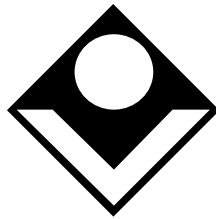

LITERATURE AND BELIEF

Edited by Jesse S. Crisler



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Volume 37.1

Center for the Study of Christian Values in Literature

B R I G H A M Y O U N G U N I V E R S I T Y

LITERATURE AND BELIEF
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EDITORS' PREFACE

Three articles in this issue discuss work by writers surnamed either Eliot or Elliott. First, Jason M. Coats provocatively positions T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1944) within the context of both Eliot's personal life, social awareness, religious views, and political leanings and events in England and Europe during the early years of World War I. That Eliot hoped to offer a largely secular audience what Coats terms "devotional poetics" accounts for his having selected the *New English Weekly* as a vehicle not only for the first appearance of three of the quartets but also the publication of a slightly revised version of the fourth, "Burnt Norton," which had initially appeared in a pre-war collection of Eliot's poetry. That the quartets have since achieved status as Eliot's late masterpiece underscores his own vision of what still then lay before England in the wake of devastating global conflict.

Next, John Mazaheri examines the nature of love for Maynard Gilfil, the protagonist of George Eliot's novella *Mr. Gilfil's Love Story*, the second of three shorter works comprising her first fictional collection, *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858). Mazaheri's close reading of several passages in the novella reveals that what many readers consider a tale of sentimental love on the part of the Shepperton pastor should also be viewed as empathetic love by an ordinary cleric for his long dead wife, that very ordinariness making the work an example not of Romanticism in which passion for a loved one constitutes love of God but of Realism, infused by Gilfil's love for his wife and his God.

In a third essay B. W. Jorgenson traces the life and reading of novelist, essayist, and professor George P. Elliott as a means of illuminating his "public Quarrel with the madness of Cold War America," more specifically, a kaleidoscope of what he deemed social and intellectual ills undermining American culture beginning in the 1960s, including Modernity, Postmodernity, Aestheticism, the Bomb, Nihilism, and other lesser movements. For Elliott what can finally save not just America but also the world generally is literature, words

themselves, but only if writers and their readers remember their literary roots, especially his own favorite poet, Dante.

Besides these three pieces devoted to two Eliots and one Elliott, this issue also includes an article by Christine Grogan highlighting the significance of female characters in two stories by the late Robert Stone. Oddly enough, the first of these, "Helping," features Grace and Chas Elliot, a couple whose co-dependence repeatedly cripples their mutual struggles to adapt to changing directions in their lives. In the other story, "Miserere," Mary, more selfish than either of the Eliots, must ultimately confess a sin of omission that she buried several years earlier.

Terry W. Thompson's essay, the final one in this issue, does not treat anyone surnamed Eliot, Elliott, or Elliot, whether author or character, probing, as it does, the likely influence of triptychs painted by famous Renaissance artists on the "spiritual triptych" encountered in Henry James's short story "The Jolly Corner." Yet an essay on a work by James in another way inherently commands a place in this miscellany of articles featuring "Eliots" of various stripes, since James himself wrote an early review titled "The Novels of George Eliot," which appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* in October 1866, while T. S. Eliot appraised the work of James in "In Memory of Henry James" a little over fifty years later in the *Egoist* in 1918, two years after James's death.

That all of the essays in this issue are linked to a similar surname is, of course, purely coincidental. That they all affirm a continuing interest in matters of faith and spirituality for five fairly disparate writers is not, for that interest appropriately defines anew the underlying principles of *Literature and Belief*.

—Jesse S. Crisler

The New English Weekly, March 21, 1940

50 George Road

"East Coker": Poem by T. S. Eliot

THE NEW ENGLISH WEEKLY & THE NEW AGE

A Review of Public Affairs, Literature and the Arts

Vol. XVI, No. 5 THURSDAY, MARCH 21, 1940 SIXPENCE

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Notes of the Week

While Stalin's abrupt pact with Hitler results certainly in the end to a complete peace in Europe, it is far from clear that Britain will manage to bring the British war to stop. The sort of operations we are likely to have to see in the next few weeks is a matter which it is difficult to say. It is possible that the British will have to see the Soviet Union as a new ally, but it is also possible that the Soviet Union will be a new enemy. It is also possible that the Soviet Union will be a new ally, but it is also possible that the Soviet Union will be a new enemy. It is also possible that the Soviet Union will be a new ally, but it is also possible that the Soviet Union will be a new enemy.

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Cover page of the March 21, 1940, issue of *New English Weekly* in which T. S. Eliot's "East Coker" first appeared.

T. S. Eliot, *New English Weekly*, and the Audience of *Four Quartets*

Jason M. Coats
Virginia Commonwealth University

Before they were consolidated as *Four Quartets* (1944), “Burnt Norton,” “East Coker,” “The Dry Salvages,” and “Little Gidding” appeared individually in a little magazine called *New English Weekly*, which Eliot’s friend John Hayward called “the obscure little journal Tom is interested in” (qtd. in Gardner 17).¹ This journal had started as a vehicle for monetary reform, but lately it had been trending toward debates about reinvigorating the Anglican Church and the overall fervor of Christian believers. At the time of the quartets’s publication during World War II, the two editorial directions were still locked in uneasy tension. Why Eliot should have chosen this venue for his late-career masterpiece may not be transparently obvious, since more popular magazines would

¹As Denis Donoghue emphasizes, the quartets may not at first have been conceived as a group of four: “Burnt Norton” had appeared at the end of Eliot’s *Collected Poems, 1909–35* (1936) and may have seemed like a capstone to his career. In any event, the poems did not appear in *New English Weekly* in the order one finds them in *Four Quartets*. “East Coker” came out first in 1940, and then “Burnt Norton” was republished later that year, followed by “The Dry Salvages” in 1941 and “Little Gidding” a year later.

surely have welcomed these poems and reached a larger reading audience. Furthermore, his motives for placing religious poetry within a quasi-religious periodical should not be misunderstood as “preaching to the choir,” since there were more theologically consistent (and coherent) journals he might have chosen instead.

The ethics of applying literature to the task of conversion had vexed Eliot since his own, very public, confession of faith in 1928. He proves even more pessimistic about the *efficacy* of literary persuasion. In his fascinatingly despondent essay “Religion and Literature,” he voices doubts that any morally upright literature can long sustain its effects upon a reader, since contemporary readers read, unaware of their susceptibility. Cavalier readers will simply unconsciously replace one loosely held belief with another when the next novel or poem is read, fueling Eliot’s anxieties that virtuous works of literature have only transient effects. If the overwhelming weight of modern printed matter works against belief and in favor of cynical liberalism, religious literature would have to be very striking indeed to have any efficacy at all.

Unfortunately, Eliot believed most of it was badly written. Ever willing to set himself as the judge of literary quality, Eliot casually laments its paucity in contemporary religious literature. He explains its shortcomings by blaming the degenerate culture that it aims to prod toward righteousness. Even the work of G. K. Chesterton, whom he admires, cannot persuade its readership as effectively as the poets of Eliot’s cherished metaphysical period, whose sporadic libertinism was tempered by a social expectation of religious commitment. In contrast, Chesterton’s writing suffers, Eliot believes, because it must impose a moral condition upon a representation of “a world which is definitely not Christian” (“Religion” 100), and although the disparity is of course instructive, it feels forced. The religious author, he insists, must attempt the impossible task of converting a readership whose faith has waned from a communally shared set of beliefs in favor of an increasingly cynical relativism:

when the common code is detached from its theological background, and is consequently more and more merely a matter of

habit, it is exposed both to prejudice and to change. At such times morals are open to being altered by literature; so that we find in practice that what is “objectionable” in literature is merely what the present generation is not used to. It is a commonplace that what shocks one generation is accepted quite calmly by the next. (97)

By complaining that what he wishes “is a literature which should be *unconsciously*, rather than deliberately and defiantly, Christian” (100), Eliot seems to be advocating for some sort of moral shame-facedness, automatic squeamishness, or bodily uneasiness: something felt rather than thought, because of long habituation. Since the preconditions for such unconscious religious belief are systemic rather than individualistic, Eliot fears that neither he nor Chesterton stands much chance in the face of such a pessimistic role for religious literary rhetoric.

But it may be altogether too easy to dismiss the original provenance of *Four Quartets* as Eliot’s attempt to turn away from the disappointments of liberalism and speak only to the Anglican faithful. The initial publication of the poems in *New English Weekly* was part of a concerted effort to brand a devotional poetics that aims for a popular audience without succumbing to popular art’s forced, and therefore false, consciousness. By doing so, Eliot advocated a turgidly difficult meeting of crisis and belief that takes place entirely within the individual—a spiritual awakening that *New English Weekly*’s audience would be predisposed to recognize, understand, and admire. That secular capitalism and Liberal politics offered no coherent hope for English culture is part of *Four Quartets*’s theological premise, but the sequence’s religious rhetoric operates through an appropriation of the journal’s mission of faith. Such belief was once and might still have been true throughout England, and war-weary readers might find its subjunctive demonstration especially attractive during the London Blitz and its aftermath. This strategy represented an opportunity literature is not often afforded to change hearts and minds.

The transition Eliot bemoans in “Religion and Literature,” when the “common code” of worship becomes empty habit rather than

real belief, was not guaranteed to flow inexorably toward decay. He merely proposes that the modern reading public had become particularly susceptible to suggestion. By the logic Eliot advances, the same cultural forces that quickened the decline of shared belief now simultaneously leave the English vulnerable to having their newly acquired liberalism shaken and supplanted in favor of something more coherently righteous. Eliot's own conversion had proven solitary, difficult, and intensely cerebral. Any religious proselytization Eliot was party to would need to reject the slick parlor tricks of charlatans and demagogues that he adamantly decried in his political adversaries—otherwise, his religious intent might be mistaken for forced conversion as well as *feeling* forced, like Chesterton's overcompensations. His desire for an "unconscious," holistic suasion was an attempt to allow for a religious experience analogous to the one he had himself undergone. *Four Quartets* lays the groundwork for such a conversion but leaves the actual miracle suspended ephemerally and precariously in air, just as occurs when the rarified lotus flower rises from Burnt Norton's garden in the first section of "Burnt Norton," only to disappear a moment later.

Furthermore, *New English Weekly* was directed at an audience that combined intellectual discourse (literary, cultural, political, and economic) with an easy assumption of Christian belief. Placing his poems in this journal meant allowing the paratextual frame of their first appearance to be consonant with his recent religious arguments in *The Idea of a Christian Society* (1939) and *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (1948), the former of which was reviewed in the journal, which also published versions of the first three chapters of the latter in 1943. By publishing in *New English Weekly*, Eliot could reasonably anticipate that his wartime readers would encounter his poems within the frame of unconsciously shared belief that the journal modeled, and which might thereby condition their reception.

Four Quartets is thus able to offer a type of extremely subtle religious persuasion wherein the pressures of enduring the war and questioning which values exactly were being defended by British soldiers are met with the unexpected pleasures brought by acceding to divine providence. At the very least, readers eventually experience a welcome

relief from the anxieties the sequence houses, which is analogous to the end of uncertainty that occurs along with one's surrender of ultimate control of, and responsibility for, events. In a very real sense Eliot spoke from within, and first and foremost to, the "Community of Christians" he describes in the *Idea of a Christian Society* when he chose to launch these poems in that journal (28). Others only overhear that conversation. If by eavesdropping one voluntarily decides to substitute a faith-directed perspective for liberal relativism, the poems would have sponsored that outcome without appearing to force the issue.

When Eliot began composing his "patriotic" wartime quartets, he manipulated their appearance to ensure that they would be read in light of his prose responses to political fanaticism.² Whereas "Burnt Norton" had first been published without fanfare at the end of *Collected Poems, 1909–1935*, in April 1936, each of the wartime quartets was a *cause célèbre*, heavily publicized by *New English Weekly*. After "East Coker" caused the Easter 1940 number to sell out (as did the pamphlet version of the poem the journal subsequently issued), the number including the "The Dry Salvages" was advertised in the two issues preceding its appearance on February 27, 1941, and readers were asked to order their issues beforehand because of wartime paper shortages. After Eliot ceased publication of *Criterion* in 1939, he began writing periodic commentaries in *New English Weekly* with the same dry title ("A Commentary") and wry editorial voice, shuttling his literary readers over to a journal begun by A. R. Orage as a Social Credit organ espousing monetary reform through a National Dividend. All of these occurred in the same journal that saw the bulk of Eliot's correspondence clarifying, quibbling over, and defending *After Strange Gods* (1934) and especially *The Idea of a Christian Society*.

²As Sebastian Knowles notes, Peter Ackroyd's biography of Eliot unearthed a draft copy of Eliot's essay *The Three Voices of Poetry* (1945) in which he strikes out a descriptor of the three wartime quartets as "patriotic" (Ackroyd 264; Knowles 102).

Publishing the wartime quartets in *New English Weekly* afforded Eliot unique opportunities to shape the emerging persona of *Four Quartets*. First of all, since Eliot had consistently referred his readers in each journal to his separate activities in the other, the authoritative, critical voice commanding *Criterion* could continue commenting in *New English Weekly* with little interruption even after *Criterion* was defunct. He could thus sustain a relationship with readers he had already primed to embrace difficulty as a means of staving off the demands of ideological partisanship by revealing their zealotry as vast oversimplifications inadequate to address the complexities of the 1930s. Eliot's frequent editorial sallies reminding readers of his Christian prose suggest that the journal's regular readership might reasonably think first of the quartets as coming from the author of *The Idea of a Christian Society* rather than *The Waste Land* (1922).³

Moreover, the eclectic preoccupations of the journal allowed the quartets's publication to link them to its complex web of *engagé* activities. When Orage returned from his long American pilgrimage in service to the cult of the mystic guru G. I. Gurdjieff, he started *New English Weekly* on the model of his previous project *New Age* as an instrument to explain, organize, and implement Social Credit in England. Upon Orage's death in 1934, Philip Mairet took over as editor, modifying the journal's original goals to include his concept of "Christian Sociology." A member of the Chandos Group, Mairet signed on the former guild socialist Maurice Reckitt (who reviewed *The Idea of a Christian Society* for the journal) as a regular contributor, and the instability caused by this confluence of active theories made for a fascinatingly incoherent confabulation of fervencies. Although he had been a frequent and prominent contributor during

³In a review of Eliot's *Later Poems* (1941), dated September 25, 1941, for example, R. A. Hodgson singles out "Choruses from 'The Rock'" for equal billing with *The Waste Land* (221). Whether this valuation results from the enthusiastic treatment of a national dividend in "The Rock," its Christian devotional choruses, or simply a profound misreading on the part of the reviewer is unclear.

Orage's editorial direction, Ezra Pound's anti-usury slurs and laments over the journal's new religious focus found themselves shunted more and more to the correspondence section, while Eliot's contributions found a serious audience of periodical interlocutors, among them Reckitt and V. A. Demant, author of *The Religious Prospect* (1939) and editor of *The Faith That Illuminates* (1935), in which Eliot published "Religion and Literature." All of these figures were as likely to counsel more expansive and ambitious thinking as to advise reigning it in.

Eliot's frequent presence, the journal's serious openness to engage diverse ideologies, and its sustained commitment to radical intervention in economic and social systems also began to attract a much different audience. Louis MacNeice and George Orwell both contributed to *New English Weekly* during the years of the three wartime quartets, and Eliot in his commentaries reached out to Stephen Spender and Cyril Connolly via their nascent journal *Horizon* ("On" 251), now not as a rival editor but as a fellow supporter of small journals, commiserating about the difficulty of keeping them afloat. He also praised some aspects of Ronald Duncan's *Townsmen*, about which he opined that its remarkable affinities with *New English Weekly* ought to outweigh the extremities to which the new journal's editor seemed intent on taking it:

I feel like a Tory who becomes aware that he is also (having been born when he was, and not several generations earlier) something of a Liberal; or a *requete* who has strayed in to a meeting of phalangists, or a Frenchman attached to the *ancien régime*, who, having come to accept the Marseillaise as the national anthem, might find himself gaoled for singing it. ("Commentary" 75)

Eliot's ruefulness derives from Duncan's similar religious and economic interests and also the obvious "influence" of Ezra Pound over the impressionable contributors of the *Townsmen*, an influence Eliot himself had personally once felt. Here, he counsels them that Pound's hobbyhorses could be beneficial as long as their sway "does

not become a possession" (75). These olive branches to the Auden Generation and to Pound's acolytes represent not so much an attempt to expand his readership but to seize control of the context by which such readers could access his new poems. Interposed between the rising successors of *Criterion*, Eliot's chosen forum could assume an *engagé* pose while maintaining its characteristic cautious thoughtfulness, and though *New English Weekly* had sacrificed the single-minded editorial discipline of Orage's tenure, the quartets as read within that journal would still seem a coherent island in the midst of a composite ocean of competing explanatory systems.

In sum, *New English Weekly* allowed Eliot opportunities to qualify his earlier authorial personae and to continue from "Burnt Norton" to "Little Gidding" newly equipped to speak authoritatively on Anglicanism and English society. It also afforded him the chance to translate his prose interests in ethics, difficulty, and abstraction into his poetry as if those interests had always been consistent fundamentals of his social thought rather than belated reactions to specific cultural pressures. The autobiographical efforts of the three quartets that first appeared in the journal depict how Eliot had come to occupy his current position in English letters from the departure of his ancestor Andrew Elyot from the historical hamlet of East Coker in Somerset in 1669 (Gardner 42) to the distinguished tenure of his family within Massachusetts Bay and St. Louis environs, described in "The Dry Salvages," to Eliot's eventual return to England, commitment to its national church, and wartime defense as an air raid warden, as depicted in "Little Gidding." The unasked question the wartime quartets answer concerns Eliot's *physical* presence in London, not his intellectual position. They establish his credentials as an ancestrally Christian defender of England rather than as a newly converted Tory or as an American arriviste. The speaking persona is always conservative and post-conversional.

The implicit consistency of his *New English Weekly* persona allowed Eliot to produce within the structural and thematic difficulty of *Four Quartets* the poetic counterpart of the double-mindedness, cautious abstraction, and priority of Christian ethics over politics that he advocated in his cultural prose. The *Criterion* commentaries

had merely reacted to recently published books and historical events that seemed in the moment to require his studious inveighing. As a consequence, they gradually took on a haphazard and accretionary politics (if indeed those commentaries can be said to have a politics at all). But Eliot's reduced role in *New English Weekly* allowed him to repackage the asperity and authority of his *Criterion* persona's aesthetic pronouncements with the new benefit of Christian humility, the ascription to which the later journal's readers would be much more receptive.

Readers of each quartet must balance two difficult situations in their minds at once. "Burnt Norton" tasks its addressee with contemplation of the "world of speculation" that might have been and continues to color that which has been (217), to exist in between the garden of lotus flowers and the London tube, thinking of both. "East Coker" balances the time past of Eliot's ancestry with the time present of his return to England, overlaying the two to legitimate the familial tradition and melancholy flavor behind the voice's claim to loss. In "The Dry Salvages" Eliot conjures the animist deities peopling the Mississippi and the dangerous rocks off Cape Ann, Massachusetts, coupling these with a geographically distant England, to which, along with its established church, Eliot has sworn allegiance. "Little Gidding" compares the martyred Christian Society of Nicholas Ferrar's experimental seventeenth-century commune with the beleaguered populace of London during the Battle of Britain. Above and beyond the cognitive expense of these parallels, readers are then expected to seek the four instruments of the persona, the four elements (earth, wind, water, and air), and the four seasons in a remarkably dexterous interweaving that eventually belabored Eliot's composition of "Little Gidding" but gives the finished sequence of four poems an aura of completeness, totality, and coherence.

Four Quartets's initial provenance in *New English Weekly* thus enacts a Janus-faced, doubled outreach through an accretionary persona. The poem creates an abstract version of the Christian Society to the sympathetic audience aware of Eliot and his public cultural activities even as it engages with the equally active young intellectual "men of letters" Eliot had earlier identified with fanatical simplifiers

in his *Criterion* commentaries. John Xiros Cooper identifies this latter group as the “mandarinate” (31), the group of committed, *engagé* thinkers who had rejected the status quo, amelioration, and gradualism in the early thirties but had increasingly begun to question their earlier fervencies after the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (August 23, 1939) muddied the ideological waters.⁴ To satisfy the mandarinate’s rigorous requirements, the poem would need to establish itself in league with potentially radical commitment toward the betterment of systemic inequities. It would also increasingly be expected to provide directions for how the intellectual might reconcile qualms about liberal democracy in order to function independently and competently within the nation-state at war. Finally, it would need to strike the right note of muted righteousness and elevated purveyance over the political situation—to indicate its poet’s savviness about the rigors of ideology without turning off its readers by reiterating old grievances.

While Cooper’s history of the reception of the poem is utterly convincing in its account of *Four Quartets*’s rapid canonization within literary modernism, the conclusion it shares with Lucy McDiarmid’s *Saving Civilization* (1984)—that the poem succeeds in

“Cooper defines the “mandarinate” as “the smaller but still rather sizable cadre of intellectuals, academics, artists, the more culturally attentive Oxbridgians from the professions, the civil service and journalism who had come to [Eliot’s] work in the late 1920s and 1930s, the readers who had puzzled over the Ariel poems and *Ash Wednesday*, purchased the *Selected Essays* in 1932, and wondered about Eliot’s politics and loyalties in the years of historical turmoil and war. . . . It was this smaller group of readers in England and America, and increasingly in Europe as well, who found in *Four Quartets* both a psychological refuge and the outlines of a new kind of subjectivity better suited to the new world order, and the situation of power politics, at the end of the German war. One could still make out these readers, even with an expanded readership, because Eliot never stopped speaking specifically to them. He may have dealt with general ideas and concepts in art, politics, and culture, but how he framed those ideas, the effectiveness of the rhetoric of their presentation owed as much, if not more, to his sense of the audience he wanted to address, and to the historical situation of that audience, as it did to the caliber of his temperament or to the icy ferocity of his private struggles” (31).

reaching this mandarinat by abjuring any real-world efficacy—is less persuasive. As Cooper and McDiarmid read it, the poem strategically prepares a safely sequestered and ontologically distinct space for its readers, a parallel realm of thought-experiment and inconsequentiality, into which author and audience can wait out the military struggle engulfing Europe that was so physically and mentally overwhelming. McDiarmid explains Eliot’s sequestration of the art-object as a substitution of the performative for the constative functions of the speech-act, prompted by the too close resemblance of the poet’s voice to the propagandizing orator’s (93). Cooper, on the other hand, stipulates Eliot’s desire to convert his readers to Christianity but judges the theological mission of the sequence a failure because of the strategy by which it appeals to its readers. To attract the mandarinat, Eliot models an “aesthetic consciousness” possessing the humility to “step back from itself, simply and unpretentiously, and assert the need to recognize the limits of [aesthetic] power and, finally, to renounce it” (135–36).

These readings proceed from the assumption that the coherence of Eliot’s religious vision depends upon a rhetoric of renunciation and evacuation of any and all vestiges of earthly power as a prerequisite for the issuance of its utterances. Indeed, since the abstraction of its hypothetical speculations tends to evoke the subjunctive mood rather than the more politically viable imperative, one may readily mistake a subtle but insistent discrimination between similar alternatives for irresolution or a refusal to act. But Cooper and McDiarmid’s readings suggest that Eliot laboriously constructed his elaborate *New English Weekly* persona primarily to efface the political purpose of his social writings. A more viable reading intimates instead that Eliot engages frequently with this periodical to clear up his record’s inconsistencies and retrospectively provide a coherent paratextual persona for the quartets.

Eliot’s insistence on the priority of ethics in public policy as well as his defensive manipulation of difficulty as a trope to ward off ideological commitment consistently shores up his haphazard prewar prose of the 1930s. But his use of abstraction progresses from an early attempt to inoculate his social theories from the unethical consequences that

would attend their actual implementation to a purposeful religious mystification in his later wartime writings. The leap of faith Eliot requires from his readers in order to imagine the Christian Society is not so much an obscurantist move as a signal that he is unwilling to divorce religious mystery from the practice of pragmatic politics.

The almost completely unchanged republication of “Burnt Norton,” both separately in *New English Weekly* and then in the 1944 pamphlet collection of *Four Quartets*, is Eliot’s attempt to make a virtue of his contradictions. As Michael North shows, this is the same tactic Eliot had applied earlier in “Tradition and the Individual Talent” by first developing cultural tradition and particular talent as antimonies before brazenly declaring them an identity (North 89). In the case of the quartets, merely by repackaging the first quartet alongside three very different poems that develop similar themes but correct, modify, and act on them rather than leave them suspended in deliberate stasis, Eliot could implicitly claim that the change in his political emphasis had not been a change at all.

A close reading of the first quartet and an examination of how “East Coker” and the second iteration of “Burnt Norton” correct possible early misreadings of Eliot’s persona demonstrate this idea. The first “Burnt Norton” arose out of a draft of *Murder in the Cathedral* (1935), one in a series of plays that developed Eliot’s post-conversion concentrations on communal religious experience. The play’s producer, Martin Browne, had requested reactions from the priests and the chorus of Canterbury women surrounding Thomas à Becket as the tempters tempt the future saint in order to alleviate the “static” nature of the dialogue (Gardner 15–16). The first thirteen lines of “Burnt Norton” at one time belonged to the second priest, responding to the second tempter’s reminder to Thomas that he was once “[t]he master of policy / Whom all acknowledged,” and that he should attempt to regain “[t]he Chancellorship that you resigned / When you were made Archbishop” (*Murder* 185). This effectual trade of “[h]oliness hereafter” for the “power [that] is present” (186) suggests, as Helen Gardner notes, that the rose garden “at the end of the passage which we did not take” is a temptation to reinhabit the moment before choosing, when one closes down a possibly more

personally beneficial outcome with no way of knowing which path would have been more beneficial (39). Although Becket shrugs off this highly specific seduction, the passage's origins in a speech by a witness rather than the target of temptation mark the formative kernel of "Burnt Norton" with the play's abstract and self-consciously bracketed interests in the political, the persuasive, and the communal.

When Eliot transposes the rose garden, representing what might have been, into "Burnt Norton," the seductiveness of the improbable becomes the seductiveness of the art object radically sundered from the real. Its aesthetic attractiveness derives from its inutility, its beauty from its fragile preciousness. The roses of the garden "[h]ad the look of flowers that are looked at" ("Burnt" 218), and the garden itself houses myriad "unseen eye-beam[s]," set to beautiful effect by the tune of "unheard music" that distances them into self-conscious metarepresentation (218). As to what those flowers could accomplish, at best they might disturb "the dust on a bowl of rose leaves" (218), given enough time; by 1944, "Little Gidding" excoriates the inefficacy of the roses by intoning "Ash on an old man's sleeve / Is all the ash the burnt roses leave" (214). The temporal suspension of the lyric moment, the permanent preservation of an individual sensoria and its attendant fascinations, and the untrammelled prelapsarian purity of the "first world" recommend themselves to readers on behalf of all that is delicate, fleeting, and vulnerable ("Burnt" 218). The lotus flower rises quietly out of the garden pool before it and the birds whose song conjured it vanish with the passing of a cloud, but the poem captures it within its instant of pluripotent multiple trajectories, when all is possible and no attractive options have yet been foreclosed.

But it is always an open question in the first version of "Burnt Norton" whether one ought to follow "the deception of the thrush" into the garden (218), since it entails renouncing earthly obligations and responsibilities in order to do so. In 1935, even before the Abyssinian Crisis, the Spanish Civil War, and the looming specter of World War II, a grim social landscape prompted poetry that either embraced an ideologically committed aesthetic or eschewed such commitment altogether. Such ideological bifurcation ostensibly

amounted to a choice between the polarized field of Left or Right aesthetic political loyalty, but for Eliot this was a false choice. He believed in a third option that rejected the comforts of speaking for a party (strength in numbers), and speaking only for his fraught and self-consciously limited perspective (lonely idiosyncrasy).

