

America

FALL 2019

THE JESUIT REVIEW OF FAITH AND CULTURE

2019 CPA MAGAZINE OF THE YEAR

FALL LITERARY REVIEW 2019

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Jesus loves me,
this I know.



gaan kólóku ku én bunuhati. Biga a mbei mi ko ta biibi neén liba, nóó hén a toona da mi di lobi di dee sémbe dee nama ku én ta feni. Aai womi, di soni dé nóó a bigi da mi e.

15 Wé Timoteo, mi o taki wan soni da i aki gbelin seei, kijoo. Nóó a dé wan gaan bambuu taki di hii sémbe musu piki waiwai. Hén da disi: Jesosi Keesitu ko a goonliba u heepi takulibima puu de a hogi basu. Nóó mi wé bi da di móon gaan takulibima a hii dee otowan dendu.

16 Wé nóó féén hedi tu Jesosi Keesitu ko abi tjallhati da mi e. Aai. A hoi pasensi da mi seei, fu mi sa dé wan maaka da hiniwan di hii sémbe musu piki waiwai. Hén da disi: Jesosi Keesitu ko a goonliba u heepi takulibima puu de a hogi basu. Nóó mi wé bi da di móon gaan takulibima a hii dee otowan dendu.

17 Wé fa i si Masa Gadu sai dé, hén wé da di kaba Tiima u mundu fu nóómó e. Fa a dé féén dé, an o dedé móónsó. Libisémbe an tjika u si én ku wé da di kaba Tiima u mundu fu nóómó e.

19 Nóó mi taki e, ta hoi di biibi di i si i ta biibi a Masa Jesosi piki di hati fii nóómó te a ta manda i a wan bambuu soni. Biga wanlo sémbe an bi du só, nóó hén wé di biibi u de kaba a sóso gbegeede, leti kuma te i singi a dan tuwe lai fii go fiaa. 20 Wan u dee sémbe dee mi taki dé, da Himéneusi, wan da Alekesani. Ma nóó mi buta de tu sémbe dé a di didibi maun kaa, be de lei taa de a an musu ta waka ta mindi soni da Gadu ta poi én né móón. Nóó da só.

Aki Paulosu ta lei fa dee biibima u Masa Jesosi musu ta tjia deseci.

21 Wé womi Timoteo, awa mi o taki da i fa fii lei dee biibima u Masa Jesosi a i ala fa u de musu libi.

Sóó. A di fosu kamian, nóó un musu ta begi Masa Gaangadu da hii sémbe. Un musu ta tjia dee fidiu. A...

féén, biga de nóó da tuutuu soni a mundu.

5 Biga wan kodo Gadu tö nóó dé a mundu e, hén da Masa Gaangadu. Nóó wan kodo Sémbe tö ta taanpu a u libisémbe ku Gadu mindi fu seeka taki da u. Hén da Jesosi Keesitu di bi tei libisémbe sinkii. 6 Hén wé bi deén seepi kuma wan paima paka puu u a hogi basu a di juu di Gadu buta. Nóó fa a du én naandé, ku én hii mundu sa si fa Gadu ké heepi u libisémbe tjika.

7 Nóó fu mi sa ta konda di soni dé hedi mbei Gadu tei mi buta tjabukama féén e. Nóó fa mi ta fan aki, na mindi mi ta mindi soni e, womi, ma tuutuu soni mi ta taki. Nóó Gadu buta mi leima tu, fu mi ta lei dee oto sémbe na u Isaélii dee soni u Gadu. Biga de da dee tuutuu soni fu musu biibi. Nóó só e.

8 Wé nóó mi taki e womi, taa a hii...

Biga di lö gade hén fiti dee mujée dee ta a di né taa de ta dimi Gadu.

11 Fa mujée ai dé, de musu ta lei a wan saapasi ta saka de seei da dee womi. 12 Mi seei ma ta da mujée pasi ude ta lei sémbe waja a lanti dudu ta pée basi a womi sémbe lá e. Nónó. Ma de musu ta hoi deesi a wan saapi fasi. 13 Faandabei, womi? Biga wé a fosu Gata mbei Adam, a baka féén u mbei Eva. 14 Hén tu, di sindi na Adam a feni ganjan e. Ma lva a ganjan, nóó hén a ko poi wéti u Masa Gaangadu. 15 Nóó hii di dé hedi Gadu taa te mujée opai, nóó pai féén o taanga.

Wé só a tu pasa tuu. Ma nóó töku di soni u poi. Biga ee wan mujée sémbe ubiibi a Gadu ta hoi go dou ta lobi sémbe ta libi a wan gbelingbelin fai ku saka fasi nóó biseegina feni soni a Gadu tu...

'It Consoles, It Distracts, It Excites'

George W. Hunt, S.J., served as editor in chief of *America* from 1984 until 1998. A literary scholar who specialized in the work of John Cheever and John Updike, he often used his weekly column to report on books he was reading or new authors he had discovered. Books about books were of special interest to him and so, in his honor, for this fall literary review, we reprint this *Of Many Things* column from Feb. 20, 1993.

"The books that you really love give the sense, when you first open them, of having been there. It is a creation, almost like a chamber in the memory. Places that one has never been to, things that one has never seen or heard, but their fitness is so sound that you've been there."

The speaker is John Cheever, and his remarks are captured in a delightful diversion for gloomy winter days, entitled *The Writer's Chapbook*, edited by George Plimpton. This chapbook is a compendium of observations from our century's greatest literary artists, culled from interviews with over 200 of them and originally published in *The Paris Review*. It is organized under specific headings, such as Style, Plot, Character, Symbols, Critics, Editors, Writer's Block, Films and so on, wherein each topic is personally addressed in refreshing and often startling ways.

For example, we learn under the heading "Work Habits" that Ernest Hemingway rose at dawn to write, James Baldwin waited until the quietest hour of the night, Truman Capote and Evelyn Waugh often wrote in bed. Robert Frost would take off his shoe and use its sole for a desk and William Kennedy composed so many re-writes of his novel *Legs* that they eventually

stacked up to match the height of his six-year-old son. Some more examples:

On Early Literary Inspirations: "I always say Hemingway, because he taught me how sentences worked. When I was fifteen or sixteen I would type out his stories to see how the sentences worked." – Joan Didion.

"You know what made me want to become a journalist? Reading Evelyn Waugh's *Scoop* when I was about eleven. Enough to make anyone want to be a journalist!" – Nadine Gordimer.

"As a writer I learned from Charlie Chaplin. Let's say the rhythm, the snap of comedy; the reserved comic presence—that beautiful distancing; the funny with sad; the surprise of surprise." – Bernard Malamud.

On Creating Characters: "Ends always give me trouble. Characters run away from you, and so won't fit on to what's coming." – E. M. Forster.

"It was not [E. M. Forster] who fathered that trite little whimsy about characters getting out of hand; it's as old as the quills, although of course one sympathizes with *his* people if they try to wriggle out of that trip to India or wherever he takes them. My characters are galley slaves." – Vladimir Nabokov.

"If I explained how [the process of turning a real-life character into a fictional one] is sometimes done, it would be a handbook for libel lawyers." – Ernest Hemingway.

On the Audience: "As I write I think about Auden, what he would say—would he find it rubbish or kind of entertaining? Auden and Orwell." – Joseph Brodsky.

"The ideal reader of my novels is a lapsed Catholic and failed musician, colorblind, authorially biased, who has read the books I have read." – Anthony

Burgess.

"I occasionally have an anti-Roth reader in mind. I think, 'How is he going to hate this!' That can just be the encouragement I need." – Philip Roth.

"When I write, I aim in my mind not toward New York but toward a vague spot a little to the east of Kansas. I think of the books on library shelves, without their jackets, years old, and a countryish teenage boy finding them, and having them speak to him." – John Updike.

On Humor: "Make the reader laugh and he will think you a trivial fellow, but bore him the right way and your reputation is assured." – Somerset Maugham.

"Humor is emotional chaos recollected in tranquillity." – James Thurber.

"If you can make a reader laugh, he is apt to get careless and go on reading. So you as the writer get a chance to get something on him." – Henry Green.

These wonderful, random selections confirm Elizabeth Hardwick's comment that "the greatest gift is the passion for reading. It is cheap, it consoles, it distracts, it excites, it gives you knowledge of the world and experience of a wide kind. It is a moral illumination."

George W. Hunt, S.J.



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A world without Toni Morrison

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From ‘Catholic Modern’ to ‘Say Nothing’

Kevin Spinale, S.J., the moderator of the Catholic Book Club, led discussions of two very different books this spring and summer. The first, *Catholic Modern*, by James Chappel, is a heady look at how the church remade itself at a time of social and political upheaval. The second, *Say Nothing*, by Patrick Radden Keefe, is a gripping account of some of the key players in the period in Northern Ireland known as the Troubles. Here are some excerpts from Father Spinale’s discussion of these books. To read more or to join the Catholic Book Club, visit americamagazine.org/cbc.

Catholic Modern, by James Chappel

Often when reading a complex text, I pay attention to words that are somewhat peculiar and rich in meaning. These words can connote metaphors that authors intend to imply along with their more explicit ideas. In the second half of *Catholic Modern: The Challenge of Totalitarianism and the Remaking of the Church* (Harvard University Press, 352p \$35), I noticed the word “enshrine” in several crucial paragraphs.

It is an interesting word because it carries religious significance, and it marks a change—something (some object or concept or phenomenon) that had not before been revered is now separated from the everyday and seen as holy. Such a metaphor, I think, marks a crucial principle underlying the more explicit ideas for which James Chappel argues. The Catholic Church—amid the upheaval of the 1920s and ’30s, the war and massacre of the 1940s, the staid conservatism and compromise of the ’50s, and the upheaval of the ’60s—changed in many important ways. But the principal enshrinement—led by lay Catholic politicians, economists and thinkers in Europe—was that of the family as the unit of political, economic and theological focus for postwar Europe.

Chappel offers a summary for his ideas in the chapter on what he calls “the long 1950’s” (1949-65). I excerpt some of his main points here:

Christian Democratic Modernism was something new: a set of Catholic strategies that drew on the long tradition of the Church but mobilized them in new ways to respond to new challenges. Catholics in the 1950’s faced two problems in particular. First, some kind of consensus had to be reached

that could bring together long-divided Catholic communities. Christian Democrats relied on the elaboration of a baseline “Christian” approach to sociopolitical affairs that could appeal to many constituencies.... Second, Catholics needed some way to understand and legitimate the most transformative element of the long 1950s: explosive economic growth and the birth of a consumer society. Catholics had long been suspicious of mass consumption and the market, a position that was no longer tenable on a continent weary of ascetic ideology and intoxicated by the new influx of consumer goods....

Catholics in the long 1950s interpreted the private sphere as a space for consuming families: nuclear families, with stay-at-home mothers, tasked less with heroic childbearing than with consumption, love, and happiness.... This understanding of the private sphere, as in other forms of Catholic modernism, authorized a novel set of claims on the public sphere. The state and the economy were now tasked, above all, with enshrining the rights and needs of the consuming family.... It was the entity in whose name the economy and state should properly be organized.

A great deal follows from Chappel’s points above, but perhaps most interesting in Chappel’s presentation of European Catholic history is the nimbleness with which the church adapted to its political-social-economic-cultural context:

It was not a given that the Catholic Church would be able to make the transition to modernity with success. Indeed, from the vantage point of 1900, it seemed to many that it would not, which is one reason why Catholic leaders were reluctant to do so for so long. It is certainly possible to imagine a world in which the Church slowly dwindled in significance, unable or unwilling to grapple with the new problems posed by the twentieth century. That is not, however, the world we live in.

A modern Catholic could add, “That is not the church we

live in either—deeply flawed but resilient through the presence of the Holy Spirit.”

***Say Nothing*, by Patrick Radden Keefe**

In his New York Times review of *Say Nothing: A True Story of Murder and Memory in Northern Ireland* (Doubleday, 464p \$28.95), Roddy Doyle reminds readers of the nappy pin—the diaper safety pin—that appears at the beginning and end of Patrick Radden Keefe’s account of the Troubles and their aftermath. The diaper pin was the only ornamentation in Jean McConville’s wardrobe, a woman “disappeared” by the I.R.A. for allegedly informing British authorities of the I.R.A.’s membership and operations. The diaper pin was indicative of McConville’s identity as a struggling, widowed mother of 10. But the diaper pin is also a haunting symbol of the reality of children caught up in a war that was not a war—a spasm of violence that marked a region desperate for economic progress and equal standing for a minority population.

The Troubles in Northern Ireland were fought mainly by children—young men and women from Northern Ireland and young British soldiers from other parts of the United Kingdom. Many young men and women lost their lives in the conflict in their late teens and early 20s. Many more spent years upon years in British prisons.

Every crusade has a cause that propels it, and perhaps the Irish Republican movement to end the injustice and cruelty of the British government and its proxies in Northern Ireland was more justified than most. But Radden Keefe’s account makes it clear that even this crusade was a children’s crusade—and as such, it should be seen as just as repugnant as any other children’s crusade.

Dolours Price, Marian Price, Brendan Hughes, Gerry Adams and many of the other figures at the center of *Say Nothing* were most active and, seemingly, most violent between the ages of 18 and 24. They should have been at university or learning a trade other than making improvised explosives and subverting British interrogation. The McConville children, orphaned when their mother was disappeared by a division of the I.R.A., also lost their childhood when their mother was taken from them.

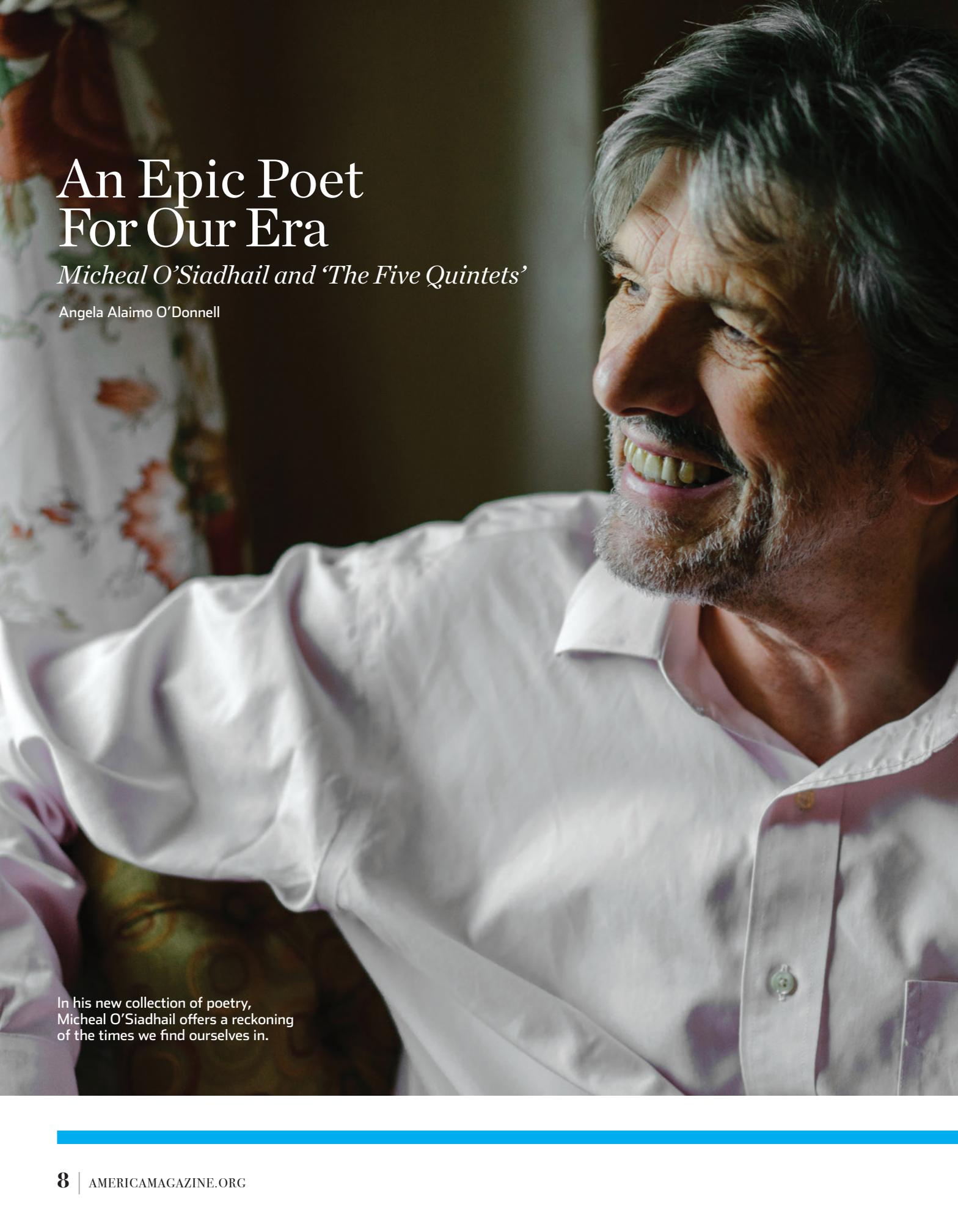
I grew up in Boston in the 1990s. There were murals throughout South Boston that depicted the I.R.A. as

heroic, as a band of underdogs courageously battling British oppression. Perhaps Radden Keefe’s account of the Troubles serves to dislodge the sentimentality and nostalgia many descendants of the Irish feel for the work of the I.R.A. *Say Nothing* is filled with stories that decouple history from sentimentality. It is also a stay against easy judgment, easy exoneration and easy acceptance of violence as a part of any crusade.

Jean McConville’s presence haunts this book, but Dolours Price’s life energizes it and makes it thrillingly complex. Price was at once a young university student, a member of the I.R.A.’s Unknowns, a bank robber, an executioner, an Old Bailey bomber, a convict, a political prisoner, a hunger striker, the wife of an actor and a disaffected former member of the larger crusade for full Irish independence. Her life is fascinating, and more than any other person crusading in the Troubles, helps underscore the moral complexity of the violence that unfolded in Northern Ireland.

It will be difficult for any reader to shake the bare cruelty of the medical staff of Brixton prison force-feeding Dolours and her sister, Marian, for 167 days. Dolours endured this barbaric feeding, likened to rape, because she sought to give herself to the cause of full Irish independence and the end of British cruelty. Yet, along with this image, it would be difficult for any reader to shake the image of Dolours Price standing over Jean McConville as she is executed. Therein lies the complexity of the crusade. On the one hand, it appears uniquely pure in what it seeks, while on the other hand, it employs means that are never justifiable in any way.

Kevin Spinale, S.J.



