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Tim VanNo

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Editorial

Have you ever wondered what happened to the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil? As traditional, assume it was an apple. Did Adam throw the core over his shoulder and forget about it? Did he plant the seeds? In either case, isn't it likely that the fruit of that tree produced many other trees of the same sort? Furthermore, why is the archetypal gift used to procure a teacher's favor an apple? Can we draw a connection between Genesis and the classroom? Perhaps the gesture is good, a return of the uneaten fruit to the godlike teacher, a gesture of obedience. Perhaps it is bad, relinquishing free choice. "What does it matter?" you may ask, "no one brings apples to teachers anymore, anyway, especially in college!" But what if the apple is merely figurative, a symbol harmless in itself, but denoting a real and much more dangerous tendency in education. What if the gift of the apple disguises what its meaning in Genesis seems to imply: a surrender of one's right to choose between good and evil, a surrender of one's nature as a human being who learns rather than a robot who is programmed? In the student's case this leads to an education where learning is a continual acquiescence to the professor or other experts in the field and where the learning self is

continually subordinated to theories.

"Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" wrote T.S. Eliot in 1934, and We're still echoing the questions. On college campuses across the country they are often paraphrased "Where is the quality we have lost in expansion?" Of course there is no simple answer, although a lot of condemnation goes back and forth. Students blame teachers. Teachers blame students. Students blame administration. The administration blames the world. It comes down to a "which came first, the chicken or the egg?" question. One has to be a politician to sort things out. Education often degenerates into politics. As a freshman I sensed this, and emulating master power-politician Niccolo Machiavelli I wrote my angry "Student's Prince: The Machiavellian Guide to Education." Part of it was the following student's ten commandments.

1) *You shall have no other goals before the GPA*

2) *You shall avoid extracurricular activities; they waste time and energy better devoted to the former.*

3) *You shall never take a prof reputed to make one work*

hard, no matter how much good is said about him

4) *You shall keep ahead by working every day of the week even Sunday*

5) *You shall earn more than your father or mother, or marry someone who does.*

6) *You shall murder your self if your self gets in the way of the GPA.*

7) *You shall always be passionately interested in your subject, even if you aren't.*

8) *Most professors consider learning parroting their own words; some consider it parroting the experts. You shall learn to do both.*

9) *You shall choose classes where the truth (and grading) is objective, with multiple-choice and fill-in-the-blank tests rather than essays or term papers.*

10) *You shall learn how to compete. The key word to characterize academia is competition.*

In summary: Love the grade above all and love your professor if it helps.

What hurts is that these are so true. Students are too much ducts of American culture, caught on the horns of the leisure ins

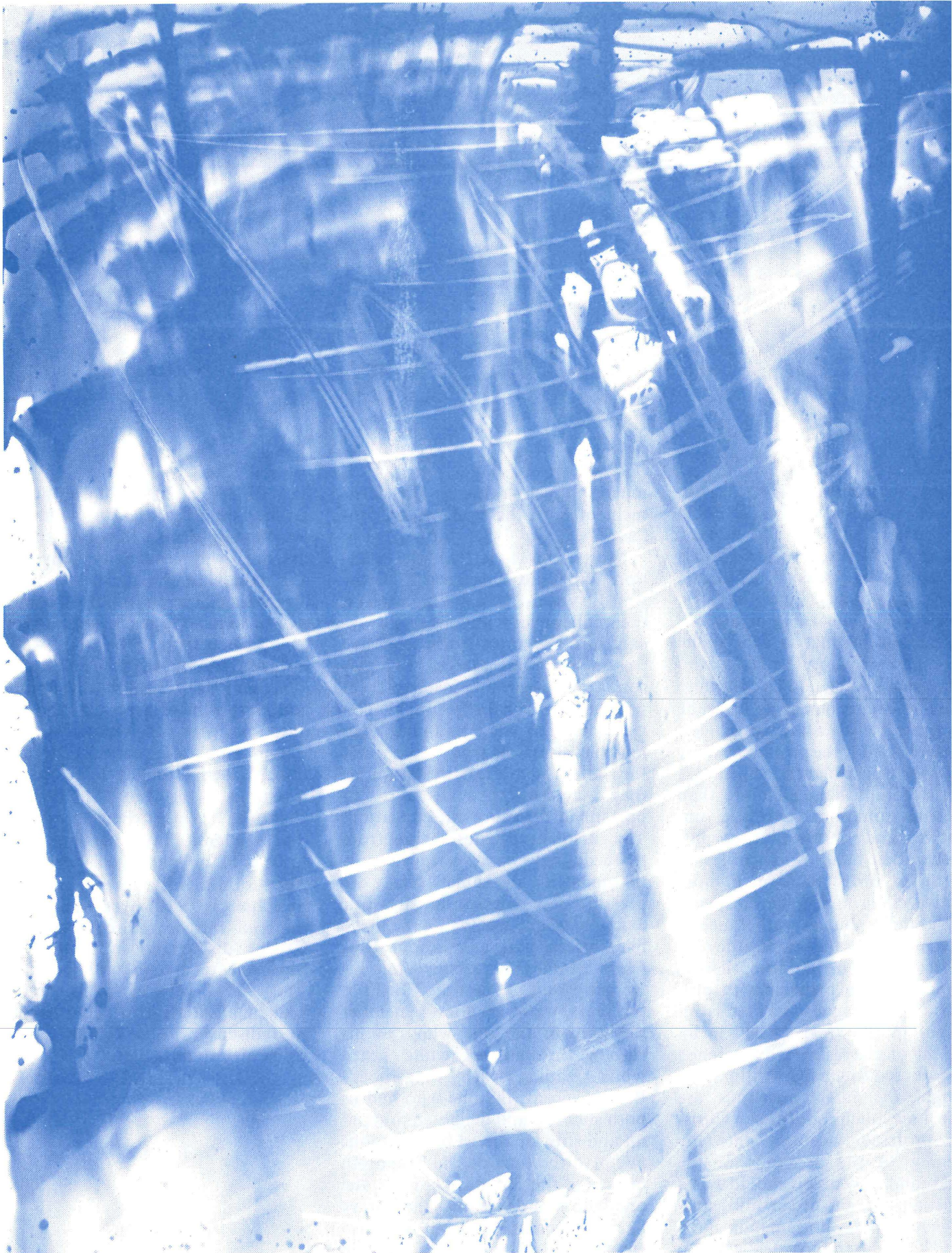
the success instinct. The leisure
nct, obvious in the veritable
ctions of some to TV, movies,
now VCRs, has produced and is
lucing its passive students,
d by books and lectures,
npressed by learning in general.
uccess instinct is behind the
that even those students who
k hard often do it pragma-
ly—a mere means to a grade
a job. These instincts produce a
ous circle for the professor. If my
essor works his students hard, I
t accomplish much more than
bare minimum—a brittle, un-
tive, and unreflective corpus.
the other hand, if my professor
up in order to form a more
tive classroom, I am unspeak-
grateful, but my other, seem-
y more pressing classes devour
free time. Furthermore, there is
pressure on professors to pro-
e a Calvin graduate that is re-
ted in the “real world” in an
unt of classes already lessened
core requirements. Ultimately,
gh, the main questions are
e: how much should I as a Chris-
professor accommodate my
hing to the demands of the
ld, and how much should I as a
istian student direct my learn-
according to the demands of the
ld? Too often the world gets too

much. Success rules, to the detri-
ment of both the student and pro-
fessor.

More important than the ques-
tion “What did you cover?” is “How
well did you do it?” Looking back on
their college years alumni usually re-
call not the most comprehensive
treatment of the material, but a per-
son, a professor who inspired them
with his love of what he taught. Yes,
we remember what he taught, but
never as clearly as what he was, and
the latter memories, irrelevant as
they may seem, provide more im-
portant in directing our education.
The person eventually emerges from
the pedagogy. It was certain people
that smashed the tablets of my de-
pressing ten commandments. For
example, many, including me, have
felt this in particular about Pro-
fessor Stanley Wiersma. While his
teaching kept us quoting T.S. Eliot
for years, we more often remember
the person: the one who ran his
fingers through his white beard
while reading with that poet’s
British accent, the one who had us
both shocked and delighted to stand
up and sing an almost blasphemous
poem to the tune of Old Hundreth
on one of the first days of class, the
one who had us treating the library
like our second home but who also
entertained my roommate and I in

his office after we’d stomped
through puddles and stood under
overflowing drains in a rainstorm,
the one who personally delivered
our papers to the dorm when we
forgot them, the one whom it visibly
pained to have to mark us down for
technical reasons, the one who,
instead of an exam, let us read our
own poetry. In a culture where more
and more is mass-produced and the
question arises “How much should
Calvin emulate successful institu-
tions?” such intimacy ought to be
treasured. In his essay “The Loss of
Creature,” Walker Percy observes
that students have become con-
sumers of a “packaged” learning.
They don’t truly learn until the
package is destroyed and the
material can be rediscovered, like
Savage discovering a volume of
Shakespeare in the ruins in *Brave
New World*. May we foster enough
academic initiative to avoid having
to rediscover John Calvin in the
ruins of Calvin College.

—MJR



**Things I've Learned—(and Other Stupid,
Senseless Stuff)**

1. Intellectuals are inadvertently not wanted stuff (A).
2. Personal stuff (A_1) are inseparable from personal stuff (b).
3. Supposed educational stuff (b) abuses the upper level of ability (stuff A_2).
4. One's intellectual capacity (stuff A_3) is hopelessly bound with one's self-concept (stuff A_4).

5. More people (stuff A_n) operate in vacuums.
6. No one else (stuff b_n) notices (stuff A_n).
7. Stuff b perceives stuff A to be okay.
8. particular stuff b stagnates, particular stuff A moves away.

9. stuff b continues to perceive additional "ok status" of other stuff A_n).
10. additional stuff A move away.
11. benevolent members of stuff b(b-1) recognize the actual "non-ok status" of A_n).
12. those stuff b(b-1) try to convince b_n that A_n is wasting away.

13. stuff b(b-1) are quietly told to be quiet, "stop causing trouble" by b_n).
14. Nothing else is ever heard from A.
15. b remains to talk, only talk.
16. Internal referents (b_n) disregard external referents (A_n).

b lives while A_n dies. b_n die slow deaths while A_n has either
a quick death or a momentary death
just another homicide case
no investigation
please, no thought. This is how it has been. This is how it will be.

—Tom Bryant

What would *Hamlet* smell like?



Reflections on the Nature of Speech

William R. Cornell

"Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue; but if you mouth it as many of your players do, I had lief the town'crier spoke my lines. . ."

