

Good Manners, Good Literature

by Richard Wilbur



Anna Myeek-Wodecki

For this very welcome and unexpected award, I thank The Ingersoll Foundation and all concerned. When I was in high school, there were certain books that I carried around in order to impress people with my literariness. One was the *Collected Poems* of Hart Crane, whom I didn't altogether understand, but whose words made me dizzy. Another was a slender book of James Joyce's poems; the poems inside it were melodious, conventional, and easy to understand, but the book's cover gave other people the impression that I was reading an author both difficult and scandalous. A third book that I carried with me like a sword or attribute was T.S. Eliot's *Collected Poems* of 1935. The book was physically delectable; it was bound in blue, and its pages were crisp and creamy like hearts of lettuce; it was a kind of transcendental sandwich, and though I didn't understand all the poems in it, I did consume them. It seems to me that the books I used for purposes of ostentation were in fact well-chosen, for I was truly drawn to them, and when I was through showing off by their means, I went on to know them better and better. What I first loved in Eliot was his mastery of tone and of changes of tone, his power to marshal various voices, and his ability, in such a poem as "Sweeney Among the Nightingales," to take a form suggestive of light verse and be savagely serious in it. I still admire all those things, though for me Eliot has come to be above all the poet of that great poem of spiritual struggle, "Ash Wednesday." It is an especial honor to receive a prize which bears his name.

Because I am generally accounted a formalist poet, I should like to say something this afternoon about form and order and the making of order. The other day, a man I didn't know came up to me and said, "I saw your latest poem in the *New Yorker*. What a pleasure to read iambic pentameter again!" I thanked him, and was glad to have met a reader who, after several decades of free verse ascendancy, could still recognize a meter. At the same time I hoped that he did not, as some do, nostalgically confuse formal poetry with conservatism, law and order,

Richard Wilbur was the recipient of The Ingersoll Foundation's 1996 T.S. Eliot Award for Creative Writing, for which this was his acceptance speech.

and the old-fashioned virtues and verities. The fact is that iambic pentameter is in itself meaningless, and belongs to no age or party; it is simply an instrument, like a No. 2 pencil, and as such can be used either well or badly.

In life, of course, there are many forms which are meaningful in themselves and of great value. I think, for instance, of good manners. Some of my college students of the 1960's, believing themselves to be naturally good and loving, rejected good manners along with certain other things, such as attractive dress and correct grammar, which they believed to be artificial. That was a sad mistake. Manners are no more coercive than a dance step is coercive, and indeed they are liberating: seating ladies and opening doors for people, and writing thank-you notes to grandmother, are acts of compliance with a code, but they also facilitate social dealings and the growth and expression of true kindness. The forms of religion can also be benignly enabling. Eleanor Clark, when living in Italy, found herself drawn toward the Roman Church, and she asked an Italian Catholic friend how she could best find out whether Catholicism was for her. The friend said, "Go to Mass. Kneel when the others kneel. Do and say what the others do and say. Ultimately you will have a Catholic experience." Similarly T.S. Eliot, at one stage of his religious quest, reversed St. Paul by valuing the letter above the spirit. On the American stage, we are familiar with so-called "studio" acting, in which the actor creates the role by going deep into this own subjectivity; but there is another kind of theater in which performances are shaped externally by the director in accordance with his knowledge of the play. I am told that Herman Shumlin would sometimes address an actor in such terms as these: "Take two steps forward, raise your eyebrows, hold out your hands, and say the line." That may sound brutal, but Edmund Burke would understand and approve, and I am sure that many actors have learned by such means what their characters were feeling.

So, there are forms and outward disciplines which may be enhancing and enlarging. The world is also full, as we know, of dismal routines and of oppressions large and small. People who, like me, visited the Soviet Union in the pre-Gorbachev days, may not have encountered the gulags, but they did encounter

much wariness and protective dishonesty, and they were able to see how a tyrannical government trivializes most of its citizens. When people are powerless, when they dare not think for themselves and have no say in anything, they are too readily reduced to mean material concerns—to envying the neighbor's fur hat and trying to wangle a better television. All order, alas, is not good; it wasn't quite enough for Mussolini to make the trains run on time; and I think of a French man of letters who, recalling the Vichy regime and its apologists, observed that no people have ever raised a monument to Order.