An Epic Poet For Our Era

Micheal O'Siadhail and 'The Five Quintets'

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell

In his new collection of poetry,
Micheal O'Siadhail offers a reckoning
of the times we find ourselves in.



Julia Hembree Smith

“May you live in interesting times.” So goes the Chinese blessing, a wish that functions equally well as a curse. Though its actual origins are uncertain (it seems to have no equivalent in Chinese), the adage was invoked by the British statesman Joseph Chamberlain in the late 19th century and President John F. Kennedy in the mid-20th, both “interesting” eras by any standard.

The Irish poet Micheal O’Siadhail (pronounced *mee-hawl o’sheel*) adds our own epoch to this list. “In the 21st century we are facing the first global era in history. Given our world with instant electronic communication, immediate media reaction, and constant and rapid travel, all our cultures, economies, politics, sciences are more interwoven than ever before. How do we orient ourselves? Where have we come from? Have we a vision for the future?”

O’Siadhail raises these provocative questions in the introduction to his new poetry collection, *The Five Quintets*, and then sets about answering them in the poems that follow. In the course of 357 pages and over 13,000 lines (by my unofficial count), O’Siadhail offers a tour-de-force reckoning of the times we find ourselves in and the story of how we have arrived here, a sweeping dramatic narrative conveyed in stately formal verse, making it a work of art that defies the tastes of our times and yet is meant for our moment.

The Poet’s Work

This, of course, is what poets do, particularly a poet like O’Siadhail: They give us the news we need in a form that challenges us to see old truths in a new way. I first met Micheal at a poetry conference some years ago. I had just delivered a presentation on the intersection

of poetry and religion when the Q. and A. session began with a voice from the back of the room (O’Siadhail’s, it turned out) posing a curious question about the story of Adam and Eve: “Couldn’t the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge have been, say, an apricot, as easily as an apple?” We had just been talking about the symbolic value of the mythic apple, considering hundreds of years of Western artistic representations of Eve handing it to Adam, when the scene was suddenly transformed for the 50 people in the room.

As we all imagined the first couple indulging in a delectable dish of apricots, the first sin not only made a great deal more sense to us but also became more understandable and, inevitably, more true. Knowledge is delicious, especially forbidden knowledge, so the fruit of its tree ought to be delicious, too. For those of us lucky enough to be present that day, we would see the fall from grace differently thereafter—a measly apple would no longer suffice.

This is the kind of reinvention O’Siadhail accomplishes throughout his considerable body of work, which includes some 16 collections of poems published from 1978 to the present: He transforms the reality that we think we know, enabling us to see its visionary, miraculous and, ultimately, sacramental nature. In an early poem, “Morning on Grafton Street,” O’Siadhail describes his native Dublin coming awake in terms that are sensual, grounding the reader firmly in the physical beauty of the here-and-now, yet it is a sensuality that bodies forth an invisible spiritual dynamic:

*Grafton Street is yawning, waking
limb by limb; jewellers’ steel
shutters clatter upwards; the sweet
doughy smells from hot-bread*



This would be a poetic venture both public and personal in nature, one that would connect the microcosm to the macrocosm. ●●

*shops steam the frosty morning,
warm our passing; disc-stores'
sudden rhythms blare an introit,
launch the busy liturgy of day.*

His is a radically incarnational way of seeing, personifying a busy market street as a waking woman setting about the business of ministering to our human needs (for food, for warmth, for music), enacting a humble, streetwise version of the ritual of the Mass. All is blessed and a blessing in such a world, and over and over again in his poems, O'Siadhail enables us to bear witness to this generous vision.

Such vision is one of the hallmarks of a Catholic imagination, conveying an abiding faith in the goodness of creation and the ways in which the natural world is suffused with the supernatural, the secular informed by the sacred. O'Siadhail credits the "sound grounding" of his Catholic education, his admiration for the work of Catholic artists (especially Dante, Sigrid Undset, Patrick Kavanagh, Oliver Messiaen and Denise Levertov) and his appreciation of the lives lived by holy people (including St. John XXIII and Jean Vanier) for shaping his imagination. These are some of the influences that have led him to his vocation as poet, whose role it is, in his words, to carry out a "ministry of meaning which is both public and personal."

The Poet's Life

O'Siadhail, like most poets, writes about many subjects, but his greatest theme is the transformative power of love. In my first conversation with him after our initial meeting, he introduced himself by asking me a question: "Do you know my story?" I confessed that I did not (though many people

in the poetry world are familiar with it, given his fame), so he obliged me by sharing it. And what a story it is.

Born in 1947 and educated at Clongowes Wood College (the famed Jesuit boarding school young James Joyce attended and made mythic in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), Trinity College Dublin and the University of Oslo (where he fell in love with Scandinavian languages and literature), O'Siadhail acquired seven languages (in addition to his native English and Irish) and thereafter worked as an academic, holding positions at Trinity College and the Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies. He continued this life, dividing his time doing research, teaching and writing poetry, until 1987, when he decided to leave the academy and devote himself full time to poetry.

"I don't remember when I didn't want to be a poet," O'Siadhail confessed in an interview; thus, taking on the title and role to the exclusion of all else was the fulfillment of a lifelong ambition. This marked a major turning point in his career, paving the way for what the poet describes as "a quantum leap" in his development as a writer. Even so, the defining event of O'Siadhail's life was his marriage in 1970 to Bríd Ní Chearbhaill (pronounced *breed nyee khyarule*), the woman who would be his wife and muse for the next 44 years until her death in 2013.

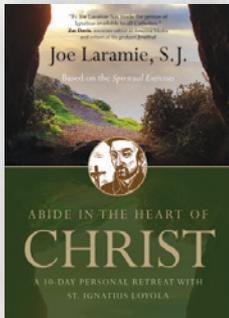
In the succeeding decades, O'Siadhail would write hundreds of love poems to Bríd, celebrating her beauty, her spirit and the powerful yet tenuous bond all lovers share:

*Sliding into the rhythm of your silence, I almost forget
how lonely I'd been until that autumn morning we met
...My desire is endless; others ended when I'd only started.
Then, there was you: so whole-hog, so wholehearted
...In the strange openness of your face, I'm powerless.
Always this love. Always this infinity between us ("Between").*

Their marriage was a happy one but also one beset by sorrow. For the last 20 years of their life together, Bríd suffered from Parkinson's disease and Micheal cared for her. His poems about her illness are frank and deeply moving. In his collection *One Crimson Thread* (2015), a series of poignant sonnets, the poet chronicles Bríd's decline, his loss of her and his widower's grief as he tries to come to terms with life without his beloved:

*A priest anoints you, binds us all in prayer.
I stroke your brow and bending from above*

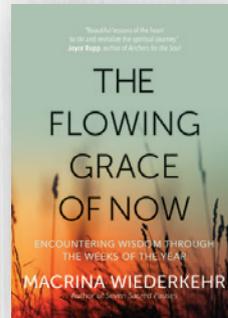
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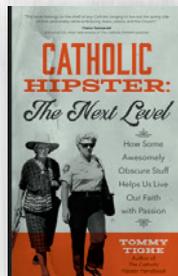
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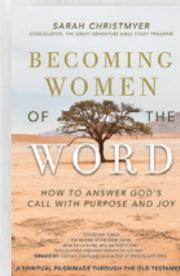
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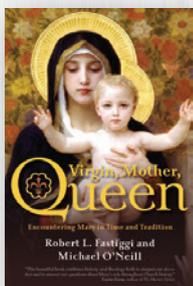


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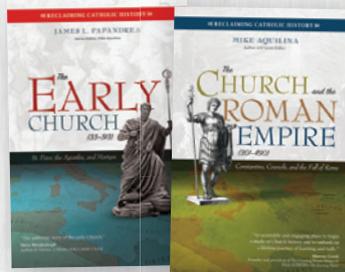


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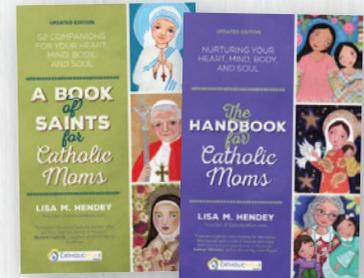
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*Am startled by your sudden flickered stare—
I snatch up your last fleeting act of love.
The crimson moment cries for you, my bride,
Yet I'm so glad that I have caught your eye;
You've seen me here and know I'm by your side,
I'm grateful for the gift of your goodbye.*

The poems faithfully narrate a dark night of the soul, taking the reader on a journey through his own suffering, guided along the way by Dante, John of the Cross and Gerard Manley Hopkins, poetic masters who traversed such terrain before him.

Micheal's story, fortunately, did not end with the loss of his wife. In 2014, what O'Siadhail regards as a miracle took place: He fell in love again, this time with Christina Weltz, a surgeon from New York City. In our conversation that day of our first meeting, he could barely contain his wonder that he should be so blessed to know great love twice in a lifetime—a circumstance for which he credits “the God of surprises.” And so began a new chapter in O'Siadhail's life, wherein he married again and moved from Dublin to Manhattan. Here, in a city largely built by Irish immigrants, he again took up his work as a poet.

The Five Quintets

During the time he was caring for Bríd and writing poems about love, loss and daily life, O'Siadhail had been steadily working on a longer, more ambitious project—a project to which he would be able to devote himself more fully after his second marriage and resettlement in New York. This would be a poetic venture both public and personal in nature, one that would connect the microcosm to the macrocosm, engaging the large forces of history and culture and their impact on individual souls.

O'Siadhail was no stranger to this kind of writing. In 2002 he published *The Gossamer Wall: Poems in Witness to the Holocaust*, a powerful book that took years of research as well as painful imaginative accompaniment to tell the stories of individual people who had been silenced by death in the concentration camps. The work O'Siadhail undertook to prepare him for the challenge of taking on a subject as looming and brutal as the Holocaust also prepared him for the challenge of trying to tell the tale of human history.

The work paid off. *The Five Quintets* accomplishes the seemingly impossible: an epic account of the ways in which the human endeavors of art, economics, politics, science,

philosophy and theology originated and evolved over the centuries to bring us to our present circumstances. These disciplines are the focus of the five “quintets,” or sections, that make up the book-length poem: Making, Dealing, Steering, Finding and Meaning.

Deeply learned, meticulously crafted and obsessively engaging, O'Siadhail's poem teaches us many things, chief among them that not only do we live in interesting times but that *all* times have been interesting, that human history is the struggle of flawed beings in search of truth and that the ultimate solution to our unhappiness is love. This love takes many forms and is enacted (often imperfectly) by a host of historical figures the poet resurrects from history and brings to life upon the page, from Aristotle to Hannah Arendt, Galileo to Einstein, Martin Luther to John XXIII, Louis XIV to Mary McAleese, and in the realm of art (which lies closest to the poet's heart), from Dante to fellow Irish writer Brian Friel.

In the end, O'Siadhail's book itself is an offering of love. After guiding us through the throes of history, he concludes the poem, as does his master Dante in his *Commedia*, with a vision of paradise—a heavenly banquet wherein the saints teach him their wisdom, where he is greeted by his beloveds (both the living and the dead) and where nature's creatures and artists spend their days enacting “a daily choreography of praise.”

While it is true that O'Siadhail's poem concludes on a note of celebration, the joy of paradise is hard won. In keeping with the Christian comedy, the overarching story that gives shape to the book tells us there can be no resurrection without crucifixion. Thus, we are given a tour of dark places, descending into the hell of history before we are led to heaven. Each quintet (so named because each consists of five cantos) serves as a single act in the drama of human salvation and presents a parade of personalities, each painstakingly drawn and given his or her own voice. The poet serves a choral function, stepping back to narrate, contextualize and also to interrogate and pass judgment on his characters.

It is often the case, as in his response to one of Karl Marx's monologues, that we hear not only the poet's judgment but the judgment of history:

*Mesmeric Marx, ideologue
Who bridles when we speak and brooks
No antidote or answers back,*

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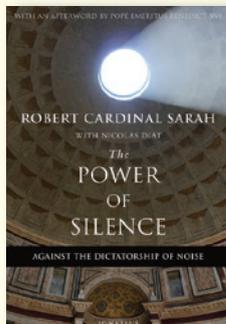
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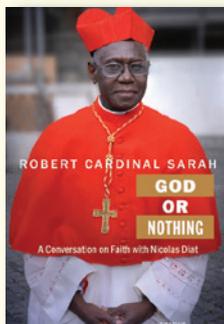
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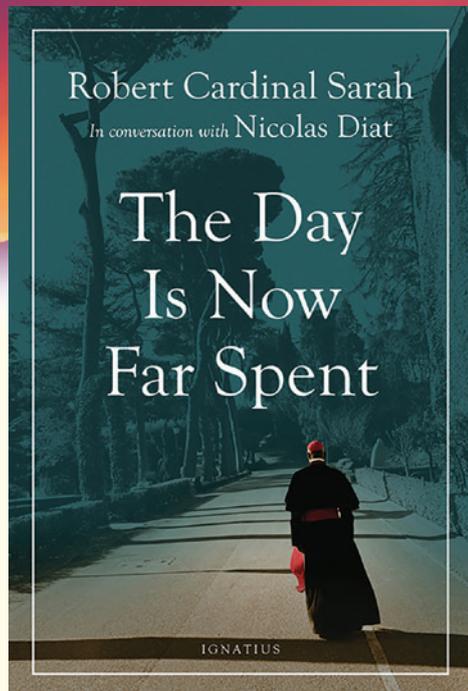
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‘The Five Quintets’ channels the voices and visions of a variety of modern poets, including Seamus Heaney and Czeslaw Milosz. ●●

*You can't conceive a compromise
Where conflicts could be reconciled—
For you the tactic is attack.
No time to keep, no time to heal,
No baron bargaining like Mill;
All government their instrument.
A time to tear, a time to kill.*

Though born of idealism, Marx's ideas and influence will ultimately lead to suffering on a grand scale, leaving the poet to sum up his legacy thus:

*Your know-all coldness casts its spell
And in your wake such wanton pain.
How dreams of heaven end in hell.*

O'Siadhail's characteristically shrewd assessment and economy of language is evident here and in all of his portraits. We come to know the virtues and foibles of the history-makers, to see them as human beings and to realize the degree to which the grand events that have unfolded across the centuries have been shaped by the personalities, preferences and peccadillos of ordinary people with extraordinary power.

Debts and Inspirations

Given its topicality and mission—to address the current state of the world—O'Siadhail's poem is recognizably contemporary, yet it is also a poem born of a long and rich literary tradition. *The Five Quintets* owes much to Dante and T. S. Eliot in its form and inception as the poet builds upon structural elements and conventions borrowed from the *Commedia* and *Four Quartets*. In addition, O'Siadhail's grand, public, prophetic voice channels Milton, Walt Whitman and the Psalms. The poet is a truth-teller, a universal voice whose vision is omniscient and unlimited in scope. *The Five Quintets* also owes much to 18th-century poetic tradition, wherein the poet serves as the moral conscience of a culture and scourge of corruption. Reading

through these pages, one hears echoes of Samuel Johnson's satire "The Vanity of Human Wishes" and Alexander Pope's verse essays.

Finally, *The Five Quintets* channels the voices and visions of a variety of modern poets, including Seamus Heaney (who was a friend of O'Siadhail's, as well as a fellow Irishman) and Czeslaw Milosz. In Heaney's version of Dante's "Inferno," *Station Island*, the poet calls forth the ghosts of Ireland's past. O'Siadhail broadens the scope of his poem, giving voice to revenants of the whole of Western civilization as well as a few from the Far East. While his poem constitutes a history—part narrative and part drama—it is primarily a lyric utterance, taking its cue from poets like Milosz whose chosen vocation is to bear witness to the sufferings (and, occasionally, the joys) of humanity. O'Siadhail combines elements from the work of all of these writers (and more) to create a poem that shares a kinship with the literary past but is entirely new.

O'Siadhail is conscious of his debt to his poetic masters and acknowledges this throughout the volume, as he does in this moving poem in the opening quintet, spoken to the poet by Dante himself:

*But seven centuries beyond my theme,
You've chosen to pursue the selfsame path
And summing up an era work the seam
Between the modern and its aftermath.
You've climbed from hell to heaven's vertigo.
I'll be your guide!*

In this witty twist of literary history, Dante, who was led through hell and purgatory by Virgil, will now lead Micheal. Thus Dante becomes O'Siadhail's Virgil, even as O'Siadhail serves as the reader's Dante, as we are all pulled into pilgrimage together. In addition to Dante, O'Siadhail engages in conversation with dozens of other writers and artists in the first quintet who have served as his guiding lights, all of them poignant exchanges that demonstrate the poet's affection for these makers, affinity for their work and

appreciation of their legacy.

There is something wonderfully bold and quixotic about *The Five Quintets*. (It is no accident that the first personage we encounter in the poem is Don Quixote's inventor, Cervantes.) In an era in which people communicate by means of Twitter and texting, in a world in which our attention is fractured and fragmented in myriad ways, O'Siadhail offers us an epic poem. That alone seems an act of literary madness. Add to this the fact that it is carefully crafted (O'Siadhail regularly invents new poetic forms as well as using tried-and-true ones), demanding the reader's attention to form as well as content. Who is the audience for such a poet and such a book?

The answer, of course, is us—as is the case with all of O'Siadhail's books, whether they are about love or loss, Ireland or America, the past or the ongoing present. *The Five Quintets* is a narrative we need, a jazz concert (the poem's muse is "Madam Jazz") performed by hundreds of instruments, a single symphony sung by many voices. T. S. Eliot once wrote of his own epic poem, "The Wasteland," "These fragments I have shored against my ruins." So, too, with Michael O'Siadhail. Out of the shards of the past and the soundbites of the present, the poet has assembled a saving story of himself and of our interesting times—times, as it turns out, we are blessed to live in.

Angela Alaimo O'Donnell is a writer, poet and professor at Fordham University and is the associate director of the Curran Center for American Catholic Studies.

'The Translation of the House of Loreto'

—Saturnino Gatti, 1463-1518

By Deborah Warren

In 1291 the Virgin's house at Nazareth was miraculously transported by angels to escape the victorious Muslim armies.... It came to rest at Loreto, on the Adriatic coast of Italy.

Look at the picture. Totally insane.
A house ups from the earth and comes to rest
intact as a virgin—a continent away.

You bet it takes a miracle to explain,
and of all the ones I've heard this is the best:
a pair of angels shows up to convey

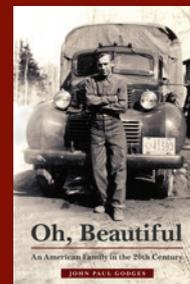
a building, on their fingertips. Okay,
shifting a house a couple of countries west,
I know one thing you *can* be sure about,

a job like this, you're looking at a crane.
No wonder they found it cheapest and easiest
to hire a couple of angels to carry it out.

