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“Postmodern Gnostics”

from *The Culture of Interpretation:
Christian Faith and the Postmodern World*

An essay about Joe DiMaggio’s remarkable 56-game hitting streak may seem at first to be an unlikely place to encounter a gnostic meditation, especially when the author of the essay is the eminent Harvard biologist Stephen Jay Gould, a renowned scholar in his specialty and an accomplished essayist with a wide audience outside his discipline. Yet the more one ponders the matter, the more sense it makes that a work by Gould—who is both a thoroughgoing naturalist and a keen moralist—might give evidence of gnostic influences. For the gnostics of the first centuries of the Christian era, the earthly life of men and women was cursed by an irreconcilable conflict between the sordid bodily world and the splendid heavenly realms. For modern naturalists such as Gould, the conflict can be just as dramatic—only now the split is between the bleak realities of matter in motion and the power of language to satisfy our longings and calm our fears.

In his essay, Gould complains that most of us cannot understand the “truly special character” of DiMaggio’s record, because we are unable “to grasp the workings of random processes and patterning in nature.” Because we “cannot bear” the “willy-nilly” workings of nature, we insist on concocting “comforting answers.” In Gould’s words, “our error lies not in the perception of pattern but in automatically imbuing pattern with

meaning, especially with meaning that can bring us comfort, or dispel confusion.” In ways that Gould considers both dishonest and cowardly, humans have persistently “tried to impose [the] ‘heart’s desire’ upon the actual earth and its largely random patterns.” To be intellectually rigorous, then, instead of distinguishing DiMaggio’s streak “merely by quantity along a continuum of courage,” we ought to see it “as a unique assault upon the otherwise unblemished record of Dame Probability.” There is no deeper meaning than that in the streak.¹

If that is the case, why do we continue to impose order upon randomness, when we ought to know better? Gould concludes that “our minds are not built (for whatever reason) to work by the rules of probability, though *these rules clearly govern our universe*” (emphasis mine). When confronted by the meaninglessness processes of natural life, our minds “match to type.” That is, they extract what they take to be the essence of an entity and arrange all judgments about it “by their degree of similarity to this assumed type.” Yet the problem is that that type exists nowhere except in the mind of the one who perceives it; the order we see when we

¹ Gould, *Bully for Brontosaurus: Reflections in Natural History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), pp. 467-68.

“match to type” is one that we have imposed upon the realities we have examined. In short, in the world as Gould envisions it we are caught between the inexorable, unfeeling laws of matter and logic, on the one hand, and our instinctive need to fabricate meaning, on the other.²

Gould’s argument represents a very sophisticated form of the ancient heresy of gnosticism. The term is derived from the Greek word for knowledge, *gnosis*. According to the gnostic sects in the early Christian era, the gospel is a special or secret form of knowledge that imparts salvation to those fortunate enough to have hold of it. Gnosticism posited a sharp dualism between matter and spirit and promised deliverance through knowledge of that dualism. In most cases, the redemption provided by *gnosis* was depicted as some form of release from the bondage of the body to the freedom of the spiritual realm. The gnostic considered embodiment, rather than sin, to be the primary cause of human suffering and frustration.

In the history of the church—a history that Stephen Jay Gould would clearly prefer to leave behind—no heresy has proved more stubbornly resilient than gnosticism. In the early centuries of the Christian age, gnosticism struggled with orthodoxy for the very soul of the faith. In later centuries, up through the modern age, the gnostic impulse has repeatedly resurfaced in church and culture. Although it has never been the official position of the church, the gnostic viewpoint has always posed a threat and remained a temptation to orthodoxy. And in the past two hundred years, it has reemerged as a dominant intellectual and cultural force, even as the public influence of Christian faith has waned. When read in theological terms, the birth and flourishing of “the culture of interpretation” would appear to be one sign of a powerful resurgence of gnosticism in a particular contemporary guise.

The Gnostic Impulse

To speak of the rebirth of gnosticism in contemporary culture is one way of coming to theological terms with the moral and intellectual world of modernity and postmodernity. What are we to

² Gould, *Bully for Brontosaurus*, p. 469.

make of the history outlined in the first chapters of this book? Should the Christian who has a concern for justice and human dignity welcome the advance of secularity, the triumph of inwardness, and the celebration of human autonomy? Or should he or she condemn it as a sign of the triumph of godlessness? Is there a middle ground between a simple accommodation to the modern temperament and a thoughtless rejection of its claims?³

In one form or another, such questions have perplexed Christians increasingly in the centuries since the Reformation. In the nineteenth century, Friedrich Schleiermacher strove to define the Christian faith in ways that would allow educated persons to believe in God without being affronted by irrelevant doctrines of divine sovereignty and the implausible realm of the miraculous. In the next century, Schleiermacher’s most brilliant theological critic and successor, Karl Barth, rejected the romantic theologian’s apologetic approach to the gospel. Barth believed that Schleiermacher had conceded far too much to human nature and unregenerate culture; he charged that in the theology of Schleiermacher there remains no “ultimate opposition between God and man, between Christ and the Christian.”⁴ In turn, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, one of Barth’s most brilliant theological heirs, faulted both Barth and Schleiermacher—Barth for having done too little to make revelation comprehensi-

³ Paul Tillich devoted himself to the task of finding a middle ground. Consider, for instance, his answers to the question of the proper role of “*nomos* or the law of life”: “Autonomy asserts that man as the bearer of universal reason is the source and measure of culture and religion—that he is his own law. Heteronomy asserts that man, being unable to act according to universal reason, must be subjected to a law, strange and superior to him. Theonomy asserts that the superior law is, at the same time, the innermost law of man himself, rooted in the divine ground which is man’s own ground” (Tillich, *The Protestant Era*, trans. James Luther Adams [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957], pp. 56-57). For all his efforts to reconcile authority and autonomy, however, Tillich ended up promoting a standard romantic argument about the relationship between the self and God.

⁴ Barth, *Protestant Thought: From Rousseau to Ritschl*, trans. Brian Cozens (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969), p. 354.

ble to modern men and women, and Schleiermacher for having allowed the world to define the very gospel itself.

One way to resolve the question of the relationship of the church to culture is to think dialectically of the needs of the church at the present time. Given the direction of church and culture in the contemporary world, what word of reproof or challenge do they need to hear? It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the needs of the late twentieth century are markedly different from those of the early nineteenth century, when Schleiermacher was at work. If the danger two centuries ago was that of a Christian faith become irrelevant, the present risk is that Christ may become so completely identified with the concerns of the present age that his person is rendered superfluous and his authority denied. When the eccentric exegetical practices of the radical Puritans have become the common habits of a therapeutic age, then the church and world need to hear something more than preaching about the "Christ within."

