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# The Life of Faith and the Life of the Mind: An Ambiguous and Nurturing Space for Students

Michael W. Higgins

*Sacred Heart University*, [higginsmw@sacredheart.edu](mailto:higginsmw@sacredheart.edu)

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# The Human Journey Core

Integrating a Faith-Based Education  
for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Challenges and Responses

Opening Address:

“The Life of Faith and the Life of the Mind: An Ambiguous and  
Nurturing Space for Students”

Dr. Michael W. Higgins  
April 15, 2012

Given my brief to make tonight's reflection part inspirational, part entertaining and part instructive, I concluded that I could either hire three ghostwriters with discrete remits or craft it in such a way as to draw you into a neatly constructed world of autobiographical epiphanies, intellectual probes, and serious queries. I want to reflect on four moments of literary and mystical history.

So, let me take you on a journey that will in some modest measure address the complex interplay between mind and faith, reason and belief, as they are played out through this quirky lens – a peregrination stamped by personal taste, for sure, but perhaps, just perhaps, a way into “an ambiguous and nurturing space for students.”

Tonight's talk will consist of snippets and shards of history—non-quantifiable, beyond measure, a potpourri of impressions. By “moment,” I do not mean an instant, or a very brief portion of time. Rather, I mean a brief period of time, associated with a particular individual. And these moments are, I think you will find, quirky. They reflect my interests in mysticism, visionary literature, the creative tension that exists between eros and spirituality, art and religious sensibility. Although not a card-carrying post-modernist, I have been interested in the literature of the margins, the underside, the minority voice, for years. For instance, while my graduate peers painstakingly studied the works of Henry James, George Bernard Shaw, and Joseph Conrad, I scoured the prose and poetry of the likes of the doomed Hubert Crackanthorpe, the mysterious Marc-Andrew Sebastian Raffalovich, and the fantastical Frederick William Rolfe or Baron Corvo, for some insight into the pulse of the age. I studied

James, Shaw, and Conrad, of course, and to great profit, but I remained captivated by the not-quite-respectable figures of the fin-de-siecle. In the late 1970s I had the responsibility of arranging an address at that most imperial of establishments, Massey College, University of Toronto. The speaker was the venerable British scholar and Carmelite of the Ancient Observance, Brocard Sewell—he had directed a baccalaureate thesis I had written—who had an incurable penchant for living in turrets. Massey seemed the right setting. Novelist, critic and playwright Robertson Davies was the Master of Massey at the time and he attended the address. The lecture was on the novels of Robert Hugh Benson, a bestseller in his day, now largely unknown, and perhaps deservedly so—like most bestsellers. The students listened rapt but confused. During the question and answer period that followed the address Sewell and the Master spoke of their shared interest in the work of the eminent Restoration scholar and dabbler in the dark arts, the inscrutable Montague Summers. I looked about me: the students were no longer rapt or confused. They simply weren't there. I had discovered my specialty at last. With a rare nod to the fashionable parlance: it is a matter after all of optics.

In the opening sequence of that flawed but brilliant—God, how I hate clichés—that damaged but luminous epic film, *1900*, by the tortured—they're always tortured—Italian director Bernardo Bertolucci, we have the bold declaration that G.Verdi is dead! An age has ended. It is a splendid stroke of theatrical genius to begin a new era with an auspicious death, although Verdi actually died in 1901. Yet another indication that God is an Italian. But although Bertolucci may see unparalleled significance in the death of the master composer, we can be

justifiable excused for seeing equal significance in the exquisitely timed demise of other shapers of the new sensibility.

Philosopher Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche—ravaged by syphilis, his reason collapsing, death by stroke.

Polymath extraordinaire John Ruskin—cocooned for a decade from reality, madness triumphant.

Wit and iconoclast Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde—erupting with infection, poisons coursing in his veins, exploding with fluid and repartee, Wilde observed to Claire de Pratz: "My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or the other has to go." The wallpaper won. Welcome to the twentieth century.

What Wilde had to offer us was more, much more, than a gift of aphorisms laced with decadence. He offered a way of viewing the world markedly at a variance with his contemporaries. Most mistook the glittering sheen for the man substantial. And so it is with "visionaries."

