a future of technological advancement where science controls society. Samuel R. Delany paints a world in *Triton* that Dreher would really find anti-Christian: a libertine society where people can readily change their gender and sexual orientation through advancements in medical surgery and psychiatric reprogramming. Another intriguing science fiction novel, *A Case of Conscience,* puts Jesuits in space: a Jesuit priest/scientist struggles to determine if the society found on a newly discovered planet is utopian or demonically controlled by Satan.

Bob Killoren
Columbus, Ohio



SOCIAL SCIENCE, SCIENCE FICTION
I appreciated the review of Peter Frase's *Four Futures* for its clarity ("The Left's Dreams & Nightmares," March 10). Yet the reviewer's call at the end for more "social-science fiction" startled me. The theme of possible futures and alternate social organizations has been a constant in sci-fi writing, especially since the '70s through the work of Ursula LeGuin and her novel *The Dispossessed*, which explored the inner workings of capitalism and socialism, and *The Left Hand of Darkness*, whose exploration of sociosexual interactions and tensions now seem to foreshadow today's transgender challenge.

The work of C. J. Cherryh in the 1980s and into today is another example of science fiction founded not so much on the "hard" sciences as on the social ones. Bruce Sterling and the cyberpunk phenomenon of the '90s already raised the issues of the impact of digital communication upon individual identity and social structure, in Neal Stephenson's novel *Reamde,* from 2011, the cast of characters has interacted in real time through their avatars on the net long before they are in the same physical location at the end of the book.

In short, it seems to me that we already have a vibrant tradition in this country of social-science fiction—we just need mainstream readers to pay more attention to it.

Michael Marchal
Cincinnati, Ohio

PLAYING PREVENT
In reading the article ("A Crisis for Crisis-Pregnancy Centers," February 24) about all the important services, both social and medical, that crisis-pregnancy centers supply to women and their families, I failed to find (and I read it twice) any mention of birth-control counseling, something the overwhelmed, and thus irresponsible, woman cited in the second paragraph was evidently in great need of. (Single with three kids, and got pregnant again? Seriously?) I assume the centers do not provide such counseling because they are Catholic in some way.

It is hypocritical to be against abortion without supporting birth control. This is why I get so incensed about people who want to "defund" Planned Parenthood. Federal funds already cannot be used to pay for abortions, but Planned Parenthood is a major provider of health services to poor women in this country. With their birth-control services, they probably prevent many more abortions than they provide. I have read that the abortion rate has dropped significantly in recent years, partly as a result of new, longer-lasting methods.

As a Catholic woman, I am still waiting for my church to get real about this. Most lay Catholics simply ignore the church's teaching on the subject, which is bad for the church in two ways: it leads people to disregard the entire body of the church's teaching about marriage and family, and it keeps the church from supporting the most effective way to reduce or eliminate abortions.

Judith Conklin
New York, N.Y.

Let Him Eat Cake

On the evening of April 6, as Donald Trump was digging into the "most beautiful chocolate cake that you've ever seen" with Chinese President Xi Jinping, the world learned that the president had bombed a Syrian military airfield in response to Bashar al-Assad's use of a nerve agent against his own people. Soon after, MSNBC's Brian Williams expressed awe at video footage of Tomahawk missiles being launched from U.S. Navy destroyers. "I am tempted to quote the great Leonard Cohen: 'I am guided by the beauty of our weapons,'" Williams said. "They are beautiful pictures of fearsome armaments making what is for them...a brief flight over to this airfield." Then, almost as an afterthought, he turned to his on-air guest and asked, "What did they hit?"

According to most reports, not much more than a few planes and some other equipment. The United States understandably warned Russian military advisers about our plans, and it seems unlikely they kept that information to themselves. Less than a day after the strikes, the Syrian air force was using the same airfield to attack anti-Assad forces. But Williams's response was telling—he wasn't alone in praising Trump's actions before grappling with what their consequences might be. The *Washington Post*'s David Ignatius heralded the military action as restoring the "credibility of American power"; CNN's Fareed Zakaria somberly intoned that thanks to the show of force Trump finally "became President of the United States"; and the *New York Times*'s Nicholas Kristof, after admitting the airstrikes were impulsive, hypocritical, and possibly illegal, confessed that "most of all, they were right."

That final assertion, more than any other, remains the best reason for the United States to escalate our involvement in Syria. Images of children writhing, gasping, and being hosed down in frantic efforts to wash off the poison is wrenching to watch, and Trump cited it as a key element in his decision to intervene. He acted, he said in a statement, to "prevent and deter the spread and use of deadly chemical weapons." The photos of war-ravaged cities, descriptions of refugee camps, and testimony of those who have had loved ones tortured or killed all provoke disgust and rage. For nearly six years civil war has unfolded in Syria, and the scale of the human suffering there is staggering. An instinct to mitigate the catastrophe—one that threatens the stability of the Middle East and even Europe—is a noble one.

Good intentions, however, are no substitute for a real a strategy in Syria. Nor are they a reason to give Trump the benefit of the doubt. The civil war in Syria presents a fundamentally different challenge from the Balkan crisis of the 1990s, an oft-cited example of successful American intervention. In Syria it is not a matter of keeping the warring armies of different nations apart. Resolving the crisis there would require imposing order on a bewildering array of factions: Assad and his allies; Sunni Arab rebels; ISIS; the Syrian Democratic Forces, which are majority Kurdish; and a number of Salafi jihadist groups.

Becoming further entangled in Syria requires a political endgame, some sense of what will come after the fighting if the United States is to do more than add to the bloodshed. So far, there is no reason to believe Trump or his administrations have any plausible plans for ending the conflict. Trump campaigned against getting stuck in a Syrian quagmire, and his sudden reversal seems driven by images he saw on cable television and a petulant desire to do the opposite of whatever his predecessor did. Nikki Haley, Trump's ambassador to the United Nations, seemed to back regime change after the missile strikes; Secretary of State Rex Tillerson initially appeared to agree, saying that "it would seem there would be no role" for Assad in Syria's political future, though he later changed course and argued that no one should "extrapolate" that there's been "a change in our policy or our posture relative to our military activities in Syria today." This isn't strategic ambiguity, it's chaotic incoherence.

Perhaps Trump's decision to strike Syria will deter Assad from using chemical weapons in the future—even as he continues to kill so many by more conventional means. But it seems just as likely that he's learned a very different lesson, that he can gas the Syrian people at the cost of some equipment, some planes, and the use an airfield for a few hours.

Trump, meanwhile, has learned his own lesson: that the quickest way to gain a strange new respect in Washington is to start bombing other countries. Whether or not that strikes fear in Assad, it certainly should strike fear in the rest of us. ■

Mollie Wilson O'Reilly

Missing Nixon

WHAT TRUMP HAS WROUGHT

I saw a clip of Richard Nixon on a PBS documentary the other night that got me thinking. You remember Nixon: he used to have a lock on the title of most disgraceful U.S. president. In this footage he was at a press conference, responding to initial news reports about the My Lai Massacre in Vietnam. He agreed that what had occurred there was rightly called a "massacre," and he promised, "I am going to do everything I possibly can to see that all of the facts in this incident are brought to light and that those who are charged, if they are found guilty, are punished." That wasn't what Nixon went on to do, of course, but I wasn't focused on his insincerity. I was struck instead by the basic competence of his answer. Our current president, I realized with dismay, could never hope to measure up.

It's a sad day that finds us yearning for the leadership skills of Richard M. Nixon. But where Nixon was corrupt and petty in private, President Donald J. Trump is corrupt, petty, and cruel in plain sight—and never more obviously than when circumstances call for largeness of spirit. Trump seems to have no instinct for decency at all, even as a performance. Confronted with his history of misogynistic behavior and remarks, or asked what his administration plans to do about the post-election increase in anti-Semitic threats and vandalism, or pressed to condemn Vladimir Putin's assassinations of political enemies, Trump sputters and grumbles that the questions are unfair, the reporters are dishonest, and by the way, did you notice he won the electoral college in a landslide? (He did not.) In a situation where any normal human, and certainly anyone in a position of leadership, ought to be able to strike a pose of proper seriousness, Trump seems both ignorant of what a decent leader would say and unable to see the benefit in at least pretending to be that leader. It is as impossible to imagine Trump handling the My Lai fallout competently as it is to imagine him sitting down to watch a PBS documentary about it.

This deficiency of Trump's—his unerring knack for making everything worse whenever he opens his mouth—is not a post-inauguration surprise. It was evident throughout his campaign whenever he faced direct questioning, which is probably one reason he did so as seldom as possible. When evasion didn't work, Trump's apologists and enablers tried to spin his crudeness as an asset. "He's not a polished politician," Mike Pence protested during the vice-presidential debate with Tim Kaine. "You know, things don't always come out exactly the way he means them"—as though Trump's good intentions were regrettably obscured by his clumsy tongue, when in fact his words made headlines precisely because they revealed his startling lack of character and integrity. Even after audio leaked of Trump describing, in vivid terms, his penchant for sexual assault, his surrogate (and former campaign manager) Corey Lewandowski said it showed that Trump "doesn't measure every word. He speaks from the heart." And what a heart it is.

People have a right to be cynical about smooth-talking candidates. "Polished politician" functions as a slur for a reason. We know Nixon's po-faced expression of horror and determination to get at the truth about My Lai didn't actually mean he planned to do the right thing. But Trump proves that the alternative to smooth talk is not necessarily candor. What he offers in place of the comforting observance of social norms is not refreshing honesty; it's defensiveness, self-obsession, naked insecurity, and simple cruelty. A politician who truly "tells it like it is" might make for a nice change. But as has been amply documented, Trump can be counted on to lie about pretty much everything, even when the truth would serve him better. There's no positive spin you can put on his awful instincts, no finessing his lack of finesse. Trump tells us, rather, *who* he is.

Trump's peevish approach to accountability certainly does clarify where other people stand. So long as political leaders stick to an acceptable script, their supporters can focus on what they say (e.g., America doesn't torture) rather than what they do (authorize torture). When what our president says is appalling on its face, there's nothing to hide behind. The potential risks of a man like Trump speaking for the nation—alienated allies, emboldened enemies, demoralized minority populations, and the outright abandonment of the common good—are awful to contemplate. But when this chapter of American politics passes into history, documentarians will not have to worry about giving Trump's enablers the benefit of the doubt. They know he doesn't mean well. He couldn't fool them if he tried. ■

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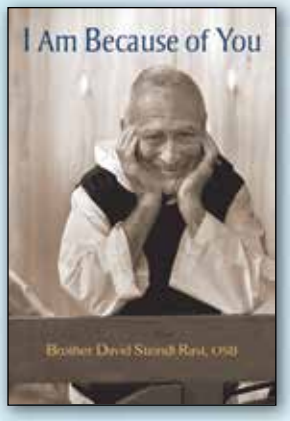

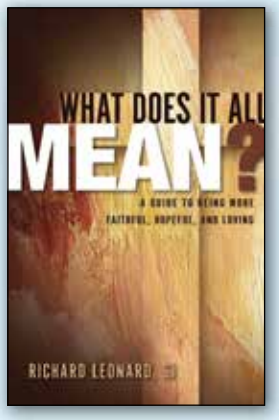

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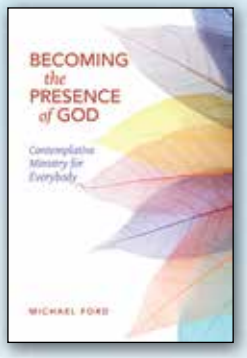

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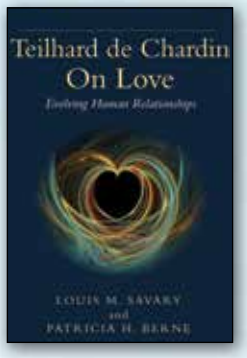

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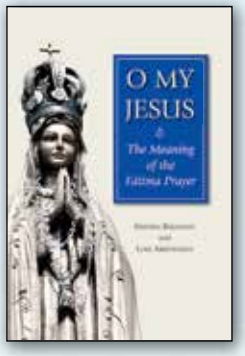

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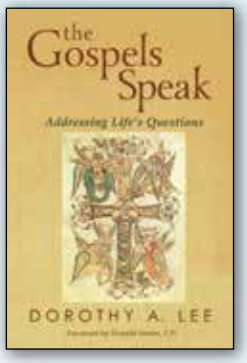

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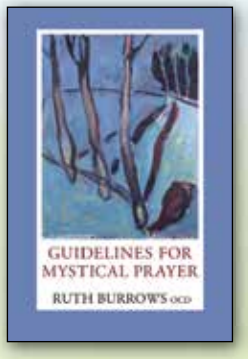

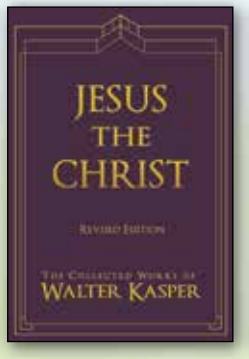

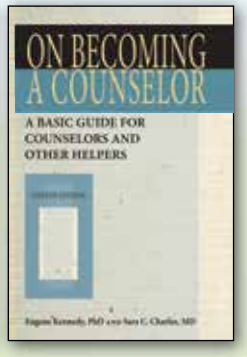

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Fr. Nonomen

Policing the Communion Line

NOT IN MY PARISH

You never know where God will surprise you.

In the middle of a hot summer, while I was standing in the produce section at the local supermarket, a woman I had never met tapped me on the shoulder and introduced herself. She told me that she and her husband were not parishioners but had experienced an amazing Lenten journey at my parish. For the past two years, she said, they had fallen into a spiritual malaise. That began when the pastor of her own parish left the priesthood. He was a popular man, highly charismatic, and deeply spiritual. His unexpected departure brought to a head many issues in the church that she and her husband struggled with. Changes to their home parish also disoriented them. Looking for some fresh air, they had prayed their way through Lent with us and then joined us for the Easter Vigil. It was there, she said, that God gave her a gift: she watched as her former pastor and his new wife (who were never before at any of our Masses) joined the Communion line and received the Eucharist. "In that moment, I knew," she said. "I was suddenly filled with a joyful, peaceful assurance that the church I love would weather the storms and issues that seem sometimes to tear it apart. Seeing Father Ed with his wife showed me how God is always doing something new! As they received Communion, I saw that there is room for all in Christ. And that has helped heal my heart."

I walked away from this exchange with a bag of tomatoes and a grin on my face, thinking she doesn't realize just how amazing the Communion line was that night. Besides Ed and his new wife, there were other Catholic priests and even a Protestant minister and her wife. Also, I saw a prominent local political leader, well known in the community and healing from a recent, very-public divorce. There were professional theologians and professional electricians. There were college students and middle-school students; the newly married and the recently widowed. It seemed that the depth and breadth of humanity was in the Communion line, all of their lives containing stories of hope and all of them, in that moment, drawn to one table, one altar, one Lord. I saw it. I sensed it. It was a foretaste of what liturgists call "the heavenly banquet." I am so grateful that my new friend, the evangelizer in the produce department, saw it as well.

A woman receives Communion from Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin of Newark.

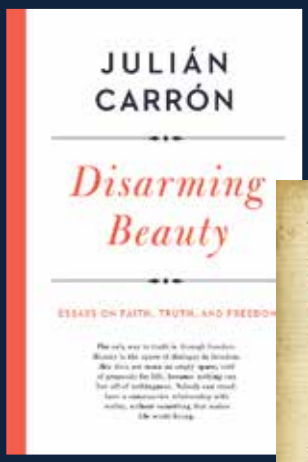
As you might imagine, it didn't take long for all these lofty thoughts of the Kingdom to come crashing back to earth. I thought of the diocesan administration and of how some might be extremely concerned about the "scandal" this sort of Communion line could cause. But as a participant and witness, it seemed to have the opposite effect, a *healing* effect. Of the hundreds who attended the Vigil that night, no one wrote a nasty letter of complaint, no unkind word was heard, not even so much as a passing sarcastic comment. Many noticed the same things I did that night and many were inspired.

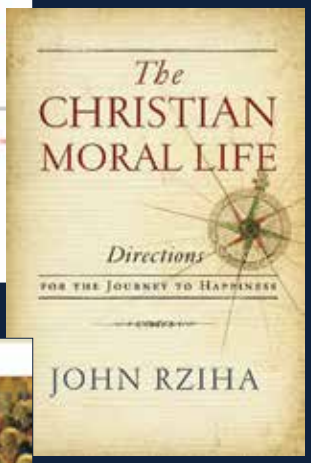
How does this happen? To begin with, the Vigil Mass cannot be taken out of context. Throughout the year, the people of this parish make a deliberate effort to be hospitable and welcoming. That is especially the case for the Vigil, which is touted as the high point of the liturgical year. No one is checking "Valid Catholic" cards at the door, and no one feels a particular need to be a Communion Cop. We recognize that we're all a bunch of needy sinful people, who are eager to make room for others at the Lord's Table. Add to this a year-long, parish-wide emphasis on the religious education of adults, both through formal catechesis and in the way we run a picnic or a liturgy or a parish council. Education has a broadening effect, which hopefully trickles down to the heart. The wider the heart, the easier it is to see the working of God and, consequentially, the longer the Communion line.