If, as Schleiermacher claims, the doctrines of the Christian faith are only "conceptions of states of mind of Christian piety, represented in speech," then when the human mind changes, those doctrines must change to be in accord with it. According to Barth, in Schleiermacher's view "theology, if only because it is merely the human word, . . . is free, capable of transformation, and relatively non-binding—not bound in respect to its subject."⁵ At first glance, it may seem surprising that Schleiermacher's romantic view of Christian truth is remarkably like that of the poststructural pragmatist Richard Rorty. After all, Schleiermacher was a devout Christian who committed himself to proclaiming the person and work of Christ, while Richard Rorty is an avowed agnostic who finds nothing lasting or useful in the language of Christian belief. The longer one looks at these two figures, however, the more the line from Schleiermacher to Rorty appears to be simply yet another path wending its way from the heights of romantic inwardness to the valleys of pragmatic preference. Schleiermacher desperately wanted to make Christ relevant to the "cultured despisers"; but as we have seen, for

Richard Rorty a completely relevant Christ is a useless Christ, a needless verbal construct we would do well to discard once it no longer serves our purposes.

To understand the connections between postmodern pragmatism and ancient gnosticism, we need to realize that, although it would be false to claim that there has ever been a unified body of gnostic belief, there was even in the early years of the church a "common stock of ideas" behind the myriad forms of the gnostic heresy. Most gnostics were dualists who established "an infinite chasm between the spiritual world and the world of matter" and attributed the creation of the world to an inferior deity, rather than to the "God of light and goodness."⁶ To the ancient gnostics it was *embodiment* that was the source of evil and affliction in human life, rather than *sin* or the waywardness of the will. In the gnostic view, the human spirit longs for release from the world of matter, and according to most forms of gnostic belief it gains that release by acquiring a secret knowledge or special revelation.

At least in part, many of the doctrinal developments in the early church may be seen as efforts to check the spread of gnostic influence. Through the doctrine of the Trinity, the early councils affirmed that God the Creator and God the Redeemer are one. In the consolidation of the canon, the church withstood gnostic attempts to divide the Scriptures, especially the attempts by Marcion to separate what he took to be the enlightened God of Jesus and the New Testament from the barbaric deity of Israel and the Old Testament. The doctrines of sin and grace, especially as they were elaborated by Augustine, undermined the gnostic explanations of evil and creation. And the public nature of Christian proclamation served to dissipate the power of gnostic claims to possess a secret, superior tradition.

Yet in spite of the official success of orthodoxy in its conflicts with gnosticism, the gnostic heresy has continued to trouble the church throughout its history. In its Manichean variety, for example, gnosticism has had considerable influence on Protestant sectarian movements, including fundamentalism. As we will see in a later

⁵ Barth, *Protestant Thought*, p. 335.

⁶ J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), p. 26.

chapter on Christianity and the arts, fundamentalists have historically emphasized the separation of Christ and his followers from the world. H. Richard Niebuhr explains that throughout history radical Christians have combined a “rejection of culture . . . with a suspicion of nature and nature’s God.” They have been tempted to divide “the world into the material realm governed by a principle opposed to Christ and a spiritual realm guided by the spiritual God” and to equate redemption with release from the body.⁷

From the Montanists of the second century to modern fundamentalists, then, radical Christians have been prone to conceive of grace as the negation of nature and culture. In early Christian history, gnosticism led to the disparagement of the body, the Scriptures, and the life of the church. In the Western world since the Enlightenment, the gnostic impulse has prompted many to dismiss the idea of an order inherent in nature and to spurn that which has been given to men and women in their cultural and intellectual traditions.⁸ It is not so much embodiment that contemporary gnostics take to be the source of evil as it is the embeddedness of the self within the limits of nature and the constrictions of society.

Gnosis and Enlightenment

While fundamentalism and perfectionistic sects have made strategic accommodations to gnosticism in the twentieth century, one modern cultural movement has been unabashed in its embrace of gnostic dualism. I am referring to the complex process of the *secularization of the spirit*, which is at the heart of both the Enlightenment and the romantic movement. In this process of secularization, “traditional Christian concepts” are retained, but they are “demythologized, conceptualized,” and the individual “subject, mind, or spirit . . . [becomes] primary and takes over the initiative and functions which had

once been the prerogatives of deity.”⁹ In earlier chapters we traced specific historical sources, particularly in philosophy, literature, and the theory of interpretation, in an effort to understand the origins of romanticism and the modern movements it has spawned. In considering gnosticism in this chapter, we are looking at a form of thought that both is a perennial source of temptation to the Christian and forms a particular challenge for the Christian student of contemporary culture.

In the introductory chapter of his survey of nineteenth-century Protestant theology, Karl Barth provides an insightful analysis of this process of the secularization of the spirit that originates in the Enlightenment.¹⁰ As he concludes his survey of eighteenth-century intellectual life, Barth discusses the thought and character of Leibniz. Barth considers this German philosopher and mathematician to represent the essence of Enlightenment humanism. Leibniz’s philosophy of the *monad* is for Barth the epitome of the eighteenth century’s view of the place of the self in the universe. “This simple and utterly individual, indeed unique spiritual substance is the fountain-head of all reality.” In the world of the monad—as in the lofty worlds of Enlightenment rationalism and romantic intuitionism—it was “as if only God and the soul existed” and “the physical and the moral evil in the world which [man] imagines to be actively opposed to him contain in truth nothing positive, but are, so to speak, only a shadow fleeing before the light.”¹¹

To the person of the Enlightenment, scientific discoveries had disclosed that the natural universe is more physically complex and less morally purposeful than the universe had been conceived to be in the ancient world and Middle Ages. The earth was no longer to be seen as the center of the universe but was instead a “grain of dust among countless others in the universe,” as Barth puts it.¹² Some were saddened by this *disenchanted* of the world, this rendering of the universe into a virtual mechanism. For instance,

⁷ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), p. 81.

⁸ On the subject of the relevance of gnosticism for an understanding of the modern world, see two very different works: Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, 2nd ed., revised (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), pp. 320-40; and Philip J. Lee, *Against the Protestant Gnostics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

⁹ M. H. Abrams, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1971), p. 91.

¹⁰ Barth, *Protestant Thought*, pp. 11-57.

¹¹ Barth, *Protestant Thought*, pp. 56-57.

¹² Barth, *Protestant Thought*, p. 15.

the French philosopher and mathematician Blaise Pascal, a devout Christian, found himself deeply distressed as he pondered the mechanical universe of Cartesian science and Copernican astronomy. “The eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me,” he wrote of the demystified heavens of early modern physics. To Pascal, the loss of a finite and animated universe was tragic because it left the yearning soul lonely in the midst of an indifferent natural order.

