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MEDITATIONS ON DEATH AND THE SUBLIME:  
HENRY BUGBEE'S *IN DEMONSTRATION OF THE SPIRIT*

What would that beauty be  
if we did not mourn from the outset  
the imminent destruction of such radiance?

-- David Farrell Krell, *The Tragic Absolute*

Philosophy ought really to be written  
only as a poetic composition  
--Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*

**H**ow do religion, philosophy, and lyric prose or poetry intermingle and animate each other—the first especially in its commemoration of the dead and celebration of the living, the second especially in its exploration of reason and ethics at their limits, the third especially in bringing us to saving passions and epiphanies?

This is not a question I want to approach at the level of theory or culture or academic disciplinary charts. It's a question or conundrum, an uneasiness, which I explore by taking up the detail of one particular thinker's immersion in it. How does a particularly gifted individual, in this case, the American philosopher Henry Bugbee, play out in his arresting writing the inter-animations of a poetic, philosophical, and religious sensibility? We shall begin with a cue from the Spanish thinker, Ortega y Gasset, who understood his *Meditations on Quixote* as "essays in intellectual love." They are what "a humanist of the seventeenth century would have called 'salvations.'"<sup>1</sup> Henry Bugbee's meditations, from his 1936 thesis *In Demonstration of the Spirit* on through his mid-50s *The Inward Morning*, seem to be luminous instances of such "salvations". They take us through death folded *within* the sublime to a death rent and overtaken by the sublime. Writing "salvations" is writing redemptions. Hearing them can also be the same. But that's to rush the story.

I. Life's Intimate Expanse

Henry Bugbee graduated from Princeton in 1936 with a major in philosophy and a senior thesis to his credit. He entitled it *In Demonstration of the Spirit*. His

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote*, 31.

supervisor was Werner Fite, a well-known philosopher in his time whose name still appears as the translator of the Spanish philosopher Miguel de Unamuno's experimental (today we'd say "postmodern") *Mist, a Tragicomic Novel*.<sup>2</sup> In addition to pursuing philosophy and literature, while at Princeton Bugbee rowed varsity crew and pursued a life-long love of music. He grew up in Manhattan, prowling all its neighborhoods, as Whitman had. He also held a seat at Carnegie Hall. If you check the last pages of *In Demonstration of the Spirit*, you will discover immediately following the last book entry a list of classical recordings that Bugbee testifies have made his philosophical ventures possible. He also cites, as inspiration, a cycle of Wagner performances he has attended during the Metropolitan Opera's most recent season. We sense this is no ordinary thesis, and no ordinary East Coast college senior.

The writer roots his thesis in then-current and still roiling debates about the aesthetic and the sacred, and how each relates to reason within a full life. He also enters debates about the tension between natural science and technical competence on the one hand, and art, social life, and religion on the other. No doubt "tension" is too weak an image. Bugbee fears that art, religion, and a vital sense of life itself are losing ground to a technocratic specter in league with a dogma, the debilitating view that only science asks the real questions. This dual threat haunts both reflection and living.

Henry Bugbee wanted, most of all, to root his academic writing in the frankly non-academic way he took up music or the works of Melville or Thoreau, the way he took up city walking, mountain brooks, or lakes. Twenty years later, in *The Inward Morning*, we could read accounts that reflect the capacious range of worlds outside technical philosophy that he would claim as touchstones of reality—of that vibrant inescapable tactile reality that arrested, engulfed, and called him close to heart. Composed in 1952 and 53 and first published in 1958, this philosophical journal shows the breadth, intensity, and lyricism of his thesis come to full maturity. Take this glimpse of school-day saunters in swamps. It is early spring, rotten ice still underfoot, and a strange wavering of mood befitting the change of season:

Of course there were pines, darkly green here and there, or massed in bunches, but when they spoke it was in awesome chorus of a cold wind and grey sky. And when the pines said nothing, they just stood around inane, giving way to the visible aptness of the bare-limbed trees.<sup>3</sup>

Some years later there were mornings of concerted action, of college rowing, sometimes in an eight, sometimes in a single scull, the rigger and coach, John Schultz, an abiding and demanding presence:

<sup>2</sup> *Mist: a tragic-comic novel*, trans. Werner Fite, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928; Chicago: University of Illinois, 2000.

<sup>3</sup> *The Inward Morning*, 43.

It was as if rowing had a kind of ground-bass meaning for him which underlay the constancy of his concern and seemed to him to demand relevance from the oarsman in each and every stroke. And so he momently expected each one of us to wake up on the end of an oar. This infinite expectation of dawn often made him seem unreasonable. What did he want of us, anyway?<sup>4</sup>

Mid-stream in the progress of *The Inward Morning*, we encounter Bugbee's sense that music was his entry into the realms of philosophical thinking:

[B]ut for the music which aroused and defined a sense of unconditional reality in me, I doubt if I would have found it relevant to reflect on our condition in a way that drew me to the works of philosophers as speaking to that condition.<sup>5</sup>

And there are those moments he tells of life and death, beauty and destruction, searing accounts of suicide attacks approaching from the sky in the Pacific—not easy to read, nor to imagine, enduring something like that in anything like readiness or poise.

And I saw the plane brought to focus in the sky by the converging cone of fire from ours and other ships. It kept on and on, and as it came on without deviation toward its target it seemed to be standing still in the sky, hanging, hanging, hanging upon the air. In that hanging moment of the undeviating plane, in that moment when the Chief became continuous fire, gun and plane came to seem one, so that we might as well have had the pilot aboard and the Chief might have been at the controls of the plane.<sup>6</sup>

Still later in the journal, in that iconic passage we've encountered, he confides, "I think of the suicide planes which I *witnessed*; . . . what I make of them, of the lives perishing in flames, is still unfinished business . . ."<sup>7</sup>

These apocalyptic, transformative moments came to pass eight years after *In Demonstration of the Spirit*, and eight years before he recounted them in *The Inward Morning*.