Hamlet
Act III, scene ii

Shakespeare wrote his plays to be heard, to be enacted aloud. To be transmitted from the page (where he had set it, direct from his mind) to the actor's brain, and from the actor's brain to his mouth where the words would be converted to sound and passed to the audience, that they might convert the sounds back to thoughts. Hopefully these thoughts would then be similar to Shakespeare's intention. Shakespeare also wrote so that the ears of the audience would take pleasure in the sound of the words, divorced from the meaning. Shakespeare wrote within the context of a language of sounds. Even as scientists define an object or process in the context of other contrasting objects and processes, it may be valuable to examine the language medium of sound in context of other sensory media. To that end we might ask the question, if Shakespeare had communicated through the sense of smell, what would Hamlet smell like?

To understand the answer to that question, we must understand a bit better the idea of language process. Noam Chomsky explains that when a person recognizes that an entity is named such and such, "The bearer brings to bear a system of linguistic structure to place the name, and a system of conceptual relations and conditions, along with factual beliefs to place the thing named. To understand 'naming,' we would have to understand these systems and the faculties of mind which they arise."¹

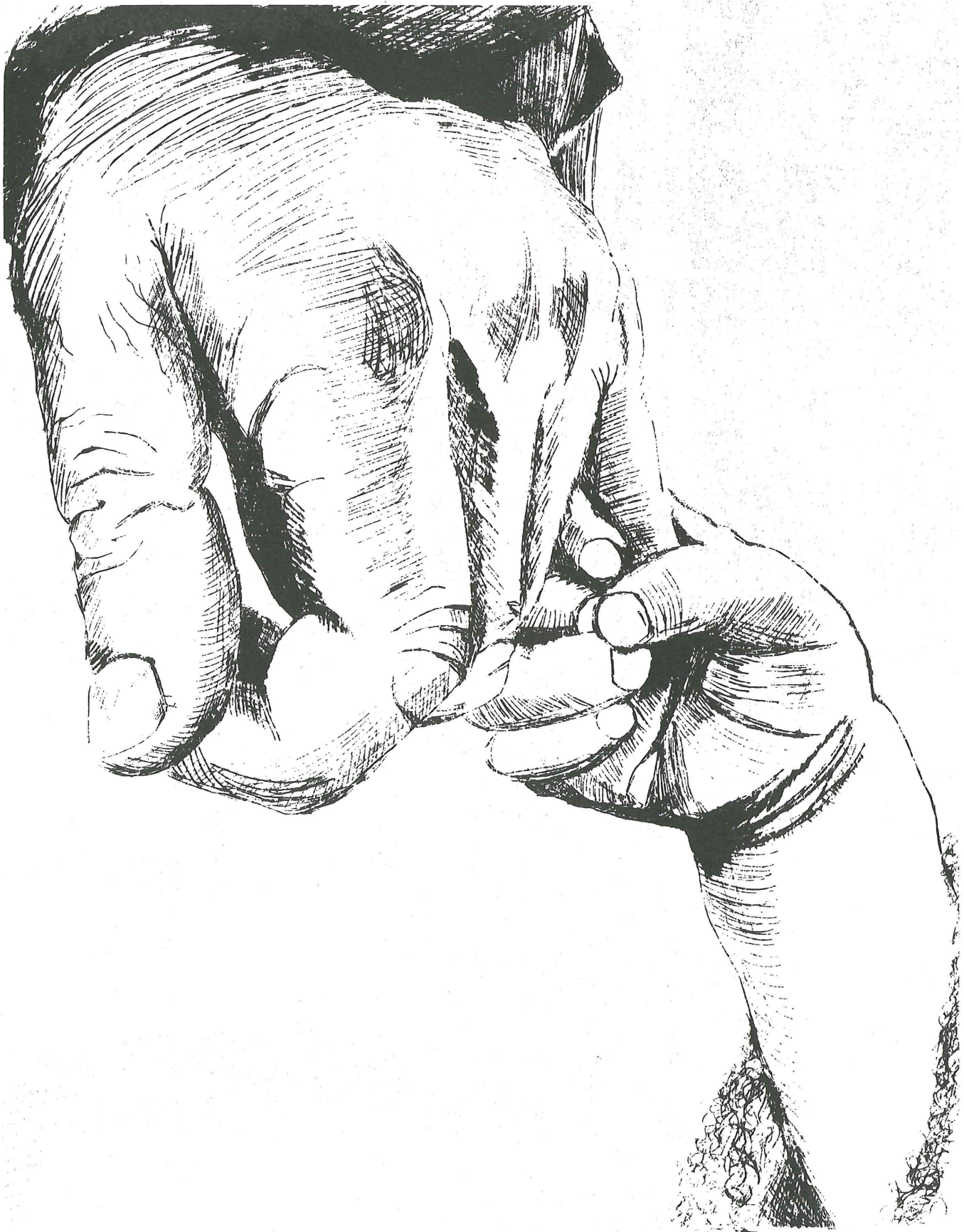
By postulating communication through sensory media other than sound, and applying that speculation to a specific example, such as *Hamlet*, we can see more effectively the advantages of all the senses, and, by additional research and application, perhaps we can understand the language, and the process Chomsky mentions, more fully.

As in the example mentioned in the beginning,

language as we are used to it enables the speaker to change ideas into sound symbols, then lets the listener turn the language back into some sort of reasonable facsimile of what the speaker's original ideas were. But why sound? We have four other senses, and we are able to communicate, to some small degree, through any of them, so why did God choose to give us sound as the central communicating sense?

Well, perhaps most importantly, unlike taste and smell, sound "Permits rapid and finely graded variation essential to a communication system of a high degree of complexity," according to Wallace L. Chafe.² This is clearly the most significant and basic advantage of sound over the other media, but there are numerous other small ones. Sound allows the listener to identify where the speaker is located provided the acoustics are without echo. Chafe further argues that human beings can remember sounds over a short period of time much easier than smell, taste, or touch sensations, although admittedly, whether this is a reason for using sound for communication or a result of its use, has yet to be determined. Over a longer period, though, humans seem much less capable of retaining sounds. Fortunately, this drawback has been overcome by developing a system of writing over the past several millennia. John Locke sums up the reasons for sound most effectively, "For this purpose, nothing was so fit, either for plenty or quickness, as those articulate sounds, so much ease and variety as God found himself able to make."³

Some experts argue that while this is true, sound has a very significant disadvantage—it divides people. Sound, by definition, is a vibration, carried across the air from one thing to another. While touch and, less obviously, smell, seem to have a certain intimate quality about them, sound, being able to carry easily for distances of ten to twenty feet and with a little effort much further, possesses a distancing quality. If language is a system which mediates "In a highly complex way between the universe of meaning and the universe of sound,"⁴ as Chafe says, and if our mediating system is inherently distancing us from each other, perhaps we could benefit from making greater use of other senses.



Taste deserves some mention although, practically speaking, it seems poorly suited as a communications medium. The crux of the problem is that taste is part of the digestive system, and even if we could work out a system of communication with all the different food-symbols easily transportable, watching a three- to four-hour play like *Hamlet* would involve a great deal more eating than the human body could tolerate. Furthermore, since food might have to serve as the symbols, taste would serve to distance us even further from each other. Sound is at least generated by our bodies. Secondly, with sound, we put different emphasis and inflection on each word. Thus the word "Hello" can have vastly different meanings if said by a friend or an enemy. In the medium of taste, the symbol "apple slice taste" is without connotation and the only difference between that symbol spoken by a friend and spoken by an enemy would be the condition of the apple used. Finally, tastes differ more between persons than their opinion of sounds does. Whereas the name "Fred" is neither particularly pleasing or displeasing to most people, the symbol "spinach" might cause some people to be ill, and consequently, attach negative connotations to the word. Perhaps, however, by studying the possibility further, we can gain some understanding concerning some of our words with negative and positive connotations.

The sense of touch would certainly close the gap caused by distancing, but it has other disadvantages. While a system of touch symbols is already in limited use (braille), touch as a conversational medium is impractical. It is important in a language to be able to communicate from a distance. Distance communication is important for cooperation on certain tasks. Imagine the difficulty of building a house if the foreman had to climb to the peak of the roof joists every time he or she had an instruction for the worker perched there. Artistic performances would become impractical since the actors would have to touch their lines to each person in the audience. A performance of *Hamlet* would take days. The final disadvantage of touch is that it doesn't leave one's hands free to do something else. It seems a medium doomed to impracticality, which is a shame because perhaps if we could endure the difficulty that it presents, we might find that through touch, we had become more intimate and personal; the less belligerent and prone to misunderstanding.

Deaf people have developed a language of sight. Second only to sound in its development and acceptance, sign language has clearly defined advantages and disadvantages and is worthy of

comparative study. Unlike taste, sight is not mingled with some other purpose. Unlike touch, sight works well across a distance. Sight is adaptable to all our artistic endeavors but music. Because *Hamlet* was written to be spoken and heard, perhaps something of its music would and power may be lost in a sight-only production, yet it would certainly retain enough to have an impact. The chief disadvantage of sight communication is darkness. As a race, we like the security of being able to cry out and be heard. Imagine falling down a well and being unable to call for help. Nonetheless, the distinctions between sight and sound, especially how the brain interprets them differently, are well worthy of study. Surprisingly, although sight is the only other well developed linguistic sense, there is very little research being done on how the brain's decoding and perception differs.

I would argue that the greatest need for research is in the area of smell. Chafe explains that "a communication medium must fulfill at least two requirements; it must be manipulable by the organism within which the message originates, and it must be perceptible to the receiving organism through one or more of the organism's sense modalities."⁵ Clearly our bodies are not designed to communicate through smell, as the bodies of some animals are. Though our noses are far less developed, we are capable, according to G. H. Parker in *Smell, Taste and Allied Senses in the Vertebrates*, to recognize garlic in a concentration of one 23,000,000,000th of a milligram per cubic centimeter. Some might object that there are not enough shades of smell to make up the necessary amount of symbols for a working language. This technicality is also easily refuted. Dietrich Barkhart explains in his book, *Signals in the Animal World*, that "there are, in fact, a very large number of odorous substances with a bewildering profusion of distinguishable shades" (p. 44). Furthermore, he adds that chemistry has developed a vast amount of additional substances, not occurring in nature, but to which the nose responds. So language through smell is a theoretical possibility.

Allow me to clarify; I am not advocating that we abandon sound and forcibly introduce smell as a medium, or any other sense. Yet it is useful to consider what might have happened had we been created with the ability to exude and receive many different smells, perhaps one with each breath. Tiny shades of difference in essentially the same smell might account for voice. Perhaps we would develop some underlying sort of emotional-indicator smell, similar to an animal's scent, which can be emotional, sexual and aggressive all

at once. Scents seem to encourage intimacy. There has been much discussion in recent years of the influence of pheromones, which are human sexuality scents. If we were capable of producing a series of scents that would promote a friendly intimacy in language, perhaps we could fulfill that lack of intimacy in the sound medium.