I would like to identify four of these visionaries of the past millennium, whose lives and writing constitute sapiential moments in our human unfolding. My choice of four, of course, betrays my own cultural and historical biases and smacks of Western—centeredness that may

well be politically incorrect. But then, anachronistically speaking, my four were hardly politically-correct in their time.

They are, in chronological sequence, Francesco di Bernardone, Jeanne D'Arc, Christopher Smart, and Oscar Wilde.

But before we begin our extra-chronological peregrination—our trip—it might be best to clarify precisely what I mean by “visionary.” The visionary elects that mode of thinking that is rightly termed sapiential, from the Latin word for wisdom (*sapientia*), and which has been ably defined by Thomas Merton, in an essay he wrote on the American novelist, William Faulkner:

It is the highest level of cognition. It goes beyond *scientia*, which is systematic knowledge, beyond *intellectus*, which is intuitive understanding. It has deeper penetration and wider range than either of these. It embraces the entire scope of human life and all its meaning. It grasps the ultimate truths to which science and intuition only point. In ancient terms, it seeks the “ultimate causes,” not simply efficient causes which make things happen, but the ultimate reasons why they happen and the ultimate values which their happening reveals to us. Wisdom is not only speculative, but also practical: that is to say, it is “lived.” And unless one “lives” it, one cannot “have” it. It is not only speculative but creative. It is expressed in living signs and symbols. It proceeds, then, not merely from knowledge about human values, but from an actual...awareness of these values as incorporated in one's own existence.

But *sapientia* is not inborn. True, the seeds of it are there, but they must be cultivated. Hence wisdom develops not by itself but in a hard discipline of

traditional training, under the expert guidance of one who himself/herself possesses it and who is therefore qualified to teach it...Sapiential awareness deepens our communion with the concrete: it is not an intuition into a world of abstractions and ideals. The poetic and contemplative awareness is sapiential...[and has] the capacity to bridge the cognitive gap between our minds and the realm of the transcendent and the unknown, so that without “understanding” what lies beyond the limit of human vision, we nevertheless enter into an intuitive affinity with it.

The visionary is not slave to the tyranny of constrictive Reason—William Blake’s Urizen—and not prey to the easy reductionism that would assess the human in quantifiable terms alone. The visionary mode of thinking and being abjures the frantic dualism that opposes matter to spirit, science to imagination, and logic to the heart. Formula and equation are anathema; number and measure oppressive. The visionary is unhoused, extraterritorial as critic George Steiner would say, viewed either as a dangerous subversive or as a harmless eccentric, but there like a sentinel on the border of unchartered and feared turf.

Francesco Di Bernardone—1181-1226—is more commonly known to history as Francis of Assisi. Francis isn’t a myth, but he could be. His life has inspired millions, great art, music, movements, and cults. A jongleur de Dieu, God’s tumbler, Francis turned the world on its head, gently mocked the principalities secular and sacred, rejoiced in the outrageous. There is a wonderful scene in Franco Zefferelli’s *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*—a film otherwise suffused with

a commanding visual lushness wedded to a deadening piety—when the director actually gets it quite right. It is that moment when the gallant son of an esteemed merchant publicly repudiates the values of his father and the prevailing culture of Assisi by stripping naked in public in order to show how radical his rejection of the old order truly is. It is an embarrassment. The viewer is embarrassed by Zefferelli's unenlightened literalism. The scene should be excised in order to prevent full frontal embarrassment. But the point, surely, is precisely that. The revolutionary simplicity of Francis embarrasses, the tumbler makes us laugh; we admire the agility, but we intuit that there is a dangerous frivolity inherent in this juggler's act.

There is a blessed simplicity in Francis, an unwillingness to be straightjacketed by ecclesiastical protocol, held hostage by theological controversy, or embroiled in the internecine struggles of competing religious interests. This now fashionable patron saint of ecology, the nature lover who could converse with fish and birds and address creation as a family member, was never one for impaling the senses on the sword of asceticism. This joyous mendicant with a spirit of temerity that would have him negotiate with pope and sultan was not by temperament disposed to administrative oversight. He cared not a whit for the trappings of power. He cared only for the freedom that comes with emptiness. The dispossessed young man in the piazza spoke with naked eloquence of a knowledge steeped in love. Francis was an outrageous romantic, a wild dreamer, God's incandescent vessel. The saint as poet.