## II. Evocations of the Spirit

Henry Bugbee was a serious student and also an adventurer. He walked Manhattan streets late at night, listened to jazz in Harlem, and hitched freights (it was the Great Depression) into the heartland plains to harvest wheat. He

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 188.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 225.

pursued music in concert halls and record shops. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche takes music to be the primal source of his vision, a tragic one, which alone is sufferable by a reflective person. As early as his Princeton thesis, Henry (as everyone was to call him) invites us to hear the power of music as speaking to (and from) the deepest levels of self and nature. He was impish enough to cast a musical lure toward the author of *A General Theory of Relativity*. Einstein would amble down the corridor each day to lunch, taking a short cut that led him by Bugbee's room. To hook the rumpled cogitator Bugbee left the door ajar and raised the volume of a Mozart piece just enough to lure him into conversation. Of course the music of the Psalms and the insistence of Pauline Letters also inhabit this writing. The surprise and shadow of lived experience—not excluding experience arriving through literature or scripture—played a commanding part for him.

As if to emphasize this breadth, he titled his thesis In *Demonstration of the Spirit*. As we will come to know, “demonstration” is not accomplished by blackboard proofs or Hegelian dialectics. It will come by way of displays or evocations—evocations accomplished by music, by rivers, by sailors or flashing trout, by just *being* there as witness to a man miraculously saved from certain death. Here is the setting and its drama, recounted above, and accordingly slightly abbreviated here:

There came a cry for help, seconded with a cry of fright, and I turned toward the tail of the pool just in time to see a young man desperately, failingly, clinging to a great log. . . . An enormous suction under the log. . . . drew him ineluctably under. . . . But it chanced that the river was abnormally high, and as it carried this helpless man doomward it swept him just for an instant under the extremity of a willow. . . . With a wild clutch the young man seized a gathering of the supple branches and held. . . . I had run across the log and arrived on the opposite side below the willow, where he now paused, panting and on all fours, unable to rise. Slowly he raised his head and we looked into each other's eyes. . . . He seemed absolutely clean. . . . I think of Meister Eckhart's “becoming as we were before we were born.”<sup>8</sup>

These moments have their say as demonstration, display, evocation—instilled by and instilling spirit, bringing us to death and its undoing.

Bugbee's writing instills a listening absorption co-present with responsive articulation and sorting out. In *The Inward Morning*, we find this listening absorption as he brings us to the innocence of rivers or to routines at sea, to the serenity of trees or to terrifying fire from the sky or to the befalling grace of snow. His lyric passages—to tumult, wonder, or serenity—seamlessly give life to the remembered.

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<sup>8</sup> *The Inward Morning*, 172.

### III. Spirit's Reach

The Spirit to which Bugbee alludes in his undergraduate thesis is meant to be as encompassing as possible within a broadly biblical tradition. It is unfolded as revelation or epiphany, a showing or “demonstration” that rings with St. Paul’s, “I speak not in enticing words of man’s wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit.”<sup>9</sup> To Paul, it was primarily the Person, the Christ, who was called forth in demonstration of the Spirit. As Bugbee’s writing matures, exemplary persons, rooted or walking in places that call on their depths, remain touchstones of what he’ll call reality—an experiential, viscerally known reality. And increasingly he attends to the *things of creation*—in their bounteous unfolding. Not unlike Heidegger, whom he had not yet read, they call forth, into a light of the place.

Each of the chapters of his thesis opens with a short biblical epigraph, unobtrusively entered; a framing device that we’d certainly find unacceptable in present-day academic prose. Inhabiting secular universities and colleges, we learn to deliver words appropriately distanced from intimations of a first-person religious sensibility. Between his undergraduate writing and his post-war publications, the style of academic thought had shifted decisively toward the secular. But even for the 30s, his writing was exceptionally personal. Of course, the hegemony of technical knowledge transmission and production has only consolidated its cultural and academic grip. Wisdom, insight, and illumination have become scraps in a stripped-down, rationalized academy, a mirror image of their meager interest in the wider culture, where they appear as shards, or abandoned sentimental objects, in an ever-expanding landfill.

In more ways than one, Henry Bugbee’s thesis of 1936 seems dated. It evinces an intimate, passionate intensity that can, at least by present measures, seem well beyond the pale. It is unapologetic in its quite impassioned celebration of a European thinker, novelist, and public intellectual, Miguel de Unamuno, known for his existentialist meditations, especially *The Tragic Sense of Life*. Unamuno wrote from life’s exigencies and exaltations as he underwent them, evoking the fragility of life, the wonder of love, the threat of violence spilling into the horrors of war and massacre. Without apology, the thesis cites an ineffable musical spirit as a source. Frankly biblical lines provide title and chapter epigraphs. And as an *undergraduate* thesis, there’s something daring, extravagant, and surely imprudent in having chapters that in succession give his evaluative overviews not just of a writer like Unamuno, but of ethics and value theory, of philosophy of science and of technological culture, of the nature of consciousness and of Kant’s Third Critique. And in a final provocation, Bugbee ends his thesis with an unblushing “Amen”—as I hear it, a word that acknowledges a kind of blessing (as Cavell will put it in *A Pitch of Philosophy*) that has instilled voice and poise.<sup>10</sup>

### IV. A Kantian Sublime

<sup>9</sup> 1 Cor 2:4.

<sup>10</sup> On his “Amen”, see my *On Søren Kierkegaard, Dialogue, Polemic, Lost Intimacy, and Time*, Ashgate, 2007, Ch. 12.

In his thesis Henry lays out the collision between freedom and deadening constraint, between our sense that our lively, "existential" projects and self-conceptions have some real non-illusory significance, and the contrary conviction that nature takes our presence indifferently, even hostilely—paying no heed either to meanings that set free, or to our powers of eloquence in the service of voicing them. The clash between freedom and an oblivious nature can frame a tragic fate. Bugbee finds tragedy confirmed in Unamuno, writing as Spain's glory spun toward death, and Bugbee even anticipates Deleuze, framing Kant as a tragic philosopher, defeated by the clash of freedom and nature.

The clash of brute force and freedom can be figured as "the sublime". In a single striking moment, we sense the convergence of external humbling power and of a strange uplift or cleansing, a quiet pleasure that one is witness to such power, partaking in a dangerous glory from a place where fate has been suspended or surpassed. As Kant or Burke would have it, a raging storm humbles our will, yet energizes self-apprehension. It's a scene as old as the Whirlwind appearing to Job in the Old Testament. Our aspirations to mastery and full cognitive grasp are depleted even as a freedom to be in dignified wonder or awe is instilled.

