



LAMP

WINTER 2009

BEAUTY'S ABSENCE
ACQUIRED TASTE
DINNER PARTY, 1885



LAMP

LAMP is a magazine of literary, fine arts, and critical essays which publishes work written by current students and alumni of Liberty University; the views expressed are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect those of the LAMP staff or Liberty University. LAMP aspires to stimulate readers both within and outside the university with the creativity and critical work of its contributors.

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TESS STOCKSLAGER

COVER PHOTO BY NICK CASTRO
SPECIAL THANKS TO NATE VANDERENDE FOR HIS CREATIVE
CONTRIBUTIONS AND FOR THE ART FEATURED ON THE
INSIDE COVER

A letter from the Editor:

THAT DARKNESS EXISTS in the world is undeniable. From a Biblical perspective, man is chronologically situated in an unchartable position between original sin and the day on which Christ returns to redeem and perfect His creation.

In John Patrick Shanley's play *Doubt*, the winner of the 2005 Pulitzer Prize for drama, Father Brendan Flynn recognizes the importance of parables to his sermons. After Sister James asks him whether he made up a sermon illustration, the conversation thus continues:

FLYNN: Yes. You make up little stories to illustrate. In the tradition of the parable.

SISTER JAMES: Aren't the things that actually happen in life more worthy of interpretation than a made-up story?

FLYNN: No. What actually happens in life is beyond interpretation. . . . It tends to be confusing and have no clear conclusion.

The same principle applies to all literature—and, for that matter, art. Artists cannot cram reality in its uncontainable entirety into their work. Any work of art is selective; artists must concentrate on something specific and comment through their work upon that subject. The more artists produce, the closer we as readers and viewers come to obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of reality as we respond to their work. Together, artists and their patrons steadily develop clarity and a more comprehensive understanding of life.

The editors and staff of LAMP intend to publish works in which the contributing writers and artists pause to reacquaint themselves with where they are in this intermediary time frame which Christ, according to Scripture, will eventually absorb into eternity. As these works illustrate, we are being renewed toward perfection—and we still have a way to go. As you interact with these pieces, I earnestly desire that you find a sense of community and companionship with the artists as they continually offer the reminder that we are together in our simultaneous movement toward restoration.



Ryan Knight
LAMP General Editor



Untitled
JILL JOHNSON

Christian Christians

Nick Olson



The Christians representing America's Evangelical subculture might be labeled "Christian Christians." Christian Christians watch Christian movies (*Fireproof*), listen to Christian music, and read Christian books published by Christian publishing companies bought at the local Christian bookstore. They eat at Christian restaurants (Chick-fil-A), attend Christian universities, wear Christian apparel ("Jesus is my Homeboy"), and some even play Christian video games (the rumor is that the Christian version of "Rock Band" is coming soon!).

Interestingly, only recently has the term "Christian" taken on such a predominantly adjectival form in culture. This is not to say that using "Christian" as an adjective is necessarily all bad. I do joyfully attend a Christian university, listen to some Christian music, read a variety of Christian books, and enjoy a savory chicken sandwich served by Chick-fil-A as much as the next Christian.

The trouble is that many Christians have been on a rampage to define every single idea or activity that is or is not "Christian" well beyond those defined in Scripture. Christians must be aware that, by using the term Christian as an adjective, they are defining what it means for someone or

something to be Christ-like for the surrounding culture. Unfortunately, Christians have created a subculture that includes approaches and attitudes that are not very Christ-like—and excluded some that are—effectively reflecting an inaccurate view of Christ.

One way the Evangelical subculture has had a negative effect on our culture is in its approach to art. Christian Christians have attempted to create a subculture that is devoid of the idea of sin – as if sin does not profoundly impact our lives. It is like the pastor who is afraid to talk about taboo topics like sex—as if talking about sin would be sinful. In our Christian television programming, music, and movies, sin is rarely depicted or addressed without being a part of a contrived didactic formula. The depiction of sin and its consequences are rarely portrayed realistically. Yet we certainly should not look to the Bible for supportive evidence to water down the depiction of sin. If numerous books of the Bible were faithfully translated to the big screen, the material would be excessive even for an R rating (much like Mel Gibson’s portrayal of our Lord’s death on the cross).

Instead, Christian media often provide movies that have unrealistic portrayals of sin and conversion and un inventive music filled with lyrics that fail to find a significant connection with believers and unbelievers alike. The lyrics are then put to music that desperately tries to mimic the mainstream, but inevitably falls a few years behind pace. Christian movies and music feel less like art and more like a false advertisement that communicates there will be a lot of mountaintops and very few valleys—if only you will convert! In short, Christian Christians apply a rigid utilitarian approach to art that is often manipulative.

Is this how Christ interacted with sinners or addressed sin?

If one has an inaccurate view of Christ, then it is likely the result of a scriptural misunderstanding. Many respectable intentions have fallen flat as a result of the misunderstanding of Scripture. If there are any Bible verses that are the clarion call for Christian Christians, they without fail have to do with Christians abstaining from being, or becoming, “worldly.” Christian Christians will often cite verses such as Romans 12:2 or, most notably, 1 John 2:15 which states: “Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (ESV). For years Christians have interpreted and

quoted this verse to fight against “questionable activities.” Yet, the intention of the verse is not to fight against the Christian’s interaction with secular art, but to exhort abstention from the attitudes, values, and desires that represent a godless culture. Some Christians have understood this distinction, but have then reasoned that if a Christian spends any time within the godless culture, then he will adopt the attitudes, perceptions, and values of that godless culture. To assert that a Christian would be doomed to paganism as a result of interacting with secular culture is presumptuous.

