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# RELIGION AND

*Faith and art have coexisted peacefully, even amicably, throughout most of history. In our day, however, relations between the realm of religion and the realm of literature are uneasy at best. As our contributors here suggest, the fault may lie with both sides—in the deafness of most contemporary writers to the religious yearnings of the average person; and in the aggressive intolerance of some believers who have gone the way of fundamentalism.*



## A MISSED CONNECTION

BY A. G. MOJTABAI

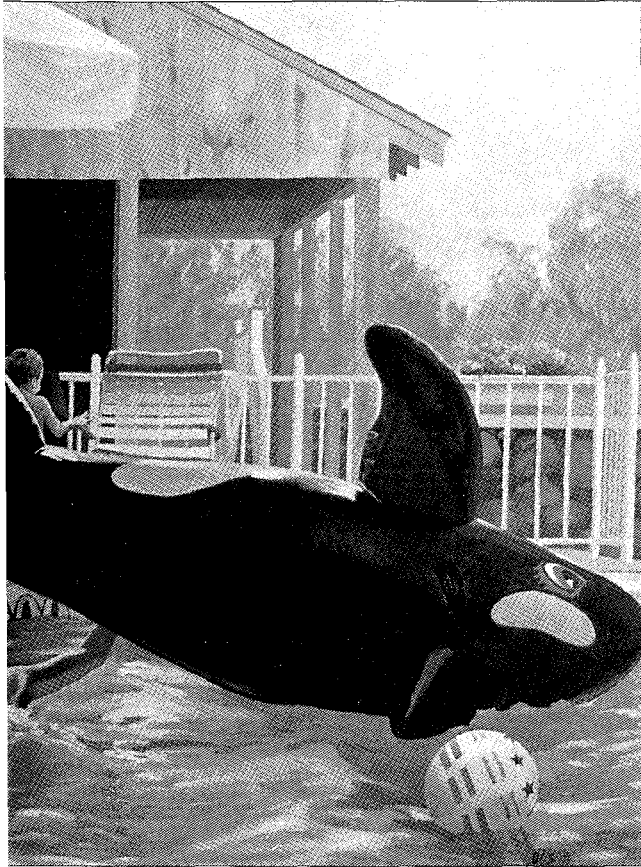
When I'm not teaching or writing, I work at the inpatient unit of St. Anthony's Hospice in Amarillo, Texas. It's a serious place. But not only serious: it's a house that contains everything, including laughter, comedy, farce, pettiness, terror, and peace, truly a house where, as Philip Larkin observed of churches, "all our compulsions meet."

One afternoon at the hospice, I was summoned to a patient's room to straighten out a lifting apparatus—one of those hanging hand pulls or grab bars, that are supposed to dangle over a patient's bed. The patient, an old man, was unable to speak, struggling to breathe, but still trying to communicate; he kept pointing overhead. The young woman tending him, his granddaughter, thought the device was what he

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# THE WRITER



*The Distress of Lot (1991) by Joel Sheesley. The artist enlists an intensely realistic style to capture flickerings of spiritual anxiety beneath the outward comfort and ease of contemporary suburban America.*

wanted. He was obviously too weak to use it, but he *was* pointing directly overhead, and all *we* could see directly overhead was the triangular hand pull knotted up in its chain. So I struggled for long minutes, intensely, absurdly, with that chain.

It was quite futile, and typically myopic of me—a comedy of mixed signals, as I think back on it now. The man before me was dying, and pointing—pointing out what might have been the one thing needful to see, and there I was completely engrossed in fiddling with the gadgets on his bed.

Then the old man stopped pointing; his hand fell away. His breathing had grown

noticeably less labored. He'd arrived at that moment I've seen many times shortly before death, a frozen moment when the eyes open wide and stare intently, unhurriedly, with perfect calm, lucidity, and impenetrability. Utter inscrutability. In the Bible Belt, they call it "angel gazing." All I can say is that his eyes were trained on something upon, or beyond, the ceiling. I thought of an antique word: *Behold*. He beheld—he seemed to; as to what he beheld, here my imagination would fly, but fails—I stumble.

There was nothing much I could do before leaving the old man and his granddaughter for their precious last moments together except to fetch another pillow and try to realign the patient's head, now at an odd angle. Then—nothing more being asked of me—I went out.

