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arts Partner School Program

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Welcome to this Winter issue—winter, at least, in Minnesota—and to good reading for we have a rich selection of articles that will engage both your thoughts and your heart.

Our first article, by Mary Farrell Bednarowski, *Theological Creativity and the Powerful Persistence of Traditional Religious Symbols* was originally published as an essay in ARTS in the Fall of 2000. We are reprinting it here for the continued relevance of its ideas and the nice complementarity that it offers Mark Burrows’s essay. In her article, she examines the power of art, and particularly poetry, to take, reshape, offer anew in creative reformulation symbols that engage us and touch us in transcendent ways. We are affected intellectually and emotionally in such a fashion that we experience what she calls “a lump in the throat” that signals that we are on holy ground. Drawing on poetry she presses us to see that there is a “reciprocal energy between artistic and theological creativity”. And the article reveals what that energy is.

In Mark Burrows essay, certain of the same themes are dealt with that we find in Mary Bednarowski’s discussion. He, too, is concerned with the “energy” of poetry and particularly the energy it has in what otherwise is the “culture of saturation” in which we live. Drawing parallels with the power of religion to affect us, he discusses poetry as a form of art that can offer us an epiphany in which we reach that which is deep and substantive within us; that which offers us what Charles Taylor, who Burrows draws on, calls a “sense of fullness”. In his essay he explores how the effect of poetry can be to push us out, to connect us with each other and, in so doing, invite us, if not teach us, how to sense the need and capacity to love and know the ‘radiance’ that poetry has to offer.

James Malone provides us in his article an exploration of the spirituality of the artist, Egon Schiele. He invites us to see how Schiele in pulling us into his own spiritual quest, moves us into an exploration of those religious questions that are central not only to Schiele but to us all. Schiele’s journey was at times a dark quest, but it always remained an honest one that pushed through to a deeper understanding of what Tillich called “our religious depths”. He was often overshadowed in the public eye by the older artist and colleague, Gustav Klimt. A part of the excitement in this essay is the discovery that Schiele invites us to go where Klimt never took us. For one on a religious journey, the works of Schiele serve us in often shaking and engaging terms.

I hope that you enjoy this issue. It truly offers a feast of ideas and moments of discovery about who we are as both religious and spiritual creatures.

-wy
Exciting changes in the leadership of SARTS and *arts*

**Paul O. Myhre Elected President of SARTS**

I take great pleasure in reporting that the Board of Directors of the Society for the Arts in Religious and Theological Studies has elected Rev. Paul O. Myhre, Ph.D., as its new President. The term of office is three years. Myhre is the Associate Director for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion at Wabash Center in Crawfordsville, Indiana, and he has served on the board of SARTS since 2007. During his time on the board, he invited SARTS to cosponsor with the Wabash Center a special program on teaching pedagogy in theology and the arts. He has been deeply involved in further efforts to develop SARTS as a well-organized academic society, and he has helped chart new directions for *arts*, the Society’s publication.

Paul is particularly interested in the field of theology and the arts in terms of the artist’s power to engage us in theological and spiritual questions and, at a practical level, with how we might most creatively teach the arts in theological and religious studies. These interests, combined with his administrative and program development talents, bode well for the future of SARTS.

**Kim Vrudny Elected Editor of *arts***

The Board of Directors of SARTS has elected Kimberly J. Vrudny, Ph.D., to be the new Senior Editor of *arts*. She has previously been an editor of this publication and in that role helped shape its use of technology and its current focus on articles that cover subjects related to the studio, the study, the sanctuary, and the classroom.

Kim is Associate Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul and is an artist of photography. Her artwork and intellectual engagement can be beautifully seen in her article for this current issue. She has written often for *arts* over the years, and her symposium, *Consultation on Teaching: Visual Arts in the Theory or Religious Studies Classroom* (20:2, 2009) and her contribution to visual ethics and the photograph-ing of human suffering in the *Symposium on Issues in Theology and the Arts* (23:3, 2012) offer wonderful insights into her current interest in the field. She is the coeditor with Wilson Yates of the book *Arts, Theology, and the Church: New Intersections* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2005) and with Robin Jensen of the book *Visual Theology: Forming and Transforming the Community through the Arts* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2009).

In “Reflections from the Editor” in the spring 2009 issue of *arts*, I wrote a piece that reflected on the amazing work Kim had done for *arts*. It is a delight, now, to have her returning as the Senior Editor. In her hands rests the shaping of a new future for our publication. They are able and creative hands.

**Spring and Summer Issues**

We will explore in the Spring and Summer issues more on the changes taking place and more about our new leadership. And I want, particularly, to comment on what it has meant to have created and edited *arts* for the past twenty-four years.
Egon Schiele: A Spiritual Searcher amid Social Disintegration

Jim Malone

Of the two artists, Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele, many would think of Klimt’s work first, given his world-renowned reputation and such paintings as his iconic The Kiss. But Egon Schiele, who painted during the same period, deserves new and fresh attention as a painter of power and, in light of my particular interest, a searching spirituality. A happy accident of professional assignment from the period of 2006 to 2011 allowed me the opportunity to explore and enjoy the works of Schiele and particularly so in such museums as the Leopold and Upper Belvidere Museums, which have important collections of his work. I was taken by an unanticipated openness and a searching quality in his work, both of which suggested to me a spirituality that invited exploration. I was drawn back to see Schiele’s work again and again, and this essay is testimony to his power and importance as an artist.

Egon Schiele (1890-1918) lived and worked in Vienna and the surrounding area for the greater part of his short life. At the turn of the 19th/20th centuries, the city enjoyed a golden age. It was the capital and center of gravity of the soon to collapse Austro-Hungarian Empire, the great Habsburg empire of eleven nations and as many languages. But it was also home to the uncertainty, decadence, poverty, social dislocation, and political upheaval that preceded the first of the two world wars that so shaped the last century in Europe and continues to shape it now. It was a center of creativity for music, the arts, philosophy, medicine, and the sciences. There was also much contemporary activity among spiritualist groups and the work of Madame Blavatsky and the theosophical society, which Schiele was almost certainly exposed to.1,2 Many of those shaping this cultural melting pot, including Freud, Schoenberg, and Wittgenstein, signaled its immanent unraveling and decline, and none more sure-footedly than Schiele.
Egon Schiele was born in Tullin, a small town near Vienna and died tragically 28 years later of the 1918 epidemic of Spanish flu. His father was the town station master, whose early death from syphilis left an enduring mark. He was poor, experienced the appalling underbelly of the imperial city, and though non-conformist and difficult most of his life, enjoyed the esteem of key figures like Klimt. In his art, he saw things in a way that allowed space for the darkest aspects of life, and made room for the men and women of sorrows, and the “terrible guests of the night of the soul.”

Schiele’s Work

With regard to how he worked, one of those who witnessed it describes him in this fashion: “Schiele drew quickly, the pencil slid over the white surface of the paper as if guided by a spirit hand, as if it was effortless. He never rubbed anything out and if the model moved the new lines were added to the old ones with the same infallible assurance. He never added color to the drawings in front of the model, but always afterwards, from memory.” So, not surprisingly, he left an enormous body of work, especially considering that he died so young. His work draws deeply on his own visceral experience and is full of authentic emotion rendered visible with a sure touch. There was an autistic, narcissistic element to him and he was something of a poseur, almost Dali like.

Schiele was an exceptional artist, unequivocally expressionist and arguably surpassing his mentor Gustav Klimt. His work contrasted with that of Klimt whose work was characterized by good taste and offered an urbane and ennobling if somewhat decadent beauty. One need only think of the power and popularity of Klimt’s The Kiss to appreciate his satisfying artistic style. Schiele, however, had an “almost pious naiveté” accompanied by authentic searching and openness. He was full of raw emotion, reacting powerfully to “the beautiful illusion” of the 19th century. His palate was loneliness, desperation, sexuality, new life and death.

The work, Self Portrait with Spread Fingers, was one of his many naked or near-naked self-portraits. In this work we find an expressive eccentric gaze and pose. As in many of his other paintings the figure is surrounded by a white accenting aura. And in his work he explores powerful gestures and feelings.

NOTES


3. Op. Cit. In addition there are many good websites on which Schiele’s paintings and drawings can be seen; two examples: http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/search/schiele/5 and http://www.egon-schiele.net/ Both accessed 12 Jan 2013


Many of the self-portraits are dark, some are world weary but others are more benign and less enigmatic. His work is imbued with a commitment to being true to whatever aspect of experience he chooses to examine. He has the capacity to create and sustain powerful moods. Sometimes, as we will see later, his search seems desperate and fearful.

