

bination of teaching and delight memorably presented—is of profound cultural significance. The great themes of poetry remain pretty much the same through history—love, war, nature, religion, death, adventure, philosophical speculation. What changes is the need for each new generation of poets to express these themes by generally employing the idiom of the times (an idiom sometimes rightly elevated and enhanced) and by mainly using what Coleridge called the *communis linguis*—words found and understood in all regions of a country and at all levels of human society. Such language allows the poet to filter the great universal themes through the familiar, sharable particulars of his own life, time, and place—Hardy’s Wessex, for example. And who among us is not moved by the simple yet powerful common language of Yvor Winters’ “A Leave-Taking,” in which he offers this poignant epigram on a stillborn son: “I, who never kissed your head, / Lay these ashes in their bed, / That which I could do have done. / Now farewell, my newborn son”?

In his discussion of the couplet and of that short pointed poem called the epigram, Baer reminds us that poetry can also be humorous. Much of this humor comes from wit sharpened by rhyme, rhyme being a device that most free verse avoids. Thus, we have Lord Jeffrey’s epigram-as-epitaph on Peter Robinson: “Here lies the preacher, judge, and poet, Peter, / Who broke the laws of God, and man, and metre.” Equally amusing is J.V. Cunningham’s jab at a modern relativist: “This Humanist whom no belief constrained / Grew so broad-minded he was scatter-brained.” Many readers of *Chronicles* may also appreciate a recent epigram (not included here) by Timothy Steele: “Words don’t match things, and authors are erased; / Reality reflects the theorist’s taste. / Yet, to the grief of all, the texts fight back, / Whether it’s *Hamlet*, *Emma*, or Iraq” (“A Short History of Post-structuralism” in *Toward the Winter Solstice*, Swallow Press, 2006).

Baer closes his book with an Appendix on the New Formalist Revival and with a compendium of quotations from poets ancient and modern on the nature and importance of measured verse. One center of this revival, Baer notes, was Baton Rouge, where, in the 1970’s, a group of graduate-student poets gathered around Donald Stanford, editor of the *Southern Review*, formalist poet, former student of Yvor Winters, and admirer of the po-

ems of Allen Tate. Among those “LSU Formalists” well known today are Wyatt Prunty of the University of the South at Sewanee, Tennessee, and the late Alabama poet John Finlay. Here, and in similar circumstances, in small, informal groups or one by one, poets—like a scattered Gideon’s band—began to recover a greatly threatened 3,000-year tradition.

Poetry is the rightful possession of all human beings. It begins in the womb with a prenatal awareness of our mother’s rhythmical heartbeat and continues in our perception of the great rhythmic patterns of breath and sex, the comings and goings of the tides, and the coursings of the stars. (It is fascinating to note that Christ died, according to Matthew, crying out in the verse of a psalm, and that Socrates turned Aesop into verse as he awaited execution.) Poetry fills our lives from nursery rhymes, hymns, and ballads to the lyrics of popular music, Bible verses, and even proverbial sayings such as Ben Franklin’s “Early to bed, early to rise / Makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise”—or a modern wag’s retort: “Early to bed, early to rise / And your girl goes out with other guys.”

Such humorous poems as those quoted above are reminders that rhyming poetry is well suited to satire. Thus, metrical poetry—though certainly practiced by poets of all cultural and political persuasions—should be quite natural to the traditional conservative poet committed to defending what T.S. Eliot called “the permanent things.” As William Baer has stated elsewhere,

it’s . . . logical to expect that individuals who value tradition and order would tend to write their poems in the time-tested metric that has dominated English-language poetry from Geoffrey Chaucer to Richard Wilbur. Some, myself included, would even tend to see the underlying structure of meter as a poetic representation of the provident order of God’s universe.

Or, as Robert Frost once quipped about God telling Moses how to make verse, “Tell them Iamb, Jehovah said, and meant it.”

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and *The Habitual Peacefulness of Gruchy: Poems After Pictures* by Jean-François Millet, both published by Louisiana State University Press.

The Hollow Men

by Fr. Michael P. Orsi

The Most Famous Man in America:
The Biography of
Henry Ward Beecher
by Debby Applegate
New York: Doubleday; 544 pp., \$27.95



Debby Applegate’s Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *The Most Famous Man in America: The Biography of Henry Ward Beecher*, treats a wide range of subjects: religion, politics, social upheaval, war, and clerical sex scandals. And, while such a list might sound as if it were referring to contemporary America, the events recounted here occurred a century-and-a-half ago. In chronicling Beecher’s life, Applegate, a professor of American studies at Yale and Wesleyan Universities, brings to light the era Beecher helped shape and makes clear to the astute reader that his influence remains with us today.

A son of the Rev. Lyman Beecher, a well-known Congregationalist preacher and professor, Henry Ward Beecher (1813-87) possessed impressive oratorical skills. He was pastor of one of the largest churches of his day, Brooklyn’s famous Plymouth Church, as well as a key spokesman for the antislavery cause. And he preached the so-called Gospel of Love, which placed him on the cutting edge of 19th-century liberal Protestantism. In many ways, Beecher was progenitor of the socioreligious phenomenon that would eventually be called the “mega-church” movement.