Pascal was lonely because he longed to encounter responsiveness and intelligibility in the natural world; but for those who sought power through the mastery of nature, the disenchanted universe of science offered unbounded opportunities for the exercise of their wills. Pascal may have been humbled and saddened by the discovery of the earth’s astronomical insignificance, but many educated persons of the eighteenth century took these discoveries as heartening indications of the central place of humanity in the scheme of things. “No, man is all the greater for this,” Barth writes, “for he was able to discover this revolutionary truth by his own resources and to think it abstractly.” The irony of the Enlightenment and romanticism is that “the geocentric picture of the universe was replaced as a matter of course by the anthropocentric.”¹³

The hero of the anthropocentric world became the free and powerful self. Under the program of the Enlightenment, and later in romanticism, that self sought to assume the authority once granted to God in historic theism. Typical of this revolution in thought is the dismissal of the gods near the end of Walt Whitman’s epic of inwardness, *Song of Myself*. Whitman disparages “the old cautious hucksters”—including Jehovah, Zeus, and Allah—who “did the work of their days” but are now a hindrance: “They bore mites as for unfledg’d birds who have now to rise and fly and sing for themselves.”¹⁴ Having grown into their enlightened adulthood, men and women have come to recognize that the source of all divinity lies within. And thus, according to Whitman and countless

other writers of the Enlightenment and romantic movements, if the natural order seems dead and void of purpose, then the rational mind or the imaginative human spirit must bring it to life; if history seems disordered and unjust, then reason and the will must alter the course of history and redeem the time.

The view of the self in the Enlightenment tradition was, in important respects, gnostic. To be sure, the dualism formulated at the beginning of the modern period did not oppose a spiritual God to an evil natural world; rather, it posited a vast chasm between the divine self and the oppressive lifelessness of nature and tradition. Whether in the rational faculties of the disciplined mind or in the intuitive powers of the creative spirit, the Enlightenment tradition honored the disembodied power of the self. As we saw in an earlier chapter, at the height of Western optimism—in the decades immediately surrounding the French Revolution—it seemed that nothing was beyond the power of this self as it worked its will upon the world. In a strong statement of the romantic ideal, William Wordsworth gave voice to what had become the common hopes of his day for the untrammelled self:

Paradise, and groves
Elysian, Fortunate Fields—like those of old
Sought in the Atlantic Main—why should
they be
A history only of departed things,
Or a mere fiction of what never was?
For the discerning intellect of Man,
When wedded to this goodly universe
In love and holy passion, shall find these
A simple produce of the common day.¹⁵

Like the gnostics of the early Christian centuries, the philosophers of the Enlightenment and the poets of romanticism took offense at the historical particularity of Christian belief. “Accidental historical truths can never become proofs for necessary truths of reason,” wrote Gotthold Less-

¹³ Barth, *Protestant Thought*, pp. 15-16.

¹⁴ Whitman, *Song of Myself*, in *Whitman: Complete Poetry and Collected Prose*, ed. Justin Kaplan (New York: Library of America, 1982), p. 233.

¹⁵ Wordsworth, preface to *The Excursion*, in *Wordsworth: Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson, revised by Ernest de Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), p. 755.

ing in the eighteenth century.¹⁶ And in complaining to a group of divinity students in 1838, Emerson argued that “historical Christianity” had mistakenly preached “not the doctrine of the soul, but an exaggeration of the personal, the positive, the ritual.” Instead of dwelling “with noxious exaggeration about the *person* of Jesus,” Emerson said, the church should proclaim Christ’s faith in the power of “every man to expand to the full circle of the universe.”¹⁷

The Fall of the Enlightened Self

In any number of ways, the intellectual history of the past two centuries might be read as a record of the initial boundless expansion of the Enlightenment self and its later severe contraction. In recent decades, any number of works have sought to document the course of its decline. These works have come from individuals of widely divergent interests, training, and commitments. For instance, four distinctly different books, recently published within a year of each other, have taken direct aim upon the Enlightenment view of the self. While they have very different subjects, each lodges sharp complaints against the Enlightenment self and implicitly challenges the “gnostic tradition” of modernity. Taken together, they are representative of a major contemporary reappraisal of the Enlightenment and the romantic movement.¹⁸

In *Continental Philosophy Since 1750: The Rise and Fall of the Self*, for example, Robert

Solomon attacks the Enlightenment self through the use of a relatively simple thesis. His argument is that the great discovery of the eighteenth century was the “transcendental self . . . whose nature and ambitions were unprecedentedly arrogant, presumptuously cosmic, and consequently mysterious.” In trying to account for the appearance of this self in the Enlightenment, Solomon describes three general characteristics of the Enlightenment—“its humanism, rationality, and universalism.” At its core, the Enlightenment held to a bedrock faith in the ability of the self to discover universal, binding truths of science, politics, and morality. Since it conceived of human nature as essentially rational, the Enlightenment could claim that every free individual would reach similar conclusions about the most crucial matters of civic, moral, and intellectual life. “Thus the belief in universal reason becomes coupled to a confidence in individual *autonomy*—the ability of every human being to come to the right conclusions.”¹⁹

The serene Enlightenment faith in the power of the isolated individual is a subject that has been treated in depth by the moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre in several books written in the past decade. Although half of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* is given over to an often brilliant exploration of Homer, Aristotle, Augustine, and Aquinas, MacIntyre’s primary concern is with what he terms the “Liberal tradition of the Enlightenment.” According to MacIntyre, the major philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, like the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Continental philosophers whom Solomon discusses, held “that the appearance of variation and disagreement in moral judgment between different cultural and social orders is an illusion.”²⁰ Beneath the superficial differences separating individuals and cultures, there is a common moral wisdom available to all who have been freed from the tyranny of particularity and circumstance. In typical Enlightenment fashion, the Scottish philosophers disparaged tradition and lauded instead acts of isolated moral reflection.

¹⁶ Lessing, quoted in Barth, *Protestant Thought*, p. 137.

¹⁷ Emerson, “The Divinity School Address,” in *Emerson: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte (New York: Library of America, 1983), pp. 80-81.

¹⁸ One of these books, Robert Solomon’s *Continental Philosophy Since 1750: The Rise and Fall of the Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), is a work in the history of philosophy; the second, Alasdair MacIntyre’s *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), is an analysis of Western philosophical traditions and contemporary moral reasoning; the third book is a collection of essays by Wendell Berry entitled *Home Economics* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1987); and the fourth book is Richard Wilbur’s *New and Collected Poems* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988).

¹⁹ Solomon, *Continental Philosophy Since 1750*, pp. 4, 9, 11.

²⁰ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* p. 330.

