

Recap:

sarts Annual Meeting & Events 2011

In November, the Society sponsored a number of meetings and sessions at the national conference of the American Academy of Religion (AAR) and the Society of Biblical Literature in San Francisco (SBL). Presentations by both senior and emerging scholars, opportunities for networking with like-minded scholars in the arts, religion, and theological studies, for mentoring, and for discussing trends in our various arenas of creative and scholarly work made this a rich brew.

On Friday afternoon (November 18), we co-sponsored a session with the Arts, Literature and Religion Section of the AAR. A panel of noted scholars and graduate students addressed the topic of “New Frontiers in Theological Aesthetics: Taking Stock and Charting Courses.” Designed to honor the work of Alejandro Garcia-Rivera, the panel featured energetic short three-person presentations on topics that Alex addressed.

That evening we held our annual **sarts** reception, where we honored the artistic work of the late Stephen De Staebler. A recent double issue of **arts**, edited by Diane Apostolos-Cappadona and Wilson Yates, featured Stephen’s sculpture. It was supported by the Center for the Arts, Religion, and Education (CARE) at the Graduate Theological Union. In addition, the many contributions of the late Doug Adams were also featured as we drank wine and ate tasty desserts.

Two presentations followed on Saturday morning (November 19). First, the 2011 Luce Fellow, Sara Patterson of Hanover College presented her research in a lively talk titled, “A Gimme Mountain: Religious Expression and Experience at Salvation Mountain.” Second, Bay Area poet Jane Hirshfield offered a stimulating and inspiring talk titled, “Given Sugar, Given Salt: Poetry, Art, and Inclusion.”

Please read more about these events on the following pages. And plan to join us next year in Chicago!

*Deborah Haynes, Co-Chair, sarts
Marketing and Promotion Committee*



Golden Gate Bridge, San Francisco, California.

arts Panel Honors Alejandro Garcia-Rivera

Cecilia Gonzalez-Andrieu, PhD



Pioneering theologian Alejandro (Alex) García-Rivera (1951-2010) was a committed scholar to the end. During the last weeks of his life, as Alex met with colleagues and students who came to his bedside, he constantly expressed the hope that the “paradigm shift” he had begun would continue to gain momentum. Shortly after his passing, his current and former students and colleagues began to think of ways to honor him while moving the scholarly

conversation about theological aesthetics forward. This had been his last charge to them.

The result was the collaboration “New Frontiers in Theological Aesthetics: Taking Stock and Charting Courses via the Sketches of Alejandro García-Rivera.” The work for the session included the collaborative sharing of papers leading up to a public presentation on November 18, 2011 during the AAR Annual meeting. The standing room only crowd was regaled by accounts both intensely personal and theoretical about Alex’s far reaching impact. Scholars explored Alex’s insistence on the potential theological aesthetics holds for becoming a unitive discourse for respectful and fruitful engagement among diverse fields and communities.

The session, chaired by Mia Mochizuki, included brief looks at the work of theological aesthetics and the liturgy (Thomas Scirghi, SJ), art and religion methodology (Cecilia González-Andrieu), the impact on the dialogue with science (Oleg Bychkov and Mark Graves), and aesthetics and ethics (William O’Neill, SJ). Additionally, although unable to be present in person, papers were read on behalf of Ronald Nakasone addressing interfaith questions and Frank Burch Brown who offered his wise assessment and vision for the future of the field. The session, designed as a round table, included short responses from doctoral students from the Graduate Theological Union. Student responses were given by Larry Fraher, Patricia McKee, April Lynch, Jenny Patten, Elaine Belz, Peter Doebler and Trung Pham. Participants were also presented a copy of the *Cithara Journal*, Volume 51, No.1, a memorial issue also dedicated to García-Rivera. Many of Alex’s close

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Professor Gonzalez-Andrieu returned to her alma mater LMU after completing her doctorate at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley. At the GTU she was the first scholar to complete a doctorate combining systematic theology and art & religion. Gonzalez-Andrieu is one of the leading scholars developing the field of theological aesthetics which she proposes as a way to bring communities together, respect and celebrate otherness and lift the theological insights of those who know and express themselves in ways beyond the textual. She has been recognized with awards for her writing from the Catholic Press Association, as a teaching scholar by the GTU, for her work on behalf of the Latino community by the Hispanic Theological Initiative and as one of the seven most promising theologians of the next generation by *America Magazine*. Gonzalez-Andrieu has recently published in **arts** an article for the Symposium on the art of John August Swanson—a symposium that she also edited (**arts** 21:2).

friends and colleagues were in attendance and the gathered community was particularly moved by the presence of Alex's wife, Kathryn.