Francis's spirituality burns with the radical intensity of a subversive literalism that shatters the veil. Whether the pious Fioretti di San Francesco, the frescos of Giotto, the lyrical chords of Franz Liszt and Francis Poulenc, the hagiographies, the holy legends, the oral histories, the chronicles of the Order, the disputatious record of partial historians—they all speak to the mystique, the wondrous singularity, of the naked male in an obscure mountain village on the threshold of a spiritual renaissance.

The Maid of Orleans, the fifteenth-century French peasant girl who would electrify a war-besotted Christendom, this Joan of Arc, this ignorant child who heard voices, defied warriors and prelates, haunts the imagination. George Bernard Shaw gives her the words, words of sweet and dangerous innocence:

You promised me my life; but you lied. You think that life is nothing but not being stone dead. It is not the bread and water I fear: I can live on bread: when have I asked for more? It is no hardship to drink the water if the water be clean. Bread has no sorrow for me, and water no affliction. But to shut me from the light of the sky and sight of the fields and flowers; to chain my feet so that I can never again ride with the soldiers nor climb the hills; to make me breathe foul damp darkness, and keep me from everything that brings me back to the love of God when your wickedness and foolishness tempt me to hate Him: all this is worse than the furnace in the Bible that was heated seven times. I could do without my warhorse, I could drag about in a skirt; I could let the banners and the trumpets and the knights and soldiers pass me and leave me behind as they leave the other women, if only I could still hear the wind in the trees, the larks in

the sunshine, the young lambs crying through the healthy frost, and the blessed, blessed church bells that send my angel voices floating to me on the wind. But without these things I cannot live; and by your wanting to take them from me, or from any human creature, I know that your counsel is of the devil, and that mine is of God.

This passage, irrespective its historical accuracy, encapsulates, albeit the encapsulation is Shavian and therefore longer than any other on human record, encapsulates, as I say, that visionary mode of knowing that sees into the heart of God and repudiates the guile and duplicity of power's reasoning.

Joan is the stuff of legend: her burning in the marketplace of Rouen an act that reverberates even now, some half-millennium later, in politics, religion, art. The list of those transfixed by the mystery of a nineteen-year-old illiterate who spirited a cowering Dauphin to Rheims to be crowned king, defeated armies, and confounded canonists, is a list that continues to grow: Shaw; Besson; Verdi; Tchaikovsky; Gounod; Schiller; Dumas père et Dumas fils; De Quincey; Lamartine; Michelet; France; Twain; Peguy; Honegger; Claudel; Maeterlinch; Anouilh; Anderson; De Mille; de Gastyne; Fleming; Preminger; Dreyer; Bresson; Le Pen; Rivette. And these are just some of them.

Critic Joan Acocella marvels at it all and sagely observes that our obsession with Joan will do her reputation no harm. "Her cult is big enough to absorb it:"

There is now a whole discipline of “Johannic studies”, together with a subdiscipline of “Johannic-reception studies”—the history of representations of her. The post-modern folk are on her trail: the women-studies people, the queer-studies people, the deconstructionists...[she has several] Web sites...[a]St. Joan of Arc Anti-Defamation League, a Clash of Arms “war games”, a rock group; three more movies reportedly in the works...but somehow Joan always slips through the net, small and wiry, brave and glad.

And this is how Shaw would have her—small and wiry, brave and glad—the essence of the Maid.

It is the late 1750s and Christopher Smart, poet and classicist, is composing in an asylum. His estimable contemporary Dr. Johnson would opine:

“Madness frequently discovers itself merely by unnecessary deviation from the usual modes of the world. My poor friend Smart showed the disturbance of his mind, by falling upon his knees and saying his prayers in the street, or in any other unusual place. Now, although, rationally speaking, it is greater madness not to pray at all, than to pray as Smart did, I am afraid there are so many who do not pray, that their understanding is not called in question...Indeed, before his confinement, he used for exercise to walk to the ale-house; but he was CARRIED back again. I did not think he ought to be shut

up. His infirmities were not noxious to society. He insisted on people praying with him; and I'd as life pray with Kit Smart as any one else. Another charge was that he did not love clean linen: and I have no passion for it."

