The Professor as Riddle

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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 man.

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 unguarded intonation takes an unfamiliar discipline across the rubble of the unseen open books and pamphlets on the unseen table beyond the door.

The Faculty of Divinity has commerce among its own population. In one of the better stories passed among its members and among all colleagues who understand, MacKinnon invites two undergraduates for tea. This indeed happened, they say. He was their supervisor, and at the end of term asked them to his house. He is known for an exacting man; the two were punctual at his doorstep. A woman showed them into a room in which tea cakes, jam, and biscuits lay ready on a table by the fire. She left them. Any minute, it seemed, the professor would appear.

A steaming china pot was delivered through an opposite door and the woman left them again. A moment and he would enter, apologizing. But the tea was hot. Should they draw the chairs closer to the table covered with a fresh cloth? Strange that he wasn't there. It was all too credible that he had forgotten; but why was the table set as if to begin? A movement caught their eye. Their heads turned. A hand appeared from under the cloth on the far side. A thick span of fingers, a fist growing out of a cuff and jacket sleeve probed along the top. It moved among the plates, caught up a slice of fruit cake, and disappeared from whence it came.

The story ends abruptly. When we hear it the first time, we have known MacKinnon only across distance, briefly in the dim emporium of the upper Faculty lecture hall, above the gallery below. Where the straightening, stiff knees of students lift the seats to a clatter in a random chorusing epilogue to his lecture as the room wakens and clears. And where once after a turn of bad health, the racket provoked him as he exited out of the double doors. He halted, swung around, and delivered yet another postscript, catching us in mid-stride, mid-sentence, unlimbering to escape out behind him into the lunch hour. He likened that irritation of his ears to "the world inhabited by telephone booth vandals," for all of us and the great, empty space of room behind us to hear.

He would finish long after the hour, tuck down his head, and lead the filing ranks of students down the stairs. Down around two spirals of the shoe-worn staircase he descends with books to his chest, an ominous bronze Balzac in cape, shadowing down away and out of comprehension to the depth below. To the street level.

We wonder at that story of the students at tea. It means he is shy. Could that be true? His thread, and now his very shape are difficult to trace. The voice echoing against itself in the unseen study chamber, the irascibility, and the recounted appearance of the professor's groping paw, cross in the imagination. The design of the man mixes; the first glimpses of grotesquerie arrange themselves in counterpoint. But the contraries of dimensions so like the stuff of children's fables skip and sway out of reach. His letter from Devon after term is over evidently declines an invitation to tea. But the scrawl is cramped. Hasty, unreadable, it tantalizes. He has gone to give lectures in Scotland, but the reckoning of what words his politeness employs is but a squinting game. His handwriting is difficult to read.

The hour of his lecture moves in cinemara before the eye. A maroon shirt folds into the long john underwear elastic top curled over his belt. His big bones fidget behind the podium. He mouths a pencil tip, his knuckles to his jaw. He hunkers upon the scribbled notes illumined under electric light. It will begin now, a quarter past the hour, and we have waited. Still he waits, as if the opening fatuous declaration was enigma. Then slowly the sound uncoils to rasp across the lectern. He hitches at his trousers, leans against the chalkboard behind, takes distance in his eyes, and rouses into pitch. The words mingle, slurring on the tongue. Their swallowed accentuations slither in the air like the caricature loopings of a Steinberg cartoon. Leering then, medieval. We must distinguish between that faith which is belief and that faith by which we believe.

* Donald H. MacKinnon, Professor of the Philosophy of Theology, Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge.
The gradient of MacKinnon's broad back projects his head out toward us like a gargoyl. Gaining tenor and still hunching, he bobs over papers and the lectern lamp, up and down on the vertical. Grey hair smears, misplacing across a forehead phrenological in breadth. As fleshed, as bruising, as the rogue theologian thunder reaching to the upper rafters of the hall. He gorgonizes from the dias. We strain to catch each garbled flight, each precisio. 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 slight of tone backwards, inwards to the centre. With the sing-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 the direction of his work. They gave him a board. 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 wail 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
would speak for itself. Though newspaperese expediency only swells 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 whelms 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 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.

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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-luscious on my tongue.

This happened. I was there.

ELVA MCALLASTER.