

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

JUNE 2007

VOLUME 6, NUMBER 4

CHILDHOOD, AGING, AND THE FALL: A REFLECTION ON WORDSWORTH'S "ODE ON INTIMATIONS OF IMMORTALITY FROM RECOLLECTIONS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD"

Margy Weinert

Editor's note: In the spring of 2007, the Christian Study Center hosted a class on "The Poet as Priest" in which we asked representatives from the Department of English at the University of Florida to address the question of whether or how poetry might point beyond itself to something transcendent. One of our speakers was Margy Weinert, who reflected on childhood in Wordsworth's poetry. We offer an abridged version of her talk here.

There's a little paragraph I found in the middle of *Moby Dick* a few years ago, and though it's not necessarily a significant paragraph in the book as a whole, it has nevertheless resurfaced in my ponderizations many times since I first read it. This little passage was in fact the starting point for the contemplations that led to my interest in Wordsworth's poem, "Ode on Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood." In the passage, the narrator, Ishmael, is on a hunting exhibition away from the main ship, the *Pequod*. As he looks over the side of the small whaling boat, he gazes into what he realizes is an underwater nursery. In the calm center of an otherwise agitated herd of whales drift the female whales who are pregnant or nursing, as well as their babies. As the other whales fight off the human spermaceti hunters, the mothers and babies are in an otherworldly world of their own.

As human infants while suckling will calmly and fixedly gaze away from the breast, as if leading two different lives at the time; and while yet draw-

ing mortal nourishment, be still spiritually feasting upon some unearthly reminiscence; -- even so did the young of these whales seem looking up towards us, but not at us, as if we were but a bit of Gulfweed in their new-born sight...Some of the subtlest secrets of the seas seemed divulged to us in this enchanted pond (Chapter 87).

In a previous talk in this series on "The Poet as Priest" Professor Richard Brantley, speaking on Emily Dickinson, summarized the relationship between Romanticism and Christianity. Wordsworth and other British Romantics were, he said, able to "conceive of the physical

senses as portals to epiphany, and not just as analogies to spiritual insight." This is just what is going on in Wordsworth's "Ode." The speaker in the poem describes how his perception of the world has changed based on input from his physical senses, so that through his physical senses he is led to contemplations of the supernatural. During his talk Dr. Brantley

read a poem by Dickinson in which the speaker seems to be expressing a feeling similar to one that Wordsworth expresses in this poem. Dickinson writes, "I know that He exists. / Somewhere - in Silence / He has hid his rare life / From our gross eyes." The speaker in Wordsworth's poem is similarly concerned with an elusive Higher Being who seems both impossibly distant and infinitely immediate.

When I recently stumbled upon Wordsworth's poem in an anthology, I found in it an expan-

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sion of the idea I hinted at before with the passage from *Moby Dick*. In the second stanza we see a description of some of the beauties of the earth – rainbow, rose, moon, and sunrise – and then we read, “But yet I know, where’er I go,/ That there hath past away a glory from the earth” (II). The speaker has a sense not only that the earth has lost some ineffable glory, but also that he himself, through his gradual realization of this loss, has lost some of his own glory. As a child he was “appareled in celestial light,” now he wears something far weightier, “earthly freight...Heavy as frost, and deep almost as life!” (VIII)

In the fourth stanza, he mentions two sights that in the midst of earth’s beauty recall to his mind the loss he has suffered. “But there’s a Tree, of many, one,/ A single field which I have looked upon,/ Both of them speak of something that is gone” (IV). Could the Tree in fact be the Tree of Knowledge, and the field the Garden of Eden? The speaker does use lots of Edenic language to describe early childhood; it’s as if he is drawing a parallel between the fall of humanity and expulsion from the Garden on one hand and the aging of the individual human and loss of the Childlike Vision on the other hand. In its infancy the human race lived in a Garden that was separated from Heaven by only the thinnest of veils, so that God Himself would come down to walk in the Garden in the cool of the evening. And just as that thin veil between Heaven and Earth became an opaque wall with hardly a peep-hole in it – so too does the human child, born still in a seeming state of mystical communion with or awareness of its Creator, seem to lose that communion the longer he lives on this side of the opaque wall. For Wordsworth, the redemption of the human race is represented by the newborn human baby; babies are the freshest and purest among us, and they also promise the future survival of the human race. For the Christian, however, redemption is found in only one Baby – the Christ child, who gives new life to all who believe in Him.