In due course, not long after that, the patient died. The granddaughter requested time alone with the body. "Whenever you're ready," we told her. We withdrew.

Finally, the young woman emerged from the patient's room and made her way to the nursing station to ask what came next. She seemed dazed, as shaken and confused as she was sad.

Before calling the funeral home, one of the nurses offered to accompany the granddaughter back for a last visit to the patient's room, to read a poem the nurse had written, a poem about letting go. The nurse made her offer twice, the granddaughter not responding, seeming not to hear, the first time. But the second time, she looked up and gave a clear, emphatic answer: "No." Although the granddaughter seemed lost

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and unsure about everything else, she was very sure about not wanting a poem.

That young woman's emphatic "no" has stayed with me and become the prompting for these reflections. I suppose her role was that of a merely proximate cause to a mind largely prepared for this news; her answer gave firm voice to something I already more or less suspected, for, standing there at the nursing station, overhearing this exchange, I found myself thinking, "That's how it is." However appropriate, or inappropriate, the nurse's timing or motive might have been, however fine or poor her poem, the young woman's refusal—the part of it I recognized, and took to heart—echoed in my mind well beyond its original hospice context. That echo said to me that whatever we were writing nowadays was not expected to offer light in a dark place, an outstretched hand in a tight place.

That is the present state of expectation, as I've come to see it, and I think, to a large extent, writers have earned it. We've worked hard to establish it.

I realize that when I make a leap of generalization, as I'm doing now, I'm not taking into account numerous other factors, such as the reader's (or hearer's) lack of preparation for meeting serious literature, old or new, or the reputed current ascendancy of image over word, or the aggressive crowding of bookstore shelves with the dregs of the new, blunting the reader's judgment and turning good readers off anything contemporary; these factors have been discussed interminably by writers and educators. Certainly, I'm not trying to make a case for a literature that makes the least demand on the reader. Ob-

viously, I'm not disputing the right—even the obligation—of serious writers to criticize and move in advance of the culture, or to make formal explorations of their medium. If the reader fails to connect in such cases, it can't be helped.

What I want to go on to confront, though, is our failure as writers to connect with the reader for reasons that *can* be helped. What have we done to earn the reader's distrust?

The more I think about it, the more convinced I am that I've done *my* part to earn it. A case in point: one of my closing rites at the end of each semester is to remind my students of the ceaseless challenge of literary creation and our perpetual falling short by intoning from T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* the lines from "East Coker" we all know:

Trying to learn to use words and every  
attempt  
Is a wholly new start, and a different  
kind of failure  
Because one has only learnt to get the  
better of words  
For the thing one no longer has to say,  
or the way in which  
One is no longer disposed to say it.  
And so each venture  
Is a new beginning, a raid on the  
inarticulate  
With shabby equipment always  
deteriorating  
In the general mess of imprecision of  
feeling. . .

But, of course, there's more in these lines than a healthy chastening, more than a salutary reminder of human frailty and fallibility. Despite the quite traditional religiosity of the context in which this passage

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is embedded, these lines are quintessential modernism: unprecedented candor and boldness. And yet, look again: how huddling—what a timid, fussy, piddling around in the sandbox! And isn't there a certain relishing of our failure amid the shifting shapes of ruins in retrospect, not to mention Samuel Beckett's "ruins in prospect," poking about with our shabby, always deteriorating little buckets and shovels? Dismantlement and then dismantlement: there's a mood and a program here—one can hardly call it a mission. Yet I had been so attuned to the long echo of modernism, with its dissonance, its sense of difficulty, discontinuity, and fragmentation, had been so thoroughly schooled in irony, that these habits of mind had become second nature, both invisible and ineradicable—*Music heard so deeply/ That it is not heard at all* (Eliot, "The Dry Salvages"). And whatever has come along in the way of postmodern advanced or retrenched gamesmanship couldn't do much in the way of releasing me from these habits, this music, much less make the world whole again.

