



Ordained Servant
March 2025

Going Peopleless

Ordained Servant Online

A Journal for Church Officers

E-ISSN 1931-7115

CURRENT ISSUE: GOING PEOPLELESS

March 2025

From the Editor

It is a tragic irony that the very technologies that were supposed to bring people together have cultivated an epidemic of loneliness. The many forces of our technological society have grossly underestimated the superiority of human intelligence and are thus robbing us of the human presence we cannot live without. For the past year and a half I have been researching so-called “artificial intelligence.” I shall begin with an introduction to artificial intelligence with a brief history and a comparison with human intelligence. “Going Peopleless Underestimates the Unique Superiority of Human Intelligence, Part 1” will be followed by Parts 2 and 3, covering the application of Part 1 in terms of benefits and liabilities.

Danny Olinger continues the series “Jesus, Stab Me in the Heart! Flannery O’Connor at 100” with an analysis of the O’Connor short story “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” Each month he will be reflecting on a sample of O’Connor’s short stories (I recommend *O’Connor: Collected Works*, The Library of America, 1988). O’Connor is unique among the greatest fiction writers of the twentieth century. “O’Connor’s one overarching theme is Jesus Christ and the scandal of the Christian religion.”

John Muether reviews *The Great De-Churching: Who’s Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* by Jim Davis and Michael Graham. While the analysis is helpful, Muether disagrees with their definition of exile and observes that the five categories of dechurching do not fully account for growth in conservative confessional communions. He also intimates that where evangelical churches are declining it may be due to their embrace of the broadening church that led to the decline of twentieth-century liberal churches.

Charles Wingard reviews *The Hobbit Encyclopedia*, which looks like a great new resource for Tolkien fans, especially his seminal fantasy *The Hobbit*. It is also a beautifully published hardcover. Its illustrations and typography are excellent.

I review an intriguing new biography of the Polish poet and émigré, and one of the West’s greatest poets, *On Czesław Miłosz* by holocaust survivor Eva Hoffman. This is the best brief introduction to the man and his poetry.

Our poem this month, “The World Is Covered,” was written as a reflection on the December 26, 2004, Indian Ocean tsunami that killed over 220,000 people across fourteen countries. In the same year, Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004), died in August. His great sensitivity toward human suffering developed through personal experience during

the twentieth-century chaos of war in Europe. Much of his poetry poignantly reflects the agony of this human plight, with occasional flashes of Christian hope. My poem is a tribute to him.

The cover this month pictures a small rural cemetery, the “Stone Cemetery,” in Bridgeton, Maine. It was begun in 1839 by the Stone family. It is in a hauntingly beautiful place, especially in winter.

Blessings in the Lamb,
Gregory Edward Reynolds

CONTENTS

ServantThoughts

- “Going Peopleless Underestimates the Unique Superiority of Human Intelligence, Part 1”

ServantLiterature

- Danny E. Olinger, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”

ServantReading

- Gregory E. Reynolds, review article, “Poetry: The Music of Particularity,” reviewing *On Czesław Miłosz* by Eva Hoffman
- John R. Muether, review of *The Great De-Churching: Who’s Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back?* by Jim Davis and Michael Graham
- Charles M. Wingard, review of *The Hobbit Encyclopedia*, by Damien Bador, Coralie Potot, Vivien Stocker, and Dominique Vigot

ServantPoetry

- Gregory E. Reynolds, “The World Is Covered”

FROM THE ARCHIVES “MEDIA ECOLOGY, POETRY”

http://opc.org/OS/pdf/Subject_Index_Vol_1-32.pdf

- “Avoiding the Tyranny of the Attention Racket” (T. David Gordon) 31 (2022): 141–44.

- “Dumb and Dangerous” (T. David Gordon) 31 (2022): 125–30.
- “Face-to-Face: The Importance of Personal Presence in Ministry and Life” (Gregory Edward Reynolds) 21 (2012):20–26.
- “Beautiful Truth” (Gregory E. Reynolds) 24 (2015): 6–7.
- “The Power of Poetry for Preaching and Enjoyment” (Gregory Edward Reynolds) 30 (2021): 20–25.
- “The Rhythms of the Christian Life in Bible Reading, Prayer, and Poetry” (Gregory Edward Reynolds) 22 (2013):109–11.
- “Your Personal Odyssey in Stereo” (Mark A. Green) 30 (2021): 81–82.

Ordained Servant exists to help encourage, inform, and equip church officers for faithful, effective, and God-glorifying ministry in the visible church of the Lord Jesus Christ. Its primary audience is ministers, elders, and deacons of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, as well as interested officers from other Presbyterian and Reformed churches. Through high-quality editorials, articles, and book reviews, we will endeavor to stimulate clear thinking and the consistent practice of historic, confessional Presbyterianism.

ServantTechnology

Going Peopleless Underestimates the Unique Superiority of Human Intelligence, Part 1

by Gregory E. Reynolds

Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?
Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?
The cycles of Heaven in twenty centuries
Bring us farther from God and nearer to the Dust.

—T. S. Eliot¹

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well.

—Psalm 139:14

Your hands have made and fashioned me; give me understanding that I may learn your commandments”

—Psalm 119:73

As you do not know the way the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.

—Ecclesiastes 11:5

INTRODUCTION

Last year was the twenty-fifth anniversary of a very popular movie that I never saw when it came out in 1999—*The Matrix*.² So, recently I decided that, given frequent references to the movie in literature, it was significant enough to watch, which I did in June 2024. I realized that I took the famous red pill in 1990 when I began to study Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman and the discipline that they initiated—media ecology. In *The Matrix* the red pill enabled a person to experience reality by escaping the matrix, which was an illusory, deceptive reality created by an evil cyber-intelligence. The red pill of media ecology revealed to me the electric matrix into which I was born—the

¹ T. S. Eliot, “Choruses from the ‘Rock’ I,” in *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc. 1963), 147.

² For those who have not seen *The Matrix* see the Summaries at IMDb, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0133093/plotsummary/?ref=tt_str_y_pl. Better still, watch the movie.

electronic environment. It is an eye-opening experience.³ Like Plato and his allegory of the cave, it became my mission to get the cave dwellers out into the light of day to understand the pervasive and subtle influences of the electronic environment on human life and culture. McLuhan referred to the cave dwellers as “technological idiots.” The term “idiot” is only apparently uncharitable. The original Greek word (ἰδιώτης, *idiōtēs*, 1 Cor. 14:24 “unlearned,” 2 Cor. 11:6 “untrained in speech”) indicated ignorance of a particular language and thus its culture. The point is that, as a culture, we are largely ignorant of what we are doing with media, or more precisely, what the media are doing to us. That too was McLuhan’s point—technological ignorance—something that needs to be overcome.⁴

Zion, in *The Matrix*, is the place of refuge from the deceptive matrix to which some humans escape after the machines enslave the rest of humanity and harvest their bioelectric power. Zion is the place of exile, an underground refuge, for free humans. It reminds me of the church; we are a people in exile awaiting the return of our Savior, the ultimate escape from the matrix of this present evil age. In Christ’s church we become fully human as we are transformed, imitating the Second Adam, extricated from the killing grasp of the matrix of this world.

I believe that STEM and the humanities should have a symbiotic relationship. A critical analysis of the electronic environment along with all the inventions (extensions) of man must be imbedded in the humanities, which includes Christian theology, along with technological understanding. I intend to bring the discipline of media ecology (ME) to bear on a critical analysis of artificial intelligence (AI). Artificial intelligence is the capacity of computers to exhibit or simulate human intelligent behavior, especially by applying machine learning techniques to large collections of data.⁵ I will expand on this below.

ME was conceived in the intellectual environment of the liberal arts, reflected in the Judeo-Christian sensibilities of its founders, such as Marshall McLuhan (Roman Catholic), Neil Postman (liberal Jew), Jacques Ellul (Neo-Orthodox Protestant), and Walter Ong (Jesuit). I am enlisting Christian anthropology and the biblical idea of idolatry as a critical tool to bear on my consideration of this modern (not actually new) technology. AI is inextricably connected with the entire digital revolution. But the most important questions about it are not technical but anthropological.

The very name “artificial intelligence” reduces human intelligence to something like information retrieval and organization. Commercial answering services regularly greet customers with, “I am your virtual assistant. I can understand complete sentences,” that is until I ask the question that did not appear in the website FAQs; then suddenly it sends me off to a human agent. But there is no “I” behind these words; this is actually a lie creating an illusion of a computer program being human.

Recently my wife and I were on a ski trip in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. We stayed at the Woodstock Inn and Brewery for three nights. As winter would usually have it, a large snowstorm was predicted for our day to travel to Bridgeton, Maine, to ski

³ As I was matriculating in the doctor of ministry program in 1990 at Westminster Seminary in California I took a course by Joel Nederhood, “Effective Preaching in a Media Age,” which introduced me to the discipline of media ecology pioneered by scholars like Marshall McLuhan and Neil Postman. Postman’s 1985 book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* popularized media ecology. It was eye-opening.

⁴ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (McGraw-Hill, 1964), 18.

⁵ See *Oxford English Dictionary* under “artificial intelligence” (revised December 2023).

with family. Google maps had recommended traveling over the Kancamagus Highway, a route that was closed in winter until 1968. There was time to take that route in the morning to avoid the storm. I knew a slightly longer route that was well traveled at all times of year and did not run to as high an altitude of the Kancamagus Pass (2,855'). It only rises to nineteen hundred feet. I figured that if we could travel ahead of the storm, the Kancamagus Highway would be fine. When I asked a local, she advised me not to ever take the Kank in the winter due to severe frost heaves which make for a miserable drive. Google had never driven that road in winter and usually only chooses the fastest route—efficiency is one of technology's chief gods. This also reminded me of the reality of human intelligence functioning in an embodied existence.