The session was sponsored by **sarts** with organizing support from the AAR's Arts, Literature, and Religion Section, the Graduate Theological Union and Loyola Marymount University.

Further information about Alejandro García-Rivera is available at:

Journal of the American Academy of Religion:
<http://jaar.oxfordjournals.org/content/79/2/280.extract>

Religious Studies News:
http://rsnonline.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=742&Itemid=836

Also see:
http://www.americamagazine.org/blog/entry.cfm?entry_id=4758

Have you seen the new **sarts** website?

sarts launched its new website, custom-designed by Keypoppy Christian Resources, in early July 2010. The new site offers a variety of resources to online visitors navigating the intersection of the arts and theological/religious studies: feature stories in **arts** magazine, information on fellowships, updates on **sarts** programming and workshops, links to other

resources on the web, and a calendar of events. The new site also provides several innovative features available only to **sarts** members. Members can make online payment of dues and register for **sarts** programs at AAR/SBL meetings. They can exhibit their art in personal online galleries or share syllabi. The site also gives members access to the membership directory and the ability to post events on the calendar.



www.societyarts.org

Poet Jane Hirshfield addresses arts session at AAR

Mark S. Burrows

What exactly is poetry? Or, more to the point: what sort of *art* is poetry, and what does the poet’s work teach us about the arts in more general terms? In keeping with **sarts**’s tradition of inviting artists to address us as one component of our scheduled sessions, this year’s annual meeting featured poet Jane Hirshfield who explored such questions in her presentation “Given Sugar, Given Salt: Poetry, Art, and Inclusion.” Her talk shaped itself around poems she read, beginning with her translations of ancient Japanese poetry and then turning to a sampling of her own work taken from her six published collections of poems. None of us wondered whether these were “spiritual” poems, or even religious. After all, how else should one describe a poem like one of those she read and discussed in this session, “Tree,” which tells of her “decision” to allow a redwood to root in a “second growth” from a fallen stump, and begin to grow next to her home in Mill Valley, knowing that this is “foolish” but knowing as well that

Even in this
one lifetime
you will have to choose.

And choose what? To honor the tree by letting it do what it means to do? As she goes on to suggest in the poem’s final lines,

Already the first branch-tips brush at the window.
Softly, calmly, immensity taps at your life.

As she explored this poem with us, we each conjured in our minds the vision of a small house dominated by the mass of a slowly maturing redwood. We also imagined, following her lead, what it means that our lives are sheltered by such “immensities” that exceed our knowing, and even our surmising.

Each event in our lives—in their inclusivity—offers an occasion to reflect on such larger questions and deeper wonderings than our prosaic eyes at first allow us to see. Poets like Ms. Hirshfield assist us in facing such larger and unavoidable inevitabilities. Her poems tutor us to open ourselves to this “inclusivity” of life, both its “sugar” and its “salt,” which is able to discern larger meanings than we might otherwise notice if left to our own less attentive devices. Is the “immensity”



Jane Hirshfield

she mentions a religious or spiritual category? Or is this sense of an “immensity,” as a tacit dimension of our human existence, an invitation to what she elsewhere describes as “an enlargement of being, the slowed and deepened breath that comes with the release of fixed ideas for the more complex read” (from *Hiddenness, Uncertainty, Surprise: Three Generative Energies of Poetry* [Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 2008], 33)? And is this a spiritual or religious “margin” of insight, properly speaking, or something else entirely?

The fact of Ms. Hirshfield’s religious identity—that she is a long-time practitioner of Zen Buddhism and has for many years been associated with Tassajara Zen Mountain Monastery—did not arise until she herself addressed the matter after her talk, admitting that she did not want to be considered as a narrowly or specifically “Buddhist” poet. But is poetry, and art more generally, a specifically “religious” enterprise? Or, is there a poetry that is specifically *Buddhist* or *Christian* or affiliated with any other religious tradition? Or, is the specific *religious* affiliation of a given artist germane to the integrity or “witness” of their work? Is “inclusivity,” in other words, a proper recognition of art’s capacity to “see” and “speak” within a broader and finally more “ultimate” human horizon? In offering what she calls a “seven-word definition for Buddhism”: viz., “Everything changes; everything is connected; pay attention.” Would this be different in the hands of a properly *Christian* theologian? One hopes not.