Which brings me back to poetry. Toward the end of his poem, "The Idea of Order at Key West," Wallace Stevens exclaims, "Oh! Blessed rage for order." What he is celebrating is the power of art to create imaginative unities in which both the spirit and the objective world are fully and truly expressed. Such unities of vision, in which self and world meet at the full, are the great forms which poetry achieves, and which formal techniques like rhyme and meter merely serve to implement. When poetry does not bring "the whole soul of man into activity," as Coleridge says it must, or when it does violence to outward reality, it fails, and here is a well-known little poem of Stevens' about a poetic failure. It is called "Anecdote of the Jar":

I placed a jar in Tennessee,
And round it was, upon a hill.
It made the slovenly wilderness
Surround that hill.

The wilderness rose up to it,
And sprawled around, no longer wild.
The jar was round upon the ground
And tall and of a port in air.

It took dominion everywhere.
The jar was gray and bare.
It did not give of bird or bush,
Like nothing else in Tennessee.

That jar declares itself to be the center of a circle, and thus organizes the wilderness of Tennessee; but it does so in such a way as to nullify the wild birds and bushes, while asserting its own sterile dominion. What the jar accomplishes is not an imaginative interplay between jar and wilderness, but an imposition of itself, a tyranny; it is a little pre-Gorbachev Kremlin of a jar, and Stevens elsewhere sums the matter up by saying, "A violent order is a disorder."

There are various ways in which poetry can leave things out and thus be less than itself—through the distortions of propaganda, for instance, through the omissions of sentimentality, through the evasions of timidity. At its best, poetry has always confronted our sorrows and described our fears, and I want to offer a modest but genuine example of that—a poem by the mid-19th-century English writer Charles Kingsley, the author of *Westward Ho!*:

When all the world is young, lad,
And all the trees are green;
And every goose a swan, lad,
And every lass a queen;
Then hey for boot and horse, lad,

And round the world away:
Young blood must have its course, lad,
And every dog his day.

When all the world is old, lad,
And all the trees are brown;
And all the sport is stale, lad,
And all the wheels run down,
Creep home and take your place there
The spent and maimed among;
God grant you find one face there
You loved when all was young!

What that says is pretty awful: it says that we begin life full of adventurous energy and romance, and end in weariness, disillusion, and lonely infirmity. Those assertions may not be universally true, but they have some painful pertinence to everyone, and so one might ask why such a grim message is wittily conveyed in clever rhymes and a rollicking ballad meter. Is Kingsley sugarcoating a bitter pill? I don't think so. For one thing, the jaunty ballad rhythms are appropriate to the youthful vigor and zest evoked in the first stanza, and the same rhythms are poignantly slowed as the poem saddens. For another thing, the poem's breezy movement reflects the high morale that poetry always has when it faces up to depressing or dreadful truths. Auden, in his elegy for Yeats, urges poets to

Sing of human unsuccess
In a rapture of distress,

and there is indeed a sort of rapture in any line of verse which articulately braves the darker areas of our experience. A recent magazine article about Yevgeny Kissim spoke of music as a way of mastering bad noises; poetry, which aspires to the fullest possible consciousness, masters bad thoughts by uttering them perfectly. I think that Shakespeare must have rejoiced when he got our fears of the grave into one horrible line: "To lie in cold obstruction and to rot."

I seem to have come round, now, to talking about meter and rhyme and verse-forms as they may further the utterance of a poem. The founders of the free verse movement (people like Ford and Pound and Williams) envisioned it as a kind of recess period—a "formless interim," as Williams put it—after which poetry would return to a fresh formality. Unfortunately, the free verse experiment, like most experiments, became institutionalized, and has dragged on for most of this century, producing a certain number of triumphs and a lot of dreary minced prose. As a result, there are many writers and readers who don't understand what meter is and how it works. They imagine that Pound was correct in his foolish statement that metrical verse is metronomic; they suppose that words in a metrical stanza are like soldiers doing close-order drill and striving for a maximum of mechanical regularity.

That's not how it is at all. A metrical form—the pentameter, for instance—is an underlying paradigm or model which we never hear, though a line like Tennyson's "The woods decay, the woods decay and fall" may come near conforming to that silent model. What one does in writing a metrical poem is to outrage the paradigm, to counterpoint the unheard model with the rhythms of emotion or description or dramatic speech. The result is that those rhythms, underlined by variance from the tidy norm, are heightened, strong, and definite in a way that

the rhythms of prose or free verse can never be. Enjambment—the spilling-over of one line into the next—is also an expressive violation of the norm, because the tidy pentameter norm wants us to pause at the end of every five-foot measure; when we don't, when we brush aside that pause and plunge into the next line, we do it in support of the poem's meaning, emphasizing perhaps some impetuous emotion or some sustained and headlong action. If one were describing in verse a 90-yard broken-field run for a touchdown, a good bit of enjambment would be called for.