In seeking to explain the theological significance of the Enlightenment, H. Richard Niebuhr writes that in the central cultural developments of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries what had long been “heresy became the new orthodoxy.” In many different figures of the age, the distinctions between Christ and human culture were obscured or openly denied as these individuals embraced “Christ as the hero of manifold culture.” Locke, Kant, Jefferson, and others sought to make the Christian faith a matter of perfect rationality and plausibility. Like gnostics in the early church, the rationalists, empiricists, and romantics of the age “sought to disentangle the Gospel from its involvement with barbaric and outmoded Jewish notions about God and history; to raise Christianity from the level of belief to that of intelligent knowledge, and so to increase its attractiveness and power.”²¹ The question of the deity of Jesus is irrelevant, Jefferson wrote in 1803, because what is important about him is that he promoted “universal philanthropy . . . to all mankind, gathering all into one family, under the bonds of love, charity, peace, common wants and common aids.”²²

The captains of the Enlightenment and romanticism believed that it would be possible to maintain the moral ballast of Christian practice while jettisoning the theological cargo of Christian belief. As MacIntyre puts it, they were eager to free the self “from the contingency and particularity of tradition” and confident of their ability to discover clear standards of truth and right action. As a pious German Lutheran, Immanuel Kant believed that, in order to discover the truth, he did not even need to leave his “provincial town of Königsberg, insisting that in its busy port he had the opportunity to observe all of humanity.”²³ After all, if the universal structures of knowledge are implanted in all minds, and if the deepest moral principles are self-evident, the rational person does not need to travel anywhere else—in time or in space—to discover the truth.

²¹ Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, pp. 91, 86.

²² Jefferson to Dr. Benjamin Rush, 21 April 1803, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), p. 1125.

²³ Solomon, *Continental Philosophy Since 1750*, p. 7.

Over the past century and a half, the collapse of the Enlightenment program has been precipitous and all but complete. The events of history—including the brutal realities of the Napoleonic wars, slavery and civil war in America, the trauma of the Great War, and the unspeakable horrors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima—have helped to topple the imperial self from its throne. In the nineteenth century, Kierkegaard scorned the palatial pretense of faith in a universal rationality and inevitable progress; Marx attacked what he took to be the oppressive rule of the bourgeois individual in the West; and Nietzsche mocked his culture for its having contrived to seek pleasure and peace at the right hand of the divine father whom, in effect, it had already slain.

If the realities of history and the radical critiques of philosophy have not completely enfeebled the imperial self, Solomon claims, then recent developments in theories of knowledge and interpretation provide further compelling proof of the bankruptcy of the Enlightenment ideal. In the final chapter of *Continental Philosophy Since 1750*, for example, Solomon describes the work of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida as a “wholesale rejection of the transcendental pretence . . . [and] its expansive sense of self, its confidence in our knowledge, its a priori assurance that all people everywhere are ultimately like us.” For Solomon, poststructuralism may be either the first hint of a new brand of philosophy, which would be post-Christian and post-Enlightenment, or “‘just more of the same,’ a final, negative expression of the old transcendental pretence.” In either case, the poststructuralist critique of modern thought provides strong evidence of the fact “that the intellect is prone to self-aggrandizement, and that intellectual arrogance will always take a fall.”²⁴

Unlike Solomon, MacIntyre does not employ poststructuralist arguments to press his points about the demise of the Enlightenment self. Instead, he argues that the Enlightenment program may be judged to have failed by its own standards. If the appeal “to genuinely universal, tradition-independent norms . . . was and is the pro-

²⁴ Solomon, *Continental Philosophy Since 1750*, pp. 194, 196, 202.

ject of modern liberal, individualist society,” he writes, then

the most cogent reasons that we have for believing that the hope of a tradition-independent rational universality is an illusion derive from the history of that project. For in the course of that history liberalism, which began as an appeal to alleged principles of shared rationality against what was felt to be the tyranny of tradition, has itself been transformed into a tradition whose continuities are partly defined by the interminability of the debate over such principles.²⁵

Liberal individualism, the child of the Enlightenment, has become a tradition of disparaging the value of tradition. Yet having claimed that it would uncover universal standards for truth, that tradition has become mired in endless disputes about the very ideals it initially set out to identify, clarify, and elaborate. The self that was to break out of the imprisoning confines of prejudice and discover universal truth now finds itself trapped within the cells of individual perception. With its epistemological and ethical claims discredited, that Enlightenment self seems to have before it a limited number of options. It may attempt to justify the dismissal of truth by celebrating the centrality of preference and the primacy of desire, or it may attempt to restore confidence in nature and revelation as sources of truth.

After the Fall

If the Enlightenment and romantic self has been dramatically weakened, how does one respond to that fact? That question seems to preoccupy Solomon and MacIntyre. Does one try to prop up the transcendent self so that it can do further work in the culture, or does one accept its demise and improvise solutions for use in a world in which final questions can no longer be answered? Or, perhaps, is it possible to find something profoundly constructive in the very fact

that the self is situated in nature and history? As vital as such questions are for anyone in the culture of the West, they are especially pertinent to Christians in America. Because of the pervasive influence of the Enlightenment upon American culture and the specific importance of romanticism to nineteenth-century American evangelicalism, contemporary Christians have much at stake in the debate about the Enlightenment self.

For his part, Robert Solomon prescribes as an antidote to the overdose of self represented by the “transcendental pretence” a large dose of pragmatism of the kind produced by the likes of William James, John Dewey, and Richard Rorty. In the final paragraph of *Continental Philosophy Since 1750*, Solomon calls for a “perfectly modest sense of self.” In his words, “the lesson of the transcendental pretence is that in order to be human we do not need to be more than human.”²⁶ Solomon’s suggestions resemble those of Rorty and others who are inclined to view intellectual life not as a quest for truth but as a means of escaping boredom and catastrophe through unending “conversation.” In the postmodern philosophy that Solomon promotes, gnosticism survives in a sophisticated form. Unlike the heretics of the early church, Solomon’s postmodern theorist neither offers access to the secret truths of the world of pure spirit nor promotes the romantic vision of the self’s power to transform history and the natural order. Instead, he or she preaches the gospel of language; its saving message is that language does not lead us to any secret truths or havens of beauty and power but rather is itself the only place of safety and delight in a hostile world. In contemporary theory, the ironic, playful consolations of language are the postmodern equivalent of a gnostic heaven in which weary souls may find rest.

To the postmodern pragmatism espoused by Solomon, Rorty, and others, MacIntyre offers a sharp rejoinder. He holds that the power of their highly subjective perspectivism derives from the “inversion of certain central Enlightenment positions concerning truth and rationality.” The proponents of “post-Enlightenment relativism and perspectivism claim that if the Enlightenment

²⁵ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* p. 335.