With Schiele limbs and particularly hands, are always important. The striking gestural and “enigmatic mannerisms” were possibly borrowed from those of autistic children. Schiele’s capacity to illuminate spirituality through such bodily presentations can be seen most immediately in four canvasses selected from a dozen works from primarily the 1910/12 period. These have, arguably, a significant and sometimes idiosyncratic visionary and spiritual content. All of them are imbued with symbolism, deeply moving and difficult to fathom. There is something in them of a dream world and of a lost world that is being sought. And sometimes the search seems desperate and fearful. The four works are: Revelation (1911), The Poet (1911), The Hermits (1912), and Transfiguration (1915), that have reference to psychiatric patients he was allowed to see. They also possibly derive from theatrical, dance and mime performances that he saw and was influenced by.7 One might also suggest parallels between his work and that of Munch, Toulouse Lautrec and Lucien Freud.8

In Schiele’s art, spirituality might be viewed as an unlikely subject for consideration. The erotic quality of his output is the dominant and most widely known theme in critiques of his work.9 It is a characteristic feature of many of


8. This can be seen in: Frank Hoiford. Edvard Munch. (London. Tate Publishing. 2012).


Self Portrait with Spread Fingers, 1911. Pencil, gouache and white on paper, 52.5 x 83 cm. The Leopold Museum, Vienna. Inventory No: 1383. Reproduced with permission.
his drawings and paintings of women as well as in his more precocious narcissistic self-portraits. However, it is likely that the emerging neuroscience studies of the spiritual and related states will throw interesting light on this question.

His work can be roughly classified as follows: self-portraits, including erotic material; women, including erotic drawings, mothers, and couples; portraits, often but not exclusively commissioned; architecture and nature paintings; and paintings with a spiritual or visionary quality, some of which are traditionally “religious”.

We have already touched on the first of these, self-portraits, and will return to the second, women, in the discussion below. We will not discuss his portraits other than to note that the paintings, though interesting and unusual, say at least as much about Schiele as they do about the sitter. His architecture and nature paintings are highly individual and immediately recognizable. Some of the former derive from a period when, having witnessed great suffering, he felt he could no longer paint people. Paradoxically the architecture paintings from this time are often anthropomorphic and can be dark and menacing. But there are also uplifting examples and his nature paintings record some scenes of outstanding beauty, with a sense of peace and painterly harmony that, despite his turbulence, is characteristic of his work. Examples of these latter type of works include *Crescent of Houses, Island Town* (1915) and *Setting Sun with Four Trees* (1917).

**The paintings of women**

With regard to his paintings of women, the erotic drawings and paintings are easily accessible. Their composition records human experience in a way that is both fresh and authentic, rather than with a mood of pornographic titillation. Notwithstanding this, he was known in some circles as the pornographer of Vienna. This led finally to his imprisonment and the burning of certain of his works.

A defining discussion of this issue would require an extended study in its own right. However, it is helpful to note a subtle parallel to Schiele’s work which can be found in Ishiguro’s novel “An Artist of the Floating World”.

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13. See biographical material in note 1.

This occurs in an exchange between two painters, master and pupil. The context includes the tension among younger artists about the role of art in supporting institutions and the state.

This official role was being set against the artist’s capacity to capture the more ephemeral and luminous moments of truth and insight that are part of the “floating world” of parties and pleasure houses. The master says: “The best things... are put together at night and vanish in the morning... The finest most fragile beauty an artist can hope to capture drifts within... [the] pleasure houses after dark”.

He continues: “I suspect the reason I couldn’t celebrate the floating world was that I couldn’t bring myself to believe in its worth. Young men are often guilt ridden about pleasure... It’s hard to appreciate the beauty of a world when one doubts its validity.”

Schiele’s work is unclouded by guilt and, obviously, has not been produced in the service of ideology or institution. It captures a delicate truth that can easily be lost. And he is quoted as feeling that “even an erotic work of art has a sacred quality”.

Notwithstanding this, other painting where women were treated did not elicit concern over the issues of the erotic or pornographic. One is of a mother and child and the other is of a couple. The purpose of presenting them here is to illustrate Schiele’s connectedness to appalling circumstances some mothers found themselves in, and his sensitivity to the human condition, as he witnessed it. He was not just obsessed with the erotic. He was equally obsessed with birth, new life, death and endings, with life as he saw it in his city. He was tuned into the immense suffering people encountered in ordinary lives. His depiction of mothers has little in common with the Madonna and Child theme but borrows heavily on his experience in seeing patients in the gynecological hospital and possibly post mortem. This accounts for some of his most distressing pictures of women and children. He was given access to these patients and hospital facilities by an obstetrician patron—an unlikely possibility today.

*Blind Mother* (1914) illustrates this well. The statuesque mother is posed, in front of a cot or a cradle, in an uncomfortable position, and nurses her two...
infants. Her upper body is bent down to the right between her legs. The face, though determined, has blank, dead eyes; her pale skin stands out from the warm hues of the background. The composition is thought to draw on Rodin’s figure “Crouching Woman” (circa 1881) and was completed after several studies some of which still survive.\textsuperscript{18} It conveys the sense that the mother is very much on her own with these two children. Their hope for a future is dependent on her strength and we realize the limits of that future.

The mother/child theme was explored time and again by Schiele, and is at least as revealing as his other work. For example, in \textit{Dead Mother I} (1910) the baby is enclosed in a uterine-like structure consisting of black shrouding and his mother’s arm and boney hand on one side and her hair on the other.\textsuperscript{19} The child has a good color and gleaming eyes. The mother’s face is corpse-like and appears to be marked with earth. Her mouth drops slightly, her eyes are lifeless and empty. Her fate is determined. The baby is trapped in a tight space, encircled by the inert. There is no visible escape. By contrast, \textit{Young Mother} (1914) (also known as \textit{Blind Mother II}) is a little more reassuring. Recording the vulnerable innocence of a young mother; it is finely depicted and is one of the few in this series with the expression of positive feelings. This hopeless and almost desperate feeling in some of the mother series is common, although some later more positive examples exist, such as \textit{Mother with Children} (1917).


\textsuperscript{19} See web reference for all pictures in 3 above.
It is important to give due weight to this work and not to regard Schiele as one dimensionally a painter of erotic work. For him the body is a window into the soul; his paintings illustrate states of mind people lived through, that until then were scarcely acknowledged. Some say he “created the modern world by scandalizing it”.20

His later work includes couples and sometimes small families. We can note strength of feeling in *Death and the Maiden* (1915-16), which is at the Upper Belvidere Museum in Vienna.21 The feeling is too strong for words but conveyed with a precision that borders on the mathematical. Here he is dealing with endings. The composition may be related to the ending of his relationship with his mistress/muse, Wally Neuzil, prior to marrying his wife Edith Harms in June of 1915. However, it is open to deeper readings. The lovers, though huddled together against the difficulties surrounding them are turned away from each other. They have painfully come to realize their own limitations. They will not be protected from the disintegration they know is immanent. From their harrowing expressions we have a sense that they both know that they will not be able to comfort and/or save each other and are looking beyond the now and each-other; often the starting point of a personal spiritual journey. Several earlier studies for this work still exist. The mood created is also evident in other similarly themed paintings such as *The Lovers*.22

Theology usually overemphasizes the cognitive and Spirituality sometimes undervalues it. Today spirituality draws heavily on emotional responses and hence will find ample material to work with in Schiele, as is evident in the small selection of his works illustrated here. It has been said that “Working as he did between the psychotic and non-psychotic

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22. See web links in note 3

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elements of his personality, Schiele is an appropriate artist for our time; . . . his feelings of disintegration and “dismemberment” are nourished by the creative, sane parts of his personality.”

**Spirituality and four representative paintings**

There are four visionary canvasses in which the connection with spirituality is more easily discerned. (It is more difficult to assess Schiele’s relatively few explicitly Christian religious paintings, including Crucifixion scenes, which I do not find convincing). These four works are selected from a dozen or so paintings from primarily the 1910/12 period. They have, arguably, a significant and sometimes idiosyncratic visionary and spiritual content. Regrettably, their content has not been sufficiently recognized and commented on in light of their spiritual aspects. All of them are imbued with symbolism, deeply moving and difficult to fathom. There is something in them of a dream world and of a lost one searching. Sometimes the search seems desperate and fearful; possibly well justified. They are Revelation (1911), The Poet (1911), The Hermits (1912) and Transfiguration (1915). The word vulnerable and the phrase searching with hope come to mind in considering them. Both conditions are consistent with his spiritual journey.