In Stanza Five, the speaker introduces a paradox. Birth is a “sleep and a forgetting,” an entrance into mortality that is in fact not unlike

death. The speaker describes four stages of human life.

Heaven lies about us in our infancy!
Shades of the prison-house begin to close
Upon the growing Boy,
But he beholds the light, and whence it flows,
He sees it in his joy;
The Youth, who daily farther from the east
Must travel, still is Nature’s Priest,
And by the vision splendid
Is on his way attended;
At length the Man perceives it die away,
And fade into the light of common day.

So the growing boy is gradually imprisoned and limited by his own improving knowledge and intellect. Our own experiences, knowledge, doubts are like vines gradually growing and twisting around us, ensnaring and imprisoning us.

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Stanza Six describes Earth’s attempts to distract us with her own inferior pleasures and beauties, just as a nurse might offer a hungry baby a bottle of formula when what the baby really wants is its mother’s breast milk.

Earth fills her lap with pleasures of her own;
Yearnings she hath in her own natural kind,
And, even with something of a mother’s mind,
And no unworthy aim,
The homely nurse doth all she can
To make her foster-child, her inmate, Man,
Forget the glories he hath known
And that imperial palace whence he came.

Skipping to Stanza Nine, the tone shifts to one of hope, almost, if one can be said to have hope in a memory of the past rather than in the future.

O joy! That in our embers
Is something that doth live,
That nature yet remembers
What was so fugitive!

For Wordsworth, or whoever’s voice he is speaking in, there is a two-fold memory that lends comfort in the listless sorrow of adulthood: the memory of childhood, and the memory of having had during childhood a more

immediate memory of Eden. He says, "The thought of past years in me doth breed / Perpetual benediction."

In Stanza Ten, the speaker continues on the theme of finding comfort in the past:

Though nothing can bring back the hour
Of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower;
We will grieve not, rather find
Strength in what remains behind;

Finally, in the eleventh stanza, the speaker seems to decide that humanity has made a worthwhile trade, that in fact it is enough to have just the memory of the past delights and the actuality of the present delights offered up by Nature and the earth. And so the speaker finds that, in later life, long after the childlike vision has faded, the adult vision that has replaced it may be richer still.

In talking about this poem I used the phrase "Childlike Vision" to describe a particular childlike way of thinking and seeing and being, a special sort of vision that fades away as we age. I've been wondering about this Childlike Vision ever since I first read that passage in *Moby Dick* about four years ago. Trying to remember what it was like to have it, wondering what it was, and why we lost it.

Before we have words for the objects around us, before we understand their uses and where they came from, everything we see is a great abstract wonderland. If we look around and imagine that we don't know what anything is - the carpet on the floor, with its countless little threads, except we don't know words like carpet or floor, how it got there, and why it's there - all we see are images, and all we can do is marvel. Until we know what a thing is, it could be anything. Around age two, the identities of objects are not yet fixed in our minds so that we can easily pretend they are something else. A blanket becomes a giant ocean wave, then you crumple it up and it's a storm cloud, then you bury yourself in it and it's quicksand. Samuel Johnson described this childish quality - as well as the loss of it - as eloquently as usual in one of his Idler essays.

We are naturally delighted with novelty, and there is a time when all that we see is new. When first we enter into the world, whithersoever we turn our eyes, they meet Knowledge with Pleasure at her side; every diversity of Nature pours ideas in

upon the soul; neither search nor labour are necessary; we have nothing more to do than open our eyes, and curiosity is gratified.