Smell as a medium has practical disadvantages as well. Smells are borne through the air, and because of this, they are subject to the wind and lack the speed and discrimination of sound. When a word is spoken, it passes through air, perhaps hits an eardrum or two, then is gone. Smells endure much longer, and if communication were based on them, they would soon pile up, until the conversation would be completely unintelligible. Finally, smells do not move as rapidly as sound. When "viewing" *Hamlet*, the front row would smell/hear the speech of Polonius long before the back row would and consequently, the audience would not react as a unit, and drama would lose the vital dialogue between actors and audience that makes it what it is. Furthermore, in an emergency situation, the slowness of smells could be fatal. Perhaps, though, there is a way to overcome these disadvantages.

Assuming there is some way, it may be worthwhile to consider what *Hamlet* would smell like if we communicated through smell. Through such consideration, *Hamlet's* unique qualities, and the qualities of sound as a medium might become more clear. Assuming that the problems could be overcome and that *Hamlet* could be translated into smell or that Shakespeare had written a version in smell-symbols, we possibly could settle the arbitrary/grounded question once and for all. The reason that we cannot prove that our language is one or the other may be that we are so buried in the symbols that we cannot see the comparison. We do not know if the word "chair" inherently sounds like a chair because, for us, immersed in our symbolic system, it simply *is* a chair. Yet if we smelled the smell-symbol for chair, we might say "Yes, that is what a chair should smell like." We need to divorce ourselves from the system to most effectively see it. If the language is arbitrary, *Hamlet* would smell like any other string of arbitrary smell-symbols, with general mood smells that might reinforce the plotline as a result of Shakespeare's genius. Conversely, if language is anchored to reality, more deeply, perhaps, than we generally assume, then *Hamlet* would smell to us exactly the way we would think it should. Musty, cold, full of the smell of death and fear in the ghost scene; festive, yet full of betrayal in our court scenes, and each line, smelling exactly as it should. When I began

researching this paper, I honestly hoped to be able to say at this point, "This, very nearly, is what *Hamlet* would smell like if we smelled our way through life." The further I researched, the further away from such a statement I became.

How could I make a pronouncement on another sensory medium, when we know so little about our own? Benjamin Lee Whorf, in *Language, Thought and Reality*, says, "Moreover, Fabre d' Olivet thought in an anthropological and not simply a grammatical way; to him, speech was not a 'faculty,' exalted on its perch, but something to be understood in the light of human behavior and culture, of which it was a part, specialized, but offering no different principle than the rest." Language must be studied in new ways if we wish to gain any real knowledge about it. I can offer you no answers, for in the time that I have worked with this question, I have found only more questions. I can only offer this challenge: More thinking must be done. Research must be undertaken. Results must be published. It seems to me that this particular topic might be best suited for a provocative piece of speculative fiction. Even more questions would be helpful.

Smell the speech (touch the speech, taste the speech), trippingly on the nose, hand, and tongue, but in any case, *understand* the speech.

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NOTES:

- ¹ Chomsky, p. 46
- ² Chafe, p. 17
- ³ Chafe, p. 16
- ⁴ Chafe p. 15
- ⁵ Chafe, p. 16



Carrying on: Talks for New Faculty at Calvin College

by Nicholas Wolterstorff

Editor's note: *The first talk, "Our Tradition," is printed here. The second and third talks—"Who We Are" and "Our Future"—will appear in subsequent issues of Dialogue.*

The substance of what follows was initially given in the form of three talks to new faculty members at Calvin College in the fall of 1987. Several persons, after hearing the talks, asked that I write them up and make them available in print. In doing this, I have not tried to obliterate the evidence that this material was indeed first presented in the form of talks.

—Advent 1987

I: OUR TRADITION

*Tradition is the living faith of the dead,
traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.*

The tradition of Christianity within which we locate ourselves—it is with some reflections on this that I shall begin my attempt to describe the identity and purpose of Calvin College and the challenges to which we must today address ourselves in the light of that identity and purpose.

Beginning with our tradition is not just a rhetorical or pedagogical device on my part, designed to ease us into our topic. Quite to the contrary. It is my conviction that if one is to understand who we are, one must understand our tradition. If true, that already says something important and striking about who we are. To understand Calvin College it will not do simply to uncover some abstract principles on which we operate. One must understand the concrete living tradition of a people.

The people out of whose tradition we live has a history which spans not just the history of Calvin College but stretches far back beyond that to the Reformation, at which point it blends into medieval Western Christendom. I am speaking of *the Reformed* people, as it has come to be called. Every tradition represents, in the words of Edmund Burke, "a partnership not only between those who are living but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born."* The tradition which this college represents is a partnership among Reformed people. Our tradition is what the Reformed community hands on, what it passes down, from one generation to the next and thereby to the ones following.

The Reformed tradition, as already indicated, is a tradition of Christianity. There are those who speak of "the Reformed faith." I think we should avoid such speech. If it is of faith we speak, we should speak simply of *the Christian* faith. But of that one faith there are many interpretations and expressions—Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Lutheran, Anabaptist, etc. These diverse interpretations and expressions are handed down from generation to generation. They constitute the traditions of Christianity. The Reformed tradition is one of those.

Every tradition of Christianity has an *interpretative* component, a component consisting of an interpretation of God and of Jesus Christ, of the world and history and human experience and obligation. Central to this interpretation will always be a certain way of interpreting Scripture. But the interpretative components of Christianity's diverse traditions always go beyond an interpretation of Scripture. Interpretation of Scripture is caught up within a broader interpretation of reality and experience and responsibility, on one way or another grounding that larger interpretation. All traditions of Christianity incorporate a vision of meaning.

Beyond that, each tradition of Christianity incorporates a certain way of *expressing* its mode of interpretation, a certain way of embodying its own vision of meaning. It incorporates a style of life—a style of thinking and feeling, a style of organizing institutions, a style of art and worship and recreation and comportment, a style of the disciplining and expressing of emotions, a style of coping with disagreements.

There is yet a third thing which, in my judgment, each particular Christian community passes on from one generation to the next, thereby forming its identity. A *mode of interpretation* and a *style of expressing* that mode—these are abstract patterns. A community also passes on a concrete narrative, a story about the formation of the community and about its triumphs and failures, its heroes and scoundrels, its joys and sufferings. To understand the Reformed tradition one has to understand how the Reformed community characteristically interprets reality

and Scripture and how it characteristically gives expression to its interpretation; but then, in addition, one has to know something of the story it tells about its own odyssey through history.

Let me add that traditions of the sort we are speaking of here are traditions of a people as a whole, not just of its leaders. The Reformed tradition is possessed and handed on by the little people as well as by the leaders, in the fine mesh of ordinary living as well in books and speeches.

Many people in the modern world do not like tradition—or more precisely, think and say that they do not like tradition. Many speak in praise of immediate individual insight in contrast to inherited communitarian modes of interpretation, in praise of individual creative freedom of expression in contrast to inherited communitarian styles of life, in praise of abstract thought in contrast to concrete narrative. For us here frankly to acknowledge the importance for our identity of a historical community and its tradition, is to put on the “outs” with a great deal of the modern world. Perhaps, though, things are changing!

With these comments as introduction, let me move on to cite for you the highpoints of the narrative concerning the Reformed community as you will hear it at Calvin College. What you will hear is different from what you would find in a book of history; for behind the narrative as told here, there is a great deal of oblivion, oblivion, even, on some of the most important and traumatic episodes in the life of the community. You are unlikely to hear anything here about the St. Bartholomew’s Night Massacre. Yet surely that is the most traumatic episode in the four-and-a-half century history of the Reformed people. We have become like most Americans; we do not remember very much. I think that we in this college ought to do much more than we do by way of recovering forgotten parts of the narrative and bringing them back into the memory of the community. We ought to undo some of the oblivion. But I do not propose doing any of that here. Here I intend just to give you the highpoints of the narrative as you are likely to hear. Naturally the narrative as we tell it is also different from how it would be told by those who dislike the Reformed tradition. We do not speak much of Servetus here, nor of our persecution of the Anabaptists; we are silent about the role of the Dutch Reformed people in the slave trade and about their role in the colonization and consequent impoverishment of Indonesia.

We remember John Calvin, the great second-generation reformer in Geneva. The so-called Reformed churches trace their history back to the Swiss Reform of the early 1500s. That reform

took place in many Swiss cities; we here remember especially Geneva. And many leaders contributed to its origins and development; we here mainly remember John Calvin, and secondarily, Ulrich Zwingli of Zurich.

Spreading out from Switzerland, the movement of the Reformed churches shortly took root in many other lands—in France, in Scotland and England, in Hungary, in Poland, in various parts of Germany, in the Lowlands. Then, with the explosion of European influence, it took root around the globe—so much so that the churches represented by the World Alliance of Reformed Churches today constitute the second largest body of Christendom, second only to Roman Catholicism.

To acknowledge the importance for our identity of a historical community and its tradition, is to put us on the “outs” with a great deal of the modern world.

Quite quickly the scope of the narrative as we tell it narrows down, from the Swiss Reform and its spread, to the Reformed churches of the Lowlands. For our roots lie in the Dutch Reformed church. Of our Reformed brothers and sisters in Hungary, in Scotland, in Germany, in France, we know very little. From the initial Swiss Reform we move quickly to the 19th century in Holland, perhaps halting only for a moment to tell the tale of the Synod of Dordt in 1619 and 1620.

The Enlightenment etched itself deeply into the Reformed churches of Europe. In general, the Reformed churches proved to have few resources for resistance—fewer, for example, than did the Catholic Church. The result in the Netherlands was that the state church, the *Hervormde Kerk*, became very intellectualized in its sensibility and, in its theology, very liberal, wide open to developments in culture. One reaction to this was the movement known as the *Afscheiding* (*afscheiding*=secession, breaking away, rupture), which erupted in 1834. People in various small villages in the eastern part of the Netherlands broke away from the state church. Their mentality, to speak generally, was theologically orthodox, intensely pietist, separatist, and suspicious of high culture. Their most prominent leader was Hendrick deCock. Though their break-away was illegal, and though the government did its best to stop it in its tracks—by, for example, billeting

soldiers in some of the people's houses—the movement spread rapidly and within two years some 120 separatist churches had been formed. In 1846-47, certain members of the group, in search of religious freedom and relief from financial impoverishment, emigrated to the United States under the leadership of Albertus vanRaalte and Hendrick Scholte. VanRaalte and his followers settled in Holland, Michigan; Scholte and his, in Pella, Iowa.