**Revelation (1911)**

This is a solemn, mysterious and somewhat severe painting with three figures. One, kneeling before an impressive figure in a large cloak, reminiscent of a liturgical cope, is obviously the


recipient of the “revelation”. An overseeing female figure is in the background; she is possibly softer and more empathetic but has a severe mouth. As with many of Schiele’s paintings the arms, legs and garments are strangely positioned and leave some confusion as to whom they belong. Schiele’s language, writing about this painting, is essentially secular and a little confused. But he does envisage something like the communication or transmission of the vision of the older man to the younger.25

The disposition of the figures suggests that the revelation is being conferred in, what might be taken in Christian terms, to be a quasi- liturgical and sacramental way. In consequence, the experience leaves the recipient irrevocably changed, again, a sacramental feature. In Schiele’s words the central figure is “giving out an hypnotic astral orange light into which a kneeling adolescent figure . . . [is] sinking”. . . . It might be a poet, an artist, a scholar or a spiritualist.”26 The painting, is a beautiful work with a stained glass quality with a surprisingly pleasing ensemble of colors, all of which combine to convey a sense of the movement of the spirit.

**The Poet (1911)**

This small richly colored self-portrait, also known as *The Lyricist* draws on the tilted neck of Klimt’s *The Kiss*. The play of light on the work gives it an almost luminous quality, as though it were lit from within. The composition is full of powerful feeling. To quote Gaillemin: “Weighed down by the burden of revelation, the artist’s head bends and rests on his shoulder .... The body is listening to itself, hoping to be reunited with the world.”27
center are highly expressive; the upper-hand almost a self-embrace. Wistful warm eyes are partially closed, possibly for comfort. His expression is sympathetic and tired. The mood suggests withdrawal into repose following creativity or growth that deeply echoes spiritual processes.\(^{28}\)

\textit{The Hermits}, 1912. Oil on canvas, 181 x 181 cm. The Leopold Museum, Vienna. Inventory No: 466. Reproduced with permission.

\textbf{The Hermits (1912)}

This very large canvas has two figures leaning to the left. They seem to glide, sway or, as the tilt and raised foot suggests, even dance in unison. Schiele is in front and the older man behind is Klimt. Both are enfolded in a long dark caftan suggesting a brotherhood. This was Klimt’s style of dress, and was also

27. See references in notes 18, 20, and 21.

adopted by Schiele. Both heads are surrounded by halo like rings of light, as are the bodies to a lesser extent. Klimt’s head is also crowned with red roses. They are, perhaps, like ripe autumn fruits, that has fallen to the ground and taken root. Some are beginning to flourish and project a triangular zone of support toward the inclined duo. Schiele’s white garland stays in place.29

The younger man in the front has his head inclined and his somewhat shifty eyes averted, possibly rebellious in a somewhat edgy glare. He looks alert, moody, pouty and petulant with uncertain averted eyes. The older man is behind, eyes now closed and blinded. Is he satisfied and withdrawn? Is he no longer capable of envisioning his own power? He seems to be leaning on the younger man, and is willing to be led by him. Is Schiele, though leading, furtive and incapable of squarely facing something important? Is it his muse? Or the establishment? Or the ultimate goal of his search: the truth, and the mysterious and mystical dimensions that inform it? The older man, satisfied or satiated, has possibly abandoned the search.

Strangely, for hermits, these are images of people with a lot of fear, frightened of the circumstances of their lives unsure if anybody or anything can be trusted. There seem to be marked by fear and in search of hope and reassurance.

Schiele painted this picture over a long period of time and never sold it. He adds something in his prose poetry, that becomes more obvious in the painting once he draws it to our attention. He wrote: “. . . . the figures themselves represent the fragility of everything that has any importance, . . . . these are the bodies of people who are. . . . nothing but sensibility. The two figures must be seen as a cloud of dust on this earth, a cloud that wants to form but is destined to collapse powerless”.30 Gaillemin feels the canvas is a “complex symbol of Schiele’s relationship with Klimt . . . .is a return to the romantic vision of the artist’s role as an intermediary with the absolute, a member of a brotherhood which can help humanity on its journey toward mystery.”31 Here there is much of the feeling of the lost one searching somewhat fearfully. This is also present in the next canvas.
Transfiguration (1915)

Again, this is a very large canvas with two robed ungainly figures. It is also known as Disappearance, Floating Away, Levitation and The Blind II. It may be taken as transfiguration in the traditional sense. But it may also be associated with other transformations such as death and dying, or even Schiele’s taking on the duties of husband and father, a radical break with his past. There is a gaucheness about the figures being drawn up from the partially withered meadow of this world into a state of graced validation. The lower figure is robed (another self-portrait) that is charged with feeling with its feet on the ground but about to leave its safety, tentative and apprehensive. Eyes wide open, interrogating the viewer: Is this ok? He is poised on the edge of commitment, not fully trusting but with hope. This state, seldom described, well reflects how we often stand in relation to God. The upper figure is suspended in mid-air experiencing similar emotions. This canvass provides endless material for reflection for those experiencing troubling and unexpected aspects of spiritual transformation. It expresses the dark night experiences.
Conclusions

Revelation, The Poet, The Hermits, Transfiguration, as well as other works repeatedly use Schiele’s own body, face and gestures to magnificent effect. He creates wonderful harmonies of color and sustains powerful impressions of various phases in the life of the lost one searching. They present emotions that, perhaps, are not the way we think we should feel. But in the face of the impenetrable, and desperate events, we sometimes find (possibly surprisingly) these feelings in our selves. In moments when grace favors us, these images help us recognize that our responses can include a furtive wariness as a partner to hope.

Some critics feel that Schiele didn’t have a formal well thought-out system behind these compositions, rather they had matured in an unconscious, possibly, semi-dreamlike state.32 Notwithstanding this, they are compelling and leave us in little doubt about his personal spiritual journey. The meanings of his work, however, needs to be “excavated”33 for the worlds of religion and spirituality. An attempt to create and paraphrase, as I have done here, is not enough to do them justice. We need further work by conscientious critics with spiritual sensibility to uncover the inspiration and mystery of these exceptional paintings.

These paintings have an almost sacramental or liturgical quality. Abbot Hederman says: “When we accomplish liturgy we do not enter another world as a replica of this one. The transformation which occurs, the making present of the kingdom of God is not a make believe. . . . it takes place personally in the space inside each one of us.”34 We become transformed. We become transfigured. There is something of this transformation and transfiguration in these paintings, but there is also a gaucheness and clumsiness partly arising from the figures’ unexpectedly being drawn into a state of almost playful, freedom and lightness. It is also possible that they benefit from Schiele’s lack of training in theological matters and can be seen as his attempt to articulate these profound matters for himself. In this his achievement and compelling use of color is unique and to date he has had no real successor.

Schiele’s own letters and prose poems, particularly around 1910 see him

33. See reference in note 1
34. Op Cit. P. 160
full of “fervent admiration of and adoration for [both] nature and life” and, yet, an “appalling fear” which proved to be well justified. He seemed to be “torn between an uncontrollable desire to merge into nature, and a fear of being swept away”. He was a young man, barely beyond adolescence when these works were completed. He wrote: “to dream forever, bursting with a superabundance of life – endlessly – with horrible pains inside the soul – blaze, burn. . . . Speak the language of the creator and give.” And further: “The greatest experience of feeling is religion and art. Nature is the goal – but that is where God is, and I feel him strongly, very strongly, more strongly yet.”

Ultimately his work doesn’t try to deal with formal religion or theology. But his spirituality is sufficiently powerful and explicit so that we can see in it a rich, if tortured and dark, source with which we can engage. While, I think, this is palpably evident in the works described here, it is also discernible in many of his other work once one explores their meaning.

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SARTS Annual Meeting & Events
November 22 & 23, 2013
Baltimore, Maryland

Join SARTS (The Society for the Arts in Religious and Theological Studies) in Baltimore this November for our annual meeting and events, in conjunction with the annual meetings of AAR/SBL (November 23-26).