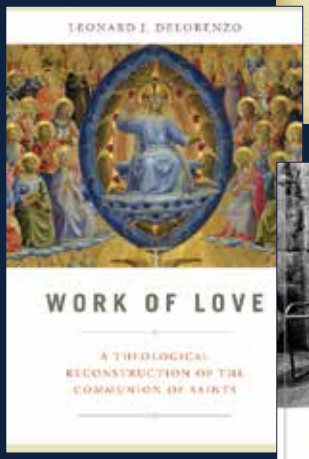
The more intriguing question, perhaps, is not how but why this happened. I figure it to be a lesson in grace. At a time when elitism and intolerance have crept into so many facets of life, the Lord insists that the Kingdom of God will be otherwise and often surprises us with glimpses of it right here, right now. The people of the Kingdom are a richly diverse people, aware of their need and drawn to the God who welcomes all and lavishes grace on all, even that former priest, even that same-sex couple, even that unsuspecting cleric in the produce department who thought he was only going home with a bag of tomatoes. ■

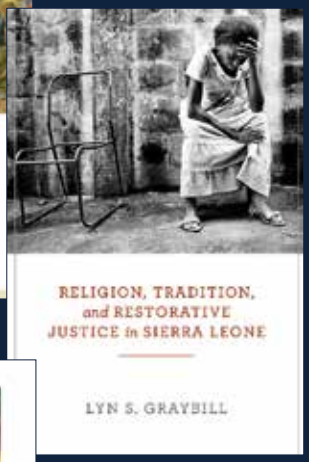
Fr. Nonomen *is the pastor of a suburban church. He has been a priest for more than twenty-five years.*

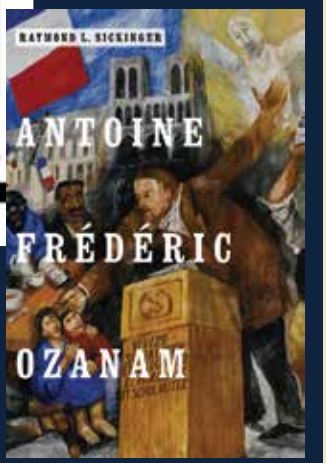
CNS PHOTO / BOB ROLLER











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Timothy Stoltzfus Jost

Health Care & the Gospel

PROTECTING THE POOR & THE SICK FROM AN UNCHRISTIAN AGENDA

One cannot read the gospels without being struck by how much of Jesus' earthly ministry was devoted to healing. The Gospel of Matthew, for example, reports that "Jesus went throughout Galilee…preaching the good news of the Kingdom and healing every disease and sickness" (4:21). In sending out his disciples he charged them also to "heal the sick" (10:7). Jesus' concern for the poor is also inescapable. He repeatedly instructs us to attend to their needs. In the parable of the sheep and the goats (Matthew 25), Jesus proclaims that those who wish to enter the Kingdom of Heaven must care for the hungry, naked, and sick—the "least of these."

Pope Francis has embraced this message. In a May 2016 speech to the Doctors with Africa mission group, he stated, "Health is not a consumer good but a universal right, so access to health care cannot be a privilege." He emphasized in particular the responsibility of Christians to care for the most vulnerable, a theme he again took up in February of this year, warning that the growing lack of health care "among the poorest segments of the population, due to lack of access to care, must leave no one indifferent."

The American Health Care Act (AHCA), which was pulled from consideration before the House of Representatives on March 24, 2017, does not pass the test proclaimed in the Gospel and endorsed by the pope. It fails to help the "least of these" and reflects just the kind of indifference Francis has denounced. According to a nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office analysis, it would have removed $880 million in federal funding over a decade from the Medicaid program, which pays for health care for the elderly, disabled, children, pregnant women, and low-income adults. Not coincidentally, it would have cut taxes by almost exactly the same amount for wealthy people, insurers, and providers. The legislation would have cut taxes for each of the four hundred highest-income taxpayers in the United States by an average of $7 million annually—enough to cover premium subsidies for more than eight hundred thousand lower-income Americans.

The legislation also would have eliminated by 2020 the Affordable Care Act's income-based premium tax credits, which make health insurance affordable for lower-income Americans, as well as its cost-sharing reduction payments that reduce deductibles and coinsurance for consumers with incomes below 250 percent of the federal poverty level. In their place it would have established fixed-dollar tax credits that would have provided more federal assistance for younger and higher-income consumers even as it reduced the assistance now offered to older and poorer consumers.

Paul Ryan talks about the American Health Care Act on March 8.

CNS PHOTO / JOSHUA ROBERTS, REUTERS

The legislation was pulled at the last minute, in large part because of opposition from Republican House members who thought it was still too generous to the poor.

The debate over AHCA offers a striking contrast to the final hours of the debate over the Affordable Care Act (ACA). As some readers may remember, different versions of the ACA were passed by the House and Senate in 2009. There was an expectation that the two versions would be combined into a final bill in a conference committee between the House and Senate, but the sudden loss of the Democrat's filibuster-proof Senate majority left only one option for moving forward: House enactment of the Senate bill.

This caused a crisis of conscience for a number of "Blue Dog" Democrats, led by Congressmen Bart Stupak and Joseph Pitts, who had included a provision in the original House bill that they believed would ensure that no federal funding would be used to pay for abortions. The Senate bill contained similar provisions, inserted at the request of Sen. Ben Nelson of Nebraska; but Stupak, Pitts, and others questioned whether those went far enough.

This issue almost brought an end to the Affordable Care Act after more than a year of Congressional hearings and floor debate. At the last minute, however, President Obama, issued an executive order—the only ACA-related executive order of his presidency—directing the federal agencies to ensure that ACA funding for insurance-premium tax credits

and community health centers not be used to pay for abortions. With this issue addressed, Stupak and other prolife Democrats voted for the bill and it became law.

The Affordable Care Act is in fact profoundly prolife. Since enactment, it has saved thousands of lives. But the prolife Democrats who voted for it paid a heavy price. Many were defeated in the 2010 congressional elections, including at least one who was falsely accused of having voted "for taxpayer-funded abortions."

Where are lawmakers of faith now? The AHCA would increase the number of uninsured by 24 million within a decade, including 14 million who would lose Medicaid. Losses of coverage would fall disproportionately on older and poorer consumers. Many would die prematurely because of lack of access to health care. Who is speaking up for them?

On March 9, 2017, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops sent a letter to Congress laying out principles for health-care reform. This letter states forthrightly that "a repeal of key provisions of the Affordable Care Act ought not be undertaken without the concurrent passage of a replacement plan that ensures access to adequate health care for the millions of people who now rely upon it for their wellbeing.... Any modification of the Medicaid system as part of health care reform should prioritize improvement and access to quality care over cost savings." The bishops joined many other faith leaders in urging Congress not to repeal the ACA without making adequate provision for health care for the poor.

One prominent Republican politician has spoken to the importance of faith in health reform. In 2013, Ohio Governor John Kasich stated: "Now, when you die and get to the meeting with St. Peter, he's probably not going to ask you much about what you did about keeping government small. But he is going to ask you what you did for the poor. You better have a good answer." Since then, he has continued to advocate for support for Medicaid, and to testify that his faith is a motivation for doing so. Other moderate Republicans have also expressed concern that the AHCA went too far in cutting Medicaid and reducing the poor's access to health care. But for the most part, issues of faith have been missing from the repeal-and-replace debate.

For now, repeal of the ACA is on hold. But legislation to repeal parts of it could come back at any time. The Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), which provides access to health care for more than 8 million children, must be renewed this year if it is to continue. Funding for Medicaid and Medicare is at risk as Congress considers further tax and entitlement program cuts. Moreover, prompt and decisive action must be taken now by the administration, and possibly by Congress, to ensure the continued availability of coverage through the ACA marketplaces to moderate-income Americans. Congress has put the funding for marketplace insurers at risk and the erratic actions of the Trump administration have undermined the confidence of insurers.

Now is the time for courageous action by people of faith, including members of Congress. Jesus calls us to a prolife agenda of caring for the sick and the poor. We as Christians must call on the government to embrace this agenda. Legislation or administrative actions in health care that undermine care for the most vulnerable are morally unacceptable. ■

Timothy Stoltzfus Jost *is emeritus professor at Washington and Lee University School of Law.*

EASTER DINOSAUR POEM

For Easter, the candy store sells
white chocolate crosses & dinosaurs.

Boys like dinosaurs, the clerk says.
Not everyone likes crosses, she almost says.

The dinosaurs almost resemble crosses
with their small arms out in front of them.

Dinosaurs: the popular mascot of science,
Science: the religion of abiding in things seen.

A student of mine, writing about Christians
who find dinosaur bones said the characters

were in conflict of what to do with them,
considering they don't believe in dinosaurs.

It's interesting that there are no dinosaurs
mentioned in the Bible, only Leviathans & giants.

I know some people who put dinosaurs
in their nativity sets instead of Jesus:

what I'm saying is it's interesting how
spectacular they are to us: dinosaurs, extinct,

while the Son of Man died & returned
with the evidence of Himself deep in his hands.

—Meg Eden

Meg Eden's work has been published in various magazines, including Rattle, Drunken Boat, Poet Lore, *and* Gargoyle. *She teaches at the University of Maryland. She has written four poetry chapbooks, and her novel* Post-High School Reality Quest *will be published in June by California Coldblood, an imprint of Rare Bird Books. Check out her work at: www.megedenbooks.com.*

Daniel K. Finn

Recycling Isn't Enough

A DEFENSE OF RESPONSIBLE MINING

The Super Pit gold mine in Kalgoorlie, Australia

It is fair to say that mining has caused more damage to workers, local communities, and the environment than any other industry. Worldwide, hundreds of thousands of mineworkers have died in mining accidents. Countless others have died from the pollution of air and water, frequently from poisons like arsenic, mercury, and lead. Others have died when protests against mines have turned violent. These facts have led some—including many in the church—to reject mining altogether. "We'd be better off without it," is the prevailing sentiment.

This attitude has succeeded in stopping such projects as the proposed Pebble Mine in southwest Alaska, which sought to harvest one of the largest known copper deposits on the planet. Situated in the watershed above Bristol Bay, the plan to store mining waste materials, or tailings, behind large earthen dams was roundly condemned by environmental groups for its alleged threat to land and water ecosystems. After spending six years and more than half a billion dollars in preparation, Anglo-American, one of the world's largest mining companies, walked away from the project in 2013. Rio Tinto, an even larger mining company, did the same six months later. In Peru, meanwhile, adamant local resistance led Newmont, the world's second largest gold miner, to walk away from its Conga mining project after spending $1.2 billion. Resistance to mining is intense.

The problem is, we all need mining. It's useful to remind ourselves that everything we touch throughout the day is either grown or extracted from the earth. My car, my telephone, my kitchen table, my watch, my refrigerator—all depend on mining. The same is true for the most basic prerequisites of well-being: housing, water and sewer systems, hospitals, schools, all of it. Consider the humble refrigerator. It is one of the first purchases poor families make when their community gets electricity. Those who simply "oppose all mining" are oblivious to their own dependence on minerals. They still want to have a smart phone and want to keep their milk cold. They rely on mining for copper and aluminum electric lines in nearly every part of their lives, something that won't change even when the world moves to renewable energy sources for its electricity generation.

We don't have to mine all the metals we use. Recycling is critical, which is a good thing, since the substances we mine are not renewable resources. According to the U.S. Geological Survey, recycling accounts for approximately 50 percent of total annual U.S. usage of many basic metals, including aluminum, copper, magnesium, and nickel. And there's room for improvement. The United States now recycles more than two-thirds of all aluminum drink containers, but this means we're still putting about $1 billion worth of aluminum cans into landfills every year. End-consumer recycling of aluminum represents only 24 percent of the total value of aluminum used nationally. Simpler lifestyles can reduce that demand, but mining will still be needed.

So what we need is responsible mining. Mining will always cause damage to the environment, it will always scar the earth; but in many cases reclamation and re-vegetation can largely restore the affected areas. We need mines that do not threaten the quality of the air and water and that don't impoverish the people who live nearby. Indeed, mines should improve the lives not only of employees and their families, but of all the people who live around them, and should do so both during and after the operating lifetime of the mine.

Christian faith requires our commitment to these goals. Private ownership of land has received theological endorsement throughout Christian history, with the understanding that everything that is owned carries, as John Paul II put it, a social mortgage. This is particularly true for valuables below the ground. Most people recognize that harvesting these regional or national endowments carries a greater social obligation than the killing of a deer or the picking of wild fruits for daily food. So in addition to the legal requirements of land ownership (a mining project starts with buying the land from current owners), there must be a debt paid to the larger community, typically through taxes and royalties.

Is it conceivable, in a globalized economy where shareholders press for the best quarterly results possible, that a mining company can do these things and still be economically viable? Why would any one company take on the burdens of responsible mining when competitors could continue apace without spending the money required to accomplish these ethically important goals? The short answer is that it takes both pressure and principle; both on-the-ground forces protesting against the abuses of mining as well as an ethical commitment within mining companies. Such a

PHOTO TAKEN AND SUPPLIED BY BRIAN VOON YEE YAP.

combination of circumstances has in fact occurred, at least for a few of the more than four thousand mining companies in the world.

Founded in 2001, the International Council on Mining and Metals (ICMM) comprises twenty-three firms that have altered their business plans to include environmental responsibility and local economic and social development. In this group are some of the largest mining companies on the planet: AngloAmerican, Rio Tinto, Glencore, Newmont, MMG, Barrick, and BHP Billiton. These firms are committed to earning a "social license" to mine, not just a legal one.

To investigate claims and counter-claims concerning the efficacy of changes made by ICMM companies, I have twice in the past two years traveled with an international team of church people, the Mining and Faith Reflections Initiative (MFRI), in Peru and Colombia. Other teams have been to Ghana, Zimbabwe, Chile, Australia, South Africa, and elsewhere. Funded by mining companies interested in getting local churches involved in dialogues with protesters about mining practices, we participants in this process have been accused of being "bought off" by corporate interests. But the agenda is developed with dissent in mind; the group meets with local people adamantly opposed to mining, not just with those who see themselves as better off because of it.

The MFRI has its roots in a "day of reflection" on responsible mining in 2013, held at the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace and attended by the CEOs of a number of large multinational mining companies. (A similar event was hosted by the archbishop of Canterbury a year later.) The pontifical council also held a two-day meeting of the victims of mining from around the world in July 2015. Pope Francis sent a message to this gathering, saying "The entire mining sector is undoubtedly required to effect a radical paradigm change to improve the situation in many countries." He added, "I encourage the communities represented in this meeting to reflect on how they can interact constructively with all the other actors involved, in a sincere and respectful dialogue."

The statement arising from that meeting, however—a prophetic denunciation of mining and its abuses—did not seem designed to further such a dialogue, and indicated little awareness of the remarkable changes that the CEOs spoke about in their earlier meetings with Vatican leaders. And at a follow-up day at Justice and Peace in September 2015, the mining execs, who had received the statement from the July meeting, listened to representatives of two international NGOs outline charges of pollution and human-rights violations against mining in general. Understandably, the CEOs asked whether any of their own company's mines were the culprits, but the representatives declined to name specific mines. Surely this was another opportunity for the constructive dialogue that Pope Francis was calling for—and those criticizing mining short-circuited it.

In many cases, important pieces are left out of the picture of mining typically propagated by protesters and purveyed by media. In 2015, a protest near the Las Bambas mining site left three protesters dead after skirmishes with Peruvian police. Peruvian news videos of the event show outside speakers rallying the crowd by condemning mining globally for its abuse of workers, communities, and the environment. Yet the concrete demands made of *this* mine were far more limited. Reading between the lines of a Reuters

and *New York Times* report on those demands, one can infer that real progress had already been made. The only demands protesters made of the mine's owner, MMG, were to pipe mineral concentrates out of town (to eliminate the dust and congestion caused by trucks hauling it away) and to hire more local workers. Gone were complaints about water and air pollution and human-rights violations.

On each trip I made with the MFRI, our team heard and saw credible evidence of positive change, from local mayors, citizens' groups, local pastors, and bishops, who have spoken favorably of the effects on the communities of the mining done by ICCM members in recent years. Yet few people hear anything about mining today other than the protests against it. I have been surprised at the lack of press coverage of so significant a shift within some of the largest corporations in the world. "Responsible mining just doesn't sell newspapers," one mining executive complained to me. But other public markers are available. The Dow Jones Sustainability Index has ranked Anglo American as "excellent" for the past fourteen years. And studies done by the Centre for Social Responsibility in Mining at the University of Queensland, Australia, acknowledge the positive changes (as well as the abuses still present) in much of mining.

What are some of these changes? The Antapaccay copper mine in the Altiplano of Peru uses new technology (without mercury, arsenic, or lead), recycles all its water, and spends $20 million a year on local economic development. The Cerrejón low-sulphur coal mine in northeast Colombia uses the overburden from current excavation to fill in past excavation, reclaiming and replanting the older areas. And, like the Prodeco mine in the region, it has dozens of morally committed employees working full-time in local communities on economic and social development. Such steps highlight the ability of profit-making firms to incorporate concerns for human rights, environmental sustainability, and local economic development.

AND FOR THE RECORD

Revelations reoccurring, he who is babbling away
in James Madison Plaza, in what goes around,
what comes around, light made holy by the fury
of the tears with which it mingles, simple enough,
when looked at directly, the child, shy and fearful,
who won't speak. And for the record, the mind,
like the night, has a thousand eyes—
sparrows in the bushes; a small cat
rolls in the snow; sleet pounding the windows.
In the space of a memory, the facade of a church,
an angel on each side of a fiery wheel.

—Lawrence Joseph

Lawrence Joseph is the author of five books of poems, most recently Into It *and* Codes, Precepts, Biases, and Taboos: Poems 1973–1993 *(Farrar, Straus and Giroux). His sixth book of poems,* So Where Are We? *will be published by FSG in August.*

The truth is that the minerals we all depend on can be extracted from the earth with far less negative impact than has occurred over the past five centuries of mining. Of course, justice-oriented critics of capitalism can claim that such improvements are only recognizable against the backdrop of mining's earlier and often brazen callousness. But those who work for an authentic transformation of market behavior in the direction of sustainable economic development need to encourage the positive steps taken by firms moving along that path. Admittedly, this whole controversy occurs outside the morally necessary, parallel conversation about the scale of resource use in the world and its ecological impact. Yet it is possible to envision the increased costs associated with responsible mining helping to internalize the social costs of the enterprise, with the resulting higher price—like a carbon tax on gasoline—leading to reduced consumption. And especially if all mining companies followed suit.

Protesters play an important role in the transformation of mining, as prophecy has in the Judeo-Christian tradition for twenty-five centuries. There is no doubt that protests have helped to effect change within some of mining's biggest firms. And protests against mining abuses today should continue. But the way to get abusive mining companies to shift to the new paradigm is to make it less arduous for the responsible firms than for the irresponsible ones.