To be sure, temptation is always a legitimate concern. Jesus was tempted, but His answer to temptation was not to surround himself with likeminded people and hide from godless culture. He did not create a subculture that failed to challenge its inhabitants and did little to reach those on the outside looking in. We see that when Jesus is praying to God on behalf of Christians, He has a more effective plan, “I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one” (John 17:15, ESV). Jesus modeled this prayer for us in His life. He was always among sinners in their godless culture.

To be sure, this approach to culture requires humility, grace, and discernment that only a Spirit-led person can exhibit. The trouble is that there are a lot of self-proclaimed “Christians” in America who are not affecting culture, but being affected by culture, and living in a “worldly” way. This should come as no surprise considering the Barna research group felt it necessary to create a category of people separate from born-again Christians called “notional Christians.” Barna defines notional Christians as “those who describe themselves as Christians, but do not believe that they will have eternal life because of their reliance upon the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the grace extended to people through a relationship with Christ.” Just a few years ago Barna concluded that an astounding 39% of the country should be considered notional Christians. Thus, at least 39% of the country claims to be Christian and are not only living “in the world,” but if honest with themselves, are actually living as people who are “of the world.”

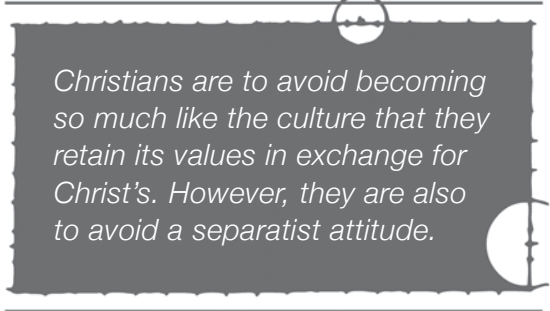
This is certainly part of the problem in convincing many Christians that any interaction with secular culture is wrong, compromising, or worldly. However, the essential question Christian Christians need to

ask themselves is whether notional Christians are ultimately living worldly lives because of their interaction with culture or because of their interaction with culture without an authentic relationship with Jesus Christ. Unbelievers are largely affected by two distinct groups. They see the Christian subculture that either ignores or is unloving toward them, and they see notional Christians interacting with them, but not living any differently.

There are certainly some Evangelicals who are effectively communicating the need for Christians to live in the world without becoming worldly. In the recent book *The Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World*, Mark Driscoll, Pastor of Mars Hill Church in Seattle, contends that Christians need to follow Jesus' lead in avoiding "liberal syncretism and fundamentalist sectarianism" in their interaction with culture. Driscoll attacks the false dichotomy that Christians have created in their approach to American culture by saying that Christians are to avoid becoming so much like the culture that they retain its values in exchange for Christ's. However, they are also to avoid a separatist attitude that is unnecessarily divisive and pharisaical.

We as Christians should confront the godlessness of the culture with discerning hearts and minds

that have been transformed by the Holy Spirit. If the Truth has indwelt our hearts and minds, we are fully equipped to live counterculturally without becoming "worldly." The best way to deal with the fear of evil is to fear God—not the Evil One. Christians should recall John Milton's *Areopagitica* in developing an approach to culture: "Though all winds of doctrine were let loose to play upon the earth, so truth be in the field, we do injuriously by licensing and prohibiting to misdoubt her strength. Let her and falsehood grapple, who ever knew truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter." Milton provides an excellent reminder that Christians should stop hiding in a subculture, hoping not



Christians are to avoid becoming so much like the culture that they retain its values in exchange for Christ's. However, they are also to avoid a separatist attitude.

to be touched by evil, and instead infuse the culture at large, confidently allowing the truth to be exhibited in the way they live so that God may be displayed to a godless culture.

Practically speaking, this may entail seeing a "secular" movie that has sinful "content" and then analyzing the film's themes in the light of God's truth. Having an informed, intelligible conversation with unbelievers about the media being produced in our culture is far more beneficial for the cause of Christ than condemning the unbelieving culture and the art they create from a distance. The first approach is godly, while the second approach is polarizing.

For all these reasons, it would be prudent for Christians to consider the significance of labeling something "Christian." In doing so, they are essentially making declarations about Christ's being and character. This being the case, Christians have not been providing a very good representation of Christ-likeness. Providing criticism that is ignorant of culture from a lofty Christian perch is not "Christian"—it is prideful. Creating art that is lackluster (which people are fearful to criticize because it is deemed "edifying") is not "Christian"—it is lazy. Perhaps a more careful consideration of our Savior's recorded life and teachings will promote a more biblically accurate Christology—and thus allow Christians to more judiciously use the word "Christian" as an adjective.

