

too, and was able to warm my chilled feet at the same time: a mathematician acquaintance estimated the number of candles then burning at 70,000.

There were about as many around the Katyn monument, recently erected: it consists of a large but simple and rough-hewn cross in an area surrounded by a low fence. Someone had defaced the cross by painting on it—at night, I was told—a fairly professional 1940. That was all that was on it, and all that needed to be on it. The question has always been who murdered some thousands of Polish officers at Katyn, officers who were prisoners of war. The Soviets blame the Nazis, but the Nazis were not occupiers of that territory until 1941: in 1940 it was occupied by the Soviets.

Various hand-lettered placards were here and there along the fence and inside it; the one I liked best, itself lit by many candles, read in Polish that “If we forget them, God will forget us.” Some might already have despaired of God’s memory in regard to Poland, and not only because of the six million of them who died at Nazi and Soviet hands in World War II. Most who died then were murdered by the former, of course, especially the three million who were Jews. (Historians often cite six million victims of Nazi extermination camps, but the figure is incomplete: six million Jews so died, but so did six million Gentiles—about half of them Poles.) The Soviets did kill quite a few, though, especially while establishing hegemony after World War II.

The country has been much fought-over—in military terms, it’s what is called “good tank country”—yet the Poles seem to think God has them in mind. Indeed, much is forgiven the Church because it has for so long been the preserver of Polish consciousness, sometimes against Lutheran and Orthodox neighbors, and now against Communist neighbors and visitors. There are more applicants at present than places available at seminaries. The Church, quite simply, is *the alternative*.

And so a quiet night of reverence and civic and religious piety came to an end. Scout troops marched off to buses, a few girls in their numbers, all looking as military as they could (whole troops of them died fighting in

World War II). I paid my respects at the graves of Home Army (that is, non-Communist) officers and men, and I too left. The graves of the Home Army people, some of whom were buried long after their military service, were well lit, marked by uniform birch crosses.

As I left I recalled a bit of family folklore passed on by my grandmother, learned by her, I suppose, from her husband’s mother’s folk (it was *her* father who never whipped a one of his 60 slaves). After the War—the War—Federal troops made the slaves leave; but after the bayonets were out of sight, the ex-slaves returned. I think my great-grandmother thought it an endorsement of her father’s vanished world instead of its condemnation—condemnation because it actually turned people *into* slaves.

The Poles are not good slaves. Good slaves, after all, achieve only the gratification of their owners, making the owners feel justified in what they’re doing. The Poles on All Saints and All Souls show at Powązki and I suppose at other cemeteries that they’re not so good at giving the desired gratification.

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Letter From the Heartland

by Jane Greer

Save the Children

Suddenly, we may receive a son—a six-year-old, our first child—and we may get him in weeks. My small worries grow immense.

Some background on one of them: My husband and I have what has been called a “mixed marriage” (sort of a hot dish, like franks and beans). He is firmly Catholic; I, by upbringing, Protestant: a lukewarm Presbyterian, dropped off at Sunday school, in my youth; a more staunch Episcopalian in adulthood. We worship together, alternating churches, and enjoy it. (So we aren’t your textbook conservatives.) I love the old enclaved Roman Catholic tradition he grew up in (“I was 18

before I knew there were people in the world who weren’t Catholic, Bohemian, and Democrat,” he brags, not a bit sheepishly), and he likes the intimacy of my small church in a state rife with large, unwieldy Catholic and Lutheran congregations. I chose Episcopalianism because it seemed to offer all the ritual I hungered for, all the history and pomp and tradition, yet lacked the few Catholic beliefs that kept me from converting.

Still, I often deplore—loudly—what I see as a growing *horizontality*, a sideways thinning, a puddling, of tradition and, with it, religious conviction. (My husband is concerned, too, but he’s not a complainer.) My grievances have become clichés to be found in nearly every conservative journal in any given month. In my husband’s large, modern church, few “hymns” that we sing were written before 1979, it seems (when we come across an anomaly dating all the way back to the 1960’s, he elbows me, points to the year, and smirks), and no one has bothered to make them rhyme—or scan, for that matter. They’re unmemorable, strictly for sanctuary use, not for humming in the car. There are no quiet times unmolested by guitar or organ or singer or “commentator.” We are requested to sing a ditty as we kneel in preparation for receiving the Holy Mysteries and as we make our way forward. We play the whole service by ear. At my little church, which looks as if it has been lifted in rapture from the English countryside, the situation is similar: Oh, we sing the great old hymns most of the time, but have the irritation of unrestrained children running amok in the aisles to “worship” noisily in their own way, sometimes with balloons. (To his credit, my priest has never held a Clown Mass, although he has allowed teenagers with guitars from time to time, after whose “performance” we must clap.) At neither church do we waste much time on confession or meditation.