Rhyme, together with the other sound-effects of a poem, can cast a musical spell, and that music is best when most attuned to the larger purposes of the poem. There are many other ways, as well, in which rhyme can be functional: it can serve to emphasize important words; it can make important linkages between key words; it can demarcate the stages of an argument; it can help a witty statement to close with a bang; by the dense repetition of a few sounds, it can orchestrate obsession or abiding grief, as in Robert Frost's poem "Bereft." Some of the things rhyme can do for a poem are almost too subtle to talk about. For instance, when two lines rhyme, and one of the rhyme-words has more force than the other, the disparity can tell us in what tone or tones those lines should be read. I put in

evidence the first four lines of a Gerard Manley Hopkins sonnet, a sonnet that's full of spiritual anguish:

No worst, there is none. Pitched past pitch of grief,
More pangs will, schooled at forepangs, wilder wring.
Comforter, where, where is your comforting?
Mary, mother of us, where is your relief?

"Wring" is a strong rhyme-word, and "comforting," in the next line, rhymes very weakly with it. If I am not mistaken, we are thereby instructed to read that whole line about the absence of the Holy Spirit—"Comforter, where, where is your comforting?"—in a weak, spiritless, and broken way.

Let me say a little about those traditional verse forms which were bequeathed to us by the masters—by those whom Yeats addresses as "sages standing in God's holy fire." When a formal poet feels a poem coming on, he reaches into the toolbox of traditional means and picks out a meter which seems likely to suit his hazily emerging thought; he tentatively decides whether the services of rhyme will be needed; he tries to foresee whether the argument of his poem will want to be paragraphed into stanzas; and then he gets going—knowing, of course, that as his poem finds its voice he may change his mind about what devices will further it. Many formal poems, nowadays, are constructed in that ad hoc fashion, and they sometimes arrive at rhyme-schemes and stanza patterns which are quite without precedent or name. On the other hand, the poet has a splendid resource in all those tested verse-forms which have been handed down to us: the couplet, the canzone, the Spenserian stanza, the rondeau, the sonnet, and so on. These various structures have something of that benign, enabling character which I ascribed to good manners, but with the difference that they are all optional, and should only be used when they are peculiarly appropriate to some incipient utterance. Robert Frost once said something like this: that if you feel like saying something for about eight lines, and then qualifying or unsaying it for six lines or so, you are probably about to write a Petrarchan sonnet. That is the way it should happen: the beginning poem, as it materializes, should choose the form whose logic will provide it with precision, economy, and power.

Every form has its particular logic and capabilities; if an epigram is on the tip of one's tongue, it should probably find utterance in a smartly rhyming couplet or quatrain, and it would be pointless folly to try to inflate it into a sonnet. There are certain reiterative forms, like the villanelle and sestina, which are designed to accommodate the mind's hashing and rehashing of a subject; if sestinas and villanelles ruminant to some purpose, they can be splendid; but if they are not driven by a strong need to turn some subject over and over, if they amount to no more than the fulfilling of a tricky pattern, then they are vacuous and interminable.

Let I be interminable, let me call a halt to all this technical talk. I hope to have made it clear that I have no interest in form for form's sake. The meter-using poets of my generation would surely say the same, as would the excellent younger formalists who are now occupying the field, such as Timothy Steele, Mary Jo Salter, Emily Grosholz, Dana Gioia, R.S. Gwynn, and many another. All these would join me, I believe, in agreeing with Ralph Waldo Emerson, who said that "it is not meters, but a meter-making argument that makes a poem."

As for this sort of prize-giving occasion, I think it is a truly benign form, and once again I express my thanks. ☺

LIBERAL ARTS



GRADE INFLATION

As the Associated Press reported in June, a former teacher at Lake Zurich High School in Illinois has been charged with official misconduct and intimidation. Prosecutors say that Douglas Petrovitch, 28, attempted to trade A grades with his students for merchandise at the department stores where they worked. In one case Petrovitch was arrested while trying to leave a Target department store with \$1,000 worth of merchandise which he had purchased for \$111. Another student "traded a \$50 gift certificate to a restaurant owned by his father for an A, and a fourth bought lunch for the teacher several times in exchange for his grade." Upon learning he was being investigated, Petrovitch called the students and threatened to break their kneecaps with a baseball bat if they talked to the police.

