

*Essays
on
Literature
& Culture*

W O R D S



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F R E S H

LARRY WOIWODE

AUTHOR OF A Step from Death

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... the ecliptic, and 90° in advance of earth in longitude.
The effect is to make a star at 180° of the ecliptic
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Words Made Fresh: Essays on Literature and Culture

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INTRODUCTION

My title is meant to echo the incarnation, because it was with the incarnation that writers outside the scope of the Hebrew or Greek texts began to understand how a metaphor of words could contain the lineaments and inner workings of a human being. The Hebrew Bible supplied the earliest clues, since it didn't merely list a set of rules to regulate social behavior, as for instance the Code of Hammurabi did, but was an ordering of stories that revealed not only heroic actions of certain individuals but also a bleak black side to others, along with glimpses into character: Moses's pretense that he couldn't speak in public (after being reared in the court of Egypt), Saul's cries for calming music, David's gold hair like the glow of his personality, Jephthah making good his rash vow.

The title also issues an assurance that the following essays, which appeared in a variety of venues over the years, have been revised or reworked and otherwise brought up to date, so that the words forming the phrases and sentences and thoughts in the paragraphs ahead have, indeed, been refashioned, made fresh.

GUNS & PEACE

On an American Icon

Once in the worst of a Wisconsin winter I shot a deer, my only one, while my wife and daughter watched. The deer had been hit by a delivery truck along a county road a few miles from where we lived, and one of its rear legs was torn off at the hock. A shattered shin and hoof lay steaming in the red-beaded ice on the road. The driver of the truck and I stood and watched as the deer tried to leap a fence, kicked a while at the top wire its stub was entangled in, flailing the area with fresh ropes of blood, and then went hobbling across a pasture toward a wooded hill. Snow-covered cows followed it with a curious awe.

“Do you have a rifle with you?” the driver asked.

“Not on me, no. At home.”

He glanced toward the deer once more, and then got in his truck and drove off.

I went back to our vehicle, where my wife and daughter were waiting, pale and withdrawn, and told them what I intended to do, and, on the drive back, suggested they’d better stay at home.

No, they wanted to be with me, they said; they wanted to watch. Our daughter was going on four that winter. I got my rifle, a .22, a foolishly puny weapon to use on a deer but the only one I had, and

we drove back. I saw that the deer was lying in low brush near the base of the wooded hill—no need to trail its blatant spoor. When I got a hundred yards off, marveling how the deer could make it so far in its condition through snow that rose over my boot tops, it tried to push itself up with its front legs, and then collapsed. I aimed at the center of its skull, thinking, This will be the quickest, and heard the bullet ricochet off and go singing through the trees.

The deer was on its feet, shaking its head as though stung, and I fired at the same spot, quickly, and apparently missed. It was moving in its fastest hobble up the hill, broadside to me, and I took time to sight a heart shot. Before the report even registered in my mind, the deer was down in an explosion of snow and lay struggling, spouting blood from its stump and a chest wound. I was shaking by now. Deer are color blind, science says, which is why hunters wear orange, and as I went toward the deer to deliver the coup de grace, I realized it was seeing me in black and white, and then its eye homed in on me, and I understood I was its vision of approaching death. And with that I seemed to enter its realm, through its eye, and saw myself and the countryside in shades of white and gray.

But I see the deer in color, I thought.

A few yards away I aimed at its head once more and heard the crack of a shot, the next-to-last round left in the magazine—all the cartridges I'd brought in my hurry. The deer's head came up, and I could see its eye clearly now, dark, placid, filled with an appeal, it seemed, and I felt the surge of black and white overtake me again. The second shot, or one of them, had pierced its neck. Its gray-blue tongue hung out the side of its jaw; urine was trickling from below its tail. A doe. I pointed the end of the barrel close to its forehead, conscious of my wife's and daughter's eyes on me from behind and, as I fired off the fatal shot, felt drawn by them into my multi-colored, many-faceted world again.

I don't remember the first gun I fired, the heritage is so ingrained in me, but I know I've used a variety of weapons to kill birds, reptiles,

amphibians, plant life, insects (bees and butterflies with a shotgun), fish that came too close to shore, small mammals, that deer—never a human being, I'm quick to interject, although the accumulated carnage I've put away with bullets since boyhood is probably enough to add up to a couple of cows, not counting the deer. I've fired at targets, both living and inert, using an elderly ten-gauge with double hammers that left a welt on my shoulder that stayed a week; also a Mauser, a twelve-gauge sawed-off shotgun, an SKS, an M-16, a .222, a 30.06 and a 30.30, a dozen variations on the .22—pump, bolt action, lever action, special scopes and sights and stocks—a .410 over-and-under, a zip gun that blew up and left a piece of shrapnel imbedded in my left arm, an Italian carbine, a .22 revolver, a Luger, a .45, and, among others, a fancily engraved, single-trigger, double-barrel, twenty-gauge at snowballs thrown from behind my back over a bluff. And on that same bluff on a New Year's Day in the seventies, after some wine and prodding, I found myself at the jittering ring of stutters from a paratrooper's machine gun with a collapsible, geometrically reinforced metal stock, and watched its spouting tracers go off across the night toward the already-set sun, realizing this was probably the hundredth weapon I'd had performing in my hands, and this, the most potentially destructive, was the newest one.