Much of the pleasure which the first survey of the world affords, is exhausted before we are conscious of our own felicity, or able to compare our condition with some other possible state. We have therefore few traces of the joy of our earliest discoveries; yet we all remember a time when Nature had so many untasted gratifications, that every excursion gave delight which can now be found no longer, when the noise of a torrent, the rustle of a wood, the song of birds, or the play of lambs, had power to fill the attention, and suspend all perception of the course of time... (No. 44 in the Idler, 17 February 1759)

As childhood wears on and we learn more and more of the world and all its labels and explanations, this Childlike Vision fades. And when it is gone, we can only dimly remember that we once had it; we can't remember the Vision itself. No matter how we may try to remember and recapture this Childlike way of seeing and being, we never can because that kind of knowledge cannot be forgotten. There is a reason why, as we grow and live, and we see more of the ugliness and the decay in the world, we are surprised by it. It is because whether or not we are born with a "sin nature," we are not automatically at the point of deepest evil. Eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge not only introduced evil into our lives, but also gave us knowledge of good and evil - we recognize what is evil and good, and we know that "good" is how things "should" be.

Remember that feeling you used to get when your mom read you your favorite book? A feeling like you're flying...a feeling in your stomach or your heart. A tensing of your toes. Whatever physiological form the feeling takes, it is something like Lewis's description of joy. A longing for something, somewhere. As adults - and Christians - we often identify this as a longing for what is to come, our eternity in Paradise. But perhaps it is also a longing for - nostalgia for - memory of - what came before. Perhaps the Fall is played out individually in the life of each of us. In the same way that we fell all at once through the actions of Adam and Eve in the Garden, and so were severed from God, so too throughout our lives do we experience a sort of fall from a state of blissful infancy to a rueful adulthood.

The Childlike Vision goes beyond wonder and curiosity and imagination. It allows a total surrender to play and make-believe, a certain lack of concern for or understanding of the ways of the world. This way of seeing and being is one that, curiously, in an adult would be considered eccentricity or even mental illness. Imagine an adult playing like a child, and you get something like Uncle Toby in *Tristram Shandy*, busying himself all day with his mock-battles, which he likes to arrange on the lawn outside and then act a heroic role in himself. Year after year he fritters away his fortune on gunpowder and other materials. At first Uncle Toby just seems lovably comical; then we come to see how sad and strange it is for a grown man to be trapped in the carefree world of his own imagination. Maturing is a necessity. And, as Wordsworth seems to say, the knowledge and wisdom brought by maturity lend an even deeper beauty to the sights we so delight in as children, a mixture of beauty and sorrows that is "Too deep for tears..." (XI).

We mature in part by gaining knowledge, and it is as we gain knowledge that the Childlike Vision fades away. It may not even be that we forget how to be and think like a child, but that we are no longer allowed to be and think like a child. Because adults are supposed to *know* things that children don't, and this knowledge binds and inhibits us.

Another feature of the Childlike Vision is, I think, that it allows children to exist in a sort of eternity. For all the talk of children's short attention spans, I've found that children often get "stuck in a moment" repeating the same action over and over. Whether it's having you read the same book to them five times straight in a single sitting, or - as a two-year-old I know recently did - leaping repeatedly into a pile of pillows, serving as an imaginary anthill, and having me, with great show of effort, rescue him from the ants while his four-year-old brother pretended to hose him down with an ant-killing concoction. The time it took to do all this was not enough to satisfy his desire to do it; he seemed to want to be in a state of doing it. So we did it continuously for a half-hour or so, and to him it was as if no time at all were passing.