I suspect that most people—with the exception of university undergraduates—have a passion for clean linen, but I also suspect that few would consider soiled linen a reason for consigning one to an asylum. That's not what we mean by Bedlam.

Kit Smart's mystical instincts, dangerous "enthusiasm", unconventional behavior, precarious mental balance, and chronic indebtedness combined to make him both a figure of fun and an admired eccentric of strange poetic genius. Smart's *Jubilate Agno*, (*Rejoice in the Lamb*)—a poem he composed while in the madhouse, a composing itself strange and wondrous, and a work that would be first published almost two hundred years after the poet's death—this very poem is full to overflowing with the intellectual energy and spiritual rapture of the visionary mode of apprehending reality. The age of the philosophe, the triumph of the ratiocinative, the discursive, the suzerainty of Reason—this is the age aching for an antidote to a plague of cerebration, of Single Vision, as William Blake would have it, of the legacy of Bacon, Locke, and Newton, of the tyranny of Urizen, who in Blake's mythology embodies a dogmatism blind to imagination, passion, and spirit, an overlordship marked by abstract codes based on mathematical reasoning alone and materialism. Blake, too, was thought mad by some.

Smart, in his *Jubilate*, anticipates something of that celebrative and prophetic poetics that would surface in the work of Blake only decades after his death. Smart chisels:

For it is the business of a man gifted in the world to prophecy good.

For it will be better for England and all the world in a season, as I  
prophecy this day.

For I prophecy that they will obey the motions of the spirit descended  
upon them as this day.

For they have seen the glory of God already come down upon the trees.

For I prophecy that it will descend upon their heads also.

For I prophecy that the praise of God will be in every man's mouth in the  
public streets.

And so we leave Smart where we found him—not in the public streets—but in the madhouse, and we go to the chambers of the dying. 1900 and in Paris, with Wilde. The manner of his dying was in stark inverse proportion to the elegance of his public life. All the props of Victorian civility were absent; the droll banter of the drawing room gave way to the tortured spasms of breathing in a room spare of furnishings and hope. As biographer Richard Ellmann notes:

At 5:30 a.m., to the consternation of [Robbie] Ross and [Reggie] Turner, a loud, strong death rattle began, like the turning of a crank. Foam and blood came from his mouth during the morning, and at ten minutes to two in the afternoon Wilde died. He had scarcely breathed his last breath when the body

exploded with fluids from the ear, nose, mouth, and other orifices. The debris was appalling.

Theatrical to the end: an exit with flourish, a morbid counterpoint to the pinnacle of polish and acceptability that he held but 5 years earlier. But if Wilde's death ushered in the twentieth century—a dark, murderous time periodically illumined with piercing shafts of genius and discovery—his spirit hovered over its end. Wilde is now ubiquitous—films and plays about Wilde and by Wilde, readings, posthumous honours, learned and occasionally readable disquisitions on the Wildean legacy, manifestos solemn and frivolous, everything but a case for his canonization. And that is only a matter of time, though I suspect not during the current pontificate.

But why all this attention for an aesthete, a dandy, a man practiced in the art of amusing subversion, a seeming antinomian, a rebel without a transparent cause? It is because Wilde—at some visceral level—articulates a morality fully engaged, life as an art form. In his 1897 letter written from Reading Gaol to his lover, Alfred Lord Douglass, his *De Profundis*, a letter out of the depths, we have his penultimate major creation prior to his death. Wilde produces in the crucible of his physical and moral imprisonment an apologia replete with anger, self-pity, recrimination, love, forgiveness, bitterness, desperate justification, puzzlement, abandonment, and grace. He writes:

I am conscious now that behind all this Beauty, satisfying though it may be, there is some Spirit hidden in which the painted forms and shapes are but

modes of manifestation and it is with this Spirit that I desire to become in harmony. I have grown tired of the articulate utterances of men and things. The mystical Art, the Mystical in Life, the Mystical in Nature—this is what I am looking for, and in the great symphonies of Music, in the initiation of Sorrow, in the depths of the Sea I may find it. It is absolutely necessary for me to find it somewhere.