Back in the days of my ancestors, there was an altogether different conception of the word: word and thing, word and deed were of a piece. Could I not reground myself, or, if not reground, then refresh, replenish, or fortify my spirit by gazing at this vision of maximal contrast? Consider Adam, by the power vested in him by the Creator, naming the animals: *And the Lord God formed out of the earth all the wild beasts and all the birds of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them: and whatever the man called each living creature, that would be its name.* (Gen. 2:19). Think of the name "Adam," itself formed from the word for earth—"adamah." Thus: earthling, scooped from the earth. Recall Jacob wrestling with a strange being—with the human and the divine—to become, himself, a new being, with a new name: "Israel"—"Yisra-El," from "El," one of the names of God, and "sarita"—"you have striven." (Gen. 32:28).

There's the word that tears up from the roots: "lekh lekha"—"Get yourself" or "Go forth": *The Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your land, the home of your kin, and from your father's house to the land that I will show you."* (Gen. 12:1). And the word that rends in twain: "Choose. . ."—"u-vakharta"—"and now you choose": *I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse. Choose life.* (Dt. 30:19).

And another conception of the word persists. Recently, in the continuing wake of the Second Vatican Council, Roman Catholics have taken to speaking of the Mass as being celebrated at two tables: the table of the word and the table of the bread.

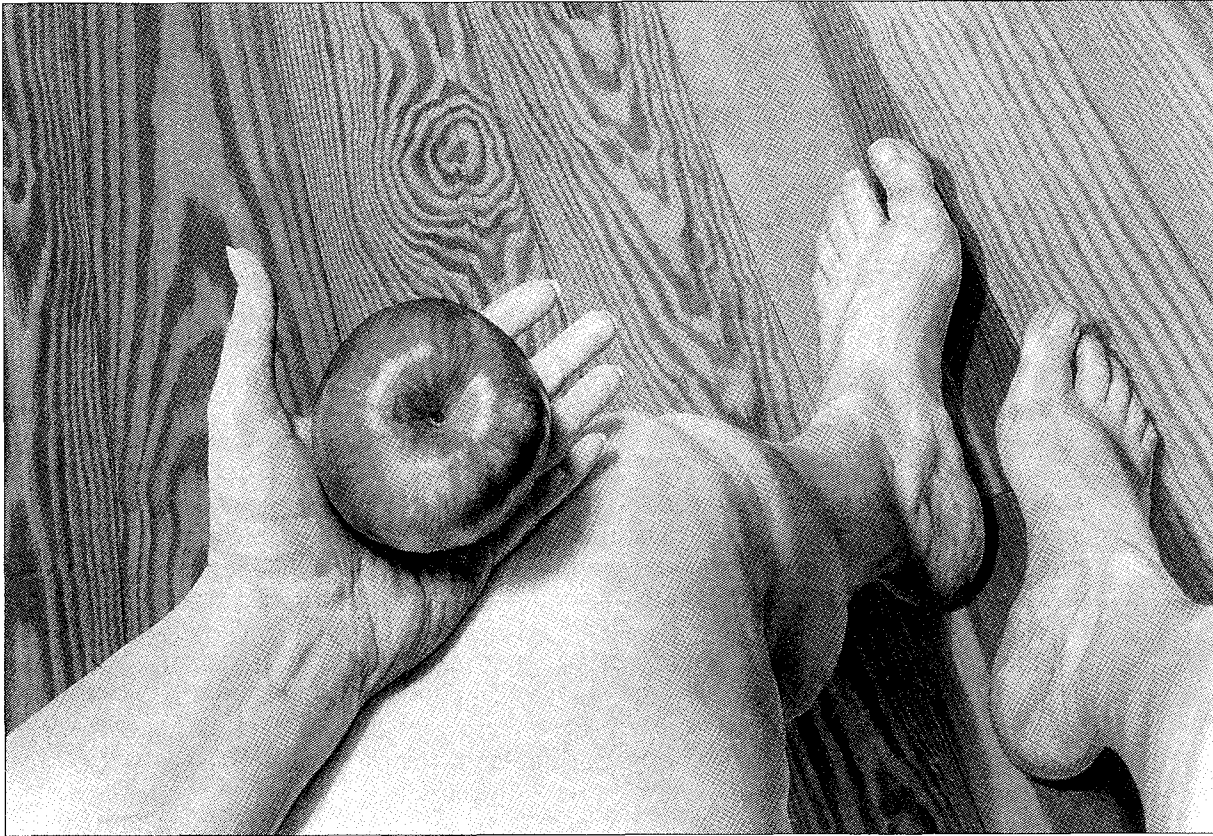
Think of it: the table of the word. How potent a conception of the word is enshrined here: the word that nourishes, brings everlasting life. The cleansing, purging word, so sweet to swallow, so bitter when it's down. The word that blesses, the word that binds. The radiant word. The singing word. And joining the two tables as one: the incarnate word.