I grew up in North Dakota, at the edge of the West, during the turbulence and then the aftermath of World War II, which America won in such an outright way there was a sense of vindication about the country's long-standing love of guns—not to say pride in them, too. “Bang! Bang! You're dead,” returns to me from that time without the least speck of friction against conscience or time. When my friends and I weren't playing War, or Cowboys and Indians, or Cops and Robbers, we were reading war comics (from which you could order for ninety-nine cents miniature cardboard chests of plastic weaponry and soldiers) or Westerns, or listening to *The Lone Ranger*, who fired off five shots before his program even began, or *Richard Diamond, Private Detective* or *Dragnet* and other radio

dramas that generally glorified guns—and the more powerful, the better.

My fantasies, when I was frustrated or irate, were rife with firearms of the most lethal sort, flying shot or rounds of shattering ammunition, leaving the enemy bodies blown away in bloody tableaux. The imagery was present whenever I picked up a comic book or went to the movies or, later, turned on the TV—all of them flashy, one-dimensional forms of communication that didn't convey the substantiality of real life, much less the ethical concerns each decision is fraught with, but strobed so far into a realm of primitive energy I could never wholly shake them as a young person. The images were reinforced often, in such an offhand manner, they seemed everyday events in the wider arena of existence. In that arena, adults were the arbiters, and it was adults who had the guns. They were so potentially destructive, no young person would imagine carrying one to school.

I've owned three firearms in my life until recently. Two of them I took back to the shops within a week after I'd bought them, subdued by a sense of trying to reach out in an archaic way, and the limits to maturity and imagination that this implied, plus the bother to my daughter of their explosive noise. And the third, the .22 I carried on my trek to the deer, after trembling over it a few years and once using it to shoot holes in the floor between my feet to enact a mock suicide, I gave away. To my younger brother.

He was initiated into the buck-fever fraternity in the forest of northern Wisconsin when he was an adolescent by a seasoned local who said, "If you see anything out there tomorrow, boy, shoot it. You can check out later what it was. Nobody gives a diddly up here." Thus the orange, to protect hunters from other hunters. On a hunting trip a few years later, an acquaintance from the village my brother lived in then, a lawyer, was shot in the head with a deer rifle but somehow survived, and even went back to practicing law. It was believed to be an accident at first, with all the bullets embroidering

the air that day; and then rumor had it that another member of a party hunting on adjoining land, an old friend of the lawyer's, had found out a week before that the lawyer had been having his wife. The two men were polite enough to each other in the village after that, my brother said, but not such good friends, of course—just-balanced, justice-balanced males.

For weeks after I shot the crippled doe, every time we drove past the field, our daughter would say, "Here's where Daddy shot the deer." In exactly that manner, in the tone and detachment of a tourist guide. And I would glance into the rearview mirror and see her in her car seat, studying the hill with troubled, sympathetic eyes.

One day I pulled over and stopped. "Does it bother you so much that I shot it?" I asked. There was no answer, and then I noticed she was nodding her head, her large eyes fixed on the hill.

"If I wouldn't have, it could have suffered a long time. You saw how badly hurt it was. It couldn't have lived that way. I didn't like doing it, either, but in the long run it was best for the deer. When I reported it to the game warden, he even thanked me and said, 'Leave it for the foxes and crows.' They have to eat, too, you know, and maybe the deer made the winter easier for them."

And I thought, Oh, what a self-justifying hypocrite you are! Why didn't you leave her at home? Or go to the farmer whose land the deer was on—which would have been quicker than going home for the .22 and back—a person who would have had a deer rifle, or at least a shotgun with rifled slugs, and could have put the deer away with dispatch—might have salvaged even the hide and venison? And who could say it wouldn't have lived, the way some animals do after tearing or chewing off a foot caught in a trap?

Who was I to presume it wouldn't have preferred to die a slow death in the woods, looking out over the pasture, as the crimson stain widening in the snow dimmed its colorless world until all went black? Why not admit I was an American of a certain backcountry

kind and, like many of my mold, had used an arsenal of firearms, and was as excited about putting a deer away, at last, as I was troubled by its suffering? Then again, given my daughter's intuitiveness and the person I am, perhaps she sensed that.

