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THE MIDWAY REVIEW

A JOURNAL OF POLITICS AND CULTURE

Andrew Hamilton *on* JMG LE CLEZIO'S NOBEL PRIZE

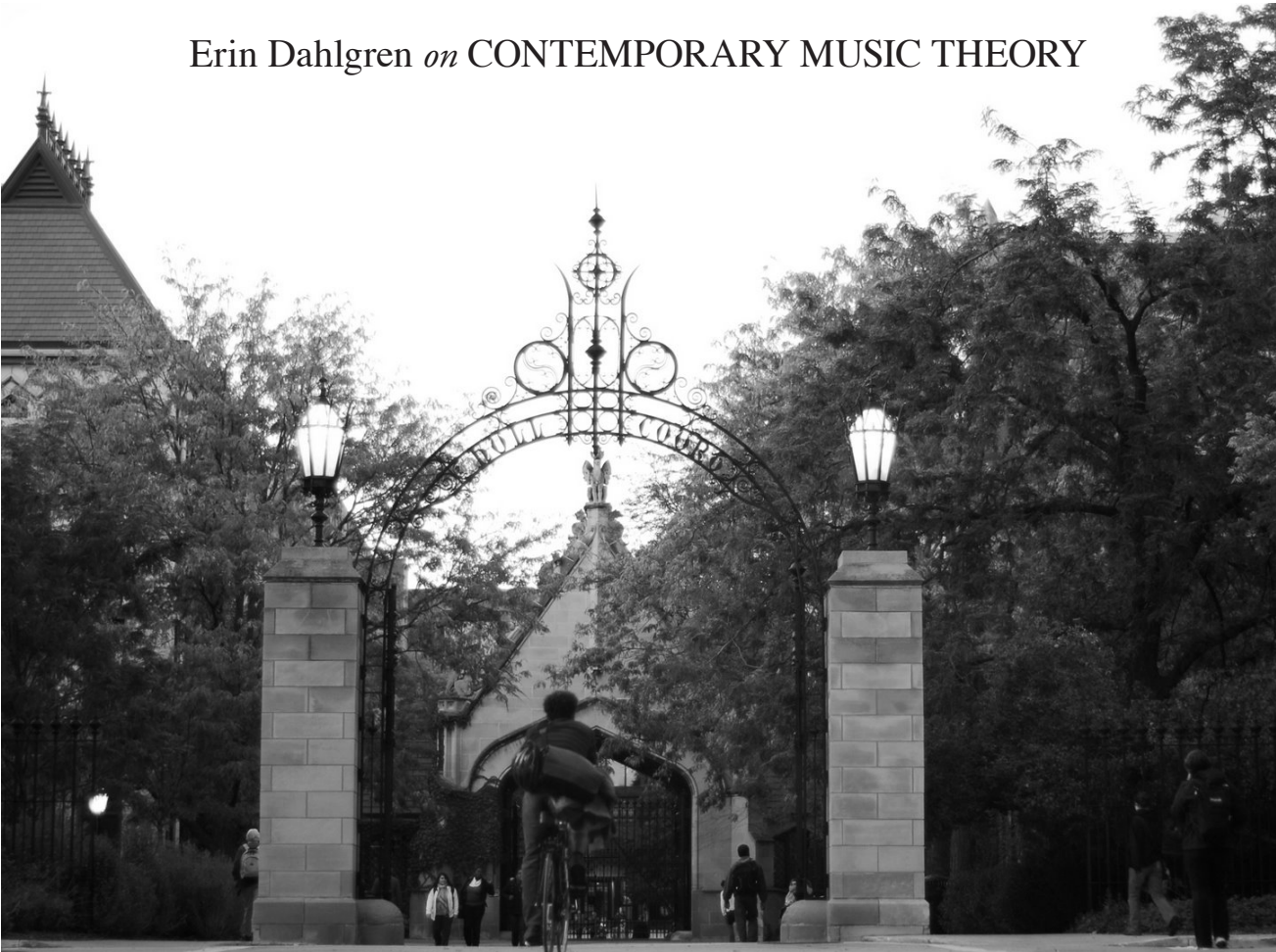
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NEW DEPARTURES

AMERICAN LITERATURE AND THE GRAND DIALOGUE

by Andrew Hamilton



I.

Last month, not long before the announcement that JMG Le Clezio had won the 2008 Nobel prize in literature, Horace Engdahl, the permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy, the body that has awarded the prize since its inception in 1901, gave a provocative interview in which he criticized the state of American literature as “too isolated, too insular” and American authors as “too sensitive to trends in their own mass culture.” This charge was met with a mix of skepticism and indignation in the American press, but also by many with a tacit recognition that there lies a great deal of truth in these charges.

The awarding of this year’s prize to Le Clezio brought renewed attention to this criticism, in two ways in particular. The first is that Le Clezio is all but unknown in the United States—raising the question of whether we are perhaps too insular to have been aware of him. The second is the way the American press has reacted to the prize by answering that question with a resounding “yes, we are.”

Considering Le Clezio’s lack of reputation in this country except among specialists, a few words about his career are in order. Le Clezio is a quintessential international author: Born in Nice, he was raised in large part on the island of Mauritius and in Nigeria. He studied in England, served in the military in Thailand and Mexico, lived among the Embera-Wounaan tribe in Panama for four years, and now spends time regularly in Albuquerque, Nice, Mauritius, and South Korea. Perhaps the New York Times was

missing something by titling its report of the prize simply, “French Writer wins Nobel Prize.”

He is the author of over twenty novels, of which about half have appeared at one time or another in English, as well as numerous essays, short stories and children’s books. He has also published translations of Central American mythology and folklore. He has won nearly every major French literary prize, including the grand prix de littérature from the French academy, and enjoys an exceptional reputation in France and Europe as a whole. In fact, a 1994 survey found that 13% of French readers (not scholars, readers) rated him as the greatest living author in the language. For the sake of brevity let it suffice to say: Le Clezio is no literary lightweight.

It is important to be aware of his stature, and draw the contrast between Le Clezio and other recent Nobel laureates relatively unknown to American audiences. From the last ten years, Elfriede Jelinek (2004) and Imre Kertész (2002) come to mind as prime examples. The general public could be excused for scratching its collective head and asking, “who?” in those years. Neither was particularly well known outside of their native countries (Austria and Hungary, respectively); in fact, the selection of Jelinek led to scandal within the Academy and the resignation of a long-time member. Le Clezio, on the other hand, is no such case; his literary reputation all over the world supports the academy’s decision.



II.

The principal charge levied by Engdahl against the US is not that our literature is inferior, or that our top writers lack talent—a glance at Thomas

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Pynchon or Cormac McCarthy discredits such a notion instantly—but rather that we “don’t translate enough and don’t really participate in the big dialogue of literature. That ignorance is restraining.”