Friday, November 22
SARTS Reception

Saturday, November 23
Presentations by 2012-13 Luce fellows
Business meeting of the Society
Additional programming to be announced

Watch our website for additional information: societyarts.org
The Energy of Poetry in a Culture of Saturation

Mark S. Burrows

We live in a fast-paced world: fast food, fast travel, fast information, fast everything. Our capacity to surf the web opens us to vast and expanding horizons of information in ways that were unimaginable only a generation ago. Our accessibility via cell phones allows us to “be” everywhere at once given the ever more sophisticated wireless technologies that many now hold in their hands; smart phones and iPads, in all their technological permutations, are part of a revolution of human connectivity. Ours is a culture of saturation, one in which the question of limits seems to be constantly shrinking. GPS devices, linked as these are to such recent technological gadgets, tell us precisely where we are at any given moment. But who are we, and where are we headed? Quo vadis?

To speak of the value of poetry in times like ours might seem strange, if not irrelevant. What, after all, can poetry offer in such a fast-paced, technologically saturated world like ours? The question posed by the German poet Friedrich Hölderlin, writing in the first half of the 19th century, seems to anticipate our hesitation: “For what use are poets in destitute times?” And, more recently, W. H. Auden claimed in his poetic tribute to W. B. Yeats that “poetry makes nothing happen”—which is surely true, when judged by the pressures of an achievement-oriented world like ours. But this line is one marked by irony, as Auden’s poem goes on to suggest. The deeper question is what poetry does make happen—or, more to the point, how poetry works on us and in us. Such wonderings shape this essay which explores the energy of poetry in a prosaic age like ours.

In his Norton Lectures—published in 1986 as Six Memos for the Next Millennium, but never delivered because of his sudden death—Italo Calvino

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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pointed out that “we live in an unending rainfall of images,” but he went further in clarifying that these are images stripped of the inner inevitability that ought to mark every image as form and as meaning, as a claim on the attention and as a source of possible meanings. Much of this cloud of images fades at once, like the dreams that leave no trace in the memory, but what does not fade is a feeling of alienation and discomfort.¹

To face and hope to survive this deluge, it seems that we have no choice but to join the hustle of connectional relevance. The notion of doing only one thing at a time, any one thing, seems increasingly quaint. But need this be so? A generation ago, Sven Birkerts lamented as much, suggesting that the promise of these technologies brought with it an erosion of what he called “duration experience,” the capacity to linger with one task and call upon the patience needed for sustained inquiry of any kind.² The older among us will remember a simpler life before all of this. We might even admire the Greek shepherd, described in a recent poem by Jack Gilbert, who “longs to live married to slowness.”

What are we to do in the face of this expanding, and even engulfing, “cloud,” which overshadows in ways that fail to eradicate the gnawing sense of aloneness, which Calvino describes as leading to alienation and discomfort? How do the pressures of such advances awaken a longing within us for something else, some connection to a more enduring reality that transcends our activities? Charles Taylor has devoted considerable attention to this question in his recent cultural critique, A Secular Age, pointing as he does to our insatiable yearning for what he calls a “sense of fullness” that we depend upon for our well-being, an awareness that “unsettles and breaks through our ordinary sense of being in the world, with its familiar objects, activities, and points of reference.”³ Taylor goes on to say that

[these may be moments, as Peter Berger puts it, describing the work of Robert Musil, when ‘ordinary reality is “abolished” and something terrifyingly other shines through,’ a state of consciousness which Musil describes as der andere Zustand’ (the other condition).”⁴

An experience of this “other condition” is one that the poet Robert Frost once described as offering us “a clarification of life—not necessarily a great

4. Ibid., 5 – 6.
clarification, such as sects and cults are founded on, but in a momentary stay against confusion.” We experience such moments as experiences of breakthrough, moments of presence, even if they offer only glimpses of the sense of fullness. For this very reason, however, they might also strike us with the force of an “epiphany,” a word whose Greek root – epiphanein – signals a “showing forth” or “shining through.”

In an age like ours in which we suffer from “information overload” and the pressures of ever expanding accessibility, what are we to make of the sense of loneliness that seems to mark our culture? The very language of a “shining through” might strike us as quaint given the unending barrage of the “clouds of images” besieging us on every side. And yet precisely in such a time, the words of the German poet Hilde Domin ring true: “We eat bread, but we live from radiance [von Glanz],” an echo to the ancient text from Deuteronomy that Jesus turns against the devil in the wilderness (cf. Mt. 4. 1 – 4). It is this “radiance” (Glanz) that interests me precisely because of the way it points to poetry’s capacity to generate “epiphanies,” its power of “in-sight” that connects us with a reality coming to us from “beyond” ourselves—even while breaking in upon us and finding its shape within us.

Poems, at least the strong ones, strike a chord within us which lingers in our minds and produces some echo of the effect felt by the poet herself. This may seem a strange way of speaking, but it is one of the dimensions of poetry—in contrast, say, to painting or music, both of which are in their “reception” markedly different than they are in their creation—that makes of it a unique art form: viz., the reader “makes” the poem happen again, in and through her own articulation. As Paul Valéry put it, poetry “tends to reproduce itself in its own form, it stimulates our minds to reconstruct it as it is.” This is not to say that the poem means the same thing to the reader as it did to the writer, or for that matter to other readers. No, I mean to say something quite different than this: the poem is an art-form we experience as a dynamic event, one involving both sound and sense. Poems “happen” to us. They are events that constitute something within us. They call us not to comprehend something, but rather to participate in the reality they gesture toward.


6. On this theme and its relation to the arts, see George Steiner, Real Presences (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 226 f.


As epiphanies, poems often do this in the ways they take us by surprise. Startlement is their familiar mode of entry. As the poet Jane Hirshfield suggests, they “transport us into previously unanticipatable comprehensions,” luring us beyond familiar assumptions, offering us glimpses as she puts it of “the as-yet-undiscovered [which] brings an enlargement of life.” She goes on to suggest that poems “preserve their inaugural newness in part because they are like the emotions—not object, but experience, event.” Their energy has to do with the ways they point to a capacity we have within us, recalling vivid lines of one of Frost’s poems, the sense of an “ever breaking newness / And [our] courage to be new.” Strong poems remind us, as Italo Calvino put it, that “we are always searching for something hidden or merely potential or hypothetical, following its traces wherever they appear on the surface.” In such ways, they function like Jesus’ parables, inviting us to live in what he calls the “kingdom” or “empire” of God, with its startling inversions of power and privilege for the sake of the common good. They offer us that “sense of fullness” that interrupts us the midst of life, startling us in the long stretches of our lives when it seems to us as if we are living in the shadows of the familiar. Carroll describes the prosaic world bereft of this poetic energy when poor Alice encounters “the Mock Turtle,” who tells her of his schooling. He’d taken “the regular course,” which meant “reeling and writhing, of course, to begin with, and then the different branches of Arithmetic – Ambition, Distraction, Uglification, and Derision,” precisely those dimensions of our experience that choke art and prevent us from receiving such epiphanies. This longing for a “sense of fullness” frames my approach to the peculiar “energy” of poems, their capacity to invite our conversion and lead us toward a greater wholeness of life.

Let us begin with this premise: art shares with religion a longing for wisdom, a kind of deep knowing rooted in the imagination. As with religion, art is constellated by our yearning for what is not—or, what is not yet—rather than our management of what is. Both have to do with the creativity of vision, the spontaneity of dream, rather than any certainty of reason, precision of argument, or clarity of technique. Religion, like fiction and poetry, offers us what Jeanette Winterson calls “a way into other realities”; they are “not a version of the facts [but] an entirely different way of seeing.” Strong poems,


10. Ibid., 46.


12. Calvino, Six Memos, 77.

13. Carroll, Alice’s Adventures, 113.

like religious teachings, name our plight, as we hear in these familiar lines from Wordsworth:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The world is too much with us, late and soon.} \\
\text{Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers;} \\
\text{Little we see in Nature that is ours;} \\
\text{We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!}
\end{align*}
\]

Here, the poet laments what we lose because of “ambition and distraction,” the first two lessons in the Mock Turtle’s “regular course.” They lure us into squandering our abilities, and forfeiting our hearts. Hollow greed, Wordsworth suggests, alienates us from beauty, and ultimately impoverishes us.