²⁶ Solomon, *Continental Philosophy Since 1750*, p. 202.

conceptions of truth and rationality cannot be sustained, theirs is the only possible alternative."²⁷ Faced with the demise of the quest for certainty, they cannot entertain the thought of truth as something other than indubitable knowledge acquired by a reasoning self. Like their enlightened ancestors, the contemporary pragmatic conversationalists cannot conceive of "the kind of rationality possessed by traditions," MacIntyre argues. Because they are tied implicitly to a view of history as progress, the pragmatic poststructuralists reject the idea that truth might reside in traditions that have been repressed, neglected, or forgotten and that stand in need of recuperation.²⁸

Each in his own way, Wendell Berry and Richard Wilbur celebrate order in nature and seek to bring dormant tradition to life. Their essays and poetry show an abiding concern with the fate of the self in the contemporary world. In addition, their work gives evidence of strong sympathy for Christian understanding, if not an explicit commitment to Christian belief. Like MacIntyre, Berry and Wilbur discover grace in the givens of life and reject the gnostic detachment of the self from the traditions of the past, the communities of the present, and the mysteries of the creation.

Though there are significant differences between them on a number of points, MacIntyre, Berry, and Wilbur desire to imagine how Western men and women might regain the ability to conceive of the given worlds of nature and moral history as signs of grace rather than as threats of bondage. They are aware of the reluctance of postmodern theorists to respond favorably to orders that they discover rather than impose; furthermore, to MacIntyre, Berry, and Wilbur, that unwillingness is as much an ethical dilemma as it is an epistemological problem. Might it not be a tragic pride in our own godlike powers, they ask,

²⁷ MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* p. 353.

²⁸ Such efforts at recuperation are decidedly different from the goals of Heidegger, who does not seek to recuperate the authority of the Bible or the life of the church but desires instead to recover "the question of Being." To Heidegger, the history of Christian theology is part of the larger history of the error that is Western metaphysics.

that makes us reluctant to acknowledge that truth is imparted to us as well as constructed by us?

Berry addresses directly the relationship between pride and knowledge in a "Letter to Wes Jackson," which serves as the introductory chapter of *Home Economics*. He begins the chapter by quoting another writer describing the passage of raindrops through trees into the soil of a forest. The drops "pass in random fashion through an imaginary plane above the forest canopy," the quoted essay explains, are intercepted by the leaves and branches and sent to the ground in "distinctive . . . patterns," and filter into the soil, eventually leaving the ecosystem as they "entered it, in randomized fashion."²⁹

Berry questions the use of the word *random* in this context. Does it mean "a verifiable condition or a limit of perception?" That is, can we prove that order does not exist, or is our failure to detect it a sign of our creaturely limitations? Berry concludes that *random* indicates a limit of perception, for "pattern is verifiable by limited information, whereas the information required to verify randomness is unlimited." For the sake of accuracy, then, the passage "should have said that rainwater moves from mystery through pattern back into mystery." When we call the mystery of life "'randomness' or 'chance' or a 'fluke,'" asserts Berry, we are taking "charge of it on behalf of those who do not respect pattern. To call the unknown 'random' is to plant the flag by which to colonize and exploit the known."³⁰

Indeed, for many writers since the romantic age, the claim of randomness in nature has been not a cause for despair but a call to action. The greater the disorder in nature and history, the greater the power of artists as they create beauty and pattern where none existed before. Through the possibilities inherent in the vocabulary of any language, artists may create both the appearance of chaos and the illusion of their power to impose order. It is a heroic tale that has been told countless times in the Western world since the romantic period—the saga of the bankrupt state of creation being replenished with surplus funds from the rich vaults of the artist's spirit. As Nietzsche put it, "One enriches everything out of

²⁹ Berry, *Home Economics*, p. 3.

³⁰ Berry, *Home Economics*, pp. 3–4.

one's own abundance." The creative person "transforms things until they mirror his power—until they are reflections of his perfection. This *compulsion* to transform into the perfect is—art."³¹

In *Standing By Words*, Berry quotes a poet who maintains that the fear of chaos originates with "people who get up every morning at eight o'clock, teach an Aesthetic Theory class at 10, get the department mail at twelve o'clock, give a graduate student exam in the afternoon, go home and have two drinks before dinner." To this, Berry responds: "Maybe so. But it seems to me more likely that the *praise* of chaos must come from people whose lives are so safely organized."³² Like St. George slaying the dragon, the academic poets mount an assault upon chaos to prove their heroic worth. Unable to find any stories of epic stature in a disenchanting world, the artists make their own activity the heroic drama, as their art risks all to slay the dragon of the void.

If it is randomness that we encounter in nature, Berry argues, then we do indeed need the power of knowledge to bring order out of chaos. But if it is mystery that we confront, "then knowledge is relatively small, and the ancient program is the right one: Act on the basis of ignorance." To act in this manner is to recognize that failure and error are lively possibilities and that "second chances are desirable." On the other hand, a cultural activity that is "knowledge-based and up against randomness . . . conforms exactly to what the ancient[s] . . . understood as evil or hubris. Both the Greeks and the Hebrews told us to watch out for humans who assume that *they* make all the patterns."³³

The temptation to hubris is particularly great for those who use language with grace and force and whose sense of power grows as they play with words detached from particular contexts and specific commitments. In the last half of the nineteenth century, several poets and fiction writers began a search for an absolute language, for a way of writing in which there would be, as

Gustave Flaubert put it, no subject but only style. For a master of language, no freedom could be greater than that afforded by words that serve the will without imposing any obligating constraints upon it. The nineteenth-century quest that Flaubert and others undertook in searching for an absolute language was, in turn, an ancestor of the various formalist and structuralist systems of literary theory so popular in the modern world. In these systems, we witness sophisticated efforts to turn the structure of language itself into the primary or exclusive object of study. "The triumph of the structural point of view," writes Paul Ricoeur in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, "is at the same time a triumph of the scientific enterprise."³⁴

In *Home Economics* Berry questions this modern tendency to study language by detaching it from objects and human actions. In what he labels the "specialist approach" to language, Berry says that we encounter the study of language "within itself. It echoes within itself, reverberating endlessly like a voice echoing within a cave." Such examination of language as an object in itself yields surprising insights, but it leads to a severely limited understanding of nature and history. To think of language solely as a system of signifiers referring to each other is to ignore the rich relationships between words and deeds and things. It is the essence of language "to turn outward to the world, to strike its worldly objects cleanly and cease to echo—to achieve a kind of rest and silence in them."³⁵ Or as Ricoeur explains: "The structural point of view also excludes . . . the primary intention of language, which is to say something about something."³⁶

Facts and words must be verified by being "carried back to the things they stand for," Berry explains. When words are not brought back to their corresponding things, they rattle around in the echo chamber of language like so many disembodied spirits in a gnostic heaven. "This carrying back is not specialist work but an act generally human, though only properly humbled and

³¹ Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 72.