I once choked a chicken to death. It was my only one-on-one, barefaced, not to say bare-handed, confrontation with death and the killer in me. It took place on my grandparents' farm. I couldn't have been more than nine, and no firearms were present. I was on my knees, the chicken fluttering its outstretched wings, unable to release any protest past my grip above its swollen crop, beak gaping, translucent eyelids sliding up and down. An old molting specimen, probably past laying age. Malthus. Eugenics. Better for it. Any excuse. If it was laying, or might again, a worse loss than a capon or cock. My grandfather, who was widely traveled and worldly wise, in his seventies then, and had started using a cane due to an injury, came tapping at that moment around the corner of the chicken coop and saw what I was doing and blanched at the sight, gagged, I believe, then did a quick turnaround on his cane and never again, hours later or for the rest of his life, mentioned the incident to me. My mother, his daughter, had died the winter before, and he may have known I needed to see the passage from life to death (so I say now) take place in my hands. In some sense, since he kept his silence, he seemed to understand; but whenever I'm invaded by the incident, the point of it seems his horrified look and his turning away from me.

My wife once said she felt I wanted to kill her, a common enough apprehension among married couples, I'm sure, and not restricted to either sex (I know there were times when she wanted to kill me), but perhaps with experience infusing the feeling it became too much to endure. I now live in New York City, alone, where the calendar and clock keep me tending toward my suitcase for yet another trip, and she and my daughter live in Chicago. The city has changed in the years since the three of us lived here. There are more frivolous wares—silk kerchiefs, necklaces and

rings, roach clips, rolling papers, a display of Florida coral across a convertible top, books of every kind—being sold on the streets than anybody can remember. Street people are saying that soon it will be like the thirties again, with all of us on the streets selling our apples, or whatever, engaged in a tacit and comradely kind of gangsterism to survive. Outside my window, a spindly deciduous species has a sign strung on supporting posts on either side of it, in careful hand lettering, that reads, “THIS TREE GIVES OXYGEN, GIVE IT LOVE.”

There are more dogs in the streets and parks and more canine offal sending up its open-ended odor; at least half the population has given up smoking, at last, for good, they say, and many actually have. There is an amazed feeling, present most everywhere, of being in the midst of a slowly forging reciprocity, along with an air of bravura in maintaining one’s best face, with a few changes of costuming to reflect that, no matter what might yet evolve—a unisex barbershop or boutique on nearly every other block.

Sometimes I think this is where I belong. Then somebody is gunned down in a neighborhood hangout I used to visit, and the next day a mafia boss is assassinated, reportedly by members of his own mob, in a place farther uptown. Or this is where I feel most at home, I equivocate, and see myself in a Stetson traveling down a crosstown street at a fast-paced and pigeon-toed hurry toward the setting sun (setting here, but not over my wife and daughter yet), my eyes cast down and hands deep in my empty Levi pockets, a suspect, closet comedy act occasionally whistled at by guys.

I can’t refute my heritage, but I doubt that I’ll use a firearm again, certainly not in the city, and, if outside it, only in the direst emergency. Which I say to protect my flanks. The bloody, gun-filled fantasies seldom return, now that layers of realistic literature crowd my head, and when they do they’re reversed. I’m the one being shot, or shot full of holes, as if the primitive portion of my imagination keeps insisting this is what I deserve.

* * *

AFTERWORD: What I deserved led me to understand the full and free payment of my just deserts. The essay was written and set in the midseventies, although portions of it, including auras of the city, are as relevant in 2010. My wife and I reunited and reared our daughter and two more daughters, plus a son, on a ranch in western North Dakota. In this incarnation I own firearms, mainly for predators, especially rabid ones, and I do not cling to them as I cling to the faith that reunited my wife and me and caused our internal lives and the lives of our children to blossom and prosper in peace.

HOMEPLACE, HEAVEN OR HELL?

On the Order of Existence

When a writer crosses the line of impropriety and talks about the act of writing itself, he or she'd better speak about it from the inside, as a person in a suit of armor might describe an itch starting to crawl up an arm, not as a scholar focusing on the makeup of a medieval gorget of mail. The itch in this instance is the relevance of place, or locale, to contemporary fiction.