This will not be news to us; it no longer startles us, since it has come to define the culture we inhabit. But how might we find our way back to “nature”? Here, Wordsworth’s poem offers little help. The poet Denise Levertov takes the opening line, which is familiar to the point of sounding like a cliché, and improvises brilliantly on it in her poem “O Taste and See.” Beginning with this familiar line from Psalm 34—“O taste and see that the Lord is good”—she frames the problem facing us differently than had Wordsworth:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The world is} \\
\text{not with us enough.} \\
\text{\textit{O taste and see}} \\
\text{the subway Bible poster said,} \\
\text{meaning The Lord, meaning} \\
\text{if anything all that lives} \\
\text{to the imagination’s tongue,} \\
\text{grief, mercy, language,} \\
\text{tangerine, weather, to} \\
\text{breathe them, bite} \\
\text{savor, chew, swallow, transform} \\
\text{into our flesh our} \\
\text{deaths, crossing the street, plum, quince,} \\
\text{living in the orchard and being} \\
\text{hungry, and plucking} \\
\text{the fruit.}^{15}
\end{align*}
\]

Here Levertov varies Wordsworth’s admonition, reversing directions in a way that startles what we expect to hear. Her approach redefines the meaning of this familiar biblical command, turning us not \textit{away from} the world but \textit{into its very heart}. Taking this command seriously, as she suggests, is not about fleeing the world in order to find refuge in something transcendent; her critique of escapist forms of spirituality is only barely veiled. Rather, the poem calls us to embrace

this world, to “taste and see” nothing less than the ordinary and varied texture of what life offers—“meaning / if anything all that lives / to the imagination’s tongue.” This echoes the poet Rilke’s conviction, expressed in a letter written late in his life:

> Religion is something infinitely simple, simpleminded. It is not knowledge, not the content of our emotion (for all possible content has been granted already from the beginning wherever a human being engages with life). It is neither duty nor renunciation; it is not limitation, but in the perfect expanse of the universe it is a direction of the heart.  

Such a poem turns from the dour God of the Puritans, still stubbornly alive and well among us: the stern Father who chides us for our broken lives, shames us for our sin, condemns bodily delights—including, for many Protestants early and late, the extravagant allure of the arts. We often think of the arts as collections to “visit”—paintings gathered in museums, or, in a quite different sense, musical recordings on CDs or our iPods. They are “things” we can visit, experience, or in some cases own – an “exhibit” is a collection that “holds” various things together (exhibere from ex + habere, to “hold from”). But such images place no real demands upon us, and rarely presume to change us. We turn from those art forms which refuse to be worked into our “program,” texts not easily comprehensible, music exposing us to unfamiliar sounds, stories that provoke without resolution.

In contrast, we often give ourselves over to expressions of the arts—and, for that matter, religion—that make no demands on us, offering no particular “direction of the heart.” We choose manageable prose over what Rilke calls “that vast, humming, and swinging syntax to which everyone feels free to add by speaking what is closest to [their] heart.” We confine art, in the public arena as in our houses of worship, to what is decorative or satisfying. In church, we rely on music to fill the awkward silences in worship and, from the great dance that constituted the medieval liturgy, we have kept at most the choir’s modest and managed processional. And we presume, often unwittingly, that the norms of religion have more to do with restricting delight, with controlling our passions, than with plumbing their often unsettling depths.

Against such tendencies, Levertov reminds us that the sanctuary is nothing less than the world we inhabit, the life and death we face, and religion
what “lives to the imagination’s tongue.” What “direction of the heart” leads us into such epiphanies, offering us moments when some radiance “shines through” the veil of the *ordinary*, when we find that “sense of fullness” in the sanctuary of what is *at hand*? Where are the glimpses of a beauty which “shines through” long after we leave the museum or concert hall, or set the book aside? Levertov’s vision in this poem is expansive: religious imagination, she suggests, is not about “the Lord” in some narrowing manner, but has to do with “all that lives to the imagination’s tongue.” It awakens us to that “direction of the heart” we know as wonder. And this requires the essential work of attentiveness, of patiently and persistently opening ourselves to the presence of this world.

In a poem entitled “Mysteries, Yes,” Mary Oliver puts it this way:

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Truly, we live with mysteries too marvelous
to be understood.

How grass can be nourishing in the
minds of the lambs.
How rivers and stones are forever
in allegiance with gravity
while we ourselves dream of rising.
How two hands touch and the bonds will
never be broken.
How people come, from delight or the
scars of damage,
to the comfort of a poem.

Let me keep my distance, always, from those
who think they have the answers.

Let me keep company always with those who say
“Look!” and laugh in astonishment,
and bow [your] heads.18
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This is a marvelous poem, suggesting how it is that we come to “the comfort of a poem,” to its essential “energy.” Here, she invites us, finally, to something as old-fashioned and essential to our well-being as *reverence.* “Look!” she cries out, echoing Jesus’ simple words: “Consider the lilies of the field. . .and the birds of the air,” his ridiculous and beautiful admonition: “Don’t be anxious about your life!” “Laugh in astonishment”; “bow [your] heads.”

We do well to notice that Oliver’s point moves *beyond* understanding the poem. What she gestures toward cannot be contained in language. She invites

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us to live differently, to open ourselves to this life, to our world, with vulnerability to what we cannot know. She implies that understanding alone is not adequate to carry our longing toward the margins of mystery. The German philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein put it this way in a now famous aphorism: “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical.” 19 Wallace Stevens, simplifying this thought even further, wonders: “Is there a poem that never reaches words”? 20 Poetry, fired by the dynamic pressures of metaphor, lives toward these boundaries; such a “direction of the heart” is what gives poems—and, indeed, religion—an essential energy, a “sense of fullness” that cannot finally be put into words.

Levertov’s poem moves toward an exhortation unlike Wordsworth’s, inviting us to deepen our vulnerability to our world and offers an odd list of things and experiences by which we might do this: grief, mercy, language, tangerine, weather, for a start. What she presumes is that each has a radiance of its own, if we only learn how “to breathe them, bite, savor, chew, swallow, transform into our flesh our deaths.” It is her way of seeing in them an “excess” which shines through, a radiance – varied expressions of the “sense of fullness” we long for. And, importantly, she suggests through layers of allusion that our “fall” has less to do with sin than it does with neglect: the holy “shines through” the goodness of all that is, a reversal of the biblical story of Adam and Eve. Our life is not shaped by the prohibition “Do not eat of this fruit”; rather, we are encouraged to “cross the street” and “pluck the fruit.” This act, far from violating some divinely authorized order, satisfies our hunger for communion. This is the desire Levertov sees as “original” within us, defining what it means for us to expect such epiphanies to happen to us – precisely in the ordinary dimensions of life.

One of the difficulties besetting so much of religious life as we know it, in churches that have for too long tolerated a diminished role for the arts, is the failure of our imagination. It has to do with our fear of the unmanageable passions and transgressive powers inherent in creativity, energies that take us toward the “other”—God, neighbor, stranger, and, yes, enemy. The lure of epiphany, the poem’s energy, calls us toward the boundaries where the familiar and unfamiliar meet, a movement that resists the third and fourth lessons in the Mock Turtle’s “regular course”: viz., “uglification” and “derision,” forces


regrettably so natural to us, tendencies which devalue our world and blunt us to the “startlement” of beauty.

Against such habits, the poet Adam Zagajewski suggests that poetry leans toward some “sense of fullness.” It anticipates the “shining through” characteristic of the arts. As he puts it,

Poetry searches for radiance.
It is the kingly road
that leads us farthest.

We seek radiance in a gray hour,
at noon or in the chimneys of the dawn,
even on a bus, in November,
while an old priest nods beside us.

The waiter in a Chinese restaurant bursts into tears
and no one can think why.
Who knows, this may also be a quest,
like that moment at the seashore,
when a predatory ship appeared on the horizon
and stopped short, held still for a long while.
And also moments of deep joy

and countless moments of anxiety.
Let me see, I ask.
Let me persist, I say.
A cold rain falls at night.
In the streets and avenues of my city
quiet darkness is hard at work.
Poetry searches for radiance.21

Poetry – and we with it – seek such “radiance,” he reminds us, “in a grey hour,” and in the oddest and most ordinary of places and times. What momentum does the energy of the poem hold within itself? Zagajewski reminds us that it is a “quest,” and one that grips us in “moments of deep joy and countless moments of anxiety.” The radiance that searches for us, that yearns to “shine through” the ordinary structures of our days and nights, answers our longing to “see” and “persist,” despite the “quiet darkness” that is always “hard at work” in our world, and often enough in our lives. In the midst of all this, poetry searches for radiance. In our search for meaning hidden from first glance, or buried beneath the pressures of suffering and sorrow, we nonetheless come to find – recalling Calvino’s image—that “the word connects the visible trace with the invisible thing, the absent thing, the thing that is desired or feared, like a

frail emergency bridge flung over an abyss.”22 The energy of the poem is one instance of this movement toward “connectivity.”