Ultimately, many unbelievers view the Evangelical subculture as more monastic, prideful, and ignorant than inviting or intriguing. So as I, along with the other staff members of LAMP, consider whether LAMP is a "Christian magazine" or a magazine composed by Christians, I suppose our decision will depend on what one defines as "Christian." Perhaps we will be a Christian magazine, but it will be with the goal of reconsidering how a Christian ought to interact with culture and the arts for the benefit of unbelievers—and for the glorification of Christ. †



Jonah
KARIN ALBRECHT

Unsullied

Kayla Webb

Why does the world shudder and tremble so?

I am like the
 stagnant
 puddle of water—
 the refuse from yesterday's rain—
 that settles in that concave dip
 beneath your rusty rain gutter.
 I breathe deeply,
 but cannot catch my breath
 in those shallow depths.

My pitifully languid water remains unmoving—unchanging, absolute—
 despite the quivering
 earth around me.

With every quake, new crags drag their claws into the unyielding ground
 and unsullied waves slosh between the land masses:

Nothing stays the same.

Except me.

I remain huddled close to your house—no current, no change, no disturbing
 ripple.

Then all at once,
 your foot
 comes splashing
 into my stale world

and my perception blurs;
 the familiar impressions crumble into a mosaic of soggy fragments
 pulsating in their place.

Nothing stays or looks the same.

And you,
 you took a piece of me with you
 and left me
 with the uncanny.

Have it Your Way

Stephanie Taylor



Abigail sat alone near the door in a wooden chair with a blue cushion. Stuffing protruded from one of the cushion's corners, and she picked at it while gazing listlessly around the room. The chair seemed to belong here, along with last year's issues of *Redbook* and the faded flower wallpaper. All of it had a sense of neglect. Only one thing had been changed in this room in the past few years. The bright allergy poster looked new. She didn't remember seeing it over the past few months when she had come for her allergy shots.

"Uh-hem."

The guttural sound pulled her attention away from the histamine blockers and over toward the sliding glass window. The mass of frizzy blond hair nearly hid the glaring eyes, but her words were clear: "Do not destroy the furniture."

Abigail lowered her head and pushed the cotton wad back into the chair. As the glass door slid shut, she reached into her messenger bag and pulled out a *Norton Anthology*. She had some reading to complete before tomorrow's American Literature class. With the book opened to "A Good Man is Hard to Find," she scanned over the words and twirled a strand of brown hair in her left hand.

She was having trouble concentrating. The music wafting through the speakers reminded her of her grandmother. These memories were always accompanied by the smell of peanut butter and crackers. Grandma Peterson had never been much of a cook, but she liked to listen to Sinatra in the kitchen.

Now she was hungry. Her jeans fit a bit tighter these days, and she was afraid that it aroused some suspicion among her classmates.

Hopefully everything would be alright. She and James had only kissed. Well, maybe a little more, but nothing too serious. She licked her lips and tried to forget.

"Abigail Peterson. Abigail," said the nurse.

"Yes?" she responded.

"The doctor can see you now."

Abigail rose and gathered her things. When she walked through the door, she set her bag down next to the scale.

"Please stand here so I can check your weight and height," she said. The orange needle on the weight meter rose, and the nurse slid the metal piece across the bar to make the calculation. "135 pounds." Then she brought the height bar down. "63 inches."

Freshman year had not been kind. An overabundance of mediocre food. Perhaps she should start exercising to curb this unwanted bulge.

"Follow me, please," said the nurse. "Have a seat."

The paper crinkled as she hopped up on the examination bed. The nurse performed the usual blood pressure test and left the room promising that the doctor would come shortly.

There were different things to look at in this room but nothing overly interesting. Jars holding various swabs and depressors lined the counter top. More magazines that she had read months ago filled the plastic shelves. But something did catch her attention: a poster on the door. The female hormonal cycle glowered at her from the back of the door.

She gathered her legs to her chest, further crunching the paper, and stared at her toes. They needed to be painted. The warmer weather had brought out the flip-flops but apparently not the nail polish. She pulled on an unraveling string at the bottom of her jeans. Being short created all sorts of annoyances.

Eventually tiring of her fidgeting, Abigail again brought out the book. She might as well do something.

As she was just about to find out what O'Connor's Misfit was going to do to the unfortunate family, the door opened, and a tall man, his hair and beard both graying, emerged. His lips bared an irritatingly jovial smile.

"How are we doing today, Abigail? I'm Dr. Street," he said.

"We've been better," she said as she tried to look him in the eyes. His white coat was doing little to take the attention away from his Hawaiian shirt.

"What seems to be the problem?" he said. The glibness continued.

"Well, my stomach is sticking out more than usual. There seems to be something hard in there," she said, her hand on her midsection.

"Have you taken a pregnancy test?" said graybeard.

"No. Generally those are reserved for the sexually active," she said.

He wasn't convinced, and asked her to lie back so he could begin his examination. As he felt her stomach, he immediately noticed the lump.

"See how you can kind of move it back and forth? That's not normal, is it? What do you think it could be?" Abigail asked.

"Do you have a boyfriend?" he asked.

"No. Why does that matter?" she answered, not liking where this was going.

"Have you had one in the last three months?" he asked.

James' face flashed in her mind. That was one night, and nothing happened. "No. I already told you that I'm not pregnant. There is no way I could be!"

"It's ok. You can tell me. I'm a doctor. I'm here to help," he said.