Deborah Warren's work has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *The Paris Review*, *Poetry* and *The Yale Review*. Her books include *Ausonius (translation)*, *The Moselle and Other Poems* and *Dream With Flowers and Bowl of Fruit*. She is a past recipient of the Robert Penn Warren Prize and the Robert Frost Award.

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John Clark



AGAINST SENTIMENTALITY

Real love and loving what is real

By Michial Farmer



“The Good Samaritan” by Jan Scorel, 1537.
The goal of art, the author writes, should be
“revelation rather than truth.”

The French Catholic philosopher and playwright Gabriel Marcel may be the 20th century’s great diagnostician of (and prophet against) one of modernity’s besetting sins: abstraction. Trained as an idealist, he began to feel hemmed in by the great Hegelian systems of the turn of the century. Even while attending the lycée, he tells us, he grew anxious:

What, indeed, could have been more abstract than our relationship with our masters or even with one another, not to speak of the notions which were inculcated in our minds? There was hardly anything in all this that could touch our sensibility or fulfil our most pressing inward needs.

Eventually Marcel developed, in his own words, “a growing horror of the spirit of abstraction,” a horror that had a tripartite solution in his life. First, he began to write plays, the most concrete form of literature, which allowed him to work out his ideas in the shape of more or less true-to-life human characters. Second, in 1929, when he was 39 years old, he converted to Catholicism, the most physical, concrete form of Christianity. And finally, he dedicated his philosophical writings, in texts like *The Mystery of Being* and *Man Against Mass Society*, to combating the scourge of abstraction in the world around him.

For Marcel, abstraction (in its philosophical, scientific and political forms alike) seeks objectivity, but in doing so, it demands “a preliminary, and complete, elimination of the subject as such”—and with the subject, everything vital and essential in the human being. In short, the objectivity demanded by abstraction eliminates me and you. It is fundamentally inhuman, even antihuman. Against this abstracted objectivity, Marcel offers intersubjectivity, by which we transcend our own subjectivities not by aiming at objectivity but by merging with other subjectivities, by connecting our own perceptions with those of other people.

Such a merger becomes possible by means of

what Marcel calls “presence,” the mysterious aura that every individual carries with him or her. In our abstracted culture, most of our interactions with one another are not marked by presence. They are dissatisfying and even alienating. When encountering a stranger with something other than presence, Marcel says, he “interposes himself between me and my own reality, he makes me in some sense also a stranger to myself.” We further abstract each other by hiding our full presences from each other. But when I encounter a person with my presence, something life-giving and revelatory happens: “It can refresh my inner being; it reveals me to myself, it makes me more fully myself than I should be if I were not exposed to its impact.”

Another way to say this is that we *love each other*—and it ought to go without saying that I can love only a presence (a grounded and particular *someone*), and I can love them only with my own and whole presence. To love means refusing objectivity in the Cartesian, Marxist or scientific senses. It means insisting on the subjective reality of the beloved and thus on my own subjective reality. And because of this, we will have a remarkably difficult time theorizing it because all theory (even this one) abstracts to one degree or another.

Abstraction takes many forms: the “absolute knowledge” of the Hegelians; the inexorable march of historical progress offered, in various forms, by Condorcet and Marx; the epiphenomenal false consciousness of contemporary materialist neuroscience. But one of abstraction’s subtlest and therefore most pernicious guises is sentimentality.

Most of us probably know the term from aesthetics, in which it signifies false or superficial emotion. Sentimentality is *false* specifically because it is removed from the real current of human vitality; it is false, in Marcelian terms, because it has no presence. From aesthetics, the sentimental spreads throughout human life. It takes over ethics and politics, where, ironically, it often appears under the guise of a rationalist utilitarianism. One can easily trace the roles of sentimentality and abstraction in three historically connected areas: aesthetics, ethics and politics.

UNTIL WE TREAT THE
WORK OF ART AS A MORE
OR LESS AUTONOMOUS
PRESENCE, UNTIL WE
RECOGNIZE THAT IT HAS
EQUAL AGENCY IN OUR
ENCOUNTERS WITH IT, WE
WILL MISUNDERSTAND IT. 

Sentimentality in Aesthetics

Real art offers us something genuine; it engages with the world around the artist, filters it through their consciousness and re-presents it to the viewer, listener or reader. The goal of art, in this sense, is *truth*—but in our data-driven culture that word may be too beholden to *facts* to be terribly useful for our purposes here. Artistic truths are not objectively verifiable; and for the most part, they do not make statements in direct ways. (For this reason, political art often fails to rise above its immediate origins, though it can be quite eye-opening in the here and now.)

The truth of art is the truth that Martin Heidegger designates as *aletheia*—“uncovering,” let’s say, or “disclosure.” An artistic truth pulls back the fabric of the world for us and shows us things we could not see without it. For that reason, I think it more helpful to think about the goal of art as *revelation* rather than truth.

I have a painting in my office. Wispy clouds dominate its top half, their undersides red. A bright orange stripe runs horizontally through the middle; a series of road maps have been pasted to the bottom third or so of the canvas and painted brown. This painting is quite obviously not “realistic”; nor can it be said to “mean” anything. But it hands the world back to me. When I look at it, it transports me to Atlanta, where I grew up, and I feel the oppressive heat of the July interstate. And even more remarkably, that experience—sitting in a traffic jam on I-85 while the pavement warps in the heat—is deeply unpleasant, but this painting

makes it beautiful. When we talk about aesthetic beauty, in fact, we are talking about this sort of transformation, which is ultimately revelation: the truth of that interstate was always there. I just didn’t realize it until I looked at this painting.

In this sense, the otherwise abstract painting is very concrete indeed: It has a real, concrete, individual presence. I *encounter* it just as I encounter a person; and like a person, it calls on me to love it. I don’t love “a painting” or “paintings” or “art”—I love *this* painting. And I love it more or less the way I love the people whom I love: for the irreducibility of their existence. I love them for the way my life becomes shaped around theirs, for the way the world looks different to me because they inhabit it. This painting—this book, or this symphony or this film—has ceased to be an object for me, an inert thing to be used any way I would like. It is a presence, not a breathing presence to be sure, but living in its way, and as such, I cannot control it; I can only encounter it, engage with it.

My lack of control over the genuine work of art matters here. Lionel Trilling tells us that great literature speaks to us but at its own leisure: “Some of these books at first rejected me; I bored them. But as I grew older and they knew me better, they came to have more sympathy with me and to understand my hidden meanings.” Until we treat the work of art as a more or less autonomous presence, until we recognize that it has equal agency in our encounters with it, we will misunderstand it.

Sentimentality looks like art, but it does not actually do any of these things. The sentimental work of pseudo-art fails to become a presence and remains an inert object, a mere *thing*. I cannot encounter it because encounter requires presence. And yet it can move me and can in that way feel quite powerful. Emotion, I should say, is frequently part of the revelation of real art; we are quite rightly moved when our world is opened up for us. But emotion can exist without revelation—an emotion that I can only call *false*—and this is sentimentality.

When teenagers fall in love with their young classmates, they engage in a kind of sentimentality, in that their “love” for each other has little to do with concrete, existing individuals. They do not love the ostensible object of their affections, though they are typically too young and inexperienced to know the difference. Instead, they feel disgust at the empty parts of themselves, which they have convinced themselves only *this person* can fill. In reality, no one can

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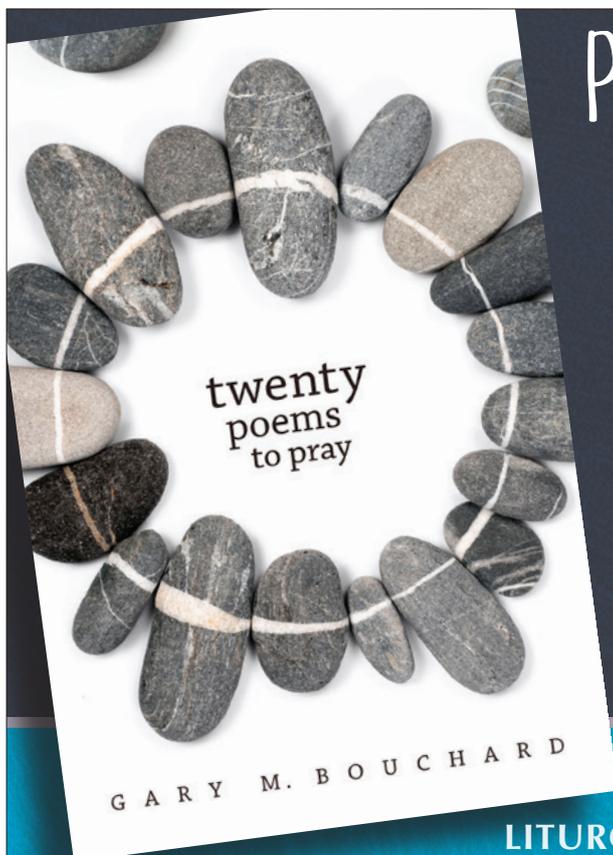
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fill them, and one attempt is virtually identical to any other, which is why a certain sort of teenager rockets through years of obsessive crushes, replacing each idealized image, once it's used up, with another, magically identical to it.

When my relationships with other people are marked by sentimentality instead of love, the difference may not be immediately apparent. I may speak very highly of them—but below the surface, I merely admire them the way one admires a well-constructed bridge. Admiration costs nothing; it is inherently objectifying, like Kantian aesthetics, which treat beauty as something utterly without stakes for the observer. The emotions stirred by my relationships with people whom I admire are often shallow and impermanent because the *presence* of these people is hidden from me (perhaps because I ultimately want it to be hidden). We admire *qualities*, but we can only love *people*, who are more than the sum of their qualities and certainly more than the sum of their admirable qualities.

I can abstract qualities from these holistic presences and create images no less dehumanizing than the teenage boy's idealized "perfect woman." A certain shallow sort of hatred works the same way. The vast majority of time when I think I hate someone, I have merely abstracted his distasteful qualities from their holistic presence. Distaste is as sentimental as admiration. True hatred, like true love, takes place only between presences, but most of us, thank God, will never truly hate someone in this way. It would do permanent damage to our souls in such a way that we could rightly call it *demonic*.

Sentimentality in Ethics

In his telling of the parable of the good Samaritan, Jesus, having been asked how to "inherit eternal life," asks his interlocutor what the law says, affirming the answer: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself" (Lk 10:27). Note the



The French Catholic philosopher and playwright Gabriel Marcel, right, wrote extensively about the dangers of abstraction.

concreteness of these rules: Both involve our relationships with individuals, not with abstractions, and both involve a personal existential engagement with those individuals. We are not to admire God and our neighbor; we are to love them with everything in us, with our full presence. The lawyer who is questioning Jesus obviously understands this because his next question—"And who is my neighbor?" (Lk 10:29)—rather transparently attempts to add restrictions to the concept of *neighbor*.

It is the Samaritan—a member of a hated half-caste ethnic group—who takes the effort to help the man who has been beaten and robbed; the respectable priest and Levite ignore him. Christ's question is cutting: "Which of these three do you think proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell into the robber's hands?" (Lk 10:36). The answer, of course, is the outsider. Jesus puts the ethical impetus not on the Jewish officials, who should really know better, but on the Samaritans, whose worship is only semi-connected to Judaism. Not only does he expand the circle of responsibility—he actually relocates its center.

But he does not at all abstract it. The Samaritan's ethical responsibility is not to "the poor" or "the Jews" or even "the suffering"—it is to *this particular man*, whom he just

happened to come across. Our obligation to our neighbor is not our obligation to the whole world. But our neighbors are every person whom we come across. And Christ himself operated this way.

It is easy for us to sentimentalize human suffering when we remain at a distance from it. Utilitarian solutions often seem designed to keep us at a distance from human suffering. The Good Samaritan does not have that option. He bandages the stranger's wounds himself—he must have gotten the man's blood on himself—and personally takes him to an inn, paying for his further care and promising to return. We get no hint that the stranger even thanks him.

Dorothy Day points out that caring for the poor is often unsatisfying because, far from the suffering masses who inhabit our sentimental imaginations, the flesh-and-blood poor are often dirty and ungrateful. Our charity will go unnoticed sometimes, and we will not be able to pretend that the people we help would worship us for our charity, as we might be able to pretend with the distanced utilitarian solutions that threaten to abstract suffering people into “the suffering.” It is no accident that Catholic social teaching relies on *solidarity*, which involves (apart from and in addition to larger-scale political action on the national and international scale) *com-passion*, *suffering with* the suffering stranger, feeling what he feels, getting his blood on our clothes. So, too, with the other great Catholic social principle, *subsidiarity*, which demands that problems be solved as close to the ground level—that is, as unabstractedly—as possible.

A clear manifestation of sentimentality in ethics was on full display in the Alfie Evans case in April 2018, in which the United Kingdom courts decided, backed by medical opinion, that the parents of a brain-damaged toddler would not be allowed to seek further medical care for him, even after Pope Francis procured Italian citizenship for the child and even though it would cost the United Kingdom and its taxpayers nothing.

The language used by the defenders of this position predictably centered on Alfie's “quality of life.” This language is sentimental because it pretends to be based on love but works by abstracting away from the actual human being—given dignity by his complete irreplaceability—to whom it ostensibly refers. The phrase “quality of life” is, in fact, almost always sentimental, in that it is meant to conceal the reality that what we are talking about is killing a child. The phrase is, not incidentally,

usually ableist as well, since it makes decisions about whether or not the life of a person with disabilities is worth living, often from a great height and without the input of the (again, irreplaceable) person.

In this sense, the sentimental arguments for killing Alfie are parallel to the medicalized, statistical language that allowed Iceland to announce that it had eradicated Down syndrome—when in truth it had eradicated all the Icelandic people with Down syndrome. Sentimental ethics, specifically because they are concealing rather than revelatory, can justify all manner of inhumanity, as Flannery O'Connor knew well. “When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness,” she wrote, “its logical conclusion is terror. It ends in forced-labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber.”

There exists, it must be said, a parallel sentimentality more common among pro-life people, in which people with disabilities are trotted out not to be gassed in the name of tenderness but to inspire the able-bodied. This sort of “inspiration porn” is certainly less immediately destructive, but it is just as abstracted. In both cases, we move away from the dignity of a person's irreplaceable, revelatory presence and turn them into the object of our pity. My wife, who has cerebral palsy and thus a visibly altered gait, was once stopped by a stranger in the entryway of a grocery store and told that she was “brave”—the implication being that Victoria's disability makes everyday activities the equivalent of a hero's journey undertaken for the emotional benefit of everyone around her. She asked the woman what exactly made her brave, and when the woman couldn't provide an answer, Victoria left her cart in the entryway and walked out of the store. Only later did she realize that the impulse that made this woman, apropos of nothing, call her brave was the same impulse that leads doctors to suggest aborting her and other people with cerebral palsy.

Sentimentality in Politics

Whenever politics appeal to something abstract—when they try to make us love something abstract—they lead us toward some sort of dangerous dehumanization. Conservative politics, for example, are at their worst when they are based on a kind of sentimental antiquarianism that is worse than nostalgia, since nostalgia at least exists, in however corrupted a form, in individual memory. When we are told about the “good old days,” we are being asked to love a specter, a false and geometrical Disneyland history.



WHETHER WE ARE
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WHOM IT EXCLUDES. 🍯🍯

(Ironically, it is fairly easy to love Disneyland itself, which is a real place, as long as you don't confuse it with the world outside its gates.) When we love that antiquarian vision, we love an ideal, one that excludes vulnerable groups and then papers over that exclusion. These groups are composed of real people with dignity and presence; those political good old days are not.

The liberal sentimental vision, on the other hand, is about the future rather than the past, an idealized future in which all marginalized groups have been set free from the powers that oppress them and are allowed to exercise their autonomy however they would like (with no apparent effect on the social fabric). To love such a future is to ignore the degree to which it would require the unchosen suffering of the real people with dignity and presence who have alternative visions. Marx's worker's paradise, Silicon Valley's globalized corporate Shangri-La, the American dream of exporting democracy and capitalism to every country in the world—all of these are abstract, sentimental and ultimately dangerous visions.

The most unfortunate thing about these tendencies is that concreteness and presence represent the best in both conservative and progressive politics. True conservatism does not ask us to love antiquarian, abstract “good

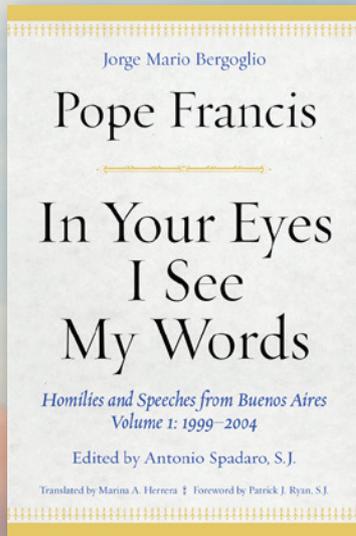
old days.” It tells us to look around and love what we see: our families and friends; the trees, lakes and animals that share our world; our churches, synagogues and mosques; our communities, shops, restaurants and bars; our culture as it is manifested in particular books, songs, statues, films. Marcel tells us that loving someone means wishing for his or her immortality. Likewise, loving these individuals and institutions in our lives means wishing for their preservation, even though we understand that human culture will never be fully immortal. To love the world around us—natural and human alike—is not only to fight to keep it alive but to think it worth sharing (though not worth forcing on people).

The best progressivism, meanwhile, begins not with a utopian vision or a conception of its opponents as inhuman bigots but with actual, existent people—people who have been wounded by the state of things as they are. Progressives also love their community, and that love makes them want to make it a more just place, more welcoming to strangers. True progressives recognize that the best sort of progress takes place less through executive and federal fiat than through human encounter. We should not downplay the role of national law in, for example, the civil rights movement, but we should also recognize that a big turning point took place when the nightly news began showing video of peaceful protesters being attacked by fire hoses and police dogs. To see those protesters as human beings is to begin to love them, and to love someone is to wish their immortality and for justice to be done.

Whether we are “conservatives” or “progressives”—and, despite the efforts of our two-party system to divide us, most of us are some combination of the two—we must begin our political theorizing and action with a love for our community as it currently exists and a love for the people whom it excludes. Otherwise, we risk sentimentalizing where we have come from and where we are headed.

Michial Farmer is the author of *Imagination and Idealism in the Works of John Updike*. His essays have appeared in *The Cresset*, *Front Porch Republic* and *Touchstone*.

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A TASK WORTHY OF GOD

Remembering Jean Giono's "The Man Who Planted Trees"

By Christopher Pramuk



The former home and garden of the French writer Jean Giono in the Alpes de Haute Provence region of France. His short story, "The Man Who Planted Trees," was published in 1953.

