

he accomplished that.

That others in the game of making plays—Marlowe and Kyd and Greene, for example, even Ben Jonson, though he was luckier than he had any right to be—flared brightly as talents and many came to bad and sad ends. Their lives are more interesting to think about because they are perfectly imaginable, then or now. The good deal that we do know about Shakespeare's life tells us that it was a quiet, sober life, first to last. All his great adventures, in that age of adventuring, are there in his words and works, the creatures of his imagination, the power and glory of which is beyond imagining.

That from his works there are clues and keys to the man. That he is the perfect Elizabethan of the second generation of Elizabeth's reign. That he shares the same education that his audience did, and that it was a good one, too. He was spared the pains and pleasures of the university. Just look what happened to "the university wits." (Marlowe dead on the floor, murdered in a barroom brawl.) That Shakespeare so exactly shared the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of his audience that he is almost anonymous, at least in the conventional contemporary sense of "personality." He earned an enviable reputation, but in no way could be called (then or now) a celebrity. That he was not a rebel, either. The best fiction about him (so far) is Anthony Burgess's *Nothing Like the Sun* (1964). But Burgess had to cheat, making Shakespeare, albeit in his "lost" years, a modern artist full of rage and rebellion, an angry young hippie of 1964. Not bloody likely. It seems pretty clear that Shakespeare as we know him, in his work, was in no way subversive, though, like everybody else in his time, he had mixed feelings about many things.

The remarkable thing for us to remember is how free he was, how free *they* were to consider any and all aspects of the human condition, social and political complexities ancient and modern, without benefit of what we call "freedom of

speech." In fact, it was a time when you could be whipped or branded or even lose a hand or two for certain kinds of subjects and libels. None of that seems to have inhibited Shakespeare much. What is missing in his plays? Well, maybe modern pornography which is certainly absent. Instead he can be and is bawdy even in surprising places like the love scenes of *Romeo and Juliet*. Think about it: how very few of our writers, popular or "literary," can handle the language and drama of simultaneous, mixed, or contrary feelings. Think, precious First Amendment or not, how many topics and subjects are dutifully avoided by our writers, as unacceptable, unthinkable, self-destructive. The day before the Earl of Essex rebelled against his Queen, he treated his rebels to a special production of Shakespeare's *Richard the Second*, most likely, it is believed, for the sake of the deposition scene. The Queen was not amused but never for a moment held it against Shakespeare or his company. Days later they were performing for her at Court. It taxes credulity to imagine any modern head of state doing the same thing.

Shakespeare lives on in our time, finally, because he lived fully in the right time and at the right place and was not only a good and decent man but also one who earned repute in his lifetime (and in memory) for being so. He lived well and quietly and lives on most richly in his works. Those riches most likely will outlast all our own. A safe bet. Meantime, in its wisdom, the *New York Times Magazine* (Barry Singer, "All Shakespeare, All the Time: The Bard has never been this popular in America—on stage, soaps and bubble gum wrappers," June 16, 1996) tells us: "It's wondrous and strange how often, and where, Shakespeare turns up across America, his characters infinitely malleable, his themes permanently pertinent." We learn that, among many things headed for us, at us, like it or not, is another film of *Hamlet*, this one directed by Kenneth Branagh and starring Billy Crystal and Robin Williams.

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On the Bach St. Matthew Passion

Holy Saturday 1995

by Frederick Turner

Again a god goes underground,
Showing a world that never learns to see
That all authority is bought and bound
By blood unspeakable and agony.

Pity all kings and presidents.
If they've not paid already, they will pay.
Forgive their arrogance, incompetence,
And till it is a sin, you must obey.

Myth bought by wounding of the tongue
Threads with its muteness all the pearls of words;
A spear thrust through the vessel of the lung
Breaks silence into most miraculous sherds.