"Well you're not doing a very good job. Apparently you haven't been listening. There are no babies in here," she said, pointing to her stomach.

"Fine. Have it your way," he said. He pulled out a pad and began writing.

"You think this is my way?" she said, more to herself than the doctor.

The pen stopped momentarily for an exaggerated eye roll. "Here is the script for an ultrasound. This test should tell us what we need to know."

"Thanks. I guess," Abigail said. She picked up her things and quickly left the office after checking out. She hated these sterile offices with their brochures and informational posters.

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"Central Virginia Radiology Center—Michelle speaking. How may I help you?"

"I would like to schedule an appointment for an ultrasound," Abigail said.

"How many months pregnant are you?"

"I'm not pregnant," Abigail said. She was having flowered-shirt flashbacks.

"Uhh huh...Sure, hun. You know we don't disclose this kind of information to parents without the patient's consent," said Michelle.

Not this again. "That's good to know," said Abigail. "But I'm not pregnant, and I have no reason to hide my non-pregnancy from my mother."

"Uhh huh... so why do you need an appointment?" The telephone operator was getting bored.

"For an ultrasound. My stomach is sticking out strangely, and I want to know why," said Abigail.

"Fine. Fine. Have it your way," was the response.

Did everyone think this was some sort of joke? It made her want to scream.

"Will 10:45 on Thursday work?" asked Michelle.

"Sure," she responded.

"Make sure that you drink eight cups of water before you come. We need to make sure that we can see the bladder clearly," concluded Michelle.

Abigail was beginning to think that this whole business would be much easier if she were having an illegitimate child. Being pregnant was socially acceptable, but telling someone that you are not "with child" when, clearly, you are not was apparently rude. "Sure," she said and hung up the phone.

—

This time Abigail did not sit alone. Lauren, a blonde friend of hers, was sitting beside her, assuring her that everything would be okay. Lauren was a nursing major, so she probably knew more about these things. She was trying to shift the conversation by chatting away about something she saw on television. But Abigail was staring at the ceiling, wishing that her chair was old, that there was something to mess with. How healthy people could drink eight cups of water a day and get anything done baffled her.

"Uh-huh. I know. Right," she said in an attempt to keep up the façade that she was listening to what Oprah had said yesterday. She tried to focus, but all she could think about was waterfalls. And the rain pouring down outside was not helping, either.

"Abigail. Abigail Peterson," said a girl with a clipboard, whose curly hair was a magnificent red.

Lauren's elbow roused her. "Yes," she said.

"This way. I'll show you where you can change into your gown," said the smiling redhead who looked only a few years older than Abigail.

After donning the oversized gown, Abigail and her friend made their way to Exam Room 3. Another technician, dark-haired but equally young and excited, guided her to the table.

"Lie down and lift up your shirt," said the redhead. "This will be a little cold, so prepare yourself."

The redhead spread the blue goo while the other prepared the machine. The conducting gel was cool as promised, and she pressed the transducer against Abigail's midsection and began moving it around.

"Could you not push so hard? I just drank my weight's worth in water," said Abigail.

"I'll do my best," responded redhead. "But some pressure is necessary."

She continued to prod and then look at Lauren, who was looking at the screen. They said nothing, just kept poking and staring for twenty minutes. Finally, Abigail couldn't take it anymore.

"I'm sorry, but I have to go to the bathroom right now" she said. "I can't wait."

After she returned, the exam continued, this time with whispers. After a few more minutes, the technicians finished and left the room.

"What was that all about?" asked Lauren.

Abigail shook her head. "I have no idea. Could you see anything?"

"No. Just blobs," said Lauren.

After a few moments of silence, the redhead returned and said that Abigail had a phone call.

"Hello?" said Abigail as she picked up the phone.

"Hi, Abigail. This is Dr. Street," the voice said. "It seems that you are not pregnant after all," he said, not at all to Abigail's surprise.

"Then what's wrong with me?" she asked.

"You have a large ovarian cyst," he said, sighing. "We'll need to have this operated on right away..."

She closed her eyes and hung up the phone. So many thoughts raced through her mind that she couldn't focus on one. But none of them had anything to do with whether or not she would keep a baby. She would not have to keep this or explain any kind of moral indiscretion. 🕯

Dinner is in the Oven

Alexandra Barylski

—❖—
Chilled dishwasher,
no longer bubbling over,
reflects the daffodils on the windowsill.

Your destressing cigarette
lazily burning on the counter—
the wisps of fume
whisper to me your whereabouts:
...on the porch, near the impatiens.

I find you snoozing in the afternoon light.
O'Keefe in one hand,
white wine in the other,
and the cat curled around your feet.

Through the screens I see your bloomed garden.
The kinked, twisted hose sputtering nonsense
to your fragile flowers who idly listen.

The hose is no longer kinked—
and I turn off the water.
(The tulips complain they're nearly drowning.)
The dish drain now empty,
the table set for dinner.

I left the butt of your Black and Mild
on top of the note saying, "— love you."
It was the least I could do before leaving.