It seems likely that "the" sublime is not a single sort of phenomenal encounter but rather a family of such encounters in which one's expected wooden or routine apprehensions are radically shaken. Edmund Burke found "the" sublime in our fascination with terrible storms and mountain peaks (viewed from relative safety). Though they instill fear of death, we cannot avert our eyes.<sup>11</sup> Kant distinguishes "a dynamic sublime", found in power and turbulence, from "a mathematical sublime", where vastness stretches without limit, as in the case of starry heavens above.<sup>12</sup> George Pattison finds a sublime associated with the "spectacular city," a vortex of spectacles, where bustle, confusion, and dizzying kaleidoscopic sights threaten not death, but the anxiety and allure of radical disorientation.<sup>13</sup> Under the aegis of "the" sublime, a mountain is not just a mountain, a city, not just a city. Each site so framed portends an uncanny, inexhaustible depth we're drawn to comprehend but can't. Even persons might be sublime, a center inexhaustibly coiling passions or unrest, as caught in The Mona Lisa's smile, open to such endless troubling interpretation. Job's encounter with the Storm is surely an epitome. It's humbling and fearsome yet portends life (as well as death). In a strange mix of anxiety and fascination there is a momentary loss of will and cognitive grasp.

From Kant's point of view, that phase of depletion can't be sustained for long, and shouldn't be. Yielding before vastness or power hints at incipient servility

<sup>11</sup> Burke, Edmund, *On the Sublime and the Beautiful*, The Harvard Classics, ed. Charles W. Eliot, New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14.

<sup>12</sup> Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Judgment*, 'analytic of the sublime,' New York: Barnes & Noble, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> See "Poor Paris!": Kierkegaard's *Critique of the Spectacular City*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1999.

or weakness (as the upright Kant hears it)—as if an emptying of the self before wonders were necessarily humiliating. Accordingly, he quickly posits a recovery of dignity in a subsequent knowledge that only a rational being could witness such grandeur: thus are the indignities of a near humiliation avoided. However great the storm or mountain that I face, *it is I, a creature blessed with rational consciousness*, who faces it.

Bugbee will amend this recovering phase of the Kantian account. To gather poise after momentary deflation does not require an assertion of rational dignity—as if the self needed to rear up to show its most noble credentials. Without a sliver of humiliation, one might bask in the sustained wonder that there are *things there* to speak! To melt before powerful significance is to relinquish willfulness and self-importance, and stay open to untold splendor. Self-emptying might be salutary, a quasi-religious antidote to the pervasive liability of overweening pride in a release from a drive to mastery. There is no need to follow Kant (as Bugbee has it) in rushing to reinstall reason and dignity.

In the current academic climate, the sublime has become an object of dispraise or suspicion. An interest in the overpowering or vast, not to mention a recovery in Kantian self-assertion and autonomy, is a cover, so it's argued, for projects of domination and violence.<sup>14</sup> How do we reach this unhappy pass? How does a bracing witness to an awesome storm become reconfigured as a breeding ground for suspect cultural and political stratagems?

Perhaps it's assumed that praising the wild, spectacular, and threatening arouses the hyper-masculine fantasy of a counter-punch, as if the sight of a tiger triggered the scenario of the hunt: *if it's wild, shoot it!* But is the slaughter of buffalo or elephants really compatible with recognition of their sublimity? Edmund Burke took the tiger as a token of the sublime, but whether it counts as sublime depends on the disposition of the viewer. To the hunter, the hunted is not sublime but at best a noble adversary, and at worst a power to eradicate, a competitor to subdue. In any case, the problem is not that the sublime instigates killing but that a killing instinct cannot countenance a moment of sublimity when as a hunter (say) he might relinquish power, or sideline the desire to overpower any power he confronts. Aggression is hardly the only non-servile response to the momentous or powerful, and it is opposite of a humility that the sublime instills.

Critics also link the sublime to mesmerizing and subduing political devices. The tyrant blares Beethoven over militaristic parades that dazzle the crowds. But why take these spectacles as instances of sublimity? The sublime (for Burke or Kant) has nothing to do with mastery of crowds through stagecraft. It's the final *refutation* of all such imperial dreams. In a pathetic miscue, just after the attacks

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<sup>14</sup> Cf. "Toward an Ecological Sublime", Christopher Hitt, *New Literary History*, 30.3, 1999. Among leaders in a campaign against the sublime, writing from Marxist, deconstructive, and Freudian perspectives, are Terry Eagleton, Paul de Man, Frances Ferguson, and Niel Hert.

of 9/11, the German composer Stockhausen remarked with cruel insensitivity that the event was “the greatest work of art in the world”—a spectacle that any artist would wish to have orchestrated! Thus can “the sublime” be co-opted and abused. Surely awe and wonder at, say, creation have their place. Wonder linked to human destructiveness is properly moral horror, not a melting before the sublime.

We might take some pride, from a Kantian perspective, reigned in well short of self-congratulation, in being present to the majesty of a mountain. Melville (and Bugbee) would even ask whether a remnant of pride is well-placed. A sublime impact—what Melville would call its mystic moment—can effect religious self-emptying. But this is not self-annihilation and co-exists with satisfactions and ease that refuses grandiosity and self-inflation. It can refuse plans to tame or corner the unmanageable or wild. Mammoth waves can beckon the surfer, but they can also instill a reminder that our conquering has limits, and that to acknowledge them is not obsequious. In Kant’s appreciation, death seems precisely *not* to foster the idea of rebellion or taking arms or steps toward mastery. “Starry heavens above” bring Kant to wonder, not to the imperial dream of getting to the moon.

When a Whirlwind accosts Job, his will-to-protest is silenced. Under stars or great whirlwinds we may realize we’re only dust in the largest scale of things—and melt as before great music. In this, we learn the wisdom of letting be, of forgoing mastery, of a submission to the world that is a kind of love and acceptance of it.