In “Burnt Norton” this choice translates to one between “garlic” and “sapphires,” the practical but pungent on the one hand, the decorous but inutile on the other. Both have dubious effects when they find themselves enmeshed in the “mud” of cultural politics:

Garlic and sapphires in the mud
 Clot the bedded axle-tree.
 The trilling wire in the blood
 Sings below inveterate scars
 And reconciles forgotten wars.
 The dance along the artery
 The circulation of the lymph
 Are figured in the drift of stars. (218)

Since one expects to find neither garlic nor sapphires in the mud, they stay undisturbed where they have been thrown; there, both do no more than further obstruct the motion of the cultural “axle-tree.” “Garlic and sapphires in the mud” is a direct, if altered, allusion to the “[t]onnerre et rubis aux moyeux” of Mallarmé’s “*M’introire dans ton histoire*,” itself an echo of Baudelaire and the Symbolistes, whose English counterparts were the aesthetes propounding the *ars gratis artis* autonomy of the written artifact (Gardner 81). Since the poem has already intoned that “human kind / cannot bear much reality” (“Burnt” 218), another line borrowed from *Murder in the Cathedral*, the temptation in this lyric is to concentrate more on the “drift of stars” and ascend above the furious political tempest to the formal aesthetic sphere. There, from the safely serene vantage of “light upon a figured leaf,” one “hear[s] upon the sodden floor / Below, the boarhound and the boar / Pursue their pattern as before / But reconciled among the stars” (“Burnt” 219). From an aestheticized remove, the now trivialized machinations of polarized politics

seem less threatening, for one begins to see them from the heights of a formal “pattern” and therefore expect no better.

When this tetrameter lyric ends by assuring that such a pattern is “reconciled among the stars” (219), “Burnt Norton” reveals the pattern as a self-satisfied and ineffective tautology even as it resembles the earlier appearance of “reconciles” ten lines earlier, which proves to be quite a different temptation for the poet. If poetry could heal the “inveterate scars” of the war-ravaged European reader, that might be a definite good, no matter how muddy the poem would have to get in the process. Since even the problematic garlic and sapphires found their effect as a physiological “clot,” poetry can lay some claim to “the trilling wire in the blood” that can tunnel below those inveterate scars, if the poet could find some way of effectively reaching and reconciling readers to the cultural tensions unconsciously at work below the surface of society.

The problem with this approach is that “[t]he dance along the artery / The circulation of the lymph” that the rhythms of poetry may stimulate are dangerously close to those rhetorical techniques of the political orator, who not only inhabits culture but attempts to propel it somewhere. Immediately after this brief lyric, Eliot quotes from his earlier *Coriolan* poems (“Triumphal March”), an unfinished sequence that was meant to consider the political temperament self-positioned “[a]t the still point of the turning world” and its effect on those it commands (“Burnt” 219). When the world has just been described as an “axle-tree,” to be at the still center of culture is to be at the axis, not seeming to move (“Do not call it fixity” [219]), but in actuality having become that which causes the revolution.

The second version of “Burnt Norton” appeared with the first collected bundling of all four quartets in 1944 and, as Peter Middleton argues, attempts an “unwriting” of the first poem by replicating its form and suggesting a sequence of poetic sequences harmonizing into a fourfold thematic unity (88). The only textual change is Eliot’s substitution of “[a]ppeasing long forgotten wars” for “[a]nd reconciles forgotten wars,” but that potent substitution forecloses the possibility that the poem advocates cultural renunciation when considered alongside Eliot’s Christian prose paratexts. In 1944, long after Mus-

solini's declaration of a Rome-Berlin Axis on October 25, 1936, any use of "axis" or its derivatives would carry a much more ominous connotation, as would "appease" after the Munich Conference in 1938 to any reader conscious of Eliot's despairing denunciation of Chamberlain's appeasement of Hitler in *The Idea of a Christian Society* (51) and his frequent essays at Liberalism in *Criterion* and *New English Weekly*. If the first "Burnt Norton" shrank away from any resemblance to the manipulative speech of the politician because of the unethical actions it might impel, after Munich the "trilling wire in the blood" had also been proven to lead to insufferable unwillingness to act against Nazi aggression. Clearly, the question has shifted from whether to engage to which form of engagement the poem will advocate. The second "Burnt Norton" conjures its rose garden and lotus flower to help readers consider how to salvage that "twittering world" of "the gloomy hills of London, / Hampstead and Clerkenwell, Campden and Putney, / Highgate, Primrose and Ludgate" (220), to seek succor within the Tube, not to take refuge *from* it.

"East Coker," too, corrects some of the more enigmatic elements of the first quartet's proximity to real events by drastically emending the separation readers may have intuited between poem and world. In its second section, having already established its seasonal motif of midsummer, "East Coker" supplies a tetrameter lyric structurally analogous to the "garlic and sapphires" of "Burnt Norton" that transforms Eliot's early assessment of ideological poetry into the naïve "disturbance of the spring" ("East" 326). When the "[l]ate roses" of the first quartet are filled with the "early snow" of the 1940 Sitzkrieg, the wartime atmosphere lends Eliot a belated opportunity to scrutinize his prewar complacency (326):

Thunder rolled by the rolling stars
 Simulates triumphal cars
 Deployed in constellated wars
 Scorpion fights against the Sun
 Until the Sun and Moon go down
 Comets weep and Leonids fly. (326)

The sapphires have disappeared, and the dismissive adjustment Eliot made when alluding to Mallarmé's sonnet in "Burnt Norton" has collapsed from contemptible garlic back into terrifying thunder. The stars, which had earlier been content to "drift" by peaceably and obliviously, now find themselves "deployed" in a martial simulation of the war below rather than its tidier astrological reconciliation. There is now no peace to be found in a poem that purposively disconnects itself from the war, no distancing aesthetic pattern to be mapped on events that will not be read by wartime readers as a mimetic flurry of fighting, weeping, and flying. Better to embrace the wartime context and find a fit role for a poetics of exigency.

Immediately after these lines, "East Coker" dismisses the spring-time of "Burnt Norton" (and its own parody of those lines) as merely "a way of putting it—not very satisfactory: / A periphrastic study in a worn-out poetical fashion / Leaving one still with the intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings" (327). This poem is intent on abasing its predecessor's valorization of form as a good in itself, its taste for the seductiveness of the sequestered aesthetic that obviates intellectual engagement in real events. But even as "East Coker" betrays its need to diagnose the potential escapism of the first quartet, it also links its self-excoriations to the ironic temperament that is satisfied merely to prefer the "long looked forward to, / Long hoped for calm, the autumnal serenity / And the wisdom of age" to the messy but more responsible "intolerable wrestle / With words and meanings" that could conceivably lead one to follow a train of thought to its logical conclusion and thereby necessitate ethical, political, and indeed sometimes military action (327). Eliot walks a fine line in revising his first poem, since the temptation to unsay or undo a past choice also led to the precious and ephemeral investigations of "Burnt Norton" and colored Eliot's despairing rejection of the Munich Pact. In effect, mental inhabitation of the abstract simulates the wishful thinking of the "quiet-voiced elders" of the Chamberlain cabinet ("East" 327), whose "peace in our time" mantra turned out to have bought only a slight reprieve for England—or as "East Coker" puts it, the "serenity [that was] only a deliberate hebetude, / The wisdom only the knowledge of dead secrets / Useless in the

darkness into which they peered / Or from which they turned their eyes" (327). Political events, Eliot argues, are simulated within poetry even as they are ignored, and the poet can only realize his complicity after the fact, once the "knowledge derived from experience" exposes the "receipt for deceit" the politicians have made (327). The ambiguity of this line refers both to a recipe for future denial and misdirection (in the British usage of "receipt") and a record of a past transaction that cannot now be undone (Gardner 101).

But the wartime quartets did much more than simply warn against future deceit, and Eliot's contemporaries who were his avid readers would also have been aware of his personal version of ethical action during war. As Gardner summarizes, during the composition of the quartets Eliot involved himself in what John Hayward described as "unending social engagements" that he feared would detract from his poetic output (qtd. in Gardner 20):

Early in the war Eliot joined J. H. Oldham in editing the *Christian News-Letter* and as 'joint-editor' wrote many whole numbers. He was also involved in Archbishop Temple's Malvern Conference in January 1941. In addition to these specifically Christian activities, he worked for the British Council and for the Overseas Service of the BBC. In April 1942 he went for five weeks to Sweden with Bishop Bell, where, according to Hayward, he lectured for the British Council. It was on this visit, whose purpose was ostensibly to make contact with the Swedish Church, that Bishop Bell made contact with Hans Schönfeld and Dietrich Bonhoeffer who hoped through him to make approaches on behalf of an organized opposition to Hitler to the British Government. (20)

The point in bringing up these activities is not to underscore the driven quality of Eliot's exertions or his remarkable productivity during this period, though both seem evident and only more impressive in light of the chronic bronchitis and painful teeth extractions Gardner sympathetically chronicles (19). Instead, it is to emphasize Eliot's one-man approximation of the Community of Christians he

describes in *The Idea of a Christian Society*. Oldham had met Eliot at the Oxford Conference of 1937 (they were also together at Malvern) from which began the meetings of The Moot, a discussion group centered around Karl Mannheim, which also included Reckitt and some members of the Chandos Group as well as Mairet, who in addition to *New English Weekly* also stood on the editorial board of *Christian News-Letter*.⁵ *Four Quartets* represents a synthetic bridge between many of the highly individual beliefs of these discussants, not the least of which was their shared conviction that the clergy should have a role in public policy that was amply attempted by George Bell's diplomatic mission. The idea of Eliot joining a diplomatic mission to topple the Third Reich ecclesiastically is intriguing. It did not work, of course, but it represents a scale of active political engagement few have proved willing to attribute to the poet.

In the pages of *New English Weekly*, those readers unaware of Eliot's social commitments would find themselves quickly schooled about them, not only by Eliot's supporters (led by Demant, another participant of both conferences and The Moot), who explicitly remind them of his activities in their columns and letters to the editor but also by the tone of his secular-minded correspondents, who again and again accept Eliot's religious stances as insistent, active, and consistent. The journal proved a space for Eliot's friends to help him expand public exposure for his pet causes while preserving his public modesty by allowing him to remain tacit about his personal activities. The attacks he received there from his irreligious print adversaries only solidified the journal's collective efforts at reinforcing his persona of resolute conviction and sacerdotal asperity. They also helped him create a poetic persona to speak to his readers coherently and authentically.

Despite his many wartime endeavors, it might seem odd that the only mention *Four Quartets* makes of any of Eliot's "war jobs" appears in the penultimate section of "Little Gidding" (Eliot, "Art" 75), and even that reference is only an oblique allusion to his service as an air raid warden. Having imagined and mourned the martyred Anglican

⁵For more on these associations, see Roger Kojecky (156–97).

enclave of Little Gidding, readers suddenly find themselves in the London Blitz, strafed by a Luftwaffe transformed by the poem into “[t]he dove descending” which “breaks the air / With flame of incandescent terror” (“Little” 216). No sooner does “Little Gidding” incorporate this terror than it pauses to transfigure it:

Who then devised the torment? Love.
 Love is the unfamiliar Name
 Behind the hands that wove
 The intolerable shirt of flame. (216)

For many readers the suggestion that the capitalized typological banality of “Love” is behind the Blitz proves hopelessly problematic. One may suspect that this apocalyptic moment is actually a millenarian gesture signaling Eliot’s anticipation that an organic Christian enclave might somehow arise out of the city’s ruins. One may be appalled that Eliot would suggest divine sponsorship of torment (or that heaven would side with the Nazis) or even reject the too-quick rejoinder of “Love” as evidence of the despicable exigency of wartime, which requires responses so pat they risk condescension.

But the poem makes clear that the authority investing its assignment of blame derives not from theology but from shared sacrifice. Eliot by 1944 had banked his 1927 citizenship, his voluntary service as an air warden, and the harrowing experience of the Blitz itself against the credit of his lyric voice’s authority. The “intolerable shirt of flame” adorned not Eliot alone but an entire besieged polis, and as both a survivor and an active defender of the city, he had as much right as any other Londoner to try to make sense out of the event. When one then considers his *New English Weekly* persona of thoughtful devotion and persevering engagement, Eliot’s decision to limit the poem’s utterances to those evoking the shared victimhood of London represents understatement bordering on litotes. It also displays *Four Quartets*’s emphatic commitment to meet readers on their own terms: to construct a voice both equal to the reader’s experience and to the task of surmounting the problems remaining in the wake of World War II.

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Aubade, Ending with a Line from Beethoven's Letters

Some birds have gathered on a bough,
and I am thinking of happiness.

How people say, I am happy, and how
we struggle to believe them.

Shouldn't we let them have that happiness,
their long mornings, the next moment's lingering?

Sure, nothing means exactly as we mean it.
What we would say, we swallow,

and in the whole of our lives some may never
see the same bird twice—passerine passersby,

every last one. Every garden is an asylum
for blossoming, followed by bereavements. And years

from now, like a bright fool, I may wish to return
to this self, whose fingers dote and linger, with a mind

desiring everything, but most especially to be
ever-during, as Milton once wrote of his darkness.

Nothing lasts, I know: night passes to day. Leaves fall,
and some time later the trees. Something startles

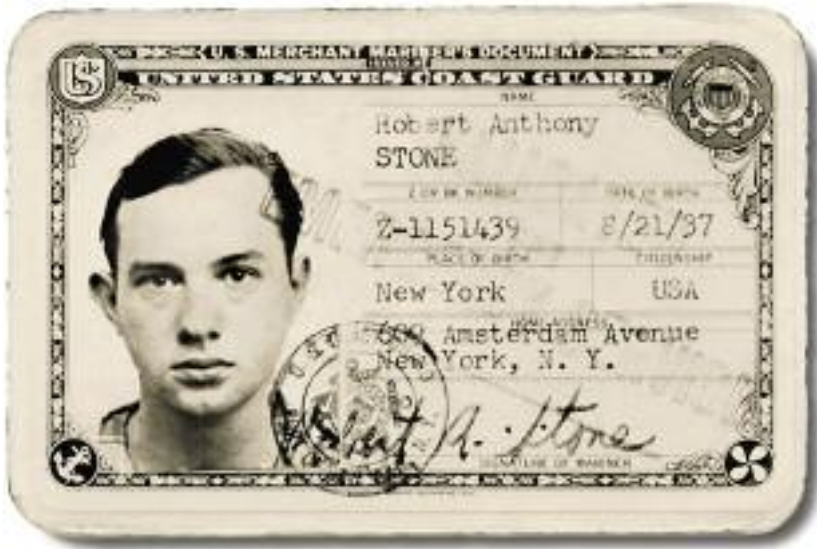
the birds: loud and hurtful, they scatter
like buckshot. But isn't that a sort of music,

thinly sharp, metrical in its perfection, demanding
that we listen? So let us listen

from our unmade bed, on a day as yet un-wholly known,
to Beethoven's letter to his Immortal Beloved:

Love demands everything and is quite right.

—Benjamin Blackhurst



Robert Anthony Stone's identification card, issued to him when he enlisted in the US Merchant Marine.

Embodying Conflicted Faith and Questionable Grace: The Women of Robert Stone's "Helping" and "Miserere"

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“I see this enormous empty space from which God has absented himself,” states Robert Stone, who died in January 2015 (qtd. in Weber). He goes on to add, “I see this enormous mystery that I can’t penetrate, a mystery before which I’m silent and uncomprehending” (qtd. in Weber). At the end of his short story “Miserere,” Stone presents his readers with a haunting image of “this enormous mystery”: after blessing and burying aborted fetuses, the Catholic convert Mary Urquhart stands before the altar of St. Macarius questioning what it means to be created in God’s image. Offering the Divine “[i]ts due” (24), she whispers words from the prayer *Miserere mei, Deus*, the title of Psalm 51, one of the seven Penitential Psalms, well known to believing Catholics. Stone tells the reader that she is torn between adoration and disgust.

Stone is not known for his female characters. Even the last book he published before he died, *Death of the Black-Haired Girl* (2013), the title of which suggests that its focus is on a woman, is really about the professor with whom the woman has an affair. Partly answering his own question of why women do not read Stone to the extent that men do, Patrick Smith states, “Stone’s women are never quite the subject; they never quite embody what is at issue” (33), and for most of his

novels and short stories, this assertion rings true. A quick reading of his first collection of short fiction, *Bear and His Daughter* (1997), reveals that many of his female characters lie on the stories' peripheries, functioning solely to complicate their males' struggles. For example, in the earliest of Stone's published short stories, "Porque No Tiene, Porque Le Falta," the expatriated, plague-ridden Marge cheats on her husband, Fletch, with his friend, Fencer. Likewise, the reader encounters the helpless, middle-aged, and elderly women who call Kieran and Mackay to action to devastating effects in "Absence of Mercy." In the story "Under the Pitons," "bimbo" Gillian, with an "irritating accent," is left to drown to death by her boyfriend, Blessington (124).

Some of Stone's females do, however, take center stage, such as the pill-popping, "deluded" (170), former topless dancer Alison in "Aquarius Obscured," but what the reader learns about her undermines her credibility—she is having a conversation with a dolphin she thinks has plans to overtake the world, and at the story's end she turns out to be something of a thief. If one had read just those four stories, one might be inclined to think that Stone stereotypes his female characters as utterly flawed beings who are to be mistrusted and do not deserve to be granted full humanity. If such were the case, one might be discouraged from reading more of his work.

Yet Gregory Stephenson calls attention to some female characters in Stone's short stories who cling to their religion in a merciless world. Stephenson praises these women for their strong religious convictions. Specifically, he compliments Grace Elliot from "Helping" and Mary Urquhart from "Miserere" for their commitment to their Catholic faith. According to Stephenson, these women are devoted to "active compassion and to the service of the supernatural principles" (218). Moreover, they "seek to counter the disorder of the world" (219), and they embody the true Church, "the Christian spirit of sacrifice and charity" (221). Stephenson even sees Mary as a Job-like character, a victim who suffers from unfortunate circumstances, as a miscalculated frozen ice-skating pond claimed the lives of her loved ones. What his analysis fails to mention, however, is that Grace, although mostly true to her name, essentially helps her alcoholic husband to keep drinking, and Mary, who does perform

selfless acts, is somewhat responsible for her family members' deaths and is most likely grieving over her loss by having affairs with priests. Thus, Stephenson's reading also borders on presenting these female characters as stereotypes—albeit as better women than they really are.

In an attempt to shed more light on Smith's question, one not yet properly answered by literary critics, and to engage with Stephenson's insightful commentary, revisiting the stories "Helping" and "Miserere" from Stone's 1997 collection may prove helpful. Dedicated to his wife, Janice, the collection casts female characters who are complex and ambivalent, emerging as stronger than their male counterparts in Stone's hypermasculine landscape where drinking, drugging, and fighting abound. These developed female characters edge beyond the margins and refuse to play the victims they initially seem assigned, simultaneously functioning as forces of destruction as well as bearers of grace, and, in so doing, embodying, despite what Smith argues, a significant issue—their author's ambivalent moral outlook.

I.

Stone cultivated his craft for almost a half-century, publishing eight novels, two collections of short stories, two screenplays, and a memoir and spawning two films.¹ With his series of accomplished

¹Along the way he also garnered many literary awards. The book that launched his career, *A Hall of Mirrors* (1967), won the Faulkner Foundation Award for Notable First Novel of the year and the Houghton Mifflin Literary Fellowship Award. *Dog Soldiers* (1974), his second novel and the work for which he is best known, won the National Book Award and was made into the film *Who'll Stop the Rain?* His third novel, *A Flag for Sunrise* (1981), enjoyed the reputation of being the only book published in 1981 that was nominated for the National Book Award, the Pulitzer Prize, and the National Book Critics Circle Award. It won the PEN Faulkner Prize and the *Los Angeles Times* Award for best novel of the year. His fifth and sixth novels, *Outerbridge Reach* (1992) and *Damascus Gate* (1998), were both finalists for the National Book Award, and *Bear and His Daughter* was a Pulitzer finalist.

novels and potent short fiction, Stone fought his way to becoming one of the foremost of modern writers. Mark Bautz, for example, considers him “one of contemporary fiction’s big talents” (33). Similarly, Smith, who notes that Stone has always been respectfully yet superficially reviewed, states, “Nobody of Stone’s generation comes near him—not in the elegant clarity of his sentences and not in terms of the thematic whale he has pursued from one book to another” (30). Yet Stone has neither been widely read nor achieved the recognition from literary critics that his work merits. To date, only two monographs on him, by Stephenson and Robert Solotaroff, have appeared along with a handful of scholarly articles, and *Dog Soldiers* has earned him a spot in studies of Vietnam War literature. Most critical response, however, appeared before the publication of *Bear and His Daughter*, which, aside from Stephenson’s commentary, has received almost no critical attention, and even less has been written about Stone’s female characters.

More, although not much, has been written about Stone’s religious ambivalence. Claiming that Stone’s “characters have always been tormented by a religious itch,” Robert Fredrickson refutes the argument that his protagonists are postmodern and maintains, instead, that his work seemingly clings to a “search for an elusive God,” characteristic of the modernist writer (“Robert Stone’s Opium” 45, 49). Stone writes in the realist tradition and explores man’s possible connection with a higher being. Ken Lopez and Bev Chaney argue that he is “widely considered to be the American novelist who has most thoroughly picked up the strand of modern literature that begins with Joseph Conrad, in which the moral fiber at the core of man is tested under stress” (123). With characteristically modern ambivalence, he revisits the theme of man spiritually struggling and seeking to actualize himself in a complexly flawed world where humans are more disposed to violence than to love. Like Conrad’s Marlow in *Heart of Darkness* (1902), Stone’s protagonists question whether life is merely a “mysterious arrangement of merciless logic for a futile purpose” (Lopez and Chaney 71).

In his review of *Bear and His Daughter*, Leon Lewis notes that Stone’s “often grim but hardly solemn vision of ‘American reality’

has been based on characters (usually male) who are essentially alone, often angry or rootless, tempted or touched by violence, and inclined [to] or deeply involved with alcohol and/or drugs." The cast of characters in his plot-heavy stories includes "drug smugglers, gun runners, alcoholics, drug addicts, schizophrenics, murderers, and sadistic law enforcers" who yet are surprisingly well read and well versed in classical music (Solotaroff x). Characters are probed to their existential core, and clear-cut answers are replaced with questions about the absence of innate, positive, moral structures.

Stone's uncertain outlook is understandable in light of what has been documented about his life. As he says, "My early life was very strange" (qtd. in Weber). Abandoned by his father as an infant, Stone was reared by his schizophrenic mother, Gladys Grant. When he was six, his mother was institutionalized, and he was placed in a Roman Catholic orphanage, St. Ann's, run by the Marist Brothers, where he remained until he was ten years old, an experience he fictionalizes in "Absence of Mercy." A member of a West Side gang in New York, he was thrown out of high school, joined the Merchant Marine, and is said to have become an atheist at the age of seventeen (Solotaroff 5). Yet his religious stance has not always been so clear, especially in light of characters who seem unable to leave their Catholicism behind them. In his memoir *Prime Green: Remembering the Sixties* (2007), in which he discusses his involvement with Ken Kesey and the psychedelic scene, Stone states, "belief fascinated me, because of my own experience of lost faith" (168). Certainly, the questioning of a higher being ruling over what appears to be an irrational and indifferent universe permeates his works.

Even though he claimed to be "the only American novelist addressing theological questions," his works and other statements offer a less doctrinaire view of the subject (Fredrickson, "Robert Stone's Opium" 44). Heralded by Roger Sale as "a nineteenth century moralist," Stone often seems "as eager as Carlyle or George Eliot to make the precise assessments required to judge the choices made by an individual or society" (9). Arguably, "The Reason for Stories: Toward a Moral Fiction," Stone's response to William Gass's "Goodness Knows Nothing of Beauty," provides the best insight into his

thinking at the time he crafted "Helping," first published in 1986. In the essay he argues that serious fiction depends on morality and that art and morality are not mutually exclusive but intimately intertwined. Citing the Bible, he states that "[i]t's hard to overestimate the impact of the Bible on our civilization and on our language" (73). For Stone the Bible has been "the great primer" (73). Moreover, he declares that the "laws of both language and art impose choices that are unavoidably moral" (75). Yet seven years later in 1995, a year before "Miserere" appeared, Stone said, "I'm certainly not the kind of writer who has a moral, as it were. It's just a process of reflection on the human condition" (Pink and Lewis 128). Typically, Stone's religious questioning manifests itself through his characters, who "usually disdain theological questions, even while implicitly asking them" (Fredrickson, "Robert Stone's Opium" 43). For example, in "Miserere," the recovering alcoholic Mary asks Father Hooke, who is refusing at this point in the story to bless and bury aborted fetuses, "Oh Frank, you lamb . . . what did your poor mama tell you? Did she say that a world with God was easier than one without him?" (21). Father Hooke does not have an answer, and the story cuts to a new scene with a new priest, who, although not asked, would also not know.

Contradictions proliferate not just in Stone's art but also in his life. He painted a damning portrait of his Catholic orphanage (where even the military pales in comparison to the violence suffered at the hands of Prefect Brother Francis), spoke poorly about St. Ann's "anti-intellectualism," but also credited "the school with deepening his respect for literature" (Steinberg 72). Although calling his mother "absolutely batty," he said that she was "well-spoken and refined . . . very fond of me . . . educated," and the one who instilled in him a love of reading (qtd. in Chapple 40). He also attributed his acumen with language to "the curious luck to be raised by a schizophrenic," which gave him a "tremendous advantage in understanding the relationship of language to reality": "Life wasn't providing [coherent] narrative so I had to" (qtd. in Words 43).

Tellingly, Stone credits F. Scott Fitzgerald, a writer with deeply contrasting views of morality and women, as his inspiration to write

his first novel. During his high school years, he read the modernist male literary canon, as described in his memoir:

I had started out under the influence of the first generation of literary moderns. Hemingway bestrode the world then, inescapable. Instead of learning algebra and long division, I had spent my high school years reading and goofing, in the manner of bookish under-achievers then as now. I read the books then read, Hardy, Conrad, Waugh, Dos Passos, Wolfe, Fitzgerald. (*Prime* 83)

Although Stone acknowledges Hemingway as a towering literary giant, it was a reread of Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) that made him want to become a writer.² According to Solotaroff, "Stone has described in different ways the moment late in 1961 when, as a twenty-four-year-old college dropout with a wife, a child, and a job writing copy for low-end furniture stores, he finished reading *The Great Gatsby* and said to himself, 'This is what I want to do. I want to write novels'" (2). On that day he decided that he "understood patterns in life. I figured, I can't sell this understanding, or smoke it, so I will write a novel. I then started to write *A Hall of Mirrors*" (18).