Upon their arrival in this country the leaders of the group made inquiries about the Dutch Reformed Church in the United States (today called the Reformed Church in America), the oldest continuously existing denomination in North America. The settlers took steps to join. But some persons shortly began to feel that they had gone from the frying pan into the fire—or more accurately, perhaps, from the fire into the frying pan. For though of course the Dutch Reformed Church in the United States did not have the arm of the state to call on, some of the settlers thought they discerned the very same practices and characteristics against which they had rebelled in the Netherlands: theological liberalism, intellectualism, lack of warm piety, the singing of other than psalms and biblical canticles; etc. Accordingly a few of them broke off in 1857 to form what is now called the Christian Reformed Church—this being, as you know, the denomination that sponsors Calvin College.

Our narrative returns for a moment to the Netherlands. The *Afscheiding* was very much a movement of “little people.” But among certain of the elite in the Netherlands there was also growing dissatisfaction with Reformed church life and with the impact of Enlightenment and the French Revolution on church and society. One of the most impressive figures in this so-called *Reveil* was Groen van Prinsterer; but the great figure, by anyone's reckoning, was Abraham Kuyper. In the narrative that we tell of the odyssey of the Reformed people, two heroes stand head and shoulders above all others: John Calvin and Abraham Kuyper.

Kuyper's dissatisfaction with the state church led him to spearhead a movement known as the *Doleantie* (weeping ones). In 1886, amidst intense political and ecclesiastical controversy and strife, and with the use of physical force on both sides, about 200 churches broke away from the state church to form the *Gereformeerde Kerken*. Six years later, in 1892, most of the churches of the *Afscheiding* movement joined this newly formed denomination.

Kuyper empathized deeply with the piety of the *Afscheiding* and with its concern for theological orthodoxy. Yet his vision as a whole was pro-

foundly different. What gripped Kuyper was the Pauline vision of the cosmic lordship of Jesus Christ, and of the calling of Christian people to acknowledge that universal lordship throughout their own existence and to struggle for its acknowledgment in all society and culture. In a famous sentence, Kuyper remarked that there is not one square centimeter in our world which does not belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. The impulse of the *Afscheiding* movement to separate from general society and high culture was replaced in Kuyper by the impulse to *conquer* society and culture, in the name of Christ. Kuyper and his followers started and promoted Christian schools, started a Christian university, started a Christian political party, started a Christian labor union, started a daily Christian newspaper; etc. In cooperation with the Catholics, they instituted the system of confessional “pillars” which has been so typical of the Netherlands over the past one-hundred years.

Around the turn of the century, a good many members of the *Doleantie* movement also emigrated to the United States. Though apparently most were initially inclined to join the Dutch Reformed Church here in the United States, they were shocked to learn that that denomination tolerated Masons as members. Freemasonry, as they knew it in Europe, was an intensely anti-Christian phenomenon. Hence almost all of them joined the Christian Reformed Church, profoundly shaping its mentality and its institutions. The fledgling Christian Reformed Church had already begun a seminary for its future pastors in 1876 before any Kuyperians had turned up. I think there can be no doubt, however, that the

I acknowledge that the Reformed tradition is weakening here in America. The Reformed community passes on less and less of it.

impetus which led to the emergence in 1920 of Calvin College from that small seminary was largely Kuyperian. Fully to understand Calvin College, one must indeed not neglect the presence among us of remnants of the *Afscheiding* mentality: concern with inner piety, worry over loss of theological orthodoxy, suspicion of surrounding society and high culture. Yet throughout the history of Calvin College, the Kuyperian influence has always been dominant.

In recent years, South Africa has intruded itself forcibly into our narrative. In our earlier years we viewed the Afrikaners as modern-day heroes. Back of that was the longstanding hostility between the Dutch and the English. The Boers had done battle with the British Empire and brought it to its knees; old wounds had been avenged. But you will not understand us today if you do not realize that the Afrikaners now give us much anguish. Our heroes in South Africa today are Christian Beyers-Naude, that scion of a great Afrikaner family who rebelled against the racist practices of his people; and Allan Boesak, black Reformed pastor from Capetown who was our first Multi-Cultural Lecturer in 1980-81.

Something like the above is the basic shape of the narrative of the Reformed people as you are likely to hear it at Calvin College. Naturally one narrator will fill in details at one point; another, at another. But what I have given will almost always be the basic shape.

I move on now to attempt something which, though essential for our discussion, is yet filled with the risk of evoking vigorous dissent; namely, to extricate the guiding genius of the Reformed tradition. What, at its core, is the interpretation of life, reality and Scripture which has shaped this tradition? What is the governing idea behind its way of expressing that interpretation?

At the very heart of the Reformed tradition, so I suggest, is a certain interlocking understanding of the significance of creation, fall, and redemption. When Reformed persons survey this cosmos of ours, and us humans and our works within it, they see goodness. Behind this goodness they see the hand of God. The goodness they see they interpret as God's gift. They see reality in all its dimensions as sacramental—not sacramental in the weak sense characteristic of Anglicanism, namely, as the *sign* of God's goodness; but sacramental in the strong sense characteristic of Eastern Orthodoxy, namely, as the *actual manifestation and exercise* of God's goodness. Reformed persons resonate to the biblical theme of God as the one who blesses. They echo the words of God himself in Genesis: "And God saw what He had made; and behold, it was very good." But they go beyond Genesis. For they do not see God's goodness only in what God himself has created but also in what humanity has made. Behind the culture which we human beings have produced and the social institutions we have erected, they see the grace of the Almighty. Sometimes they call it "common grace."

But when Reformed persons survey reality, including society and culture, they see more than goodness and gift. They also see fallenness, evil, destructive powers, idols. This too they relate to

God; namely, as sin, as violation of the will and purpose of God. Typically Reformed persons will relate these two, creation and fallenness, by saying that the good potentials and possibilities inherent in creation have in good measure been turned in the wrong directions—in life—squelching, oppressive, directions. Reformed persons will always find some goodness left. Yet deep in their consciousness is the awareness of the ravages of sin; and then, of the pervasiveness of those ravages. Fallenness has etched its way into all the nooks and crannies of our human existence. Hence to all suggestions that sin has entered Here, but lo, There one finds it not—that it has affected our will but not our reason, our philosophy but not our theology, our technology but not our art—to all such boundary-drawing suggestions, the Reformed person intuitively reacts by saying, "No, There too it has entered: Our reason is fallen along with our will, our theology along with our philosophy, our art along with our technology." In the Reformed person's perspective on the effects of sin there is—it sounds odd to say it—an intensely *holistic* quality.

A dialectic of Yes and No, of affirmation and negation—of Yes to God's creation, and Yes but also No to humanity's life in that creation—that is characteristic of the Reformed sensibility.

But then, thirdly, corresponding to their holistic view concerning the ravages of sin, Reformed people have a holistic view concerning the scope of redemption. God in Christ did not come just to save souls from the burning but to restore life in its fullness and deliver the cosmos from its groaning. There is, in Reformed life, a displacement from the emphasis on conversion so characteristic of Anglo-American evangelicals to an emphasis on sanctification, understood holistically. We are called to become holy, holy in our whole existence. And more even than that: The imagination of Reformed persons is gripped by the Colossians' vision of cosmic redemption. God is working for the restoration of his whole groaning creation. In this, we are his co-workers. We are called to cooperate in the *missio dei*. We are called to critical creative engagement.

Thus not only do we discern the goodness in creation's potentials and the ways in which those potentials have been fulfilled, and the fallenness in what has been done with creation's potentials. We see ourselves as called to struggle for renewal. Called to struggle toward making the world holy, always acknowledging, however, that it is God who will have to bring about his Reign in its fullness. The coming of the shalom of God's Kingdom is divine gift.

It may help us to give some examples of the dia-

lectual attitude I have been describing. Music qua music is a good gift from God. As we actually find music being used in our society, however, it serves both good and bad ends. It is our calling to struggle to enhance the good and diminish the evil. We are called to redeem music. Politics qua politics is a good gift from God, a blessing. Politics as we find it, however, serves bad ends along with good. It is our calling as people of God and disciples of Christ to struggle to diminish the bad and enhance the good. We are called to redeem the politics.

Corresponding to their holistic view concerning the ravages of sin, Reformed people have a holistic view concerning the scope of redemption.

At bottom, it is this same dialectic of Yes and No and redemptive activity which accounts for the fact that the social mores here at Calvin College have always been so different from what they are in most American evangelical Christian colleges. Alcohol as such is a good gift of God. As we find alcohol actually being used, however, it functions not only as blessing but also as curse in people's lives. We are called to use it in the right way—and then not just to use it in the right way ourselves, but to struggle to promote its right use in others as well. We are called to redeem the use of alcohol! And so even for tobacco. Tobacco is a good gift of God, something to be enjoyed, a blessing. In fact it is often used in wrong ways. We are called to use it in the right way and to promote its right use by others. (Of course, the evidence is mounting for the conclusion that there is no way to redeem tobacco smoking!)

If you understand the dialectical pattern—of affirmation and negation and redemptive action—, then you have, in my judgment, understood very much indeed of the inner genius of the Reformed tradition of Christianity. It is a dialectical pattern which leads to a particular and radical turn toward the world in the name of Christ. It is a world-formative and world-reformative tradition of Christianity, a tradition of holy worldliness.

Of course, there are other themes as well. Let me briefly single out a few. You might ask: What is to guide us in our endeavors at discernment and redemptive activity? The Reformed person will always say that our ultimate guide is the Scrip-

tures of the Old and New Testament. He readily acknowledges with the Catholic tradition that there are stable laws and structures and obligations built into creation, though he will tend to think of the stability of these in terms of covenant rather than necessity.* But his sense of the pervasiveness of sin makes him despair of trusting only to reason for accurate insight into these structures. We need Scripture as spectacles to correct our astigmatism and short-sightedness. For this purpose, the Old Testament is almost as important as the New. It is utterly characteristic of Reformed persons to interpret the New Testament in the context of the Old as well as the Old in the light of the New. The Old Testament probably plays a larger role in the Reformed tradition of Christianity than in any other.

There is also a certain intuitive understanding of faith in the Reformed tradition. Faith is not a virtue, a *theological* virtue, one virtue among others. Faith is the central dynamic of one's life. One's entire life is to be the life of faith. God in Christ is to be lord of all one's life. Butchering and baking and candlestick-making are to be acts of faith.

