

that comes of intricate ritual faultlessly performed": *ritual is a tool, nothing more or less, which helps us to DO holy things even though we can't BE holy.* Liturgical predictability takes the intellect out of worship—and with it the ego—and lets us participate even if we don't particularly "feel like it." Is ritual in worship, like ritual in craftsmanship, a lost art, to be tolerated smugly but not encouraged?

I don't know. Our children are laboratory rats in this experiment, as they are in all experiments where a monolith of tradition is intentionally chiseled away in an artificially short period of time by those with ulterior motives—usually a latent atheism—as the rest of us let them. Perhaps the old way of worship lasted so many centuries precisely because it *was* the most natural, the most helpful to us in our lives, and our children will go home to it like the prodigal son to his father. But the more I consider, the more I understand that we have only one *right* in this life. It is not the "right" to ride in the front of the bus, or to not go hungry. It is not the "right" to privacy or to bear firearms or to worship as we please. God gives us none of those "rights," and what man gives, man can take away. The only right God gives us is *truly* inalienable: the right to glorify Him. That is why He made us and the Sabbath, and why *we* used to make cathedrals. And this solitary right of ours is the very one we're not teaching our children these days.

Jane Greer edits Plains Poetry Journal.

Letter From New York

by Stephen Kogan

The Unseen Caravaggio

I went to the Caravaggio exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art on a rainy Tuesday morning, hoping to avoid the crowds that gather at big-name art events these days. The streets were fairly empty, and I could feel the temperature drop along the line of fountains as I passed—a cozy moment before moving from nature into art. I remembered the dingy comfort of the

museum when it was like a library or an old-fashioned bookstore—a perfect place for browsing and meditation—and I recalled my trip to London last January, where I spent a quiet day at the Royal Academy's exhibit of Venetian art, one of the most beautifully presented shows that I have ever seen.

I canceled out these reveries when I saw the ticket line for "Caravaggio and His Contemporaries." I was a veteran of several crowd-control experiences, including the last Van Gogh exhibit at the Met, and I could feel that slight edge of tension rise in me again to compete for space in order to see the present work. Unfortunately, I did not see the Caravaggios as much as I saw the entire event itself, which was as far from Caravaggio as I ever want to see again.

I say this because art was the last thing that I experienced at the show. I do not exaggerate when I say that the noise in the first room of Caravaggio's contemporaries was at a low-level din by 11:30. There were two men next to me talking about their wrist ailments, several women on my left discussing what they would have for lunch, couples exchanging the high points of their trip to New York, babies crying, everyone talking as if they were, in fact, on the street or in their living rooms, the noise of a crowd that might have been just as happy with tickets to a hockey game or midtown movie. Self-restraint, civility, and a general sense of caring and decorum were hopelessly missing from that scene, like an art form or a way of life that once was common knowledge and has now become a secret.

I hate these "blockbuster" exhibitions and the corporate style of the new rooms at the Metropolitan, with their walls of glass and designer partitions, the bookshops selling stationery and vases and bracelets, the mounds of catalogs waiting to be sold in volume sales. I hate the overdone floral arrangements on the main floor and the guards who ask to see my admissions button every time I pass from one entrance to another; and I still remember the ticket attendant who said, "Enjoy the show" at the Van Gogh exhibition, as if I were going to a movie. The crowning touch to this unfeeling scene is the modern managing and marketing of art in today's

"heady art market," as a recent *New York Times* article described the current trade. It is the type of scene in which critics exaggerate "world class" names and trivialize them at the same time; where Frank Stella can talk about a European master as if Caravaggio somehow led to him; where the great moment of the Renaissance passing into the Baroque is reduced to a question of "space," as if art were the same as interior decorating.

We seem to flee from history and subject matter, from everything that once was understood as spiritual authenticity in art: the necessary connection between feelings and ideas. Yet that is where we are today, or better still, who we are today, not only with a Caravaggio or a Van Gogh, but with a Mozart, whom we regard as he was portrayed in *Amadeus*, as a babbling idiot, a narcissistic child surrounded by a world of less-gifted idiots and craven jealousies, anything but the intelligent master of a discipline that he was, moving in an equally intelligent world of musical culture. For we seem to feel so bad about ourselves, so empty and devoid of values that we need to tear down all that we can no longer respect in simple modesty and to which we no longer have any pretense of aspiration.