#### V. Death, Violence, and What Matters

Death is linked to the sublime, but not as the simple thought that you could die in an ocean storm. A storm can present imminent danger, and if I am about to drown, survival will preempt any impulse to bask wonderingly in its fury. To be swept or thrown off is traumatic or cruel, not sublime. Yet there can be something refreshing, restoring, in seeing high waves from the safety of a cliff. If I have room for awe, wonder or fascination (as well as fear), death can be an occasion for transformative insight. The non-imminent but hauntingly possible presence of death reminds me that from the standpoint of the sea’s vast power I could be alive or dead, perish or be spared, and it would matter *not a whit* to the sea, to the sky, to creation.

Worse than my biological death is the thought that it doesn’t matter if I live or die, suffer or rejoice, if others listen or turn a deaf ear. From the vast perspective of the sublime, we matter not at all. This dashes Promethean aspirations and belittles our wish for enveloping love and attention. But will can be flattened in an experience of the sublime, without portending annihilation of the world. We may matter not at all, but from that it does not follow that *nothing* matters. Things beyond our will can matter still: stars and storms, shafts of winter light, an infant’s smile.

Artists can feel rebuked by the sublime, for it seems to undo their capacity to depict what is so massively *there!* It seems bent on eluding conceptual, linguistic, or imagistic grasp -- as if genius were required to even start. There may be misguided attempts at capture, but mere mortals fail. Perhaps artists out to depict the sublime garner not success in *grasping* it, but success in grasping the truth that all we will ever have is *attempts that fall short*.

Think of how quickly the conceptual or psychological region we're testing eludes our grasp. Are we annihilated or empowered in the presence of the sublime? Is facing it fearful, or fascinating? Does it exceed the power of poetry or music, or is it well suited to bring out the best in gifted artists? The impact of the sublime heralds both significance of surpassing importance and a power to squelch all steps to convey it. As I see Bugbee finds that the sublime opens a necessary corrective to standing, pernicious assumptions. In an age of ego, acquisitiveness, endless competition and conquest, the sublime opens an unassuming, power-renouncing receptivity at once moral, religious, and aesthetic.

By the time *The Inward Morning* begins to take shape, no vestige remains of Kant's view that the saving grace of the sublime is its affording an occasion for affirming reason and autonomy. That conceit rings of self-congratulation, and denial of mortality and dependence. If the sublime exposes our mortal presence in an overarching creation, then it's fitting to halt ever-expanding autonomy, to embrace dependence on and with others, placed among the things of creation.<sup>15</sup> Bugbee tunes life-affirming flows of wonder, awe, and care, preserving and memorializing these in lyrical rendition and living speech.

*The Inward Morning* is anything but morbid, but Henry does confess, in the journal's preface, to writing in a continuous awareness of death. Many of his exquisite narratives give us an uncanny *closeness* to death's dance with life—and life's, with death.<sup>16</sup> Witness the young man swept toward the rapids, the kamikaze descending, fish leaping high and hooked. This tensed interplay of life and death, power and impotence, clarity and mystery, displays the sublime in our presence to the wild (and within it, a presence to the serene). Although the sublime is not an explicit term for him in *The Inward Morning*, the phenomenon bursts through, now indexed as "wilderness". One might even see in wilderness the transfiguration of what otherwise might be the only terrible or traumatic.

Not only presence to wonders in music, art, and literature, but presence to wilderness becomes, he avers, the unifying theme of his life. The wild intimates a sacred place, a place of and for neighbors and companions where spirit speaks not just in human syllables but through fast water, distant peaks, and flurries of

<sup>15</sup> For a defense of dependence, see my "What has Hegel to Do with Henry James? Acknowledgment, Dependence, and Having a Life of One's Own," *Inquiry* [Oslo], 2002, and *The Loss of Intimacy in American Thought: Recovering Personal Philosophy from Thoreau to Cavell*, Continuum Books, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> See the exploration of dancing with death in my "Transfigurations: The Intimate Agency of Death" in *Kierkegaard and Death*, ed. Stokes and Buben, forthcoming.

snow, through the cacophony and then music of night-bells in Taxco, through the plunging bow of a ship at sea, through attention to a campus bell that calls him to his next hour:

It would seem to me that the bell spoke a final word in the soul, the meaning of coming to be and passing away, perennial, always and always, ever so, just as now. . . . It seemed to key me to the vein of ultimacy in which philosophical reflection must move; many times, I know, it summoned me into the attitude of prayer, teaching me the namelessness of that which [we] must serve.<sup>17</sup>

## VI. Being and Beings: the Dissertation

As a graduate student at Berkeley before the war, Bugbee wavered between literature and philosophy. In his second semester he gathered his professors: which discipline should he follow? They demurred; in the event he chose philosophy. He would focus on aesthetics, working under the Hegel scholar, Jacob Loewenberg. But he did not leave his literary, existential, and even religious sensibilities far behind. *The Inward Morning* would convey the arbitrariness disciplinary and cultural divisions of labor. A journal is a thing of the day. Writing of the day, for this philosopher, will lay out a biblical site where we can live and move and have our being. It is a site for Eckhart and for Job's Whirlwind, for Shakespeare, Melville, and Thoreau. There are intervals on Spinoza's blessedness and necessity, on Stoic resignation, Kant's reflective judgments, and Tillich's ultimate concern. There is no discernible disciplinary grid. *The Inward Morning* invites us gently by the greeting of its title. The title of Bugbee's Berkeley dissertation is starkly forbidding: *The Sense and the Conception of Being*.

Completed in 1948, the dissertation develops a broad notion of the aesthetic as containing and revealing a sense of Being. For Bugbee, Being is not an onto-theological abstraction but fundamentally experiential, something *sensed* rather than only conceptualized or system driven. There were few signs from 1938 to 1941 of any such dissertation taking shape. Pearl Harbor put a quick stop to expectations. Bugbee became Captain of a minesweeper that survived typhoons and kamikaze attacks. Before the war his sense of being and the sublime took heart from music, books, or mountain treks. Now in the time of the dissertation it is remembered under aspects that are more desolate, ferocious, and wounding. The sense of dangerous confluences of life and death and the precariousness of survival must have enveloped absolutely everything. Yet there were also evenings at anchor, quiet, far from home. There was much to absorb of men teamed not just for battle, but for the everyday tasks of maintenance, moving through varied seas, lonely months on end.

There was time to think about these things in 1946 and 1947, yet as I read Bugbee's Berkeley dissertation, there's no discernible after-shock of war.