That such an important and well-known author as Le Clezio could be all but non-existent in our bookstores is one thing, but the lack of interest in or response to his winning the most prestigious literary prize in the world is egregious. At the announcement of the prize, there was a generally positive reaction all over the world: French President Sarkozy was predictably pleased, a prominent South African author contrasted this year’s with other recent decisions, calling it “above suspicion,” for instance. A German magazine, admitting that Le Clezio was not as well known as other contenders, called the choice a challenging “reading assignment” for Germans.

The response in the United States, however, was quite different: as David L. Ulin wrote in a particularly spiteful piece in the *Los Angeles Times* entitled “Le Clezio—who’s he?”, the executive director of the National Book Foundation and the literature director of the National Endowment for the Arts both confessed to having never heard of Le Clezio before his winning the prize. When these, our nation’s ostensible vanguards of literature, are caught unawares by someone whose international reputation is so expansive, the charges of being restrained by ignorance start to stick.

Ulin also neatly summarizes his own reaction to Engdahl’s comments, calling them “widely seen in the United States as evidence of the insularity of Nobel Prize itself.” In effect, he is trying to turn the insularity argument around, saying that perhaps it is those Swedes who don’t know what they’re doing, in picking a writer unfamiliar

to us. This response appears rather feeble when measured up against a few facts: the first being Le Clezio’s reputation and stature around the world (as we have already seen), the second being the American reaction to his winning the prize, as evidenced in part by Ulin himself, characterized above all by resentment and a lack of openness to this new writer.

“This ... is perhaps
the worst form of
isolationism, to see in
one’s own country such
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simply no need to reach
out from it.”

III.

Whereas the US exports its literature—good and bad alike—in huge quantities to welcome audiences in Europe and elsewhere, the rate at which even the masterworks of world literature trickle into our awareness is glacial by comparison. The difficulty the American reader may have in finding an

English translation of much of Le Clezio’s work is indicative of a larger problem. There has not been, nor will there be, a rush to translate more of his works; sales of the books in English will not increase appreciably (It is apparently known among publishers that an author’s winning the Nobel Prize has less of an impact on sales than the Pulitzer Prize or National Book award.) Finally, the newspapers and magazines charged with guiding the reader to the best and most important books being produced in the world today, having run an obligatory piece on the prize announcement, listing Le Clezio’s places of residence and major titles, and the cash value of the prize, will likely not

mention the man again. Compare this to the German reaction, which found an opportunity to offer the new writer, a “reading assignment.” In short: our national ignorance of the works of JMG Le Clezio has become a willing ignorance.



Blame cannot be placed simply in the hands of the readers who have little interest in anything foreign, or the publishing houses who do nothing to foster such an interest, or the schools that do not adequately emphasize foreign language instruction and leave us reliant on translations. Rather, I see a pervasive turning-away from any notion of literature's "grand dialogue" that runs through our culture. (What relation this may have to a wide range of political states of affairs is beyond our purpose here, but I propose that there may well be a deep-rooted connection between literary isolationism and certain darker aspects of the ways in which we Americans relate to the rest of the world.)

Some are bound to respond to such criticism by pointing out that we are a large country. We produce a wide range of literature, some of which is among the best in the world (as even the Nobel Committee would be sure to grant; the prize has been given to an American author eight times, more than to any other country).

Really, we have something for everyone, in our pluralistic society, so what need is there to import literature at all? This point of view, which at a glance seems to carry some merit, considering the size and importance of our nation, is in fact perhaps the worst form of isolationism, to see in one's own country such an elegant microcosm of the world that there is simply no need to reach out from it. There can be no doubt that the internal rumblings of our nation can be of tremendous importance—look, for instance, at the attention the world is giving our presidential election—yet, the shortsightedness inherent in not even seeing that there is a "grand dialogue" going on around us or wanting to participate in it (wanting to participate in this dialogue is the same as finding one's own

literature incomplete, and looking outside it) may lead to a national solipsism on a grand scale.

Surely no American would claim that we have no need for the European masterworks of the nineteenth century: it is inconceivable to imagine a flourishing intellectual atmosphere in the twentieth century that is ignorant of Tolstoy, Goethe, Flaubert or Dickens. One of the gifts of the passage of time is that, in the intervening years, these masterpieces—of which Americans were necessarily ignorant at the time, just as their creators were by necessity unaware of Whitman or Hawthorne—have made their way, via translation

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we can communicate across national and linguistic barriers at a rate unimaginable only a generation ago. Technology has opened to us the possibility of near-instant translation and dissemination of the best literature being produced all over the world; many countries are taking advantage of the opportunities this creates, are translating foreign literatures, and are expanding their own traditions with spectacular success. I am afraid that the U.S. is at risk of missing out and falling behind if we don't open our ears to the miraculous dialogue that is taking place right now all around us.

How ironic it is, that the sheer wonder of the possibility of such communication has long been one of the central themes of the works of J.M.G. Le Clezio. He has been reaching out a hand to us—will we accept it? 🍷

CODE GREEN

THOMAS FRIEDMAN PUTS AMERICA ON THE ALTERNATIVE ENERGY ALERT
by Rachel Cromidas

***Hot, Flat and Crowded:
Why We Need a Green
Revolution—and How
It Can Renew America***
by Thomas L. Friedman

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 448 pp., \$27.95



If you ask Thomas Friedman, thanks to climate change, globalization and climbing population rates, the earth looks hotter, flatter and more crowded than ever before. It also looks like a self-indulgent scene out of *The Garden of Earthly Delights*. Hieronymus Bosch's fifteenth-century triptych of excess and greed decorates the cover of Friedman's newest book, *Hot, Flat and Crowded*, suggesting that the way the United States has been tearing through global resources is finally catching up with us.

In the first half of his book, Friedman recounts the development of the global energy crisis. In responding to the crisis, he claims, the United States has done more to isolate itself from the rest of the world and deepen its dependency on foreign oil than promote innovation. Meanwhile, Denmark's booming wind turbine industry, Brazil's emphasis on ethanol production, and Japan's high fuel efficiency standards are each propelling their respective nations into the future a lot faster than we Americans can manage, even with the help of our high-powered SUVs. And if we don't pull our heads out of the ground, where no doubt we've been poking around for oil, Friedman warns that we as a nation risk falling hopelessly behind in technological innovation.

In particular, Friedman fears the convergence of three global phenomena, for which he coins the

mnemonic "hot, flat and crowded." In the next fifty years, he claims, the world's population will swell 45%, from 6.7 to 9 billion. Outsourcing of business will likewise increase, causing the numbers and spending power of the world's middle class to rise in turn. Meanwhile, fossil fuels like oil, coal and natural gas will add CO₂ to the atmosphere and fuel global warming. These developments together will produce a greater strain on the Earth's ecosystem than it has ever felt before.