My argument in this article is that human intelligence (HI) can never be replaced by computer systems for three reasons. 1) computer data and their algorithms are created by human intelligence. 2) Human intelligence is embodied intelligence that requires physical presence in the world of ideas, matter, and people. 3) Human intelligence involves consciousness, cognition, and conscience, none of which can be reduced to material or digital realities. Humans are creatures of God before they are intelligent thinkers. This creatureliness involves more than reasoning power.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE: A BRIEF HISTORY

Discussion of AI has broken like a tidal wave over all media outlets as if it was something new. But it was conceived almost seventy-five years ago with Alan Turing's now famous paper "Computing Machinery and Intelligence."⁶ Computers at the time needed a great deal of development in order to attempt to answer Turing's question about computing, "Can machines think?"⁷ Turing anticipated the development of computing in the direction of simulating human intelligence, but he simply posited a test to compare the two.⁸ Large amounts of computer memory, especially, needed to be developed. Five years later the first computer program was invented to mimic the problem solving skill of a human; *Logic Theorist* was created by Allen Newell, Cliff Shaw, and Herbert Simon. A year later in 1956 a historic conference attempted to inspire a collaborative effort among top researchers to develop AI. The Dartmouth Summer Research Project on Artificial Intelligence resulted in a scientific consensus that AI would be achievable. This was where the term "artificial intelligence" was coined. The conference was the catalyst for the next two decades of AI research.⁹

Computer scientist Joseph Weizenbaum (1923–2008), inventor of the first interactive computer program (AI), ELIZA (named after the *Pygmalion* character), was surprised to see "the enormously exaggerated attributions an even well-educated audience is capable of making, even strives to make, to a technology it does not understand."¹⁰ In 1970

⁶ A. M. Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence," *Mind* 49 (1950): 433–60.

⁷ Turing is especially known for his "Turing Test," which tested a machine's (computer's) ability to simulate human intelligence, answering his question, "Can machines think?" see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turing_test.

⁸ I owe this and other clarifications to my friend Gregory Tarsa, software engineering manager.

⁹ Rockwell Anyoha, "A History of Artificial Intelligence," accessed April 11, 2023. <https://sitn.hms.harvard.edu/flash/2017/history-artificial-intelligence/>.

¹⁰ Joseph Weizenbaum, *Computer Power and Human Reason: From Judgment to Calculation* (W. H. Freeman, 1976), 7.

cognitive and computer scientist Marvin Minsky (1927–2016) told *Life* magazine that in less than a decade there would be a machine that equaled the intelligence of an average person.¹¹ Such was the optimism of the philosophical materialist, who also overestimated the progress of computer technology.

In the 1980s the concept of “deep learning” was promoted by John Hopfield and David Rumelhart developing “techniques which allowed computers to learn using experience.”¹² In 1997 reigning grand master chess champion Gary Kasparov was defeated by IBM’s *Deep Blue* computer program. In the same year Dragon Systems developed speech recognition software. Finally, computer memory, which according to Moore’s Law doubles each year, along with the availability of huge amounts of data from various sources, allowed for great advancement in the field of AI.¹³ The author Rockwell Anyoha in his 2017 “History of Artificial Intelligence,” accurately predicted that “AI language is looking like the next big thing. In fact, it’s already underway.”¹⁴ On November 30, 2022, the first commercially available AI, OpenAI’s ChatGPT, became available, and the conversation about its benefits and liabilities began.

In the spring of 2023, technology columnist for *The Wall Street Journal*, Christopher Mims, observed,

What’s unique about this moment is that new systems like text-generating AIs, such as ChatGPT . . . are the first consumer applications of AI. . . . What characterizes this time is that computers—rather than humans—are now building the models that machines use to accomplish a task.¹⁵

In 2024 Cal Newport, assistant professor of computer science at Georgetown University, observed, “If 2023 was the year when we learned that language models could do more than simply mix and match existing text, then this year might be when we learn that the power of linguistic A.I. is nonetheless still limited.”¹⁶ In the summer of 2024, researcher Dean Ball observed a new stage in AI development,

Today’s language models operate in a broadly similar way, except that they predict the next word rather than the next character. (Actually, they predict a sub-word linguistic unit called a “token,” but “word” suffices for our purposes.) The basic theory behind scaling language models further — and spending hundreds of millions, even billions, of dollars to do so — was that, with more data and larger neural networks [neuron-like adjustable connections between computational units], models would learn increasingly sophisticated heuristics and patterns that mirror human intelligence.¹⁷

¹¹ Anyoha, “A History of Artificial Intelligence.”

¹² Anyoha, “A History of Artificial Intelligence.”

¹³ Anyoha, “A History of Artificial Intelligence.”

¹⁴ Anyoha, “A History of Artificial Intelligence.”

¹⁵ Christopher Mims, “The Secret History of AI, and a Hint at What’s Next,” *The Wall Street Journal* (April 22, 2023) <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-secret-history-of-ai-and-a-hint-at-whats-next-428905de>.

¹⁶ Cal Newport, “Can an A.I. Make Plans?” *The New Yorker* (March 15, 2024), <https://www.newyorker.com/science/annals-of-artificial-intelligence/can-an-ai-make-plans>.

¹⁷ Dean W. Ball, “The Era of Predictive AI Is Almost Over —,” *The New Atlantis* (summer 2024): 28. The definition of neural networks in brackets is from Arlie Coles, “Demystifying AI,” *The American Mind* (June 19, 2023), <https://americanmind.org/features/the-exterior-darkness/demystifying-ai/>.

Before ChatGPT, most language models truly were next-word predictors. To prompt those models, one needed to give them a starting sentence and ask them to finish it: “Once upon a time, a brave hero . . .” These earlier models could be fine-tuned to make them more conversational, but they had a tendency to exhibit toxic behavior or gradually veer off into mirroring the tone of a Reddit commenter rather than a helpful AI assistant. What made ChatGPT a breakthrough consumer technology was a new step in the model’s training process: reinforcement learning from human feedback (RLHF).¹⁸

The recent surge in AI development has led to much speculation about the dystopian and utopian possibilities of AI. Both make the materialist mistake of underestimating human intelligence.¹⁹

WHAT IS ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE?

Artificial intelligence (AI) is a general category referring to the larger field of computerized simulation of human intelligence. Artificial general intelligence (AGI) aims at, but has not yet achieved, human-level general intelligence and possibly beyond, including reasoning, thinking abstractly, learning from experience, and adapting to unfamiliar situations, much like a human. Artificial special intelligence (ASI) is narrow AI applied to specific tasks like dimming headlights before oncoming cars or Siri and Alexa.

Generative Artificial Intelligence (Generative AI) is the form of AI we are especially concerned with, since it presently exists and through research and development is continually improving. It “refers to a category of AI models designed to create new content, such as text, images, audio, video, and more. Unlike traditional AI models that primarily analyze or classify data, generative AI can produce original outputs based on the patterns it has learned from training data.” It “mimics human creativity.”²⁰

The GPT in ChatGPT stands for Generative Pre-Trained Transformer, which is a commercial type of Generative AI. It is a word pattern recognition machine that is capable of “learning” from human input. Associate director of the Data Science Program and an assistant teaching professor at Mississippi State University Jonathan Barlow defines it this way: “Generative AI is a species of AI designed to produce new content indistinguishable from human output.”²¹

Large language models (LLM) are the “intelligence” behind AI programs. They are focused on text generation and power a wide range of applications, including: chatbots

¹⁸ Ball, “The Era of Predictive AI Is Almost Over —,” 30.

¹⁹ Cf. Andrea Vacchiano, “Artificial Intelligence ‘Godfather’ on AI Possibly Wiping Out Humanity: ‘It’s Not Inconceivable,’” *Fox News* (March 25, 2023), <https://www.foxnews.com/tech/artificial-intelligence-godfather-ai-possibly-wiping-humanity-not-inconceivable>; Sam Schechner and Deepa Seetharaman, “Tech Leaders Are Divided on AI’s Threat to Humanity,” *The Wall Street Journal* (Sept. 5, 2023), <https://www.wsj.com/tech/ai/how-worried-should-we-be-about-ais-threat-to-humanity-even-tech-leaders-cant-agree-46c664b6>; Marc Andreessen, “AI Will Save the World,” *The Free Press* (July 13, 2023), <https://www.thefp.com/p/why-ai-will-save-the-world>.

²⁰ Accessed ChatGPT February 28, 2025 asking for definitions of “artificial intelligence, artificial general intelligence, generative artificial intelligence, and artificial special intelligence.”

²¹ Jonathan Barlow, “Artificial Intelligence: Towards a Christian Perspective,” *By Faith* (May 29, 2024), <https://byfaithonline.com/artificial-intelligence-towards-a-christian-perspective/>.

and virtual assistants, ChatGPT, Google Bard, or other conversational agents. They can generate articles, stories, code, or even poetry.

