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### *John Harris: An Appreciation*

JOHN J. PARIS, SJ

James Russell Lowell, in his poem “The Vision of Sir Launfal,”<sup>1</sup> asks “What is so rare as a day in June?” A unicorn, perhaps, or an academic philosopher who probes human nature other than by relying on the abstract musings of long-dead predecessors. John Harris’ essay “The Chimes of Freedom”<sup>2</sup> demonstrates that there is a yet more perfect way. The subtitle of his recent *Cambridge Quarterly* article, “Bob Dylan, Epigrammatic Validity, and Alternative Facts” reveals the wider scope of Harris’ vision. He utilizes lyrics of a song by a recent Nobel Prize winner, rules of grammar, and current events for source material.

Confirmation of Harris’ insight that a novel or popular culture could be a richer source for an understanding of human nature than reading philosophical texts is seen in an essay by Tom Beachamp in the same issue of *Cambridge Quarterly*. Beachamp, a renowned philosopher in his own right, comments in the essay that he was more moved and enlightened on social issues by reading Alan Payton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* than from time spent with the “unruly, divisive, and ill-managed philosophy department at Yale.”<sup>3</sup>

Far from dismissing as “mere poetry” Dostoevsky’s chapter on “The Grand Inquisitor”—as does Alyosha, the kind and saintly Karamozov brother in the eponymous novel—Harris begins his

essay with a long preamble from the lyrics of Bob Dylan’s “Chimes of Freedom,” in which Dylan captures the mood and sentiment of a world stunned by the assassination of the young and vibrant John F. Kennedy.

Tennyson’s words on the sense of loss after the death of a friend capture the moment better than any philosophical analysis of grief:

Break, break, break.  
On thy cold gray stone, O Sea!  
And would that my tongue could utter,  
The thoughts that arise in me.<sup>4</sup>

Even poetry fails to capture the acute sense of loss felt by an entire nation as it watched Kennedy’s widow on television, no longer dressed in a festive pink pillbox hat, but veiled in black, walking in the funeral cortege from the Capitol to Washington’s St. Matthew’s Cathedral behind the caisson bearing the late president’s body. Even more poignant was the photo of two-year-old John John dressed in a powder blue coat and short pants, standing at attention on the Capitol steps while saluting his father’s flag-draped coffin. Emotions rather than reason more closely capture such a moment.

As Puccini’s *Tosca* demonstrates, nothing encompasses the panoply of human emotions—love, deceit, lust, revenge, marriage, and murder—as does music.

At the Kennedy funeral, as at that of FDR and Princess Grace of Monaco, it was the sound of Barber's "Adagio for Strings" that expressed the pathos experienced by a grieving world. The music also proved cathartic. As in Mahler's *Resurrection Symphony*, once we have plumbed the depths of loss from a death, we seek a reassurance, a hope, that death is not the end. In the moving lyrics in the fourth movement of Mahler's symphony we hear the comforting words:

Arise, yes, you will arise from the dead,  
My dust, after a short rest!  
Eternal life!  
Will be given you by Him who called  
you.<sup>5</sup>

How do we express our deepest longings? Not, Harris proposes, only with the insights of thinkers such as Hegel, Wittgenstein, or Rawls, great as their contributions to our understanding may be, but also from popular artists such as Bob Dylan and Pete Seeger, whose appeal to freedom, Harris tells us, is "also aesthetic." Seeger's phrase "Eye on the Prize" provides not only lyrics for a song, but the title for Ken Burns' epic documentary of America's struggle for civil rights from the perspective of the ordinary men and women whose extraordinary actions set off a movement that transformed life in America.

Evidence of Harris's contribution of a richer description of human nature than that provided exclusively in the thought of philosophers can be found by asking a random group of undergraduates their reaction to modern art. The response will be almost universally negative. When asked how they would portray the trauma the nation experienced at 9/11—rare will be the description in philosophic terms, literature, or even poetry. Most will turn to art.

The depiction will not be of the missing towers, but of the ash that enveloped everything in a gray gloom. What other colors will be used? Black. For violence. And red. For blood shed, spilt and flowing aimlessly from 3,000 innocent dead.

How will those colors be utilized? Not with the precision of a Vermeer. The gray will be all enveloping as in a Rothko. Color alone will tell the story. The black will be not an outline of now absent towers, but the broad brush strokes of a Franz Klein intended to capture all that remains—the blackened steel beams of what once were the World Trade Center Towers. And the red—thousands of splotches splattered over the canvas as if applied by Jackson Pollock to serve as surrogate for those whose strength is now spent.

Since John Harris began his essay with a Nobel Prize-winning poet, it seems fitting to end this appreciation of his work with another Nobel laureate, Seamus Heaney, the Irish playwright and poet, who at age fourteen composed a poem in honor of his dead four-year-old brother, killed by an automobile. The work, entitled "Mid-Term Break," is sparse. It ends abruptly. The last line contains not a wasted word, nor a word too many:

Wearing a poppy bruise on his left  
temple.  
He lay in the four foot box as in his cot.  
No gaudy scars, the bumper knocked  
him clear.  
A four foot box, a foot for every year.<sup>6</sup>

Literature, unlike philosophy, pays exquisite attention to the truth of lived experience. Philosophy speaks to the way things ought to be. Its demands, however, may be too daunting or too devastating to be embraced in individual circumstances. A novel or a poem captures life in its fullness—with its emotions, conflicts, and contradictions exposed. The novelist, the poet, and the

song writer portray a far more nuanced understanding of our inclinations, limitations, and idiosyncrasies than does philosophy, bioethics, or the law. Harris observed that phenomenon. His reflections encompass the totality of life's experiences. We are the beneficiaries of that depth and breath.

### Notes

1. Lowell JR. "The vision of Sir Launful." In: Poems of James Russell Lowell. <http://www.poemhunter.com/james-russell-lowell/bography/html>. (last accessed 14 Jan 2018).
2. Harris J. The chimes of freedom. *Cambridge Quarterly of Health Care Ethics* 2018;27(1):14–26.
3. Beachamp TL. My path to bioethics. *Cambridge Quarterly of Health Care Ethics* 2018;27(1): 4–13, at 5–7.
4. Tennyson AL. *Break, Break, Break*; <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45318/break-break-break/html> (last accessed 14 Jan 2018).
5. Klopstock F. *Primal Light* [translated]; available at [www.tavmahler.com/symphonies/Mahler-symphony-2.html](http://www.tavmahler.com/symphonies/Mahler-symphony-2.html) (last accessed 14 Jan 2018).
6. Heaney S. *Mid-term Break*; [www.famouspoet-sandpoems.com/sandpoems.com/poets/seamus\\_heaney/poems12698.html](http://www.famouspoet-sandpoems.com/sandpoems.com/poets/seamus_heaney/poems12698.html) (last accessed 14 Jan 2018).