Beauty's Absence

Samuel Loncar



Beauty has fallen on hard times. Overcome by ugliness and triviality, she has slipped away, leaving traces of herself in but concealing her presence from our culture. Truth and goodness, beauty's sisters, remain relevant and visible. Even if they are relativized by our culture, they are still important. Beauty, however, has received the greatest of insults: that of being largely ignored, regarded as unworthy of consideration or refutation. Perhaps it would be unreasonable for Christians to expect a relativistic and pluralistic culture to register the absence of beauty or ponder its significance. Christians, however, whose theology affirms that God is the source of beauty and is himself beautiful and glorious, ought to be deeply concerned about beauty. Yet American Evangelical Christians have had very little to say about beauty and given little evidence of taking it seriously. Thus she has not merely crept out of our culture: if we look at the architecture, art, and music within the Church we find expediency, evangelism, and attempts at cultural relevance, but beauty seems as shy of the Church as she is of the secular culture. By neglecting, ignoring, and even shunning beauty, however, we have damaged our witness and exposed deep incoherence in our doctrine and our practice.

The absence of beauty from the church may be partly explained by the fact that, for about 40 years, evangelical Christians in America have been happily imitating the popular culture, too busy trailing behind the secular entertainment industry to ponder something as weighty as the nature and significance of beauty. Yet while the Christian music industry, for example, was occupied with the transformation of music into a commodity for its own niche market and the glory of God, generally

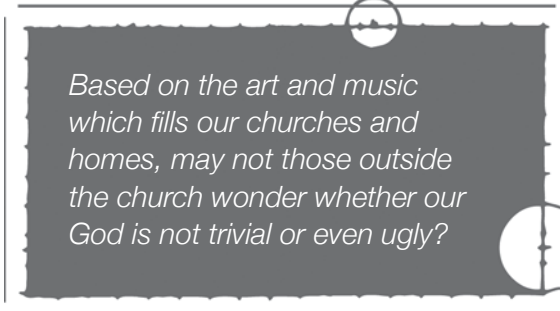
ignoring if not disdaining high art and its characteristic concerns for quality (such concerns are “elitist”), Christians were nonetheless loudly proclaiming the importance of absolute standards of truth and goodness in the realms of politics and academia.

The idea that one can cogently speak about truth and goodness while ignoring beauty is a perilous one. Indeed, such an idea can find no legitimate place in Christian theology even if it is the unstated assumption of much Christian practice. The reason for this is simple: truth, goodness, and beauty form a unity, not in the abstract realm of ideas, but in the Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer of the world, who is the source of all truth, goodness, and beauty. Christian theology is committed to the belief that God’s being is simple—it is not composite and therefore divisible. Although this is a difficult idea, the important part to understand is that orthodox theology has always affirmed that God is not part goodness and part beauty, etc. He is wholly good and wholly beautiful. So, while we can and should make conceptual distinctions between God’s attributes, we can never assume a genuine independence of one attribute from another. Yet we have.

By practically enshrining the assumption that there is no relation (much less a necessary one) between art, knowledge, and ethics in our practice, evangelical Christians have joined the postmodern world in embracing, wittingly or not, a hopelessly fragmented view of reality, one in which experience replaces critical reflection and reception in the evaluation of art. Moreover, Evangelicals have, in general, demonstrated a greater concern and desire for political influence, quantitative church growth, and the production of cultural commodities fit for the consumption of Christians, than for the cultivation of beauty and the rarefied air of high quality art and music. In so doing, we have quietly told those serious about beauty that they need not bother with Christianity.

In *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, Hans Urs von Balthasar, the great twentieth century Catholic theologian, aptly describes our condition: “Our situation today shows that beauty demands for itself at least as much courage and decision as do truth and goodness, and she will not allow herself to be separated from her two sisters without taking them along with herself in an act of mysterious vengeance.” Perhaps, then, the fashionable relativism of our culture, often little more

than a veneer covering the absence of moral standards and convictions, is related to the proliferation of ugliness to be found everywhere in our culture, from the slums of our cities to our production and consumption of hyper-sexualized bodies. Such a relation between moral degradation and aesthetic impoverishment should be obvious, for as Balthasar observes: “In a world without beauty...the good also loses its attractive-

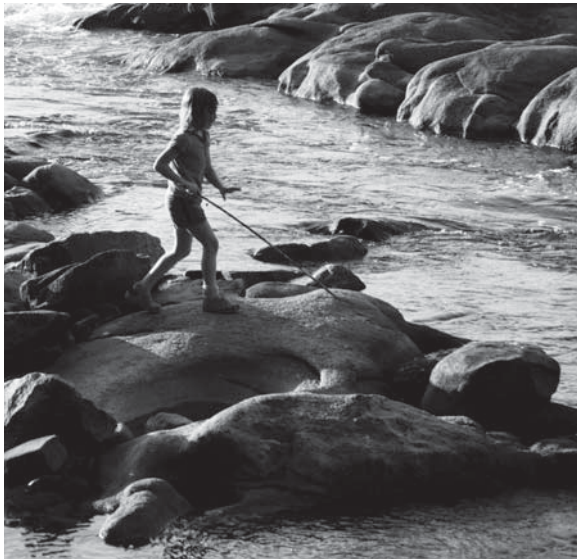


*Based on the art and music
which fills our churches and
homes, may not those outside
the church wonder whether our
God is not trivial or even ugly?*

ness, the self-evidence of why it must be carried out.” In such a world, how else can the true and the good attract converts but through psychological and emotional manipulation, the promise

of sated desires and pleasant experiences? For if something can be both true and trivial, good and ugly, it clearly lacks the capacity within itself to attract desire. Thus emphasis shifts from the object presented to the consuming subject and the way that subject can be manipulated so as to desire the object. The effects of this shift, rooted in the fragmentation of truth from beauty, on evangelical Christianity have been disastrous and debasing. Like our words and deeds, our art and music reflect our God and his nature. Based on the art and music which fills our churches and homes, may not those outside the church wonder whether our God is not trivial or even ugly?