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<sup>17</sup> *The Inward Morning*, 229.

Perhaps it was still all too close. Six years later, the war figures prominently in *The Inward Morning*, where it becomes thematically continuous with wilderness he had known since his youth, and to which he returned after the war. In Henry's dissertation "the sense of being" can be figured as a sense of the sublime. In a memorable evocation near its center, Henry in fact paints a majestic alpine scene that stands in as an experience of Being. It is Being experienced through attention to *beings*. Being is exposed in rising peaks, racing clouds, crumbling talus slopes, pines and it also appears through attention to the soft coming of snow.

[With the snow] each thing which had stood out, crying in resistance to the wind, now lapses and is lost in a pervasive still. Bird, bush, mountain, animal, stick, and stone—each is left to itself, alone, as in [a] timeless slumber. The wildness is sealed in silence. . . . What blanches things visible, blotting mass and form, absorbing their very thinghood? What in this obscuring is hushedly revealing? What but the pure and secret presence that is snow? <sup>18</sup>

This is a precursor to Henry's later *The Inward Morning* passage, that iconic passage where wilderness brings instruction in the Canadian Rockies.

I weighed everything by the measure of the silent presence of things, clarified in the racing clouds, clarified by the cry of hawks, solidified in the presence of rocks, spelled syllable by syllable by waters of manifold voice, and consolidated in the act of taking steps, each step a meditation steeped in reality.<sup>19</sup>

An alpine storm, a vastness of the sea, a wilderness vista -- these diminish, yet animate the self. Each conjures a spirit that supercedes, suspends, or transcends the vulnerability of the body to the ravages of nature or of war.

Is Chief Johnson firing on a diving plane an instance of the sublime? It might be riveting to behold that plane against the endless sky. But in the event, it's primarily seen as impending death that must be met with counter-force. It might speak otherwise if I find myself relatively safe, but this is terribly unavailable to those on a ship under fire. The sort of poise in recollection that we find in Bugbee's journal, written eight years after the events, gathers from the years and distance now separating him from the actual attack. Perhaps the recollections in *The Inward Morning* are healing, a therapeutic retelling of terrifying and deeply wounding events that still call achingly for restorative interpretation. Even so, acknowledging the traumatic doesn't close all the gaps for a powerful sense of the sublime to emerge—muffled in battle, more available later. It can saturate an image of the plane hanging in the sky, and then linking Chief and pilot.

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<sup>18</sup> Henry G. Bugbee, *The Sense and the Conception of Being*, PhD diss. 1947, University of California, Berkeley, 69.

<sup>19</sup> *The Inward Morning*, 139.

Storms and a sea's vastness may intimate mortality, or scream its imminence. But perhaps in memory it can reverse the tide, can intimate mortality's undoing. Vastness and power overtake and rend the self, leaving it, in a sense, hanging timelessly—and thus, in that sense, in that moment, immune. The sense of Being is the sense of the evanescence of beings passing in and out of wondrous presence. So death is not the only word, nor necessarily the last word. It might always be next to last, as birth presages death, and from death springs birth in the ephemeral cycles of creation: mortality answered by natality, flowing always unfinished.

#### VII. Is there an Ethical Sublime?

The account of the firing and counter-firing in the Pacific depicts much more than exposure where individual survival is at stake. Skills, sure footedness, cooperation, and courage make life in such circumstances much more than a desperately thrashing fight to survive. There is also the moment Bugbee imagines the Chief and pilot transposed, a moment that transcends this site of raw vulnerability. We are perishable bodies but not only that. Kant and Burke presented sublimity in wild storms or open skies, and it might also hover, as we've seen, over cities or a Mona Lisa smile. Now in a particularly wrenching moment of deadly fire in the Pacific, we might find ethics, too, infused by a dark sublimity.

Ethics might be a set of laws or rules or an array of Apollonian ideals. But it can also be a domain verging on the wildly Dionysian, a place of immediately impacting calls, solicitations, or demands.<sup>20</sup> The terribly wild terrain of this wartime event in the Pacific is a time that threatens to explode yet sustain an uncanny moral center. As such, it might instance an ethical sublime.

If the Chief might as well have been the pilot, and the pilot, the Chief, then they are not *only* enemies, and perhaps not enemies at all. They share a moral status, a humanity, and in that become transposable. The perceived exchange of positions effects and seals this moment as an instance of the ethical sublime. Each now inhabits a status transcending their perishable bodies in that despite perishing as flesh and blood, they are and forever will be preserved as persons. This is to deny that in death each will be no more than a corpse, fodder for the sea, as if never having been born. Yet if each aims to annihilate the other, how do we fathom this status of equal imperishability as persons of moral worth?

When battle erupts for great Homeric warriors, neither hero preemptively casts his adversary as evil. Each is a worthy opponent to the other. Fate will bring them to battle, and sometimes a sense of justice will, but hardly ever, it seems, do they enter battle with the thought that the other is brutish or evil or subhuman. In this they are like Olympic wrestlers rather than flag-bearers for a cosmic good. (It's another story for Homer's warriors *after* a battle, when custom allowed the

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<sup>20</sup> See *On Søren Kierkegaard*, p. 197-9.

victor to desecrate the defeated.) Zen warriors might see each other as adversaries but not evil, and so might honor even he whom they set out to kill. The idea that behind each battle is the instigation of an enemy who is evil who must be destroyed with due heartlessness would be foreign to both Homeric and Zen warriors.

Bugbee says he cannot believe that the pilot and Chief are enemies to each other – or that he himself faced enemies, problematic as that sounds. “Is it not true that we were not enemies? And who will believe this, how can it be believed?”<sup>21</sup> If we grant this shared humanity we preserve in the midst of deadly confrontation the contrast between the unspeakable toll in death and suffering and the high moral standing of adversaries. Neither is subhuman to the other. That is as hard to believe as the faith that in concrete human exchange, the ethical is always inviolably present. Because this moment humbles yet exalts our sense of ethics I call it an instance of the ethical sublime.

Bugbee does not provide a detailed interpretation of that moment. No doubt he fears that switching to analysis would weaken its impact, for him and for us. It suffices for him, I suspect, that he that he leaves no trace that he or the gunner preserve the good against the assault of incoming pilot. But if this is not a collision of good and evil – what is it?