But, as I say, this is old news, the long-standing but mainly private objections of mainstream America, those of us too polite or embarrassed or cynical to grumble out loud. Joining a particular church is like marrying: One doesn’t get a divorce just because one’s husband’s relatives lack aplomb—and the Bridegroom is ever con-

stant. Annie Dillard, in her wonderful "An Expedition to the Pole" in *The Yale Literary Magazine's* anniversary issue, was the first to make me question my own convictions: If little things like inane lyrics and the inescapable messiness of human fellowship

could get in the way of my healthy communion with God on Sunday morning, I really *did* have a problem. It's easy to love one's neighbor and concentrate on prayer when one's surroundings are aesthetically pleasing. I happen to love Bach on a booming

organ and the terrifying silence that follows, and to despise fourth-rate guitarists and church applause and constant chatter. . . . I could go on. Dillard, making me ashamed, writes, "A taste for the sublime is a greed like any other, after all," and, "Week after

REVISIONS

Stamped With the Image of the King

The "matter of Britain" has been inspiring European writers since the 12th century, when Geoffrey of Monmouth chronicled the arrival of Brut in England, the struggles of Uther Pendragon and his son Arthur, and the wizardry of Merlin. In *The Quest for Merlin* (Boston: Little, Brown) Nikolai Tolstoy recounts a few of them: Wace (the Norman Jerseyman whose *Brut* brought the matter to French attention), Thomas Malory, Spenser, Walter Scott, Tennyson, Hardy, and J.R.R. Tolkien, whose Gandalf is only the latest and most powerful reincarnation of Merlin. In his highly readable book—part scholarship, part fantasy—Tolstoy argues that Merlin was an historical personage, the last of the Druids in Scotland and an "authentic prophet." Much of his evidence is drawn from a comparison of Geoffrey's later *Vita Merlini* with the *Four Ancient Books of Welsh poetry* in which a Myrddin figure prominently.

Less convincing is his use of Irish material. While Tolstoy does manage to draw attention to several striking Irish parallels with the Merlin story, they are as likely to be signs of a common Celtic literary tradition as evidence for the historical Merlin. But most Celtic scholarship strikes Germanic and classical philologists as on the zany side. Perhaps it is the inevitable result of enchantment. There is a powerful allure to these tales. The great failure of English literature is the lack of a great Arthurian epic. Milton had one in mind, and Tennyson made an attempt even while realizing that his strength did not lie in

extended narrative. The result, his *Idylls*, for all their flaws are among the enduring masterpieces of the language. C.S. Lewis, like Tolkien, was drawn to the story of Merlin, whose appearance at Ransom's door in *That Hideous Strength* may be the most powerful scene of recognition in modern fiction—odd that it should have escaped Tolstoy's attention.

The most influential Arthurian theme is probably the quest for the Holy Grail, which inspired such different treatments as Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* and the *Perceval* of the 13th-century French poet Chrétien de Troyes. In her new translation, *Perceval or The Story of the Grail* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press) Ruth Harwood Cline succeeds in bringing out the liveliness and subtlety of Chrétien's final (and uncompleted) work. Despite certain confusions and paradoxes in the narrative, *Perceval* is not only a masterful tale—more entertaining than most novels—but it is also a strong psychological study of the adolescent in search of manhood. Young Perceval has been reared in isolation, in total ignorance of chivalry. When he discovers a desire to become a knight, his mother gives him some simple advice: be kind to the ladies; if one wishes to reward him with a kiss or food or a token like a ring, he should accept them.

Not far from his mother's house, he meets a damsel whom he proceeds to kiss repeatedly—much against her will; he gobbles her food and rips the ring off her finger. Later he tells Arthur, in peremptory terms, that he must be made a knight immediately. Eventually, Perceval is taken in hand by a wise knight who tells him to mind his

tongue and not reveal his ignorance. Like most adolescents, Perceval overinterprets. His taciturnity has fatal results when he fails to ask the Fisher King the crucial questions which could have restored him—and his realm—to health.

Cline's translation is lively and effective in every respect but one: her versification is not up to the difficulty of eight-syllable couplets. Ben Jonson thought, quite rightly, that the rhymes came too soon in this form. The poet runs the risk of jingling. Cline, however, in avoiding jingles usually ends up with prose in rhyme, with scarcely any attention to the subtleties of enjambment—a rereading of Andrew Marvell is in order. As prose, however, this translation is wonderfully readable.