But the world Christianity describes is a world full of beauty because its Creator is beautiful, and our response to that beauty is our response to an objectively existing and good, though fallen, reality. To faithfully proclaim the message of Christianity is not merely to describe the moral dimensions of reality, but to affirm the inherent goodness and beauty of that reality, to affirm that in God’s creation truth, goodness, and beauty are unified. And to faithfully live the truth of Christianity is to protest ugliness, to affirm that it is a perversion of the created order, and to contribute to its destruction by participating with God in the recreation and reordering of the world, by participating in the production and preservation of beauty, though art, literature, and music. 📌



Untitled
RACHAEL MELOY

On Hypocrisy

Jonathan Samuelson



In Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*, hypocrites occupy the sixth ring of the eighth circle of Hell, tucked into a cozy nook just between grafters and thieves. In the modern map of Hell—copies of which I believe must bedeck the offices and hard drives, if not the imaginations, of nearly every news reporter, commentator, and blogger in the land—hypocrites constitute one-third of Hell's population (the others are smokers and those who believe in Hell).

Hypocrisy drives the news. Nothing incites the editorial passions like an ethics committee member caught in a web of unethical behavior or a family values-style Republican embroiled in a steamy sex scandal. Moreover, hypocrisy sells: to a news-hungry people, it is a savory dish indeed. And because we live in a fallen world, hypocrisy vendors need not fear famine. But sin can be most entangling when we feel the least encompassed by it, and we can easily scandalize ourselves by the way in which we choose to respond to the sins of others: the desire to see hypocrites exposed and punished can be sinfully intermingled with self-righteousness and its attendant pleasures. That we should not be hypocrites is beyond dispute, but how do we navigate this knotty thicket of response? How should we respond to hypocrisy?

One starting point is trying to understand what I contend is our hypersensitivity to hypocrisy. The immediate context is this: the moral and social codes which were binding in former times have now unraveled because the communities which sustained them have lost their authority. In order to inhabit such a confusing world people have become moral improvisers, seekers-out of alternative means of judging and differentiating. One effective way is to set upon the hypocrites, who violate one of the few remaining common standards. Permit me to illustrate.

Perhaps you are no moral nomad, but imagine that you are. Suppose you hold in agnostic dubiety the claims of total truth upon your life. Whether good and evil exist in any binding sense, you may or may not presume to know, but you do know that, for whatever reason, people persist in making moral prescriptions and proscriptions. They continue to say how things ought and ought not to be. But you see that those “oughts” amount to naught because they cannot bind communities to communities or individuals to individuals. Hence, the only viable standard presents itself: when people violate their own standards, you may safely cudgel them, but beyond that you have no claim upon them. Hypocrisy is your cardinal sin and authenticity your cardinal virtue. Since you cannot hope to touch the inner truth of things, you learn to keep everything on the surface. You occupy yourself in the consolation of ethical superfluities. If your values condemn or inconvenience you, simply change your values. Avail yourself of those glorified Jiffy Lubes called universities and churches, which exist not to aid in growth or repentance but to tweak and realign the self according to its whim, even the whim of self-destruction.

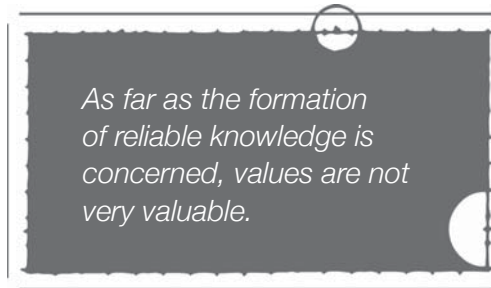
The first symptom of a community losing sight of truth and goodness and beauty is the degradation of its language. Consider the way in which some Christian citizens now describe themselves as “values voters.” I think I understand what they mean by that and its sibling phrases like “family values” and “community values.” But we need to be aware that in using such language we may have implicitly if unwittingly accepted the key assumptions of an alien and worldly persuasion.

The more it is scrutinized, the less persuasive weight the average allegation of hypocrisy tends to carry. From my vantage, either hypocrisy is far too common or far too rare for me to expend much energy sniffing it out. In the first case, surely everyone is a hypocrite in some respect or another: who does not fall short? In the second and more interesting case, when I consider the grounds on which I may reliably claim that someone is a hypocrite, I always butt up against that tall inviolable wall which places strict limits on my own ability to know the motivations of another person with any certainty. When someone contravenes his values, how do I know that he does not act in accordance with his true set of values? And even if I can know hypocrisy in another, by what

right may I make that claim? By what authority may I set myself up as the judge and juror of authenticity? Almost invariably my attempts to sift the values of others lead me further into confusion. Moreover, the attempts of whole communities, societies, and nations to do so typically fructify in bureaucratic relativism. As far as the formation of reliable knowledge is concerned, values are not very valuable.