³² Wendell Berry, *Standing By Words* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1983), p. 12.

³³ Berry, *Home Economics*, pp. 4-5.

³⁴ Ricoeur, "Structure, Word, Event," trans. Robert Sweeney, in Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 83.

³⁵ Berry, *Home Economics*, p. 79.

³⁶ Ricoeur, "Structure, Word, Event," p. 84.

quieted humans can do it.” When we use the word *tree*, for example, we are not manipulating an empty cipher or a simple fact. Instead, we

are at once in the company of the tree itself and surrounded by the ancestral voices calling out to us all that trees have been and meant. This is simply the condition of being human in the world, and there is nothing that art and science can do about it, except get used to it.³⁷

For more than four decades, Richard Wilbur has tried to bring words back to things in his poetry. Although acknowledged as one of the finest technical masters of contemporary poetry, Wilbur has consistently resisted any temptation to think of language as a haven from reality or of verbal dexterity as an end in itself. Wilbur is “one whose Way in his dealings with the body of this world is not the Way of Rejection but rather the way of Affirmation,” explains Nathan A. Scott, Jr.³⁸ For instance, in “Love Calls Us to the Things of this World,” Wilbur imagines himself in the uncertain world between sleep and waking, be-

³⁷ Berry, *Home Economics*, p. 80. The Russian theoretician Mikhail Bakhtin makes this same point more abstractly: “When discourse is torn from reality, it is fatal for the word itself as well: words grow sickly, lose semantic depth and flexibility, the capacity to expand and renew their meanings in new living contexts—they essentially die as discourse, for the signifying word lives beyond itself, that is, it lives by means of directing its purposiveness outward” (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981], pp. 353-54).

³⁸ Scott, “The Poetry of Richard Wilbur—‘The Splendor of Mere Being,’” *Christianity and Literature* 39, 1 (Autumn 1989): 8. “His [Wilbur’s] is the vigilance of one upon whom the natural order of common things is pressing all the time, and he wants to translate into the images and meters of poetry not the light that never was on land or sea but, rather, the light of ordinary day, for, above all else, he is convinced that it is in the order of common things that, as Charles Williams puts it in his great book on Dante, ‘the great diagrams are perceived; [that it is] from them [that] the great myths open; [and that it is] by them [that we understand] the final end.’”

tween dream and fact. In the poem, the soul whose “eyes open to a cry of pulleys” is “astounded.” Hanging for a moment “bodiless and simple,” the

soul shrinks
From all that it is about to remember,
From the punctual rape of every blessed
day.³⁹

The Neoplatonic image of the waking soul, with which Wilbur is working in this poem, is a rich one in the romantic tradition. In several of his most famous works, William Wordsworth depicted the awakened soul as one that had been saddened and that sought through poetry the wonder it had lost upon entering the world of time. In “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” for instance, Wordsworth wrote that “our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting”; the soul within us “hath had elsewhere its setting, / And cometh from afar”:

Not in entire forgetfulness,
And not in utter nakedness,
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home.⁴⁰

The goal of adult life, according to Wordsworth’s poem, is to recapture childhood through memory, to recall the time when the soul was as close to eternity as the waking mind is to the dreams from which it has just emerged. In “Love Calls Us to the Things of this World,” however, Wilbur has the waking soul renounce the desire to retreat from the dawning world:

The soul descends once more in bitter love
To accept the waking body, saying now
In a changed voice as the man yawns and
rises,
“Bring them down from their ruddy
gallows;

³⁹ Wilbur, “Love Calls Us to the Things of this World,” in *New and Collected Poems*, p. 233.

⁴⁰ Wordsworth, “Ode: Intimations of Immortality,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 5th ed., ed. M. H. Abrams et al. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986), vol. 2, p. 211.

Let there be clean linen for the backs of
thieves;
Let lovers go fresh and sweet to be undone,
And the heaviest nuns walk in a pure
floating
Of dark habits,
keeping their difficult balance.”⁴¹

Desire allures us with its promises of purity of spirit and language, but love calls us incessantly back to the things of this world.

While many poets and critics since the romantic age have conceived of poetic skill as a means of apprehending the wonders of imaginary worlds, Wilbur thinks of it as a way of striking a delicate balance between the desires of the heart and the constraints of creation. In a longer poem entitled “Walking to Sleep,” he addresses a person trying to drift into unconsciousness. Wilbur first advises the person to “step off assuredly into the blank of your mind.” But he also gives the following warning:

Try to remember this: what you project
Is what you will perceive; what you
perceive
With any passion, be it love or terror,
May take on whims and powers of its own.

“What you hope for” at the end of the “pointless journey” of the mind through its own labyrinths is that,

when you least expect it,
Right in the middle of your stride, like that,
So neatly that you never feel a thing,
The kind assassin Sleep will draw a bead
And blow your brains out.⁴²

In the second half of the poem, when the aimless drift of the mind has failed to lead the person into sleep, Wilbur offers contrary advice:

What, are you still awake?

⁴¹ Wilbur, “Love Calls Us to the Things of this World,” pp. 233-34.

⁴² Wilbur, “Walking to Sleep,” in *New and Collected Poems*, pp. 158, 160.

Then you must risk another tack and
footing.
Forget what I have said. Open your eyes
To the good blackness not of your room
alone
But of the sky you trust is over it,
Whose stars, though foundering in the time
to come,
Bequeath us constantly a jetsam beauty.

In this second journey, “if you are in luck, you may be granted . . . / A moment’s perfect carelessness” and then

sink to sleep
In the same clearing where, in the old
story,
A holy man discovered Vishnu sleeping,
Wrapped in his maya, dreaming by a pool
On whose calm face all images whatever
Lay clear, unfathomed, taken as they
came.⁴³

If there is in the heritage of the Enlightenment an implicit gnostic desire to spurn the created order—to shun nature in favor of a self-generated grace—then there is in Wilbur’s poetry a tendency to blur the distinctions between the self and the created order, that is, to turn nature into grace. In most cases, however, irony keeps Wilbur from succumbing to that temptation. As one of his witty short poems realizes, the self and nature cannot be in perfect harmony precisely because human transgression has “loosened the grammar” of God’s world:

Shall I love God for causing me to be?
I was mere utterance: shall these words
love me?