Like the parables of Jesus and Martin Luther King Jr.'s vision of the Beloved Community, it is the poetic word, the storyteller's vision that can break open the human imagination to possibilities not yet realized. The French writer Jean Giono's timeless short story "The Man Who Planted Trees," published in 1953, offers a vision of hopefulness that our suffering planet badly needs today, a prescient parable for coming to grips with climate change and the call to "environmental conversion," as Pope Francis urges in "Laudato Si': On Care for Our Common Home." Can we believe, as Giono's tale gently affirms, that human beings can be "as effectual as God in tasks other than destruction"?

During his lifetime, Giono (1895-1970) was celebrated as one of the greatest writers in 20th-century French literature. The author of over 30 novels and numerous essays, stories, plays and film scripts, Giono was awarded, at age 58, the Prince Pierre Literary Prize for his collective work, much of which is still being discussed and published today.

Giono published "The Man Who Planted Trees," which he later described as one of his proudest achievements, in the same year he won the Prince Pierre prize. At just under 4,000 words, it tells the story of a shepherd's solitary efforts to reforest a desolate region in the foothills of the Alps during the first half of the 20th century. Like Giono's own life, the shepherd's story spans two world wars and the bloodiest half-century in human history.

More than 60 years after its publication, "The Man Who Planted Trees" can remind us of the hidden power of seed-planting, of patient cultivation when all around us seems barren. Like the Gospels, it reminds me that the humblest tasks, performed with love, increase a hundredfold, even when few others notice. It stirs in me an impossible hope, which is the task of imagination itself, the sacred calling of the poet and storyteller.

Who Would Dream of Such Generosity?

The tale begins in 1913, when the narrator, a young man, sets out on a walking tour through "that ancient region where the Alps thrust down into Provence." After some days, the man finds himself at the edge of an abandoned village, in a broad valley of "unparalleled desolation." Some days later, finding no water and "nothing to give me hope of finding any," the young man notices a small figure standing against the horizon. As he draws nearer, he encounters a solitary shepherd with his 30 sheep "lying about him on the baking earth." The shepherd offers him water and rest, welcoming him to his cottage "in a fold of the plain."

The next morning, his curiosity piqued, the sojourner accompanies the shepherd into the valley with his flock. As they reach the top of a ridge, the shepherd takes an iron rod, which he had been using as a walking stick, and begins to thrust it into the earth, "making a hole in which he planted an acorn." The young man, taken aback, realizes that the shepherd "was planting oak trees."

I asked him if the land belonged to him. He answered no. Did he know whose it was? He did not. He supposed it was community property, or perhaps belonged to people who cared nothing about it. He was not interested in finding out whose it was. He planted his hundred acorns with the greatest care.

The shepherd, having lost his only son and then his wife, has been planting trees for three years in the wilderness. "He had planted one hundred thousand. Of the hundred thousand, twenty thousand had sprouted. Of the twenty thousand he still expected to lose about half, to rodents or to the unpredictable designs of Providence. There remained ten thousand oak trees to grow where nothing had grown before." The man's name was Elzeard Bouffier.





GIONO GIVES US A VISION OF WHAT IS YET POSSIBLE WHEN WE SET OUR MINDS AND WILLS TO THE RESTORATION OF THE EARTH.

The next day, the young traveler departs and for five years is engaged as a foot soldier in World War I. After the war ends, shell-shocked and longing “to breathe fresh air again,” the young man returns to the barren countryside. Nothing seems to have changed. Yet just as his memory of the oak-planting shepherd returns, he glimpses in the distance “a sort of greyish mist that covered the mountaintops like a carpet.”

Having imagined that Elzeard Bouffier must be dead—“especially since, at twenty, one regards men of fifty as old men with nothing left to do but die”—the man is astonished to find the shepherd alive and in excellent health. He has become a beekeeper; and the oaks of 1910, as well as “beech trees as high as my shoulder,” fill the valley as far as the eye could see. The narrator is struck with wonder, not only at the rebirth of the landscape but also, and no less, the disposition of its cultivator.

Creation seemed to come about in a sort of chain reaction. [Bouffier] did not worry about it; he was determinedly pursuing his task in all its simplicity; but as we went back toward the village I saw water flowing in brooks that had been dry since the memory of man. This was the most impressive result of chain reaction that I had seen....

The wind, too, scattered seeds. As the water reappeared, so there reappeared willows, rushes, meadows, gardens, flowers, and a certain purpose in being alive. But the transformation became part of the pattern without causing any astonishment.

Perhaps above all, the young man is overcome by the realization that Bouffier had worked “in total solitude: so total that, toward the end of his life, he lost the habit of speech.” Awestruck by this “land of Canaan” bursting forth in a region once devoid of hope, he concludes: “When you remembered that all this had sprung from the hands and soul of this one man, without technical resources, you understood that men could be as effectual as God in other realms than that of destruction.”

As settlers return to the region, enchanted by the sudden growth of this “natural forest,” nobody knows whose patient labors had made it possible. “He was undetectable.” Who in the villages or in the government administration “could have dreamed of such perseverance in a magnificent generosity?”

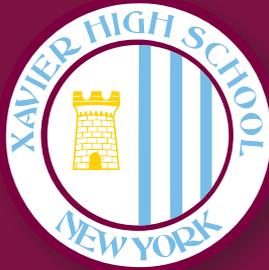
An Obligation to Profess Hopefulness

For all the recognition he received during his lifetime, Giono believed he made his most valuable contribution when he wrote “The Man Who Planted Trees.” Refusing to take royalties for the story, he granted free use to anyone who wanted to distribute or publish it. In an interview with the American writer Norma Goodrich shortly before his death (published as an afterword to a 2007 edition of the story), he said, “It does not bring me in one single penny, and that is why it has accomplished what it was written for.”

Giono explained to Goodrich that his purpose in telling the story “was to make people love the tree, or more precisely, to make them *love planting trees*.” Within a few years the tale was translated into at least a dozen languages, and it has long since inspired reforestation efforts worldwide. Giono’s goal as an artist has been realized in ways he never could have imagined.

In his interview with Goodrich, Giono also insisted that writers have “an obligation to profess hopefulness, in return for their right to live and write.” And he believed, as Goodrich emphasizes, that hopefulness springs above all from a poetic sensibility.

People have suffered so long inside walls that they have forgotten to be free, Giono thought. Human beings were not created to live forever in subways and tenements, for their feet long to stride through tall grass, or slide through running water. The poet’s mission is to remind us of beauty, of trees swaying in the breeze, or pines groaning under



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snow in the mountain passes, of wild white horses galloping across the surf. You know, Giono said to me, there are also times in life when a person has to rush off in pursuit of hopefulness.

It is interesting, as Goodrich notes, that Giono “termed his confidence in the future *espérance*, or hopefulness; not *espoir*, which is the masculine word for hope, but *espérance*, the feminine word designating the permanent state or condition of living one’s life in hopeful tranquility.” The tree-planter’s attunement to the earth beneath his feet is not episodic, abstract or utilitarian. It is sustained, sensate and “maternal,” responsive to the particular qualities and potentialities of the land that lay dormant within the soil, “just beneath the surface.”

Though I am not a farmer, as a father and as a teacher I recognize the dynamic of attunement at play in the story. Whether with children or with the soil beneath our feet, to cultivate is to love. It is to linger with the other, over deep time and often in silence, so that I might listen and discern with all my senses the needs and wondrous potentialities of the one with whom I am in relationship. Is this not our deepest need and greatest deficit with respect to the earth?

Between What Is and What Is Yet Possible

In 1987, the Canadian animator Frédéric Back gave “The Man Who Planted Trees” new life when he adapted the story into a short film that earned him an Academy Award. The film is truly breathtaking, employing an impressionistic, Monet-like animation the likes of which I have rarely seen. When I share the book and film with my students, they are mesmerized. And eventually, inevitably, they ask: Was Elzeard Bouffier a real person?

For many years, Giono enjoyed allowing people to believe it was so. Later he confirmed that the account is fictional, a kind of illuminated parable or allegory. But one may also ask, as I ask my students: Does the story’s fictional character make it *any less true*? While Americans may hear in Giono’s protagonist echoes of the real-life historical figure of Johnny Appleseed, the story, as Goodrich suggests, “calmly veers away from past and present time toward the future of newer and better generations.”

In other words, “The Man Who Planted Trees” offers us not only a vision of what is—the enduring beauty of meadows and mountain streams and undulating forests stretching out as far as the eye can see. It also gives us a vision of

what is yet possible when we set our minds and wills to the restoration of the Earth, our common home, a task yet “worthy of God.” There is “a peace in being with” Elzeard Bouffier, the storyteller suggests, because the shepherd embodies a holistic and healing way of being in relationship with the land in the stream of time, a humble attunement to the restoration of “all things.” Thus he effects, sacramentally, as it were, what he patiently and methodically signifies: the miraculous possibilities of presence.

“The glory of God is the human being fully alive,” proclaimed St. Irenaeus. Dare we believe that human beings can be as effectual as God in tasks other than destruction? The birthing of hope in the face of the global environmental crisis depends on our lived response to that question.

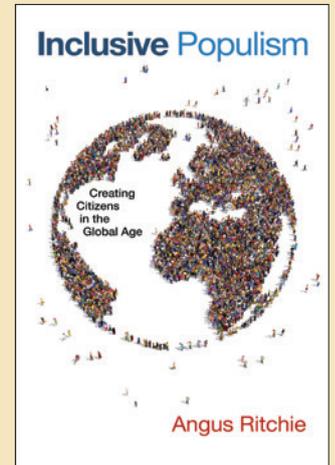
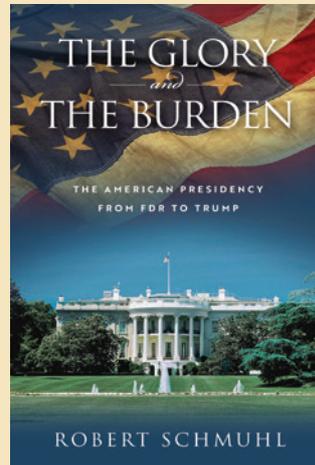
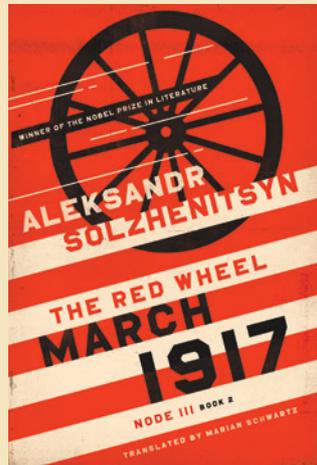
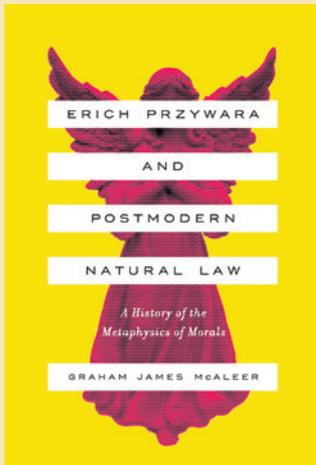
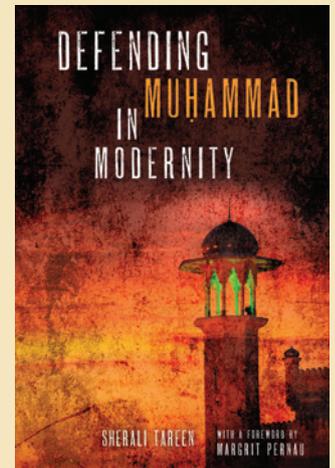
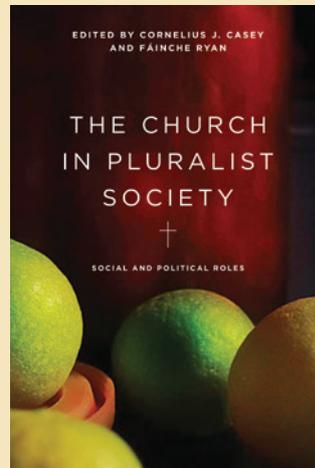
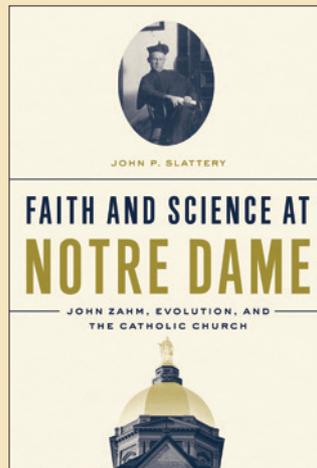
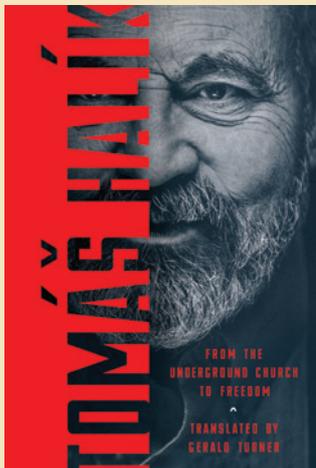
As Pope Francis writes in “Laudato Si’,” “The history of our friendship with God is always linked to particular places which take on an intensely personal meaning (No. 84)”. To embrace the earth “as a sacrament of communion, as a way of sharing with God and our neighbours on a global scale” (No. 9), is to begin to renew the face of the planet, one afflicted square mile at a time.

For those with eyes to see and ears to hear, Jean Giono’s simple tale can awaken the artist, the poet, the storyteller and perhaps even the farmer in each of us. Like the parables of Jesus, the story belongs to everyone. So let us waste no more time finding out “whose it was,” as the narrator in Giono’s story asked about the land, when we lament our part in the suffering of the planet. The Earth is our common home, its suffering our common cause. Let us begin planting our hundred acorns with the greatest care.

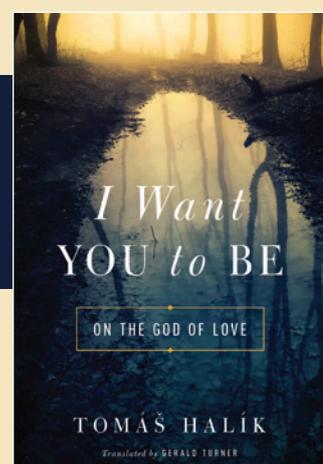
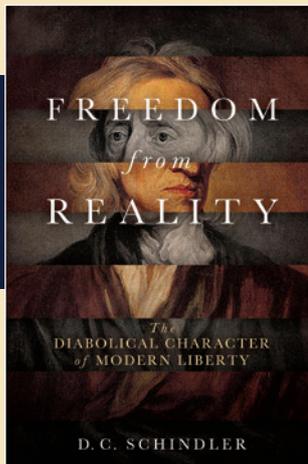
Christopher Pramuk is an associate professor of theology and the University Chair of Ignatian Thought and Imagination at Regis University in Denver. This essay is excerpted from his latest book, *The Artist Alive: Explorations in Music, Art and Theology* (Anselm Academic, 2019).

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A BRICKLAYER TURNED AUTHOR

The incredible tale of Pietro di Donato's 'Christ in Concrete'

By Joe Pagetta



In March 1937, when *Esquire* published Pietro di Donato's first short story, "Christ in Concrete," the magazine included a rare prefatory note.

"In the three years since Louis Paul's prize-winning *No More Trouble for Jadwick*," wrote Arnold Gingrich, the editor, "Esquire has received about eighteen thousand short stories from unpublished authors and has published forty of them. But not since then has a new writer come our way with the performance and promise shown by Pietro di Donato in this, his first, short story."

The praise didn't end there. It didn't start there either.

The magazine dedicated a significant portion of its opening salvo on Page 5 to the discovery of di Donato and his unique story. "We find ourselves wishing for a stronger word with which to introduce the first published writing of Pietro di Donato," wrote the editor, "an almost incredibly talented young Italian bricklayer lately turned author."

Wanting to know more, *Esquire* had the critic Meyer Levin bring di Donato into its New York office. The transcript of the conversation with Levin and di Donato, presented in the magazine "exactly as received," revealed that di Donato, who was teaching drama on Long Island

The dedication ceremony for Pietro di Donato Plaza in Union City, N.J., on May 22, 2010. Holding up a copy of di Donato's novel, *Christ in Concrete*, left, is the author's son, Richard.

through a Works Progress Administration program, was indeed a bricklayer, and that "Christ in Concrete" was based on the true story of the death of his Italian immigrant father, Geremio. "He has been supporting family of seven brothers and sisters since he was 13," relayed Levin, "when his father, a master mason, was buried under the collapse of a six-story building on which he was working." The title refers to the death of Geremio on Good Friday in the rubble of the collapse.

We learn that after his father's death, di Donato began laying bricks at 14 and was a master mason by 18. He had no formal education past grammar school and sporadic night courses, but in his own words, he "read hungrily and felt kin not only to those who expressed themselves, but also to those who had no voice."

With his literary career launched, di Donato soon expanded his short story into a full autobiographical novel, also titled *Christ in Concrete*. Published by Bobbs-Merrill 80 years ago in 1939, the novel begins with the death of Geremio in the Lower East Side building collapse, and then follows the efforts of his eldest son Paul (based on di Donato) to learn the trade to support his mother, Annunziata, and seven siblings. In Paul's coming-of-age story, we find a portrait of immigrants and laborers, so essential to the growth of the United States then as now, largely mocked and dismissed by the companies that used them, the authorities sworn to protect them, and even the church supposedly committed to minister to them. As Studs Terkel points out in the preface to the 1993 New American Library edition of the novel, it is "the story of so many immigrant peoples whose dreams and realities were in conflict" and where "the sanitized American Dream is challenged."

The novel, like the short story, brought di Donato instant acclaim. It was a bestseller and the Book-of-the-Month Club main selection, notably beating out another popular Depression-era novel released at the same time, John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. In its review on Aug. 20, 1939, *The New York Times* called it "a stunning performance" by "an artist as story-teller" who "has the gift." In the same newspaper a month later, Charles Poore dedicated the bulk of his column to the book, writing of "a strange and fiery mixture of realism, romanticism, naturalism and impressionism in...this moving and eloquent story of Italian immigrant life in America" that is "operatic, lyrical, fe-

rocious and hilarious."

While di Donato went on to publish dozens of additional short stories and six more books, including a biography of St. Frances Xavier Cabrini (*Immigrant Saint: The Life of Mother Cabrini*), he never matched the critical acclaim or popular success of that first novel. As the writer and critic Barbara Bauer asserted in 1979, noted by Matthew Diomedede in *Pietro DiDonato, the Master Builder* (Bucknell University Press), di Donato's works "have gone relatively unnoticed in the annals of American literary scholarship."