The thesis isn't new. Friedman, a three-time Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for *The New York Times*, walked his American readers through the leveling of the economic playing field in his bestseller *The World is Flat*, and cautioned them not to rest on the laurels of the business and political tactics that served us so well through the 20th century. And writers as diverse as Michael Pollan, Eric Schlosser, and Al Gore have been decrying the culture of over-consumption for years. But this time, Friedman is hoping to lure the audience of entrepreneurs he snagged with *The World is Flat* into thinking about the environment, even if their concerns have more to do with profit margins than polar bears.

So what's different about Friedman's solution? First, it does not sound much like "205 Easy Ways to Save the Earth," or other magazine features telling consumers what cars to drive or light bulbs to buy. Friedman knows going green won't be easy, simple, or fun for the nation, and insists that only drastic changes in policy can make a lasting impact.

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Second, and perhaps more importantly for Friedman, green is no longer synonymous with Birkenstocks and tofu. In one of the many anecdotes that punctuate Friedman's arguments, he explains how even the U.S. Army has cause for concern: at one point an officer observed that transporting oil across the Iraqi desert puts men needlessly at risk of enemy attack. As he says, "[alternative energy] is now a core national security and economic interest."

Friedman is calling for U.S. business and governments, and not just hemp-wearing, hybrid-driving consumers, to lead a "Green Revolution." In doing so, he hopes the United States can set an example for developing nations like China and India, who tend otherwise to envy the U.S.'s trajectory of industrializa-

tion, despite its history of utter disregard for environmental matters. This process would involve imposing serious gasoline taxes like Denmark's to encourage consumer restraint, building mass-transit systems to rival Europe's, and trading in our present dependence on dirty energy for cleaner biofuels and more efficient power plants.

Friedman borrows a number of suggestions from the "Carbon Migration Initiative" proposed by Robert Socolow and Stephen Pacala, both professors at Princeton University: replace 1,400 large coal-fired electric plants with facilities powered by natural gas; double the output of today's nuclear power facilities to replace coal-based electricity; increase wind power eightyfold to make hydrogen for clean cars; double the fuel efficiency of two billion cars from thirty to sixty miles per gallon. Again, not the kind of prescription you'll read in *Working Mother* magazine.

To accomplish all this, Friedman wants to tap into a history of American ingenuity—the panache for

self-reinvention that made Americans the pioneers of global industry, put a man on the moon and invented the Internet. He wants green to mean more to the country than the color of Jay Gatsby's light, but knows it will take the leadership of an FDR or JFK to make this happen.

But just as Ronald Reagan stripped the White House of Jimmy Carter's solar panels when he

took office, it is doubtful whether twenty-first century Americans will take heed should the government tell them to green up their lives. When the Soviets launched Sputnik, Friedman applauded America for successfully spurring itself to surpass the U.S.S.R. in space-exploration. But after the events of September 11th shook America to attention again, in a way much more immediate

and devastating than the threat of communism had ever been, the opposite happened. Americans were encouraged to spend more, travel more, and ignore the fact that their nation was at war.

Friedman mocks the low-impact, consumerist trends that have made Green a glamorous color in niche markets. But there is one central question he doesn't fully answer: How readily will Americans, so accustomed to free-market-forces, support this dramatic shift in federal policy, when they could just as easily switch from incandescent light bulbs to LEDs and call it a day? Only the next ten years will tell. I'm going to hold on to that article, "205 Easy Ways to Save the Earth," just in case. 🌱



"Increase wind power
eightyfold to make hydrogen
for clean cars; double the fuel
efficiency of two billion cars
from thirty to sixty miles per
gallon. Again, not the kind
of prescription you'll read in
Working Mother magazine."



GUIDO ANSEMI GOES TO WASHINGTON

by R. Daniel Smith

There's nothing like an election season to stultify the prose of the nation's commentators and the minds of its thinkers. Should the conscientious citizen, on finding himself formally solicited to nudge the American polity in the direction he fancies most, decide to inform his decision by watching debates, or paging through commentary magazines, or browsing his blog aggregator, there is no doubt but he will find cause to be uneasy. Whatever eagerness he may bring to his researches is sure to dissipate when it dawns on him that the public face of the electoral process is so carefully choreographed and so thoroughly disingenuous as to resist any kind of critical engagement. In fact, his well-meant investigations might lead him, not, as he first intended, to step out one fine November morning and cast a ballot for the candidate whose position he finds nearest to his own; nor even to place a grudging vote for the candidate whose tendencies he finds least destructive—but simply to abstain, his ardor reduced to apathy.

For instance, should he, from an innocent desire to know a candidate's position on a certain matter of policy, go to see a stump speech, he will learn that satisfying such curiosities is rarely a straightforward matter. For behind the bedizened podium he will not find an elder statesman asserting and defending a specific program of action, or even a coherent system of beliefs, in an orderly fashion. Instead he will find a consummate actor assuming the demeanor and adopting the speech-forms necessary to endear himself to his audience, painstakingly preening and endlessly transforming his self-presentation in order that the potential voters in attendance might—to use a simplistic but not unapt term—*identify* with him. He will discover with dismay that this game of theatrical self-po-

sitioning is in fact the primary function of campaign events. And the merest glance at the audience is bound to convince him that the electorate are, by and large, chumps for said game.

Or again: should his disappointment with a candidate's own words lead him from the primary into the secondary literature, he will surely notice that the descriptors that comprise a candidate's reputation among bloggers and columnists—say, 'visionary' and 'inspirational,' or alternatively 'genuine' and a 'regular guy'—reflect neither more nor less than his success at inhabiting a certain kind of theatrical role. From this perspective, accusations of disingenuity appear, not as evaluative judgments that might allow a discerning voter to prefer one candidate to another, but only as observations that one candidate is less talented than the other at insincerely acting sincere. And once our conjectural citizen convinces himself, like a contemporary Holden Caulfield, that this sinister second-order phoniness is to politics as honey to a baklava, he may begin to doubt even the reliability of the candidates' few unequivocal commitments to the 'issues.' He is liable, in fact, to conclude that none of the available information about a candidate—official and unofficial biography, voting record, self-description, secondary and tertiary commentary and evaluation—can be trusted to indicate presidential competency, and that he is left with no principled basis at all for deciding whom to vote for.

In a word, through his noble attempt to do his part in preserving the polity, the reflective man is likely to find himself transformed from dutiful citizen into diffident skeptic.