O taste and see. Sandbox and table of the word: contrast and compare.



Let me make my bias plain. It has been suggested that the positive view I take of religion is a minority position among writers. I hope this is not the case, but if it is—so be it. A New Yorker born and bred, I live now—by choice—out on the high plains of Texas, well beyond shouting distance of the cultural trendsetters on either coast. I live in the heartland among so-called ordinary people. I speak from this ground. I may be out of step with the literati, but I don't think I'm out of touch.

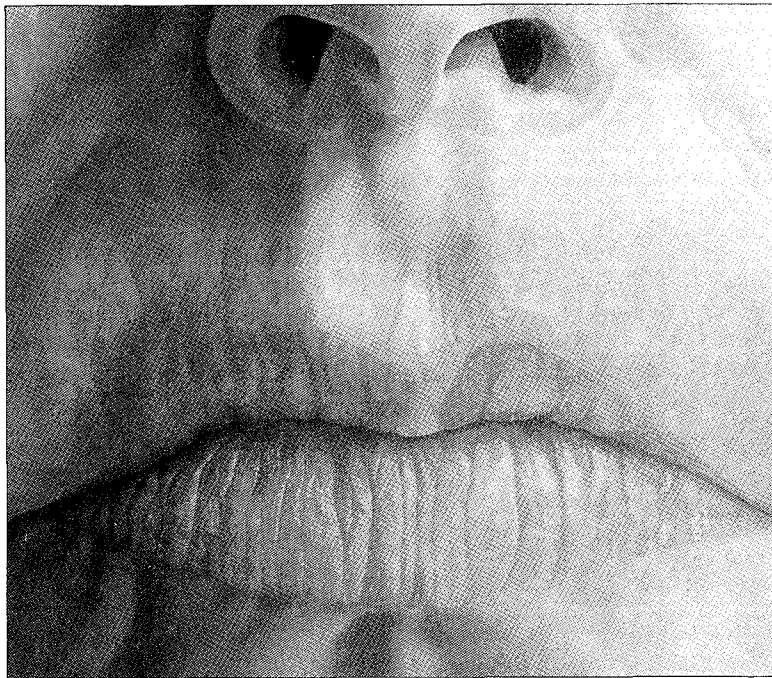
It is my conviction that there exists today a religious hunger in our country and in our world so widespread that writers ignore or disdain it at our peril. I'm not talk-