The French novelist Georges Bernanos says about his native Provence in *Essais et écrits de combat I*, after being absent from it for thirty years,

Whether here or there, why should I be nostalgic about what actually belongs to me, is mine, and which I cannot betray? Why should I invoke the black puddles of the beaten-down path, or the hedge resounding under the melancholy beating of the rain since I am myself both the hedge and the black puddles?¹

Here is a heartfelt response to homeplace, in which details of a particular place become one with the writer. Some critics might view Bernanos's response as regional. When canonmeisters label a

writer “regional,” they suggest that the writer isn’t in quite the same league as the big boys, equating regionalism with parochialism—an attitude that honors certain areas of the United States (or the world, for that matter) as right and proper, preferable to others—while the rest is regional. Every traveler knows that the vast tracts of continent from New Jersey to California contain varieties of typography, though some travelers might feel a sort of homogenous blandness begins in Ohio and isn’t quite healed until the Pacific Coast. The area is called the Midwest, although it contains areas of the East and Northwest and West.

In our anxious modern tendency to categorize—a reflex that suggests fear and has its apotheosis in computer circuits, as if fear dictates even the patterns of organization in the machines we invent to think for us—we seem to have forgotten the unpronounceable county in Mississippi, whose creator said it was the size of a postage stamp, or the locale of the odyssey of our latter-day Ulysses, Dublin, or the best-selling prophet who never strayed far from his birthplace, Bethlehem.

Let me say, then, that the properties of a particular place are important, yes, but that human beings are more important than locale. And the inner state of a character is of far greater importance than any external estate containing him or her, no matter how extraordinary its geophysical distinctions. Of even greater import is the character’s need to relate events that have had an emotional effect on his or her character to a friend or neighbor, the auditor of fiction.

Those elements make up what is known as narrative, and they can be transferred to any landscape on the planet, or to any vehicle in orbit around it. In one of the most limited poems, William Blake gives voice to a clod of clay and a pebble in a brook.² It’s difficult to narrow your vision more than that, though Theodore Roethke does in his greenhouse poems.³ In the “The Clod and the Pebble,” Blake dramatizes self-centered and selfless love, and by implication suggests that selfless love renders living in the world bearable, if it

isn't the foundation on which redeeming life in the world is built. It might help to have a Christian perspective to arrive at this last, larger inference (the clay as God-man trod down) but the poem is one that anybody from any culture at any given period can pick up and resonate to, as with Bernanos. Both speak to an unequivocal nature in every human being.

So it's time to shed one obvious misapprehension about writing—that the physical locus of a piece of fiction limits the way in which meaning may widen from it, as rings of water widen around a cattail that a blackbird abandons. I can indeed reverse the premise and say that to the degree writing is true to indigenous detail, to that degree it resonates with wider meaning—or universality, as some might say. Think of the young man from rural Stratford who never forgot the local flora or any Bottom or Dogberry or resident of Arden, or the poetic, power-stricken Richards who aspired to be kings of one kind or another.

The writing I refer to is of the compressed specificity found in poetry and fiction. Such writing has its ear to the pulse of people, who are at the heart of writing, whatever form it takes, and by conveying the feelings of a particular person, that writing connects with humankind. An unfolding story begins to take its course, and story examines the passage of light or darkness in each individual, common to the flaws and scars all of us bear. Descriptive prose examines only appearances, as if the suit of armor or clothes on one's back is the person—prose that goes out of fashion as quickly as clothes themselves. That sort of writing could be called sociographic news and is not the writing I want to linger over.

Writers such as Wendell Berry, who settle in their native home place, are seen as “going back to the land.” Part of the motivation behind Berry and writers akin to him has roots in the Agrarian movement, and for others it may be romantic modishness rising from the sixties—ecology, back to nature, the natural world, and the like. Writers who settle outside city boundaries are often termed

regional or terminal regionalists. A writer who limits the scope of a work to a known environment, and then narrows the focus within that environment, is liable to receive that title nowadays, rather than the one that has served for centuries: a poet.

Universality is compounded of specifics, or we have no referent to relate to, and a writer is no more local than clods or stones or trees or animals or flowing water (with variations in types or shapes or species) or individual vision, or imagination itself, is local. A more useful division might be between writers who wish to reside in and refer to nature, a universal phenomenon, or to live in the academy or the city, both of which are affected by fashion and the winds of change—though traditions of knowledge certainly exist in both.

Blake, in his notebooks, says, “Everything which is in harmony with me I call In harmony—But there may be things which are Not in harmony with Me & yet are in a More perfect Harmony.”⁴ This should narrow the writer’s vision further, and Blake’s proposition strikes across the honesty of a writer’s intent as a qualitative measure. The proposition also implies that a reader must be willing to admit limitations in perspective. A more perfect harmony exists. Fifth Avenue at Christmas rush is exhilarating, but any city offers specific geophysical reference, especially when, as in New York, you enter ethnic or parochial, block-by-block neighborhoods.