À propos of nothing

I would now like to change the subject, abrupt-

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ly and without apology, to an old and venerable Italian movie. Federico Fellini's *8½* tells the tale of an eminent and aging film director, Guido Anselmi—Fellini's own lightly fictionalized surrogate, as it turns out—stumbling through what is often unilluminatingly branded a mid-life crisis. Everyone in his life—his producer, various actors and members of his staff, his mistress, and, most importantly, his wife—is dissatisfied with him in one way or another, a situation which compounds, or at least does not alleviate, his own profound dissatisfaction with himself. The movie depicts the final stages of his crisis, and its uncertain oscillation between fantasy and reality leave the viewer with a number of interpretative difficulties. My own reading could no doubt be convincingly contradicted in many ways; but I have developed it for a certain purpose, as I hope will become clear, and anyway I do not think it is so far-fetched as to do needless violence to Fellini's masterpiece.

Guido's producer, we learn early in the film, has spent a lot of money building an enormous rocket launch pad for the science fiction epic that is to be Guido's next project. Yet it looks as though, despite his producer's optimism, Guido has written no more than a rough outline for the film. In fact he seems to have lost interest in it, and has lately begun writing scenes for a quasi-autobiography. He navigates a series of social encounters, reacting with as much passivity as he can muster to the ceaseless stream of questions about his projects put to him by his staff, his actors, and the press. He refuses wherever possible to make any sort of determinate commitment, and retreats, when he cannot face the petulant world any longer, into a series of vivid and often surreal daydreams and nightmares.

The causes of his discontent are at first somewhat unclear. The Roman Catholic church seems to have something to do with it. Early in the film he meets with a cardinal, a senior officer of the Church, who asks him whether he has any children. He reflexively answers "yes" and immediately corrects himself to "no." It looks as though his first answer is a wishful one. A faithful and fruitful marriage

would gain the cardinal's approval, which is to say the Church's; but in truth Guido has no children and has not been faithful to his wife. His deviation from the Church's unitary picture of proper living was from the start motivated by his desire for a woman. As a boy, we discover, he sinned only by looking on Saraghina, a gypsy woman, with lust and so committing adultery in his heart. By middle

age he has moved on to adultery proper.

But Guido is not, or not only, suffering from 'Catholic guilt'. There is also an aesthetic dimension to his malaise, beyond the unsubtle demands of sexual morality: Saraghina is curvaceous to the point of preposterous excess, and his latter-day mistress Carla, though not so exaggeratedly tasteless as Saraghina, nevertheless looks tawdry and cheap by comparison to his elegantly bespectacled wife Luisa. And the chief difference between Carla and Luisa is without parallel in his childhood or clear relevance to the Church: while Carla is frivolous and empty-headed, Luisa is possessed of an intellect worthy of Guido's own sublime genius.

So a powerful sense of moral inadequacy, as much his own making as the Church's, has beset Guido. His moral sensibility wants him to be what his libido stops him from being: a man who can love a woman with his whole and undivided self. He is left with what might, with apologies for barbarism, be called a meta-conscientious double bind:

“ Guido is left with what might, with apologies for barbarism, be called a meta-conscientious double bind: the moral imperative that he be internally unified is one side in the very conflict that renders him internally divided.”

the moral imperative that he be internally unified is one side in the very conflict that renders him internally divided.

Guido's troubles do not ordinarily cripple him. He stays sane by dosing himself regularly with a powerful narcotic: to wit, fictional narrative. Whenever reality presents him with a situation he cannot handle, he retreats into an imagined world replete with fantastic solutions to all his problems: a harem composed of all the women he has ever lusted after; a hangman to dispatch with an obnoxious critic who relentlessly anatomizes his script; and eventually, as we will see, an ideal woman to redeem him once and for all. And of course the structure of his fantasies—film shorts screened for the exclusive benefit of his consciousness, as it were—is identical to that of the art-form in which he has made his career.

The encounter with the cardinal is one in a series of incidents, outwardly trivial but inwardly devastating, that leads Guido to doubt the adequacy of his film work and his marriage, two topics he seems quite unable to keep separate. He quits working on his science fiction project. He even has a moment of second-order crisis, worrying aloud about his own acute case of writer's block: "And what if it weren't a passing one, my dear? What if it's the final collapse of a filthy liar with no flair or talent?" He finds himself suddenly and utterly incapacitated by self-doubt—and, crucially, he doesn't understand why.

His incomprehension doesn't stop him trying to patch things up in the usual way. Just as he is wont to escape from everyday problems into fleeting daydreams, so in a moment of unique crisis does he attempt a lasting resolution in the form of a whole movie. He resolves to direct his own re-imagined autobiography, in which the mechanism of his fictive self-redemption will naturally be a woman. He meets her in his daydreams, and places in her all his hope for a unifying solution to the disarray of his professional and personal lives. "I want to create order," she whispers to him, "I want to cleanse ..." Her beauty is surpassing; she is at once sultry and refined. She has Luisa's intelligence and demeanor and Carla's looks: by

uniting the positive features of each of the women in Guido's life, she will resolve the conflict of his moral sensibility with his libido and bring him internal order. He will remain faithful to her, as he has never been able to do for his wife.

The nimble-minded reader will no doubt have guessed that Guido's clever scheme winds up looking rather naïve. Imagined utopia gives way to authentic catastrophe when Luisa discovers his affair; and as Guido begins to fear, evidently for the first time, that he may really lose her, his confidence in the restorative power of his film quickly fades. "I really have nothing to say," he confides in Luisa's friend Rossella, "but I want to say it all the same." When his wife sees some screen tests for her own character, she realizes precisely what he is doing and confronts him. "It's a movie, another invention, another lie," she cries. "You put everybody in it, but the way you like to see them." And when, minutes later, Guido at last meets Claudia, the actress whose photographs had given form to the woman of his fantasies, he knows at once that she is not so perfect as he had supposed. He tries bravely to hide his dejection, but at length he admits, to her and to himself, that he has no part to offer her, nor indeed any film at all. He claims he is giving up because he doesn't "feel like telling another pile of lies," but she knows it's because "he doesn't know how to love."

Yet no sooner has Guido confessed to his film's demise than his producer turns up, as out of touch as ever, to announce a lavish party at the launch pad in honor of the launch of Guido's film. As his staff hurry him through a mob of journalists his mind reels in utter despair. As he takes the stage, from which he is expected to deliver a speech he has not written and take questions he cannot answer, the last act of the film begins.