A tragic view—the sort of view that Bugbee embraces in his undergraduate thesis—would see these combatants as equally committed in the conflict that befalls them. The conflict is tragic because they are thrown into battle by fate, they have no escape, and they cannot but do grievous damage, however shattering their actions will seem to them in hindsight. This may be close to Bugbee’s sense of things, but he doesn’t say that it is. Why not? He tries in *The Inward Morning* to stay close to the particulars of his experience, which are perhaps too varied to be grouped under a single broad heading like “the tragic sense of life.”<sup>22</sup> He is explicit in a refusal to generalize quasi-metaphysically about evil or tragedy or calamity.

Bugbee won’t take some particular crisis or horror or delight as emblematic of some larger class of events and their general import. Looking for the generalization abandons the shifting specificity of what we do and undergo, in its telling detail. Necessarily more abstract summations, in his view, distract from the singular grain of experience in whose irreducible and often opaque complexities I must live (and die). And there are contrasting arrays of epiphanies that fall outside the heading of tragedy. Bugbee recounts moments of deep celebration and gratitude, of rebirth and dawn, moments of rejoicing and moving compassion, redolent of New Testament themes. What would it be to weigh disaster against dawn, as if we held a reliable balance, and the significance of one could be seen to shadow its other? Better stick to the grain of experience. Even in his student thesis, tragic and counter-tragic notes sound sequentially,

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<sup>21</sup> *The Inward Morning*, 226.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 225.

like shifts from minor to major keys. He is haunted by death and by spirit strangely resurrected from the dead; by Unamuno's not solely tragic but tragic-comic vision; by mortality in phase with natality; by Eckhart's moment before we are born—that we may be born from the dead into morning (and, let us admit, no small portion of mourning).

Perhaps no single narrative or lyric assembly of insight can gather all that calls to be gathered. That would be to live under a sublime. In any case, both tragedy and comedy deeply discredit the illusion of one right, one wrong. Perhaps it's two rights, no wrong, or one good-enough right but no evil, or two wrongs. However you cut it, it's enough to make you weep, given that fateful suffering, even if a comic reconciliation were to supervene. We are close to Dante's in a dark wood, lost, yet yearning to emerge into creation's redeeming light.

Perhaps we should rest with that image, so reminiscent of Heidegger and of Thoreau, of a dark wood and clearing, but let me think, for a moment, of the relevance of Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*. Nietzsche takes over from Schopenhauer the idea that music expresses the truths of our tragic condition. Now whether or not existence is wholly, or only, tragic, Bugbee could agree that music provides uncanny access to its mystery. His affirmation of cycles ephemeral evanescence resonates with Nietzsche's affirmation of eternal recurrence (all things go under and return—to go under again). Whereas Bugbee greets rebirth with unqualified affirmation (how could one reject morning light?!), Nietzsche flirts with the possibility of a wholesale rejection of life, birth, or rebirth.

Nietzsche has Silenus whisper unnervingly from an extreme edge of possibility that it's "best never to have been born -- and next best, to die early."<sup>23</sup> This echoes Ecclesiastes (4:2-3):

And I thought the dead who have already died more fortunate than the living, who are still alive; but better than both is the one who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun.

Birth and life become a cause for grief (and death, cause for celebration). Yet Nietzsche also has Achilles: "better to live as a day-laborer than to die, even if one were to become ruler of the dead."<sup>24</sup>

In effect, Nietzsche valorizes the dark ambiguity created by this juxtaposition of Silenus and Achilles. A tension between tragedy and celebration permeates Bugbee's world, as well, but for him, tragedy is never as bleak as a Silenus extreme. On another front, still in *The Birth of Tragedy* and in a sentiment Bugbee would recognize, Nietzsche laments the emergence of a theory-based Socratic-

<sup>23</sup> Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, § 3, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 22-4.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

Platonic culture that overtakes the dark vitality of tragic culture. Both join in praise of a wilderness or wild that overwhelms any narrow Platonic aspirations for abstract reason and rationalist clarity, secured only from a great and distorting distance.

### VIII. Not Death Alone: Ethics and Transcendence

The gunner fires in utter concentration at the oncoming plane, "making the prayer of his life." As Bugbee says, he's "burning out that gun with the white fire of his soul."<sup>25</sup> Now the oncoming pilot, too, may be making the prayer of his life. He emerges from behind the horizon, out of sight at first. Bugbee can't read his full body. Yet the plane finally comes close enough that he can glimpse his face, just before a glide over the deck and into a surging wave. Yet why not attribute to each an equal moral intensity? If pilot and Chief each make the prayer of their lives, in that respect they bear witness to a shared dedication as well as to a shared humanity.

This emphatic event carries a moral revelation in a powerful irruption whose scale and intensity resembles the sublime revelation Job receives through the Whirlwind. The tie between Chief and pilot is exemplary and includes transcendence. As Bugbee has it, in that instant: ". . . I saw beyond the war." He adds, "Into this transcendence, the Chief carried us all."<sup>26</sup> If war had become only heartless duty and lifeless routine, at that moment all that is transcended. And if war was ever was ever driven moralistically, self-righteously, now that is transcended in the perception that the Chief and Pilot share common ground. If it were ever a zealous or holy crusade, that is transcended. A radiant sunrise can break through the stock perception that time transpires at an even, uneventful pace—throwing us then into the glory and surprise of creation's dawn. Just so, the radiance of simple human dedication can break through the dark of war's otherwise bitter disasters.

In a passage further on in *The Inward Morning*, Bugbee takes up the suicide attacks again. It's now many years later, far from the heat of action. We hear an aching sense of responsibility for the deaths of those he shot down.

I think of the suicide planes which I witnessed; oh! They still call out to me, and what I make of them, of the lives perishing in flames, is still unfinished business.<sup>27</sup>

If he has glimpsed his adversary's humanity, how can he have been part of those fiery deaths? Some eight years later, he struggles to understand how he might answer for that – might be answer for *them*.

<sup>25</sup> *The Inward Morning*, 187.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 188.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 225-6.