When thinking about poetry Nikolas Prassas defines LLMs, large language models, as “essentially machines for choosing combinations of words.” He summarizes physicist and creator of the Mathematica Computing system, Stephen Wolfram,

These models are designed to solve one simple problem: predicting what the next word in a sentence is. They do this by breaking down sub-semantic units known as tokens. The tokens are converted into vectors, which give us an array of numbers, which in turn can be used to estimate the probabilities associated with each word as the machine moves along its sentence. Through judicious use of engineering voodoo, the system is then directed to find what Wolfram calls “the rational continuation” of the sentence. The system thus generates meaningful text by simply asking over and over what the next “expected word” is. And thus Peter Lax’s dictum is shown once more to be right: “If you can reduce a mathematical problem to a problem in linear algebra, you can most likely solve it.”²²

So mathematical magic is behind ChatGPT. Cal Newport describes the process of ChatGPT,

None of this jargon is needed, however, to grasp the basics of what’s happening inside systems like ChatGPT. A user types a prompt into a chat interface; this prompt is transformed into a big collection of numbers, which are then multiplied against the billions of numerical values that define the program’s constituent neural networks, creating a cascade of frenetic math directed toward the humble goal of predicting useful words to output next. The result of these efforts might very well be jaw-dropping in its nuance and accuracy, but behind the scenes its generation lacks majesty. The system’s brilliance turns out to be the result less of a ghost in the machine than of the relentless churning of endless multiplications.²³

Is ChatGPT truly Intelligent? No, it is based on human intelligence. Humans create and gather the data used by AI; and even more importantly, tremendous human intelligence is required for programming of large language models (LLM). But intelligence is far more than any LLM or computer program. I have a quarrel with the label “artificial intelligence.” Machine learning? That’s half right, but learning is rooted in intelligence, so no, it is a very sophisticated computer program, but not intelligent. That is something uniquely human, especially when we remember that our intelligence is embodied. So, as I have said above, artificial general intelligence does not exist and most developers understand that the work they are doing on generative AI is focused largely on specific applications. Transhumanists and others who believe that artificial general intelligence is achievable are in a different category. Former CEO of Google and executive chairman of its successor Alphabet, Eric Schmidt, opines, “A key marker of the shift to AGI will be AI’s ability to produce knowledge based on its own findings, not

²² Nikolas Prassas, “Large Language Poetry,” *First Things* (March 2025): 9.

²³ Cal Newport, “What Kind of Mind Does ChatGPT Have?” *The New Yorker* (April 23, 2023), <https://www.newyorker.com/science/annals-of-artificial-intelligence/what-kind-of-mind-does-chatgpt-have?>

merely retrieval and recombination of human-generated information.” Schmidt goes on to hint that AGI may be possible to achieve, but admits the limitations of AI, when he says that two areas are ripe for advancement, mathematics and programming, but “Unlike biology and other fields that require real-world experimentation, these disciplines are largely self-contained.” He concludes, “Superintelligent systems will face inherent constraints. . . . Just as human cognition is bounded by physical and biological limits, AI will remain subject to the limits of the physical world.”²⁴ These limits are precisely what differentiates human from artificial intelligence.

Weizenbaum was shocked over the response to his primitive AI program ELIZA because it was based on the idea of a psychiatrist who believed that therapy is simply a matter of decision making based on information processing. This was reminiscent for Weizenbaum of physical chemist and philosopher of science Michael Polanyi’s discovery that many modern scientists and educators believed in a “mechanical conception of man.”²⁵ This is the only explanation for people thinking of ELIZA as human.

Christians need to be engaged in the name game. The ways in which we describe and name things are means of understanding and control.

Yale computer scientist David Gelernter recently observed,

The biggest challenge AI faces today is to understand the human mind. The mind is capable of maneuvers that no AI system I know of has ever achieved. Future AI must learn to understand real human speech and writing (Watson made a strong start), which requires a thorough understanding of humor, irony, metaphor and many other twists on speaking and writing. Most important, AI must learn to understand emotion and emotion’s central role in human thought.

Some thinkers hold that software will never actually understand anything, because it will never be conscious. They’re right. Consciousness is a product of certain organic systems, not of electronic circuits. But software can act as if it understands—and that’s what matters in practice.

In time, AI will be able to chat with the lonely and sick around the clock. Will it replace humans who care? Of course not. But it will be better than nothing. Many of us will come to rely on AI-based digital assistants, small devices that murmur schedule notes or parking tips in our ears, patch in phone calls, read us emails and otherwise act like superhuman secretaries. Our understanding of the mind will be the basis of software models that will be widely (sometimes dangerously) used to predict a person’s future behavior.²⁶

Recently I experimented with the latest free version of ChatGPT, asking the question: “In which Wit Stillman movie is Ecclesiastes mentioned?” It responded with “*Metropolitan*.” But I responded that it was not in that movie, as I had just rewatched it, although there was a philosophical discussion with references that might sound similar to Ecclesiastes. Then the bot responded, “You’re correct—there is no explicit reference to

²⁴ Eric Schmidt, “AI Could Usher in a New Renaissance,” *The Wall Street Journal* (March 1, 2025): A15.

²⁵ Weizenbaum, *Computer Power and Human Reason*, 1, 6.

²⁶ David Gelernter, “Artificial Intelligence Wasn’t Born Yesterday” *The Wall Street Journal* (Sept. 19, 2024): A15.

Ecclesiastes in *Metropolitan*. I misspoke . . .” I then queried about the same content’s presence in the film *Barcelona*. In that film Ted Boynton reads the Bible and finds Proverbs and Ecclesiastes most helpful in dealing with romantic matters. My correction helped ChatGPT to answer my first question correctly in the future should anyone else make the same inquiry, but it is still simply adding information, not truly learning, which is a distinctly human activity. All the vast information available to it (not “I”) was first humanly produced. It is also deceptive to perpetrate the idea that a chatbot is a person, using words related to human intelligence, even though its producers know it is not. The voice recognition used by my TV tells me that it is “thinking” and “listening” when I make a query. It is not; it is simply a very convenient and complex program retrieval system based on word recognition and probability theory. If Weizenbaum’s primitive ELIZA seduced people into making this mistake, so much more do highly sophisticated programs promulgate what we might call the ELIZA syndrome today.

AI does not have a mind. Cal Newport concludes that despite the apparently startling “intelligence” of ChatGPT, its well-crafted prose is not the product of a mind. His *New Yorker* article “What Kind of Mind Does ChatGPT Have?” makes this crystal clear. He makes an important distinction: “It doesn’t create, it imitates.”²⁷ Here, besides chatbots not being embodied beings, they lack the invisible aspects of human intelligence: consciousness, cognition, and conscience, what we might call the trinity of human intelligence.

Furthermore, scientists like Michael Polanyi have pointed out the importance of imagination in scientific research, which is similar in poetry as well as science. Michael Polanyi’s student, Nobel prize winner Dudley Herschbach,²⁸ assigns poems to be written by students doing frontier science. In other words, exploration is not about getting something right but about exploring by seeking what is new. As Albert Einstein famously observed,

Imagination is more important than knowledge. For while knowledge defines all we currently know and understand, imagination points to all we might yet discover and create. I rarely think in words at all. A thought comes, and I may try to express it in words afterwards.²⁹

I do not believe that this mysterious human process of exploration can ever be achieved by AI because it involves the invisible trinity of human intelligence.

The Literary Limits of Artificial Intelligence

ChatGPT is capable of doggerel, a simple rearrangement of information, but is never going to be a T. S. Eliot or a Robert Frost. As literary scholar Nikolas Prassas observes, “To date, I have yet to see ChatGPT ‘generate’ any masterpieces, only doggerel of truly awesome inanity.” What poets do is the opposite of the process by which ChatGPT

²⁷ Newport, “What Kind of Mind Does ChatGPT Have?”

²⁸ Dudley Robert Herschbach is an American chemist at Harvard University. He won the 1986 Nobel Prize in Chemistry jointly with Yuan T. Lee and John C. Polanyi “for their contributions concerning the dynamics of chemical elementary processes.” *Wikipedia* https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dudley_R._Herschbach.

²⁹ Walter Isaacson, *Einstein: His Life and Universe* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 7, 9.

operates. Also, poetry “differs from other ways of using language.”³⁰ Philosopher and author Simone Weil’s (1909–1943) complex criteria for poetic composition require human perception and sensibilities, condition and values, and embodied lives that no AI system can ever duplicate.³¹

The essayist Joseph Epstein, who formerly taught a course in Advanced Prose Composition, reflects, “I feel fortunate in retiring from teaching when I did, in 2002, just before the current technocracy set in.” He used to have students identify fifteen cultural figures or events, such as “the 1913 Armory Show, Reynaldo Hahn, the Spanish Civil War and Robert Graves.”³² Few students, even before smart phones, could identify these. The electronic distraction and its tendency to move our thinking over thin surfaces was already at work. With cell phones they would now simply google the answers, but their knowledge would be superficial at best. Epstein quotes the author John Warner, whose book *More than Words* he was reviewing, “No, we do not and may never fully understand the mechanisms of the full range of our cognition, but this doesn’t stop us from recognizing that human thought is distinct from algorithm-produced syntax.”³³ Epstein observes,

A composition rendered by AI is certain to be grammatically and otherwise formally correct, lacking only in originality and an interesting point of view. Machines, Mr. Warner holds, cannot teach writing. “Only humans can read. Only humans can write. Don’t let anyone tell you otherwise.”³⁴

Epstein concludes with an epigrammatic statement: “In learning how to write well, nothing can replace thoughtful reading, careful practice and an interesting point of view. Anything else is artificial all right, but a good deal less than intelligent.”³⁵ Ever the punster, Epstein happily sounds like a Luddite, “ChatGPT and other bots are ubiquitous, giving a whole new meaning to botulism.”³⁶

In Part 2 we will explore the uniqueness of human intelligence; in Part 3 we will explore the benefits and liabilities of AI.

Gregory E. Reynolds is pastor emeritus of Amoskeag Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Manchester, New Hampshire, and is the editor of *Ordained Servant*.

³⁰ Prassas, “Large Language Poetry,” 9.

³¹ Prassas, “Large Language Poetry,” 10.

³² Joseph Epstein, “Teaching Writing in an AI Age,” *The Wall Street Journal* (Feb. 22, 2025): C7.

³³ Epstein, “Teaching Writing in an AI Age,” C7.