Stephen Kogan teaches at the Borough of Manhattan Community College.

Letter From the Lower Right

by John Shelton Reed

A Mississippi Homecoming

Chauvinistic Southerners like me are hard to please. We don't like it when visitors pop in and out and say that the South has changed so much that it looks like everywhere else; but we don't like it when folks come calling and say that nothing important has changed, either. In a recent article in *The American Spectator*, an expatriate Mississippian named James Harkness did just that. He really should know better.

Harkness grew up in Greenwood,

but now he lives in upstate New York. He clearly wants us to recognize that he's come a long way from his Mississippi roots, and, for better or for worse, he obviously has. But origins will tell—he writes like an angel. I just wish I agreed with more of what he has to say.

Harkness went back to his hometown for a visit and was apparently ticked off to discover that Mississippi is not an equitable, color-blind society. Like (one might ask) where? He does not vouchsafe to us what part of the U.S. he would have Greenwood emulate, and I doubt very much that he could be pleased by the white attitudes to be found in any American town with a significant black presence (much less any, like Greenwood, with a substantial black majority).

Now I've never been to Greenwood. I've never done more than briefly visit the Deep South. Maybe Harkness is right and things in the Mississippi Delta are pretty much what they always have been. Maybe race relations and conditions for blacks are better in upstate New York or in Chicago or Detroit or the other cities to which black Mississippians have historically migrated. Maybe so.

But you wouldn't know to read his articles that for the past decade and a half more blacks have been moving to the South (in most cases, probably,

returning there) than have been leaving it. You wouldn't know from his article that the South is the only part of the country where the percentage of black families living in poverty has decreased in the past few years, or that that percentage is lower now than in the Midwest. You wouldn't know that Mississippi now has more black elected officials than any other state in the country, or that a higher proportion of blacks hold public office in the South than in any other region. You wouldn't know that an increasing number of Southern politicians, black and white, have been elected by biracial coalitions. You wouldn't know that a majority of Southern whites now tell the Gallup Poll that they'd vote for a black for President. (OK, so some of them are lying, but what they think they *ought* to say is important, too.)

No, the South isn't a color-blind society. What some of us hope it is becoming is a working and relatively decent biracial society—a rather different thing. (If it can be done, it will be no small accomplishment: I remember a college political science course that held up as examples of successful multiethnic societies Switzerland and . . . Lebanon.) Not all whites share that goal. Not all are happy about the prospect. But a good many of us are. Harkness has little use for what he calls the “old, humorous,

relentlessly superficial affability” of my region, but I suggest that it's close kin to the quality known elsewhere as civility, and that it will get us through this if anything can.

I'm not one of those who feels that Southern whites are uniquely fitted to instruct the world on race relations. Harkness makes fun of those who see something of value in the South's unhappy history on this score, and he may be right to do so. But for whatever reason—luck has something to do with it, and so do the goodwill and political skills of black Southerners—things are looking up in those parts of the South that I know best. And they may even be looking up in Greenwood.

There's no evidence in his article that Harkness talked to any blacks at all during his short visit, much less to any who had come back from the cities of the upper Midwest. On his next visit, he might try that. He could ask them whether *they* think anything of importance has changed.

It's OK to talk to black folks now, James. They'll even tell you what they think. And maybe that's the most important change of all.

John Shelton Reed's latest book, Southern Folk, Plain and Fancy, will be published this fall by the University of Georgia Press.

POLEMICS & EXCHANGES



On 'Conspiracies Against the Nation'

Thomas Fleming's broad-brushed editorial "Conspiracies Against the Nation" (*Chronicles*, April '86) has led me to conclude that Mr. Fleming's

own political philosophy lies precariously close to the extremism of libertarianism (one of many "extremisms" he cautions against), insofar as he seems unwilling to grant any legitimate government intervention into the private lives of individuals.

Mr. Fleming's fear of conservative

statism is misplaced as he warns against the dangers of "Baby Doe Squads," whose only purpose is to protect newborns from being denied life-saving medical treatment. Parental privacy, and all claims to a "right of privacy," do not legitimize the willful taking of an innocent life for whatever