Politics and filmopathy

Well, that is all very bleak, no doubt about it. But before tackling the last few scenes it might be wise to change course once more, perhaps to atone for my sins of discontinuity. Recall, if you will, our nameless and aimless citizen-turned-skeptic. Suppose we christen him Howard. Howard's at-

titude toward electoral politics was born, we speculated, of a naïve political ardor. He might have wished to enact and preserve the hallowed traditions of American democracy, or, equally and oppositely, to reform the American polity according to one or another radical scheme. Jefferson Smith, hero of Frank Capra's classic film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, exemplifies both naïvetés: he took his seat in the Senate full to bursting with wide-eyed civic pride, but quickly metamorphosed into a crusader for public virtue and against corruption.

Capra, of course, granted Mr. Smith a happy ending, but his central position in the popular imagination belies the wishful thinking behind his story. Nobody knows this better than Howard, whose virtues—commendable,

to be sure, and herewith commended—were also his downfall. For through intellectual honesty and a sharp eye for charlatanry he found himself mistrusting the electorate, the press, and most of all the politicians.

We left Howard in rather a bad way. In fact we wouldn't exaggerate too much by calling his state of mind downright pathological. I suppose nobody will object if I say the same holds for Guido, since we last saw him on the verge of delusion. But what if they had more in common?

In his abortive autobiography, Guido tried to achieve his longed-for unity by manipulating the fictional universe afforded him by the medium of his art, even inventing a character from whole cloth—but he didn't change anything, on screen or in life, about himself. Altered circumstances made clear to him this plan was doomed, and what I have called the last act of the film is the story of his true redemption.

As he approaches the stage, the press inundate him with dichotomies: Are you for or against *x*? Do you or don't you believe *y*? He ignores them all, takes his seat at the center of a long table, and launches into his last fantasy. As the clamors grow louder and his producer entreats him to say "anything at all," he climbs under the table and out of sight, grabs hold of a pistol that has materialized just at the right moment, and turns it on himself.

No sooner do we jump at the gunshot and wonder whether he has really done it than the scene changes to another flurry of action, this time of technicians dismantling the set. Guido has not committed suicide: he has announced the cancellation of his film. Delivered from his artistic burden, he approaches his wife.

"Everything is confused again," he tells her, "but this confusion is me. . . . Accept me for what I am, if you want me. It's the only way we might be able to find each other." In a matter of moments he is bounding around the remains of the set, megaphone in hand, pointing and positioning and shouting orders—he is a director again.

Something subtly brilliant has taken place in these brief scenes. No more does Guido need an ideal woman to cleanse him and bring him order. He is no longer trying vainly to accommodate himself and everyone else he knows to a unified scheme of understanding and evaluation. He acknowledges his own permanent and irresolvable disunity, and entreats his wife to do the same, in order that they may at last get to know one another. Rather than manipulate the world to fit him properly, he has undertaken to transform himself so he might understand the world.

From the outside, Howard's skeptical affliction

“We left Howard in a bad way. In fact we wouldn't exaggerate too much by calling his state of mind downright pathological. I suppose nobody will object if I say the same holds for Guido. But what if they had more in common?”

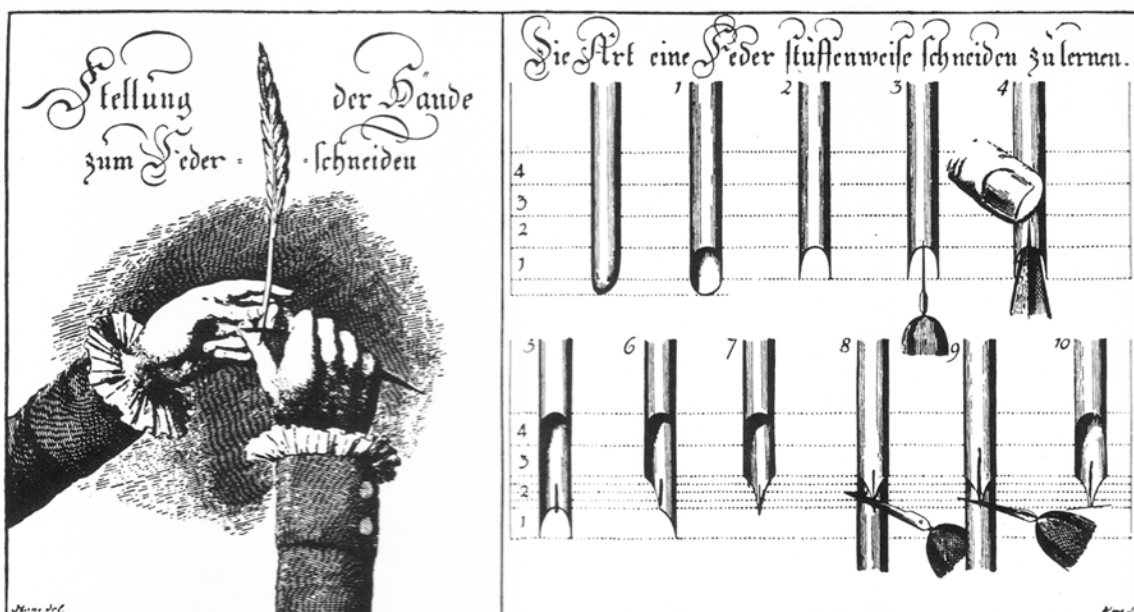
doesn't look much like Guido's moral crisis. But they are nearly identical in structure. Consider: each man confronts his object with a powerful conscience—Guido scrutinizes himself and his life, and Howard the public discourse of his nation. Each finds his object wanting in coherence, order, unity. Each despairs of his own ability to repair the object, and so concludes that he simply has nothing to say. Guido says nothing by cancelling his film, Howard by refusing to vote.

Yet there's an evident asymmetry. Guido knew he could say nothing but tried to say it all the same—and in doing so found that, by coming to terms with his own chaotic self, he was able to say a great deal after all, both in his art and to his wife. Howard, by contrast, is still sulking that he can't cram the world of politics into a mold of his own choosing. He yearns for sincere politicians, a rational electorate, journalists as intellectually diligent as himself. He pleads in vain that everybody quit acting and talk about the issues—is it too much to ask for an honest and direct approach to the truth?

Well, yes. The power of Howard's skeptical arguments lies in their being right on all essential points. Politics is theatre: this revelation can demoralize the brightest thinkers of Right and Left

alike. But it only looks like a *reductio ad absurdum* of all political activity—to those whose simplistic assumptions make it so. Should the conservative recognize that the world has always been a stage, and the radical that it always will be—in fact that what looks like posturing and disingenuity is the necessary condition of all social, and especially political, life—then he may find that he has something to say after all. That man will be revolutionary, writes Wittgenstein, who can revolutionize himself. And the man who sets out to cure politics of its ills must first take a close diagnostic gander at himself.