I’ll narrow this by being personal. In 1978, after living in a series of cities and rural areas in the East and Midwest of the United States and Canada, my family and I moved to North Dakota, my native state. We settled in the southwestern corner, three hundred miles from where I was born and lived until I was eight and then returned for a year of high school. But I had the feeling of returning home. And here might be the place to put to rest the sentimental supposition that you can’t go home again. You may not be able to return to an earlier time but anybody can go back home, where “in folds of familiarity the land tighten[s] around,” as Updike has put it in a

semi-Oedipal conclusion to one of his short stories.⁵ Where, after all, does one take one's rest, no matter how far one might travel from it, in every respect, except at home? Home is the center of rest, the wellspring of consciousness, the setting where our minds first open to light.

The definition of home or homeplace, and the implications of the locale we call home, is the matter I'm after. Is that home a haven? Is it a miniature heaven, a *picture* of heaven? Or is it hell?

The weight of my decision to move to North Dakota—it settled as a weight over my body—was not pleasant the first year. The weight was intellectual and emotional, centered on a concern for my family. Could they, would they, settle here? The possibility of their discontent was at times hellish. The geographical state we were living in wasn't quite the state I had once written about, which set off internal dislocations. What was I doing here, besides trying to reconcile a dozen discrepancies? As I searched for the cause of the weight, or my mistake, I came to several conclusions, and I'll use a few to define my subject from the inside—that itch along an arm under the armor.

I should say, first, that in an entirely other realm, the physical and psychic, I experienced a sense of healing integration I hadn't felt before, full blown and profound. The source of the weight started coming clear: it registered a commitment. I believe I'm a servant to my family, but I serve in another sense, too, and a servant's first allegiance is to his master. I don't serve myself or the academy *per se*, though I do teach, nor the place or populace of North Dakota. I serve God, through the person of Jesus as portrayed in the Bible. That should send a legion scurrying off in alarm or setting this aside in embarrassment—perhaps with the wish that I were a plain old regionalist and not a religionist, or whatever term you wish, and that suggests discrimination beneath the fear that leads to the categorizing reflex.

My spouse and I wanted to raise our children in the nurture and admonition Scripture encourages, in the country. We felt we were following the line of the covenant that began with Abraham and was reemphasized by the apostles (Acts 2:39)—that the promise of grace extended to us and to our children. That promise surpassed mere generational lines, which may be the reason I was uneasy about settling near my birthplace or the Red River valley where my great-grandparents homesteaded. The terms of the promise in the original pact aren't nullified or purified by the passage of time. If anybody wonders whether I believe those terms, or believe them to be true, the next question is, Do you believe Scripture, in its many ramifications? And I would have to say, yes, as far as I understand it, I do.

If I say from personal conviction and not in opposition to a doctrine or hermeneutic or philosopher's premise that nothing supernatural exists in the cosmos, I'm acknowledging that I've felt internal stirrings that suggest otherwise. That is, by speaking out of my conviction, without referring to any other teaching, I'm saying I carry inner information I wish to refute. That was my outlook for a decade as a writer. I worked to discredit in every way I could that internal evidence. My route was to accurately portray reality, I believed, which to me was unvarnished truth, no B.S. added, and over that route contravening evidence arrived. I can trace its path in Psalm 19 and the first chapter of the epistle to the Romans. In my ambition to refute that evidence, yet remain steadfast to my convictions and the characters in my fiction (for whom I'm also a servant), I see how my work began to build a case for the opposite side—affirming an overseeing autonomy, if not an affirmation of life itself.

If anybody thinks I've been deluded—an understandable response; I've held it—I feel I've been denied my search for the truth in the varieties of experience my work has brought about. We don't ask every existentialist if he or she has thought through every phase of belief to its outermost reaches, as Camus bravely did, and then near his end consulted with a pastor. It's obvious that many claim the right to a version of Camus's experience, and even if they

undergo a certain amount of mental deliberation, and naturally angst, there's nothing original in their trek. That is why the verve and excitement of discovery is evaporating from American fiction.

The text that's the source of the Western tradition, the Bible, is frowned on if not scorned by many, so young writers have no fire to fight through, as Joyce and Camus and Colette and Tolstoy had to do. I know scholars who wouldn't think of criticizing *Ulysses* (either text) if they hadn't read it, but will gladly go at the Bible, unable to explain the difference between Ephesians and Ezekiel.

To suspect I've been deluded not only disallows the originality of the path that brought me here, but also ignores the tone and import of my early work—through *Beyond the Bedroom Wall*—when I seem, to my sense of it, to protest too much. This is a fine line that perhaps only I can detect, sensing it from the inside, and I should say that unless a standard exists against which beliefs can be measured, then every belief is equally valid (the common present-day belief) and modern currencies of belief may be based on mere social consensus or day-to-day trends, as they often are.