Write he did. After five novels—long ones—he deviated from that form and published his first collection of short stories, which spans almost thirty years of his career and includes six stories previously published in magazines plus the title work "Bear and His Daughter." Commenting on the short story form, Stone says:

Well, I started out writing quite a few. I find that I'm difficult to satisfy in terms of my own stories. I think I have destroyed many more than I have ever submitted. My stories are rather different from my novels. They're a bit more surreal, perhaps there's more

²Maureen Karagueuzian compares *Dog Soldiers* to *The Sun Also Rises* (1926); Fredrickson cleverly states that "Stone's characters, however, obviously seek more than Hemingway's pleasure in things pleasant, clean, and well lighted" ("Robert Stone's Opium" 45).

humor in the short stories. The concerns, though, are the same.
(qtd. in Solotaroff 173)

As his words suggest, he prefers a larger scale than the short story affords. When *Bear and His Daughter* was published, readers were curious as to how Stone would approach a tighter space and also whether the themes that marked his novels would be repeated or “tamed to fit the more restrictive form” (McGraw 790). The answer: as in his novels, his short fiction shows violence and corruption endemic to American life, close personal relationships difficult, if not impossible, to maintain, and happiness or peace coming from drugs or death. Writers, especially poets, feature as principal characters. The American reality that Stone presents is based on characters who are essentially alone, angry, rootless, uprooted, blocked, paralyzed. As Fredrickson observes, “There’s a sort of negative quest motif,” “the trip gone bad” (“Robert Stone’s Decadent” 320). As Fredrickson puts it, “they make odd pilgrims, these men, since they seem not to want to find anything” (“Robert Stone’s Opium” 42). Yet both Stone’s men and women embark on these strange journeys.

II.

First published in *New Yorker* on June 8, 1987, “Helping” is one of the earliest examples in Stone’s short stories in which a female character embodies his conflicted moral stance. Grace is a not-so-sly wink at what she is supposed to represent for her husband, Chas Elliot. Despite focusing on Grace’s husband’s struggles with the traumatic effects of being a Vietnam War combat soldier, this is the most hopeful of the stories in the collection, which may not be saying much. It follows Elliot, a troubled soul with a mean edge, some twenty years after the war. He has done time in jail for an undisclosed crime but now has a master’s in social work and is employed as a counselor for veterans at the state hospital, earning slightly more than the PhDs he works alongside. Like many a Stone character, Elliot is a recovering alcoholic, eighteen months sober, fifteen in Alcoholics Anonymous. Throughout their marriage Grace has aided her

husband, as Stephenson states, "in summoning sufficient moral strength to resist being overwhelmed by his destructive impulses," eliciting in him "feelings of sympathy and contrition" (208). During the course of the story, Elliot embarks on a physical and spiritual journey that culminates in an epiphany fostered by Grace (Stone, "Helping" 89). The story, however, ends ambiguously, leaving readers guessing at Grace's final actions and whether her aid is partly responsible for his drinking.

The story's February day is significant because it marks the end of Elliot's sobriety. Set in New England just outside Boston, "Helping" reflects the Elliots' childless state, something that Stone notes more than once but never fully explains, leaving the reader to assume that Elliot fears bringing new life into a senseless existence. Stone supplies some details about Grace: she is a churchgoing, loyal woman. She attends Christmas Mass and sleeps beside her restless husband, who listens to dog packs chasing undernourished deer, symbolizing one of the central themes of the story: a cruel and savage world. She is a lawyer who takes on worthy, but often lost, causes. In short, both Elliot and Grace are in the business of "helping" people.

The world Stone portrays here is one of corruption, dishonesty, and disease. In this post-Vietnam War landscape, Elliot works the welfare system to his advantage and ministers to men like the undiagnosed Blankenship, who is doing much the same as Elliot as "a sponger and petty thief," whose specialty is suing companies by claiming to have slipped on their ice cubes (84). What his family "could not extort at law [it] stole" (84). Recently abandoned by family members, Blankenship was last arrested for the petty crimes of stealing hot-dog rolls from Woolworth's and showering at midnight in the regional high school. But his worst offense, according to Elliot, is his claim to nightmares about Vietnam, a place he has never been, let alone fought in. Perhaps this is Stone's way of suggesting that no one was immune to the trauma caused by that war, or he may be criticizing those who saw a picture or read a news story and wrongly cried PTSD. But the fantasy that Blankenship fashions, especially the sensation and black smoke, is too close to Elliot's reality. Elliot "had caught dengue in Vietnam and during his weeks of delir-

ium had felt vaguely as though he were floating in rubber" (86). The black smoke that Blankenship invents but that Elliot experienced symbolizes a universe without design, purpose, or mercy.

Before Grace enters the narrative, Stone introduces a secondary female character, whom Stephenson describes as "a gentle and generous-spirited woman," but who played a role in Elliot's alcoholic undoing (21). Candace Music is a sixty-some-year-old librarian at Packard Conway Library, a Quaker of socialist convictions, and Elliot's cousin. Described as tall and plain, Candace is the daughter of a medical missionary. She is "a classicist's widow and [knows] some Greek" (93). She and Elliot even used to work together, translating fragments of Sophocles into English verse for the sake of art and beauty. He used to enjoy talking with her, but when the conversation turned to Vietnam one too many times, he stopped, getting the impression that he was being used by Candace, pumped for information about the war that she would then pass on at her East Ilford Friends meeting. On this particular day Elliot pays Candace a visit. Although his motives are unclear, Stone suggests that he first attempts to cure his restless anxiety with something civilized and edifying, like the library, which should be "an oasis of human dignity and harmony" (Stephenson 210). The roles reverse in this scene, and it is Elliot, like Blankenship, who plays the patient on Candace's chair by the fire. This, however, proves futile, and when she leaves to answer her phone, Elliot seizes the opportunity to exit and go to Midway Tavern for drinks after which he proceeds to drive home drunk, his car blaring a recording of "Handel's Largo," a solemn aria often played at funerals (Stone, "Helping" 95).

Unlike Candace, Grace has no desire to hear Elliot's gruesome stories, especially the one about his plans to decapitate their neighbors, the Anderson family, children included, when they are cross-country skiing. After crying upon learning of her husband's failed sobriety, Grace in an interesting turn pours a whiskey for herself and proceeds to dump her problems at work on Elliot. Instead of letting Elliot sulk in his own misery, Grace tells him about her morning in court where she lost an important case. Elliot thinks to himself that "once again my troubles are going to be obviated by

those of the deserving poor" (101). Like Elliot, who allows himself to be affected by Blankenship, Grace also is too involved with her clients. She prosecuted the Vopotiks, a young couple—an obese mother and biker father—for harming their three-year-old son. She lost the case when three witnesses, who were going to testify that the couple had burned the child on a radiator and broken his fingers, failed to show up, rendering their depositions void. Elliot does not view the parents' depraved behavior as unique or exceptional in this bleak, fatalistic world: "'You go messing into anybody's life . . . that's what you'll find'" (104). Losing the case leads Grace to ask the "unaskable" question that has certainly haunted her husband, whose life has been a battle against loss of purpose (103): what difference does it make? Neither provides an answer.

The story suggests that Grace wants to believe that life is not a series of random events to test mortal people. During the conversation with her husband, Grace's, and perhaps Stone's, moral stance is portrayed in contrasting terms through the eyes of Elliot, who, knowing that he needs her help, resents her for it. Earlier, Stone paints her as a victim of a bad marriage, since Elliot spends every weekend in his office reading all day, while she does something at the church: "Every night he's at A.A. and she's home alone" (91). Moreover, in this scene where Grace threatens to walk out, Elliot pictures her in court, looking "like the schoolteachers who had tormented their childhoods, earnest and tight-assed, humorless and self-righteous" (104). He proceeds to nastily mock Grace's concern for others and for him, sarcastically calling her a "'friend of the unfortunate'" and "'the Christian Queen of Calvary'" (100). Yet Elliot has a high opinion of his wife, whom he also calls hopeful, knowing she clings to her religion and holds a "'sense of the divine plan,'" something Elliot is incapable of doing on his own (105). Telling her she should have been a nun, Elliot acknowledges her saving grace, thinking, "if it had not been for her he might not have survived" (105). Grace, more than any other character, is committed to upholding mercy and bringing order to her husband's anarchy. But her intentions become suspect when she admits that in her family "'we stay until the fella dies. That's the tradition. We stay and pour it for

them and they die'" (100). With these words Grace acknowledges that she is not only powerless in the face of Elliot's addiction but is his enabler.

Grace as a redeeming figure is further questioned when Vopotik calls their home, informing Elliot that his wife has a destructive side, evident when she tried to break up his family. Elliot defends her by refusing to put Grace on the phone. Significantly, there is a change in Elliot: instead of feeling "helpless in the face of human misery," he is "ready to reach out" (108). As she literally stands behind him, he is ready to fight for his wife: "He was still standing by the window when she came up behind him. It seemed strange and fateful to be standing in the dark near her, holding the shotgun. He felt ready for anything" (109). However, they are not battle buddies for long; in a clever evasion of his pain and vulnerability Elliot sends her upstairs.

In the story's final pages, Elliot's reliance on Grace's help becomes evident. After spending the night clutching his shotgun and whiskey in the dark living room, in the black smoke he has created, Elliot has a showdown, not with Vopotik but with Loyall Anderson, his self-assured neighbor, who is taking his "brisk morning glide" (98). Going so far as to remove the safety from his shotgun, Elliot subtly threatens Anderson when he mentions that he has been up drinking all night, which quickly ends their conversation. Even more than Blankenship and Vopotik, Elliot hates Anderson, a full professor of government at the state university, whose entire family are tall blondes, and whose children qualified for the gifted class but "attended regular classes in token of Anderson's opposition to elitism," none of which the Vietnam vet finds respectable (98). "Elliot hates the Andersons' collective self-satisfaction, their smug certainty of the rightness of their politically correct behavior in a complexly flawed world, more than he does the Vopotiks' psychology or Blankenship's uncanny parasitism," states Solotaroff; "[m]uch more than he wanted to, he identified with Blankenship's dream, and his fantasy of killing the Anderson children aligns him with the Vopotiks" (193). What stops Elliot from shooting Anderson is the fear he hears in his voice, which arouses pity in him. Elliot is literally disarmed by "the aspect of true

fear" (Stone, "Helping" 87). Instead of an enemy, Anderson becomes a "fearful fellow human" (Stephenson 213).

In the story's final passage with a newfound perspective of helping others, Elliot longs for divine grace, embodied in his wife. After Anderson skis away, Elliot does take a shot, but it is at a bird and misses. Solotaroff notes, "Having armed himself against the violent rabble, quietly but successfully threatened a member of the ranks of the virtuous, and tried to take life, Elliot now wishes 'no harm to any creature'" (194). Suppressing his emotions, Elliot hears the shot echo, turns toward his house, and

looked up to see his wife at the bedroom window. She stood perfectly still, and the morning sun lit her nakedness. He stopped where he was. She had heard the shot and run to the window. What had she thought to see? Burnt rags and blood on the snow. How relieved was she now? How disappointed?

Elliot thought he could feel his wife trembling at the window. She was hugging herself. Her hands clasped her shoulders. (Stone, "Helping" 115)

Although throughout much of the story Elliot desires to be free from the burden of consciousness, after these thoughts of his wife, he experiences an epiphany. When "his attempts to anesthetize himself with alcohol, irony, and anger" prove futile, he embraces his half-hearted tenderness and compassion and wishes for redemption (Stephenson 213). He sees his wife through the vinegar-cleaned window, which symbolizes his clarity. Acknowledging that the "length of the gun was between them," he understands that he has unfairly taken the effects of the war out on her: "Somehow she had got out in front of it" (Stone, "Helping" 115). She had become the enemy, but he now acknowledges that his worst adversary is himself. He seems to know that he failed her by breaking his promise not to drink. Thinking of how strikingly beautiful she is and how much help she has to give, he begins to hope for her forgiveness, perhaps realizing just how much he needs her. The story ends ambiguously with Elliot reaching not for the shotgun but for his wife's hand. He waves to

her, desiring nothing so much as a show of hands to gesture that she was still behind him, still wanted to work on their marriage: "It seemed to him that he could build another day on [that gesture]" (115). He is left waiting for her reply at the end.

Does she wave back? Stone leaves the reader to decide what Grace will do. When she runs to the window after hearing the shot, Elliot is not sure whether she is relieved or disappointed that he has not killed Vopotik, Anderson, or perhaps even himself. Although hungover and uncertain about their future, Grace will likely continue to support Elliot, who seems to have a better understanding that she needs his help too. Grace is the force that has kept Elliot alive, if just, as the slogan at AA states, for one more day. Stone suggests that searching for grace is a daily struggle that comes with the risk of reaching out to the Divine, only to be left hanging.

III.

"Miserere," originally published in *New Yorker* on June 24, 1996, features a female protagonist with far less grace to offer her male counterparts than the Grace of "Helping." Although appearing virtuous and concerned with the spiritual welfare of others, Mary is also partly to blame for her family's deaths and engages in affairs with Catholic clergymen. The story's title is a shortened form of *Miserere mei, Deus*. Significantly, Stone deletes God from his title. Turning to each other, even to the clergy whose job it is to be bearers of grace, is shown to lead to major disappointment; as in the ending of "Helping," turning to God is full of uncertainty. Stone's title refers to the musical setting of Psalm 51, one of the Penitential Psalms frequently used in Catholic liturgical rituals to foster a spirit of humility and repentance, such as in the *Tenebrae* service on Good Friday and Ash Wednesday. Normally sung at dusk, while candles are extinguished one by one, save for the last, which is hidden while still burning, the text calls for the repentant to ask God to "[w]ash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin" (v. 2). After being delivered from sin and granted a clean heart, the individual vows to teach other sinners about God's mercy and

forgiveness. Instead of sacrifices and burnt offerings, the repentant acknowledges that God wants a contrite heart.

Stone's story is a retelling of the *Miserere* in the modern world. Appropriately, most of its action takes place in a snow-soiled New Jersey city on a "darkening winter afternoon" that's approaching nightfall (4). In place of sacramental candles Stone provides broken streetlights with fixtures "torn away by junkies for sale to scrap dealers," "faint neon beer" signs in the windows of bodegas, and cheap lamp stores in strip malls next to Mashona's Beauty Shoppe (5). Throughout the story Stone questions what it means to be made in the image of God, quickly establishing that this is a corrupt land, full of wickedness and sinfulness, where even the police, priests, and protagonist are corrupt.

As in "Helping," the society Stone depicts here is marked by immorality. As the story opens, Mary and her friend Camille Innaurato, like Grace, are preparing for a worthy, although lost, cause—burying four aborted fetuses, the interment being something that they have done before. Mary receives a call from Camille, informing her that Camille has "more babies" (3). Not coincidentally, the phone rings just as Mary finishes reading to underprivileged children during the library's story hour from C. S. Lewis's *Prince Caspian* (1951), the only book in the Narnia sequence in which men dominate, and talking animals and mythical creatures are oppressed and even endangered—an appropriate epigraph for a short story about dishonest Church leaders and aborted babies.

Mary, like Elliot, is a recovering alcoholic who embarks on a journey of sorts, both physical and spiritual. Also, like most of Stone's protagonists, Mary is uprooted—a fifty-year-old North Carolina native who now calls "a modest house in what had once been a suburb" of a New Jersey city her home, and who, despite living in this town for "many years," still is awoken by planes flying into and out of the Newark airport (Stone, "Miserere" 8). As Mary drives to Camille's house, she passes the symbolically named Temple Street, which proves to be anything but a high place of worship and a site for sacrificial offerings: "About every fifth house was derelict and inside some of these candlelight was already flickering. They were crack houses. . . .

Many of the houses were in worse condition inside than out. The official census description for all of them was ‘Dilapidated’” (5).

After Mary arrives at Camille’s house, Stone makes clear that even the police are not immune to corrupt practices. Earlier, the reader learns that the place is “largely a city of racial minorities, in the late stages of passing from the control of a corrupt white political machine to that of a corrupt black one” (4). Moreover, “its schools were warrens of pathology and patronage. Its police, still mainly white, were frequently criminals” (4–5). Camille receives the aborted fetuses from her younger brother, August, a rare policeman because he is “not an actively corrupt one” (9). Stone discloses that

he had no particular constabulary duties. The family had had enough political connections to secure him a clerical job with the department. He was a timid, excitable man, married, with grown children, who lived with his domineering wife in an outer suburb. But as a police insider he knew the secrets of the city. (9)

One of those secrets is that the state’s abortion clinics have no incinerators of their own. August had been successful in discovering that the scavenger company that handles the county’s medical waste also services abortion clinics. He “fixed it with the scavengers to report specimens and set them aside,” maybe even earning money from this business venture (11). He then hands over the fetuses to Camille, who with a friend—usually Mary—brings them to a church for proper blessing and burial. It is never quite clear why Mary buries the fetuses. Stephenson maintains that she does so because of “a compelling impulse to guard and honor the human image . . . of God” (220). As Mary says to Camille, “‘This is Mass,’” as their actions are a “sacrifice,” a mass in itself (Stone, “Miserere” 21). But Stone complicates this reading by suggesting that Mary’s actions are part of her penance.

Stone saves the most corrupt entity for the Catholic Church itself, represented by priests characterized more by weak flesh than willing spirit. Although never stated, sexual relationships between Mary and Father Frank of Our Lady of Fatima and also between her and Monsignor Danilo of St. Macarius are implied. Stone hints at

this at the beginning of the story when, in describing Camille, he mentions "her counterpart in *Traviata*" (3). *La Traviata* (1853), Verdi's opera based on *La Dame aux Camélias* (1851) by Alexandre Dumas, is a novel about a woman with many lovers, frequently more than one at a time. Although one might assume that Camille is being referred to here, it becomes increasingly clear that it is Mary who has many lovers, including clergymen. Frank and Mary are close friends. He received Mary, who had been a "good Protestant," into the Catholic Church (Stone, "Miserere" 12). "They had known each other for years. Frank had been in a somewhat superficial way Mary's spiritual counselor," *superficial* indicating that he is something other than a religious guide to her (11). He had helped her "through her last stage of her regained abstinence" (12). Stone writes, "she had been a friend to him. Lately, though, there had been tension between them"—tension not just from the aborted fetuses (12).

Dialogue between Mary and Frank suggests far more than a parishioner/priest relationship. Mary calls him, using Camille's phone, tellingly not her own for fear that he might be dodging her calls, immediately addresses him by first name, and blurts out, "'we have some children'" (12). Frank responds with dead silence, perhaps thinking Mary is referring to children they have conceived. Mary then addresses him as Father and explains the situation. Frank dismisses her request with one of the most famous lines in Catholic theological writing, "'All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well'" (12), first enunciated by Julian of Norwich, a medieval English anchoress and Christian mystic, who saw no wrath in God but held that He wanted to save, not punish, all humans—perhaps wishful thinking on Frank's part for his guilty conscience. Moreover, Julian exalted the role of mother for her love, wisdom, and protection, qualities that do not come naturally to Mary. Mary tells Frank that they can talk after the interment, although it is unclear what they will talk about. Frank then tells her that the bishop "'has been hearing things that trouble him'" (12). The "'things'" in this case are most likely their affair. However, Mary dismisses him, calling him a "'little boy'" and instructing him to "'take up your cross'" (12).

The actual meeting between Mary and Frank is no less con-

tentious. Although the “parlor lights were lighted in the rectory,” which suggests Frank was prepared to receive Mary and Camille, he answers the door in street clothes, indicating that he has no intention of performing priestly duties at this hour (15). Again addressing him by first name, she elicits a confession of sorts from Frank, who says, “It isn’t just the interments. . . . It’s the whole thing. Our whole position’” (16). He continues, noting that the Church’s teaching may be wrong, that “‘women have a right’” (17). By this point in the conversation, it does not seem as though Frank is referring to abortions, if he, in fact, ever was. He seems to be saying that Mary has a right to pursue a relationship with a man, although not with a priest. “‘Sometimes I’m ashamed to wear my collar,’” he tells her (17).

As the two continue their heated discussion, Frank brings up Mary’s grief, and the reader finally learns that Mary, the lady from the story’s opening, has quite a story of her own. The story of Mary burying fetuses and the story of her dead motherhood and wifehood come together about halfway through “Miserere.” Although hints of it are given earlier, Stone discloses the full story when Mary confronts Frank. An unlucky thirteen years ago, on December 23 on a lake outside Boston, “almost Christmas,” her husband and three children drowned to death while skating on thin ice, clinging to the ice “for hours” (18, 19). Despite being well-lighted, there was a dark corner, “where the light failed, a lonely bay bordered with dark blue German pine where even then maybe some junkie had come out from Roxbury or Southie or Lowell or God knew where and destroyed the light for the metal around it” (18–19). Mary had been within earshot but was drinking and only too late had questioned their cries. Unlike Elliot, who reaches out to his spouse by the story’s end, Mary has neither husband nor children to turn to.

Mary as a force of destruction is further seen in her final dealings with Frank. Attacking his masculinity, she says in a confusingly fused sentence, “‘it would appear to me that you are a man—and I know men, I was married to a man—who is a little boy, a little boy-man. A tiny boy-man, afraid to touch the cross or look in God’s direction’” (19). The blurring of Frank and Mary’s husband, Charles, is even more direct when she says, “‘You have to try to forgive me, Charles.’”

Had she called him Charles? How very strange. Poor old Charles would turn in his grave. 'Frank, I mean. You have to try to forgive me, Frank'" (20). The scene ends with Frank weeping, threatening to call the police and telling Mary that she is "'violence'" (20).

Mary and Camille waste no time in driving to the final resting place of the fetuses, St. Macarius, which is also where another of her lovers lives. When questioned regarding what they will do, Mary laughs and tells Camille, "'as it happens, I have another fella up my sleeve'" (21). Although it is after ten o'clock when Mary calls Monsignor Danilo, he "hurriedly agreed to do what she required," for he was "always ready to accommodate her" (21). After the hour drive, they arrive at the church where, as in the *Miserere* ceremony, "candles were flickering" (22). A "tall, very thin, expressionless young man," who Mary thinks is an illegal immigrant, assists the monsignor. After Danilo says something to this man in his native language, most likely telling him about their affair, the man "looked at Mary with a smirk and shrugged and smiled in a vulgar manner" (23). Danilo then performs the ritual. Although Danilo, unlike Frank, does this service for the fetuses—or really for Mary—he emerges as no nobler than Frank. Mary lumps together all of the priests as "self-indulgent, boneless men" (16). Frank is a "snob" who is embarrassed by the ethnic name of the parish to which he ministers (15). Moreover, he says the world would be better off without "'a few million more black, alienated, unwanted children'" (17). Although Danilo readily accepts the task at hand, he is described through Mary's eyes as "the reeking model of every Jew-baiting, clerical fascist murderer who ever took orders east of the Danube. His merry countenance was crass hypocrisy. His hands were huge, thick-knuckled, the hands of a brute, as his face was the face of a smiling Cain" (23). Furthermore, Danilo will demand money, time, and perhaps sexual favors for the services rendered.

Mary is no victim of these priests, however. Her role as initiator of her affairs is never clear, but just as she is shown to have a violent, destructive streak, she is also portrayed with redeeming qualities. At the start of the story Camille calls on her, almost prayerfully, for help during this desperate time. Mary blesses the snow-soiled city and stolen fixtures, along with the drunk man from Floyd's rib house.

She prays for the deaths of four—Indian gas attendants, family members, fetuses. She attends anti-war, anti-apartheid, and anti-abortion clinic demonstrations. She even privately counsels pregnant women “over coffee and cake,” many of whom then decide to bring their pregnancies to term (17). She also volunteers her time in reading to underprivileged children and burying their aborted fetuses.

Mary’s ambivalent nature, along with Stone’s divided religious views, is most evident in the story’s final passage when she tries to connect to the Divine. As Stone notes,

Finally, she was alone with the ancient Thing before whose will she stood amazed, whose shadow and line and light they all were: the bad priest and the questionable young man and Camille Inaurato, she herself and the unleavened flesh fouling the floor. Adoring, defiant, in the crack-house flicker of that hideous, consecrated half-darkness, she offered It Its due, by old command. (24)

After likening the church to a crack house, Stone ends the story with Mary standing alone at God’s altar, referring to Him as an “ancient Thing” and “It” and contemplating how humans, including sinful ones, are made in His image. She reasons that the Eucharist therefore must be sinful and foul. She stands amazed before God’s will, “adoring” yet “defiant” (24). She tries to worship God but sees Him as a creature who has created a dark, merciless universe. As if rehearsed and ritualized, stripped of its meaning, Mary says, “by old command”: “Lamb of God, who takest away the sins of the world, Have mercy on us” (24). It is unclear whether Mary’s words deliver her from sin and grant her a clean, contrite heart. As in most of Stone’s stories, such as “Helping,” the attempts to unite with God are just that—attempts—and, contrary to what Stephenson argues, no clear resolution is granted.

Perhaps the most Virginal woman in this story is not Mary but Camille. Just as Stone flips the *Traviata* reference, so too he may be inverting the Mary figure in his short story. Although at times portrayed as a frail woman in need of an inhaler, Camille reveals herself to be a holy woman. Middle-aged, unmarried, and unsophisticated,

she selflessly took care of her aging parents, helped rear her younger brother, and kept house while working in a garment-sewing shop. Even more than Mary, she regularly buries fetuses. Her eyes are described as “sparkling and shimmering with their infernal vision” (9). Displaying maternal qualities, she hugs Mary to her bosom upon greeting her and places a crucifix on the dead babies. She finds them “sweet,” unlike Mary, who thinks about how “disgusting” they are (11). She cries—the only one to show emotion—when Mary recites poetry on the drive to the interment. Moreover, she is obedient and shows respect for Father Frank by curtsying and sitting when he tells her to, unlike the “defiant” Mary. Even in the midst of the awful row between Mary and Frank, Camille remains “kind-hearted” (20). Stone’s secondary female character is a positive woman who commits herself to doing the good works that Mary and Grace only half-heartedly attempt.

IV.

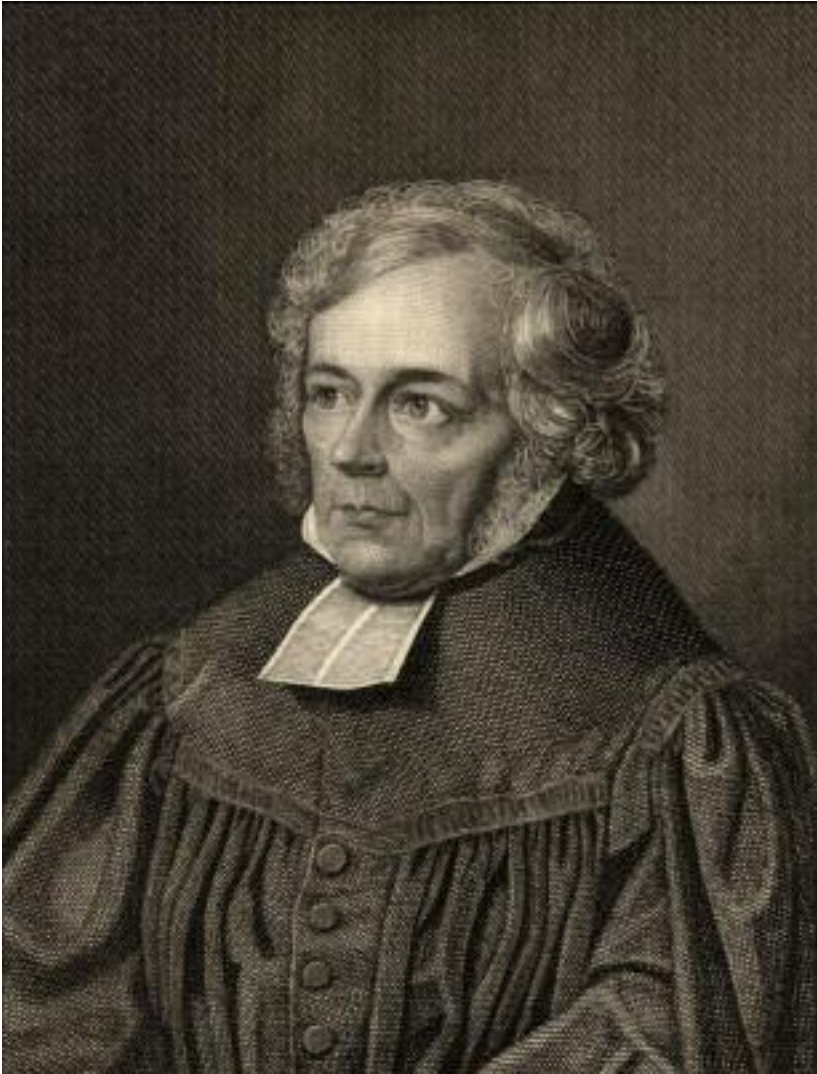
Stone’s dynamic female characters are deeply flawed individuals, who also hold the potential for much saving grace. They have the capacity to feel compassion and love but also to hate and harm. Grace in “Helping” is a complex figure, described as the reason her husband has survived, but also enabling him to keep drinking—pouring the drink until the “fella dies” (100), as is her family’s motto. Although the reader does not know whether she accepts Elliot’s gesture at the story’s end, one can hazard a guess that she does and will continue to “help” her husband until he dies. Mary in “Miserere” is a redeeming figure who performs good works of charity as “[h]er piety expresses itself both in prayer and in action and sacrifice” (Stephenson 219). But her reputation becomes tarnished when the reader realizes that her lack of action resulted in the death of her husband and children and that she is most likely masking her loss by sleeping with priests. Deserving of more female readers, Stone’s stories offer a glimpse into the role of women in contemporary American society. The female experience portrayed in these two stories embodies Stone’s dual vision as they give much away regarding their author’s own moral

convictions, or lack thereof, suggesting that these characters, like their creator, are plagued by desires, fears, and vanities but are always in search of some spiritual or moral affirmation that, however much they seem to covet it, eludes them in the end.