The world needs a prophecy that remains open to the possibility of authentic transformation. And where transformation does indeed occur, prophets need to shift their methods toward civil engagement for a more just and sustainable world. ■

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How the Light Gets In

Leonard Cohen's Biblical Vision

Christian Raab

On Saturday November 12, 2016, *Saturday Night Live* began more soberly than usual. Cast member Kate McKinnon, in character as Hillary Clinton, sang a sincere and haunting version of Leonard Cohen's most well-known song "Halleluiah." It was a striking way for *SNL* to honor both the life and work of Cohen, the Canadian poet and singer-songwriter who had died two nights earlier, and Clinton, who had just lost the United States presidential election. *SNL* used Cohen as a soundtrack to a political moment. It made sense to do so. Because of his recent death, many people, including myself, were already listening to Cohen on repeat while thinking about the state of affairs in America. The lyrics of "Halleluiah"—especially lines like "even though it all went wrong, I'll stand before the Lord of song, with nothing on my tongue but Halleluiah"—were well suited to an audience that needed to express the pain of loss, but who also needed to be discouraged from becoming embittered or politically paralyzed. Accordingly, "Halleluiah" served as the perfect overture to McKinnon's final words to introduce the telecast: "I'm not giving up, and neither should you."

In a secular age, artists are often the closest thing we have to prophets. Leil Leibovitz's *A Broken Halleluiah* (W. W. Norton) argues that the work of Leonard Cohen is, in fact, best understood and appreciated in the Old Testament prophetic tradition. Leibovitz is not reaching. Cohen was raised in an observant Jewish home and was the grandson on both sides of rabbis of considerable renown. Even if Cohen, like many famous people, often failed to be a paragon of private virtue (his womanizing and drug abuse, especially during his early career, are well established), spiritual concerns nevertheless framed his life and art. The language and imagery of his lyrics came from a biblically formed imagination. His personal faith, as he reaffirmed many times, was in the God of the Torah, and his flashes of prophetic genius were his insights into the application of biblical logic to the contemporary world. If, like many of his peers in rock stardom, he often failed to

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RAMA

live at the center of righteousness, he, unlike most of them, maintained a sense of where that center remained, and of how to find it again in prayer and repentance.

In *A Broken Halleluiah* Leibovitz asks, "What is the prophet Cohen telling us?" This has more or less been my question too since the week of the 2016 presidential election. In order to explore Cohen's prophetic vision, I have turned especially to his records from the 1980s and early '90s, *Various Positions* (1984), *I'm Your Man* (1988), and *The Future* (1992). Many critics and rock historians agree that those recordings represent the peak of Cohen's creative output, and best articulate his religious and political views. Jeff Burger's *Leonard Cohen on Leonard Cohen: Interviews and Encounters* (Chicago Review Press) gives further evidence for that assessment.

Cohen was disinclined to take political sides, at least in public. "My song has no flag, my song has no party," he once said. The remark was occasioned by the use of his "The Partisan" (1969) as a sort of anthem by the Polish Solidarity movement in the 1980s. When, in 1992, it was suggested that his song "Democracy" hailed the triumph of Bill Clinton in the U.S. presidential race, he expressed the desire that his song not be identified with any administration. He preferred, instead, that his work be taken as a view from outside, above, and below the political fray.

When Cohen viewed the social and political landscape in the 1980s and '90s, he was not encouraged. Even after the fall of the Berlin Wall, when optimism reigned in Europe and North America, Cohen warned that the West would soon be falling apart, if it wasn't already. In 1989, he quipped: "You're going to settle for the Berlin Wall when you see what's coming next. You're going to settle for a hole in the ozone layer. You'll settle for crack. You'll settle for social unrest. You'll settle for the L.A. Riots. This is kindergarten stuff compared with the homicidal impulse that is developing in every breast."

Cohen was writing and recording in Los Angeles at the time. "What's coming next," he predicted, is the "survival of the fittest" mentality that characterized the urban street gangs of that city. That sort of nihilism would become the new moral norm of the wider social and political ethos. In Cohen's estimation, the process had already begun. In "Democracy," he described how the political landscape was becoming a Nietzchean contest of wills. Discourse had been reduced to "the homicidal bitchin' that goes on in every kitchen to determine who will serve and who will eat." He positioned himself as an outsider to this unfolding, viewing it all on television:

> I'm sentimental if you know what I mean
> I love the country but I can't stand the scene
> And I'm neither left or right
> I'm just staying home tonight
> Getting lost in that hopeless little screen.

Cohen, a man from the upper classes, who in many ways possessed Old World values, saw that he, and those like him, who would prefer a civilized pursuit of the common good to polarized discourse, were being exiled by a new norm of irrational extremism. Also, the poor and marginalized were being left behind by the failures of contemporary politics. The response of the latter, however, would not be to remain bystanders. In three songs from 1988, "First We Take Manhattan," "Tower of Song," and "Everybody Knows," he predicted that many of the poor, the fatherless, and the exploited would gravitate to the very extremism that victimized them and rise up in fury against elites. In the process, he suggested, they would take down the West: "First we take Manhattan, then we take Berlin," he has them sing.

Cohen acknowledged that extremism could take either rightist or leftist forms, and he refused to predict which would triumph. The rightist leader, said Cohen in a 1993 interview, would present himself as a strong man and refuse "to deal on the democratic plane, the parliamentary plane, to enter into the debate." He was someone whose attraction would be based in his willingness to take charge and stop listening to other opinions. The leftist leader, on the other hand, would promise to eliminate all the traditional structures widely perceived as causing suffering. The leftist message would be:

> None of your institutions are worth protecting. Don't talk to me about order, don't talk to me about family, don't talk to me about your beautiful monuments and your works of art and your museums and your restaurants and your hotels. I don't want to hear about those things—they're all going down. There may be something good. I'm sorry about it. If a child is going to be burnt, forgive me. The thing produces only suffering, the whole affair deserves to be blown up, and I'm going to blow it up.

Cohen was not entirely pessimistic about the future of politics. In "Democracy," he pleads hopefully that the "mighty ship of state" might "sail on...to the shores of need, past the reefs of greed, through the squalls of hate." For democracy to recover its potential, two things needed to happen. First, denizens of democratic states needed to recover their confidence that pluralism and unity could co-exist. That meant both affirming diversity and recognizing one's shared humanity and citizenship with the other. Democracy, he said in 1993, "affirms the equality of the white and the black, the poor and the rich. It's filled with affirmations, with validations for the fragments of society, but unless the fragments of society can experience themselves as something other than the fragments, then democracy will fail." Second, but related, citizens of democratic states needed to recover a spiritual center of gravity. If the right needed to overcome its resistance to accepting the complexities inherent in pluralism, the left needed to recover the supra- and pre-political values that had been preserved in Western tradition.

In addition to politics, Cohen pointed to the arena of sexuality as manifesting the symptoms of cultural breakdown. It may seem strange to find in Cohen, a somewhat notorious ladies' man, something of a conservative in the area of sexuality. By the time these albums were recorded, however, Cohen was approaching sixty and expressing in interviews regret that he had left behind him a wounded family and a string of broken relationships. Perhaps because he knew the sufferings wrought by the sexual revolution firsthand, he was able to write about them with considerable poignancy. A critique of the sexual revolution is discernable in "Closing Time" (1992). He describes an end-of-the-evening bar scene. There's an alcoholic haze produced by "Johnny Walker." There's a woman "rubbing half the world across her thigh." Men and women are coupling and then disposing of one another. Clothes are coming off: "it's partner found, it's partner lost."

Cohen's voice in the song is that of both participant and judge. He sings as one partaking of the party. He admits of longing with "sigh, cry, and hungry kiss." But then he notes that closing time "looks like freedom, but it feels like death." In the final verse, he laments that the potential for real love, for himself and for the West, has been "wrecked in the winds of change and the weeds of sex." In the chorus, he describes the closing time ritual being led by a fiddler (a symbol of Satan in medieval folklore), and hints at a coming eschatological comeuppance: "the women tear their blouses off; and the men they dance on the polka dots, there'll be hell to pay when the fiddler stops."

In other places, Cohen gives voice to more innocent victims of the sexual revolution, namely women and children. In a 1993 interview, he contended that once God was removed from the sexual sphere, it necessarily became pornographic. In song, he referred sympathetically to the women who had been dominated and objectified by pornographic culture. *The Future*'s title track describes men, whose "private life" was "exploding," circling around a "woman hanging upside down, her features covered by her fallen gown." In "First We Take Manhattan," Cohen, railing against the fashion business for objectifying women and keeping them thin with drugs, calls for justice for "what happened to my sister."

Finally, Cohen spoke up for the unborn who had been betrayed and disposed of by the throwaway culture. In the bold language of "The Future," he writes:

Destroy another fetus now
We don't like children anyhow
I've seen the future baby,
It is murder

Cohen's regard for dignity of life of the unborn can be perceived in other works like "Diamonds in the Mine" (1971) and "Dance Me to the End of Love" (1984). He seems to have understood that they were among the sexual revolution's most vulnerable victims.

While Cohen's critique of contemporary sexual mores is somewhat self-evident in his lyrics, his esteem for traditional marriage is revealed mostly in his interviews. Although Cohen never married, and never personally achieved more than episodic monogamy, he pointed to marriage as the surest, if one of the most difficult, paths to true freedom, as opposed to the illusory freedom described in "Closing Time." Cohen had already said in 1974, "I think marrying is for very, very high-minded people.... It is a discipline of extreme severity. To really turn your back on all the other possibilities and all the other experiences of love, of passion, of ecstasy, and to determine to find it within one embrace is a high and righteous notion. Marriage today is the monastery; the monastery today is freedom." Understanding that in an age of sexual chaos, marriage could provide a route to the peace, self-knowledge, and self-transcendence for which the culture truly longed, Cohen called marriage, in 1988, "the foundation stone of the whole enterprise." In 1993, while admitting his own failure to attain what he believed in, he reiterated: "Monogamous marriage and commitment, all those ferocious ideas, are the highest expression of a male possibility."

It is commonplace for conservatives to identify the breakdown of the family as the root cause of all social and political ills. For Cohen, who did not want to be labeled politically, sexual anarchy was not the ultimate cause, but yet another symptom, like political polarization, of an even deeper problem. Culture and politics merely manifested what was in people's hearts.

In the opening lines of "The Future," Cohen adopts the voice of a menacing figure who seeks only power and control over others, whose appetites center on hedonistic pleasures, and who breaks his solitude only out of a desire to dominate. "It's lonely here, there's no one left to torture," says the voice. This figure represents the kind of sociopathic persons Cohen saw emerging at an increasing rate in modern society. They are not merely flawed, as men and women have always been; they have lost connection with their spiritual center and, consequently, with their consciences. Cohen goes on to prophesy:

Things are going to slide
Slide in all directions
Won't be nothing
Nothing you can measure anymore
The blizzard, the blizzard of the world
Has crossed the threshold
And it has overturned
The order of the soul
When they said repent
I wonder what they meant

In Cohen's estimation, our contemporary alienation is rooted in amnesia regarding the created order and tradition. There has been a "breaking of the ancient Western code"

("The Future"). Men and women of the West have lost the memory of their religious heritage, and therefore their spiritual intuition; they no longer even know how to repent.

Those familiar with Cohen's biography know that he was an ardent spiritual seeker. As a child in Montreal, he breathed the air of French Catholicism, and developed, with the help of an Irish nanny who occasionally brought him to Mass, a love for Jesus, and a devotion to St. Kateri. He could quote Chesterton and Graham Greene. As an adult, he studied Sufism, Hinduism, and Buddhism. Crediting meditation practices with helping him overcome a lifelong struggle with depression, he lived in a Zen monastery for a number of years. Nonetheless, he never ceased to identify with Judaism and was defensive when challenged about it—as is evident in his 1997 poem "Not a Jew." Throughout his life, he maintained membership in a synagogue. In his maturity, he kept the Sabbath and regularly prayed the Jewish liturgy. When his son Adam was hospitalized for four months in the '80s, Cohen kept vigil by his bedside reading aloud from the Bible. When his son finally regained consciousness, he is said to have asked: "Dad, can you please read something else?"

Cohen saw commonalities in mystics across the religions of the world, but his home, as his coreligionist Liebovitz argues convincingly, remained biblical. So, when he decried that the "the ancient Western code" was being broken, and "the order of the soul" was being "overturned," he was appealing for a return to a primarily biblical rather than Vedic worldview, a Judeo-Christian, rather than Eastern spiritual center.

Cohen thought the Western religious tradition could still serve as a sure anchor in the storms of modernity. In 1988 he stated: "A lot of information in our religious systems has been discarded, and people find themselves in predicaments that have the potential of being addressed from a religious point of view, but they lack the religious vocabulary to address it." In 1992, he reiterated: "Redemption, repentance, resurrection. All those ideas are thrown out with the bathwater." Most forcefully, he said in an interview with a Jewish publication in 1993:

> I *know* what it takes to survive. I *know* what a people needs to survive and as I get older I feel less modest about taking these positions because I realize we are the ones who wrote the Bible. And, at our best, we inhabit a biblical landscape, and this is where we should situate ourselves without apology. For these things, for the burning bush, for those experiences, those are the experiences that we have the obligation to manifest. That biblical landscape is our urgent invitation, and we have to be there. Otherwise, it's really not worth saving or manifesting or redeeming anything, unless we really take up that invitation to walk onto that biblical landscape.

Cohen contended that a sense of the fall as the truth about our human condition was essential for a realistic approach to political and social problems. None of the West's accomplishments would matter if people did not acknowledge their own brokenness and sinful impulses. He was brutally frank about this: "Human beings have a deeply homicidal appetite—I see it in myself, and in everyone else. Acknowledging it is a first step towards controlling it." Unfortunately, as he went on to say, "no one wants to believe the central myth of our culture...that this world is the manifestation of a fall."

In "Anthem" (1992), Cohen sings, "there is a crack in everything." He explained the meaning behind the line: "We develop utopian theories—socialism, fascism, democracy—to bring us back to Paradise. But there is a crack in everything, because this is the realm of the crack, the realm of failure, the realm of death, and unless we affirm [the reality of these things], we're going to be very unhappy." In Cohen's view, ignorance of the fall leads to utopian politics that turn parties and leaders into false messiahs and idols.

"There is a crack in everything," but "that's how the light gets in," he goes on to sing. The light is the wisdom that the Jewish witness offers. Cohen was not fatalistic. It is possible to live meaningfully and hopefully amid suffering, provided one has access to the perspective of divine revelation. Moreover, he sought, with his description of an apocalyptic landscape, to force the question of moral decision, of the best mode of behavior in the middle of catastrophe. In his songs there is a choice to be made between "the crucifixion" and "the holocaust" ("The Captain," 1984), between "Christ" and "Hiroshima" ("The Future"). That choice begins not in the halls of politics, though it may end there, but in the caverns of the heart. The repentance he envisioned was not limited to apology and regret, but entailed the whole turning away from self and sin and turning toward love of God and neighbor meant by the original Hebrew word for it, *shuv*. Cohen's choice of crucifixion and Christ as symbols of love indicates that he was referring to something that involved self-denial and sacrifice. He put the matter aptly: "The kind of surrender that is involved with love means that you have to take a wound also.... The condition that most elevates us is the condition that most annihilates us.... Somehow the destruction of the ego is involved with love," after which "you can never again feel at the center of your own drama." For Cohen, the wounds of the risen Christ demonstrate the eternal truth of love's *agapic* essence. "If the wound of Jesus comes to express his love for mankind, then it will never heal." Hence, for Cohen, the path of redemption must pass through something the Jewish Cohen thought was best expressed and understood in the terms of Christ and the cross.

If Cohen is a prophet, he is telling us that contemporary political discourse is being reduced to a Nietzchean contest of wills. The answer is not messianic politics but rather something prepolitical. The order of the soul has been overthrown and the ancient Western code has been broken. The recovery, therefore, must be the remembrance of the code and the re-ordering of the soul. We have a choice between total destruction or light and mercy, the path of the "little Jew who wrote the Bible." ■

The Free Banquet

The Case for Universal Basic Income

George Scialabba

From St. Paul's venerable saying, "if a man does not work, neither shall he eat," to the always-contemporary saw, "there's no such thing as a free lunch," the common sense of humankind has always seemed dead against a universal, unconditional basic income. Charity, of course, is no less a tradition: for widows, orphans, and the infirm in all periods, and in the modern period also as social insurance for the elderly and the involuntarily unemployed.

But aid for the deserving poor has at times, and especially in modern times, entailed the expensive and humiliating burden of proving to the satisfaction of donors that the recipient is indeed both deserving and poor. And even in the most generous and enlightened societies, such aid has sometimes had perverse effects. The most common is the "poverty trap." When aid is means-tested, every dollar of earned income above the qualifying level results in a corresponding reduction of aid. This is a disincentive to accept the generally low-income, training-poor jobs available to welfare recipients. The same disincentive functions as a "household trap," keeping women—the usual caregivers—with small children at home until the children are grown, insuring that when those women do eventually enter the labor market, they are at a severe disadvantage. In the United States, the Clinton administration resolved this dilemma by the simple, harsh step of eliminating long-term assistance to poor households, forcing even parents of small children into the labor force—a boon to low-wage employers. Unemployment insurance, meanwhile, is conditional on recipients' producing evidence of a minimum number of job applications per week—a requirement that, as often as not, proves either burdensome or farcical.

We do not, obviously, take very good care of our poor and unemployed. And we will soon have even more of them: the elimination of jobs by automation has barely begun. Without a radical new approach to economic security, we are headed either for an even worse bureaucratic morass or for a *Blade Runner*, devil-take-the-hindmost world.

Basic Income: A Radical Proposal for a Free Society and a Sane Economy (Harvard University Press, $29.95, 400 pp.) by economist Philippe van Parijs and political scientist Yannick Vanderborght proposes a radical idea that will be new to many readers although, as they conscientiously point out, it has a rich history. Like most good political ideas, the right to a basic income originated in the Enlightenment, though proposals for the relief of the poor are of course much older. St. Ambrose waxed eloquently indignant on the subject of economic inequality. Luther admonished the German nobility that "it would be easy to make a law, if only we had the courage…that every city should provide for its own poor." The narrator of More's *Utopia* railed against England's savage punishment of crimes against property: "It would be far more to the point to provide everyone with some means of livelihood, so that no one is under the frightful necessity of becoming first a thief, then a corpse."

The *philosophes* radicalized and universalized this impulse. According to Montesquieu, the state "owes all its citizens a secure subsistence"; Rousseau posited that "every man has naturally a right to everything he needs"; Condorcet wrote that "society is obliged to secure the subsistence of all its citizens." Thomas Paine even proposed the first universal basic income, combining an endowment at age twenty-one and a retirement income at fifty. The subsequent history of experiments with income-security schemes in modern Europe and the United States, from Bismarck to Milton Friedman, from the Poor Laws to the current experiments in Switzerland, is a secondary but fascinating theme of Van Parijs and Vanderborght's book.