All of this is to say that the energy of the poem, like religious faith, is not a mechanical tool. It is not an automatic reflex. As a “clarification of life,” as Frost put it, art is and remains in an important sense useless. It does not declare or inform, but rather invites, entices, suggests. Paul Valéry clarifies this energy by contrasting prose to poetry by the analogy of walking and dancing:

Walking, like prose, always has a definite object. It is an act directed toward some object that we aim to reach . . . . Dancing is quite different. It is, of course, a system of acts, but acts whose end is in themselves. It goes nowhere. Or, if it pursued anything it is only an ideal object, a state, a delight, the phantom of a flower, or some transport out of oneself, an extreme of life, a summit, a supreme point of being. But however different it may be from utilitarian movement, this essential yet infinitely simple observation must be noted: that it uses the same limbs, the same organs, bones, muscles, and nerves as walking does. It is exactly the same with poetry, which uses the same words, the same forms, the same tones as prose.23

Poetry lives by something like the movement of dance in that its life is its purpose. It “goes nowhere,” as Valéry suggests, or in the words of W. H. Auden, it “makes nothing happen”24—except that it beckons us into the heart of the “living, breathing word” which is what happens when language begins its dance within us. And this has to do with the kind of imagination we know not as duty or discipline, understanding or admonition, but rather—and quite simply—as “a direction of the heart” toward a “sense of fullness.”

Such imagination is what lures us to see our world, to frame our lives and the lives of others, in more generous ways. The real question before us as adults is not whether what we believe is impossible, since the things worth giving our lives to often seem to be either impossible or at least improbable—like love for the enemy or generosity toward the stranger. No, the deep question is a different one: whether our beliefs finally matter for the sake of others, whether they are true for the life of the world. The “courage to be new” calls us to embrace “all that lives to the imagination’s tongue,” even when we recognize its apparent futility when measured against our “purpose-driven” habits. A poem by Langston Hughes (d. 1967), one of the shapers of the Harlem Renaissance, captures this insight eloquently. In “To You,” he writes:

22. Calvino, Six Memos, 77.

The ironic force of this line should not be missed; Auden goes on to say, about poetry, that

. . . it survives
In the valley of its saying
where executives
Would never want to tamper; it flows south
From ranches of isolation
and the busy griefs,
Raw towns that we believe
and die in; it survives,
A way of happening, a mouth.
To sit and dream, to sit and read,
To sit and learn about the world
Outside our world of here and now –
    Our problem world –
To dream of vast horizons of the soul
Through dreams made whole,
Unfettered, free – help me!
All you who are dreamers too,
    Help me to make
Our world anew.
I reach out my dreams to you.25

Art can have this effect on us. In its spell, we often find ourselves awakening, in ways that either disturb or delight us, to that “world outside our world of here and now”—in a word, the “shining through” of epiphany. Poetry shaped by such an aesthetic invites us to imagine something “else,” and dare to dream it—and then “reach out [these] dreams” to “all you who are dreamers too.” This is the energy such a poem carries within itself: it enables us to imagine something that is not (yet) present, to announce the way the world might be. Again, Langston Hughes:

    Hold fast to dreams,
for if dreams die,
life is a broken winged bird
that cannot fly.26

Such dreams invite us into a larger “sense of fullness,” and one we share with others in the social world we inhabit. They invite our conversion of mind, startling us by offering different ways of seeing across the distances. In point of fact, the “gap” at the heart of metaphor, the tension between unlike things and the Spannungsfeld—or “horizon of tension”—that metaphor creates across this distance, is inherent in the very structure and function of poetry, shaped as it is by metaphor. They give poems their energy, and are essential in cultivating a vigorous imagination. In this sense, churches are metaphorical communities. They live in the prophetic dreams and images that promise to “make our world anew,” as Hughes put it. But this requires courage, the “courage to be new” as Frost suggests, the audacity required to “sit and dream, to sit and read,/ To sit and learn about the world/ Outside our world of here and now;/ Our problem world.”

Dreams of this magnitude call us to reach beyond what we know, to draw a wider and more inclusive circumference of dignity for those at the edges


of our society. Many in our world, and even in our churches, would gladly settle for smaller dreams and less noble metaphors than these. But such dreams cannot be silenced. When we try, as Jesus reminded us, the very stones themselves will cry out. Perhaps our worship ought to begin with Hughes’ bold words: “All you who are dreamers too, / Help [us] to make / Our world anew.” Prophets like Hughes—and Jesus, for that matter—are the dreamers we need in a culture of saturation like ours, for they remind us that poetry is not a solution to such challenges but “a different way of seeing” (Winterson). They lure us to imagine singing “new songs,” calling us “to sit and learn about the world”—and dare to imagine making it “anew.” Such audacity will not change the “fast” world we inhabit. But the energy of poetry like this might encourage us to indwell that world with a sense of attentiveness. And, if so, it will remind us that we live “not by bread alone, but by radiance.”

SARTS: Society for the Arts in Religious and Theological Studies

ABOUT THE SOCIETY

The Society for the Arts in Religious and Theological Studies had its charter meeting at the 2002 AAR/SBL. The Society was organized to provide a forum for scholars and artists interested in the intersections between theology, religion, and the arts to share thoughts, challenge ideas, strategize approaches in the classroom, and to advance the discipline in theological and religious studies curricula.

The goal of the Society is to attract consistent participation of a core group of artists and scholars of theology and religion in order to have dialogue about theological and religious meaning of the arts, and the artistic/aesthetic dimension of theological and religious inquiry.

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Theological Creativity and the Powerful Persistence of Traditional Religious Symbols

Mary Farrell Bednarowski

One of those harmonic convergences has opened up for me a new—or, at least, newly framed—arena of thinking and research. Several years ago I received an invitation to deliver a convocation lecture at United Theological Seminary. The general theme was religion and culture, but the choice of subject was wide open. At that same time, I came across a poem by Muskogee Indian poet, Joy Harjo, “Perhaps the World Ends Here.” It is in most ways a very simple poem about “life,” about the history of the world, about who we are as various kinds of human beings who are capable of rendering to each other great joy and terrible destruction. For me it is also a religious poem. For one shaped by Christian/Catholic sensibilities, it is nearly impossible not see this as a poem about communion, about the church and the altar as the gathering place of the community, where most of the rituals central to our tradition take place and we live out the various passages of our lives in symbolic fashion. I have read and loved a thousand poems that have been both obviously and subtly religious, but this one struck me powerfully at a time when I was struggling to formulate some ideas about theological creativity and vitality that have been stirring but inchoate for a long time. Without ever using an obvious word, Harjo evokes the depths of tradition: the communion table where all might gather and be fed with the bread of justice—this place where we gather to sustain each other, to insist that if life can never be totally without suffering, neither should it be without hope. This is an end-of-the-world poem but not one that predicts apocalyptic catastrophe; it is rather one that says we are in this together and that together we will face whatever comes—at that most ordinary and extraordinary of altars, the kitchen table, “while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bit.”

ABOUT THIS ARTICLE
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PERHAPS THE WORLD ENDS HERE

The world begins at a kitchen table.
No matter what, we must eat to live.

The gifts of earth are brought and prepared, set on the table. So it has been since creation, and it will go on.

We chase chickens or dogs away from it. Babies teeth at the corners. They scrape their knees under it.

It is here that children are given instructions on what it means to be human. We make men at it, we make women.

At this table we gossip, recall enemies and the ghosts of lovers.

Our dreams drink coffee with us as they put their arms around our children. They laugh with us at our poor falling-down selves and as we put ourselves back together once again at the table. This table has been a house in the rain, an umbrella in the sun.

Wars have begun and ended at this table. It is a place to hide in the shadow of terror. A place to celebrate the terrible victory.

We have given birth on this table, and have prepared our parents for burial here.

At this table we sing with joy, with sorrow. We pray of suffering and remorse. We give thanks.

Perhaps the world will end at the kitchen table, while we are laughing and crying, eating of the last sweet bite.¹

Harjo’s poem took hold in my heart and my mind and in that often unacknowledged critical faculty, the lump in the throat, that tells us we have

encountered a powerful call to our depths. As it did so, I discovered that more and more what I wanted to emphasize in my convocation address was the persisting strength and power of religious symbols and ideas rather than their imminent declension, disintegration, or watering-down (all longstanding themes in American religious history and culture). I suspect that this desire was so readily at hand because there has been stirring in me for a long time a resistance to the gloomy predictions about religion in our culture. I am convinced that the symbols of our various religious traditions are much more powerful in their ongoing meanings than we seem to realize—and that we do ourselves a disservice in underestimating that power. Their meanings are subject to change, of course, in form and emphasis—how could it be otherwise? - but not, in my opinion, to destruction or irrelevance. And no matter how much they have changed—and will continue to change—we can also trace their continuity through endless centuries.