Yet when I caused his work to jar and
stammer,
And one free subject loosened all his
grammar,

I love him that he did not in a rage
Once and forever rule me off the page,

⁴³ Wilbur, “Walking to Sleep,” pp. 160-61.

But, thinking, I might come to please him
yet,
Crossed out *delete* and wrote his patient
stet.⁴⁴

Latin for “let it stand,” *stet* is a proofreader’s mark indicating that a passage marked to be changed or deleted from a text should be allowed to remain instead. In a world that is both bountiful and cursed, nothing less than the patience of God is required to keep the self from ruin.

In a recent poem called “Lying,” Wilbur ponders the way we respond to the *given* world. Its opening lines describe a lie:

To claim, at a dead party, to have spotted a
grackle,
When in fact you haven’t of late, can do no
harm.

To say that you have seen this most common of birds will neither damage “your reputation for saying things of interest” nor rupture “the delicate web of human trust.” Later, however,

You may enjoy a chill of severance, hearing
Above your head the shrug of unreal wings.

Why do we lie, then? The world is not
“tiresome” in itself, but “boredom,”

a dull
Impatience or a fierce velleity,
A champing wish, stalled by our lassitude,

makes it seem tiresome. Yet no matter how much we fantasize about our power to create and to redeem, the fact remains that

In the strict sense, of course,
We invent nothing, merely bearing witness
To what each morning brings again to light:
Gold crosses, cornices, astonishment
Of panes, the turbine-vent which natural
law
Spins on the grill-end of the diner’s roof,
Then grass and grackles . . .

⁴⁴ Wilbur, “The Proof,” in *New and Collected Poems*, p. 152.

.....

All these things
Are there before us; there before we look
Or fail to look.

And the fact that “all these things / Are there before us”

is what galled the arch-negator, sprung
From Hell to probe with intellectual sight
The cells and heavens of a given world
Which he could take as but another prison.

Satan, the “arch-negator,” was considered a heroic figure by some romantic poets because he refused to accept the limitations placed upon him by his creator. In refusing to accept them, he turned to the joyful pretense of creating by destroying. The first true gnostic, Satan was able to find in the “given world” nothing but “another prison.”⁴⁵

Like Satan reacting to the created order, modern thinkers often seem doomed to choose between two extremes as they respond to nature and the past. MacIntyre argues that the Enlightenment bequeathed to us an unworkable dichotomy between the uncritical adherence to tradition and the categorical rejection of it. If these stark options appear to us to be the only possible alternatives, MacIntyre argues, it is because since the eighteenth century we in the West have made a fundamental error in our conception of tradition. MacIntyre asserts that a genuine tradition is not marked by unreflective rigidity but is distinguished by its very ability to respond to legitimate challenges; in meeting such challenges, the tradition may expand or modify itself in previously unimagined ways. MacIntyre himself is an Aristotelian, but his Aristotelianism has passed through Augustine and Aquinas, and his Thomism, in turn, has had to respond to the challenges of the Cartesian and empiricist traditions. Thus his particular tradition is marked, as are all lively traditions, by continuity and by change.

As MacIntyre argues that moral reasoning arises out of given traditions and is compelled to

⁴⁵ Wilbur, “Lying,” in *New and Collected Poems*, pp. 9-10.

adapt those traditions to changing demands and new realities, so Wendell Berry claims that the self is in a state of dynamic tension with nature. According to Berry, it is a mistake to assume that there is a “divisibility between nature and humanity,” but it is also wrong to claim that there is “no difference between the natural and the human.” Life would be far easier than it is, Berry says, if nature and the self could be divided (as the gnostic tradition seeks to do) or if there were no difference at all between the human and the natural. “Our problem, exactly, is that the human and the natural are indivisible, and yet are different.”⁴⁶

Because modern gnosticism eliminates the dynamic tension between the self and nature, Christian faith must take issue with it, especially at those points where it conflicts with a Christian understanding of creation and the incarnation. For instance, like their Enlightenment forbears, many skeptical postmodernists see nature as an amoral realm subject to the dominion of the human will. What the German sociologist Max Weber called the “disenchanted” of the world began in the earliest stages of modernity. “We could also call it neutralizing the cosmos,” says Charles Taylor, “because the cosmos is no longer seen as the embodiment of meaningful order which can define the good for us.” Instead, we have come to see the world as a mechanism so that it no longer contains mysteries that speak to us of the *ends* for which our lives are intended but becomes a “domain of possible means.”⁴⁷

In *King Lear*, written almost four hundred years ago. Shakespeare created in one character, Edmund, a prototype of the modern aspiring self that sees nature exclusively as a means to a private ends. As the illegitimate second son of an earl, Edmund stands to inherit nothing upon his father’s death. He turns to nature because she has no scruples about that accident of birth for which custom has consigned him to an inferior position:

Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law
My services are bound. Wherefore should I

Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
The curiosity of nations to deprive me,
For that I am some twelve or fourteen
moonshines
Lag of a brother? Why bastard? . . .
.....

. . . . Fine word, “legitimate.”
Well, my legitimate, . . .
. . . . Edmund the base
Shall top th’ legitimate. I grow, I prosper.
Now, gods, stand up for bastards.⁴⁸

Like the gnostic self imagined in contemporary theories of language and culture, Edmund wishes to owe nothing to custom or to nature’s God. He worships nature because he sees her as a force sanctioning his fantastic desires.

Edmund appears to be wedded to a view of the world much like that embraced by Richard Rorty and by a European thinker highly prized by Rorty, Hans Blumenberg. In *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, Blumenberg agrees with those who claim “that there is a connection between the modern age and Gnosticism.” But unlike the critics of modernity who see a decadent form of gnostic belief governing contemporary life, Blumenberg claims that the “modern age is the second overcoming of Gnosticism.” The truly gnostic moment in modernity, Blumenberg asserts, occurred in the late Middle Ages, when the nominalist attack on universals proved to be so thorough and successful that “a disappearance of order” took place. With a sovereign, arbitrary, and “hidden” God ensconced within his own transcendent mystery, nominalist Christians could “no longer [perceive] in given states of affairs the binding character of the ancient and medieval cosmos.” The “disappearance of order” led to a “new concept of human freedom” at the dawn of the modern world, and it eventuated in the last century in Nietzsche’s celebration of “the triumph of man awakened to himself from the cosmic illusion” and to the assurance of “his power over his future. The man who conceives

⁴⁶ Berry, *Home Economics*, p. 139.

⁴⁷ Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), pp. 148-49.