Beecher was reared a strict New England Congregationalist. However, the rigidity of his upbringing was challenged by two factors: an insatiable need for love (owing partly to the death of his mother when he was three years old) and his family’s migration to the less religiously restrictive Midwestern frontier, when his father became head of Lane Theological Seminary near Cincinnati. From these conflicting personal currents would emerge a highly personalized doctrine

that was light on theology, sketchy on the consequences of sin, and heavy on individual and social concerns. Beecher's pulpit prowess, his belief in Herbert Spencer's concept of "evolutionary meliorism," and his proclamation of the nonthreatening Gospel of Love made him an international *cause célèbre*. The effectiveness of his message can be attributed to its timeliness. It found rich soil in America's broadening democratic ethos and the rise of pragmatism in the 19th century.

The election of Andrew Jackson in 1829 brought to a close the limited republic of philosopher-statesmen envisioned by America's Founding Fathers, as the growth of raw democracy that broadened the voting franchise weakened traditional social hierarchies, including the hold that established religions had on the people. It opened the door to the rise of populist faiths, such as Methodism, which were based less on dogma and more on sentimentalism and ministering to emotional needs. This religion grew rapidly in the developing Midwest, where Henry Ward Beecher spent the early years of his ministry.

Beecher's entrepreneurial instincts and pragmatic approach to life enabled him to borrow from Methodism and to adapt his church's message and style of worship accordingly. He built his ministry not on orthodox Christian doctrine (which includes such disturbing dogmas as Original Sin and Hell) but on what he perceived people wanted to hear—the empathetic "personalism" that the market for religious ideas was demanding. As Applegate puts it, Beecher's message was successful because "he was so aware of the world's alienation and pain." Such a "grassroots" approach to religion encourages an easy adaptability, away from theological truths and toward societal problems and personal needs. It greatly enhances the power of charismatic preachers, since it offers "cheap grace" in the form of quick solutions to life's most vexing challenges. For evidence, we need only reflect on the influence wielded by today's star preachers, such as Joel Osteen, Rick Warren, and T.D. Jakes—all of whom are Beecher's spiritual heirs.

Populist religion also gravitates toward politics. Abraham Lincoln recognized Beecher's stance against slavery as a valuable asset to his own presidential ambitions, visiting Beecher's church as a candidate and, later, courting him at the

White House. In appreciation of Beecher's support during the Civil War, Lincoln gave him the honor of delivering the keynote address at the reclamation of Fort Sumter in 1865.

Beecher realized the personal value of getting along with those in power, adjusting his loyalties to his own advantage. For example, despite his strong and vocal opposition to slavery, after Lincoln's assassination, Beecher supported the retrogressive President Andrew Johnson (1865-69). And, in 1885, he switched his allegiance to the party of the Democracy and Grover Cleveland, whose election all but ended federal efforts to ensure freed slaves the rights conferred by the 14th and 15th Amendments. How could Beecher have been so flexible? Applegate's answer is simply that he enjoyed the prestige and the patronage that came from associating with those in political power. In some ways, Beecher anticipated the multiparty relationships maintained in our own time by the Rev. Billy Graham, who, though certainly not a moral pragmatist, has managed to get along with every president since Eisenhower.

Beecher had serious character flaws, in addition to his apparent fascination with political power. Allegations of marital infidelity clouded the later years of his ministry; indeed, they command too many pages of this book. Applegate's account does provide some worthwhile insights into sexual exploitation by the clergy, however. The personal magnetism, verbal mesmerism, and kindly manner exerted by a gifted pastor inevitably garner a certain number of female admirers—a dynamic that has accounted for the fall of many clergymen. In Beecher's case, it led to a trial for adultery, and both his behavior and the testimony he gave are indicative of an acute ability to compartmentalize and prevaricate. In addition, his manic accumulation of material goods suggests an inner emptiness.

Noticeably missing from the story of Beecher's later life is any mention of the devotional prayer to which he was given in his younger years. This apparent lack of an interior prayer life may be best attributed to his loss of faith in a personal God. Perhaps this was the cause of his decline in moral discipline and his willingness to compromise pastoral moral standards that should be above reproach. In this area, Applegate lets Beecher off too easily. Her comparison of his short-

comings with those of John F. Kennedy, Bill Clinton, and Martin Luther King, Jr., makes it seem as if she is excusing all these men on psychological grounds—which may indicate an acquiescence on her part in the present culture that extols candor and doubts the ability of men to practice virtue.

With the 2008 presidential-primary campaigns already under way, American church leaders have another opportunity to speak out on the subject of personal morality as well as on current political issues. Unfortunately, the thinking that Beecher worked so hard to promote—and which persists today—encourages pastoral focus on the latter, but not the former.

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A Moderate Proposal

by Andrea Kirk Assaf

The Right To Be Wrong: Ending the Culture War Over Religion in America

by Kevin Seamus Hasson
San Francisco: Encounter Books;
176 pp., \$25.95



In America today, nearly every month brings a new occasion to renew the Culture War over religion in the public square. By next year, our sensitive multicultural elites might insist on celebrating "Hearts and Flowers Day" on February 14 and "Drink Beer and Wear Green Day" on March 17.

Americans have not always been such zealous secularists, Kevin Seamus Hasson, founder and chairman of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, argues in *The Right To Be Wrong*. He ably recounts the surprising religious intolerance of some of our earliest settlers, the Puritans, and with lively descriptions paints an unflattering portrait of their attempts to establish a theocracy in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. (Even their efforts were nothing new in New England: Shortly after the First Thanksgiving, the Pilgrims banned the few Anglicans in their midst from