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The Professor as Riddle

Kevin Lewis
University of South Carolina - Columbia, lewiske@mailbox.sc.edu

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The patterns on MacKinnon's office door take the darkness of the hallway in shadow. Wood polish gives the ornament a lustre dulled by the fall of light in the afternoon. Where the shadows begin, where they merge, is indistinct. Behind the panels and the curlicues of inlay in the door the echoes of a voice deploy. It listens to itself. He is alone, practising his manner to the mannered walls.

The further, centre door of the gallery swings inward to cast and close a triangle of light over the brick-tile floor. Footsteps click along the hallway to add another listener to the steady resonance of voice within the inner chamber. That's his voice surely, eking through the crannies around the lumpy, crypto door. For an instant heard, and a moment longer, it spews out exaggeration upon exaggeration. His un governed intonation takes an unfamiliar discipline across the rubble of the unseen open books and pamphlets on the unseen table beyond the door.

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Logically in breadth. As fleas hedged, as bruising, as the rogue theologian vertical. Grey hair smears, misplacing across a forehead phenomenological in breadth. As fleshed, as bruising, as the rogue theologian thunder reaching to the upper rafters of the hall. He gorgonizes from the diad. We strain to catch each garbled flight, each precisiosity. He, conjuring on the outskirts of the ways of God the viability of an unsophisticated awareness of the presence of the Divine.

Note-takers look up as the floor boards creak and crash. He descends in mimic fury to the common level and to the windows on St John’s Street below. Stone ornament pedestals from the buttressing look in at the man looking out. He stops again. His reflection at the equal angle from the glass plane doubles his brown study. Against the casement stone, against the wrought iron moulding arabesque, against transparency and daylight, his eyeballs bulge with the idea. We must ask of Peter’s confession whether it be true or false, although such a confession is not like a statement of fact such as, his voice rising. The Term is Half Over. Cadenza rattles on the walls to punctuate performance in mid-drama. And it goes on.

The lectern at symmetry in the middle-stage receives him back. The spool unwinds through a sleight of tone backwards, inwards to the centre. With the song-song of a prelate at evensong prayer he puts on custom to encompass what he means. Rigid against erasures on the chalkboard. His mangled digits dig the hollows of his eyes. The ceiling lowers. He talks gently. Tell me what you remember and I will tell you what you are. The pencil rubs across his chin. To those below and watching he slumps again to gaze. In stricken suspension, the moment crucial to his point evacuates. A palm squashes the cartilage in his nose. MacKinnon contemplates a zenith. Change jingles in his pocket, the boards creak under his shifting weight, he moves and speaks. And lurching across the boundary from fixity, he wants such things to read as records of just that kind of engagement.

Something about Wittgenstein. The Mysterium at its depth. But from that angle he turns to the space above our heads. The instant of his pivot holds the flaring of gown at his knees, extended to the ground. And sleeves and elbows shoulder height at the stop of action as if stopped in dance. Or caught in a spell. Chalk smudges at his shoulders blur to re-focus as stars and crescent moons. The photograph swells to distraction; the sleeves billow downward, filling like sails embossed with zodiacal design. Somewhere green and orange fluorescence glimmers in the dusty hall. Agape’s monster-priest put on a peaked cone written round with equations for the deities. His shaggy hair violates around his ears. With the invocation of the Corpus Mysticum then, the cosmic gestalt, he wears the demoniac possession of a wizard.

Then plainly it happens. The realized, spatial conjuring of the eschatological vapour. In Latin, in Greek, in English, he writes “real presence” on the board, praeentia reatio, and descends to our level, stands back, and begins again. The arms begin and the voice again, stalking the equivalent riddle of the figures on the wall. His arm wields out at manneristic length to point with accusation at the Holy. At the front they can hear his indrawn breathing whistling in his nose. Fingers grip his throat, press and pull his ear, fall away and disappear. The hand returns, the arm. He semaphores demythologization of Plato by Aristotle. Beckoning us through patriarchal range of gesture into the abstraction. Where words on the lips of Caliban stutter and fail; for even fluency jumbles. And union dissolves. He speaks, but the noise is the clangour of machine cartwheeling vision across vision. He whales the pattern as if gone back in time to rend the earth, as if there still were giants in the earth.

Backing against one wall and opposite against the other, he speaks the rest of it against himself. And from the middle and from between and from the aisle as he departs across the footlights away. Across the air beyond the first row of desk he weaves tapestry of air. As if all knowledge is geometry, we must see it to know. As if idea must take shape in space as space before it can have shape. Will abstraction deliquesce unless an episode strikes it out upon the eyes? The wrought filigree of the seen design?

What did he say? It ran to its accomplishment like those demons of creation run, catalyzed by the wild gesticulation of both performance and the thing performed. We might have been there when Hitler and Luther pushed back the brink to fix the words of change to the wall and understood. But what did he say? I remember, but I forget.

When MacKinnon was interviewed in Varsity, he described the direction of his work. They gave him a quarter of a page and kept the rest for “Religion: Alive or Dead”? Under his glowing photo, taken in his chamber, was the information and irony both together. Newspaper economy strips him bland, held impossibly still and naked in an impossible solution under glass. I am primarily concerned with frontiers of Philosophy of Theology but I also lecture for example on Aristotle and Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason. In a better world the stifled brevity of that sentence
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would speak for itself. Though newspaperese expediency only swirls like the dry leaves at the feet of an untouched giant, he does change slightly in the imagination for having been so bottled and cured for the public.

He is exercised by the intelligibility of statements concerning the Transcendent, the nature and validity of the Christian claim that for example Jesus is Divine. But drama hardens to still-life. The words themselves, not just the sounds, return, pre-empting the whole dumb show. So ready, so intelligible is the departure of his work. I am a layman and not committed professionally to Christian religion. Elusion in design gives way to illusion. The printed word carries but the elusive irony of phantasmagoria behind the benign utility of quotation. Who, reading that, is to know that somewhere in the shadows of a transept a figure spits and cries and whirls among the idols along the wall.

But could the spinning pattern of his theological re-evaluation be like a web tricked out by a spider? As if from the safety of a high rafter, or as if before dawn in the garden? That lacework, like a child’s toy left out overnight in the grass, spangles with dew. When familiarity comes round with the day and we go abroad, it vanishes into oblivion underfoot.

I passed him on the sidewalk one afternoon when rain slicked over the surface of St John’s Street. Or rather he passed me before I realized it was he. Having missed him, I turned to see his back hunched over, collar to his ears, hatless. Either because rain itself will clear the air to sharpen lines and details of the surroundings, or because MacKinnon for, again, an instant foiled the brick, iron, shop-window and pedestrian scene through which he walked, honing the coherence of this time the impinging reality, everything in its place in the eye took immanence. The immediacy of all angles, transversals, the slope of line against line, arc upon arc, fired against the imagination, exploding with the power that unprepared recognition can release. MacKinnon went out of the picture, bending out of sight past the bake-shop, subtracting only a flourish of leitmotif from the way the pattern grew.

KEVIN LEWIS.

St John’s College Chapel, Cambridge

(From the December 26th, 1965 issue of The Living Church)

I HEARD the stained glass windows sing, Smelled fragrance everywhere, From rich, sonorous, prose, well-read. I watched with thoughtful stare As organ melodies by Bach Cavorted through the air.

I held the anthem in my hands And touched with awed delight Its convolutions, globes, and spires.

The sweet warm candle light Lay lovely-ious on my tongue.

This happened. I was there.

ELVA MCALLASTER.