And there is an understanding of God. Often it is said that an emphasis on the sovereignty of God is characteristic of the Reformed tradition. That is true. But to put it thus is to put it too abstractly to fit the Reformed tradition as a whole. It is characteristic of many Reformed persons to see themselves in the presence of God; the Reformed sensibility is, in that way, a deeply sacramental sensibility. As we go through life we meet God in the affairs of life—blessing us, instructing us, chastising us, redeeming us, and, in Calvin's view, suffering over us and with us. The conviction has shaped the Calvinist understanding of political authority; behind political authority the Reformed person sees God's authority—though by no means can all exercises of political *power* be regarded as exercises of (legitimate) political *authority*. It has also shaped the Reformed liturgy and the Reformed understanding of liturgy. In the liturgy, not only are we present, but *God* is present. And not just present, but *active*. In the reading of Scripture and in the sermon, *God speaks* to us. In the sacraments, *God feeds and nourishes* us, drawing us into closer union with Christ. We then are called to faithful response to these actions of God—faithful response in the liturgy, of course; but just as much or more, faithful response in the world.

There is also a unique understanding of the institutional church. The church does not belong to, or consist of, the clergy, whose business it is to dispense sacraments for our contemplation and for our reception so as to make sure that our

moral ledgers are on the positive side when we die. We are saved by Christ on the basis of faith, not on the basis of a sacramental balancing of the ledger nor on the basis of a superfluity of good works. The church is then the people, not the clergy; and the liturgy is the work of the people as a whole. The clergy are not priests but ministers—ministers of God but also ministers to us. Indeed, they are ministers of God by being ministers to us. The church selects its ministers by democratic procedure. But then, once they have been selected and ordained, they speak with divine authority. There is, thus, in the very structure of the Reformed congregation a curious blend of democracy and authority. Very much in Reformed political sensibilities can be traced to the participation of the people in this form of ecclesiastical structure. It is an aberration in the Reformed tradition for a congregation to be formed around some charismatic leader.

Much more could be said—for example, about the importance of families in the Reformed tradition, about the stress on liberal education, about the role of the arts, about the characteristic lifestyle: serious, industrious, modest, penitential. But perhaps one final word should be said about the fact that the Reformed tradition, like the Lutheran, is a confessional tradition.

It has always been characteristic of the churches of the Reformation to produce confessions in time of crisis—the Augsburg Confession, the Belgic Confession, the first and second Helvetic Confessions, the Scotch Confessions. The practice has continued into our own day; witness the Barmen Confession produced in Nazi Germany, and the recent Belhar Confession produced in South Africa. The Christian Reformed Church has adopted three of the Reformation confessions as what it calls “Forms of Unity.” One of these is a confession in the strict sense, the Confession of the Lowlands, or as it is also called, the Belgic Confession. Another is not strictly a confession but a catechism, the Catechism of Heidelberg. The third is the resolutions of the Synod of Dordt on certain disputed points of doctrine. Each of these doctrines, formulated in a crisis situation, presents a pattern of biblical interpretation. Thus what ultimately binds us together is not allegiance to a certain hierarchy, as in the Orthodox and Roman churches; nor adherence to liturgical prescriptions, as in the Anglican Church. What binds us together is the declaration: *This we do all confess.*

Each mode of unity has its own particular strengths and annoyances, abrasions and opportunities, threats and dangers. The weakness of a confessional tradition, as I see it, is two-fold. The crisis to which a confession was addressed may

recede and be only marginally relevant to new situations and crises. And new ways of interpreting the Bible may threaten the patterns of interpretation enshrined in the confessions, thus threatening the integrity of the tradition. Indeed, a mentality often arises in a confessional tradition whereby new modes of biblical interpretation are seen as threatening the integrity of the tradition whether or not the tradition’s confessions even speak to the matter. This is true, among us today, for our debates over women in ecclesiastical office and for our debates over the proper interpretation of the opening chapters of Genesis.

I have tried to give you some sense of the tradition within which we stand, by giving you, first, some sense of its identity-forming narrative as you are likely to encounter it here; and secondly, by giving you some sense of its inner controlling genius. Let me add that though I am convinced that to understand us one must understand the Reformed tradition, I acknowledge that this tradition is weakening here in America. The Reformed community passes on less and less of it. The eventual result, if this continues, will, of course, be that the community loses its identity. There are many factors contributing to this weakening of the tradition. The modern world is hard on traditions in general, except for nationalistic traditions. The rise of biblical scholarship and biblical theology among us has put questions around some of the old received interpretations of Scripture. Our style of life is shaped more and more by the powerful ambient American culture and less and less by our own hermeneutic of reality and Scripture. And the habit of some of our conservatives, of defending peripheral features of the tradition rather than penetrating to its guiding genius and defending that, produces alienating annoyance and irrelevance.

How should I, as someone reared within the Reformed tradition and consciously locating myself within it, try to live with it? And you, if you are someone just entering it, how should you try to live with it?

Let me close my discussion by reflecting on two existential issues which our adherence to tradition raises. The first is this: How should one live with a tradition? How should I, as someone reared within the Reformed tradition and consciously locating myself within it, try to live *with* it? And you, if you are someone just entering it,

how should you try to live with it?

We must allow our tradition to nourish us—teach us, stimulate us, discipline us. We must probe its resources and feed on them. We must let our tradition be our teacher. But the teacher is not infallible. So, secondly, we must submit our tradition to critique—to loving critique, indeed, but to critique nonetheless. We must be willing to say where, in our judgment, it fails to live up to its own ideals. We must be willing to say where, in our judgment, its ideals fail to live up to Scripture. We must be willing to say where it has fallen into irrelevance and where it proves inadequate to meet the challenges facing it. And then, thirdly, building on this engagement of instruction and critique, we must work to extend the reach of our tradition and stretch its grasp; we must work to follow out its guiding genius, its inner governing idea, into new domains of thought and practice and feeling. Goethe, in a passage from the Night section of Part One of *Faust*, puts it well:

*What you have as heritage,
take now as task;
For thus you will make it your
own.**

In my experience, what this combination of instruction, critique, and creative expansion always means is that one interprets and lives out one's tradition differently from how those from whom one received it did so. Not only is it the case that a tradition of Christianity incorporates an interpretation of reality; anyone who receives and stands within a tradition also adopts a way of interpreting and expressing that tradition itself—a way of interpreting and expressing its inner genius. Some things are highlighted in one's tradition and others are allowed to recede into the mists. To appropriate one's tradition—for that is what I am speaking of, *appropriation*—to appropriate one's tradition is to work toward one's own interpretation of that tradition and toward one's own expression. That means reading its texts differently from how they were read by those who passed on those texts, it means telling its narrative differently from how one was told it; and it means living out the tradition differently from the way it was lived by those who were one's models—living it out so that it fits who we are and where we live. The mark of a living tradition is that it can tolerate this variation of interpretation and expression while yet preserving its identity. Various experiences in my own life made me reflect on suffering in a way I had never reflected before. In the midst of these reflections I happened one day to be reading John Calvin. Certain passages leapt to my attention which I had never so much as noticed before, passages in

which Calvin speaks of injustice as the “wounding” of God. So it is with each of us.

A living tradition of Christianity is neither an idol to be worshipped nor a mere token to be discarded, but a sort of icon which points beyond itself while yet being of worth in its own right.** And though it is the same icon we see, we see it with different eyes, and live with it in different styles.

If you appropriate the Reformed tradition as *your* tradition, and if the tradition remains alive, then you will not find yourself within an

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imprisoning cage, but will find yourself instead a member of a community spread across space and time whose tradition nurtures and instructs and illumines and disciplines you—while at the same time calling for your critique and stimulating your creativity.

And now for the final issue: You will not find the Reformed tradition present here at Calvin College in the form of some abstract ideal. You will find it embodied in an actual college community. And that community is dominantly white, more specifically, dominantly Dutch-American; it is dominantly Christian Reformed in its ecclesiastical allegiance and it is dominantly male in its power structures. Some of you, however, are not white—I apologize for referring to you in this negative way. Some of you, though white, are not Dutch-American. Some of you are not Christian Reformed—you may never have been a member of any Reformed or Presbyterian or Congregational congregation in your life. And some of you are not male. All of you are asking yourself whether, or how, you can be assimilated into this white, Dutch-American, Christian Reformed, male-dominated subculture. Some of you, I feel quite certain, are not at all sure at this point that you even want to be incorporated into the *Reformed* tradition. You are not sure that this is the tradition most faithful to Scripture and reality, not sure that this is the tradition bearing the most promise for nurturing your own sensibilities and aspirations and tasks. Others of you do want to make this tradition your own. But you are wondering whether, or how,

you can be incorporated into this particular embodiment of the tradition which is to be found here at Calvin College.

Let me address these wonderings, after I have said a word to those of us who *are* white, Dutch-American, Christian Reformed, males. In the past we have tried to *assimilate* those who were not like us in these four respects into our own patterns of thought and action and feeling. I sincerely believe that we must stop working with the model of assimilation and begin instead, to work with that of *dialogue*. Respecting what these others have to offer us by way of their own uniqueness, we must engage them in a genuine dialogue, a genuine encounter, a genuine conversation. We must allow our whiteness, our Dutch-American ethnicity, our Christian Reformedness, our maleness, to become legitimate topics of conversation; and we must genuinely listen to those who find these traits odd or oppressive. I say, we must *listen* to such people, not try to talk them down. I recognize that to do this is to take a step into the unknown. One can predict the outcome of assimilation. The outcome of an encountering dialogue one cannot predict. For in dialogue, each learns from the other.

To those who are not white, or not Dutch-American, or not from the Christian Reformed Church, or not male—to you is say: Treasure what you are. Do not let us humiliate or overwhelm you. You have something precious to bring to us and to this tradition. Have the courage to keep putting before us the gift that you bear in your own person.

No doubt tensions will arise in this dialogue. You who are newcomers will sometimes feel that you are beating your head against brick walls of misunderstanding. We who are oldtimers will sometimes feel that you don't appreciate all we have done over these long and weary years. But let us stick together. We at Calvin College are entering a new era, in part by virtue of the presence among us of so many of you who come bearing something new in your very persons. We, who have invited so many of you, now have the obligation to treasure and learn from you, thereby becoming enriched in unpredictable ways.

We here at Calvin College stand within one of the great traditions of Christianity. It has been my central thesis that understanding that tradition is essential to understanding us. It is a tradition with many glories to its credit and many shames; a tradition with many heroes and more than enough scoundrels; a tradition which has nourished many and squelched too many; a tradition of unique strengths and unique weaknesses. It is a tradition which confesses that Jesus Christ

is Lord of every square centimeter of our existence—while yet those who adhere to the tradition try to keep more than a few centimeters for their own. I welcome you to this tradition of besmirched glory—to this tradition in which, so I believe, the glory, though mingled with shame, outshines it.

*Quoted in Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven, Yale University Press; 1984), p. 20.

*In making this covenant/necessity distinction, I have in mind the superb book of Francis Oakley, *Omnipotence, Covenant, & Order* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press; 1984).