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Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher (1768–1834),
a copy of whose *On Religion* (1799) George Eliot owned.

Love and Religion in *Mr. Gilfil's Love Story*

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What is “love,” according to Rev. Gilfil, the protagonist of *Mr. Gilfil's Love Story* (1858), the second story in George Eliot's *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1858), as well as according to Eliot herself? One assumes that they have basically the same understanding of it: Love is a sincere and strong feeling of empathy, and romantic love, like what Gilfil experiences with Tina, is not only a beautiful feeling but by no means contradicts *agape*, which signifies love for God and one's neighbor. Thus, the Faustian moral dilemma, characterizing much of Romantic literature in which an individual's passionate love for another person is in conflict with God, is not the case in Eliot's work. However, since she portrays the Shepperton pastor in a positive and sympathetic way, and inasmuch as she admirably presents his love, not only what he feels for Tina but also what he shows for his fellow humans, Eliot's own conception of love and religion becomes at the same time more conspicuous.

I.

Consider the novella's last paragraph:

And so the *dear* old Vicar, though he had something of the knotted whimsical character of the poor lopped oak, had yet been sketched out by nature as a *noble tree*. The heart of him was *sound*, the grain was of *the finest*, and in the gray-haired man who filled his pocket with sugar-plums for the little children, whose most biting words were directed against the *evil-doing* of the rich man, and who, with all his social pipes and slipshod talk, *never sank below the highest level of his parishioners' respect*, there was the main trunk of the same *brave, faithful, tender* nature that had poured out *the finest, freshest* forces of its life-current in a *first and only love*—the love of Tina. (166, emphasis added)

This conclusion, ending with the phrase “the love of Tina,” suggests that romantic love is the novella's main theme, indeed, that is, a combination of platonic and erotic love in which one finds, in spite of a great physical attraction, a sense of purity as well as beauty and goodness. Such a love may seem idealistic to many, but it is genuinely felt by the lover. It is also usually associated with religiosity, mysticism, or spirituality. Since the “love” in Eliot's title refers to Tina, she is thus present in the first as well as the last words of the narrative, and what immediately precedes the story's last words, namely the phrase “a first and only love,” also underscores that it is about a romantic love *par excellence*.

Now, this strong feeling does not have to be mutual. It may only exist in the heart of one individual toward another. In the last paragraph Eliot emphasizes the protagonist's goodness. Gilfil is not only a passionate lover and husband but also a very good man, who sincerely cares about others, a rare phenomenon offered by Eliot, both an idealist and a realist—an idealist because she expresses an ideal, a sublime love, and a realist because, although quite rare, people like Gilfil do exist. At any rate, almost everyone loves Gilfil, “the *dear* old Vicar,” *dear* to Eliot as well as to Sheppertonians. Eliot compares him to a beautiful “tree” who has suffered much—he resembles a “poor lopped oak”—but still remains “noble” because he is very kind and honest.

He loves everybody but is particularly fond of children. Gilfil is also very much concerned with justice, which is a fundamental theme in the Bible. It is true that he is sometimes harsh in his sermons, but were not Jewish prophets generally harsh against evil-doers or evil-doing? However, one must not forget that Gilfil's "most biting words were directed against the *evil-doing* of the rich man" and not the rich man himself. He has, indeed, a "tender nature," Eliot points out. Furthermore, he is "brave" and "faithful." As far as his love for Tina is concerned, he remains so faithful to her that he never marries again, although he lost her when he was still young, and no child had blessed their union.

The novella's first sentence is, like its ending, quite revealing: "When old Mr. Gilfil died, thirty years ago, there was *general sorrow* in Shepperton" (67, emphasis added). The introductory "Chapter One" lengthily shows how much people loved their old preacher: thus at his funeral service,

if black cloth had not been hung round the pulpit and reading-desk, by order of his nephew and principal legatee, the parishioners would *certainly* have subscribed the necessary sum *out of their own pockets*, rather than allow such a tribute of respect to be wanting. (67, emphasis added)

In this long chapter, readers are taken back to the time when Gilfil was an old respected pastor in Shepperton and told about his interactions with country folk of both Shepperton and Knebley, the nearby village where he also preached on Sundays. Eliot provides a number of examples to illustrate the Vicar's practical theology. The first one is humorous, concerning Dame Fripp and her pig. Gilfil shows that he is not an importunate and severe preacher. He thus could have a good and warm conversation even with a woman like Dame Fripp. He does not lecture or admonish anyone, especially not randomly or out of place. He is friendly and amiable with all kinds of people. So after the funny words the lady utters about her pig, comparing it to a good "Christian," one realizes that Gilfil is not offended by this comparison, as many of his colleagues would

have been. On the contrary, he “laughed [and] . . . said good-bye to Dame Fripp without asking her why she had not been to church, or making the slightest effort for her spiritual edification” (68). Evidently, Eliot does not blame the pastor for avoiding the “edification” of Dame Fripp. She must even appreciate the good man’s sense of humor and simple manners. True religion lies not in the appearance, she intimates. It is not usually found in moralistic discourse and severe attitude but, rather, in one’s thoughts and deeds. This is basically the point the Apostle Paul makes in his letter to the Romans:

For not the hearers of the law *are* just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified. For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law to themselves: Which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness. (2:13–15)

With regard to Dame Fripp, not only did the pastor refrain from admonishing or reprimanding her, but he even sent her a “piece of bacon” the next day (68). This is a more profound way to “edify” somebody, Eliot might suggest.

By the same token, the fact that Gilfil’s sermons are short is not a negative sign either:

You already suspect that the Vicar did not shine in the more spiritual functions of his office; and indeed, the utmost I can say for him in this respect is, that he performed those functions with undeviating attention to brevity and dispatch. He had a large heap of short sermons, rather yellow and worn at the edges, from which he took two every Sunday, securing perfect impartiality in the selection by taking them as they came without reference to topics. (68–69)

He may not *seem* to be well versed in theology, but who can really tell how much he knows about doctrine, since he does not display his knowledge, as some less godly preachers might? Does Jesus talk about

the Good Samaritan's doctrinal knowledge? No, because to Jesus only the man's actions mattered. Moreover, he was a Samaritan, that is, an individual despised by the prejudiced Jews of that time. The truth about Mr. Gilfil is that he is a humble man, who hates to talk much about intellectual issues or to show off, especially since his congregation, consisting mainly of uneducated people, would have had a hard time understanding him. That is why Gilfil's gesture touches Dame Fripp so much that she never forgets the old man's kindness, and it is also why in both Shepperton and Knebley, where people had known him, the "farmers would as soon have thought of criticizing the moon as their pastor" (69). Now, the quarrel with Oldinport is an exceptional case in the village, an illustration of Gilfil's "biting words against" a rich man's "evil-doing." Rev. Gilfil is sarcastic toward the rich landlord's treatment of others. Obviously, Oldinport could not like such a man. But were not Jesus, the Jewish prophets, and the Apostles hated by the same type of people?¹

Another example of the preacher's goodness occurs in his relations with children. He used to fill "his pocket with sugar-plums for the little children" (166). The amusing scene with Tommy Bond is a fine illustration of his love for little ones. The pastor jokes with the boy, nicely teases him about geese and goslings but calls him "dear heart" and lets him put his hand into his pocket to take out some goodies (71). He has them in "his wonderful pocket, because, as he delighted to tell the 'young shavers' and 'two-shoes'—so he called all little boys and girls—whenever he put pennies into it, they turned into sugar-plums or gingerbread, or some other nice thing" (71).

¹Indeed, Oldinport represents the epitome of an arrogant, greedy, and ambitious rich man: "and as Mr Oldinport's armour of conscious virtue presented some considerable and conspicuous gaps, the Vicar's keen-edged retorts probably made a few incisions too deep to be forgiven" (70). Farmers, however, liked the way their pastor treated the landlord: "Hence, to the Shepperton farmers it was as good as lemon with their grog to know that the Vicar had thrown out sarcasms against the Squire's charities, as little better than those of the man who stole a goose, and gave away the giblets in alms" (70).

Overall, then, Gilfil is a good-humored man who makes nearly everyone happy. He shows interest in the people's ordinary and daily affairs, and so

[t]he farmers relished his society particularly, for he could not only smoke his pipe, and season the details of the parish affairs with abundance of caustic jokes and proverbs, but, as Mr Bond often said, no man knew more than the Vicar about the breed of cows and horses. (71)

It seems that the way he lives and talks is not different from theirs, because "it was his habit to approximate his accent and mode of speech to theirs" (72), another reason why he is likable. Because he is a humble man, he had made an effort to get close to people, but, adds Eliot, if "a *superficial observer* might have seen little difference, beyond his superior shrewdness, between the Vicar and his bucolic parishioners" (71–72, emphasis added), "the farmers themselves were perfectly aware of the distinction between them and the parson and had not at all the less belief in him as a gentleman and a clergyman for his easy speech and familiar manners" (72). By criticizing some people's lack of depth, Eliot continually warns against misjudgment, based on the Vicar's appearance. Does she find fault with the way Gilfil performs his "clerical functions," or does she underestimate the pastor's theological knowledge (72)? Not at all, for Eliot's sarcastic tone against the villagers' prejudices and superstitions should not be confused with her opinion about the pastor's intellect and personality. The farmers are prejudiced against what they scornfully label "Dissenters," someone like the Milby pastor. But this is probably not Gilfil's view. These same ignorant people do not care whether the sermon their preacher delivers "had been heard for the twentieth time" (72).

It is true that Eliot mocks these simple-minded people, as she asserts that "to minds on the Shepperton level it is repetition, not novelty, that produces the strongest effect; and phrases, like tunes, are a long time making themselves at home in the brain" (72). She does not, however, mean that *the preacher* is stupid for repeating

himself. Even though his sermons “were not of a highly doctrinal, still less of a polemical cast” and “perhaps did not search the conscience very powerfully” (72), one should consider the fact that Eliot is addressing a cultured reader who *might* despise a preacher like Gilfil, like Friedrich Schleiermacher’s “cultured despisers.”² But two following points are implicitly made in the description of the pastor’s theology and the content of his sermons. First, he wants to be understood by his congregation, where many people were like Mrs. Patten, so he has decided to be just a practical and effective theologian. After all, he has studied theology and had preached at Cheverel Manor when he was young, that is, in front of “educated” and “refined” people. Second, he is mainly interested in the *essence* of religion, in other words, in the practice of goodness. Although Eliot *seems* ironic in using the expression “concise thesis” (72), it is not at all ridiculous, for it consists of basic principles of morals, including “honesty, truthfulness, charity, industry, and other common virtues” (72). Third, punishment and reward, fundamental notions in the Bible, are also mentioned. The pastor stresses the fact “that those who do wrong will find it the worse for them, and those who do well will find it the better for them” (72). In spite of its simplicity, still Mrs. Hackit has a hard time understanding “the sermon on anger” (73). The reader realizes that Eliot’s sarcasm is in fact directed against some of Gilfil’s parishioners and not against Gilfil himself. Besides, Eliot praises him so much throughout the story that it would be contradictory to mock him: a few humorous remarks should not be confused with sarcasm.

Whether he knows much about “doctrine,” since Gilfil is a humble man in the true sense of the word, he prefers being in the company of common people rather than the upper class. He does, in fact, exactly what Jesus did. But he knows rich people quite well also, having been reared at Cheverel Manor. Moreover, “Old Sir Jasper Sitwell would have been glad to see him every week” (73)—and with him Gilfil used to feel quite comfortable in the past. How-

²Eliot had probably read Schleiermacher’s *On Religion: Speeches to Its Cultured Despisers* (1799), since she owned a copy of it.

ever, “in his later years these visits became a little too troublesome to the old *gentleman*, and he was rarely to be found anywhere of an evening beyond the bounds of his own parish” (74). Note that Eliot does not like much the haughtiness and snobbery of many wealthy people either, and so her sarcasm is not only directed against some farmers but also against alleged “refined” persons (74).³ Therefore, she must agree with Gilfil for preferring now a more simple lifestyle and society. Other moral qualities of the pastor, appreciated by Eliot, include his sobriety and frugality. If he has become thrifty, it is not because he loves money but because he wants to save it for his nephew, his sister’s only son. He thinks that after he passes away, the young man “will have a nice little fortune to begin life with, and will bring his pretty young wife some day to see the spot where his old uncle lies. It will perhaps be all the better for *his* hearth that mine was lonely” (74). The pastor’s thought is very kind and generous, indeed, though the ending seems rather sad. It is because, despite his apparent joviality, the old man, much more deeply than he appears, has not forgotten his love for Tina. This faithfulness is certainly not the least of his qualities; it is even one of the novella’s main topics. One of the points made numerous times by Eliot is that one should not judge people by their appearance. The last part of this chapter emphasizes Gilfil’s fidelity and devoted love to his wife, although deceased so long ago. Still, who would imagine that this old man has been, and has remained, such a romantic lover?

Before examining Gilfil’s love story *per se*, something even Mrs. Patten knows almost nothing about—only Eliot and, to some extent, the pastor’s housekeeper, Martha, do—one must focus on the ending of Chapter One, which so touchingly describes a strong feel-

³Since Gilfil sometimes takes a little gin-and-water, which is not a drink for “refined” folks, Eliot sarcastically observes, “Here I am aware that I have run the risk of alienating all my refined lady readers, and annihilating any curiosity they may have felt to know the details of Mr Gilfil’s love-story. ‘Gin-and-water! foh! you may as well ask us to interest ourselves in the romance of a tallow-chandler, who mingles the image of his beloved with short dips and moulds’” (74).

ing and scene, telling of an old man *still* in love with the only woman of his life. Based on what one can observe from Gilfil's humble sitting-room, where he spends most of his evenings alone with his dog (75), it would be impossible, Eliot points out, to imagine the room where he keeps alive the memory of his beloved Tina, so different from the rest of the vicarage:

But there was a chamber in Shepperton Vicarage which told a different story from that bare and cheerless dining-room—a chamber never entered by any one besides Mr Gilfil and old Martha the housekeeper, who, with David her husband as groom and gardener, formed the Vicar's entire establishment. The blinds of this chamber were always down, except once a quarter, when Martha entered that she might air and clean it. She always asked Mr Gilfil for the key, which he kept locked up in his bureau, and returned it to him when she had finished her task. (75)

This room, kept like a shrine, tells of a beautiful young woman, who died many years earlier and has been deeply loved. There is ironically more life in this room than in the pastor's living-room, for in there, just by looking at the "threadbare Turkey carpet" (75), one feels that it is not only expressing contempt for the material world but also decline and death. In the secret room, if the blinds are always down and the door locked, it is because Gilfil refuses to talk about his private life with others. Besides, he must care too much about others to bother them with his own sad memories. If Martha can enter the room, it is because it must be once in a while aired and cleaned. It has to be kept in a good condition, like anything one respects and loves. Thus, Tina's memory remains *alive* for Gilfil. One's memories, Eliot suggests, may be more precious than one's present life. At any rate, the pastor's nostalgia is so poetic and beautiful and brings so much hope, especially to blasé readers who do not believe in such a constant romantic love, that Eliot's description of the room makes this passage one of the book's most moving and significant ones:

It was a *touching* sight that the daylight streamed in upon, as Martha drew aside the blinds and thick curtains, and opened the Gothic casement of the oriel window! On the little dressing table there was a *dainty* looking-glass in a carved and gilt frame; bits of wax-candle were still in the branched sockets at the sides, and on one of these branches hung a little black lace kerchief; a faded satin pincushion, with the pins rusted in it, a scent-bottle, and a large green fan, lay on the table; and on a dressing-box by the side of the glass was a work-basket, and an unfinished *baby-cap*, yellow with age, lying in it. Two gowns, of a fashion long forgotten, were hanging on nails against the door, and a pair of tiny red slippers, with a bit of tarnished silver embroidery on them, were standing at the foot of the bed. Two or three water-colour drawings, views of Naples, hung upon the walls; and over the mantle-piece, above some bits of rare old china, two miniatures in oval frames. One of these miniatures represented a young man about seven-and-twenty, with a sanguine complexion, full lips, and clear candid gray eyes. The other was the likeness of a girl, probably not more than eighteen, with small features, thin cheeks, a pale southern-looking complexion, and large dark eyes. The gentleman wore powder; the lady had her dark hair gathered away from her face, and a little cap, with a cherry-coloured bow, set on the top of her head—a coquettish head-dress, but the eyes spoke of sadness rather than of coquetry. (75, emphasis added)

One's room generally represents one's personality, tastes, feelings, etc. Of the secret room in the vicarage Eliot only describes first and very briefly the window, an old and charming one ("Gothic," "oriel"), but which does not reveal anything about Tina's personality. Her "little dressing table," however, meticulously described, is not without significance. The adjective "dainty" applied to the looking-glass, suggesting some sensuality and femininity, could pertain to other items on the table, such as the "black lace kerchief," "the satin pincushion," "the scent-bottle," and "the fan." "Dainty" could also qualify other objects in the room, especially the "tiny red slippers." Besides, if all

these details, the “wax-candle,” the “kerchief,” the “pincushion,” are mentioned, perhaps it is because Eliot wants the reader to feel what the old pastor has felt throughout these years of Tina’s absence. She wants the reader to know how important and precious all these ordinary objects have been to this sensitive man. One sees that he has kept them religiously in the same place, like relics. The time as well as the strong feeling attached to them is emphasized by the adverb “still,” by the epithet “faded,” by the term “rusted,” and by the phrase “yellow with age.” In other parts of the room, old age is again stressed—in the “[t]wo gowns, of a fashion *long forgotten*” and in the “*tarnished* silver embroidery.” On the dressing table the “unfinished baby-cap” is an especially touching object. The young mother and the expected baby come *alive* again in this depiction. Other objects in the room are also each undoubtedly precious to the old and faithful husband, including the “tiny red slippers” and the “water-colour drawings.” The bed itself is not described, probably out of nineteenth-century decency.

Then come the pictures of a young couple “over the mantle-piece,” which constitutes the longest portion of the paragraph. The portraits of the young couple, Maynard Gilfil, twenty-seven, and his wife, Caterina (Tina) Sarti, eighteen, are all the more moving because of the tragic ending of this beautiful union. These details are surely not without significance. First, Eliot implicitly expresses the fact that the changes in the pastor’s physique are not only due to aging but also to lifelong suffering. One must compare this portrait of the young Gilfil with that of his old age. He had in those former days “a sanguine complexion, full lips,” and according to the fashion of the time he also “wore powder.” Gilfil looked happy in spite of all the hardship he had already experienced—including Tina’s love for Anthony, the latter’s sudden death, Tina’s disappearance, and her long and worrying illness. However, after marrying her, he had forgotten about all those miseries and had become somewhat joyful again. The only physical feature that has probably not changed is the “*candid* grey eyes,” for he remains indeed a kind, frank, favorably disposed person throughout his life. In contrast, the older pastor has “white hair hung around a *pale* and *venerable* face” (74),

which reflects a grave and pure spirit.⁴ As for Tina's portrait, one can imagine the old pastor's feelings as he looks at that miniature every time he enters the room. Eliot puts herself in his shoes as she highlights Tina's beauty, especially with regard to her dark eyes but also an inner beauty manifested in her paleness and her melancholy look, as her "eyes spoke of sadness rather than of coquetry." This sadness has been with Gilfil himself all his life, and there is surely a beauty in it. But, as the reader knows, this sadness is related to the young woman's guilty feeling since the premeditated intention of killing Anthony until the horrible death scene of the Captain due to heart attack. Even though it was not her fault, the thought she had had was enough for her to feel guilty the remainder of her short life. At any rate, a portrait is no doubt an interesting item to analyze, and Eliot's comparison of Gilfil's picture on the wall with the way he looks at an advanced age foreshadows a later poetic comment about the effect of love and suffering upon an individual's life:

Rich brown locks, passionate love, and deep early sorrow,
strangely different as they seem from the scanty white hairs, the
apathetic content, and the unexpectant quiescence of old age,
are but part of the same life's journey; as the bright Italian
plains, with the sweet Addio of their beckoning maidens, are
part of the same day's travel that brings us to the other side of

⁴Eliot's earlier digression is here appropriate to quote, for it reveals her compassion and understanding of the elderly, although she herself was only thirty-eight when she wrote it: "Alas, alas! we poor mortals are often little better than wood-ashes—there is small sign of the sap and the leafy freshness, and the bursting buds that were once there; but wherever we see wood-ashes, we know that early fullness of life must have been. I, at least, hardly ever look at a bent old man, or a wizened old woman, but I see also, with my mind's eye, that Past of which they are the shrunken remnant, and the unfinished romance of rosy cheeks and bright eyes seems sometimes of feeble interest and significance, compared with that drama of hope and love which has been long ago reached its catastrophe, and left the poor soul, like a dim and dusty stage, with all its sweet garden-scenes and fair perspectives overturned and thrust out of sight" (74).

the mountain, between the sombre rocky walls and among the guttural voices of the Valais. (165–66)

The comparison with the Italian landscape is doubly significant, first, because Tina was an Italian girl who brought Maynard both sorrow and joy, and, second, because the contrast between the two types of nature shows that one ought to look at an entire life if one wishes to describe it realistically. Furthermore, everyone's life resembles that Italian nature, for sorrow and joy are both part of life.

A return now to another interesting comparison with nature in the novella's Epilogue completes the parallel between the external and the internal as well as between the two Gilfils, the young and the old:

And indeed the Mr Gilfil of those late Shepperton days had more of the knots and ruggedness of poor human nature than there lay any clear hint of in the open-eyed loving Maynard. *But it is with men as with trees: if you lop off their finest branches, into which they were pouring their young life-juice, the wounds will be healed over with some rough boss, some odd excrescence; and what might have been a grand tree expanding into liberal shade, is but a whimsical misshapen trunk.* Many an irritating fault, many an unlovely oddity, has come of a *hard sorrow*, which has crushed and maimed the nature just when it was expanding into plenteous beauty; and the trivial erring life which we visit with our harsh blame, may be but as the unsteady motion of a man whose best limb is withered. (166, emphasis added)

The simile here is at once very poetic and realistic. Indeed, trees suffer too in the vicissitudes of nature and weather. Yet there is beauty in the "misshapen trunk." Gilfil's life has not been an easy one. Although the sensitive man has suffered more than many, still most humans' lives are shaken by similar tragedies. Eliot's art in part consists in revealing the greatness of some people one considers ordinary, just by judging from their appearances. The reality is that Gilfil does not love the way most people do. He is in this respect a superior man, for his love is sublime. But one can still better assess

his greatness by comparing him with Tina herself, who is actually not an ordinary woman either. Indeed, her guilty feeling after Anthony's death is not something so common after all.

II.

The novella's main plot is a classic love triangle: Gilfil loves Tina, but Tina loves Anthony, and Anthony himself is not in love with Tina nor Beatrice, even though he is supposed to be and is willing to marry her. The feeling is in fact reciprocal, and so Beatrice's jealousy toward Tina has nothing to do with love. So it would simply be a marriage of convenience on both sides. As for Gilfil's love for Tina, it happened gradually and imperceptibly, as he was growing up by her side at Cheverel Manor. One sees this kind of love in other Eliot plots too. It is, for instance, the case for both Adam and Dinah in *Adam Bede* (1859). Tina is a very sensitive girl, and Eliot understands and is compassionate toward her, as she describes Tina's sorrow in the summer of 1788: "The poor bird was beginning to flutter and vainly dash its soft breast against the hard iron bars of the inevitable, and we see too plainly the danger, if that anguish should go on heightening instead of being allayed, that the palpitating heart may be fatally bruised" (89). She passionately loves Anthony, who is false and insensitive. Hypersensitivity and romantic love, as described by writers such as Shakespeare, Rousseau, Goethe, Stendhal, the Brontës, and Balzac, are not absent in Eliot's works. Tina is certainly a very good example of them. When she is seven years old, her feelings for the fifteen-year-old Gilfil, Sir Christopher Cheverel's ward, are of a sisterly nature and remain so till after her serious illness at eighteen, when her love grows for the young pastor quite unexpectedly and imperceptibly. It is true that when she was just a child, she liked her "playfellow" so much that "[w]henver Maynard went back to school, there was a little scene of parting" (100). Still, nothing one might call a romantic love existed between them. Then, "As the years wore on, and Maynard passed from school to college, and from a slim lad to a stalwart young man, their companionship in the vacations *necessarily* took a different form, but it retained a

brotherly and sisterly familiarity” (101, emphasis added). This interesting revelation, however, must be noted: “With Maynard the boyish affection had *insensibly* grown into ardent love” (101, emphasis added), as should Eliot’s further comment concerning this type of love: “Among all the many kinds of first love, that which begins in childish companionship is the strongest and most enduring: when passion comes to unite its force to long affection, love is at its spring-tide” (101). The first tragic event in the young pastor’s life is caused by the fact that Tina’s feelings for him are different, even though she likes and respects him very much. She is also quite aware of his passion:

And Maynard Gilfil’s love was of a kind to make him prefer being tormented by Caterina to any pleasure, apart from her, which the most benevolent magician could have devised for him. It is the way with those tall large-limbed men, from Samson downwards. As for Tina, the little minx was perfectly well aware that Maynard was her slave; he was the one person in the world whom she did as she pleased with; and I need not tell you that this was a symptom of her being perfectly heart-whole so far as he was concerned: for a passionate woman’s love is always overshadowed by fear. (101)

There is some ambiguity in this passage. That Tina is not in love with Gilfil is a fact, but, subconsciously, as she enjoys seeing him so much in love with her, one might imagine that she is capable of loving him someday in a different way. So Gilfil is not wrong to be hopeful, as Eliot explains: “Maynard Gilfil did not deceive himself in his interpretation of Caterina’s feelings, but *he nursed the hope* that some time or other she would at least care enough for him to accept his love. So he waited patiently for the day when he might venture to say, ‘Caterina, I love you!’” (101).