³⁴ Epstein, “Teaching Writing in an AI Age,” C9.

³⁵ Epstein, “Teaching Writing in an AI Age,” C9.

³⁶ Epstein, “Teaching Writing in an AI Age,” C7.

ServantLiterature

A Good Man Is Hard to Find

by Danny Olinger

Jesus, Stab Me in the Heart! Flannery O'Connor at 100

Literary critic Robert Drake argues that Flannery O'Connor's one overarching theme is Jesus Christ and the scandal of the Christian religion. Drake contends that when O'Connor writes about guilt and suffering, she is the rare author who interprets these things against a Christian frame of reference.¹ He also maintains that her unyielding Christian stance is literary heresy to many writers and critics who assume that the more any writer can flee from dogmatic commitment (unless perhaps to some kind of vague humanitarianism) the better. But for O'Connor, backing away from her Christian viewpoint was non-negotiable. According to Drake, she believed that man "does in fact need to be saved—from the world, the flesh, and the Devil, really at last from himself. And, for her, there can be only one true Savior, Jesus Christ."² Offering no apologies, O'Connor's overriding question in all of her work is "what do you think of Christ?" Jesus is really the principal character in her fiction, just as her one real story is man's encounter with Jesus in this fallen world.³

Arguably, the story in which O'Connor makes Drake's point most clearly is also her most famous story, "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." The story concerns a family (husband, wife, three children, and grandmother) who encounter a serial killer (The Misfit) and his henchmen after an automobile accident on a country road. As O'Connor systematically has the rest of the family taken off stage to meet their end, she has the grandmother and The Misfit engage in an encounter that centers on Jesus. The grandmother would eagerly lessen Jesus's significance to the personal development of manners and cultural preservation if it meant her earthly survival. The Misfit's view of Jesus is not so banal. He focuses the issue on the supernatural reality of whether Jesus is God, the divine miracle-worker, or not.

Part One: The Trip

The story opens with the grandmother seeking to change her son's (Bailey) mind about going to Florida for a family vacation. She warns him that a Federal Pen escapee

¹ Robert Drake, *Flannery O'Connor* (Eerdmans, 1966), 13–14.

² Robert Drake, "Flannery O'Connor and American Literature," *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, vol. 3 (Autumn 1974): 11.

³ Robert Drake, "The Paradigm of Flannery O'Connor's True Country," *Studies in Short Fiction* 6 (1968): 434.

called The Misfit is headed to Florida. Bailey never looks up from reading, nor does the children's mother, "a young woman in slacks, whose face was as broad and innocent as a cabbage and was tied around with a green head-kerchief that had two points on the top like rabbit ears," who was feeding the baby. Eight-year-old John Wesley hears the grandmother complaining. He says, "If you don't want to go to Florida, why dontcha stay at home?" to which his sister, June Star, answers, "She wouldn't stay at home to be queen for a day."⁴

Bratty as John Wesley and June Starr are, they are correct about the grandmother. The next morning she is the first one ready to go. The grandmother's "collars and cuffs were white organdy trimmed with lace and at her neckline she had pinned a purple spray of cloth violets containing a sachet," because it was important "in case of accident, anyone seeing her dead on the highway would know at once that she was a lady."⁵

Driving through Georgia in the morning, "the trees were full of silver-white sunlight and the meanest of them sparkled,"⁶ but no one was paying attention, the children reading their comic books and their mother sleeping. Even if the family acts as if there is no God, the *meanest* trees that sparkle testify both to a present glory, the Lord who created the earth and rules over it, and prefigure a glory that is to come.⁷

Bailey stops the car for sandwiches at the Tower, owned and operated by Red Sammy Butts. The grandmother and Red Sammy strike up a conversation where each agrees that a good man is hard to find.⁸ Despite his words, Red Sammy keeps a monkey chained outside, no longer trusts others, and treats his wife poorly, and yet the grandmother calls him "a good man."⁹

The first half of the story ends with the grandmother's smug pretentiousness revealed. She appears as one who is seemingly incapable of either preferring others in love or judging righteously. Her family is not much better as it alternates between nastiness and vacuousness. The tone, predominately comic in the first half of the story, shifts with the

⁴ Flannery O'Connor, *The Complete Stories* (Noonday, 1995), 117.

⁵ O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 118. O'Connor paints a contrast between the grandmother and the children's mother. The children's mother (her only moniker in the story) has no idea on how to dress as a lady. She wears slacks and a green head-kerchief two days in a row. Further, if the grandmother is alienated from reality by being too judgmental, the children's mother is alienated from reality by her passivity. When The Misfit, who just had her husband killed, asks her if she would like to join him, she replies, "Yes, thank you." Her one positive assertion, "We'll all stay in the car," which comes after John Wesley declares that he would like to go explore the mansion, signals her attitude towards life. See, Margaret Whitt, *Understanding Flannery O'Connor* (Univ. of South Carolina, 1997), 45, and Kathleen Feeley, *Flannery O'Connor: Voice of the Peacock* (Rutgers, 1972), 70-71.

⁶ O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 119.

⁷ Drake, "American Literature," 19.

⁸ Mark Grief writes that for O'Connor a "good" man "is hard to find in any secular perspective, because, first, people think "good" is a secular judgment, when it's not; and second, they think a "man" can take his own measure, without God, which he can't." Mark Grief, *The Age of the Crisis of Man* (Princeton, 2015), 207.

⁹ Hurd argues that throughout the story O'Connor suggests Roman law (Pompeian) punishment for those found guilty of murdering blood-relatives. Blood-relatives murderers were tossed into the sea in a sack that contained a cock, a dog or ape, and snakes. Each of these or their equivalent is found in the story: Red Sammy's monkey, parrots on Bailey's shirt, The Misfit's father calling him a dog, and the Misfit springing back as if a snake had bitten him. Myles Raymond Hurd, "The Misfit as Parricide in Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find,'" *Notes on Contemporary Literature*, 22.4 (1992): 5-7.

introduction of The Misfit in the second half of the story to a mix of violence and religious concern.¹⁰

Part Two: The Misfit and the Grandmother

The grandmother recalls an old mansion and begs Bailey that he turn the car off on a side road to find it. After he does so, she realizes that her memory is wrong, panics and loses control of her cat, Pitty Sing, who leaps on Bailey, causing him to crash the car.

Despite the crash and her sitting in a ditch, the grandmother still retains the veneer of Southern gentility, "I believe I have injured an organ," but no one answered her. The family then sees a car in the distance. The grandmother stood up and waved her arms to get its attention. Three men get out of the black, hearse-like car. The oldest, wearing silver spectacles and holding a gun, was someone that the grandmother sensed she had known all her life.

With the man's appearance, two attitudes towards life converge in the narrative. One is straightforward in its view of reality. The other rearranges reality to suit itself.¹¹ "'We turned over twice! said the grandmother. 'Once,' he corrected. 'We seen it happen.'"¹²

John Wesley asks the man, "Whatcha gonna do with that gun?" which causes the man to ask the children's mother to have the children sit by her, because children make him nervous.¹³ As June Starr challenges the man, "What are you telling US what to do for," the line of woods behind them "gaped like a dark open mouth."¹⁴

The grandmother then recognizes that the man is The Misfit, and he tells her that it would have been better for them if she hadn't. Bailey immediately says something harsh to his mother that both makes her cry and offends The Misfit's sense of etiquette. He calms the grandmother, "Lady, don't you get upset. Sometimes a man says things that he doesn't mean."¹⁵ She perceives his words of comfort as an opportunity to save herself. She declares that she knows he is a good man and comes from fine people. The Misfit affirms that he comes from the finest people in the world, interrupts to tell Bobby Lee to watch the children, "you know that they make me nervous," and then pauses as if to find the right words. He finally remarks that there wasn't a cloud in the sky, no sun neither. The grandmother replies that it is a beautiful day and repeats that she knows that he is a good man. He tells her, "I pre-chate that, lady," and then asks Hiram and Bobby Lee to take Bailey and John Wesley off to the woods.

Bailey realizes what they are going to do and cries out, and the grandmother realizes it also. She reached "up to adjust her hat brim as if she were going to the woods with him but it came off in her hand. She stood staring at it and after a second she let it fall on the ground."¹⁶ Her religion is southern gentility, but in encountering The Misfit, her gentility,

¹⁰ Frederick Asals, *The Extremity of Imagination* (Univ. of Georgia, 1982), 152.

¹¹ Feeley, *Voice of the Peacock*, 72.

¹² O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 126.

¹³ In contrast to The Misfit who desires the little children be kept from him, Jesus tells his disciples to let the little children come to him and not to hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belong to such as these. Michael O. Bellamy, "Everything Off Balance: Protestant Election in Flannery O'Connor's 'A Good Man Is Hard to Find,'" *Flannery O'Connor Bulletin*, vol. 8 (Autumn 1979): 117.

¹⁴ O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 126–127.

¹⁵ O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 127.