I grew up a second-generation Italian American in Jersey City, N.J., not far from Union City (then West Hoboken), where di Donato was born and raised before his father's death. I showed an interest in literature and promise as a writer in high school, and went on to study English at a local Jersey City college. But di Donato and his work were never a part of my studies. It wasn't until I was in my mid-40s that I discovered *Christ in Concrete* while browsing books at the Tenement Museum store in Manhattan. I was immediately taken with the work, both for its modernist prose and what I felt was its modern message. I wish I had discovered the novel earlier so I could better understand myself. More important, I wish it could be discovered by more people now so that we would better understand ourselves and our histories.

It would dispel the myth often perpetuated by third- and fourth-generation Americans who offer up the sanitized—to use one of Studs Terkel's words—versions of their ancestors' arrivals, in which they came to the United States through the legal channels, learned the language, worked hard and were integrated into American society. It would today, in a time of a humanitarian crisis at our southern border, illustrate the insensitivity inherent in bureaucracies that create detachment and harden our humanity.

In di Donato's novel we find the brutal truth of the immigrant experience over and over again. In Chapter 2, "Job," young Paul goes from one municipal building to another seeking relief for his family after his father's death. At the building with JUSTICE and EQUALITY inscribed over its entrance, he finds himself in ROOM 32: OVERSEER OF THE POOR.

"What building collapse? Never heard about it. Was he an American citizen?" Paul is asked. "He had taken out his first papers."



The presence of Christ and the theme of Christianity are clear throughout the novel, from its title to Geremio's death on Good Friday. ●●

"But he's dead."

"Yes...."

"Well then he wasn't a citizen."

When Paul goes with his young sister to the police station after the collapse to claim his father's body, he is confronted with ethnic slurs and a stunning lack of compassion.

"On Friday—Good Friday—the building that fell—my father was working—he didn't come home—his name is Geremio—we want him—"

The sergeant thought for a moment, and called to the next room: "Hey Alden, anything come in on a guy named—Geremio?"

A second later, a live voice from the next room loudly answered: "What?—oh yeah—the wop is under the wrappin' paper out in the courtyard."

The presence of Christ and the theme of Christianity are clear throughout the novel, from its title to Geremio's death on Good Friday to the devoutness of Paul's family. It is in that context that di Donato calls out the bureaucracy, and perhaps hypocrisy, of the church as well. Paul seeks help for his family from their local parish, St. Prisca—a saint who was martyred for her faith. He originally goes to the church to ask innocently for his father to be resurrected. His request to see Father John is at first rejected. "He is at supper...then he has many duties," he is told.

After refusing to take no for an answer, and being let in to see the priest, he finds a long table covered with plates filled with baked potatoes, lamb, fresh peas and strawberry shortcake. "Has your mother applied at the Welfare?" Fa-

ther John asks Paul. "They say my father was not a citizen," he replies. "Has your mother tried to get up a collection among the neighbors?" Father John asks. "Can you help us?" Paul responds.

In the continuation of this conversation—indicative, perhaps, of di Donato's feelings on bureaucracies and the church—Father John replies, "I have nothing to do with the Charities. There is a board of trustees who confer and pass on every expenditure." The priest cuts off a piece of the shortcake to give to Paul and sends him on his way.

Later in the novel, on a fruitless visit to the Workmen's Compensation State Bureau to make a claim for money after her husband's death, Annunziata finds plenty of people like herself in desperate need of help. "They were as herself," she reflects. "They were wounded and sought the helping hand of Christ's Christians." Dealt with by "fine-looking men" who "carried leather cases beneath arm," Annunziata notes that they "seem masters" and "not of Christ."

Why Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, a novel that dealt with similar themes (simply trade di Donato's immigrants for Steinbeck's migrants) and was equally lauded, continues to appear on syllabuses in high schools throughout the country while di Donato's book has largely been forgotten or relegated to Italian American studies is unclear. Perhaps it is di Donato's prose, which may strike the contemporary reader as challenging. Rather than have his Italian immigrant characters' dialogue be in clear English, he chooses to have them speak in cadences that reflect a literal word-for-word translation into English.

Take, for example, the words of Paul's godfather, Nazzone, to whom Paul is apprenticed and who is trying to convince Paul that they should skip work and go to the beach:

"Why, godson, each wave brings in saltine bafts that scour the breathing sacks and impart the appetite of ten Christians, and your skin will consume the touch of sand and sun like a sitting to platter of spaghetti..." and "there is at this morning's young hour a surpassing lovely color...let us wrap up this tender day in pocket and steal it to the ocean's side."

While it may take the reader a few passages to adjust to, it is an effective device, meant to turn the everyday language of common people into poetry. Ernest Hemingway used a similar tool a year later in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*

to give voice to the Republican guerillas in the Spanish Civil War.

Both Steinbeck's and di Donato's novels were adapted into films, *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1940 by director John Ford, and *Christ in Concrete* in 1949 by Edward Dmytryk. Ford's film is as classic and well-regarded in its medium as the book from which it is derived, and generally considered one of the greatest films ever made.

Dmytryk's film version of *Christ in Concrete* also drew accolades, winning the Grand Masterpiece Award at the 1949 Venice Film Festival. But the film never enjoyed a theatrical run in the United States, largely because its director was among the Hollywood Ten, a group of ten filmmakers blacklisted in 1947 for refusing to answer inquiries from the House Un-American Activities Committee about their alleged involvement with the Communist Party. Even today, a DVD copy of the film is hard to come by in this country.

Another theory as to di Donato's exclusion from the mainstream of America's literary canon may be found in an interview by Carol Strickland with the author in *The New*

York Times in 1990, less than two years before his death on Jan. 19, 1992.

"[Di Donato] differed from other 'proletarian' novelists like John Steinbeck and John Dos Passos in his consistent concern for the poor," Strickland writes. Indeed, even his biography of Mother Cabrini, published 21 years after his debut, focuses on and gives agency to the poor and the immigrants in every community where Cabrini ministers.

"Whereas the youthful idealism of those two writers gave way to conservatism," Strickland adds, "Mr. di Donato retained his sense of outrage at economic inequality."

"The older you get, the more you must become a dangerous element in society," the novelist is quoted as saying.

That sentiment may be true for novels as well. *Christ in Concrete*, 80 years old this year, may be more important and dangerous than ever.

Joe Pagetta is a personal essayist and arts writer in Nashville, Tenn. He released a collection of essays in 2018.



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The World as a Lie

George Orwell's fight against 'alternative facts'

By Franklin Freeman

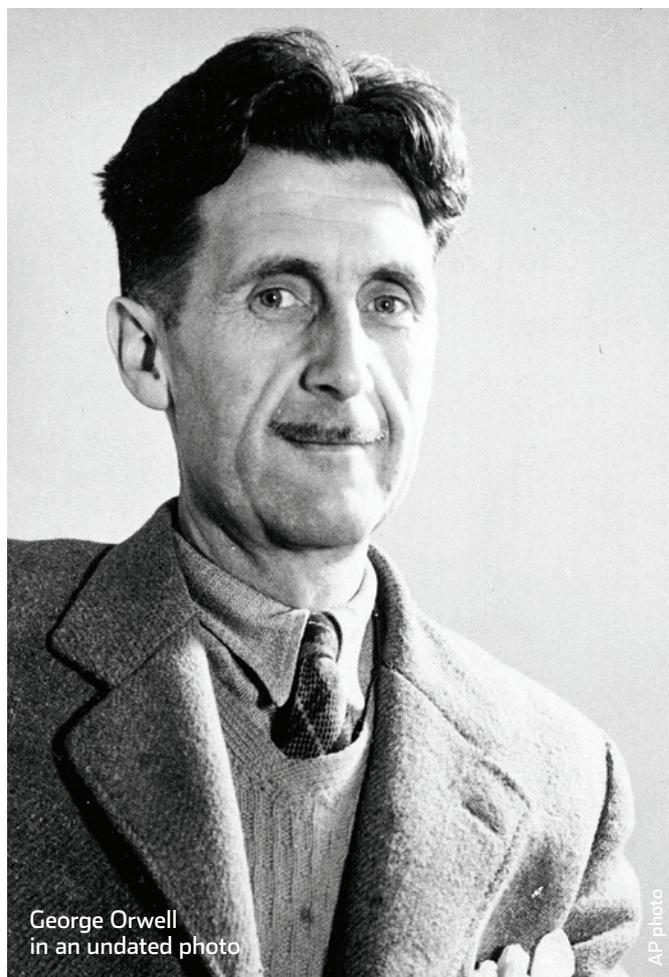
"We are all drowning in filth," George Orwell wrote on April 27, 1942, in his "War-time Diary," included in Vol. 2 of *The Collected Essays, Journalism & Letters of George Orwell* (four volumes, edited by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus; Nonpareil Books/David R. Godine). He continued, in words readily applicable to our own interesting times:

When I talk to anyone or read the writings of anyone who has any axe to grind, I feel that intellectual honesty and balanced judgement have simply disappeared from the face of the earth. Everyone's thought is forensic, everyone is simply putting a "case" with deliberate suppression of his opponent's point of view, and, what is more, with complete insensitiveness to any sufferings except those of himself and his friends.

These words recall one of Orwell's favorite books, *Gulliver's Travels*, where in a preface to the "editor" of the book, Jonathan Swift has Gulliver write, "You have made me say the thing that was not."

Saying the thing that was: That was Orwell's mission. Which is why, when Kellyanne Conway suggested there were "alternative facts" about Donald J. Trump's inauguration in 2017, a lot of people reached for (or went out and bought) Orwell's best-known novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. They knew this kind of talk was not normal and that Orwell was the writer to help us. Even if the subject was as absurd as how many people attended an inauguration.

Orwell learned about "alternative facts" during his time fighting for the Republicans and against the Fascists in the Spanish Civil War. Because of a childhood education that left him guilt-ridden and indignant at injustice, Orwell's work often exposed an institutional wrong, but his experience in Spain clarified the issue. Although always



George Orwell
in an undated photo

outspokenly a man of the left, a democratic socialist who was resentful of the conservative attempt to co-opt him to its cause, he became the enemy of any party line, especially of the left, the one with which he was most familiar.

As he wrote in "Looking Back on the Spanish War," (also in Vol. 2), "in Spain, for the first time, I saw newspaper reports which did not bear any relation to the facts, not even the relationship which is implied in an ordinary lie." He admitted the lying was often about "secondary issues," but added, "This kind of thing is frightening to me, because it often gives me the feeling that the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world." Or that, as he also wrote, "The truth, it is felt, becomes untruth when your enemy utters it."

This fear of deceit became the foundation of Orwell's work. David R. Godine is to be commended for reissuing this four-volume set in a time when, again, "the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world." Each volume is a chronological arrangement of essays, letters and

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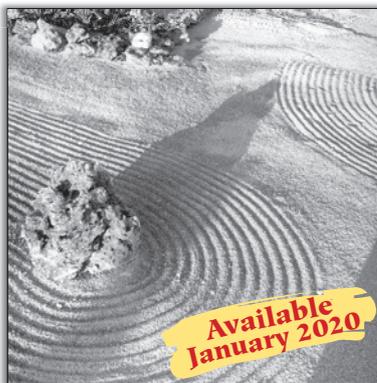


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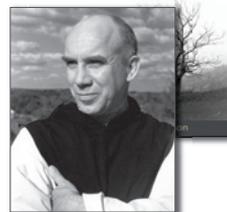
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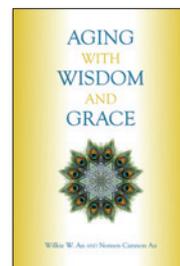


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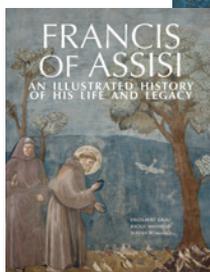
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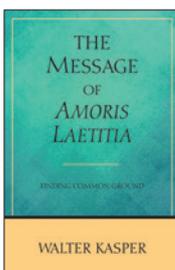
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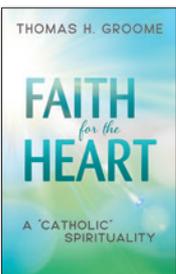
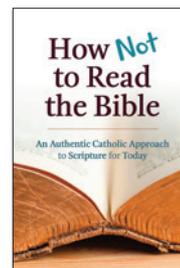
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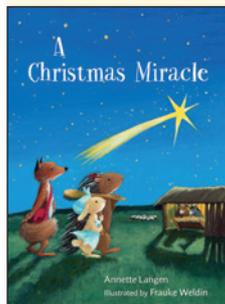
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journal entries, and the whole work reads as an ad hoc autobiography (although one would have to add *George Orwell: Diaries* and *George Orwell: A Life in Letters* edited by Peter Davison and published by Liveright, to complete the picture).

Orwell—his original name was Eric Blair—was born in Bengal to a father of English descent and a mother of French descent. Orwell, his older sister and his mother moved back to England when he was young; and he, along with his sister, was first sent to an Ursuline convent for his education. There, according to the biographer Gordon Bowker, Orwell's sense of guilt was fostered and his anti-Catholicism engendered (though the anti-Catholicism would be qualified later).

But even more formative, at least as far as Orwell was aware, was his time at a school named St. Cyprian's, where he was accepted only because of his potential scholarship abilities. The husband and wife team who ran the place—Sambo and Flip in Orwell's scathing essay, "Such, Such Were the Joys"—regularly swindled the young Eric Blair out of the money his parents sent him and made him feel his lowly position, whereas boys from wealthy or titled families could do no wrong.

This was why Orwell could never stomach rich people telling working class people to say their prayers and be happy with what they had. He saw religion as a bludgeon rich people used to clobber poor people into their place. Or, as he wrote in his deathbed notebook, the perfect symbol of the Christian religion was a crucifix that concealed a stiletto.

After his schooling, Orwell joined the Imperial Police in Burma because he felt he was not qualified academically to go up to Oxford or Cambridge, but also, perhaps, because he was entranced by the East and was half in love with the idea of failure. In Burma, he participated in the evils of imperialism (thus giving him more guilt to expiate) and came away with the life material he would transform into two of his greatest essays, "Shooting an Elephant" and "The Hanging," as well as his first novel, *Burmese Days*.

In "The Hanging" (Vol. 1), Orwell writes, "It is curious, but till that moment [when a condemned prisoner stepped around a puddle on the way to the gallows] I had never realised what it means to destroy a healthy, conscious man. When I saw the prisoner step aside to avoid the puddle, I saw the mystery, the unspeakable wrongness, of cutting a life short when it is in full tide." Then Orwell recognizes his shared humanity with the condemned:

This man was not dying, he was alive just as we were alive. All the organs of his body were working—bowels digesting food, skin renewing itself, nails growing, tissues forming—all toiling away in solemn foolery. His nails would still be growing when he stood on the drop, when he was falling through the air with a tenth of a second to live. His eyes saw the yellow gravel and the grey walls, and his brain still remembered, foresaw, reasoned—reasoned even about puddles. He and we were a party of men walking together, seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding the same world, and in two minutes, with a sudden snap, one of us would be gone—one mind less, one world less.

This passage, especially the last line about the "one world less," illustrates Orwell's near-mystic sense of human brotherhood. I used to think I understood Orwell's criticisms of Christianity, but then for him to believe in—what, politics?—seemed a terrible comedown on his part. But these four rich volumes show that what he believed in was not politics but human solidarity, a profound sense of which he got in his early days in Spain when Barcelona was held by the anarchists. There, shoeshine boys refused tips, and signs asked comrades to respect the prostitutes, who were also comrades. That is where, he wrote, he truly believed in democratic socialism, whereas before he had only thought he believed in it.

While fighting in Spain, Orwell was shot in the throat but survived because the bullet missed his carotid artery by a centimeter or two. After he apparently contracted tuberculosis in a Spanish hospital, he and his wife Eileen barely escaped from Spain. The Soviet-backed party was carrying out a purge, prompting Orwell, back in England, to write that the Soviets were in league with the Fascists to prevent real revolution. Why else would they quash the anarchist takeover of Barcelona—where true equality had been, for a brief while, achieved?

For the rest of his life he wrote journalism and novels that mostly warned the world about the dangers of totalitarianism of any kind.

Eileen died unexpectedly during surgery while he was in Europe after World War II had ended. They had a loving, devoted marriage, despite it being rather an "open" one. Eileen appears to have had a few real love affairs. Orwell had many flings, which hurt Eileen, who had subordinated her

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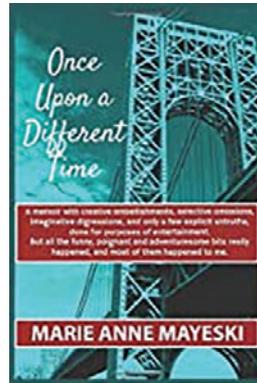
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career for his. They had always wanted children and, when it appeared they never could, had adopted a son, Richard, not long before Eileen died.

Orwell wrote *Animal Farm* with her help, but had trouble getting it published, as its criticism of Soviet-style communism was too sensitive a topic while Stalin was still supposedly on the side of the Allies. Orwell then sought shelter from the storm of city life on the island of Jura in the Scottish Hebrides, where he wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four* before having to return to sanatoriums to treat his tuberculosis. He died in London shortly after marrying Sonia Brownell, who, with Ian Angus, edited these four volumes.

One theme in Orwell's writing I have never seen discussed is the importance of children. More than once he commented on the declining birthrate in England and the modern penchant for preferring affluence to children. He could see a demographic disaster in the future. This is one of the ways in which his writing cut against the grain of liberal thought in his time, and ours, and shows his courage in speaking what he thought.

But Orwell was not always criticizing injustice and declining birthrates. He loved English folkways, tobacco, tea and pubs; and he loved nature—characters delighting in favorite groves in their local countryside relieve the bleakness of his novels. In his “As I Please” columns, which he wrote for *Tribune*, a non-Stalinist leftist paper, he wrote on whatever topics he preferred. As Gordon Bowker noted, “The kind of short essay he produced followed in the long tradition of Hazlitt, Lamb, Stevenson, Belloc and Chesterton.”

He also wrote essays like “Some Thoughts on the Common Toad,” which include the following:

I think that by retaining one's childhood love of such things as trees, fishes, butterflies and...toads, one makes a peaceful and decent future a little more probable, and that by preaching the doctrine that nothing is to be admired except steel and concrete, one merely makes it a little surer that human beings will have no outlet for their surplus energy except in hatred and leader worship.... The atom bombs are piling up in the factories, the police are prowling through the cities, the lies are streaming from the loudspeakers, but the earth is still going round the sun, and neither the dictators nor the bureaucrats, deeply as they disapprove of the process, are able to prevent it.