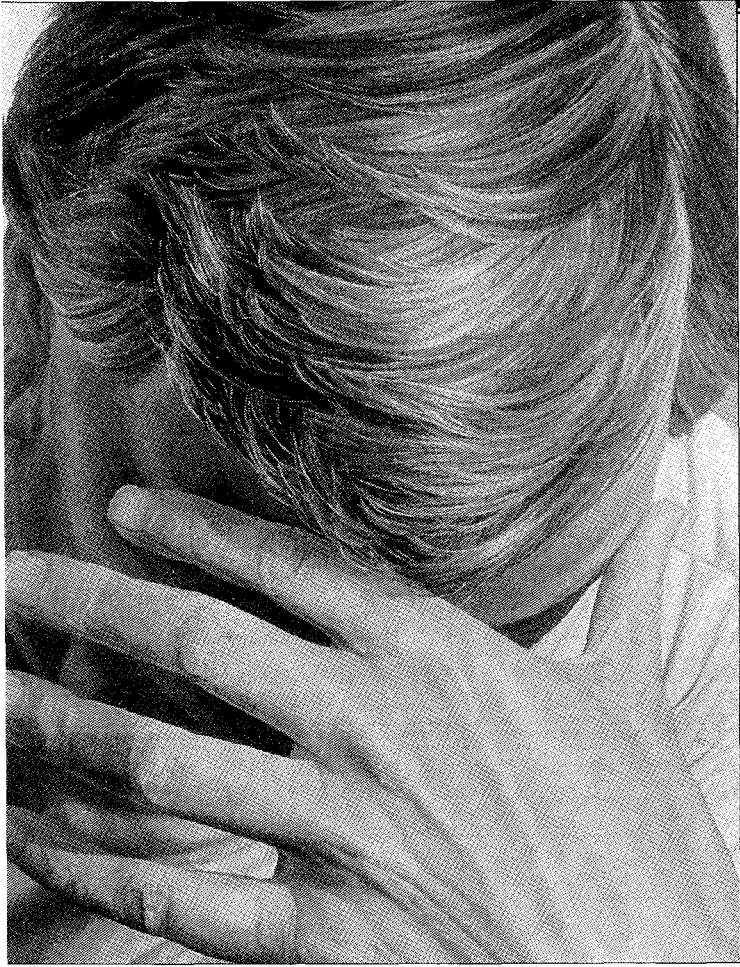


ing only about the peril of backlash, of censorship and repression from the outside, but of something even more deadly that eats away at us from within: untruthfulness, shutting out the voices we don't want to hear.

I don't believe this hunger is encountered only in the Bible Belt; it's to be found even in the great cities of the coasts. To be sure, it's harder to make out in the midst of the clamor of a large city, and it's also easier for writers to wall themselves off in enclaves of the like-minded if the population is large and diverse.

I heard Billy Graham say in a radio sermon once that there were more than 400 people claiming to be Christ in the city of Los Ange-





The Garden of Eden Trilogy by Catherine Murphy (clockwise from upper left): Self-Portrait with Apple (1989), Eric (1990), and Persimmon (1991).

les alone. I believe it. And if that many Christs, how many Mary Magdalenes, prophets, faith healers—and faith seekers?

I'll go further. You'll laugh, but I'd like to suggest that something so seemingly silly as our compulsion to plaster slogans on bumper stickers, t-shirts, and walls testifies to a widespread hunger for belonging and belief. Even slogans such as *Save the Whales*, *Life's a Bitch*, or *I Love Dallas* speak to a hunger for the proclamation of belief. So prevalent are these proclamations that those of us without words emblazoned on our chests may well begin to feel naked, undifferentiated—unreal.

Contemporary Americans may have garbled or lost much of the traditional language of religious belief, but we haven't lost the yearning for that belief. About this reality, this intractable huge fact, the American

literati, for the most part, have maintained a defensive or indifferent silence, or taken satiric note, and I suspect that this slighting of a matter of vital concern to so many people around us is symptomatic of other important things we're diminishing with our disdain, or just plain leaving out.

I preach to myself first of all—the "me" in the "we." Looking back over my first three novels and into my fourth, I've been struck by what these books have in common: views of a broken world, of lost connections . . . *the future/ Futureless* (Eliot again, "The Dry Salvages"). A bleak vision, accurate as far as it went, but incomplete, far too passive and acquiescent a reflection. I had set forth, in my first book, a

vision of mind and body severed beyond reconnection, then turned, in my second, to a utopian community where science and art, reason and emotion, were murderously torn; in my next, I moved on to a town divided first by the partition of a subcontinent, then by religious hatred and suspicion. Disconnection was my theme; it was what I saw. But it was not all that I saw. The connections were there all along, could I but reach for them. I was too busy indicting, documenting, with whatever clarity I could muster, my corner on the confusions of my time, too busy with the overriding demands of wordcraft to ask what sort of offering this made to the reader if served up in a steady diet of such things.

In teaching, we—I—don't talk much about ends; more time is devoted to questions of means. Students reflect these hab-

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its of mind, habits reinforced by their reading of contemporary North American writers whom they tend to emulate. With my most accomplished students, questions of encompassing vision tend to be repressed as distracting to aesthetic concentration. The less skillful students might—and do, with much higher frequency—trouble about such matters. But, for the most part, there's a marked avoidance of those "eternal questions" (Why are we here? Where are we going? What is a truly human life?), a withering away of any significant sense of greatness. Indeed, the word "awesome" has lately become one of the tamest of expletives.

Passivity despite energy and constriction of aim strike me as tendencies for concern in contemporary North American fiction. When I say "constriction," I'm not speaking of scale but of a failure of vision. I recall somewhere in one of Ann Beattie's novels—*Falling In Place*, I believe—a man and a woman talking about a famous wishing well he had visited in Europe. She asks him what he wished for when he tossed in a coin. "The usual," he says. To me, this is a terribly poignant and revealing moment. By a winking sort of irony, he masks his aspirations, distances, diminishes, and effectively disempowers them.