I wanted my presentation to be a word of hope, although, lest anyone feel too optimistic too soon, a word of hope qualified by the modesty of its scope rather than by lack of intensity. Alas, the persisting power of religious symbols does not seem to mean the end of sin and suffering and evil in the world. Nor do I assume that the powerful persistence of traditional religious symbols is an unrelievedly good thing—it, like everything else about religion, is mixed. For me, “hope” means having the wherewithal to proceed with what needs to be done, whatever that requires in any particular circumstances—to take the next step. And hope, I’m convinced, is a communal project; we elicit it in each other, we share it with each other, and we find it in many places in the culture. It is one of the gifts of theological creativity, by which I mean the capacity, the commitment, and the desire to respond to religious symbols—to take responsibility for them in ways that are both innovative and conserving—to see what we can make of them that is new, but not so totally new that they no longer speak to the communities of people to whom they have been entrusted. We are obligated to cultivate the courage to let those symbols make their way into the world and to learn how to recognize their evocative power when we encounter them in startling new ways. The longer I study religion and theology the more I want to say that we (“we” being people who for the most part have found the church an institution with the capacity to be transforming
and transformable) are often much too worried about the tenuousness, the precariousness, of our religious world views. We tend to expend a great deal of theological energy in guarding boundaries, setting limits, clinging too tightly to what we assume will come apart or blow away if we let go. We assume too often that they anger and doggedness that accompanies the ongoing, and necessary critique of our traditions are more dangerous than the quiet that may just as likely signal apathy as affirmation.

As I wrote this paragraph, surprised a bit by my own vehemence, I asked myself again: “Where are these strong convictions coming from, convictions that I have been moving toward for a long time, and probably even acting out of, but not really formulating or saying out loud?” They come, I suspect, from the fact that for most of my academic career the various things I have been studying—new religions, women’s theologies, literature—lie outside, although never totally, the publicly acknowledged centers of theological production and maintenance. They inhabit border regions, some might say, or even dangerous territory. But it is in these borderlands that I’ve learned about the persisting power of religious symbols.

Anyone who studies new religions at a given moment in history encounters people who ask questions, who voice their doubts and their disillusionments. They probe; they point to the inadequacies they experience in the established religious traditions and in the broader culture. Whatever the sociological complexities of new religions, one of their major aims is to join theological conversation in a given culture, to construct new world views. In doing so they often illuminate the particular religious and secular questions of an age, much like Christianity did in the early centuries of its existence. “What is the ‘really real’,” Christian Scientists and Mormons were asking in the nineteenth century. “What is true religion?” “What must we do to be saved?” “What is the nature of community?” “How is the divine made known in the world?” “What are the make-up and the possibilities and limitations of human persons?” ask Moonies and Scientologists and Hare Krishnas and members of Eckankar and New Agers at the beginning of the twentieth-first century. These are not unfamiliar questions. They are the persistent theological questions that we in the mainline traditions ask as well, and they emerge from a variety of needs: social, spiritual, psychic, physical.
The construction of compelling responses to them requires theological creativity. It is in this aspect of new religions that I have been particularly interested: the relative power and creativity of their responses. Sometimes these groups fade away in less than a generation; sometimes they go horribly and dangerously astray. In cases like Christian Science, they persist without really flourishing. Or, like Mormonism, they persist and they flourish. Sometimes, as in the case of the New Age movement, they are much more a collection of ideas and practices than they are an organized institution.

However much these movements make use of what they often call “new revelations,” always they point both to the power and the limitations of traditional religious concepts, symbols, and rituals. Often the proliferation of new religious movements is interpreted as a sign of malaise in the culture, an indication that things are getting out of control. But it seems to me that religious innovation—which takes place, of course, both inside and outside established religious traditions—is always part of any culture. In an interestingly paradoxical way, this kind of innovation is a kind of conversation as well because it takes the questions so very seriously.

I have experienced the same kind of paradoxical, sometime volatile, combination of conservation and innovation in the theologies of women who are relatively new to the public expression of their beliefs and their experiences of the sacred. For the last several years I have been reading the theological writings of many women of different communities: liberal and conservative Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, Native American, New Age, Mormon. A great deal of what I have read is, as you would imagine, filled with rigorous and far-reaching critique of religious communities for their gender exclusiveness and oppression of women. That’s what I expected to find, and I did. But to my own surprise, the more I read the writings of both radical and more moderate religious feminists the more I began to think about how very conserving the most radical of feminists’ theologies have been and continue to be—not conservative, but conserving. And the obvious finally dawned on me—that to take something very, very seriously, no matter how much change one advocates, is to conserve it, to “save” it, to contribute to its healing—certainly to demonstrate its power and persistence.

And the obvious finally dawned on me—that to take something very, very seriously, no matter how much change one advocates, is to conserve it, to “save” it, to contribute to its healing—certainly to demonstrate its power and persistence.
Women have expended immense theological energy and creativity since the 1960s in demonstrating that their religious communities are more than capable of ignoring, silencing, and circumscribing the participation of half their members. Women have faced some hard and bitter realities about their traditions, and they have asked, “Is there anything worthwhile left?” Many, many, have answered, “Yes, there is.” But it is a “yes” that requires an acknowledgement of the worst before any authentic commitment can be made. Sheila Redmond, a counselor in Ottawa, Canada, who focuses on issues related to women and AIDS says that she has a quote attributed to Thomas Hardy on the blackboard in her office: “If a way to the better there be,/It exacts a full look at the worst.” Redmond keeps this quote always in front of her, because it undergirds her conviction that, “Whenever we fail to take a full look at the worst, whenever we deny the imperfections of our belief system, whenever we deny the evils our theologies have created and perpetuated, whenever we deny the abuse we have ourselves suffered from and caused in the name of our Christian beliefs, we risk, at the least, perpetuating the present violence and at the worst, causing even more harm however inadvertently.”2 Most of the time in her work, she tells us, she feels “knee deep in crocodiles,” but part of her work is to create worship services that call for ways to make the world safer for women and children and to demonstrate that our God is a God who demands that kind of change. That is a way of attributing great power, I think, to the possibilities in creative worship.

Rachel Adler, a Jewish theologian, formerly Orthodox and new Reform, approaches the need to acknowledge the worst from a different angle. In an essay on changing her mind about whether the menstrual purity regulation in Orthodox Judaism are positive or harmful for women—she now thinks the latter—she tells us that she does not think a religious tradition has to be inerrant in order to be “infinitely dear.”3 It only has to be inexhaustible—to be somehow bottomless, I assume she means, in its depth of meaning.

It is this bottomless depth of meaning that women speak of when they offer their “yes” to their religious communities. In my readings I have not come across women who say “yes” because they think theirs is the only one true religion, superior to all others. Rather they talk about their experiences with the major symbols of their traditions. Their “yes” has to do with the feelings and


experiences these symbols generate, the histories they evoke, the web of connections they sustain. Their “yes” comes with the insistence that critique is a way of knowing and of loving—sometimes ruefully, never without pain—but loving nonetheless. The painter Meinrad Craighead speaks of the persistently creative power of religious symbols as related to the principle of “indefinite extension,” a term she learned as an art major but has applied to the religious formation of her childhood in the Roman Catholic tradition. She has left this tradition officially but not viscerally, because the symbols of her childhood continue to shape her art. As is true for Craighead, the depth of meaning women experience in their religious traditions generates a creativity that is evident in new models of God, new rituals, new perspectives on ethics and ministry.

It is an interesting irony, I think, that the rigorous and far-reaching critique by women of their traditions has generated what amounts to a revitalization movement, a reformation. Women’s “yes” says that any authentic commitment to a religious tradition must integrate both the intellect and the affections—that there is something of the non-rational about loyalty to a religious tradition. I’m certainly not advocating the irrational here, but I am saying that any religious tradition that relies on the hyper-rational in its efforts to persuade is going to run out of steam. Much more is required.