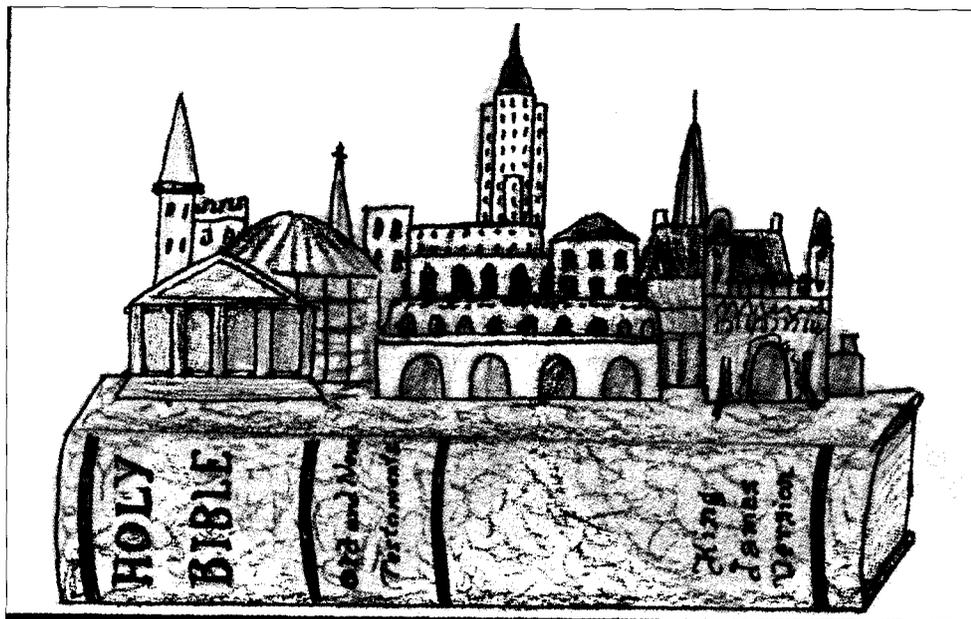
Soul of the world, smashed to your tomb,
How do you bear that monstrous weight of guilt?
Ah, king, who now endure your never-ending doom,
How do you bear the world that it has built?

Across one hemisphere the flowers
Blush through the continents in white and red:
Tongues of the earth, fed with the freshening showers
Of white blood from a god-king who is dead.

The Unbanable Book

The Bible, Past and Present

by Harold O.J. Brown



A recent full-page advertisement in the *Chicago Tribune*, which no longer calls itself “The World’s Greatest Newspaper,” listed four documents that supposedly are foundational: the Magna Carta, the Treaty of Versailles, the Declaration of Independence, and the Infiniti Retailer Pledge. These four, according to the advertiser, Infiniti, are totally trustworthy, because: “A promise is a promise.” Unfortunately, at least for the reader with some knowledge of modern history, the Versailles treaty is hardly an attractive pattern: it was one of the worst documents ever foisted on the human race. It violated President Wilson’s Fourteen Points, the pledge given to the Central Powers to obtain the Armistice of 1918; it falsely defined the origins of the war and dishonestly fastened the guilt on Germany alone; it plundered the already impoverished Central European states, and it set the stage for the resumption of war in 1939. The Magna Carta produced better results, of course, and so did the Declaration of Independence.

Infiniti’s advertisement is mentioned here because it shows an astonishing lack of historical awareness, both of the documents that actually have made history, and of the extent to which the promises and pledges they made have been fulfilled or may yet be fulfilled. This is ignorance not only on the part of the Japanese manufacturer, but also on that of the American advertising agency and the mostly American prospective purchasers.

Of course, the Japanese can hardly be expected to have an easy familiarity with the foundations and fundamental documents of Western civilization, any more than Westerners have

with those of East Asia. Nevertheless, the advertising agency is American. It is a bit surprising to observe its naiveté about the foundations of its own society. Can the agency really expect buyers to be encouraged by the thought that an Infiniti is as trustworthy as the Treaty of Versailles? This advertisement is only one symptom among many of the degree to which modern Americans are cut off from their own spiritual roots. If they said, “The Magna Carta, the Stamp Act, and the Ribbentrop-Molotov treaty,” the advertisement might be no less effective.

Not every society quickly forgets the soil out of which it grew; cultural memories and influences can persist for centuries, even for millennia. Two thousand years after Homer, the Greeks of the Byzantine Empire knew him and honored his *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as part of the foundation of their own 1,000-year-old Christian culture. Byzantine Christian civilization was built on the Bible and the Church Fathers, not on Homer or Plato and Aristotle, but after some initial hostility to its pagan heritage, Greek Christian culture learned to cherish it again. In a similar way, although the Protestant Reformation rejected the authority of Roman Catholicism, it quickly came to honor and utilize much of what it found in the heritage of the Greek and Latin Fathers. John Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* abounds in citations of the fathers and doctors of the Greek and Roman churches. It has remained for Christians of the late 20th century to forget the sources of their religious life almost as thoroughly as the general American culture has forgotten Homer and almost everyone of merit since him.

In contemporary America, historical memory hardly exists; happenings a quarter-century old are treated as epoch-making. The Beatles and Woodstock have been repeatedly remembered, rememorized, and recelebrated, and Elvis Presley has a commemorative stamp, but who knows today what happened at Versailles in 1919? If we have so soon forgotten Versailles and

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