The phrase “the dictators nor the bureaucrats” shows how much Orwell distrusted the extreme products of both the right—dictators—and the left—bureaucrats.

This passage, though, in its love of nature, also points to the occasional resemblance of Orwell to Henry David Thoreau. Negatively, both writers can come across as judgmental writers who think they know better than everyone else. And this is one of Orwell's faults, as well as a tendency to criticize in others what he himself practices fairly frequently. He complains when political writers use blanket terms and do not distinguish between different types of people or causes, yet he often uses terms like “pinks” for Communists and “Blimps” for conservatives.

But he writes about this too—he writes about everything!—and confesses his own biases, at least at times. He admonishes himself and other writers to work to know one's own leanings and take account of them.

His views on Catholicism and Christianity in general were more complex than is often acknowledged. Yes, he severely criticized the church for its support of fascism in Spain, its reactionary tendencies and what he called the “silly clever” books of G. K. Chesterton, Ronald Knox and C. S. Lewis; but he also fairly represented the church's point of view in reviews of books, including *The Spirit of Catholicism*, by Karl Adam, and *Communism and Man*, by F. J. Sheed (both in Volume 1).

He also broadcast a talk discussing a poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J., “Felix Randal” (“The Meaning of a Poem” in Volume 2), in which he said, “A Christian, I suppose, if he were offered the chance of everlasting life on this earth would refuse it, but he would still feel that death is profoundly sad.” His view, then, was divided: at the same time he commented on the crucifix-stiletto, he was also reading Dante.

These four volumes might be the perfect tonic for what ails our society. The essay “Notes on Nationalism” (Vol. 4) is especially telling. See if the following does not reverberate in your mind: “Indifference to objective truth is encouraged by the sealing-off of one part of the world from another, which makes it harder and harder to discover what is actually happening.”

Franklin Freeman, a frequent contributor to *America*, lives in Maine.



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An Unlikely Prophet

By Santiago Ramos

In an interview with *Wired* magazine (12/12/18), Geoff Hinton, a cognitive psychologist and head of Google's artificial intelligence research team, fielded a question about the ethical challenges soon to be posed by technologies running on A.I. The A.I. controlling, say, a driverless car will sooner or later have to make a choice (if that is the right word for it) about which way to swerve when it loses control of the steering: toward the park over there, placing pedestrians and joggers at risk? Or toward an embankment on the other side of the road, placing the car's own passengers at greater risk? A morally dependable A.I. would have to behave a lot like the human brain:

People can't explain how they work, for most of the things they do. When you hire somebody, the decision is based on all sorts of things you can quantify, and then all sorts of gut feelings. People have no idea how they do that. If you ask them to explain their decision, you are forcing them to make up a story.

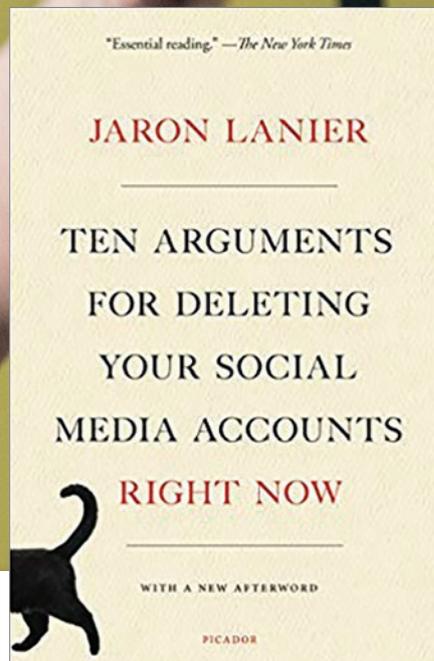
Neural nets have a similar problem. When you train a neural net, it will learn a billion num-

bers that represent the knowledge it has extracted from the training data. If you put in an image, out comes the right decision, say, whether this was a pedestrian or not. But if you ask, "Why did it think that?" Well, if there were any simple rules for deciding whether an image contains a pedestrian or not, it would have been a solved problem ages ago.

There is a level at which, Hinton seems to argue, the brain cannot be fully understood. Any attempt to fully explain the gut feelings, moral hunches, snap judgments and other quick reactions of the brain would be futile, or a made-up story. The volume and intricacy of these cognitive operations are so great that a complete account of them would be like a map with the same area as the territory it covers.

Hinton's statement would not surprise Jaron Lanier, an interdisciplinary scientist at Microsoft, who in his latest book, *Ten Arguments for Deleting Your Social Media Accounts Right Now*, writes: "AI is a fantasy, nothing but a story we tell about our code." This is an exaggeration, but Lanier has been trying to get his point across for almost 20

Jaron Lanier's five books have shaped the conversation regarding the Internet, A.I. and human nature.



The Dutch House
By Ann Patchett
Harper. 352p
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years: Human beings are special in a way that computers, even A.I., are not. If we miss this point, Lanier says, we will create bad technology. Lanier's writing career spans from seminal early essays—"Digital Maoism" and "One Half a Manifesto"—through five books that have shaped the conversation regarding the Internet, A.I. and human nature.

Most people in tech, Lanier believes, have not reached the same conclusion as Geoff Hinton, and even Hinton himself might not totally understand the importance of what he has said. There could be high costs for thinking of consciousness in terms of computing, rather than the other way around. For example, Lanier argues that thinking about human consciousness in terms of computing has led to a diminished appreciation of the importance of individual authorship.

In his second book, *You Are Not a Gadget* (2010), Lanier quotes Kevin Kelly, executive editor of *Wired* magazine, who has argued that there is a "moral imperative" to meld all the world's books into "one book," wikified and online. This idea horrifies Lanier. If implemented, the "one book" would crush the individual author amid "the digital flattening of expression into a global mush." The cost would

be freedom of thought: "any singular, exclusive book, even the collective one accumulating in the cloud, will become a cruel book if it is the only one available." What Lanier ultimately fears is the rise of a tech-driven collectivist ideology that drowns out the individual mind. He gives several names to this fear, like "digital Maoism," "cybernetic totalism," "computationalism" and—in *Ten Arguments*—"social media."

Pavlovian Response

Ten Arguments is a less speculative book than *Gadget*. Less than 150 pages long and consisting of numbered arguments, it is a cross between a political pamphlet and a manifesto. Most of these arguments are founded on the idea that all forms of existing social media treat human beings as if they were basically a bundle of nerve endings. These nerve endings behave in relatively predictable ways when bombarded with certain stimuli. Lanier defines social media through an acronym, BUMMER, which stands for "Behaviors of Users Modified, and Made into an Empire for Rent." Our behavior is modified by algorithms

so that it generates clicks, and clicks generate profit. In other words, social media treats us like Pavlov's dog, and if you spend enough time there, you will become the dog.

In his first argument, "You are losing your free will," Lanier argues that social media algorithms attempt to generate addiction in their users by applying behaviorist techniques, and that these techniques in turn are very amenable to the binary mode of thinking that is characteristic of computing. "There's something about the rigidity of digital technology, the on-and-off nature of the bit, that attracts the behaviorist way of thinking. Reward and punishment are like one and zero," Lanier writes. In fact, programmers have harnessed the power of reward-and-punishment by encouraging addiction: "Social media is biased, not to the Left or the Right, but downward. The relative ease of using negative emotions for the purposes of addiction and manipulation makes it relatively easier to achieve undignified results." These claims are not controversial; as Lanier himself notes, many people who have worked in social media (like Sean Parker, former president of Facebook) have made similar arguments.

The fact that negative emotions are the ones most easily and reliably generated by social media means that its algorithms will push to inspire them. BUMMER thus becomes "a style of business plan that spews out perverse incentives and corrupts people." From here follow many of the other arguments for quitting social media: It causes a sort of "insanity" (Argument Two); it gives us an incentive to become trolls and harass others (Argument Three); it makes us depressed (Argument Seven); it hurts our capacity to empathize with others by promoting a default adversarial attitude (Argument Six). Lanier also critiques social media's economic and political impacts in Arguments Eight and Nine, and a longer, fuller version of his arguments is found in his 2013 book, *Who Owns the Future?*

All these arguments are something of a prologue to a coruscating finale, Argument Ten: "Social Media Hates Your Soul." BUMMER amounts to nothing short of a new religion, one responsible for "metaphysical imperialism." "If you use BUMMER... [you have] effectively renounced what you might think is your religion, even if that religion is atheism." Instead, you have adopted BUMMER's new conception of "what it means to be a person."

BUMMER diminishes our free will by conditioning our behavior; it tricks us, cult-like, into believing that the good aspects of technology would not be able to exist

without it. It increases mob-like and antisocial behavior through its behavioral schemes and defines truth for us by having us read and watch only what its algorithms tell us we should want to read and watch. Moreover, Lanier believes that the increasingly popular notion that A.I. will eventually surpass human intelligence in power and scope, and that the riddle of death will somehow be solved along with it—what is now known as the Singularity—means that BUMMER tech and its promoters will have less loyalty to "present-day humans" than to "future AIs."

Liberation Technology

Lanier arrived in Silicon Valley in the early 1980s, just as its ideas and inventions were poised to change the world. Lanier was part of that change, too—he made his name primarily in the field of virtual reality, his abiding passion. But he eventually woke up, sometime in the 1990s, to discover himself spiritually at odds with the tech culture he helped create—not because he fell out of love with technology and invention. Quite the contrary.

Unlike previous critics of technology, like Jacques Ellul, Neil Postman or Martin Heidegger, Lanier is positively enthusiastic in his conviction that technology can serve human happiness and freedom. He places a great deal of hope in virtual reality, which he defines as an opposite idea to A.I., because it is "the technology that...highlights the existence of your subjective experience. It proves you are real." It is a medium "potent for beauty." It seems futuristic, but in fact is already commonplace in the worlds of entertainment, automotive engineering and medicine. Lanier is not a Luddite; he is a liberation technologist.

Lanier's personal history is one of eclectic experiences and realities. He is an accomplished musician who specializes in playing rare and forgotten instruments; he paid for college courses (as a teenager) by raising goats and making cheese; he worked as a graduate-level teaching assistant in math courses at New Mexico State University at age 17; he spent much of his youth on the road as something of a bohemian, including a stint as an antinuclear activist; he hung out at Cal Tech (where he was not enrolled) with the physicist Richard Feynman, as well as in New York, playing music with John Cage.

Lanier also suffered greatly as a child. The son of Holocaust survivors, he lost his mother during his childhood in a car accident. Lanier's family history has also contributed to his singular combination of American adventurism

and healthy disregard for established academic authority, coupled with Old World education and sensibility. Lanier's maternal grandfather, a rabbi, was an associate of the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber, and Buber's influence is detectable in Lanier's thought. Lanier's mother, a painter and pianist trained in Vienna, even after being chased out of Europe by the Nazi ideology that had possessed her countrymen, taught Lanier to appreciate and preserve "the good in Europe."

In any case, Lanier's unique genius is not what alienated him from the tech milieu. As he notes in his delightful 2017 memoir, *Dawn of the New Everything: Encounters With Reality and Virtual Reality*, there were many free spirits like him in Silicon Valley in the 1980s. Lanier found himself at odds with Silicon Valley when he started noticing the emergence of an ideology that, he feared, threatened the very quirkiness, strangeness, passion and wandering nature of human existence—that is, an ideology that, through optimization, surveillance and other forms of control, threatened the life of a free spirit.

More specifically, Lanier was at odds with the idea that the primary task in tech research should be to reverse-engineer the human brain, as if the brain is a computer that can be broken up into its component parts. This is the view Lanier claims is becoming the norm. If the brain is a computer, consciousness is data and you and I are merely gadgets, then ultimately we will become obsolete through optimization, secondary in importance to the machines that will overtake us. No more random road trips, time wasted fiddling with ancient instruments or bull sessions about the nature of the universe.

Mind Over Machine

To fight the "new religion," Lanier insists that we recognize the superiority of the mind over the machine. As he puts it in *Gadget*: "If a machine can be [said to be] conscious, then the computing cloud is going to be a better and far more capacious consciousness than is found in an individual person. If you believe this, then working for the benefit of the cloud over individual people puts you on the side of the angels." But really, it would put you on the side of the demons.

If the machines do overtake us, however, it will not be because they are somehow superior, but because—and this is Lanier's big point—we chose this fate for ourselves. "When you live as if there's nothing special, no mystical spark in-

side you," he writes in *Ten Arguments*, "you gradually start to believe it." So don't. Social media is driving us crazy, taking away our freedom. Delete your account.

But does Lanier see that we need more than the mere will to believe that human beings are special in order to really believe it? "Consciousness is the only thing that isn't weakened if it's an illusion," he claims. The pragmatic argument—let us believe in X, even if it is an illusion, because not believing in X will lead to disaster—sounds good only in theory. In practice, we need deep reasons to sustain the belief that human life contains a "mystical spark."

Here is where "the good in Europe" comes in. Western philosophy (which extends beyond Europe) has resources for thinking about human nature in ways that go beyond behaviorism. It includes thinkers who made robust claims about how human thought transcends computing: how it grasps eternal truths (such as mathematical principles), and makes evaluations (about goodness or beauty). The debate over the nature of consciousness is not new: While many historians trace the origins of the debate to 17th-century thinkers like Locke and Descartes, it actually goes as far back as Plato's *Phaedo*, where Socrates argues that any full account of human existence requires a concept of morality and not only biology.

Philosophy also provides a language for dialogue with those technologists Lanier disagrees with. Ironically, ancient philosophers would understand the longing for immortality better than some representatives of modern thought, such as Freud or Marx, who would dismiss it as neurosis or false consciousness. All living creatures, Aristotle wrote in *On the Soul*, "stretch out" toward "that which always is, and is divine." Peter Thiel, PayPal founder and a venture capitalist, has engaged in just this type of dialogue with the theologian N.T. Wright, comparing the claims of the Judeo-Christian tradition with "tech optimism."

Lanier has cleared the ground for a renewed account of human nature. Hopefully, others will follow his lead.

Santiago Ramos teaches philosophy at Boston College.

Young Adult Literature Has a Lot to Say About Social Justice

By Emma Winters



If the entire 2016 election cycle felt like a circus to you, then you will empathize with the students of Lincoln High School. The election for class president at this fictional school ended in a parade of quinceañera dresses, interrupted by a guy in a cow costume wearing an astronaut helmet, who was subsequently karate-kicked to the pavement.

Gordon Jack's novel, *Your Own Worst Enemy* (Harp-erTeen, 2018), is not exactly a one-to-one analogy of what happened in 2016. But the book makes a stab at unraveling some of our last election's qualities: the importance of social media, the pull of identity politics, what it means to be a "likable" woman and the stone cold calculus of political operatives.

And yet, for all its political zingers and campaign sabotage, *Your Own Worst Enemy* manages not to end in chaos or despair. The tone is tongue-in-cheek, but the characters treat each other with empathy. At the end of the novel (spoiler alert), the losing candidates and their supporters are not angling for the next snarky hot take. They are building new relationships and repairing old ones. They are working to make their school better, greener and more inclusive. And, of course, they disagree about how to do that.

Your Own Worst Enemy is not the only young adult novel trying to make sense of the world, injustice and the obstacles that impede change. Many books, music, TV shows and movies are trying to do that. But young adult literature offers an earnestness and hopefulness I rarely find

elsewhere. It makes me want to care.

Shifting the Focus

Young adult books are geared toward 12- to 18-year-olds, teenagers more than adults. This means that the current target audience for young adult novels is Generation Z, a cohort defined by their use of technology, their multiculturalism and their career focus—having grown up in the age of iPhones, shifting demographics and the Great Recession.

While this generation, along with the millennials, has been derided as sensitive "snowflakes," they are proving themselves to be resilient and thoughtful activists. Among the most visible have been students of Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Fla., who organized the March for Our Lives against gun violence, but they are not alone. Members of Gen Z have been involved in fighting for women's rights, advocating for access to mental health resources, marching with the Black Lives Matter movement, speaking up for L.G.B.T. people and getting out the 2018 midterm vote.

Young adult literature is shifting, following the gaze of Gen Z toward social justice issues and activism. In *Dry* (Simon & Schuster, 2018), the authors, Neal and Jarrod Shusterman, tell a dystopian survival story of what happens after suburban California runs out of water. Despite their desperate attempts to survive, the main character, Al-

While this generation, along with the millennials, has been derided as sensitive “snowflakes,” they are proving themselves to be resilient and thoughtful activists.

yssa, her younger brother, Garrett, and her neighbor, Kelton, eventually become dehydrated and are surrounded by a blazing fire that moves across the landscape faster than they can run.

Now that the deadliest wildfire in California history killed 85 people last fall, *Dry* feels a lot less hypothetical than previous young adult dystopian books, like Suzanne Collins’s “The Hunger Games” series or Margaret Peterson Haddix’s “Shadow Children” series. *Dry* responds to the issue of climate change directly. There is no metaphor, no future date posed, no drastic change in government structure, just the crazy idea that a big chunk of California has no more water.

When grappling with an issue like climate change, there can be a temptation to lose hope. It feels so big. *Dry* could easily have given in to despair. As the fire begins to engulf Alyssa, Garrett and Kelton at the end of the novel, Alyssa is holding a loaded gun. She is poised for a mercy killing—a harsh echo of John Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*. But she never gets the chance. Instead, a generous helicopter pilot showers the three young people with water from the nearby reservoir they had been trying to reach.

The novel offers a new image of hope, albeit a messy one: Alyssa slurping water from the surface of a rock into her own mouth, pressing her lips to Kelton’s and spitting the water into his mouth. “A week ago, I would never have considered such a thing,” Alyssa thinks. “The box I lived in was simply too small to think that.”

With the characters at the edge of despair, the authors introduce hope and an expansion of how the protagonist thinks about mercy. The book ends several weeks later with California beginning to return to normal. Alyssa tells us that 60 percent of the human body is water, but “the rest is dust, the rest is ash, it’s sorrow and it’s grief.... But above all that, in spite of all that, binding us together...is hope. And joy. And a wellspring of all the things that still might be.”

Young adult literature will often tell you directly the lesson you should walk away with. Does spelling out the message of a book make it a little cheesy? Maybe, but if we are going to work effectively for social justice, don’t we need to speak with that kind of earnestness? It is easy for me to sit in New York City and say: “They called it the Camp Fire, really? Oh, the irony.” It is harder to say: “Eighty-five people died.... Wow, I wonder who they left behind, who is grieving.”

Taking It to the Streets

Books like *Dry* and *Your Own Worst Enemy* are not the first of their kind. Young adult literature has dealt with serious topics for decades: gang violence (*The Outsiders*, 1967), substance abuse (*Go Ask Alice*, 1971), feminism in Latina culture (*The House on Mango Street*, 1984), sexual assault (*Speak*, 1999) and racial justice (*Bronx Masquerade*, 2002). There is a whole subgenre of young adult “social problem” narratives.