In a poem called "My Kingdom" that R.L. Stevenson wrote for children, he speaks in the voice of a child playing in a little dell he has found, imagining that all the land around him is his own kingdom. He is completely immersed in his pretend world when the voice of his mother calls him home. The child is

called back from one reality to another - to a playing child the pretend world does seem all but real. I'd guess most of us have memories of similar experiences. One summer Sunday afternoon when I was maybe seven, my brothers and sister and I were playing in the backyard, pretending our swing-set was a space ship hurtling through distant galaxies. I can still feel the warm, moist air of that afternoon, and I can still feel my bare feet caked with dirt. I was in that purple realm which to a child is earthly heaven. Until we were interrupted. Long before we would have stopped our game, my dad called to us that it was time to come inside and clean up for evening church. I begged him to let us stay and play. Something in it felt wrong to me, to leave this glorious outdoor world behind in exchange for a stiff dress and a hard church pew. That summer evening, I felt I was not simply being told playtime was over; I was being yanked from a state of bliss that was beyond time.

So where do all of these contemplations leave us with Wordsworth's poem? I wish I could give a confident and expert conclusion summarizing the meaning and significance of this poem, but I'm afraid that that would somehow minimize not just what Wordsworth has written, but also what poetry is...If one purpose of poetry is to sing of the ineffable, to try to take an idea as ethereal and intangible as angels' music and put it into the small, hard, tangible words we call poetry - then surely the words of a poem cannot be reduced any further into explanations without losing even more of whatever it is that makes it true and beautiful. In short, all I really know to say is that we should all read Wordsworth's poem for ourselves and contemplate the Childlike Vision, if such contemplations seem valuable.

Is Wordsworth an example of the Poet acting as a Priest? Not in the sense that he acts as a mediator between Humanity and God, standing with his back to his congregation, performing rites and ceremonies in a foreign language. But he does take on a priestly function in the sense that he can inspire us to worship. He gazes up at the clouds in awe, singing of what he sees, and as we hear his song we feel compelled to do the same.

Margy Weinert recently completed a Bachelor of Arts in the English department at the University of Florida where her emphasis was on pre-20th century British literature. This fall she will begin a doctoral program in English at Baylor University where she plans to narrow her focus to supernatural and religious themes in British literature.

NEWS FROM THE CENTER

RECENT HIGHLIGHTS FROM OUR PROGRAM

The spring semester program included:

- **Class: "Getting a Job, Making a Life: How Should We Think About Work?"** – Richard Horner
- **Class: "The Poet as Priest: Poetry and Transcendence,"** – members of UF English department.
- **Reading group: "T. S. Eliot: Mythic, Modernist Poet,"** – Todd Best

While our program takes a summer break, our building will remain open throughout the summer when University of Florida is in session. Additionally, Pascal's Coffeeshouse will maintain limited hours of coffee bar operation – Monday-Thursday 10a - 6p (no coffee bar service on Fridays). The Center itself will be open 8:30am – 6pm on Monday-Thursday, and Friday 8:30am – 12:30pm.

TENTATIVE ACADEMIC PROGRAM FOR 2007-2008

Culture Seminar Returns

February 2008: **Nicholas Wolterstorff**, Noah Porter Professor of Philosophical Theology (Emeritus) at Yale University and currently a Senior Fellow at University of Virginia's Institute of Advanced Studies in Culture.

April 2008: Calvin DeWitt, Professor of Environmental Studies, The Nelson Institute for Environmental Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Founding Director of the Au Sable Institute of Environmental Studies.

Classes

Fall 2007: "Blaise Pascal and the Discourse of Modernity" – Richard Horner and Daniel Julich

"Religion and Scholarship: Religion as a Subject of Academic Study" – Various UF faculty

Spring 2008: "The Pastoral Epistles and Their Argument" – Reggie Kidd (Reformed Theological Seminary)

"Technology and Local Ecological Health" – Various UF faculty

Reading Groups

Fall 07: Dorothy Sayers

Spring 08: "The Health and Wealth of the Community"

THE CENTER'S EXTENDED CONVERSATION

Members of our community who have received attention or have scheduled engagements:

Executive Director Richard Horner

June 14 – speaking at Westside Baptist Church men's group, Gainesville, FL

July 15 – preaching at Christ Community Church, Gainesville, FL

Board Member Ron Akers (faculty in sociology at UF)

April 2007 – Presented "Faith Based Mentoring and Delinquency Treatment In Florida" at the Southern Sociological Society. A portion of this also appeared in the newsletter of the Christian Sociological Society, "The Christian Sociologist," Spring 2007.