One moment in her talk points to the artistic mastery one finds in her poems, and illustrates the entrancement we felt during that session. She selected one of her poems, “Da Capo,” taken from a collection entitled *Lives of the Heart* (HarperCollins, 1997). Before reading the poem, she commented that this particular piece had elicited a vexed response from a reader whose attempt to make the soup described in the poem had been regrettably unsuccessful. Of course, the “directions” are hardly adequate as anything beyond a general summary of the ingredients required for making a lentil soup: “[S]lice carrots, onions, celery. . .” and so forth. Beyond a naming of the ingredients, Hirshfield offers few details about how to prepare the soup—nothing that would suffice for a recipe in a proper cookbook, something the poet certainly knows about as a one-time sous-chef at the celebrated vegetarian restaurant “Greens” in San Francisco. But this is a poem, after all, and the opening line, “Take the used-up heart like a pebble / and throw it far out”, should have been notice enough of this.

As she spoke about this poem, moving quickly past this disenchanted reader’s complaint, she remarked that “there is always a new place to begin” in our lives, no matter the difficulties we face. The poem begins with that opening line, describing what would happen if one threw one’s heart out into a quiet lake. “Soon there is nothing left,” she goes on to write. “Soon the last ripple exhausts itself / in the weeds.” What follows is her listing of the ingredients needed for lentil soup, and as the short poem turns from this, the reader follows a line that

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Mark Burrows is the author and editor of numerous books and more than fifty articles. Burrows’ writings explore a range of topics related to medieval mysticism, aesthetics, poetics, and contemporary culture. He is a recent Henry Luce III Fellow in Theology (2007-2008), during which time he completed work on a forthcoming book, *Untamed Wisdom: Mystics and Poets in Search of God*. Past president of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality (2003) and current poetry editor of *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality*, Burrows is an oblate at Glastonbury Abbey in Hingham, MA, where he frequently teaches and leads retreats. In the spring of 2009, he co-founded an emergent worship gathering in Framingham called OpenSpirit (www.comeopenspirit.org).

ends with a one-word imperative: “Eat.” This is not the command—or is it invitation?—uttered by a minister or priest at the height of the eucharistic liturgy, “Take and eat.” Or is it? Is it anything different than this, this poem which joins in pointing toward our yearning for communion and suggests the courage required to take up our broken or belittled heart and begin again—“from the beginning” (or, literally, “from the head”) as the Italian title suggests? The poem then moves adroitly away from admonition to invitation: “You may do this, I tell you, it is permitted”, closing with a line that returns to voice another imperative, this time one that looks forward: “Begin again the story of your life.”

Is this a poem about “inclusion”? Perhaps, in the sense that occasions of loss, crisis, disappointment, as “Da Capo” suggests, are never only about endings. They are moments of decision, calling us toward yet unanticipated new beginnings in our lives. But how exactly are we to “begin again”? Making soup is a metaphor that points toward creativity, and more than this: toward our capacity to sustain life in abundance and with attention to beauty in a physical, bodily sense. In this sense, Hirshfield’s poem invites us to move from the note of despondency that shapes the poem’s atmosphere at the outset toward an “enlargement” that finds voice in the poem’s concluding invitation. Here, we find ourselves facing at least one of the primary functions of poetry, and art more generally—though, true to her vocation, Ms. Hirshfield does not *assert* this in the poem. Neither does her poem make such an assertion; indeed, few poets or artists voice *assertions* about what it is that they make. What she did do was to suggest how a poem like “Da Capo,” beginning with two unrelated metaphors—the wounded heart thrown out “like a pebble” into a lake, and the domestic task of making soup—moves toward a way of reframing one’s own life, of beginning again, and in this sense is a poem about one of the many “lives of the heart.” In her remarks at this session, she suggested as much if in a less direct manner, commenting after reading this poem that “each moment in our lives is a new place to begin.” Conversion of heart, whatever this means, can never be confined to the past tense.

In one of her published essays on poetry, Jane Hirshfield suggests that “the part of art that is art, and not device, unshackles us from usefulness almost entirely.” But is this really the case? Is the invitation that finds voice in such succinct forms of the genre we have come to call “wisdom literature” finally “useless”? Such questions needed no answer among those gathered, in focused attention, for Ms. Hirshfield’s talk. We knew that the answer would come in the living, and in sensing the presence of an “immensity” that calls us to a more capacious and generous way of life.