The Arthurian tales are a superb example of how one society can transmit its traditions to another. The heroes of Celtic Britain get adopted by Norman English aristocrats and writers, and the part-Welsh Henry VII names his eldest son after the British king. Meanwhile, the French too adopt the national heroes of Britain, their greatest enemy, and Eschenbach uses the material to create one of the early German masterpieces. Of course, Malory's heroes are rather English, Chrétien's are the picture of French chivalry, and Wolfram's more mystical *Parzival* inspired that most ardent Nordicist, Richard Wagner. Underneath all these versions lay the eerie vision of a subject race that failed in politics and war but lent the cruder Germans—Saxons, Normans, Franck, and Bavarians—some, at least, of their poetry.

week, we witness the same miracle: that God is so mighty he can stifle his own laughter.”

And, to be honest, I glean hope from the belief that all this will pass, that it's a fad, albeit a tenacious one. The *verticality*, the up-and-down sense, of worship and our relationship with God will return, perhaps even stronger than it was before we learned we could lose it; and meanwhile, maybe, we'll learn to love each other better. Maybe.

But I'm still worried, because sud-

denly I'm going to be a mother, and it occurred to me, as my husband and I knelt one Sunday morning and tried to raise our thoughts above the surrounding chaos, that today's children have had no chance to *develop* a “taste for the sublime.” If they meet it, will they like it? When the old way comes back—and it will, because sooner or later we'll rediscover that to focus on this life is prodigal—will it seem alien and constrictive to young folk who grew up having *fun* in church? What will the priesthood mean to them, the

relinquishing of this world? If a child learns to expect disorder in worship and clatter where there might be peace—if he knows hand-clasping and absolute familiarity (a friend of mine calls this the “Jesus is my pal” syndrome) but nothing of terrible grandeur or the sweet relief of true, if momentary, humility, of saying *Thy will be done*—what will he make of Chartres or Notre Dame, of St. Thomas and Belloc, of most of Western civilization?

Dorothy L. Sayers writes of being “filled with the solemn intoxication

REVISIONS

A Private Publicist

For more than four decades Walter Lippmann preached to America on politics and catechized Presidents, Supreme Court justices, Harvard professors, and ordinary readers of *The New Republic*, the *New York World*, and the *New York Herald Tribune* in the fundamental doctrines of his “public philosophy.” It is symptomatic of much that is wrong with modern America that while no 20th-century American commentator has exerted more political influence, few have been so alienated from the perceptions of its ordinary citizens. To help us understand Lippmann's opinion of Middle America, we now have *Public Philosopher: Selected Letters of Walter Lippmann*, with an excellent introduction by the editor, John Morton Blum (New York: Ticknor & Fields; \$29.95).

In 1925, Lippmann conceded in a letter to Learned Hand that “my own mind has been getting steadily antidemocratic” because of “the fierce ignorance of these millions of semi-literate priestridden and parsonridden people” called Americans. Just how antidemocratic Lippmann's mind had become is revealed by his comments on the Scopes trial:

Bryan has, as you know, based his case on the right of the majority of a legislature to determine the character of teaching in the

schools for which it votes the money. This is a difficult principle to controvert. Personally, I am pretty well persuaded that it's necessary to controvert it. But in doing so, it will be necessary to invent some sort of constitutional theory under which public education is rendered rather more independent.

Now we also understand why Lippmann had to keep the inner workings of his public philosophy private: He feared “an outcry in the South that New York is trying to run things.” If Lippmann hadn't existed, Leo Strauss might have invented him as a modern Maimonides.

Lippmann came by his antipathy for populists like Bryan predictably enough. Early in his life, he repudiated the Jewish faith of his parents. While he subsequently claimed “the classical and Christian heritage” as his own, he never converted. As Lippmann explained in *A Preface to Morals* (1929), modern thinkers like him could maintain moral order without religious doctrine if they practiced the intellectual habits of “detachment, understanding, and disinterestedness.” The educated and cultivated few who master this outlook deserve positions as an administrative elite, managing the growing productivity of industry and directing a powerful executive branch in the govern-

ment. Perhaps even more pointed than the contrast with Bryan is the contrast with another 20th-century political commentator, James Burnham, who warned in *The Managerial Revolution* (1941) that the movement toward elitist control of the American economy was “in the same *direction* as Stalinism and Nazism” and who argued in *Congress and the American Tradition* that the ascendancy of the executive branch posed a threat to American freedom.

To his credit, Lippmann became increasingly skeptical of the planned society in his later years, as he moved toward a secularized appreciation for natural law and historical traditions. America might have avoided a great deal of suffering if more of us had listened to Lippmann's criticisms of Wilsonian idealism after World War I and to his analysis of Cold War “containment” after World War II. But to the end there remained a fatal abstractness in Lippmann's work, a disturbing aloofness from the interests of most Americans, whose political lives he was eager to direct. As wrong as the radical John Reed may have been about most matters, he never saw clearer than when he playfully satirized his Harvard classmate as a man “Who dreams a fragrant gorgeous infinite, / And then leaves all the color out of it— / Who wants to make the human race, and me, / March to a geometric Q.E.D.”

that comes of intricate ritual faultlessly performed": *ritual is a tool, nothing more or less, which helps us to DO holy things even though we can't BE holy.* Liturgical predictability takes the intellect out of worship—and with it the ego—and lets us participate even if we don't particularly "feel like it." Is ritual in worship, like ritual in craftsmanship, a lost art, to be tolerated smugly but not encouraged?