Passivity and constriction are most obvious among our so-called minimalist writers, where they appear to be elements in a conscious aesthetic strategy, but constriction is to be found also in the very idea of postrealist fiction, if I understand it, in its highly conscious and strategic refusal to dream beyond the page, beyond the act of writing itself. I believe that too many of our writers are afflicted to some degree with passivity and constriction, refusing to own up to the full gamut of our dreams, or refusing to dream beyond what we think we know. The boundaries are self-imposed: they may be those of the page, or of the limited first-person narrator. You have only to think of the

scarcity of omniscient narrators in serious fiction today. To what does this scarcity testify? I suppose it points to the decline of the God idea among writers, and also—significantly? concomitantly? accidentally?—to a waning of our faith in our own ability to know.



In a lecture entitled "Virtuous Lying: Imagining More Than One Knows and Knowing More Than One Imagines," Monroe Engel laments the abundance of recent stories that, to a greater or lesser degree, "luxuriate in impotence," stories "content to tell us . . . that our lives are not what we would like them to be—which is, after all, something we are likely to know all too well already," and urges the writer to reach for "the exhilaration of imagining more and better than he knows." Engel highlights two stories in his argument: "The Blind Man," by D. H. Lawrence, and "Cathedral," by Raymond Carver.\*

Readers will recall that both stories revolve around the presence of a blind man. (Each is differently constellated: in the Lawrence story, the blind man is the husband, and the sighted man comes to visit; in Carver's story, the husband and wife are sighted and the blind man comes to visit, but those are minor variations.) Minimally, both stories involve a married couple, an evening visit—including dinner, an aftermath with the two men alone together, a laying on of hands, and a transformation. In the words of one of my University of Tulsa undergraduates when I pressed him to say what the stories were about and what they had in common: "They're about different

\*A later version of Engel's lecture was published as "Knowing More Than One Imagines: Imagining More Than One Knows" in *Agni Review*, 31-32, 1990, pp.165-176. I shall continue to refer to Engel's original lecture because it bears an immediate connection with a living occasion, that of hearing Carver give a reading of "Cathedral," and is the cry of its occasion—full of admiration, but also bristling with uncomfortable, needed-to-be-asked questions.

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kinds of blindness." A terse answer—but a good, true one, for in both stories the so-called sighted are shown to be more deprived than the blind.

Within their commonalties, the two stories are very different. Carver's "Cathedral" is narrated in the first person, from the point of view of a very limited, unnamed individual. To grasp just how limited, listen, for a moment, to the opening lines:

The blind man, an old friend of my wife's, he was on his way to spend the night. His wife had died. So he was visiting the dead wife's relatives in Connecticut. He called my wife from his in-laws'. Arrangements were made. . . . I wasn't enthusiastic about his visit. He was no one I knew. And his being blind bothered me. My idea of blindness came from the movies. In the movies the blind moved slowly and never laughed. Sometimes they were led by seeing-eye dogs. A blind man in my house was not something I looked forward to.

And here is the narrator-host sitting down to dinner: "Now let us pray," I said, and the blind man lowered his head. My wife looked at me, her mouth agape." And here is his prayer: "Pray the phone won't ring and the food doesn't get cold."

This is the characteristic flat, numb sound of the narrator-protagonist. The maddening inadequacies of this man, apparent from his first utterances, are, of course, part of the story's brilliance. So much unfelt, unnoticed, unsaid, creates a lump in the reader's throat, a palpable ache of feeling, a longing for articulation. There are great gaps—wide blank spaces—silences—between the lines. You have to scour those silences between the lines where—if anywhere—meaning, hidden, lurks.

Nothing could be in sharper contrast to Lawrence's narrative strategy. In Lawrence, it's full illumination everywhere. Shifting from one person's point of view to another's, spelling out everything, including

the most private, delicately nuanced perceptions and thoughts, he creates a composite, overarching intelligence, the illusion of a nearly omniscient narrator brooding over the scene, an illusion, as I've mentioned, greatly absent from serious fiction today.