Their deaths cannot be undone, nor can his implication in them be erased or forgotten. This is a moment of tragic recognition. He will have “unfinished business” with those men through his dying day. He sees the horror of killing a man making “the prayer of his life”—yet how could it have been otherwise? Fate seems to rule over the encounter. And if he now cries out that he must *be* the answer to those lives, then the cry is at least a prayer that he may have such strength to be answer in the living out of a gentle prayer. Bugbee doesn’t respond to the approach of death with some version of the plea, “Why me?”—nor with the bromide that if evil is to be defeated, violence is (I’m so sorry) unfortunately necessary. The thought, “I don’t deserve to die—he does!” counts as moralism. Bugbee sees only the soul that in the long run he alone must answer for.

There’s a difference between giving an answer for one’s deeds (where we imagine a short speech in something like a court of law), and *being* the answer for one’s deeds, where we imagine the pattern of one’s actual living, its exemplariness, as the only “answer” that might in the circumstance even approach sufficiency. Bugbee calls his answer “articulating a true prayer”. But at the least this abjures the easier paths of patriotic self-righteousness, thoughts of revenge, plain indifference, forgetfulness, or outright denial. More positively, it suggests a prayer for strength to be answer for those who have perished, and for understanding (and perhaps forgiveness), and for an answering lived-out compassion somehow commensurate, if only marginally, to the suffering in which he is implicated.<sup>28</sup>

This complex event bears import for the spirit and even serves in demonstration of it. There’s the primal level of a brute and devastating threat to life. Yet the occasion opens to other levels. The descent of kamikazes gives us a glimpse of the sublime: witness the plane hanging -- as if it might hang motionless forever. There’s a glimpse of an ethical sublime in the revelations of the transposition of pilot and gunner, in the concentration of action that takes on all the force of nature, in the sense that the dominance of war’s nihilism can be strangely transcended. And at yet another level these events occasion thinking through trauma. There are wounds, pure and simple, emotional and physical, and also moral traumas. If even for an instant Bugbee could take the pilot as no different from his shipmate, how could he bring him down? Only his working through that trauma in an unfolding life will tell if he can be answer to those fallen men: honoring them, remembering them in compassion, mourning them.<sup>29</sup>

## IX. Ethical Calls

Kant finds confirmation of a reflective being’s dignity under “starry heavens” and under those skies Bugbee husbands wonder and astonishment. Things

<sup>28</sup> See my “Becoming What We Pray: Passion’s Gentler Resolutions,” in *Prayer and Post-Modernism*, ed. Bruce Benson and Norman Wirzba, Fordham University Press, 2005.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

speak from their silent surround. An encounter in and with wilderness is aesthetic and religious and can intimate how a person might live. Bugbee's life at sea grounds communal solidarity and installs a vision of participating in creation that expands the moral or ethical domain. Ethics can answer more than questions of explicit duties or what a utilitarian calculus might dictate.

The sublime works in a moral or ethical vein against arrogance, self-importance, and egoism. A moral sublime (in a transposed Chief and pilot) makes a fight for survival simultaneously something more. A sublime creation overshadows the counterfeits of fame, riches, or power and occasions gratitude for the gifts of life and its many legacies—adventure, serenity, the voice of particulars that call us to an openness to the world. Without such openness, a broadly moral attunement, no moral or aesthetic or religious self could be alive and well.

Imagine a moral or spiritual self-unfolding, flowing stream-like through a venture in the wild, called by peaks or streams, seeking its next self around the next bend in the river. Bugbee hears the voice of *this larch*, *this* stretch of stream; he attends to *this* face by the bank of rushing waters, *this* face in an on-rushing fighter plane. Each voice and face has universal relevance but no link to universal law. Spirit is not lofted up above the clouds but embodied in the particulars of this ordinary/extraordinary world. It speaks in particular address: *this* snow whispers, *this* pilot addresses him—as do the bells calling from the quad. Things of creation join, conjoin, voice in mutual address. They converge in acclamations, sound a world where persons can stand forth independent and together.

Bugbee's theme of life in the unknown of wilderness can be seen as a version of what Stanley Cavell calls moral perfectionism. That perfectionism, developed from Thoreau and Emerson, does not posit a static ideal to attain.<sup>30</sup> It is to know that there's always something undone, more to be done, that one's evident imperfections are a reminder of steps yet to be taken in an unfolding wilderness. An ethics should not just give one the complacent satisfactions of a moral task completed, a rule obeyed, a result accomplished, and a perfection in hand. When we know we have not got our relations or feelings quite right, when we know that we are, let's agree, less than perfect, it is the glimmer of a further perfection yet to be attained—and another after that, endlessly—that captures the spirit of the perfectionism at issue. This journey, in what Bugbee calls a wilderness, is a moral task of discovering, as Cavell has it, my next and better self. We know our status as moral seekers of perfection in our moments of knowing we've fallen short, that there's more to be done; or in the idiom of wilderness, that there are always new vistas and dangers ahead.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Stanley Cavell, *City of Words, Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004. See also, John Davenport, *Will as Commitment and Resolve: An Existential Account of Creativity, Love, Virtue, and Happiness*, New York: Fordham University Press, 2007, 291f.

<sup>31</sup> On moral perfectionism, see *On Søren Kierkegaard*, Ch. 10.

Here are three themes, greatly condensed, of Cavell's moral perfectionism, which I see as providing a backdrop for Bugbee's vision of life (a moral life) in wilderness. First, a crisis marks a threat to self, but also an opening for renewal. Henry might say: we find ourselves at risk in the wilderness; renewal comes through voice, calling us toward vocation. Then the self finds itself beside itself in ecstasy, in enchantment and transfiguration. Bugbee might say: we're gripped in wonder and astonishment; we stand forth, to be born. Third and last, the self transparently encounters that which it must answer, an exemplar, or the radiant things of an exemplary world. Henry might put it this way: persons and particulars speak or call in invitation of an answering response, opening a dialogue for which we cannot but be grateful. Perfectionism registers our sense of being drawn into unending, ever-open significant experiences, and into acknowledgment of resuscitating perceptions of the new at every turn, perceptions that make *us* new.

Things of the place – moving waters, the song of an unseen bird – give vocational address. They call us to witness to their presence and confirm that our calling is to listen, alert in the place of their habitation and becoming. There are shipmates to remember, and mentors like Gabriel Marcel, and the ghost of Bugbee's father as he learns at sea of his death. Eckhart, Melville, and Thoreau shimmer in texts that become his texts. Their words and worlds beckon. The path is his alone and also the general pattern of moral perfectionism. Creation holds exemplary persons and things of the place ready, one step ahead, calling to a dawning light.