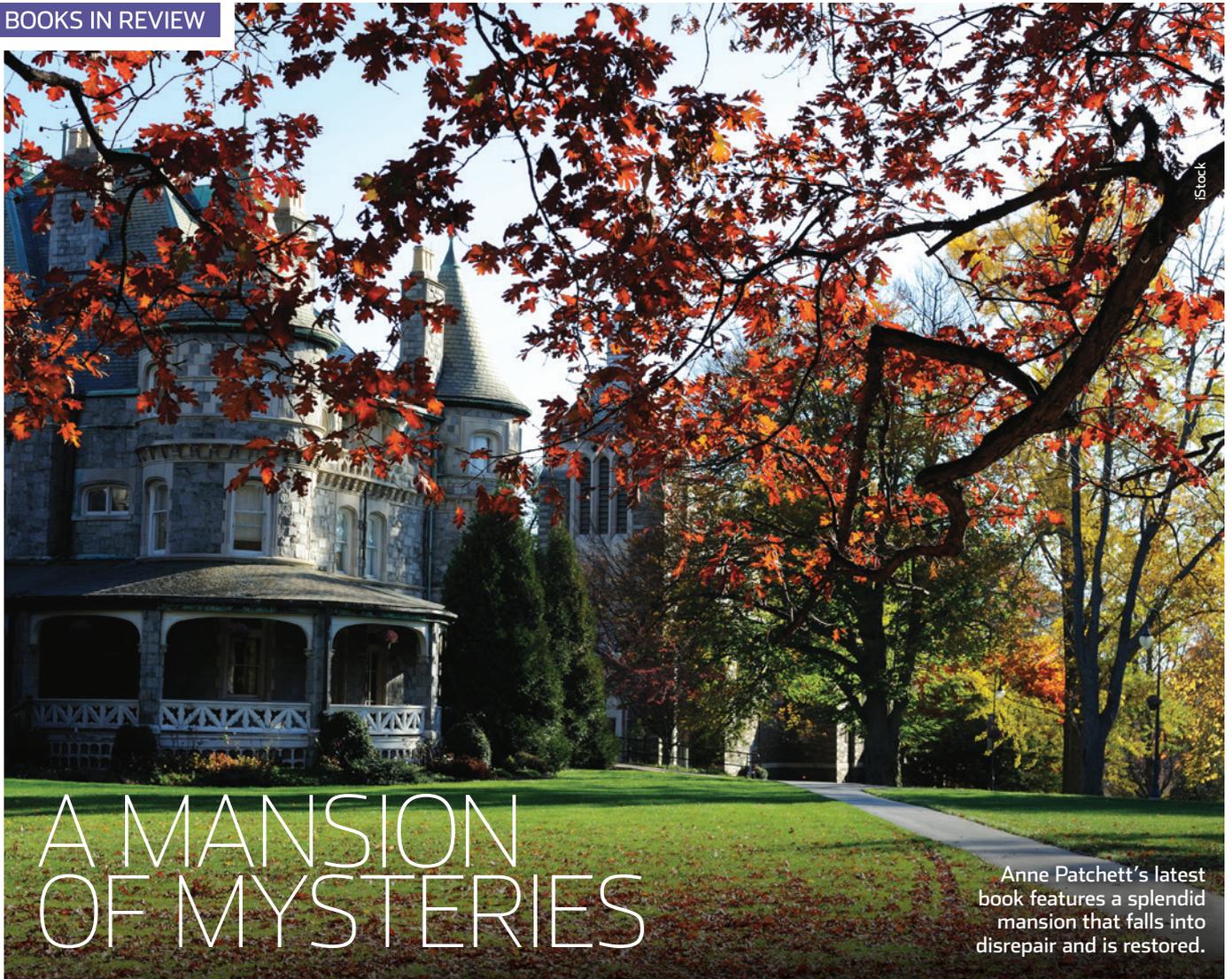
More recently, these young adult social problem narratives are morphing into social activism narratives—books about protests. In *Your Own Worst Enemy*, for example, young women in quinceañera dresses protest racially motivated vandalism. Angie Thomas’s *The Hate U Give* (Balzer + Bray, 2017), which remained over 100 weeks on the New York Times Best Seller List and was made into a movie, ends with the protagonist, whose childhood friend was murdered by police, joining and leading a protest.

Mark Oshiro’s debut novel, *Anger Is a Gift* (TorTeen 2018), is also forging the way for young adult social activism narratives. The book holds an ocean of grief but also a raging revolutionary fire. Moss, the main character, lost his father to police brutality as a young child. In a peaceful walkout to protest his high school’s increasing militarization, Moss’s boyfriend is also killed by police. I felt close to Moss; reading this knocked the wind out of me.

While the novel begins and ends with grief, it also transforms the depths of hopelessness into vertices where emotion and activism meet. At the height of his anger and despair, Moss does not think; he acts. He chains himself to a flagpole outside the police precinct. Soon a large crowd gathers and the police must respond. There is no idealistic ending for a book like *Anger Is a Gift*, but, like *Dry*, this book says exactly what it means. Moss’s final words are: “Stop killing us.”

Our culture needs young adult novels because they are sincere when the world is quippy. These books say what they mean and in doing so invite us to empathy. Young adult books also call us to activism: not to phone it in or Tweet it out but to be out in the streets practicing solidarity in the flesh.

Emma Winters is a former *Joseph A. O’Hare, S.J., fellow at America.*



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A MANSION OF MYSTERIES

Anne Patchett's latest book features a splendid mansion that falls into disrepair and is restored.

If Elna Conroy had not been a Catholic and had not taken the Bible seriously, especially the parts about following Christ and turning the other cheek, her life and that of her family would have followed a path entirely different from the tortuous one described in Ann Patchett's *The Dutch House*.

When the novel opens, Elna has been missing for five years, leaving behind her 15-year-old daughter, Maeve, and 8-year-old son, Danny. The two are preparing to meet Andrea, who will become their stepmother. Maeve rightly believes that things will be difficult for them.

Praised for her simple, though

elegant, writing style, Patchett is a best-selling author whose work has won numerous awards, including the prestigious PEN/Faulkner Award. She received a New York Times Notable Book award for her first novel, *The Patron Saint of Liars* (1992), which bears a striking resemblance to her latest.

Both novels concern Catholic women who wish to help an order of nuns in their work. Both books are set at similar times in the 20th century, and both feature splendid, somewhat ostentatious mansions that fall into disrepair and are restored.

More important, both novels also

spotlight lying and its ill effects on characters who at best are unreliable narrators and at worst, just plain liars. In the first novel, it is Rose, the mother, who lies about being pregnant and commits what she identifies as a lie of omission. In this book, Danny commits lies of omission as he does not tell his sister how much he hates Elna for essentially leaving them to whatever fate throws their way.

One major difference between the two novels concerns the narration. *The Patron Saint of Liars* is told by three narrators from three points of view. Each view spins off from and informs the others. *The Dutch House*

The Dutch House
By Ann Patchett
Harper. 352p \$27.99

has one narrator, Danny, whose views develop as he grows older. His views also spin off of those of other characters, primarily his sister, Maeve, as the two try to unravel the past.

At first, Maeve serves as Danny's protector. He was only 3 years old when his mother left and he has no memory of her. But after Danny grows up, Maeve experiences serious health issues, and he then protects her. In addition, his opinion of his mother changes as he learns more about her—or so he thinks.

We learn that Elna had planned to become a nun and was already a postulant when Cyril Conroy persuaded her to leave the order and marry him. After they married and bought the Dutch house, Danny was born and Elna supposedly read an article in Time magazine about Mother Teresa of Calcutta.

Elna's sense of vocation seemed to return, and she planned to help Mother Teresa minister to the poor. But some say Elna miscalculated and wound up in Bombay. From there, she evidently wandered to California and other states where she volunteered in homeless shelters. She believes that "you have to serve those who need to be served not just the ones who make you feel good about yourself." There is speculation that Elna is a saint. Whether that is a valid consideration is central to the novel.

"I think it's hard for people like us to understand," observes Sandy, one of the servants. "But when you think about saints, I don't imagine any of them made their families happy." As

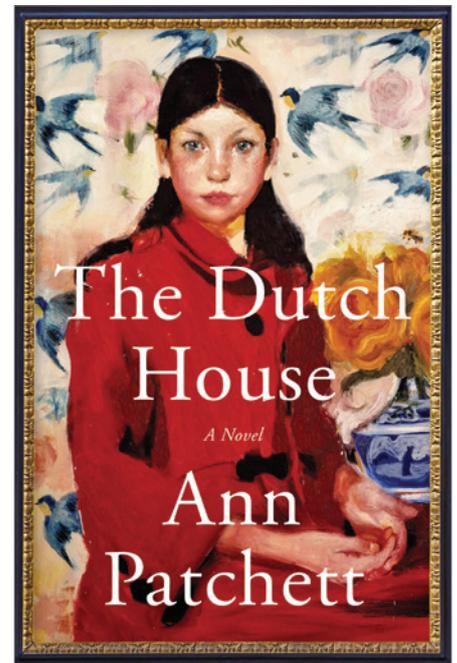
Danny sees it, "Taking care of someone who doesn't know you doesn't make you a saint." He asks himself what kind of a person—let alone a mother—would desert her two young children for any reason, even out of a deep spiritual sensibility?

An overly long and winding plot corkscrews from present to past and back again—revealing, among other things, that in 1946, Cyril bought and restored the Philadelphia-area Van-Hoebeek mansion (a.k.a., the "Dutch House") after the owners went bankrupt during the Depression. Elna often attended daily Mass and visited with the nuns when Maeve was in school.

The siblings attended Catholic elementary school, where Maeve was religious but Danny less so. Their father was Catholic but not particularly devout. When Elna disappeared, Maeve nearly died.

At Maeve's insistence, Danny goes to medical school, but ends up a landlord and builder like his father. And like him, he also marries the wrong woman, though he remains very involved with his two children. Cyril was a distant father who mostly ignored his family, although it turns out that Cyril was more aware of his children than Danny realized—as was Elna, who unfortunately had not foreseen the coming of Andrea.

Andrea is thoroughly enamored of the Dutch house and its rounded glass front doors, held in place with wrought iron vines. She loves the exquisite ballroom on the third floor, the Delft Blue mantels in the drawing



room, library and master bedroom, which was "said to have been pried out of a castle in Utrecht...to pay a prince's gambling debts."

Unlike the tall, dark Elna, who wears jeans and who is focused on religious matters, Andrea is a short, petite blonde. She is also materialistic and manipulative and wears pantsuits. Before anyone realizes it, she talks Cyril into changing his will, thereby making his successful business, multi-million-dollar Dutch house and all his assets hers.

When Cyril dies from a heart attack a few years after marrying Andrea, she admits her hatred for all things Catholic, refusing to allow Cyril to be buried in a Catholic cemetery because she does not want to "spend eternity" buried beside Catholics. She also fires the servants who raised Danny and Maeve.

She cheats the children (and possibly Elna) out of their rightful inheritance, insisting they fend for themselves. There is speculation as to whether Cyril and Elna are actually divorced, with hints dropped on both sides of the issue. (If they weren't di-



Who are these women who seem like evil and good incarnate? Does one ever know another person? These questions reverberate throughout the puzzle of this novel. 🍇🍇

forced, that would change the inheritance). There is also some question about the family connections of Andrea's two young daughters.

Years later, when Andrea's health deteriorates, one wonders whether Andrea is as vicious as she seems—and whether Elna is a saint or just another goody-two-shoes. And is there a difference? Who are these women who seem like evil and good incarnate? Does one ever know another person? These questions reverberate throughout the puzzle of this novel.

This circuitous plot develops through numerous flashbacks and subtly seeded questions in the storyline—which goes on to just as subtly suggest answers. Some of the answers stare Danny in the face, although he fails to recognize them until much later, when he hears from someone with another perspective.

It is difficult to decode the past, Danny tells Maeve, since it is colored by the perspective of the present. As an adult, Danny puts the idea in a statement that could serve as the novel's theme: "We overlay the present onto the past. We look back through the lens of what we know now, so we're not seeing it as the people we were, we're seeing it as the people we are, and that means the past has been radically altered." Danny realizes just how

altered the past has become when this novel ends on an unexpected note that doesn't make sense—at first.

Diane Scharper has written or edited seven books and teaches memoir and poetry for the Johns Hopkins University Osher Program.

The Burdens of Identity

Identity is at the heart of much of today's political conflicts. In his latest book, *Identity: The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, Francis Fukuyama traces a brief history of how identity came to occupy such a center.

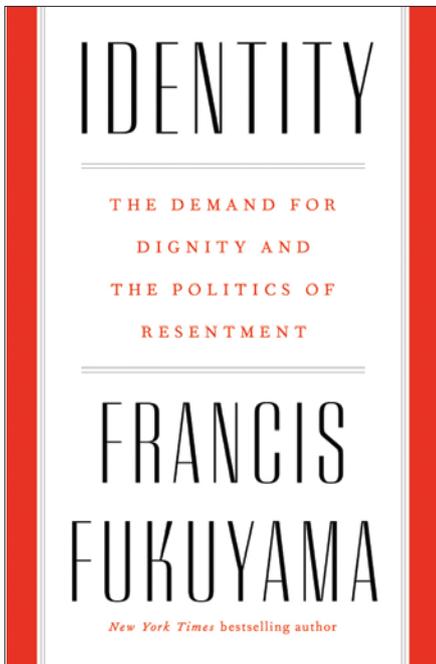
Fukuyama is a political scientist best known for his 1989 essay "The End of History?," later expanded into the book *The End of History and the Last Man*. In it, he argues that with the fall of the Berlin Wall, liberal democracy and the market economy had become the systems of social organization that best satisfy people's needs for social recognition. And lacking any better alternative, liberal democracy and the market economy will henceforth remain for the most part unchallenged as wars will become less frequent.

Since its publication, there has been no shortage of Fukuyama critics. Some have questioned why liberal democracy and capitalism should be the final stage of history, given how much violence and inequality they continue to engender. Others have pointed out how the rise of religious fundamentalisms are threatening liberal democracies.

Yet most critics failed to sufficiently notice the question mark in the title of his original essay and the final section of his book subtitled "The Last Man." In other words, it would be better to see this early work as an interpretative hypothesis of the geopolitical situation at the end of the Cold War rather than a closed thesis. In that last section, Fukuyama considered what future threats to liberal democracies might look like.

One of these threats could come in the figure of an autocrat. The founders of the United States had an intuition of this, Fukuyama notes, when they proposed a "system of checks and balances that would distribute power and block its concentration in a single leader." Also, the market economy provides many business opportunities for overly ambitious persons to channel their quests for power.

Fukuyama did in fact mention Donald J. Trump in *The End of History* "as an example of a fantastically



Identity

The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment

By Francis Fukuyama

Farrar, Straus and Giroux. 240p \$26

ambitious individual whose desire for recognition had been safely channeled into a business (and later an entertainment) career.” But Fukuyama was unable to foresee that all the possibilities offered by a liberal democracy and a market economy would not be enough to quench Mr. Trump’s thirst for even more recognition. In a way, *Identity* is Fukuyama’s attempt to explore the state of liberal democracy and a market economy in the aftermath of Donald Trump’s election to the presidency.

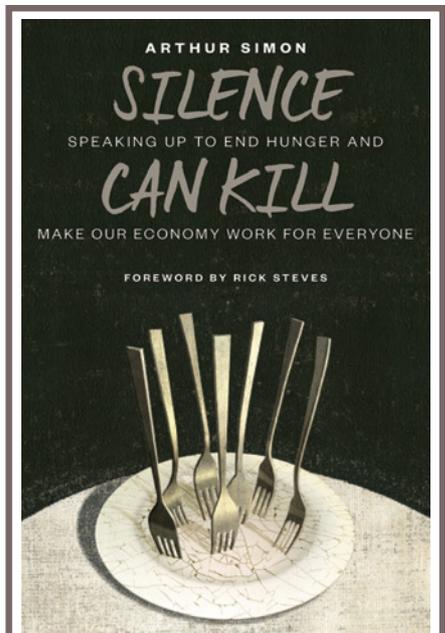
The notion of *identity* brings together those of “authenticity” and “individualism.” In a recent article in **America**, Ronald E. Osborn described Donald Trump as “the president of expressive individualism” and a master at playing the “ethics of authenticity.” In his latest book, Fukuyama traces the history of concepts like “expres-

sive individualism” and “authenticity” to show how they have come to dominate today’s politics.

Identity is a “powerful moral idea” because it presupposes a conflict of values. It “tells us that we have authentic inner selves that are not being recognized and suggests that the whole of external society may be false and repressive.” In other words, modern identity privileges the individual’s capacity to express himself over the demands of tradition or society at large. The desire to authentically express oneself is at the heart of today’s identity politics.

Fukuyama agrees with the Canadian sociologist and philosopher Charles Taylor in inscribing the emergence of modern identity within the larger process of Western secularization. Two key historical figures in this development were Martin Luther and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. “Luther was one of the first Western thinkers to articulate and valorize the inner self over the external social being.” He wanted to be sure that he was “acceptable to God,” but he found that the rites and practices the Catholic Church had to offer “acted only on the outer person.” This led him to set up a dichotomy between the outer and the inner self, with the latter being the true place of “Christian righteousness or freedom.”

Jean-Jacques Rousseau later secularized this inner self and established its priority over social convention. Both Luther and Rousseau played a crucial role in giving rise to the contemporary notion that, to discover one’s true identity, one must break free from tradition and convention. However, with the collapse of a shared religious horizon, the burden of con-



Eerdmans Publishing, July 2019
Paperback, 300 pages

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— E. J. Dionne, Jr.,
Washington Post

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structuring one's identity based on one's chosen values falls entirely on the individual. With the freedom of constructing one's identity without traditional constraints comes a paralyzing anxiety: figuring out how to do this all by yourself.

Fukuyama considers 19th-century nationalisms as the first manifestation of identity politics. Nationalism became for many a refuge against the malaise brought about by industrialization, like the isolation and mechanization of modern urban life. Cultural authenticity thus become a way of feeling *proud* of being part of something great.

Identity politics stems from this tension between individual expression and longing for community. It does this by mobilizing a particular identity's struggle for social recognition.

Human behavior cannot simply be explained by economic motivations, whether they are based on reason or appetite. "Human beings do not just want things that are external to themselves, such as food, drink," writes Fukuyama. "They also crave positive judgments about their worth or dignity."