There are three defining elements in Van Parijs and Vanderborght's proposal. First, basic income is *individual*, paid to each citizen rather than to a family or household. Second, it is *universal*, paid without regard to other income or assets. Third, it is *obligation-free*, a matter of right, and not tied to any work requirement. Other aspects of their plan—income levels, funding mechanisms, pace of adoption—are less fundamental.

The chief reason for individual rather than household payments is that marriage and cohabitation are complicated enough without introducing economic incentives into a

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A huge poster on the Plaine de Plainpalais square in Geneva, Switzerland, on May 14, 2016. The poster appeared ahead of a national referendum on the introduction of an unconditional basic income for all Swiss citizens.

MAGALI GIRARDIN / KEYSTONE VIA AP

relationship. Public-assistance programs usually take account of the economies of scale in consumption that living together entails, reducing benefits accordingly. But basic income is not a poverty-reduction program; it is a freedom-maximization program. Its purpose is to increase options for everyone, in both work life and intimate life.

Why universality? In the first place, because means-testing is an administrative nightmare. But even more important, because it frees recipients to work. At present, earned income reduces public assistance dollar for dollar, and a full-time job is likely to result in termination of benefits. But far too many of the jobs available to most recipients of public assistance are insecure dead-ends. If the jobs disappear or prove intolerable, the resulting interval until benefits resume can plunge a family into a debt spiral. With a secure basic income, taking whatever job is available entails no such risk, and recipients are freer to take a low-paying job that provides valuable training or experience, hence perhaps a way out of the low-wage ghetto. They are also freer to create their own jobs, and even to become entrepreneurs, on however humble a scale.

It is the obligation-free part that sticks in many people's craw—who, after all, is not incensed by the spectacle of the idle poor? Forcing recipients of public assistance to prove that they are involuntarily unemployed serves several unworthy social purposes: it gratifies popular sadism; it keeps the number of recipients down; and it swells the reserve army of the unemployed, thereby subsidizing low-wage employers. Van Parijs and Vanderborght quote a sociologist's scathing description of the effects of obligation-to-work regulations: by "allowing the authorities to force someone into a job, however rotten or badly paid," they "assure that the meanest employer, paying the worst wages for the filthiest jobs, is not kept out of a worker while there is one able-bodied unemployed man available." And of course, like means-testing, obligation-to-work regulations require a large, expensive, and intrusive bureaucracy.

Historically, the two main grounds for criticizing unbridled competitive individualism have been efficiency and justice: it wastes the talents of the losers and deprives them of chances for a decent life. These are also the moral underpinnings of a universal basic income. Van Parijs and Vanderborght repeatedly stress that their proposal is not a species of poor relief; it provides a floor, not a safety net. It is not only, or even primarily, intended to keep people from starving or sleeping in the streets. Shelters and soup kitchens might achieve that goal equally well, but the goal itself is too modest. A basic income aims at allowing people to design their lives, on the principle that while creativity in some form is a universal biological endowment, chronically insecure, degraded, and exploited people cannot be creative, and society will be worse off for the loss.

The argument from justice may, as in Rousseau, appeal to every individual's natural right to realize her powers, rather than, as in the argument from efficiency, to society's interest in her doing so. This argument is perfectly adequate, provided rights are derived from contingent moral intuitions—Smith's and Hume's "sympathy," for example—rather than from supposedly immutable (but unfortunately nonexistent) metaphysical principles. But there is another, even firmer ground for treating basic income as a right: the social nature of wealth creation. Markets do not allocate rewards fairly; no one deserves to be filthy rich. Van Parijs and Vanderborght illustrate by quoting the economist and computer scientist Herbert Simon, one of the twentieth century's biggest brains:

> When we compare average incomes in rich nations with those in Third World countries, we find enormous differences that are surely not due simply to differences in motivations to earn [or natural resources, but to] differences in social capital that takes primarily the form of stored knowledge (e.g., technology, and especially organizational and governmental skills). Exactly the same claim can be made about the differences in income within any given society.... It is hard to conclude that social capital can produce less than about 90 percent of income in wealthy societies like those of the U.S. or Northwestern Europe.... [A flat tax of 70 percent] would generously leave the original recipients of the income with about three times what, according to my rough guess, they had earned.... In the U.S., a flat tax of 70 percent would support all governmental programs…and allow payment, with the remainder, of a patrimony of about $8000 per annum per inhabitant, or $25,000 for a family of three.... Of course, I am not so naïve as to believe that my 70 percent tax is politically viable in the U.S. at present [i.e., 1998], but looking toward the future, it is none too soon to find answers to the arguments of those who think they have a solid moral right to retain all the wealth they "earn."

It is, indeed, never too soon to disturb the ineffable confidence of overpaid blockheads in their perfect entitlement to a disproportionate share of the common wealth. There most certainly is such a thing as a free lunch. There is, in fact, a free banquet, of which every rich person daily partakes. It is long past time they invited the rest of us.

Much of *Basic Income* is devoted to practical matters: in particular, to comparing Van Parijs and Vanderborght's proposal with likely alternatives. Traditional guaranteed-minimum-income schemes involve means-testing, clawback (the reduction of assistance dollar for dollar of earned income), and proof that the recipient is actively seeking employment, with the undesirable effects already noted. Those disadvantages have been widely enough recognized that both liberals and enlightened conservatives generally prefer a different income-maintenance approach, either a negative income tax or an earned-income tax credit.

The best-known proponent of a negative income tax was Milton Friedman. As with a basic income, a minimum income level is set for all individuals or households, and those

with incomes lower than the minimum receive an amount equal to the difference. By means of a somewhat technical but always clear discussion, Van Parijs and Vanderborght show that, given certain common features (payment to individuals, no work requirement, and similar funding mechanisms and tax rates), a negative income tax and a universal basic income are equivalent in every respect but one. That respect is, however, crucial. A basic income is paid upfront: weekly, monthly, or quarterly. A negative income tax is paid out at the end of the tax year; and as Van Parijs and Vanderborght dryly observe, "poor people cannot wait until the end of the tax year before receiving the transfer that will enable them not to starve."

An earned income tax credit (EITC), a variant of the negative income tax, first introduced in 1975, is now the largest poverty program in the United States. Its defining feature is that benefits are paid only to the employed. If a means-tested program is also in place, the EITC would approximate the effects of a negative income tax, though again without the ability to cushion families through periods of income deprivation. Without a minimum-income program, an EITC functions as a subsidy to low-wage employers, which doubtless explains its popularity in the United States.

Van Parijs and Vanderborght also discuss a range of other possibilities: wage subsidies, a reduction of the work week, the government as employer of last resort, and a close cousin of universal basic income, a universal lump-sum endowment at age eighteen or twenty-one. They argue, plausibly I think, that in all cases a universal basic income offers more freedom and security for the money. They also discuss whether and how other kinds of government assistance—for housing, education, health care, etc., as well as social-contribution programs like Social Security—might be combined with a basic income.

Is it feasible? Even if America were a functioning democracy rather than a dysfunctional plutocracy, would there be enough money? Van Parijs and Vanderborght propose, for illustrative purposes, a funding level of 25 percent of average GDP—around $1,200 per month in the United States. On one side of the ledger, this would replace the public-assistance portion of the government's current social-welfare spending—a considerable saving. But on the other side, if financed solely by a flat tax on labor income, and without taking into account likely improvements in productivity and human capital that would eventually result from a basic income, this funding level would entail marginal tax rates somewhere between 60 and 80 percent.

Is that the end of the story, the graveyard of our noble hope? Not quite. There are several other possible—indeed socially beneficial—ways of raising revenue besides taxing labor income. Before even mentioning them, though, one should note an elementary fact about taxes. As a famous social parasite once remarked (a sentiment echoed by another social parasite during a recent presidential campaign debate): "Only the little people pay taxes." Tax evasion—primarily by those who can afford to hire expensive tax lawyers—costs hundreds of billions of dollars in lost tax revenues each year, and an estimated $20 trillion is held offshore for purposes of tax evasion. In a rational world, the costly and destructive Global War on Terror would be replaced by a Global War on Tax Evasion.

Even before that happy day, much progress can be made simply by holding President Trump to his campaign promise to eliminate the carried-interest deduction, a $250 billion-a-year gift to hedge-fund managers, and more generally by taxing capital income at the same rate as labor income. Since the top 0.1 percent of American households receive half of all capital gains, there can be no reason for taxing them at a substantially lower rate that the median wage earner, except a fanatical devotion to increasing the income of the fabulously wealthy, a compulsion one might call Republicans' Disease.

Other possible sources of revenue discussed by Van Parijs and Vanderborght include user fees on scarce resources like land, the atmosphere, and the broadcast spectrum; a "Tobin tax" on financial transactions; and consumption and value-added taxes. They mention only in passing possible reductions in military expenditures, but there are large savings to be looked for from closing some of our nearly one thousand foreign military bases and canceling unnecessary weapons programs, above all the mind-bogglingly expensive F-35 Joint Strike Fighter.

Convalescence from large-scale social pathologies like plutocracy is bound to be gradual. Barring a miraculously rapid disappearance of Republicans' Disease, a universal basic income will have to be approached by stages. Essentially this means compromising on funding levels, funding range, or obligation to work. After further technical but, again, lucid discussion, Van Parijs and Vanderborght settle on two options: in societies where the obstacles to a basic income are mainly political, a negative income tax, which appears to base assistance on virtuous behavior (i.e., participation in the labor market); and in societies where the chief obstacles are economic, a partial universal income, starting low and perhaps increasing along with average productivity.

We can, of course, start anywhere—"if only we had the courage," as Luther put it. It hardly matters where or how. What matters—what will lift the heart of every reader of *Basic Income*—is that Van Parijs and Vanderborght have enlisted the rigor and scruple of first-rate social science in the service of a generous social vision that is at least as old as Saint Ambrose and as up-to-date as Pope Francis. Our sensible and humane descendants—they are bound to be sensible or humane, since humanity would otherwise have long since succumbed to nuclear or environmental catastrophe—will doubtless wonder, with the easy impatience of posterity, what we were waiting for. They may, in fairness to us, decide that we were waiting for books like this. ■

‘This Suffering Business’

The Lives of Robert Lowell & Elizabeth Bishop

B. D. McClay

Even to themselves, the poets of the mid-twentieth century seemed cursed. “I’m cross with god who has wrecked / this generation,” wrote John Berryman in “Dream Song 153.” “First he seized Ted, then Richard, Randall, and now Delmore.” Some years after he joined this list himself, his long-suffering first wife Eileen Simpson would write: “Many—I, too, at moments—blamed the suicide on John’s having been a poet. The litany of suicides among poets is long. After a while I began to feel that I’d missed the obvious. It was the poetry that had kept him alive.”

For the host of critics, biographers, and memoirists who have approached these poets since, the question Simpson seeks to answer here has not always been easy to settle or even to pose. One stance, which at least has the virtue of consistency, is to say: the art goes in one box, and everything else—the alcoholism, the mental illness, the broken marriages, the violence, the suicide—goes in a different box. If you won’t do the hard work required to discuss what’s in box number one intelligently, you can open box number two. However, your interest in doing so is voyeurism and you should, probably, feel bad about it.

As with most “big” questions, “What is the relationship between Life and Art?” is answered by a fat and unsatisfying “it depends.” Most of us wobble, looking at things one way, then another. Two new books, Kay Redfield Jamison’s *Robert Lowell, Setting the River on Fire*, (Knopf, $29.95, 560 pp.) and Megan Marshall’s *Elizabeth Bishop: A Miracle for Breakfast*, (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, $30, 354 pp.), take aim at this separation of life from work and poet from reader. In so doing, they illustrate the best and the worst case scenarios for their approach.

Like Lowell, Jamison suffers from what is now called bipolar disorder, about which she has written extensively both personally and professionally (she is also a psychiatrist who teaches at Johns Hopkins University). Marshall, who has written two other biographies of American women of letters, identifies with Bishop strongly enough to alternate chapters of biography with chapters of memoir. Her grounds for doing so are shaky. What she does have is, in its way, worse than nothing at all.

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Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop

Elizabeth Bishop’s life contains enough material to make at least seven confessional poets, but she refused to give herself away so easily. Her careful poetry, neither personal nor impersonal, spoke and saw through an “I” that strove to dissolve itself into its own observation. Though she sometimes tried to write poems directly from life, these attempts did not often result in publication.

She certainly had, if she had wanted to use it, the material. In 1967, Bishop woke in the night to find that her partner of more than twenty-five years, Lota de Macedo Soares, had swallowed most of a bottle of Valium. She slipped into a coma and died a few days later. Yet Lota was not even the first person in Bishop’s life to commit suicide as an act of revenge. Bob Seaver, a college boyfriend, shot himself and sent her a postcard that said only “go to hell, Elizabeth” when she refused to marry him.

Indeed, Bishop entered the world losing things. Her

father died when she was eight months old. Her mother, Gertrude, apparently unhinged by grief, would become unstable, at one point sleeping with her young daughter while holding a knife. After a suicide attempt when Bishop was five years old, Gertrude would be institutionalized and disappear completely from her daughter's life. Bishop spent her childhood bouncing from relative to relative—among them her Uncle George, who sexually abused her and once held her by the hair off a second-story balcony. The only security that her family would provide was financial—the inheritance that funded her life as a poet.

One way of understanding Elizabeth Bishop is that walling herself in was the price she had to pay to come out of her childhood alive. Some of the people who knew her say as much. "Elizabeth had a place she could go in which she was all alone as a kind of frigid little girl," recalled the critic Helen Vendler in an interview. "She could be enticed out of it, but then she would go back into it, back into her own aloneness." How can a biographer scale that wall and understand the person beyond it? One trick is to begin mapping Bishop's interior by heading into your own, hoping, as Bishop wrote in "Maps," you can provide the color that "suits the character or the native waters best." This is Marshall's approach. She has some secret weapons. First, hitherto unknown letters from Bishop to her therapist, Dr. Ruth Foster. Second, the archive from which she retrieved these letters, unsealed only in 2009. Third, she took Bishop's poetry class at Harvard.

The letters to Ruth Foster contain shocking information about Elizabeth Bishop's childhood, but though the details of her abuse are nauseating to read, they disappear almost as soon as they are mentioned and Marshall never really ties them to other aspects of Bishop's work or life. As for the other letters, Marshall claims in her last chapter they contain new information "never revealed…even to close friends"—namely that Alice Methfessel, the companion of Bishop's final years, the woman with whom she lived and traveled, was not merely a very good friend.

Though Marshall's willingness to write frankly about Elizabeth Bishop's romantic relationships is both refreshing and commendable, the relationships themselves are not news. Methfessel and Bishop's relationship was clearly known to some of their friends: they are referred to explicitly in *Remembering Elizabeth Bishop*, an oral biography from 1994, as lovers. If Bishop thought she had kept the relationship a secret, she was mistaken.

The poetry class takes up most of the space, even shaping the structure of the book. Yet Marshall did not really know Bishop, was not mentored by her, and does not seem to have had any serious conversations with her. Because the personal connection with Bishop is not strong, Marshall's decision to publish her own life story as a biography within a biography is not always easy to understand. When she writes that "newly divorced, I found myself looking for a teaching job in my mid-fifties, as Elizabeth Bishop had after her marriage ended"—thus analogizing her divorce to Lota's suicide—it is, frankly, offensive.

In dealing with Bishop herself, however, this treatment produces an image of the poet that is indistinct and far away; the writing about her is overawed and overfamiliar—which is how we often relate to teachers who have meant much to us. Bishop's flaws, missteps, and unfashionable qualities are airbrushed or replaced by wishful thinking. Much is made of a car trip with Adrienne Rich, but one car trip cannot replace Bishop's general indifference to politics and frequent hostility toward feminism.

To relate the facts of Bishop's life, Marshall leans heavily on speculative questions. Sometimes these questions are simply confusing:

> Was it imagining that distance, the land and the water to be crossed by carriage or automobile from Great Village to Dartmouth, N.S., that made Elizabeth love the two glossy maps—one of Canada and one of the whole world—that hung on her classroom wall, though she was too young to learn geography?

Cumulatively, however, these questions undermine her authority: If Marshall doesn't know, who does? Similarly, to provide interior detail in a moment when archives cannot, Marshall sometimes will pull from the poetry as if it were a direct transcription of events—quoting "In the Waiting Room," written toward the end of Bishop's life, as a simple description of an experience Bishop had when she was five. Treating women writers as stenographers rather than artists is a common trap, and Marshall, who should know better, falls into it frequently.

If any poet can be fairly called a stenographer, it's Robert Lowell, Bishop's "sad friend" and faithful correspondent. Particularly in his later poems, Lowell put life directly onto the page, even publishing one of Bishop's letters as a poem in his 1973 collection *History*:

> Finally after hours of stumbling along,
> you see daylight ahead, a faint blue glimmer;
> air never looked so beautiful before.
> That is what I feel I'm waiting for:
> a faintest glimmer I am going to get out
> somehow alive from this.

"Cal," as he was known to his friends (it was short for both "Caligula" and "Caliban"), did know what it was like to hope for deliverance from darkness. But in his life, as he wearily wrote in "Since 1939," "if we see a light at the end of the tunnel / it's the light of an oncoming train." If Bishop's life was marked by early disaster, the unknown future could bring hope and healing. Lowell, suffering from severe manic-depression, already knew his future. It was the same as his past.

Like Bishop, Lowell was born into money, and, like Bishop, this would allow him to pursue poetry single-mindedly.

He came from a Boston family that already included in its ranks two poets, one, incredibly, also named Robert Lowell. (The other, Amy Lowell, is a minor American poet in her own right.) But, as Jamison points out, the family legacy and name that brought him money, fame, and talent also brought with it what she calls the "dark cards" of "madness and depression." Mental illness ran in the family, too.

Lowell would get sick and upend his life, causing great pain, again and again. He would turn violent, leave his wife, and succumb to delusions. During his first marriage, these often took the form of bouts of religious enthusiasm, which caused a different kind of pain to friends like Flannery O'Connor. For most of his life, his manic spells could not be avoided, warded off, or treated except through hospitalization. They also could not be kept secret, and early in his life, when his condition was not well understood, his delusions would play out publicly, with painful and humiliating consequences.

