
TALK TO THE ANIMALS



MASS LUNACY

by Bruce Bawer

I'd never seen a church so crowded. The right aisle—which was separated from the cavernous nave by a long row of massive stone columns—was as packed as the A train at rush hour. There were not only hundreds of peo-

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ple but dozens of cats and dogs, the felines squirming in their owners' arms, the canines padding nervously underfoot, getting their leashes tangled together and winding them around the legs of strangers. Some of the people were pushing their way, as I was, toward the front of the church, and some were moving just as determined-

ly toward the back, rather like the fairgoers who stream meaninglessly in both directions at one of those New York street festivals. What made it harder to get anywhere was that while some people were moving, others were standing stock still, scanning the faces of the passersby, of the animals, and (though some of them had to stand on tiptoe to manage it) of the hundreds of congregants seated in the nave.

And a few, remarkably enough, seemed actually to be absorbed in the words of the sermon which, spoken in a man's heavily amplified upper-class British voice, echoed eerily within the stone walls. "It matters little whether you believe in God," the seemingly disembodied voice boomed over the hubbub. "What matters is that God believes in you." My first thought was that the speaker must have seen *Elmer Gantry* recently; for the revivalist Sister Sharon Falconer (played by Jean Simmons) had spoken almost the exact same words in that film to the agnostic newspaperman Jim Lefferts (Arthur Kennedy). My second thought was that this Brit, whoever he was, had just blithely dismissed the doctrine of salvation by faith, upon which the entire Protestant religion happens to be founded. And this *was*, after all, a Protestant church.

But it wasn't just *any* Protestant church. On the contrary, it was the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine, the seat of the Episcopal diocese of New York and the headquarters of the Reverend Paul Moore, Jr., the Episcopal Bishop of New York, who in many people's minds is the very embodiment of new-wave American Protestantism. It was to witness a manifestation of the New Wave that I had come, on this cold, rainy fall morning, to Bishop Moore's cathedral. I'd arrived forty-five minutes late, to be sure, and in the middle of the sermon, but I was here. The event? The Solemnity of St. Francis, a.k.a. Missa Gaia, a.k.a. Earth Mass, which a friend of mine had attended last year (a friend of *his*, who sign-language interpreted for the deaf con-

gregants seated in the transept, had in turn introduced him to it) and which he'd insisted I join him at this year: "You've got to see this to believe it," he'd said.

The idea of the Earth Mass, he'd explained, was to celebrate the beautiful Earth that God had blessed us with, and all its appurtenances—the trees, rocks, oceans, what-have-you. Since animals came with the package the celebration was taking place this year, as it had once or twice before, on the Feast of St. Francis, the patron saint of animals.

Moving forward in the aisle, I was finally able to glimpse the distant pulpit and, in it, the speaker of the sermon. He was middle-aged, bespectacled, mousy-looking, and clad in a long brown frock; from 200 feet away, he looked rather like Philip Larkin. When, a few moments later, I miraculously espied my friend in a seat near the middle of the church and managed to slip into the seat he'd saved, I glanced at the missal and noted that the Brit was a Franciscan named Brother Michael. Appropriately enough, Brother Michael was now speaking of St. Francis, and of all the nice animals that St. Francis loved—and also of wolves, who were not, Brother Michael informed us, nice at all; his tone suddenly tinged with *saeva indignatio*. Brother Michael warned us that there were, as a matter of fact, wolves among us today in this very city: "Wall Street wolves," he growled, "... real estate wolves." He frothed at the mouth for a while about those wolves, whom he clearly considered to be among mankind's greatest enemies, and in closing asked us to pray for all suffering and victimized people, especially those in Nicaragua and Northern Ireland.

It was hard to concentrate on the sermon for all the activity around me. I'd expected things to be less chaotic in the nave than in the aisle, but such was not the case. Ushers moved constantly up and down the central corridor, walkie-

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**Isn't it about time somebody
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talkies in their hands. Shabbily dressed men carrying videotape cameras and recording equipment continually moved by in packs of three and four, hunched over like Marines storming a beachhead. Small children, some alone and some in groups of two and three, ran all over the place throughout the service, laughing and yelling; nobody tried to shut them up or make them sit down.

When we stood for the Nicene Creed, moreover, I noticed for the first time that, in this congregation of several hundred people, I was one of the very few men in a jacket and tie. People were wearing sweatshirts, jogging suits, T-shirts bearing the names of rock groups and soft drinks. And these weren't poor people, either, who couldn't afford good clothing; no, although we were on the fringes of Harlem here at Amsterdam Avenue and 112th Street, the congregation was overwhelmingly white, Anglo-Saxon, and affluent-looking. Perfect teeth and beautiful complexions abounded. I knew that at home, these folks had closets full of Brooks Brothers suits and designer dresses, which they wore to their executive jobs in midtown, to power lunches and dinner parties, to the theater and opera and ballet.