I do not mean to diminish the sinfulness of hypocrisy, nor do I wish to propose indifference to hypocrisy as a worthy response. Scripture con-

demns the practice in no small measure. Jesus himself spends much of his recorded time on earth pronouncing woe upon the scribes and Pharisees, whose deceitful hearts are like whitewashed tombs.



Another instance is related in Luke 6:39-42, where Jesus censures those who have no trouble spotting the speck in the eye of their brother but miss the log in their own. Clearly Jesus has no patience with hypocrites. Therefore, all Christians must scruple to avoid hypocrisy. In fact, we might even consider the world’s sharpened sensitivity to hypocritical behavior a positive blessing, for by it we may be kept honest.

But note what else Jesus says in that passage in Luke; his words are easy to overlook. After commanding the hypocrite to “first take the log out of [his] own eye,” Jesus says that by so doing, “then [he] will see clearly to take out the speck that is in [his] brother’s eye.” Jesus suggests the opposite of what the world thinks he means when it enlists him in its crusade for tolerance. Hypocrisy should elicit our compassion, not our indifferent self-righteousness. Dante describes the infernal hypocrites as “a lacquered people who made their round, in tears, with listless steps.” They are burdened by their golden cloaks, which are “gilded and dazzling on the outside” but are leaden within, and are “so dense,” they explain, “like scales we creak beneath their weight.” What a costly peace we buy if we disburden ourselves only to let our neighbor be crushed. 🕯



Misquoted
RACHEL KAZ

Acquired Taste

Joe Dickinson



i suppose mom and dad weren't always
right. i did fall off that bike
when i was seven, alcohol is not
the devil, and the worst thing
an eighth grade girl can say is not
"no." on top of that, i have not burned
down my home by running the dryer
when i run out for groceries, and coffee
doesn't start the day right. i have yet
to develop an affinity for
that scalding hot jumpstart in a cup—too bitter.
maybe there's something wrong with me;
did i miss the boat on this magic, delicious
drink? perhaps, but when the brunette on the
bus asked me "would you like to get
a cup of coffee sometime?" i said
"i would love to"...

man, i love coffee.



Downtown Bicycle
NICK CASTRO

lineate

Davis Branch



our lives run parallel
geometric rays which fail to intersect

side-by-side, we carry on
equidistant, we venture forth

are we cursed to never cross?
destined to never join?

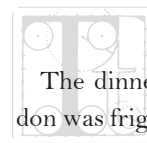
our lives are lineated against our will
but for our own good.



Untitled
CHERRISSE GRAY

Dinner Party, 1885

Tess Stockslager



The dinner party that happened one long August evening in London was frightfully dull. Three of the five people attending were nearly invisible. Mr. Jones, a middle-aged middle-class banker, whose true appearance was camouflaged by the drab suit and serious face of the London middle-aged middle-class banker, hosted the party. Also attending was the angel of his house—his wife, that is—who was so quiet, submissive, and consumptively slender that she barely had a body. One of the guests was Algernon Smith, a young Oxford student who considered himself avant-garde, but was such a cliché that one forgot what he looked like the moment one looked away from him.

The other two guests were, by comparison, blinding in their substantiality. Elizabeth Burney was of that class of progressive females known as bluestockings. At the table, she appeared polite, though bored. She fulfilled the role for which she had been invited by occasionally drawing the company's attention to the lack of safe space in the Coventry factories for the lace workers to eat their noonday meal. The other guest, Adrian Marcus, was a noted epicure. He was usually invited with the expectation that he would say amusing things and pay shocking

compliments to the married women, and he never disappointed. Both of these guests were single. They were of the free-spirited class, exempt from ordinary human relationships.

After dinner, which was mediocre, the gentlemen paired their port and cigars with a discussion of politics. Marcus, who was firmly apolitical, took this as his cue to exit. The women withdrew to take tea and stare at the carpet. Five minutes of this activity prompted Miss Burney to take the air behind the house.

In the lane behind the house, between the garden wall of this house and that of the next, Miss Burney saw the epicure kneeling in a corner. He was apparently in the gasping stage that occurs directly after vomiting. His coat was folded neatly on the ground about a yard away from him. Miss Burney gasped as well. Marcus turned around and sat down heavily with his back against the garden wall. "I apologize for anything you may have just seen," he said.

Miss Burney sat down against the opposite wall. "I don't mind. Are you quite well?"

He produced a small box from the pocket of his emerald green waistcoat, which seemed to celebrate, rather than feebly attempt to hide, his rather prominent stomach. He withdrew a sprig of mint, which he put in his mouth and began to chew. "Quite. The situation is entirely under control." He sighed and leaned slightly forward with a confidential air. "I did...that...on purpose. I've been invited to a late supper party this evening, and I'll be expected to eat, of course. But I didn't think I could after that dreadfully heavy yet bland dinner."

Miss Burney did not raise her eyebrows. She had been on the receiving end of that subtle yet unmistakable form of social ostracism too many times to employ it without very good reason. She did ask a question for clarification. "Did you just..." Here she put her finger in her mouth in a most unladylike manner.