If Gilfil wished to be chaplain at Cheverel Manor, it was because he wanted to be close to his love and see her as much as possible. Thus, his jealousy toward Anthony seems quite natural, Eliot intimates—a minimum of this feeling is normal in romantic love—but

this does not make the vicar mean or hateful. He is afflicted because he knows that the Captain is dishonest and therefore capable of badly injuring Tina. The latter remains rather blind for a long time, which is also psychologically understandable, and does not believe Gilfil at first when he tries to disabuse her mind about Anthony. When Beatrice enters the Captain's life, and thus his attitude toward Tina totally changes, "Gilfil watched Caterina through these days with mixed feelings. Her suffering went to his heart; but, even for her sake, he was glad that a love which could never come to good should be no longer fed by false hopes" (105–06). Tina, who is rather an ordinary person compared to her old playfellow, imagines that he is merely jealous of the rival and does not tell her the truth about the latter's relationship with Beatrice.

Another instance of Gilfil's devoted love, which goes beyond a regular romantic one, is the way he deals with the marriage Sir Christopher tries to arrange between him and Tina. Anthony also tries his best to make this happen so he will be rid of Tina and can marry Beatrice without any obstacle. Nevertheless, the good pastor is not happy with this arrangement. Even though it would be to *his* advantage, he only wants Tina's happiness and would never marry her in this way without her entire consent. He hopes that some day she may love him. The letter he writes to Tina in this regard is a good testimony of his sincerity:

Do not suspect for a moment that anything Sir Christopher may say to you about our marriage has been prompted by me. I have done all I dare do to dissuade him from urging the subject, and have only been prevented from speaking more strongly by the dread of provoking questions which I could not answer without causing you fresh misery. (135)

When she finally finds out that Gilfil was right and the Captain dishonest, she thinks about her old friend: "Dear, good Maynard!—what a poor return I make him! *If I could but have loved him instead*—but I can never love or care for anything again. My heart is broken" (137, emphasis added). This thought is quite revealing, for

it shows one more time that, subconsciously, Tina might come to love Gilfil. Maybe there has been with her a psychological obstacle, some moral issue tormenting her mind, perhaps even a sexual repression due to the fact that Gilfil as a playfellow had been like a brother to her.

Tina's decision to murder Anthony in the Rookery where they are supposed to meet is due, Eliot suggests, to momentary madness. She is a very impulsive girl, but she still loves Anthony: "See how she rushes noiselessly, like a pale meteor, along the passages and up the gallery stairs! Those gleaming eyes, those bloodless lips, that swift silent tread, make her look like the incarnation of a fierce purpose, rather than a woman" (140–41). Eliot describes her in almost Racinian terms: she is out of her senses, close to madness, as she rushes to the cabinet in the gallery where the "sharp weapons" are kept, with a firm resolution to "plunge that dagger into his heart" (141), because he has broken hers. That only Gilfil could not believe her capable of such a crime is also proof of his great love for her. Eliot herself considers Tina at this moment a mentally deranged person, capable of anything in her abnormal state, even murder, but pities her: "Poor child! poor child! she who used to cry to have the fish put back into the water—who never willingly killed the smallest living thing—dreams now, in the madness of her passion, that she can kill the man whose very voice unnerves her" (141), from which one can deduce, first, that although she is not justifying Tina, she would not consider her a true, i.e., conscious, murderer; second, that her pity is mingled with empathy; and third, that in her view, if passionate love is blind and selfish, it can lead to madness, and so love may turn into its opposite. But Tina is not that type of passionate person. She still believes in love, and her ethical principles do not disappear on account of temporary madness. She completely forgets about her criminal plan when she sees Anthony's body lying on the ground. Even before she realizes that he is dead, she panics and is much troubled by the idea that he has fainted due to illness: "Good God! It is he—lying motionless—his hat fallen off. He is ill, then—he has fainted. Her hand lets go the dagger, and she rushes towards him. His eyes are fixed; he does not see her. She sinks down on her knees, takes the

dear head in her arms, and kisses the cold forehead” (141). She is terrified when she fully realizes that he is dead.

The best testimony of Tina’s moral mindset is her guilt for her criminal thought. She is so tormented that she cannot bear life any longer and sincerely wishes to die; describing her remorse and pangs of conscience, Eliot observes,

But she could not stay at the Manor, she must go away; she could not bear Sir Christopher’s eye, could not bear the sight of all these things that reminded her of Anthony and of her *sin*. Perhaps she should die soon; she felt very feeble; there could not be much life in her. She would go away and live humbly, and *pray to God to pardon her, and let her die.* (146, emphasis added)

In the New Testament, sinning is considered a form of death. Thus, Tina believes her soul to be already dead and so thinks that the only thing she must now do is to “pray to God” for forgiveness, for her sinful thought and intention, and for Him to “let her die,” since suicide is out of question for a Christian. Indeed, Eliot immediately adds, “The poor child never thought of suicide” (146). As she runs away from the manor, she still thinks of Gilfil and the others. She does not want to hurt them. She hopes that they will forget her soon, thinking that she is dead, and her old playfellow will be able to marry someone else, a better woman. She wishes for him to be truly happy: “and by-and-by they will forget me, and Maynard will get happy again, and love some one else” (146). One sees here a teenager with not only much sensitivity but also high moral standards and a religious mind, and one wonders how such a person could possibly have murdered Anthony, even in a transitory madness. The last sign of her sincerity is that, as she reaches Daniel Knott’s farmhouse, where she had decided to seek refuge, she faints in Dorcas’s arms (154). If during “those five long days and nights” at the hospitable coachman’s house (152), in spite of his wife’s great and motherly care, she remains in a state of total bereavement and looks so miserable, it is because her soul has been seriously bruised. It is not only because Anthony is dead but also, and above all, because

of her guilt. Only a very ethical mind is capable of such a reaction. As Dorcas reports to Gilfil, who has come to see Tina at her house, "She lies there teckin' no notice o' nothin, no more nor a baby as is on'y a wick old, an' looks at me as blank as if she didn't know me" (155). The death Tina desires so much would surely have come, had not Gilfil saved her, thanks to his great love. Nonetheless, Tina has not yet understood how deep is the love Gilfil has for her. If she knew, she would not feel so forlorn and thus might be cured.

Eliot takes pleasure in describing again, but in a new way, the beauty and the nuances of Gilfil's particular romantic love. As soon as the young pastor learns from Knott that Tina is alive, he hurriedly rides to Callam, a few miles away, to see her:

Once more he saw some gladness in the afternoon sunlight; *once more* it was a pleasure to see the hedgerow trees flying past him, and to be conscious of a "good seat" while his black Kitty bounded beneath him, and the air whistled to the rhythm of her pace. Caterina was not dead; he had found her; *his love and tenderness and long-suffering seemed so strong, they must recall her to life and happiness*. After that week of despair, the rebound was so violent that it carried his hopes at once as far as the utmost mark they had ever reached. Caterina would come to love him at last; she would be his. They had been carried through all that dark and weary way that she might know *the depth of his love*. How he would cherish her—his little bird with the timid bright eye, and the sweet throat that trembled with love and music! She would nestle against him, and *the poor little breast which had been so ruffled and bruised* should be safe for evermore. In the love of a brave and faithful man there is always a strain of *maternal tenderness*; he gives out again those beams of protecting fondness which were shed on him as he lay on his mother's knee. (154–55, emphasis added)

Gilfil is so devastated by Tina's disappearance that the news brought by the coachman revives his soul. The phrase "once more," twice used at the beginning of this passage, clearly expresses a kind of resurrection,

the more so since the young man believes in the power of love, which is capable of reviving a sick soul. He is confident that his strong love and steadfastness toward Tina can “recall her to life and happiness.” One should not consider egoistical his idea of being at last loved by Tina in this way, even though his hope is quite natural. He does not compare her to a “little monkey,” as Sir Christopher used to, even though he did so also out of tenderness, but to a bird, since she is a remarkable singer and as pretty as one, just as Eliot had stated earlier, associating her with warmth, passion, and beauty. No Romantic poet has better depicted a man’s love for a woman. The last part of this passage is particularly touching, as erotic/platonic love reveals another component, maternal love. Indeed, who can love better than a good mother, Eliot intimates, as Gilfil compares himself to the mother-bird who would take care of his Tina, and so “*the poor little breast which had been so ruffled and bruised should be safe for evermore.*”

It is true that romantic love for Eliot is quite different from Balzac’s conception of it, not because the latter is a man, for even in female authors like the Brontë sisters or George Sand one does not see a lover like Gilfil with such a feminine heart and sensibility. Eliot thus emphasizes the idea that “[i]n the love of a brave and faithful man there is always a strain of *maternal tenderness.*” Does this mean that the erotic aspect is weak or nonexistent? Surely not. Eliot simply shows that in a great romantic love, in spite of its specific mystery, which is a combination of sexual desire and spirituality, the “maternal tenderness” is not absent, whether one be a man or a woman: if the lover is a man, such as Gilfil, “he gives out again those beams of protecting fondness which were shed on him as he lay on his mother’s knee.” Silas Marner rears and loves his Eppie in both fatherly and motherly fashion, but his relationship with her is obviously not erotic. What is interesting about Gilfil’s love for Tina is its novelty. Eliot means to show that, although rare, this type of romantic love is not impossible. Another implicit idea in both the novella and *Silas Marner* (1861) is the fact that a man is not necessarily devoid of motherliness. He can be, as far as affection is concerned, both father and mother. The same can be said of a woman,

but that idea, although found elsewhere in Eliot's work, is not at issue here.

Another sign of Gilfil's genuine and remarkable love for Tina is the way he attempts to relieve her of her remorse of conscience. He really believes that she would never have been capable of murdering the Captain. Besides, what he says makes sense and is convincing, although it is hard to know what would really have happened had she not found Anthony dead already. Here, what matters is the vicar's kindness and intelligent reasoning:

"No, my Tina," answered Maynard slowly, waiting a little between each sentence; "we mean to do wicked things that we never could do, just as we mean to do good or clever things that we never could do. Our thoughts are often worse than we are, just as they are often better than we are. And *God sees us as we are altogether*, not in separate feelings or actions, as our fellow-men see us. We are always doing each other injustice, and thinking better or worse of each other than we deserve, *because we only hear and see separate words and actions*. We don't see each other's whole nature. *But God sees* that you could not have committed that crime." (159, emphasis added)

Gilfil does his best to ease Tina's sorrow. One notes that he has a strong faith in a just and good God who is infinitely more charitable than humans are—"God sees us as we are altogether," whereas humans judge each other according to "separate feelings or actions." Furthermore, his love for Tina does not prevent him from loving humans in general, even though he finds them, including himself, "always" unjust toward one another—"We are *always* doing each other injustice"—emphasizing again God's goodness and revealing his perfect trust in the Creator as well as in his much afflicted friend: "*But God sees* that you could not have committed that crime."

During the night Gilfil spends at Tina's bedside, the confessions they make to each other of their sins reveal the degree of their religious belief, especially that of Gilfil's, who had not done anything most people would have considered wrong. Nonetheless, he insists

that he is not better than she. He even views himself as worse, as he says to her, “I am more sinful than you, Tina” (159), simply because he has “often had very bad feelings towards Captain Wybrow” (159–60). As a later comment underscores, “My Tina, we have all our secret sins; and if we knew ourselves, we should not judge each other harshly” (160). Gilfil has the Bible in his heart, even though he does not quote from it. He does not like to preach but to act according to Jesus’ religious principles. The way he confesses himself and listens to her, affectionately holding her “tiny hand” in his (161), is another testimony of his sincere faith in God, who *is* Love. The relationship between religion and love, as described by Eliot, is quite significant, as her conception of religion is at the same time revealed:

In this way—in these broken confessions and answering words of comfort—the hours wore on, from the deep black night to the chill early twilight, and from early twilight to the first yellow streak of morning parting the purple cloud. Mr. Gilfil felt as if in the long hours of that night the bond that united his love for ever and alone to Caterina had acquired fresh strength and sanctity. It is so with the human relations that rest on the deep emotional sympathy of affection: every new day and night of joy or sorrow is a new ground, a new consecration, for the love that is nourished by memories as well as hopes—the love to which perpetual repetition is not a weariness but a want, and to which a separated joy is the beginning of pain. (160)

Confessing in this way is something that has always been done among Christians, starting with Paul himself. Gilfil, a Protestant pastor, himself confesses as much as he listens to Tina’s confession. He does not consider himself superior to her but even worse than she is, since he says to her—there is no reason to question his sincerity—about her criminal thought with regard to Anthony, “if he had provoked me as he did you, I should perhaps have done something more wicked” (160). Eliot’s phrase, “their broken confessions,” expresses the spontaneity and naturalness of their talks. Besides, no one is above another; no one acts like a saint; no one is God’s representative.

The reason why time is so much stressed, and night and day are both poetically described, may be that Eliot meant to show through the symbolism of these notions the end of a tunnel or the promise of an end to misery and weariness for both characters. The term "sanctity" about love best shows this kind of love: a true romantic love is "holy," but let one not confuse this religious component with one Balzac had for Madame Hanska, or one theorized by Auguste Comte based on his passionate love for Clotilde de Vaux. Likewise, the term "consecration," definitely religious, alludes to Christian faith: everything is holy, and one ought to be grateful for everything one receives. Ludwig Feuerbach would have said from one's own mind, not from God, which is far from Eliot's digression.

III.

It is true, as some critics note,⁵ that Eliot, like William Wordsworth in *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), decided to describe the lives of ordinary people and show that they can be beautiful and interesting. She herself clearly expressed this idea in her correspondence. Note, however, that her narratives are not without real heroes and heroines. For example, if Amos Barton is a commonplace preacher and man, his story is interesting to recount mainly because of his wife, who is not ordinary but a kind of saint. By the same token, if Adam Bede is almost an ordinary carpenter, though an excellent man, his story would not have been interesting to tell without a Dinah Morris, who is an extraordinary personage, indeed another saint. As Milly Barton is the reason why Eliot's first narrative is beautiful, and as Edgar Tryan is the great hero who makes *Janet's Repentance* (1858) such a moving story, so Gilfil is the one without whom the second novella would not have been as interesting. Tina's story

⁵For example, U. C. Knoepfelmacher writes, "'Mr. Gilfil's Love-story' portrays the history of a 'man so wrapt up in a woman' that he becomes dulled by her premature death" (59). To Knoepfelmacher, Gilfil's love, unlike that of Tina, is "unromantic" (59); the pastor is "a man condemned to remain in that temporal world" (72).

alone would still be a touching one, but Gilfil is not a “common-place” preacher, as Thomas A. Noble, for instance, believes (x). On the contrary, Gilfil is a remarkable man and preacher, for he practices *true* religion, meaning that he does good discreetly and humbly. Gilfil’s sermons are simple and short for the reasons here explained, not because he has nothing to say, but because he practices the religion of the Good Samaritan Jesus talks about, not that of the Levite and the Rabbi of the famous parable. His love for his wife is also a sublime one. These two extraordinary qualities (true religion, according to Jesus’ definition of it, and his ethical principles), as well as a true romantic love, so rare in literature, make this second novella of *Scenes of Clerical Life* a true masterpiece.⁶

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⁶To Noble, however, “‘Mr. Gilfil’s Love Story,’ while not an absolute failure,” is still “very inferior George Eliot” (146). Melissa Raines writes, “In calling our readerly focus to the quiet Mr Gilfil, we are made to see that for all his apparent ordinary-ness, he is the extraordinary one” (42).

Imprint

Snow keeps falling
on fallen snow,
unmaking the wings
of a child I know.

Easter

The sun's finally out
and with his stepdad a boy
builds a newspaper boat
they both half-believe
the snowmelt will float.

Rain Clods

An innocent slip
at the typewriter,

and God . . .

God not being one
to waste a perfectly
good word,

the sky opens
as never before.

The Reading Lamp

allows
the living

room
to be

other-
wise
dark

—Mike White



Dante Alighieri (c. 1335)
fresco, Podestà Chapel, Palazzo del Bargello, Florence
Giotto di Bondone (1266–1337)

“No home for him, no way”: George P. Elliott’s Religious Reversion from Modernism

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Kicking Some Modern Habits,” the introductory essay in George P. Elliott’s second and last essay collection, *Conversions: Literature and the Modernist Deviation* (1971), begins this way:

Two centuries ago with the Enlightenment, there began a great age which boasted of its modernity and for which the name Modern seems to me as fitting as any other, for during this period Now and the New came to be worshiped as they had never been worshiped before. Modernism substituted science for religion, technology for magic, democracy for monarchy, change for tradition, and progress for salvation. It challenged all authorities, accepting only the few that could withstand the assaults of rational criticism; as a consequence, rebellion became more orthodox than obedience. God was the essence of what Modernism opposed: He is eternal; He is outside of nature and beyond understanding; He is a king who ought to be obeyed, for His commands are always right. (9)

The spiritual trajectory that brought Elliott to the point of making such a statement against Modernity and Modernism was as singular as any; yet it also evidences a counter current within Modernism—a “backward motion,” in Robert Frost’s words, “against the stream” (329)—that often goes unnoticed but that also belies easy generalities about the “nihilism” or “relativism” of twentieth-century American literature. There was a conflict, perhaps even an interdependence, of the modernist and the religious in Elliott’s soul—a word he would have used in keen awareness of its unfashion but needing to name as truthfully as he could the “thing that chooses” (“Certain” 97)—that would not let him find a resting place in modernity.

“Singular” but not unique. One writer or intellectual reverting to—or in Elliott’s case toward—religion in mid-twentieth-century America was not exactly front-page news; but he was not alone. In 1950 *Partisan Review* devoted space in four consecutive issues (Feb.–May) to “Religion and the Intellectuals: A Symposium,” in which twenty-nine writers, critics, and thinkers responded to questions posed by editors William Phillips and Philip Rahv (and perhaps associate editors William Barrett and Delmore Schwartz). Elliott’s literary career was just getting well launched in 1950 (one of his short stories first appeared in an annual award collection that year), and he did not take part in the “symposium,” though he may have read at least some of it.¹ The three-paragraph “Editorial Statement” that, with five “queries” or open-ended “topics,” prefaces the first two installments in the symposium takes note of “the new turn toward religion among intellectuals and the growing disfavor with which secular attitudes are now regarded in not a few circles that lay claim to the leadership of culture” (103). Speculating that “if the present tendency continues, the mid-century years may go down in history as the years of conversion and return,” the statement also remarks on “how these puffs of the *Zeitgeist* catch up the intellectuals for a decade or so only

¹References in Elliott’s essay “Who Is *We*?” indicate a broad awareness of New York intellectual culture from the late 40s on, including *Partisan Review* and several people associated with it. Later in his career Elliott attested his reluctance to take part in symposia (“Confessions” 143–47).

to let them down just as abruptly into disillusion and frustration" (103–04).

Statements by Barrett and Phillips bracket the symposium's last installment.² Reflecting on the "pandemonium of voices" and their "amazing dissonance," Barrett exclaims, "Talk about cultural pluralism! Well, we have it, and our problem may now be how to get beyond it. In a real Age of Faith a symposium like this could not have been held" (456). In such an age "everybody is religious as a simple spontaneous act of being" (456), and since the times then were manifestly not such an age, one should "not conclude too hastily that we shall shortly have a homogeneously religious life like that of the past" (457). Regarding America as "certainly the most irreligious civilization that has ever existed" (457), with its "masses . . . immersed in their gadgets" and "know[ing] nothing of the religious passion that once characterized the peasantries of Europe" (458), Barrett confesses his own "private religion" (459), his inability "to think of the world except as opening to the possibility of God," which he concedes was "very little" (460). Admitting his discomfort with "harboring a private religion . . . since religion is most valuable in human community, when alive in a whole people," Barrett concludes that

one can only wait: the creative waiting in which one struggles to send one's roots deeper into life and reconquer for oneself, in the openness toward Being, the primitive simplicities that our civilization has almost entirely lost and without which life itself has no meaning—no, none at all. (461)

If Elliott might have found something of a kindred spirit in Barrett, he would have felt less fraternity with Phillips, who, giving himself the last word in the symposium, cannot "help seeing the turn to religion

²The editors seem originally to have intended just three installments. At the end of the second, a note announced that "the third and last" would "appear in the April issue" (256); but then a note at the end of the third said, "the concluding installment . . . will appear in the May issue" (339). The number or the length of responses might have obliged the fourth installment by overcrowding the April issue.

here [in America] as a sideshow”; though granting that his “native heathenism [had] cut [him] off from many varieties of religious experience,” the revival strikes Phillips as “neither a genuinely literary nor religious movement” but, rather, “one symptom of a general breakdown of beliefs and values” that “raise[d] a lot of boring questions” (480). For him, “what we have now in America is not so much a turn toward religion as a turn toward religiosity,” in which “many writers . . . are generally devoted to the ‘new criticism,’ to some theory of myth, and to the idea of tradition that stems from T. S. Eliot and his followers in this country”; and “the result so far . . . is not a religious literature but a religious attitude to literature, which is a reversal of the situation that produced the great religious art of the past” (481). With figures like Søren Kierkegaard and Georges Bernanos “remind[ing] us that neither the clerical nor the secular tradition has been able so far to lift human existence to a moral plane,” Phillips remains unimpressed “by the new religiosity” as too “ready to dismiss scientific and naturalistic thinking as arid, schematic, and generally insensitive to the mysteries of literary and human existence” (482). Elliott might have felt constrained to accept many of Phillips’s claims, including his distinction between religion and religiosity;³ yet from his essays it seems clear that, for him at least, a reversion away from Modernism toward religion, or religiosity, was not a sideshow but the one show.⁴

George Paul Elliott was born on June 16, 1918, in Knightstown, Indiana, and shared that birth date with his mother until “on the day I turned four a brother was born. This was no coincidence: it was an intrusion cheating me from sharing birthdays exclusively with my mother. I took refuge on Father’s lap. I knew the hymn: God’s eye was on the sparrow and I knew he thought of me” (“Piece” 247–48).⁵

³Of Henry James, Elliott remarks, “He likes religiose metaphors, and religiosity flourishes nowadays” (“Getting Away” 25).

⁴In the first installment of the symposium, John Dewey writes of a “reversion to moral attitudes and beliefs which intellectuals as a class had abandoned” and of “reversion to a position not long ago discarded” (“Religion” 129).

⁵June 16 is also Bloomsday, but in 1918 Bloomsday had happened to James Joyce but not yet fully to Mr. Leopold Bloom or to the world at large. Elliott regarded Joyce as “a romantic nihilist” of “heroic proportions” (“Never” 221).

That was the sort of event Elliott describes as “reach[ing the child] radiant with magical causes but not yet trapped in sufficient cause” (248). Elliott’s mother was a churchgoing Methodist; his father “was that religious oxymoron, a gentle Calvinist—that is to say, a Quaker. He knew he could keep the murder in his heart from reaching his hands” (“Coming” 155). Later Elliott’s father told him “that he had been a member of the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan did not ride in Indiana in the Twenties; it was a sort of lodge. Nevertheless, he joined it, and the Klan it was” (156). Both father and mother “believed in ghosts. I was born in a haunted house, and before I was weaned, my parents moved from it: a man’s snores often disturbed the peace of the attic at night and several times at dawn a woman’s shriek drifted around the eaves” (“Brown” 32). Elliott’s

mother had the habit of denying unpleasantnesses. “Rise above it” was one of her maxims; and when that one didn’t work, she had a second line of defense: “think nothing of it.” She had been raised in town, the daughter of a school principal. But my father was a farmer and son of a farmer; he had shoveled too much manure to be able to think nothing of it, though he never deliberately subverted my mother’s gentility. In me, the result of these attitudes was that I at once denied, pretended to deny, and exaggerated unpleasantnesses as they came along. (47–48)⁶

Elliott spent his tenth birthday “on a train—going to Southern California—Mother and I and my interloper of a brother, to whom I had grown accustomed. Father had gone ahead and built us a house in the desert” (“Piece” 255). For the next seven years the family “lived on a carob plantation not far from Riverside” (“Raymond” 59), in a

and elsewhere cited *Ulysses* (1922) as “the example of the highest” and as “perfectly communicat[ing] modernist attitudes” (“Science” 67).

⁶Elliott’s last novel, the brief and austere elegant *Muriel* (1972), might look to be loosely based on the lives and character of his parents, as it borrows many details from their lives that Elliott’s essays record. Still, the novel is decidedly fiction, not family history.

California dream of prosperity that never came. The Depression came instead. Elliott describes Southern California folk like his parents as “refugees from the Protestant Midwest, [who] brought the forms with them” (61). His father

had some odds and ends of theories about how the world was put together. He was sure God had done it, and he was pretty sure he’d done it in the year 4004 B.C. . . . He also believed and didn’t believe that God was just and good, and had created the world out of loving kindness, and cherished each of us and every living thing. (“Brown” 31)

“The desert,” Elliott writes, “is a good place to seek the truth, but hard on one [like his mother] whose passionate interest is in other people. It was a long time before I realized that, though my parents’ qualities underlay my life like strata—emerging here, disappearing there—they did not often blend” (“Piece” 255).

When the adolescent Elliott became enamored of poetry, he “thought it hard not to be living among that Nature described by the poets [he] loved,” especially “Shelley, my most adored,” who “sent me to Plato” and “the ladder of love, which I resolved to climb. But I found most of the rungs missing, the rungs that should have been provided by Nature” (“Sky” 3–4). “The desert,” he writes, “did not like us. Sometimes, especially at sunset, it was beautiful, but its beauty was not responsive in any way; it was just there; sometimes after supper we would sit on the porch and awe at it. Yet neither did the desert *dislike* us” (5). “The pathetic fallacy . . . was wholly absent here, and it transplanted badly” (5), so the young Elliott “substituted poetry for Plato’s ladder, and got so [he] could run up it like a monkey up a palmtree and jump off the top step into a Palgrave posy of perfection” (6). “It seemed to” Elliott “at the time that all that really mattered was the realm where Truth was Beauty, God was the spirit of the Universe, and the quality of Mercy was not strained, and that my family and I alike were clayey beyond redemption” (6). He later judges that he might “in fact have grown toward Manichaeism—that desert-born heresy—shoving the Will for Good up among those sky-

blue abstract nouns and concentrating the Will for Evil down in the carob plantation. But fortunately," among other things, "the clay of my family was yeasted not just with affection, which I dismissed as an analgesic, but also with a whiff of *agape*, about which my poets had not instructed me" (6).

One critical turning point in Elliott's life—or, rather, perhaps several—occurred about where some models of development would look for it, near age twelve or thirteen, the onrush of adolescence. At "twelve or so," his head was felt by a phrenologist: "This lad will earn his living with his brains" ("Brown" 32). That

cleared my father's farmer conscience about letting me read as much as I wanted—that is to say, most of the time. With his second blessing, he cleared my conscience to go away to the university, when the time came, rather than get a job and help out at home. He said I might become a college professor. (32–33)

The reading had an impact. "The liberal spirit of the age started getting to [Elliott] through H. G. Wells's *Outline of History*," and he began "to see in [his] father the superstitiousness of religion, the illusions of Christianity; Mother was exempt from my suspicion because I saw that religious belief was the least of the reasons she went to church—as it was the greatest of the reasons Father stayed away" ("Piece" 254). "Here I was," he writes, "with a John Bunyan farmer for a father and a Queen Victoria housewife for a mother" ("Never" 216). The winter he was twelve, Elliott "had made friends with [his] first atheists, the Babcock brothers," boys in a family "a whole lot better mannered, more thoughtful, and more fun to play with than any of the lunks I'd met in Sunday school" (215). He was "especially perplexed by their calmness about" the nonexistence of God; in deference to his mother's view that "they were not nice people," he "quit stopping by their house on the way home from school, but I also quit going to Sunday school, unless Mother made an issue of it" (215).