In the first sentence of *The Closing of the American Mind*, Allan Bloom states, "There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative."⁶ Albert Einstein said, "The theory of relativity refers to physics, not morals."

Several matters intervened to suggest North Dakota as the place to head for. External confirmations occurred that can be seen as the concatenations of circumstance or working of Providence, however you wish, and I need to mention only two, and not in detail, to illustrate how we were urged in the direction we took. My wife and I spent several weeks traveling the West and Southwest, looking for a place to settle, and when we returned to Chicago, where we were living then, I asked her where she had most fully sensed the West, or the fresh air of a new place, and she said, "western North Dakota."

That was exactly what I felt, so her response was a surprise.

A denomination we decided to join had one church, we learned, in North Dakota. With a compass I drew a radius of forty miles, using the church as pivot point, and we found a farm within that circle. It was the sort of place we had looked for, in different regions of the country, for seven years, and it was in western North Dakota. I'm the fifth generation of my family to live in the state, my children the sixth, a minor feat—the state not a hundred years old when we moved. My great-grandparents settled in what was then Dakota Territory. We were far from there and my birthplace, as I've mentioned, and the farm was not handed down by the family, as often happens, through generations.

A larger promise was at work.

Those with roots in an immigrant background—a truism for many Americans—are prone to draw parallels with the Jews in their desert wanderings from Egypt, or to see the crossing of the ocean as their exodus. This is a temptation it's best to resist, since the Israelites were singled out to be freed from slavery—a picture of freedom from the death-dealing bondage of sin. Their exodus was brought to fruition for anybody who becomes a member of the household of God, grafted onto the root of Jesse into the original Israel. This can occur regardless of our nationality or race or gender or status or physical placement on this planet.

The Israelites claimed they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth, searching for a place of rest. About Abraham, the one in whose hands the promises of the covenant were placed, the epistle to the Hebrews says “he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God” (11:10). That city sits on the cornerstone of the Word. “For here”—here on earth, the epistle says in its last chapter—“we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come” (13:14). This is the heavenly Jerusalem and shouldn't dislocate us from our homework on earth. It's the life here we're responsible for, in its minutest detail. We should expect to give an account, according to a teaching of Jesus, for *every idle*

word that comes out of our mouths. That's a weighty responsibility for a writer.

The responsibility began to increase in weight with our move to North Dakota. It's true that a prophet, and perhaps even a writer, is held in a certain amount of regard, except in his home state. No better temporal judges exist than family or friends who have known one from birth. With our move I now had neighbors, true critics, and was less able to fictionally fudge any sentence that appeared in my head or on a page. Many of my words, I felt, had indeed been idle, an acknowledgment that shifted me toward further accuracy. The commitment to a Lord and a church and a community might have carried me to this consciousness eventually, but the process was speeded up by the move. I started all over on a long novel half done, *Born Brothers*.

I say "might have carried me to this consciousness" because it is Scripture, as applied by the Spirit, that continues to refine for me the direction and meaning of home. A year before the move, I became (so I felt at the time), a believer; I began to read Scripture with the regularity I believed a believer should, and tended to believe it. In that sense, the Word *is* home.

If this seems formulaic or simplistic, so, too, does environmentalism at times to me, and I'm an environmentalist. If it seems like a sermon, at least it's not in a work of fiction, as excoriations of Christianity are, and the point is that standards and ethics, when open to hunches or common sense or reason, grow shaky as they move from our culture's home base. Western civilization took its shape from Scripture. With that gradient beneath my words, I don't have to set up a pulpit in a novel. My work has become more open ended, to the consternation of those who want explanations step by step, rather than accurate details, and it extends in freedom from a center of rest.

Graham Greene has written in his *Collected Essays* that "with the death of Henry James the religious sense was lost to the English

novel, and with the religious sense went the sense of the importance of the human act.”⁷ Then this:

The novelist, perhaps unconsciously aware of his predicament, took refuge in the subjective novel. . . . The visible world for him ceased to exist as completely as the spiritual. Mrs. Dalloway walking down Regent Street was aware of the glitter of shop-windows, the smooth passage of cars, the conversation of shoppers, but it was only a Regent Street seen by Mrs. Dalloway that was conveyed to the reader: a charming whimsical rather sentimental prose poem was what Regent Street had become; a current of air, a touch of scent, a sparkle of glass. But, we protest, Regent Street too has a right to exist; it is more real than Mrs. Dalloway.⁸

This subjective mode that readers discover in many modern novels limits the world to the filtering consciousness of one person rather than a first or limited third person, and imprisons the natural world and its people. The viewpoint never explores manifestations of reality that can take language deeper than before. The earth groans for redemption, as we do, while it promises an eternal renewal we share, at least suggestively, in nature’s cycles—spring springing green again. The caliber of an open consciousness can take in a strawberry and its complexity of texture, not to say the act of eating its humped and seedy yet vermilion-sweet spillage of—I fumble for words.