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*The translation is Jaroslav Pelikan's, from *op cit*.

**I am borrowing the metaphors here from Pelikan, *op cit*.

CATHARSIS

Every night about this time the toilet
belches. I pace myself: English for an hour
then break, and with another belch from the john
I'll be back reading and nodding off

Last night I dreamt I saw a face
at the window, a young girl, watching me.
I smiled and the face was a skull

I'm learning so much. I put Shakespeare
in my Augustine paper and last year's history
into Shakespeare and with a drop more schnapps
this Coke and I will debate gastronomy

I feel bones harden with each caffeine pill. Times
when I'm alone in the house I want sleep, to dream
of warmth and darkness, my mother's womb
but the skull appears and the toilet burps and
a young girl is rapping on the door downstairs

—Heather Gemmen

WORLD NEWS TONIGHT

Alypius clamps his eyelids shut. He swore
off the games in Carthage, but this is Rome, with
more gladiators
and a better arena
When the crowd roars he sneaks a peak
and likes what he sees

Alan sits with his popcorn. Only
four bucks to see a goalie mask and
buckets of Heinz ketchup
(the third in the series)
with a new flick opening next week

Across town an elder opens his bag of toys
outside the Bijou theatre and books. If only
the neon sign didn't flicker
he could read the fine print

And in Madrid today
they had another ox roast fete

Ole

—Heather Gemmen

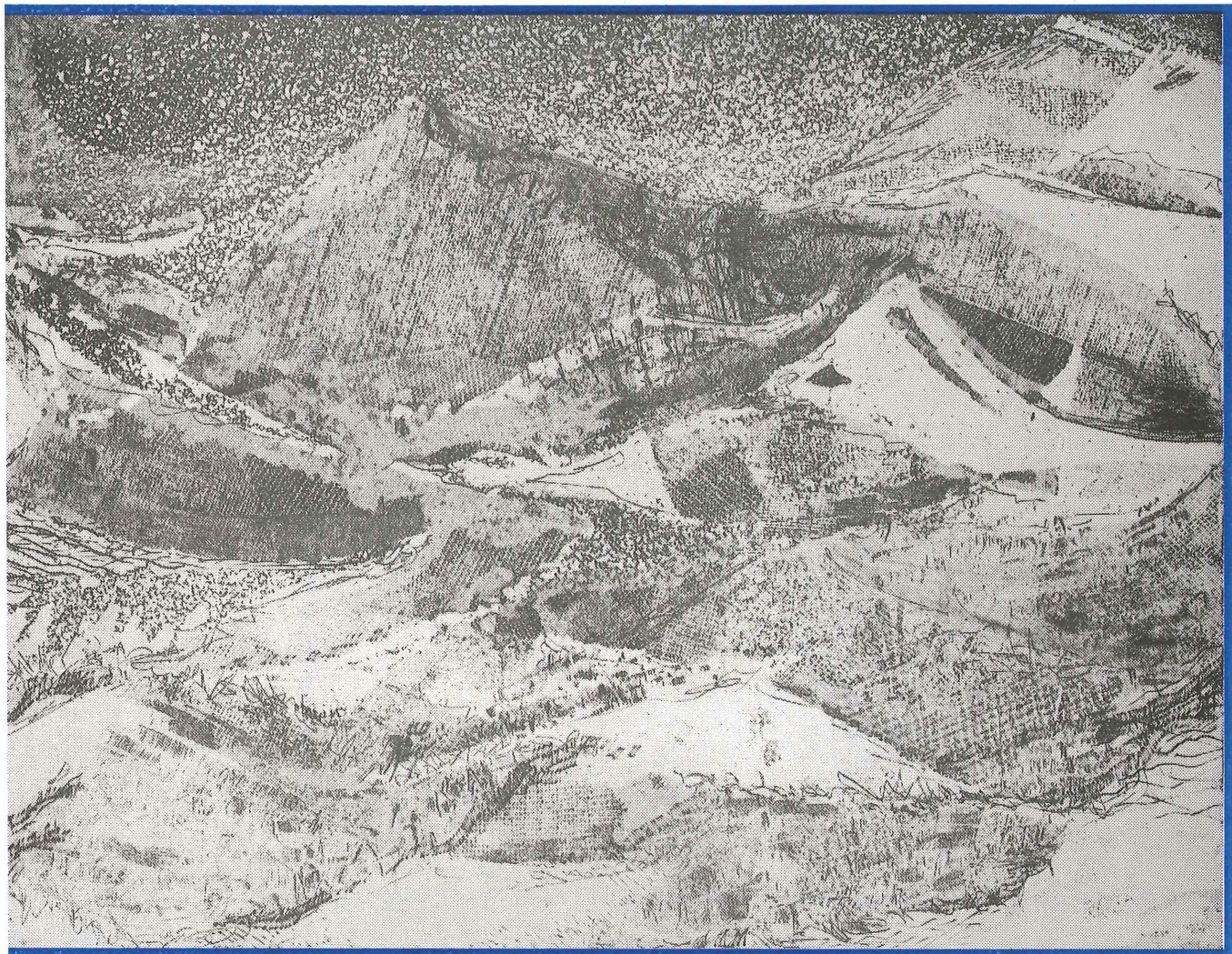


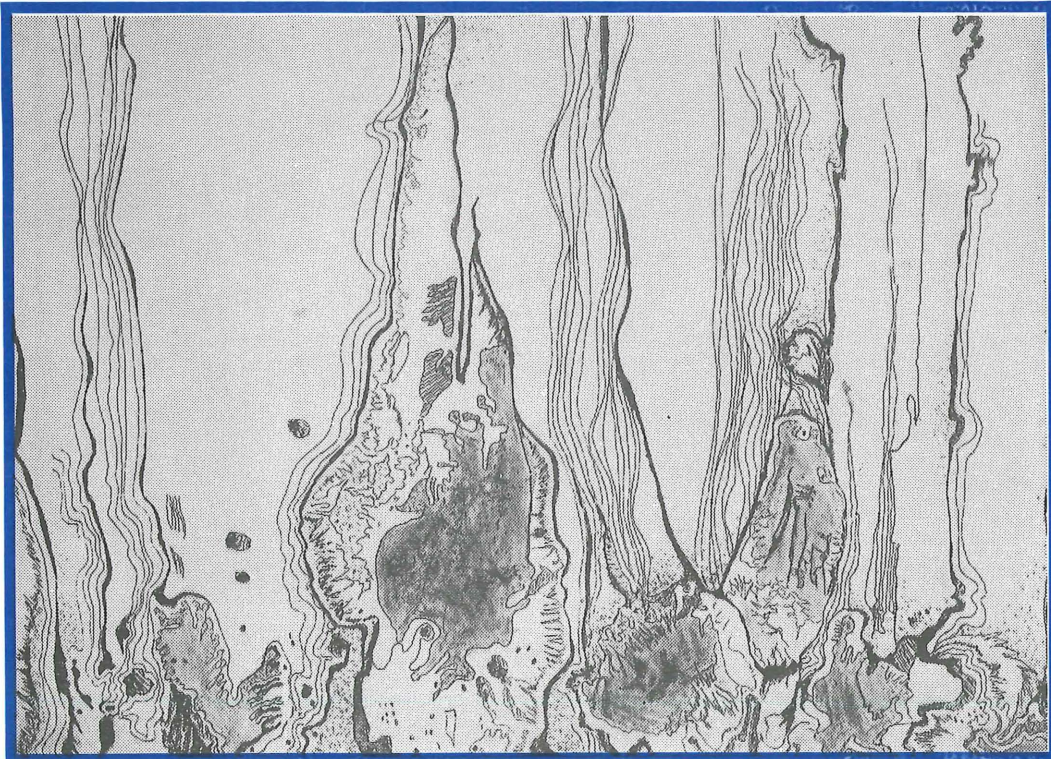
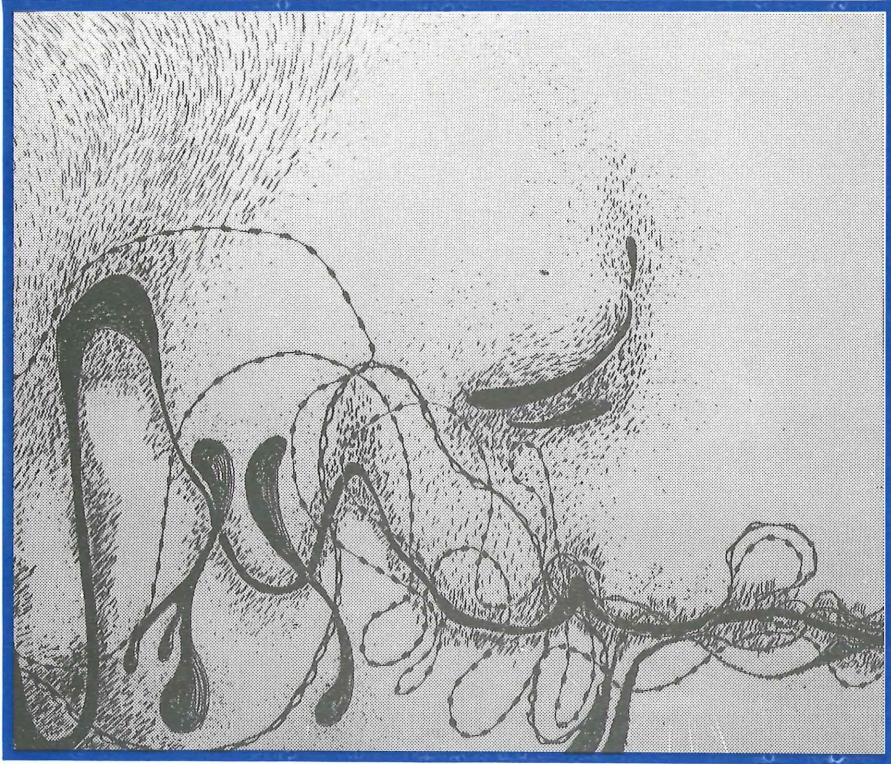
Tom Bryant