⁴⁸ *King Lear*, act 1, scene 2, II. 1-6, 18-19, 20-22, in *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, rev. ed., ed. Alfred Harbage (New York: Penguin, 1969), pp. 1068-69.

not only of nature but also of himself as a fact at his disposal has traversed only the first stage of his self-enhancement and self-surpassing.”⁴⁹

In effect, Blumenberg’s argument is that men and women in the Western world were wise and perfectly within their rights at the beginning of the modern age to turn their backs upon a God whose transcendence rendered him irrelevant and to focus instead upon their own technological and pragmatic powers. Edmund questions the authority of “legitimacy”—“fine word, ‘legitimate’”—and resolves to consider himself and his world as facts at his own disposal and not as links in some great chain of being. Similarly, Blumenberg sees the modern world not as a child to be blamed for having strayed from its parents’ course but as an orphan free to celebrate the creative opportunities occasioned by its abandonment.

The “disenchanted” view of nature espoused by Edmund—and established at the center of Blumenberg’s thought—contrasts sharply with the understanding of creation put forth by John Calvin in his *Institutes*. To Calvin, of course, it was the child’s act of rebellion, rather than the parent’s abandonment of the child, that served as the key metaphor for the human condition. For those who have been adopted through Christ into the family of God, nature is far more than a fact at humanity’s disposal. Heaven and earth are wonderfully adorned “with as unlimited abundance, variety, and beauty of all things as could possibly be, quite like a spacious and splendid house, provided and filled with the most exquisite and . . . abundant furnishings.”⁵⁰ In the face of the unfathomable complexity and order of the universe, we ought not to be “ashamed,” but rather should take “delight in the works of God open and manifest in this most beautiful theater.”⁵¹ As Calvinism developed in the seventeenth

century, the doctrines of creation and providence made it possible to affirm divine sovereignty without having recourse to a medieval, magical view of nature.⁵²

The doctrine of the incarnation also challenges the modern gnostic view of selfhood. To bring life to the mechanical, disenchanted world of post-Newtonian science, romantic poets and philosophers promoted the power of the imaginative spirit. In a poem written at the very beginning of the nineteenth century, Samuel Taylor Coleridge laments the “dull pain,” the “grief without a pang, void, dark, and drear” that he feels while gazing at a beautiful western sky. The problem is that the beauty is one he can “see, not feel.” He does not resolve his crisis of despondency until he realizes that he has been mistaken in looking to “outward forms” for “the passion and the life, whose fountains are within.” In our encounters with nature,

philosopher, a rationalist and a schoolman in the high Scholastic tradition represented by Thomas Aquinas, a man of fixed principles, and a conservative. This philosophical Calvin craved desperately for intelligibility, order, certainty.” But the “other Calvin was a rhetorician and humanist, a skeptical fideist in the manner of the followers of William of Ockham, flexible to the point of opportunism, and a revolutionary in spite of himself. This Calvin did not seek, because he neither trusted nor needed, what passes on earth for intelligibility and order; instead, he was inclined to celebrate the paradoxes and mystery at the heart of existence” (Bouwmsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth-Century Portrait* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1988], pp. 230-31).

⁵² In *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971), Keith Thomas examines the complex relationship between Protestantism and the anti-sacramental bias of modern science. He writes of the Reformation’s “onslaught on the central Catholic doctrine of the Mass. . . . The Papists, wrote Calvin, ‘pretend there is a magical force in the sacraments, independent of efficacious faith.’ . . . In place of the miraculous transubstantiation of the consecrated elements was substituted a simple commemorative rite, and the reservation of the sacrament was discontinued. It went without saying that none of the Protestant reformers would countenance any of the old notions concerning the temporal benefits which might spring from communicating or from contemplating the consecrated elements” (p. 53).

⁴⁹ Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. Robert W. Wallace (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), pp. 126, 137, 139.

⁵⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics, vols. 20 and 21 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), vol. 1, p. 180.

⁵¹ Calvin, *Institutes*, vol. 1, p. 179. Statements such as these represent what William J. Bouwmsma calls the “philosophical” side of Calvin. This was Calvin as “a

we receive but what we give,
And in our life alone does Nature live:
Ours is her wedding garment, ours her
shroud!
And would we aught behold, of higher
worth,
Than that inanimate cold world allowed
To the poor loveless ever-anxious crowd,
Ah! from the soul itself must issue forth
A light, a glory, a fair luminous cloud
Enveloping the Earth.⁵³

As long as Coleridge and the romantic poets believed that the spirit at work within their separate selves was the same as the divine spirit at work in all creation, this praise of the imagination was tempered by humility about its meaning and ultimate source. The imagination was only seeking those spiritual and moral truths the pursuit of which science had forsaken.

With the breaking of the bond between the self and truth in the late nineteenth century, however, the postromantic poet was left with no justifications for imaginative activity beyond those of preference and desire. With the loss of a belief in the spiritual and ethical significance of creation and the human body, the contemporary aesthetic temperament has found an easy justification for license. If nature and the human body are essentially amoral mechanisms to be used as means to whatever private ends we have, then the human will is free to do with them what it will, confident that any activity may be sanctified as a legitimate manifestation of desire.

The doctrine of the incarnation challenges the amoral and utilitarian orientation of the modern gnostic self. It affirms that nature and the body are significant, not because they are the useful tools of imaginative, willful human activity, but because God has taken on human form and dwelt among us. Because “the Word became flesh,” Christians may affirm the significance of creation and wait in hope for its transformation. The incarnation of Christ, in the words of Langdon Gilkey, “was of such a character that it established a new relation between eternity and time

⁵³ Coleridge, “Dejection: An Ode,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 2, p. 376.

which . . . flattened the cycles of time out to become the linear stage of God’s purposes.”⁵⁴

In the work of theology, as in all cultural labor, it is essential to maintain a difficult balance—a balance between the demands of the present and the claims of the past and between the power of the human will and the ordered limits of creation. In Western culture since Descartes, there have been more than enough weighty forces siding with the mind against the body, with the creative power of the intellect against nature, and with the promises of the future against the authority of the past. The works by MacIntyre, Berry, and Wilbur are part of a growing minority tradition in contemporary intellectual life. Contrary to Coleridge and the poets and theorists who followed in his wake, these authors tell us that we do indeed receive far more than we give. For that very reason, these minority voices need to be heard as they seek to strike a balance by speaking of what is, in actuality, a gift—a gift of grace in the given.

Without question, there are many elements in the given world that constitute burdens to be discarded, wounds to be healed, and wrongs to be righted. But there are also in that world gifts to be received. As we will see in the following chapter on Ralph Waldo Emerson, one of the most powerful of romantic voices, those who cannot discern grace in the given are unable to express gratitude for what they have received. This ingratitude, and its attendant resentment, are distinguishing attributes of much of contemporary literary and cultural theory.

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⁵⁴ Gilkey, *Maker of Heaven and Earth: The Christian Doctrine of Creation in the Light of Modern Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1965), p. 302.