I have also long been interested in looking at religious themes in literature. Since my early days as an English major, I have seen poetry and fiction as among the great preservers of religious language and symbols and among the most compelling sources of theological creativity. Poets and fiction writers have the freedom to be evocative rather than prescriptive in the use of religious concepts: the freedom to play on multiple meanings for religious language, in fact to count on multiple meanings. The poet creatively loosens up religious ideas rather than pines them down, intensifies religious symbols by asking questions about them. Poetry integrates intellectual and emotional responses. To “know” what a poem means requires a multiplicity of responses. Not all of those responses can be articulated verbally; some can only be “felt.” In other words, some of what a poem elicits is ineffable; it cannot be put into other words but it can offer the kind of knowledge that a lump in the throat points to—a response that comes from the depths of our beings.
Sometimes it is only the title of a poem that alerts us to religious meaning, sometimes just one line. Another time it is an image that the poet plays with throughout. In “Annunciation,” another of her poems, Joy Harjo counts on all the historical and devotional associations most of her readers will be able to make with the title of this poem about the birth of her granddaughter. This is not a poem about the Angel Gabriel announcing to Mary that she is to be the mother of Jesus. It is about a baby girl in her mother’s womb: “She is kicking, she is swimming/she is shining human laughter/as she takes a turn upstream/her mother’s dark crimson river.” This annunciation is not about an event in history considered unique by Christian tradition. “She isn’t the first red star/ in this watery universe,” writes Harjo, “nor will she be the last.”4 But can the reader refrain from making a connection with the old story and feeling how both stories deepen each other and tell us about the uniqueness and the ordinariness of any child’s coming into the world?

What about one of those old anthology favorites, Robert Frost’s “Nothing Gold Can Stay” with its single line about Eden interwoven with images of “going down” in nature:

Nature’s first green is gold,  
Her hardest hue to hold;  
Her early leaf’s a flower,  
But only so an hour;  
Then leaf subsides to leaf,  
Thus Eden sank to grief,  
So dawn goes down to day,  
Nothing gold can stay.5

Because of the power of “Eden” in Christianity and in culture, we know that there is more depth here than the literal meanings of the words suggest. “Thus Eden sank to grief,” the poet writes, and he is counting on our making all those connections with loss and regret and diminishment that the Fall stirs in us. The poet draws life from that ancient story and gives renewed life to it. It is not possible to be creative in this way when there is no vitality left in the symbols.

Or what about a poem like Philip Dacey’s “The Feet Man,” part of a prize-winning collection, Night Shift in the Crucifix Factory, whose title warns us that any religious whimsy in these poem will likely have a grotesque edge to it.

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In “The Feet Man,” the narrator tells us about the worst job he ever had: “Nailing Jesus’ feet to the cross on the/assembly line at the crucifix factory.” He has never thought of himself as a religious man before, but when he figures out that he has to strike the nails more than two thousand times a day he begins to see things and develop tremors and then to flinch, “as if I were the one getting pierced.” Finally, the foreman tells him that if he can’t calm down he’s going to lose his job. He does his best, he tells us, but it isn’t easy: “Imagine Jesus after Jesus coming down/at you along that line, and you with/your hammer poised, you knowing what you have to do to make a living.”

I doubt whether Dacey could have found a more gripping image of all the compromises we make, all the pain we inflict and endure, just to make our lives work. To say that he pounds his point home is understatement. He pounds it home two thousand times, and he knows that the power of his imagery will make the reader flinch along with the narrator.

It goes without saying that fiction is another art form that demonstrates the reciprocal energy between artistic and theological creativity. I am especially interested in how this dynamic works in popular fiction and the risks authors take in creating works that they hope will draw large audiences. Two recent works suggest that they will take quite a few. In Evensong, Gail Godwin takes religion and ministry and the relationship between theology and cultures as her subject matter. She gives us an argument between two characters, Margaret, the rector of the Episcopal church in a small city in the mountains of North Carolina, and Grace, the daughter of a fundamentalist preacher who’d “gone bad” at an earlier time in the town’s history. It is Advent, and Grace fervently wants Margaret and her congregation to join a march for Jesus’ birthday as a way to reconcile some class issues that have been troubling the town. Margaret has refused. Grace asks her, “Don’t you believe that if all of us come out in honor of His Son’s birthday, rain or shine, in the last days of the millennium, that the force of it, the sheer force of us lifting our voices in praise and offering our lives to him can bring change?”

Margaret gives a long answer—a speech, really—to this question. She begins by saying, “I believe that everything that happens brings change, Grace. As for marches, for whatever purpose, history certainly has shown that they can bring change, sometimes for the improvement of people’s lot, sometimes to

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whip people up for the worst sort of carnage of evil.” She goes on to say, “I believe we need change, but not apocalyptic change. We need the kind of change that comes out of foundation, not fireworks.” She concludes with a final zinger: “And nowhere in the Gospels do we ever hear mention of Jesus’s organizing a parade to get God’s attention.”

Margaret also says some things about the need for individual, interior change and the coming of a spiritual kingdom that don’t quite cut it for me. I want more emphasis on the importance of community, and, as someone who came of age in the ’60s, I think now and then we have to march. But I am obviously drawn into the discussion. This is an argument in a book that may be a bestseller about how to show forth the truths, the vitality, of our religious traditions and how to make the world a more just place. If this is indeed the stuff of bestsellers, then we have the assurance that the power of these ideas transcends the boundaries of the institutional church.

Wally Lamb’s *I Know This Much is True* is another such popular novel, a *New York Times* best seller and an Oprah Winfrey book club pick. Lamb does not present the subject matter of his novel as obviously religious; it is about identical twin brothers, one a paranoid schizophrenic. But religious themes and questions pervade it. Throughout there is ongoing conversation about institutional religion, about religious devotion and faith, about the Bible and its uses. Dominick’s brother Thomas has cut off his hand in the public library. He has made a sacrifice, according to this understanding, to stop the war in the Persian Gulf. For this he is judged by the world as crazy. At one of the most poignant moments in the novel, Dominick is in a police car accompanying Thomas back to a psychiatric hospital. Thomas asks his brother to read from the 26th Psalm: “The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom should I fear? … The Lord is my life’s refuge; of whom should I be afraid?” The driver reached back over and turned off the radio. Even the dispatcher back at the station shut up.” Uttered even in this most bleak and chaotic of situations, the words are powerful. But not for Dominick. He continues to read, but he is having none of what he calls Bible voodoo. Thomas had also quoted scripture when he cut off his hand: “If thy right hand offend thee….” But by the end of this very long novel, Dominick has come not only to find something of value in the Bible; he can also offer a “yes” about other things. He has, he testifies,
found that “God exists in the roundness of things. This much, at least, I’ve
g figured out. This much I know is true.” I do not see the unfolding of this novel
as offering a simple message through the medium of a complex plot: the
triumph of religion over skepticism—cynicism, really. I see it as a
demonstration of how a novelist finds immense dramatic and theological depth
to draw from in the Christian tradition. He gives religion a run for its money—
the worst with the best—but the final word is “yes.”

That there can be a “yes” at all at this moment in history, given how
much we realize about religion’s capacity to bring about destruction as well as
transformation, says to me that we can afford to have much more confidence in
the power of our religious symbols than we often have and thereby generate
more theological creativity of the kind that keeps our traditions alive, their
symbols vital. We worry about so many things that we don’t need to worry
about, in my opinion. We worry about religious pluralism, but I have no doubt
that our tradition shines brightly enough and that it will endure if it is full of
life. We worry that rigorous criticism of the excesses of our traditions will bring
them crashing down. We especially worry about angry critiques—but at least
they’re a sign of life. I am convinced that the church is safer from our anger
than it is from our apathy.

We worry about syncretism—that our traditions will become such a
mish-mash of influences that they will lose their distinctiveness and authenticity.
But there has always been syncretism. How can there not be? Religions are
dynamic entities, not static. They come in contact with all kinds of different
influences in the culture, including other religious traditions. What we used to
call syncretism we are coming to see as a “gift exchange.” We have gifts to offer
and gifts to receive, even if discerning judgment suggests that, of course, some
gifts need to be returned or never opened in the first place. We worry that we
might cross boundaries that will carry us right out of our communities. To the
contrary, I contend that if our traditions have vital depth to them, the
boundaries will take care of themselves. They will be permeable but not full of
holes. We worry that pluralism will lead to relativism—an inability or an
unwillingness to value any one tradition over another—but I think we
underestimate the powerful formative powers of the symbols that have shaped
us—the history and depth of response we bring to them.
The theological creativity we encounter in many parts of our culture counters the assumption that our task as members of religious communities is to conserve the vitality of our symbols by closing down on them. It is an impossible task anyway. In attempting to accomplish it we are likely to find ourselves guarding a static center with a shrinking circumference. A poem like “Perhaps the World Ends Here” helps us to know that, if we work to keep the center dynamic, symbols like the communion table will continue to be a source of depth in the broader culture. We will recognize them in new forms and rejoice over what they convey with an interpretive creativity that is its own kind of theological gift to the culture.
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