Board Member C. John Sommerville (Emeritus Professor of History at UF)

March 9 – interviewed in *The Methodist Reporter*

Spring 07 – essay "How Christian Ideas Might Change the University" appeared in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship's "Faculty Newsletter," Spring 2007.

June 6 – interviewed on British radio network, Trans World Radio

October – addressing Retired Faculty of Florida

October 5-6 – addressing National Faculty Forum conference at University of Colorado

Forthcoming – interview on Mars Hill Audio Journal (next edition)

ON 'FAITH AND REASON'

A Review of

The Regensburg Lecture

by James V. Schall, S.J.

(St. Augustine's Press, 2007)

Graham B. Glover

On September 12, 2006, Pope Benedict XVI delivered an academic address at the University of Regensburg entitled: *Faith, Reason, and the University - Memories and Reflections*. Given at the university where the Holy Father taught from 1968-1977, Benedict's comments drew the ire of many commentators throughout the world. Fueled by his reference to a comment made by the 14th century Byzantine emperor, Manuel II Paleologus, Benedict was accused of making insensitive and derogatory remarks about Islam. Calls for an apology instantly went out to the Pope, and Benedict (perhaps the first academic theologian to be elected pope) found himself immersed in a controversy that went well beyond his lecture at Regensburg.

However, anyone who either heard, or has subsequently taken the time to read the Pope's address at Regensburg last September, is sure to realize that his lecture had very little to do with Islam. Indeed, the Pope's comments at Regensburg had as their focus the inseparable link between faith and reason in the Christian tradition, and the critical role that each of them play in understanding the Christian faith and human rationality. This link, according to Benedict, has increasingly been ignored not only among Christian theologians who downplay the role of reason, but among secular philosophers who all too quickly dismiss the role of faith. In a world that finds itself struggling against cultural and political tensions that result in horrific acts of violence, oftentimes in the name of God, Benedict's address at Regensburg sought to repair this link, illustrating not only the reasonableness of God, but truthfulness of His revelation.

On the heels of Benedict's address, Fr. James V. Schall, S.J., a professor of Government at Georgetown University, has recently authored a text offering a profound commentary on Benedict's lecture. Entitled, *The Regensburg Lecture*, Schall suggests that Benedict's address (despite its brevity, it was less than 4,000 words) will have a profound impact, compara-

ble only to John Paul II's first visit to Poland. According to Schall,

Events need not be words. But words can also be events. Words at their best are intended to move us. And they do move us. But academic words have a different purpose. They are intended primarily to enlighten us, to take our minds to the heart of *what is*. This enlightenment is the purpose of the Regensburg Lecture. It is what has been lacking in our understanding of where we are" (14).

It is important to point out that the enlightenment and reason that Schall and Benedict have in mind are not to be equated with that of *The Enlightenment* or post-enlightenment rationality which became reductionistic and rigid, locking out the mysteries of religious faith. Rather Benedict's "reason" allows for faith to be reasonable and for reason itself to point to faith.

Schall begins his commentary on Benedict's lecture by discussing the uniquely academic nature of it. As Benedict makes abundantly clear throughout his lecture (and in his writings, authoring some 86 books, 471 articles and prefaces, and 32 contributions to various encyclopedias and dictionaries), the university is the heart of where the human mind engages *Logos*, reason. At the beginning of his address, Benedict recalls with fondness his time at the University of Bonn, where theological discussions were frequently engaged among historians, philosophers, philologists, etc. and where the two theological faculties regularly entered into discussions about the right use of reason and the reasonableness of faith. When such discussions are limited, or in the case of many university settings today, excluded, humans become incapable of having any discourse about the nature of truth and our reasons for it. Consequently, this lack of discourse leads to perverted concepts about God, and false dichotomies between faith and reason, both of which lead to the cultural and political tensions evident in the modern world.