"No," Marcus replied. "I've never been able to do that." He produced a flask of ipecac from his apparently roomy and well-stocked waistcoat.



ART BY NICK CASTRO

The bluestocking still did not raise her eyebrows, but she did lower them, worried. "You'll wear down the lining of your stomach," she said.

"I daresay I will," Marcus rejoined in a calm tone, quieter than his usual company voice. "And eventually, I'll die." He sighed again. "I'm not entirely happy with my life."

Miss Burney said nothing. Marcus shrugged his shoulders and stretched out his legs. "Besides, old men inevitably develop gout—all that rich food, you know—and then all they ever talk about is how their joints ache. I think I would rather die before I become a tedious old man who can barely walk from gout."

"You don't mean that," said Miss Burney. "You're just trying to be witty. But you meant what you said before, did you not? You're not entirely happy with your life."

"You seem to be an expert on my internal state," said Marcus, thinking that she was too lovely for a bluestocking. "I suppose I should expect this from a learned woman like yourself."

Miss Burney had temporarily lost her usual keen ear for sarcasm. Only one phrase in his statement caught her ear, and she seized upon it. "I'm tired of being a learned woman," she said with a tempestuous sigh.

"I'm tired of being witty," said the epicure.

"I'm tired of having to write about serious things all the time," said the bluestocking. "I'm tired of caring about the starving orphans. I don't even know the starving orphans; how can I care about them?"

"Would you like a menthol cigarette?" asked Marcus, thinking it would be the most appropriate thing to say in the situation.

"Please," said Miss Burney. Marcus pulled a cigarette case out of his green waistcoat, which was beginning to seem a bottomless pit of wonders. He leaned over and handed her a cigarette and a pack of matches.

"I wish I could write lovely things—like you, Adrian Marcus," said Miss Burney, once her cigarette was lit.



"My food critiques are quite lovely, aren't they?" said Marcus. "Writing about art is always inspiring."

Miss Burney ignored the aphorism. "I didn't mean those; I meant your poetry."

"Oh, don't say that about my poetry," said Marcus earnestly. He was not generally an earnest person. "It's mediocre and derivative. You shouldn't even read it. It will destroy your sense of the beautiful."

"I'm afraid writing tracts about universal suffrage has already destroyed my sense of the beautiful." She took a long puff on her cigarette and shook her head sadly. "And do you know what else?"

"No," said Marcus. His usual weapon of glib speech was ineffective in the presence of this visible, audible woman. He felt utterly vulnerable, without armor.

"I can never marry," she said. "My distinguished predecessors and colleagues would tell me I shouldn't care about that, but I'm lonely."

"And why can you never marry?" asked Marcus. He put out his cigarette against the palm of his hand. It hurt but was effective and strangely satisfying, like talking without witticisms.

"No man wants to marry a woman who writes for a living," said Miss Burney, as if she quoted an ancient maxim. "Besides, I'm twenty-seven, quite past my prime."

The epicure looked into the bluestocking's intense green eyes, which also hurt him, though he made himself keep looking. "I would marry you. Would you marry me?"

She made that universally recognized sound that is half-gasp and half-laugh and always accompanied by an incredulous facial expression. "Are you drunk?" she asked.

"No," he replied, more quietly, but still very seriously. "I never get drunk at dinner parties."

"But—but it would cause a scandal," said Miss Burney, sputtering like a morally outraged old spinster.

"Why?" asked Marcus, still looking at her eyes, though she was no longer looking at him.

"Well," she said. Then she stopped sputtering, and looked at him. She looked at him for a long time. She thought he was beautiful, like a mature Bacchus. But then she imagined them as a middle-aged couple attending

an interminable series of dinner parties, he making predictable jokes and spouting off empty paradoxes and getting fatter every year, she making automatic pleas for charity and political action and becoming the tedious, dried-up intellectual woman who appeared in the Punch cartoons. Then she said, "I don't suppose either of us is the marrying kind."

"No," he replied, and sank back against the wall. "I suppose not." But he too had seen a vision, and it was of himself attending an interminable series of dinner parties, making predictable jokes, spouting off empty paradoxes and getting fatter every year—alone, without a brilliant woman to challenge his frivolity and rescue him from a life as insipid as one of his horrid poems. He could not tell her his vision, however. He could not speak.

"There is one thing you can do for me, though, as a favor," said Miss Burney. A shadow had fallen, and he could not see her green eyes. "Is your mouth quite fresh yet?" she asked.

"I think so," said Marcus shallowly, as if he had been allowed only enough breath to answer the question.

"Perhaps you will find this request unseemly." She spoke rapidly. "It's been such a long time since anyone kissed me."

Before he could speak, she leapt across the walkway and commenced a kiss which he soon joined in on, remembering with some surprise that his mouth had a skill besides talking and eating. She put her hands in his long, dark, curling hair. He clasped his arms behind her back like a small boy saved from drowning.

When, past their prime as they both were, they could no longer breathe, they fell back against the wall. Both of them had tears in their eyes, certainly due in part to the temporary lack of oxygen. Perhaps, though, it was also due to the fact that it is a sad and breathtaking thing to kiss someone whom you can never marry. 🕯

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