The winter he was thirteen, a boy five years older than he approached him in a public library aisle where Elliott was "thumbing through a fat, blue book entitled *Adolescence*, extending [his] ignorance

of sex,” and asked him “whether God existed” (218). Elliott answered “yes of course,” and the boy asked

what made me think so. I said I didn’t know. . . . What right did he have to ask me that question? Who was I to say whether the earth was round and God existed? I could not imagine that the world could exist without God to make it and keep it going. . . . It had also not occurred to me yet that God might not be good—evil was our doing, that seemed clear enough. (218–19)

Yet, he wrote, “Without knowing it, I was ready to hate Him and even to cry He did not exist. Instead, there chancing to be no nihilists about to tempt me, to authorize rage for me, I neither looked straight at the whole confusion I was in nor went away from it, but messed around, avoiding” (219).

But if it set him up for the modernist temptation of nihilism, the reading also led Elliott toward his literary vocation:

While taking a deep, unsteady breath after reading *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* the winter I was twelve, I realized that what I was going to do in life was to write stories and poems. Coleridge, not intending anything of the kind, expressing who cares what?, altered the way I breathed and moved. So, a few years later, did Kafka in *The Castle*, that unfinishable tale of incomplete connections. (223–24)

About this same time, Elliott’s “parents spent \$5.00 of their monthly income of \$85.00 to buy [him] his first fountain pen” to write with (“Brown” 47), and one evening Elliott lost it down the hole of the outhouse. His father, muttering and stomping his feet, went out with a shovel, lantern, and lighted cigar and, after quite a while, came back “into the kitchen, the stub of the cigar still between his teeth, and plunked my rescued pen down on the table in front of me” (49). “Whatever in this world could I do after that,” he asks, “but write”:

And how with that pen in hand—it lasted me for twenty years—could I ever be tempted to mire down in verbal rebelliousness?

And after that, how—no matter what rigid theories I might let in—could I ever let the mineral of reason deposit itself in my mind, to the petrification in me of the moving branches of language? the sudden irregular foliage of intercourse everywhere? (49)

Elliott apparently continued into later adolescence his friendship with the atheist Babcock boys, for he mentions, around age sixteen, debating big questions with another boy: “when I was with him I was a pacifist, a socialist, and a rational atheist. But most of my free time I spent getting away from the chickens” (“Getting Away” 19). His first job was tending chickens for a neighboring farmer, and “being . . . *ab ovo*, a fantast” (29), he got away from the chickens by reading books, a lot of Tarzan books among others. He helped pay his tuition to Riverside Junior College by selling his blood “for twenty-five dollars a pint in hospitals” (22), where he continued his adolescent rebellion against his parents’ Christianity. “Rationalism,” he later writes,

that’s how I tried to start all over when adolescence and college began to ferment in me. Things should be stuck together with logic and high ideals; Shelley was my prophet of the sweet and reasonable world to come. A place for everything and everything in its place: the *Divine Comedy* I loved too, by omitting, as a rationalist must, half the main things. (“Brown” 33)

Later he saw through the defects of rationalism: “The rationalist Karamazov brother was Ivan, who went mad. The last book by H. G. Wells, my special mentor, was entitled *Mind at the End of Its Tether*. And the classical poet of reasonableness, Lucretius, killed himself in a fit of melancholy. All the same,” Elliott writes, “rationalism I tried, being rebellious, ignorant, and cruel; that is to say, young”:

The main thing I rebelled against was my father’s submission to a God who had put the world together irrationally, and for irrational reasons. Being unable to deny that my father existed, I denied that there was a God, or said if there was one that he was

a sort of machine operator, the maker and winder of the cosmic clock, the World-Soul, Nobodaddy. (34)

Finishing at Riverside, he “left home to work [his] way through college [at Berkeley], not to return again except for visits. The world could be reasonable, and so could I”:

Flanked by Shelley, “the world’s great age begins anew,” and Poe, whose rationalization for writing purely irrational poetry was pure, and Swinburne, who would teach me how to change the lilies and languors of my parents’ virtue for the roses and raptures of liberated vice, and James Branch Cabell, who came along for the ride, I would go forth and be a poet.

But it turned out to be a tepid rebellion, and as for my mascots, those *fleurs de petit mal*, it was distressing how fast they faded on the page. (35)

At Berkeley, Elliott “matriculat[ed] up into literary criticism” (“Sky” 8)—the brand new New Criticism then reshaping literary studies from Louisiana State to Vanderbilt to Kenyon to Chicago to Stanford and Berkeley under the “luminous guidance” of Coleridgean “esemplastic Imagination [that] work[ed] through the poet to fashion out of intrinsically valueless materials a perfect work of art; a poem must be perfection. If there was anything the New Critics agreed on it was this, and I loved them all” (8). It may not be too much to say that at Berkeley in the late 1930s Elliott was baptized into the New Critical view of the literary work as “well-wrought urn,” the view he later questions as “the masterpiece-or-nothing theory” of literary merit: “it is,” he writes, “against life. It is literary Calvinism with a vengeance: a book is either one of the elect, and there aren’t many of those, or one of the damned. But a man who is full of life is not so keen on this butchery of experience” (“Critic” 183).⁷ Elliott’s “own cantankerous

⁷The eponymous narrator-protagonist of Elliott’s second novel, *David Knudsen* (1962), majors in English at Berkeley in the late 1940s and experiences some of this same tension between New Critical literary formalism and

experience that life refuses to be divorced from literature even as it refuses to succumb to it" ("Getting to Dante" 197) persuaded him, among other things, that "a novel is not just a work of art: it is, somehow, a work of life as well" ("Wonder" 70), and that "It is far better to enjoy *King Solomon's Mines* by H. Rider Haggard than to 'like' the *Aeneid* just because you think you ought to" ("Critic" 179).

Beyond all New Critical articles of faith he may have subscribed to, Elliott remained an "unspecialized citizen" ("Fun" 227) and a "Common Reader" ("Critic" 171), who liked Sir Thomas Wyatt's "They Flee from Me" less for its debatable "perfection" in "organic unity" (its final couplet is a letdown) than for its

content: I delight in imagining myself a nobleman into whose chamber women have stalked with naked feet (one in especial with arms long and small), who through his gentleness is forsaken by her in favor of newfangledness, and who perceives and withstands this with elegant irony. ("Sky" 10)

He persisted lifelong in this attitude—learned in part from milking an affectionate goat named Eva, who "instead of one large right tit . . . had two, a middle-sized one and a small one"—"that love, any sort of love, even of poetry, no matter what beautiful-true perfection it gets up to, forgets at its peril the nuzzling, butting, pie-eyed clay in which the foot of its ladder had better be secured" (15).

Neither the Enlightenment rationalism he had embraced in adolescence nor the New Critical literary theory he learned at Berkeley could account for some of the things Elliott most valued in the poems and novels he loved or for the things that mattered in the experiences he lived: "One of the disadvantages of living in the house that H. G. Wells built is that in it you can't read most of the great writers with thorough comprehension; some of them you can't read at all" ("Brown"

his sense of "life" (20–27). Elliott mentions "a character based largely on myself in a novel" ("Person" 114), who might be David Knudsen but could also be a minor character in *Parktilden Village* (1958) or *In the World* (1965).

36). *King Lear* (1608), Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1863–69)—all these and more would trouble the Enlightened rationalist and the New Critical organic perfectionist with their irrationality and imperfection and their refusal to disengage themselves from human life and from ideas that mattered apart from the works themselves; “alas, in reason’s fatherless house there are not many mansions” (36)—and far too few for inconvenient, inorganic, artistic splendors.

Elliott seems to have learned from Wells and Edward Gibbon, for instance, about Byzantium:

The first thing I learned about Byzantium was that the Enlightenment considered it one of the maddest blights of the Dark Ages: Christianity the enemy of civilization. At the time I learned this, I was young and eager to lapse from Protestantism, and my intellect thought itself very enlightened. (“Kicking” 11)

Years later, probably at Berkeley,

The next thing I learned about it . . . was Yeats’s two visionary poems. I did not understand “Byzantium,” though I thought it a marvel, and “Sailing to Byzantium” inspired in me an intense, obscure awe of a sort that would make a Christian rejoice and a Gibbon wince. But not only was my intellect by then less enlightened than it had been; I was darkening all through, staining. (12)

About two decades later, a face-to-face—or face-to-icon—encounter with Byzantine mosaics seemed to confirm decisively Elliott’s reversion from Modernism to Christianity.

Above all, it was Elliott’s reading of Tolstoy that would not accommodate his narrow rationalism and his reductive sense of “realism” as (perhaps) the literary mode most congenial to a rational-scientific picture of the world. Although he had known “wonder” as a child, and the “amazement proper to the experience of all great art” (“Piece” 248), from age thirteen he had begun to see “more and more mediocrity” in the life he knew (251), particularly in his father (254–55). At Berkeley, Elliott

acquired the notion that everything was subject to the rule of rigid and subtle law, equally society and the individual's psyche (no longer a soul). I accepted this as dogma liberating me from religion; everywhere I looked I was seeing squads of unalterable law; physics was metaphysics was truth; I knew all about the God I realistically did not believe in. On the other hand I saw the mediocrity of things as determined: the irrational was only the coincidental or the pathological, both of which could be accounted for rationally; all things were rationally ordered and hence were without wonder because wonder depends on the mystery of irrationality. (251)

He had "set [his] gaze sternly toward realism" ("Getting Away" 24), and "Realism," to him at the time he first read *War and Peace*, "was about a pigeon-chested little janitor, drunk because he was unemployed because of his race, scraping some dog shit off his shoe at a curb on a side street in Chicago. You could tell the truest truth because it was the ugliest" ("Piece" 258). Realism "meant facing the ugliest facts and creating more like them" (258). Against this dogmatic background, Tolstoy's "world was by no means reliable, in the way I demanded of realism. Unexpected events and irrational impulses were constantly disturbing both Tolstoy's characters and me the reader"; so Elliott "guarded [him]self from what the art said by denying that the art was good" (258).

But about the same time, while hitchhiking home for summer vacation from college in the spring he was nineteen, on an empty roadside gusted by the wind of passing semis Elliott had an experience of profound unreasoning "dread" at the absurdity and sheer uninterestingness of the world:

I stood looking at my feet undecided whether to walk on. A cigarette butt scuttled on the edge of the road toward a grimy clump of dandelion and came to rest on it.

Like a gas the suspicion began to seep into me that nothing in this law-abiding scene was interesting and that this scene was the world. I did not recognize this suspicion so much as sniff it. I

knew that if the suspicion really became a part of me, that if I came to believe that nothing was interesting, nothing wonderful, I would no longer want to live. (252)

The moment resembles in a minor way the “vastation” that preceded the elder Henry James’s embrace of Emmanuel Swedenborg (Lewis 53); or the similar attack of a “horrible fear of [his] own existence” (149) that William James reports pseudonymously in his lectures on “The Sick Soul” in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902); or Tolstoy’s state of mind on the verge of his religious conversion, when, though “happy and in good health,” he felt “an aspiration of [his] whole being to get out of life” (qtd. in James 143).

In Elliott’s case this moment of “freezing dread” did not lead (“Piece” 252)—at least not immediately—toward a religious conversion but seems to have been a clear first step in his reversion from Modernism: “I leapt out of that dread in the only direction I could go, toward the irrational. But I did not make a Kierkegaardian leap of faith; at any rate I did not land with both feet solidly in the Absolute”; rather, he had discovered first of all that “the tight fabric of things had holes in it. My relief was greater than my terror” (259).

This moment of relief from terror seems nearly to coincide, temporally and logically, with Elliott’s discovery that Tolstoy in his great fiction “does not look at an event expecting it to fulfill the law. He looks with absolute interest at it itself. Mostly it abides by the laws—but also mostly it doesn’t”; and thus “[s]omething wonderful shoots through, redeeming the ordinary” (267). He had found that

War and Peace gives as powerful a suggestion of the living as a fixed art can do, and we know that any chance which entered into its creation is subject to its author’s control. In that imagined world, which seems to be the daily world revealed and redeemed, the irrational ceaselessly appears: as an intrusion of the subconscious, as a creation of the human will, or as an inrushing of the unnamable. Even when it is this last—the unsymbolizable, the irrelevant, the voiding force, an intolerable anti-epiphany on the part of that which cannot be felt toward because it cannot be

defined or named and but dimly approached through metaphors for nothing, the most dreadful, the altogether Other—even then we do not freeze with fear, we do not cease feeling. For we know that the lovers rejoin, just as the bullet shot through Petya's head, because Tolstoy's hand wrote the words, because his shaping imagination aimed the sentences. The love of Andre and Natasha, our love for them, our yearning for their coming back together, everyone's joy at their union: all are created by his chanceless words, and we rest secure in this knowledge. (269)

He also found that he could, as a devotee of the literary "traditionalism" Tolstoy represented, construct a sort of halfway shelter on his way out of Modernism:

Perhaps a god causes [things in the universe that matter "to me, to every me"], the unnamed, unnamable god, but I have no way of knowing that he does or of imagining why; the effect on me is exactly the same as if they resulted from irregular mixtures of men's will, chance, and natural law. Either way, not having landed on the Absolute when I leaped, I live in the modern world: we create some of reality and some of the beautiful; holiness and virtue are nowhere but in us. No wonder that among us many who earlier would have been exegetes of the Word of God are now literary critics justifying the words of a writer. Of the supreme writers Tolstoy has been justified the least. He leaves little for an exegete to say. His words are so plain that they seem not to have been chosen and placed but to be a transparent medium through which we look at the world they say; and in the body of the novel his immanent will is as sure as was God's will when His eye was on the sparrow and I knew he thought of me. (269–70)

Through "the late '30s," Elliott kept himself "busy with socialist optimism, and liberal analysis, and tolerant repudiation of religion, and scientific opinion" ("Brown" 35). He took his BA in 1939 at Berkeley and his MA there in 1941 and married that same year. Exempted from the draft because he "suffered severe attacks of claustrophobia"

("Revolution" 172), he worked during the war as a shipfitter, a junior analyst for the War Labor Board, a reporter and photographer with the *AFL News* for the San Francisco Bay Area, a business agent for a labor union, occasionally a taxi driver, and for six months a real estate broker in Berkeley (Pack and Parini ix). The war "assisted" him

to persevere in [his] lucid courses, for the wrong which seemed most monstrous, irrational, and visible of all wrongs was concentrated in the enemy: he had deliberately killed masses of innocent people. But after August of 1945, it ceased to be possible to ignore the fact that the same intolerable wrong was also part of our side. I was of our side; therefore it was part of me and I was my own enemy. . . . I began to be able to hear the prophets. ("Brown" 39-40)

"The prophets" started with Blake, and again the visionary Yeats, but included more. "As the world began coming apart," Elliott "discovered that it had come apart before a great many times. In *Agamemnon* and *Oedipus*, it was riven wide, as wide as poetry could grasp. In *Lear*, when at last I read it, it came apart appallingly, beyond the utmost reach of poetry: 'never, never, never, never, never'" (40).

From the prophet-poets of extremity, "who had been there before me and had returned to tell me of their dark journey in figures and symbols and strange structures," he learned that "chaos excited them and they knew the muck":

You must start all over, they said in a thousand ways, you must change your life. But a lot of the time they were obviously mad; . . . so involved in structuring symbols to figure forth their world that they forgot to pay attention to the apparent part of it, the one we daily live in. . . . Yet whenever Blake, say, happened to glance out of his dream at the ordinary world, he was not only sane but wise. (41)

He "was saved from the occultism of [his] prophets . . . not through any wisdom but because of three illogicalities in [him]self": first,

“the suspicion of mumbo-jumbo which I had left in me from scorning my father’s superstitious odds and ends”; second, that he

was a farmer’s son: if it worked, there must be something to it, and science worked. In their fit realm, the works of reason were too worthy of respect for me to challenge. . . . Moreover, my main disenchantment was not with reason but with wholesale systematizing, and I had no desire to exchange an inadequate rational system for an inadequate irrational one. I was in the muck and I had to be in it, but it never occurred to me to pretend either that muck did not stink or that there was nothing else but muck. Dante called it Hell, and he got through it with the guidance of Virgil, who was a figure of Reason, and with the help of an angel; the point is, he did not want to go through Hell, but he did want to go to a place he could reach only after he had gone through Hell. (42–43)

His third reason for “avoid[ing] occultism and [taking] no joy in the muck was low, proud, and personal: there were too many already splashing around in the muck-cults, tempting me *Come on, this is the thing to do*” (43).

Elliott taught at St. Mary’s College in Moraga, California, from 1947 to 1955, first as an instructor and then as an assistant professor of English. In 1955–56 he taught at Cornell, in 1957–60 at Barnard, in 1960–61 at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop, in 1962 at Berkeley, and in 1962–63 again at St. Mary’s. From 1963 until his death in New York City on May 3, 1980, just days after his last class, he taught at Syracuse as a professor of English and from 1978 to 1980 served as director of the writing program there. In those years, especially in the sixties and seventies, he conducted a public quarrel with the madness of Cold War America, with Modernity and Postmodernity in general, and with modern and postmodern literature in particular. His named antagonists, toward which his attitudes were seldom simply or reductively antagonistic, included democracy in its capacity to blur excellence and generate envy; the explosion of Fun in postwar America; sexual and other revolutions and the proliferation of

pornography; Aestheticism and the Artist; science as the one true faith of Modernity, especially in its psychologizing manifestations; the great God Zeitgeist;⁸ and nihilism.⁹ What had begun to show him a way apart and out from these before his death were the literary traditionalism of Tolstoy, Chekhov, and others, the *Divine Comedy*, and the works of anonymous mosaicists he beheld in Byzantine churches—too much to cover in this essay, but some representative passages from Elliott’s essays do sketch this last arc of his trajectory.

To start with the Cold War itself and more specifically with the Bomb, Elliott found “our ways of waging” war “worse than our reasons for going to war”:

The ways themselves challenge and overshadow and finally obliterate the reasons. Nothing could justify such abominations: I believe that we all feel this obscurely and refuse, in any effectual way, to look at it. Our United States used the Bomb, nobody else; our government is the one chiefly responsible for spreading radioactive particles over the world. *We had not thought we were capable of such evil.*

And we don’t know what to do about it. (“Fun” 228)

Humans’ bewildered incapacity to confront (much less repent of) such monstrous evil in themselves seemed, to Elliott, the first cause of “our fun desperation” (227). The second, as he saw it, was “the dreadful social injustice which we are guilty of and benefit from, especially we white Americans and most especially we whose Christian

⁸The Zeitgeist did get several nods (not all of them reverential) in the course of the *Partisan Review* Symposium from Phillips and Rahv (“Religion” 103, 237, 240, 480). Elliott may well have read the Symposium, or parts of it, but after all—the Zeitgeist being the Zeitgeist—the word was in the air; as Elliott himself put it, “Many do not heed Zeitgeist, but in New York it is hard not to. For American intellectuals, New York is the holy city of the cult, to which all go at least once to make a salaam or two and where many stay” (“Two” 31).

⁹For a useful discussion of Elliott’s engagements with nihilism in his fiction, see Blanche H. Gelfant.

ancestors came from Northern Europe" (228). Elliott means national injustices against Native Americans (as now called), Africans, "the Americans from south of us," Asians, and the poor. He writes that

the productive modes of our gaining our inconceivable wealth we ourselves think to be unscrupulous and unjust, and they are so lunatic that one of our reasons to give to the poor is that this will make our nation richer; and for this same bad-dream reason, to make ourselves the better off, we destroy, forbid, or hoard vast quantities of food, which food we know we should give to the hungry.

We don't like it. We don't like to think about it. But we are so rich, so comfortable, so powerful.

Circuses. Bread and circuses.

Let's have us a ball.

If we tickle each other expertly enough, maybe we can just quit thinking about the whole business. (229)

He concludes, "To be sure, having the kind of fun you have to doesn't hurt as much as finding out what's really wrong and doing something about it. But finally, to that grinning stupefaction, I prefer pain" (231).

The madness of Cold War America was highly visible to Elliott when he visited his parents' home in the late fifties and early sixties, and when he lived again in Berkeley in 1962–63. "Everyone expects lunacies in Southern California," he writes; "guessing what the next craze is going to be can be a game. This state at the brink of the country is so steep that change roars over it as over a rapids" ("Home" 237). For that reason among others, California, and particularly the Bay Area, were always Elliott's main literary territory. On one visit he "learned that the world had arranged things so that half the people in Southern California were making their living off the war to come" (237). When Federal Civil Defense officials urged American citizens to build fallout shelters, Elliott saw that

[t]he main consequence of this advice was not so much actual shelters (few were built) as moral perplexity about what to do to

someone trying to force his way into the safety of your hypothetical shelter in time of emergency. A priest of the largest church in the world, an upright pistol-Christian like most of the neighbors I'd ever had, assured the prospective denizens of shelters that they had the right to shoot an intruder. Jesus-Christians, and neighbor-lovers generally, demurred, but there were not then, as there never have been at any one time, enough of them to inconvenience the world much. (235)

Teaching at Berkeley in 1962, Elliott found that "the world saw to it that [Edward] Teller lived next door to me for a couple of years" (232). He "thought it enough that the world was threatening to blow me up, without its also forcing me to be neighbors with the man most zealous about bringing this to pass" (232). When students flocked to enroll in an introductory physics course Teller taught, "Here was the only man most of them had seen in the flesh who was working to get them killed, and all they cared about him was that he was an easy grader" (239). Teller had proposed, for national "defense," a plan to have trucks prowling the highway system of the United States carrying launch-ready atomic missiles. "That might not be so bad, you know," Elliott wryly remarks (243); "At least, with all those trucks roaming around loaded and ready to go off, there wouldn't be anything else worth worrying about" (243). He saw in the nuclear madness of the early sixties "a secret wish that I recognized: the wish for one trouble so big that they could give up trying to manage it" (244).

He had been living in Venice in 1961 at the time of the Berlin crisis, and "[w]hat from Venice had looked like other people's nightmares was now my nightmare too. I thought the world had finally done me in for sure" (244). The world had finally "deprived me of the power to laugh at it and began driving me crazy" (233). He recovered the power to laugh one afternoon on a Berkeley quad the next year:

I happened to be standing by a student on the lawn when a flock of five fighter jets flew over in a V. We both watched

them with open mouths, then glanced at one another and shook our heads. "Golly," he said, "doesn't it make you feel safe to have them up there?" I laughed. Without hating him, without thinking either of us insane, I laughed at the perfect, absolute, simple irony, and said no, it didn't make me feel safe to have them up there. (244)

Elliott knew that even though "[t]he famous inalienable error about happiness is proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence" ("Fun" 221); and thus "[h]appiness is an official U.S. product, all right" (223),

To Sophocles and Blake, the world is unreasonable, and the gods meddle in our affairs as it pleases them, not as it pleases us. And Aristotle—who was like the Founding Fathers in that if a god should speak through his lips, his ears would refuse to hear more than human words, and the universe was as reasonable as he could make it—even Aristotle defined happiness not as a thing to be sought directly but as the result of a life lived in accordance with virtue and blessed with good fortune.

If you live as you ought *and* if you're lucky, then the adjective "happy" may be applied to you. (222)

He could not countenance the reduction of "high art . . . to 'entertainment' even when, like *The Magic Flute*, it entertains. . . . On the other hand, if watching *This Is Your Life* is entertainment, then so is cutting up Siamese kittens with a dull pair of scissors" (226). So much for the "Fun You Have to Have," and why it has to be had in America under mushroom clouds: "Someone—I think it was St. Augustine—suggested an image of hell for the intellect: two mirrors facing each other in a gray void. We have improved on all that" (231).

The Bomb was an appalling triumph of scientific reason, technical ingenuity, and nearly inconceivable will to destruction, latently if not manifestly nihilistic. But the destructive will of science, which had supplanted both Christian religion and classical wisdom as the one true faith of Modernity, might be equally manifest in social science, in

psychologizing.¹⁰ “Wisdom is a spiritual quality,” writes Elliott, “and if there is one thing for which false science has less use than another, it is spirit, spirituality, the soul; *psyche* is the word, for you can add *ology* to it and sound as though you know exactly what you are talking about” (“Coming” 150). As Elliott saw it, to psychological and motivational researchers who “conceive of a man’s soul as something for them to take apart to see how it ticks,” “a human mystery, even the most intimate mystery of love or artistic creation or religious faith, is a problem unsolved only because it has not yet been correctly stated” (150). He

believe[d] that the drift of their present experimentation is towards self-consciousness without self-knowledge, and that this self-consciousness generates self-alienation . . . [and] further . . . that however interesting self-alienation may be to study, it is bad to bring about, that one should not bring it about no matter what one might learn from doing so. (154)

“Self-consciousness” of this kind, he felt, “is one sort of deafness to the word of God” (153); “Just as no man has the right to shoot into a crowd of schoolchildren, so no man has the right to unconnect us, to violate another’s soul” (154). He ruminated on the fancy of an anthropologist studying his own “deplorable coming of age on the Carob Plantation in the Southern California desert,” his adolescent attempt to lick his father in a fight: “one who had come to study me might have pried and probed till he learned what happened, but he never could have known what mattered unless he were told about it with words, aromatic, slippery words, unsolving and insoluble words” (154).

Always Elliott came back to words, to literature, to story-making, insufficient as that itself might be, endangered as it was by Aestheticism and the Modern cult of the Artist as priest of the great god *Zeitgeist*:

Literature brings knowledge and it may bring wisdom; it may even instruct in virtue; it has changed a man’s life more than

¹⁰Peter Hazen, the protagonist of Elliott’s first novel, *Parktilden Village*, is a Berkeley sociologist studying motorcycle gangs.

once; it may divert you from trouble a while like a game; it may untie your knots with laughter; it can purge you for a time of great dread; it has power if you will to elevate you to something like ecstasy. . . . [S]till it also produces delight, if only the delight of ordered thoughts and of language used well. Lovers are poets, and experience of literature is something like love: it quickens its lover to intense life, it is not everlasting but at the time it is of eternity, it is incalculably precious, its power is measured both by its delight and its anguish, it is there for all who want it, each makes it himself. It is everybody's language shaped with love. ("Critic" 189)

But such values in literature or in other arts were threatened by the Modern cult of Aestheticism and the Artist. Consider two instances, one visual, one literary. Elliott had a long interest in photography and photographers, and one of his ambiguous exemplars of the Artist was Edward Weston.¹¹ "Now that The Scientist has lost his capital letters and is becoming one of the boys, has joined the commissars, generals, executives, and engineers," Elliott writes, "the world may be in for a bad stretch during which The Artist is worshiped uncontended. What this means in effect is more and more beat bohemians, mescaline mystics, and self-regarding phonies"; Weston, no phony but "The Artist as photographer" ("Photographs" 101),

took, and preserved with formidable consistency, the esthetic view of things; it was the form that counted, no matter what object embodied the form, whether the smooth back of a nude woman on pure sand or a slender, smooth-folded stone on pure sand; when he caught the face of a man in sudden action, he sought the moment of revelation, not because the truth would

¹¹Weston briefly appears as a character in *David Knudsen* (33–35); the narrator-protagonist of that novel is a photographer, the son of a physicist who helped devise "a trigger mechanism for the atom bomb" (12) and was a victim of radiation sickness from the fallout of a Pacific H-bomb test (103).

be revealed so much as because at that moment the face would make the most beautiful image. (102)

But as such,

What a monster is The Artist—that is, a man who dedicates himself to constructing works of art, and who believes that a great work of art is the highest of all things made and that making one is the highest of all occupations. When The Artist has purged himself of vanity and doubt—like Joyce, like Edward Weston—then he is monstrous indeed, for then he is wholly justified. The religion of art is like Calvinism: in both, the elect are known by their works but are justified by their faith, by their very being. (100)

Elliott read in Weston's *Daybooks* (1961–1966) an account of one photograph Weston took of his mistress weeping and comments,

To us who look at [this photograph] only as a picture in a book, its beauty is moving. But a chill seizes me to learn that at the moment when he might have consoled her, have wept with her, he instead took her picture. Why then? Because no model could have generated an expression of woe so genuine, so valuable for his art. Is this not the authentic monster's uncommuning coldness of heart?" (103)

For the Modern literary version of the Artist, Elliott asks the reader to consider Marcel Proust:

Modernism produced no greater work than *Remembrance of Things Past*, and so long as the book is known Proust's name and personality will also be known and inquired into, as the type of Artist. Yet a marvel of the book is to make us understand, with sympathy and clarity, that Marcel's way and also his world were so wrong that nothing could rescue the man whole; he gave up being himself and became An Artist. Among other things, the profoundest Modern told us, *Don't be like me if you can help it.*

Let us honor Proust for his terrible honesty, and then try something different—perhaps something old. (“Kicking” 11)

“Something old” would be traditionalism of the sort represented by two very different artists, Tolstoy and Van Gogh:

Both of them elevated *Uncle Tom's Cabin* into the ranks of important art, an error of judgment The Artist would be incapable of making. But they saw true art as efficacious in revealing the unknown or instructing to virtue, and the efficacy of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* had been demonstrated unmistakably. They saw an artist as important, first as any man is important, then as he succeeds in making a work of art which creates a communion among those who admire it. They were concerned to save men, to help men save themselves. They despised The Artist, some of whose works they could not help admiring. (“Photographs” 100)

But farther back than these two, Elliott looked for models of Art in Dante and anonymous mosaicists. Reading Dante first in adolescence or college, he could love “the *Divine Comedy* . . . by omitting, as a rationalist must, half the main things” (“Brown” 33). But after a second reading, by the early sixties, he could no longer omit so much: “Dante's vision,” he allows,

is alien to the modern way of conceiving man's soul . . . according to which man has not an immortal soul but a mortal self. In Dante's time each several soul was a defined mystery known only by God, but known by him—whereas now each blurred self is an unbounded obscurity known by no one, not even by itself inspecting itself. (“Getting to Dante” 193–94)

An educated, irreligious Modern Common Reader, who held “to this modern view of the self,” would “read Dante with no more than aesthetic pleasure. But you should know before you start that really to read this book is to risk changing your views, especially of your self, and to test your faith” (194).