But not to church. A charitable friend suggested afterwards that perhaps they had all been dressing down in tribute to St. Francis's vow of poverty. But their extremely casual attire seemed, to me, to reflect a distinctly different notion: namely, that it just wasn't proper to get all *formal* with God. Several times, people around me glanced at my tie and jacket with looks of silent reproach. This attitude would explain not only the adults' garb but the children's lack of discipline. To these parents, apparently, taking the kids to God's House was like taking them to visit an indulgent Grandpa: here you simply had to let them get away with more than you did at home.

But I didn't pay attention for long to my fellow congregants. There was too much going on elsewhere. Much of it was the work of the Paul Winter Consort, a group of avant-garde instrumentalists and modern dancers (and one big-voiced blues singer who, we were told, had just left the cast of *Big River*) that, along with the church choir and organist, provided the music for the Mass. Periodically, in the apse and transept and up and down the nave's central corridor, the dancers, twenty or so in number and wearing white tights, frolicked to the reedy, hypnotic strains of the Consort's unmelodic hymns and chants; some of these musical pieces were hauntingly enhanced by the recorded sounds (mating

calls?) of whales and seals. (The composer's credits for the "Sanctus and Benedictus Qui Venit" reads "Humpback Whale, Castro-Neves, Hailey, Winter"; for the "Agnus Dei," "Harp Seals, Scott, Winter." Do the whale and seals belong to ASCAP?) At one point, this novel variation on sacred music served as accompaniment while two of the dancers—a young black

man and a young white woman—climbed up into the pulpit and did an erotic *pas de deux*.

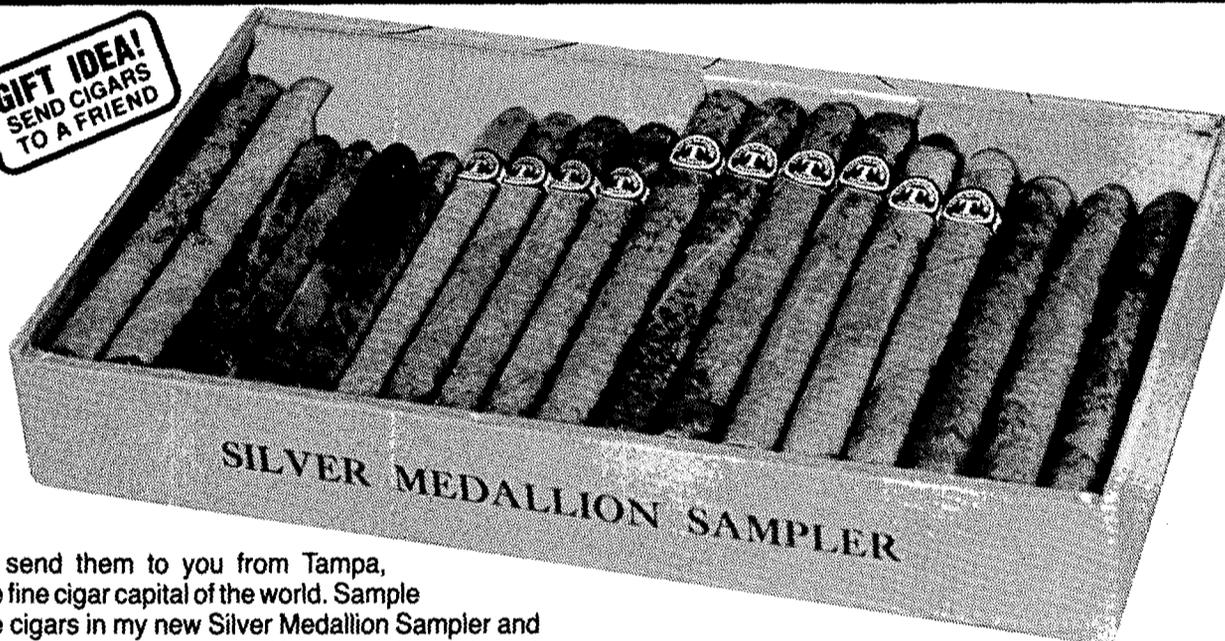
Finally Bishop Moore took the mike, and reminded us (just in case we'd forgotten since Brother Michael's sermon) to pray for suffering and captive peoples, especially those in Nica-

ragua and South Africa. And he reminded us that our beautiful God-given earth is being despoiled by air and water pollution and overdevelopment, and threatened by the existence of nuclear weapons. This was not only bad, it seemed, but blasphemous, because, according to the "Canticle of the Sun" (I'd missed it, but the words were printed in the missal), the celestial

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The Stars above give thanks to Thee. . .