And there is no mistaking Lawrence's message; it is laid out programmatically. Too programmatically, perhaps, but his aspirations are large, prophetic, unafraid to inquire fully. Which is the more redeemed life? Why? He enters the intimate world of the blind man and imagines what he does not know. His incidental details are rich and luminous, none unliving, from the glistening white tablecloth dropping "its heavy pointed lace covers almost to the carpet," to the rain and the wind blowing in upon the horses in the stable, to the sweet roots crushed by the turnip pulper, to the "flattened grey head of the cat." As Engel has noted, "At the quick heart of Lawrence's story . . . is the essentially religious belief that a life of feeling was, or could be, superior to a life of ideas." In Lawrence's story, Maurice, the blind man, goes on "into the darkness with unchanging step. . . . Life seemed to move in him like a tide lapping, lapping and advancing, enveloping all things darkly. It was a pleasure to stretch forth the hand and meet the unseen object, clasp it, and possess it in pure contact. He did not try to remember, to visualize. He did not want to. The new way of consciousness substituted itself in him."

Here is Lawrence's blind man eating:

Maurice was feeling, with curious little movements, almost like a cat kneading her bed, for his plate, his knife and fork, his napkin. He was getting the whole geography of his cover into his consciousness.

Here is Carver's blind man eating:

The blind man had right away located





Signal (1991) by Joel Sheesley

his foods. . . . He'd cut two pieces of meat, fork the meat into his mouth, and then go all out for the scalloped potatoes, the beans next, and then he'd tear off a hunk of buttered bread and eat that. He'd follow this up with a big drink of milk. It didn't seem to bother him to use his fingers once in a while, either.

In the world of this Carver story, the blind man is finer, but not all *that* different from his companions; they are all equally into scarfing and grazing. There's a pervasive leveling, a shared cultural impoverishment.

The endings of the two stories are similar—and very different. Lawrence's ending is dark, shattering, momentous. Maurice observes that he does not really know his

visitor and asks for permission to touch him, to know him through touch; the other reluctantly consents. Then Maurice lays his hand on the other man's head:

Closing the dome of the skull in a soft, firm grasp, gathering it, as it were; then, shifting his grasp and softly closing again, with a fine, close pressure, till he had covered the skull and the face of the smaller man, tracing the brows, and touching the full, closed eyes, touching the small nose and the nostrils, the rough, short, moustache, the mouth, the rather strong chin. The hand of the blind man grasped the shoulder, the arm, the hand of the other man. He seemed to take him, in the soft, traveling grasp.

The sighted man, Bertie, is devastated:

He had one desire—to escape from this intimacy, this friendship, which had been thrust upon him. He could not bear it that he had been touched by the blind man, his insane reserve broken in. He was like a mollusc whose shell had been broken.

Admittedly, there's a dangerous—or what could be a dangerous—exercise of power here.

Carver's ending seems to be much milder and has an affirmative feel to it. Left alone with the blind man, having exhausted Scotch and marijuana in repeated attempts at onepmanship with the blind man, the desper-

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ate narrator-host is at the end of his resources. He turns on the television and finds nothing but a documentary on cathedrals. The narrator is questioned by the blind man as to what cathedrals look like, then, failing to communicate with words, is asked to draw one while the blind man latches onto his sketching hand. The blind man asks the narrator to keep his eyes closed while they're drawing the cathedral, and the narrator complies. Inexplicably, he continues to keep his eyes closed even after the blind man tells him to take a look. Nothing really prepares us or accounts for the narrator's change of heart. Nothing except for a sudden infusion of grace, or, perhaps, the author's unease—a nagging sense that the limitations he has imposed upon his imagined character are intolerable, even—could it be?—inhuman.

Listen again to the penultimate lines:

I had my eyes closed. I thought I'd keep them that way for a little longer. I thought it was something I ought to do. "Well?" he said. "Are you looking?" My eyes were still closed. I was in my house. I knew that. But I didn't feel like I was inside anything.

A sort of *ex-stasis*, then, a standing outside himself? Hard to tell—but his words seem to suggest a bursting forth from his self-encapsulation—he's sharing blindness, if only for a moment. He's also, albeit in a very small way, sharing something of the experience of cathedral building, for the builders often did not live to see the completion of their labors. So, again in a very small way, he's breaking out of his historical encapsulation.