The *De Profundis*—Wilde's prison memoir—lacks something of the fanciful lustre of his plays, the frisson of this novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, the lambent prose of his correspondence, but there is in it an imperfect nobility.

In the *De Profundis* we have a work, a gallimaufry, that is Neo-Platonic and Paterian, but also a work that straddles devotion and blasphemy, Christ as pure artist, Wilde as suffering servant, spirituality as artifice. Let me suggest to you something as outrageous as this: Wilde's prison letter to his narcissistic lover might deserve comparison with Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Letters & Papers from Prison*—he perished at Flossenbug in April 1945—in that both works, etched out in the pain of incarceration, proffer a new religious understanding.

Wilde's final outing?

He has become a symbol of resistance to a constricting and hypocritical Victorian morality, and a martyr to the cause of homosexual liberation. The sometimes aggressive

appropriation by the Gay community of the greatest of all the fin-de-siècle artists is both reasonable and justifiable. Certainly, Wilde was a homosexual and paid dearly for it, even if the facts are such that he madly provoked authority to do its worst. The pathology of the Wilde affair, the bringing down in disgrace of the darling of Victorian society, is complex and does not lend itself to univocal explanation.

The author of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, *The Importance of Being Earnest*, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, and numerous other plays, short stories, and essays amuses his listeners/readers with his dangerously seductive wit. He charms at the same time as he implodes. And we already know that he explodes. Quite a fellow our Wilde.

So we are fascinated, endlessly so it would seem, by Wilde the man and Wilde the artist.

But something is missing it seems to me. We are taken with the tragedy of his charm, the reluctant heroism of his sexuality, his clever and brutal honesty, the epic proportions of his ruin. We are enchanted by his aphorisms and delighted by his ripostes. Everything about him fascinates the post-modernist; he is nothing but gesture and construct. Pure evanescence!

But somehow in all this hoopla over Oscar the tragic genius, Oscar the Gay guru, and Oscar the model of social rebellion, we have forgotten, if we ever knew, Oscar the Catholic.



Wilde's Catholicism is an embarrassment for many scholars and commentators, best explained as one of the master wit's subversive gestures, nothing too serious, a pose. Some biographers barely allude to his Catholicism and when they do it is dismissed as a deathbed conversion of improbable sincerity. This is unfair in my view. Why should Wilde's faith be taken less seriously than his sexuality? If it took him some time to "out" as a homosexual in a society that was as virulently homophobic as it was anti-Catholic, why should we be surprised that his final declaration of Catholicism should come so late? In fact, Wilde's interest in Roman Catholicism dates to the 1870s, nearly two decades before his summary disgrace in 1895.

As Adam Gopnik observed in *"The Invention of Oscar Wilde,"* his perceptive *New Yorker* article, "[Wilde's] Catholicism has become as much an embarrassment to his admirers as his homosexuality used to be."

Indeed.

And yet his religion was much more than a green carnation, that delicious symbol of his artistic rebellion. We cannot truly begin to appreciate the value of his art and of the significance of his life if we persist in ignoring or diminishing the role of his faith, a faith that attracted countless others of his "cult." There are reasons for the Decadent obsession with the Church of Rome and by no means are they all devotional or theological. But surely, some are.

We have played the impish intellectual, ferreting about with a nose for the obscure and the mystical, seeking in art the interconnection of time and space, eternity and enfleshment, and we have done this by looking anew at the religious visionary, the genius, the mad rebel.

We have explored all too briefly a place of the imagination and the spirit, a place where the “rules of mind” are second to the “dream-sickness” that drives vision. The imagination is outside boundaries, ahistorical, a cartographer’s nightmare. The imagination allows us to see differently, the “doors of perception” are many, the tight rule of Blake’s Urizen broken.

Our peregrination has come to an end, 4 quirky moments, quirky still, but welcome epiphanies of that mode of knowing we call wisdom: the saint; the visionary; the mad; the poet. A holy hodgepodge.