The ceremony's climax came after

the communion: the big bronze doors at the back of the church were opened and there began what the missal referred to as a "silent procession of representative animals." One by one, an elephant, a camel, a llama, a horse were led down the aisle toward the altar. A young boy carried a turtle; a man carried a small bird; a woman carried a kitten. A parrot rode by on somebody's shoulder. The congregants watched

with fascination, some of them standing on their chairs, or on the waist-high bases of the huge stone pillars, to get a better view; some took out cameras and snapped flash pictures as the animals filed past. A middle-aged woman stood near me, raising her right hand the way the Pope does when he's blessing people. But she had something in her hand. "What's she holding?" I whispered to my friend. "Magic crys-

tals," he said. "They're supposed to have healing properties. She's blessing the animals." It was not till the animals had all arrived at the altar, and the congregation was in the middle of a "Prayer of Thanksgiving for the Animal Kingdom," that it occurred to me what this scene reminded me of: an ancient pagan ceremony of animal sacrifice (only without the actual sacrifice).

After the prayer came a sort of finale. With the elephant, llama, et al. still hovering around the altar, the whole company—all the humans, anyway—took part in a "Hymn of Acclamation":

For the Beauty of the Earth, Sing, Oh Sing
Today,
Of the sky and at our birth, Sing, Oh Sing
Always,
Nature, Human and Divine, all around us
lies,
Lord of All to Thee we raise grateful hymns
of praise.

While we sang this, we were supposed to raise and lower our arms—rather like Moslems, except that we weren't groveling on the floor but standing upright. Almost everyone went along, obediently imitating the dancers, all of whom were now synchronously waving brightly colored flags up, down, up, down. The dancers swayed a little, too, and so did the crowd. The combination of the chantlike music, the pagan lyrics, the white-garbed dancers, and the churchful of supplicatory arm gestures made it look as if this congregation were worshipping not Jehovah but Ra, the Egyptian sun god.

And that was it. The "representative animals" filed out, and then the priests, the choir, a half dozen or so Tibetan monks whom I hadn't seen before, and the Paul Winter instrumentalists, who in their seedy habiliments (e.g., dirty dungaree jackets and no-longer-white T-shirts) looked like a sixties acid-rock group after too much acid. When, after ten minutes or so of creeping slowly toward the door, my friend and I finally made it out of the church, it was cold and windy but had stopped raining; though the sky was still clouded it looked as if the sun might break through shortly. Most of the members of the congregation had the collars of their coats pulled up tight and were proceeding quickly, in groups of five and six and seven, in the direction of West End Avenue and Riverside Drive. A small crowd, however, had formed on the front steps around a man who was holding open an expensive-looking cat carrier. A priest had one hand inside the carrier and with the other hand was making solemn motions in the gray early afternoon air. He was blessing a pussycat. □

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AMONG THE INTELLECTUALOIDS



MLA MALAISE

by D. G. Myers

Toward the end of a particularly grueling session of papers at the recent convention of the Modern Language Association in San Francisco, Stephen Greenblatt spoke yearningly of what every English professor wishes for—"the moral authority of homelessness." Greenblatt is a star of the profession, head monkey of the latest fashion in literary studies (the New Historicism), full professor at Berkeley in his forties. Yet still he envies the frayed, unshaven, coughing men who live upon the streets. Why? They don't have a lifetime job or a home in the Berkeley Hills. But they do have the one thing Stephen Greenblatt does not: the moral authority ceded to the weak in a social-welfare state.

In his envious recognition of what it is he lacks, Greenblatt could easily have been speaking for a large segment of the academic profession of literary studies. As the MLA convention illustrated, these days a good many left-leaning professors of literature are demoralized. You wouldn't think they would be. After all, they are fortunate enough, as Cecelia Tichi of Vanderbilt said at one point, to live in "the post-Vietnam era of a declining imperial power." They have captured the profession; they have radicalized literary studies; they have very nearly succeeded in transforming the MLA from a scholarly to a political organization. By all rights they should be celebrating. But there is no celebrating. For the professors continue to lack moral authority, even though they're feeling weak.

MLA is sometimes called "Malaise," and the name never seemed more apt than in San Francisco this year. At the very moment of its triumph, the academic left—at least in literary studies—has run out of gas. Just as it should be entering a period of concentration, of drawing back and consolidating its gains, the professoriat seems instead to be entering a period of fatigue,

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self-doubt, and nagging discontent.