To understand the cause of these tensions, Benedict delves into a discussion about the Christian notion of the nature of God, namely that God is *Logos*. In other words, God has and creates things in order and with good reason - His nature is reasonable. This notion is what the Byzantine emperor, Manuel II Paleologus speculated about when discussing Islam with "an educated Persian." As the two discussed

the theme of a holy war, the emperor suggested that violence is “incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul.” For those who believe that God commands, or allows, violence in his name, the emperor posits, is contradictory to God and to reason. “Faith is born of the soul, not the body. Whoever would lead someone to faith needs the ability to speak well and to reason properly, without violence and threats...” This is why Benedict goes on to say that not only is God reasonable and that to act unreasonably is to act contrary to the nature of God, but that the faith God has given humanity is understood and lived out in accordance with the right use of reason.

But the real concern of Benedict at Regensburg was not only those who suggest that God can be unreasonable, but those, especially within Christendom and the academy, who seek to separate the interdependency of faith and reason. In his chapter entitled, “Modernity and the Three Waves of Dehellenization,” Schall discusses Benedict’s three steps of dehellenization (which in many respects, mirror the late political philosopher, Leo Strauss’s, three waves of modernity). From the Reformation rejection of scholastic theology and its perversion of the pureness of Scripture that questioned the role of philosophy in Christian theology; to the notion that theology, born in the 19th century with Adolf von Harnack, should be done with the historical and scientific tools that eschew reason; and culminating in today’s cultural pluralism in

which truth changes with time and any notion of a transcendent truth is itself “unreasonable”; Schall highlights Benedict’s concern about the dehellenization – the demarcation of “Athens and Jerusalem” from Christian thought and the university setting. As Schall notes,

The Christian faith proposed itself to other cultures not as a conquest but as understanding of what was good in a culture, but also of what was unreasonable. What was unreasonable was against the true human good and ultimately against the possibility of faith...But Benedict’s point here is that because of the revelation of Greek reason and faith, a basis already existed for an approach to any other culture, even an ‘unreasonable’ one...The effort to get behind the hellenization of Christianity to a pure form with the presumed burden of reason is itself contrary to the workings of the faith in its initial and formative period” (111-112).

James Schall’s commentary on Pope Benedict XVI’s Regensburg Lecture reminds us academics and theologians not only of the task of the university in the constant discovery of reason, but of Christianity’s critical role in using faith and reason to understand the nature of God, and humanity’s role in the world.

Graham B. Glover is a doctoral student in the Department of Political Science at the University of Florida where he is writing a dissertation on Pope Benedict’s “Theology of Politics.” He is also Pastor of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church in Chiefland, Florida.

CHRISTIAN STUDY CENTER OF GAINESVILLE

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INSIDE THIS EDITION

Essay: "Childhood, Aging, and the Fall..." by Margy Weinert, p. 1.

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A Review of *The Regensburg Lecture* by James V. Schall, S.J.

SUMMER CALENDAR

We offer no summer program, though the Christian Study Center building is open for reading, study, conversation, etc. Monday - Thursday 8:30am - 6:00pm, and Friday 8:30am - 12:30pm. Full service coffee bar by Pascal's Coffeehouse: Monday - Thursday 10am - 6pm.

The Center is also available by reservation for classes, meetings, or receptions. For hours, availability, and rates, please contact Nora at 352-379-7375 or Nora@christianstudycenter.org.

Please check our website at www.christianstudycenter.org for the latest information and previous issues of *Reconsiderations*. If you do not wish to receive *Reconsiderations*, email us at info@christianstudycenter.org or call us at 352-379-7375

Reconsiderations is a quarterly publication of the Christian Study Center of Gainesville, whose purpose is to offer the thoughtful consideration of a Christian understanding of life.

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