Dante's pilgrim-self (or soul) had been "seeking for a way of life," and that, "*per se*, is not an esthetic endeavor at all" (195). For Elliott, after his second reading, "the *total experience* of Dante's poem" needed "the comprehension and sympathy which any work of literature must have to be experienced, but goes farther and needs the reader's belief and agreement as well" (197). He grants that every book did not "have to be read according to its author's intentions, but" his thesis is "that Dante's does if it is to be read well" (199). Thus,

a convinced materialist, a hidebound skeptic, or a secure atheist—in a word, anyone who holds a disbelief so firmly that he is unwilling or unable to suspend it and who refuses sympathy to those with whom he disagrees—would not be able to read the *Divine Comedy* with much benefit; for, irked or repelled by much of what he understood of the poem, he could not experience it fully. (200)

"At any rate," he observes, so his experience taught him:

when I thought Dante's teachings were mostly wrong or foolish, I liked the *Comedy* incomparably less than I do now that I think they are substantially right. He intends us to believe as he believed, not temporarily or for an esthetic pleasure, but because his faith is the one true faith; and this intention is impossible to ignore. He believes in God and in love as drawing us to God, in Adam's fall and in Christ's redemptive power; some readers can put these beliefs off, for the purpose of the poem, as conventional. (200)

Elliott could no longer put those beliefs off "as conventional," though to admit that in America in the sixties was to invite intellectual scandal. Minimally, Elliott writes,

how anyone can read the *Comedy* without accepting Dante's beliefs about sin, I do not understand, for the heart of the poem is a vision of moral order. And by sin I do not mean crime or guilt, or the state of mind of one who has committed a crime or is guilty of he knows not what: I mean what the dictionary says

of sin, a serious transgression of divine or moral law—a non-psychoanalytical, non-sociological matter because it assumes the law is *there* whether we like it or not, recognize it or not. (201)

“For anyone born into” the Modern world, “reared in it, in it now,” as Elliott himself was, he admits that “Dante’s full faith is impossible. But one of the ways out of this limbo of our own creation is to follow Dante as far as is possible” (202). “How far” this might be depends “on how willing you are to change your self and how well you read the poem” (202).

His “own experience with the poem,” he witnesses, was “like [his] experience of many other works of art: it is not purely esthetic. . . . [T]o disentangle the moral teaching from [Dante’s] poem and hold it separate while you read is an act of violence” (202–03). So Elliott’s second reading of “Dante altered the way I see the world, as he may alter it again” (203):

It is because of Dante’s fictional account of his experiences in Hell and Purgatory, and their allegorical meanings, and also because of his explicit, paraphrasable analysis of sin in the *Purgatorio*, that I believe in a moral scheme of things according to which hypocrisy is more sinful than simple murder, sloth is graver than adultery, and all sin derives from love rather than from some external force of evil—that sinning consists, in fact, in the sinner’s deluding himself that wrong love is right. It is largely because of the *Paradiso* that I believe that the highest conceivable, and also the highest possible, experience is mystical vision, an experience of which I have had only the dimmest apprehension once. I am grateful to Dante for having persuaded me of the truth of these beliefs, which, however, I believe not only because they are Dantean, poetic, mythic, viable, but because I am convinced they are true. (203–04)

Ending his essay on Dante, Elliott quotes from *Paradiso*, canto 4, when Dante is speaking to Beatrice:

Therefore at the foot of the truth,
 like a sprout, questioning grows, which pushes us on
 from peak to peak toward the summit.

“Caveat lector” (205), he concludes. In the tercets before this one, which Elliott also quotes, Dante says,

I see clearly how our mind
 is never satisfied unless the truth
 that includes all illumines it.
 Therein it rests, like a beast in its den
 when it reaches it, and it can—
 otherwise every desire would be in vain. (205)

Elliott’s questioning mind seems never to have come to rest in that lair, though he might only reluctantly have said, with the Modernist Wallace Stevens echoing Dante, “It can never be satisfied, the mind, never” (247).

But what of “the highest possible experience,” the “mystical vision, an experience of which I have had only the dimmest apprehension once”? The only published clues that “once” occurs are in Elliott’s remarks on Byzantine mosaics. In 1961 he was in Venice, which he describes as “not in the world at all but . . . an illusion of reality off the northeast coast of Italy in the Adriatic Sea” (“Home” 234). Another “of the most famous” of such places, he continues, “is on a plain not far below Paris; there is a town on a hill in this plain, and at the top of this hill, surrounded by the quite ordinary town of Chartres, thousands and hundreds of thousands and millions of people have stepped out of the world into an illusion about how men can be connected with God” (234).¹² Was that the illusion that, as the Berlin crisis poised the planet on the edge of nuclear holocaust, “bewitched” Elliott in Venice and made “the actual world [seem] unreal, a dream, a very bad dream, not even my own bad dream but

¹²In *David Knudsen*, the narrator recounts an experience at Chartres that may well be a version of Elliott’s own (29–30).

somebody else's, somebody else's nightmare" (234)? In Byzantine churches in Venice and Ravenna, where the exiled Dante spent the last few years of his life and finished *Paradiso*, Elliott "first glimpsed the Byzantium of the Byzantines themselves":

Sometimes mosaicists set tesserae at such angles that if you are too close you see pretty parts and if you are too far you see a bold but lifeless cartoon, whereas if you stand at the right place the separate rays of light converge in you and become a live image in you. So I have read, and it seems to me, when I am in those sacred buildings, that I am penetrated by what those mosaicists figured forth. The reality of Byzantium is what they imagined. ("Kicking" 12)

Perhaps in that year, or later in the decade but in any case before 1970, he had also visited Constantinople, where "St. Sophia, when I went into it and looked, came into me" (13).

Here is one account of that sort of looking, that beholding in which the beholder is as if beholding himself:

High in the vaulted apse of a church, many smooth-faced bits of colored mineral have been fixed in such a way as to make an image that looks like a stiff young woman staring at you: not a particular woman, not even a possible woman, yet more like a woman than like anything else. What the mosaic projects is an artist's idea of a holy virgin, an idea nearly all the components of which were given him by others (including her name, the Mother of God), and his purpose in making the mosaic is to cause you, by contemplating that idea, to save your soul. The Byzantines believed: *Without feeling this idea and others like it you will perish.* (11)

Elliott was both attracted to Byzantium's vision of divine order and repelled by its rigidities; yet he was by the sixties less powerfully drawn to the energies and the "muck" or "mud" of Modernity. For him, "The aggressive questions" that moderns ask—"How can things be arranged to suit us better? What can I do to change things?" [—]

are potent questions, they inspire in me fear and trembling, but they are not the one I ask in the dark of night" (13).

That one, "That question," he "hear[d] rising about [him] on every side, disguised in a thousand ways—disguised because people hardly even know what the question is, so alien is it to the Modern language of problem setting and problem solving":

Kafka knew the question and asked it over and over. . . . The form in which an Englishman three centuries ago told a tale of that question was this: "What shall I do to be saved?" The anguish with which Bunyan's Christian cried was pure as K's, but it could be, and finally was, relieved with an answer: progress for that pilgrim was the way toward a satisfying answer. In the Modern world, the question echoes, jumbles, fades; progress for the Enlightened is headed in another direction. A person who asks "What shall I do to be saved?" wishes both to act and to be acted upon; Modernism provides no home for him, no way. (12–13)

Byzantium as a home was not available, but its art, preserved by the modern world, could and still did envision a way.¹³ The worst of the modern was "entropy. All energy is distributed uniformly, attraction and repulsion cancel out, there can be no movement. Its social form is that egalitarianism which is total democracy and the avowed goal of socialism: justice as equality" (13–14). Elliott's metaphor for "the Byzantine worst is catatonia. Idea controls matter absolutely, all things are ranked as they are supposed to be, there is no cause for movement. Its social form is that pyramidal bureaucracy which is the perfection of absolutist authority: justice as subordination" (14). Either way, the choice might look desperate, agonized.

Yet the balance tipped:

¹³Elliott's last but never published novel, "Michael of Byzantium," offers evidence of his deep fascination with, and his large effort to imagine living in, that lost world.

at least in mosaic, [hierarchical art could] nevertheless incarnate great spiritual vitality which can come only from (or through) an artist.

You stand in a church moving your gaze over a mosaic high on the vault across from you. It has been there a month, a century, twelve hundred years; no matter how long. It has changed, and seemingly can change, no more than can the laws of geometry in obedience to which it was composed, or the idea which explains the color of the background, or God the Father Whom the image represents. Yet, without moving, it acts upon and within you. As the light alters in intensity and quality, the picture continues to act on you, motionlessly various. To look at it is to participate in an action, is a rite of incarnation, is a way of taking communion. . . .

I, a storyteller, a craftsman working in an art that needs and uses moving time, would have hated to be prisoned in the rigidities of Byzantinism. All the same, I prefer that stone system which could be used against itself to the mud nonsystem which I feel to be the threat of Modern progress toward homogenization. The best an artist can do with congealed mud, with plastic, is not good enough.

I grew up in Modernism, and now, a straddler who does not know what the new world is going to be like, I imagine one which needs art to be and commissions artmakers to make it. . . . Needed, used, art has a chance of striving again for elegance, delight, celebration, beauty, as it has pretty much ceased to do in recent years but as it always does when not turned aside from its natural courses. (14–15)

Elliott's *Conversions* ends with the essay "Never Nothing," his witness against nihilism, which in many accounts, as in Irving Howe's representative one, is "the Central Preoccupation, the inner Demon, at the Heart of Modern Literature" (Howe 36).¹⁴ Elliott observes,

¹⁴Elliott knew and used Howe's *Literary Modernism* (1967), referring to it in his essay "Two Good Novels and an Oversized God" and to Howe specifically as "one of the best critics in the country, but also a true believer [in the Zeitgeist]—not quite a zealot and certainly not a fanatic: a true, but intelligent and, therefore, saddened believer," whose introduction to that collection

I see in nihilism the sufficient contour of the adversary. . . . [H]e can make disconnection seem desirable; he encourages us to it; he can arrange things so that cold hatred seems good and moving love impossible, so that falling out of communion takes no more than indifference but entering into communion is difficult and risky. He tempts me, and I fear him. (“*Never*” 212–13)

At the end of that essay he again, and movingly, invokes Dante:

Dante has helped me, too, even as I am sure he has helped unnumbered thousands of others, even as Virgil helped him. . . . [After looking at Satan,] Dante took hold of Virgil, who “caught hold of the shaggy sides,” clinging to Satan for a while because there was no other way to go beyond him, and when they had passed through dead center in a kind of parody of birth, they turned around so that what had been down now became up, what left now right. Then, right side up, they went away, leaving that dark cave, which will always be there and which they could do nothing about, their ears no longer ringing with the howls of those whom God had abandoned, those travesty-babies in that dead womb, and they climbed back up to the world of light, where the sun and the other stars shine unobscured, where communion is possible. (237–38)

“amount[ed] to a brief memorial to the [Modernist] movement now in decline” (31).

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Saint Peter the Martyr (1428),
Museo di San Marco, Florence
Fra Angelico (c. 1395–1455)

“The Jolly Corner”: Henry James’s Spiritual Triptych

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Described as “rich and multitudinous” by Richard Hocks and “ambiguous and elliptical” by David Galloway (6; 276), “The Jolly Corner” is Henry James’s universally acclaimed variant of the traditional doppelgänger story, wherein a divided man meets his other self and is changed forever by the encounter. Inspired in part by the commercial success of Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde* (1886) and Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), James’s tale about an aging man’s overwhelming sense “of loss and regret” while visiting the old house of his youth has been interpreted many ways since its initial publication as a Christmas ghost story in *English Review* in December 1908 (Gorra 187). For instance, Adeline R. Tintner argues that because “it was not unusual for James to go to Poe” for inspiration late in his career, “The Jolly Corner” draws heavily on two of the Gothic master’s most architecture-centric works, both published in 1839: “The Fall of the House of Usher” and “The Haunted Palace” (194). Other critics have pointed out the many subtle allusions to Sophocles’s *Oedipus the King* sprinkled liberally throughout James’s enigmatic tale. There are references to self-blinding, for example, as well as father–son conflict, a symbolic crossroads, and the search for one man’s “social

identity” upon his return to the city of his birth after a decades-long absence (Shear 547). Still others, both scholars and lay readers alike, have suggested that another well-known Greek myth offers a fitting template for at least some of the tale’s action; and that is the story of Theseus, Crown Prince of Athens, and his pursuit of the Minotaur in the maze, a grotesque fellow prince who must be slain before Theseus can live a normal life. There are also veiled allusions to such turn-of-the-century notables as J. P. Morgan, Theodore Roosevelt, John Singer Sargent, and Edward Steichen in this elegant account of a remorseful expatriate who struggles to come to grips with what he has missed out on—“the whole show” as he puts it—by turning his back on America when he was young and moving to Europe for three decades (James, “Jolly” 698).

James’s manifold narrative “with levels psychoanalytic, cultural, and mythic” contains a number of enriching Biblical allusions as well (Hocks 114). For instance, Jason Rosenblatt points out how “the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew is projected with special clarity” in the story, specifically Christ’s parable about the wise virgins who patiently trimmed their lamps and waited for a better future (282). There is also an implied reference to iconic Christian statuary in James’s best known doppelgänger story (he wrote others), since a number of critics have remarked how its famous closing scene—wherein the unconscious protagonist is cradled in the lap of his “feminine confidante” (Bell 285)—is clearly suggestive of the classic *Pietà* image in which a grieving Mary, after the Deposition from the cross, cradles the body of Christ in her lap. In keeping with such resonant Christian iconography, James’s lengthy tale about one man’s psychic suffering is organized and presented in what amounts to a prose triptych. That is to say, it is a three-chapter narrative that at once emulates and evokes traditional Christian triptychs. This organizational structure is appropriate as well as enriching since the middle-aged protagonist of the story, a troubled American named Spencer Brydon, undergoes what amounts to a Passion episode while in the haunted temple of his ancestors, a looming estate house that stands empty and unfurnished “on the jolly corner” of his childhood block in lower Manhattan (James, “Jolly” 698).

In *A Small Boy and Others* (1913), the first volume of his three-volume autobiography, James details his lifelong love of art and art galleries. For instance, in one vivid reminiscence from his formative years, this son of a prominent clergyman writes of a trip to “Bryan’s Gallery of Christian Art” at Broadway and Thirteenth Street in New York, where he viewed several old examples of “triptychs, of angular saints and seraphs, of black Madonnas and obscure Bambinos” (208). Years later, during his decades of living and traveling in Europe, he viewed many more Christian triptychs in, for example, the Louvre and London’s National Gallery, not to mention those masterpieces of that art form housed in the great cathedrals of his adopted continent.

Regardless of the artist’s chosen medium, a traditional Christian triptych is always “made up of three parts, usually with a central portion and two wings, often made so that the wings close over the centre” for protection as well as ease of transportation (Murray and Murray 544). These three sections serve to symbolize the Holy Trinity, and the parts of the work are customarily of unequal width and height. The first one, always on the viewer’s left, is smaller and narrower than the middle section because the initial panel or wing only sets up or introduces the main panel and its dominant subject matter. Conversely, the central section is broader and oftentimes far taller than the two flanking panels since it goes into much greater detail, often contains more figures, and features more activity in the foreground and background than the other two sections. Then the third panel, smaller like the first, offers the viewer what amounts to the dénouement of the painting—or the bas-relief or the stained glass window—since its purpose is to reconcile and conclude the piece.

A common subject for a Christian triptych is, of course, some momentous event in the life of Christ or the Apostles. If the middle panel presents, say, the Crucifixion as its central image, then the smaller panel to the viewer’s left might offer Christ presiding over the Last Supper or praying in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before His death, while the panel on the right might contain an image of the resurrected Christ, perhaps the Ascension as witnessed

by the Disciples. Among some of the most famous examples of Christian triptychs are *Saint Peter the Martyr* (1429) by Fra Angelico, housed in the Museo di San Marco in Florence; *Triptych of the Last Supper* (1464–67) by Dieric Bouts, which hangs in the Louvain Cathedral in Belgium; and *The Elevation of the Cross* (1611) by Peter Paul Rubens, housed in the Cathedral of Our Lady in Antwerp. “These hinged panel paintings were one of the most popular forms of altarpiece art from the medieval era on,” and whether mounted permanently behind the altar of some great European cathedral or folded and carried from parish to parish, they “served to inspire and educate Christian congregations with Biblical art from the Old Testament and the Gospels” (“Triptych”).

In the opening paragraph of chapter 1 of “The Jolly Corner,” in what serves metaphorically as the first small panel of James’s spiritual triptych, Brydon, a “highly cultivated” man of leisure (Benet 519), has recently returned to New York City after a self-exile in Europe that lasted for “more than thirty years—thirty-three, to be exact” (James, “Jolly” 697), a subtle allusion to the “exact” age of Christ when He endures His Passion, when He is betrayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, arrested, tried, scourged, crucified, placed in the tomb, and then resurrected three days later on Easter morning. Even though Brydon is well into his fifties when he returns to New York City, a much older age than now, this specific reference in the opening lines of chapter 1 provides the first of many allusions of varying subtlety to the final hours of Christ. What is more, at the age of thirty-three Jesus was not considered a young man by His Biblical contemporaries, for according to most New Testament scholars, given the much shorter life spans of people in first-century Israel, Jesus would have been seen as middle-aged at the time of His Passion and death.

Consequently, when He first begins His public ministry at the ripe age of thirty years, Jesus was already getting a late start as a traveling preacher, which, by the way, was not the profession His family had wanted for Him. It was expected that, like a good son, He would follow in the footsteps of His father and become a carpenter in Nazareth, His home village. In short, then, given the life-span differentials be-

tween the first century and the early twentieth, Brydon and Jesus are in about the same midlife periods when they undergo their similar crises of faith and resolve, crises that they both deliberately precipitate. And chapter 1 of James's "final fable" about "the rival reality of the un-lived life" serves (Bell 276), just as does his first panel in a traditional Christian triptych, to set up the action or the event that will be depicted in much greater detail in the long middle chapter of the story, a dense and extended narrative that is filled with "scriptural allusion and reference" as well as "those wonderfully ambient sentences that only James could write" (Rosenblatt 282; Humma x).

After three years of preaching in Galilee and the surrounding region, Jesus, a middle-aged man who is still unmarried and childless, decides to return to Jerusalem, the city of His forefathers and the capital of His faith. According to tradition, He has not been there in some time, and He makes this long-awaited pilgrimage in order to fulfill His destiny and undergo His Passion. Hard upon His arrival, He begins to speak out publicly against those in positions of power and influence. Jesus denounces, for instance, scribes, Pharisees, and members of the Sanhedrin, labeling such leaders as little more than "blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel" (Matthew 23:24). He declares that these men in control of Jerusalem have been poor stewards, for they have overseen the ruination of the capital city of David and Solomon: "And when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it" (Luke 19:41). But even worse, these leaders have allowed the great Temple on the Mount, the most sacred site in all of Judaism, to be corrupted by the pursuit of earthly treasure and profit.

This consecrated structure is now, in the early decades of the first century AD, overrun with moneychangers, profiteering men who have turned its holy ground into a place of rank buying and selling. An angry Jesus announces to the people, "It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves" (Matthew 21:13). When the city authorities, both religious and secular, become upset with His inflammatory pronouncements, He retreats eastward to the Garden of Gethsemane on the slopes of

the Mount of Olives, where He spends the bulk of the night praying and soul-searching, hoping amid the elemental darkness that the cup of suffering will be passed from Him and that He can somehow escape His coming trial by torture: “And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Luke 22:44). So in a moment of extreme self-doubt and stark irony, Jesus begs to escape the coming crisis that He has intentionally precipitated by His long-delayed return to Jerusalem and His disruptive actions inside the Temple. He asks passionately, ardently, “Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done” (22:42).

The opening chapter of “The Jolly Corner,” only a few pages in length, serves to introduce a similar spiritual crisis that Brydon has “precipitated” in his own life by returning to New York City after an absence of not just a few years but more than thirty (703). Relishing his life of cultured ease in faraway Europe—with no plans whatsoever for a repatriation to America—this prodigal son was compelled by the death of his last brother to sail back to the city of his ancestors in order to sign legal documents pertaining to inheritance. Once that simple task with the attorneys is accomplished, this last member of the Brydon dynasty had intended to return straightaway to his beloved Old World and there spend the remainder of his years with his fellow sophisticates and Europhiles. “How could anyone,” he asks early on in chapter 1, “of any wit [want] to live in New York?” (704). However, just for the sake of nostalgia, the aging *bon vivant* decides to pay a visit to the grand house in which he was born and spent the first two decades of his life. But that one visit morphs into many, and Brydon soon becomes completely “obsessed with a metaphor” (Yeazell 171). Thus, he begins to roam the empty estate house night after night, postponing his planned return to Europe to do so: “It was what in these weeks he was living for” (James, “Jolly” 709).

This “obsession,” what he calls his “secret thrill,” gains so much control over him that he “sometimes came twice in the twenty-four hours” (709), hoping thereby to trigger a vision of his doppelgänger, the ghostly embodiment of the corporate American—a robber baron perhaps—whom he would have become had he remained in

New York City for those missing thirty-three years and followed in the footsteps of his businessman father. This was the traditional corporate lifestyle for which the young Brydon had been groomed and apprenticed from birth but had rejected outright with some vehemence, upon reaching maturity:

“What would it have made of me, what would it have made of me? I keep for ever wondering, all idiotically; as if I could possibly know! I see what it has made of dozens of others, those I meet, and it positively aches within me, to the point of exasperation, that it would have made something of me as well. Only I can't make out what, and the worry of it, the small rage of curiosity never to be satisfied, brings back what I remember to have felt, once or twice, after judging best, for reasons, to burn some important letter unopened. I've been sorry, I've hated it—I've never known what was in the letter.” (706)

As a result, even though he is repulsed by the clamor and the “ugliness of the city he has known since his youth” (Tambling 213), and even though he roundly condemns the American robber-baron class—his version of the moneychangers—for their huge profits, Brydon nevertheless is consumed with finding out whether he would have become one of “the Morgans, Rockefellers, and Carnegies” (Nixon 808), had he not followed what he now laments as “my perverse young course” (James, “Jolly” 706). In short, Brydon is a cloven man, “uncentered” and out of place amid “American consumer culture” with all of its noise, bustle, and turn-of-the-century “swagger” (Leithauser 21; Agnew 206; James, “Jolly” 698). Yet this man of refinement and ease is strangely “fascinated by the power behind the American scene” (Tintner, *Twentieth-Century* 13).

In chapter 2 of the story, which functions as the large middle “panel” of James's elegant prose triptych, Brydon begins—in grave earnest—to explore every room, floor, landing, and stairwell of his beloved ancestral home on the corner of his old block: “He walked there on the crisp November nights, arrived regularly at the evening's end” (James, “Jolly” 710), and he always goes there only after he has

eaten his late evening meal, quietly exiting a tony restaurant or the dining room of his club to make his way there on foot. As such, Brydon consumes a symbolic last supper every night before undergoing his emotional “passion” (724 *passim*), while locked deep inside “the great gaunt shell” of his old estate house (702), a neglected mansion that now stands unfurnished and unlit in a neighborhood that has over the years become both “dishonored and disfigured” (701). For him, it “was as easy to do this after dining out as to take his way to a club or to his hotel” (710).

As the “refined, hypersensitive” Brydon (Pollin 236) scours the mazelike house “night after night, carrying a sputtering candle” (Edel 621), he is in stealthy pursuit of his all-American double, the great capitalist success story—“He has a million a year” (James, “Jolly” 731)—whom he could have become, had he not relocated to Europe for over three decades and there lived what he now considers to have been a “selfish frivolous scandalous life” of Old World ease and comfort (707), all courtesy of Gilded Age capital that he did not lift a finger to earn. Significantly, he does the bulk of his clandestine searching amid “the upper rooms” of the old estate house (713 and *passim*), a choice of wording that clearly evokes the iconic “upper room” or the Cenacle in which Jesus spent his final evening with the disciples and there consumed what would prove to be his Last Supper (Luke 22:12):

And when the hour was come, he sat down, and the twelve apostles with him. And he said unto them, With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer: For I say unto you, I will not any more eat thereof, until it be fulfilled in the kingdom of God. (22:14–16)

James likewise emphasizes several other high places—landings, balconies, overlooks—in the four-story brownstone, as Brydon, elevated and isolated, struggles through a “psychic crisis” over exactly who and what he really is as well as what qualities and talents he may have kept “dormant in his own organism” during his thirty-three years of self-exile in Europe (Tuveson 271; James, “Jolly” 699):

"If I had waited . . . then I might have been, by staying here, something nearer to one of those types who have been hammered so hard and made so keen by their conditions. It isn't that I admire them so much . . . it's only a question of what fantastic, yet perfectly possible development of my own nature I mayn't have missed." (James, "Jolly" 706–07)

And so in chapter 2 of the story, these elevated places of mental anguish, of spiritual suffering, serve to evoke the hill of Calvary. For instance, on the fourth floor landing "high above he was still perched" (720), and thus Brydon gazes "far down" from this high "station" night after night in hopes of catching a glimpse of his elusive American doppelgänger (713; 719), a dynamic man "of wealth and force and success" who moves confidently in and out of the shadows below (700): "*He* isn't myself. He's the just so totally other person. . . . But I do want to see him. . . . And I can. And I shall" (708). At one point while in this raised place of spiritual anguish, Brydon even stands for several moments with "his hands held off" to either side, his eyes closed, and his head "bent" forward in a pose that subtly but tellingly suggests the very "attitude" of a crucified man (719).