¹⁶ O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 128.

symbolized by the hat, the true sign of a lady, is stripped away.¹⁷ After hearing the pistol shots sound from the woods, she cries out, “Bailey, Boy!” but finds herself looking at the Misfit. “I just know you’re a good man,” she said desperately. “Nome, I ain’t a good man,” The Misfit said after a second, as if he had considered her statement carefully, “but I ain’t the worst in the world neither.”¹⁸

The Misfit then tells the grandmother that he was a gospel singer, served in the military, twice married, been in a tornado, and seen a man burnt alive. He never remembered being bad, but after doing something wrong he was sent to the penitentiary. The grandmother sees another opening to save herself and tells him that if he would pray, Jesus would help him. The Misfit, as if agreeing, says, “Right,” and she states with sudden delight, “Well then, why don’t you pray?” He tells her, “I don’t want no hep . . . I’m doing all right by myself.”¹⁹

When Bobby Lee and Hiram return, they throw Bailey’s shirt to The Misfit. Putting the shirt on, he declares, “I found out the crime don’t matter. You can do one thing or you can do another, kill a man or take a tire off his car, because sooner or later you’re going to forget what it was you done and just be punished for it.”²⁰ In hearing this, the grandmother found that she had lost her voice. She opened and closed her mouth several times before something came out. She finally mutters, “‘Jesus, Jesus,’ meaning Jesus will help you, but the way that she was saying it sounded as if she might be cursing.”²¹

“Yes’m,” The Misfit said, as if he agreed. “Jesus thown everything off balance. It was the same case with Him as with me except He hadn’t committed any crime and they could prove I had committed one because they had the papers on me.”²²

The Misfit then explains to the grandmother that he calls himself The Misfit because he “can’t make what all I done wrong fit what all I gone through in punishment.”²³ It is a terse summary of the problem of evil, a problem that The Misfit agonizes over. He believes that life has already punished him more than he deserves, and yet others who are worse than he is have gotten away without punishment.

More shots ring out from the woods, and the grandmother seeks all the more to appease The Misfit with faint praise and platitudes. “You’ve got good blood! I know you wouldn’t shoot a lady! I know you come from nice people! Pray! Jesus, you ought not to shoot a lady. I’ll give you all the money I’ve got.”²⁴

The Misfit responds that there was never a body that gave an undertaker a tip and confronts her in Gospel imperative mode²⁵ about Jesus.

“Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead.” The Misfit continued, “and he shouldn’t have done it. He thown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then

¹⁷ Feeley, *Flannery O’Connor*, 72.

¹⁸ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 128.

¹⁹ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 130.

²⁰ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 130–131.

²¹ Bernetta Quinn observes that “the grandmother in all her exhortations to [the Misfit] to pray never turns to Christ herself; she wants others to practice religion while ignoring it herself.” M. Bernetta Quinn, “Flannery O’Connor, a Realist of Distances,” *The Added Dimension*, eds. Melvin Friedman and Lewis Lawson (Fordham, 1966), 175.

²² O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 131.

²³ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 131.

²⁴ O’Connor, *Complete Stories*, 131–132.

²⁵ Drake, *Flannery O’Connor*, 24.

it's nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn't, then it's nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way that you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness.”²⁶

For the Misfit, life turns on whether Jesus was God. If Jesus was God, then all lives are his. If Jesus was not God, then life is meaningless. For the grandmother, life doesn't hinge on Jesus. She mumbled, “Maybe He didn't raise the dead.” The Misfit replies, “I wasn't there so I can't say He didn't,” but he immediately adds, “I wisht I had of been there,” and hits the ground with his fist. “It ain't right I wasn't there because if I had been there I would of known.”²⁷

Hearing his voice nearly cracking and sensing that he was about to cry, the grandmother suddenly realizes the futility of her attempts to save her life. She confesses that she and the Misfit are related, “Why you're one of my babies.” She reaches out and puts her hand on his shoulder, an acknowledgment that she is not a good woman and he is not a good man. Knowing that such shared sinfulness is that which he cannot confess,²⁸ the Misfit recoils as if a snake had bitten him and shoots her dead.

The Misfit's sidekicks returned from the woods and stood over the ditch, “looking down at the grandmother who half sat and half lay in a puddle of blood with her legs crossed under her like a child's and her face smiling up at the cloudless sky.”²⁹ The Misfit, sans glasses, tells them to take her body off and throw it with the others. O'Connor then has him speak her most quoted line, “She would have been a good woman,” The Misfit said, “if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life.”³⁰

Faith and Death

O'Connor openly abhorred the non-redemptive Christianity that the grandmother embodies, those “politer elements for whom the supernatural is an embarrassment and for whom religion has become a department of sociology or culture or personal development.”³¹ Part of O'Connor's genius in exposing the emptiness of such a Christianity in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” is with having The Misfit, a practicing nihilist, wrestle with the questions of the faith, as opposed to the grandmother whose faith and piety is unreflective.³²

²⁶ O'Connor, *The Complete Stories*, 132. Ralph Wood writes that The Misfit is appalled that Jesus raised the dead. “This bringer of death is profoundly offended that the Giver of Life cannot be dismissed as a mere holy man or eminent ethical figure but must be adjudged as either the incarnate God or else a wholesale fraud.” Ralph C. Wood, *Flannery O'Connor and the Christ-Haunted South* (Eerdmans, 2005), 38.

²⁷ O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 132.

²⁸ Wood, *Christ-Haunted South*, 40.

²⁹ O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 132.

³⁰ O'Connor, *Complete Stories*, 133. Ralph Wood writes, “Had death been perennially present to remind the Grandmother of her total dependence on God, she would have trusted in his grace rather than her own gentility.” Ralph C. Wood, *The Comedy of Redemption* (Notre Dame, 2000), 90.

³¹ Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, eds. Sally and Robert Fitzgerald (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970), 207.

³² Wood, *Christ-Haunted South*, 41.

As she often does, however, O'Connor uses death to focus the reader's attention on Jesus Christ and the life to come. The Misfit has ended the grandmother's life on earth, in death the grandmother smiles heavenward. "For O'Connor," Sarah Gordon writes, "there are more important worlds than this fallen one, that the grandmother needed to confront her mortality and the flimsiness of her faith in order to be saved."³³

O'Connor's Commentary

O'Connor testified that "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" was her only story that she could read to others without laughing, although when she read it, she felt as if she had been shot four times.³⁴ Being her most anthologized story, it was also the story that others wanted to engage her about the meaning. She amusingly related an exchange that took place after she read it at Wesleyan College.

After the reading, I went to one of their classes to answer questions. There were several young teachers in there and one began by saying, "Miss O'Connor, why is the Misfit's hat black?" I said most countrymen in Georgia wore black hats. He looked quite disappointed. Then he said, "Miss O'Connor, the Misfit represents Christ, does he not?" "He does not," says I. He really looked hurt at that. Finally he said, "well, Miss O'Connor, what is the significance of the Misfit's hat. "To cover his head," I say. He looked crushed then and left me alone.³⁵

She once received a letter from an English professor who taught the story to ninety students spread out over three classes. The professor reported that the students came to the conclusion that the events in the first part of the story are real but that the accident and the appearance of The Misfit were imaginary, as if Bailey was having a dream.

Such an interpretation left O'Connor in a state of shock. Admittedly, she explained, the story is stylized in its depiction of the everyday doings of people in Georgia, and its conventions are comic, but its meaning is serious. "The story," she said, "is a duel of sorts between the Grandmother and her superficial faith and the Misfit's more profoundly felt involvement with Christ's action which set the world off balance for him."³⁶

Before O'Connor read "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" at Hollins College, Virginia, she told those gathered that much of her fiction takes its character from a reasonable use of the unreasonable, that belief is the engine that makes perception operate in her stories. "The heroine of this story, the Grandmother, is in the most significant position life offers the Christian. She is facing death. And to all appearances she, like the rest of us, is not too well prepared for it."³⁷

O'Connor did not deny that the grandmother is a hypocritical old soul whose wits are no match for The Misfit's. But it is through the grandmother that the moment of grace occurs in the story. Her family murdered, alone with The Misfit, the grandmother's

³³ Sarah Gordon, "Surface Matters in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction," *Flannery O'Connor Review*, vol. 11 (2013): 24.

³⁴ Flannery O'Connor to Katharine Ann Porter, August 17, 1963, *Good Things Out of Nazareth*, 271.

³⁵ Flannery O'Connor to Caroline Gordon, May 10, 1959, *Good Things Out of Nazareth*, 141.

³⁶ Flannery O'Connor to a Professor of English, March 28, 1961, *Habit of Being*, 437.

³⁷ O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 110.

head clears for an instant and she realizes, even in her limited way, that she is responsible for the man before her and joined to him by ties of kinship which have their roots deep in the mystery she has been merely prating about so far. And at this point, she does the right thing, she makes the right gesture.³⁸

O'Connor continued that if she took out the grandmother's gesture, she would have no story. In every story that she wrote, not just in "A Good Man Is Hard to Find," the key to understanding is the moment of grace, the gesture, that indicates where the real heart of the story lies. She said, "This would have to be an action or a gesture which was both totally right and totally unexpected; it would have to be one that was both in character and beyond character; it would have to suggest both the world and eternity."³⁹ She then elaborated that what she was talking about was writing on

the analogical level, that is, the level that has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it. It would be a gesture that transcended any neat allegory that might have been intended or any pat moral categories a reader could make. It would be a gesture which somehow made contact with mystery.⁴⁰

O'Connor further explained that she found violence capable of returning her characters (and her readers) to reality and preparing them to accept that moment of grace. She understood that many would not accept her explanation and would equate her fiction with Southern Gothic horror, but she stated that she had no interest in using violence as a means in itself. The lines of spiritual motion that pulled her forward, and should pull the reader forward if she had done her job well, were invisible lines. Consequently, "in this story you should be on the lookout for such things as the action of grace in the Grandmother's soul, and not for the dead bodies."⁴¹

O'Connor preferred to think, unlikely as it seemed, that "the old lady's gesture, like the mustard-seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in the Misfit's heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet that he was meant to become." She then added, "But that's another story."⁴²

Danny E. Olinger is a minister in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church and serves as the general secretary of the Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

³⁸ O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 111–112.

³⁹ O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 111.

⁴⁰ O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 111.

⁴¹ O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*, 113.

⁴² O'Connor, "On Her Own Work," 112–113.