The narrator's final sentence, his best attempt at communicating his experience, is thoroughly in character, as inarticulate as anything he has come up with before: "It's really something," is all he can say. So we're left with either mystical ineffability or a relapse into the old limitations.

Even though, as Engel has noted, "in 'Cathedral,' starting with the title itself, the religious context is strategic and surely highly conscious, it's all a matter of 'negative reference.'" Engel continues:

Religious allusion suggests what is missing from the life depicted. It is not part of the present context of that life. The religious suggestions of "The Blind Man," by contrast, are less strategic, less intentional, and less overt, but Lawrence's intense experience of chapel in the mining village of Eastwood in Nottinghamshire where he spent the first half of his short life informs both the language of his fiction and his unappeasable appetite for transcendence.

Engel observes that "both stories concern themselves with human deprivation and inadequacy—with the ways in which our lives are not what we would like them to be. And each is evidence of the courage required to look steadily at these painful conditions of deprivation." Nonetheless, he feels "a kind of gratitude" for Lawrence's story that he cannot feel for Carver's. For, Engel explains, "the Lawrence story not only tells us that our lives should be better than they are, it also suggests something of what 'better' might mean." This is not necessarily to attempt to create "alternative forms of life."

Just imagining *why* our lives are not better than they are—why they do not meet those expectations and hungers that no amount of experience can lead us to relinquish—is after all another way of imagining more than we know. [The alternative] is to see our deprivations as inexplicable and beyond reach of that kind of imaginative inquiry that our best storytellers have so frequently had the arrogance or virtue to exercise.

And, finally, Engel puts the question: "Are we now in the hold of a morality or

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an aesthetic that makes it difficult for a scrupulous writer to employ that virtue?"

I put that question to you as well.



If I could wish, toss my penny into the fountain, or better—since wishes are beggars—toss in my three pennies, and name my nine and more wishes for myself as a writer, for my country's writers, and for our literature, what would they be? I'd wish, first of all, to be able to name my wishes, to be able to avow them openly: to name them, to claim them, the better to act upon them. I'd wish upon most of us more ambition, a larger sense of possibility. I'd wish for a sense of mission beyond identity politics—a wider healing. I'd wish as many of us were as interested in healing as in indicting, and if not able to name, at least willing to point, or if not able to point, at least willing to *search* for what could make our lives better than they are. I'd wish for a serious literature less willfully inarticulate to spiritual need, less deaf to spiritual summons, a literature that looks to what has long endured as well as to the novelties of the moment, a literature that seeks wisdom, that is unafraid to speak, without taking ironic cover, its full heart and mind.

But, of course, wishing makes nothing happen. We choose our words—dim or radiant, clanging or choiring—and could choose differently.

There's a litany of theme, like some Galtonesque algorithm for creative thinking, that I can't get out of my head: writer *and* religion, writer *on* religion, writer *in* religion. I've come to the last part of this litany, and it seems to me, finally, that the writer is *in* religion—or should be—cannot

help but be, without diminishing our reason for being. What do I mean?

Clearly, I'm not thinking of the institutional-bureaucratic side of things; as a rule (a rule with notable exceptions) we don't do well there. But I'm not only thinking of the prophetic role. What I am thinking of is religion in its broadest signification. "Religion" from the root "ligare," meaning "to bind." To bind into meaning. Or perhaps to rebind—to connect what is broken—the known with the unknown, our one moment with the eons, each of us with one another.

**P**hilip Larkin's poem "Church Going," which I echoed a little at the beginning, might well be speaking of literature—churches and the great literature of the past, which *held unspilt/ So long and equably what since is found/ Only in separation-marriage and birth/ And death . . . / . . . In whose blent air all our compulsions meet/ Are recognized and robed as destinies. . .*

Is it impossible nowadays to recapture that sense of things "unspilt?" It's been our fashion not to reach for it—or, at least, not to be seen reaching. Is it ever possible to completely stop trying, though? Even those of us who would deny any agenda for the arts beyond purely formal, internal fulfillments specific to the medium really can't stop there. Why struggle so for precision and clarity—honoring radiance, not murk? Why should the formal coherence of the artwork matter unless wholeness and integrity are to be prized? Where does this prizing come from? *Read* our revisions, our endless revisionings, not our manifestos. Despite our loudest professed intentions, and all our inattention, we still can't help making those ancient, barely explicable gestures of holding up and gathering in.