In this "gossamer-like" story so laden with memories and misgivings (Stern xviii), Brydon more than once describes his ancestral estate as a "consecrated" structure (James, "Jolly" 698 and *passim*). Therefore, the old mansion standing on the corner of what used to be one of New York City's most distinguished avenues is like a sacred temple to him, a site of transcendent pilgrimage and "mystical" experience (710). Indeed, this divided man practically worships "the mere sight of the walls, mere shape of the rooms, mere sound of the floors, mere feel, in his hand, of the old silver-plated knobs of the several mahogany doors, which suggested the pressure of the palms of the dead" (704). Exuding the concentrated "human resonance" of three generations of his family as well as "the impalpable ashes of his long-extinct youth" (703; 704), the run-down condition of the Brydon family mansion and its near derelict setting call to mind the decline of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in the early

decades of the first century AD and how, at Christ's last visit there, it had become the favorite haunt of the moneychangers and the dove sellers: "And he went into the temple" in order to cleanse it of the profiteers "and began to cast out them that sold therein, and them that bought" (Luke 19:45).

Of course, Brydon's grand family temple—a place of "histories" and "relics"—is dedicated not to Jehovah but to American business and free enterprise (James, "Jolly" 700). The estate was built by his successful grandfather seventy years earlier, but then it was remodeled, enlarged, and "consecrated" by his even more successful father (698 and *passim*). Thus, in essence, it is like a second temple to Brydon. Yet this old house that conjures up so many "stirred memories" will soon meet the same fate as the once great temple of Herod (712). Besieged not by Roman soldiers but by turn-of-the-century "forces of transition" (Cox and Gilbert ix), the jolly corner mansion is slated to be demolished for the sake of urban renewal—"But I hope you don't mean they want you to pull this to pieces!" (James, "Jolly" 703)—and then a modern skyscraper can be built on the site. "They might come in now," Brydon sighs at one point, "the builders, the destroyers—they might come as soon as they would" (723). These words of architectural farewell, uttered so late in the long middle chapter of the tale, recall Christ's prophecy about the coming destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem:

And Jesus went out, and departed from the temple: and his disciples came to him for to shew him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said unto them, See ye not all these things? verily I say unto you, There shall not be left here one stone upon another, that shall not be thrown down. (Matthew 24:1–2)

That dire prophecy, mocked at the time by the powerful, comes to pass when the Romans under General Titus sack and destroy the Second Temple in AD 70 and then lay waste to all of Israel.

After many weeks of nocturnal searching for his American doppelgänger—"the ghostly possibility of the businessman he might have been" (Nixon 811)—Brydon decides that he will stay away

from the "consecrated" house on the jolly corner for three straight nights, thereby evoking the three days that Jesus spends in the garden tomb after His Crucifixion. At the end of this highly symbolic absence, Brydon returns to the estate in hopes of baiting a final confrontation with his other self, that "dominating Faustian self" of his nightmares and fancies (Fadiman 643). And it is on the highest floor of the old house that Brydon comes to one of the small "upper rooms," where he is convinced that his all-American double, an "evil, odious, blatant" robber-baron type (James, "Jolly" 725), has taken refuge, causing Brydon to declare proudly, "I've hunted him till he has turned." He then describes his cunning adversary as "the fanged or the antlered animal brought at last to bay" by his many weeks of determined "stalking" (714; 711).

However, much like Christ in the garden, Brydon is abruptly seized by a crippling self-doubt, so that in "the next moment he had broken into a sweat" (715). There is no blood mingled with his perspiration, of course, but the man's sudden dread is palpable and profound. Realizing that "his curiosity" has placed him "in peril," he begins "panting" in the darkness, trembling as well (724; 718). Thus, Brydon asks that the cup of suffering be passed from him also. Thus "recoiling" from the very confrontation that he has sought with his robber-baron shadow (722)—the "ideal of American masculinity" (Collister xii)—Brydon pleads instead to be allowed to avoid the horror of meeting "the ghost of his unrealized self" (Levine 186), that intimidating avatar of what he would have evolved into had he not chosen a carefree "life of unspecified dissipation in Europe" (Rawlings 277).

This dapper, monocle-wearing "man of culture and imagination" (Hughes 177), but of no real accomplishments, lingers for an agonizing moment in front of the closed door beyond which awaits the object of his long quest, the root cause of all of his "passion" in the old house (James, "Jolly" 724 and *passim*). Still, at the very moment of knowing, Brydon's courage fails him, and so, drenched in sweat, he backs away from the supernatural encounter that he has long wanted. He decides for the sake of "discretion" that he will leave unrevealed the ruthless entity who lurks just behind that closed

door: “I spare you and I give you up. . . . I retire, I renounce—never, on my honour, to try again. So rest for ever—and let *me!*” (719). Giving up this “morbid obsession” at last (706), Brydon, exhausted and shamed, turns on his heels and hurries down four flights of stairs, planning to rush out into the street to find safety in noise, light, and other people: “He would have blessed that sign of life; he would have welcomed positively the slow approach of his friend the policeman, whom he had hitherto only sought to avoid” (720).

After this “descent” from his high place of agony (720)—a symbolic Deposition of sorts—when he is mere feet from the front door and the safety that waits just beyond it, Brydon asks, “wasn’t he now in *most* immediate presence of some inconceivable occult activity? It was as sharp, the question, as a knife in his side” (723). This imagined injury to Brydon’s flank echoes the last wound suffered by Christ on the cross: “But when they came to Jesus, and saw that he was dead already, they brake not his legs. But one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water” (John 19:33–34).

Then just as Brydon sighs with relief and steps toward the door of deliverance, a “grey glimmering” mist begins to coalesce out of the chill November air, “a cold silvery nimbus that seemed to play a little as he looked—to shift and expand and contract” (James, “Jolly” 724). Blocking the means of his intended “escape” (723), this living vapor begins to assume “the very form toward which, for so many days, the passion of his curiosity had yearned. It gloomed, it loomed, it was something, it was somebody, the prodigy of a personal presence” (724). Once it is fully formed into his long-sought double, this assertive other Brydon, “spectral yet human, a man of his own substance and stature” (724), begins to advance boldly “as for aggression” (725). And so the weaker Brydon, the “sensitive expatriate” self (Bell 276), falls back, retreating before “the roused passion of a life larger than his own, a rage of personality before which his own collapsed, he felt the whole vision turn to darkness and his very feet give way. His head went round; he was going; he had gone” (James, “Jolly” 725–26).

In chapter 3 of James’s “famously ambiguous tale” (Claggett 198) about a conflicted American heir who spends the better part of his

life “dodging the question” of who and what he really is (James, “Jolly” 697), Brydon awakens gradually—very much like a man “emerging from [a] tomb” (705)—to find that his head is cradled in the lightly perfumed folds of the flowing dress of Alice Staverton. An unmarried woman of his own class and generation, this embodiment of “a slim mystifying grace” is a close friend from his old New York days (700), their mutually “remembered Eden” (Toibin x), and she has become his constant companion ever “since his repatriation” many weeks before (James, “Jolly” 697). Brydon describes her as “this disposition [a word play on Deposition] and this resource, this comfort and support” (697). As he slowly regains mental clarity after enduring his dark night of the soul, he tells this “pious” confidante who cradles him in her lap that he must have actually expired in the house of shadows and then somehow been brought back to life (700), resurrected as it were: “‘Yes—I can only have died. You brought me literally to life. Only,’ he wondered, his eyes rising to her, ‘only in the name of all the benedictions, how?’” (727).

An elegant, patrician woman who always has “the scent of a garden” about her (700), Alice, a lifelong New Yorker, becomes Brydon’s own Mary Magdalene, his faithful attendant and “the cornerstone” of his new life to come (Burlison 100)—after his resurrection and a concomitant “revelation” (James, “Jolly” 709 and *passim*). Mary, a native Galilean just like Jesus, never once doubted or abandoned her teacher and friend during His Passion. Therefore, on Easter morning as a reward for her devotion and her faith, she was the first to bear witness of the Resurrection of Christ, for she had come to the garden tomb to anoint His body with various “sweet spices” (Mark 16:1), only to find that “he is risen, as he said” (Matthew 28:6). So, as James’s “reverential” doppelgänger story comes to its “redemptive” conclusion (Rosenblatt 283; Hocks 82), Alice’s “refreshing fragrance” provides an olfactory allusion to the woman who came to the garden tomb at sunrise with her alabaster jar of ointments and spices in order to perform one last service for the fallen Christ (James, “Jolly” 726). In similar fashion, “the golden glow” (726), which bathes Brydon and his companion on the morning after his own “passion” (724 and *passim*), represents the redeeming

light of “beatitude” and peace (727), for they both realize that his “inner turmoil and division” have been exorcised forever (Hutchison 171), as this tortured man has at last come to terms with his choices in life: “It had brought him to knowledge, to knowledge—yes, this was the beauty of his state [and] he had only to let it shine on him” (James, “Jolly” 726–27). In short, through spiritual suffering and nightly passion, he “discovers that it is not too late for him to become the financial giant that he might have been” (Tintner, *Twentieth-Century* 12).

If Brydon, late of the Old World, can be interpreted as something of a Jamesian Christ figure for the Gilded Age—a “mocked” and “ravaged” man who begs for the cup of agony to be passed from him (James, “Jolly” 724, 731), then James’s decision to present this long “parable of loss and regret” in the form of a Christian triptych serves to intensify and deepen a three-part narrative of suffering that is already rich with “spiritual implications” as well as New Testament “reverberations” (Gorra 187; Rosenblatt 282; Sullivan 10). As the short chapter 3 comes to its gentle and luminous end, Brydon, having finally cleansed his ancestral temple, has become whole and is healed for all time by his fully immersive baptism in darkness the night before: “He could but wonder at the depth and duration of his swoon” (James, “Jolly” 728). With the morning sun upon his face and with a saintly woman “of impregnable stability” by his side (Wagenknecht 204), Brydon is now ready to walk out of the tomb-like house for the last time and give up his life of European leisure in order to preach his newfound “gospel of achievement” in the great city that he had previously scorned and condemned as some fallen Jerusalem (Tuveson 275).

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Book Reviews

The Redemption of Narrative: Terry Tempest Williams and Her Vision of the West. By Jan Whitt. Mercer UP, 2016. 256 pp. \$29.

In her introduction to *The Redemption of Narrative: Terry Tempest Williams and Her Vision of the West*, Jan Whitt says that Williams's writing is "born in the red-hot fires of contradiction" (1). Perhaps this is the reason why Whitt's response to Williams's work is an evocative synthesis rather than a mere analysis. How should one pin down a salamander whose writing is built on paradox and constantly changes form? Williams uses the vehicles of autobiography, memoir, critical analysis, literary or immersion journalism, lyric essay, mosaic, editorial, manifesto, poetry, sermon, and others, often blending several of these in the same work. As Whitt suggests, "The paradoxes inherent in Williams's life and work defy the readers, editors, and librarians who struggle to catalogue her" (10). Also, Williams's reason for not writing in strict subgenres of creative nonfiction may be that her objectives are also multivarious: "I cannot separate the writing life from a spiritual life, from a life as a teacher or activist or my life intertwined with family and the responsibilities we carry within our own homes" (233).

A reading of several of Williams's works points to the value of Whitt's approach, which is both analytical and subjective. But what did not make

sense at first is Whitt's comparison of Williams to T. S. Eliot, because they are very different writers. However, Whitt's evidence is convincing. In the interview at the end of the book, Williams says, "T. S. Eliot speaks to the beauty and brokenness of the world as well as any writer I know. *Four Quartets* remains a seminal text for me. I read it frequently—not so much as a poem but a catalogue of sentences, beautiful, poignant, provocative, and true" (226). Eliot's influence is manifested most obviously in her *Desert Quartet*, but the emotional force and the spiritual and political aims of her work are illuminated by Whitt's loose comparison to an Anglican who never wrote about the West: "Connecting Eliot and Williams are the evolution of their intricate personal belief systems and their longing to find order and stability through the act of writing" (234). In addition, these writers are connected by their interest in the sacredness of the earth, the belief that narrative can redeem, the richness of allegory, and the bond of community.

Whitt reads Williams with constant reference to Eliot but does not compare them exhaustively or routinely. Her introduction contains two very curious sentences. First: "*The Redemption of Narrative: Terry Tempest Williams and Her Vision of the West* does not rely on a comparison of the philosophies of Thomas Stearns Eliot and Terry Tempest Williams; however, Eliot and Williams are connected even in their respect for paradox and their desire both to advocate and write" (16). This implies that Whitt's comparison evokes understanding but should not be read as complete or sufficient. Rational exhaustion of their similarities is not the goal; evocation of themes, issues, and concerns is. The other sentence is similar:

The Redemption of Narrative does not depend upon what inspires Williams and Eliot to produce vastly different texts, nor is it an assessment of their respective spiritual journeys or their reliance upon Christian images and a belief in a savior for humankind: however, poems by Eliot and Gerard Manley Hopkins serve to illuminate Williams's theories about creation, her love of nature, and her religious convictions. (17–18)

This is not merely apophysis. Though Whitt does analyze well, her goal is to evoke Williams's work, often with a clearly admiring tone: "Williams . . .

unites these themes with prophetic fire and an unsettling vision. Responding to Williams's writing requires not literary criticism but action, conviction, and commitment. Hers is a religious vision" (4). It is certainly true that most readers love or hate Williams's writing; Whitt is clearly an acolyte, but one who claims that without understanding Williams's deepest aims, readers cannot understand her methods. In aid of understanding, *The Redemption of Narrative* illuminates Williams's dual roles as artist and activist, offers biography, synthesizes previously published criticism, describes the spiritual and literary traditions Williams inhabits, and joins Whitt's voice to Williams's in a few social justice campaigns.

The book falls naturally into an introduction, two parts, and a brief conclusion. The Introduction explores Williams's paradoxical or oppositional nature: she is Mormon but flirts with paganism; she believes in individual discovery of God and accepts the consequent diversity of definitions of divinity but celebrates her own Mormon tradition; she is an environmental activist and speaks out publicly but is also a private, contemplative artist. Whitt claims that Williams writes along the borderland "between the religious and the secular, between the restorative beauty of night and the sunrise that breaks open the sky, between the mind and the heart, and between euphoria and eviscerating loss" (140). Affinity for dialectical tension determines how Williams thinks about the issues she treasures—the power of narrative to negotiate between opposites, her celebration of the feminine, her search for truth, and her life of public activism, which Whitt typifies as hurling flowers at evil, an image Williams borrows from the Yaqui Easter Ceremony. As Williams says, "I do believe in the transformative power of art—the power of art to change our lives" (qtd. in Whitt 142).

Part 1 loosely compares each of Eliot's *Four Quartets* to various of Williams's works. The following chart shows the structure of this comparison:

Title from <i>Four Quartets</i>	Theme	Phrase from the Poem	Titles of Williams's work
"Burnt Norton"	Time and place	Time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future.	<i>Refuge: An Unnatural History of Family and Place</i>
"East Coker"	Allegory	In my beginning is my end.	<i>An Unspoken Hunger: Stories from the Field</i> and <i>When Women Were Birds: Fifty-Four Variations on Voice</i>
"The Dry Salvages"	Phenomenology	I do not know much about gods.	<i>Desert Quartet: An Erotic Landscape, Pieces of White Shell: A Journey to Navajoland, and Red: Passion and Patience in the Desert</i>
"Little Gidding"	Apocalypse, revelation, and hope	Midwinter spring is its own season.	<i>Leap and Finding Beauty in a Broken World</i>

Though the chart implies strict divisions, Whitt's explorations in the four chapters of the book's first part bleed into each other. This section also raises other issues important to Williams—faith, loss, memory, feminism, redemption, freedom of expression, political action, sacred knowledge, search for meaning, reconciliation, and restoration.

Part 2 contains a two-chapter comparison of Williams's work with that of other American writers. In the fifth chapter Whitt describes Williams's place in the tradition of literary journalism, of writers who enabled Williams to exchange the false objectivity of corporate journalism for the subjectivity of personal vision, which then manifests itself in a multiplicity of forms. Whitt places her firmly in the tradition of Sara Davidson, Joan Didion, Truman

Capote, Susan Orlean, Tom Wolfe, John Steinbeck, and others. Chapter 6 discusses writers who use descriptions of violence against animals to illuminate violence between humans—Ernest Hemingway, George Orwell, Roger Rosenblatt, and others. Whitt also discusses Jane Tompkins, who, like Williams, writes to reveal violence against animals but also against the land. Whitt clearly believes that Williams belongs not only to the tradition of American nature writing but to these two broader literary traditions. This section also includes a valuable interview with Williams, one that seals the meaning of the rest of the book. Following the interview the Conclusion summarizes Whitt's analyses and gives suggestions for future studies.

Often in the book, Whitt takes up Williams's causes—her resistance to the hierarchical nature of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, her support of Kate Kelly of Ordain Women, her efforts to protect prairie dog communities, and other campaigns. Whitt clearly identifies with these causes in a subjective manner foreign to much literary criticism. However, this is entirely consistent with her claim that Williams is best understood through participating in her passion. Distracting are Whitt's frequent references to her own book, as in "*The Redemption of Narrative* explores" (19), or "*The Redemption of Narrative* . . . addresses" (233). Also, through adopting Williams's evocative and lyrical methods, Whitt often revisits ideas and analyses in a manner that seems less lyrical than repetitive.

However, these distractions are minor. Whitt successfully demonstrates that Williams is—like Coyote, a figure and an animal she clearly admires—a shape shifter. In an interview, Williams says, "I don't know where I am going until the last sentence delivers me to a place I have never been before" (225). Form is negotiable and objectivity is an illusion. What is most valuable is passion. Says Whitt, "Writing is daring to feel what nurtures and breaks our hearts. Bearing witness is its own form of advocacy. It is a dance with pain and beauty" (233–34). A more compartmentalized and distant analysis would not get at the heart of Williams's work the way Whitt does.

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Between the Canon and the Messiah: The Structure of Faith in Contemporary Continental Thought. By Colby Dickinson. Bloomsbury, 2013. 267 pp. \$37.95.

The overall aim of Colby Dickinson's *Between the Canon and the Messiah: The Structure of Faith in Contemporary Continental Thought* is to present an alternative hermeneutic to the "totalitarian" representational practices of both Christian and secular "fundamentalis[ts]" (205). Building on the theories of such Continental thinkers as Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben, and Paul Ricoeur, Dickinson takes what is perhaps best described as a poststructural, or even deconstructivist, stance, though he never actually uses these terms to describe his position. The reason for this, one suspects, is that Dickinson does not want readers to misconstrue the relationship between "canonical representations and their messianic undoing" as the mere application of contemporary Continental philosophy to longstanding theological ideas (20). In fact, the hermeneutical stance Dickinson puts forth predates the thinkers mentioned above, finding its roots, Dickinson argues, in Pauline Christianity and the heretical seventeenth-century Jewish movement of Sabbatianism. Thus, a large part of Dickinson's project is to underscore the theological foundations of contemporary Continental thought, which in turn highlights the theopolitical nature of his "radical" hermeneutic (210). For Dickinson, such a position is mindful of history's outcasts and the violences committed against them by canonical representations. Dickinson's argument is radical because, with representational forms, conceptions of morality are subject to deconstruction—something Dickinson does not address directly, though he certainly implies as much throughout his text. As he states in the final paragraph of the book, his hermeneutical stance "is radical only insofar as it does not subscribe to a predetermined set of ontological forms, leaving such matters to be played out on the fluctuating field of historical-canonical forms, whether these be religious, cultural, or political" (210). For this reason, Dickinson's book might be poorly received by Christian scholars of a dominant, fundamentalist persuasion, but such readers are among those whom Dickinson wishes to address. By locating a deconstructive (or, in his language, a *messianic*) force within the representational canons of Judaism, Dickinson champions a hermeneutic that is forever seeking more just forms of political

representation—a point that is certainly deserving of further scholarly attention, however controversial its outcomes.

At the risk of papering over the subtle nuances of Dickinson's analysis, one can describe the first chapter of his book as framing a critical distinction between dialectical thinking and antinomianism that will later mark, in the second chapter, a similar distinction between canonical representations and their messianic undoing. Though these distinctions are not entirely parallel, readers will find that the corresponding concepts are similar in their basic contours. In the first chapter, for example, Dickinson positions dialectical thinking as an adherence to the law or the differential boundaries structuring human thought. By contrast, antinomianism (a term originally coined by Martin Luther) is deployed somewhat loosely by contemporary Continental philosophers like Alain Badiou and Gunther Bornkamm to refer to the teachings of the apostle Paul, who, Dickinson writes, "adhere[s] to the truth of a grace instead of returning to the inscriptions of law" (17). Dickinson uses most of the chapter to outline the work of Jacob Taubes, a Jewish scholar who terms the conflict between Christianity and Judaism as one "between *representation*—to which, in his eyes, Judaism must remain faithful—and *presentation*, which Christianity, or any other messianic movement sprung from its Judaic origins, has tried to elicit through its apparent jettisoning of the law" (20). One such movement, Taubes explains, was Sabbatianism, which sought an unmediated presentation of the divine apart from its canonical representations. Thus, one can already see how multiple terms are employed throughout the chapter to refer to overlapping (though not entirely identical) concepts—antinomianism, presentation, messianicity, and grace pinned against dialectical thinking, representation, canonicity, and law, respectively. Though these multiple, overlapping terms make the first chapter somewhat difficult to navigate (especially for readers unfamiliar with antinomianism or Benjamin's rendering of messianicity), Dickinson offers a valuable insight that frames the discussion for the second chapter and provides the basis for his radical hermeneutic, locating within the "legacies" of Judaism "the very fabric of contemporary philosophical reasoning" (41). Judaic law, for Dickinson, embodies the totalitarian propensity of canonical representations, while Christianity and other antinomian movements embody what Benjamin will describe as a weak messianic force, the fracturing, or deconstruction, of canonical representations from within.

This chapter traces the conflict between dialectical reasoning and antinomianism into the philosophical debate between Derrida and Giorgio, but, as before, the distinction between dialectical thinking and antinomianism, canonical representations and their messianic undoing, becomes somewhat muddled in this section. On the one hand, Dickinson rightly portrays Derrida as a dialectical thinker, operating under models of difference and the repressed, or antinomic, relations of thought, but, on the other hand, he portrays Agamben as Derrida's antinomian opponent who seeks a pure presentation beyond the failures of representation, "a return to our animal being beyond the constructed fabrications of the human subject" (68). Presenting these two thinkers as oppositional becomes slightly confusing because Derrida crosses the antinomian/dialectical divide, adhering to representational canons and their messianic undoing, which, readers will recall, was aligned earlier with antinomianism, presentation, and grace. Thus, antinomianism, for Agamben, is an attempt to uncover, apart from representational canons, the prelinguistic animals that people are, while, for Derrida, antinomianism refers to Benjamin's weak messianic force, or the deconstruction of representational canons from within. Dickinson presents both Agamben and Derrida as antinomian, though they clearly disagree on key points. While the debate between Agamben and Derrida is fascinating and will, no doubt, interest many of Dickinson's readers, one is left wondering whether the inclusion of Agamben was really necessary. Dickinson claims to formulate a radical hermeneutic that "takes seriously" Agamben's antinomian challenges, but he more or less aligns himself with Derrida, claiming that there will "always be an oscillation in language between its *canonical* and *messianic* elements—a truth that Judaism firmly seized upon shortly after its conception (and which philosophers such as Derrida have detected)" (106). As before, Agamben's antinomian stance complicates how readers understand the relationship between the first and second chapters, since Dickinson's reading of Pauline Christianity, Sabbatarianism, and the work of Taubes could have led smoothly into a discussion of Derrida without any references to Agamben at all, whose work here only serves to obfuscate Dickinson's development of a radical hermeneutic.

The third chapter of Dickinson's book underscores the politics of canonical representations, which tend to portray history as an objective reality in line with a single, authoritative narrative. But, as Dickinson's project seeks

to uncover, there are embedded within any historical narrative alternative histories, or antinomic accounts, that threaten to disrupt the authority of canonized history from within—what Benjamin (and Derrida after him) calls a weak messianic force. These alternative histories are usually articulated by minority voices who are marginalized and sometimes excluded from the historical narrative by those in power. Like Derrida, Dickinson proposes a *just* hermeneutic that accounts for both the canonical and the messianic—a recognition, first of all, that canons are necessary for cultural intelligibility, and, second, that canonical representations, be they historical, political, or theological, are not transcendent categories, exempt from the deconstructive forces that lead, inevitably, to their messianic undoing. Such a recognition, Dickinson argues, lessens the exclusionary violence of canons while working toward more just forms of representation. In light of this, Dickinson proposes a *just* form of canonicity that “strives to become conscious of its relationship to violence, something the Judaic canon, with its focus on the victims and the marginalized figures of history, can be said to accomplish in some fashion” (146). He argues that “the more the canonical element exposes its own proximity and propensity to violence . . . the quieter may the messianic forces grow” (147). This concept more or less forms the basis of Dickinson’s hermeneutic, which he articulates in the fourth chapter. Entering into conversation with Ricoeur, who reframes the canonical/ messianic relation as a tension between the Pharisaic and the Prophetic, Dickinson argues that one’s hermeneutical practices should always be “hospitable to the other, the foreigner,” because such practices will “*lead, more dramatically, toward a transformation of the world we live in*” (189). In other words, one should be cognizant of the violence and the instability of canonical representations, embracing the weak messianic force embedded within all canons that leads, inevitably, to more just forms of political representation.

Dickinson’s book is philosophically sophisticated and noble in its loving concern for the marginalized figures of history, but it also presents, if tacitly, provocative questions to its Christian readership, namely, how does one enact Christ’s command to love the marginalized figures of history—the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the impoverished, the lepers, the queer—in the context of Dickinson’s radical hermeneutic without falling into the trap of moral relativism? Stated more generally, should Christians adopt deconstructive reading practices if they lead to the messianic undoing of

moral principles, the canonical representation of God's commandments? These questions are perplexing and even troubling, and Dickinson does not provide any answers to them. In fact, his project demands further commentary and debate. The book will therefore be of great interest to theologians and philosophers of religion engaged in similar questions. It should also be of interest to secular Continental philosophers, who will no doubt be intrigued by Dickinson's unearthing of Continental philosophy's religious origins. Finally, given the sophistication of Dickinson's philosophical analyses, it is surprisingly accessible, despite some confusion over Agamben's contributions to the discussion, so it may also be helpful to novice scholars who wish to further their knowledge of Continental thought and postmodern theology.

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My God

My god is a lanky god. My god wears flannel.
My god wears a beard. When he goes for a run,
he hunches after mile one. My god is afraid
of bears, but makes a mean coffee cake.
When my god reads Hemingway, he gets weepy.
My god can't read Woolf, it makes him
a drinker, a lake lingerer, melancholy
for days. My god didn't anticipate
motorcycles, the bite of the pavement.
He didn't anticipate cancer lipping
into lymph nodes. My god picks raspberries
softly but they still bleed in his palm.
My god stopped eating when Cain
opened Abel, when the earth folded
him in, when his parents said, *My god, My god.*

After Sandra Beasley

—Meg McManama

Three Men Loose in a Fiery Furnace

Fed up with fire
Meshach finds ice
in the memory of
his daughter's palm.

Hoping to be purged
Shadrach presses coals
small white hearts
to his lips.

To have no hurt
Abednego kneels
while the Son of God
braids his fiery hair.

—Meg McManama

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