The American political imagination, our popular understanding of how things used to be or ought to be, is full of people like Capra's Mr. Smith. As such it provides a poor model for the practical understanding and actual conduct of public affairs, which, by contrast, is rarely short on Howards. If, like Howard, our thinkers hold fast to some beloved political vision and try to create the world in its image, they will find themselves, truly and permanently, with nothing to say. But should it occur to them that it might be wiser to approach political life without concluding in advance how it ought to work, they may well find that they can say something all the same. 🐼



SOLA SCRIPTURA AND CHRISTIAN VALUES

by Bryant Jackson-Green



The determination of what the Christian community would call its values or ethical standards has its roots, for the Protestant branch of Christianity at least, in Biblical interpretation. This idea is founded on the principle of *sola scriptura*, one of the five *solas* that served as the doctrinal foundation of the Protestant Reformation: scripture alone is authoritative for the faith and practice of the Bible, on the basis that the Bible is complete, authoritative, and true. Should one assume this is the case, it will naturally follow that all other means typically used to determine truth according to the faith—tradition, popular beliefs, and personal judgment—are secondary in importance and can in no way contradict the word of God.

In spite of this principle, there is still great controversy within the church on a host of issues, some of which are not specifically addressed by the Bible. For those that are, however, the dissonance between the precise word of the Bible and actual Christian practice can result from differences in how the Bible is interpreted. What is the source of conflicts in interpretation, and is there is legitimate cause for debate and discussion? To what degree are arguments made based merely on conjecture or spin as opposed to genuine truth? I propose that the analysis in the context of Biblical text of two divisive issues, the acceptability of divorce and homosexuality, can elucidate some of the questions raised by the tensions between personal belief and religious law.

I.

In October 2007, David Instone-Brewer wrote an article for *Christianity Today* entitled “What God Has Joined,” provoking controversy and debate within the evangelical community. He argued that

a close analysis of scripture reveals that divorce is permissible not only in cases of adultery, but in instances when marriage vows to “love, honor, and keep” one’s spouse have failed to be fulfilled. A response by theologian John Piper countered that Instone-Brewer’s view encourages “easy divorce and cavalier-covenant breaking.” This debate is by no means new, but demonstrates the lingering moral conflict between a desire to prevent the frivolous divorces that undermine the institution of marriage, and the reality that relationships can go sour.

On what grounds does the Bible permit divorce? There are three specific instances where varying reasons are given:

When a spouse is engaged in an extra-marital affair:

But I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery.

—Matthew 5:22 (NIV)

When a nonbeliever wishes to leave their Christian spouse:

If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.

—1 Corinthians 7: 12-13, 15

If the spouse is in some way neglected or abused:

If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights. If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free, without any payment of money.

—Exodus 21: 10-11

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Much of the current debate over divorce arises from the third point because of the subjectivity of the terms ‘neglect’ and ‘emotional abuse.’ Few would encourage a woman whose husband physically abuses her and her children to remain in such a relationship; however, the oft cited “boredom” or lack of “passion” is too weak an excuse for separation, let alone divorce. Of course, it would be impossible to determine and unfair to claim that a given portion of these divorces are frivolous and that couples simply decided to disregard what they saw as “outdated” Biblical edict. Yet, in a time where 35% of born-again Christians are divorced, one must wonder if those who claim Christianity as their faith have forgotten that marriage was intended to be a life-long, permanent relationship, a commitment not to be lightly taken or discarded. The varying circumstances surrounding marital discord do not always allow for a simple, clear-cut method for determining what is or isn’t compatible with Biblical law, necessitating that each case be judged on an individual basis.

Still, the issue is all the more serious since references to divorce in the Bible tend to either strongly discourage or, more often than not, expressly forbid it. From Jesus’ admonition in Matthew 19:6 that “what God has joined together, let man not separate,” his elucidation a few verses later that the only reason why Moses’ law even allowed divorce in the first place was “because your hearts were hard,” and the concise condemnation “‘I hate divorce,’ says the LORD God of Israel” from Malachi 2:16, it is abundantly clear that the standard for ending a marriage, when allowed, is extremely high for those who profess to follow Christ.

II.

The issue of homosexuality in the Bible differs from questions on divorce, as the latter is allowed under certain circumstances, while the former is, in every single instance it is mentioned

in the Bible, either condemned as or strongly associated with sin. Still, the issue has somehow managed to become a subject of considerable controversy within the church and, according to the principle of *sola scriptura*, the Bible must be the only source used in evaluating arguments for or against the acceptability of this life style.



While there are several Biblical passages that state homosexuality is a sin, many of the texts cited against this practice have unfortunately been taken out of context or are used to justify hateful speech, reactionary violence, and discrimination. Take, for example, the Genesis account of Sodom and Gomorrah. The cities are first mentioned in Chapter 18:

20 Then the LORD said, “The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous 21 that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know.”

No specific mention of any one offense other than in general is mentioned at this point. The story continues in Chapter 19 after two angels sent to judge the region’s inhabitants are attacked while staying at the home of Lot:

4 Before they had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom—both young and old—surrounded the house. 5 They called to Lot, “Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them.”

It is this mention of homosexuality that some have reasoned as sufficient proof of its sinfulness: it is sin so great that it was the specific cause of the city’s destruction that follows a few verses later. First, one must ask themselves what precisely was so immoral about the actions of the city’s men. Was it that they sought to engage in homosexual acts, or that they attempted to overpower and rape the angelic visitors who resided with Lot? Even if this question is answered, no specific reason is ever mentioned as being the cause of Sodom’s destruction, rather wickedness in general. God was considering the annihilation of the city before the

event in the city took place, so this must be a one part of the whole of their sin. To simply speculate that homosexuality was the reason for the city's doom is improper, violating the spirit of *sola scriptura* by substituting human conjecture for what the Bible actually states.

Another example of improper interpretation is found in how Old Testament Biblical law on punishment has, in certain arguments, not been tempered with considerations of New Testament teaching. According to Leviticus 20:13:

If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They must be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads.



Tempting though it may be to conclude that Christianity condones such a response to homosexuality, one must also look at Jesus' teachings in the New Testament that respond to such harsh commandments. Let's look at another verse in the same chapter that states punishment for a different offense:

If a man commits adultery with another man's wife—with the wife of his neighbor—both the adulterer and the adulteress must be put to death.

—Leviticus 20:10

Now, if we examine John Chapter 8, we find that Jesus has been confronted with the problem posed by the previous verse, when a woman who had been found in the act of adultery was brought before Christ by the Pharisees. When asked whether or not she should be killed as scripture commands, His reply was: "If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her."

Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."