Despite this, the list of people in Lowell's life who could neither forgive nor like him was short. They included his first wife, Jean Stafford; fellow poets Delmore Schwartz and W. H. Auden; and, unfortunately for Lowell, his first biographer, Ian Hamilton, who depicted Lowell as a cruel and selfish man whose poetic gift was killed when he began to take lithium. This portrait is certainly not false: Lowell really could be both cruel and selfish even when perfectly sane. It is, however, incomplete.

Offering a fuller portrait is Jamison's first goal in writing *Setting the River on Fire*. The mystery of Robert Lowell is that he was both loved and forgiven. That Lowell would reach the end of his life, as he did, on good terms with most of the people in it, was by no means guaranteed for a man as sick as he was and as destructive as he could be. People loved him. Why?

Jamison's Lowell is a gentle figure, considerate to his friends and deeply remorseful for the pain caused when manic. She provides details of his kindness and generosity toward his friends, often contrasting the lovable figure they knew with the frightening stranger he could become. They recall, for instance, how Lowell would seek out people who were depressed or isolated at parties and draw them out. Much of the book is heartbreaking to read.

Is this whitewashed? A little. Though none of Lowell's bad behavior when manic is glossed over, the nastier details of his conduct even when lucid sometimes are. And when confronted with a difficult situation, Jamison occasionally takes refuge in statements that are true, but evasive; for instance, she writes that "the truth of any marriage is not fully given" when considering Lowell's ugly marriage to Jean Stafford. That's a dubious formulation, given that (as Jamison admits) Lowell once tried to strangle Stafford and twice broke her nose.

Similarly, when writing about the scandal of *The Dolphin*, in which Lowell published recriminatory letters from his second wife, Elizabeth Hardwick, Jamison says only this: "Art lasts or it doesn't." Which side of this *The Dolphin* falls on is yours to guess.

Jamison's other goal is to examine how mania relates to art, but here, she keeps things frustratingly vague. With the same evasiveness that characterizes her approach to sticky points of behavior, Jamison avoids directly stating what it is she wants to say. Though she amasses quite a lot of suggestive material, and includes studies on mental illness in artists and on creative achievement and bipolar disorder, she never comes to a concrete suggestion.

She does, however, make a strong case that Lowell's mental illness and his creativity are directly related to each other, and that his spells of mania, however destructive, should also be given credit as generative. Contra the high school teacher who warned you not to mix Virginia Woolf's madness with her work—insisting that the work was produced in spite of, not because of, mental illness—Jamison wants to say that Lowell was the great poet he was because he was the sick man he was.

"Sometime," wrote Elizabeth Bishop to Robert Lowell in the summer of 1948, "I wish we could have a more sensible conversation about this suffering business, anyway. I imagine we actually agree fairly well. It is just that I guess I think it is so irresistible & unavoidable there's no use talking about it, & that in itself it has no value…"

Was their suffering of no value? It was surely capricious. "It's terrible," said Lowell as he improved under the influence of lithium, "to think that all I've suffered, and all the suffering I've caused, might have arisen from the lack of a little salt in my brain." A living father, a healthier mother, and Elizabeth Bishop's entire life changes. Would they have written poetry anyway? Perhaps, but not this poetry. Was it worth it?

Bishop and Lowell lived and worked, sometimes heroically (sometimes not), despite debilitating loss and illness. They aimed for excellence, and they achieved it; they looked for love, and they received it. They drank too much, hurt the people they loved, succumbed to despair. Out of this, if not only this, came the poetry. One wishes them happier lives, but it's hard to wish for other poems.

It's also true that they were happy, even for long stretches, if not for always. "I believe," wrote Elizabeth Bishop, on the boat that would bring her to Brazil, where she would bite into a bad nut, be cared for by Lota de Macedo Soares, and fall in love

> that eventually I shall see things in a "better light,"
> that I shall continue to read and continue to write....
> that love will unexpectedly appear over & over again
> that people will continue to do kind deeds that astound me.

And if those were not the only things to come true—what of it? ■

The Freedoms of Fiction

An Interview with Elif Batuman

Anthony Domestico

Elif Batuman borrowed from Dostoevsky for the title of her first book, a collection of memoiristic essays about reading Russian literature and traveling in Uzbekistan called The Possessed. *It offered an absurd, moving look at the absurd, moving nature of grad-student life: the blend of self-satisfaction and self-laceration that attends academic conferences; the ever-shifting relationship—now hate, now love; now obsession, now indifference—one has with one's research. With a doctorate in comparative literature from Stanford, Batuman conveyed just what it's like to be young and possessed absolutely by literary studies—a possession that while ennobling can just as often be cringe-inducing (I still wince when thinking of my grad-student self holding forth on "critical interventions" and "problematizing").*

Now, with The Idiot, *Batuman has shifted genre (to the novel) and subject matter (to the undergraduate experience), though she still borrows from Dostoevsky.* The Idiot*'s narrator, Selin, is the daughter of Turkish immigrants and a freshman at Harvard. She is inquisitive, callow, besotted with linguistics and reading and with an older Hungarian mathematics student named Ivan. The novel is roughly organized into two parts. First, Selin struggles to adjust to life as a college student in Cambridge. Then, during the summer after her first year, she travels to Hungary and teaches English. Throughout, Batuman's style is whip smart and bracingly deadpan, a controlled anarchy that is lean and loose, learned and screwball.*

Batuman is a staff writer for the New Yorker. *We recently talked by email.*

Anthony Domestico: In the introduction to *The Possessed*, you dispense with the notion that to study literature critically and to read literature lovingly are antithetical enterprises: "Was love really such a tenuous thing? Wasn't the point of love that it made you want to learn more, to immerse yourself, to become possessed?" What role has love played in your own reading life? How has that love shifted over the years—from childhood to college to grad school and beyond?

Anthony Domestico *is an assistant professor of literature at Purchase College, SUNY and a frequent contributor to* Commonweal.

Elif Batuman: I've been thinking about the role of love a lot lately, especially when I go to readings and listen to other writers read from their work. It somehow only recently occurred to me that every single novelist (or literary critic), no matter how middle-aged and downtrodden, is someone who passionately loved reading as a child. And if you look for it, you can see that child still in there somewhere, closer to the surface in some people than in others. Basically, every adult novelist is doing a job that a little kid told them to do. There's something really moving about this.

As a grad student and later as a writer, I have found it hard to sustain the pure, almost erotic love of reading I had as a kid—you know, where you climb in bed and read for hours and hours, and the book itself is this charged magical object. Later, when writing becomes your job, it's tied up with ego and all kinds of worry, and it's not always easy to get to that state of pure escape. But it does still happen for me sometimes, and then it's more precious to me than ever. I try really hard to cultivate it, to make time for it, because it would be really sad to still be a writer without remembering why, on some visceral, emotional level. In a lot of ways, being a writer is a lousy job—grueling, emotionally taxing, terrible hours, no health care—so if it wasn't about love, what would be the point?

AD: In *The Possessed* you describe the relationship between "the two halves of [Augustine's] *Confessions*"—the first half filled with sinful pears and sensual pursuits, the second with "philosophical musings on the nature of memory and time" and a disavowal of "narrative itself"—as "a balance—a kind of credit and debit." How would you describe the relationship between your first book, a work of memoir/criticism, and your second, a work of fiction? The two books share themes, characters, settings, even plot points. What did writing about these things in fictional form enable you to do that you couldn't do in the earlier book?

EB: Ha, that's a good one! You know, I actually wanted to write *The Possessed* as a novel—I first pitched it around 2007 as a fictional retelling of Dostoevsky's *Demons* set in a Stanford-like Russian lit program. Nobody thought that was a good idea. It was suggested to me finally that I do it

as nonfiction. The logic was that nobody would want to read a whole novel about depressed Russian literature grad students—whereas, with a nonfiction book, people might read it to learn about Russian novels. Personally, I didn't really see why people couldn't learn just as much from a novel about Russian literature as from a nonfiction book about Russian literature.

With *The Idiot*, I had a little more freedom, and I felt really strongly that I wanted to do it as a novel, not a memoir, even though the basic experiences are similar to my own. So to keep the double-entry metaphor, *The Possessed* earned me the credit to finally write about my experiences in the form of a novel.

I've been thinking a lot about why it was so important to me to do *The Idiot* as a novel, and not a memoir. One reason is the great love of novels that I keep droning on about. I've always loved reading novels. I've wanted to write novels since I was little. (I started my first novel when I was seven.) I don't have the same connection to memoir or nonfiction or essays. Writing nonfiction makes me feel a little bit as if I'm producing a product I don't consume—it's a really alienating feeling. The novel tradition is the closest thing I have to a religion, and being a part of that tradition means a lot to me. I don't really see—I never have seen—why I should have to forfeit that feeling, or hope, of belonging, just because the stories I want to tell are close to my own experience.

Elif Batuman

On a more practical level, writing fiction lets you be a little more emotional and unguarded, a little freer. Selin is way more emotional and unguarded than the narrator of *The Possessed*. She's similar to how I was at age eighteen, but she isn't totally the same, and I didn't feel any kind of pressure to make her a "fair representation" of myself.

Writing fictional characters is also really different from writing about real people. In nonfiction, you can only say so much about the people you interact with. After all, they're actual people, their version of their story trumps yours. In a novel, you can build a character, using certain parts or impressions of someone you know, and guessing or inventing others, without having to worry that your guesses or memories or inventions are wrong. You can let yourself inhabit other people's subjectivities a little more. To me that makes a richer, more whole story, a story you can get lost in, in a way that I find it harder to get lost and immersed in nonfiction, which is always just a part of a whole (the whole of reality).

AD: You end your acknowledgements in *The Idiot* with these beautiful words: "Fyodor Mikhailovich: when it comes to titles, and not just titles, what writer could ever touch the hem of your lofty garments?" Why has Dostoevsky been so important to you, both as a novelist and a critic?

EB: Another interviewer recently asked whether my intention

BEOWULF SHEEHAN

was to retell Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* in some way. My first response was "No"—but when I thought about it, I realized that that, too, was a book about a young and clueless person who thinks a lot about the right way to live, falls terribly in love, and does a lot of running around in an inefficient way.

In short, Dostoevsky has been a strong, sometimes imperfectly recognized inspiration to me, even though (because?) there is a lot that I find alienating in his worldview. I think there's something about Dostoevsky that can pull you toward him and push him away at the same time. (Nabokov, who always disparaged Dostoevsky in his criticism, was so clearly influenced by Dostoevsky in his work.) That's just the kind of "perverse" feeling that Dostoevsky himself describes all the time.

AD: I suspect that critics will focus on *The Idiot*'s comedy, or on its clear delight in literature and linguistics, or on Selin's intelligent, naïve, and compelling sensibility. These are all great, but I was most impressed by the sentence-by-sentence writing—the control of tone, syntax, and rhythm. Who are some of the stylists you most admire?

EB: Thank you! From the Russians, I would say Tolstoy (especially his use of repetition); Dostoevsky and Gogol ("somehow," "some kind of," "even"); and Isaac Babel (the killer last sentences, and also the way he kind of zooms between very concrete and cosmic language in a short space). For comic pacing I admire Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, and P. G. Wodehouse. Of contemporary writers, I admire Haruki Murakami for his tone—at once hardboiled, bemused, and good-natured, with surprising metaphors. (I also really admire Raymond Chandler, who is important for Murakami.) And, not that it's a contest, but I can't think of a living stylist I admire more than Renata Adler—so fluid, witty, precise, and conversational at the same time, with something of the bemusedness and detachment that I like in Murakami.

AD: Are there other campus novels that you had in mind while writing this—other books that got across something crucial about being young, interested, and ignorant that you wanted to get across yourself?

EB: I thought about *Norwegian Wood* by Haruki Murakami, *Prep* by Curtis Sittenfeld, and also *Dryland*, a wonderful novel about high school by Sara Jaffe. (*Prep* is also about high school, but it's boarding school so it feels like a campus novel.) Probably *Catcher in the Rye* and *This Side of Paradise* were hovering around there, too. Other campus novels I have enjoyed include *My Education* by Susan Choi, *On Beauty* by Zadie Smith, *The Secret History* by Donna Tartt, and *The Marriage Plot* by Jeffrey Eugenides.

AD: How much does Selin's feeling of alienation stem from her status as a child of immigrants? What angle of vision on the world does this particular position provide her? What angle of vision on the world does it provide you?

One of the most powerful ideas of Stoicism is that you can't pick or choose in the world what you want to happen and what you don't want to happen, and that actually if you did get to choose, the version you would come up with would be unsociable, lame, and basically less beautiful than the truth.

EB: I think it's true that, as is often observed, the writer is always an outsider. A writer is someone who is telling stories about what's going on, which is something you can't do if you're totally caught up in the moment. Obviously there are many, many ways of being an outsider, but having immigrant parents is one of them. For one thing, it makes you a translator: there are all kinds of things that American parents know about life in America (and about being a kid in America), that non-American parents don't know, and in many cases it falls on the kid to tell them, and also to field questions from Americans about their parents' native country. Like many immigrant children, I had the experience of visiting my grandparents every summer, going to a different country, speaking a different language, seeing different stuff in the supermarket, experiencing a whole different way of doing things. I think that, in this way, I realized the provisionality and contingency of human systems earlier than I might have otherwise. That, too, was something I had to narrate to myself, to make sense of it—to have one story where everything made sense. If a story like that was going to exist for me, I was going to have to tell it myself; it wasn't going to come ready-made.

AD: At one point, Selin says, "My policy at the time was that, when confronted by two courses of action, one should always choose the less conservative and more generous. I thought this was tantamount to a moral obligation for anyone who had advantages at all, and especially for anyone who wanted to be a writer." Not to conflate creator with creation, but to what extent do you buy this logic—that to be a writer

obligates you to generously open yourself up to the less conservative course of action, the seemingly unreasonable or dangerous situation or decision?

EB: I definitely wouldn't recommend this "policy" to a young person now, no. But it's what I believed when I was Selin's age. I associate it a little bit with being the child of immigrants. I was so conscious of all the opportunities I had that my cousins didn't, of all the sacrifices my parents made. The thought of wasting those opportunities seemed like the worst shame, the worst indignity. I also had a hatred of caution and what I thought of as "bourgeois values" or "bourgeois morality," plus a terror of hypocrisy and of not living according to my beliefs.

Now that I'm almost forty, I look back at some of the decisions I made when I was younger—decisions that I thought of as courageous, or generous, or otherwise befitting a writer; befitting someone who had taken it as her life's goal to understand the human condition—and I wish I could go back in time and be like, "Hey, you don't actually have to do that—you're allowed to look out for yourself a little bit."

AD: Late in the novel, Selin, heartbroken, is told by her mother to "go see some beautiful things." After all, her mother continues, "Beauty encouraged the production of endorphins, which helped make you feel better and prevented inflammation." This brought to mind the famous claim attributed to Myshkin in *The Idiot*: "Beauty will save the world." What's your stance on the saving power of beauty? More generally, how would you define beauty? Where do you find it in art? In the world? (Small questions, I know!)

EB: Lately I've gotten a lot of comfort from the philosophy of the Roman Stoics. For me, one of the most powerful ideas of Stoicism is that you can't pick or choose in the world what you want to happen and what you don't want to happen, and that actually if you did get to choose, the version you would come up with would be unsociable, lame, and basically less beautiful than the truth.

There's an amazing line in Marcus Aurelius: "The healthy eye ought to see all visible things and not to say, I wish for green things; for this is the condition of a diseased eye." Maybe green is your favorite color—but if you saw everything as green, that wouldn't be a blessing, it would be an eye disease. By the same token, if there was no heartbreak, and everything happened exactly as you want—it would be a less beautiful and meaningful story than the actual story, where you're a part of a huge complicated mysterious whole.

In this sense, there is salvation—happiness and virtue—in beauty. I would define beauty in this context as a kind of richness, complexity, mystery, diversity, otherness, and unexpectedness—something that comes from the outside. It's out there in the world, yeah, but you have to see it, and that's what art is: it's the record of people who see beauty in the world, and want to isolate it, and preserve it, and share it. ■

Two Poems by Norita Dittberner-Jax

EVENSONG

Walking the river trail,
I see one boat, one fisherman
on the river, his back
against low sun.
I think of the Dakota,
the early ones in their river
solitude, knowing the currents
and when to head to shore.
Darkness narrows the river's
silver path. I'm heading
home myself, up the steep hill,
a little breathless. A chill
from the woods touches my arm.
how we come to evening.

MOVING THROUGH TIME, HOW WE LIVE

While the coffee brews,
I stare out the window
at the snow graying,
winter's end.

A flight of sparrows crosses
the yard and I wonder
how they all agree.

They live here, thanks
to the lilac bushes and the neighbor's
fir tree, good for hiding
from the hawk.

Smoke billows from a chimney
chugging into polar air
above a mountain peak of roof.
Smoke and sparrows on the lam.

Norita Dittberner-Jax has published four collections of poetry, most recently, Stopping For Breath *from Nodin Press.* Crossing The Water, *her fifth collection, will be published by Nodin in June, 2017. Norita has won numerous awards and fellowships, among them several nominations for the Pushcart Prize. One of the poetry editors for Red Bird Chapbooks, Norita lives with her husband in Lilydale, Minnesota on the banks of the Mississippi River.*

Rand Richards Cooper

Only Connect

'WILSON' & 'PERSONAL SHOPPER'

The plight of protagonists missing absconded family members, and seeking to reestablish contact with them, could hardly be more differently explored than in two current films.

Based on a graphic novel by Daniel Clowes, *Wilson* stars Woody Harrelson as a gleefully loudmouthed misanthrope who tracks down his estranged wife Pippi (Laura Dern), then sets off with her on the trail of their daughter, whom Pippi gave up for adoption seventeen years ago. The reunion offers Wilson a belated shot at redemption, which then blows up in ways that threaten to knock him still deeper into bitterness.

A giant among graphic novelists, Daniel Clowes was the force behind 2000's *Ghost World*, which took a familiar genre, the coming-of-age movie, and polished it to a fine gleam of sardonic wit. That film followed a pair of teenaged girls drifting through high school, trading deadpan quips and sarcastic putdowns of classmates. Director Terry Zwigoff pegged the alienated adolescent's cult of irony, revealing behind it a Holden Caulfield–like fear of the messy compromises of adult life. *Ghost World*'s take on the adolescent preoccupation with authenticity found its object in Steve Buscemi's Seymour, a fortyish nerd, obsessed with record collecting, whom the girls worship, conferring heroic outsiderdom on a loner who in reality mourns the fact that "I can't relate to 99 percent of humanity."