City of Man, City of God

by James Hitchcock

"Glorious things are spoken of thee, O city of God."

—Psalms LXXXVII

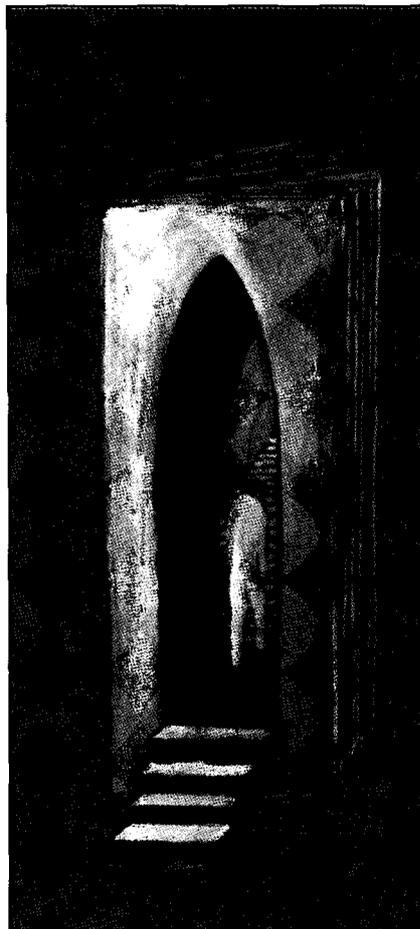
Heart of the World, Heart of the Church

by David L. Schindler
Grand Rapids: Eerdmans;
340 pp., \$37.50

This rich and complex book is on one level the summing up of a controversy over a properly Christian, specifically Catholic, view of politics which has pitted the author, a theologian, against certain "neoconservative" thinkers, notably Richard Neuhaus, Michael Novak, and George Weigel. Beyond them, Schindler takes issue with the late Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray, whose specialty was church-state relations and who is credited with the only original American contribution to the Second Vatican Council—the decree on religious liberty.

Murray is hailed, both in secular and religious circles, for refuting once and for all the idea of the union of church and state, at one time held by almost all religions and abandoned especially late by some Catholics. Murray claimed that the "neutrality" of the American political system makes possible an uninhibited Christian embrace of modern democracy, since neutrality proves to offer the most favorable climate for the development of religion. Schindler, however, considers this neutrality a "con job," arguing that it embodies a secular ideology. Believers are invited to participate in the system without realizing that they are being required to prescind from their faith, to become "a-theists." Hence, in Schindler's view, Catholic neoconserva-

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tives are unduly optimistic about the exceptional character of American, as opposed to European, democracy.

While his thesis may be true, it requires a good deal more historical exploration than Schindler offers. Presumably he agrees with those who think the United States was from its inception the child of the antireligious Enlightenment, but here that is merely assumed. Oddly, given his purposes, Schindler does not examine the nation's founding documents and their subsequent interpretation, in spite of the national debate proceeding

in—among other places—the halls of the Supreme Court. The real problem with the First Amendment is not its implicit ideology but its cryptic character. No one knows what "respecting an establishment of religion" means, so the debate continues.

As a philosopher Schindler appears to believe that he who says A must say B, whereas a historian would reply that he who says A can then say just about anything he pleases—not because the historian rejects the authority of logic but because he realizes that very few people are logical. Thus, whatever may have been the intention of the Founding Fathers, the present civil-libertarian understanding of the Religion Clause was not simply determined from the beginning. All such things tend finally to be shaped by a series of historical contingencies, which means that at many points in history another road might have been taken. For example, Joseph Story, one of the greatest justices of the Supreme Court and an authoritative commentator on the Constitution, held that the common law incorporated Christianity. The modern understanding of the Religion Clause is traceable to the appointment of certain justices to the Supreme Court by President Franklin Roosevelt, although it is unlikely that Roosevelt desired, intended, or even foresaw the effect those appointments would eventually have on religion. Thus, in a sense, the present jurisprudence of the First Amendment is due to the Great Depression and the New Deal to which it gave rise. So, also, the Republican promise to mount a counterrevolution was thwarted by a series of political contingencies. Schindler addresses this subject in a footnote, citing the opinion of another theologian that in the long run the contradictions inherent in false interpretations will reveal themselves. But history shows oth-