ServantReading

Poetry: The Music of Particularity

A Review Article

by Gregory E. Reynolds

On Czesław Miłosz, by Eva Hoffman (Princeton University Press, 2023).

My initial encounter with Polish poet Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004) was through an interview about his poetry on Mars Hill Audio in 2004. Ken Myers interviewed Roger Lundin. Miłosz was quoted to say that when he arrived at the University of Paris from his native city of Šeteniai (now Vilnius) in Lithuania, formerly part of Poland, that many students showed disdain for their homelands. He engages this experience in his 1981 poem “Bypassing Rue Descartes”:

Ashamed to remember the customs of our homes,
About which nobody here should ever be told:

...

I had left the cloudy provinces behind,
I entered the universal, dazzled and desiring.¹

He deplored this attitude, especially as one who felt he was an exile from Europe because he came from “the other (Eastern) Europe,” considered inferior by the rest of Europe. I became a fan. The local is where we live and is the soil for the best poetry but much of modernity works against thick local connections. In his autobiographical novel *The Issa Valley*, he reminds us, “Until recently everything a man needed was manufactured at home” (8). In the poem Miłosz also satirizes the “universal” as at the root of the beautiful utopianism of Marxism and National Socialism which led to the extermination of millions.

He lived most of his childhood in Czarist Russia. In 1918 Poland regained its independent nationhood and Lithuania declared independence from the new country. His native city, the capital of Lithuania, consisted of a rich cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity including Lithuanian, Jewish, Polish, and Belorussian citizens. His family was considered Polish minor nobility. As a young man he wrestled with the teachings of Polish Catholicism, deploring “organized religion.” His intellectual curiosity, honesty, and sensitivity led him to lament the cruelty he witnessed in the world. At university he was the only one to defend his fellow Jewish students from anti-Semitism (12–13).

During my first pastorate as a church planter in New Rochelle, New York, I was bi-vocational, working part time for a Jewish engineer, Gustav Getter and Associates. One of the engineers was a Polish Jew who was born in Auschwitz near the end of World War

¹ Czesław Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems 1931–2001* (Penguin, 2001), 393–94.

II. She was excruciatingly thin due to her near starvation diet in the camp. Then to my astonishment I discovered that the author of the book under review, Eva Hoffman, is also a Polish Jew who was born in Auschwitz.

Unlike the solipsistic stream of consciousness of so much contemporary poetry, Miłosz deals with the large and difficult questions of life in concrete lyrical language. This was no doubt borne of the anguish he suffered throughout his early life until he fled Nazism and then Communism. His early training at school in Vilnius

in Latin classics and translation instilled in him a basic but crucial lesson that “what one says changes, depending upon how one says it,” and also the hard-earned conviction, conveyed by a demanding teacher, that “perfection is worth the effort . . . in other words, he showed us how to respect literature as the fruit of arduous labor.” (15)

He resisted the idea that literature was the “outpouring of some creative genius” (15). His approach to poetry as craftsmanship is beautifully expressed when he says, “The peasant is honest because his energy is transformed into bread. The artisan is honest because he makes over wood, hide, or metal.” Hoffman adds, “The energy of labor is what converts stone into cathedrals, plants into food, steel into bridges, perceptions into understanding—and words into poetry” (15–16).

After a brief flirtation with Marxism, Miłosz turned from politics to poetry. He always needed a larger framework for perception and understanding, what Hoffman calls “a metaphysics of particularity” (19). Poetry for Miłosz meant exploring the foundations of life in the particularities of one’s life situation. He was no fan of generalization. This yielded what Hoffman calls “the music of thought” (19). During the war Miłosz recounts in *Native Realm* (1959)² an incident that provides clear insight into his idea of poetry. Lying in a field that was being bombarded by airplanes with bombs whistling by, “I riveted my eyes on a stone and two blades of grass in front of me. . . . I suddenly understood the value of matter: that stone and those two blades of grass formed a whole kingdom, an infinity of forms, shades, textures, lights.” For Miłosz, meaning inheres in the concrete particularities of existence (30). In high school my English teacher commented on an essay of mine, observing that it was too general and needed to be more specific. I never forgot that criticism; it forms part of my attraction to Miłosz.

Religiously, he had an affinity for Judaism, perhaps because their religion was not associated with a national identity like Polish Catholicism. He learned Hebrew in order to translate the Old Testament (20). Having visited Warsaw after the German retreat left it in utter devastation, he wrote in his 1945 poem “In Warsaw,” “It’s madness to live without joy.”³ In his essay “If Only This Could Be Said,” Miłosz points to the veracity of the Gospels and their account of Jesus’s resurrection,

Scientific-technological civilization has no place for death . . . I must ask if I believe that the four Gospels tell the truth. My answer to this is: “Yes.” So I believe in an absurdity, that Jesus rose from the dead? Just answer without any of those evasions and artful tricks employed by theologians: “Yes or no?” I answer: “Yes,” and by that

² Czesław Miłosz, *Rodzenna Europa (Native Realm)* (Instytut Literacki, 1959).

³ Czesław Miłosz, *Poet in the New World: Poems 1946–1953* (HarperCollins, 2025), x, 4.

response I nullify death's omnipotence. . . . So what remains is the covenant, the Word in which man trusts. Who however will inherit life? Those who are predestined to do so. . . . I am with all those people who have proclaimed their distrust of Nature (it's contaminated) and relied solely on the boundless freedom of the divine act, of Grace.⁴

His love of the particularity of the created order, especially our embodied existence, cultivated a deep attraction to the resurrection of Jesus.

During Miłosz's year of study in Paris in 1935 he encountered the suffering of displaced migrant Poles. In 1936 he wrote a poem, "Ballad of Levallois," about their "barracks for the unemployed, Levallois-Perret," later published in Polish in *Rescue* (*Ocalenie*) in 1945.

O God, have mercy on Levallois,
Look under these chestnut trees poisoned with smoke,
Give a moment of joy to the weak and the drunk,
O God, have mercy on Levallois.

"We were sensitive to the smell of misery and brutality" (27). Between the Nazi occupation and their persecution of Jews, three million Poles lost their lives. Miłosz lived most of the terrible years in Warsaw, but he eventually made his way to Lviv, Ukraine (29–30). He made his way back to occupied Warsaw to be near his future wife Janka. There he found freedom, despite the Nazi presence, to read and write to his heart's content because the Nazis did not adhere to a rigorous ideology like the Communists. Intellectually they were a zero.⁵

He learned English by reading the works of T. S. Eliot and translating Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. The influence of Eliot can be seen in poems like the poetic series *The World* (1943) and the poem "Faith" (34–5). Hoffman sees echoes of Eliot's *Four Quartets*. I see a powerful resemblance to *The Wasteland* in Miłosz's "Two Men in Rome": "And there's the dancing girl. / Ta tada tada . . ." ⁶ Perhaps Eliot more than any other English speaking poet helped Miłosz achieve "deeper layers" in his poetry (34). Hoffman considers that the two best poems written by Miłosz during this period were "Campo dei Fiori" and "A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto" (36).

"Campo dei Fiori" is the result of Miłosz witnessing a failed uprising in the Warsaw ghetto in which many lost their lives, outside the ghetto walls people were enjoying a beautiful spring evening, indifferent to the tragedy (37). He laments, "that day I thought only / of the loneliness of the dying."⁷

"A Poor Christian Looks at the Ghetto" is a more severe and perhaps more profound feat of metaphoric thought, imagining an underworld of the dead" (38). Miłosz's empathy for the persecuted Jew also reveals his interaction with the Bible and his action in helping

⁴ Czesław Miłosz, "If Only This Could Be Said," *Cross Currents*, excerpted from *Begin Where I am: Selected Essays*, eds. Bogdana Carpenter and Madeline G. Levine (Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2001), 64–66.

⁵ Adam Kirsch, "Czesław Miłosz's Battle for Truth," *The New Yorker* (May 22, 2017), <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2017/05/29/czeslaw-miloszs-battle-for-truth>.

⁶ Miłosz, *Poet in the New World*, 13.

⁷ Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems 1931–2001*, 34.

Jews in Warsaw escape the Nazis in coordination with the British foreign intelligence MI5. Also compelling is Hoffman's memories of her parents living through the Holocaust in a tiny village in the Polish part of Ukraine (41). No wonder she connects with Miłosz's poetry of memory and witness. Miłosz also had to deal with survivor guilt as reflected poignantly in his 1944 poem "Café" written in Warsaw. "The waiter whirls with his tray / and they look at me with a burst of laughter / for I still don't know what it is to die at the hand of man, / they know—they know it well." A man of deep emotion, Miłosz avoided entering into the deep emotion connected with his country's tragic past and present. His poem "In Warsaw" (1945) expresses it well: "My pen is lighter / than a hummingbird's feather. This burden / is too much for it to bear" (48–9). The only survivors of the devastation of the war were two important words, "Only two salvaged words: / Truth and justice." These he would pursue for a lifetime beyond mere politics.

He chafed under the Communism in postwar Poland; But he sought and accepted the post of cultural attaché at the Polish embassy in Washington, DC. The "DP" on his license plate, which stood for "Diplomatic Personnel," he insisted was for "displaced person" (53). American "aggressive individualism" and lack of a sense of history did not make a good first impression. This would change in 1960 with his professorial appointment to the University of California in Berkeley.

Under suspicion due to his lack of Communist party membership and his poetry, Miłosz was recalled by the Polish government from Washington, DC, to Warsaw in 1950. This often meant imprisonment or death. He was in a state of deep despair, when a friend, Natalia Modzelewska, whose husband was Minister of Foreign Affairs, arranged for Miłosz to be sent back to Paris. Once there he slipped out of the Polish embassy and hid at the offices of his émigré publisher, *Kultura*, for three and a half months.⁸ He remained in Paris even though he deplored western Europe's capitulation to National Socialism as well as Eastern Europe's succumbing to Communism. Through it all he never relinquished his vocation as a poet.