This desire for recognition poses certain challenges to a given society. If a few people gain greater social recognition than others, then this can wound the pride of those who are not as socially recognized. Because of their belief that "honor or esteem was not due to everyone," aristocratic societies were perhaps better able to channel the flux of rage and pride within their citizens. However, in egalitarian societies, for "every person recognized as superior, far more people are seen as inferior and do not receive any public recognition of their human worth."

On the political left, movements like #MeToo and Black Lives Matter have made a lot of necessary progress in challenging injustices like sexual assault and police brutality. However, this has not prevented people like President Trump from "moving the focus of identity politics from the left, where it was born, to the right, where it is now taking root."

Identity politics thus divides "societies into ever smaller, self-regarding groups." But, by that very same token, the fluidity of modern identity makes it possible "to create identities that are broader and more integrative." This in short is Fukuyama's thesis: We need broader identities rather than narrow ones. "We need to promote creedal national identities built around the foundational ideas of modern liberal democracy, and use public policies to deliberately assimilate newcomers to those identities."

A broad national identity needs to avoid the traps of extreme versions of the right and the left. Whereas the far right tries to forge an identity based on white racial theories and Christianity, the far left comes off as defeatist when it sees racism and discrimination as intrinsic to the country's DNA. Neither, in their extreme versions, helps to construct a national identity capable of successfully assimilating its citizens and immigrants. Moreover, they undermine the foundations of the liberal democratic society in which they live.

*José Dueño is a Jesuit scholastic and a former associate editor at **America**.*

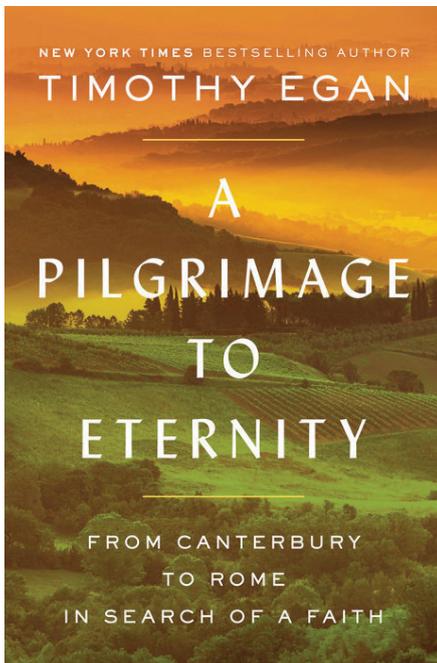
A Pilgrim Soul

In 2016, I accidentally earned a plenary indulgence.

I was in Rome with a group of international journalists studying reporting on religion in turbulent political times and had wandered into St. Peter's Square on my day off. It was the Year of Mercy, and a pilgrim who fulfilled all the qualifications would be granted a plenary indulgence by walking through the special Mercy Door of St. Peter's while reciting prayers with a group.

I Googled the qualifications, did my best to check off the list and started the walk among a group that had traveled from Eastern Europe; but I found the heat and humidity of a Roman September too much to endure. The next day, I decided to skip the indulgence and just walk in to see the church again. However, the security guards waved me through the Mercy Door in front of a group of exhausted and sweaty pilgrims by mistake. I got the indulgence but hardly felt like a pilgrim because I had taken a cab.

The question of what a pilgrimage means in the modern day loops throughout Timothy Egan's *A Pilgrimage to Eternity*. Many modern pilgrims, including nonbelievers, seekers and lapsed believers, still set out on the Camino de Santiago, which Egan acknowledges is what most people think of when they consider a pilgrimage. Egan, however, decides to undertake the longer and lesser-known Via Francigena, which takes him from England to Rome. He also gives himself a bit of an out on the 1,200-mile route, choosing to walk most of it but allowing himself "two wheels, four wheels, or train," or any method that



A Pilgrimage to Eternity
From Canterbury to Rome in Search
of a Faith

By Timothy Egan
Viking, 384p \$28

keeps him on the ground.

Egan has a Jesuit education and writes frequently about the church in his New York Times columns, but he freely admits that he drifted from the Catholic Church years ago. But this trip begins with a desire to meet Pope Francis, whom Egan sees as one of the few hopes the church has during its “worst crisis in half a millennium.” As the book unfolds, it becomes clear that Egan’s stake in that crisis is personal. His family has been directly damaged by the abuse crisis, and his own faith deteriorated as a result. But as another writer of Egan’s generation—Bruce Springsteen—recently put it, “once you’re a Catholic, you’re always a Catholic.” Egan is not so much God-haunted as he is Catholic-haunted.

Egan’s reading material during his pilgrimage speaks to the liminal space he occupies in his faith life. He brings along both St. Augustine and a book by

the late Christopher Hitchens, whose snarky cynicism about religion seems to help Egan keep Augustine’s pious self-loathing in check. And Egan may be a lapsed Catholic, but he begins the book looking for a “stiff shot of no-bullshit spirituality.”

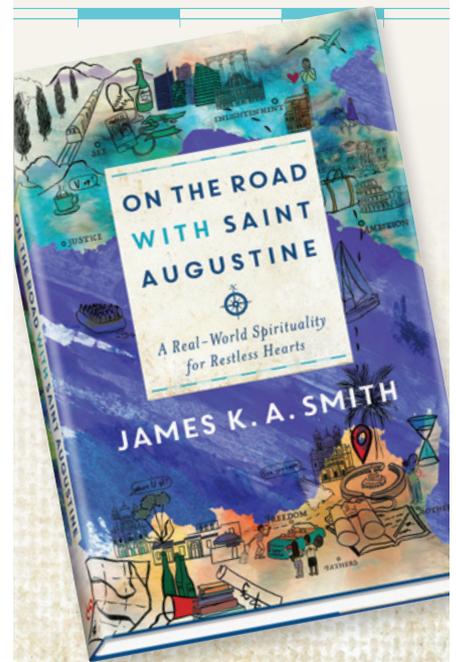
Like many American Catholics, Egan is “lapsed but listening,” and ready to “force the issue.” The pilgrimage will determine whether he is a believer or not.

Without spoiling the conclusion, I can tell you that Egan remains mostly in a liminal space at the end of the book, but as a Jesuit friend once told me, “if we didn’t have doubt, we wouldn’t be human.” The purpose of a pilgrimage may ultimately be to seek God, but more often, we meet ourselves and ultimately have to decide what kind of person we will be upon our return. Egan begins in England and in Chaucer’s *Canterbury*, the Medieval origin of the Via Francigena, but finds that *The Canterbury Tales* itself is too raunchy to be sold in the cathedral gift shop.

Egan’s historical chops are on show throughout his journey. His well-regarded books on Irish and American history have in the past demonstrated his engagement with history as something we grapple with in our everyday lives, but in this book his personal history is interlaced with the journey into the past. His family’s deeply Catholic roots have been severed and starved by clergy abuse, and his long marriage to a Jewish woman has produced two children who, like many American millennials, are agnostic in temperament.

All three of these family members join him for jaunts along the way, providing some breaks in the narrative

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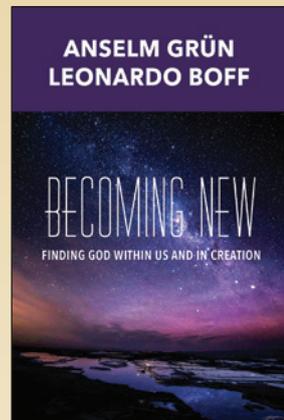
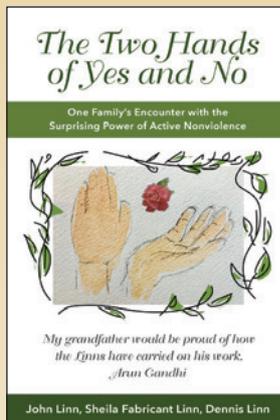
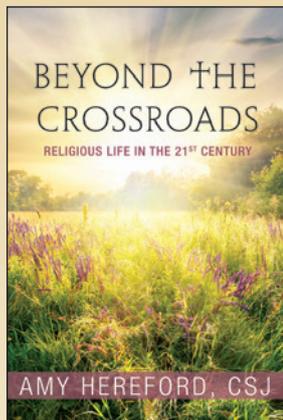
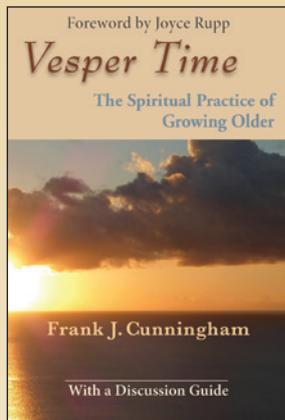
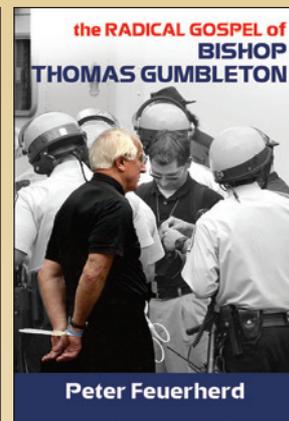
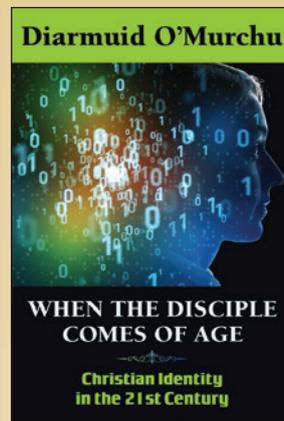
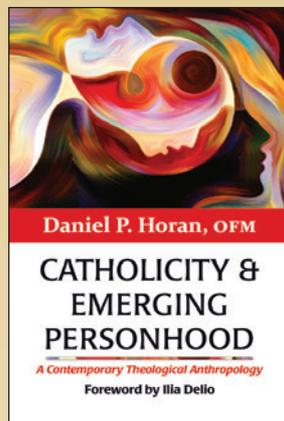
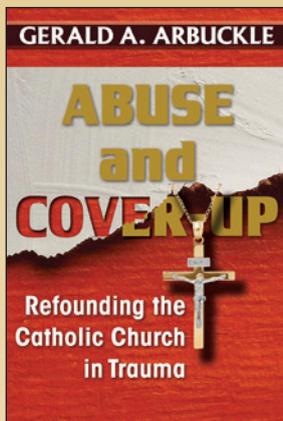
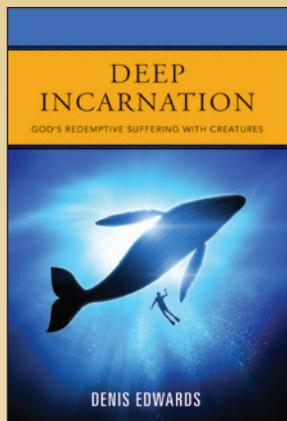
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overview of Europe's Christian history. Depending on a reader's own interests, that overview may occasionally prove somewhat redundant, but Egan is an engaging narrator, aware of the American problems that he has dragged with him to Europe. An exchange with the abbot of a French monastery captures some of this:

"How are things in America?"
"Troubled."
"Why is that?"
"Trump."
"What's wrong with him?"
"Everything."
"I'll show you to your room."

Although the presidency is not the topic of Egan's pilgrimage, the crises the United States is facing at the border and in our churches are inescapable in Europe as well. Egan's route and Europe alike are haunted by the Crusades and the Reformation, and the violence entrenched in European Catholic history is inescapable. European Catholics have for decades been drifting from the church. Like Egan, in a 2016 trip to Europe I saw soaring cathedrals with maybe a dozen people in the pews for Mass, heard the regular reports of immigrants drowning and dying trying to reach European shores and saw the nationalist tides beginning to rise. I too had the experience of walking into poorly attended church services and "feeling like a hemophiliac at a vampire convention," but I regularly repeat that experience here in the United States as well.

So what is truly at stake when it comes to the question of faith today, and how can a pilgrimage

answer the questions that keep arising on such a trip? Or, as Egan asks us and himself, "How can you believe in a savior whose message was peace and passive humility, when the professional promoters of that message were complicit in so much systematic horror?" It is a fair question, and one which no book can really hope to answer adequately. But a pilgrimage is ultimately more about questions than answers.

At the end of the book, Egan, crowded among thousands at a papal audience, looks around and sees not the Catholics who "want a museum for a religion" with "doctrine mortared to the statues," but instead, a mostly non-white, mostly female crowd: the "future of the church, if it can keep from betraying them," pilgrims drawn not by the grandeur of their surroundings but by "something else." Egan does not name that thing, but it is the same thing that keeps him moving throughout the Via Francigena, the same thing that keeps the leaky ocean liner of the Catholic Church afloat and the same thing that motivates the current pope whose humility Egan admires. It's called faith.

Kaya Oakes, a contributing writer for *America*, teaches writing at the University of California, Berkeley, and is the author of *The Nones Are Alright*.

Tripping on Metaphors

By Amit Majmudar

A line is spider
silk cross-linking
an inkling with
another of
its ilk. A line is
a tripwire that
when tripped on
closes a neural
circuit. What detonates
is a significance
that trips
up logic since
metaphor
is to logic
what analogy is
to twins, what psilocybin
is to water
from the faucet
because it
hallucinates
a kinship of some kind,
some never before
seen symmetrical
design of being
between
this love and that fire,
that dagger and this stare,
this night
and that mare. If light
is a metaphor
for truth,
a metaphor
takes a leap of faith
on a dare.
We must take care
to trip on every
metaphor's
nonlinearity
of line.
Falling is
the metaphor that
sends us flying.

Amit Majmudar is a diagnostic nuclear radiologist. His work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *The New Yorker* and *The Best American Poetry 2017*. His newest book is a verse translation of the Bhagavad-Gita, entitled *Godsong*.

Thanking Toni Morrison

She made living in this world more bearable

By Tia Noelle Pratt



When I learned that the Nobel laureate Toni Morrison had died at the age of 88, I was more devastated than I had expected to be. Her presence in this world seemed to make everything our society is enduring a bit more bearable.

Now, it all seems that much harder.

While there are others who are more fluent in her work than I am, she had a profound influence on me. Toni Morrison's work conveyed the pain, sacrifice and trauma that exemplifies so much of the African-American experience—Eva's sacrifice of her leg in *Sula*, the pain of racism that gives way to self-loathing in *The Bluest Eye*, and the violent trauma of slavery in *Beloved*, a trauma so painful that a mother would murder her child rather than consign her to such a fate.

In 1993, Morrison became the first black woman to win a Nobel Prize in any category. Before #RepresentationMatters became a part of our lexicon, Morrison's work provided black people, especially black women, with representation. As an editor, she amplified the voices of writers like Wole Soyinka, Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Davis and Gayl Jones. As a writer, her novels allowed African-Americans to see themselves and their experiences reflected in literature and to see how those experiences could be celebrated and appreciated at the highest levels.

The way she addressed the themes of race and racism in the African-American experience has influ-

enced how I live my life and choose to be in the world, as well as my work on systemic racism in the Catholic Church and its impact on black Catholic identity. Morrison once described the function of racism as "distraction": "[K]now the function, the very serious function of racism, which is distraction. It keeps you from doing your work. It keeps you explaining over and over again, your reason for being....None of that is necessary."

In television interviews—notably with white interviewers—she rejected as "illegitimate" questions that presumed her work should or needed to center the "white gaze" and called out the racism that is inherent in such questions.

For the 20 years that I have been researching and writing about systemic racism and black Catholics, I have found that more often than not, I am expected to juxtapose the experiences of African-American Catholics and those of Catholics from various white ethnic groups. I have largely gotten away from that approach but still often find myself distracted from celebrating black Catholic identity and expression solely on its own. In that way, I have not lived up to the standard that Morrison set. When I find myself not living up to that standard, I remind myself how I refuse to succumb to the trope of exoticizing black Catholics in my work. This form of the white gaze only serves to center whiteness, and that is not why I do my work. I do it to center black

Catholic identity and expression.

During an appearance on "The Oprah Winfrey Show," Morrison talked about writing her "to-do" list years earlier. The list was so long that she took out a second piece of paper. Once she realized even that would not be enough, she decided to take another approach. She took another piece of paper and decided to write down "the things I needed to do or else I would die." She came up with only two things: be a good mother to her sons and write books. Everything else would be in the service of those two things.

While I was in graduate school, I once found myself reaching for a third piece of paper for my weekly "to-do" list. I was suddenly reminded of Morrison's appearance on "Oprah." In following her example, I also came up with two things I needed to do or else I would die: finish my doctoral degree and write about black Catholics. Everything else I did would be in the service of those two things.

It would take several more years of work that sometimes seemed futile, but I did finish that degree. And today, I research and write about black Catholics.

Tia Noelle Pratt is a sociologist of religion and the scholar-in-residence at the Aquinas Center in Philadelphia. She is currently working on a book about systemic racism in the Catholic Church and African-American Catholic identity.

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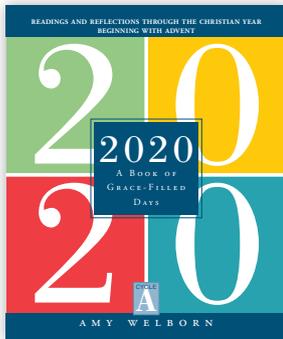
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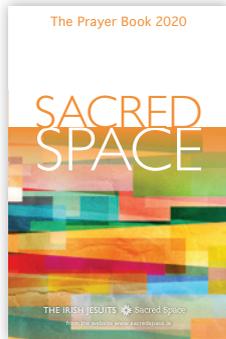


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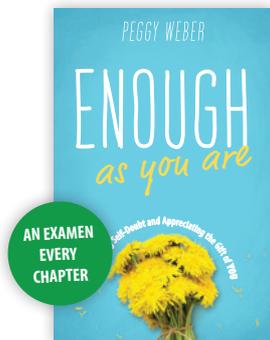
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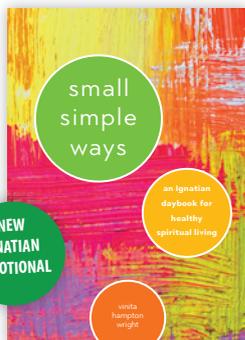
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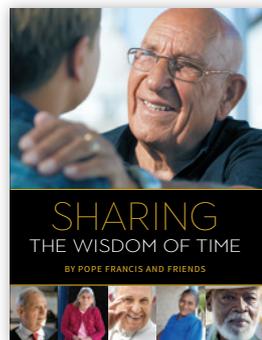
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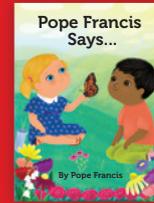
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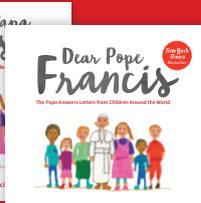
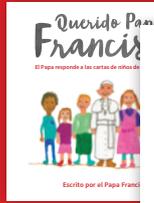
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