A perfectionist moral stance doesn't aim at universal justification for a way of life. It aims to illuminate exemplary ways of living, inviting wider audiences to test the worthiness they instantiate. They invite universal resonance and appeal, and their staying power is tested through dialogue, meditation, and continuing exploration. Perfectionism of this sort foregoes justification Kant or Mill or Aristotle might seek, and invokes instead the mysteries of receiving oneself, of losing oneself to find oneself, of encountering a call to stand forth, of relating transparently to others and to the luminous things of creation – intimately at hand yet always somewhat out of reach.

#### X. Simple Transcendence

The sight of geese against the infinite sky, in the leap of a trout toward a morning fly – each is an *Augenblick*, a “twinkling of an eye,” when “all shall be changed”, each marking an instant of awakening. Bugbee's smaller scenes can fall within the ambit of the sublime, even though they lack its characteristic vastness or power. Such small-scale wonders, in my view, expand the reach of the sublime by altering expectations of scale. There are small majesties. Creation holds even a snowflake in fluid wonder. Such majesties contest unmitigated suffering, and even death. Small wonders brush by in a wisp of breeze -- or a wisp of a laugh.

The movie version of Ken Kesey's *Sometimes a Great Notion* has an unforgettably terrifying – yet strangely redeeming – moment of death. A logger is trapped beneath a great fallen redwood as the tide rises inexorably. We see nothing but

tragedy. As the tide rises, a brother who stands free of the trap desperately breaths air into the lungs of this now submerged man. The camera views his doom from below, as if a curious fish were attending. Fatefully, in death's grip, a smile creeps over his face, then a bubble-expelling giggle—the silliness of a mouth-to-mouth dance between he-men. The exhale swivels into an intake of sea, and we watch him fail grimacing, a twinkle still playing on the eyes.<sup>32</sup>

It's impossible to watch and not to watch. There's the laugh, the grin, rising absurdly from the depth of the man's life-rejoicing character. Like a wink at his executioner, it makes his death less than unmitigated annihilation. Even in this most violent and helpless of circumstance, death's dominion is lessened, if by no more than a wisp of breath.

For Kant, an awareness of how easily we could be crushed by massive overhanging rocks prompts spirit to affirm that it is more than what can be so easily destroyed. For Henry Bugbee, awakening in the presence of death affirms the inviolate depths of a creation that is more than what can so easily be destroyed, an affirmation articulated in the particulars of creation -- not least, among particular persons, close at hand. Transcending spirit is found in the intensity of Chief Johnson spiting fire, and in the pure gentleness of a young man's face, reborn from fast waters. And it's found in the voice of a stand of larches in late autumn splendor.

Some part of each day or night, for forty days, flurries of snow were flying. The aspens and larches took on a yellow so vivid, so pure, so trembling in the air, as to fairly cry out that they were as they were, limitlessly. And it was there in attending to this wilderness, with unremitting alertness and attentiveness, yes even as I slept, that I knew myself to have been instructed for life...<sup>33</sup>

The transcendence at issue is not movement from a natural to a non-natural world, from death to afterlife, as it were. It is the transcendence Thoreau celebrates in "Walking" or *Walden* from night to day, as from an unawakened self to one present at an inward morning. It brings us not *out* of the world, but back *into* it -- alert, alive.

## XII. Prayer

I find it striking that as early as Henry Bugbee's thesis we sense a deep earnestness, uncommon in any academic writing, but doubly uncommon in undergraduate writing, in the writing of one so young. It's a quality of commitment, intimacy, and urgency familiar in the pages of *The Inward Morning*, a quality that prompts two of his friends to say, "You write here as a man might write only near the end of his life."<sup>34</sup> In the opening preface to his undergraduate

<sup>32</sup> The 1971 film stars Paul Newman, Lee Remick, and Henry Fonda.

<sup>33</sup> *The Inward Morning*, 139-40.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 11.

thesis he alerts his professors that they will not find just another philosophy major's culminating senior effort. He confides that the search undertaken in its pages is of more than academic interest to him, that he senses a vocational stake—a life at risk—in the pages he delivers. This is an intimate revelation, and perhaps we'd rather not have intimacy in philosophy, or in academic writing generally. Knowledge is impersonal, isn't it? But we might ask, from a different quarter, how we could know his writing, know it as *his*, if we lacked that touch of intimacy? Can we really expect that a thoughtful writer seeking personal insight should assume a vacant voice announcing anonymous truths from the distance of all time and eternity?

As we've seen, that deep earnestness speaks also from his bibliography. There he lists classical recordings from Bach to Schubert to Rachmaninoff that on his account informed his writing as much as any book. The great works of Beethoven unleash and explore infinite emotion, and are paradigms of the sublime. He knew them by heart, well enough to hear silently on sea watch in the Pacific. He must sense that words do not always compete in expressive power with the music he so cherished. Writing was not easy for him; he wrote little in his life.

His final chapter on the then still-living Spanish existentialist Unamuno marks his homage to the thoughtful life of a man of tragic vision yet not devoid of hope. Henry thinks in the light of this exemplary figure, forced out of Spain and into exile at the height of his creative powers. Perhaps unsurprisingly, he characterizes the tragedy of this silenced thinker in roughly Kantian terms as the clash of dignity and defeat. And this tragic clash in turn can be drawn out as resonate with the sublime and at least partially, death's undoing.

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I find the closing gestures of this mature yet youthful effort especially moving. That his effort had been religious throughout had been evident in the title, invoking St. Paul, and symmetrically in its final lines, the lines that confess his stance and that give context for the title: "I speak not in enticing words of man's wisdom but in demonstration of the Spirit." His writing of worlds and of the things of his worlds has been an evocation and demonstration of spirit, and a discipline of religious self-emptying. Then a final word discretely recalls the tenor of humility that saturates the course of his writing. Just above Henry's longhand sign-off is a simple closing word of solid and unmistakable intent: "Amen."

This has been a "salvation," a poetic evocation of spirit, and a prayer.

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