Harrelson's *Wilson* exhibits many of the same loser/loner traits. He goes through life assailing strangers with riffs on the fallen state of humanity, firing off rude one-liners meant to skewer what he sees as the hypocrisy and shallowness of conventionality (when a passerby on the sidewalk stops to coo over his dog, he mocks her, addressing her in the same cloying voice). Wilson's excesses—together with his wife's cackling, acerbic responses—create an enjoyably snarky-funny repartee; but it gets lost in a parade of sentimental tropes as director Craig Johnson struggles to make Clowes's edgy scenarios more audience-friendly.

Unfortunately, he succeeds; and the result is an interesting train wreck of a movie. Johnson is trying to fashion a heartfelt family comedy from material that glitters darkly with droll and anarchic elements. Harrelson labors valiantly, but he's got manacles on; hewing to a conception of his character—and to a Clowes screenplay—that reflects a graphic novel's compressed emotional shorthand, he ricochets from casual snark to neurotic self-doubt to blissed-out poeticism, and finally to maudlin dopiness and self-pity. The result is a bizarre mix of Woody Allen plus Allen Ginsberg, channeled through Peter Sellers's simpleton Chauncey Gardiner in *Being There*, and injected with a bug-eyed dose of *Popeye the Sailor Man*.

In *Ghost World*, Buscemi's oddball brio buoyed the themes of Clowe's novel; as a result, that film "stayed true," as *Chicago Tribune* critic Michael Phillips remarked, "to the tone, rhythm, and sneaky pathos of the book." Not here. As Johnson channels Clowes's unruly energies into a straightforwardly crowd-pleasing product, what passed for deadpan irony in the graphic novel comes off in *Wilson*'s protagonist as borderline developmental delay, and makes both him and the movie itself seem, well, cartoonish.

Kristen Stewart in Personal Shopper

LES FILMS DU LOSANGE

Crowd-pleasing would appear to be far from what Olivier Assayas has in mind in *Personal Shopper*. Like *Wilson*, his film is a showcase for one actor's talents (in this case, Kristen Stewart, best known for playing Bella

Swan in the *Twilight* film series). But the similarity ends there.

Stewart's character, Maureen, represents yet another iteration of that gauzy romantic trope, the American in Paris—though her experiences there might be enough to put an end to this frolic once and for all. As the film's title informs us, Maureen works as an assistant to a wealthy celebrity socialite, Kyra (Nora von Waldstätten), charged with managing her extensive wardrobe. Assayas deployed a similar setup with Stewart in his last film, *Clouds of Sils Maria*, casting her as personal assistant to an aging actress (Juliette Binoche). Apparently, having to cope with the Binoche character's precarious ego was insufficient challenge for her, so this time Assayas doubles down on the misery, and then some. Maureen, it turns out, is consumed by grief over the recent death of her twin brother, who succumbed to a genetic heart defect that she herself shares. Years before, she and her brother, who was unusually attuned to the spirit world, agreed that whoever died first would send the other a signal from beyond. Thus Maureen's days are spent foraging the Rue Saint Honoré for expensive swag, and her nights hunkering down in the gloomy old house in the French countryside where her brother lived—and where she sits all night in pitch-black rooms while the house creaks, shimmery phantasms flit across the walls, and water taps suddenly gush on without warning. Wherever her brother is, it seems he's thirsty, or wants a bath.

Assayas take what initially seems like familiar material for social satire—the misadventures of a young woman hired as helpmeet to the fabulously wealthy—and give it one tug sideways after another, until it no longer resides in the zone where we thought it did. The director practiced a subtler form of this shiftiness in *Clouds of Sils Maria*, surprising us with unexpected silences and narrative reversals, scenes entered *in medias res*, and maximum stress on things left unsaid. Here, he opts for changes not merely of pace, but of genre, combining crime drama, slasher film, contemporary satire, and ghost story. Did I say before that Harrelson's Wilson presented curious admixtures of unlike elements? Well, *Personal Shopper* is *The Babadook* meets *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* meets *Rififi*.

Essentially a one-character story, the film is a feast for Stewart. She plays the same driven, unhappy, and vaguely neurotic young person she did in *Sils Maria*, but her disaffection this time is deepened by grief. As Maureen she exudes unhappy energy; her restless intensity is mesmerizing, and her dread and dismay infectious. This quality helps keep tension in a film in which a big chunk of the action consists of text messages. Stewart has an affinity for playing bitten-down agitation, as if accustomed to deep inner distress. Watching her, you may feel like reaching for the Xanax.

The plot Assayas works up in order to mine this disaffection comes across as halfhearted. Though Maureen spends her days selecting posh duds and jewelry for her celebrity boss, she herself dresses down—sneakers and sweaters, jeans, the typical millennial uniform—and her attitude toward clothes, as toward most things, seems one of casual but bitter contempt. Eventually she decides to both exercise and exorcise her contempt by committing the one trespass her employer has forbidden her: to try on any of those expensive clothes. When it finally plays out, the act seems less erotic fantasy or angry transgression than a desultory expression of Maureen's own deep uncertainty about who she is.

That uncertainty mirrors a similar quality in the film itself. *Personal Shopper* is festooned with plot curlicues, like one in which Maureen, a would-be artist, becomes fascinated by the work of a nineteenth-century Swedish artist; the ensuing mini-seminar in the artist's work is interesting, but leads nowhere and seemingly connects to nothing. Is this carelessness, or canny misdirection? There is no way everything in this film hangs together. But Assayas keeps you watching. Sometimes a film succeeds by being hard to pin down. There's a jittery hand on the controls of this movie, and it leaves us feeling a bit shaken. ■

Kate Massinger

Present in His Grace

BACH, MAHLER, AND THE DIVINE

Reggie, the countertenor, was singing to God. He was doing it in German: pucker in his vowels, crisp k's and bright a's. *Erbarme dich, mein Gott*, he sang. *Have mercy, my God.* Damp air on the "ch." A barely tapped "tt" on the backs of his bared teeth. The thousand-seat hall was dripping with chandeliers, warm with reverent bodies. Reggie was our entertainment, and our prophet.

Um meiner Zähren willen! For the sake of my tears! Reggie was singing in our college performance of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*, a three-hour masterwork for chorus, soloists, and orchestra. In this aria, he played Jesus, immediately prior to crucifixion. Kneeling among Gethsemane olive groves, Christ pleads for a way out—if it's God's will to provide one. It isn't. Jesus proceeds with the salvific plan.

Reggie sang his Jesus tragic: ferocious in fear, dappled with blood, and empowered by begging. *Schaue hier. Look here!* He worked in two registers: the dusky hoots of a mature alto, and the gemmy brilliances of a good tenor. Reggie's countertenor was flawless. He leapt the intervals lithe as a pole-vaulter. I sat on the stage behind him, an anonymous nineteen-year-old chorus member waiting for a cue.

What really got me, a singer myself, was imagining how it felt for Reggie to sing this way—how invigorated his body must be. I watched his stomach swell, imagined the heady whoosh of oxygenation. I knew what it felt like to engage the body so fully in pursuit of expression—that trippy buzz of ringing sound, caught up against your nose like a bad cold; spine stretched long between each vertebrae; legs quaking, and mind curiously blank.

Herz und Auge weint vor dir Bitterlich. Heart and eyes weep before You bitterly. Reggie sang. The audience listened. Out of our engagement came a third person, Jesus resurrected in the dark musty hall. Flickering through Reggie's music, there suddenly was Christ. His voice was sharp and clear and plaintive.

Later, we'd applaud Reggie. For now it was a time to sit and mourn. The chandeliers hung still. We watched in cultivated horror as Reggie, Jesus, begged his Father for freedom.

Bach and I share a birthday, March 21. In spite of his glower, powder, and historical remove, I've always felt close to the master composer. In high school, I spent summers with the Oregon Bach Festival's youth choir, cradling copies of his Masses and cantatas. Bach trained my fledgling soprano in breathing and tuning, straightened my slouchy back. In college, I sang more of his work—most notably, the *St. Matthew Passion* in freshman year.

The language of aesthetics and the language of faith have overlapping vocabularies. A symphony is called transcendent; a sculpture is deemed divine. God is majestic, God is beautiful, and God is great. When the spheres overlap, when Christianity begets beauty

CNS / PAUL HARING

in art or literature, and particularly in music, I feel proud. *We made that.* In thousands of years of Christian bloodlust, ignorance, and hypocrisy, we at least put paint to canvas and stroked out the Sistine Madonna. We've got Dostoevsky. Most precious to me, we number Bach among our ranks.

It's true: scholars have proven the master composer is ours, as much as you can "prove" someone's faith. Bach's personal Bible, now known to historians as the Cavlov, is filled with marginalia in his hand—phrases like *With devotional music, God is always present in his grace.* "No Sunday Christian could have made such acute observations," writes music critic Alex Ross.

Faith inspires art. Art also enlivens faith—not as a moral teacher, but as an insidious catalyst. The plaintive, counterpoint cries of "Kyrie, eleison" give suffering a tune. The horrifying, choppy "*Laß ihn kreuzigen*" chorus positions singers as angry mob members. I feel the weight of sin more acutely in these measures than I do after the most brimstone homily. The chorales can be moments of peace, a resting in God that one feels in comfortable harmonies. When dissonance returns, we long for God, and know, in our ears and muscles, what both his presence and absence feel like.

Freshman year offered an embarrassment of riches—not only Bach, but Gustav Mahler. I sang the twentieth-century composer's Second Symphony, "Resurrection," under blazing lights, nearly hidden behind a cluster of timpani. The heat and tinnitus didn't matter; the music was so good. Flurries of violins and horns, operatic soloists who careened into harmonies. Gooseflesh streaked my arms. All this joy was for Jesus, ascended and united with his Father. The triumphal bell peeling of an Easter vigil, times ten.

But was the joy for Jesus, really? Mahler, a German-Austrian-Bohemian ex-pat, was a Jew by birth. He described himself as an open but unwavering agnostic. His religious compositions illustrate the reality that for generations, artists had to create for the church if they wanted to eat. They didn't have to believe what they wrote. For most of our canonized artists, who can know if they did or not? For me, as a listener and believer, this raises the question: Does religious art lose its potency when we know its maker didn't believe? Or at least, wasn't sure?

As much as I love my Bach, I think the answer is no. To crave beauty is to be human. God, a craftsman himself, threaded this longing into us, stitched it somewhere beneath our skins. "Be fruitful and multiply," he said after days of culling water from sky, sticking scales on fish, and coating the skies with clouds. "Replenish the Earth"—make, fill, revel.

In a world without sin, all would be beautiful. In the world as it is, we only get tastes. Thus, there's that pinch in the sternum when we see something ravishing and feel a pain akin to nostalgia. As C. S. Lewis argues, we are homesick for a world where things are right. In that world, we are creators made by an artist. We are always inventing. Beauty is the freewheeling norm, without an ache and eventual end. When we long after beauty, long even in its presence, we are longing for a better world, a mysteriously intuited paradise, a glint in deep pools.

When Mahler wrote music, even now when Adele and T. Swift write music, there's a nod to an impulse shared with Bach, one of mankind's common denominators: the need to create. That very act is godly, something for Christians to take inspiration from as we seek to make peace and fashion justice. Even if the musical products—"God Made Girls" by the country star RaeLynn versus Bach's Mass in B Minor—may not be equal in the eyes of the Lord or this critic, the artistic impulse is.

The sensibility that's found in the music of doubters can be particularly helpful. This season, the New York Philharmonic is doing several concerts of Mahler. In February, I saw their rendition of Symphony No. 1. This symphony's U.S. premiere in 1909 was actually with the N.Y. Philharmonic, and was conducted by its composer. (Mahler was the Phil's music director for two seasons.) This was the last time he waved a baton over one of his own scores.

This symphony, like the Mahler that I'd encountered before, is thickly textured and deeply dramatic. It's got no text; like much of Mahler's work, it is open to interpretation. It features a raunchy peasant dance, as well as a parody of a funeral march. The whole work wanders between keys and modes; many have connected it to the diaspora. Horns squeak; violins slither. Early reception was critical. According to the program notes, Mahler went about like a "sick person or an outcast" when he heard the reviews.

And yet, there's real anticipation in the First Symphony, particularly in its final movement. Crescendos swell, then collapse back into minor keys. From my stage-left seat, I watched the violists edge forward on their chairs, then relax. We all kept thinking we'd made it to the end, but Mahler was teasing. A woman seated behind me, following along in a score of her own, flipped her pages more and more urgently. The conductor, Austrian Manfred Honeck, jumped, and pumped, and stabbed at the air. I thought of the "Resurrection," Mahler's Second Symphony, which was to follow this one. I wondered what Mahler put his hope in. The movement ended with a flourish, and we all, score-reader included, sprang to our feet.

It's moving to hear the story of Christ rendered by someone who isn't entirely assured of Him. A composer who, like Bach, puts real darkness between the bar lines, who goes so far as to twist funeral music. For this man, what would characterize a Christ? What might a resurrection sound like? In his religious music, I can hear Mahler imagining, longing. Perhaps dreaming a Jesus like Reggie's: sacrificial, divine, human in his song. ■

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John T. McGreevy

Destructive Solidarity

Age of Anger
A History of the Present
Pankaj Mishra
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $27, 416 pp.


Pankaj Mishra

Upon arriving in Colorado's Supermax prison in 1999, Timothy McVeigh met Ramzi Yousef. Held in adjacent cells, the men became acquainted in the one hour a day allotted for human contact. McVeigh, who destroyed the Murrah federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995 with a truck full of explosives, killing 168 people, apparently spoke with Yousef, architect of the World Trade Center bombing in 1993, through the fence separating each prisoner from his neighbor.

Pankaj Mishra sees the encounter between the two terrorists as the "most illuminating coincidence of our time." It conveys Mishra's central theme: that the "unprecedented political, economic, and social disorder that accompanied the rise of the industrial capitalist economy" in the nineteenth century is now "infecting much vaster regions and bigger populations."

In both eras—the nineteenth century and now—those left behind as new technologies created enormous wealth reacted with fury, forming solidarities of the alienated to combat helplessness and envy. In both eras, too, global connections between peoples accelerated. Our own Age of Anger makes sense only in light of these earlier convulsions and the ability of ordinary Americans, South Africans, and Italians to see how their more affluent compatriots live.

Originally from a small village in India, Mishra is an accomplished essayist and novelist whose recurring theme is the relationship of modern Asia to the West. Among Anglophone academics he is best known for an eviscerating review of Niall Ferguson's comically triumphant *Civilization: The West and the Rest* and he is a regular contributor to the *New York Review of Books* and the *London Review of Books*. He began pondering the relationship between nationalism and globalization in response to watching family members and friends express their support for the Hindu Nationalist party. He began writing this book just after Donald Trump declared his candidacy for President. He finished writing the same week that Britain voted to leave the European Union.

Published just as Donald Trump took the oath of office, *Age of Anger* is well timed to reach an audience craving explanations for this bewildering sequence of events. Mishra's first historical study, *From the Ruins of Empire*, published in 2013, traced how intellectuals from India and China absorbed and reformulated Western ideas of modernity. Many of these figures, notably Gandhi, were themselves torn between two worlds, and over time Gandhi shifted from wearing the bespoke suits suitable for a London barrister to a traditional dhoti. But Gandhi was also assassinated in 1948 by a Hindu nationalist convinced that Gandhi's conciliatory gestures toward Indian Muslims threatened the country's Hindu identity.

WINDHAM-CAMPBELL PRIZE

Age of Anger strikes many of the same notes, and includes, for example, an absorbing discussion of how Russian anarchists, emerging from a society only partially modernized, are the predecessors of today's Islamic militants. Just as anarchists wavered between denouncing the imposition of Western values and recognizing their allure, so too did Mohammed Atta, the leader of the 9/11 attacks, lurch between having drinks with friends at local bars in Hamburg and bemoaning the effects of Western urban planning on Cairo and Aleppo.

Back to McVeigh and Yousef. The two men were born five days apart in 1968 on opposite ends of the globe. The son of divorced Catholic parents living near Buffalo, McVeigh struggled to find a sense of purpose after leaving high school and abandoning college. He had few close friends and a single girlfriend. He joined the army and served during the first Gulf War. His experience of combat was alienating and he later spoke of his regret at killing unarmed Iraqi soldiers. His fascination with guns and festering hostility toward the federal government then propelled him into the shady world of white nationalist militias. He wrote letters to the editor decrying a "democracy" incapable of resolving "America's frustrations." Outside Waco, Texas, where FBI agents had launched an assault on the Branch Davidian compound, McVeigh handed out leaflets decrying governmental tyranny not long before he planned the attack in Oklahoma City.

Yousef studied electrical engineering in Wales before moving to Pakistan. He learned to make bombs in a Peshawar training camp organized by a Muslim radical—Osama bin Laden—himself infuriated by the presence of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia. In a letter sent to the *New York Times* after the 1993 Trade Center bombing and before his capture, Yousef demanded an end to both American support of Israel and an American military presence in the Middle East. After McVeigh's execution, Yousef said "I have never (known) anyone in my life who has so similar a personality to my own as his." McVeigh in one of his last interviews defended Yousef's actions as understandable in light of U.S. foreign policy.

Both McVeigh and Yousef are extremists, and neither represents either Trump supporters or Pakistani Muslims. But for Mishra a "nativist radical right" and "radical Islamism" have emerged against a common backdrop of economic decline and social fragmentation. Their meeting in Colorado from this vantage point is one revealing episode in a much longer story of globalization and then nationalist reaction, unfolding over a two-hundred-year period that began with the French and industrial revolutions. If the sages of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment conjectured a world of progress and universal reason, contemporaries such as Rousseau and other "latecomers to modernity" stressed the tribal importance of belonging and community. As capitalism in its modern form edged across the world, intellectuals in Cairo and Calcutta, not just New York and London, became local Rousseaus, hoping to gain a better grasp of social relationships in a world defined by increasing trade and rapid communications.