You who have wronged a simple man . . .
Do not feel safe. The poet remembers.
You can kill one, but another is born.
The words are written down, the deed, the date. (60)⁹

Throughout it all, during these years of anguish, he developed his poetic skills with great intensity and assiduity.

In France he found few sympathizers among the intelligentsia except Albert Camus. The rest were under the thrall of Communism (63). In 1953 he published a brilliant analysis of totalitarianism in *The Captive Mind*.¹⁰ With Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn he shared the belief that susceptibility to Communism lay in the lack of religion. Christianity gives human life morality and meaning. Dialectical materialism is a substitute god, Diamat (68–9).¹¹

⁸ Kirsch, "Czeslaw Milosz's Battle for Truth."

⁹ Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems 1931–2001*, 103.

¹⁰ *Zniewolony umysł The Captive Mind* (Instytut Literacki, 1953).

¹¹ Diamat is a name for Marxist philosophy defining the relationship between knowledge and the material world.

In 1960 Miłosz came to America to assume his new position as professor of Slavic Languages and Literature at the University of California in Berkeley. “Miłosz could combine genuine gratitude to America with a deep critique of some of its cultural features.”

California is a “mecca for seekers of mystical unity, for consciousness-expanding drugs, ecstatic sects, publications devoted to Hinduism and Zen Buddhism, for prophets preaching wisdom from Tibetan monks.”—tendencies that make it, in his view, “the capital of everything that is turning against Western man’s fondness for intellectual precision.”

His poem “To Raja Rao” embodies this critique (102–105). In his essay “The Agony of the West,” he wrote that the catastrophism and utopianism of the hippie was a way for sensitive people to deal with “the horrors accompanying technological progress” (109–110). Whitman and Thoreau represented nostalgia in contrast with the revolutionary impetus of Marxism (111). The Berkeley rebellions, unlike the European resistances during World War II, “were almost entirely costless: no gulag, no Lubyanka prison, no Siberian exile” (115). Miłosz concluded that middle-class Americans

spend their lives working, often in dull and meaningless jobs, and this does not allow them to “break through their habits of mind.” There is also the nefarious influence of television and roadside ads, “which become richer in brutality, and more moronic the further one goes from the big cities.” And no bookstores anywhere in sight, no time (or urge) to read. (122)

More positively, he felt that “auto trips about America result in admiration for man and compassion” (125). Hoffman concludes:

For all his gratitude to America and his admiration for the United States, he didn’t find it a comfortable country to live in, and a lingering sense of estrangement—creatively so fruitful and personally so difficult—never entirely left him. (127)

This is why in 1993 he returned to Poland and lived out his days in Kraków.

On the other hand, Miłosz admired the local color of village life and the diligence of the American worker, especially the farmer. He deeply appreciated the patriotism and the democratic freedoms which allowed people to advance. He understood Europe to be the past and America to be the future (135).

Despite his melancholic proclivities, he also had a robust capacity for pleasure, which is especially evident in his late poetry (139). This may be clearly witnessed in his short poem written in Berkeley in 1971, “Gift”¹²:

A day so happy.
Fog lifted early, I worked in the garden.
Hummingbirds were stopping over honeysuckle flowers.

¹² Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems 1931–2001*, 277.

There was no thing on earth I wanted to possess.
I knew no one worth my envying him.
Whatever evil I had suffered I forgot.
To think that once I was the same man did
Not embarrass me.
In my body I felt no pain.
When straightening up, I saw the blue sea and sails. (138)

In his long poem “A Treatise on Poetry” Miłosz provides “a kind of aesthetic manifesto” in the first section, “Preface” (82).¹³ He begins almost predictably,

First, plain speech in the mother tongue.
Hearing it you should be able to see,
As if in a flash of summer lightning,
Apple trees, a river, the bend in a road.¹⁴

The particulars of place in speech, nature, and artifacts Miłosz “wanted—needed—to assert that his native realm, his small corner of the world, mattered; that it contained interesting personalities and great writers; that—however obscure its history—it was part of the civilized world” (144).

The range of Miłosz’s interests, and thus the subjects of his poetry, is enormous: from the Museum of Modern Art in Berkeley to the Bible, from Gregory of Nyssa to Pascal, and on and on. The Greek goddess of memory, Mnemosyne, was an inspiration to many exiles, since what they could recall might never otherwise be remembered (149). Miłosz wanted us to remember and to be remembered.

In 1980 he received the Nobel Prize; the hitherto unknown poet seemed to be associated with the Polish movement known as Solidarity. He was thus afforded the pleasure of a trip to Poland, where he met Lech Walesa, the leader of Solidarity, and Pope John Paul II. “Eventually, the words from his poem ‘You Who Wronged’ were inscribed on the memorial to the fallen shipyard workers in Gdańsk, where the Solidarity movement started and heroically continued against great odds.” “*You who have harmed simple man, mocking him with your laughter, you kill him, someone else will be born, and your deeds and words will be written down.*” “His books were officially published in Poland for the first time since 1951” (154–55).

Miłosz saw himself as a voice crying in the wilderness. His poetic endeavor was “a quest for reality, or *esse*—a serious and ethical task. . . . He thought of himself not as an inspired individual ‘artist’ but as a voice representing an underestimated literary tradition and emerging from the insufficiently understood Other Europe” (157–58).

While most of Miłosz’s poetry is translated from Polish, it translates well because most is not rhyming in the original. This gives the translator more linguistic latitude. Also, many poems are translated by Miłosz himself, so much less is lost in translation.

In 1991 Lithuania had broken away from the Soviet Union, and Miłosz visited the country of his birth for the first time in seven decades. His essay “Happiness”

¹³ Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems*, 109. “A Treatise on Poetry” is not an easy read, but it is deeply rewarding for the effort. It reminds me so much of Eliot.

¹⁴ Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems*, 109.

commemorates the event (174). But his second wife, who was much younger than him, died of cancer in 2002 (188). He lost his first wife in 1986. So sorrow overshadowed much of his life. But conventional Catholicism appears more prominently in his later poems (201). After his poem “Heaven” Miłosz has a commentary. The poem has a passage from the Catholic catechism explaining heaven as the abode of the Father. He refers to the “biblical allegory of original sin” resulting in human death. But the creativity of mankind paradoxically comes from his rebellion. This is the riddle of Christian theology.¹⁵ After his death in 2004 he received an elaborate funeral in Kraków (204).

Czesław Miłosz’s religious commitment has been a matter of controversy. John Wilson referred to Miłosz as “a decidedly unorthodox Roman Catholic, one who expressed ecstatic praise and perennial doubt, eschatological hope and a questioning wonderment.”¹⁶ This is a fair conclusion based on what we know. Miłosz’s 1974 poem, “Bells in Winter,” the last poem of the series *From the Rising of the Sun*,¹⁷ confesses:

Yet I belong to those who believe in *apokatastasis*.
That word promises reversed movement,
Not the one that was set in *katastasis*,
And appears in Acts 3, 21.

It means: restoration. So believed St. Gregory of Nyssa,
Johannes Scotus Erigena, Ruysbroeck, and William Blake.

In his wrestlings Miłosz surely plumbed the depths.

The book has no chapter divisions but is divided into sections of various lengths by a square printer’s device. It also lacks an index.

I must confess to my readers that I have felt out of my depth, as I have often felt after years of reading Eliot, with Miłosz. Their classical training, native brilliance, and intense devotion to poetry are simply dazzling. But I remain content to be dazzled. I highly recommend this biography and the poetry of Czesław Miłosz.

Recommended Reading

Andrzej Franaszek, *Miłosz: A Biography* (Belknap, 2017)
Czesław Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems 1931–2001* (Penguin, 2001)
Czesław Miłosz, *Selected and Last Poems 1931–2004* (HarperCollins, 2006)
Czesław Miłosz, *Poet in the New World: Poems 1946–1953* (HarperCollins, 2025)
Czesław Miłosz, *The Witness of Poetry* (Harvard University press, 1983)

Gregory E. Reynolds is pastor emeritus of Amoskeag Presbyterian Church (OPC) in Manchester, New Hampshire, and is the editor of *Ordained Servant*.

¹⁵ Czesław Miłosz, *Selected and Last Poems 1931–2004* (HarperCollins, 2006), 298–300.

¹⁶ John Wilson, “The Miłosz Year: Longing for the Restoration of All Things,” *Books and Culture* (December 29, 2010), <https://www.booksandculture.com/articles/2011/janfeb/miloszyear.html>.

¹⁷ Miłosz, *New and Collected Poems*, 326–31. This excerpt is on page 328.

ServantReading

The Great De-Churching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back? *by Jim Davis and Michael Graham*

by John R. Muether

The Great De-Churching: Who's Leaving, Why Are They Going, and What Will It Take to Bring Them Back? by Jim Davis and Michael Graham. Zondervan, 2023, xxiv, 242 pages, \$29.99.

Jim Davis is a pastor and Michael Graham a member of a Reformed Baptist congregation outside Orlando. Together they offer their analysis of the profound “dechurched of America” that has taken place over the past 25 years. The number is staggering (40 million by their reckoning). Their extensive research indicates that this is happening in all denominations, but the reasons are quite varied. This book is their effort to help churches reverse this trend, with evangelicals as their primary readership.