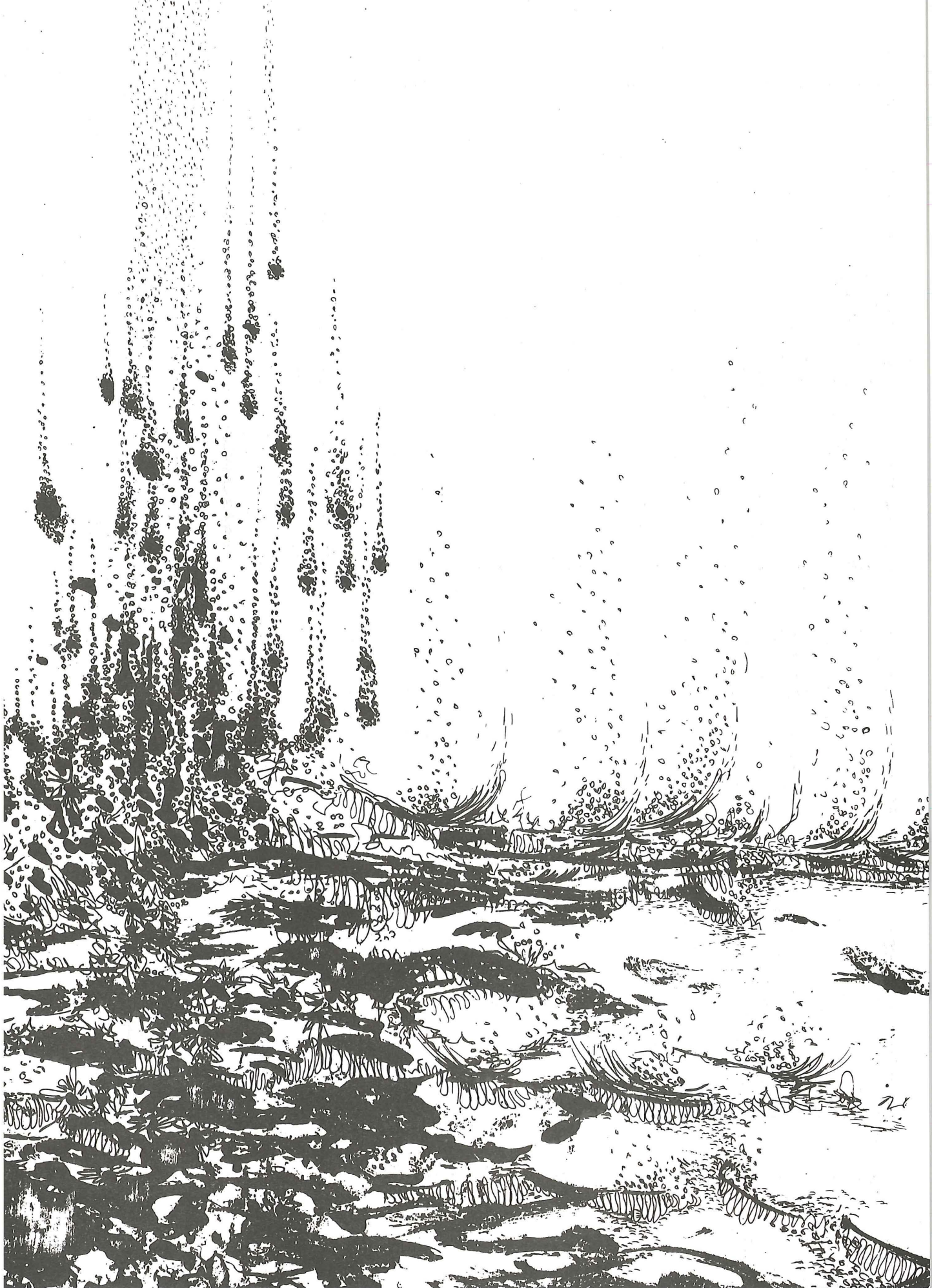
Portfolío

René Vachon Helt











ANNO MUNDI

This is the morning
of the day of judgment:
I awaken to the last sunrise
shining through the open window

I turn to the radio for companionship
while I wash my hair in the sink
all that is played is white noise
beamed out over the air waves
(Later I learn my neighbors hear only static.
Blood gushes from the faucets, and the salt
doesn't ease their thirst.)

I sip my coffee on the back steps
listening to the swan song and I now understand
(Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they shall see God.)
the vultures gather
in the yard next door

(Thieves broke in last night but they were too late)
I found five dead moths
on the kitchen floor

—Heather Gemmen





On Modern Poetry: Confessions of a Reformed Addict

by John H. Timmerman

People addicted to tobacco in one form or another fondly tout the day they quit their habit. Some peg it down to the very hour, this time when they squashed their last butt, and like evangelists for the Good Air Society (GAS) go about spreading winds of their good news. With far less precision, I recall breaking the equally addictive habit of writing poetry. This was not a planned break. It was like this: I recently woke up in the middle of the night, a time when I once wrote poems, and realized that I had not written a poem in something over two years. No hypnosis, no pills, no societies. A clean, sure break, nonetheless. I was free.

Certain traits marked my poetry addiction. It began, as so many of these wretched habits do, out of a perverted and wayward youth. Starved for money as a seventh-grader and the son of a college professor, lusting after several young ladies whom I desired to treat at the Cherie Inn Sundae Shoppe, I whacked off three poems for our junior high fine arts festival. Emulating beauty pageants, which were in that day a national passion of innocence instead of passionate insolence, the judges called the places in ascending order: third, second, first. I made three trips to the platform, receiving checks in the amounts of 5, 10, and 15 dollars. I could have treated every young lady in the Oakdale Elementary School seventh grade. I even detected a slightly greater willingness in one of them to accompany me. However, she opted for a football game and a long walk with the fullback who had fumbled three times.

No matter, I was hooked.

Fame, of course, is relative. The hero of the football team may indeed be a hero—to the 743 people associated with that school. People elsewhere talk about their local boys. Many people talk about heroes in state colleges who have 200-yard games. People nearly everywhere talk about William Perry, the one with the fingers two yards in diameter, the one who eats 325 pounds of

chicken before games. Fame makes for good myth no matter where it occurs.

Fame is the addiction of the poet—*my* name is printed under that poem. Never mind what's in the poem; that's the stuff of myth. Succored by my three consecutive trips to the awards podium at Oakdale Elementary School, I shot for bigger things. I wrote stuff for the school annual, for . . . whatever I could. I was like Twain's Emmeline Grangerford. I "never had to stop to think." The odd thing was that certain organizations kept insisting upon giving me awards for it when I entered their contests. When I was in 8th grade, the public museum gave me a first place for an obscure poem, something to do with Ojibway Indians as I recall the eminently forgettable work. Recollection dims, because in my frantic pursuit of fame, I forgot to keep any copies of these pieces. Just certificates of place and merit stuffed in a box under a row of model cars I made in 9th grade, and which I unearthed the other night while looking for an old report card that would prove to my son that I really did pass algebra. I couldn't find the report card. These people who nurtured my illness, however, didn't understand the monster they were making with their ten-dollar awards and neatly calligraphed certificates. By my freshman year in college I was certifiably a modern poetry junkie.

I did all the things a confirmed poetry addict does. I read Dylan Thomas's works three times through. And wrote about 100 poems in imitation. Even some of these were published in the college *Fine Arts Review*. I was on an aesthetic roller-coaster, sliding headlong into the domain of Oscar Wilde. I even went to Europe, trailing my parents on a Fulbright excursion, and managed to hang around Paris. I strolled along the Seine, bought a beret, and wore it to classes upon my return to college until I lost it one night at a beach party thrown by the college newspaper to which I contributed random lines. I won a first prize award in a poetry competition for the western half of the state in my senior year.

In graduate school the unthinkable happened. I began submitting to journals, any journals, some with the oddest names in creation, ferreted out of *Writer's Digest* and the like for addresses. Many of these journals, these little magazines that nurture the obsession, seem to have the word *River* in their titles. I'm not sure why. River of what? Most of these manage to stay afloat only a year or two before they drown in a river of red ink. You can only put so much garbage on a barge. All the same, a poem from this dim period won the Emerson Award at the University. More encouragement. Where were my friends in my hour of need? They actually nurtured the Imp of the Perverse, that desperate longing for the mad edge of danger initiated each time one sends out a 9 x 10 envelope with SASE.

My fellow grad students looked at me with envy, and envy is a deadly sin to both parties, the envier and the envied. Had I read Dante's *Purgatorio* more carefully, surely I would have understood this. But modern poetry, you see, has no *time* for the past—always the procreant urge and urge at the rivers of onrushing subconsciousness as future slides maddeningly to present.

Moreover, as one publishes in these little mags one begins to accumulate a "List of Publications." When it gets to a half page, one wants to go for a second; get to a second and one is on to a third. Before long the addict spends half the night cranking out poetry, stealing money from the grocery budget for postage. One lies about it. None of these little magazines pay, of course. Instead they give contributors copies. But the list grows.

As the list of publications grows, nurtured by all that river effluvia, the addict begins publishing in better magazines, those that have been around for more than six months. You want the hard stuff. But the compulsion is nurtured in other ways also.

For example, because I had published these poems in grad school, my first teaching position required that I teach a creative writing seminar. (This was in addition, of course, to mentoring the college fine arts journal, which task, I now understand, belongs in the Business Department.) I knew even less about teaching creative writing than I did about some of the other courses I was doing at the time—courses with foreign titles such as "Business Communications." With small colleges we learn diversity, and how to stretch an inch of knowledge into a yardstick of prattle. So it was that I met with a dozen students who wanted to "learn" creative writing. I became a pusher. But also, to justify my teaching I had to keep writing—a vicious cycle.

We stood one day before the large window on the third floor of the campus library. The students may have thought I had an "exercise" in mind for them. Not so. We were looking out the window for two reasons. First, it was an incomparably beautiful campus, a joy simply to look upon. Second, I was desperate for something to "teach" and was watching for a thunderbolt of an idea to burst across the green. Poetry addicts in their later extreme begin to mumble about "inspiration." You know you're lost by that point; most such are irrecoverable. They will go through life mumbling about getting on with their "work," and take sabbaticals to do it.

We saw a coed stumble out of the basement laundry of a dorm. She balanced a huge basket of wash, from which brightly colored socks—as was the fashion then—dangled like streamers in the spring breeze. Her box of Tide, perched atop the basket, had tipped and trailed a stream of granules in her wake.

"Okay," I said meaningfully to the students, "describe her."

This one bit of sanity guided my pedagogy. I never assigned a project to a creative writing class that I didn't do myself. I sat down, scribbled out a poem, and submitted it to the Hart Crane Poetry Competition. It won first prize. And, worse, the prize carried a \$200 award. An almost scandalous amount in those years. In the same year, I had the misfortune to win first prize in the Stephen Vincent Benet Competition—more prestige, less cash.

I read Dylan Thomas's work three times through. And wrote about 100 poems in imitation.