Rapture is the primary matter I hope to fumble over. It’s my responsibility to elevate consciousness by rendering the interlocking nature of the “things of this world,” as Richard Wilbur puts it, including our lives within it, good or bad, in their manifold specifics—by reconstructing, through language, a niche of existence a reader can rest in. If I can’t lead a young person through the minefield of the world, I’m blindly leading the blind. And if I take a leap of faith into a nameless dark, it’s to discern light’s source, a matter of good news, as long as I can reconcile the metaphor of language with the changing yet essentially unchangeable, actual, fallen world.

As an analogue to my odyssey of reconciliation, I offer a commentary by Wendell Berry on the original *Odyssey*. In his fiction and nonfiction, Berry is the wisest and most articulate American writer about “place” and the meaning of home, and he says of Odysseus in “The Body and the Earth,” from *Recollected Essays*, that his “far-wandering through the wilderness of the sea is not merely the return of a husband; it is a journey home.”⁹

By the end of Book XXIII, it is clear that the action of the narrative, Odysseus’ journey from the cave of Kalypso to the bed of Penelope, has revealed a structure that is at once geographical and moral. This structure may be graphed as a series of diminishing circles centered on one of the posts of the marriage bed. Odysseus makes his way from the periphery toward that center. . . . As he moves toward this center he moves also through a series of recognitions, tests of identity, and devotion. By these, his homecoming becomes at the same time a restoration of order.¹⁰

One way in which Odysseus restores order, grimly, is by slaughtering Penelope’s suitors, and of this Berry says, “The suitors’ sin is their utter contempt for the domestic order that the poem affirms.”¹¹ The entire Trojan War began, indeed, when a guest took advantage of the hospitality required of a Greek host.

For Odysseus, then, marriage was not merely a legal bond, nor even a sacred bond, between himself and Penelope. It was part of a complex practical circumstance involving, in addition to husband and wife, their family, both descendants and forebears, their household, their community, and the sources of all these lives in memory and tradition, in the countryside, and in the earth.¹²

My return to North Dakota sought a similar order. I was raised and catechized in the Catholic Church and knew its doctrines from childhood. A bombardment of unbelief in college dismantled my faith, because I had little to refer to other than the catechism and the traditions of the church. For some that community and communion might have been enough, and it might have been for me, too, at another time. But not then.

In times of crisis I prayed, no matter what I was pretending or saying or not saying about belief. I gave thanks for passages of prose beyond my capabilities, aware that they couldn't have arrived wholly from the often fractured state of my consciousness. When I was writing *Beyond the Bedroom Wall*, I began to read the Bible in order to understand the certainties previous generations had upheld, and most of the doctrines that had been catechized into me were confirmed.

A series of verses, especially in Ephesians—"even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him"—coalesced. A span broad as the cosmos seemed to overarch my life, now that that life had been acted upon and restored, forward to back. I understood the power of grace. Though I lived in unbelief, denied God and cursed him, he kept his side and called me back. I was, in the truest sense, home. And in my new geophysical state I could be more accurate, as I discovered in *Born Brothers*, about a place and a people I was in communion with.

If values evolve from traditions and common sense, then when values start clashing, we need a judge or referee, as we do when we turn to a dictionary to define words. Otherwise any individual value is as valid as another. Without an outside guide we're in Babel, where everybody is talking nonsense, because everybody is using words that have meaning only to themselves, and, as Einstein has pointed out, "It is easier to denature plutonium than to denature the basic evil nature of man."

The best source to teach us about this nature realistically, and why it exists as it does, is the Word. It's the fixed pivot on which this world revolves. If a person moves from that pivot or spirals away from it, as I have, "the heavens over your head shall be bronze, and the earth under you shall be iron," as in Deuteronomy 28:23.

A metallic, unfeeling universe with a lid over every avenue upward is not an enviable existence. It can sober a writer about the necessity of one-mindedness in the search for reconciliation, as with Esau, who "found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears." It conveys a sense of the separation I underwent, and I

now know that every person on earth is spared the entirety of that separation, though some will be left, eventually, by the wayside. I, with my contrary nature, need to be reminded of that to avoid the rebellion of separation for separation's sake—freedom, as I once called it. For those whose heaven is brass and the earth iron, any home here is hell.