Much of *Age of Anger* is an explication of this seesaw relationship between systems of democracy and capitalism and the uneven experience of these systems. Mishra jumps from religious nationalisms in the nineteenth century (as in Poland) to the failed secular nationalisms of the postcolonial era (as in Egypt) to the present. After the 1960s, as the economic benefits of capitalism increasingly accrued to a global elite, the reaction against that elite manifested itself not just in the lesser developed world but in Europe and North America.

Mishra is almost incapable of writing a boring sentence, but the haphazard architecture of *Age of Anger* reflects its speedy composition and gaps in the logic of his argument. He might do more than he does with the fact that alienation does not always equate to economic impoverishment. Yousef, after all, was a trained engineer and abandoned a potentially comfortable life. He also glides over the extraordinary (if admittedly uneven) benefits of capitalist development in the late twentieth century and how these have enhanced human possibility across the globe, not just awakened feelings of envy or frustration. The evidence is most compelling in a once impoverished and now prosperous East Asia, but not only there. Timothy Garton Ash in

a recent mordant essay on the fate of Europe after Brexit notes that the only thing worse than the market revolution in Poland after 1989, would have been not having a market revolution. In 1989 Poland's economy equaled the Ukraine's. Now it's three times as large.

Democracy in Poland, as Ash concedes, is also volatile, with a populist (and strongly Catholic) government seemingly bent on weakening an independent judiciary and free press. And democracy in Turkey, Russia, and China is more fragile still, or nonexistent.

Only one public intellectual in the world, Mishra concludes almost offhandedly, now has the capacity to offer a plausible alternative to contemporary forms of global capitalism and a reactionary nationalism. Who is it? The answer may surprise *Commonweal* readers.

It's Pope Francis. No one, in Mishra's view, has more credibility on the related challenges posed by economic inequality and climate change. *Laudato si'*, in fact, can be understood as an effort to meld environmental and economic thinking into a new vision for human development and care for our "common home."

The irony is palpable. Many—although not all—Enlightenment thinkers saw the church as the most vehement opponent of a universal human reason, and papal suspicions of democratic politics lasted well into the twentieth century. Now Mishra and the editorial page of the London *Guardian* identify Pope Francis as the world's foremost "champion of humanity." (Meanwhile, some Catholics downplay their own Pope's teaching on environmental and economic topics.) Full credit to Mishra, then, for his effort to identify and explain present challenges. Or to quote Pope Francis, the task is to improve a world where "some are mired in desperate and degrading poverty, with no way out, while others have not the faintest idea of what to do with their possessions." ■

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John Wilson

O & I

My Utmost
A Devotional Memoir

Macy Halford
Knopf, $26.95, 358 pp.

Evangelicals. Without them, no "President Trump," no Sean Spicer. There are tens of millions of them. They want to establish a theocracy, partnering with conservative Catholics. Their brand doesn't resonate with millennials. In a couple of generations, they'll be a fringe group—like the Amish, but nastier. Let's be frank: they're racists, through and through. Transracial adoption is the ultimate act of appropriation. They think we're all going to hell. They don't preach judgment any more—it's all about "love." Bad taste, bad hair, bad suits. They hate sex. They're obsessed with sex. Those sex manuals! They quote from the Bible endlessly, but somehow they miss all the verses about the poor. They're so angry! They're so soft and sentimental. They're so dumb. They hate science. They love war and long prison sentences. Their real religion is capitalism. They've mixed their faith up with politics. They're relentlessly individualistic. They move in lockstep. They can't think systematically. Islamophobic, homophobic, climate-change deniers. The last bastion of patriarchy. Their lingo! They "just want to tell you." I can see them coming a mile away, with their phony smiles. They're stealthy—you could be talking to one of them without even knowing it!

We need a big essay—the sort of thing the late Robert Silvers published, may his name be blessed, though this essay couldn't appear in the *New York Review of Books*, where the track record on all things evangelical is dismal—surveying the history of the post-evangelical memoir from, say, 1990 to the present. The subject might even occasion an interesting book.

Most of the writers in this subgenre were raised evangelical, though some were converts who later deconverted. Some of them, by the time they are writing, have left the faith altogether; others have moved away from evangelicalism while remaining Christian, as is the case in Macy Halford's *My Utmost: A Devotional Memoir*, one of the best books of this kind I've read over the past twenty-five years or so.

I should tell you at the outset that it's a very strange book, neither fish nor fowl. It's as much about Oswald Chambers (1874–1917), author of *My Utmost for His Highest*, as it is about Halford herself, and it includes in its meandering course a good deal of biographical information about Chambers and informed speculation on his inner life, but it's not a biography.

It is also—very much so!—a biography of a book in the vein of that series from Princeton University Press (Lives of Great Religious Books). Halford tells us that, since she was thirteen years old (she's now in her late thirties), she's read in *Utmost* more or less every day. But she has done more than that. She's pieced together the complex publication history of Chambers's best-known book, which was compiled by his wife, Biddy, after his death, pairing a Bible verse for each day of the year with brief reflections quarried from Chambers's writings. (An "updated" edition appeared in the early 1990s, intended to make the book more "accessible" to contemporary readers.) Halford has also sought to understand its place in the larger history of modern evangelicalism.

And yet, while she has made use of the tools of scholarship—in the Chambers archive at Wheaton College and elsewhere—her relationship with her subject is intimate in a way that scholarship typically precludes. I was reminded

Macy Halford

COURTESY OF THE AUTHOR

of Nicolson Baker's idiosyncratic book *U & I*, a defiantly personal testimony by a reader of John Updike. For Halford, Chambers is often "Oswald," and (given the sly sense of humor running through her book), it's clear that she knows how this will provoke some readers while no doubt delighting others (especially women, perhaps; she remarks several times on a sense of kinship with other women who are also "Utmost" Christians).

So her account of Chambers (and his wife and daughter) and of his book is interwoven with episodes from her own life (each chapter begins with a brief epigraph from *Utmost*—a verse or a reflection—followed by the place and date of the episode at hand; the sequence isn't chronological), mixed with reflections from the time of writing. There is no continuous autobiographical narrative, and while we learn bits and pieces about her daily life (she graduated from Barnard, has spent time in France, worked at the *New Yorker*), the emphasis—as the subtitle of the book suggests—is much more on interior experience.

When I first heard about Halford's book, I didn't think I would like it. Oswald Chambers is emphatically not my cup of tea. I don't think I have ever written about him; there are people dear to me who, like Halford, have been nourished and inspired by *Utmost* for years. The fact that I am allergic to his sayings doesn't seem particularly important; God works in mysterious ways.

But reading about Chambers from the standpoint of another reader—a gifted one, and a kindred spirit—turned out to be absorbing. At the beginning of her book, Halford notes that she was given a copy of *Utmost* by her grandmother when she was baptized, but that it wasn't until some while later, when she was thirteen, that she started reading in it. She thinks about that years later, when her Nana is suffering from dementia.

This introduces a recurring theme: the struggle to reconcile experience with our understanding of God and his promises. Near the end of the book, Halford recalls Chambers's daughter, Kathleen, talking about her mother, Biddy. In old age, "Biddy ceased to be in her right mind and began to believe herself separated from God."

> She had an "inexplicable" illness, Kathleen said. "She wasn't senile, she didn't have Alzheimer's disease, she was mentally ill. Mentally obsessed with guilt and separation from God.... It was shocking, because Biddy had always "been somebody who had never for half a second questioned what God allowed to happen, ever."

And Halford goes on to relate how Kathleen herself was able to achieve "the same sort of unblinking realism about God that her parents had embraced" and that Halford aspires to.

She has reached this point via her deep engagement with Chambers, which wouldn't have worked for me, and the way she formulates it isn't satisfactory to me either. "Where did one worship, when one's original church had lost its sheen?" she asks—lost its sheen, that is, by falling short of "unblinking realism about God" and substituting something else.

> The answer, I thought, lay in *Utmost*. Not in the text of the book, but in the way the book was intended to function, as a daily ritual performed privately but also as a part of society: it was a book to share with friends. Against grand, abstract forces—churches, religions, nations, civilizations—the Chamberses embraced the intimate, the personal, and the communal.

What? The church is an "abstract force," in contrast to "the communal"? And how much longer must we listen to cries against "institutionalized religion"? Come, Lord Jesus.

But in the meantime, all quibbles aside, Macy Halford has written a wonderful book, and I hope she will soon write another one, as delightfully quirky as this one. ■

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Leslie Tentler

Here from the Beginning

Continental Ambitions

Roman Catholics in North America, the Colonial Experience

Kevin Starr

Ignatius Press, $34.95, 675 pp.

Americans do not generally think of themselves in historical terms. This is perhaps especially true of Catholic Americans, given that the pieties of the imperfectly received national narrative center on Protestant heroes. What Catholic figure can rival the principal Founding Fathers in conservative esteem, or the likes of Martin Luther King Jr. and Susan B. Anthony for progressives? Innocence of history confers certain advantages on a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional society; imported tribal feuds fade in the space of a generation, as any historian of immigration can tell you, and even the religiously orthodox embrace ecumenism in practice if not in theory. But innocence of history also impoverishes, depriving individuals of an arguably necessary sense of rootedness, meaning, and purpose. Thus the late Kevin Starr, at the outset of his wide-ranging and vividly detailed narrative: "As they seek renewal, American Catholics need to regain their sense of being a historical people."

Starr intended *Continental Ambitions* to be the first in a multi-volume history of American Catholicism, one aimed at a literate popular audience as well as a scholarly one. Like nearly every historian of American Catholicism in recent decades, he wanted to demonstrate the centrality of Catholics to the American historical narrative—to show that the Catholic experience was "part of the warp and woof, the very fabric and meaning, of American life." The earliest centuries of European presence on the North American continent provide an especially congenial setting for his purposes, since virtually all the European actors were at least nominally Catholic. Starr opens with the Vikings, visitors in the eleventh century to what are now the Canadian Maritime provinces. Leif Ericsson, who led the first of these expeditions, was apparently a recent convert to what Starr calls "Catholic Christianity," though what passed for Catholicism in Ericsson's native Greenland would be more or less unrecognizable today. (As in some other parts of eleventh-century Europe, Clerical celibacy was widely ignored, bishop's sons often succeeded them, plural marriage and concubinage were tolerated of necessity.) Still, by Starr's lights Ericsson was indisputably Catholic and he indisputably visited American soil long before any Protestants did—indeed, long before there were any Protestants.

The lion's share of Starr's book is given over to Spanish and French exploration and attempted settlement in what is now the United States and Canada. His vigorous style is well suited to tracing these epic feats of travel and discovery. Spaniards were the first Europeans to visit present-day Florida and its adjacent Gulf Coast, which they did as early as the 1520s; Spaniards also engaged in extensive exploration of the states now bordering Mexico, where they eventually established missions, military installations, and civilian settlements. Even before the Puritans landed at Plymouth Rock in 1620, the Spanish mission system in New Mexico was expanding rapidly—a precursor to Spanish missionary activity in present-day Texas, Arizona, and California. French Catholics founded Quebec City in 1608 and were pioneer explorers of the Great Lakes region and long stretches of the Mississippi. (French was the language of my native Detroit even at the opening of the nineteenth century.) Starr's message is clear and indisputable: Catholics got here first. Reflecting on the possibility—the surviving historical record is silent—that a Franciscan priest who accompanied a Spanish probe into present-day Kansas in 1540 may have said Mass at this remote location, Starr asserts its symbolic value for Catholic historians: such a Mass "turns into a statement about the priority of Catholicism in the unfolding history of Christianity in what later became Canada and the United States."

Asserting Catholic priority, however, is not—at least in Starr's hands—the same thing as writing pious history. Pious Catholics might in fact be troubled by aspects of Starr's narrative. He is frank and sometimes graphic when it comes to Catholic brutality toward the

MARY SIMLAZ

The Mission Church at San Xavier del Bac on the Tohono O'odham San Xavier Indian Reservation outside Tuscon, Arizona

indigenous people of the Americas and frank as well about the all-too-frequent moral failings of Catholic missionaries, who often blessed military mayhem by their silence and were themselves advocates of physical punishment for erring neophytes in their missions. He takes the Franciscans to task for what might be called their ill-considered holy impatience: the principal order engaging in missionary activity in North America's Spanish colonies, the Franciscans regarded indigenous religions as literally diabolical and were horrified by polygamy and tolerance of homosexuality, both frequent features of Indian societies. Their insistence on rapid eradication of Indian culture and religion resulted, as Starr sees it, in at best a superficial conformity to Catholicism among Indian converts, often coupled with the secret practice of prohibited rituals. Starr prefers the Jesuits, disposed by their training to seek elements of "natural religion" in Indian cosmologies and religious practice and genuinely curious about Indian cultures as the products of brutally harsh environments. But even the Jesuits' relative sophistication did not make for enduring mission success. The North American Indian missions, as Starr tells it, must for all practical purposes be considered failures.

Starr closes his narrative with colonial Maryland and Pennsylvania, the only British colonies with any significant Catholic population. Here, as elsewhere, he links North American developments to Great Power rivalries in Europe. *Continental Ambitions*, as the title suggests, is more a political history than a history of religious sensibilities. Starr seems especially at home in this section of the book, perhaps preferring the austerity of English Catholicism to the baroque flavors of Spain and France or simply grateful for the chance to link his story to indelibly American values and events. The longest and most affectionate of the many splendid mini-biographies featured in the book appears in this section. The subject is Charles Carroll of Carrollton, a Jesuit-educated member of Maryland's most prominent Catholic family, not himself terribly devout, who was the only Catholic to sign the Declaration of Independence. Carroll had decidedly unorthodox literary tastes for a Catholic, being especially fond of Montesquieu and Voltaire, both of whose works had been placed on the Index of Forbidden Books. "As an American, Charley Carroll had to learn to think for himself if he was ever to be able to think for his country."

For all the breadth of his narrative, Starr pays surprisingly little attention to life in the Indian missions, particularly those in California, presumably on the assumption that European settlers were the true founders of the Catholic Church in the United States. But the Indian missions were hardly unimportant. Those missions and their purported successes—which were real, if often short-lived—fueled missionary fervor in Europe and largely explain the willingness of so many priests and religious

to come to the New World. Even those men and women who spent their American careers ministering to their fellow Europeans often embarked on those careers as would-be Indian missionaries. Nearly every missionary, moreover, was changed by his contact with the wholly alien cultures of the New World, some of them profoundly. How to translate the Christian message into tongues lacking words that seemed capable of conveying fundamental Christian concepts? What concessions could be made to indigenous cultures when it came to iconography, spiritual practice, and standards of personal conduct? Even the most obdurate Franciscan could not escape such dilemmas or the need to live with imperfect solutions.

The Indian missions also enjoyed a kind of enduring success in the New World evolution of "mixed peoples"—a development Starr rightly celebrates and quite possibly the greatest gift Catholicism has bequeathed to the Americas. European women were in such short supply in the New World colonies of France and Spain that marriage across racial lines was essential to colonial success and actively encouraged by the church. Thus the "Spaniards" who colonized California were descended not just from Spanish progenitors but indigenous Americans and sometimes Africans, as well. For indigenous women, however, conversion to Catholicism was a necessary precursor to marrying a man of even partial European origin, which might help to explain—though only in part—why French and Spanish missionaries nearly always converted more women than men. Even after the Indian missions were abandoned, then—and this happened just about everywhere—they lived on in the often flourishing parishes that came to characterize the territory once colonized by Spain and France, and in the "mixed peoples" who more and more characterized the experiment we call the United States. ■

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Tom Deignan

Echoes of a Lost Faith

There Your Heart Lies

Mary Gordon
Pantheon, $25.95, 336 pp.

History, art, politics, even botany: Mary Gordon's fiction infuses all of these things—and so much more—with the intensity of religious experience.

This can be taken to ghastly extremes, as in Gordon's powerful 2005 novel *Pearl*. In that story, the daughter of a thoroughly assimilated, lapsed Catholic goes to Ireland to study linguistics. In the wake of Ireland's Good Friday peace agreements of 1998, the once-apolitical title character ends up going on a hunger strike and chaining herself to a flagpole.

In Gordon's latest novel, the cleverly titled *There Your Heart Lies*, she portrays another act of self-mutilation—this time by a priest. As in *Pearl*, it is a horrific act, motivated not by a radical dedication to a single cause but by simmering conflicts spanning generations, even continents.

If *Pearl*, broadly speaking, looked at the legacy of the 1960s, *There Your Heart Lies* stretches back to explore the long shadow cast by the 1930s. Marian Taylor, as with many Gordon protagonists, is born into a very rich, very conservative Catholic family: "the Newport and Park Avenue Taylors…a family of nine." Like Pearl's mother, Marian revolts. Following a tragedy, which was exacerbated by the family's religious beliefs, Marian does pretty much the worst thing a woman of her background and station could do. She marries a Jewish Communist.

There Your Heart Lies, is first and foremost, a vivid reminder of the tumult unleashed by the Spanish Civil War. (In fact, Gordon's novel is a colorful companion to read alongside *Spain in Our Hearts*, Adam Hochschild's excellent 2016 history.) Marian travels to Spain with her new husband to volunteer in the fight against Franco and the fascists.

Mary Gordon

A soap opera's worth of romance and tragedy ensue, leaving Marian to live for years under the roof of a tyrannical Franco sympathizer.

The church is on the receiving end of some harsh words in *There Your Heart Lies*, another common element in Gordon's fiction. Marian declares that she "hasn't the slightest shred of anything but rage-filled aversion for the institutional church." She later observes, with some truth, that "there was a particular kind of Catholicism that was uniquely American. They combined the worst prejudices of the worst Americans with the worst of being Catholic."

You can call these harsh truths, or overstated half-truths, or self-loathing, or even anti-Catholicism. But whatever label finally fits best, the point is that the sheer passion and rage behind Marian's rejection of the church illustrates the degree to which her life—and the lives of her generation—were shaped by Catholicism. "So often," Gordon writes, "the echoes from a lost faith, a faith willfully and violently discarded, bob up, float up, unbidden, unwelcome, the flotsam and jetsam of a vanished way of life."

Gordon also skillfully illuminates one generation's influence on the next. *There Your Heart Lies* moves back and forth from Franco's Spain to Avondale, Rhode Island, in 2009. Marian is now in her nineties, living with her granddaughter, Amelia, an affable but aimless young woman who deeply admires Marian.