—John 8: 9-10

The Law of Moses demanded death for adulter-

ers, yet Jesus rebuked those who sought to impose it, setting an example through his refusal to condemn her. By what right can we then, since "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), throw the first stone? It's not that

her sin was ignored—Jesus showed mercy but he did not lie to her about the nature of what she did. This same principle can be applied to the question of homosexuality. Old Testament accounts call it "detestable" and Paul in Romans 1:27 calls it "indecent" and a "perversion." But just as death or violence is dismissed by Jesus as a valid response to

adultery, such reactions to same-sex relationships must be dismissed as well.

* * *

Approaching the Bible as the source of Christian authority is necessary to ensure an accurate, complete view of the Christian values that serve as the basis of the faith. As time moves forward and social norms change, Biblical interpretation becomes an increasingly confusing activity, as views are informed more so by outside influences rather than the Bible itself. This is the importance of *sola scriptura*, of having an objective, unchanging standard from which to remind ourselves exactly what can or can not be cited as genuine Christian values. While it may be tempting to cherry-pick from the Bible, embracing what one finds agreeable while rejecting the inconvenient, such habits only dilute both its meaning and interpretation. If *sola scriptura* is the basis from which Christian values are discerned, this objective, unchanging standard would begin to resolve the debates on what these values really are. 🙏

A CONTEMPORARY PROBLEM: MUSIC AND THE LISTENER

by Erin Dahlgren

"I confess that the major preoccupations of my neighbor, my very close and actual neighbor, of any particular time, seem to me to be bizarre, absurd, and quite distant from my own frame of mind."

—Olivier Messiaen

On the third evening of the recent Messiaen Festival, after witnessing the virtuosity of Stephen Gosling, eighth blackbird, and the Pacifica Quartet, I was left a bit confused.

The night's program, entitled "Contempo: Spheres of Influences," focused on Olivier Messiaen as a musical advisor to such modern composers as Turo Takemitsu, Gerald Levinson, and Pierre Boulez. My confusion did not lie in any lack of introduction to Messiaen himself, as Professor Marta Ptaszynska's personal accounts of the man's youthful excitement for life were both eloquent and inspiring. In fact, my confusion had nothing to do with anything that could have been explained to me, before or after the evening.

Instead, my confusion manifested itself when the music first began, at the moment between my eager and open anticipation and the first harsh sound of a bow on strings. I felt strangely distant from the performers on stage; it was as if the sound stayed rooted in their passionate and jerking movements instead of resonating back to me.

Still, I'm compelled to understand what exactly might have constructed this barrier between a common lover of art like myself and the music of Olivier Messiaen. I understand that I may have certain tastes and biases, that they may in effect taint this exploration of Messiaen's contemporary influence. Yet I feel that my reaction can speak to at least a few human aesthetic needs. To this end, I will attempt to investigate Messiaen's style with the use of comparison to a few well-known and ar-

guably more accessible composers who range from the late eighteenth- to the nineteenth-century.

Recounted one student of Messiaen, "I will remember forever his friendly 'innocent child' smile, his shining personality emanating with joy, excitement, and genuine enthusiasm." Despite any argument I make here, it is necessary to appreciate Olivier Messiaen as a compassionate and fanatically spiritual man. Raised during World War I by a poet and a liberal scholar of Shakespeare, Messiaen was free to indulge in a musical world that had come "very naturally, as an apple tree bears apples, or a rosebush roses."

And in this musical world, where he first encountered the humbling power of the Church organ and the cadence of beautifully written scripture, young Messiaen became a devout and faithful Catholic; he later claimed to have been one since birth. At the ripe age of twenty-two, as the youngest titular organist in the history of the Église de la Sainte-Trinité in Paris, he was allowed to improvise during certain pauses in the Sunday services. He later confessed, "The first idea that I wished to express—and the most important, because it stands above them all—is the existence of the truths of the Catholic faith."

But apart from his depth as a person, Messiaen's aims as an artist seem to rely on solving an ever-growing analytical puzzle. "I compose to defend something, to express something, to place something; and each new work obviously poses new problems, all the more complex in that our age has given birth to numerous contentious aesthetics. I try to become acquainted with them all and yet to remain outside them." Messiaen learned these

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contentious aesthetics through meticulous study of bird-song and his mental coloring of sounds, similar to synesthesia.

With this wider picture of the man, it is now easier to focus on peculiar aspects of Messiaen's style, such as time and color. For the sake of space, we must sadly leave rich areas like harmony and cultural influence to patiently wait for us along the sidelines of this discourse. So with special attention to Messiaen's *Pièce pour piano et quatuor à cordes*, his only work in the concert's contemporary program, the investigation finally starts.

I. Time

Rhythmic music, as Messiaen defined it, is "music that scorns repetition, straightforwardness and equal division. In short, it's music inspired by the movements of nature, movements of free and unequal duration." Therefore, Messiaen would consider a standard composer like Bach, whose work most listeners consider very structured and rhythmically pleasing, as having no sense of rhythm at all. This will no doubt make a few people quake with agitation. But Messiaen goes on to explain in an interview with Claude Samuel that an unbroken pulse only gives the listener a comfortable illusion of rhythm. And perhaps it is really not so strange to think of the irregular patterns of our natural world as having meaning for us—patterns from things like bird-song, water, and wind—but what sort of meaning, and how?

According to a recent study of music and memory, for patterns to seem directly connected and be digestible for the human ear the phrases themselves must be inside the three- to five-second limit of short-term musical memory. Furthermore, as the number of beats in a metrical pattern increases,

the overall feeling of a unified meter gets weaker and "pulls apart" into smaller meters. Even when a seasoned musician is confronted with the dreaded five beats to a measure, which can popularly be heard in the theme of *Mission: Impossible*, it is most helpful for them to break it up into first three and then two beats. North Indian *raga* music, which theoretically can use up to 108 beats in a single

cycle, tends to use relatively strict repetition of a basic metrical structure to make that pattern clear.

Considering this human need for music structure, one might wonder if Messiaen's rhythmic irregularity even has a place in our cognition. It would be wrong to neglect, in Messiaen's view, our own inherent interruptions of rhythm, which he

explains in the context of a military march. "The march, with its cadential gait and uninterrupted succession of absolutely equal note values, is anti-natural. True marching is accompanied by an extremely irregular swaying; it's a series of falls, more or less avoided, placed at different intervals." But this unevenness of marching does not strike us as we plod forward; if it did, we would be so distracted that we might fall out of synch with our comrades, disorient the group, and send the whole procession crashing down like dominoes. With a few bruises, we might then come to appreciate our general need for rhythmic structure, which seems to supercede the randomness of movement because it's on a larger and perhaps more mental scale. Instead of physical bruises from an uncoordinated march, during Messiaen's sporadic *Pièce pour piano et quatuor à cordes*, the bruises were inside my head.