Writers who seek direction are admonished by the eighth verse in the last chapter of the epistle to the Philippians, which is a list. Lists in Scripture often run in descending order of importance (though not always), and here it says, “Whatever is *true*”—an admonition to not remake matters in order to pretty them up—“whatever is honorable, whatever is *just*”—justice, especially of a spiritual sort, isn't easy to accept with an honorable spirit—“whatever is *pure*, whatever is *lovely*, whatever is commendable”—whatever is excellent or praiseworthy in these, we're to think of that. Yes, I affirm, but we need to keep it all in proper balance, and the place to begin is with truth.

The realism of the world the Word reveals is not a goody-two-shoes kind. We read about incest, prostitution, giving up a daughter as a living sacrifice due to a vain vow, adultery, hate, murder, as in driving a tent stake through a warrior's head after lying to him. So we don't need to pretend that some soulful form of sanitized Victorianism was the state of mind of the authors or Author of such passages. If the realism of the Word exposes realities sometimes shocking or emotionally loaded, seeming a bitter pill to swallow, we should expect similarities in our everyday existence, as it was with Jesus. We may search for the invisible in faith, forever propelled forward, but also have the business of the world to be about, the bare brute reality of it.

I should be able to describe a patch of ground so faithfully that you would know it if you came upon it (imaginative fantasies of moonscapes won't do), and could traverse it if you had to, with no hazard to your life. To do less for the interior landscape of a woman or man or child, or the pitfalls the world presents to them, is irresponsible. If my prose sets before you a naked person, as church painters

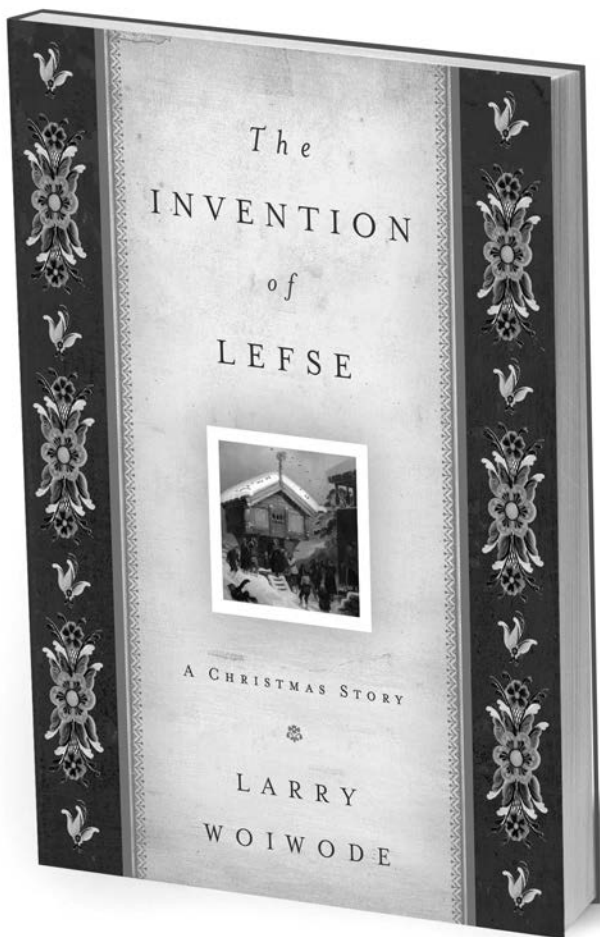
do, in a representation of his or her beauty, or to remind you of its pitfalls, and I've done all I can to keep the image from being a temptation, I'm able to say I've presented something pure and beautiful, so why do your thoughts run in another direction?

Writers may be reformers after they reform themselves and their outlook, but they aren't reformers if they aren't shaping contemporary experience and phenomena into forms that illustrate a dependence on, and captivity to, ultimate form. Chaos can't be illustrated without order to depart from, and it's up to writers, as it's been for centuries, to help us find our way around this home on earth, whatever our place on it.

Christian writers, especially, should be suggesting directions for our culture, as they have since Shakespeare, rather than scrambling backward to find favor with whatever "readership." If I merely sit in a pew once a week, content to rest in the patriarchal embrace of previous believers or, worse, if I'm self-satisfied and smug, my faith and works are dying on the vine, if not long-past dead. I've placed a burden on the backs of my children that won't be easy or light, and left work undone for them to undertake. So if I shy from describing the worst winter landscape or a person as that person epitomizes the truth, that is, if I retreat into the arena of false prudery or the social consensus of what some might term *taste*, which is not in the list above and is as changeable as clothes, then somebody may never be able to make their way through that inscape, and I've lied to you and my children—the little ones I'm not to offend. This is the literal hell of any writer.

Children are called out, too, to lead lives in a world that it is my duty to portray with accuracy and passion—this planet, this earth, this precious place spinning through its fixed purposes each hour. I reach from my armor to that generation, as I reach to you, reader, to say we are sanctified by Truth. That Truth is accessible to all and exists forever as our enfolding home.

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