Two bad results have ensued. First, although I have learned absolutely nothing about teaching creative writing in the years since, I still am required to do that mad thing. It is done with considerable guilt, to be sure. I am not amoral. I have contributed to the delinquency of minors, majors, and several biology students. Worse yet, some of them have already won prizes and are footloose on the slippery slope of poetry addiction. It does not matter that I have tried to entice every colleague in my department to volunteer to teach this course, appealing even to our resident

linguist. None accepts and the chairman has been deaf to my need. Several in the department have published poems and so match my qualifications. I have come to the conclusion that, while all fine arts products should be mentored by Business Department faculty, teaching this course belongs in the Economics Department. The second bad result was the full understanding that I was saturated with the illness of modern poetry addiction. Despite my protests, I was a closet addict, secretly in love with the stuff.

At this last stage I was meeting, over a period of two years, once a month on a Saturday morning, with several friends for a "poetry breakfast." For three hours or so, we slouched over omelets and poems, complimenting or criticizing one or the other with no bars holding us. These were family restaurants. We were required to write four or five poems a month for review. We were close enough friends, albeit in different professions—psychiatrist, bank-teller, unemployed attorney, and teacher—to be nothing less than completely honest. Even though it hurt, our poetry got better—meaning that it could win more prizes. It was about that time that I won one of my last prizes: a first place in the Dyer-Ives Competition. One member of the group milked a poem for three first prizes in three different competitions, netting him somewhere in the neighborhood of \$300 for a 12-line poem.

That was the presumable point of no return, until I came back, gasping and choking, like one returning from the dead.

Why is this illness, this "disease" as some liberals would have it called, so serious? Let me suggest only the primary issues.

1. Poetry-writing as practiced today inures the writer from the world in an essentially private psychic universe. Modern poetry suggests that we feel rather than think, that the world may be reduced to images rather than ideas. One manifestation of this appears when a student hands me a poem to read. I say to the writer, "I don't understand this." I receive either a wounded or a pitying look. Am I not supposed to understand it? Are modern poets talking a special language to themselves?

2. Poetry-writing celebrates concision over elaboration. Ideas are truncated rather than developed. Lines, most of which have no essential reason for being as they are, force the meaning in and in, on what? A shrunken nugget of an image. If the idea is worthwhile, why not let it grow?

3. Stylistically, modern poetry-writing works on impulses rather than meter and rhyme. There is seldom a good reason for the modern poet's beginning or ending a line other than "it feels right."

Metered poetry in the modern mind is bad poetry. Rhyme is sentimental, something reserved for Hallmark cards, which modern poets tend to scorn. Modern poets, for the most part, don't believe that e.e. cummings worked his silly mind sick revising his poems—"Rosebud" through 125 drafts by one count. They believe that what comes is right, and because they don't understand the aesthetics of cummings, or Eliot, or—no, let's not mention Pound, they believe that whatever they feel like doing constitutes an acceptable aesthetic. Doing whatever one feels like may constitute a case of rape, or a bowel movement, or a midday nap, but not at all a reasonable aesthetics.

4. The egocentricity of the "I" struts through poems in a psychological strip-tease. If I were to have my way, no poem would be permitted to use the first person singular pronoun until the fourth stanza or so. I also prefer poems only three stanzas long. Count the number of poems that begin with "I." Who cares? Can't we have ideas, or events, or places, for a change? This excavation of the psyche has reached the level of mucky egomania.

There are other problems. If one is a Christian, for example, one starts thinking about things like "A Christian view of poetry," forgetting that King David and Milton already took care of that. Such concerns only lead these types to submit poems to competitions such as that by the Center for Christian Values at Brigham Young University, where religious biases are presumably more important than art. I did just that twice. A first and third place.

How did I rehabilitate myself from this disease-illness that strikes so insidiously, that eats up night-time hours with writing, devours days of travelling to poetry readings, spews little magazines with recycled ideas on recycled paper across the nation? How to resuscitate the mindless corpse so many years buried in addiction?

My own rehabilitation began, I now believe, as I trace a dusty back trail looking for signs, with a renewed appreciation for writing fiction. It happened like this. The next step after publishing in little mags and winning competitions, after inflating that "publication list" to three or four pages, is to publish a volume of poetry. Twice I had volumes of poetry accepted by small presses and scheduled for publication. The first press simply packed up and called it quits. The second went bankrupt with my volume ready for typesetting. Divine interference, some might say. Dark despair for me, which as Jung demonstrated, is the first step in confronting our shadow. Where else does one go? To one of the

half-dozen national competitions.

By this point, I recognized that I was dissatisfied with the imagist fare of the time, the poetic craze that was driving me crazy. Furthermore, I had had it with poems that substituted abstractions for ideas. If I had to read one more poem about love, friendship, or someone's grandfather, I would scream. (By this point, understand, I was being asked to judge poetry contests for high schools, societies, and so forth.) But I wanted that volume out. I decided to come clean, to start anew. I wrote a volume of narrative poems. I loved them. So did several readers. I received some glowing notes from them, which is unusual in competitions. But the prizewinner, if I remember right, was a volume of imagist verse on something like life in an Appalachian rug-weaver's cabin. Each strand in the rug was a symbol. I wondered what the rug looked like, where it was laid on the floor, how much the weaver got for it. In short, I was moving from poetry to story.

“. . . If I read one more poem about love, friendship or someone's grandfather, I'll scream. . . .”

Which drove me to look again at the poems I had written. I was struck by the fact that they were stories. Instead of images and impressions, instead of a symbol every sixth word, characters were living in those poems, and they had stories to tell. I actually enjoyed rereading them for the sake of the story rather than the fact that I had written them. (By this you shall know them—poetry addicts are forever rereading and revising their poems.) This is what I had been working toward—the beginning place of all art, and indeed, along with rhyme and meter, the beginning place of all great poetry until the modern era. In the heat of some nights, then, I began doing what I should have done, writing these stories out in prose. They kept poetic qualities, to be sure. Who says fiction can't be poetic, responsible to meter, melody, even rhyme? Indeed, it may have imagery, real imagery; figures of speech developed in a rhetorical context rather than an impression.

Other surprises appeared. Fiction, for example, requires a coherence and a unity with which poetry hardly troubles. In poetry, the unity

is the individual perception; the coherence the relation of image-impressions. Fiction requires that one think. A plot must adhere and inhere. It must begin someplace other than the writer's inspiration, go somewhere other than the writer's whim, end somewhere other than the writer's self-gratification. All this requires some brainwork. I found a left-brain that had lain dormant for years.

This third thing. A story is told for and to some-one. Too often modern poetry consists of a writer flagellating a wounded psyche or strutting some personal travail; a kind of travail literature unique to our age. Lost is the sense of audience. Who really gives a rip about all these tortured dreams? Stories move audiences, not snippets of Freudian psychology.

Finally, prose and fiction provide a linguistic challenge that modern poetry has contentedly ignored. Modern poets seldom use words with power. They don't have the rhetorical context do do so. Seldom do I see good linguistic amateurs, those in love (*amo, amare, etc.*) with words. Prose provides the greater space required to let a word live and play on the page.

Once an addict always an addict. True, I retain bad habits. In addition to my regular writing times (don't bother calling Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday mornings), I still get roused from bed once or twice a week around 3 a.m. I still brew the cup of hot chocolate while the idea germinates. I still shuffle downstairs to the desk and jot the ideas out. Moreover, on rare occasions I still submit stories to journals where I think the readers will like them. This has been rare. My list of fiction publications is less than a half-page. I have entered several, minor fiction contests and have won a first and a third prize. I recognize the symptoms. And I fight them. I have started five novels and finished three of them. One was sent out and published. Another is under consideration. The illness still simmers on low burner in my blood stream. But I am content. I have an audience even if the audience doesn't know it. I'm telling them stories. I'm giving them characters. When I write about them I sometimes find tears in my eyes or I howl with laughter, down there in the study during the late night. I do that for my unknown audience. And I try to give that audience the best writing of which I'm capable, full of good words, of bright imagery, of hard, sharp sentences. For the love of the thing; not for myself.



Plato father of myopics
was he real?
How do we know he was a "Philosopher"?
theory pliable as Play-Doh
Never, never to be real
Plato, such a genius
No, saint Plato
Real Philosophy
none else will do
Never, never to be real
triumph of forms raise the right way
above all else
Saint Plato

Theory Pliable as Play-Doh
Never, never to be real
uttered as the man drove off the cliff
Theory pliable?
Never
Concrete Saint
Sold the soul to Plato real philosophy
saint Plato told me I was imaginary

Nonsense reigns
rains?
beating down on once plentiful fields
never, ever to grow
again

—Tom Bryant

Meditation

We have risen hours before the sun
And in the quiet city bound by light
We are all that moves, we
The fishermen who have risen
Early. When the fish bite best.
The year's last leaves still lie
On the river's banks, where we stand
Each casting his line across the silent, cryptic river, hoping,
Praying for the tug that means
The fish is on his line, the
Great Fish. He will pull it in
(Not, to be sure, without a struggle),
He will force the river to reveal its secret
And will hold up the gasping fish
For all to see, and the camera to record
For all time.

But that is in the future. Now
Each casts his line, hoping,
Praying, content with minor tugs
And minor fish. We look at the rosy glow
Against the blue of the southern sky
Brilliance of a thousand neon lights
Proclaiming endless dawn against nature's night.
"Just like the sun," we say.
"Like the sun below the horizon."
And turn back to the silent water, waiting
Watching and waiting
For the great tug on the line
Or the real dawn in the East.
Think of Simeon, who also waited.

—Chris Wolterstorff



1 VanNoord

February Series

1988

of Calvin College

11 Monday

WAYNE K. HUBERS:
Financial AIDS: How Do You
Get It?

12 Tuesday

NICK WOLTERSTORFF:
Explains Everything
NOTE TIME: 12:30-12:45

18 Monday

IRENA VAN RAALTE:
An Afro-Iowan Poet Speaks

19 Tuesday

WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY:
Explains Wolterstorff

25 Monday

HENRY VANDER GOOT
and DALE VAN KLEY:
The Henry and Dale Show

26 Tuesday

FILM:
A reshewing of
"Donald Duck in
N-dimensional Vector Space"

6 Wednesday

QUENTIN SCHULTZE:
Tele-evangelist Prepare for
Winter: Are You Insulated?

13 Wednesday

ED ERICSON:
Into the Gulag (a failed
attempt)

20 Wednesday

LOUIS VOS:
Babes in Grand Rapids:
Growing Up Blonde in a
Society that Bleaches

7 Thursday

GARY HART:
Narcissism and You: An
Introspective Self-analysis

14 Thursday

FILM:
"Ichthyology and the Reddish-
Brown Annelid: A Pragmatic
Approach"

21 Thursday

The Tower Brass

8 Friday

DAN SMITH:
Wielding the Budget Axe

15 Friday

GLENN BULTHUIS:
Nuclear Fundamentalist
Folk Astronomy Capture
Christians in Story and Song

22 Friday

JAMES WATT:
Nuclear Spring: After the
Meltdown