I don't know. Our children are laboratory rats in this experiment, as they are in all experiments where a monolith of tradition is intentionally chiseled away in an artificially short period of time by those with ulterior motives—usually a latent atheism—as the rest of us let them. Perhaps the old way of worship lasted so many centuries precisely because it *was* the most natural, the most helpful to us in our lives, and our children will go home to it like the prodigal son to his father. But the more I consider, the more I understand that we have only one *right* in this life. It is not the "right" to ride in the front of the bus, or to not go hungry. It is not the "right" to privacy or to bear firearms or to worship as we please. God gives us none of those "rights," and what man gives, man can take away. The only right God gives us is *truly* inalienable: the right to glorify Him. That is why He made us and the Sabbath, and why *we* used to make cathedrals. And this solitary right of ours is the very one we're not teaching our children these days.

Jane Greer edits Plains Poetry Journal.

Letter From New York

by Stephen Kogan

The Unseen Caravaggio

I went to the Caravaggio exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on a rainy Tuesday morning, hoping to avoid the crowds that gather at big-name art events these days. The streets were fairly empty, and I could feel the temperature drop along the line of fountains as I passed—a cozy moment before moving from nature into art. I remembered the dingy comfort of the

museum when it was like a library or an old-fashioned bookstore—a perfect place for browsing and meditation—and I recalled my trip to London last January, where I spent a quiet day at the Royal Academy's exhibit of Venetian art, one of the most beautifully presented shows that I have ever seen.

I canceled out these reveries when I saw the ticket line for "Caravaggio and His Contemporaries." I was a veteran of several crowd-control experiences, including the last Van Gogh exhibit at the Met, and I could feel that slight edge of tension rise in me again to compete for space in order to see the present work. Unfortunately, I did not see the Caravaggios as much as I saw the entire event itself, which was as far from Caravaggio as I ever want to see again.

I say this because art was the last thing that I experienced at the show. I do not exaggerate when I say that the noise in the first room of Caravaggio's contemporaries was at a low-level din by 11:30. There were two men next to me talking about their wrist ailments, several women on my left discussing what they would have for lunch, couples exchanging the high points of their trip to New York, babies crying, everyone talking as if they were, in fact, on the street or in their living rooms, the noise of a crowd that might have been just as happy with tickets to a hockey game or midtown movie. Self-restraint, civility, and a general sense of caring and decorum were hopelessly missing from that scene, like an art form or a way of life that once was common knowledge and has now become a secret.

I hate these "blockbuster" exhibitions and the corporate style of the new rooms at the Metropolitan, with their walls of glass and designer partitions, the bookshops selling stationery and vases and bracelets, the mounds of catalogs waiting to be sold in volume sales. I hate the overdone floral arrangements on the main floor and the guards who ask to see my admissions button every time I pass from one entrance to another; and I still remember the ticket attendant who said, "Enjoy the show" at the Van Gogh exhibition, as if I were going to a movie. The crowning touch to this unfeeling scene is the modern managing and marketing of art in today's

"heady art market," as a recent *New York Times* article described the current trade. It is the type of scene in which critics exaggerate "world class" names and trivialize them at the same time; where Frank Stella can talk about a European master as if Caravaggio somehow led to him; where the great moment of the Renaissance passing into the Baroque is reduced to a question of "space," as if art were the same as interior decorating.

We seem to flee from history and subject matter, from everything that once was understood as spiritual authenticity in art: the necessary connection between feelings and ideas. Yet that is where we are today, or better still, who we are today, not only with a Caravaggio or a Van Gogh, but with a Mozart, whom we regard as he was portrayed in *Amadeus*, as a babbling idiot, a narcissistic child surrounded by a world of less-gifted idiots and craven jealousies, anything but the intelligent master of a discipline that he was, moving in an equally intelligent world of musical culture. For we seem to feel so bad about ourselves, so empty and devoid of values that we need to tear down all that we can no longer respect in simple modesty and to which we no longer have any pretense of aspiration.

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Letter From the Lower Right

by John Shelton Reed

A Mississippi Homecoming

Chauvinistic Southerners like me are hard to please. We don't like it when visitors pop in and out and say that the South has changed so much that it looks like everywhere else; but we don't like it when folks come calling and say that nothing important has changed, either. In a recent article in *The American Spectator*, an expatriate Mississippian named James Harkness did just that. He really should know better.

Harkness grew up in Greenwood,