Take the case of feminism (as if you had any say in the matter), the most prominent of the new theoretical movements in literary studies. Outgoing MLA President Winfred Lehmann reported that the women's studies section of the Association has increased in membership to rank second in size only to the section on literary criticism. Lehmann's figures were borne out by the program of the 1987 convention—fully 10 percent of the sessions were exclusively devoted to feminist topics (not counting the nineteen sessions on female writers or the endless number of papers given over to "feminist readings" of male writers). There were as many sessions on "Chicana" writers as on Shakespeare. (Esteeming writers solely on the basis of their "gender" or "ethnicity" is known in literary studies as "opening up the canon.")

The titles of MLA sessions are an easy mark for ridicule, but one will give a whiff of the present intellectual milieu of the MLA: "What Is a (Wo)Man Critic and What Does (S)He Want?" More than one convention paper raised the subject of "(en)gendering." Titles like "Let Us Speak" or "Speaking for Us" were characteristic, testifying to feminism's conception of literature as a branch of political oratory. Indeed, so prominent a part of the academic literary scene has feminism become that during one afternoon time slot at the convention no fewer than nine sessions on feminist topics from lesbian writing to "feminist dialogics" were droning on concurrently. Feminism has gone from being a special and rather narrow interest to having become one of the large clumsy categories by which literary study is organized in the university.

For all that, however, there are rumblings of discontent. What does feminist criticism have left to do when the last poem has been unmasked to reveal a male poet's secret desire for "immersion in the feminine"? Foreseeing a depletion of the literary works

and problems that will yield to the feminist approach—what might be called feminism's impending energy crisis—Sandra M. Gilbert of Princeton and Susan Gubar of Indiana proposed a solution. There have always been, they said, two types of feminist critic. On one hand there is the critic who insists on her "expressive autonomy," her freedom from fidelity to the historically determined text, and who despises "the phallo-logocentrism of the very idea of history"; on the other there is the critic who "believes that literature inscribes social conditions" (usually evil ones) and who "imagines utopian futures." Gilbert and Gubar named these critics, respectively, the "mirror" and the "vamp" (their caricature of the title of M. H. Abrams's great study of critical theory in the Romantic age was meant as homage, but its effect was to suggest the literary bounding, the straining after unearned distinction, characteristic of much feminist criticism). These two types of critic have remained at odds too long; they and their separate functions must be merged into one.

Gilbert and Gubar demonstrated how this might be done in an incoherent reading of Coleridge's *Kubla Khan*. In their version of the poem, Coleridge announces that "the utopian City of Ladies" has arrived, and the next task is to bring the repressed to the surface of consciousness and set it free! "Though based on misreadings," Gilbert said, such an interpretation "might be more to the point."

But if the new two-in-one feminist approach proposed by Gilbert and Gubar only demonstrated the hollowness of the previous feminist approaches, if feminist criticism was demonstrated to be in deep trouble as an intellectual method, feminists themselves at MLA appeared to be internally divided, rancorous, and fretful. More than one objected to the fact that not all women in the profession are radical feminists. Catherine R. Stimpson of Rutgers complained that too many grants were going to women "in the middle," and Ruth Salvaggio of Virginia Tech declared bitterly that it

is unethical to permit "conservative women" to review the work of feminists. What's more, men who express sympathy for feminism turn out to be just as dangerous as men who fiercely oppose it. Annette Kolodny of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute warned that male professors who seek to synthesize feminism with other methods or subjects are covertly seeking the "containment" of feminism. The result, she said ominously, would be the depoliticization of feminism.

Much as this might be welcome to feminism's opponents, there is better news still. Feminists in the academy fear they are reaching not so much a critical mass as a saturation point. Martha Evans of Mary Baldwin College said that, as women's numbers rise in the university, men are beginning to call for "balance" in the name of the same principle asserted to fuel the rise of women—Affirmative Action. "The very words we had used to attack white male hegemony are now being used to defend those interests," Evans said. "We need to rethink our rhetoric . . . to defend and protect our position. By our very success are we undoing ourselves?"

Feminists were not the only ones at MLA who felt their gains of the past two decades slipping away. Deconstructionists moaned that students continue to enroll in graduate school believing superstitiously that "texts" are actually "writings." Marxists, who once confidently expected Departments of English to wither away and be replaced by "cultural studies," are depressed to see how few courses in film and TV criticism are being offered in American graduate schools and how few articles on mass culture are being published in the scholarly journals. Worse yet, conservatives are beginning to develop cultural criticism of their own in journals like the *American Scholar*, the *New Criterion*, *Commentary*, and *The American Spectator*. Radicals warned that cultural criticism, meant to be "liberatory, feminist, egalitarian,"