Following a health scare, when Amelia begins asking questions about her grandmother's past, the gap between the two initially frustrates Marian. "How can she possibly recreate a world so entirely alien to everything Amelia knows," Marian asks, "a way of being in the world, a system based not only on the belief that what was at stake was life and death, but eternal life, eternal damnation?"

These intergenerational conversations, which could easily have come off as sentimental, instead help us understand not only Amelia's intense curiosity, but her sudden decision to take her own trip to Spain, in search of her own answers.

Even within the Catholic American literary tradition, there is a unique seriousness to Gordon's characters and their struggles with faith and related matters of consequence. They are learned, articulate, and often strident. They are passionate about so many of the big questions in life, which (for some readers) might come off as "pretentious, even boorish," as one character worries in Gordon's 2011 novel, *The Love of My Youth*.

This is why it's important to note that Marian, so bold at times, can also be as vulnerable as the reserved, adrift Amelia. She's not all fierce argument and religious struggle.

This brings us, perhaps unexpectedly, back to botany. It seems no accident that the self-mutilating priest, as well as Marian and Amelia, all work closely with plants. This even though Amelia, at one point, admits that "she doesn't like working with plants.... What she can't bear is the uncertainty, not knowing whether what you have planted will prosper or perish."

In the end, this is also the challenge Marian—and really, all of us—face.

Like so many of Gordon's lapsed Catholics, Marian has "violently discarded" a faith that, imperfect as it may be, offered answers. So the big questions remain. Even at her most youthfully idealistic, in Spain, Marian thinks to herself at one point: "You must understand, I have no idea who I am."

It is a confession, though not a sacramental one. This makes it no less an act of faith. *There Your Heart Lies* concludes with an even more poignant moment of affirmation between Amelia and Marian. It is quiet and sad, but also strangely joyful, a fitting end to Mary Gordon's latest challenging, heartfelt novel about the questions we can't avoid, whether we are prospering or perishing. ■

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James J. Sheehan

Destined to Lead?

Earning the Rockies

How Geography Shapes America's Role in the World

Robert D. Kaplan

Random House, $27, 224 pp.

Since ancient times, storytellers have used journeys—quests, pilgrimages, expeditions—as a way of ordering experience. And while there is nothing uniquely American about these travel narratives, the genre has a special appeal to a nation founded by voyagers from across the sea and shaped by the westward movement of explorers, adventurers, and settlers. After all, the greatest American novel is about a trip down the Mississippi, while the best book ever written about America is based on a young Frenchman's travels in the 1830s.

Journeys have always been an important part of Robert Kaplan's life and work. Most of his seventeen books have been shaped by his travels, especially in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, but also in Asia and the United States. *Earning the Rockies* is his most personal and didactic book. Like many travel books, *Earning the Rockies* describes three different journeys. First, there is the author's month-long drive in the spring of 2015 from his home in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, to San Diego, California, which provides the narrative structure for the book's first four chapters. Second, there is his journey back in time, to the past of the places he visits and to his own boyhood travels with his family, which gives the book its understated but pervasive elegiac tone. And finally, there is Kaplan's interior journey that inspires his reflections on a variety of subjects, most but not all of them related to the landscape through which he moves.

Kaplan seems to have traveled alone: there is no Jim to his Huck Finn, no Beaumont to his Tocqueville. Instead,

John Gast, American Progress, *1872*

his most important traveling companions are other authors, especially three whose work he uses to illuminate both his own journey and the lessons it suggests. First and most important is Bernard DeVoto's trilogy, *The Year of Decision: 1846* (1942), *Across the Wide Missouri* (1947), and *The Course of Empire* (1952). Second is Walter Prescott Webb's magisterial study, *The Great Plains* (1931). And finally, there are Wallace Stegner's two classics, *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West* (1954) and *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (1964). Kaplan quotes at length from these books, deftly deploying their insights to explain his own experiences.

Unlike many travel narratives, Kaplan's itinerary is not punctuated by memorable encounters with people along the way. Kaplan's goal is reflection, not observation; he seeks silence, not conversation. He does not engage with the natives. This is a journey of recovery rather than discovery, a journey in which the author seeks to reestablish his connections to the landscape, to revisit his favorite books, to refresh his commitment to understanding his nation's place in the world. The distinctly American landscape through which Kaplan moves retains its natural grandeur, the vastness of its plains and deserts, richness of its soil, the majestic scale of its great mountains. But there is also the inescapable intrusion of what he calls "the nightmare of uniformity" expressed again and again in the motels and rest stops that line every highway. Between the roadway and the scenery is all too often a verge of weeds and litter that suggests a society unable or unwilling to protect its natural splendor.

As he traveled westward in the spring of 2015, Kaplan clearly saw the contours of the two Americas that would, a few months later, shape the presidential campaign. On the two coasts as well as in islands of economic vitality scattered in between, he found those who benefited from a globally connected system, prosperous, cosmopolitan communities that were linked to one another and to the wider world by a dense network of communications without parallel in human history. Elsewhere, however, Kaplan encountered Americans for whom globalization is not a promise but a threat, economically, culturally, and morally. These people, he writes, "feel their way of life is being endangered and fear being economically left behind in this new world of slim people on low-carb diets with stylish clothes: a world where both skin tone and sexual orientation are not singular but multiple, and celebrated for that." In places like Wheeling, West Virginia, with its boarded up shops and declining industries, Kaplan observed those wellsprings of anger and anxiety that Donald Trump would tap with such success. Like J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy* and Arlie Hochschild's *Strangers in Their Own Land*, *Earning the Rockies* is, among other things, an introduction to Trump's America.

On page 129, Kaplan reaches his final destination, the Naval Base in San

Diego. Here he pauses to contemplate the awesome power on display: "miles of more than fifty gray-hulled steel behemoths of war, each surface ship and submarine costing billions of dollars, line up, as if in formation, in their gargantuan piers." At this point, the travel narrative falls away and a very different book appears. Parts of this final chapter rehearse Kaplan's arguments about the importance of geography that he has made more fully and convincingly in his earlier works, especially *The Revenge of Geography*, published in 2012. More important, Kaplan mounts a passionate defense of the role that American power has played in the world. "These gray-hulls defend a liberal maritime order, something that is the greatest single good any nation provides the world in the early twenty-first century, something that none of America's detractors can credibly deny or take away—no matter our periodic blunders. We cannot willingly fade way—not without a successor on the horizon that roughly approximates our own values." Even readers who sympathize with Kaplan's insistence on the value and importance of America's global commitments may find he overestimates the benign effects of American power and understates the cost it has often imposed on others.

As his book's subtitle suggests, Kaplan's travel narrative and his advocacy of America's global responsibilities are linked by his belief in the determining power of geography. Leading the world, fulfilling its obligations as the indispensable nation, patrolling the world's two great oceans, imposing order and stability—all this was made not only possible but necessary by American geography, the vast continent through which Kaplan traveled. "America was a continent of such dimensions that to lead was not a choice, but a fate."

Kaplan is, I think, no more than half right. Geography is not destiny. Nature is a realm of possibility not necessity; it presents and often limits the range of opportunities, but it does not impose the choices that people must make. There is no doubt that America's extraordinary natural advantages, which Kaplan describes in such convincing detail, provided the resources necessary to sustain America's global ambitions. But for most of the nation's history, these same advantages led some Americans to conclude that they did not need or want to accept the role that Kaplan thinks is rightfully and inevitably theirs. Secure on their vast continent, these Americans believed that they were powerful enough to live in isolation, husbanding their resources rather than expending them on a recalcitrant, often ungrateful world. America is not, as Kaplan argues, "fated to lead." America is fated to debate whether global leadership is necessary, desirable, or even possible. Since 1945, during the period in which both Kaplan and this reviewer came of age, the advocates of global leadership have dominated this debate. Now, as we stumble through the first days of the Trump presidency, there is reason to believe that the great debate about the nation's role in the world is entering a new stage. It is much too soon to predict the outcome, but I am less confident than Robert Kaplan seems to be that geography ensures that the globalists will prevail. ■

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Real & Unimaginable

Jerry Ryan

Many years ago I worked for several months as a gravedigger in the Catholic cemetery of Leeds, England. The grounds crew consisted of a man named Denis, his three sons, and myself. Denis resented me. I wasn't his son. I wasn't even from Yorkshire. For all he knew, I could be a CIA agent out to get him. The superintendent of the cemetery was, believe it or not, a guy by the name of Ted Graves. He was separated from his wife and lived in a little house in the middle of the cemetery with his teenaged daughter. Mr. Graves was a man of prayer who tried to live the Gospel and who dabbled in philosophy. He was also totally impractical and absent-minded. On several occasions when we'd be sitting around or tinkering with something, a procession would suddenly show up at the gate. Mr. Graves had forgotten another burial. Denis was a master at coping with situations like this. He'd lead the procession in circles around the cemetery for about half an hour while the rest of us would frantically dig. There was a way of hanging the artificial grass carpet over the sides of the grave to make the hole look deeper than it actually was. During my stint we pulled this off more than once and got away with it.

In the family plots in England at that time, you didn't pour concrete over a buried casket. You just threw dirt on it. So when a grave was reopened to greet another family member, you dug until you reached the first casket—and there was an anxious moment when you would find out whether or not it supported your weight. Some parts of the cemetery were very humid and hilly. Which meant that the coffins in those sectors tended to rot. The worst possible scenario was a "re-opener" on a slope in the humid section. Perfect joy is standing in the rain in a ten-foot hole, your foot having gone through the rotten casket you're standing on, and watching the caskets in the next grave uphill slowly sliding through the mud above your head.

Denis once summed up the fruits of his experience quite succinctly: "No way these piles of shit are coming back up." On the face of things, such as we saw them, this was a perfectly obvious conclusion.

A while back I read in a survey of religious beliefs that only a minority of Christians believed in a physical resurrection, be it Christ's or ours. This is nothing new. The Athenians laughed at St. Paul when he broached the subject (see Acts 17:16–34). His Corinthian converts had trouble accepting the Resurrection in spite of Paul's personal testimony of his encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and the report of other witnesses who were still alive. In our own enlightened age, this core belief of Christianity appears irreconcilable with both rationality and experience.

"How are the dead to be raised up? What kind of body will they have?" (I Corinthians 15:35). St. Paul's reaction to these legitimate questions isn't very diplomatic. "What a stupid question" is the essence of his reply. He goes on to explain to us dummies that the corruptible body is the seed of an incorruptible body, the natural body the seed of a spiritual body. As if that should be obvious. It might have been to Paul, who experienced the third heaven, but for those of us who have not received such lights, the idea of a "spiritual body" is a very nebulous and enigmatic concept.

How, then, should we envisage resurrection? Scripture and tradition affirm the physical resurrection of Jesus as the model and prototype of ours. I don't think that there is any getting around the fact that, notwithstanding all our postmodern deconstructionism, this is a core belief of Christianity. Our points of reference should be the post-paschal accounts of the risen Jesus and his preliminary glorification on Mount Tabor.

In the gospel accounts of the manifestations of the risen Christ, there are consistencies and inconsistencies. He is not immediately recognized in certain of these narratives—on the road to Emmaus, on the shore of Lake Tiberias, in the garden of the tomb. He invites Thomas to feel his wounds, yet forbids Mary Magdalene to touch him. Many of the meetings between the Resurrection and the Ascension include a shared meal. If the angelic witnesses of the Resurrection appear in their glory and inspire fear, the risen Jesus does not. He exudes a sense of peace, fulfillment, and total domination, yet he is discreet and fraternal. He bears the marks of his Passion. He passes through closed doors.

It is the same Jesus, the King of the Jews who hung on the cross. Yet he is also somehow different. Something has changed. He is still in this world but no longer subject to its laws. There is also something incomplete about him during the forty pascal days. He has not yet returned to his Father. He has not yet manifested the fullness of his victory over death, which will be revealed only "when he comes again in glory," and this will be accompanied by the resurrection of all and the glorification of the Mystical Body of Christ. The evangelists' descriptions of the resurrected Christ give us a glimpse at a new dimension of existence, but they also give the impression that much more remains concealed than has been revealed.

So should we just let it go at that, and stop asking what Paul called stupid questions? I don't think so. The appar-

Sir Stanley Spencer, The Resurrection, Cookham, *1924–7*

ent contradiction between the divine promise and what we know about the body needs to be addressed.

Much can be learned, I believe, from the epiphany on Mount Tabor. Jesus is with Moses and Elias in the splendor of his glorified humanity, and they converse about his approaching passion and death. This is not the resurrected Christ of the forty days whose glory still isn't manifested because he has not yet returned to the Father. This is Jesus in his triumphal resplendence. Here time touches eternity. They who had experienced the divine glory on Sinai (Moses) and Horeb (Elias), are both visibly present on the holy mountain along with Jesus and are recognized by Peter, James, and John. Their physical presence is so real that Peter suggests erecting tents for them. They appear in the midst of a cloud that the Fathers of the Church identified as the Holy Spirit. All this is before Christ "comes again in glory," before his ascension and resurrection, his passion and death. And yet to the chosen disciples who saw him on Mount Tabor, his visible glory that day was as much as they could bear. The Transfiguration prefigured all that the general resurrection will finally reveal.

Tabor reveals Christ as a mediator between time and eternity. The very structure of the Incarnation implies the entrance of eternity into time and time into eternity. The Incarnation refers temporal realities to a dimension beyond themselves where they acquire their full meaning. To enter into eternity is to enter into one's true identity, and the body is essential to our identity—so much so that, for St. Thomas, a disembodied soul would not really be a person: the very nature of the soul is to be the form of the body.

There must be a continuity between the bodies we have now and the spiritual body to which Paul refers. The spiritual body is our present body fulfilled according to the will of Christ. Despite its infirmities and imperfections, our present body is destined to become the body of a child of God. This does not necessarily imply that all the elements of that body will be identical with the elements of the bodies we have now. But then, the bodies we have now are not identical with the bodies we had a few years ago. We know from modern biology that our physical components are constantly changing, our cells constantly being replaced, yet the soul remains the same and makes these elements ours.

Finally, it is worth noting that on Mount Tabor, it is not only the visage of Christ that becomes brighter than the sun; his clothes, too, shine forth in dazzling splendor and the mountain is covered with a luminous cloud like that of the Exodus. The glory of Christ extends to the material world around him. So, in some mysterious way, will the glory of the spiritual body radiate and transform the new heavens and the new earth. Indeed, the whole created universe will be freed from its slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God.

The Father without beginning and the consubstantial Spirit are present on Tabor, as they were in the waters of the Jordan when Jesus was baptized. In both instances, the voice of the Father confirms his love for his Son. On Tabor the Spirit manifests itself not in the form of a dove, but as a luminous and transforming cloud. It is the Spirit who fills all things with life, gently and forcefully, as the Advent antiphon sings. It is the Spirit who glorifies the humanity of Christ and, through him, all of creation.

So my friend Denis was wrong. Strange as it sounds—and impossible as it may be for us to imagine now—at the end of time it's all coming back up. Until then, all Creation groans. ■

Jerry Ryan *joined the Little Brothers of Jesus in 1959. He lived and worked with them for more than two decades in Europe and South America. He and his family now live in Massachusetts.*

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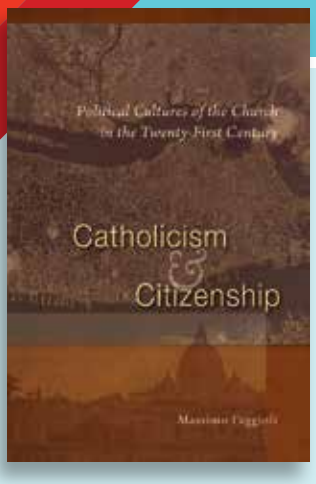

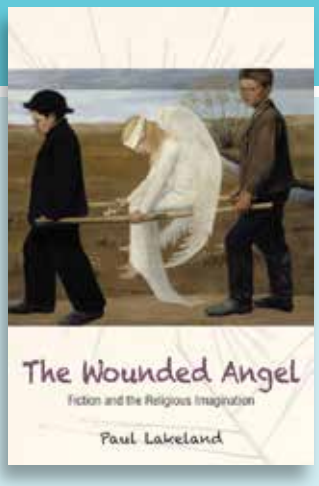

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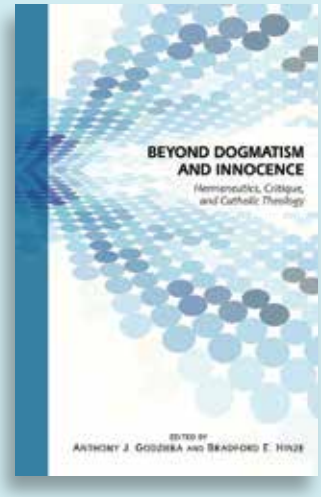

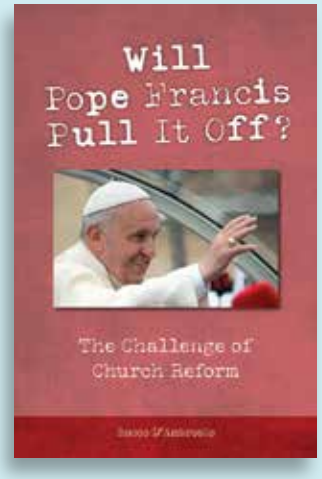

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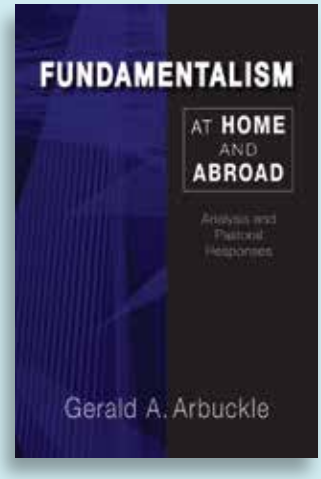

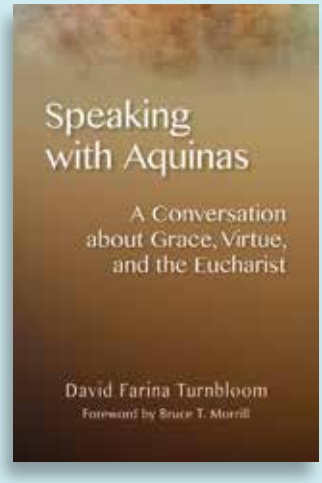

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