

BOOK REVIEW

David B. Bowman, *Faith Rising-Between the Lines: Intimations of Faith Embedded in Modern Fiction* (Eugene, Oregon: Resource Publications, 2021), 162 pp.

In this interesting work, David B. Bowman seeks to contribute to the conversation between modern creative writing and theological discourse, endeavors he appreciates not only in themselves but also in relation to each other; as an apologist for a religious view of the world, he points out the potentially powerful, even if at times unintentional, insights afforded by literature. Emily Dickinson's poem "Tell all the truth but tell it slant," quoted on the opening page, refers to the way revelation must be gradual to avoid blinding the human viewer. In the Preface, the author calls to mind the way in which challenges such as 20th century conflicts and resulting devastating loss of life, as well as the COVID-19 pandemic, may play a role in a readiness to acknowledge limits to human control over well-being, which in turn lead to a more urgent search for meaning and ultimate reality. With this work, Bowman hopes to support the search for "a reliable faith" (from the dedication page) and suggests that his book may possibly offer "a cudgel with which to fight the good fight" in daily spiritual conflict (xi).

The book is comprised of essays on ten selected works from a range of writers, artists, scientists, and ordained ministers, and presents an eclectic mix of genres. While readers may recognize classics such as *The Lord of the Flies* by William Golding or *Babette's Feast* by Isak Dinesen, the latter's short story, "The Deluge at Norderney," may be a discovery. Others with an interest in literature and religion may be well-aware of popular southern writer Walker Percy's *The Second Coming*, Annie Dillard's *Holy the Firm*, or Frederick Buechner's *The Final Beast*, but may be interested in the inclusion of *The Unexpected Universe* and *The Immense Journey* by the scientist, Loren Eiseley, described by Bowman as a creator of soliloquies on nature and as searching for "the transcendent meaning of being human" (23). Even Garry Trudeau's comic strip "Doonesbury," featuring Chaplain Sloan, who appears at a news conference with just one reporter present, finds a place here, in the context of parallels with New Testament parables and "religion's reduced impact in a secular time" (41). Also considered are Kent Haruf's novel *Our Souls at Night*, Garrison Keillor's story "The Storm Home," and Gabriel Marcel's play *The Broken World*. Each discussion of a literary work is preceded by a brief summary of the author's life and work, especially with regard to the theme of the book. The volume also offers an introduction, commentary, endnotes, substantial bibliography, and a helpful guide to abbreviations for references to Scripture and periodicals.

Dr. Bowman, an ordained minister, explains what he means by "indirect discourse" (xv) in his introduction, that is, a non-authoritarian and even "oblique" (xviii) way of examining various points of view for the purpose of elucidating matters of faith. Not to be confused with the technical literary term of free indirect discourse, in which the words and thoughts of a character are presented as if from that character's point of view, the term here simply suggests that indications of the transcendent may be found instead "between the lines" (xviii), and yet for all that be no less persuasive. As an apologist for religious faith, Bowman prefers to offer new life through a pastoral "listening ear" and "wise tongue" (xix) that he finds at times in fiction, instead of the

“pronouncement and threat” (xv) religious atmosphere in which he grew up. Rather than menacing, the tone sought is therefore that of a guide showing tales which on their own ring true in their description of the human condition. As to style, it might be described here as colloquial and invitational; the author reaches out to readers across disciplines in accessible ways, even using popular references at times, such as the song title, “What’s it all about”? (114) and a personal anecdote to illustrate “genuine availability” (82), such as being driven home in an emergency by a stranger who would not accept remuneration.

Questions and paradoxes are not avoided; Dillard’s recent silence, for instance, on matters of faith, is included right along with her search for the “tangible God” (8); likewise, the grim events which transpire in Golding’s *Lord of the Flies* are examined in an unflinching way. At the same time, reason to hope, as that appears, is also highlighted, such as when justice, kindness, and humility meet in Trudeau’s cartoons (46), or altruism, as suggested in Golding’s character Simon (74).

Of special interest to readers of this journal will be the chapter devoted to Gabriel Marcel, as well as the one devoted to Walker Percy, since Percy was influenced by Marcel. While recovering from tuberculosis, Percy read the existentialists and, influenced by the philosophy of Marcel, eventually developed the theme of mutuality and intersubjectivity in his writing. Bowman incorporates here Marcel’s statement (in his Gifford Lectures) that one can only reach understanding by “starting from the other” (79). And, as one of the treasures of the volume, the author shares a personal letter from Walker Percy, written in 1988, two years before his death, in which he confirms this debt, stating, “I am deeply grateful for your comments, especially for your associating me with the great French philosopher, Gabriel Marcel.” Percy adds in the letter to Bowman that, though he is American, he owes more to Marcel, Kierkegaard, and Sartre than to any American philosopher (83).

In the culminating chapter on Gabriel Marcel, Bowman treats this theme of relationship, principally in the play *The Broken World* (*Le Monde cassé*, 1933), with brief reference as well to another of his plays, *A Man of God* (*Un Homme de Dieu*, 1922). With regard to Marcel, Bowman reminds us that he considered himself a dramatist before a philosopher and a musician before that; in fact, we are reminded that Marcel indicated that *The Broken World* allowed him to understand his experience and the change that took place in him, which would be difficult to reach in ways other than literature (107).

The connection between *The Broken World* and the theme of this volume is that at the end of the play, a window is opened on the transcendent when it is revealed that a character never seen on stage, Jacques, realized that his abrupt decision to enter a Benedictine monastery rather than marry Christiane may have caused a void in her life; as a result, he carried a burden of prayer for her, especially since her later marriage to Lawrence has been troubled, due in part to the lack of resolution of the earlier relationship. In the end, this revelation results in a recommitment and sense of belonging between Christiane and Lawrence. Bowman concludes his analysis by recalling Marcel’s “considered reply” (107) to hesitation to stage the play in Paris, despite favorable reviews, due to what some construed at the time as an element of divine intervention at the end of the play. This sense of *deus ex machina* can also be seen, according to Bowman, in *A Man of God*. However, Marcel responds to criticism of this aspect of the play by asserting that it is the liberating capacity of the theatre that can detach the spectator from prejudice and the opinions of others that oppress and keep one from “entering oneself and communing with another” (108). Within this volume, “the capacity to discern the needs of another” is also seen in the novels of Kent Haruf

(119). Even the reunited hawks of Loren Eiseley's nature reveries reflect a longing to be in the presence of the Other (33-35).

Faith Rising is a welcome contribution to reflection on faith in "certain sorts of literature" (109). While it does not purport to offer systematic theology or formal literary theory, the volume does offer explicit analysis of what may lie implicit in selected stories that strike a chord, as the sub-title suggests, concerning "intimations of faith embedded in modern fiction." Finally, the original juxtaposition of such diverse kinds of creative writing invites further thought about what may arise when reading between the lines of imaginative tales that strike "with a sense of reality" (6).

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