Far from what one might now come to expect, Messiaen considered Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart to be an extraordinary rhythmician. Specifically

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looking at this classical composer's famous *Symphony No. 40*—the second and last symphony he would ever write in an emotionally dark key—we find natural undulations in the major theme of the first movement, a two-note theme that shines in its simplicity. After establishing this theme with excessive repetition, only then does he experiment with interrupted patterns similar to nature. Yet each irregular phrase is repeated at least once in this development of the theme, which gives an underlying structure to what would otherwise sound chaotic. Richness flows out of the movement, from of the delicate balance of repetitive structure and musical experiment.

In Messiaen's own piece, the only recurring idea was a four-note motive. Unfortunately, because it only resurfaced after many disjointed ideas in a last spurt of sound, this motive easily floated past my short-term memory and into the recesses of my struggling brain. Analytical phrases and changing speeds, all well intended, ended in a furious squabble. With optimism, I assigned this chaotic battle to some subconscious conflict within myself; but in the end, no matter how hard I tried to give it meaning, a sense of hollowness pervaded the experience.

I felt forgotten by this brilliant man, as if he had surrounded himself with all these fascinating possibilities of rhythm and had blocked me out. My confusion with Messiaen's use of time, fundamental to my appreciation of and connection with his work, seems now to be a result of structural limitations set up by my own ears and mind. But on whose shoulders does this burden lie, mine or Messiaen's?

II. Color

Messiaen relied on the confusion between his visual and auditory senses, whether real or imagined, to construct thick chords out of colors. He explains matter-of-factly, "One really can't talk of an exact correspondence between a key and a color; that would be a rather naive way of expressing oneself because, I repeat, colors are complex and are linked to equally complex colors and sounds." In the same interview, he analytically de-

scribes a twelve-note semi-tone method for relating color to sound, in which limited groups are divided into the multiplications of twelve's factors until the groups sequentially return to the original permutation.

But apart from any convoluted mathematical method for giving emotional richness to both color and sound, Messiaen's chords are most interesting in how they progress. For Messiaen, what precedes and what follows comes secondary to the present impression of the individual chord; each is extremely dense and well thought out. It makes more sense to think of him as enamored with the beautiful and complete pictures on isolated pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. A potentially larger picture instead relies on relatively simpler pieces, fitting nicely together because they are incomplete.

Something that we often neglect to appreciate is the potential tension of a progression of ideas compared to the static nature of a single idea. This sense of drama, which we find ourselves drawn to in everything from Shakespeare's tragedies to Van Gogh's psychologically suspended paintings of fields, is often necessary to keep an audience engaged.

The simplest way to create musical tension is through the suspended resolution of a chord progression, which is often and easily done by letting the fifth note of a scale lead back into the first. According to the same study on music and memory, music that is hierarchically organized by closure in different parts of the progression tends to be retained in the human memory with maximum efficiency. But music without this progressive style, often referred to as "existing in the present only," provides either no memorable patterns, or no basis for expectation, or neither. Without the mental stamina to process disparate and new chords, I sat in Mandel Hall, distant, tired out, and unengaged.

Ludwig van Beethoven, arguably the greatest master of tension, was praised by Messiaen himself for his rhythmic use of silence. Above all a student of his own art, this Romantic genius never stopped pursuing a maddening and often subcon-

scious tension, even when the public praised his style as fully developed. It is therefore somewhat unnerving, as we reflect on all of Beethoven's masculine, dramatic works, that one of his tensest pieces is a delicate and unelaborate sonata.

The *Moonlight Sonata* is able to blossom with color for very simple structural reasons. The constancy of the rhythm, the individually played notes of each chord, along with a foundational low note for each melodic change, makes it much easier for the listener to focus on the tension created by the colorful progression. Melody is secondarily blended at a higher pitch than the progression and consists of long sustained notes.

Most surprisingly, Beethoven's primary tool in the *Moonlight Sonata* is as simple as suspending a chord long enough to drive us feverish. No matter what came before or how we initially expected the pattern to evolve, we are filled in the present with a burning desire to somehow resolve this one sound; our hearts wait in our throats the entire time. It is really not so different from holding an object just above the reach of a cat; it will begin to reach for the object as you bobble it back and forth, but its interest wavers when its frustration reaches a peak. Beethoven's strength, and Messiaen's weakness, lies in the exact placement of the resolution;

right before our stamina is lost in our desperate clawing at the object, just as we are about to walk away completely.

My confusion, thankfully, has since bloomed into a broader realization: some composers, especially those of Messiaen's contemporary age, easily fall into the comfortable hole of composing music purely for music's sake. They could very well then stuff their scores into filing cabinets and never have to worry about them again. The study or experiment would be finished, done with, and achieved.

But those who follow this path run the risk of fading off into oblivion, with no other soul to have ever heard or criticized their work. Although I do not advocate composing for the sake of popularity or recognition, a focus on what makes art even digestible for one's fellow man gives the work the potential to be intimate with the rest of the world. And this intimacy, so treasured by the artist when he connects with his creation is, in my limited opinion, the right of every man.

The barriers set by Messiaen and his contemporaries, deeply felt as I yearned to touch that intimacy in Mandel Hall, at the time bred perplexity. Now they breed resentment. 🐼



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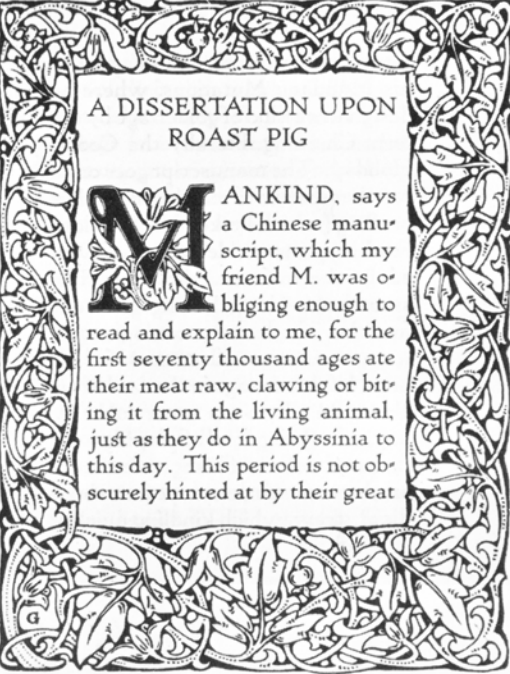
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A DIS- SERTA- TION UPON ROAST PIG



A DISSERTATION UPON ROAST PIG

MANKIND, says a Chinese manuscript, which my friend M. was obliging enough to read and explain to me, for the first seventy thousand ages ate their meat raw, clawing or biting it from the living animal, just as they do in Abyssinia to this day. This period is not obscurely hinted at by their great

EXIT, PURSUED BY A BEAR



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