They divide the dechurched into five groups, and the first half of the book profiles each of them. Among the first four groups are “cultural Christians,” the least theologically orthodox, who account for 52 percent of the total dechurched. Cultural Christians leave for reasons that include inconvenience and not finding their friends attending. Then there are the dechurched mainstream evangelicals, whose orthodoxy often exceeds the still-churched mainstream evangelicals, but they have relocated or fallen into bad habits (perhaps COVID-induced), or otherwise “casually” dechurched. Thirdly, “evangelicals” include growing numbers whom the church has disappointed, offended, hurt, or even abused. The fourth group is BIPOC (black, indigenous, and people of color), many of whom struggle to fit in or belong to their congregation.

The fifth category are outliers: the dechurched among the mainline Protestants and Roman Catholics. Ought we to be surprised or even disappointed that corrupt churches are in decline? And if they were never in a true church, ought we really to consider them “dechurched”? A similar question can be raised with the exodus of cultural Christians. The low orthodoxy scores of this group raise the question of whether they were ever meaningfully church. When the numbers of these two categories are combined, the crisis of a “great dechurched” may be less than the alarms of this book warrant.

An additional cause for skepticism is the low baseline for defining “church.” “For the purposes of our study,” they write, “we defined a dechurched person as someone who used to go at least once per month” (xxii). It stretches credulity to imagine that a monthly church attender is “church” or a “religious adherent” in any meaningful way. The

better way to describe anyone who answers the call to worship less than 25 percent of the time (except the providentially hindered) is *unchurched*.

Still, the book has its value, and the last section on “Lessons for the Church” is worth reading. Just as the wise preacher applies the word in different ways for different kinds of hearers in the congregation, so ministers and elders should study the different reasons for leaving the church. Particularly helpful are the “key awarenesses” that comprise relational wisdom and maturity (133–45). The authors rightly challenge the church today to be both confessional and missional (chapter 13), in the proper senses of those frequently misunderstood terms.

This reviewer wonders whether dechurching might apply also to matters the authors do not address. Over the course of the last half century, the nearly universal practice of Sunday evening service has done an astonishing disappearing act in almost all quarters of American Protestantism. Might reducing the preached Word in half, itself constitute functional dechurching? Are departing souls already in a state of spiritual malnourishment? Do we create an offramp for the dechurched when we turn the Lord’s Day into an hour?

The authors lament the missed generational “handoff” in churches (the focus of chapter 10). However, more should be said about the pastoral care for the children and youth in the church. Consider the rise of “children’s church” in evangelical circles, where covenant children are excused from at least part (and sometimes all) of the worship service generally until third grade and increasingly as late as middle school. Are we guilty of dechurching our children? After all, are not parents to nurture children by their example of singing, praying, and attentively hearing the Word of God?

While teens may be attending worship, often their main church social network is the youth program, often outsourced to a youth “specialist.” James K. A. Smith has rightly described the ensuing youth detachment from the life of the church as “excarntional”¹: they have been figuratively disembodied or dechurched. It is a great indictment of the practice of youth ministry when the authors note that both the mainstream evangelical and mainline Protestant dechurched had high rates of youth group involvement in their church past (pages 60 and 105). The result has been what sociologist Christian Smith called moralistic therapeutic deism: an astonishing inarticulateness of the faith in which they were raised. To be fair, the authors issue a call for more systematic discipleship, and they even commend catechesis. But greater thought must be given to the environment where this can effectively take place.

Chapter 14 encourages readers to “embrace exile.” Here there are helpful observations on the character of post-Christian America. However, there is also a misunderstanding of the biblical teaching on exile. One of the authors trivializes matters when he describes his exile as leaving a pastorate in the deep south where he enjoyed the benefits of “free golf and discounted luxury items” to take a call to a church in the “largely dechurched context of Orlando” (216). Whatever the toll to his golf game, he is not describing the biblical call to exile. The authors further assert that American Christians have not “lived in exile for the past few hundred years,” because they enjoyed “comfort and power in society as Christians” (218). Biblically, exile does not refer to being marginalized in an unfamiliar culture or even a negative world. Exile describes the redemptive-historical location of the church seeking a better country and living by faith

¹ James K. A. Smith, *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit* (Brazos, 2016), 146.

in the promises yet unseen. This is the state of the church in all times and places, and it will continue until the return of our Lord. It calls for patient endurance through suffering, which is Paul's constant prayer for the churches he was shepherding. In this book, the language of suffering yields to the frequent call for "human flourishing." While we are called to seek the welfare of the city to which we are called in exile, talk of flourishing presents a peculiarly upper middle class western picture of the Christian life.

A little over fifty years ago—at the start of the dechurching trends this book analyzes—sociologist Dean M. Kelley wrote *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*. Commissioned by the National Council of Churches to study the decline of mainline churches (already in freefall), Kelley presented a counterintuitive thesis: Conservative churches' strict demands for the belief and the behavior of its members were precisely their keys for growth. By minimizing the duties of discipleship, liberal churches began their rapid decline, as their messaging became indistinct from the wisdom of the world. Kelley's thesis generated howls of protest and plenty of ridicule, but it has yet to be refuted. However, the high expectations for church membership that Kelley described are absent from this book. Perhaps the great dechurching today owes itself to evangelicals' embracing of the mainline recipe for failure.

John R. Muether serves as a ruling elder at Reformation Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Oviedo, Florida, and as Dean of Libraries at Reformed Theological Seminary. He is a former historian of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

ServantReading

The Hobbit Encyclopedia by *Damien Bador, Coralie Potot, Vivien Stocker, and Dominique Vigot*

By Charles Malcolm Wingard

The Hobbit Encyclopedia, by Damien Bador, Coralie Potot, Vivien Stocker, and Dominique Vigot. Translated by Alayne Pullen and Matthew Clarke. Frances Lincoln, 2023, 336 pages, \$18.69.

Quite a few books that were lost on me as a young reader have come to be cherished, read, and reread through the years. In my case, I can point to the novels of Austen and Eliot, which made for dreary reading earlier in life but have long since become treasured literary companions.

Within the last several years, Tolkien has joined their ranks. Our introduction did not go well. I completed *The Hobbit* in high school only under the threat of a failing grade. I reread it again not too many years later with little interest. Fairies, elves, and wizards were never my thing, not even as a child. Several attempts to get through the first installment of *The Lord of the Rings* ended in failure. The world of fantasy was of no interest to me.

This has now changed. While reading a major biography on C.S. Lewis several years ago, I became interested in the history of the Inklings, which led to a growing interest in Tolkien, the man and author. His Catholic faith, imagination, and far-reaching influence led me to revisit *The Hobbit* and then to move swiftly through *The Lord of the Rings*.

If I had had *The Hobbit Encyclopedia*, my earlier encounters with Tolkien might have fared far better.

The comprehensive and beautifully illustrated encyclopedia assists readers to grasp the scope of the world Tolkien created. The volume is arranged under these headings:

- Characters
- Peoples and creatures
- Languages and writing systems
- Objects and constructions

Encyclopedias, by nature, do not lend themselves to summary. I will share several highlights.

In addition to Bilbo Baggins, Gandalf, Gollum, Smaug, and others, some figures are introduced, like Legolas and Galadriel, who will make their first appearance later in *The*

Lord of the Rings. The authors note that Tolkien's Catholic faith, cultivated by his mother as a child, led him to find inspiration for Galadriel's character in the Virgin Mary (46).

It comes as no surprise that the Khuzdul language was based on Semitic languages (160). After all, Tolkien was one of the Old Testament translators for the Jerusalem Bible, providing the translation of the prophet Jonah.

Tolkien's neologism "eucatastrophe" is illustrated and explained. Just when Bilbo Baggins is overwhelmed by dread of the massing Goblins at the battle at the Gate, the Eagles come and bring deliverance. The authors comment:

A eucatastrophe is therefore neither a pleasant interlude nor a final triumph. It is a specific moment, as emotionally powerful as the irruption of a catastrophe, in the sense that a eucatastrophe "pierces you with a joy that brings tears," as Tolkien indicated in one of his letters. Whereas catastrophe engulfs us in sadness and anxiety, eucatastrophe overwhelms us with joy and hope. This is exactly what Bilbo felt when he saw the "dark shapes small yet majestic against the distant glow." (283)

I recall reading somewhere that William F. Buckley, Jr. quipped after reading *Moby Dick* for the first time later in life: "To think I might have died without having read it." I can say that about *The Lord of the Rings*. I am grateful for friends and books that made me give it another shot. And as I (hopefully) return to it and *The Hobbit* in the coming years, *The Hobbit Encyclopedia* will be an invaluable resource in navigating the history, geography, and characters of Middle Earth.

Charles Malcolm Wingard is minister of shepherding at the First Presbyterian Church of Jackson, Mississippi (PCA), and professor of pastoral theology at Reformed Theological Seminary.

ServantPoetry

Gregory E. Reynolds (1949–)

The World Is Covered

On the death of Czeslaw Miłosz
and 220,000 in the Pacific Rim tsunami

The world here is covered in cold peace.
In the bleak new winter, elsewhere
Mountainous waves have dashed countless
Bodies against the edge of the world.

I search the web, googling, googling
Finding the late Czeslaw Miłosz
“A Poem for the End of the Century.”
Saying: “Totally enigmatic, totally intricate.”

The fabric has been ripped asunder.
Grief counselors will come to numb
The horror of the memories
As if to soothe existence in that hot clime.

The thrashing walls inundating
Cannot be forgotten easily if ever.
And what of the other, self-perpetrated tyrannies?
“Don’t think, don’t remember the death on the cross”
But here and here alone the peace is not cold.

God justified Himself there
Sharply nailed in exquisite agony:
“Save me, O God! For the waters have come up to my neck.
I sink in deep mire, where there is no standing;
I have come into deep waters, where the floods overflow me.”¹
A tsunami of unspeakable wrath
Breaking on the rim of mercy!

¹ Psalm 69:1–2